

The “Street” of Life

Codi Chambers, Hilary Heinrichs, Stephanie Lacy, Kayla Penning

Sociology 211 FYS

November 30, 2009

Dr. Sue Williams

Abstract

Not only is homelessness a growing problem in the United States, it is also very prominent in other developing and developed countries due to lack of affordable housing, economic crisis, extreme poverty and violence in the home. Because of these issues, people often find themselves living on the streets. Homeless can strike anyone at anytime regardless of age or race. However, it is more prevalent in children and younger adults as well as African Americans. Especially during tough economic times, such as these, more and more people are unexpectedly finding themselves without a home. Through our experiences and research, we have discovered that homeless people have a negative stigma and are often discriminated against. Many people fail to realize that homeless people were more often than not in their position at one time, leading “normal” lives. By assuming the role of a homeless person, we discovered the negative stigma that is placed on homeless people as well as people’s tendency to ignore this growing issue.

On my honor as a student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this academic work.
-Codi Chambers, Hilary Heinrichs, Stephanie Lacy, Kayla Penning

Introduction and Background

On any given night in America, anywhere from 700,000 to two million people are homeless. With such staggering numbers, the number of homeless people in the United States is increasing. From 2007 to 2008, cities, on average, reported a 12 percent increase in homelessness (NLCHP). While most people would assume that unemployment is the leading cause of homelessness, there is actually a more prevalent cause. In reality, the leading cause is the lack of affordable housing. A survey of major U.S. cities depicted that hunger and homelessness continued to rise in 2004, with 78 percent of cities reported increases in requests for emergency shelters (Survey). This survey also found that 81 percent of cities reported that homeless shelters have to turn families away because they lack sufficient resources.

Homelessness does not just affect one race. Forty-two percent of the homeless population is African American, 39 percent white, 13 percent Hispanic, 4 percent Native American, and 2 percent Asian. Forty percent of homeless men have served in the military, as compared to 34 percent of the general male public (NLCHP). A large majority of the homeless population is homeless families. The typical homeless family consists of a single mother with two to three children. Children of all ages can be affected by living on the streets. The effects can range from developmental delay as a toddler to extreme mental disorders as young adults. Families and individuals living on the streets or without a home are more vulnerable to infections, diseases, and violence.

People can list the facts and statistics of homelessness all day long, but in order to truly understand homelessness, one needs to walk a mile in their shoes. In order to better understand

this lifestyle, we had to do just that. We had to get out of our college student shoes and slip on the shoes of a homeless person.

Methodology

For part of our research, half of our group watched different films regarding the issues of race as well as age. During the movies, the girls sat on the floor in the coldest room of the house in low-lighting to get a better feel for the dinginess of an alley. For the other half of our experiment, we actually went out into the streets. To really look the part, we wore holey, dirty jeans and sweatpants as well as inside out grey sweatshirts. Furthermore, we did not shower, brush our teeth or hair, or eat that morning. To look haggard, we used makeup to create dark circles underneath our eyes. We also carried around plastic sacks full of a couple shirts, to look like we were carrying all of our belongings. We set out for the streets, on Tuesday, December 22. We spent four hours in front of the Wal-Mart in Manhattan and then walked to the mall and then to the park in Aggieville spending an hour at each place. By doing all of these things, we hoped to get a good feel for life as a homeless person.

Experiential Observations

Homeless children live the street life because of poverty, domestic violence, sexual abuse, and fractured social support. At any age, street kids are more vulnerable to physical abuse and sexual assault. “Three quarters of homeless children are elementary school age and 42% are below age six” (Child Homelessness). Street kids experience stress through constant changes and as a result they have a higher incidence of mental disorders. However, those children receive less than one third of the professional help. In the documentary, *Streetwise*, several children of all ethnicities and backgrounds were depicted living the urban street life. They experienced hunger and as a result they dumpster-dived, stole, and sold their bodies as a way to support themselves.

On my honor as a student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this academic work.
-Codi Chambers, Hilary Heinrichs, Stephanie Lacy, Kayla Penning

Most of the children had no real support system. They were completely on their own. A couple of the kids in the documentary used pseudo names (i.e. Rat, Tiny) so the authorities wouldn't figure out who they were and turn them into child services.

“Homeless children are sick at twice the rate of other children. They suffer twice as many ear infections, have four times the rate of asthma, and have five times more diarrhea and stomach problems” (Child Homelessness). Street kids are also vulnerable to STD's including HIV/AIDS. In *Streetwise* a young 14-year old girl had contracted several STD's several times because she was a child prostitute. Prostitution is a way of older youths and adults exploiting the children. The children are also enticed into stealing and selling drugs by the older members of the street society. “The mental, social and emotional growth of children are affected by their nomadic lifestyles and the way in which they are chastised by authorities who constantly expel them from their temporary homes such as doorways, park benches and railway platforms” (Street Children). Sometimes, the children don't even receive that much attention from authorities in society. Street kids are too often ignored because they are seen as problem kids that cannot be fixed. The result of such stigma can be as severe as suicide and murder.

In addition to the majority of homeless people being children, we also discovered that the majority of homeless people are also African American. According to a December, 2000 report of the US Conference of Mayors, “the homeless population is about 50 percent African-American, 35 percent white, 12 percent Hispanic, 2 percent Native American and 1 percent Asian” (Homelessness). On the screen, African Americans are portrayed to be more menacing figures than other races. For example, in the movie *Dark*, the main character, Dark, had homeless friends in the neighborhood that were often seen suspiciously standing in the streets making drug deals and engaging in other illicit activities. Contrary to *Dark*, in *Pay It Forward*, the white

homeless people appeared content in their state of homelessness and seemed almost at ease around their trash can fire. By sitting on the floor while watching the movies, a feeling of inferiority was noted by the fact that those who walked by were literally of a higher stature.

Furthermore, we conducted additional research by actually submersing ourselves in the life of a homeless person. Some of what we experienced was expected, while others experiences came as a surprise. First off, we prepared ourselves physically. We wore make-up underneath our eyes to look worn out and also wore raggedy clothes. Later, while we were sitting in front of Wal-Mart, we discovered that the majority of people would just stare at us. However, as soon as you would look back at them, they would immediately look away.

Oddly, we found a number of what appeared to be college aged students laughed at us. We could not decide if they were laughing because of the fact that we were homeless, or that we looked foolish and failed at looking the part. One passerby did not turn the other cheek and asked if we had found a warm place to sit. We replied with a simple, “yes.” Every time someone got close, or looked like they were going to talk, we found ourselves getting nervous because we really were not sure how a true homeless person would react. In addition to that confrontation, one man got a little too close for comfort. He asked if we were okay and after a little small talk, he asked for a hug. That was when we decided to get up and move to a new spot. Not too much happened at the mall or the park in Aggieville besides a few odd looks and stares. Our overall reaction was that the majority of people choose to ignore the fact that there are homeless people, much like many other significant social troubles in America such as racial discrimination.

Sociological Focus

The effects of living on the streets can be especially detrimental to children of all ages. “One in 50 children in the U.S. [is] homeless,” and these numbers are expected to rise with more

job losses as a result of the recent recession (Child Homelessness). Whether these children are abandoned, runaways, or living with a parent, they receive less help than they are entitled to. “In 2008, over 740,000 (population of Seattle) documented contacts were made by youth outreach professionals in the United States and of those, less than 43,000 received emergency shelter and less than 3,600 were accepted into a transitional housing program” (STREET CHILD). It is very clear that children bear the brunt of homelessness.

Infants born into homelessness tend to have a low birth weight, lack essential immunization, and because of those factors they are at a greater risk of death. Homeless toddlers demonstrate reactions to stress. These reactions can be seen in their insecurity, irritability, they can be very distrustful, and can regress in speech. There are more children at the preschool age that are separated from their parents. This leads to developmental delays and emotional problems yet, homeless children receive less help than other children their age. The reason: “international indifference to the problem has led to continual neglect and abuse of these children” (Street Children). Who will decide when these children deserve help? How long must they live on the streets?

A street child is “any girl or boy who has not reached adulthood, for whom the street (in the widest sense of the word, including unoccupied dwellings, wasteland, etc.) has become his or her habitual abode and/or source of livelihood, and who is inadequately protected, directed, and supervised by responsible adults” (Street Children). The 1984 documentary, *Streetwise*, depicts the life of a street kid. A life of drugs, stealing, scavenging, and prostitution is very real in many societies. “Drug use by children on the streets is common as they look for means to numb the pain and deal with the hardships associated with street life” (Street Children). Street kids are also more susceptible to sexually-transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS because of drug use and

child prostitution. Many kids that live on the street never get off. They live that lifestyle to the grave, whether it be through suicide or murder. “Countries in Latin America are notorious for the torture and violence inflicted on street children, many times escalating to murder—by police officers or death squads” (Street Children). Street kids lack safety, security, and hope. Above all else, they lack love.

Conclusion and Personal Reaction

Homelessness is a growing problem in the United States as well as globally. It affects people of all ages, races and ethnicities. This project demonstrated that although homelessness, especially in America, is a prominent issue, the majority of the population chooses to ignore this problem. Through our research and experiences, we discovered that there is a negative stigma towards homeless people. People tend to automatically assume that a homeless person is a drug addict or has never worked a day in his or her life. However, that is almost never the case. “Homelessness results from the combined effects of extreme poverty, lack of affordable housing, decreasing government supports, the challenge of raising children alone, domestic violence, and fractured social supports” (STREET CHILD). So, where do we go from here? As we become more informed and aware of this issue, we are now more equipped to help out the increasing population of homeless people. Because of this project, we are no longer so quick to judge those who are less fortunate than us or turn the other cheek when passing by. As we continue on the “street” of life, we will be reminded on a daily basis of how truly connected we really are, regardless of what we call home.

Works Cited

2008 Annual Report. Rep. National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty. Web. 26 Nov. 2009.

"Child Homelessness In America Is A Growing Problem - Homeless children - Jezebel." *Jezebel:*

Celebrity, Sex, Fashion for Women. Without Airbrushing. Web. 30 Nov. 2009.

<<http://jezebel.com/5167276/child-homelessness-in-america-is-a-growing-problem>>.

Dark. Dir. D.A. Bullock. Perf. Vince Green, Janina Gavankar. Dreamworks, 2003. DVD.

Homelessness." *Almanac of Policy Issues*. Web. 01 Dec. 2009.

<http://www.policyalmanac.org/social_welfare/homeless.shtml>.

Pay It Forward. Dir. Mimi Leder. Perf. Haley Joel Osment, Helen Hunt, and Kevin Spacey. Warner Bros. Pictures, 2000. DVD.

"Street children and homelessness." *The International Child and Youth Care Network [CYC-NET]*.

Web. 30 Nov. 2009. <<http://www.cyc-net.org/cyc-online/cycol-0904-Homelessness.html>>.

STREETCHILD: An Unpaved Passage, by JUSTIN REED EARLY - Home. Web. 30 Nov. 2009.

<<http://www.justinreedearly.com/>>.

"SURVEY FINDS LACK OF AFFORDABLE HOUSING THE LEADING CAUSE OF

HOMELESSNESS IN THE UNITED STATES." *Journal of Housing and Community*

Development 1 Mar. 2005: Research Library, ProQuest. Web. 30 Nov. 2009.

Appendix



On my honor as a student, I certify that I have not plagiarized this work and that I have not used any resources that I have not been permitted to use.
-Codi Chambers, Hilary Heinrichs, Stephanie Lacy, Kayla Penning