

RESISTING SHELTERIZATION: THE POLITICS OF HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS

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Abstract

This paper addresses the homeless situation in the United States and the government's approaches to solving the problem. This paper argues that a proliferation of shelters and shelter services has occurred over the past decade, contrasting that with a precipitous decrease in low-income housing. An analysis of the negative consequences of shelterization follows, stressing the control and dependency engendered in shelter settings. Finally, the paper presents the homeless response to this issue and calls for political mobilization of the homeless rather than the present "advocacy" of human service professionals.

Introduction

Over the past decade, homelessness in the United States has been increasingly perceived as a significant social problem. This growing acknowledgment has paralleled the recognition of homelessness as affecting various segments of society: not only males, but females; not only adults, but youth; not only single persons, but families. This changing image of the homeless population also includes a rethinking of the cause of homelessness. From an individualistic concentration on mental illness, substance abuse, incompetence and other personal failings, research has moved to structural discussions of economic circumstances, family crisis, and most significantly, the lack of affordable housing.

And yet, as our sophistication in understanding homelessness increases, we have generally failed to question the overriding societal response to the problem: shelters and shelter services. We have placed the problem of homelessness in the hands of social service professionals, assuming they know best how to proceed. But do they? Are shelters necessary stopgaps (if not perfect, at least benign), or debilitating, dependency-creating institutions?

Discussion

The Growth of Shelters and Shelter Services

Funding for homeless assistance grew dramatically during the 1980s. The McKinney Homeless Assistance Act, passed in 1987, encompassed a wide range of programs and benefits for the homeless, including emergency food and shelter, health care, mental health services, transitional housing, education, and job training. In Chicago, for example, overall funding for homeless programs increased nine-fold between 1984 and 1988. The McKinney Act was responsible for most of this increased funding, infusing an average of \$10 million into homeless assistance in Chicago in 1987 and 1988 (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 1989). Funding for McKinney Act programs nationwide has increased from 1987 appropriations of \$514.4 million to 1990 appropriations of approximately \$600 million, including some redefinition and expansion of services. The Bush Administration's fiscal year 1991 budget request for current McKinney Act programs totals \$568.8 million (Wasem, 1991).

Chicago's experience reflects a related funding issue. There has been a significant shift in the relative levels of public and private funding for homeless assistance, with the federal share showing the greatest increase. The City of Chicago Department of Human Services

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reports that in 1984 its funding for homelessness consisted of 44 percent private (from such sources as United Way and Catholic Charities) and 56 percent public (city, state, and federal monies) dollars. By 1988, these figures had shifted to 13 percent private and 87 percent public, and of the 87 percent public share in 1988, fully 57 percent was federal money (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 1989).

How are these funds used? For shelter? Services? Or both? As the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (1989) reports, aid has traditionally gone to provide overnight shelter and perhaps a meal. In fact, certain of the largest funding sources, such as HUD's Emergency Shelter Grants program, require a minimum of 85 percent of grant funds be spent on these basic needs (shelter and food), leaving no more than 15 percent for social services, including those related to job training, substance abuse, and physical and mental health. This emphasis on shelter rather than services is undoubtedly related to relative cost: providing a bed is cheaper than providing assistance in other forms. A trend toward increased funding of shelter services is suggested in HUD's 1989 Report on Homeless Assistance, "... as cities increasingly focus on the goal of helping the homeless to achieve self-sufficiency" (p. 31), but that intention has yet to be actualized in any significant way.

Given increased funding and the knowledge that most of the dollars go to providing shelter, it is logical to expect that shelter capacity has risen. Shelter capacity grows when new facilities open up, additional beds are added to already existing facilities, and authorization is made for the purchase of commercial bed space. From 1984 to 1988, each of the five largest cities in the United States saw tremendous growth in their shelter capacity. Shelter beds in Philadelphia grew from 1,174 to 6,936 (491 percent increase); beds in Houston numbered 2,414 in 1984 and grew to 3,078 in 1988 (28 percent increase). Chicago's bed capacity went from 1,240 to 2,588 in this four year period (109 percent increase), while 2,094 beds increased to 6,930 in Los Angeles (231 percent increase). And in New York, shelter capacity rose from 10,961 to 30,500 (178 percent increase) (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 1989). Indicative of even more recent national data, Chicago's current (1990) shelter capacity numbers over 4,250 beds (City of Chicago Dept. of Human Services, 1990).

The Shortage of Low-Income Housing

While the shelterization response to homelessness, including both bed capacity and other shelter services, receives greater funding, less and less is spent on low-income housing. There is simply not enough low-cost housing available for the economically marginal in American cities.

The low-income housing supply has shrunk dramatically in recent years. Inflation is one cause of this decrease. The cost of housing at all levels has risen rapidly. The median price of a single-family dwelling sold in 1970 was \$23,000. In 1980 it was \$62,200, and in 1989 it was \$92,900. This varied by locality, of course, with the median 1989 cost in San Francisco \$265,700, Los Angeles \$215,000, Boston \$188,600, and New York City \$185,200. The cost of renting followed this inflationary trend. Between 1970 and 1983, median rents increased 192 percent while renters' income increased only 97 percent (Gilderbloom and Appelbaum, 1988). This inflation has placed increased pressures on the low-income population who simply cannot afford the increased rents, or must sacrifice essentials, such as food, to pay the higher rents. Data from 1985, for example, showed that 6.1 million households below the poverty line spent more than 50 percent of their incomes for housing (the Federal government considers any amount above 30 percent excessive) (Appelbaum, 1989). Paying such a high proportion of their low income for rent places the poor in jeopardy each month, making them extremely vulnerable to eviction and homelessness.

Although inflation is a major cause for the loss of low-income housing, other factors are equally significant. Foremost, there has been an absolute loss in low-income units. Most conspicuous has been the loss of single-room occupancy (SRO) hotels, often the housing of last resort for the economically marginal in urban areas. In New York City, for example, the stock of SROs shrunk from 127,000 units in 1975 to 14,000 in 1985 (Siegel and Levy, 1985).

The SROs and other low-cost rental units have disappeared because of two related trends. One is gentrification—the process of converting low-income housing to condominiums or upscale apartments for the middle-and upper-middle classes (Kasinitz, 1984). The other trend has been to demolish low-income housing and replace it with high-rise office buildings, luxury apartments, and retail space to “revitalize the downtowns” of American cities. These actions resulted in removing affordable rental housing from the market, driving up rents in the remaining apartments and displacing tenants from their homes and neighborhoods.

This decimation of the low-cost housing supply by the private sector has not been countered by public policy and action. Federal low-income housing programs, including government subsidies for housing construction, declined dramatically during the Reagan administration. Federal support for subsidized housing dropped from \$32.2 billion in 1981 to \$6 billion in 1989 (Appelbaum, 1989). Put another way, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) authorized the construction of 183,000 subsidized dwellings in 1980 but only 20,000 in 1989 (Appelbaum, 1989, p. 7). When Reagan came to office in 1981, the federal government spent seven dollars on defense for every dollar on housing. When he left office in 1989, the ratio was forty-six to one (Appelbaum, 1989).

In addition, given these funding cutbacks, the existing stock of public housing fell into disrepair, causing city housing authorities to be faced with increasing numbers of uninhabitable units. For example, vacancy rates in high-rise public housing projects in Chicago currently average 25 to 40 percent, while waiting lists for apartments range from 8 to 10 years. And if this were not enough, in some states existing federally subsidized units were threatened. Developers began choosing early payoff of 20-year low-interest HUD mortgages that required them to rent units at below-market rates. This maneuver allowed them to escape government housing regulations and collect higher rents, thereby removing more low-cost housing from the market. Moreover, the relatively meager federal budget for housing, compared with countries such as Canada, Sweden, Holland, and France, was mismanaged by HUD with outright fraud as monies targeted for the poor were often diverted to housing for the non-poor (*Don't let scandals*, 1989).

The dramatic shrinkage in the supply of low-cost housing is both a problem of affordability and supply. Clearly, market forces, which according to conservative analysts should work to solve the problems of urban poverty and homelessness, have not worked to furnish an adequate supply of low-cost housing in America's cities (Gilderbloom and Appelbaum, 1988). Thus, market forces are the source, not the solution, of the problem.

Shelterization Versus Housing

Shelterization has dramatically eclipsed housing as a response to homelessness. Why? Shelterization is more politically palatable. At least in the short-term, shelters and even more costly shelter services are cheaper than the construction or rehabilitation of permanent low-income housing. Putting the homeless into shelters removes these persons from the streets and thus from public view. If the homeless are “hidden” in shelters, the non-homeless do not have to step around them or deal with them directly. The problem of homelessness “disappears” from an increasingly antagonistic public (Ferguson, 1990). Homeless persons are also more easily controlled in the shelter setting, which can be seen as analogous to the control of delinquents in juvenile institutions or prisoners in correctional facilities. The accounting of comings and goings, lack of privacy, and regimented daily schedules in the homeless shelter are evidence of this similarity. The shelterization response additionally serves the interests of social service bureaucracies, by creating a population of “clients” whose “needs” warrant professional intervention.

Shelterization, Control, and Dependency

The shelterization response clearly fails to address the root cause of homelessness, that is, a critical lack of sufficient low-income housing. But the issue may be more profound than that. Shelterization may in fact do harm. How may the shelterization response be hurting the very persons it is intended to serve? John McKnight (1989) offers one analytical route to such a conclusion. McKnight's analysis rests on two basic premises: (a) human service interventions have negative effects as well as positive benefits, and (b) human service

interventions are only one of many ways to address the condition of "disadvantaged" persons. This critique of negative effects concentrates on four characteristics of the human services approach to problem solving:

1. Emphasis on "deficiencies:" Persons with specific needs are labeled as generally deficient and incapable.
2. Unacknowledged monetary impact: Dollars spent on service programs (including the salaries of professional providers) are not available as cash income to the "needy" themselves.
3. Impact on the community: Social service professionals become the authority figures of the neighborhood, relegating local citizens in their role as problem-solvers to an impotent position.
4. Impact on "clients:" Human service programs in the aggregate create an overwhelming environment of deficiency, which results in dependency and deviance, and negates the potential for positive effects that singular programs may offer (McKnight, 1989).

Applying McKnight's work to homelessness and the shelterization response, an emphasis on deficiencies is clear. Homeless persons are regularly labeled as mentally ill, substance abusers, and otherwise generally incapable of, or unwilling to, live productive lives. This downplays and obscures homelessness as the simple lack of permanent housing. Social service agencies then attempt to "fix" these deficient persons, rather than "fixing" the underlying cause of homelessness--insufficient affordable housing.

This latter viewpoint has been called naive by Rick Roberts, director of the largest shelter for the homeless in Chicago. Roberts claims that those who advocate housing as the solution to homelessness are dismissing other deficiencies in homeless persons, who will "inevitably become homeless again if these underlying problems are not addressed" (Roberts, 1990). This interpretation suggests that generalized personal deficiencies, not housing, are the real cause of homelessness. We disagree. As James D. Wright has summarized:

. . . some of the homeless are broken down alcoholics, but most of them are not. Some are mentally impaired, but most of them are not . . . in a hypothetical world where there were no alcoholics, no drug addicts, no mentally ill, no deinstitutionalization movement, no personal or social pathologies at all, there would still be a formidable homelessness problem . . . (Wright, 1989, pp. 18, 50)

The "formidable homelessness problem" Wright cites is due to the absolute shortage of low-income, affordable housing in the United States. This shortage exists regardless of individuals' "deficiencies." Alcoholics, the mentally ill, the drug-addicted, and those with other individual "flaws" may be more vulnerable to the kind of impoverishment that excludes persons from the urban housing market. They are the first to lose permanent housing, but these "deficiencies" in and of themselves are not the cause of homelessness. The absolute shortage of low-income, affordable housing in the United States ensures that even if no one were plagued with these personal "deficiencies" or vulnerabilities, the size of the homeless population would be roughly the same. Only then we would not be able to identify the homeless population as drunk or crazy, and, therefore, identify the causes of homelessness as their personal "flaws" or vulnerabilities. The homeless would be like everyone else (as they, in reality, are now) except that they would not have a "home" (Timmer and Eitzen, 1992).

McKnight's second point, the unacknowledged monetary impact of social services, can also be applied to the shelterization response. Funds spent on shelter beds, food, and services are unavailable for federal and state cash assistance programs for "disadvantaged" persons. Perhaps public investments for services would be more enabling as cash income. And putting this issue in yet another way, McKnight's critique calls for a recognition of the trade-off between social services and housing advocates. To give more to one activity, shelterization, arguably means giving less to another--the construction/rehabilitation of low-income housing.

Shelterization may additionally have a negative effect on the community and its willingness and ability to confront the social problem of homelessness. As mentioned previously, shelters act as "hiding places" for the homeless, so that citizens may conveniently ignore the disadvantaged in their midst. The public may then assume that the problem is being addressed by professionals, who must know best what to do. As one woman remarked after refusing to give money to a homeless panhandler in Manhattan, "I think there's plenty of services in the city for people who want help" (Ferguson, 1990, p. 54).

Human service professionals with special expertise, technique, and technology push out the problem-solving knowledge and action of friend, neighbor, citizen, and association. As the power of profession and service system ascends, the legitimacy, authority, and capacity of citizens and community descend. The citizen retreats. The client advances. The power of community action weakens; the authority of the service system strengthens. And as human service tools prevail, the tools of citizenship, association, and community rust. Their uses are even forgotten. Many local people come to believe that the service tool is the only tool, and that their task as good citizens is to support taxes and charities for more services. (McKnight, 1989, p. 9)

McKnight's fourth point, the negative impact on "clients" of a "forest of services," can be readily applied to the shelter as an institutional setting. People there live wholly surrounded by services and service providers. As McKnight argues, this enveloping of the person creates a distinct environment, one in which a circular process develops. The institutional environment causes persons in it to adapt, sometimes in deviant and/or dependent ways, but the adaptive behavior itself is taken as proof of the "need" for the institution's services.

An example of this is found in Timmer's (1988) ethnographic account in his study of a Chicago shelter for homeless mothers and their children. There was a conflict in this shelter between women residents and the staff over the parenting of the women's children. Corporal punishment was not allowed under any circumstances, even though this mode of discipline was the most established and consistent method these mothers had in dealing with their children's misbehavior. The parenting assistance of an extended kin-network, generally present prior to these women coming to the shelter, was also missing. Living in the shelter, under the shelter's rules, these mothers were denied the ability to parent in their accustomed way. They responded to their felt lack of authority by generally ignoring their children's actions, which resulted in the staff defining these mothers as incompetent. To complete the circular process, these "incompetent mothers" were required to attend parenting classes as part of their shelter stay (Timmer, 1988).

Hoch and Slayton's *New Homeless and Old* (1989) offers yet another approach from which to view the harmful effects of the shelterization response. Using the phrase "the politics of compassion," these authors contend that in the mid-1980s social service providers succeeded in framing the language of the homeless debate to emphasize the physical and social vulnerabilities of homeless persons, rather than the right of all citizens to housing. Homelessness was thus defined as a genuine social problem requiring professional caregivers and their skills. This ideological position portrayed and treated the homeless as passive, needy victims. The "politics of compassion" resulted in the stigma of dependence. And yet, these worthy dependents also required control. It was seen as simply impossible to shelter large groups of vulnerable strangers without the tight restrictions and rule enforcement reminiscent of correctional facilities (Hoch and Slayton, 1989).

The Homeless Response

How do the homeless themselves respond to shelterization? The seemingly inexplicable irony of increasing numbers of homeless persons juxtaposed with empty shelter beds addresses this issue.

When bitter cold hit Chicago in late December 1990, the media reported in disbelief that the homeless would not come in from the cold. The city's Department of Human Services publicized the fact that there were over 4,000 shelter beds available, but 600 were not being used. Film crews followed department workers in unsuccessful attempts to coax the home-

less into shelters. All this occurred amid the 1990 U.S. Conference of Mayors report of increasing homelessness in almost all American cities.

The media's interpretation was a psychological one, suggesting that homeless people are crazy, indeed choosing to remain on the streets, so as to be free to hustle. A more accurate political interpretation is that the homeless are resisting the control (threats to their autonomy and privacy), dependency, and victimization that come with shelterization.

This rejection of the shelter can be placed in historical context. As Hoch and Slayton's (1989) work highlights, the economically marginal in America's cities have not always had such limited choices. Earlier in this century, a variety of housing options, from the SRO, to the lodging house, to the working-class cage hotel, to the "flop" hotel, gave the poorest of the poor housing alternatives. Even though this housing may have been physically deteriorated, it provided residents autonomy and privacy. Economically marginal persons used that housing, but decline to use the contemporary shelter.

Homeless persons' negative definition of shelterization is clear in the actions of those who reject shelters altogether. Suspicion and resentment of the shelter and its services, not gratitude, is evident in reports of a growing "shelter rebellion." In New York, the growth of a tent city in Tompkins Square showed the refusal by many of that city's homeless to enter the shelter system (Ferguson, 1990). Similar protests have occurred in Los Angeles, where a short-lived tent city was constructed in 1984, and in Chicago where homeless squatters broke into vacant Chicago Housing Authority units in 1988 (Hoch and Slayton, 1989). This rejection is also evident in shelter occupancy rates. In Chicago, for example, the average shelter occupancy rate in 1987 hovered around 84 percent, and beds were filled to capacity less than half the time (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 1989). These vacancies, given 4,250 available beds, exist even as the city's Department of Human Services estimates the number of homeless at 40,000 to 49,000 over a year's time (City of Chicago Department of Human Services, 1990).

Those homeless persons who do enter shelters recognize them as dismal places of last resort, not welcomed "treatment centers." In the words of Kitty, a shelter resident in Tampa, Florida, "It's like a correctional institution and I'm not a criminal. . . . I haven't done anything wrong" (Timmer, 1988, p. 163). Other first person accounts speak of the hope of "escaping the shelters" and existing "on the verge of madness, so hungry for a little privacy and peace that I was afraid I'd start screaming in my sleep. . . . No one should have to live like that" (Russell, 1989, p. 52). Interviewing homeless persons in Chicago, researchers from the National Opinion Research Center found that most who had used shelters agreed that they offered a clean and decent place to sleep, but almost half complained about a lack of personal security and privacy, and resented the restrictions on their personal freedom (Rossi, Fisher, and Willis, 1986, p. 136). Fear, both of losing one's meager possessions and suffering personal injury, is often cited by those who have experienced shelter life. Shelters are perceived by the homeless as not only demoralizing, but dangerous (Timmer, Eitzen, and Talley, 1993).

Increasing numbers of homeless people are organizing, speaking out for themselves and against shelterization. One group, the National Union for the Homeless, consists of fourteen local chapters representing 30,000 homeless individuals. This organization's underlying principle, and the basis for its collectivist protest action, is that citizens have a right to housing. The words of Alicia Christian, a union member, exemplify this position:

Homeless people are saying they don't want any more stopgaps.
They don't want shelters; they want houses. They don't want welfare;
they want jobs. That's a profound threat to people who say they want
to enable, but really want to control (Ferguson, 1990, p. 55).

Christian's statement suggests another issue, that of class differences between the homeless and their "advocates." Many of the advocacy groups focusing on the homelessness problem are dominated by middle- and upper-middle class persons, including professional service providers and shelter operators. These professionals and the homeless they "serve" have quite distinct, if not opposing, agendas and ideologies, according to Christian's quote. This supports McKnight's (1989) critique of social service care-givers as creating de-

pendency rather than self-sufficiency and gives credence to the National Union for the Homeless in its claim that only the homeless can speak for the homeless.

Conclusion

The Solution Is Housing

As we move further into the 1990s, homelessness is, by all estimates, increasing (U.S. Conference of Mayors, 1990). It is not a temporary crisis, but an enduring problem. And yet, our response to this long-term problem continues to be the funding of short-term "solutions" --shelters and shelter services.

There is no question that emergency assistance is needed. We cannot do away with all emergency shelters and food programs. To consider these "band-aids" the solution, however, is to dismiss the cause of homelessness in America--the lack of affordable housing. And, it is to dismiss the harm done to homeless persons by the shelterization experience itself. A "shelter industry" has been created, which will undoubtedly perpetuate itself and its clientele unless an alternate path is taken.

That alternate path is the only systemic solution to homelessness--remedying the shortage of low-income housing. A national housing policy, including a renewed commitment to the construction and renovation of public housing, support for housing subsidies and controls on urban redevelopment and gentrification, is sorely needed (Dreier and Atlas, 1989).

Federal spending for low-income and affordable housing programs must far surpass the current \$600 million being allocated to shelters and shelter services. But to put this amount in perspective, we only need recall the \$500 billion price tag for the criminal and corrupt Savings & Loan bailout. If we intend to address homelessness, we must not allow ourselves to mistake another problem--the creation of a dependent and controlled client population in the shelter system--for the solution. We must encourage the mobilization of homeless persons in their own interest against the "advocacy" and "helpfulness" of the social service bureaucracy.

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Talley and Timmer

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