

HOMELESSNESS: A SPECIAL TYPE OF UNMET PHYSICAL NEED

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by

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Out they have to go from the homes that they know so well, and they can't find anywhere else to live. Their whole stock of furniture wouldn't fetch much of a price, even if they could afford to wait for a suitable offer. But they can't, so they get very little indeed for it. By the time they've been wandering around for a bit, this little is all used up, and then what can they do but steal - and be very properly hanged? Of course, they can always become tramps and beggars, but even then they're liable to be arrested as vagrants, and put in prison for being idle - when nobody will give them a job, however much they want one.
Thomas More, Utopia

Human material need consists of two central elements: physical need and the need for work itself. Poverty or economic hardship is a condition wherein economic resources in general are insufficient to meet physical need. Since need is a normative concept that reflects the values of the persons who use it and homelessness is a special type of unmet physical need, it is virtually impossible to achieve universal agreement as to the proper definition of homelessness.

Even so, it is entirely erroneous and a great disservice to public policy-making to assert that defining homelessness and therefore counting the homeless are thoroughly arbitrary enterprises. To illustrate, Louisianians very likely would consider as homeless a person living in a cardboard box under a railroad trestle because they know from direct human experience that living under such circumstances is incompatible with human dignity and poses a serious threat to that person's physical well-being. Similarly, a person who is assigned a cot in an emergency shelter that is open to anyone in need would be regarded as homeless in Louisiana because a home is more or less permanent living space with some privacy and an overnight shelter plainly is not.

Thus, we can state without fear of being arbitrary that homelessness must be defined and measured according to the general standard of the dignity that is characteristic of human beings because they are persons and not objects. Strictly speaking, persons have physical need because they are living, breathing, existential actualities. No physical need attaches to objects because they exist in an entirely different existential order. Objects have neither the free will nor the intelligence that are the *differentia specifica* of persons. Further, persons have certain inalienable rights that affirm and safeguard their intrinsic dignity. No rights attach to objects because they are entirely devoid of such dignity.

Foremost among the rights of personhood is the right to life which the government must affirm and safeguard because no one can claim the right to take another person's life. In a society of persons who otherwise are equals, government-approved taking of life means in effect that some persons are more equal than others and that the ones who take life have the divine wisdom to know for sure whose life is worth protecting and whose is not.

The right to life is hollow, however, if some human beings do not have the means that are necessary to maintain and support life. Indeed, the homeless person not only has a right to exist that is guaranteed by the government but also a right to the means that will allow him/her to exist at least minimally as a person and not just as an object. Having a place to call "home" is one means that is essential to existence and is properly called a natural right of every human being. Because this right is a natural right as opposed to a legal right and given that the government should do for the people what the people are unable to do for themselves.

Abraham Lincoln's own words for the principle of subsidiarity are:

The legitimate object of government is "to do for the people what needs to be done, but which they cannot, by individual effort, do at all, or do so well, for themselves". [Shaw, p. 136].

The government has an obligation to see that the homeless have adequate housing. Helping the needy find a place to call home is not charity, it is justice.

In policy matters like homelessness, normative means that the problem is to be defined and measured in accordance with public opinion as to what constitutes an acceptable home given accurate and reasonably detailed information as to the way in which individuals and families commonly are being housed. In this regard, the obligation of the citizen is to be well-informed. At the same time, the obligation of the person researching the problem of homelessness is to develop and present the information needed to assist the citizen and his/her representative in making an informed judgment.

It is instructive at this point to turn first to the closely-related concept of poverty for which there is 25 years of continuous experience as to how the concept is to be defined and measured and then to the concept of unemployment for which there is 50 years of experience. As to poverty, our attention focuses on the controversy regarding absolute poverty vs. relative poverty which we suggest has a bearing on the definition of homelessness. As to unemployment, our interest lies in certain cherished labor-market freedoms and an irreducible level of unemployment which relates substantively to a similar level of homelessness.

HOMELESSNESS AND POVERTY

Conventionally, poverty is defined as either absolute or relative, that is, the poor are viewed from two different perspectives. One perspective counts a person as poor if he/she does not have enough money to purchase the minimum market basket of goods and services. This type of poverty is called absolute poverty. The other considers a person poor if his/her income puts that person at the lower end of the income distribution and commonly is known as relative poverty. The first perspective ignores income distribution. The second disregards the critical minimum. Of the two, the first perspective is the more widely accepted.

The controversy as to whether poverty is absolute or relative, which continues even after 25 years of intense research on all types of poverty-related questions, parallels the 19th century debate in economics as to whether price is determined by supply or demand. The solution is the same now as it was then: just as price is determined by both supply and demand, so too poverty properly understood is both absolute and relative, as is homelessness.

Poverty and homelessness are two-dimensional because physical need is two-dimensional. Physical need is two-dimensional, in turn, because human beings are two-dimensional. One dimension is individuality wherein the person is unique, independent, and self-determining. The other dimension is socialibility wherein the person is like other human beings, dependent, and conditioned by the environment.

Human beings by their very nature are neither individual nor social alone. Rather, they are both at once. Fingerprints attest to the fact that every person is a separate and distinct individual. Speech is evidence that everyone is profoundly social as well.

In order to accommodate the duality and the physical need that characterize all human beings, a proper definition of homelessness includes two main requirements. A person is homeless if (1) he/she does not have a place to stay that provides protection, permanency, and privacy or (2) his/her "home" is vastly different than the homes of others. The longer the deprivation of protection, permanency, and privacy, or the wider the separation from others, the greater the hardship of homelessness.

Persons or entire families who are doubled up in housing units with friends or relatives, for example, qualify as homeless under the first main requirement because while they are afforded protection they are deprived of privacy. Similarly, living in a building that is designed and still used as a factory or a barn identifies a person as homeless under the second main requirement because such housing is vastly different to what others typically possess.

A person on the street with absolutely nowhere to go is definable as homeless under both requirements. Clearly this type of homelessness is the most acute of the four types suggested here. In William Kennedy's novel *Ironweed* the fourth type is described as sleeping "in the weeds" [p. 31].

Students of poverty have struggled with the issue of absolute poverty vs. relative poverty for 25 years mainly because they begin with the wrong question. Instead of beginning with What does it mean to be person? they open with What does it mean to be poor? Having started with the wrong question, they never fully understand the significance of the underlying premise.

Students who use the absolute standard are not aware that they implicitly define human beings one-dimensionally, as individuals alone. Similarly, those who use the relative standard are unaware that they implicitly construe human beings only as social beings. Students of homelessness would do well to learn from the 25 years of dialogue in poverty studies which to date has not resolved this controversy.

Defining homelessness one dimensionally misleads us because it suggests that homelessness comes in only one basic form. Defining it two-dimensionally reminds us that there are two basic forms: (1) deprivation of protection, permanency and privacy and (2) separation from one's neighbor. With the first type, the person's independence is diminished or taken away. With the second, he/she exists more or less outside the human family.

HOMELESSNESS AND UNEMPLOYMENT: AN IRREDUCIBLE MINIMUM?

Fifty years of experience with and findings from the *Current Population Survey* (CPS), which is the joint program of the Bureau of the Census and the Bureau of Labor Statistics for estimating the U.S. labor force on a monthly basis, demonstrates that there is a lower limit below which it is virtually impossible to reduce unemployment any further. Labor economists are not fully agreed as to precisely the level of the irreducible minimum. During World War II the rate of unemployment dropped as low as 1.2 percent [*Historical Statistics*, p. 135]. Accepting that figure as the minimum rate and given the present U.S. civilian labor force of about 120 million persons [*Statistical Abstract*, p.377], a pool of some 1.4 million persons approximates the irreducible minimum level of unemployment today.

More than anything else, the irreducible minimum level of unemployment derives from the fact that ours is a market economy where resources, including labor, are allocated privately through the individual interaction of buyers and sellers, employers and employees. In labor markets, unemployment is the means by which a market economy reallocates resources from economic sectors where demand is decreasing to sectors where it is increasing. As long as employers and employees value the freedom that the market system affords both parties in the labor market, some unemployment is inevitable. In other words, unemployment cannot be reduced to zero without dismantling a free labor market. The Fishmans elaborate instructively on the linkage between unemployment and freedom.

Freedom of movement into and out of the labor force, freedom to change jobs, and freedom to accept or reject job offers for personal reasons are rights that are guaranteed to citizens of the United States. They are related to our most basic and most cherished political and economic institutions. We cherish also our freedom to begin operating a new enterprise ... or to discontinue an existing enterprise. We are reluctant to tamper with the basic institutions affecting labor-management relations in this country by denying workers the right to strike. As long as their rights exist, there will always be some men

and women who are unemployed, no matter how high the level of economic activity [Fishman and Fishman, p.68].

Given that unemployment contributes indirectly to homelessness, it follows that some homelessness is inevitable in a society where freedom of choice for workers and employers alike is such a highly-cherished social value. It is beyond the scope of this paper to hazard even a rough estimate as to the size of the pool of homeless persons either in the U.S. or the State of Louisiana.

No less valued is the freedom to pull up roots in one place and put them down in another, the freedom to screen tenant-applicants on a nondiscriminatory basis and to evict tenants for cause, not to mention the freedom to buy and sell land and property for investment purposes and to change the way in which land and property is used. These freedoms contribute directly to a pool of homeless persons which cannot be reduced below some minimum level as long as freedom of choice is held in such high esteem as a social value. In others words, a market economy will continue to produce certain levels of unemployment and homelessness which are irreducible unless we are willing to make some very fundamental changes in social values.

Authentic freedom of choice is premised on knowing what is best for one's self. Knowing what is best and doing what is best, however, are two entirely distinct phenomena. The first is a matter of intelligence; the second is a matter of the will.

In some cities the homeless have been bodily removed from the streets and housed in shelters especially in the winter months. Backers of such programs argue that some of the homeless lack the faculties required to provide even minimally for their own physical need. Critics reply that such practices are an infringement of individual freedom.

Our view is that it is an infringement of authentic freedom of choice to forcibly care for persons who know full well what is best but choose to act self-destructively. It is not an infringement to impose one's will on others whose incapacities render them unable to provide for their own physical need because their incapacities also render authentic freedom of choice inoperative. The difficulty of distinguishing in practice between persons who are in command of their faculties and those who are not does not invalidate the distinction between the two types.

Freedom of choice is no excuse for indifference towards needy persons who are in full command of their faculties. In a world where such needy human beings are denied the means to maintain life itself freedom hangs by a very thin thread. While many for sure consider life without freedom to be intolerable, no one can escape the reality that freedom without life is completely empty.

LESSONS ON HOMELESSNESS FROM DATA ON UNEMPLOYMENT AND POVERTY

Fifty years of data on unemployment from the CPS may be instructive on the nature of homelessness. Most of the unemployed are out of work for only a very short period of time. In 1988, to illustrate, median duration of unemployment was 5.7 weeks. At the same time, only a small fraction of the jobless are out of work for a relatively long period of time. In 1988 persons with joblessness of 26 weeks or more accounted for only 11 percent of all out-of-work individuals. [Howe and Parks, p. 13].

Unemployment does not produce the same hardship for everyone who becomes unemployed. Blacks when they are out of work experience a greater physical need, defined in terms of absolute poverty, than do whites. About 18 percent of whites with at least one week of unemployment in 1985 were classified as poor. Among blacks with some unemployment during the year, the proportion below the official poverty threshold was about twice as high. Among black women who maintain families and who experienced one week of unemployment or more in that year, roughly three-fourths were living below the poverty level. [*Linking Employment Status to Economic Status*, p. 10].

Data from other studies of poverty are instructive too. Many persons and families in poverty do not remain poor for very long.

The impacts of within-year movements into and out of poverty can be seen more clearly by comparing those who are poor in at least one month with those who are poor over the year as a whole. For the full sample, the proportion poor at least one month is more than four times as high as the proportion poor in every month -- about 26 percent as compared to about 6 percent ... the fluctuations seen differ across the five subgroups considered, with single-parent families having the most stable (and most consistently low) incomes, and with married couples with children experiencing the greatest fluctuations. These estimates imply, for example, that while married couples with children are almost as likely to be poor in at least one month as is the average member of the population as a whole, they are less than half as likely to be continuously poor for an entire year. Elderly persons, on the other hand, are substantially less likely than the average to experience at least one month of poverty, but those who are poor are more likely to stay poor over the year as a whole. [Ruggles and Williams, p. 8].

Approximately one out of every four persons who were poor in 1984 were not poor in 1985. There were very wide differences in the poverty exit rate for different groups in the population. Among divorced or separated women and among persons 65 years of age and older, the exit rate was about 16 percent. Among persons who went from part-year work to year-round, full-time work, the exit rate was 72 percent [*Transitions in Income and Poverty Status*, p. 8]. Only 0.7 percent of the U.S. population was poor in every year during the 10-year period ending in 1978 [Duncan, p. 41].

Three lessons on homelessness can be inferred from these data. First, while the homeless no doubt include large numbers and proportions of persons for whom homelessness is a chronic condition, there is a significant flow of persons in and out of that status from one month to the next and from one year to the next. As with unemployment and poverty, homelessness for some is self-correcting in that the trauma which it brings forces the affected person to take steps that may overcome it.

Second, the risk of homelessness is much greater for blacks than for whites because the probability of falling below the poverty level during a spell of unemployment is much greater for blacks. *Homelessness, therefore, is inextricably intertwined with discrimination and ghettoization.* Further, a market economy in which economic insecurity is accepted as the price of freedom in economic affairs is less attractive in general to blacks than to whites because throughout the U.S. and Louisiana freedom historically has had a different content and meaning for blacks than for whites.

Third, homelessness cannot be brought down to its irreducible minimum unless and until unemployment is cut to its irreducible minimum. This means that in Louisiana where unemployment for the past several years has been much higher than in any other state in the United States more jobs at rates of pay that make housing affordable, especially for primary wage-earners, is a necessary condition for a housing policy that will be effective in meeting the needs of the homeless in the State.

NORMS AND CRITERIA OF HOMELESS

Common sense alone indicates that a home is a place that is (1) protective, (2) permanent, (3) private -- the three characteristics that relate to the fact that persons have a need for housing that derives from the individual side of their nature. It is problematical as to whether common sense alone would inform us that a home is a place that is not vastly different than what the public commonly accepts as a home -- the one characteristic that reflects the need for housing that is an extension of the social side of human nature.

It follows that homelessness, strictly speaking, is a situation where one or more of these housing characteristics is missing. In general, the more that are missing, the greater the burden of homelessness. These four characteristics are the standards or norms by which homelessness is defined.

All four we suggest can be found in the general definition of homelessness in the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act of 1987, Section 103(a).

... the term "homeless" or "homeless individual" includes ...

- (1) an individual who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence; and
- (2) an individual who has a primary nighttime residence that is
 - (A) a supervised publicly or privately operated shelter is designed to provide temporary living accommodations (including welfare hotels, congregate shelters, and transitional housing for the mentally ill);
 - (B) an institution that provides a temporary residence for individuals intended to be institutionalized; or
 - (C) a public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings.

The way in which "fixed", "regular", "temporary", and "public" in particular are used in this definition reinforces the norms of protective, permanent, and private which we have suggested. Further, the way in which "institution", "not designed for", and "shelter" are employed in the Act supports our norm that a home is a place that is not vastly different than what the public commonly accepts as a home.

Before these norms can be used to determine if a given person is to be classified as homeless, it is necessary to express them in measurable form. That is, it is necessary to assign critical values to each norm and, if the housing available to a person fails to meet those critical values, the person involved is to be considered homeless. We refer to these critical values as criteria of homelessness. The following critical values are offered as suggestions.

NORM OF HOMELESSNESS

SUGGESTED CRITERION OF HOMELESSNESS

Housing accommodation ...

- | | |
|--|---|
| (1) is not protective → | does not conform to all applicable housing codes |
| (2) is not permanent → | is scheduled for demolition or removal |
| (3) is not private → | does not provide divided space for use by different families or unrelated individuals |
| (4) is vastly different → than what others have | was designed for some other specific use and never modified for use by human beings as a place to eat, sleep, and bathe |

These criteria of homelessness are no more than suggestions and are intended as devices to sharpen the public focus on the problem of homelessness in order to help arrive at criteria that

are thoughtfully constructed and widely accepted. In that regard, several questions likely will be instructive as to the criteria that work best. Those questions are:

- (1) Does the criterion probe the problem of homelessness superficially or in depth?
- (2) Does the criterion operate consistently, that is does it classify everyone in similar housing circumstances the same way?
- (3) Does the criterion express the associated norm in a way that makes it to use administratively and analytically?
- (4) Does the criterion express the norm indirectly or directly?
- (5) Does the criterion express the norm narrowly or comprehensively?
- (6) Finally, and most important, is the criterion publicly accepted?

The criterion of conformance to applicable housing codes appears to perform well under questions (4), (5), and (6) above. It may prove to be problematical under (1), (2), and (3) depending on how carefully the codes have been written, how well housing units are inspected, and whether there are substantial differences in the codes from one political jurisdiction to another or even one part of town to another.

Whatever critical values finally are selected to express the four norms of homelessness in measurable form, the four criteria can be employed in combination to differentiate the homeless by the severity of their condition.

| <u>Severity of Homelessness</u> | <u>Number of Criteria Met</u> |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Type I | only one |
| II | any two |
| III | any three |
| IV | all four |
| V | person lives in street |

This severity index has its counterparts in both unemployment and poverty. The unemployed conventionally are differentiated as short-term (1-4 weeks), long-term (15-25 weeks), and very long-term (26 weeks or more). The poor are classified at 100-percent of the official poverty standard, at 125-percent of the official standard, and 150-percent of poverty.

A severity index like the one we are suggesting would allow policy makers to allocate limited resources for the homelessness first to those persons who are in greater need.

ASSISTING THE HOMELESS: TWO CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Thomas More's remarks in *Utopia* about the effects of homelessness more than 450 years ago, which we employ as our epigram, along with President Franklin Roosevelt's inaugural comments on a nation that is one-third "ill-housed, ill-clad, and ill-nourished" indicate that homelessness is a persistent problem that likely will occupy our attention for a long time to come. In this regard, homelessness parallels unemployment and poverty. As we have suggested already, there is much that can be learned from programs of aid to the unemployed and from programs for the poor because unemployment has been high on the public agenda since the 1930s and poverty has been on that agenda since the 1960s. Homelessness, in contrast, did not appear there until quite recently. Two general comments follow.

First, a system of classifying programs for the homeless might profitably be patterned after a system occasionally used to classify programs of aid to the unemployed as one of three types: (1) alleviative, (2) curative, and (3) preventive. Alleviative programs attempt to relieve the unmet physical need of the homeless. Curative programs seek to cure the problem that caused the homelessness.

Alleviative and curative programs operate directly at the level of the homeless person *after* the homelessness has occurred. Preventive programs operate *before* homelessness occurs and by definition deal with the problem indirectly and impersonally in a way that reduces the need for alleviative and curative programs. As stated previously, the value we as Americans and Louisianians attach to freedom ensures that some homelessness is unpreventable. It follows that there always will be a need for alleviative and curative programs. A central question in that regard is Should those programs be public or private and, if public, how should they be financed?

Our second concluding comment relates to the question of financing. Borrowing again from our experience with unemployment and poverty, it is instructive to note that the funding of programs for the unemployed and for the poor are handled in two ways that are significantly different. The main program of assistance to the unemployed is unemployment insurance which is funded largely through a tax that is imposed on employers and which is individually adjusted upward or downward depending on the unemployment experienced by the individual employer. Those taxes are called experience-rated. By taxing each employer thusly, the cost of unemployment is reflected in the cost of the goods and services produced and the prices that are charged. The experience-rated tax forces the employer to be more careful about laying off workers and forces the consuming public to bear at least some of the cost of any unemployment that occurs. Since consumers in general would prefer to buy at the lowest possible price, the experience-rated tax

further penalizes employers with high unemployment costs by driving some of their customers to those employers with lower unemployment costs and lower prices.

In contrast, programs of assistance to the poor are funded through general taxes revenues. Thus, whereas the cost of providing aid for the unemployed is embedded in our markets for goods and services and in our labor markets, the cost of helping the poor is not. For that reason, the market system plays no role in penalizing business establishments, organizations, and institutions that contribute directly to the problem of poverty and none in rewarding the ones that do not add to the problem.

At present, public programs of assistance to the homeless are supported from general tax revenues. Some of this cost could be embedded in the housing market. An experienced-rated tax that is imposed on rental housing and that is earmarked for programs of assistance to the homeless could be an effective way to deal with some of the homeless if it were linked directly to the number of tenant-applicants the landlord discriminates against or the number of tenants he/she evicts without cause. To make such an experienced-rated tax administratively manageable, only landlords with sizable holdings of rental property would be covered just as under unemployment insurance for a very long period of time coverage extended only to employers with four or more employees.

In addition, or alternatively, an experienced-rated fee might be imposed on mental-health institutions to pay for those patients that are de-institutionalized and become homeless soon after they have been discharged. Imposing fees of this type on private mental-health institutions means that the cost of any homelessness that is attributable to de-institutionalization is included in the overall cost of providing mental-health services to their patients. In the case of public mental-health institutions, such a fee would mean that the cost to the taxpayer would more accurately reflect the true cost of providing mental-health services to the indigent.

Experienced-rated charges of the types described above, along with an earmarking of those revenues to help the homeless, would make landlords and mental-health institutions more mindful of the human beings under their care or in their housing units. A carefully structured program for the homeless modeled after the unemployment insurance program reasonably might be expected to have desirable effects in preventing, curing, and alleviating the problem of homelessness.

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