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# Conditions And Issues Involving The Homeless In New York City

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**Conditions and Issues Involving the Homeless in New York City**

**By**

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**Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
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# Chapter One: Hypothesis

The homeless crisis is getting worse. Both City Hall and homeless advocates agree on that. I plan to examine some of the significant conditions which lead to homelessness and some of the significant conditions which entangle the homeless in New York City. I plan to explore economic concerns as well as shelter options with regard to health and environmental issues.

In setting out to explore the homeless situation in New York City, I visited the streets of the lower East Side of Manhattan. I walked down Avenue A and Avenue B and came across several people who offered their first names only. I was able to interview a handful of people. The subjects were primarily males, middle-aged or younger. In observing the group of people it appeared that they slept on the street, on park benches when they were told not to move along by the police and in shelters when the cold was too difficult to bear. I did also meet a woman who was homeless and had two children. She reported that they did sleep in a shelter at night. She also mentioned to me that this was not her first time living on the street.

Many of the people that I have met told me that they came from dysfunctional homes or have experienced problems with the law or with mental illness. Despite claims that ordinary citizens are one step away from homelessness, the people I came across were far from ordinary. It is difficult to do such a study without having an emotional reaction. It is important for me to separate my emotions from an objective evaluation. With all the homeless people that I came in contact with I continue to have the point of view that homelessness is abnormal. I found interviewing homeless people rather disturbing. It

was certainly disturbing because it has been my belief that anyone should be able to get a job and have a home. My initial perspective was negated after speaking with the group in that there are many other factors one must take into account. Homelessness is not that simple, by that I mean there are so many other factors that come into play.

As basic needs are fulfilled, human beings want more things. If anything, the homeless do provoke a sense that people do not realize how little they really need to be happy. I also thought that if I did spend a full night on the street, something I did not do, I would have learned much more about myself.

As I researched my topic I discovered that the homeless situation since the late 1990s now included the working poor as well (The Second Decade, 2002). Currently there are 8,500 homeless families in the shelter system in all of New York City (Manhattan, Bronx, Queens, Brooklyn, and Staten Island) (The Second Decade, 2002).

I was first shocked at this alarming number and I believe now that this is a continuing crisis. By law, city officials are required to find beds for the homeless. The problem is they are coming in faster than the city has places to put the beds. As I begin to explore my research studies and have a better understanding of the crisis, I plan to set out to examine conditions that now include the working poor in New York City (Manhattan, Bronx, Brooklyn, Queens, and Staten Island). I believe that this study will show that with the lack of affordable housing more and more families are entering the homeless system. I plan to explore other more cost-effective, humane solutions to get families out of the shelter system and into permanent housing at a fraction of the cost of the current system.

More than a decade ago, New York City allowed the use of barracks-style shelters, an all too

familiar setting. The problem is that no “ideal” solution has been found in over twenty years. I believe that the current administration has to have some freedom to figure out a more effective way to deal with the homeless. In Long Island, for example, Governor Pataki has permitted the local welfare agencies in Nassau and Suffolk counties to provide a rent subsidy to move families out of the shelter system and re-direct some of the money that’s now being used on emergency shelter, but the governor has refused to provide that same authority in New York City (Bernstein, N. 2002). New York City offered families who were in the first thirty day period of the system to be placed in a “regular” apartment. The apartment is only for a limited period of time and there is pressure to move the occupant to a more permanent solution. It is important to remember that these temporary solutions of housing are by no means an answer to our current homeless crisis.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

It is important to understand that the problem with the shelter system is that families coming into the system can no longer go into emergency shelter and they end up sleeping on the floor of the office. The local authorities need to understand that these situations are only temporary shelter. The homeless are in shelters sometimes run by not for profit, sometimes run by private welfare hotel owners. The key factor here is that it costs \$3,000 a month and it should be much less expensive to provide rent subsidies to move people out (Pressman, 2002). The Giuliani administration had wanted to throw homeless people into the streets and put their children into foster care, and the court system rejected that move. What is known as Section 8 public housing is basically almost rent free housing. New York has almost 25,000 people receiving subsidies because the Human Resource Administration (HRC) has staff in every housing court that prevents evictions (Pressman, 2002). There are over 25,000 - - over \$100 million of subsidies that are going out to families in need right now (Pressman, 2002). There is a federal program called Section 8. It is a federal rent subsidy program, but it is not an entitlement program.

Families of the working poor appear to be hit the hardest by the combination of high housing prices, a legacy of the '90s and shrinking job opportunities. In New York, for instance, of the 80,000 people who lost their jobs in October, almost half were low-wage service workers (Marks, 2001). At the same time that demand for shelter and homeless prevention services is on the rise, providers report a funding squeeze as a result of tight state budgets and contributors who are tapped out by the terrorist



tragedies. Even groups that diversified their funding sources by requiring contributions from other shelter inhabitants are finding themselves in a bind. For instance in Georgia, several shelter programs are designed to help people re-enter the housing market by providing an array of services such as education, job training, and child care. Once someone in the family is working, he or she is required to pay thirty percent of their income to help pay for those services (Marks, 2001). Throughout my research I have not come across this policy where those have to pay back into the system as a program that is instituted in New York City. I do not know if a program like this would work where the recipient pays back into the system. While on paper it may look good, I don't know how one can expect to maintain their own apartment with thirty percent being deducted from their paycheck.

A study released by the National Low Income Housing Coalition in Washington found there is nowhere in the United States where a person working full time at a minimum wage can afford a typical two bedroom apartment (Marks, 2001). The wage pays for a one bedroom apartment in only ten jurisdictions. There is an extraordinary mismatch between rental housing costs and what low wage workers earn. With the housing market like that what you have is a dangerous situation where some people fall out of the game and become homeless. Because it is proved so difficult to create affordable housing without subsidies, housing advocates contend that to prevent another homeless crisis, there are only two alternatives: The government could step in with more subsidies and encourage the development of affordable housing, or it could increase the minimum wage (Marks, 2001). But many are doubtful the later will happen. So, homeless and housing advocates are hoping for increased money for subsidies.

Whether you are working for \$5.15 an hour or you are on public assistance receiving a \$286 a

month rent subsidy from the state, it is not enough incentive to move out of the shelter system or to avoid falling into the shelter “homeless” pattern. What happens with the homeless system is that you go to the front of the line. Being in public housing is a huge advantage to being in a “regular” apartment. It is highly subsidized since it reduces your housing costs. I am not saying that this is not a remedy; I am saying that if you go to the front of the line that you go in front of other people who have been waiting for many years.

Today most American communities plan how to manage homelessness - not how to end it. I believe that the first step in accomplishing this is to collect much better data at the local level. A second step is to create a planning process that focuses on the outcome of ending homelessness. I believe that the Department of Homeless Services are trying to do just this. I have discovered that the homeless system end homelessness for thousands every day, but they are just quickly replaced by others. People who become homeless are almost always clients of public systems of care and assistance (“End Homelessness,” 1999). Through my readings I have discovered there are those people who do enter and exit the system relatively quickly. The other group as discussed is those who are chronically homeless and chronically ill and they live in the shelter system and are heavy users of other public systems such as hospitals and jails. We all know and understand that people should be helped to exit homelessness as quickly as possible through a housing first approach (“End Homelessness,” 1999). For the others we need to provide permanent supportive housing with services, this solution I believe will save money as it reduces the use of other public systems. I do not believe that people should spend years in homeless systems, either in shelters or in transitional housing.

For mayors of cities it often seems that placing homeless people in shelters, while not the most

desirable course is at least the most inexpensive way of meeting basic needs. This is deceptive. The cost of homelessness can be quite high, particularly for those with chronic illnesses (“End Homelessness,” 1999). A recent study of supportive housing in New York City compared Medicaid costs for residents for six month periods prior to and after their move into permanent supportive housing. Reimbursements for mental health and substance abuse treatments decreased by \$760 per service user while reimbursements for inpatient and nursing home services decreased by \$10,900 (“End Homelessness,” 1999). According to a report in the New England Journal of Medicine, homeless people spent an average of four days longer per hospital visit than did comparable non-homeless people (Salit and Kuhn, 1998). The researchers conducting the study estimate that the excess cost for treating these homeless individuals was \$3.5 million or about \$2,000 per person (Salit and Kuhn, 1998). Emergency shelter is a costly alternative to permanent housing. While it is sometimes necessary for short-term crises, it too often serves as long-term housing. The cost of an emergency shelter bed funded by HUD’s Emergency Shelter Grants program is approximately \$8,067 (Salit and Kuhn, 1998). Perhaps the most difficult cost to quantify is the loss of future productivity. Decreased health and more time spent in jails or prisons, means homeless people have more obstacles to contributing to society through their work and creativity. Also, because many homeless children have such poor education experiences, their future productivity and career prospects may suffer. This makes the effects of homelessness much longer lasting than just the time spent in shelters.

The Department of Homeless Services is not just there to provide shelter. They are also there to get at the causes of homelessness and to address the issues. You cannot address homelessness just by building shelters. The city hopes to increase the number of New York City Housing Authority units

available to homeless families to 2,000 apartments, a fifty-seven percent increase over the current level (The Second Decade, 2002). There are long waiting lists for public housing; about five percent of the units become available each year (The Second Decade, 2002). The Bloomberg administration had decided to give homeless families an increased share of those existing units, whereas the Giuliani administration had decided to reduce the number earmarked for the homeless to offer more to working families. The plan would require shelter clients to look at two apartments per week and prohibit them from refusing housing options presented to them or they would risk losing the right to stay in shelters for thirty days. Families in that situation would have the option to place their children in temporary care while they sought housing alternatives. Clients need to understand and accept their obligation to seek and accept permanent housing.

People who are homeless spend more time in jail or prison. According to a University of Texas two-year survey of homeless individuals, each person cost the taxpayer \$14,480 per year, primarily for overnight jail ("Life After," 2000). A typical cost of a prison bed in a state or federal prison is \$20,000 per year ("Life After," 2000).

Under the Bloomberg plan, families could find it easier to enter the shelter system, because they will no longer be required to move from one shelter to another, night after night, before being assigned to a more steady location. For single adults who usually go to a centralized location where they wait in long lines and are fingerprinted, the Bloomberg plan allows them to go directly to the drop-in centers. The agency, however, had no clear goals, nor publicly disseminated measures by which others could measure the agency's progress.

The mission of the Department of Homeless Services, in partnership with public and private

agencies, is to provide temporary emergency shelter for eligible homeless people in a safe, supportive environment.

Homeless individuals or families should receive safe, temporary shelter; planning for permanent housing should begin immediately (The Second Decade, 2002).

- If preventive interventions cannot support an at risk individual or family in their current housing situation, temporary shelter should be provided.
- Temporary shelter is a short term intervention, not a substitute for permanent housing.
- Homeless individuals and families should receive a thorough assessment for placement into shelters with services that meet their particular needs and will expedite permanent housing placement.
- Children in homeless families should be assured access to a sound education by minimizing school disruptions that may occur as a result of becoming homeless.

Individuals should not have to make their home on the street or in other public spaces; safe and humane options should be available (The Second Decade, 2002).

- Effective outreach must be provided to encourage individuals living on the street to accept services and shelter.
- Practices that encourage individuals to live on the street are counterproductive and should not be supported.
- Safe environments must be provided that appropriately support individuals who fear service engagement.

All individuals and families deserve and are expected to actively participate in the development and implementation of their independent living plans (The Second Decade, 2002).

- Every individual and family deserves respect.
- Individuals and families must receive clear information and consistent services as they transition through the shelter system.
- Individuals and families should have permanent housing that is reflective of their assessed needs, including services, if necessary to support permanency.

Services must be provided with the goal of achieving the highest standards of practice through continuous quality improvements (The Second Decade, 2002).

- Every employee has a significant role in achieving positive outcomes for clients, regardless of rank or title.
- Providers must have the appropriate training and resources to enable them to achieve successful outcomes.

New York City Department of Homeless Services - Outcomes and Indicators (The Second Decade, 2002).

- Increase the number of people prevented/diverted from homelessness.
- Reduce street homelessness.
- Increase client engagement and responsibility.
- Reduce shelter length of stay.
- Reduce re-entries into the shelter system.
- Increase the number of trained staff.

- Maintain shelter safety and cleanliness.

If an individual or family is at risk of becoming homeless, then I believe that they should be served in their current housing situation through preventive measures. When an individual or family in need come to the City's attention, appropriate efforts should be made to explore options to allow them to remain in their current home.

Greater coordination among programs and agencies is facilitated when the information is shared. The clients that are served by the DHS are those in the single adult population that often struggle with mental illness and/or substance abuse. They frequently have been in the care of other public institutions. Many have criminal histories and have served time in prison or jail, often entering the homeless system when they are released. Although no agency monitors the number of clients entering the homeless services system from the mental health system, there is no doubt that the number is significant. Better planning and system-level coordination is required. It is my belief that to accomplish this task we will need to see an increase in state/city funding to deal with the homeless.

Effective outreach should be provided to encourage those individuals living on the street to accept shelter. Through my research it is difficult to gauge an estimate of the national number of street homeless, as it varies greatly. One method to remedy this situation would be to conduct a routine count of the street homeless to put planning together for future services.

The expanding growth of the family shelter population is the result of an increase in the length of stay for families. It requires a response to ensure that services are provided to the outside and within the temporary shelter service system. It is important that the families themselves need to have a proactive response to also working the system to move themselves toward permanent housing. I have

found that families that stay a longer time often have to resolve more complex family and social challenges to achieve their independence. As of April 2002 fourteen percent of families have been in the homeless services system for more than eighteen months (The Second Decade, 2002). The Division of Family Services is committed to reducing the length of stay for families. It is also important to create a new rental assistance program for long staying families. This assistance can be provided at two points in time - - as a preventive measure before they enter the system and after they exit the system. Please note that long staying families may not be able to obtain rental assistance due to eligibility requirements.

While we all know that we need a support team comprised of volunteers and advocacy groups it is essential that material assistance is also met. To escape and end homelessness it is a long process.

The lack of clean, well fitted clothes and shoes causes great hardship beyond exposure to the elements – it hurts one’s self image and the chance to move forward. And that is our ultimate goal in dealing with this crisis. It is important to help people that experience homelessness to contact their loved ones by offering them the opportunity to make free, long distance calls on holidays. Also, let’s encourage our companies, schools or places of worship to hire experienced homeless. I have found through my study that most unemployed homeless adults want to work, but an employer needs to first give them a chance. I don’t know if I am asking far too much with my last statement, but it would be interesting to gather further data to support this.



## Chapter Three: Methodology

The methodology I utilized was a survey questionnaire that I sent out to eighty individuals living and/or working in New York City. Of those that I sent out, I received fifty completed surveys back. In addition to the surveys I also spoke with homeless men and women throughout the last year which was instrumental in writing my paper. I chose to e-mail or hand-out the survey questionnaire to those respondents living and/or working in New York City since it was important to me to get a true indication from people who came in visual contact with New York City's homeless population on a daily basis.

Through my survey questions I was looking for elements of a plan to end homelessness. The questions that I asked were leading towards a development of a plan to end homelessness rather than manage it. There are two components. Every jurisdiction can collect data that allows it to identify the most effective strategy for each sub-group of the homeless population. Second, jurisdictions can bring to the planning table those responsible for mainstream as well as targeted resources. With the results of my survey questions, all of my respondents felt the most important add-on would be to build the infrastructure to end homelessness. The question regarding funding and tax dollars was often the next question brought up by all of the respondents. Many felt that to build the infrastructure would mean an increase in resident and commuter income taxes in New York City.

The shortage of affordable housing, since all of my answers were from residents who live and/or work in New York City, all felt that permanent housing was the first obstacle to tackle. The

second was that the federal administration needs to address the incomes of the working poor where their income does not pay for basic needs. Also, which was a surprise to me, was that many felt that there was a lack of appropriate services available for the homeless. I must admit before I started my research I also believed that to be the case. I realized through my research that there are a vast number of programs available to the homeless and working poor. Those programs for instance include housing assistance, job training and placement, substance abuse counseling and services to help the homeless reconnect with their families. At present there is very little local planning to end homelessness. New York City needs to go beyond the effort to create a full spectrum homeless assistance system which manages people's experience of homelessness. Through my questions I have come to realize that local economic policies need to develop long term plans where the goal is to immediately re-house anyone who becomes homeless. This system will involve agencies and programs far beyond the scope of the homeless assistance providers. Some responses that I did get back, as far as agencies that should be involved, were state/local mental health departments, public health, corrections departments, veterans departments and employment services providers.

For many of the men and women that I spoke with, the casual charity of strangers was a steady source of income and food. Some stationed themselves in the same spot along commuter routes day after day. Some of the homeless people that I spoke with also said that merchants could always be counted on for a meal or a cup of coffee. While this generosity does help out the homeless it does not get to the root of the problem and some that I interviewed felt that perhaps it just perpetuates the homeless situation.

## Survey Questionnaire

1. The Department of Homeless Services has done enough with the vast increase of homeless people entering the system.
2. Homeless individuals or families should receive safe, temporary shelter.
3. Planning for permanent housing should begin immediately upon entering the system.
4. Individuals should not have to make their home on the street or in other public spaces and safe humane options should be available.
5. All individuals and families deserve and are expected to actively participate in the development and implementation of their independent living plans.
6. Evaluation systems must be developed to accurately measure and recognize success.
7. Temporary shelter is a short-lived intervention not a substitute for permanent housing.
8. Effective outreach must be provided to encourage individuals living on the street to accept services and shelter.
9. Children in homeless families should be assured access to a sound education by minimizing school disruption that may occur as a result of becoming homeless.
10. An individual or family that can be supported within their current appropriate housing situation should not come into the homeless system.

Regarding the Department of Homeless Services and whether they had done enough with regard to the increase of homeless people entering the system, the split was: thirty felt that they have not done enough and twenty felt that sufficient work was being done. This tells me that the administration has a lot of work to do. Should homeless individuals or families receive safe, temporary shelter? The response was interesting; all fifty respondents agreed that individuals and/or families should receive safe temporary shelter. All of the respondents emphasized that this should only be a temporary solution. With regard to planning for permanent housing and if it should begin immediately upon entering the system, all fifty respondents strongly agreed that this was a must, not a surprise to me. Should individuals make their home on the street? All fifty said that in this country all people regardless of their economic situation should have a home. We all know that this is not the case and one reason that prompted me to research this subject. All fifty respondents were in agreement that an evaluation system must be developed to measure success. Effective outreach must be provided to encourage individuals living on the street to accept services and shelter. I was surprised with the response here, twenty people asked, how do we measure how much encouragement must we give to people? When I asked the question regarding children in homeless families and if they should have access to a sound education by limiting the time spent moving from shelter to shelter, all respondents agreed that it is important to provide some source of stability in this very unstable environment. I also collected some statistics on the respondents that answered my survey.

## Survey Statistics

Initial Survey Mailing 80 individuals

Male 50

Female 30

Completed Survey's sent back 50

Male 27

Female 23

### Marital Status

Male (Single) 8

Male (Married) 18

Male (Divorced) 1

Female (Single) 6

Female (Married) 14

Female (Divorced) 3

Age Group of Participants

Male 25 - 51

Female 22 - 52

Income of Participants

Male >\$50k but less then \$200k

Female >\$40k but less then \$125k

Education

Male College Grad + Graduate School

Female College Grad + Graduate School

## Chapter Four: Discussion

There has been a lot of talk recently about the growing problem of homelessness in New York City but some startling statistics released by city officials show how bad the problem really is. Imagine the entire village of Ossining, NY wandering the streets of New York City by day then checking into shelters at night. The city states that there are now 38,000 homeless people in New York City on a daily basis (Kaufman, .2002) It is a staggering number, but one that experts say will only go up.

There are more homeless people now than at any other time in the history of New York City. Homeless people have become more visible recently in places they have not been seen in years. Mayor Bloomberg states that he wants to be able to look the people of New York City in the eye and say, "The city is doing what a compassionate city should do" (Kaufman, 2002). Mayor Bloomberg said he is determined to improve conditions in the shelter system, but he also will not tolerate having people sleep in the streets. Mayor Bloomberg seems anxious to distance himself from former Mayor Giuliani's tough talk on the homeless. The administration has already proposed posting police officers at New York City shelters, which many homeless people say are far to dangerous.

The New York City Department of Homeless Services was established in 1993 to address the problem of homelessness. Over the last twenty years we have noticed a change in who is actually homeless. Through my research I have discovered that the new pictures are those of families who do not have a home. Policy makers and advocates define two main categories of homeless people: single adults and families. The single adult in the shelter system can be defined as those who are chronic users

to those who are only transitional short term users. Those adults defined as chronic use of the system are also associated with substance abuse and prison history. Compare this to the short term users and it is often associated with temporary unemployment.

The family system provides for two distinct populations, single mothers with children or two parents with children. It is often common that many family members may also be suffering from mental illness and drug abuse as well. Through research studies many characteristics of the single mother is one who is in her late twenties with two or more young children.

During the 1980's and 1990's families with children have been the fastest growing number entering the shelter system within New York City (Kaufman, 2002). Many of the families in the system are largely from a minority. Approximately 60-65% are African American, 30-35% Hispanic and less than 5% are white (Kaufman, 2002). When you compare these statistics to those of the general population on New York City it is quite alarming. According to the 2000 Census, NYC's general population is comprised of 24% African American, 27% Hispanic, 35% White and 10% Asian (Kaufman, 2002).

When you now compare the single adult population to that of the families in the shelter system I found that this population is also comprised of a large group of minorities as well. The single adult population is approximately 60% African American, 25% Hispanic, 15% White and a small percentage of Asians.

Through my research I also realized that the shelter population is aging which is and should be a growing concern for the Department of Homeless Services. The head of households in the family shelter system were between the ages of 18 -29 years old. (Kaufman, 2002). Now, compare this to



the homeless population of those over forty years of age and they have increased to almost twenty percent of the total homeless population (Kaufman, 2002). Because the system is now experiencing an older adult we are also noticing an increase in the number of children between the ages of 6 and 11 years old. The family shelter system is now accommodating far more school aged children than ever before (Kaufman, 2002). It is important for the school system to also become involved with these children to limit those that seem to “fall through the cracks”.

I have also researched the gender distribution of the homeless population in the shelter system and was surprised of the findings. Among the adults in the family system, nearly 70% are female (Kaufman, 2002). The male population has grown as a percent of the total by more than 5% since 1996 (Kaufman, 2002).

The changing demographics of the shelter population in New York City may have important implications for the homelessness prevention efforts. By conducting further research into the causes of the significant increases in the single adult and family shelter populations, as well as some of the significant demographic changes, DHS will be able to tailor prevention efforts to serve populations that are at an imminent risk of homelessness. I have also realized that the top priority of the DHS is to improve their data collection and analyze the data which in turn will facilitate housing permanency for homeless adults and families.

Through my research I have also learned that it is equally important to look at the destruction of Skid Row and how this has had an impact on homelessness. Single adults who once lived in skid-row hotels now live in shelters and bus stations. This occurred because the politicians and planners let developers replace “single room occupancy” hotels and rooming houses with higher end housing units.

The term SRO describes older buildings divided into single rooms that do not meet city's current standards for new construction (Jencks, 1994). Because building codes vary from city to city and are constantly changing, what gets counted as an SRO varies both from place to place and over time. There are three types of rooms that are relevant to problems of the poor: rooms without kitchens, rooms without bathrooms, and rooms in hotels and rooming houses. While the total number of one room units was essentially stable from 1973 to 1989, the number of people living in hotels and rooming houses declined from 314,000 in 1973 to 171,000 in 1983 (Jencks, 1994). The Census found 640,000 people with no permanent address in hotels and rooming houses in 1960 (Jencks, 1994). This figure was down to 320,000 in 1970 and 204,000 in 1980 (Jencks, 1994). The exact 1990 figure is uncertain, but it was on the order of 137,000. The Consensus therefore implies that the number of hotel residents fell by 120,000 during the 1970s and 60,000 during the 1980s (Jencks, 1994). Those who think the destruction of SROs played a major role in the spread of homelessness must also solve another problem. The residents of SROs while they are poor they are by no means as poor as most of today's homeless. I also wanted to know what would happen if NYC were to rebuild all of the SROs that were torn down between 1975 and 1985. Roughly speaking, that would mean creating 150,000 rooms of extremely low quality and renting them for an average \$150 a month. This may be far fetched on my part as the federal government states that no one should have to spend more than thirty percent of their income on rent. By this standard people will need an income of \$500 a month before they can afford a room costing \$150. Less than five percent of the homeless single adults who used NYC shelters and soup kitchens reported incomes that high.

I had to ask myself why are no more cheap hotels around? While the number of very cheap

rooms destroyed after 1980 was quite small, the fact that we lost any cheap rooms at all during a period of rising homelessness requires explanation. When extreme poverty increases and more people turn to free shelters, one also expects more people to seek out cheap hotels and rooming houses.

While tearing down cubicle hotels in the 1960s and 1970s did not make many people homeless at the time, I believe that the destruction of skid-row neighborhoods did make it harder to create housing for the very poor when the numbers began to rise again. Once skid row was gone, it was hard to find any other area that viewed the very poor as a commercial asset rather than a liability. That fact, combined with changes in the laws about panhandling and vagrancy, encouraged destitute single adults to spread out over the entire city, turning every doorway into a personal flophouse (Jencks, 1994).

Municipal policies that bar the creation of new cubicle hotels force the people who once patronized such places to live in shelters and public places. Yet NYC who listens to its citizens has few alternatives. The very poor are a tiny minority, and they hardly ever vote. Citizens who want the poor to live as far away as possible are a large minority, and they vote regularly. That leaves the poorest of the poor with nowhere to go.

With the poorest of the poor with nowhere to go, I believe it is important to look into the fact if shelters cause homelessness. By the late 1980s America had created a network of shelters and soup kitchens that serviced between 200,000 and 300,000 people per day (Jencks, 1994). Their goal was to improve the lives of the homeless and to a certain extent they did succeed. To say that people choose to become homeless seems indecent. But the homeless are not just passive victims. They make choices like everyone else. The choices that the homeless make are far worse than those open to most Americans, but regardless they are still choices. Consider homeless families. About two million single-

parent families currently live in someone else's home (Jencks, 1994). In a sense, all these families are already homeless.

Federal law gives priority to certain kinds of applicants, including the homeless. In New York City the homeless get very high priority. This is only true with the Bloomberg administration as we have seen with previous administrations such as Koch's. The Koch Administration housed most of the city's homeless families in welfare hotels, forcing them to wait well over a year for permanent housing. These hotels were nasty, dangerous places and most people moved out within a few weeks.

By the time Mayor Koch left office in 1989, the city was under court order to move the homeless out of welfare hotels, and the Bush Administration was trying to cut off federal funds for such places. Soon after David Dinkins became Mayor, the city began reducing the wait for permanent housing. At first this policy lowered the number of families in welfare hotels.

Even when homelessness is not a path to better housing, creating family shelters will pull some single mothers out of conventional housing. Shelters for battered women are the most obvious example (Jencks, 1994). The whole point of these shelters is to lure women out of conventional housing and into a shelter. If this effort succeeds, the number of people counted as homeless will rise. The women in question are better off, and so is society. But that is not always obvious to casual observers, who find it easier to ignore these women's situations when they suffer behind closed doors. Once they are officially homeless, their troubles become, at least in some small measure our troubles. Physical abuse is not the only force pushing families into shelters and welfare hotels.

The prospect of a free bed may be enough to pull some single adults out of other people's homes.

It is important to note that I not be misunderstood. I am not suggesting that anyone prefers

living in a shelter to living in a place of their own. But for the poorest of the poor these are seldom the choices. For them, the choice is usually between different kinds of homelessness. That may be living in someone else's home, living in a shelter or living on the streets. Each of these options, if that is what they are has different costs.

No one, whether rich or poor wants to spend all of his or her money on housing if he or she can avoid it. If shelters become more attractive or more widely available, or if changes in police practice make the streets more hospitable, some people who have been living in very cheap hotels may well spend fewer nights in hotels and more nights in places that are free (Jencks, 1994).

Homelessness also feeds on itself. For those of us who have never been homeless, the prospect is quite fearsome. We do not know our way around the shelters, soup kitchens, and other places where the homeless congregate. People who have been homeless before will be able to cope with the system better than those entering for the first time. By 1990, 5.3 percent of all grownups said they had slept in a shelter or on the streets at some point in their adult life (Jencks, 1994).

Some partial solutions to the homeless situation are to make shelters habitable. The first step as noted earlier is that better housing is one way to deal with the problem. With stable housing this affords people the avenue to put their lives back on track. I am a firm believer that with improved housing the rest of their life may improve as well. The worst scenario is that if it does not improve at least they have a home.

Unlike programs that seek to improve people's character, programs that seek to improve their housing are comparatively easy to devise and evaluate (Jencks, 1994). The simplest test is whether people use them. Through my research only about fifty percent of the homeless use the shelter system.

If housing is as important to the homeless as I noted, then their reluctance to use the shelters does require an explanation. Some advocates believe the problem is simply a lack of beds, but that is just not the case. In September 1998, shelter managers told HUD that 35 percent of their beds had been vacant over the course of the previous year (Jencks, 1994). It is important to note that everyone that shows up to a shelter door gains admission for the evening. New York, Philadelphia and Washington are the only major cities that guarantee everyone shelter. Many exclude people who appear to be drunk, hallucinating or high on drugs. These policies keep out a significant fraction of the homeless on any given night. And once a shelter has turned a man away or asked him to leave, he is often reluctant to come back, even when he is sane enough or sober enough to be admitted. There is no easy way out of this dilemma. A shelter that admits everyone, such as New York City's will scare away many of its potential clients. A shelter that makes strict rules will also drive away many of the homeless seeking shelter for the evening. The only solution would be to give everyone a private space of their own.

To do this we need to spend more money. But taxpayers will only agree to spend more money if we ask more of the homeless in return. Simply warehousing the homeless in better places would do nothing to restore their self respect or return them to the larger society. For that, they must be given some form of responsibility. At the beginning of entering the system we need to distinguish between families with children, single adults who can be expected to work and single adults who we do not expect to work.

I also need to address the issue of deinstitutionalization which occurred in New York City between the years of 1965 and 1977. During this period New York released over 126,000 patients from the state hospitals in the New York City area (Hopper, 2003). The real forces of displacement

proved to be the living circumstances confronted by people with diminished coping skills and low tolerance for stress. Especially relevant for this group was the growing scarcity of what had been housing for thousands of ex-patients, the SRO residential hotels. With no place to stay many of the homeless were forced to “sleeping rough”. By this I mean the homeless slept on the streets or in the city parks. In 1982, a survey conducted that 62 men and women were sleeping along the southern perimeter of Central Park on a permanent basis. Long periods of uninterrupted sleep on the street were difficult to come by. The homeless found that the only way to ensure a nights sleep was that they would need to find a hidden spot, away from patrolling cops, maintenance workers or people just walking by.

While we may think that those on the street of some sort of apparent orderliness as they use public space, we certainly cannot ignore the rough and seamy side of the street. This was told to me by the people that I conducted my survey with. I was told that trafficking in drug sources was quite commonplace. This was done openly or sometimes done behind the scene. The brief bursts of violence were usually clumsy scuffling, though knives and clubs were used at times.

Advocates for the homeless usually argue that drug use, like mental illness, is a product of homelessness. New York City shelters are full of crack cocaine, and in some of the shelters, sharing drugs has apparently become the nexus of social life, in much the way that sharing a bottle of alcohol was twenty years ago. This could mean that a lot of people begin using crack because they are homeless rather than the other way around. I have not found through my research studies that crack’s role is pushing people onto the streets; it clearly does help to keep them there though.

A large fraction of the single adults in the New York shelters who test positive for cocaine presumably

think that a crack high, however brief, is worth more than a SRO cubicle (Jencks, 1994). I believe that we need more reliable information on where the homeless get their money and how they spend it. But the only way to collect better information is to spend endless hours with the homeless, observing what they do instead of just asking them about such matters on surveys. Whatever their current budgets look like, we have to assume that a significant proportion of today's homeless will spend any additional cash they receive on drugs or alcohol. This is likely to be true regardless of whether the extra money comes from a government check or from individual handouts. If even a third of the money we give the homeless ends up improving the quality of their lives, it would yield more happiness than most of what we spend on ourselves.



## Conclusion

Many consider the fifth and final chapter of their thesis to be the most important. By its very nature, homelessness is impossible to measure with 100% accuracy. Twenty-five years ago there was not wide spread homelessness in our major cities, especially New York City. Tonight, though, nearly one million people will be homeless, despite a two billion dollar a year infrastructure designed to deal with the problem. While the seeds for homelessness were planted in the 1970s and 1980s with deinstitutionalization of mentally ill people and loss of affordable housing stock, wide-spread homelessness did not emerge until the late 1980s. Several factors have affected its growth over the last twenty years. Housing has become scarcer for those with little money. Earnings from employment and from benefits have not kept pace with the cost of housing for low income and the working poor. Services that every family needs for support and stability have become harder for very poor people to afford or to even find.

More important than knowing the precise number of people who experience homelessness, is New York City's effort to make the necessary steps to ending it. It is through my research that I have discovered that Mayor Bloomberg's decision is to take a very different stance to tackle this growing population. I have encountered that many people often think of those who are homeless as people we view sleeping on the sidewalk or going through the trash to retrieve cans and bottles. While that is true to a certain extent the ever increasing population now consists of the working poor in New York City. These are single mothers with two or more school age children and two parent households as well.

Their jobs only pay a minimum wage and it is not enough to afford housing in the metropolitan area. Many of the people have been forced out of their apartments by fire or because they could just no longer afford the rent.

While my research does support that the working poor are our “new” homeless population, I must admit that I was visibly moved that in our country and in this region this was the best that we as a nation could do. I strongly feel that anyone who is working should have access to affordable housing, but I have come to realize this is just not true. We have noticed the real estate market has driven the economy and therefore landlords are pushing the boundaries of where the working poor can afford to live. It also was alarming for me to realize that the United States generates homelessness at a much higher rate than I thought when I started my paper.

Most of the people that I spoke with did fit into the categories where they were either a part of a deviant subculture, or they were mothers who were just dealt a bad hand. On the other hand, I did speak with some men who I felt were just ordinary men, which suggests to me that at times homelessness can happen to anyone. It is true to remember that at times economic factors come into play for some more often than personal factors.

While it does appear from my research that the homeless have not chosen their paths, they nevertheless find themselves in a dismal state. To summarize there are a multitude of reasons for homelessness inclusive of gender issues, mental illness, criminality, drug addiction and economics. While I have found it difficult to point to one as the ultimate cause, solutions are largely in the economic camp. While the homeless do have certain shared basic needs, including affordable housing, adequate incomes and health care; some need additional services such as mental health or drug treatment in order

to remain securely housed. I have found through my research that all of these needs must be met to prevent and end homelessness. Reasons for homelessness vary as I discovered during my interview process, as well as the research does reveal a variety of causes. Yet, solutions are far from adequate in a world that has both plenty and poverty within single cities.

Taking all of the necessary steps will change the dynamic of homelessness. While it will not stop people from losing their housing, it will alter the way in which housing crises are dealt with. We know how to prevent homelessness. We just need the political will and the resources to do it. I strongly believe that if we deal with the people who are chronically homeless and provided good prevention services for families that are on the edge, we may be able to solve the problem. I plan to follow the efforts of the Bloomberg Administration over the next few years to see if we really do make progress to curb the homeless problem and to evaluate affordable housing for the working poor in New York City.

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