

Homelessness: Scientific Research and Current Studies

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ABSTRACT: *This review takes stock of current social science studies on homelessness. Research on homelessness in the 1980s has been motivated by the increasing numbers and visibility of homeless individuals including men, women, and families, as well as young people without families. Most empirical research uses a working definition of homelessness as the situation of those individuals who are without a permanent place to reside. However, a broad variety of views vary about what homelessness is. In part, this reflects awareness of the dynamics of homelessness that involve periodic mobility in and out of homeless circumstances. But it also reflects shifts in societal attitudes about what constitutes sufficient housing. Research indicates that the demographic of homeless people is varied, but most homeless persons are young and single. Many have significant chronic issues including mental illness, alcoholism, physical impairments, and poor health. A substantial proportion have criminal backgrounds. Many were reared in foster care settings. All suffer from economic hardship, and many have suffered long-term unemployment. Considerable dispute occurs about the number of homeless people, in part because the lack of resources to address this issue politicizes the discussion. There is also considerable debate about the underlying causes of homelessness.*

KEYWORD: *Employment, Homeless, Homelessness, Informant, Poor.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Social scientists' predicting scorecard has undoubtedly documented more failures than triumphs. The assertions that homelessness in America was going to vanish in the 1950s and 1960s are among the most recent forecasting errors. Rather of decreasing, homelessness increased dramatically in the 1980s. Homelessness is now regarded as one of the country's most serious social issues. Social science research on homelessness exhibits a high degree of politicization, in addition to the set of traditional problems that afflict other study fields. Determining what is meant by homelessness, describing the characteristics and composition of the homeless population, assessing the macro structural and micro level causes of homelessness, counting the homeless, and evaluating public and private efforts to address and prevent homelessness are all critical issues facing contemporary homelessness research. Each of these problems has both technical and political dimensions. Homelessness research is not for people who want to avoid debate[1].

1.1 The "New" Homelessness Research:

Researchers researching homelessness today may draw on a long and illustrious past. The majority of previous homelessness studies centered on "hobohemia," where clusters of single room occupancy hotels (SROs), boarding houses, low-cost dining establishments, and spot labor employment agencies drew casual and transitory workers in transition zones. It's essential to emphasize that these guys were not legally homeless since they had addresses and somewhere to sleep. They were dubbed "homeless" by social scientists because they were adult men who lived outside of traditional family structures. A house became a home when it had a space to live with family. A guy was homeless since he lacked a house and family[2].

As the need for itinerant labor fell after WWII, so did the population of skid row. The fact that homelessness was on the decrease aided in the justification of urban redevelopment initiatives in city after city. Most of the inexpensive skid row hotels were demolished as a result of urban redevelopment initiatives and housing market pressures. Homelessness was not a popular study subject for more than a decade. In the early 1980s, a confluence of macrosocial developments reintroduced homelessness to the public eye and reintroduced it to the social research agenda. Most importantly, homelessness started to rise, spilling over from the dwindling skid rows.

There were not only more homeless individuals, but they were also more conspicuous in our cities. Skid rows, which have shrunk in size as a result of urban redevelopment and the growth of downtown, could no longer accommodate the bulk of homeless people. In the 1970s, decriminalization of public intoxication and vagrancy, as well as redefinitions of loitering and other public "nuisances," increased the visibility of the

homeless because individuals who would have been arrested and therefore housed temporarily were less visible[3].

Finally, public awareness of the homeless became unavoidable, with demands that local governments create initiatives to address the issue. Skid row missions and flophouses, which were few or no longer available, were no longer feasible alternatives. Women and children's emergence as the "new homeless" drew special notice. Homelessness has risen higher on the public agenda as a result of greater awareness, increased spending, and an increase in the number of homeless people.

1.2 The Politics of Homelessness Social Research:

Much of the study on homelessness, like other areas of public policy, comes after suggested policies have been implemented. As a result, the match between results and current policies and initiatives is often used to evaluate research. Those who focus on the structural reasons of homelessness accuse others of "blaming the victim" by focusing on individual issues. Those that stress the root causes of homelessness criticize structural studies for neglecting the unique needs of homeless individuals, claiming that "the homeless are exactly like you and me, but unfortunate!"

Counting the homeless is a particularly politicized exercise. Advocates think there is a "need" to display huge numbers of homeless individuals, especially the most "worthy homeless," women and children who are not mentally ill, do not have drug or alcohol issues, and do not have criminal records. Causal analyses are likewise subject to criticism. To campaign for greater government spending on low-income housing, for example, it seems that support for a causal connection between homelessness and the lack of federal assistance for low-income housing is required. Although studies that focus on high unemployment rates as reasons of homelessness are not dismissed, they are given much less attention than studies that focus on housing problems[4].

1.3 Definition of Homelessness:

Homelessness was frequently characterized in terms of personal connections and links to the community in studies of skid row dwellers in the 1950s and 1960s. Homelessness was not regarded as mainly a housing issue in the wider society. People's housing circumstances are more closely related to contemporary conceptions of homelessness. However, there is a lot of dispute about the details within that broad trend. Those who have no shelter at all, as well as those who must rely on "emergency shelters" for accommodation, are both considered homeless. Some, however, broaden the definition to include individuals who have some kind of shelter, such as those who are housed with family or friends, in hospitals, prisons, or jails, or even renting a room in a single-room-occupancy hotel[5].

The numerous definitions each support a different perspective on the scope of the homelessness issue. More broad definitions are preferred by advocates for the homeless, while more conservative critics support narrower ones. Changes in societal attitudes about what constitutes acceptable living conditions are reflected in the dispute over the concept of homelessness. Housing circumstances have improved dramatically after WWII, raising societal expectations regarding how people "should" be housed. As a result, some have expanded the definition of homelessness to include individuals who are "badly" housed in units that fall well short of acceptable standards.

Importantly, the diversity of viewpoints on what homelessness is indicates an understanding of some of its characteristics. According to studies, homelessness is sporadic for many people (Rossi et al 1986). Those who are dangerously housed at any one moment may have been homeless in the past or may become homeless in the future. The distinction between being homeless and being housed is a hazy one that is often and readily crossed[6].

1.4 Homeless Person:

Understanding the processes of homelessness, creating methods to avoid homelessness, choosing what kinds of assistance and support homeless people need, and evaluating who is at danger of homelessness all involve determining the characteristics of homeless people. Age, sex, family status, color and ethnicity, economic and labor market position, and personal vulnerabilities of homeless individuals have all been studied extensively.

One would think that, despite its difficulty, researching the features of homeless people would be devoid of controversy. The study of who is homeless, however, has resulted in disagreements within the profession. There are two major problems that have sparked debate. The first is whether the results support a picture of

homeless people as a varied or homogenous group. The second question is whether the results point to individual flaws or systemic failings[7].

1.5 Homogeneous Homeless Population:

The argument over whether homeless individuals are varied or homogenous is not about statistics, but rather how those figures are interpreted, driven in part by the battle for limited resources to address homelessness. The "old homeless" were mainly white, male, unmarried, and in their forties or fifties. Many observers think the modern homeless are a varied population, pointing to the increasing presence of women, children, and families among the homeless, as well as increased variety in color and ethnicity, when compared to the old homeless.

Those who claim that the homeless are all the same compare them to the rest of the adult population. In compared to the overall population, the homeless are much more likely to be very poor, men, single people, and young individuals. These results back with the idea that the homeless are a fairly homogenous group. The origins of the various views on homelessness, like with most other debates, are political concerns. Those that highlight the variety of the homeless also wish to underline that the homeless are not all that different from the rest of the population, and that homelessness is something that may happen to anybody in the United States. Supporters of the homogeneity hypothesis, on the other hand, emphasize the idea that homelessness is caused by the homeless' unique traits[8].

2. DISCUSSION

There is much debate on the number of homeless people in certain areas or throughout the country. The number of homeless individuals in the United States is estimated to range from 250,000 to 3,000,000 people, with local figures varying as well. Estimates are generated in a number of ways, some of which are based on pure guesswork and others on more reliable methods. The problems that confront estimation are inextricably linked to being homeless. The majority of modern censuses and sample surveys are based on enumerations of people residing in "dwelling units." The homeless, by definition, cannot be addressed in this manner, particularly those who live in cars, abandoned buildings, or public spaces such as bus terminals. Homeless people who remain in shelters may be counted as living in "congregate quarters," but those who don't have no simple method to be counted.

Using both direct and indirect techniques, a number of ways have been created. There has never been an effort to perform a direct count of all homeless people in the United States. All previous counts were carried out on a local level, mainly in cities. Despite the fact that the 1990 Census made a particular effort to include all those living in shelters, only a partial census of homeless people outside of shelters was done. As a consequence, when the 1990 Census data are released, they can only be used as a lower limit. Surveying supposedly informed key informants and asking for their "expert" opinions on the number of homeless in their communities, estimates of the number of homeless individuals have been compiled. Particular estimates of the number of homeless people vary depending on key informants' knowledge base, their definition of homelessness, and the consistency with which they define a local location[9].

The extreme high numbers in the spectrum of national estimates of homelessness have been generated by research employing key informants. HUD's contentious 1984 research has been criticized by those who claim that poor methodology resulted in unreasonably low estimates of the number of homeless people. However, opponents of a survey published in 1982 by the advocacy group Center for Creative Nonviolence concurred that the research's high estimations of the number of homeless individuals were not based on any systematic approach. Clearly, important informants' estimations do not converge on reliable estimates.

Using street-to-shelter ratios, the number of homeless people has been projected. A group of homeless people in New York City food kitchen lines were questioned how much time they spend on the street and in shelters in one contentious research. An estimate of the number of homeless street persons was extrapolated from direct counts of shelter occupants, using the premise that the street-to-shelter ratios were similar across cities, using the average time spent on the street compared to time spent in shelters. This research has been chastised for assuming that the street-to-shelter ratio in New York City was universal. Indeed, a broad variety of street-to-shelter ratios has been observed from place to place.

Direct counts of the homeless have been undertaken in a few locations. Researchers have tallied homeless people in public locations in certain areas. Interviewing individuals in public areas to see whether they were homeless is a more comprehensive survey: Counts have been conducted for many years in Nashville, where the more comprehensive method was employed, and they show a surprising consistency in the number of the

homeless population. The majority of such counts have been limited to certain locations of the cities examined, typically those known to be frequented by homeless people.

Modifications to traditional area probability sampling approaches have yielded the most reliable results. NaRC performed the first research of homeless individuals living in shelters and on the streets using a probability sampling methodology in Chicago. Two different example designs were utilized, one for homeless people living in shelters and the other for homeless people living outside of shelters and in normal housing. A random sample of shelters and systematic sampling of people residing in the chosen shelters were obtained from the shelter survey. The "street survey" was based on thorough searches of non-dwelling unit places in a probability sample of Chicago census blocks stratified according to expert estimates of the density of homeless people on each block—sidewalks and alleys, vacant lots, abandoned buildings, parked vehicles, hallways, basements and roofs, and so on. In the dead of night, a street survey was conducted. People living in shelters and on the streets were questioned to identify their housing status as well as to gather basic demographic and epidemiological information.

When the surveys are properly integrated, they offer a statistically solid foundation for calculating Chicago's overall homeless population. The method used by Rossi and NORC is not unique to Chicago and may be applied throughout the country. Unfortunately, it is prohibitively costly due to the time-consuming nature of the block sample searches. Although the Chicago homeless research is widely regarded as the most thorough investigation of homelessness to date, it has been heavily criticized for sending off-duty, plainclothes cops to accompany interviewers (homeless people are harassed by cops), for identifying homeless people by asking them if they are homeless (homeless people are ashamed of being homeless), and for failing to enumerate the homeless population. A significant portion of the backlash to this study seems to be motivated by its "low" figure of 2300 people, which represents less than 15% of Chicago activists' estimate of homeless people.

Probability sampling approaches have been employed to estimate the homeless populations in Los Angeles and Washington, DC since Rossi's 1985-86 research. No nationwide probability-based studies have been conducted to far. Although there haven't been any national enumerations of the homeless, there have been enumerations of major sections of the homeless population. There have been national studies of the homeless in shelters or those who use other services. A sample study of shelters in urban regions, which collected data on shelter capacity and occupancies, was one source used for the 1984 HUD national estimates.

A more recent research conducted by the Urban Institute was based on 1987 samples of homeless people living in shelters or utilizing food kitchens in 20 cities; these samples were chosen to serve as representative of cities over 1 00,000. Using information collected from homeless users of food kitchens to estimate the number of homeless who are not shelter users and extrapolating to the country, Burt & Cohen arrive at an estimate of 600,000 homeless in the nation in 1 987. Note that this estimate is dependent on making a number of assumptions about the non-sheltered homeless that may be incorrect[10].

Counting the number of homeless people is complicated by the various definitions of homelessness. Most empirical studies assess the extent of literal homelessness. Therefore, the study gets fewer numbers of homeless people than anticipated by the proponents of more broad definitions of homelessness. Recent study has tried to extend the scope of homeless research by trying to estimate the number of people at high risk of becoming homeless, based on the premise that the high risk population comprises of very impoverished single persons. Using the Current Population Survey, Rossi has' demonstrated that domiciled very poor individuals are considerably more common than the Homeless, approximately 5.7 million people.

3. CONCLUSION

Many elements of homelessness need greater study by the social research community. Homelessness is a multifaceted issue, and the various aspects of this problem are not fully recognized. While research has been more attentive to homelessness as a housing or mental health issue, less attention has been put on other essential elements of this problem. One of these is the role of employment. Research needs to examine the dynamics of homelessness in terms of labor market participation, joblessness, structural change, and the stability of the economy. This is especially essential in understanding the homelessness of young single males. Clearly longitudinal investigations of the routes traveled and events encountered on the road to homelessness and back to the domiciled situation are needed for.

A second significant problem is the function of social connections in homelessness. This is not to equate homelessness with social disaffiliation but to explore clearly the role of family and friendship networks in

the process of becoming and remaining homeless. A potential approach in this line is the current emphasis on the foster care experiences of homeless people. Here again, long-term research is required to understand how fundamental family connections degrade under hardship and what social interactions maintain them.

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