Homelessness

✔ Who is homeless?
  • Estimates of homelessness range from 750,000 to 2 million (2000)
  • 1995 survey of homelessness: 46% homeless men, 13% single women, 36.5% families with children, 3.5% children on own

✔ Individualistic explanations of homelessness
  • Substance abuse
  • Mental illness (Snow et al. found only 15% were mentally ill)

✔ Structural explanations
  • Residential dislocation (lack of low-income housing, housing inflation)
  • Economic dislocation (unemployment, low-paying jobs)

✔ Best explanations connect structural to biographical
Pathways to the street

✓ Snow and Anderson’s *Down on Their Luck* (1993)
✓ Method: participant observation and analysis of shelter and government documents in Austin, Texas
✓ Connects structural factors and individual-level factors
✓ Structural factors: residential dislocation & economic dislocation
✓ Biographical determinants of homelessness
  • Voluntarism (homeless as lifestyle choice): not supported by evidence; only 6.3% of homeless gave this explanation
  • Disabilities and pathologies: also not supported; Snow & Anderson view individual pathologies as adaptations to homeless, not cause of it
  • Lack of family support: most commonly mentioned biographical factor (66.6%); S & A claim it’s also the most important biographical factor
  • Bad luck: may result in homelessness among the economically marginal

Homeless job experience (Texas, 1980s)

✓ Last job
  • General laborer (construction, warehouse loading, oil field): 30.7%
  • Service (dishwashing; janitorial; nursing home): 21.5%
  • Factory work and vehicle operation: 20.6%
  • Craft/skilled work (building trades; mechanics): 19.3%
  • Sales and clerical: 5.7%
  • Military: 2.2%

✓ Median hourly wage: $4.90

✓ Median duration of job: 6.5 months

✓ Reason for job termination
  • Laid off/job ended: 44.3%
  • Fired 9.1%
  • Quit: 21.0%
  • Other: 25.6%