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Framing and Claiming the Homelessness Problem

David A. Rochefort
Roger W. Cobb

Despite a recent upsurge of interest in the issue, homelessness is a problem of long standing in American society. This article traces how several forces catalyzed the problem's re-entrance onto the political agenda in the 1980s. It then reviews the ongoing debate over homelessness causes and cures as a struggle for problem ownership that has complicated the choices of public policymakers. The final section examines various descriptive attributes that figure into the dispute over how to define homelessness and influence the nature of the public policy response to it.

The lack of a place to live must surely rank as one of the most devastating human experiences in modern society. Forced to choose between the perils and indignities of the street and inadequate public facilities, the homeless find themselves separated from the mainstream community. From this precarious station all attempts to maintain the activities of a "normal" existence — locating and keeping employment, fulfilling family responsibilities, protecting one's own physical and mental well-being — become extraordinary challenges. Even the receipt of welfare checks, itself a symbol of marginality, is more problematic for those who have no address. Compounding the situation are the complex, ambivalent reactions of fear, hostility, disgust, pity, compassion, and guilt with which the homeless are viewed by more fortunate members of society.¹

Academic study of the homeless and their plight has grown by leaps and bounds over the past decade. Demographers and survey researchers have counted the homeless, analyzing their composition and geographic distribution. Sociologists have determined the conditions of existence of the homeless and the sequence of events bringing them to misfortune. Health care professionals have assessed their physical and mental states. Social workers have looked into the varied adjustment issues facing homeless families and the shortcomings of current support services. Arguably the most important question of all, however, has yet to receive an ade-

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quate answer: What accounts for the limited, disorganized, and ineffective way in which public policy has responded to this pressing social issue?

The purpose of this article is to provide further information and insight relevant to this puzzle. It argues that development of homelessness public policy has been hampered by fundamental disagreements over the nature and causes of the problem being addressed. Guiding this analysis is a "problem definition" framework that emphasizes the malleable quality of public issues, that is, their openness to competing factual interpretations and value stances.² The ongoing struggle over how to define homelessness as a public problem — one in which diverse outlooks, interests, and philosophies shape the positions of different actors — enriches the policymaking dynamic but also diffuses it by producing confusion over the promise and very appropriateness of proposed interventions.

If public problems are not simply "givens" but are matters of interpretation and definition,³ it is necessary, first of all, to explain how homelessness gained recognition as a serious public concern during the 1980s. Next we review the debate over homelessness causes and cures as a conflict over "problem ownership." Finally, we consider a set of definitional issues having special import for homelessness policy that are raised by this debate and cut across it.

How Did Homelessness Enter the Political Agenda?

The attention capabilities of government are necessarily limited. There are always more matters vying for the notice of decision makers than can be actively considered. Agenda building refers to the process through which problems or issues come to command the active and serious attention of government officials as prospective matters of public policy. Two separate agendas are of crucial importance: the public agenda and the formal agenda. The public agenda consists of those issues that a sizable portion of the population believe merit government attention. The formal agenda consists of those items up for serious consideration by officials in one or more units of government (for example, legislatures, courts). The size of the public agenda is limited by the public's interest in any given set of issues, that of the formal agenda by time and resource constraints.

Since many matters are "givens" on a formal agenda (like budgetary matters or previous issues, such as abortion, that remained unfinished in past considerations by officials), there is very little space for new items. Indeed, officials could devote all their time to focusing solely on old issues. Yet new issues inevitably emerge. How? One source of new items on the formal agenda is those issues which spill over from the public agenda. Popular concern about an issue normally means that officials will give it consideration. However, the public agenda is much more volatile than the formal agenda. The public's attention span is more limited than that of officials, and members of the public often have to be stimulated by external sources to follow a problem.⁴

Keys to Issue Visibility

Since public agenda access normally precedes formal agenda consideration, what enables an issue to attain sufficient visibility for the public to recognize that a problem exists? First, there needs to be a change in the external appearance of a problem. Regardless of how serious the consequences of an issue are, there needs to be a sudden and dramatic increase in awareness of a problem's existence. For example,

oil tanker safety has long been a concern for environmentalists. But until the *Exxon Valdez* crashed off the coast of Alaska and spilled thousands of gallons of crude oil into Prince William Sound, threatening fish and fowl, beaches, and other aspects of the natural habitat, people did not take the issue to heart. At that point, however, the issue quickly appeared on the public agenda.⁵

Second, there needs to be media interest. This can come from the occurrence of an event such as the leaking of the *Exxon Valdez*, or it can come from the media's new attention to a problem that has always existed. An excellent example is the media's discovery of the hunger problem in Ethiopia in the mid-1980s. People had been starving there as a consequence of a civil war and drought for a number of years, but a documentary sponsored by the BBC and run on NBC caused an intense interest in the issue, which ultimately led to Ronald Reagan's administration sending food aid to a Marxist government that was anathema to it. Rock concerts by popular singers also raised millions of dollars to feed the hungry. Significantly, after the passage of some months, interest waned even though the problem did not.⁶

A third component of public agenda access is the existence of activists on behalf of a cause. For years, health groups and the American Cancer Society have been working for tougher regulation of the tobacco industry. These antismoking actors are taking on a formidable economic interest and, until recently, their victories have been few and far between, despite diligence on a variety of fronts: law suits, new legislation, commercials on television discouraging smoking, and the creation of the issue of passive smoking. What has proved equally important, however, is the appearance of an individual who has skill in using the media and is an articulate spokesperson for the cause. Under the Reagan administration, Surgeon General Everett Koop became this leader pushing for additional controls on the tobacco industry. He raised public consciousness concerning the issue, and smoking rates declined during this period.⁷

Homelessness as a Public Issue

How does the agenda-building concept relate to the problem of homelessness? The first question to be asked: Is homelessness a new issue or merely an old issue newly named? The preponderance of evidence points to the latter position. The main thing that is "new" about homelessness is the level of attention it now receives. It has been a concern as far back as Colonial America. New England towns created residency requirements for dealing with the problem. Those with "settlement rights" were accepted as members of the community; those who were not (typically transients) were neither accepted nor helped.⁸

The number of homeless increased dramatically in nineteenth-century America. The westward movement, industrialization, and the rise of urban centers all required a large manpower pool provided mainly by immigrant workers. Such individuals were needed to provide seasonal and episodic labor. In addition, a series of major economic dislocations left many jobless and homeless. The problem became a real concern of local police departments, which jailed such people on charges of vagrancy. Toward the end of the century, the homeless settled in dilapidated parts of the city, known as skid rows, which meant the centralization and isolation of those without a place to live. The beginning of the twentieth century also brought a decline in the demand for transient unskilled labor and left many men without a job.⁹

Local homelessness increased dramatically in the depression of the 1930s. Most of the dispossessed did not elicit great public sympathy, with the partial exception of families in the dust bowl states who lost their farms and were forced to move to the West. Shantytowns grew in many cities, and large numbers of men became unemployed for long periods of time. This population was reduced but not eliminated by the post-World War II prosperity. Urban renewal programs displaced many of the shantytowns, but the homeless simply moved to other declining areas in the city. As a result, the problem was constantly festering.¹⁰

Homelessness in the 1980s

A combination of elements brought the homeless to the public agenda in the early 1980s. First was the involvement of a number of activists. A New York City attorney who later founded the National Coalition for the Homeless, Robert Hayes, filed a legal action on behalf of vagrants in the Bowery section in the late 1970s. This suit led to a decree requiring the city to provide shelter for all homeless people who sought it. A group of demonstrators protested at the 1980 Democratic National Convention in New York City, demanding better conditions for the homeless.¹¹ A series of books also came out in 1981 focusing on the issue, including such titles as *Shopping Bag Ladies*¹² and *Private Lives/Public Spaces*.¹³

An especially bitter winter in 1981–1982 led the media to focus on grim stories of people freezing to death in cities throughout America.¹⁴ This led to a second ingredient promoting agenda access, media interest. Stories of people facing death and despair are a staple of television news. With most Americans receiving their news primarily through television reports, it is not surprising that a 1989 *New York Times* poll reported that half of all Americans found out about the problem of homelessness by watching television (the other half had seen the problem in person).¹⁵ Another important stimulus for increasing media attention to the homeless at this time was political controversy over social welfare cuts in the first Reagan administration and their impact on society.

Third, an issue entrepreneur was the catalyst who helped bring many of these elements together. Mitch Snyder, a longtime activist in the antiwar movement in the 1960s and early 1970s, participated in creating the Community for Creative Non-Violence in Washington, D.C., in 1970. The group started out protesting the war in Asia, but by the late 1970s it had turned to the homeless as its major concern. Snyder was a committed idealist who knew how to develop media events galvanizing public attention. In 1984 he staged a hunger strike that lasted fifty-one days with constant publicity. He finally extracted a promise that federal money would be used to renovate the largest homeless center in the nation's capital before ending his fast. In 1986, Snyder brought congressional members and Hollywood stars out to sleep in the streets of Washington, D.C., for one night, which was dubbed "the Grate American Sleepout." All these participants were adept at dealing with the media themselves and helped to publicize the issue. Snyder staged other "sleepouts" in front of national monuments for various lengths of time during all seasons to keep the public's attention.¹⁶ A speaker at a Boston rally held in July 1991 to commemorate the first anniversary of Snyder's death stressed his unique contribution to the homelessness cause: "Without Mitch, who will shoulder the burden? Who will take Mitch's place? Who will carry the anger and joy that Mitch carried? Who will fast and who will pray? Who will show his anger and go to jail? And who will stand up before the powers that be and tell the truth?"¹⁷

Fourth, Stern notes that the homeless became pawns in larger battles for power between different levels of government. In New York City in 1980, for example, Mayor Edward Koch resisted state pressure to open more shelters because he felt the city could not afford them. Public clamor for action ensued. Koch thought his deliberate inactivity would prod the state into taking responsibility for the homeless. Thus, this group became a political football as different agencies tried to avoid the responsibility for dealing with the problem, thereby making their short-term plight worse but inevitably raising their visibility.¹⁸

Fifth, there was a change in the attitude of police toward the homeless. In the past century, police "sweeps" would clear certain areas, with the people being jailed or moved. Now that the homeless had become so many and with the decriminalization of many minor offenses, police devoted their limited resources to dealing with more serious problems, such as drugs and physical assaults.¹⁹

Sixth, although homelessness is not a new problem in American society, its form has evolved in a way that brought it into prominence in the 1980s. Previously the homeless were confined to rundown areas or skid rows where people did not have to see them. By the 1980s, the numbers had increased and the families moved into the central business areas of cities. That meant more middle- and upper-class citizens would be forced to witness homelessness and, in some situations, confront homeless individuals. The problem could no longer be ignored. In previous times, the homeless were likely to be men; now one could find women and families without a place to live.²⁰ Finally, the decade of the 1980s was one which saw a vast accumulation and display of wealth.²¹ In this context, homelessness stood out because of its contrast with the trend of economic affluence.

Homelessness as a Fluctuating Issue

The homeless, then, have always been a social problem, although not one consistently receiving the attention of public policymakers or the general citizenry. Recently, however, they have managed to attain the volatile public agenda and have squeezed onto the formal agenda for consideration. Yet, it should be noted, they are not a permanent resident on either agenda. Interest in their plight is spasmodic, depending on such factors as seasonal weather shifts and the ascendance of competing social issues. As demonstrated in Figure 1, the priority given by the public to the homeless waxed and waned repeatedly just over the past five years.²² There is no reason to believe this pattern will be altered in the future.

Claiming "Ownership" of the Homelessness Problem

Central to the definition of public problems is their "ownership."²³ To claim ownership of a problem is to seek control over how it is thought of and acted on within the public arena. What causes a problem, who is most directly affected and how, and which remedial approach will have the most effect are all controversial questions in the typical public policy debate.²⁴ Out of the political cacophony of contending opinions and factual assertions, the problem's owner is the one who comes to speak with recognized authority and shapes the direction of public intervention from among many conceivable alternatives.

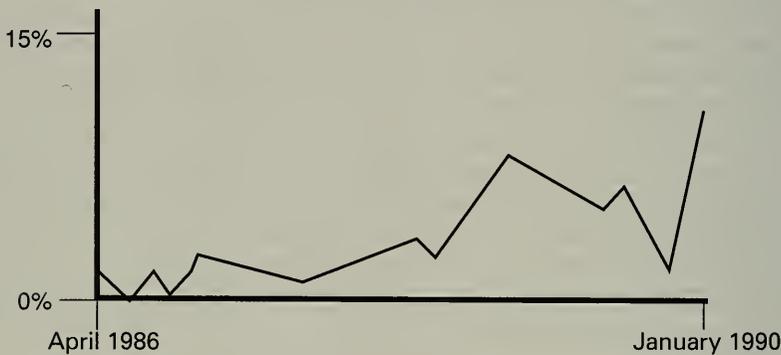
Problem ownership may be claimed by an individual (such as an academic expert) or by a group that has coalesced to promote some professional, disciplinary, religious,

economic, or ideological interest. Incentives for engaging in the ownership struggle are several, can vary according to the actor involved, and are not mutually exclusive. An obvious motivating force for those claiming problem ownership in order to gain added resources, territory, or prestige is self-interest. But another purpose may be to promote an impartially researched and reasoned assessment of an important public issue. Ownership claims may also be advanced as an unconscious reflexive expression of the identity, values, and intellectual outlook of the claimer.

Figure 1

Changing Public Agenda Status of the Homeless

"What do you think is the most important problem facing the country today?" Line shows percentage of adults who responded "homelessness."



Source: Based on fourteen *New York Times*/CBS News Polls and one *New York Times* poll.

Yet how is it that so many competing perspectives are possible on a single public issue, one which has captured widespread attention yielding abundant factual information? The answer lies in the inherent causal complexity of social reality. In the language of social science, every public problem results from multiple "independent variables." These variables exert their influence simultaneously, 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.

These general observations provide a key to understanding the dynamic quality of the homelessness debate, in which housing, economic, and mental health advocates continue to vie for centrality. We will also consider a "holistic" definition of the problem that attempts to incorporate multiple causal factors and corrective measures.

Homelessness as a Housing Problem

Taken most literally and immediately, homelessness is the lack of a suitable residence. Eschewing distracting complications, some policy analysts and activists adopt this narrow focus for explaining the occurrence of homelessness. For example, Jonathan Kozol, best-selling author of *Rachel and Her Children*, selects families as the most significant part of the homelessness problem and gives this response to the question of why they are without homes.

Unreflective answers might retreat to explanations with which readers are familiar: “family breakdown,” “drugs,” “culture of poverty,” “teen pregnancies,” “the underclass,” etc. While these are precipitating factors for some people, they are not the cause of homelessness. *The cause of homelessness is lack of housing.* [Emphasis in original]²⁵

Another author notes the different forms and degrees of homelessness that exist according to the time period involved (temporary, periodic, chronic, and total) and the type of persons affected (single men and women, poor elderly, ex-offenders, single-parent households, runaway youths, substance abusers, and ex-psychiatric patients). Underlying most variations, she concludes, is one basic element, “the critical shortage of low-cost housing.”²⁶ Maria Foscarinis, an advocate with the National Coalition for the Homeless, is another who has put the matter very bluntly: “Homelessness is primarily a housing problem to be addressed with more housing.”²⁷

Compelling statistics are available to underscore this perspective.²⁸ Each year, fires, demolitions, and conversion upgrades eliminate approximately 500,000 low-income housing units. Federal funding for publicly owned and assisted housing declined by about 80 percent over the last decade, with a consequent sharp fall in federal housing starts (to 20,000 in 1989 from 183,000 in 1980). Vacancy rates as low as 2 or 3 percent indicate the tightness of the housing market in major cities like New York and Boston. Meanwhile, fewer and fewer low-income persons can hope to realize the American dream of homeownership, as mortgage payments on new homes demand an ever rising portion of household resources.

Prescribed remedies follow logically from the diagnosis of ills — a host of different housing arrangements targeted to those in need. Or, as Robert Hayes of the National Coalition for the Homeless has stressed, solving the homelessness problem requires “housing, housing, housing.”²⁹ Development of an adequate shelter system is a front-line, stopgap measure. Also necessary are more comprehensive policy reforms meant to replenish the dwindling low-income housing stock.

This housing definition of the homelessness problem proves flexible enough to fit both liberal and conservative philosophies. On the liberal side, the approach of choice is a large-scale infusion of public funds, primarily from the federal government.³⁰ Some activists have even pressed the courts to recognize a constitutional “right to shelter” compelling public authorities to provide housing to the homeless as a legal entitlement, although this strategy has been largely unsuccessful to date.³¹ One conservative solution is to deregulate the housing market on the local level through weakened housing code enforcement and the elimination of rent control, thereby protecting low-rung housing from extinction and stimulating new rental housing development.³²

Homelessness as an Economic Problem

For some observers of the homelessness problem, the shortage of affordable housing in the United States raises more questions than it answers. Why is available housing so expensive? Why aren't incomes sufficient to allow people to purchase on the present market the housing that they need? Concentration on these issues leads to a definition of homelessness that is economic in orientation.

One review of studies of the homeless in a number of major urban centers revealed the following economic facts: many homeless persons had no jobs or income whatsoever and most others were underemployed; there was a high dependence on government transfers; most of the homeless stated that they would work if they

could get a job; and they most often cited economic reasons when asked to account for their situation. The reviewer analyzed these data as follows:

Evidence from local studies, testimony before congressional committees and other local reports indicates that service providers and advocates alike agree that economic conditions constitute the primary underlying cause of most homelessness. Despite the many pathways that lead to the loss of shelter, all slope down the incline of economic hardship. Economic weakness makes coping with illnesses, handicaps and addiction seriously debilitating, especially when someone has no place to stay that they can afford. The wealthy or the well-insured, although they may endure similar illnesses, handicaps or addictions, avoid the privations of the streets and the indignities of dependence by purchasing the care their savings or insurance benefits afford them.³³

Peter Rossi, one of the nation's leading social researchers on the subject, takes a similar economic position when he holds that "homelessness is more properly viewed as the most aggravated state of a more prevalent problem, extreme poverty."³⁴ When the American Public Welfare Association (APWA) formulated a special policy statement on the nation's housing problems, its first recommendation spoke to the issue of comprehensive welfare reform and the need to improve cash benefits so that needy families could afford their shelter costs. Emphasized the APWA, "The welfare system has become the housing agency of last resort for the poor."³⁵ According to at least one national survey in the late 1980s, it is the economic perspective that best parallels the view of a majority of citizens, who said that a lack of jobs or a poor economy is the main cause of homelessness.³⁶

The ultimate culprits in this kind of economic analysis are the macroeconomic forces that produce destitution and inequality in our society. Hopper et al., for example, argue that "widespread homelessness in major urban areas in the 1980s must be related to wholesale changes in the political economy of the city. Deindustrialization, or the shift from manufacturing to the finance and service sectors, with its accompanying 'renovation' of the central business district and surrounding areas in the inner city, is the driving force behind the process."³⁷ Belcher and Singer speak even more broadly of homelessness as a "cost of capitalism."³⁸ Among the specific factors they cite as responsible for homelessness are business mergers and corporate takeovers that have thrown workers out of jobs; the movement of U.S. businesses to foreign countries; and anti-inflationary policies of the early Reagan years that led to recession and high unemployment. They and others also emphasize the negative impact of cuts in public welfare, disability support, and other social programs during the 1980s.

The program of reform that stems from such sundry economic analyses contains many possible initiatives, some of them verging on the visionary. One proposal related specifically to housing policy is the so-called fair share/balanced housing plan. As Lang explains, "Most low cost housing programs are place-oriented and seek to reestablish and refurbish the ghetto. Those programs are doomed to failure since many of the rehoused will soon be homeless again due to the lack of an economically viable and supportive local community."³⁹ Accordingly, the recommendation is that suburban communities, where much of the new job growth is located, no longer be permitted to utilize exclusionary zoning to keep out multifamily and other forms of low-cost housing. Moreover, these communities would also be required to provide decent housing for a "fair share" of the area's poor. Some noteworthy inclusionary zoning programs have been implemented in New Jersey, Massachusetts, and California.⁴⁰

The purpose of certain other proposed policies, such as a national full employment/minimum income program, would be to assure that the poor have adequate resources to pay for their housing.⁴¹ Income redistribution, it has been suggested, could provide a means for financing the effort. Finally, some proponents argue that government could undertake tougher regulation and taxation of the activities of private business to safeguard the well-being of the most vulnerable.

Homelessness as a Mental Health Problem

No single population group has come to be associated more strongly with homelessness than the mentally ill. The comment of one group of homelessness researchers that “common folk wisdom remains hostage to the notion that were it not for the mentally ill, there would be no crisis of homelessness”⁴² is an exaggeration, but it contains an element of truth. Mental health advocates generally do not deny the heterogeneity of the homeless population or the desirability of an appropriately diversified governmental response, yet their emphasis is unmistakable. In the words of psychiatrist E. Fuller Torrey, “The seriously mentally ill are the most poignant and helpless of the homeless population.”⁴³

Interpretation of homelessness as a mental health problem derives in large part from the collection of statistics on the number of homeless people with psychiatric impairments.⁴⁴ Typical estimates fall in the neighborhood of 30–40 percent, although some studies have placed the figure as high as 90 percent. Statistics on the average mental illness rates of designated subgroups of the homeless, such as women and the out-of-shelter street people, tend to be even higher than for the homeless overall. Another substantial segment of the homeless, again perhaps as much as one-third, are identified as having substance-abuse problems, also a condition commonly “claimed” by the mental health community. Add to these data the number of homeless persons judged to be at risk of developing emotional difficulties because of the stressful experience of homelessness — young children are a prime example — and you have a compelling depiction of the entanglement of mental health and homelessness issues.

Disenchantment with the controversial policy of deinstitutionalization is the second main component of the homelessness/mental health construction.⁴⁵ This theme stresses that the emptying out of public mental hospitals since the mid-1950s (from a high of 559,000 patients to fewer than 110,000 today), coupled with the current practice of community-based care, is the responsible agent behind our vast numbers of homeless mentally ill.⁴⁶ New York senator Daniel Moynihan expressed this view in a letter to the editor of the *New York Times*. The failure of deinstitutionalization, he wrote, “is precisely where to begin any discussion of the homeless.”⁴⁷ Firing off a salvo at deinstitutionalization advocates, a hospital medical director attributed blame to the same source.

Some supporters of deinstitutionalization are aware of the plight of the mentally ill in the community, but instead of faulting deinstitutionalization, they condemn society for not doing more to make life livable for the chronically ill in the community. These supporters are so committed to deinstitutionalization that they do not criticize those who let the fox loose in the chicken coop but rather those who do not give the chickens adequate protection.⁴⁸

Others in the psychiatric community, like Torrey, draw a careful distinction between the concept of deinstitutionalization and its faulty implementation, concentrating their complaints on the latter.

For those who link homelessness so tightly to mental health concerns, what, then, is the means for rectifying the problem? A range of opinion exists, although on one point there is consensus: housing and jobs — the principal plans of action, respectively, of housing and economic advocates — are not enough to address the special needs of the mentally ill. Militant opponents of deinstitutionalization call for such measures as restoring the state hospital system and easier commitment procedures. Proponents of a comprehensive, adequately funded community mental health system propose a spectrum of supportive services.⁴⁹ A task force report of the American Psychiatric Association on the homeless mentally ill lists fourteen recommendations, including more supervised housing, crisis intervention services, case management, and treatment and rehabilitation.⁵⁰

Homelessness as a Holistic Problem

The housing, economic, and mental health definitions of homelessness are derived from placing emphasis on a particular segment of the homeless population or on a particular grouping of causes and interventions. A last major contending definition of homelessness moves in just the opposite direction. It promotes as inclusive a view as possible along all these dimensions. Thus it is holistic in nature, aiming to take account of the analyses of virtually all major participants in the homelessness discussion and to marry their divergent policy recommendations.⁵¹

Certain key terms and ideas are central to the holistic perspective on homelessness. The problem is viewed as being complex, heterogeneous, and multifaceted. Solutions should be comprehensive, broadly based, and integrated. A representative policy product of this approach is the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act of 1987 (Public Law 100-77), which encompasses as many as eighteen programs.⁵² Both new homelessness initiatives and increased funding for existing programs are included to better serve the homeless in such disparate areas as emergency food and shelter, supportive housing, health services, rent subsidies, community mental health services, adult literacy, and veterans job training.

The very nonexclusivity of a holistic definition of social problems makes it appealing on intellectual and political grounds. To social scientists and other policy researchers, it may suggest a probing, coherent overview that doesn't oversimplify an issue just to make it seem more manageable. To elected officials, it offers a means to satisfy pluralistic demands by distributing resources among many interested parties. Yet holistic policy actions are perhaps intrinsically ill fated due to their reliance on complicated, coordinated implementation and funding systems, dispersion of effort, problems of scale, and the often rapid erosion of their ad hoc base of political and popular support.⁵³ Significantly, in the years since its passage, appropriated funds under the multi-pronged McKinney Act have fallen far below the legal authorization.

Other Definitional Elements

Our review of the debate over ownership revealed fundamentally differing perceptions about the nature of homelessness. We turn now to four additional descriptive attributes that figure into the public dispute over homelessness and powerfully condition policy responses to the problem.

The Magnitude of Homelessness

An essential determinant of a public problem's perceived importance is its scope, or the number of people affected. The more widespread a problem, the better the chances that public officials will be concerned — or forced — to develop remedial measures. Alternatively, problems exhibiting neither large scope nor dramatic growth patterns have little chance in the fierce competition for agenda access. Given the political significance of statistics conveying the scope of a problem, it is understandable that measurement disagreements commonly surround research into public policy issues.

Controversy over the size of the country's homeless population has existed for years. Numbers as high as 3 million and as low as 250,000 have been disseminated by the Community for Creative Non-Violence and Department of Housing and Urban Development, respectively. In general, the higher values are the ones that best support the cause of homeless advocates, barring the danger that extremely high figures could have a boomerang effect by creating feelings of fatalism about the situation.⁵⁴ The practical difficulties of arriving at precise calculation of such a transient, changing, and partially hidden population are extraordinary — among them, deciding the actual level of housing that separates the poorly housed from the homeless, developing inclusive sampling lists, distinguishing between prevalence and incidence, and gathering valid information from survey respondents who may be uncooperative or impaired.⁵⁵ For these reasons, it is impossible to say with certainty how many homeless there are in the United States at this time or how this number has changed over the past decade, even though a number of cities have supplied evidence of rapid growth. To its credit, the Census Bureau dived into these troubled demographic waters when it attempted to enumerate the nation's homeless with a two-day census of its own, in March of 1990.⁵⁶ Yet even supporters of the research undertaking had little hope that it would settle what has now become a highly charged argument.

In political terms, it is clear that persistent uncertainties regarding the size of the homeless population greatly disadvantage the issue within policymaking circles. No one can know for sure where the line falls in documentary efforts between sensationalism and accurate revelation. These circumstances make it easy for officials to offer a modicum of programmatic funding while awaiting the results of definitive research.

Homelessness as an Emergency

When public policymakers define a problem as an "emergency," several consequences follow. First, there is greater visibility. The news media highlight the special emphasis being placed on the issue, and more citizens come to recognize the problem as an important concern. Second, legislators often act more quickly on a problem defined in this manner. Some portion of requested program funds is likely to be allocated in short order. Also, when a problem is defined as an emergency, the implication is that it is of recent origin and potentially solvable. However, the solutions pursued also tend to be of a short-term nature that ignores larger and longer-term ramifications.

Lipsky and Smith argue that two of the major social welfare problems of the 1980s — homelessness and hunger — were both defined as emergencies.⁵⁷ To deal with these ills, localities around the country and the federal government approved modest funding initiatives. Nonprofit emergency service agencies were heavily utilized. And shelter programs and the distribution of food and other surplus commodities served as a

means to meet the most immediate needs of the homeless and hungry populations. By contrast, there is relatively little to point to in the way of a concerted public effort to face the deeper challenges raised by homelessness or hunger to the structure of the American welfare state and its faulty "safety net."

A recent controversy in Florida accents the distinction between emergency interventions against homelessness and more substantial remedies. It also shows how certain kinds of leverage can be used to tilt the balance of public policy toward the latter. This past summer the state denied funding for a Miami plan to move hundreds of homeless people congregating under a downtown highway overpass to a public baseball stadium. The proposed plan entailed the provision of shelter, food, and counseling for a thirty-day period; a contribution of \$300,000 in state money was sought. A spokesman explained Governor Lawton Chiles's position, stating that the governor's "interest is that this be not just a Band-Aid approach but part of a strategic approach to dealing with homeless people. He's prepared to provide funds under those circumstances."⁵⁸ Following the impasse between state and city officials, Miami announced a revised plan to bring social workers and counselors to the homeless to aid them to find employment and permanent housing.⁵⁹

Homelessness and Deservingness

The concept of deservingness is of paramount importance to social welfare provision in the United States. Its policy influence can be traced back at least as far as England's Elizabethan Poor Law of 1601, which divided applicants for relief into the "unworthy" and "worthy" poor, rendering to the former only the most restrictive and meager forms of aid. This framework, which colonists adopted for themselves in the New World, still persists today in such distinctions as that between social insurance and public assistance methods of income maintenance. A suspicion that many recipients are undeserving or unworthy also lies behind continued widespread public antipathy toward the so-called welfare mess. In short, the general rule is that "groups viewed as personally responsible for their own problematic condition and thus considered undeserving tend to be handled through public programs that are limited, stigmatizing, and even punitive in nature."⁶⁰

Some have attempted to use this worthy/unworthy dichotomy to categorize America's homeless population. According to this approach, a substantial segment of the homeless do not merit much public sympathy or resources because they became homeless through their own vices or do not make sufficient effort to escape the condition on their own. Substance abusers, dropouts, and those just too lazy to work are often used as prime examples of this negative behavioral syndrome. President Reagan's infamous phrase of "homeless by choice" also comes to mind in this connection. One careful analysis of various studies, however, estimates that only perhaps 5 percent of all homeless persons would actually fit the profile of the "lazy shiftless bum."⁶¹ Such data notwithstanding, several localities around the nation have reported an emerging social backlash against the homeless, which is evidenced in frequent complaints about panhandlers, incidents of brutal muggings and harassment, and increased political support for cuts in programs to benefit the homeless.⁶²

Just as opponents of large-scale antihomelessness initiatives attempt to relate their stance to the concept of deservingness, so too do the advocates of homelessness programs. Here the emphasis is on the most sympathetic constituents of the

homeless population, such as children, the disabled, veterans, and involuntarily unemployed parents. The point, obviously, is to show that homelessness befalls many who cannot help themselves, who are members of society in good standing, and who have a just claim on the public purse. Thomas Hunsdorfer, director of operations of Saint Francis House, a homeless shelter in Boston, addressed the issue in an editorial: "Here's the bottom line: the homeless in the United States feel like aliens and outcasts — like 'them.' But they are not; they are our neighbors, people from down the street or across town who have problems. They are 'us.' Nothing they have done merits a sentence of life in the shelter system or death on the streets."⁶³

The Affordability of Combating Homelessness

Sooner or later, every public policy discussion turns to the question of whether or not the specified solutions for a problem are affordable. The answer is seldom obvious or incontestable, depending as it does on the costs associated with taking action and on perceived government resources. Affordability debates make use of many kinds of standards, such as dollar comparisons with other existing or proposed programs (contrasting domestic and defense programs is commonplace), references to overall budgetary conditions, and forecasts of the costs of action measured against the probable economic (and social) costs of inaction.⁶⁴

Figures for New York City's shelter budget, which climbed from \$6.8 million in 1978 to more than \$320 million in 1989, suggest the magnitude and direction of expenditures for existing homelessness programs.⁶⁵ An ambitious blueprint for future action against homelessness nationally, drafted by a group of dissenters from the Institute of Medicine's panel on homelessness and health care, calls for housing improvements, raising the minimum wage, expanding welfare cash support, and extending health care benefits to the uninsured. One scholar's estimate of the price tag is about \$30–\$40 billion in new funding annually.⁶⁶ Dramatizing the size of these outlays is the backdrop against which such a recommendation occurs: a public resource base undergoing erosion on all levels due to recession, accumulating budget deficits, and popular antitax sentiments.

Like other aspects of the controversy over defining the homelessness problem, the affordability issue elicits varied responses. Those in charge of public budgets or opposed in principle to growth in the size of government or just unfriendly to the homelessness cause are especially prone to point out inherent fiscal limitations. Advocates for the homeless, on the other hand, maintain that not even these hard times make additional public expenditures inconceivable. With the proper level of commitment, new funding could be found through budget reallocations or new revenue collections. The ultimate "truth" of the matter lies not in any macroeconomic formula, but in the ongoing political dynamic and its operational choices.

There are always many ways to view a public problem, and just as many approaches for attempting corrective action. Long-familiar problems or those that mobilize a small range of political and professional interests obscure this realization due to the narrowness of established public discourse. With the homelessness issue, however, all the complex possibilities lie out in the open. The result is a confusing disharmony of fact and opinion, of causes and effects, that so far has ensnarled the policy process and deprived it of focus. Careful empirical research might tease out the rela-

tionships among key variables or identify the most cost-effective intervention strategies available. But this process will take time — and money — and those currently homeless can hardly wait for the findings.

The plural needs of the homeless, their diverse composition, and their marginal social status are ill suited to the response capabilities of the U.S. welfare state, whose largest programs were created to transfer income to narrowly defined categorical populations, such as the elderly and disabled, with long-term attachment to the work force. Conceivably, finding a way to render the homeless adequate assistance could lead to a fundamental reconsideration of the effectiveness and equity of this system. For this to happen, however, the homeless would need to have higher standing politically than they do at present, as well as more consistent media and public interest. Needless to say, it would also help the situation if involved advocacy and provider groups could agree on the nature of the condition being addressed.

The problem-definition perspective is an analytical tool, not a means for making policy prescriptions. But if there is any practical lesson to be learned from its application to homelessness, it is the inadvisability of awaiting consensus before taking further public and private action against this problem. Arising from the failure of so many different support systems, homelessness can be ameliorated from an equal variety of source points, even absent an overarching policy strategy.⁶⁷ So framed, however, it is a task that will severely test the creativity, no less than the resolve, of our faltering American social welfare institution. ❧

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