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# Unraveling the Social Construction of Homelessness

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*This article provides a historical and critical analysis of homelessness in the United States. It argues that societal understanding of homelessness stems from a process of social construction in which, over time, differing groups have framed the definition and debate. The main groups influencing interpretations of homelessness are those ascribing to individual and the structural interpretations of social problems. Individual interpretations suggest that homelessness is the result of personal deficiencies, such as substance abuse and social disaffiliation, whereas structural interpretations suggest that it is the result of systemic factors, such as lack of affordable housing and employment opportunities. Social construction has influenced scholarship as well by dictating which questions researchers ask and which evidence gets disseminated. The article concludes by encouraging scholars to reframe the policy debate in a way that more accurately reflects the empirical reality of homelessness.*

**KEYWORDS** *Homeless, social construction, individualism, structuralism*

## INTRODUCTION

Homelessness is also a historical social issue that has existed since the 1700s (Hopper, 2003) and may affect as many as 2.3 to 3.5 million people in the United States annually (National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, 2006). Since the 1960s, it has been an issue of national concern among the media, academia, and policy makers. Much of their focus concerns efforts to explain the causes of homelessness. The expectation is that correctly

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identifying the causes will lead to the development of more effective prevention and intervention strategies. A critical point in the debate is whether homelessness results from individual or structure-level factors. For instance, is homelessness the result of personal disabilities such as substance abuse and poor decisions or is it the result of larger systemic factors such as insufficient affordable housing and employment opportunities (Kuhn and Culhane, 1998). Empirical evidence increasingly suggests that homelessness results from structural problems at a societal level (Burt, 1992; Belcher, DeForge, and Zanis, 2005; Phelan and Link, 1999; Shinn, Baumhol, and Hopper, 2001) or, more recently, from the convergence of individual and structural factors. Policy makers, however, more often attribute the causes to individual factors (Wright, Rubin, and Devine, 1998).

How and why have these divergent perspectives emerged? This article provides a historical and critical analysis examining how socio-cultural and political trends have shaped perceptions of homelessness over time. It argues that the process of social construction, or the creation of meaning by a group, has contributed to public policy that is based less on empirically derived knowledge and more on public perceptions of homelessness. The article suggests implications for people who are, or are at risk of becoming, homeless and attempts to help reframe the homeless debate to more accurately reflect the lived experiences of homeless persons.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The argument in this article relies on the theories of social constructionism (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Hatch and Yanow, 2003; Montero, 2002; Nichols, 2005; Weick, 1993) and sociological imagination (Mills, 1959). Nichols explains that the idea of social construction in the social sciences emerged from constructivism, the process by which individuals interpret experiences and make sense of the world. Constructivism is based on a Western philosophical tradition that emerged in the 1800s with Emmanuel Kant, who argued against the idea of the brain as a blank slate upon which experiences are imprinted uniformly. Instead, he contended that the brain actively filters information. This means that each individual experiences reality differently.

Social construction expands the idea of constructivism to account for the social context in which people interpret their experiences. Thus, meaning is based on the interaction between the individual's interpretation of the experience and the social context in which it occurs. In sum, reality becomes a subjective, rather than an objective, experience that exists independent of people and communities. Reality is as much created as it is discovered. Stacey (1999) argues that social construction operates by transforming truth into a "creative process" that results in "*virtual social science*" (p. 18), meaning that external actors such as the media, public relations, and political forces

actively interpret and frequently distort knowledge creation and dissemination. Thus, reality contains both empirical facts and the socio-political forces that interpret and define the facts. For instance, societal preferences for individualistic explanations for well-being may influence researchers to frame their research questions according to this perspective. Policy makers may favor funding research, which aligns with their preconceived interpretations of the problems.

The second theoretical framework comes from the work of the twentieth-century sociologist, C. Wright Mills, in his text, *Sociological Imagination* (1959). Mills distinguished between the individual and the structure, describing them as the “the personal troubles of milieu and the public issues of social structure” (p. 8). He defined *troubles* as those experiences that “occur within the character of the individual and within the range of his immediate relations with others; they have to do with his self and with those limited areas of social life of which he is directly and personally aware” (p. 8). Conversely, he defined *issues* as those experiences “hav[ing] to do with matters that transcend these local environments of the individual and the range of his inner life” (p. 8). Mills argued that the *sociological imagination* is the “quality of mind that seems most dramatically to promise an understanding of the intimate realities of ourselves in connection with larger social realities” (p. 15). He argued that the chief task of social scientists is to attempt to understand these interconnections between personal problems and public issues.

## HISTORICAL TRENDS

### Pre-1930s: A Hidden Problem

Hopper (2003) offers an informative account of how homelessness has evolved in the United States. He argues that kinship care networks provided emergency shelter and services to homeless family members and neighbors during the 1700s and early 1800s. A gradual shift from in-home to institutionalized care for the homeless began in the mid-nineteenth century. This shift continued through the Progressive Era of the early twentieth century. During these periods, societal trends such as social Darwinism and the English Poor Laws led to perceptions of the homeless as deviant and shiftless persons needing correction and discipline. In fact, Hopper describes many of the individuals receiving assistance from these institutions as migrant, under- or unemployed men lacking traditional kinship networks and unable to find work during periods of economic decline. Hopper is careful to note, however, that those receiving institutional assistance represented a mere fraction of those in need, and kinship care networks remained the primary providers of housing assistance throughout the nineteenth century.

Skid row communities began to emerge during the late 1890s (Wallace, 1965). Society came to view these settlements, makeshift housing in urban areas (Hopper, 2003), as one of the most enduring images of homelessness. These communities often possessed well-organized social structures that provided ad hoc kinship care networks. As such, most of the residents were street-dwelling men who eschewed traditional services and relied on one another. Many were either under- or unemployed and frequently suffered from substance abuse or mental health disorders.

### 1930s to 1960s: The Public Role

During the Great Depression, the federal government assumed a central and permanent role in social welfare (Burt, 1992; Hopper, 2003; Wright, et al., 1998). This shift from private to public-based relief occurred as the growing number of people needing assistance exceeded the resources of kinship networks and private organizations. The National Committee on Care of Transient and Homeless reported that 1.2 million persons were homeless in 1933 (Burt). This population was much more diverse than previous generations of homeless and included a significant number of women, children, and families. Indicative of its expanded role, Congress passed the first federal housing program in 1937, followed by a second policy in 1949 with the goal that “every American would have a decent home and suitable living environment” (Wright et al., p. 87). The movement to federal intervention during this period culminated with the formation of the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) in 1965, the cabinet-level agency responsible for overseeing housing policies.

During the 1960s, perceptions of homelessness reflected both the individual and structural perspectives. Leaders in President Johnson’s War on Poverty viewed homelessness as a structural issue stemming from causal factors such as poverty and economic injustice. Many of these individuals were involved in the process of deinstitutionalization and the Civil Rights Movement, both efforts to alter structural conditions in the United States. Deinstitutionalization was an effort beginning in the late 1950s to discharge mental health patients from in-house facilities and provide services through alternative community based clinics (Farkhoury & Priebe, 2007). It was motivated in part from overcrowding in mental health facilities and the perception that community-based care would serve the needs of the mentally ill more effectively and humanely. Baum and Barnes (1993) argue, however, that deinstitutionalization and the Civil Rights movement inadvertently contributed to the problem of homelessness. They criticize the proponents of deinstitutionalization for inadequate planning, which left thousands of disabled persons without a “safety net” and led many directly into homelessness. Similarly, they argue that the Civil Rights movement neglected the basic economic and social needs of minority groups by focusing on issues such as

equality and justice. Thus, it had the unintended consequence of abandoning those least able in economically and racially isolated ghettos. The resultant isolation and the loss of social services produced what Baum and Barnes describe as an underclass plagued by high levels of substance abuse disorders, health problems, and interpersonal violence. This group, like those coming out of institutions, was highly vulnerable to homelessness. However, as urban ghettos existed long before the Civil Rights movement, attributing an increase in homelessness to this issue is a dubious proposition. In addition, though many share the view of Baum and Barnes that deinstitutionalization has contributed to the problem of homelessness, few would agree that it is one of the primary causes of the population's growth (Wright et al., 1998).

### 1980s to 1990s: Toward Privatization

Johnson's Great Society of the 1960s gave way to more conservative political movements and tightening economic conditions during the 1970s and 1980s. Regarding homelessness, policy decisions strongly endorsed the individual perspective, leading to cuts in HUD funding that reduced its share of the federal budget by 80% between 1980 and 1989 (Koschinsky, 1998). Similarly, HUD stated that it was "backing out of the business of housing" during the 1980s (ACCESS, 1990; cited in Wright et al., p. 87).

Homelessness demographics began to change noticeably during this decade; the population grew in size and diversity. The population grew by as much as 22% in some cities (Burt, 1992). Moreover, fewer and fewer of the homeless resembled skid-row residents and more and more were precariously housed and economically vulnerable women, children, and families and minorities (Kuhn and Culhane, 1998; Wright et al., 1998). These changes were reflective of the worsening economic conditions and public planning decisions that left many more people vulnerable to homelessness. The U. S. economy suffered from high unemployment and falling real wages for low-skilled jobs while housing costs increased (Danzinger & Danzinger, 2006; Wright, et al.). Meanwhile, gentrification and urban renewal led to the demolition of many skid-row communities and single-residency occupancies (SRO).

Homeless advocates, such as the Community for Creative Non-Violence in Washington D.C. (Baum & Barnes, 1993), responded to the growth by successfully lobbying Congress to pass the first federal homeless policy in 1987, the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act. Despite its passage, Foscarinis (1991) contends that President Reagan signed the bill at night to express his administration's lack of support for the legislation. The Act interpreted homelessness according to the individual perspective and thus provided short-term emergency relief and social programs to address individual level problems. Since then, homelessness has gained increasing prominence as a social and political issue, although the general perception of its causes

remains largely one of individual problems. Reagan's conservative framework continued throughout the 1990s and was reflected in policies such as the 1995 *Blueprint for Reinvention of HUD* (Koschinsky, 1998). Policies continue to emphasize community-based solutions and market preferences, meaning decreased direct federal assistance for housing related programs.

### Contemporary Issues

Homelessness again received national attention in 2003 when President Bush declared a commitment to ending chronic homelessness in 10 years (Grzeskowiak, 2005). He argued that because these individuals consume a disproportionate share of resources, public policy should focus on this population. Related to the declaration, the Interagency Council on Homelessness, formed under the McKinney Act, has encouraged local communities to devise *Ten-Year Plans to End Chronic Homelessness*, and Bush allocated \$1.4 billion for Homeless Assistance Grant Awards for 2005. Grzeskowiak writes that advocates such as Bob Erlenbusch, executive director of the Los Angeles Coalition to End Hunger and Homelessness, have expressed skepticism, though, arguing that the government's primary goal should be to *prevent* homelessness before it occurs by offering structural improvements such as increased housing availability.

## CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Intertwined in this history of homelessness are socio-cultural and political trends that have shaped societal understanding of the issue over time. This section will offer an analysis of how these trends have influenced changing perspectives around the knowledge base of homelessness, ultimately resulting in an interpretation of homelessness that emphasizes individual rather than structural epidemiology.

### Socio-Cultural Trends

Several socio-cultural trends have contributed to differing definitions of homelessness, its causes, and solutions to the problem. Foremost among them are the themes of individualism and self-reliance that permeate U. S. culture (Zinn, 2005). For most Americans, success and failure become matters of individual responsibility. The individual interpretation of homelessness (Baum & Barnes, 1993) gains strong support within this paradigm of individualism and self-reliance. Here the individual's ability to locate and retain housing becomes a matter of individual-level factors and personal choice. Those without homes are either deviant or dysfunctional. The influence of this ideology on homelessness is evident as early as the nineteenth century, during

which time the institutions serving the population emphasized correction and rehabilitation of the individual (Hopper, 2003). Additionally, the trend of individualism is consistent with notions of kinship care wherein the primary responsibility for the welfare of dysfunctional individual rests with families and friends rather than the state.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the rhetoric of individualism and personal responsibility continued to define homelessness as an individual problem. In 1993, Alice Baum and Donald Barnes published the book, *A Nation in Denial*, based partly on their experiences as homeless outreach workers in Washington, DC during the 1980s. In the book, they maintain that the homelessness is a function of personal problems such as substance abuse and mental health disorders, meaning that public policy should shift from housing to rehabilitating the homeless. This is an idea that many Americans shared during the 1990s. One public opinion poll concluded that “Americans ‘are inclined to the idea that opportunity is present to those who avail themselves of it’” (Ladd & Bowman, 1998, p. 115; cited in Danzinger & Danzinger, 2006, p. 29). According to the individual argument, people become homeless in the United States not because of a dysfunctional system but because of a dysfunctional self.

Liberalism and the language of civil and human rights have also influenced perceptions of homelessness. In a rare legislative example, the Housing Act of 1949, with the goal of providing every American with a home, defined housing as a right rather than a matter of individual responsibility (Wright et al., 1998). Liberalism gained prominence during the 1960s with the onset of the Civil Rights Movement, Vietnam War protests, and President Johnson’s Great Society. Advocates cited poverty, economic injustice, and housing accessibility as responsible for homelessness rather than individual failure to made responsible decisions (Blau, 1992; Burt, 1992; Wright et al.). Solutions to homelessness began to reflect structure-level approaches such as the establishment of HUD, which allocated funding for programs to increase both the quality and quantity of affordable housing. Advocacy groups, such as the Community Center for Creative Non-Violence, the National Low-Income Housing Coalition, and the National Coalition for the Homeless, used this same language of civil and human rights to frame the issue of affordable, quality housing as a social and economic right. This influence that helped to gain passage of the McKinney Act in 1987, which assigned explicit responsibility to the federal government for preventing homelessness (Foscarinis, 1991).

## Political Trends

The neoconservative perspective, introduced during the Nixon Administration of the 1970s, emphasized privatization and devolution. The trend gained increasing popularity among politicians and policy makers during the Reagan

era of the 1980s. President Reagan significantly reduced the HUD budget during the 1980s and promoted decentralization of federal responsibility for the issue (Koschinsky, 1998). These activities helped to build strength for the individual perspective of homelessness by transforming the experience into a distinctly personal and isolated problem. The Republican Party clearly reflected neoconservative values in their 1994 *Contract with America* and subsequent welfare reform legislation, both of which focused solely on the recipients of public assistance rather than the social conditions that rendered public assistance necessary (Mills, 1996). Newt Gingrich, Republican Speaker of the House at the time, praised the Contract and resultant welfare reform legislation for “requiring welfare recipients to take personal responsibility for decisions they make” (cited in Mill, 1996, p. 391). Policy decisions related to housing mirrored and often predicted the trend in welfare reform.

Although the Clinton Administration embraced a more liberal outlook, Koschinsky (1998) argues that it did little to replace the underlying individualist perspective of neoconservatism. This meant marginally increasing funding for housing programs but requiring local communities to design and implement them, frequently through community block grants. This trend recalls earlier notions of kinship care in which local communities, rather than the federal government, organized and provided social welfare interventions. Koschinsky explains that policy groups and scholars are divided over the effectiveness of this neoliberal privatization. Groups such as the Cato Institute contend that local responses to housing will result in more efficient and effective prevention and intervention strategies, because they rely on community and market preferences. The *Cato Handbook for Policymakers* (Cato Institute, 2009) states that overregulation of land use leads to land shortages and increased housing costs. To ensure affordable housing, a government must allow the market economy to determine development and thus costs. Other policy groups and advocates, such as the Urban Institute and the National Coalition for the Homeless, disagree with this view, arguing that the private sector cannot address housing shortages adequately and thus privatization actually exacerbates housing needs.

The George W. Bush Administration continued to emphasize community-level interventions. For example, the Interagency Council on Homelessness was established under the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act of 1987 with the stated mission of coordinating a *federal* response to homelessness. The Council’s recent activities, however, suggest greater efforts to coordinate *local* responses to homelessness. One example is the aforementioned initiative encouraging local communities to draft what it calls *Ten-Year Plans to End Chronic Homelessness*, which ostensibly provide the opportunity to individualize local solutions to the issue. The federal government continues to exercise influence through funding and requirements such as using an information management system or adopting a housing-first approach, but it is devolving responsibility for program planning and implementation to the

local community (Grzeskowiak, 2005). The political trend toward privatized social services may be responding to what Danzinger and Danzinger (2006) describe as a lack of public support for federal intervention in social welfare. They maintain that the public encourages a free-market approach to social welfare, believing that *laissez faire* trade results in the most equitable and efficient distribution of resources.

In addition, the community and faith-based initiatives proposed by the George W. Bush Administration supported the trend toward devolving and privatizing social welfare responsibility. According to its 2006–2011 Strategic Plan, HUD will help to fulfill its mission of encouraging homeownership and community development by increasing faith-based and community partnerships and helping to leverage resources so that they are “on equal footing with other organizations that serve low-income Americans and revitalize distressed neighborhoods” (p. 55). HUD now includes a Center for Faith-Based and Community Initiatives whose role is to conduct outreach to such groups. Moreover, although funding for homeless assistance increased under Bush’s proposed 2007 FY budget, it included a \$25 million transfer to the Department of Labor for a faith-based initiative (Rosenthal, 2004).

When the government does fund potentially public housing and homeless programs, it does not always implement them thoughtfully or successfully. Two examples are the HOPE VI Project and Quality Housing and Work Responsibility Act of 1998. Beginning in 1993, HUD aimed to replace high-density, dilapidated public housing facilities with lower-density, higher-quality, mixed-income communities (Brooks, Zugazaga, Wolk, & Adams, 2005; Ramirez, 2005). Some public housing residents have criticized the program for reducing housing availability further by decreasing the number of units (Brooks et al.). This problem can be minimized, however, through careful relocation into revitalized housing projects and active promotion of housing vouchers. Brooks et al. argue, however, that inconsistent and inadequate funding for the voucher program, titled Section 8, threatens the continued provision of this service to residents dislocated by HOPE VI. This has led to the relocation of some residents to inferior housing.

The Quality Housing and Work Responsibility Act contains similar problems. Policy makers intended to diversify and expand the number of people eligible for housing assistance through this legislation. Unfortunately, Foscarinis (2000) contends that they enacted the policy without increasing funding. She claims that by diversifying the number of people eligible without increasing the funding, the legislation made fewer resources available for more people. Thus, it has intensified rather than reduced housing shortages.

## Funding Trends

Political and funding trends are closely linked. Generally, those in political power determine funding priorities, and analyzing funding trends helps to

show how people conceptualize issues. An increasing focus on foreign rather than domestic policy during the administration of President George W. Bush pulled resources and attention away from public social welfare policy. After the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, the Administration reacted by increasing spending for defense and homeland security. Meanwhile, federal spending on low-income housing fell by more than 20% as a share of the budget between 1993 and 1997 (Rice & Sard, 2009). The trend continued with the Bush Administration's 2009 FY budget. The *Washington Post* declared that the budget proposal sought "a virtual freeze on domestic spending programs" while allocating increased funding to the Departments of Defense and State (Weisman, 2008).

HUD states that the 2009 budget proposal contains \$38.5 billion dollars for the department, representing a \$3.2 billion or a 9% increase from the 2008 budget proposal ([www.hud.gov](http://www.hud.gov)). However, the National Coalition for Low-Income Housing reports that these increases mask substantial cuts for vital programs. The nonpartisan research group The Center for Budget and Policy Priorities supports this claim (Rice & Sard, 2009). The Center reports that the budget would cut vouchers for low-income families by 100,000 and cut block grants, which states rely on to fund housing and community development, by \$19.1 billion, or 11%, when adjusted for inflation. These cuts to come at a time when housing foreclosures are at a historic high and the need for affordable housing is increasing.

The Obama administration may reverse some of the funding trends. The administration allocated \$47 billion dollars for FY2010, which will restore funding levels to the 2008 amounts (Orszag, 2009). The budget plan highlights key activities that the administration hopes will expand affordable housing and economic opportunities as a means of reducing homelessness. They include funding for an affordable housing trust fund to develop and restore low-income housing and maintaining the voucher program. These decisions reflect a reinterpretation of homelessness as a result, largely, of structural factors, such as access to affordable housing, rather than an individual-based problem solved by local solutions and disability services such as substance abuse treatment.

## HOMELESSNESS SCHOLARSHIP

The result of the politicization of homelessness means that much of the scholarship has been hard-pressed to maintain an objective stance in the debate. After all, grants fund the majority of social science research. Grantors are more likely to fund the projects with research questions corresponding to their perspectives on the issues. Individual and structural camps have debated fiercely over the years. Gradually, however, researchers have emphasized the interplay between individual and structural factors. Homeless

scholarship began to proliferate during the 1960s and 1970s and was influenced by individual-level causes. Kuhn and Culhane (1998) describe it as the skid-row era of research, inspired by individuals such as Bahr in his book *Skid Row: An Introduction to Disaffiliation* (1973). They write that many of the researchers were sociologists who conducted ethnographic studies in skid-row communities. These researchers often concluded that homelessness was limited to specific populations—older, chronically unemployed men characterized by deviant behaviors that caused them to detach from society. As such, the researchers defined the problem as an individual issue limited to the individual environment, most specifically to the individual's disaffiliation from regular social networks. They cite as examples texts by Bahr and Caplow (1973) and Rossi (1989). In many ways, this research both helped to validate and was validated by the individual perspective.

Sociologists, beginning with Wright's seminal study on housing shortages and homelessness in Chicago (Main, 1996), began to shift their focus to the structural perspective during the 1980s. Rather than looking at isolated individuals' experiences and their personal risk factors, this new group of researchers sought to identify how society-level risk factors such as economic contraction and housing shortages impacted homelessness (Wright et al., 1998). More recently, researchers have begun to merge the individual and the structural theories in their recognition that polarized perspectives are not producing effective prevention strategies (Baron, 2004; Burt, 2001; Caton et al., 2005; Haber & Toro, 2004). In these efforts, researchers were attempting to connect the *personal troubles* to *public issues* that Mills described in *Sociological Imagination* (1959). Martha Burt wrote one of the seminal books advancing the structural argument, *Over the Edge* (1992), in which she argued that poverty and the inability to find affordable housing are the most important factors associated with homelessness. Burt works as a senior research associate for the Urban Institute and has continued to publish research emphasizing the structural elements of homelessness (Burt et al., 1999, 2002). Other examples include the National Coalition for the Homelessness and the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness.

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR HOMELESS POLICY AND INDIVIDUALS

Despite these research developments, socio-culture and political influences have created a public perception that individuals suffering from personal problems and making poor decisions cause homelessness rather than structural problems, such as inadequate affordable housing and falling wages, which place individuals at risk for homelessness. According to a 2003 poll

for the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, “a large majority [of Americans] (71%) continues to think that poor people have become too dependent on government assistance” (cited in Danzinger & Danzinger, 2006, p. 30). Such statistics may suggest that people believe that many social problems are individual problems or that federal assistance actually exacerbates them. It has been argued that some homeless people choose to become homeless (Baum & Barnes, 1993) or that homeless services create a culture of dependency that causes and perpetuates homelessness (Baum & Barnes; Filer, 1990).

Foscarinis (2000) argues that the nature of McKinney Act, with its focus on emergency relief and rehabilitation programs, has remained the nation’s response to homelessness. As previously mentioned, the policies support short-term relief and rehabilitation programs for personal problems. Moreover, they continue to emphasize small-scale, community-based solutions with increasingly fewer federal supports, both financially and logistically. These efforts encourage collaboration among local homeless service providers including distributing grant funds and developing programs. They also encourage greater reliance on private funding sources as the federal funding frequently does not cover all costs (Kosckinsky, 1998). As Danzinger and Danzinger (2006) assert, “What remains absent is the political will to take bold action to confront poverty and inequality” (p. 34). Public policy eschews serious efforts toward long-term solutions and structure-based reform such as raising the minimum wage, expanding job opportunities, and improving the quality and quantity of low-income housing. Foscarinis contends that the truly effective solutions to homelessness must shift toward supportive and transitional housing providing mental and physical health care along with expanded employment opportunities.

Housing shortages and housing assistance needs have been intensifying over the last decade, and more and more of these people are falling into homelessness. According to research from the Urban Institute (available at <http://www.urban.org/toolkit/issues/housing.cfm>), only one-third of former or current welfare recipients received housing assistance in 1999. According to a report by the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP), the number of low-income renter households that paid more than half of their income for housing increased by 2 million, or 32%, between 2000 and 2007 (Rice & Sard, 2009). The Section 8 voucher program, the largest form of housing assistance, fails to provide equal access to the lowest-poverty and lowest-minority neighborhoods (Rice & Sard), and data suggest that the number of homeless families children increased throughout 2008 (Sard, 2009). Finally, growing numbers of low-income people are being displaced owing to gentrification (Levy, Comey, & Padilla, 2006). Eighty-six percent of cities reported an increase in low-income housing requests in the 2004–2005 survey of the U. S. Conference of Mayors (National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, 2006).

## CONCLUSION

The idea that homelessness is the result of individual problems has dominated U. S. public opinion and public policy. Housing is a privilege in our country, not a right. A historical and critical analysis reveals that the ideas of individual responsibility, conservative government, and privatized social welfare approaches to homelessness consistently have eclipsed empirical evidence (Burt, 1992; Belcher et al., 2005; Phelan & Link, 1999; Shinn et al., 2001), suggesting that homelessness is the result of structure-level factors such as employment and access to affordable housing or an interplay between individual and structural factors.

Social scientists, through their research, are working to distill the true nature of homelessness. Historically, homeless research has been difficult owing to the transient and chaotic lifestyles of many homeless persons. Scholarship is benefiting from recent innovations in homeless services, however. Many homeless service providers now use homeless management information systems, which facilitate data collection and improve data quality. Scholars can use this information to continue to enhance our understanding of who is homeless and how they come to be so in our society. It is an opportunity to reframe the homeless debate in an empirically based paradigm that connects personal problems with social issues. Only then will we be able to design effective strategies that help people move out of homeless and into stable housing.

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