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Editorials and Annotations

Editorial: Homelessness in America

The study by Link et al.¹ in this issue of the Journal uses an innovative household sampling method to estimate that 8.5 million Americans experienced homelessness between 1985 and 1990. This figure is two to three times that of previous estimates. Furthermore, the risk for homelessness does not appear to be concentrated among residents of large cities, men, or African Americans, as has been indicated in prior studies. Rather, it is far more evenly distributed among low-income people across the country.

When homelessness first surfaced in public awareness in the early 1980s, it was viewed as a tragic but temporary aberration affecting particularly vulnerable segments of the population. The deep recession of 1982 to 1983 had brought a precipitous but temporary rise in unemployment. Accordingly, many people expected the crisis of homelessness to be short-lived and to be largely resolved by the next upward turn of the business cycle.

It was also widely understood that some homeless people would not be able to work. These people were likely to be medically or psychiatrically disabled and would need emergency shelter and special services. The deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill, in particular, had failed to provide adequate community supports for patients discharged from state mental hospitals. Early research reports showed that a large number of homeless persons suffered from schizophrenia; that single mothers and their children were the fastest growing subpopulation of the homeless; and that, unlike single homeless persons of previous eras, those of the 1980s were mostly young, unemployed African-American men. These reports reinforced the widely held view that homelessness is a temporary problem that

is confined to the fringes of society and does not affect the societal core.

Although, in the late 1980s, the United States experienced the longest sustained period of economic growth of the postwar period, homelessness did not disappear, nor did its growth abate. While the paradox of expanding homelessness amid unprecedented economic growth gained widespread attention, homelessness was still seen as a peripheral issue and a problem of marginal populations. Study after study highlighted the fact that many homeless persons were mentally ill, that they often suffered from substance abuse disorders and severe social isolation, and that many were members of racial minority groups. President Reagan reassured the American public that the federal safety net was operational and effective for those who sought its help.² Persistently homeless street people, he suggested, were deviants who chose their homeless lifestyles voluntarily. He pointed to the vast number of jobs available in the want ads of the typical Sunday paper, jobs that were presumably available to any motivated homeless worker who made the effort required to apply. A prominent commentary in a leading news magazine echoed the chief executive's perspective and portrayed the homeless as rebels, voluntary exiles who *could* but *would not* participate in the social mainstream.³ When large numbers of veterans were observed among the homeless, researchers emphasized that their presence was probably yet another manifestation of the Vietnam War, whose legacy tragically extended across the decades to the present. The sense that homelessness is an aberration affecting Americans who have

Editor's Note. See related article by Link et al. (p 1907) in this issue.

distinct personal histories or who are situated on the fringes of society was further supported by the sense that homelessness is an urban problem that mostly affects large cities, especially those in the industrial Northeast.

Unlike previous research, the study of Link and his colleagues challenges the perception that homelessness is limited in its reach. Basing their study on a telephone survey of a representative sample of US households, they estimate that 7.4% of all adult Americans (13.5 million) have experienced *literal* (i.e., street and shelter) homelessness in their lives, and that 3.1% of adult Americans (5.7 million) experienced it between 1985 and 1990. Again, this is a far larger estimate than previous ones based on surveys of currently homeless people. Even more striking than these large numbers (which the authors show to be conservative estimates) is that the incidence of homelessness appears to be no greater among men than among women, among Blacks than among Whites, or among urban than among rural populations. Homelessness, these data suggest, affects a broad spectrum of Americans and, not surprisingly, is most likely to affect those who have low incomes or are poorly educated.

The discrepancy between these findings and those of previous studies is striking. Homeless people are most visible in large cities, where they draw attention because they are an irritant to those with whom they share public spaces. As a result, most survey research has been conducted in such settings, with limited attention paid to the broader national picture. Link et al.'s study is the first to look at homelessness as a truly national phenomenon, and, as a result, it may be the first to approximate the true magnitude of homelessness in our society.

The rise in homelessness, it appears, may be less an aberrant phenomenon affecting the margins of urban society than an indicator of major changes in American society as a whole. Like the proverbial miner's canary, the homelessness of the 1980s may have been a harbinger of broad social changes that would affect the health and welfare of a wide range of low-income Americans and, ultimately, the quality of life of all Americans.

By the end of the decade, it had become clear that during the 1980s and for the first time since the end of World War II, the United States had experienced a regressive change in distribution of wealth: the lowest quintile of the population experienced a 13% decline in income while the highest quintile experienced an 8% increase.⁴ With the deindustrialization of the American economy, employment opportunities for less well educated workers declined substantially,⁵ and African Americans living in large cities in particular found their neighborhoods to be increasingly characterized by concentrated poverty.⁶ Unemployment rates were higher in rural areas than in urban settings,⁴ and many small farmers were displaced from their land.

In one view, the core commitment of Americans to one another was eroded by the change from a national economy that depends on American workers to a world economy centered on international corporations that may be based in the United States but that owe allegiance to workers of no particular nation.^{7,cf8} To the extent that Link et al. show homelessness to be a national problem of broad scope, it may be understood as reflecting these deep structural changes that cut across all of American society. From an even broader perspective, the continuing erosion of domestic life in America, of which homelessness is but one symptom, may be understood to be a consequence of the commitment of resources to defense policies that may benefit the nation by protecting the security and stability of international trade, but that restrict our investment in social welfare at home.⁹

Homelessness is a serious public health issue in its own right. In addition, homeless people suffer from associated conditions such as mental illness, alcoholism, tuberculosis, and a substantial excess of deaths.¹⁰ After a decade of trying, we know that emergency approaches to this problem have not worked.¹¹ Link et al. show us why. Homelessness is not an isolated problem that can be resolved through emergency interventions with currently homeless persons. One cannot fix a leaky boat by bailing out the water. One must find the holes and patch them.

Homelessness is a symptom of much deeper and more serious changes in American society. How we would reverse these changes is not easy to specify in policy recommendations that are both empirically based and politically acceptable. Effective action is urgently needed in the areas of housing, health care, employment, and education. The alternative of continued social disintegration will have grave consequences for the national health and welfare and makes this a problem on which we cannot turn our backs. □

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