

Homelessness and Public Perception

By Tim Salam & Jessica Rice

SOC 210 – Northern Arizona University

Introduction

"...If your going to give me a job working in that park for 40 hours a week for the money I get you give me, why not give me a regular job workin' on, workin' with the same people who work for the Parks Department? They're makin' \$400-500 a week. I'm doin' the same work they do. I'm doin' their work, as a matter of fact! Why can't I get the same paycheck they get, and get me off welfare? So that's basically what the system is designed to do now. That's why a lot of people say there's no way out. No matter how hard you go through it. You get people who come out here and say why don't you get a job? I bet you if I go to about 10 of these stores right now askin' for a job they gonna tell me, "well we don't have anything right now," or "Well, um, its slow right now," Anything to throw me off-"well give me your name and we'll call you." Ten days later you still haven't got the goddamn call. And I know a lot of you guys up here. You know, a lot of stores know me. But, I ask for a job, "You got any kind of work?" Even part-time. There is nothing. So they can't really say every homeless person out here are bad people. They just happen by a misfortune in which the system is designed to..."

- *John McMillan, Homeless in New York City (Rennick, website)*

Homelessness in America, as well as Flagstaff, has been a serious and growing issue. Attention to the subject has steadily increased, as has a growth in misperception about the homeless. For the most part, the general public is intimidated by homeless people, feeling the to be "crazy" or "dangerous."

It's entirely possible that the average person is more intimidated by the "sense of homelessness" than actual homeless people. In other words, the average person can't deal with the impact of being homeless (neither can homeless people!), but transfer that fear and nervousness into repelling actual homeless persons.

While there are indeed such instances of homeless people with mental and/or emotional problems, most homeless became so due to a chain of bad circumstances, or one of a variety of reasons.

I. Description and Analysis

How Many Homeless?

An accurate number of homeless people is difficult to determine, due to differing methodologies and a debate in the actual definition. In the 1980s, figures varied wildly from 250,000 to 3,000,000 (Snow & Anderson, 6); the difference was generated by arguments in definition. According to a fact sheet written in February 1999 by the National Coalition for the Homeless (NCH), "As a result of methodological and financial constraints, most studies are limited to counting people who are literally homeless -- that is, in shelters or on the streets." (NCH, Fact Sheet #2) In a 1998 study of 30 cities, "26% of all requests for emergency shelter went unmet due to lack of resources," and in an additional study of 50 cities, in each the "official estimated number of homeless people greatly exceeded the number of emergency shelter and transitional housing spaces." (NCH, Fact Sheet #2) The NCH Fact Sheet also pointed out that counting homeless is made more difficult by the fact that many of them are not in places where they are easily found, such as rural homeless living in cars or tents.

The most current and substantial national statistic available at the time of this writing, provided by the NCH in their Fact Sheet #2, follows:

“The 500,000-600,000 estimate is sometimes updated by using a projected rate of increase of 5% a year to produce an estimate of over 700,000 people homeless on any given night, and up to 2 million people who experience homelessness during one year (National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, 1999).”

In terms of the rate of increase, the Fact Sheet explains that a count of shelter beds is a loose way of determining increase in the number of homeless:

“A 1997 review of research conducted over the past decade (1987-1997) in 11 communities and 4 states found that shelter capacity more than doubled in nine communities and three states during that time period (National Coalition for the Homeless, 1997). In two communities and two states, shelter capacity tripled over the decade.” (NCH, Fact Sheet #2)

Judging whether such a manner of measuring increase in homelessness is sound or not is subjective – an increase in shelter space may not mean an increase in the actual population of homeless, it may simply mean the demand is being met a little more.

Conversely, it can be easily assumed that homelessness has increased commensurately with the population of America. In terms of our region, in 1998, 16.6% of Arizona’s population lived in poverty. (Census Bureau, Historical Poverty Tables, Table 19) In Coconino County, 20.3% lived below the poverty level in 1995. (Census Bureau, Model-Based Income and Poverty Estimates for Coconino County, Arizona in 1995)

Defining Homelessness

When we say homeless, are we meaning all those that do not have a permanent and established domicile, or are we talking about just those on the streets? Is there a difference between the two?

In the most general sense possible, it is reasonable to say that homelessness is indeed a situation where either an individual or familial group of individuals is without a permanent shelter, unendangered and established. Already there are arguments with this broad and rather vague interpretation. For instance, one could have an *endangered* shelter or domicile if they were working “paycheck to paycheck.” Should they lose their job, losing their place of residence would be a very realistic possibility. According to our overall definition, it’s entirely possible that most people in America could be classified as homeless.

According to several studies conducted in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Unemployment or underemployment was reported by homeless individuals as one of the primary reasons for becoming homeless ...” (DeOllos, 46). Figures on how many Americans live so precariously vary as wildly as the estimated number of homeless, but general layman’s knowledge offers the fact that too few have a sound pool of savings available to them.

The known reasons for becoming homeless are economics, lack of affordable housing, deinstitutionalization, and personal issues. Obviously, economics and affordable housing are linked intimately. In America, it is generally known that the most

expensive item one can buy in their entire lifetime is a home. This statement alone speaks volumes in terms of how our economy and value system is oriented.

To return to defining homelessness, it seems too vague to consider people whose home is economically endangered. Technically (and often in reality), one can “hang by a thread” for a lifetime, struggling to retain permanent residence; though they are struggling and on the cusp of homelessness for years, they don’t actually lose their domicile. So, to hone our definition, we drop the qualifier of “endangered” in terms of the domicile in question.

To proceed, we use the following definition: “An individual or familial group of individuals without a permanent shelter or domicile.” This includes all groups lacking a domicile of their own – “street” homeless, as well as those living with relatives or friends due to the loss of their own domicile. In this definition, we already begin bursting the barriers constructed by the narrow popular perception of homeless people. For instance, one may lose their job because they suffer from mental distress, and thus may lose their home. However, the reverse is incorrect; just because one loses their job, and subsequently their home, does not mean they suffer from a mental disease or other similar difficulty.

If one doesn’t lose their home due to mental illness, then what other possibilities are there? Economic factors begin to fill this gap – layoffs, lack of reasonable employment, high costs of living, lack of affordable housing, poor financial planning, skewed financial expectations, and instances of crises and emergency (the onset of a serious health issue for the main earner of a family, for instance).

Since the early to mid-1980s, many American corporations have moved shifted the source of their labor to other countries, where they can take advantage of lower costs in lesser wages and the lack of (legal) obligation to provide benefits such as insurance to workers. These companies become what is termed “multi-national corporations,” or MNCs. In the mid-1990s, it was estimated that by the end of the century, MNCs would “produce over two-thirds of the world’s gross economic product.” (Papp, 102) Many MNCs are economic units that are larger in size than many nations; for instance, in the early 1990s, General Motors generated only slightly less income than Iraq, Singapore, Chile, and Ireland *combined*. In the same time period, forty-three of the top 100 economic units in the world were corporations, not nations.

Despite the discussion of MNCs seeming like a digression, this is a way of working the economics of homelessness from the top down. When an MNC is created, tens of thousands of jobs in America disappear. They are not jobs lost to other American workers; when we purchase from MNCs (difficult to avoid in a global economy), our money is leaving the country, and not likely to return. Though this spells a measure of prosperity for other nations, it really only displaces the problem of economic prosperity, thus mocking a solution. When five thousands jobs leave the country, we are talking about five thousand Americans who must find work elsewhere, or financially begin the cycle of homelessness.

Coupled with the depletion of jobs is the issue of affordable housing. The market for affordable housing increases every time individuals fail to escape poverty level, a situation often unavoidable when a well-paying job is lost and another is not there for the

taking. For a four-person family, if the major earner loses his or her source of income, it is likely that the next best job pays half or even a third of what was previously earned.

At this point, the two income earners of the four-person family are making a combined income that fails to meet the financial obligations that were entered when the family was enjoying economic prosperity. A house has been purchased, as well as a vehicle or two, and possibly other items of great expense. Debt rises, eventually becomes impossible without assistance or the exhaustion of grace periods on payments. Unless one of the income earners of the family is able to regain employment at the level they need to meet their obligations, their financial history is obliterated and they must deplete their obligations. This often means releasing one of two vehicles (making it sometimes impossible for one of the two income earners to maintain gainful employment), or possibly their home. The family accepts the help of family or friends, in terms of temporary shelter, until the family can “get on their feet.” Either it happens or it doesn’t. The sky is the limit, and the last two steps down are the street or a shelter for homeless people.

This scenario relies on a variety of luck factors, believe it or not. First, it considers that there are two income earners in a family. It could just as well be a single parent with one or two children. What if that parent can’t work because of the need to care for an infant? What if that parent is unable to afford daycare, and hasn’t any family or friends readily available to help in this way?

Additionally, the above scenario is a deteriorating process somewhat slowed by the assumption that both of the two income earners are always able to actually find employment of any sort. Also, it is assumed that the family has family or friends that

could take them in either temporarily or indefinitely if they had to divest themselves of their own home. Last, it disregards the possibility of either the onset of a serious health issue, or a chronic/current instance. If the major earner of the family lost the source of income, it would likely be accompanied by the loss of health insurance. Consider the scenario without any or all of these factors, and we realize the family in question could become homeless at an incredibly accelerated rate. Also remember, this scenario has absolutely nothing to do with mental illness.

Having covered the economic reasons for becoming homeless, deinstitutionalization is now considered. This is a source of some debate. One side states that policies that either remove those institutionalized or restrict institutionalization contribute to homelessness. The other side insists that “the mental health problems of many homeless individuals are the result of stresses of homelessness and occurred after individuals became homeless.” (DeOllos, 53) It is entirely reasonable to suppose that the reasons of both sides contribute equally to the combination of mental illness among homeless individuals.

In the late 80s to 90s, “empirically credible estimates (of mentally ill homeless) has stabilized at about one in three.” (Wright, Rubin, Devine, 105) To reason this measure into analysis, if two in three are not mentally ill then one would be hard-pressed to insist on mental illness to be a predominant factor and cause of homelessness. It should also be noted that most “crazy” behaviors of homeless persons, such as urinating in public or digging in dumpsters for food, are in fact coping mechanisms and should not be confused with mental illness.

Other interesting aspects, such as seemingly talking to oneself or committing crime very belligerently and consistently, are more advanced coping mechanisms. A homeless person once told me that they talked to themselves so that he wouldn't have to deal with people. He wanted people to be afraid of him and thus leave him alone, because he had grown to hate people. I suspected that what he hated was the success of others that he perceived, in comparison to his personal failure to provide for himself and any possible family members. Also, it is generally known by law enforcement officers that homeless persons will commit rather harmless crimes so that they will be arrested and placed in jail – even one night with shelter is worth it for a homeless individual.

In terms of mental illness and the homeless, the subject of institutionalization is key. Since housing (or the lack thereof) is the central issue of homelessness, further consideration is due the mentally ill, as they have very different housing needs than that of a mentally healthy individual. Institutionalizing a person costs a great deal of money, in terms of facilities and skilled staff for the purpose of supervision and care (both general and special).

Deinstitutionalization began largely in the 1950s and entered full swing in the 1960s. The process was spurred by two situations – the prohibitive cost and the government shutdown of many institutions due to public horror at inadequate facilities and barbaric practices. Regardless of the reason, the peculiar end result was to release masses of mentally ill persons. Somewhere, the concept that these people weren't able to care for themselves unsupervised was lost in the wind. It can be considered akin to abandoning a baby on the street because it's parents neglected her.

It should also be noted there exists the opinion that the public perceives homeless individuals to be mentally ill because there has been undue focus on homeless persons who are mentally ill. Opponents to this liken it to saying that the vast majority of Californians are poor, because only poor Californians were subject to research – not middle- or upper class Californians. According to S. Anthony Lampman, “Who does research on homelessness? The answer, primarily medical doctors and psychologists, reveals the extent of biases toward studying homelessness in terms of mental illness and substance abuse.” (Lampman, 6) The same author notes that while running a search through almost six million articles, “nearly two-thirds of the articles on homelessness appeared in journals devoted to psychiatry, psychology, and medicine. That was compared to only five percent in journals devoted to housing, economics, and political economy.” (Lampman, 6) Taking this information into consideration, it is highly possible that the public perception of homelessness as a predominantly mental health issue is the product of a skewed research focus.

Personal issues can be considered a key element in becoming homelessness, such as alcohol and drug abuse, domestic violence, and difficulties with relationships (mainly, family issues). Close support networks can be lost when these issues arise in a family. Often, all three personal issues occur, in the same succession laid out above. For instance, an individual who heavily abuses alcohol and/or drugs may be likely to be domestically violent, which in turn would sever many relationships in the family structure (both internal and external to the immediate household).

It should be pointed out that the majority of homeless individuals are exactly that – individual parties. Estimates place two-parent families as one-tenth or less of the

homeless population. In terms of families as a general term, the vast majority of homeless families are actually single mothers with children. Couple this with the scenario described earlier (involving a two-parent household) and the specter of becoming homeless looms ever darker over Americans, where currently 50% of marriages end in divorce.

There are also the debates of whether those already gripping the poverty level should be having children when they can't provide for them, and whether or not some persons have children with the single goal of using their presence to leverage support (public or private). Though there are probably always going to be exceptions such as these, there are plenty of factors that can render a person homeless without entering into the territory of personal choice. These exceptions will not be covered in this discussion, but suffice to say for now, the point of these debates is moot.

Homelessness predominantly occurs due to economic factors. Particularly in American society, people often live quite close to "the edge," and likely unaware of how close they are to becoming homeless. This lack of substantial separation is very important to understand, because it is proof that the difference between homeless persons and the "regular" public are purely academic – otherwise, many of us possibly brush with homelessness many times without being aware of the fact.

The homeless, as a general population, are not "crazy" or "dangerous"; at least, not any more so than any desperate person. They are the skilled laborer, laid off a job in a town with no prospects and no money to travel to more work. They are the single mother who couldn't care for her children and work at the same time, missing the rent too many times and lacking any family or friends that were willing or able to help

adequately. They are the elderly, lost to the streets having possibly outlived their children (if any) and possibly suffering from some illness. They are castaways, put out by their family and friends for being abusive, freeloading, possibly a substance abuser, or a combination of these factors. They are any or all of these, or something entirely else. For certain, there are released mental patients and other such invalids on our streets, but they require help just as much as a “hard-luck case,” and they certainly don’t speak for the homeless en masse.

II. Description of Social Change Project

We decided to make a website for our social change project for a variety of reasons, both in terms of what to do and why. The address of the website is <http://members.tripod.com/~nealos/homeless/>

First and foremost, the intended content of our website coupled with the ability to reach a large audience was our main drive. We felt that the best place to start with the issue of homelessness was to attempt to eliminate public alienation from this separated, indeed segregated and ignored population. In our studies, we found that homeless people as a group are far more dynamic and diverse – several generalizations as outlined in this text were found to be unacceptable. These generalizations seem to serve as barriers between the average population and the homeless, barriers that make help given to homeless persons far less likely due to the stigma instilled by slanted presentation by media and researchers alike.

Second, and equally important, was the fact that due to the scope of the problem, using the Internet as a vehicle for the project seemed appropriate. By creating a website, we are enabling our research and project to more readily benefit anyone, regardless of region, rather than limiting it to a local environment. Though the website is completely relevant to the local area, it was designed with utility for the masses in mind.

The website is comprised of three main areas. The largest area is discussion taken directly from this text, in hopes of dispelling public opinion that homeless people are “crazy” or “dangerous.” The next area provides details, both specific to Flagstaff and the entire nation as well, on how one can help; donations, volunteerism, and contributions are discussed, among other things. The third and final area is a set of links provided for the viewer, which will further inform them on the issue and related topics.

III. Visions for the Future

We feel that the first and most important change that needs to take place is how the public perceives homelessness. Currently, homeless people, and the subject itself intimidates many. While in the physical presence of homeless people, most feel that they may be in danger. While discussing homelessness, many can't arrive to any “answers” to the problem, due to its scope.

If the public was less intimidated by homelessness, we believe there would be more done. For instance, people may be more willing to volunteer if they realized that homeless people as a group are just as diverse as their own family or circle of friends.

Also, it's upsetting to for many to think about homelessness as an issue for any extended period of time, because the prospect of becoming homeless is, in reality, terribly close to many people's lives. It is reasonable to fear such a thing, and more often that not, that fear felt by many lower- and middle-class Americans can be translated into unwillingness to help – simply put, “out of sight, out of mind.”

There are many terrific organizations, both local and different regional levels, that aid the homeless in a wide variety of ways. More involvement is needed from those capable of donating time, money, or goods. Between America's resources, in terms of material goods and manpower, there is little reason for homelessness to continue, especially if everyone realized that the vagrant they see on the street could well be an old neighbor, classmate, co-worker, or even an old friend.

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