The Past, Present and Future of Homelessness: Myths and Realities Surrounding Homeless Children and Families, Previous Efforts to Eradicate, and Suggestions for Future Action and Social Work Legislation for the New York City Government

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Abstract

This paper explores the growing issue of homelessness in the nation and particularly in the City of New York. The myths and realities of homeless populations are addressed, as well as the public perception toward this group. This work seeks to illuminate the characteristics of the homeless individuals and families, as well as identify several causes that contribute to its growth. Past attempts at alleviating homelessness in the nation are discussed and analyzed, with insight into its strengths and weaknesses. The future of New York City is considered, with recommendations given for future government legislation and social outreach programs. Possible solutions to the issue of homeless are discussed. Drastic changes in the pervasiveness of homelessness can be brought on through mass efforts to educate the public, redesign the city's housing system, restructure the existing social outreach organizations, and enforce the necessity of prevention programs for at-risk individuals and families.

Keywords: homelessness, New York City, social work, social outreach, policy, social work

The Prevalence and Complexity of Homelessness

At some point in our lives, we have all seen the men and women of the streets; the ones whose only possessions include a cardboard box and perhaps a ragged suitcase and worn-out shoes. We have all encountered beggars on our way to work or school, shaking paper cups pulled from trashcans and asking for spare change. Statistically speaking, Americans generally have a tendency to refuse to believe that massive poverty is prevalent in the richest nation on earth .Most city dwellers move through these scenes with rushed avoidance; they think 'if I do not make eye contact with them, they will leave.' Some believe that homelessness is simply the result of an individuals' inability to function well in society, perhaps attributed to laziness or mental insanity, and thus resolve not to help them.

The reality of the problem, however, is not so black-and-white. Levels of poverty are increasing at an unforeseen rate, and homelessness is becoming a larger and more pervasive problem whose scope hasn't been seen since the Great Depression. The most recent statistics show that there are between two to three million homeless individuals in the nation; 40% are families with children, 30% are substance abusers, 23% are severely mentally ill, 17% are employed, and 10% are veterans (Triplett, 2) As foreclosure and unemployment rates across the nation continue to rise, the numbers of individuals and families in shelters rise too.

All of the literature explains that homelessness is a complex issue to understand and its solutions remain elusive. The 'collective denial' of the American people has had troubling and severe consequences for the improvement of the status and well-being of homeless individuals, children, and families. A close examination of public views toward and myths about the

homeless population is as vital as analyzing the realities of homelessness; this will provide insight into how social inequality and exclusion problems arise and are manifested in society.

Assessment of Homeless Populations Today: Myths and Realities

Homelessness can be defined as a complex social problem with a web of economic and social factors, such as "poverty, lack of affordable housing, uncertain physical and mental health, addictions, and community and family breakdown" (Mago, 1), whose interactions contribute to the duration, frequency, and severity of homelessness.

The rapid growth of the homeless population has led to much informative study and media attention in the hopes of finding its causes and researching possible solutions. Since the early 1960s, the majority of educational and literary pursuits to identify and understand the issues surrounding homelessness have centered on transient adult men. However, beginning in the mid-1970s, The United States witnessed the rise of a new sector of poverty: homeless families. In fact, the U.S. Conference of Mayors reported that this group "comprises the fastest growing segment of the homeless population" (Nunez, 289). Although it is difficult to create a definitive count of the city's homeless population, recent tallies estimate that 10,000 single adults live in the city's shelter system while family shelters house approximately 10,600 families (Hirschfield, 2). This study focuses mainly on families and children in the shelter system:

> Homeless Parents and Families: The national average age of homeless parents lies between twenty and thirty-nine years of age, with a national median of 29; the New York average is twenty-four, with 37% between the ages of nineteen and twenty-one. The majority of homeless families are African American (58%), followed in frequency by whites (22%) and Latinos (15%); though whites make up nearly three-quarters of the

general population, they comprise less numbers of homeless families than African Americans, which make up only 12% of the U.S. population (Nunez, 290). On a national level, the overwhelming majority of homeless families consist of a female head of household, about thirty years of age, with two or three children. (Kerker, 546).Eighty-one percent of homeless parents are currently single, with 78% of these as single mothers.

Homeless Children: Children who experience long-term homelessness face an elevated risk of mortality, particularly those under the age of four and between twelve and seventeen, as compared with the general population of New York and those living in low-income neighborhoods (Kerker, 550). Homeless children also show a higher rate of lead contamination, potentially as a result of poor-quality housing environments.

There are various contributing factors to the rise of homelessness. For one, a lack of affordable permanent housing leads many families to homelessness. The statistics show that there is very little affordable housing available today and the possibility for its future production is slim; this dearth of opportunity has led many New York residents to view shelters as the low-income housing of today. In the late 1970s, the nation created 400,000 units of subsidized housing every year; for the years in the new millennium, the tally of new housing has ranged between 60,000 and 70,000. Meanwhile, housing costs rose an average of 639%, and New York residents faced a serious shortage of affordable housing (Triplett, 2).

Secondly, a lack of education among NYC adults leads to decreased job opportunities and economic advancement prospects: only 47% of homeless parents in New York City above the age of twenty-five have completed high school or attained a general equivalency diploma (GED), compared with 75% nationally. New York employment statistics are bleak, depicting

that only eight percent of the homeless population is currently employed, while thirty-four percent have never successfully held a job, and the remaining fifty eight percent have not worked in the last year (Nunez, 294).

Cuts to federal welfare programs and food assistance are attributed as a third contributing factor. Regarding public welfare, the vast majority of homeless families receive some type of public assistance, such as Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) , food stamps, Women Infants and Children (WIC) and Medicaid. Remarkably, more than half reported that this aid constituted their only source of income (Nunez, 295). Welfare cuts deeply and negatively affect poor individuals and families: 49% of homeless parents cited cuts to public assistance as the main cause of their homelessness.

Lastly, a lack of community intervention and prevention to ask-risk individuals and poor families adds to the number of homeless. It is important to note that, for most families, homelessness is not an isolated, brief, and random episode. Rather, it is often the result of a continuous financial struggled that is characterized by instability and frequent transfer of homes. On a national scale, more than one-third of homeless families have been homeless more than once in the past (Nunez, 292). In a city-wide study of homeless populations, findings showed that the "average cumulative length of stay [in shelters] for families was 307 days" (Kerker, 547). In most of these cases adequate services, such as job training, education, and child care, were not provided to at-risk families, and thus rendered them especially vulnerable to financial struggle.

Historical Attempts to Relieve Homelessness

Homeless is not a new problem to the United States; this nation has encountered large levels of poverty and homelessness for the last century. Prior to the 1930s, the responsibility to provide services to the poor, jobless, and homeless people fell mainly to private charities and local governments. However, the Great Depression of 1929 and the poverty-stricken years that followed overwhelmed the resources and abilities of the traditional service providers. To combat this dilemma, President Franklin Roosevelt initiated the New Deal Program in 1933, a huge undertaking that mandated federal government assistance to alleviate poverty and homelessness. As part of the New Deal, the Federal Emergency Relief Administration was established to provide support, such as food and medical care, to the nation's homeless, while the Works Progress Administration created jobs.

The start of World War II, however, signaled the end of the emergency-relief programs, and the issue of homelessness was not widely addressed until President Lyndon Johnson's "War on Poverty" in the mid-1960s, whose many provisions benefited homeless populations, particularly the enactment of the Social Security Act and Food Stamp Act. (Loehwing, 1).

The twenty-year period between Johnson's "War on Poverty" and the 1980s saw a steady decrease in homeless populations. To further enhance this progress, Congress signed the McKinney Act in 1987 after President Ronald Reagan campaigned to create the Interagency Council on the Homeless, an agency that would "coordinate the activities of federal agencies and designate $1 billion in federal funding for emergency food, shelter, care, education and job training for the homeless" (Triplett, 7). It also called on the Department of Housing and Urban Development (DHUD) to make underused and abandoned buildings available for use by the homeless.

The most recent attempts by government to reduce homelessness have been brought forward by the last two administrations. As of 2008, the Bush administration worked with DHUD to endorse a ten-year plan to end homelessness; though the end success has not been determined yet, motions have been set forward to work with local governments to enact programs to battle the increasing rise of this population. Additionally, the Obama administration has also put forth plans to end homelessness; Plan 2.0, "Opening Doors", calls to end chronic (long-term) and veterans' homelessness by 2015 and family homelessness by 2020.

Current Programs and Efforts to Combat Homelessness in NYC

One does not have to walk far in New York City to find a homeless individual sleeping on the street sidewalk or see somebody holding a cardboard sign stating "Will Work for Food." Such frequency of these occurrences can lead one to believe that the city government has done little to combat the growing rise of homeless adults, families, and children.

It is important to note, however, that New York has legalized and established some of the most "homeless friendly laws in the nation" (Nunez, 377). It has dedicated hundreds of millions of dollars to providing resources to the city's needy, including programs that offer shelter, food, health care, clothing, and support services such as job training and education programs. No other city in the United States guarantees the right to shelter for its citizens; a 1981 decree, pushed forward by Robert Hayes, mandates the accessibility of shelter for citizens who seek it. In fact, the program of emergency aid is so successful that in seven years of an annual tally of street homeless populations, a family has never been found on the street (Kerker, 546).

In New York, the Department of Homeless Services (DHS) supplies shelters and support services such as childcare, housing assistance, and health care referrals to homeless families. The

ultimate goal for the DHS is "to assist clients in achieving and sustaining independence from the shelter system (Campbell, 342). Created in 1993, the DHS made New York the "only city with a separate agency dedicated to the provision of services to the homeless" (Campbell, 341). DHS also works to run drop-in centers around the city, which are 24-hour centers that offer showers, meals, and social services to transient individuals who do not wish to live in, or are not suitable for, shelter settings (Campbell, 347).

Recently, the DHS coordinated a major change in its service approach by privatizing a great majority of its facilities. This change was led by a hope that privatization would allow the DHS to provide a wider array of programs to better meet the needs of the homeless population while also decreasing the costs of management. For example, new programs have been established in adult shelters to provide aid to those dealing with substance abuse, mental health issues, and unemployment. Improvements in already existing adult programs have also been implemented, allowing for adults to learn both parenting and life skills, such as stress management and stress coping.

New York has also led the establishment of "work plus housing", a system in which shelters provide support and skills training so that its residents and families learn responsibility, independence, and initiative. Rather than acting as "permanent warehouses for the poor" (Nunez, 378), the "work plus housing shelters" foster a nurturing and helpful environment that aids the temporary residents in attaining employment and connecting them with neighborhood services to promote their increased autonomy. In the city, "work plus housing" has already been enacted in numerous at-risk and poor neighborhoods; in them, parents return to their education while children enhance theirs, and parents learn how to decrease their dependence on public assistance.

Countless organizations have been established by the local government and citizens alike to raise awareness for the issues surrounding homelessness and provide both temporary and long-term assistance to needy individuals and families. One notable example is Picture the Homeless, a non-profit organization, run almost exclusively by homeless and formerly NYC homeless, which combines social outreach and advocacy in efforts to challenge stereotypes about homeless populations, campaign for systemic change, and improve the long-term standing of current homeless.

Suggestions for Future Action and Legislation

Despite all of the above mentioned statistics depicting the prevalence of homelessness in the city and efforts to decrease its expanse, there appears to be no end to the number of individuals and families in need of shelter in New York. Drastic changes in the pervasiveness of homelessness can be brought on through mass efforts to educate the public, redesign the city's housing system, restructure the existing social outreach organizations, and enforce the necessity of prevention programs for at-risk individuals and families.

Stigma of an uneducated public toward the homeless places much weight on the debate of providing needed services to the nation's poorest: the general public stigmatizes, discriminates, and excludes this growing group of people largely on the belief that the homeless are to be blamed for their status and must be held responsible for their errors and laziness. In the 1980s, the term homeless" was used by the general public to distinguish between the "typical alcoholic vagrant and the newly de-housed poor" (Schneider, 105). This new group of "homeless" was characterized as victims of governmental policy and structural changes—rather than blaming personal deficiency, this group was merely a negative by-product of neoliberal reforms that were

beyond their control. This idea of societal influence dramatically changed over the next decades, and homelessness is now increasingly viewed as an 'illness of the individual' instead of an effect of a poorly managed and structured social system. Education of the general public is vital in changing the perception of the homeless as people who lack capabilities to function in society; rather, the public must learn that societal changes place economic pressure individuals and families that are difficult to overcome. The idea that most homeless people have mental illness needs to change, as well.

Many share the concern that any resources provided to the homeless will be obtained "under false pretexts or would be used inappropriately" (Schneider, 103). Some fear that money given to a homeless individual will be squandered away on cigarettes and alcohol instead of food. Many citizens believe that handouts can "enable dysfunctional behavior and can be disincentives to work" (Triplett, 6). This mistrust of the homeless to use their resources responsibly leads to frustration and discourages their willingness to help improve the poverty of the homeless. Any future change in the social improvement of the homeless must be augmented by shifts in the public perception; education of the causes and statistics of homelessness will lead to a more understanding and supportive public.

It is evident that the current organization of shelters and temporary housing must be redesigned. In the current shelter system, the city of New York allocates between $1,500 and $2,000 monthly to house homeless singles and up to $3,500 monthly to shelter homeless families (Hirschfield, 4). These numbers greatly exceed the cost that would be spent on rent in most city suburbs; in order to improve the shelter system and decrease the costs of maintaining increasing homeless populations, the money spent on shelters should go toward building affordable housing. The structure of the Department of Homeless Services should be updated as well to

include a plan for evaluation and revision of current programs to measure their growth and identify areas for improvement. Mission statements should be reinforced, reminding all social workers within the agency of the ultimate goal of DHS: to place clients into long-term housing and achieve low rates of recidivism back into the shelter system. An improvement in the performance of these private agencies and social reform programs would "reduce the length of shelter stays, stabilize the size of the population in the shelter system, and enable more new clients to be served with a broad array of services" (Campbell, 345). This would lead to a noticeable decline in homelessness that would consequently be more economically beneficial for New York City.

Social work efforts to improve the health of the homeless population should focus on community-based prevention in low-income and at-risk neighborhoods. Emphasis should be placed on reinforcing shelter connections with valuable health care programs and services so families remain connected with these health care providers even after they have exited the shelter. In addition to reducing rates of recidivism and attaining long-term housing for individuals and families, the city's organizations should aid parents in registering their children in school, as well as encourage the advancement of their own education (Park, 434).

Recent studies show that while three-quarters of homeless individuals believe that a high school education is necessary for independence and achieving success, only 19% are actively registered in programs to overcome these obstacles (Nunez, 294). The implementation of education programs and other preventive measures will prove to be essential for combatting present and future homelessness. Health issues regarding homeless populations are critical, too; for example, families with children in city shelters would greatly benefit from future programs

that provide lead screening for children and parental education on the prevention of lead poisoning.

Other cities have witnessed success in decreasing homelessness by initiating "inclusionary zoning" legislation that requires high-rise condominium developers to additionally erect low-cost housing in another section of the neighborhood; this saves the government money by allowing the private sector to build desperately-needed affordable housing (Triplett, 14). On a separate spectrum, some cities have chosen to focus their efforts on preventive measures, like creating programs that help families already in the welfare system who face risk of becoming homeless in the near future.

Conclusion

Most citizens agree that local and federal governments should contribute heavily to combatting homelessness. The debate lies, however, in "what the government should do and how much it should spend doing it" (Triplett, 4). These 'pavement dwellers' pose important questions for the future of New York City and the efforts of the local government. Through the aforementioned suggestions, New York has the ability to transform shelters into "communities of opportunity" (Nunez, 378) and forever alter the lives of homeless individuals and families. These programs would give the homeless tools to enhance their lives, autonomy, and self-confidence and would begin to remove the stigma of being homeless.

Bill de Blasio, the City's upcoming mayor, will inherit an unprecedented growing crisis. The main idea to take away from the current homelessness prevalence is this: no problem is too big to solve. "You take each new [person off the street] as a victory", said Robert Hayes, one of the early advocates for social reform to combat homelessness in New York, "otherwise you

become absorbed in the pessimism at the size of the task" (Champion for the homeless). By taking one step at a time, New York City will serve as a beacon of light and hope for the nation and lead the successful campaign against homelessness. It all begins with a single step.

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