

Homeless Identity and the Issue of Housing

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The issue of homelessness has hit the front page newspapers across the nation. Headlines display the war on homelessness to bring about change within welfare policies and government aid. On March 27, 2005, "King County Journal" published an article titled, "Second Opinion: It takes a community to defeat homelessness."¹ It listed 8,000 homeless in King County and that the challenge is to end homelessness in 10 years. Many are coming to the conclusion that homelessness affects everyone; however, there is a difference of opinions in the attitudes displayed among many officials, business leaders, and citizens that would label the homeless as; scum, liars, untrustworthy, and violator's of the law because they fall outside of what society would deem as normal. What is at stake is the negative image of homelessness and society wants it removed from their cities. Policies such as city ordinances have been drafted to remove the homeless from sidewalks and parks. Researchers and scholars have revealed that attitudes within society in regards to the homeless needs to change in order to foster respect and understanding among all of its members. Yet, dominant social groups solicit labeling the homeless with laws against them, and ignore legal injustices by not recognizing them or acknowledging the root causes of homelessness.

Labeling and or classifying homeless people enforces the cycle of homelessness by discrediting the individual as something other than a normal human. It is automatically assumed that all homeless people display negative behaviors as a result of being homeless. By placing all homeless people within a specific classification means that they are something other than normal. It is true that homeless people can become acculturated by association with other homeless people; however, this does not describe who they are as a human being. MacKnee and Mervyn comment about a

1990's research that one of the reasons for homelessness is because the homeless have become acculturated.² The reason for the acculturation of the homeless is due to the loss of social support, which keeps them in the cycle of homelessness. It is also said that many become the product of their environment and the break down between interpersonal relationships becomes crucial. The MacKnee and Mervyn study identifies key points on the homeless transition from streets back into mainstream society. One key point is the importance of social support, such as when someone reaches out to help, or helps them to reconnect with family members. Jo Phelan cites Irving Goffman as defining stigma as to discredit or disqualifying one's identity from full social acceptance.³ It is clear that society sees homelessness as a non-acceptable condition. The homeless are labeled as being unworthy, unfit or unable to function within a community.

The social order is derived from a system of beliefs, values, and attitudes that is established by the dominant social order or group. Phelan states that the stratification is based upon the sociopolitical hierarchies within society.⁴ These hierarchies are defined where each individual is classified as to the social structure such as the social/economic status of upper, middle, and lower class. The emphasis is placed upon the individual for being in a particular class status. In the 1980's many homeless individuals were blamed for their status/conditions of being homeless. The emphasis was placed upon the individual choice for becoming homeless, rather than on structural economic changes. This caused polarization between structural and individual choice that brought about specific policies that were overlooking economic and social structure to which the political economy operated. Feldman explains how two political groups the

left liberals (who are for structural and social influence) and the neo conservatives (who are for individual choice) pulled at opposite ends of the spectrum and thus created policies that solicit not only the dominant groups beliefs, but places the homeless population as a “subordinate legal status.”⁵ This creates inequality that divides people into specific statuses, such as the homeless. The homeless becomes disenfranchised from normal citizens by losing their dignity, voice, and identity.

Policies within cities now have laws against the homeless and they are labeled as criminals in order to promote social order. The homeless population is seen as undisciplined and unruly due to incidents of pan-handling, occupying public spaces and public urination. Leonard Feldman discusses the aspect of the naked life versus the political life of people in how this is fractured due to how society views homelessness “as a problem of society rather than a problem of sovereign state power.”⁶ Feldman asserts that the person who is a “home-dwelling citizen” and the person who is “homeless bare life” are ranked according to political status.⁷ Feldman explains bare life to be that of necessity, or physical existence and uses Giorgio Agamben example to confine it in the “realm of the household” as not being natural, since it is a part of the political sphere.⁸ In essence, if a person chooses this lifestyle they were banned or expelled from the institutions to be killed, thus exposing the victim within society, but today this has changed by a legal code that defines the character and condition of the homeless. Once defined as a legal code, it becomes a status or position and may take the form of involuntary status where a person is forced against their will of being labeled that further discriminates them to assuming that status or condition.

The homeless laws within cities are taking personal liberty away from individuals and thus establishing individual as subjects to the law. Feldman asserts that by the state “refusing to recognize homelessness as an involuntary status” it produces “a political status subordinate to full citizenship.”⁹ Seattle has been an example of the underlying argument of state sponsored programs in redistribution of its resources. Feldman comments about the Tent City of organized single homeless people who governed themselves and were denied permits to stay on public or private lands because it was considered not to be the real solution to the issue of homelessness. The real solution was to “use a computerized intake and referral system to help move homeless people towards self-sufficiency.”¹⁰ There wasn’t a survey as to the actual threat or cost to public safety in allowing this homeless camp to exist. The front page news of King County Journal made it clear as to the attitudes when Mike Archbold, the Journal reporter, quoted King County Executive Ron Sims saying, “This is America. We don’t put people in tents.”¹¹ Archbold also commented how Leo Rhodes of the Seattle Housing and Resource Effort “acknowledged there are stereotypes about homeless and the tent cities, that they will bring crime, drug use, and prostitution to a neighborhood.”¹² The fear of crime, drug, and prostitution automatically labels a homeless camp, but also solidifies the vision of the American dream of everyone living in a home as the acceptable style of living, rather than living in a tent.

The question of legal injustice never seems to come up when the issue to beautify our cities or to eliminate certain eye sores from the public view. Seattle is labeled as one of the most livable cities and the total cultural-retail projects in the downtown area during the 1990’s reached over \$1.4 billion.¹³ To retain its image

investors sought to reclaim downtown by revitalizing its positive modern urban image. Seattle elites, retailers, and investors desired economic growth to promote global investors and tourisms in a cultural climate of consumption and leisure. In fact, in order to save Seattle from decay, Timothy Gibson quotes Seattle Times columnist Terry Tang saying, “salvation by retail,” in order to promote new growth in the downtown area.¹⁴ The idea is the promotion for the consumption of commodities that would promote economic growth. Gibson comments that public surveys revealed how the homeless people were “one of the top three things shoppers, office workers, and tourists disliked about downtown” Seattle.¹⁵ Retail owners felt that the homeless undermined their business by scaring people away. Sidewalks were deemed no longer safe where homeless people panhandled, slept, and drank. The homeless are seen as a threat not only to the revitalization of downtown, but feared in regards to personal safety.

The homeless characteristics of harassing the general public by aggressive panhandling, drinking and disorderly behavior produced cultural fears in the public minds. This meant the city had to find ways of eliminating this fear from the public minds by placing restrictions on the use of public spaces such as sidewalks and public parks. These restrictions were passed in October of 1993 by city hall council member in Seattle and is known as the “Sidran ordinances” where public drinking and urination became a criminal misdemeanors with up to ninety days in jail and a fine of \$1,000, while anyone sitting or lying down on sidewalks were told to move along.¹⁶ Gibson quotes Mark Sidran, an attorney, stating that it was an individual’s bad choice,¹⁷ thus emphasizing that it is the individuals fault for being homeless regardless of the First Amendment rights to freedom of speech and assembly. No one questions the injustice

of the homeless or how an individual becomes homeless. The homeless are targeted, excluded, and displaced by being removed from the public image of vitality, growth, and leisure. Policies such as the Sidran ordinances, I believe is an example of how people are given an immediate status in the form of involuntary status that clearly subordinates an individual to the law, thus creating subjects by the law rather than subjects for the law.

In reality, the causes of homelessness have many variables to take into consideration and these include the social economic structures within society. Various researchers have shown primary causes of homelessness to be placed into three basic classifications, which are economic, relational, and treatment issues. From my research I have drafted the following numerical table with number one being the highest percentage of the causes of homelessness and listed its classification.

	Primary Cause	Classification
1.	Lack of Affordable Housing	Economic
2.	Loss of Income	Economic
3.	Lack of Living Wage	Economic
4.	Unemployment	Economic
5.	Domestic Violence	Relational
6.	Divorce/Separation	Relational
7.	Poverty	Economic
8.	Poor Financial Management	Economic
9.	Mental Illness	Treatment
10.	Drug Abuse	Treatment

11.	Alcohol Abuse	Treatment
12.	Medical/Health	Treatment

Gibson asserts that the origin of root causes of homelessness can be traced to the competition of affordable housing. Gibson cites that in Seattle there was only 25,000 low-income and or subsidized housing in 1999, while in 1980 it was 10,000.¹⁸ Such figures clearly limit low income families any access to downtown simply because housing is not available. Gibson comments that Seattle inflated housing market during 1986 to 1998 increased on average the rent from 3% to 9% every year.¹⁹ The United States Conference of Mayors 2004 report stated that city officials estimated that low-income households spend 45 percent of their income on housing.²⁰ It is estimated by most financial planners that a family's budget should allow 30% to 35% of their net income towards the cost of housing. Usually a person making minimum wage has to double or triple their hours in order to fall within this percentage, which means working over 80 hours a week in order to pay for the cost of housing.

The Waiting list for "Section Eight Voucher Program," coordination and administration of the different programs requirements, and criteria limits access for homeless people. United States Conference of Mayors 2004 report listed Seattle as closing the wait list for Section Eight Housing Choice Voucher Program,²¹ and that Seattle Housing Authority's Housing Choice Voucher wait list was closed until July 1, 2005.²² This is a clear example how government programs were not fulfilling the requirement for helping the homeless. Stanley Czerwinski stated how the homeless were unable to access and or use federal programs due to existing condition of

homelessness.²³ The existing conditions relates to the transient conditions of homeless people who do not have a permanent address or phone number that is required during the intake application procedures of many programs. Czerwinski also explains that providers may not be well equipped, knowledgeable, or sensitive to treat the many needs of the homeless population with respect. This means that the homeless do not have available resources or access needed to help them with meeting their personal needs such as medical/health care or mental illness. Czerwinski also stated that various grants listed had different criteria. For example, the state government could apply for emergency shelter, supportive housing and shelter plus care grants, but not Single-Room Occupancy grants.²⁴ Likewise, private nonprofit organizations could apply for supportive housing program and shelter plus care grants, but not emergency shelter or shelter plus care. Knowing the governmental requirements, coordinating funds within private and nonprofit sectors, and listing specific intake criteria for the homeless at times greatly limits access for the homeless population due to poor communications of various program resources.

The pathway to seeking help for the homeless at times limits them in their ability to cope with the many regulations placed upon the individual. The normal pathway for the homeless is through the idea of self-help by working through personal networks such as family, friends, church and social services. Poole and Zugazaga asserts the three main events that disrupt the pattern for self help is job loss, eviction and divorce, or separation.²⁵ Poole and Zugazaga main emphasis is on the Community Prevention Model by retaining the self-help network and personal networks of an individual. When an individual has exhausted this outlet, the community support system would conduct

“outreach, intake, and assessment,”²⁶ and then coordinate with other agencies to ensure that the individual needs are met. The desired outcome is for people to live independently in permanent housing. One main drawback for this support, along with current policies, is that the general public doesn’t want this type of housing or facilities to be in their neighborhoods. Poole and Zugazaga stated that citizens “react negatively against efforts to host” such facilities in their neighborhoods.²⁷ This fosters the attitude of exclusion and segregates this group of people as something other than normal. The only clear way around this is what Poole and Zugazaga eloquently outlined in regards to how people with disabilities were treated, and that was to stop channeling them through institutional settings, but instead, foster independent living by self-help and changing society’s view of social control, dependency and institutionalization.²⁸ The ideal solution is to foster and nurture an individual’s independence to retain one’s self-esteem, dignity and identity.

Policies should solicit availability of housing that would support creating socially mixed communities. Chris Holmes cites Alan Berube’s written report on mixed communities in England in that “mixed communities are to be an effective response to growing economic segregation.”²⁹ This would help eliminate exclusion of any class status within a neighborhood. In fact, Holmes asserts that the goal is to have mixed communities with variety different styles of housing to accommodate different living arrangements. Holmes also explains about the situation that has taken place in London and states, “for homeless families the worst aspect of temporary accommodation is the lack of stability.”³⁰ This lack of stability causes children to fall behind on their education and it causes personal stress on the head of the household. The strategic goal is to

have a proposal for a program that would buy housing for families and then allow families to lease the home for an indefinite time frame. These houses would fall under the category of “affordable housing,” which was “defined as housing for people not able to meet the full market cost.”³¹ The emphasis was to plan what is needed at each location and to correspond with families who were in need of housing. Holmes comments that the choice in renting homes to homeless is simple, for “it is undesirable that homeless families should have to go through all the trauma of becoming homeless and having to live in temporary accommodation before being given a permanent home.”³² The idea is to place the homeless directly into permanent housing to allow full citizenship status and resume a normal pattern of living.

In conclusion, policies must become more pluralistic to decrease inequality, polarization, discrimination, and exclusion of its citizens. The idea of mixed communities and having a program that uses existing housing as well as new housing within neighborhoods in providing permanent housing for the homeless is a better approach than temporary shelters that institutionalized, label, and stigmatize the homeless population. Many communities throughout the Seattle area are more than able to divert funds in supporting permanent housing. In fact, several nonprofit organizations have a similar program for housing homeless within normal neighborhoods; however, this is all under transitional housing instead of permanent housing. City officials need to support permanent housing and realize the danger of polarization in how they view the homeless. A system of beliefs is a driving force within society. Therefore, society needs to check constantly what it believes in order to bridge the gap of inequality by creating better policies that promote social equality.

Notes

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- ¹ King County Journal. *Second Opinion: It takes a community to defeat homelessness*, 27, March 2005
- ² Chuck M. MacKnee and Jennifer Mervyn, "Critical Incidents That Facilitate Homeless People's Transition Off the Streets," *Journal of Social Distress and the Homeless* 11, no. 4 (October 2002): 301.
- ³ *Ibid.*, 323.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 325.
- ⁵ Leonard C. Feldman, *Citizens Without Shelter/Homelessness, Democracy, and Political Exclusion*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004, 58.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 18.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 20.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 63.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 100.
- ¹¹ Mike Archbold, "Home for homeless needs home," *King County Journal*, 7 December 2003.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, A13.
- ¹³ Timothy A. Gibson, *Securing The Spectacular City- The Politics of Revitalization and Homelessness in Downtown Seattle*. Oxford: Lexington Books, 2004, 3.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 76.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 177-180.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 179.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 171.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 171.
- ²⁰ The United States Conference of Mayors – Sodexo USA. *Hunger and Homelessness Survey A status Report on Hunger and Homelessness in America's Cities*, December 2004.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 101.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 103.
- ²³ Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs, Subcommittee on Housing and Transportation, *Homelessness – Improving Program Coordination and Client Access to Programs*, Statement of Stanley J. Czerwinski, Washington D.C.: United States General Accounting Office, 6 March, 2002.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.
- ²⁵ Dennis L. Poole and Carole B. Zugazaga, "Conceptualizing Prevention as the First Line of Offense Against Homelessness: Implications for the Federal Continuum of Care Model," *The Journal of Primary Prevention* 23, no. 4 (2003): 416.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 420.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 421.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 422.
- ²⁹ Chris Holmes, *A New Vision for Housing*. New York: Routledge, 2006, 113.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 91.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 77.

³² Ibid., 94.

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