The Poor and the Homeless

April 9, 2008

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

- **Absolute poverty**: inability to afford the minimal requirements for sustaining healthy existence (p. 355)
- **Relative poverty**: individual’s economic position compared to the living standards of the majority in society (p. 355)
- **Poverty line**: amount of yearly income a family requires to meet its basic needs, according to the federal government (p. 355)
- **Poverty rate**: percentage of people whose income falls below the poverty line (p. 357)
The poverty line (1960-2006)

One person: $8,414, $13,359, $17,603, $20,614

Two people: $13,167, $17,603, $20,614

Family of four: $10,294, $13,359, $17,603, $20,614


© 2008 David Schweingruber
Below the poverty line

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%