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# Ideology. Public Policy and Homeless Families

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## Introduction

The Nineteen Eighties are perceived as a period of sustained economic growth and continued prosperity for most Americans. That decade also had its casualties. None are more striking and visible than the homeless, who congregate in the public buildings and plazas of major cities across the United States, the "new Calcuttas" of this affluent society. Homelessness in the United States does not follow the traditional pattern of homelessness found in third world societies. There homelessness is the result of rapid urbanization and migration. The underlying dynamics of homelessness in the post-industrial United States of the 1980s appear to be different. This paper will focus on one segment of the homeless: children and families, assessing the extent, characteristics and essential sources of their plight. This is a group that until recently has warranted special protection.

## Dimensions

The actual numbers at first seem staggering. In New York City alone, half the 27,000 persons sheltered by the city in 1986, were children in families headed by a single-parent. Eighty percent of the families sheltered by the city were on welfare (New York Times. 1987.d). Most had doubled up with relatives or been evicted from their homes. The experts in the field are all agreed that the numbers are increasing. Before 1982, fewer than 100 families came into city shelters every month and usually

stayed only a few weeks (Kircheimer. 1987). In 1986 there were 4,476 families in the city's shelter system and the average stay was about 8 months (New York Times. 1987.b). By summer 1990, despite huge expenditures by the city, the shelter population of homeless families was still around 4,000 and children constituted a larger fraction of the shelter population than unattached men (N.Y. Observer. 1991).

### Changing Composition of the Homeless

Especially troubling for policy makers is the changing composition of the homeless population. The homeless today are no longer the Skid Row alcoholics and former mental patients that once made up the bulk of the homeless population. The new homeless are functioning adults and families with children. Another disturbing trend in the suburbs especially is the increasing number of working poor among the homeless (New York Times. 1987.e & 1988). The homeless today are far more heterogeneous than their Skid Row predecessors and many of them can be distinguished from the settled poor chiefly by their displacement.

Evidence of the rise in homelessness and the radical changes in the circumstances and composition of the homeless population raise disturbing questions regarding both the underlying causes of homelessness as well as the directions of public policy. Does homelessness represent a failure of public policy or is it only a symptom of a deep seated and pervasive economic malaise? What part, if any, do the characteristics of this population play in relation to their unsheltered condition? The extent of the problem and its highly visible nature question some of the assumptions on which current public policy towards this population has been based.

Despite considerable evidence that lack of affordable housing is a cause of homelessness, all levels of government have in the recent past dealt with the problem as though it were crisis related, temporary in duration and best explained by the individual characteristics of the homeless themselves. Questions need to be raised as to why substantial resources are expended on solutions that would appear to be inadequate,

wasteful, destructive to the beneficiaries of aid and costly to the taxpayers. Why for example did New York pay \$35,000 a year to shelter a family in a notorious welfare hotel (New York Times. 1986a), while restricting a similar family on welfare to a shelter allowance of perhaps a tenth of that amount? The mismatch between the assumptions on which public policy is based and the facts related to poverty and housing needs fuller exploration. Nor can the role of political ideology in fostering the disjunction between facts and policy be ignored.

### Problem Definition and Ideology

Homelessness did not catch the media attention until the beginning of the decade. Until then the problem had been perceived with some justification as being confined to middle-aged, white, male alcoholics and drug users (the Skid Row population of an earlier era). The rise in homelessness and the radical restructuring of the welfare state that began with the Reagan Revolution is no coincidence and the relationship between these two events needs further exploration.

Returning the responsibility for vulnerable and "at risk" populations back to the states, localities and private charities, with greatly diminished resources to accomplish these tasks was one thrust of the revolution. Conservative scholars like Murray, Meade and Gilder provided the philosophical underpinnings for this thrust (Murray. 1986: Meade. 1989: Gilder. 1984). Murray's book *Losing Ground*, which became the bible of budget-cutting conservatives, laid out the arguments very convincingly. He resurrected the centuries old principles that underlay the Poor Laws of England and the United States, namely that the distinction between the deserving and the undeserving poor should serve as the basis for public policy (Katz. 1990).

A major theme of social policy in the Nineteen Eighties became the limits of social obligation towards the needy (Katz. 1990). Meade argued that government entitlements "by expecting nothing in return shield . . . clients from the treats and rewards that stem from private society . . . particularly from the marketplace" (Meade. 1989). The individual pathology or personal problems explanations were reincarnated to lend credence

to the changes in housing policy. Personal problems, according to this line of thought, create situations where people lack a place to live. When this doctrine is applied in homeless women and children they are classified not as victims of circumstances or structural conditions, but as individuals who have some responsibility for their fate. Thus homeless women and children are now defined as abused women and children or as members of dysfunctional families. Children are perceived as 'runaways' or 'throwaways'. Homeless families are also portrayed as turning to public shelters, not out of dire need, but because they wanted to improve their housing situation. The then mayor of New York asserted that 'some families are deliberately moving out of crowded apartments into hotels in the hope of getting city owned apartments' (New York Times. 1985). Main (1986) sees the lack of affordable housing as at most a "necessary but not sufficient condition" for family homelessness. The function of the shelter system was not the protection of women and children from the elements, but relief from a tense and uncomfortable family situation of doubled up families. The rise in homeless families is a result of "voluntary failure on the part of families and their kin" (to meet their familial responsibilities)(Ibid).

Public policy towards the homeless in the 1980s appear comprehensible only if the individual pathology perspective and the evidence on which it rests are convincing. During the first wave of homelessness during the early Eighties many of the homeless did in fact exhibit characteristics that appeared to buttress "the individual pathology" view of the homeless. The behavior of these homeless was either so bizarre or their addictions so severe that they seemed unable to function in normal society. Landlords and family members could be excused for being unable to tolerate the behavior of such individuals and their actions in turning them on the streets could be condoned. The relationship between their increasingly visible presence on the streets and public policy seemed tenuous. Homelessness could also be blamed on the Community Mental Health movement that had denuded the huge state psychiatric facilities of their populations and ejected them into communities that were ill-prepared to receive them. Many of the homeless women in

the early period were single individuals who also exhibited symptoms of addiction or mental illness.

The early empirical research on homelessness which was mostly descriptive and focused on the characteristics of the homeless gave additional credence to this view. Many studies (Arce et al 1983; Lipton, Sabatini and Katz. 1983; Bachrach, 1984; Fisher. 1986) documented the high incidence of mental illness among the homeless, ranging from 30% (Roth and Bean. 1986) to as high as 90% in one study (Bassuk. 1984).

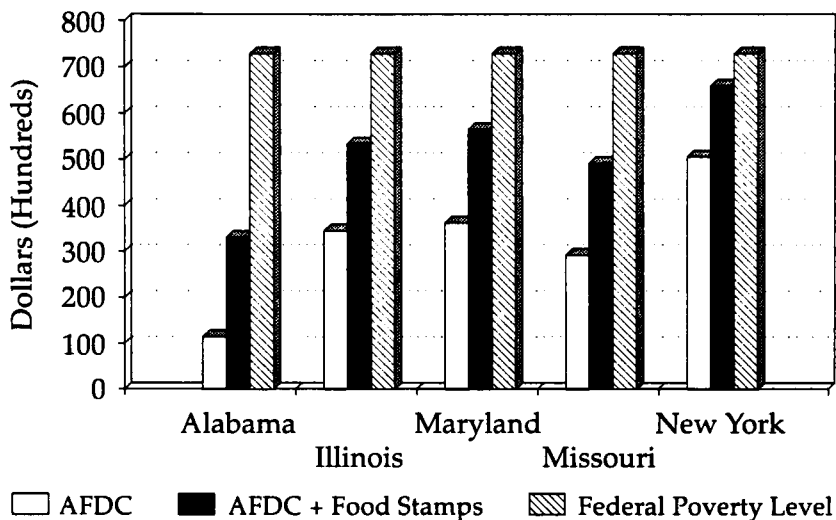
Despite the early evidence that appeared to support the individual pathology perspective, it is our contention that homelessness among families must be viewed within the broader context of the feminization of poverty and changes in welfare policy. If we adopt this view, the policies adopted in the eighties towards this population become indefensible.

### Policy prescriptions of the Nineteen Eighties

The conservative ideology regarding poverty when translated into public policy, had especially devastating impacts on low-income women and children. These impacts need to be examined in relation to a) income and access to low-income housing b) public solutions to family homelessness.

Poor women and children were among the first casualties of changes in federal social policies, which were embodied in the Omnibus Reconciliation Act of 1982. The rise in poverty among single-parent households has been amply documented in the literature. The underlying reasons for this increase are not difficult to ascertain. In the implementation of the Omnibus Reconciliation Act, many of the working poor were removed from the Aid to Families with Dependent Children rolls, which resulted in sharp reductions in income. (Figure 1). Those still on the rolls were affected by the cuts in the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program. Between 1970 and 1980, the value of Aid to Families with Dependent Children benefits declined by about one-third in constant dollars (Katz. 1989: see also Figure 3). Aid to Families with Dependent Children recipients, even though presumably still covered by the social safety net, found it increasingly impossible to find housing in the private

Figure 1

*AFDC, Food Stamps & Poverty Line (July 1987)*

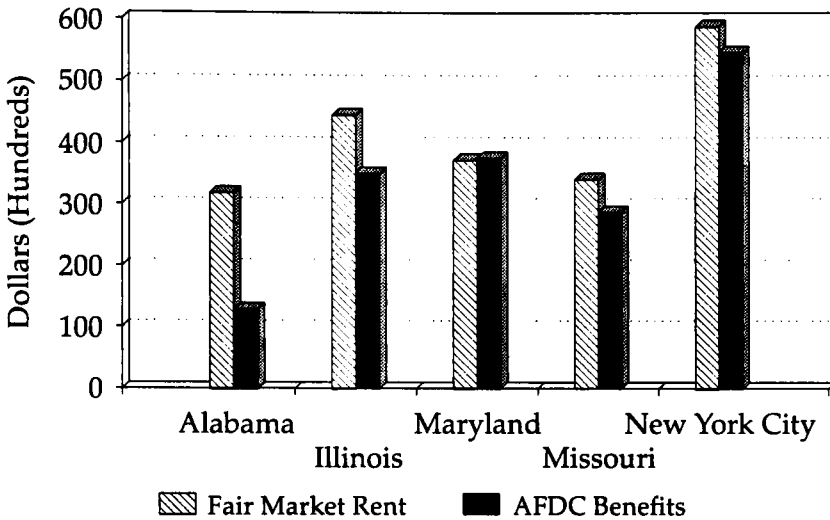
market. While the average value of benefits declined by 33%, since 1972, shelter costs rose disproportionately (Public Welfare. 1989: Figure 2). During the current recession several proposals are before legislators, that would cut these benefits further.

The lack of affordable housing for the poor is borne out by current research on the topic. New starts for all HUD lower-income housing programs dropped steadily from 183,000 in 1980 to 28,000 in 1985. Expenditures on housing were cut more deeply than for any other federal activity (Huth. 1990). At the same time market forces operated to drastically reduce the stock of low income housing. Gentrification, urban renewal and the destruction or conversion of Single Room Occupancy hotels and the elimination of tax incentives to produce or maintain low-income housing are blamed for this result. The convergence of reductions in benefits and the diminishing supply of low-income housing are not unpredictable.

In most states HUD's fair market rent for housing is higher than the entire welfare grant for a 3 person family. In all but 4

Figure 2

AFDC Benefits and Housing Costs (1989)



states, the amount the federal government estimates is necessary to rent a modest 2 bedroom apartment in the least expensive metropolitan area in the state is more than 75% of the entire Aid to Families with Dependent Children grant for a family of 3 (Children's Defence Fund, 1990: Also see Figure 2). Back-to-back recessions and the administration's cuts in eligibility and benefits for welfare and disability programs resulted in rapid increases in very poor people at the same time that the numbers of affordable low-income housing units shrank dramatically. Low-income advocates were quick to point out the discrepancies between the numbers of poor people seeking housing and the numbers of available low-income housing units. By 1985 according to some estimates there were 8.1 million low-income households competing for about 4.2 million low-cost housing units, resulting a shortfall of about four million (Dolbeare, 1986).

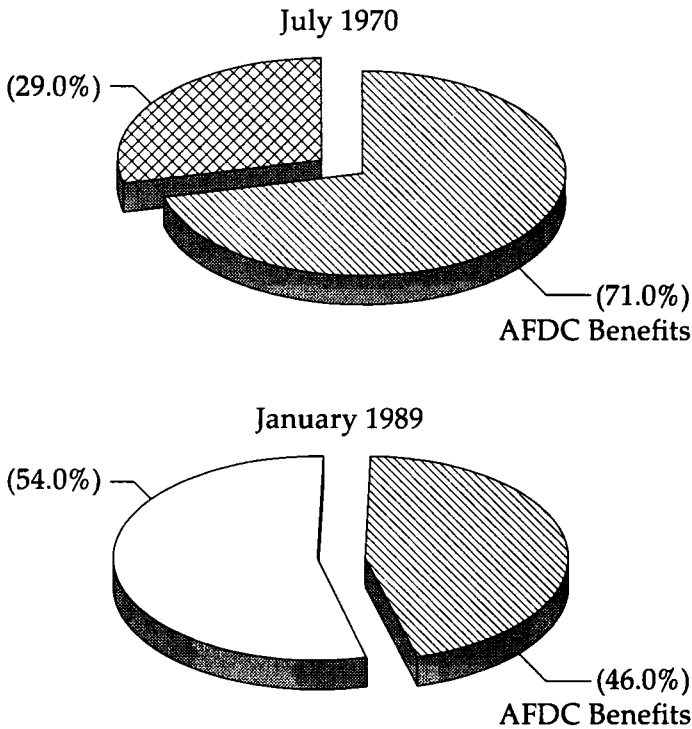
The individual pathology thesis becomes unsustainable in light of this documentation, despite the early empirical evidence to the contrary. Skepticism regarding the deinstitutionalization



Figure 3

*AFDC & Inflation (AFDC benefits as a percentage of poverty line)*

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hypothesis surfaced in the literature and the media even in the early eighties. Between 1982 and 1989, the media focused increasingly on the plight of homeless children and families. The New York Times Index did not have a special category for homelessness in 1982. However, in the very next year the index displays 80 items under the homeless category, of which five dwelt on the plight of homeless women and children. By 1988 one fourth of the 284 stories the New York Times ran on homelessness concerned children and their families. The sight of children living in cars and abandoned housing, in vivid color on the evening news, was upsetting to most people.

The barrage of media coverage on the changing composition of the homeless, which now included intact families and the working poor shifted the nature of the dialogue on homelessness. Increasingly researchers focused on the structural nature of the problem (Huttman. 88: Gilderbloom. 88: Axelson and Dail. 87). Disenchantment with the solutions offered by Reaganomics led some of them to take a closer look at the social policies of the Reagan era and their role in increasing poverty and homelessness. Others have claimed that the focus on the personal life situations of the homeless, deflects interest from an examination of the structural conditions which cause individuals and groups to become seriously disadvantaged. (Wilson. 1987).

Researchers also challenged the basic premises of the individual pathology slant. The fact that a majority of the homeless are mentally ill does not in itself explain why their numbers are growing or why a particular individual joins their ranks (Brown and Krivo.1988). Nor is it a coincidence that homelessness is more common in settings in which housing is not affordable or unavailable, poverty is extreme, unemployment is high and social support is lacking. Would those with personal problems be less likely to be homeless under more favorable structural conditions? (Ibid). Could there be a confusion between cause and effect variables? As the mentally ill were joined by new populations on the street, there was a dawning perception that the issue of deinstitutionalization had obscured an issue that was primarily due to a lack of affordable housing. The new populations of homeless individuals, despite the stress of being without shelter appeared "normal" in most respects. Some of them even had regular jobs (New York Times. 1988).

Within this context, the connections between family homelessness, the feminization of poverty and the breakdown of the social safety net were not hard to establish. The increasing numbers of single-parent households eking out an existence on meager welfare payments or marginal jobs had become a public issue. That some of them would slip through the cracks and join the homeless multitudes was almost inevitable.

The National Governor's Association Task Force sounded the alarm in explicit terms. "Over the grim statistics on homelessness looms the shadow of a housing crisis whose dimensions

are unprecedented in this century . . . and when one realizes that the major victims . . . are those with the fewest resources to absorb new hardships or to recover in its wake, it is no mystery why the ranks of the homeless continue to swell at the rate of 20% a year or more (National Governors' Association. 1987). There was an awakening suspicion that the homeless were only the visible tip of a housing crisis that was reaching into the middle-classes.

### Consequences

Despite the very strong evidence that structural factors were behind the surge in homelessness and were at work to both reduce the supply of low-income housing and increase the demand for such housing, the initial public response was to focus on the provision of temporary housing and not on the larger problem. While accumulating evidence lead to the conclusion that for most of the homeless families, homelessness was not a temporary situation (the average length of stay in New York city's shelter system was 233 days), families were housed in barrack like structures and in welfare hotels under extremely unpleasant living conditions (New York Times. 1986b).

The consequences for homeless families and the taxpayer were disastrous. Some information is available on the linkages between family disruption and homelessness. New Jersey's Division of Youth and Family Services has found that up to 40% of the children placed in foster care were there because housing for the family was not affordable or unavailable (Schwartz, Ferluto and Hoffman. 1988). Very few studies focus on possible connections between foster home placements and family homelessness, despite assertions by advocates for the homeless of the frequency of such outcomes (Middleton-Jeter 1983; David Crossland. 1989; New York Times. 1987b). Tomaszewicz, in a study of 690 children placed in foster care in New Jersey, between January and September 1983, reported that homelessness was the single most frequent problem experienced by such families (1985). Reports of the large numbers of children being placed in foster care in New York and New Jersey due to the homelessness of the parents were reported in the New York Times (1985 b

and c). A recent study of families and individuals seeking help at Travelers Aid agencies in several cities found that the foster care rate of children left behind by both families and single individuals was three to six times higher than in the general population (Child Welfare League of America. 1989). The National Coalition for the Homeless asserted that parents fearing that their children would be placed in foster care, where emergency shelter unavailable, had taken to sleeping in abandoned buildings, cars or even outdoors (New York Times. 1987a).

Early childhood experts warned about the harmful effects of placing children in overcrowded run down hotels in high crime neighborhoods. The human costs to families and children of homelessness has been documented in the literature (Bassuk E. 1986: Bassuk and Lauriat. 1986: Bassuk and Rubin. 1987: Simpson. Kilduff and Blewett. 1984). Child psychiatrist Robert Coles has described the impact of rootlessness on young children (1976). Fears that prolonged stays in 'welfare hotels' could create a new 'underclass' have been expressed by several commentators (New York Times. 1987.). It was feared that these 'hotel' children would grow up to be unskilled and unschooled, a new underclass who were unlikely to enter the mainstream. Kozol's poignant vignettes of families living in the Martinique Hotel drew national attention to the notorious hotels, which had become 20th century recreations of the Poor Houses of the previous century. Health officials warned of cockroach infested hotel rooms that failed to meet the most ordinary health and safety standards. The consequences for homeless children of existing policy responses included health deficits, high infant mortality rates, interrupted schooling and family stress and disintegration (New York times 1986.a: 1987.c).

### Costs

There is ample evidence to indicate that while existing shelter arrangements for families, while inadequate and harmful to families, are also unkind to the taxpayer. Housing a family of four in a barracks-like shelter in the Bronx, the Roberto Clements Family Shelter cost \$6,000 a month or nearly \$80,000 a year. City auditors revealed that Holland Hotel, one of the more

notorious welfare hotels had made huge profits of over 50% a year. The costs of housing homeless families in welfare hotels was approximately \$35,000 a year (New York Times. 1986.c: 198b.d) At the same time, the shelter allowance for welfare recipients in New York City was under \$300 a month. Much of the money for housing poor families was provided through the Aid to Families with Dependent Children's Emergency Assistance Program In 1987, emergency assistance programs operating in about 28 states provided approximately \$200 million for housing families (Public Welfare. 1989).

The monetary costs of these policies on an already overburdened foster care system are described by a few analysts (Geoglio. 1988: American Public Welfare Association. 1989). California which has 50,000 homeless children has already passed legislation which prohibits the placement of children in foster-care if lack of housing is the only reason. No estimates have been made of the costs of placing children in foster homes because of a lack of shelter,. Congressional hearings revealed that in an average state foster parents receive four times as much money per child as the caretaker of a child (U.S. Congress. 1983). Despite the astronomical costs of providing shelter to families over an extended period of time, the state and national response is to treat homelessness as a local problem that requires a short term response.

Why then do all level of government persist in spending huge sums of money on solutions that are inadequate, wasteful and eventually destructive to the beneficiaries of aid, as well as the communities in which they live? The answers to these questions are complex and there are no easy responses. Part of the responsibility lies in the fragmented nature of the systems involved in the homeless problem. Housing is not considered a mission of the agencies that have primary responsibilities for the homeless families and children either at the local, state or federal level. Even when money is appropriated for homeless families, restrictions are placed on how, the money can be used. For example, money cannot be spent by the welfare department to provide permanent housing, while staggering sums of money can disbursed on "temporary" housing. Neither can the role played by ideology be ignored. The focus on the less attractive

features of the homeless, deflects public attention from the critical shortage of low income housing.

### Conclusions

The public debate on homelessness parallels in many ways the ongoing controversy on poverty, its causes and consequences that has existed in the United States for the past three hundred years. There is a reluctance to view it initially as more than a reflection of the inadequacies of the victims themselves. As the numbers of distressed persons swell and a sizeable component of them exhibit characteristics of main-stream populations, there is a search for factors that reside outside the victims themselves. Finally there is an awareness that fundamental restructuring of existing systems is needed if an appreciable impact is to be made on the problem

While the evidence, including rigorous studies would appear to lend support to both the structural and individualistic explanations, a sole focus on the personal inadequacies of the homeless or the structural factors underlying homelessness, will not lead to an amelioration of the problem. An alternative view that incorporates both conceptions is needed.

Homelessness like poverty is not a random phenomenon. The lack of affordable housing hurts the most vulnerable members of a population first; the mentally ill, the substance users and single-parent families. As the housing crisis persists and welfare payments fail to cover the purchase of housing, even those supposedly protected by the safety net are struck down. The attacks on the social welfare system during the conservative decade have left huge gaps in the protection afforded these populations. Situational crises such as death, disasters, illness or layoffs will precipitate homelessness among persons who are considered part of the general population.

This perspective recognizes that homelessness is not solely due to failures of the low-income housing market. The role of other systems such as the mental health and income maintenance programs in creating homelessness are also considered. Last but not least, the personal difficulties of some of the homeless are not ignored. Programs that address the needs of the

mentally ill, substance abusers and dysfunctional families need to be developed.

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