

Off-road, off-grid: the modern nomads wandering America's back country

Level: Advanced

1 Warmer

Brainstorm reasons why people might become homeless and where they might live when they no longer have a home of their own.

Reasons for homelessness	Places homeless people might live

2 Key words

a. Match the words in the box to the definitions below.

accessible	concede	contributing	dignity	dwelling
insulation	mission	nomad	prospect	resilient
self-sufficiency	sponsors	spousal maintenance	thriving	tribe

1. someone from a group of people moving from place to place _____
2. an aim that is very important to someone _____
3. money that someone pays to support an ex-husband or ex-wife _____
4. something that you think or know is going to happen in the future _____
5. material used to prevent heat, cold or noise from passing through _____
6. the act of living somewhere _____
7. easy for anyone to use or do _____
8. helping to make a plan or activity successful _____
9. people or organizations that support projects with money or items _____
10. the act of being able to provide everything that you need by yourself _____
11. respect that other people have for you or that you have for yourself _____
12. being or feeling successful, happy and healthy _____
13. a group of people with its own ways of living or behaving, etc. _____
14. admit that something is true _____
15. able to quickly become healthy or strong again after a problem _____

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b. Use some of the key words above to complete these sentences.

1. My new houseplant is _____ on the bright windowsill.
2. Matt _____ that he probably made a mistake.
3. A great deal of Jeff's money went on _____ for his three former wives.
4. Rescuing donkeys was Gina's _____ in life.
5. When I fell over in the street, I felt I'd lost my _____.
6. Spending a week at his cousin's farm was an exciting _____. He was really looking forward to it.

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Across US public lands, thousands of people are taking to van life

Stevie Trujillo

4 February, 2021

- 1 If you look closely on city streets, campsites and stretches of desert run by the Bureau of Land Management, you'll see more Americans living in vehicles than ever before.
- 2 "I wasn't prepared when I had to move into my SUV*. I had no money saved. I was really scared," said April Craren, 52.
- 3 She shows me photos of the camp stove she uses to make coffee and her view of the sun rising over the Colorado River. She has no toilet, shower or fridge.
- 4 After separating from her husband, April found herself homeless in June 2020.
"I could have gotten an apartment but in an unsafe place with no money to do anything at all," she explained.
- 5 April lived in Missouri, where the average rent for a flat was \$762, slightly less than the national average. Like nearly half of American renters, she would have been crippled by the cost.
- 6 It's not surprising, then, that job loss, divorce or a health or financial crisis can push so many over the edge.
- 7 Bob Wells, 65, helped April to adopt the nomad way of life and change her life in the process.
- 8 Today, he lives on public lands in his GMC Savana fitted with 400 watts of solar power and a 12-volt refrigerator. His life mission is to promote nomadic tribalism in a car, van or RV as a way to prevent homelessness and live more sustainably.
- 9 Before becoming a nomad in 1995, Bob lived in Alaska, with his wife and two boys.
Bob had a job he hated and worked with people he didn't like, to buy things he didn't want. He knew he wasn't happy, but it never occurred to him to live differently.
- 10 Then, when he was 40 years old, he got divorced. After paying spousal maintenance and child support, he was taking home \$1,200 a month, \$800 of which went towards rent.
- 11 One day, worrying about impossible finances, he saw a green box van for sale and thought: "Why don't I buy that van and move into it?" The idea struck him as crazy, but with the prospect of homelessness closing in, he drained the last \$1,500 in his savings account and bought the van.
- 12 Then came the first of the month, and he didn't have to pay rent. As his finances improved, he installed insulation, a proper bed, even a PlayStation fortress for his boys. He started working fewer hours and spent more time camping with his kids, which helped his outlook on life.
- 13 Realizing he had something valuable to share, he bought the domain name Cheap RV** Living. He posted tips and tricks about better vehicle-dwelling – a road map to a better life.
- 14 Many Americans are interested in van life as an answer to the affordable housing crisis, an idea made accessible by Bob on his YouTube channel.
- 15 Bob's videos make him a beloved celebrity in the nomad community. With 460,000 subscribers, the videos are also making him money via ad and affiliate sales. His most popular video, Living in a Car on \$800 a month, has more than 4m views.
- 16 Bob founded the Home on Wheels Alliance (HOWA) charity in 2018. With the help of his team and volunteers, Bob helps people who can no longer afford traditional housing into becoming contributing members of the mobile community.
- 17 To date, funded by sponsors and donations, HOWA has given away seven minivans, two trailers, one school bus and many tents, brake pads and tyres.
- 18 April had been watching Bob's videos for years when a nomad friend suggested she apply to HOWA for assistance. At the time, she was living in her car.
- 19 To join HOWA's programme, April had to sign a three-year contract, prove she had sufficient income to regularly maintain her vehicle and agree to put \$200 a month in an account until she reached the value of the minivan, after which the vehicle title would be released to her.

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- 20 "Most of HOWA's applicants are older women. They're disabled, or retired and divorced, or simply don't earn enough to afford rent," Bob explained.
- 21 By learning to save money and live rent-free in their vehicles, HOWA's clients preserve their independence, self-sufficiency and dignity while also making friends within the larger nomad community.
- 22 Today, April camps on public land alongside Cliff, a veteran nomad and HOWA volunteer. Together, they make runs to a nearby laundrette, grocery shop and gym where she works out and showers. She's lost 20lb and feels healthier, thanks to eating fresh foods and living a more active outdoor lifestyle. "I'm not just surviving; I'm thriving," she said.
- 23 Bob's dream for the tribe is to see the expansion of Long-Term Visitor Land (LTVA), including areas in national forests. Most public lands allow visitors to camp for only two weeks, but LTVA campers can stay for as long as seven months.
- 24 While Bob concedes the limits of his solution – it doesn't address PTSD***, mental illness or drug addiction, three main causes of homelessness – he does see it as a way to lower our carbon footprint and make ourselves more financially resilient in trying times ahead.
- 25 "I want to leave a world behind that's habitable. For every person I'm able to help into a vehicle, that's one less person in a house," he reasoned.

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Glossary

*SUV = sport utility vehicle

** RV = recreational vehicle

*** PTSD = post-traumatic stress disorder

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3 Comprehension check

a. Find the facts.

1. What caused April to become homeless?
2. How did April get the minivan that she lives in now?
3. Where does she live now?
4. How does April feel about her new lifestyle?

b. Are these statements true (T) or false (F) according to the article? Correct any that are false.

1. Bob became homeless after he lost his job in Alaska. **T / F**
2. Bob has not seen his children since he moved into his van. **T / F**
3. Bob's aim in life is to help other people lead the best alternative lifestyle that they can. **T / F**
4. The HOWA charity offers special help to people who become homeless due to mental health problems. **T / F**
5. Bob's biggest success has been to secure permanent long-term access to visitor land for homeless people. **T / F**
6. Bob believes that the more people who decide to live in a vehicle, the better it will be for our world. **T / F**

4 Phrases and expressions

a. Match the beginnings and endings of these phrases and then find and underline them in the article.

- | | |
|----------------------|------------------------|
| 1. crippled by | a. in |
| 2. push someone over | b. occurred to someone |
| 3. it never | c. date |
| 4. close | d. the edge |
| 5. to | e. the cost |

b. Talk about what the phrases mean. Look up the meanings of any phrases you do not know.

c. Use the phrases in sentences of your own. Which is the most useful phrase for you?

5 Discussion

- What do you imagine would be the biggest challenges associated with vehicle-dwelling?
- What attitude do the authorities and people in general in your country have towards people who live in vehicles?
- What other alternative ways of living can you think of? Who is likely to choose these, and why?

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6 In your own words

Watch the video from Cheap RV Living: Living in a car on \$800 a month.

Make notes so that you will later be able to retell the information to someone that has not watched the video. In particular, make notes about:

- the adaptations Dee has made to her vehicle
- Dee's essential equipment and how she stores it
- the danger and discomforts Dee might have to deal with
- the (possibly unexpected) 'comforts and luxuries' Dee has
- Dee's most useful tips
- questions you would still like to ask Dee about aspects that were not addressed in the video.