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It's Hard Outside:

Profiles of Elderly Homelessness

Joseph Doolin

This article is a qualitative study of the lives of homeless elders in Boston. It examines the concerns uppermost in the minds of the homeless including the art of integrating their past lives into the values and milieu of their current homeless situation. Concern about the reinstitutionalization of the mentally ill in public shelters, domiciles once reserved for the older alcoholic, the pressures and stress of shelter life, victimization, the shrinking supply of SRO units, and the role of alcohol are also examined. Considered in detail are various coping strategies and supports utilized by older adults in their survival roofless. Homelessness as an industry is considered, and recommendations are offered to stem the increasing tide of homelessness among older adults. The article also critiques current public policy, which is preoccupied with shelter services rather than with services to the homeless. To adequately serve the entire homeless population, a policy on homelessness rather than solely a shelter policy must be developed.

The homeless are today's untouchables. They have become social lepers that may be fed and clothed by society, but only at special stations for the unclean in zones set aside for them. In the public mind they are considered dirty, defective, diseased derelicts without hope of rehabilitation. Some other *d* words to describe them are depraved, degenerate, and degraded.

The stereotypical image of the homeless is that of an unkempt old man, stumbling drunk or sleeping it off on a park bench. Certainly, he is a man who never worked.

The reality is that the median age of American homeless today is the early thirties and that among the homeless, the elderly constitute a smaller proportion than they do in society as a whole. Among the elderly homeless, long work histories and, among the men, military service are the norm.

For years, urban social workers have neatly characterized the homeless population in America as being distributed equally among three basic groups.

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1. *The chronic or traditional homeless.* These people have long been part of the American scene, as evidenced in familiar words such as “panhandlers,” “derelicts,” and “bag ladies.” This population traditionally sought housing in overnight shelters, in the streets, and where possible in cheap hotels and rooming houses.
2. *The deinstitutionalized.* These people represent the failure of the public mental health system to create community supports when mental health hospitals began to discharge large numbers of patients in the late 1960s.
3. *The new or temporary homeless.* Also called the “dishoused.” This group’s predicament is caused by external factors: unemployment, welfare cuts, personal or family crises, and shortage of low-income housing.

Most homeless elderly fall into the first category, the chronic or traditional homeless. The focus of this article is the subgroup within that population that is chronologically or physiologically old. For the most part they are not people who spent significant portions of their lives in mental hospitals from which they have been recently deinstitutionalized, nor are they people who suddenly lost their lifetime dwellings. Understanding the homeless elderly is like looking at a piece of movie film. To comprehend the situation in one frame, we must look at the many frames preceding it. One value of studying homelessness among the elderly is that it allows us to examine issues in the life course and to identify patterns rather than idiosyncratic, environmental problems. The pattern that emerges is of lives lived at the fringes of society, usually with insufficient social margin, of unstable family situations, and of social deviance in various forms including but not limited to itinerant work, poverty, underemployment and unemployment, physical or mental disability, alcoholism, and homosexuality.

Over a three-year period, from 1985 to 1987, I studied the life histories, coping strategies, and survival skills of Boston’s homeless elders. The excerpts printed here are taken from interviews with long-term homeless adults. They represent a cross section of homeless older people, through whose lives we can glimpse the world of the street person, the circumstances that forced the person onto the street, and the life that person lives today.

Several public policy implications are suggested by this study. The central implications have to do with our nation’s preference for a shelter policy rather than a homelessness policy. In addition to being significantly less expensive than the alternative of investing in affordable housing, the shelter policy allows us to lull ourselves into the belief that homelessness is a temporary emergency situation, thereby ignoring the root causes — chronic poverty, the weakness of our economic system, and the disintegration of the American family. The lack of a national family policy and the expulsion of the man from the household under most states’ Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) rules undoubtedly trigger homelessness at midlife and beyond.

Sam: “I was livin’ with this one lady at the time. And, uh, we had two kids. I was workin’ in security. I don’t know if you ever heard of Bromley Heath [Community Center] in Jamaica Plain? You’ve heard of Martha Eliot Health Center? I worked there for three years as a security guard. Right on the door. And I worked in Bromley Heath for three more years. So I worked there for altogether six years.

“I got laid off the job.

“Somethin’ happened on the job — everybody got laid off and the company cut us loose. And, uh, I wasn’t workin’ for a couple of months and she was gettin’ upset ‘cause I wasn’t bringin’ in no money, yuh know. And I was stayin’ with my mother, my step-mother, at the time. And my sister was on drugs and all this and I had to get away from there too.

“So I didn’t have no other place to go. So I just started hangin’ with the fellas on Boylston Street and Mass. Avenue. And then I was drinkin’ again, startin’.

“I was never on the street before. But that was rough. And umm, but it was quite an experience, because I ain’t never been on the street before. Oh yeh. It was pretty rough on me. I cried many a night. I slept behind the library. Yuh know behind the library they have a heater on the wall. I put cardboard down there, put a sleeping bag down there, slept behind the library. I’ve slept in subways. I’ve slept on buses. Yuh know where, what do they call it, Boylston Street, when you turn the corner, there’s a subway right there? I forget what they call it. Across the street they’ve got the seat where the buses come, with the benches there? I’ve slept right there many a day. I’ve slept back of the subway on the other side. On Newbury Street there’s a little doorway where the people come up? At twelve o’clock at night, after the security guard come, the MBT come and check it, you take a screwdriver and open the door and sleep right there till five o’clock till we hear the other door open, then we run.

“You see, when I was first on the streets I didn’t go to Pine Street to sleep. At the time, I didn’t know where to go. When I was on the streets, wherever I slept, I slept. Then I started sleeping on the benches at Pine Street.

“I slept on the bench many a night, but you have to be careful if you got a watch on, a ring, whatever. And from there I’d come out in the morning with a couple of fellas and we’d go in the street and walk around until eight o’clock or if we have some money we’d buy a drink. But most of my day was in the library. If it was a nasty day, the library opens at nine o’clock and does not close until six o’clock.

“They don’t care if you sit there and read, but if you fall asleep and they catch you three times, they put you out. ‘Cause a lot of people are apt to fall off to sleep and somebody’ll rob you. If you have something on the table and you fall off to sleep and when you wake up, it’s gone. And from there I usually walk around. If it’s the summertime I go down to the Charles River, take a walk, get up a tree, fall asleep, wake up, and say, ‘Now where am I gonna eat lunch?’

“You know, one of the way you can tell the alcoholics is ‘cause they’d be standin’ on the corner beggin’ for money. If they don’t have any. Now you can go to the library and watch ‘em on your day off. They’ll be all over the library, standin’ in front of the subway. ‘Have you got a dime for a cup of coffee?’ ‘Have you got a nickel?’ I’ve done it. I’ve done it myself, just to get something to eat. You see at that time I didn’t know where to go. And I met a friend of mine and he showed me where to go. He showed me where to go to eat: Kingston House at nine in the mornin’ for breakfast, come back at Kingston House at twelve o’clock for lunch.

“Well, sometimes the food is not enough. You might as well say most of the time the food is not enough. Lotta people I know they come here to eat first and then they go straight to St. Francis House to eat there. Matter of fact, tell you the truth, I used to do the same thing myself. When I was on the streets. I’d either go to Kingston House or St. Paul’s, or whatever, yuh know? But then in the evening, if it’s cold, if I have a little change, I go to Burger King and sit up there for an hour or two. Burger King lets you hang around awhile as long as you’re buyin’ cups of coffee. McDonald’s won’t let you in there

at all. You buy somethin' and you eat it. I guess they know because you might need a shave, or your clothes might smell, or whatever. You know what I mean? They look at you that way.

"They say, 'Well, you have to leave now.' But just like the women that go around the street with the bags, a lot of men tend to go around the street with bags, and they walk in a place and they see you with two or three bags and the bags look, uh, discarded, or somethin', they gonna know right away. But as long as you got some money in your pocket and you buy a cup of coffee, they can't say nuthin'.

"Anyway, about Pine Street. One of the reasons so many people sleep on the benches is that they don't get there in time to get a bed ticket. Some others, they don't want to take a shower, 'cause yuh know, sometimes they may have somethin' and they don't want to have to go to the hospital. They're afraid. And, well, I guess most of them, most of them say they're afraid because they don't want to stay in. They know if they got somethin' real bad and they send you to the hospital, then they say you have to stay. And they don't want that.

"And then again, when you talk about they don't want to take a shower, that way too, 'cause people'd be lookin' at you. There's one fella there, he has boils on him all over his body. He takes a shower every night. Yet if you came there and I came there and we were takin' a shower and he happened to walk in and take a shower, you feel funny, yuh know, 'cause these big boils all over his body from his foot to his head, yuh know. But they make you take a shower for the simple reason, before you go to bed, you been on the street all day.

"And then you get your clean clothes, right? And then when you go you take the other clothes and you throw it in a basket. You throw . . . like these are my dirty clothes for the day and I throw 'em in the basket. It's a big basket. But before that I run downstairs and I get my clean clothes. And when I go upstairs to take a shower, I take all my clothes off, put it in the basket, from underwear, socks, everything, except my jacket. Shirts and sweaters — they give you all that stuff. Then you come upstairs like I told you, you put it in a box, your shoes, your socks, your underwear, your tee shirt — all of that is clean. Your socks are clean, well, maybe not your shoes. And the jacket, and the clean shirt, and the pants, and the sweater or whatever, goes on a hanger and they give you a ticket they give you there. And then you go take a shower and you go to bed. When you wake up in the morning you come back downstairs and you got your clean clothes. And they give you toothpaste, toothbrush. They have, uh, razors to take a shave. Other than that you have underarm deodorant which most of them won't do. You know. And I know most of them don't want to take a shower."

Families

A study of homelessness in older adults must consider causes arising in the family.

The lack of coherent family policy in America is not only an instrument against the poor, it is also one of the gaps in social welfare policy that allows homelessness to happen at an accelerating rate. Families are the largest-growing segment of the universe of the homeless; their increasing number is one of the factors in the declining average age of the homeless person. And the threatened state of the institution of the family in America, documented by Lasch¹ and others, affects homelessness in two other ways. First, "man-in-the-house" rules in most states' family assistance programs have contributed both to the disintegration of the two-parent household among the very poor and also to homelessness among those now past middle age. Two-thirds of all homeless people are single adults, and three-quarters to four-fifths are male. In addition, while a third of all home-

less people are age fifty and older, half of the single adults who are homeless are also age fifty and older, and the latter group spends the longest period of time homeless. At forty, Boston's average homeless person is nearly seven years older than the national average.² Additionally, half of Boston's homeless have spent the greater part of their adult lives elsewhere, usually in areas having less progressive social welfare policies than Massachusetts.

According to Hopper and Hamberg, "More than half the states do not make payments to families when both parents are in the home. These families, along with single adults not eligible for the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program for the blind, the disabled, and the aged, find themselves relegated to locally funded General Assistance [GA, also known in Massachusetts as General Relief] — assuming they live in states and counties where it is available. Compared with other income-maintenance payments, GA benefits are invariably lower, sometimes woefully so. Moreover, the real value of these benefits fell 32 percent during the 1970s!"³

Tony: "I always worked. I started bartending weekends for my mother-in-law, then I left the shoe factory and tended bar full time. Did it for, uh, forty years. I worked at the Old Vienna Cafe on Commonwealth Avenue, the Gateway Cafe on Kneeland Street, and Sullivan's Tap in North Station. I retired from there. The boss used to tell us to have a couple drinks to relieve the tension, the nervousness. Some guy gets drunk and ya gotta ease him out an' you get nervous, ya know?

"Personally, I liked bartending, because I always had a way to deal with people. It was a good job, good money as far as salary. The pay and the tips are very good. I was makin' as much in tips — twenty-five, thirty dollars a day — as I was in salary. Y'know, you do make people like you. And, I mean, I drank, but I never drank on the job. I used to go to work at eight o'clock and get through at five o'clock. I had a drink . . . 'course at that time I was married.

"My wife passed away about four years ago, and I been on my own. I got a family, but they grown up with teenage kids. No parents. My parents are dead. And I got a brother and two sisters. They got their families that they're raisin'.

"I tried to live with my sister one time. When my mother died, where I was alone, she said, 'Why don't you come and live with me?' She figures that she keeps me clean, she feed me, y'know, just like Mama used to. So I'd get my check and I used to give her half of it. I used to give her two hundred dollars. She feed me. I have my own room because her son moved out and got married. I took over his room. I had the run of the house. Her husband worked. And I'm loafin' so I could come and go as I pleased. The only thing is that she didn't want me come home drunk or come home at three o'clock in the morning. No women. You know, you gotta live a normal life. I tried. And it's no good. It's just one of those things. I said I appreciate it but I gotta go, 'cause she don't like me and the way I live, it's just one of those things.

"So then I went over to Dorchester. Across the street from the ballpark, beside the liquor store on Gibson Street, I used to live next door at number four, over the liquor store. I was working then. At North Station. And then I got sick, and I went to the VA and the VA shipped me to Brockton Hospital. I was there about five and a half months, and at the time I had a room, I mean I was there for so long . . . I came back and I went to the landlady, she gave the room up, and in the meantime I had no money, I had no place to go, uh, I went to the Veteran's and they tried to find me a place and gave me some money and told me to go to Pine Street until I straightened myself up. 'Cause see, I'm on Social Security, see, and I get paid once a month.

“For me to live on the outside, at these rents, it’s impossible. I get a hundred dollars a week, now they want a hundred dollars a week for a room . . . four hundred bucks a month. Well, that’s all I get. So, I mean, how could I eat, have a social life, or whatever — at least a normal life. So I’m stuck here [at Pine Street]. I don’t want to bother my family — my brother or two sisters, or my own three children. So I stay here.

“I’ve been at Pine Street a little over a year now. I think they do the best they can under the circumstances, ’cause it’s overcrowded. They got an average of four hundred fifty to five hundred men per night. They got three hundred eighty beds, so now if you’re stuck with five hundred, you got problems. They sleep on the floor, on benches, it’s first come first serve. Now, like, in the mornin’ we have mornin’ list at seven thirty. You stand in line to put your name on the list [for a bed that night]. Then you gotta go out, they close the place at eight in the mornin’, and ya can’t come in all day. Now we go back at four o’clock and get a bed ticket, and at five-thirty we eat, and we can stay up until nine. You can go out, but you have to be in by nine. Unless you have special permission to stay out until eleven or twelve o’clock. But you have to have a very good reason. You can’t go out to get drunk, or to have a good time, or to have a date, or somethin’ like that, y’know. If you went to the birthday party of your son, or, y’know, they try to work on your honor system. But if I say I’m gonna go and see my sister and I’ll be back at ten o’clock that night, they will take your word because they know you’re honest, but if they know you’re drunk, an alcoholic, a liar, somethin’ like that, they more or less sorta judge you. It ain’t a bad place, but the guys don’t appreciate it. They give ya half-decent meals, not all the time, and a shower every night, clean linen every day. Eat breakfast. Eat supper. We have a nurse and a doctor there, every day of the week, in case.

“You have to adjust yourself to living here more or less. But at times you get all tied up in saying, ‘What the hell am I doing here? How did I get in the position I’m in? Why?’ I mean, I made a lot of money in my days. I should have a few dollars put away that I could look forward to as a rainy day. I haven’t four cents except my check. ’Cause as I made it, I blew it. I drank, I gambled, I went out. You name it, I done it.

“The only way I could get outa here is I would have to go to work. If I didn’t go to work there’s no way for me to get outa here. I would have to eat breakfast, lunch, supper, social life, little entertainment, clothes, and maybe ninety or a hundred dollars a week for a room. Now, that means I gotta go to work. I’m gonna be sixty-seven years old, and I should go to work? That’s the way I look at it. And how long am I gonna live?”

The Boarder

As the family is the primary caregiver for the aged and infirm, so it is also the strongest bulwark against the indulgences and follies that often characterize the passages of later middle age. Eighteen to twenty percent of all homeless people are age fifty to sixty-five. The type that I call the Boarder, the majority of homeless elder males, is dominated by this age group. This is the group for whom public shelters are the rooming houses of last resort. There is a strong correlation between widowhood and divorce or separation and homelessness in men. Most active alcoholics can manage their drinking sufficiently to maintain job and home when they have the incentive of family. Without it, many men disintegrate.

Development of a sound, coherent, supportive family policy benefiting the very poor would also undoubtedly reduce the number of homeless, not only those in homeless families but over time homeless single adults as well. A universal social welfare policy such as

that discussed by Kamerman and Kahn⁴ would entitle all family units with children to financial assistance. Such a policy is common in other industrialized nations.

Phil: “I got out of work in April 1982. I couldn’t find any work after that so I paid the rent for the next six months and finally I was running low and I couldn’t keep paying rent if I didn’t get a job, so I gave up and went to a shelter.

“The best thing about Pine Street is that everybody has to take a shower. So that’s where they’re better than any other shelter, ’cause everybody takes a shower and they’re all, everybody’s clean when they go to bed. The problem at Long Island: some of the men have lice. I’ve seen them in, uh, they’re spreading it around, and the people in charge don’t pay any attention. You don’t get the same bed every night. They give you a certain bed and don’t know who slept in it. Many cases of people who do catch sickness from somebody else.

“It’s much better food at Pine Street. Also, they have the best clothing. A lot of people go to Pine Street, go over there once in a while just to get the clothing. They don’t stay there. Where Long Island has a very small amount of clothing. They do give out clothing at night but it’s not very good and the chances are that they might not have anything to fit. They don’t have much in clothing. But the food is poor. What they did is increased the shelter.

“In 1984 it was as good as it’s ever gonna get. That was when they had three buses and they had the second, oh, originally when they opened in ’83 they had two buses and the first floor. That was just enough beds for the people on two buses, about ninety-six beds. Uh, with a few sick people left over who were staying. So that took care of the first floor. Then they opened up the second floor in 1984. And they made it three buses. That was great because, uh, they had only half the floor had beds on it. And half of it had tables and chairs, and a recreation area. You could sit around and talk.

“It’s just aggravation in the shelters. There’s a lot of people there that want to argue or some people want to make a whole lot of noise to annoy other people. Not having any privacy, that’s the worse thing, not having my own room.

“Breakfast is the worst time. You have everybody eating at once so you have over two hundred people waiting in line for breakfast. And they don’t give you enough time, they wait, just after the last person goes through they’re all of a sudden yelling, ‘Everybody out of the cafeteria,’ because they want to clean up and have some time off. But they really wouldn’t need to ’cause they’ve got all day.

“Long Island’s very convenient because you, well, let me tell you what it’s like. First, you get in line, they open up at three-thirty at intake, that’s at Boston City Hospital, they have a big room that has seats. And then everybody waits in line and then they get searched so that nobody can bring in a knife or alcohol. Generally it’s alcohol that people have, or drugs.

“Then they have to talk to the nurse. The nurse talks to them to see if they’re too drunk. A lot of them, most of them are drinking so, uh, if they’re too drunk they send them over to room five at Boston City Hospital and then from there they can go to Boston Detox.

“So, umm, they have eight buses starting at, uh, about quarter to four, the last one leaves at seven. So that’s always a certain hassle. It’d be difficult for people to work because the amount of time is limited. They might get to Boston City Hospital at nine in the morning, if they take the last bus and go back at three. A lot of them do. So they’re only out, some people are only out for six hours out of twenty-four. And they spend most of their time over there and then getting back. And getting back is generally worse ’cause

everybody's pushing to get on the bus to get away from Long Island. So uh, uh, a couple of times I just waited rather than get pushed. Waited an hour for three or four buses before I could get a seat because everybody was pushing to get on. I didn't feel like going through that. So it takes quite a bit of time to get out there and quite a bit of time to get back to Boston. So a person might only be in town from nine to three and most of them probably go to St. Francis House because there they can get clothing as well as have lunch. Get their clothing first and then have lunch. By that time it's one o'clock. And they've only got, I guess for most people it's just a matter of wasting time. And then they only have two hours to, uh, and now, it's like here, they can sit over there until I don't know what time, maybe three o'clock, about the same time as this. So then, they can stay there until three and then take the Orange Line back to the shelter.

"You can't stay in Pine Street or Long Island in the daytime. You have to go out. The last bus is at eight-thirty. Only if somebody's sick can they stay in. Otherwise we take the bus to Boston City Hospital. Once I get there, I well, I, uh, try to, sometimes I try to pick up, if the weather's good I pick up a few cans. Make some change. I need change for, umm, transportation — I think everybody just throws in a dime like I do because it's kind of hard to spend more than that if you're not working — and phone, and an occasional phone call, and, and a cup of coffee. Maybe I make a dollar, a dollar and a half in change. Then I come in here [Medeiros Day Center]. Maybe I get a cup of coffee in the afternoon. I don't need to the days I come in here, 'cause I get a cup of coffee.

"So, sometimes, I picks up cans and if I don't feel too tired or something like I couldn't do it, it's been terribly hot the last few days and I don't feel like doing anything, so, umm, if I don't want to do that and make a couple of dollars, I, uh, just ride around. I get on the T, let's say eight-thirty, and ride around until ten. That's what I did today. I rode on the Orange Line. Went out to Oak Grove, sat there and picked up a newspaper that somebody had left on the train. So I went out to Oak Grove, waited there until twenty of ten maybe, just in time to get to Dover at ten, which is twenty minutes from Oak Grove to Dover. So I sat there and read the *Herald* for a while, till it was time, and then I came back to Dover and walked over to here [the day center opens at ten] a little after ten.

"So I ride around the trains a lot. You can change from one line to another and it never costs you anything extra.

"The only money I have is the few dollars I make in canning. It's difficult at first — being without money. But later you find out there's many places in Boston, more than any other city, where you can get a good meal. Even on weekends, there's the Church of All Nations, they're open Saturday and Sunday. Yeh, you can get all the food you need. Kingston House has breakfast four days a week. If a person, most people get breakfast in shelters, but if they didn't they could go, if they had to stay out they could go to Kingston House Tuesday through Friday and get breakfast. Weekends are more difficult. I don't know where you'd go for breakfast, if you didn't get it at shelters.

"Sunday's much worse though. Nothing opens till noon on Sunday. It's a longer day because people have to sit outside and just hang around most of the day. Sunday in Boston is really bad. Sunday is a long day. The stores, I like to go to the grocery stores, and usually I have enough money to buy something. Yuh, I usually like to buy a quart of milk on a day when nothing else is open. At the Prudential, if I buy at the Star, anybody can sit around the Prudential area. Up there, what would you call that, a mall? Where all those stores are? Yuh, and there's no . . . and it's cool, it's a good place in the summer. Anybody can sit there and have a drink or eat something. It's one of the few places that no one bothers you.

"I don't like to walk through the stores carrying a bag. Occasionally I go to Jordan Marsh just to look at sports on television, that's the only thing. But because of the bag, I don't like to walk around. Because many times in stores somebody will come up and say, 'I thought I saw you pick up something' or something like that, and they'll search my bags. I've had some bad experiences. There's nothing in the bags, but the point is they're so insulting about it. One store, I was in the Stop and Shop one time. Somebody came up. I was waiting. I was buying something for, some small item for a dollar or something. The manager of the store grabbed the basket that had my bags in it and he went all through it before I could get through the checkout line. I should have, if I'd known what to do, I would have sued him for that. That's no excuse. And then he said something nasty like 'Well you got away with it this time, but we'll catch you the next time you come in.' Well, naturally I didn't go to that store.

"There's several places you can go during the week. It's much more pleasant here [at the day center]. I would much rather come here. The people are . . . it's quieter, the people are generally nicer, better behaved. Most of the people who go to St. Francis House are from Pine Street, or they're alcoholics or something and they're generally, uh, because of their drinking they're very loud and argumentative. They'll start an argument with anybody. They're always looking to grab some food or clothing if they can get it. Here it's much more relaxed.

"Yuh, it's pleasanter here. It's the nicest of all places I could go. The fact is, the food is pretty poor out there most of the time. They figure if they're doing you a favor to give you a bed you should. . . . The main thing is it's too dangerous to sleep out on the street overnight. You know, there are quite a number of people who don't go in the shelters. They stay outdoors in Boston, somewhere. That's dangerous, though, 'cause I know a guy who stayed outdoors.

"Somebody came up and hit him on the head and he never recovered. It isn't safe to stay outside in Boston, because quite a number of them do it. Because they don't like the big crowds that are in shelters. Also, you have the inconvenience.

"I have slept out a few nights recently. I found a place in the woods over in Medford. I was all right there. Yuh, there were two nights I slept out because it was so hot. So it was really beautiful over there. Later on, in a few weeks there'll be mosquitoes and then if I was gonna stay out I'd have to get some good, I'd have to find out which kind of insect spray to get to keep the mosquitoes off. But I don't stay outside in Boston, but I have stayed outside in the suburbs, places where I found. The police are a problem. Medford was all right. Once I stayed overnight in Newton. The police gave me all kinds of trouble. They only saw me in the morning when I came out of the park. But over there they have big signs. There's a lot of little parks, in Newton, way out at the end of the Riverside Line. There's a big park and it's right next to the Charles River. It's a beautiful place. But they've signs everywhere in Newton, nobody's allowed in the park after eight P.M. So they don't want anybody in the park overnight. So, some of the towns, they give you a lot of trouble like Newton and Brookline. But, uh, they don't in Medford, Malden, Melrose. A few times I've stayed up in that area and the police don't bother anybody. In fact, somebody told me they once stayed overnight in the Malden Police Station because they didn't have anyplace to go. I think I could do that in an emergency. In terms of the police in Boston, actually it's not that bad. I can't go into the suburbs much. It's different there.

"I take a lot of abuse every day when I'm walking around or riding the subway. People, well, apparently the way I look carrying bags or wearing an old coat or something. People get up and move to another seat or they make . . . yesterday was bad. Some schoolkids

were making insulting remarks, called me crazy. And I said, 'You should be careful who you call crazy, because if I really was I'd probably throw you under those tracks!' But I'm not so, uh, they should realize that if somebody really was, uh, they're liable to get really mad.

"There are some people who get the best clothing at Pine Street every couple of days and they never carry any bags. They'll get one, they must have one good bag which they either got for free or a couple of dollars at Goodwill. And they put a few things, yeh, they don't keep many things, they just keep a few things like, uh, just what they need for a comb, razor, and toothbrush and toothpaste in the bag, just a few things. And they get, uh, all the free meals they need. They get all the clothing they need at Pine Street every couple of days or at St. Francis House. Yuh, there's a few that look good. You wouldn't know they were in shelters.

"I can't keep my appearance that well. I just don't like going into the bathroom and, uh, shaving and combing my hair when the place is crowded with thirty and forty men. And, uh, I generally do it someplace else, like, uh, oh there are public buildings like uh, the post office, or federal or state buildings that anybody can go into and shave if they want to.

"It's quite different now, in that I can't go out in the evening. And, umm, go to a movie, or even someplace to have a drink. Well, what I used to like when I was working was going to the Lenox Hotel, to the, yeh, it's the Lenox next to the Public Library. They always had a very good piano player. The nicest time was going there on Friday. A lot of nice people were in there after work having a drink and socializing between five and seven in the afternoon. It was nice to go there and talk to people after getting through work. The week was over. And nice piano music. Yeh, I used to enjoy having dinner out, having dinner over there and other places.

"But now, I'm not that lonesome. I usually see a few people every day that I know from the shelters. Now I don't, yuh, I used to have some friends when I was working that I, of course, stopped seeing them once I started going to shelters. I didn't want to tell anybody. I didn't even tell anybody that I was in a shelter because I don't see any of those people anymore. It's not loneliness; it's just aggravation in the shelter. But not loneliness so much, no.

"I've tried to think about why I'm in this situation. No job, living in shelters. Well, when I had, the few times I had good jobs, I, uh, didn't try to hold on to them. I could have worked harder. It was fine having the income, a place to live, but I didn't pay enough attention and I could have worked harder and kept those jobs and gradually gotten a raise in pay and, and been able to keep on, and then would have been able to afford to live in a nice apartment. And maybe have enough money left to join some kind of a club. I always like to play tennis, but, umm, I don't have the money right now to join. It wouldn't be worth what they want anyway.

"And then I try to figure out what to do next and realize how difficult it is finding a job. Like when I went into the state employment office the woman there said, 'Well, I can't send you out on any jobs, your appearance is so bad.' "

Street Dwellers

There is a clear distinction between the world of the shelter dwellers and that of the street dwellers. Among other differences, the street-dwelling population is a decade older, more disabled, and less apt to have an income source than the shelter-dwelling population.

Freeman and Hall⁵ calculate that the average homeless person spends 31 percent of his time in shelters and 69 percent on the street, unsheltered, and that there are about 2.23 persons on the street for every person in a shelter. My study, however, does not corroborate their findings. I estimate that two-thirds of homeless people never live in shelters and, therefore, never benefit from the resources channeled through the shelters.

In 1986 the National Coalition for the Homeless reported that there were 9,000 homeless people in Boston and that a total of \$8.25 million (\$916 per capita) was spent by city and state authorities for emergency food and shelter. This cost does not count the mountains of donated clothing, food, and toiletries that are moved to Boston's shelters every year or the convoys of volunteers who come in to assist the homeless. And it does not include the money spent on homeless alcoholics through other public agencies, such as public detoxification centers, alcoholism counseling programs, and the corrections system. Garrett and Schutt⁶ emphasize that adding these specialized, more medical services to the costs of caring for the homeless results in a 2,500 percent jump in per capita costs, to \$22,800! Even if one agreed with Freeman and Hall's premise that all homeless people spend some time during the year sheltered and some time on the street — which my study does not support — it is clear that the policy of delivering all homeless services through shelters leaves out the element of selectivity.

The type of homeless older adult that I call the Camper — one who alternates staying in shelters and staying outdoors — belongs to a very small group. Many — not most — street-dwelling homeless persons do occasionally use shelter services. And it can be argued that for that minority it may be effective to deliver some level of homeless services through shelters. But the majority of street dwellers need services to reach them where they are. Only two efforts in Boston do this now. One is the Pine Street Inn Rescue Van, which operates from 5:00 P.M. to 8:00 A.M. and seeks to bring street dwellers nursing services, warm clothes, fresh water, and coffee and sandwiches as well as the invitation to spend the night in the shelter. The van service has been threatened with termination because of insufficient funding. The other effort for street dwellers is the Kit Clark Senior House canteen, which operates between 10:00 A.M. and 4:00 P.M. bringing hot food, information, and referral services and other interventions. The canteen workers also extend invitations to participate in the Cardinal Medeiros Day Center for Homeless Older Adults, a program sponsored jointly by Kit Clark Senior House, the Catholic Archdiocese of Boston, and the commonwealth's Executive Office of Elder Affairs.

This country does not really have a policy on the homeless; rather, we have a policy on shelter. Symbolically, the name of the unit within the Massachusetts Department of Public Welfare that is responsible for homelessness is the Temporary Shelter Unit. In the city of Boston it is the Emergency Shelter Commission. We almost want to believe the fiction that homelessness is a temporary crisis, like an earthquake. Policymakers, and taxpayers as well, must accept the fact that homelessness is a concrete manifestation of the abstract concept poverty.

Policymakers must recognize the needs of two-thirds of the homeless who are not being assisted by present shelter policy because they do not live in shelters. Many will never go to shelters, others cannot go because they have been "barred" for disruptive behavior. Their per capita resources are being spent on the Boarders. Among the unintended consequences of the present shelter policy are the continuing segregation and isolation of unsheltered homeless people from the mainstream of service delivery that happens inside the shelter system.

Eddie: “When I got out of the army I had a good job workin’ in the naval shipyard in Chelsea. What happened is I got sick. Y’know, and I couldn’t work no mo’. [Last five words pronounced so softly as to be almost indistinguishable.] Yeah, I worked in the navy yard. Then I worked for this guy in South Boston called M and O Waste. Drove a truck for them for around three years. Doctor told me I can’t do no more work. Y’know? And I had to give up, ’cause after that I had a slight heart attack, and I had to give it up.

“I used to work for New Haven Railroad Company. I used to work for them. And so I was gettin’ sick, an’ so I quit. An’ I used to work for . . . Roofin’ in Watertown, I used to work for them. An’ I quit them. That ’bout all.

“Place I had over here in Worcester Square, the man sold out, and, uh, new owner bought the buildin’ and fixed it up and charges more rent than I could pay. So . . . I was out in the streets.

“I been goin’ to Long Island shelter for some time now. Better than Pine Street. You don’t have to fight that big line to eat, y’know. You be standin’ in line and somebody walk by and butt you in de head . . . see, y’know I had a problem, y’know what I mean.

“There are more younger guy at Pine Street. ’Nother thing about Long Island is that, uh, you can stay up and look at TV till nine o’clock. And if the movie’s good and you be quiet, y’ can stay up until eleven. Then ahhh, then another thing, ah, you can go see the nurse, they have nurses out there, you don’t have to fight that big line waitin’ and waitin’ to see the nurse, right? If you have problems, y’know, if yuh have real, real problems y’can go to them, they can solve tem f’ya. It’s a hundred percent better there than it is at Pine Street, y’know? And when it cold, you don’t hafta come out if you don’t want. Stay in. And when you get there, when y’ get t’ Long Island, y’ can take a shower and get right to bed. At Pine Street everybody gets to bed the same time, they get up the same time, five o’clock. You don’t hafta get up till seven or eight o’clock at Long Island, if you don’t want breakfast.

“Younger guys, they can move faster, y’know what I mean? Now take me, I ’sociate with guys my own age, y’understan’? I don’t mess with them younger . . . younger guys, y’know what I mean? ’Cause I can’t communicate with them. So, it’s more harder for a older guy on the street than a younger guy. ’Cause I don’t smoke reefer, I don’t mess with dope. If you don’t do that, you lost. I have to be lost, but I don’t mess with those children.

“I have to be careful. I get a check, y’know. VA. It ain’t that much, y’know. I get two hundred and seven dollars every two weeks. Rooms cost you that a week. I went to a guy, I looked at a room: beautiful! He wanted a hundred and ten dollars a week! A hundred and ten a week. Couldn’t afford that. And I went to another guy and he wanted ninety-five a week! The place in *Dorchestah*, that’s a hundred and ten. Now, in *Roxberry*, guy took me there, and the guy there wants ninety-five dollars for a kitchenette. Couldn’t afford that. See, I’m oney gettin’ but two hundred and ten a week [*sic*]. I could afford it, but I couldn’t eat.

“I’d like to find me a room, y’know in my, somethin’ I can pay, y’know. I can’t afford no hundred dollars, a hundred and ten a week. So that be a hundred and twenty dollars every two weeks. I gotta eat, I got to buy clothes, right? So that. . .

“As it is now, livin’ at Long Island, I take the bus down here and sit aroun’. Sometimes I go over there to the Copley Square Library, when they have a movie, a good movie, somethin’ like that. The guards never bother me. The only ones that give trouble is those younger guys. Older people they don’t bother. Like I go there and get me a book and when I get tired, then I’ll go. More probably the younger guys try to bring their booze in there. Go in the bathroom an’ try to smoke that reefer.

“The hardest part of being on the streets is worryin’ ’bout people rippin’ you off.

That's the hardest. Always. I'd just as soon be outa here. Soon as the bus goes to Long Island, I'm gone.

"The thing to keep people off the streets is give 'em a job. Like I tell the young guys, right, when I was those young guys' age I was workin' two jobs. These young guys these days, they don't want to do nothin', right. An' all they wanna do is rip people off. There are plenty of jobs out there. Not for a man like me, my age. No, not for me. I went to get a job one time and the guy axed me my age, right? An' I tol' 'im. An' 'e said, 'It's not that I won't want to hire ya, . . . I'd train ya, the company could, but it takes too long. You over fifty years old. We want younger guys.' Well, I came back and tol' a guy about this, younger guy, tol' me, he said he didn't want to work, he tol' me, he said he didn't want to work, he tol' me, he say, hey, . . . I'm goin' on fifty-six years old, people don't want me."

Consequences of the Shelter Policy

There are three interlocking unintended consequences of the present shelter policy.

1. Virtually all homelessness resources are channeled through the shelter system, although two-thirds of the homeless population regularly sleep outside the shelter. A majority of those are a decade older than the overall homeless population, more frail, more apt to be chronic alcoholic or mentally ill, and have far less contact with informal and formal supports.

2. This resource policy maintains the isolation of the more needy and desperate unsheltered homeless people from the mainstream of service delivery inside the shelter system, which tends to benefit not those most in need but those who have learned to work the system as a coping strategy and can best adjust to a rule-governed milieu. The more erratic behavior of those who sleep outside deviates from the norm of shelter dwellers who, although they are a minority among the homeless, are able to set the standards within the shelters. A person whose behavior is disruptive most often is "barred" from shelters, the contemporary equivalent of medieval excommunication. Those barred from the shelter system are excluded not only from indoor sleeping facilities but also from the food, clothing, and medical care dispensed within. Consequently, shelters effectively exclude the majority of those most in need of their services.

3. The shelter policy and the network of homelessness services in general serve as an enabling mechanism for the impoverished chronic alcoholic. Garrett⁷ quotes a sixty-three-year-old homeless alcoholic: "The shelter is my home, and it is the only way I can have my cake and bottle too." Or, as one of the men I interviewed put it, the shelter "is the purpose of booze, that's what they're there for." Garrett and Schutt⁸ point out that net-working or, as many Boston homeless elders call it, "doing the circle" of public and private agencies can become a way of life. "Although shelters, detoxification centers, hospitals, and rehabilitation agencies provide for the basic needs of homeless individuals and oftentimes delay their demise as a result of alcohol-related diseases, these agencies can also play a role in sustaining the drinking cycle of the alcoholic."

My study supports this view.

Frank: "I got married . . . 1969. But, uh, a couple of years ago we separated. That's when I went to Pine Street Inn. I knew about it before. I've known about it for years, yuh. In fact, it goes back to the old Pine Street, yuh know?"

"I think, I, uh, in general terms, I knew what to expect — more or less. I didn't expect that there, uh, would be so many, uh, mentally ill people over there. And that makes it

hard. Somebody had told me that there were a lot more mentally ill people over there but I didn't expect that there would be perhaps half.

"You have to deal with these things down there. It was a matter of necessity, living at Pine Street. But, uh, I'm adaptable, I guess, maybe it's because I was in the service for so long, that I can, uh, no matter what you were in the service there's still a certain amount of the kind of thing, regimented kind of, uh, life. It is a regimented kind of existence. And it was even worse before because you had to be there at two o'clock for a two o'clock line and again at four, and you had very little time if you wanted to get a bed, which I always opted for. It occupied, uh, very little time for yourself. But now they've changed it, so I think it's a little better. But it does remind you of the service except for the mentally ill people. The alcoholics didn't really bother me too much, uh, because, uh, in a general rule, that's their only problem. I mean they're not actually mentally ill.

"But as far as Pine Street goes, I appreciated what they did down there. I remember one young girl over there was walkin', just happened to be walking by near me, and she said to one of the other counselors, 'Welcome to my nightmare.' Yuh know, I mean, they're under a terrific strain.

"One thing that shocked me was the fact that there were an awful lot of young people showing up there and you wonder, uh, you wonder if they start out there what's gonna happen in later years. You know what I mean? Gee, that was a surprise. I mean these are kids sixteen years old, yuh know, right up. Not too many like that but a lot of kids in their late teens and very early twenties. And they'd come in there with suitcases and everything, and gee, when they left they had nothing, yuh know? Wherever they went somebody'd rip them off for everything they had, and uh, yuh know, if they stayed there any length of time, they weren't streetwise too well, and they just didn't know what was going on.

"That was hard to see. But I think that the hardest part for me was mingling with this mass of humanity and fifty percent of them are mentally, uh, ill, uh. A couple of times a day, in the morning, see it was the worst in the morning because a lot of people came in there at night and were sleeping on the floor and when they got up and got going again, they, uh, were in bad frame of mind. There was a lot of trouble there. Then in the evening, of course, when everybody has got a bed is in there, all at once, waiting for meals to be served. So early in the morning and late in the afternoon is the roughest part. I would go up to bed right at six o'clock when they opened the doors, when they were goin' upstairs. I'd go right up and take a shower and go to bed until six o'clock in the mornin'.

"At first . . . I felt sort of a helpless feeling. Well, because I had nothing, no, uh, nothing concrete to put my, uh, so that I was gonna get out . . . you know, uh, if this pension didn't come through . . . God only knows how long I might have been there. In fact, it was sort of a feeling of ah, desperation there, ah, but fortunately this pension came through, and then I was able to uh, uh, but I mean I feel bad now for the people who don't have that hope that are over there. Because if you haven't got hope, and I mean you're gonna spend the rest of your life there, that could be, uh, that is a helluva feelin'.

"The hopelessness of it, ah, as I say. I didn't have anything that I could get hold of any day, gee, now I'm gonna. I know I'm gonna get outa here . . . because I didn't know if, whether I could get that pension or not. And, uh, there was a fellow that used to come in here a lot . . . he had a cancer operation, but anyway, I introduced him to some guy at one time here, and he saw him again, and he, uh, said to me, gee, uh, the guy's in better frame of mind since he had the operation than he was before. And I said, Yeah, but you forget one thing. Before he had the operation he was over at Pine Street. He had a lot, lotta pres-

sure on him, he had a ah, ah, kind of hopeless feeling of how in the world was he ever gonna get outa there? And just that pressure off him, when he got out of Pine Street, even though he has a physical problem now, made him a different person.”

Older Males and Alcoholics

Another policy question is how we serve the demographic cluster of men age fifty to sixty-five who dominate the homeless adult landscape. As previously discussed, this age group represents eighteen to twenty percent of all homeless people. This group has been prevalent on skid row almost since the inception of that urban preserve for America’s untouchables. Most are too young for Older Americans Act services as presently structured, most would not be reached by family service agencies, and many are not veterans. Perhaps we need to consider that the homeless person, like the American Indian, does not suffer through as long a life span as other Americans and therefore should be entitled to publicly supported elder services at a younger age. Clearly the homeless person, including the long-term shelter dweller, is physiologically older than his counterpart in home-dwelling society.

Public policy often overlooks the hidden homeless population in alcohol detoxification centers. The government should reassess its policies on and its investment in alcoholism treatment and rehabilitation. The relative unproductivity of the aged and the very poor is not a valid reason to withhold therapeutic interventions.

Jim: “I began to see familiar faces [in Houston, where he had gone to seek his fortune]. Both in person, people who looked like people who I used to know, and then in these big ads. Madison Avenue. The advertising business. Well, I have a cousin and she was in the biggest ads in the country. And I saw her in New Jersey like comin’ out of the woodwork lookin’ me over, she had one time a pigtail wig, and another time dressed up with a ton of makeup. I see her various times. By the time I recognize her, she vanishes. She’s not the only one I see in ads. My landlady from Newark with a redheaded wig — several ads! A fellow I knew from two labor companies, some big ads, cigarette ads — Winston, Marlboro! The family downstairs, everybody I know has turned up on Madison Avenue! Now that’s a lot of money to keep their mouths shut. There’s a brain behind it, and I say it’s bigger than Watergate. My cousin says I was just imagining all this. But there’s so much to it I could write an encyclopedia.

“Why is it that everyone I knew in my life has turned up in an ad? And then they go out of their way to talk to me. And then when I ask them I get a smile and a crazy answer.

“At the Big Busy Diner over a three-year period there were twenty waitresses who look like people I knew. This is bigger than Watergate. But no one takes me seriously. They’ve convinced everyone what nice guys they are: ‘Here’s a lot of money, all you gotta do is smile, and you’re in an ad.’ And that shuts everybody up. From my cousin in Belmont I fully expected the truth. But they’ve been bribed. They pay you a lot of money and they work through the modeling companies.

“Somebody told a lie about me. I was accused of something pretty bad. I don’t even want to talk about it. I’ve been hearin’ this since 1960. I’ve been seein’ familiar faces, gettin’ little hints and all. ‘Don’t worry about it.’ I like to hear that about it. Scientists want to tinker with your mind. They are atheists, of course. Like the Antichrist. And there’s going to be a tremendous attempt at the resurrection of the Roman Empire.”

After a few years of sporadic working and unemployment in a variety of menial jobs,

Jim headed back east in 1964. He landed in New York City, where he worked in a number of food service jobs and for “spare-tire” agencies, often working weekends and loafing during the week. Jim thought there were a lot of opportunities in New York.

“If you can’t make it there you can’t make it anywhere. There are these employment agencies, and you could get a weekend job, and you could take your pick, and it would seem like heaven to be able to go out and get a job when I wanted to. I hadn’t been doin’ what I was doin’. I hadn’t progressed very far anyhow. I was workin’ like on the grill and could make sandwiches, and eggs, and breakfast cooking — light short order. But I hadn’t been doin’ that for quite a while. I wasn’t too anxious to get started. I was takin’ my own time. Now, this is America. I was earnin’ my own way doin’ what I thought I should. I was gettin’ along just fine, gettin’ myself feelin’ a little bit better, to where I thought I’d tackle somethin’ that I wanted to. That’s when my troubles began.

“When I was waitin’ for a subway one night a cop came along and accused me of tryin’ to rob that man on that train, and very briefly he acted crazy, like there was something wrong. So he arrested me, and I was released on my own recognizance. At the very last minute as I was goin’ to court, something inside me said, ‘You wouldn’t have the chance of a snowball.’ Now what would you do, what would anybody do? My word against his. There was no train. I was not on a train. I want a good investigative reporter like Jack Anderson. I think a good reporter can do more than anything else. I heard ‘Don’t worry about it’ for twenty years. Everywhere. And I’m not worried about it.”

Hal: “But all this nonsense came up when I was workin’ in Bridgeport. I was tryin’ to get away from these people harassing me through the electronic surveillance equipment that they have. You’ve probably seen some of these tall buildings scattered all over the United States. And they can throw their voices all around the face of the earth. And they been harassing us pretty well but it’s all over now, jest about.

“But I’m gonna tell you the reason all this is goin’ on. These subversive organizations like the three Ks, Ku Klux Klan, the Mafia, and all that, call themselves, giving me and my future wife interrogation and it’s illegal. We are represented by the Lloyds of London. Me and my wife . . . were picked five hundred years ago, at the time Columbus discovered America. The Raleigh-Durhams of London and Liverpool picked me and her from our titled families back then whichever generation that we would be born then, knowing the democratic form of government, religion, and legal industries, yuh know?

“And after the job in Bridgeport I’m unemployed. Now, I’ve been unemployed since the eleventh of June 1973 when I was livin’ in Pennsylvania. And, uh, I came up here to Boston thinkin’ I could speed the inheritance along. But . . . they got the time.

“We have done our job, Annie and I. We had done our job figurin’ out Frederick Crosby. And if you know what a ying-yang is . . . I don’t quite know, but that’s what they call it. Anyway, now we’re just waiting on our inheritance, it’ll happen about the eighteenth of this month. For part of the inheritance. By that time I hope I’ll be living over in Cambridge instead of Boston.

“We got property in Cambridge across the bridge, and we got property out west in Brockton, Massachusetts. It’s gonna take time. It will be solved by a court in the United Nations headquarters in New York. . . . I don’t know if you heard the talk of it in 1929, but back in the early days, the same Lloyds was harassing my father, too, thinkin’ he was me and I was he. And they closed the banks down. Confiscated property, same people over the face of the United States until they got their money back. And then they left it up to the

federal government through the state government to sell the property and give poor people a chance to survive.

“From the preliminary transactions we comin’ into quite a sum of money. A home, a wardrobe, free insurance for the rest of our lives, and, uh, transportation, a yacht, a cabin cruiser, and two airplanes, a small one, a transworld airline and a big Eastern airplane. And, uh, that’s about all the transportation ’cause we’ll be movin’ on our own estate to western Brockton, Massachusetts. And on our estate we got a tennis court, a volleyball court, a swimming pool, and a softball field. It covers eight acres, mine and Annie’s. And we got a fourteen-room house with, uh, comin’ to us. And, uh, plenty stuff to our liking, televisions, pianos, organs, and all that kind of stuff. And I got three guitars comin’ to me. I’m a folk singer, yuh know what I mean?

“And it’ll be nice, if we can live until we receive it.”

The Mentally Ill

A discussion of policy implications regarding the homeless would be incomplete without mention of mental illness. *The New American Poverty* (1984), Michael Harrington’s sequel to *The Other America*, describes the plight of the uprooted mentally ill as an example of a new poverty group. Along with many other observers and researchers on homelessness, Harrington sees a connection between the deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill and the upsurge in homelessness. A visit to Boston’s Downtown Crossing or Boston Common makes apparent the presence of the deranged among the homeless.

Clearly, a policy of selective reinstitutionalization needs to be considered as a valid alternative to today’s cruel hoax of emptying mental hospitals into communities unequipped to provide custodial care. While we need to guard against the replication of the worst in custodial facilities, we must face the reality that the public shelter today is a poor substitute for an adequately run mental hospital. Before practice becomes policy, we must craft another, more humane practice. We need to learn from the mistakes of previous asylums and strive to create new structures to care for the mentally ill who are also old and poor. Some will always need a protective, predictable institution that meets their basic needs. Many others would be able to function adequately in lower-density, scattered-site, community-based lodging houses with supportive services to make independent living possible. As with other subgroups of the elderly, those with mental disabilities are a diverse group. Alternative solutions to their divergent needs should be available.

Conclusion

In this study I have found that homeless elders (age fifty and older), roughly one-third of “traditional” homeless — those not deinstitutionalized or part of homeless family groups — are predominantly white, with the numbers of blacks and other minorities decreasing with age. There are roughly four men to every woman. Precipitating causes of homelessness among men tend to be evictions, unemployment, underemployment, and alcoholism; among women causes are more often domestic violence and abuse that set them adrift. For most, homelessness is just one more manifestation of their lifelong poverty, the culmination of a lifetime of missed opportunities, foreclosed dreams, and hard knocks. This population has lived on the edge, with relatively little social margin, all their lives. Poverty, lack of education, substandard housing, precarious working conditions,

alcoholism, underemployment, disability, and illness have followed them throughout their lives.

Most homeless elders have had long work histories, largely in peripheral unskilled areas — itinerant work and food service, resort, factory, and construction work. They have been the invisible people who have kept America humming. Very often their housing was provided by their employer and was lost along with their jobs. These jobs today tend to be filled by the new immigrants; they are the jobs that social groups use to get up and out of poverty. But the people in this study are the people who didn't make the hurdle. Anderson⁹ used the term “residuum of industry” to describe the relationship between the homeless of the 1920s (the period in which he wrote) and the economic system; it is an apt description today.

Many homeless elders have kin within commuting distance of public shelters, and many more could telephone their relatives inexpensively. A minority seem to have no family supports at all. Friendship within the homeless community seems to be problematic for most older members. There is a suggestion of true examples of friendship supports only among the group of male long-term shelter dwellers, the group that I call the Boarder.

A clear majority of homeless elders are troubled by an alcoholic present or past. Far fewer seem to suffer from mental illness to the degree that they need institutionalization.

The likelihood of having regular income seems to increase with age, with the group between age fifty and sixty-five having the lowest incomes.

Of the cohort now homeless and elderly, there seems to be a very large showing of World War II veterans, which may be partly a factor of the overrepresentation of males and of the cohort's historical experience. Nevertheless, it is clear that a military experience is preparation for homelessness.

One of the notable characteristics of older homeless people is their ordinariness. My study shows that they are people who have worked, raised families, owned property, paid taxes, voted, and defended their country in military service. Those looking for exotic subcultures must look elsewhere. Homeless elders do not have a special argot, an ethos. Many of them, especially the shelter dwellers, look just like their housed socioeconomic peers. Their value system is very similar to that of mainstream housed elders. They see their families, and most of them are rooted to a geographic area. Many have developed elaborate coping strategies that enable them to survive under highly adverse conditions.

Long-term Homelessness

While the elderly are not a large percentage of the homeless, they are a highly vulnerable subgroup. The routine deficits of aging are exacerbated by the physiological ravages of living in a public shelter or on the street. The older homeless person is a multiply disadvantaged individual. In addition to alcoholism and mental illness, Brickner¹⁰ and others found acute and chronic arthritis, hypertension, diabetes, and cardiovascular problems to be common among homeless persons. The effects of these conditions are magnified by deplorable living conditions — lack of heat and protection from the elements, scant sleeping accommodations, limited resources for preventive medicine, and overcrowding in shelters. Complicating matters are stress and the consequent sociopathic behavior of many homeless persons. Medical problems common among the homeless include infestations, scabies, and lice, trauma, peripheral vascular cellulitis, leg ulcers, and tuberculosis. Tuberculosis is a particularly serious problem among the homeless, with an incidence ten times that among the general population.

At least one-quarter of the homeless of all ages, Brickner¹¹ contends, suffer from acute medical problems that should receive the attention of a medical professional, including ulcerated or gangrenous limbs, pneumonia, burns, and fractures. An even higher number suffer from chronic medical problems including seizure disorders, heart disease, respiratory disease, and untreated malignancies. Substantial numbers have physical disabilities that interfere with their ability to work. These numbers increase with age.

The special needs of homeless older people are not just the immediate food and shelter needs of other age groups who may be younger and stronger and less affected by years spent on the street. They also encompass the burdens of aging and increased vulnerability in stressful and dangerous life settings. Most important, older homeless people are faced with the Sisyphean task of caring for numerous maladies while managing the normal aging process, without benefit of a living arrangement over which they have control.

While I did not attempt to ascribe cause in this study, it is clear that in the view of homeless elders themselves, homelessness is strongly correlated with poverty and the lack of low-income housing. Homelessness among the elderly in Boston is exacerbated by the declining stock of rooming and lodging house units, which is of course the other side of the rapid gentrification and upscaling of many urban neighborhoods, particularly the South End.

Social Reality of the Homeless Elder

Over the course of this study, I listened to homeless elders themselves describe their fears of victimization at the hands of younger homeless and of “outside” predators. Homeless elders shared with me their concerns about victimization, homosexuality, the stress of shelter life, and the increasing reinstitutionalization of the mentally ill in public shelters that homeless elders had come to think of as their place. They told about the central role that alcohol, no less than money — and having almost as much currency as cash in the homeless network — plays in their lives, both drinkers and nondrinkers.

I found that most — at least regular shelter dwellers — do not perceive of themselves as homeless. Those I have called the Boarder especially do not identify with the stereotypical image of the bedraggled drunkard, stumbling from alley to trash can. And most do not look the part. Those who regularly sleep on the streets have a more negative, more underclass image of themselves, and this self-identity may be a major factor in the cyclical nature of their problem. Many homeless people are greatly concerned about their ability to pass in mixed society, apart from the shelter network that has replaced skid row. They talked about how hard it is to accomplish grooming and toileting tasks to keep themselves looking presentable.

They talked about their “careers,” the significant incidents in their lives; they told how they evolved from rooming house resident or worker with housing provided or couple status to become homeless. The stories of their lives tell also how often the cycle is repeated within the same individual. Their occupations are constituted, as were those of prehistoric humans, of gathering basic needs through the round of shelter, food, and clothing resources available in the homeless network.

Some among them have become quite skilled in using the homelessness resources so as to preserve most of their small public benefits check for their own consumption, with a disposable income far greater than housed elders of comparable income level. It can be argued that perhaps in these instances the homeless network is enabling, abetting, and in fact supporting alcoholism and other socially undesirable behavior patterns. The manifest

function of the shelter system is to provide inexpensive “emergency” housing for the very poor who have no fixed residence. The latent function may be to provide no-cost room and board for chronic alcoholics. This issue deserves to be addressed.

Using the homeless network as a means to stretch their money is a coping mechanism. We must be careful about making judgments about such coping mechanisms, partly because of social distance and disparities in socioeconomic status. Low-status people, especially the very poor and the homeless, are studied with far greater frequency than are higher-status people. cursory glances at the financial pages of the daily newspaper suggest that commercial properties, multifamily dwellings, municipal bonds, and other instruments may well be coping strategies of the upper classes to stretch their money. We also know that alcoholism is a disease of all social classes and can assume that some of the money so stretched by upper- and middle-class seniors is channeled into alcohol, just as some of the preserved VA check, Social Security check, or pension of the poor elder is so spent. While we may not approve of the various coping strategies of any one group, we must be careful not to make value judgments on one class while withholding judgment on another.

A fundamental and self-evident problem with all poor elders — housed or homeless — is the inadequacy of their income. The VA disability pension system was never intended to be the sole support of a retired individual living alone. And Social Security, the main source of income for many elderly citizens, is not an income adequacy program. Nationally, 66 percent of the elderly derive half their income from Social Security; 26 percent depend at least 90 percent on it. Fifteen percent of America’s older persons — four million people — live in poverty. Some subgroups are even more disadvantaged. Thirty-nine percent of elderly blacks live in poverty, 19 percent of all elderly women, 44 percent of older black women, and 31 percent of elderly women living alone. Especially in cities like Boston, which behind Anchorage, Alaska, is the second most expensive place in the United States for elders to live, it is hard for elders living alone. Housing and energy costs are among the highest in the nation, while fixed public benefit incomes remain low.

Comparisons with Other Age Groups

Given the limited nature of this study, comparison with other age cohorts must be approached with hesitation. Part of this timidity is based on my conviction — informed by careful observation of homeless elders, but admittedly more conjecture as to younger cohorts — that the experience of homelessness is fundamentally different for older people. Casual observation suggests that families and children and homeless teens and adolescents tend to be homeless owing to environmental, episodic causes including unemployment, evictions, fires, and domestic violence.

A mere .1 percent of the youngest cohort (age seventeen to twenty-four) studied in *Taking the Next Step*, Boston’s most recent study on homelessness, were homeless for four or more years. Nearly 11 percent of the oldest cohort in the study (age forty-five and older) were homeless for more than four years. Only 10 percent of those in my sample were homeless for less than six months. Half were homeless for more than two years, and 40 percent for more than six months.

I suggest that the quality and quantity of the homeless experience is different for homeless elders than for younger people. Within the shelter system, two-thirds of all homeless families are living in hotels or motels at the state’s expense,¹² while the homeless single adults are in shelters. The homelessness of the very poor elder is more a function of

long-term poverty, lower educational and job status, alcoholism, and disability that has followed them throughout their lives than it is a temporary displacement.

Alcoholism, for example, among homeless people of all ages has hovered around 30 percent for nearly a century,¹³ but among the elderly I have found that it is closer to 60 percent. Older homeless people spend more time in grinding poverty, more time homeless and locked in the homeless network than do families and children and younger people generally, and they lack both the supports of the immediate family unit and the hope of a brighter day tomorrow. This is their tomorrow. This is their Golden Age. 🐼

Notes

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