

A LINE ON LIFE

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"No Place Like Home" *

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When we think about the homeless, typically we think of men – usually alcoholics or drug addicts. A 1988 study in Buffalo, NY, found that the homeless population is evenly split between three groups:

1. those who heavily used alcohol or drugs,
2. those who were past abusers but are currently "*clean*" and
3. those who never had a serious problem with alcohol or drugs.

Veterans – including Desert Storm vets – make up almost one-third of the homeless. Even though African-Americans are 15% of the general population in the United States, they are 50% of the homeless.

However, in the last two decades, there has been a significant change in the homeless population. Now almost 30% of the homeless are **mothers** – typically with two children under the age of five. In the last few years, considerable research has been done on these families by a task force by one division of the APA (American Psychological Association). In contrast to homeless men, homeless families are younger on average and they "*have much lower levels of substance abuse and mental health problems.*" There are essentially three different groups of homeless women:

1. those who have no children,
2. those with children and
3. those with children, but the children do not live with them.

One study indicates that approximately 29% of the homeless women have no children, 43% have children who aren't with them and 28% are on the street with their children. Of the children who live away from their mothers, only about 10% live in foster homes. The remainder live with relatives. Although the mothers might try to keep their families together, many make the choice that their children would be better off with others.

Of the three groups of homeless women, the ones who still have their children with them in the street seem to manage better. Of the three groups, they are more likely to have finished high school and have the fewest adult arrests. On average, they seem to be homeless for the fewest number of days, attempt suicide less often and have lower rates of mental illness. However, they are under great psychological stress. In comparison to

housed poor women, homeless women are more likely to be victims of domestic violence.

Even so, according to the APA task force, the number one cause for the increase in homeless families is not factors related to individuals – mental illness or domestic violence – but **poverty**. During the 1980s, the poorest 20% of families became even poorer. This decline was greatest among the poorest young families and the poorest single mothers.

Another factor in our system is the **lack of affordable housing**. One researcher sees homelessness similar to the game of "*musical chairs*." With eight chairs and ten people, two are left "*standing*" when the music stops. Similarly, there is not enough housing, so some families are left standing. Without an adequate increase in housing facilities, finding homes for these homeless people only means that others will then acquire homeless status.

In 1988 – to find other factors that lead to homelessness – psychologist Marybeth Shinn and her colleagues at New York University studies 700 families who asked for shelter and 524 housed families on public assistance. To distinguish causes from consequences, the subjects – mostly women – were interviewed before they entered the shelters.

In analyzing her data, Shinn found that – in contrast to the housed poor – more people requesting shelter had never been primary tenants in a home (44% compared to 12%). (This means that their names never appear on a rental contract.) Due to this, shelter requesters were almost twice as likely to double up in living quarters with another family (80% compared to 45%) and to have lived with three or more persons to a bedroom (45% compared to 26%).

Shelter requesters were more likely to be pregnant than the housed poorer women – 34% compared to 6%. Even so, the family size among the shelter requesters was smaller. This is probably because the shelter requesters were typically younger than the housed poor. Like previous studies, the incidence of childhood victimization and early separation from their families of origin was found more with women requesting shelter. With the poor – especially the homeless – these conditions are passed on to their children. Physical and emotional problems plague homeless children – including malnutrition, severe stomach disorders, poor physical development, aggressive and demanding behaviors, sleep disorders, abnormal social fears and speech difficulties.

From 1990-1992, psychologist Pamela Reid of the City University of New York interviewed second- and fifth-grade children of poor mothers – both housed and homeless. Both groups of children shared the same major concerns. Violence and death of loved ones are major problems. However, because of their living conditions, the homeless children are more likely to lack peer support in dealing with these stressors.

"Simple direct intervention...can make a difference."

Reid and her associates at City University set up an after-school and summer program for both groups of children. Graduate students tutored the older children, and these children then tutored the younger ones. Even though there was not a formal evaluation of the program, teachers reported that they "*could see changes in the kids who attended.*" Unfortunately, after two years, the program was cut due to budget problems.

There are several reasons why very little is known about the fathers of these homeless families. First, they may no longer be part of these families. Second, even if they wanted to be with their families – because of concern over problems with violence and aggression – "*many shelters are not eager to have men around.*" Third, even if they were around, women are not likely to admit it, because they could lose any public assistance benefits they might have.

In the face of such a situation, we feel very helpless. Unless we assist some larger organization, there is little we as individuals can do for these people. However, understanding a little more about their situation may make us a little more compassionate. In addition, it might help us to appreciate what we have. This knowledge adds deeper significance to the cliché-like phrase of an old song – "*Be it ever so humble, there is no place like home.*"

* Adapted from Tori DeAngelis' articles, "Homeless families: stark reality of the 90s" and "Vets, minorities, single moms make up the homeless population," [*APA Monitor*](#), May 1994, pages 1, 38, 39.