

Homelessness and Race Literature Review

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Homelessness is a concern for social workers, researchers, citizens, public policy makers, and, of course, the homeless themselves. In America, an entire “class” of citizens drags through daily life with no place to call home and no bed to sleep in at night. But the problem extends beyond a lack of adequate physical shelter. Few research articles or studies explicitly define such a well-worn term like “homeless”; the best definitions come from personal ethnographies and participant observations. In his book on the lives of homeless women, Liebow (1993) paints a picture of what homelessness really is; people with nowhere to live. And even though the women he observed resided in shelters for the most part, they were still “homeless” by definition, since they had no long-term housing stability. Shelter living is “temporary”, and a shelter is not a home. The women in his ethnography were not simply the “homeless”; they were the *people* who were homeless. Recalibrating perceptions towards this group of downtrodden citizens reveals that effective solutions for the issue must stem from unique and adaptable efforts that identify *individual-level* risk factors for homelessness. Like everyone else, all homeless people are unique, and initiatives that preconceive the “homeless” as a homogeneous mass will leave scores of unassisted individuals behind. Identification of the varying characteristics of the homeless can begin with a look at the relationship between race and homelessness.

The racial buildup of America’s homeless population is not difficult to ascertain. Research has been consistent and largely undisputed; minorities are disproportionately overrepresented (Belcher 1192:41; Rosenheck et al. 1997:632). A study by North and Smith (1994:642) of 900 homeless men and women in St. Louis, Missouri found 78% of the sample to be “non-white”. The figures blossom meaning when comparisons to the national population are made. African-Americans account for only 12% of the United States population, but make up 40% of all homeless people in America (Sparks 2006:21).

Focusing within the realm of homelessness, differences arise between white and minority homeless individuals. In the St. Louis study mentioned above, white individuals had more alcohol related problems in their lives than non-whites (North & Smith 1994:646). Another study by Rosenheck et al. (1997:636), examining the relation between mental illnesses and race in homeless veterans, noted that homeless African-American veterans were more affected by problems relating to drug use and abuse than their white counterparts. The same report also noted this drug issue as a particular

problem for impoverished inner-city blacks, not the general black population. Revealing specific trends such as these can better equip policy makers and social workers to attack the homeless problem.

The North and Smith study (1994:647) came to an important conclusion on race and homelessness. They stated that a similar “baseline” group exists in both white and nonwhite homeless populations. However, another sub-group is what inflates the nonwhite homeless population to its disproportionate size. “External” forces more heavily afflict this faction of nonwhite homeless people, which in turn leads to poverty and homelessness.

The idea of “structural” problems disproportionately affecting nonwhite over white homeless people is supported by research. Belcher (1992:42-44, 47-49) focuses on these external factors in an article on homelessness and poverty. He concludes that blocked opportunities for minorities contribute to a “racial exclusion”, which presses and holds many minority individuals in poverty and homelessness. For Belcher the issue is self-perpetuating. For example, he notes that geographic exclusion, based on race, keeps minorities in underdeveloped and dangerous neighborhoods. These neighborhoods harbor poor schools that fail to equip students with the knowledge and resources necessary to lift themselves out of poverty. This broad lack of public assistance in deteriorated communities is what contributes to the disproportionate representation of minorities among the homeless.

Conclusions that focus on discrimination as the breeding grounds for minority homelessness are also supported by Rosenheck et al. (1997:637) in their research on homeless mentally ill veterans. Their report revealed that white *and* nonwhite subjects benefited equally from residential mental illnesses treatment, as opposed to non-residential treatment, which only benefited white participants. They accounted for this discrepancy by noting the African-Americans in the study often resided in and around more deteriorated neighborhoods than their homeless white counterparts. Residential treatment took them out of these counter-productive environments and put them on a more level playing field.

Research consistently indicates that treatment for the homeless must tailor to the needs of the individual, and not be systematically dispensed to a general homeless

stereotype. In a study focusing on depression treatment in black and non-black women, Sleath et al. (2006:81-82) concluded that African-American women, even though they tended to be more depressed than non-black women, were less likely to be on antidepressant medication(s) for their disorder. A number of barriers have been established that deter minorities from seeking or receiving proper treatment. For example, it has been shown that, compared to whites, black people tend to display greater distrust for the physicians or mental health services made available to them (Sparks 2006:23; Sleath et al. 2006:82).

It is worth refocusing our perspective for a moment to discover what race means to the homeless people themselves. Liebow's (1993:162) ethnography on homeless women indicates that race is a relatively idle issue for them. The very status of being homeless had two neutralizing effects on issues of race. First, all the women in the shelter Liebow studied were homeless and, if nothing else, the women always had this much in common. Second, the extreme situation that the women were in minimized much of the importance that may have otherwise been associated with racial divides. Just as in "conventional" society, public displays of racism were discouraged and inappropriate among the homeless women. So, while Liebow notes that it was "no accident" that certain women such as "Elsie" had all white friends, the homeless women still subscribed to conventional socially accepted behaviors and norms.

A brief overview of the relationship between homelessness and race begins to peel back the layers of homogeneity society has constructed around the proverbial "homeless person". A homeless person is a unique individual and one-size-fits-all plans don't cater to specific risk factors that force and hold many of these individuals in poverty. Different homeless people are in different situations for different reasons, these variables must be anticipated, well accounted for, and reacted to before hopes to eliminate homelessness are realized.

References

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