

Discussion

The personal stories in this study of how individuals become homeless are revealing of the dynamic forces that produce residential instability, and the structuring of the responses of people amidst that instability. Given the breadth and complexity of this study's findings, it is important to provide some discussion here, and to suggest some things that could be done to prevent and ameliorate the urban crises responsible for homelessness. Therefore, this chapter will begin with a brief discussion of the significance of this study's findings to the literature on homelessness. Some recommendations will then be offered for public policies dealing with homelessness. And finally, suggestions will be made for the future study of homelessness.

The Study Findings and the Literature on Homelessness

One of the principle findings from this study is that the prevailing "defect" models in the homeless literature are insufficient for understanding the complexity of the homeless problem. Similar to the connotations of the term "underclass," defect models have not understood homelessness and poverty as dynamic processes, and phenomena whose size and character change along with shifts in the population and larger economy. In contrast, by reviewing changes in the Philadelphia metropolitan area that have coincided with changes in the composition of the Philadelphia homeless population, and

by investigating the influence of those changes in the individual experiences of homeless men and women from Philadelphia, this study has established that homelessness is deeply connected to the dynamics that hierarchically structure the availability of resources in our society, as in the housing and labor markets. Moreover, far from a non-mobile "underclass" of incompetent decision-makers, the sample from this study showed substantial mobility and involvement with the labor force, and was comprised of people who had to make often unreasonable and disturbing choices within unreasonable and disturbing circumstances.

Hence, the significance of this study to the homeless literature is that neither a structural perspective alone, nor an individualistic "defect" model are sufficient for understanding how people become homeless. Though a structural perspective is critical for understanding the factors that produce residential instability in the population, it is necessary to account for the agency, or active decision-making and choices of homeless people *within* the domestic, social and economic contexts nurtured by our culture and economy, to understand how residential instability turns into homelessness.

Unfortunately, defect models tend to isolate *some* of those choices or *some* of those behaviors and traits (usually those that are deviant) that concentrate in homelessness, but fail to consider the contexts of their concentration, and the range of experience and subjectivity that they represent. Therefore, both structural analyses, with their emphasis on the deterministic role of social factors, and defect models, with their reductionistic emphasis on the defective traits of homeless people, do not adequately consider the mediating influence of the actions, choices and immediate life circumstances of homeless people in producing their social locations.

Taking account of those critical mediating forces, as they were identified in this study, requires a different perspective on both the origins of homelessness, and the

necessary prescriptive measures. First, regarding the origins of homelessness, it is clear from both the structural review in Chapter 2 and the findings in Chapter 6 that homelessness is a dynamic phenomenon; dynamic in the sense that larger social and economic changes influence the shifting demographic composition and size of the homeless population over time; and dynamic in the sense that the actual experience of homelessness is one of movement and mobility, whereby homeless individuals come from homes with varying degrees of stability, often return to home-like settings in the course of their homelessness, and given certain changes in individual and social circumstances, will likely return to homes in the future. From this "dynamic" perspective, changes in the homeless population over time must be interpreted as reflecting a change in the availability of housing and income options for varying subgroups in the population, as well as the evaluations and choices of people regarding the adequacy of those options. In other words, the problem of homelessness results from a restriction on the choices of certain groups of people, given their social, demographic and geographic location, such that the available options for "home" are unacceptable or unrealizable, and the shelters and the streets are what remain.

Given this analysis on the general origins of homelessness, certain conclusions can be made regarding the specific origins of homelessness in Philadelphia. In Philadelphia, young adult men and women, particularly black men and women, are the subgroup in the population most represented among the homeless, and consequently, the subgroup with the greatest apparent restrictions on their housing and income options. From the review in Chapter 2 of the changing structure of social and economic rewards in the Philadelphia metropolitan area since 1950, such a demographic concentration of the risks for homelessness in the 1980's is not surprising, and is, in fact, predictable. And within the deprived and impoverishing conditions that have resulted for young black men

and women, the range of choices and behaviors that people will make could also be seen as not surprising, and, in fact, predictable. Denied the opportunity for independent household formation, and satisfying and rewarding experience in the sphere of work and income, individuals will display an array of responses, and not always responses that are judged positively. For example, given the perceived failure of the alternatives generated by the local economy, and given the availability of the drug economy, many will choose to get involved in the penalties and rewards of illicit drug capitalism. Of course, others will take actions which are judged as more compensatory, such as seeking or maintaining employment, utilizing the limited resources of family, friends and public services, or fleeing abusive situations. Whatever the responses of residentially unstable people, when personal and family resources are expended, and for the poor, those resources are expended quickly, the poverty of choices leads to homelessness.

Hence, there are multiple subjectivities that comprise the decisions and behaviors of homeless people, that are neither uniform nor generalizable in any obvious way. Any attempts to make such judgements must be especially careful to include an assessment of the collective experience of social and economic change and the biographical context of those changes if such an assessment is to be fair and scientifically accurate. However, since these subjectivities and choices stem from the common experience of restricted choice and lead to the common experience of homelessness, it might be best to think of prevention and resolution of homelessness through a similar framework of the collective experience of choice and opportunity.

Some Policy Implications

Following the line of analysis suggested by the findings of this study, one might think of prescriptive measures for homelessness as needing to socially structure and enhance the choices for income and housing available to the people most vulnerable to

homelessness. Again, since young adult black men and women are the most vulnerable to homelessness in Philadelphia, they are the potential targets of social policy remedies for enhanced choice and improved access to housing and income. It would be assumed from this study's findings and the dynamic perspective that it suggests, that an improvement over time of the range of alternatives available to young adult men and women, especially blacks, would significantly diminish their demand for emergency shelter, since homelessness and shelter life are often chosen because of a lack of other alternatives. However, a number of points should be made regarding the specific means for achieving that end. First, remembering the importance of the evaluations and decision-making of people when they become homeless, prescriptive measures should also take account of peoples' preferences and needs in designing housing and income options. Hence the process for improving those options should involve adequate consultation with target groups, and full consideration of their preferences and needs. Secondly, remembering the criticality of the neighborhood and community contexts of the conditions which lead to homelessness, social policies improving the options of target groups should take a community perspective, and work with entire neighborhoods when trying to improve the quality of life for families and individuals in those neighborhoods. Neighborhoods are perhaps *the* critical functioning unit in which to consider housing investment decisions and job and skills promotion programs. Thirdly, and more specific to the policies that are required to enhance the options available to people, given the coexisting trends of economic development and underdevelopment in the Philadelphia metropolitan area since WWII, some specific guidelines are necessary when considering development decisions and the unevenness of economic benefits as they have materialized in the region historically. Though continuous economic growth and expansion are necessary for the improvement of the US economy and standard of living as a whole, the benefits of

economic expansion do not accrue to everyone equally nor in a balanced manner, as has been obvious from this past decade throughout the United States, and for the past several decades in the Philadelphia Metropolitan Area. For example, while the US economy underwent an economic expansion since the early 1980's, the income distribution in the United States has since become more polarized, leaving an increase in income inequality, while things like the cost of housing, health care and education have outpaced inflation, leaving an increase in living standard inequality. This differential shift in income and living standards is perhaps most graphically evident when comparing the lifestyle of the Yuppies of demographic lore (the young, urban professionals) with the Other Yuppies found to be at high risk for homelessness in this study (the young, urban poor). There is an obvious need and requirement for social policies that ensure that the benefits of economic development are more widely shared, that they do not contribute to the glaring inequalities of American life, and that, quite to the contrary, the benefits of economic development are used to diminish the inequalities of American society. A much enhanced range of alternatives for those groups vulnerable to homelessness could be accomplished by explicitly aiming to ensure access to quality housing at an affordable price for every person and family, by an improved balance in education and job training funding, by improved access to higher education and employment for disadvantaged groups, through increased eligibility and sufficiency in income maintenance programs, through an expansion of housing subsidy programs, and through home and neighborhood improvement programs. Indeed, while beyond the limits of this discussion, a more balanced approach to community, housing, and industrial development, along with concerted government attention aimed at insuring access to basic resources, would be required to salvage the future of urban areas like Philadelphia, and in the end, metropolitan areas as a whole.

Ideas For Future Research

Future research on homelessness could more fully explore the interface between social structure, and human intention and action, and the findings from this study are suggestive of some directions for future research. This study found that residential location was important as both a social structural source of residential instability, as well as an influence on the decisions and actions of people living in those residential locations. Future research could establish the distribution of homelessness by neighborhood of origin, and assess the degree to which other social structural factors are related to that distribution, such as the neighborhood distribution of housing investment, housing affordability, abandonment, crime, and other neighborhood characteristics. In the other direction, future research could explore how homeless people perceive their former neighborhoods, and the role that neighborhood conditions have on the former households of homeless people, and their decisions regarding those households. Similarly, the occupational histories of homeless people could be better explored, and the relationship between characteristics of those occupations, such as pay, and gender and racial composition, and their likelihood of occurrence among people who become homeless. Research on employment might also assess the perceptions of homeless people toward work options, and the basis for their choices in taking or refusing employment. Since some of the data collected during interviews for this study explores work issues and work histories, it is a potential resource for future research.

As this study documented how people became homeless, future research could also benefit from documenting what occurs to people once they become homeless. In particular, future research could assess the experiences of homeless people within the shelter system, with employment agencies, with public assistance programs, and with mental health and substance abuse programs. Research could analyze the various

functions of the shelters, as low-income housing, as retirement and convalescent homes, as dormitories for low-waged and unemployed workers, and as drug treatment centers. Such research could help to better understand the sufficiency of the shelter system in meeting the needs of homeless people, and the potential for alternative programmatic remedies to address those needs. Other programs and institutions utilized by the homeless could also be studied to understand the range of needs met or unmet by them. The interviews reported in this study collected data for some of these issues, and will be a source of information for future research.

Homeless people are not the only potential study population for better understanding the homeless process. Future research could establish the "lifetime prevalence" of homelessness in the "homed" population. And formerly homeless people could be studied for how they managed to exit homelessness, and what circumstances they faced upon that exit. Indeed, the most important information about the experience of homelessness not considered in this study, is the pathways *out* of homelessness, and the conditions in which people live when they exit homelessness. Of course, a longitudinal study of homeless people, tracking them through their homelessness, would provide substantial information, but such a study would be difficult within the limits of the homeless environment and experience.

Finally, studies systematically comparing cities and the structural factors that vary by city along with variations in the respective homeless populations, would help to better explain both the regional variations among homeless populations and the most critical factors linked to homelessness, on both the regional and national levels. However, again, studies will be limited by the methodological problems in harmonizing data on the homeless from across cities. Nonetheless, even pursuing such problems as sampling in different cities would be informative of the varying sheltering

accommodations that exist by region, and some of the factors associated with regional variations in the homeless population.

In summarizing the contribution of this study to the literature on homelessness, on a broader level, this study has helped to link the people who most often become homeless with the changing demography, geography and economy of the area from which they come - in this case, the city of Philadelphia. Moreover, this study has helped to build an understanding of the complex mix of factors that produce the social selections leading to homelessness, including social structural factors, domestic conditions and the personal choices made from among the limited range of alternatives available to homeless people. It is hoped that this study will inform future efforts to understand and resolve the problem of homelessness.