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Anthony Halter  
*University of Illinois, Urbana*

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# Homeless in Philadelphia: A Qualitative Study of the Impact of State Welfare Reform on Individuals

DR. ANTHONY HALTER

University of Illinois  
Urbana

Although homelessness is not a new problem, the faces of the homeless are changing. For many, the term "homeless person" conjures up the image of a skid row alcoholic. However, the homeless now include unskilled middle-aged males, the chronically mentally ill, and families (Chaiklin, 1985). The reasons for the amplification of homelessness include unemployment, insufficient low-cost housing, alcohol and/or drug addiction, mental health deinstitutionalization and the inadequacy of community-based services. In addition, advocates for the homeless including Mitch Snyder (1986) and Jan Hagen (1986) have argued that federal and state welfare policy changes have served to shift potentially at-risk populations into homelessness. Hopper and Hamburg (1984) point out that one of the underlying causes of homelessness is the increase in the number of welfare recipients whose benefits were discontinued, while Koitz (1987) has shown that one of the reasons for homelessness is cutbacks in social spending. First, Roth and Durden (1988) emphasize that the crisis of homelessness has not been addressed completely on the federal, state, and local levels while Karger and Stoesz (1990) point out that homeless providers envision that in the future there will be minimal federal funding available to address the problems of homelessness.

The purpose of this article is to discuss the effect of one state's welfare policy changes on a segment of its General Assistance population which became homeless. It describes, from the perspective of the homeless, the impact of these changes. Topics that will be addressed include: 1) the homeless views of welfare reform, 2) means of survival after becoming homeless, 3) the effects of homelessness on relationships, 4) the alienation experienced by the homeless, 5) efforts of the homeless to find

work and 6) levels of employability of the homeless. This study is significant since few researchers have undertaken an in-depth review of the consequences of limiting eligibility for individuals on welfare. The most recent federal welfare reform legislation, The Family Support Act of 1988, was meant to give the states flexibility in designing their employment, education, and training programs for welfare recipients. It may be that the current emphasis on work and employment in the Family Support Act needs to be re-examined in order to determine whether or not its objectives can be met as well as to assess its impact on large numbers of people. In view of this new federal legislation and its implications for state welfare reform policy, this article describes the experiences and survival methods of a segment of the welfare population which became homeless following the enactment of Pennsylvania's current welfare reform law, the Welfare Reform Act of 1982.

#### The Pennsylvania Welfare Reform Act of 1982

In response to spiralling welfare costs, and influenced heavily by the Reagan Administration's welfare policy, the Pennsylvania legislature enacted the Welfare Reform Act, which Governor Richard Thornburgh signed into law in April, 1982. A major change made by this Act was the division of General Assistance recipients into two distinct groups: the Chronically Needy and the Transitionally Needy. General Assistance is a state-funded cash program intended for single individuals. The Chronically Needy are "truly needy" individuals on General Assistance who, due to medical or social difficulties, are not able to work. Those classified as Transitionally Needy are between the ages of 18 and 45, considered able to work, and eligible for General Assistance cash benefits for a maximum of ninety days in any twelve month period. The rationale for this legislation was that these individuals (the Transitionally Needy) were considered employable, and therefore should be able to find jobs. The Governor felt that General Assistance encouraged dependence by providing an alternative to work without a work incentive, and that those individuals who were able to work should be taken off the welfare cycle and placed

into the economic independence that jobs would provide (Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 1982).

A study in Pennsylvania found that 10% of those discontinued from General Assistance as a result of the Act became homeless (The Conservation Company, 1987). The Advocacy Committee for Emergency Services (1983) concluded that the combination of a reduction in benefits and limited employment opportunities contributed to many of these individuals becoming homeless. Other studies have reviewed the demographic changes of welfare recipients who were discontinued (Ozawa, Turcotte, Wahl, 1973; Denham, 1984; Murphy, 1978; Halter, 1989; Glass, 1982; Stagner and Richman, 1986) and the downward spiral of homelessness (Petchers, Chow, and Kordisch, 1989; Hope and Young, 1986; Rossi, 1989). Consequently, this study was designed to explore the ways in which some of the Transitionally Needy who became homeless described their methods of surviving.

### Method

A qualitative approach was used, relying on interviews in which the subjects' own comments provided descriptions of their experiences of being homeless after discontinuance of cash assistance. The value of this approach has been best exemplified by Bakke's study of unemployed men (1940) and Maurer's study of the unemployed (1979). Questions were open-ended and semi-structured in order to elicit narratives regarding the ways in which homeless individuals had used support systems. In order to observe changes in this population, interviews with 35 volunteers were conducted at two shelters for homeless persons in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania over a six month period from October, 1984 to April, 1985. All the respondents had received their ninety days of General Assistance benefits and had been discontinued from welfare. To support the trustworthiness of the data, all subjects were interviewed on five separate occasions, each lasting approximately 30 minutes. After obtaining authorization from the respondents, the writer verified the information they gave by discussions with shelter social workers. Prior to the interviews, considerable amounts of

informal time were spent with potential respondents in order to develop rapport and trust. Although this group may not be representative of the entire homeless population, this review provides insight into the experiences of some of the homeless through observations and their own comments.

During the initial introductions, the principal investigator explained his purpose and the nature of the study. The interviews were designed to respond to one general question which was, "How are homeless individuals managing after being discontinued from welfare?"

### Findings

Although the initial general question attempted to find what means of support were used, other problems and concerns of the homeless became apparent during the interviews. Together, these underscore the critical dimensions of the thoughts expressed by those interviewed. These included:

- 1) their views of the Welfare Reform Act,
- 2) their means of surviving after becoming homeless,
- 3) the effects of their homelessness on relationships with family and friends,
- 4) their sense of alienation,
- 5) their attempts to find work,
- 6) their level of employability.

It is apparent that this population has a variety of complex, problems which make functioning difficult. In order to grasp the concerns of the homeless, each of the six areas listed above will be explored using some of the comments of the respondents.

Table 1 lists the areas addressed by the 35 respondents during their interviews, and the total number of the respondents who discussed each issue.

### Characteristics of the Respondents

As Table 2 shows, Black persons were predominant in the study population. Although the population studied may not be representative of the larger population, a study completed by the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare (1984) indicated

Table 1

Issues and Problems	(n-35)	(%)
1) Views of Welfare Reform Act	30	85.7
2) Means of surviving	35	100
3) Negative influence of homelessness on relationships with family and friends	29	82.8
4) Growing sense of alienation	33	94.2
5) Attempts to find work	35	100
6) Decrease in employability	25	71.4

that the percentage of Blacks discontinued from welfare as a result of the Welfare Reform Act (64%) was higher than that of other races in the urban areas of Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. However, White persons were the predominant group on General Assistance throughout the state. In addition, Hispanics and Asians are absent from those who volunteered to be interviewed. During the time I visited the shelters, there were some Hispanic residents. However, at no time were there any members of the Asian community. This observation was corroborated by a review of the case records at the shelter. There are organizations which specialize in providing services to the Hispanic and Asian communities. It may be that these populations after discontinuance of welfare, found supportive services in such organizations.

#### View of the Welfare Reform Act

Thirty of the homeless expressed their views regarding what they perceived as the government's lack of concern for the Transitionally Needy population. One individual who had been discontinued stated, "These guys in Harrisburg (state capital) are smart. They cut off mostly single people. That's easy. We don't have wives, close family ties. If we did, more people would be complaining. Now we become more hidden."

Many of the respondents indicated that the elimination of their welfare benefits was a small hindrance compared to the

Table 2

Race and Sex	(n-35)	(X)
Black Males	24	68.6
Black Females	6	17.1
White Males	4	11.4
White Females	1	2.9
Hispanic Males	0	0
Hispanic Females	0	0
Asian Males	0	0
Asian Females	0	0
	<u>35</u>	<u>100</u>

larger problem of being homeless. Some felt that the legislators responsible for welfare reform would not have favored this strategy if they had studied the complex problems this population faces in trying to become self-sufficient. Concerns were expressed about the reasonableness of this legislation when contrasted to existing opportunities for employment. One individual who had been discontinued from cash assistance two months prior to entering the shelter stated, "Maybe welfare shouldn't cut people off. I mean if they can work, why don't they refer them to jobs? Or at least give them more help in finding work than they do." Some of the homeless felt that the savings the state projected it would make as a result of welfare cuts would be realized at the expense of the people using private agencies and shelters. One respondent indicated that "the state tries to cut to help the taxpayer. We were once taxpayers. Now, we have nothing to offer and we are the ones who suffer."

#### Methods of Survival

Survival methods consisted of begging, part-time work, leaving the state in order to find work, activity in the illegal drug market, theft, selling contraband, using other forms of public assistance, i.e. Food Stamps, and selling blood and scavenged scrap metal. One homeless person stated, "I get by selling blood, doing work for my aunt and uncle and coming to these shelters.

I sell blood downtown. Usually you can get \$9.00 for a pint. I try three times a month."

One opponent of welfare reform (Advocacy Committee for Emergency Services, 1983) predicted that the method of discontinuing individuals from welfare outlined in the 1982 Act would only serve to increase the crime rate, since some of those who are discontinued would attempt to make money by engaging in illegal activities. One individual who was interviewed three weeks prior to being arrested for attempted burglary stated, "Do you know what it's like to be on the streets? No, you don't. Nobody does until they've been on the street. You feel worthless. Everybody trying to get by, to survive, to steal. Before, I would think twice about stealing. Now it's different. It's a matter of just staying alive."

The underlying purpose of the Pennsylvania Welfare Reform Act was to motivate individuals to find work and move out of the cycle of poverty. All of those interviewed were from the Philadelphia area. In some instances, they left the area in order to find work, but invariably returned to Philadelphia. One homeless person who left and returned stated, "To get by I went west to that Indian place in Oregon when I was cut off welfare. They worked you to death 14 to 16 hours a day. I finally left because they told my friend she had to go because she wasn't doing her share of work in the fields." Others tried any available means in order to find income. "I survive by part-time work and panhandling. I look for scrap iron. I look in garbage cans and dumpsters for aluminum and things like that. I sell it to scrap iron yards. I haven't stole yet, but don't think I haven't given it some thought."

Some of the respondents used old buildings and abandoned cars as their form of shelter. "I was staying with friends in an old building that was on the verge of being condemned. This was right after being taken off welfare. No heat and no water. We would heat water that we got from another place on a small gas propane stove. The police came and kicked us out of that place."

In addition to using these methods of survival, this population also attempted to rely on their families and friends for support. This reliance had a negative impact on their relationships.



### Impact of Homelessness on Relationships

After discontinuance of General Assistance, individuals often turned to their relatives (mothers, fathers, sisters, or brothers) and close friends for a place to live and/or financial support. No homeless individual who had been married indicated that he or she relied on spousal assistance. Based on the respondents' statements, affectional and biological relationships were equally important as sources of support for the homeless. Some pointed out that it was easier to live with their friends, since they were too embarrassed to let their relatives know of their circumstances. According to one homeless person, "I mean, how can I tell them? I've had problems before and this would only make them sad and things uncomfortable for me." Others indicated that they had worn out their welcome with relatives prior to becoming homeless, and one individual pointed out that his grandparents were not well off themselves. "What can you do? I know they love me and care about me, but they just have enough to get by. I couldn't stay and take food out of their mouths." Some felt that returning home placed impossible demands on already strained family finances. One homeless person stated, "For awhile, right after I was cut off, I stayed with my mom and dad, but I didn't want to be a burden, so I left". Another shelter dweller stated, "I really don't have anybody because I'm too embarrassed. Sometimes my grandmother has helped me, but she has trouble caring for herself. At least at this shelter, you are with people who are in the same boat as yourself."

The longer these individuals were homeless, the more they tended to restrict their associations to those in the same situation as themselves. "This cutoff just puts more pressure on you. Since my pressures have gotten worse, my relationships have gotten worse. I have new friends and they're in the same situation that I'm in." The longer this population was without funds, the worse relationships with family members and old friends became. A three-phase cycle of reliance developed. First, the individual would rely on a family member, then on a close friend, and finally on a private agency or shelter. The longer the period of homelessness, the more the homeless person came to

rely on the shelter. However, the longer they spent in shelters, the less trusting some of these individuals became about past acquaintances. Some mentioned competing among themselves for the basic necessities of life. One homeless person stated, "These same people can be your best friend and your worst enemy. That is the way the system is. They are your friend because at times they are the only ones you can talk to, and sometimes that's all you want to do. They are your enemy because you're always competing against them for a place to stay or a way to get some money." In addition, others indicated that friendships had changed over time. "My friends have changed because I am not glad to tell everybody about my situation. I only hang with those who are down and out like me."

The longer these people remained homeless, the more they felt like outcasts from their families and friends. This alienation showed itself in a variety of different ways.

### Alienation

For some, shelters for the homeless became a way of life. The longer these individuals were in shelters, the more they spoke of being alienated from society and from their friends. One homeless person stated, "Nobody wants us. Employers don't want no street people. The community don't want us near their homes. You just can't do anything right." Others indicated that the homeless were treated by people passing on the street as if they did not exist, as if they were invisible. "It's like no one cares. I see the street people out there. The people going to work just see right through them. Alone, no one cares for them, and they just don't care. Being on the street does something to you and you're never the same again."

The sense of hopelessness apparent in the comments of the homeless hampered this population's attempts to achieve independence. The longer they remained homeless, the stronger became their attitude that their situation was insurmountable. Hopelessness, alienation and bitterness were characteristic of this population. One respondent stated, "I mean who cares about me? Nobody. I know I've done some of this to myself but nobody is out there to help. I've been living this life for seven

months and there are times I feel so lonely, especially right now" (Christmas). In the interviews, it became apparent that the longer this population remained homeless, the more difficult it became for them to have a positive outlook about seeking work and achieving some form of financial independence.

### Employment Opportunities for the Homeless

All of those interviewed spoke of a desire to get jobs or to be trained for jobs. However, according to comments made by shelter caseworkers and the respondents themselves, all of the 35 interviewed had limited education (less than high school) and minimal skills. Employment for this population was short-term, erratic, menial and provided minimal wages. Past employment of the interviewees consisted of: short order cook, baker, construction laborer, janitor, kitchen helper, asbestos remover, fast food worker, dishwasher, laborer in a state farm show, migrant worker, security guard, delicatessen kitchen help, and window washer for the City of Philadelphia. Although the respondents expressed a desire for employment instead of welfare or homelessness, their minimal human capital skills restricted the types of jobs they were able to find. In addition, earnings in these jobs were rarely sufficient to elevate them above the poverty rate.

Lack of housing makes it difficult to find employment since many job applications require a statement of the applicant's address. Karger and Stoesz, in their book *American Social Welfare Policy: A Structural Approach* (1990) point out that present housing policies have reduced the supply of low-income housing while a St. Louis study (Krenger et al, 1987) indicates that one of the causes of homelessness is a shortage of low-cost housing. Blau (1989) when discussing New York's homeless, points out that in the past there has been an emphasis on temporary instead of permanent housing since New York believed that the growth of the homeless would not be long-term.

The mere fact of being homeless makes it more difficult to find employment. In the past, some federal and state administrations have indicated that the employable poor on welfare should be able to find jobs, since a variety of jobs is listed in

the Help-Wanted ads of local newspapers. One homeless person refuted this when he stated, "I sometimes don't know what to do. I look at the Help Wanted ads but don't find anything. If I had a dime for every time I went for a job from a newspaper ad and was told I wasn't skilled enough or that they had hired someone already, I'd be rich." In addition, maintaining a presentable appearance for a job interview is difficult when showers and clean clothes are inaccessible. For a person with no permanent address, job opportunities are limited. As one individual pointed out, "I go to a job and they tell me they will call me. They never call me. I go look for myself. There are no jobs for you and when they ask you your address, if you say this shelter, you're out the door. You're damned if you do and damned if you don't."

Some also commented that the various state-sponsored programs designed to help in looking for work were unable to assist them. "I once tried getting into something called the Public Employment Program, but the man there said I needed to be on welfare. Makes a lot of sense - welfare cuts me off because they tell me I can work. I look for work and I'm told I need welfare to get into the work program. It's crazy." Many clients stated that they received minimal services in the form of employment training or job referrals from the welfare department and the employment service, respectively. This was primarily due to the disparity between the few available jobs and the large employable population.

### Employability

The longer the individual was without work and the longer he or she remained homeless, the more difficult it became to find work. In addition, the longer this population remained homeless, the more at-risk their health became. Twenty-five of the individuals interviewed reported health problems including respiratory infections, pneumonia, skin lesions, lice and depression. These reports were corroborated by information from shelter social workers. This population was discontinued from welfare because they were considered employable. However, the longer they remained homeless and without financial

supports, the less employable they became. A review of the previous themes shows that each had a negative impact on potential independence.

### Conclusions

The respondents survived by begging, part-time work, engaging in illegal activity, selling their blood and selling scrap metals. Housing consisted of vacant buildings and cars, staying with friends and in shelters. The longer the individuals remained homeless, the more time was spent with those in a similar situation. In addition, most of the respondents indicated that the problem of being homeless created a real impediment to finding work. Lack of a permanent address, means of maintaining personal hygiene and transportation combined to limit their employment potential. In addition, the debilitating effects of homelessness had an impact upon their physical and mental health.

During the six months that I spent with these 35 people, they remained without any stable means of support. Many in this group verbalized a sense of hopelessness and some felt overwhelmed, confused, angry, and inferior. They often indicated that they could rely on no one and that the longer they remained homeless, the deeper their sense of alienation became. It became apparent during these interviews that most of the subjects had developed a cynicism as a result of their inability to achieve some form of independence.

A review of the comments made by the interviewees reveals that the longer they were without support; the more likely it became that they would develop relationships with others who were in a similar state. During the initial stages of discontinuance from cash assistance, individuals would rely on family members and close friends. However, the longer this population remained homeless and without financial support, the more they depended on shelters for survival and the less time they spent with relatives.

Based on the comments made by the respondents, it appears that long-term homelessness may have a negative impact on the psychological and physical well-being of some of the discontinued clients, thus diminishing their employability. The

discontinuance of welfare appears to be one of the contributing factors in the downward spiral of homelessness. Other factors include education, employment, health and housing limitations.

It is hypothesized that as a result of the hardships of homelessness, some would not be considered employable if they were to reapply for welfare. In addition, it is anticipated that there will be a greater need for services stemming from the adversities experienced by those who become homeless following discontinuance of General Assistance. As a result of the findings of this study, one may question whether Pennsylvania will actually save money in the long run, considering the additional demands placed on state-funded private agencies and shelters for this segment of the population. Furthermore, this study shows that, for some, the impact of Pennsylvania's welfare reform policy may serve to reinforce a state of poverty rather than bring people out of it.

The policy implications of these findings indicate that a quick fix approach that discontinues populations from welfare may have long-term negative effects by increasing the homeless population and, in some instances, contributing towards additional financial hardship on family members. There is a need to rethink the current emphasis of returning welfare recipients to a job market without increasing the availability of jobs. For the population studied, lack of jobs, and inadequate support services hampered their abilities to become truly independent. It is hoped that planners and policy makers will use the concerns expressed by this population as a beginning point in preparing to plan and refine their welfare reform strategies.

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