Homelessness

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Glossary

Compassion fatigue A term used to reflect the public's saturation with increased homelessness and a shift to perceiving the homeless as responsible.

Deinstitutionalization A trend or policy to decrease the number of hospitalized mental patients.

Existentialism A philosophical perspective that studies the meaning of having free choices in a finite existence.

Feminization of poverty A condition in which women, especially older women, are at increased economic risk due to lower wages, early pregnancy, divorce, and abandonment.

Gentrification An urban transition that typically includes the purchase of low-income housing and its renovation into upper income residences such as condominiums.

Homeless People who have no residence address of their own.

Marginalization A condition in which policies erode the social standing of a person or group of persons.

Negative rights A concept that imposes obligations to refrain from acting in proscribed ways.

Positive rights A concept that imposes obligations to act in a required manner or have required goods.

Wealthy poor Thousands of upper middle and middle-class people who lost their homes because of foreclosures and the failed financial institutions that were relied on for their continued wealth and security.

Introduction

Homelessness is a social condition, not a problem. It reflects the rapid changes of contemporary culture. It involves diverse groups, all of which are extremely poor. The definition of homelessness is complex because it is intricately related to the identifiable attributes that change, shifting some into the class of working poor and then back again. In a sense, the meaning of homelessness seems circular – that is, anyone without a home or, more generally, without an address of their own. The Stewart B. McKinney Act of 1987, which was updated in 1994, provides a more qualified definition. It considers a person as homeless when he or she

> lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence, and has a primary night residency that is (A) a supervised publicly or privately operated shelter designed to provide temporary living accommodations ...; (B) an institution that provides a temporary residence for individuals intended to be institutionalized; or (C) a public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings.... The term 'homeless individual' does not include any individual imprisoned or otherwise detained pursuant an Act of Congress or a state law.

There has been an increase in families and single mothers among the homeless, which prompted the U.S. Congress to extend the definition under the McKinney–Vento Act. This statute states that

> the term 'homeless child and youth' (A) means individuals who lack a fixed, regular and adequate nighttime residence ... and (B) includes: (i) children and youth who are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason; are living in motels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to lack of alternative accommodations; are living in emergency or transitional shelters; are abandoned in hospitals; or awaiting foster care placement; (ii) children and youth who have a primary nighttime residence that is a private or public place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings ...; (iii) children and youth who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings; and (iv) migratory children ... who qualify as homeless for the purposes of this subtitle because the children are living in circumstances described in clauses (i) through (iii).

Thus, included among the homeless are those people who reside with family or friends and, after a short stay, either from a sense of pride or personal conflict, join the many who seek refuge on the streets for a place of privacy and safety. The homeless are basic needs seekers; they are people without a key to a place of solitude. Homelessness is endemic to the human condition that

grips those most vulnerable to economic and political shifts. It is only since the early 1990s that philosophers have examined this condition.

There are several philosophical perspectives on homelessness. The first is the existential viewpoint. There is loss of personal space and privacy that threatens security. Philosophers speak of the homeless peoples' estrangement from oneself and alienation from their ideals that gave life meaning. Space transforms the experience of being homeless, whether it is the public space that becomes the dwelling space or the personal space that is exhausted by surrounding onlookers as dignity erodes. The second focuses on the social and political dimensions of homelessness. These are among the most prevalent concerns of those addressing this subject, and they include matters of public policy formulations that omit consideration of this group, as in the rezoning introduced in some urban areas would exclude low-income housing, or restrictions that would exclude low-income housing, or restrictions imposed on activities that can be conducted in parks that, by circumstance, discriminate against the homeless dwelling in public places. This domain asks for fair treatment of those groups whose lives have become impoverished while the same principle elevates and enriches the lot of others in society. Third is the moral perspective in which the issue becomes one of access to be treated as persons and not as disposable objects of economic policy. One central question ethicists address concerns what moral obligation a society has to render a group the basic needs to pursue a life of happiness. On the question of this claim right, there is no simple or uniform response.

Sustained Profile of the Homeless

Misconceptions: Facts and Folklore

The common perception about the homeless is that they are vagabonds — lazy and aimless people who either choose to not have the responsibility of employment and property or, once down on their luck, have no desire to continue in the social system. This is a general feature shared by the earlier -romanticized wanderers referred to as hobos or tramps. These are subgroups of the homeless, and throughout the late nineteenth century their lifestyle became synonymous with boxcar riders, never remaining in any one place for any length of time. The distinguishable characteristics are small, but all are without stable homes. The tramps were seen as immigrants trying to absorb into the culture and become accepted. Their lack of skillful experience and education sustained their distance from the inner wheel of the economic and social life. The more generalized homeless were more diverse than the tramps, vagabonds, and hobos because the common feature among the homeless is that they comprised women and men. They originated from the urban setting and often had skills to apply. The industrial emergence brought with it

the swings of high and low productivity that created the lapse periods of employment among the homeless. The hobos and tramps, to a lesser extent, relied on short-term odd jobs, or some selected seasonal laborer jobs, whether agricultural or industrial, that arose in different areas of the country. Although they were gainfully employed, it was inadequate to sustain a different and often difficult lifestyle.

The Great Depression in the early 1930s ushered in the features of homeless men and women we recognize in contemporary society. Yet the perception today is still that the homeless are predominantly unmarried males who are often thought to be mentally ill or addicted to drugs and alcohol. Why must they be out in the elements? Don't they have somewhere to go? These repeated questions among city dwellers reflect the assumption that there is a place for these people to go, such as shelters or churches, but that they exercise their independence by remaining on the street.

Part of this misconception is due to the lack of public policy attending to the needs of the homeless; there was not sufficient information of their plight until the late 1960s. Sociologist Peter Rossi conducted one of the most concentrated studies of the homeless in Chicago, in which he accounted for the changing perspective on this population, which he distinguished as the old and the new homeless. The figure of the old homeless derives from a study in New York City's Bowery (1969–72). It found that the old homeless consisted mostly of older white males whose alcohol abuse and the paucity of jobs offered few alternatives to the street life.

The new homeless are younger and have less money than the older group. Within this modern profile, the economic factor was central to determining the rise of homelessness. The term 'poverty' conjures up images of people who are unemployed and abandon the personal struggle to overcome blights associated with their condition. Yet, in 2008, it was estimated that 42% of the homeless population in the United States were working minimum-wage jobs. This fact about working poor and homeless has persisted. For example, the reported annual income of Chicago homeless in 1958 was $1058. In 1986, Rossi reported it to be $1198. In 2009, the National Health Care for the Homeless Council reported that an employee who works 40 h per week at minimum wage will earn $15 080 annually, four-fifths of the poverty level threshold for a family of three — $18 310. A renter with full-time employment would not be able to afford a one-bedroom apartment. The purchasing power of the minimum wage is at a 51-year low. Economic depravation and political marginalization are sustained traits of the new homeless. Surprisingly, they are younger and better educated, not as many are alcoholics, and some have jobs but cannot earn enough to pay for rising rent costs and medical insurance. This transformation of the homeless reflects the changed social and economic conditions for

which the attainment of a shelter would not be sufficient as a solution. Proposing shelters as the solution would be equivalent to doing nothing. There is no acknowledgment of ending homelessness with this approach. The stay time in shelters is generally limited or attached to conditions (e.g., religious or mental hygiene) so that many resist such temporary relief as another source of control.

The New and Unexpected Faces of the Homeless

The new homeless are a mixed population. Advocates and social scientists disagree on the number of homeless. In 2007, advocates from the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty estimated that 3.5 million people, 1.35 million of them children, experience being homeless during a year. However, analysts believe the count to be 300 000 to 750 000. The discrepancy lies in the methodology for identifying the homeless recognized on the street and the different numbers occupying beds in shelters. The ratio between the two gives a sum of how many are in any area. Advocates contend that there are a greater number of homeless who are hidden and will not allow themselves to be exposed publicly. Many of them reside in cars, campgrounds, or other inconvenient places for researchers to access and verify they are homeless. There are also conditions in which they double up and only half are accounted for. The more accurate method is counting the sleeping locations, whether emergency shelters or transitional housing, or those using vouchers for accommodations. These sources can provide counting of prevalent homeless over time, referred to as period prevalence. In contrast to this method is the point-in-time method, which counts people in the street, soup kitchens, shelters, and clinics. The point-in-time method is criticized as unreliable because it runs the risk of double counting the same person in different locations or counting those who find short-term lodging with a friend or family and who are thus no longer homeless when the study is reported. In 2007, the National Alliance to End Homelessness reported a point-in-time estimate of 744 313 people experiencing homelessness. Whatever the actual count is, there is an alarming percentage of mentally ill people as part of this group. Researchers indicate that 50% suffer from a form of mental illness, whereas those who are substance abusers (alcohol and drugs) represent 35–40%. The remaining 10% comprise families and children. Among the latest studies of homeless groups, the number of women has been rising faster than any other group. There are some understandable reasons for this: Women, as single parents, cannot afford to pay rent, feed their children, care for them by purchasing medication when needed, or provide the comfort of silence for bonding relationships. They are quickly growing in number, suggesting that even if they are employed, without affordable housing they move their family to a shelter or the streets. This growing trend is referred to as the feminization of poverty.

The most devastating effect of homelessness is noticed in children. Not only is their health in jeopardy due to lack of proper nutrition but also education is interrupted by either the constant mobility of their parent or their own lack of motivation resulting from embarrassment and resentment. It becomes more difficult for a mother with even the best intentions to hold the unit together as she balances whatever work she can find and a day care for her child to attend, usually at the shelter where they have taken residence. However, it is reported that some shelters introduce a new set of challenges: mean-spirited older children and unclean premises.

There are always reports about people being left homeless after natural disasters. The brush fires that sweep through Southern California, the rising rivers in the Midwest sweeping homes off their foundations, and devastating hurricanes in the Southeast that level communities are a few examples. In 2008, quite an unexpected group joined those classified as homeless, although their circumstances are distinctively different. The higher income earners, for the most part, comprised this group. They lost their lavish homes due to subprime mortgage schemes conducted by realtors, Wall Street bankers, and insurance companies. Housing rates were inflated to such an extent that home loans in excess of $150 000 were awarded to people with $35 000 per year income and with a long history of bad credit. Loan agencies gave inflated ratings to borrowers on whom they never checked. These subprime mortgages were bundled together and sold to investors on Wall Street as collateral debt obligations. These were turned over in the market as if they were bonds. Other loan recipients, although earning six-figure incomes, entered the market with designs on owning a house that was well beyond their means. They were offered an appealing low interest rate whose loan principal rose rather than declined. In a short period of time, their mortgage payments swelled and they could no longer make the payments. They defaulted, which left them homeless. In a very short time, the least likely people, many of them upper middle class and middle class, were homeless. In Southern California, the new and unexpected homeless set up tent cities that expanded with every failed loan and mortgage. A new class of vagabonds dwell together, sharing their frustration as they try to regain hope and a measure of dignity. When we compare residents of tent cities with traditional homeless people, one common element is clear: the economy. However, contrast with the traditional homeless is stark against the plight of the wealthy poor; greed and self-interest clouded their reason and prudent judgment.

The Causes of Homelessness in the United States

There are five common sources of homelessness: (1) rising unemployment, (2) a decrease in the number of wage opportunities, (3) gentrification of the city and increased cost of housing, (4) deinstitutionalization of mentally ill patients from supervised care, and (5) feminization of poverty. For the unexpected homeless population, there is a sixth cause described previously – artificial inflation of the housing market.

The first two sources can be attributed to diminished corporate loyalty and the aim for profit maximization above all other considerations. Pushed by the global markets to remain competitive, technological advances are made without consideration of the human factor, the dedicated years of service by employees, and the tax incentives provided by the community. As corporations in the United States shift their manufacturing to other countries because of lower wages, more unskilled laborers in the United States are unemployed and communities transformed. Typical examples include plant relocation either in or outside of the United States, corporate mergers and takeovers of established companies, downsizing, and the restructuring of corporate production. The absence of manufacturing goods has had a major impact on earning power but also on a laborer's self-image as a contributor to the social good.

Since the economy shifted from industrial producers to service in a rapid phase from 1979 to 1984, 11.5 million people have lost their jobs to deindustrialization. The percentage of Americans living below 50% of the federal poverty level has increased every year since 2000. In April 2009, the U.S. Department of Labor reported that the rate of poverty in the United States rose from 11.3%, or 31.3 million people, in 2000 to 12.5%, or 37.3 million people, in 2007, witnessing a slight decline from 12.6% in 2005 although not statistically different – and approximately 65% of those families included at least one worker. With the unemployment rate up to 9.5% in April 2010, the highest in 14 years, more people are expected to fall into poverty as a result of job loss.

The third source of homelessness, the gentrification of the city, stems from the diminishing availability of affordable housing in central urban areas. Gentrification involves the purchase and restoration of older residences by middle-income earners, landlords, and developers. These developers purchase apartments and rooming houses and convert them into single-family upscale apartments or condominiums. Although the old neighborhoods are revitalized by higher income residents, the poor are displaced.

The fourth contribution, the deinstitutionalization program for mental patients, began more than 30 years ago under President Kennedy. Mainstreaming patients into community life in conjunction with a network of community mental health centers (CMHCs) was believed to be an asset of this program. The CMHCs were designed to serve chronically severe patients once released so that there would be continued care. However, these centers ended up focusing on preventative care because they were not sufficiently funded to staff appropriate professionals. They spent their time on the worried well, and those in need wandered the streets because most shelters do not admit people with psychiatric problems.

Feminization of poverty raises the concern of fueling the cycle of poverty and homelessness because it affects mothers or potential mothers. This was previously discussed as a growing concern that has emerged out of the traditional masculine socioeconomic structure. Many women, particularly single parents, are on the threshold of poverty. High costs of child care, health care, and housing often put them on the street.

The sixth cause of homelessness affected the unsuspecting. These are the victims of financial institutional failures. Through willful neglect of fiduciary duties, loan agencies, banks, insurance companies, and bond raters caused homelessness and long-lasting deep losses to the financial security of millions of innocent people.

The Moral Status of Homelessness

Marginalized Citizenship

There is ongoing discussion among philosophers about the political standing of the homeless. As numbers increase, the demand for shelter or any sort of warm cavern – doorways, sidewalk grids over subways, park benches, and abandoned and public buildings – also increases. Although their hunkering down for a night in these places raises conflicts of interest among other citizens, the homeless appear to claim them as if their own. The question of proprietorship over public space pits those who have material goods and dutiful lives against those who apparently do not.

At the 1991 U.S. Conference of Mayors, it was estimated that homelessness increases at a rate of 25% each year. An example of the exasperation is the callous treatment of the homeless in major U.S. cities: In Seattle, Washington, an attempt was made to move them away, whereas in Atlanta, Georgia, Andrew Young offered them a ticket home. In Phoenix, Arizona, garbage was declared public property so that picking through trash was considered theft. Laws have been written to insulate society from this group and have thus invited charges of human rights violations. N. V. McKittrick studied the struggle of the homeless people in the legal context. This struggle was given emphasis by the late U.S. Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, who observed that the homeless are politically powerless inasmuch as they lack the

financial resources necessary to obtain access to the most effective means of persuasion.

Moralists and legal scholars have crafted arguments supporting the rights of the homeless to exercise choices worthy of being human. They have addressed the fundamental issues of disenfranchisement, denial of dwelling space, safety, food, and health care. Many advocates for the homeless have waged campaigns against hunger and poverty, such as Mitch Snyder, who was instrumental in forming the Coalition for the Homeless. A greater awareness of their plight and vulnerability in the public square motivated another advocate, Maria Foscarinis, to form the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty. The center's focus was on strategies of defense against social assaults on liberty expressed by the homeless occupying public space. It extended to fighting for services that include emergency relief shelters, substance abuse programs, soup kitchens, and employment consulting. The compassion to assist the down and out goes through waves. Charitable contributions to soup kitchens and shelters that provide sustenance and care go a long way to resurrecting the self-regard and dignity of many homeless. This phase of compassion and the politics that is mounted to support it runs against the intolerance of others who have formulated arguments that place the burden on those who are homeless. Tolerance and frustration regarding the complexity of the condition result in the development of compassion fatigue, and this extends to city officials. Kim Hooper remarked that the two-sided perspective on the homeless is viewed as a tension between providing sanctuary for the helpless and disciplining the unruly that reflects the characterization of the deserving and undeserving poor.

Moral Rights and Duties

The rights claims made on behalf of the homeless to ensure that basic needs are met are grounded in their value of personhood. These claims honor both positive and negative rights. The argument is made that the duty of a bountiful society to provide liberty, shelter, and food to its citizens is derived from principles of fairness. Each person has the right to have his or her own needs satisfied and to pursue happiness. When the distribution of wealth is concentrated so that it serves to benefit the least needy while the most needy receive woefully less so that their choices cannot be qualitatively changed, an underclass is reinforced. Social position, along with a person's self-esteem, is profoundly compromised.

Moralists suggest that respecting negative rights of individuals, namely not to interfere in their lives, is central to autonomy and self-respect. Because certain communities grew tired of the homeless sleeping in parks and doorways, they intervened, sweeping streets and buildings and placing them in shelters. The rationale given is that it is for their own safety. That such occurrences came before conventions questions the sincerity of the intervention. After judicial intervention and social activists championed the homeless cause, the moral imperative of prevention was begun. The balance between respecting the autonomy of these persons in need and the occasion of paternalism through intervening measures of help is the aim of prevention and assistance programs.

In the United States, services have begun to assist low-income renters and homeowners to avoid eviction or foreclosure. Mediation between landlords and tenants is sometimes offered, and financial assistance is made available along with household management advice. Such efforts are aimed to keep the family intact. Beyond prevention, some programs are designed to assist the homeless to achieve a stable home life. The Stewart B. McKinney Homelessness Act (1987) has undergone refinements to allocate funding to communities that need shelter, food, and counseling. The Housing and Urban Development program responded in 1996 with Shelter Plus Care, which provides rent subsidy and case management connected to counseling for the homeless.

Housing with supportive services seems to be successful in reducing homelessness. Dennis Culhane found increased turnover rates in family shelters when subsidized housing, mostly without services, became available, indicating that proportionally fewer families returned to shelters. The conclusion is that no matter how much these numbers are reduced, it is only temporary. This has been demonstrated in studies that attempted to coordinate services among the various social systems. Some propose fair housing laws, available space in vacant houses, and better coordinated transitional housing to meet the needs of the homeless.

Clearly, these are not immediate solutions, but they are recognized social responses to meet the rights claims of the homeless. As homelessness is more carefully followed, its random nature may become more appreciated, and the realization that it could happen to any one of us or our neighbors may have a sobering effect on moral attitudes toward the homeless.

See also: Existentialism; Mental Disorder, Concept of; Needs and Justice; Privacy, Challenges to; Rights Theory.

Further Reading

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Biographical Sketch

G. John M. Abbarno is Professor of Philosophy at D'Youville College. He has published numerous journal articles on value theory and applied ethics in business and medicine, and he has edited a book on the ethics of homelessness. He holds visiting professorships at several Chinese universities, where he lectured extensively on the previously mentioned philosophical areas. He is co-editor of the *Journal of Ethics & Axiology* from the Hubei Institute in Wuhan, China. In addition, he is a former president of the American Society for Value Inquiry and the International Society of Value Inquiry. He is the current president of the Conference on Philosophical Societies and is a board member of a soup kitchen that serves the homeless in Buffalo, New York.