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Editor's Note

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Editor's Note

Padraig O'Malley

Walking into Harvard Square in the late evening, you will pass them: a man, perhaps in his mid-twenties, with a duffel bag, taciturn behind a sign that simply says "Help," crouched on the sidewalk against a railing of the Old Burying Ground; two more men, with long hair and the gaunt, disinterested features and spasmodic movements of serious substance abusers, who call out, halfheartedly at best, for a dime or a quarter, on the steps of the Unitarian-Universalist Church; another two men, one older, roughly hewn, and practiced, the other timid, uncertain, and apologetic, in front of the Harvard Coop; a woman, whom you will fail to notice at first because she is so smartly dressed, but whose suitcase and travel cart, always at her side, will in time give her away, in front of Gnomon Copy on Mass. Avenue; and another woman, also minding her meager chattels, her obviously derelict circumstances in sharp contrast to her low-key, carefully articulated solicitations, her polite, almost polished expressions of thanks, just outside Holyoke Center. Seven faces of homelessness, invisible yet exposed, ghosts on the urban landscape who have lost their ability to haunt us.

For a while in the mid-1980s, when they were "new," they held our attention, but when it became clear that their presence among us was not the result of some temporary aberration in the socioeconomic mix but rather a manifestation that something in the country had gone seriously wrong, we disengaged. The thought that we, too, might be just a paycheck or two away from homelessness is too unbearable, too anxiety provoking for comfort: the suggestion that the system itself is at fault and that no amount of tinkering at the margins will fix matters, in fact, that nothing short of a complete overhaul will, flies in the face of our received wisdom. It is too unsettling to contemplate for a people not given to undue contemplation: denial is the preferred panacea for the unpalatable. But, of course, it is just such fears, fueled by, and in turn fueling, a recession that has spilled its insidious bile into the guts of the middle class which underlie our uncertainty about the future, our uneasy questioning of assumptions long the cherished cornerstones of our national myth: that if you educate yourself and work hard and live virtuously, you will get ahead and stay ahead.

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This special issue of the *New England Journal of Public Policy* will, I hope, add to the vigor of that questioning. Our aim is to make the policy dilemmas related to homelessness understandable to policy practitioners, policymakers, elected officials, government managers, the business community, journalists, academics, humanists, students — and the larger public; to draw attention to the web of complexities that entangles the major policy concerns; to expose some of the more fanciful and convenient shibboleths homelessness incubates; to provide a showplace for innovative research in the social and medical sciences that charts new paths and alerts us to new possibilities, enhances our understanding of the core problem, builds new frameworks to explore policy alternatives, and provides prescriptive agendas for policymakers.

Today, much of public policy debate takes place in a social vacuum. This is partly because policy issues are often rather arbitrarily assigned to particular and seemingly unconnected disciplines that put a premium on maintaining their separate baronies of intellectual hegemony, and partly because of our own too-pervasive proclivity for compartmentalizing in order to simplify. One of the goals of the *New England Journal of Public Policy* is to invade, as it were, these baronies, to liberate the policy issues held hostage there and release them into a broader, more human context, one that accentuates the idea of connectedness as the hallmark of continuity in public affairs.

For this special issue, therefore, we have drawn on contributors from all quarters — from people who work with the homeless, human service advocates, social workers, mental health professionals, housing experts, the medical community, psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, and “ologists” from many other fields. Some contributors do not agree with one another, and I have encouraged them to pursue their disagreements passionately, in the belief that the clash of opposing voices invigorates our thinking and makes us re-examine our own suppositions, that out of the hot crucible of debate emerges the distillation of ideas germane to finding new ways of looking at old dilemmas. But the emphasis throughout is on the homeless as human beings — we get behind the numbers and make the homeless a living part of the issue.

Hence the voices of the homeless themselves.

Lars Eighner wrestles from scavenging the essence of a contemplative spirituality that puts the madding crowd's pursuit of consumer materialism into an unsettling perspective: “I find from the experience of scavenging two rather deep lessons. The first is to take what I can use and let the rest go by. I have come to think that there is no value in the abstract. A thing I cannot use or make useful, perhaps by trading, has no value, however fine or rare it may be. . . .

“The second lesson is the transience of material being. . . . I do not suppose that ideas are immortal, but certainly mental things are longer-lived than other material things. . . .

“Many times in my travels I have lost everything but the clothes I was wearing . . . The things I find in Dumpsters, the love letters and ragdolls of so many lives, remind me of this lesson. Now I hardly pick up a thing without envisioning the time I will cast it away. This I think is a healthy state of mind. Almost everything I have now has already been cast out at least once, proving that what I own is valueless to someone.”

S.B. (a pseudonym) immerses us in his pain but asks for no easy pity: “I have written [my] story, not only to share with others, but to help myself. I returned to drinking [again] after four months of being sober. I can’t stop and am scared, and will be sick and desperate soon. This is a hard disease, and I know I can’t be helped until I want to help myself.”

Susan Fowler, on turning twenty, rages at the world, her despair erupting from unfathomable depths of loneliness and isolation few of us have experienced and fewer still would survive: “I just can’t find any answers to my problems. I think I’m going over the edge. See, one of these days I’m going to kill myself. I mean really do it. See, the other times I was just looking for someone to care, take me home with them, but now that I’m 20 I find out nobody gives a fuck about me and I’m too old for a foster home. My life is over before it even starts. When I was 17 the social workers could have helped me find a home where someone cares and appreciates me, but the motherfuckers didn’t care either. I wish I knew what to do. The only way out is to die. This [world] seems to me where hell is. If there’s a place worse than this world I hope I never go.”

Other voices, too — Thomas Newman, Betty Reynolds, Edward Baros, A.E.S., D.B., B.S., Vince Putnam, Steve Johnson, Robert Pavel, Ray Hall, Jr., Kathie Boulanger, Dean Hamlin — give poignant testimony to the human search for dignity in the face of extraordinary adversity, to how some struggle and endure and to how some struggle and fail, to how amorphous and unpredictable is the line between the two, to how success is often as much a question of happenstance as of determination.

To be homeless literally means that you have no home to live in, that you are without the reference point to which you instinctively turn to define who you are in relation to the larger order of things; that you are deprived of your sense of place and privacy, your sense of belonging, of rootedness and community, of being part of a social configuration that gives context to your aspirations and purpose to living — all essential elements of identity, of self-worth, all inextricably related to the functioning of the psyche and the meaning of life. To lose your home is to lose a part of yourself, of the meaning of your life; it induces a profound sense of loss and the grieving that inescapably accompanies loss.

“Any severe loss may represent a disruption of one’s relationship to the past, to the present and to the future,” Marc Fried writes in “Grieving for a Lost Home.” “It is the disruption in that sense of continuity which is ordinarily a taken-for-granted framework for functioning in a universe which has temporal, social and spatial dimensions.” The loss of an important place “represents a change in a potentially significant component of the experience of continuity.”¹ The sense of belonging is severed; the focus of consequential interpersonal relationships is destroyed; the sense of spatial identity — that sum of experiences grounded in spatial imagery and the spatial framework of social activities which is fundamental to human functioning — is traumatized; the sense of human self-image, of shared human qualities, is undermined.

Questions of definition and numbers continue to eviscerate the public policy debate. David Rochefort and Roger Cobb argue that “the ongoing struggle over how to define homelessness as a public problem — one in which diverse outlooks, intents, and philosophies shape the positions of different actors — enriches the policymak-

ing dynamic but also diffuses it by producing confusion over the promise and very appropriateness of proposed interventions.” This much we can be sure of: estimates of the number of the nation’s homeless range from a low of 300,000 to several million, depending on the counting criteria employed. Twelve percent of the homeless are adults with children, 10 percent are children, and 78 percent are single adults. Of all homeless people, 58 percent are single men; between 33 and 40 percent are women and children.

However, only a quarter to a third of the homeless are permanently homeless. The majority are episodically so — periods of homelessness alternating with periods when people have access to housing. In *Address Unknown: The Homeless in America*, James Wright estimates that, on any given night, a half million people are homeless, leading him to conclude that the *annual* homeless population is in the region of one and a half million.² In *Down and Out in America: The Origins of Homelessness*, Peter Rossi distinguishes between “the literally homeless” and “the precariously housed.”³ The literally homeless are people who don’t have “customary and regular access to a conventional dwelling,” while the precariously housed are poor people who are about to be evicted, or thrown out of a house by relatives, or who can’t meet higher rents. According to Rossi, “The most believable estimate is that at least 300,000 are homeless each night in this country, and possibly as many as 400,000 to 500,000.” He estimates that another 4 to 7 million Americans are so poor as to be precariously housed.

A 1991 report for the U.S. Conference of Mayors, to which Mayor Raymond L. Flynn alludes in the Foreword, surveyed twenty-eight major cities whose mayors are members of the Task Force on Hunger and Homelessness, drawing a demographic profile of the urban homeless population. About 50 percent are single men, 35 percent are families with children, 12 percent are single women, and 3 percent are unemployed youth. Children constitute 24 percent of this homeless population, African-Americans 48 percent, whites 34 percent, Hispanics 15 percent, Native Americans 3 percent, and Asians less than 1 percent. Only 18 percent are employed in full- or part-time jobs.⁴

In the country at large, substance abusers account for close to 40 percent of the homeless population, and mentally ill people for approximately one-third. The failure of deinstitutionalization, the relative lack of comprehensive community alternatives, and the demolition of single-room-occupancy (SRO) units in many large cities during the 1980s (during the late 1970s and 1980s, one million rooms — almost half the total — were lost) left many of these chronically isolated individuals particularly vulnerable to becoming homeless. About half of the homeless receive some form of social service assistance; the other half manage to survive without government assistance of any sort.

Aggregate statistics, however, often conceal the nature and extent of the real problem. In New York City, a mayoral commission which studied the problems of the city’s shelter system found that 80 percent of the homeless men housed in the city’s vast armory shelters and 30 percent of the adults in shelters for families abuse drugs or alcohol. Drug use is as much a symptom as a cause of homelessness. Although many of the homeless have a drug problem before they enter the shelter system, others develop a problem once they are in the system — drugs, after all, anesthetize the pain. The city’s homeless, the commission found, were hobbled by interrelated afflictions: extensive poverty, mental illness, AIDS, domestic violence,

and lack of education and job skills. Only a minority of the homeless, it concluded, need housing just to get back on their feet. ("While the call for 'housing, housing, housing' is misguided, so are the calls for 'services, services, services.' The truth is that both are necessary.")⁵

Approximately one third of the entire homeless population are veterans, a figure that is an appalling indictment of the entire array of Veterans Administration services. According to the National Coalition for the Homeless report on homeless veterans, they are better educated (80 percent graduated from high school and one-third either attended or graduated from college) than the at-large homeless population; the majority have been homeless for less than a year; and approximately one-half have a substance-abuse problem.⁶ Vietnam veterans account for 40 to 60 percent of homeless veterans, while those who suffer from posttraumatic stress disorder are more likely to become homeless than other Vietnam veterans.

Robert Rosenheck, Catherine Leda, and Peggy Gallup evaluate the impact of two programs which, since their inception in 1987, have treated 40,000 homeless mentally ill veterans. Success rates, they conclude, are "modest . . . reflect[ing] both the severity of psychiatric disorder and social dysfunction in this population and the limited ability of health care programs to address the full range of problems faced by the homeless mentally ill, even when services are specifically tailored to meet their needs."

In *Without Shelter: Homelessness in the 1980's*, Peter Rossi contrasts the "old" homeless of the 1950s and 1960s with the "new" homeless of the 1980s.⁷ The demographic and social characteristics of homelessness are decidedly different. The homeless of the 1980s suffer a more severe form of housing deprivation than their counterparts of thirty or forty years ago: they include a sizable number of women — one homeless person in ten is a woman; they are younger — the average age of a homeless person has dropped from somewhere in the mid-fifties in the 1950s and 1960s to the mid-thirties today; they are much worse off — in constant-dollar terms, the average income of today's homeless person is at best a third of what it was thirty years ago; and a disproportionate number of them come from racial and ethnic minorities, in contrast to the mostly white homeless population of earlier years.

However, Ellen Bassuk, who compares and contrasts the nature and extent of homelessness during 1890–1925 and the present, demonstrates that the homeless populations of both eras have many similarities, with the exception of the growing number of homeless families over the last decade. "Then and now," she concludes, "homeless people tend to be young, single, and . . . have fragmented social supports and a history of dysfunctional family relationships." She uses the comparison to underscore a point: that the causes of homelessness are systemic, and that our unwillingness to address these systemic ills virtually ensures the existence of homelessness.

Pamela Fischer adds another layer to our understanding of the social entrapments that perpetuate propensities to homelessness. She asserts that "victimization appears to be embedded in homelessness at least in its contemporary form, if not throughout history. It arises from patterns of behavior deeply rooted in virtually every aspect of social life, but is perhaps most visible in disadvantaged populations among which homeless people fare worst. Victimization is pervasive and its effects devastating and long lasting, resulting in culturally molded patterns of behavior transmitted generationally that are extremely difficult to reverse. Although homelessness itself fosters violence, victimization has been shown to cause homelessness

directly through events that propel individuals onto the street, as well as more insidiously. Chains of events beginning in childhood render individuals unable to cope with demands of adult life, thus predisposing them to becoming and remaining homeless.”

Homelessness shows no sign of leveling off. Estimates of the rate of annual increase vary between 10 and 38 percent. Among the twenty-eight cities surveyed by the Conference of Mayors’ Task Force, twenty-five reported increases averaging 13 percent over the previous year’s requests for emergency shelter, whereas the number of emergency shelter beds increased, on average, by only 4 percent. As a result, three quarters of the surveyed cities had to turn away homeless people because there were no resources — at least 15 percent of the requests for shelter went unmet.

Disagreements over definition and numbers reinforce other disagreements. Liberals argue that homelessness reflects, for the most part, the structural deficiencies of the economy and the government’s inadequate housing, income, and health care services for the poor. Conservatives argue that it is the homeless themselves who bear the primary responsibility for their predicament — hence the “drunk, addicted, and just plain shiftless” and the Reagan “Well, we might say, homeless by choice” paradigms. At the public policy level, however, disagreement over the relative importance of economic and health-related factors continues to fuel a controversy that has raged for some years among those involved with homelessness. Many mental health professionals believe that programs to help chronically ill homeless persons have, at best, short-term benefits if they do not also provide regular clinical care. Many advocates, on the other hand, insist that focusing on mental health or other service needs is a distraction obscuring the basic issue: the lack of affordable housing.

Viewing homelessness through the prism of a single socioeconomic or health indicator, however, refracts our understanding of the problem. The causes of homelessness are multiple and self-reinforcing; they are intrinsically interrelated, not separate and exogenous — the function of many variables, many of which are functions of one another. “These variables exert their influence simultaneously,” write Rochefort and Cobb, “as part of sequential chains and as greater or lesser components of hierarchical structures. Varying problem definitions arise from the way that different observers interpret the available data within this framework of analytical possibilities and from the relative importance they assign to the identified causal factors.”

(Russell Schutt postulates the homelessness equation with succinct elegance: homelessness is a function of the level of poverty in relation to the supply of affordable housing and the level of personal disability in relation to the supply of social services and supports. “Accordingly,” he states, “homelessness cannot be understood solely by studying homeless persons; the social policies and institutions by means of which we respond to homelessness also help to define its nature.”)⁸

The economic and social data are damning. In the 1980s the economy underwent a structural transformation that was characterized by an outflow of previously high-wage manufacturing industries to low-wage countries, leaving in their wake low-wage service industries. In *The Great U-Turn: Corporate Restructuring and the Polarizing of America*, economists Barry Bluestone and Ben Harrison document the consequences. They report that 54 percent of the jobs created between 1979 and

1987 paid poverty-level incomes or less, 34 percent paid middle incomes, and 9 percent paid high incomes. In contrast, in 1979 low-income jobs accounted for just 31 percent of all jobs, middle-income jobs for 65 percent, and high-income jobs for just 4 percent. The trend is unmistakable: the broad job base of the middle class has been eroded, creating a larger "at risk for homelessness" population, an increasing number of wage earners at the housing market margin.⁹ According to a Children's Defense Fund study, families in which the head of household is under thirty have experienced a 25 percent decline in median family income since 1973. Half of all black children live in poverty. Children under eighteen years of age make up 38 percent of the nation's 33 million poor.¹⁰

The nation's economy is skewed in all kinds of undesirable ways, increasing inequality, squeezing the middle class, and raising the specter of a society polarized into two groups: the haves and the have-nots. In the late 1980s, labor accounted for 80 percent of national income; today it accounts for 67 percent. The share of national income (47%) going to the richest 20 percent is the highest since the late 1940s; the share (4%) going to the poorest 20 percent is the lowest. And perhaps most alarming, one in ten Americans uses food stamps.

Between 1977 and 1989, according to a study prepared by the congressional Budget Office, the average income of families in the top one percent of all wage earners increased 77 percent in real terms; the income of a typical American family — that is, a family in the median of the income distribution — increased a mere 4 percent; while the income of the bottom 40 percent of all families actually declined.¹¹ In short, three quarters of the increase in total family income during the boom days of the 1980s went to the richest one percent of families — the rich, indeed, have gotten richer, and homelessness is perhaps more a question of too many people chasing too little income than we have heretofore imagined.

Couple these developments with record levels of corporate and government indebtedness (during the 1980s the country went from being the largest creditor nation in the world to being the largest debtor nation), federal deficits, adverse trade balances, a woeful insufficiency of capital for private investment (the government consistently absorbs about three quarters of private and business savings to meet its debt obligations), a banking system in disarray, and you begin to get the full picture of the Reagan economic legacy. To compound the problems of the rapidly proliferating economic underclass, in real terms the purchasing power of welfare, Aid to Families with Dependent Children, and most other social welfare benefits is about half what it was twenty years ago.

The housing situation is even bleaker. Structural changes in the economy have resulted in growing numbers of poor people who are unable to pay rents or mortgages that would make investment in low-income housing profitable. Yet only one person out of every four living in poverty is able to find subsidized housing — one of the smallest percentages in the industrialized world. Some 6 to 7 million low-income renting families received no housing assistance whatsoever. Meanwhile, as rents tripled between 1970 and 1983, the income of renters only doubled. As a result, by 1985 one out of every four renters paid more than 50 percent of his or her income for housing, and some estimates put the national housing shortage for households earning under \$7,000 at 4.1 million units. Moreover, the Reagan administration all but eliminated Section 8 of the Housing and Community Development Act of 1974,

which provided low-income renters with housing certificates that guaranteed landlords the difference between a tenant's rent and 30 percent of his or her income.

Most major cities have more boarded-up houses than there are homeless. The federal government commitment to publicly owned and assisted housing has practically disappeared. Between 1981 and 1989, federal expenditures for subsidized housing declined by 80 percent, from \$32 billion to \$6 billion, and total federal housing starts declined from 183,000 in 1980 to 20,000 in 1989. In the United States, public housing accounts for an insignificant 1.5 percent of the total housing stock, in contrast to Great Britain (27%), the Netherlands (43%), Federal Republic of Germany (20%), France (16%), and Sweden (35%). In short, in James Wright's words, the essence of the problem is "too many poor chasing too few affordable housing units."¹² Although the National Affordable Housing Act of 1990 provides some funding for housing assistance for the poor and for the preservation of the existing inventory of public and subsidized housing, as Jim Tull indicates, it hardly begins to meet current needs — it does not even restore federal funding for housing to the level of the pre-Reagan years.

The fault, of course, lies not in our stars but in ourselves. Some of the homelessness is unquestionably attributable to our attitudes toward government intervention to redress inequities in the social arena — and our attitudes toward poor people. Compared to our counterparts in industrialized countries, we are less likely to favor the government in the role of social arbiter, still clinging to the notion that the best government is the least government and that social problems, therefore, should not fall within its purview. Similarly, with regard to taxes, we pay a considerably lower share of our national income, particularly personal income, than the citizens of much of the industrial world, but we are truculently resistant to the idea of paying higher taxes even when a demonstrated need for them is evident.

Our attitudes toward the poor are more complicated, perhaps, but nevertheless negative. There is an implicit endorsement of the assertion that the poor are somehow at fault for their poverty, a too-ready willingness to blame the victims, a too-naïve belief that every American who has the pluck and the patience and a capacity for hard work can make it into the economic mainstream, that the American dream is there for those who dare to succeed. It is, of course, gibberish, the stuff of myth, but with shattering societal repercussions. When you add the poison of racism to the brew, attitudes harden in their disapproval, politicians bash welfare mothers, and we walk serenely in our righteousness.

In *On the Fringe: The Dispossessed in America*, Henry Miller finds little to distinguish between our response to the homeless today and to the "wandering poor" of earlier times. The basic attitude is "harsh, unsympathetic and — all too often — draconian in its severity. . . . [Yesterday's homeless person was] whipped, branded, jailed, transported, indentured or executed; in less harsh times he was scorned, shunned, harassed or pushed out of the community. Today the vilification of the homeless is couched in a language of surface neutrality; he or she is 'mentally ill,' 'alcoholic,' 'drug-addicted,' 'pauperized'" — subtle and not so subtle forms of depersonalization.¹³

"A homeless person suffering from a psychiatric illness or an addiction," writes Ellen Bassuk, "is not always viewed as someone who has a disorder . . . Instead the

affliction becomes a metaphor for a host of evils; it serves as testimony to the individual's unworthiness and becomes a cause of condemnation."

We are, Thomas Byrne Edsall and Mary D. Edsall postulate in *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics*, a nation at war over conflicting visions of itself: "One [is a vision] of individual initiative and equal opportunity . . . the other [a vision] of welfare dependence and anti-egalitarian special preference. . . . At stake," they write, "is the American experiment itself, endangered by a rising tide of cynicism and alienation, and by basic uncertainties as to whether or not we are capable of transmitting a sense of inclusion and shared citizenship across an immense and diverse population."¹⁴ "America," Shaun O'Connell admonishes, "needs to be reminded of the nation's original idea of community, best expressed by John Winthrop in [his 1630 sermon] 'A Model of Christian Charity.'"

"We must delight in each other," Winthrop said, "make each other's condition our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together: always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, our community as members of the same body."

How weakly Winthrop's exhortations echo in the corridors of power and the living rooms of the affluent! And what a cynical commentary on our public life that Ronald Reagan would shamelessly invoke the pristine translucence of Winthrop's shining metaphor of "a city upon a hill" as a beacon of community for all Americans while his administration betrayed its ideals, systematically excluded the homeless from the American covenant, dismissed their situation as being one of choice, revealing what O'Connell calls "the darker side of American Puritanism, the impulse to expel and punish those who are unable to affirm the common faith."

But to excoriate Reagan alone would be to miss the larger point: something has gone profoundly wrong when a country, the self-proclaimed greatest nation in the history of mankind — begrudges its children the food they need, even in the face of overwhelming evidence of that need, and simultaneously burdens them with having to bear in the future the cost of its own excesses.

In the end, the homeless are visible symbols of our decline as a nation, and we resent them for it. "Man's inhumanity to man / Makes countless thousands mourn!" the poet Robert Burns wrote some two hundred years ago. Today, we mourn not.

In the light of more recent and continuing research, the emphasis in many of the articles in this issue of the *New England Journal of Public Policy* is on questioning the status quo and on debunking many of the assumptions policymakers adopt when they develop their agendas and design their programs. Despite almost universal acknowledgment that the homeless must have access to some form of transitional housing, more specifically shelters, in the short run at the very least, the shelter system as remedy comes in for sustained criticism. Some articles declare that it will ultimately create more problems than it solves, that it perpetuates rather than alleviates homelessness; others argue that there is a propensity on the part of civil authorities to believe they have discharged their public obligations once they build enough shelters to house their homeless populations, when in fact they have become merely more proficient at concealing them from public view, lowering the threshold of public awareness to the acute urgency of the larger social and economic problems and the need for long-term remedy.

Kostas Gounis examines the persistence of shelter dependency in the New York City shelter system. Residents interpret the use of all available resources, regardless of their intended functions, according to their current, shelter-based needs. As a result, “instead of fulfilling their objectives in assisting shelter users to find appropriate housing in the ‘community’ and connect them to adequate clinical and social services, shelter-based programs tend to become part of the shelter and an elaboration and expansion of the shelter’s technologies of control.” Homeless people become entrapped in the shelter. “The more they adapt to the demands of shelter living, the more difficult their journey back to a normal life. . . . The obstacles that prevent homeless people from rejoining the mainstream,” he concludes, “are the effects of a state of captivity, not the symptoms of a disease.”

These sentiments are powerfully — and passionately — reiterated by Kip Tiernan, the founder of Rosie’s Place, the first shelter for women in the nation. “Our ‘burnt offerings’ become alternatives to justice — shelters and soup kitchens and food banks, some of which I started myself,” she writes. “For the past several years I have spoken out about setting at liberty those who are oppressed. Maintenance efforts threaten to re-create the almshouses and the orphanages of the nineteenth century. The Band-Aid solutions are wreaking social havoc. We have already seen the results of raising children in the unstable and unholy and impermanent environments of shelters and welfare hotels. They not only expose our children to violence and criminal activity, but they also serve to break down traditional family roles and discipline. And they ultimately can cause mental and physical anguish that frustrate any normal development. Ah, you are probably saying, she doesn’t like social workers. I don’t dislike them. They simply haven’t changed anything, any more than I have. To continue what we are doing might perpetuate the problem, not solve it, and we have to look at that.”

The New England Shelter for Homeless Veterans developed a working philosophy that specifically addresses itself to these dangers, the emphasis being on creating a structured environment that rebuilds self-respect and self-confidence. It uses a military regimen, with veterans organized into “four platoons and one company. Each platoon, consisting of twenty-five veterans, is led by a staff counselor platoon leader (a fellow veteran) who daily addresses the individual needs of the platoon.”

The shelter, its founder, Ken Smith, and James Yates write, “resisted the trap into which many large shelters fall — that of warehousing the homeless. [We] didn’t want to become an ‘enabler’ to homeless veterans. [We] wanted to provide as many services as possible in order to give veterans every opportunity to return to the mainstream.” In keeping with this philosophy, the shelter adopted a policy that requires each veteran, after securing a permanent bed, to find part-time employment (a minimum of twenty-four hours per week) or enroll in some type of educational program, either vocational or academic, within twenty-one days. If the veteran fails to do either in the allotted time, he has to give up his bed and go back on the waiting list.

Anne Lovell examines the complex and frequently misstated relationship between mental illness, homelessness, and the provision of social services. She cites compelling evidence to show that surveys measuring psychiatric states among the homeless tend to inflate rates of mental illness among them, and that needs determined by using rates of psychiatric disorder do not coincide with the needs expressed by homeless people themselves. “By now,” she writes, “enough surveys have established

the consistent finding that homeless persons do not necessarily express a need for the mental health resources service providers and researchers assess them as needing. They also order their needs quite differently from the way professionals do. . . .

“Rather than interpreting homeless persons’ reluctance in seeking or accepting mental health services on the basis of a universal notion of need,” Lovell says, “we might do well to view such expression of autonomy as a critical consciousness of the situation. The low priority they give to psychiatric care may reflect conflicts between the value systems of two worlds or dislike or inability to tolerate the rigidity of organizational structure and time, as well as the centrality of basic needs for shelter, food, and so forth. Refusing to ‘hear’ such needs has adverse effects on service planning and may lead to extreme consequences, such as creating absolute and meaningless categories of mentally ill homeless. Rather than interpreting the expression of non-mental health needs as resistance, the context in which they are voiced should be examined. This points to the way mental health services are organized, the multiplicity of agencies a homeless person must deal with, and the continual shrinking of resources.”

She goes further, urging us to challenge the very concept of need that underlies much of policy research. “Using psychiatric status as an indicator of need presents a further danger. It promotes a circularity by which the supply defines the demand. That is, by defining the needs of homeless persons in terms of psychiatric dimensions and symptoms, the service itself — hospitalization or treatment — becomes the social goal. This circularity in turn legitimates and reinforces the existing system (or nonsystem) of services while pre-empting the possibility of other types of responses.”

Paul Carling offers one kind of solution. After analyzing the traditional approach to mental health systems to meeting the housing needs of individuals with severe and persistent mental illness, including those who are homeless, he identifies an alternative approach or “paradigm shift” that views people with mental illness as citizens rather than as patients, with attendant rights, responsibilities, and needs similar to those of all citizens. “In this situation, people with mental illness should be given the opportunity to participate actively in the selection of their housing arrangements from among those living environments available to the public.”

We know a lot more about the homeless today than we did at the beginning of the 1980s: we recognize that different homeless people have different needs; that the services single mothers require are much different, for example, from the services adult single men require; we acknowledge that homeless people who are substance abusers or mentally ill or lack education or basic work skills need programs tailored to their specific needs.

What we should do in the short term is transparently self-evident: establish aggressive outreach programs to bring the homeless who are eligible for welfare support under the cover of the safety net (Peter Rossi, in *Down and Out in America*, reports: “Almost all the research on the homeless in the 1980s has shown that few of them participate in the welfare programs they appear to be eligible for by virtue of their financial plight and their disabilities”¹⁵); move the most severely disabled mentally ill from the streets and shelters into total care institutions and release the chronically mentally ill from hospitals only when there are strong assurances that

supportive living arrangements are available; subsidize shelters according to their quality, thus providing incentives for shelters to improve their accommodations and services.

The more important foci of what must be addressed in the longer term are also in place: provide labor market opportunities for young people, especially minorities, through public employment programs; phase out emergency shelters, especially the mass dormitory shelters in the cities; encourage the maintenance and expansion of commercial SRO hotels and rooming houses for single adults; mend the holes in the social welfare net with broad, encompassing, humane definitions of what constitutes disability; make aid available to families who take care of dependent adults in their households.

There is no lack of proposals, creative thinking, or innovative programs, as most of the articles in this volume make abundantly clear (see Jessica Segré; Ellen Nasper, Melissa Curry, and Elizabeth Omara-Otunnu; David Mehl and Mary Ellen Hombs; and Peter Dreier and Richard Appelbaum, for example), albeit philosophical differences continue to make their impact felt. Shelter as a right to all who need it is coming under increasing scrutiny.¹⁶ In 1990, Washington, D.C., voters repealed the city's right-to-shelter law. A city ordinance now limits the length of stay in shelters to thirty days for single people and ninety days for families.

Philadelphia has gone even further. Since 1989 it has halved the money it spends on the shelter system and the number of people in shelters. The city, which does not shelter drug abusers who refuse to participate in recovery programs, conducts random urine tests in shelters to monitor performance. Shelter residents must save 60 percent of their income, whether from work or welfare, and pay another 15 percent of it for shelter. New York City will continue to provide shelter as a right, but the mayoral commission recommends that permanent housing be provided only to those who complete self-help programs. Los Angeles, rather than building shelters, gives vouchers to the homeless, which they can exchange for housing at SRO hotels. Many of the new emphases reflect the concerns of some advocates that the homeless themselves must take partial responsibility for getting out of homelessness, especially when substance abuse is involved.

But in the we-will-help-only-those-who-want-to-help-themselves dispositions to which some advocacy groups are increasingly leaning, conviction can easily drive out compassion. Kathleen Hirsch, in *Songs from the Alley*, makes the point eloquently: "The many chronic alcoholics and drug abusers among the homeless population can no more be disowned by us (or by advocates for the homeless who all deny their existence) than they can be sentimentalized. All have been victims of early violence, and most have suffered from the lack of real opportunities to overcome its worst effects. Their families have exhausted their abilities to aid them. Their habits are deeply entrenched.

"Yet what keeps most of them entrenched are the haunting memories of their previous failed efforts to overcome addiction and hold on to meaningful relationships. [Many have] tried sobriety so many times with such disappointing results that [a] voice inside [them] tells [them] any attempt now is doomed from the start."¹⁷

The addictions to drugs and alcohol mirror the larger addictions of our society: to acquisitiveness, possessions, consumerism, the glitter of the gaudy bauble — and we have our own deeply entrenched attitudes to break down, the one most resistant to

change being “an unwillingness [to own up] to the bankruptcy of some of our dominant social values, which foster these addictions.”

Sheila Rauch Kennedy illustrates how grassroots efforts have forged the coalitions needed to address homelessness at the local level. “The greatest challenge of the 1990s,” she writes, “may be to incorporate the lessons of these community initiatives into the mainstream of America’s housing providers.” Richard Ring, Pine Street Inn’s executive director, argues for “broad-based coalition[s] of people from all walks of life united by a genuine desire to help people in obvious need”; coalitions that serve as “a constituency for homeless people, a large and generous source of voluntarism and financial support, and as a political force of its own”; others make the case for public/private partnerships, for increasing the role of the nonprofit organizations, which are better equipped than municipal bureaucracies to administer homelessness programs, for keeping the scale of effort at human proportions, for involving the business community at a direct level.

All worthwhile arguments for worthwhile efforts. But if we are to drive a stake into the heart(lessness) of homelessness, all are contingent on our collective commitment to the precepts of community: “There are no shortcuts to community, to support, or to relationship,” Kathleen Hirsch concludes. “Families that have been forced to deal with a homeless relative have long since lost the luxury of complacent detachment or sentimentalized concern. They know that the homeless once had homes and once belonged to the neighborhoods. They know that the homeless are not an anonymous aggregate but are individuals, each related to us in a vital and intimate way. . . .

“The only real change occurs when we invest ourselves in the lives of others: by alleviating the loneliness of a solitary neighborhood child . . . sharing our skills; easing the plight of [others] who can’t buy private solutions to the problems we all share, such as lack of child care; contributing time and money to educational, housing, and work opportunities for those who haven’t had our good fortune; listening with an open heart to the songs from the alley. These are the investments that will yield real change. Nothing else, nothing less. The solution to homelessness begins at home.”

Some years ago, *CBS Sunday Morning* did a program on Rosie’s Place. In one poignant scene, an old woman named Dorothy, a one-time Rockette, pulled off her boot and shook it furiously. Out fell a key, which she thrust with some defiance at the camera. “See,” she said, “I still keep the key to the place I used to live in.”

A small thing, a key, a thing we take for granted, a small thing that separates the homeless from the housed. Next time you reach for it, remember. 🍀

Notes

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3. Peter Rossi, *Down and Out in America: The Origins of Homelessness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

4. U.S. Conference of Mayors, *A Status Report on Hunger and Homelessness in American Cities: 1991* (Washington, D.C., December 1991).
5. "The Way Home: A New Direction in Social Policy," Report of the Mayor's Commission on the Homeless (New York, 1992).
6. Joan Alker, *Heroes Today, Homeless Tomorrow? Homelessness among Veterans in the United States* (Washington, D.C.: National Coalition for the Homeless, 1991).
7. Peter Rossi, *Without Shelter: Homelessness in the 1980's* (New York: Priority Press Publications, 1989).
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9. Bennett Harrison and Barry Bluestone, *The Great U-Turn: Corporate Restructuring and the Polarizing of America* (New York: Basic Books, 1988).
10. Children's Defense Fund, "Report on Children in Poverty" (Washington, D.C., June 1991).
11. Cited in *New York Times*, March 16, 1992.
12. Wright, *Address Unknown*.
13. Henry Miller, *On the Fringe: The Dispossessed in America* (Lexington, Mass.: D. C. Heath, 1991).
14. Thomas Byrne Edsall, with Mary D. Edsall, *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991). Quoted by Shaun O'Connell.
15. Rossi, *Down and Out in America*. Rossi outlined these short-term and long-term steps in 1989. They are, unfortunately, as relevant today as they were then.
16. Celia W. Dugger, "New York and Other Cities Diverge in Their Plans for the Homeless," *New York Times*, March 1, 1992.
17. Kathleen Hirsch, *Songs from the Alley* (New York: Doubleday, 1988).