Homelessness

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http://www.iastate.edu/~soc.134

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 their 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 homelessness, 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 skills 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%