Homelessness: What Can We Do.. Essay, Research Paper

Homelessness: What We Can Do About It

“Being homeless is often defined as sleeping on the streets. Although this is the most visible and severe form of homelessness, there are many other types of acute housing need. These include living in temporary accommodation, poor or overcrowded conditions, or being in mortgage arrears and under threat of re-possession.” (Hope, 27) It is a symptom of many complex problems: mental illness, emotional instability, illiteracy, chronic substance abuse, unemployment, and, most basic of all, the breakdown of city planning.

Anyone can become homeless and the reasons that force people into homelessness are many and varied. The leading cause, however, of homelessness in the United States is the inability of poor people to afford housing. “Housing costs have risen significantly over the last decade, while the incomes of poor and middle-class Americans have stagnated.” (Erickson, 169) The millions of Americans who are unemployed or work in low-paying jobs are among the most vulnerable to becoming homeless. Therefore, homelessness, housing, and income are inextricably linked. Low-income people are frequently unable to pay for housing, food, child-care, health care, and education. Difficult choices must be made when limited resources cover only some of these necessities. Often it is housing, which takes a high proportion of income that must be dropped.

Two major sources of income are from employment and public assistance. A decrease in either one of them would certainly put poor people at risk of homelessness. Additionally, minimum wage earnings no longer lift families above the poverty line. “More than 3 million poor Americans spend more than half of their total income on housing, yet the Department of Housing and Urban Development estimates families should spend no more than 30%.” (Gilbert, 84) Although many homeless adults are employed, they work in day-labor jobs that do not meet basic needs, while technological acceleration excludes others from a competitive job market.

Many factors have contributed to declining work opportunities for large segments of the workforce, including the loss of well-paying manufacturing jobs. The decline in relatively secure and well-paying jobs in manufacturing, which have been replaced by less secure and poorly-paid jobs in the service sector, has greatly limited the opportunities for poorly-educated and low-skilled segments of the population. This transformation has led to an unprecedented incidence of chronic unemployment and underemployment. (Hardin, 379) “Underemployment is an especially useful measure of the decline in secure jobs since, unlike the unemployment rate, measures of underemployment reflect not only individuals who are unemployed, but also involuntary part-timers and those who have given up seeking work.” (Hardin, 263) In addition to increasing underemployment, an estimated 29.4% of the workforce are employed in nonstandard work arrangements, for example, independent contracting, working for a temporary help agency, day labor, and regular part-time employment. These kinds of work arrangements typically offer lower wages, fewer benefits, and less job security.

“As recently as 1967, a year-round worker earning the minimum wage was paid enough to raise a family of three above the poverty line” (Sklar, 103). From 1981-1990, however, “the minimum wage was frozen at $3.35 an hour, while the cost of living increased 48% over the same period. Congress raised the minimum wage to $5.15 per hour in 1996. This increase made up only slightly more than half of the ground lost to inflation in the 1980s” (Hardin, 191). Thus, full-time year-round minimum-wage earnings currently not equal to the estimated poverty line for a family of three. Unsurprisingly, the decline in the value of the minimum wage has been accompanied by an increase in the number of people earning poverty-level wages and the declining wages have put housing out of reach for many workers, in every state.

Slashed public assistance has also left many people homeless or at risk of homelessness. Replacement of the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) entitlement program, a program that was already inadequate in meeting the needs of families, with the non-entitlement block grant program would significantly increase the risk of homelessness for many Americans. Furthermore, earned income and asset limitations discourage individuals and families from breaking the cycle of homelessness and extreme poverty. Several states have terminated or reduced public assistance and food stamps for individuals, while Social Security Income (SSI) is inadequate, and sometimes impossible to obtain, for disabled individuals. As a result, the number of poor Americans is growing and the poor are getting poorer.

Across America, there has been a substantial decline in the number of housing units that low-income people and those in need of shelter assistance can afford. Those losses have resulted primarily from downtown urban renewal, gentrification, abandonment, and suburban land use controls. The elimination and reduction of federal low income housing programs has also dramatically reduced the supply of affordable shelter. Moreover, construction of low income and assisted housing has essentially stopped. Due to the increased demand and diminished supply of housing or shelter, the problem of homelessness is further deteriorated.

The amount of housing available in the private sector rental stock is diminishing rapidly. As more and more landlords abandon apartment buildings and houses rather than repair them, the housing supply for the poor has declined at an accelerating pace in some cities in the nation. The growth of service-sector employment in central business districts has attracted white-collar professionals, many of whom prefer to live in accessible central city neighborhoods, where they compete with poor, indigenous residents for private market housing (Noyelle, 210). The result is frequently gentrification of inner city housing which traditionally has been the major source of low- income housing. At the same time, downtown service sector expansion has created jobs for many low-waged workers, which increases the demand for low cost shelter readily accessible to the downtown. It makes the homeless in downtown even harder to rent a place to live.

Downtown development also diminishes the supply of low-income housing for poor people. As the City raises more new office towers, the vacancy for housing is getting less. In Seattle, for instance, office space in downtown grew from 13 million square feet in 1981 to about 24 million square feet in 1990. On the other hand, the downtown low-income housing stock declined from about 11,000 units in 1980 to less than 6,000 units in 1987. With the passage of new housing levies, cities will try to regain some low income units, but today s low-income units vanish faster than they can be built and there is still a shortage in housing supply in downtown areas.

Besides, the qualities of temporary shelters for homeless people are terrible that they think staying on streets is a better choice. Not only have the lost bed-spaces not been made up, but the new hostels are not as readily accessible to the homeless coming directly off the street. They tend to cater to special-needs groups and access tends to be through referral.

Planners can play an important role in the search for solutions to homelessness. And homelessness is an extensive, complex process. Different kinds of intervention are needed to deal with the problem. But the most widely accepted approach is a three-tier system, beginning with emergency shelters and moving through transitional accommodations to long-term housing. Rehabilitation of old buildings by minimal funding are common projects to provide shelters for the homeless people. However, some observers suggests that making the renovation of buildings for low-income housing profitable, for developers or investors, can be the solution to the homeless problem.

Our examination makes it clear that piecemeal intervention can alleviate emergency shelter crises, but such action will not resolve the long-term problem of finding permanent shelter for the homeless and returning them to the mainstream of society wherever possible, which we regard as the ultimate goal of intervention. Equally obvious is that while long-term intervention strategies are vital, they do not address the problems of survival for those presently without shelter and support. We conclude that both long-term and short-term measures are necessary, but that all the solutions should be based on integrated, comprehensive understanding of the homelessness problem. Only such a comprehensive approach will allow planners to develop workable strategies with any chance for success.

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