Social Problem Description: Homelessness in Minnesota

Over a billion people worldwide are considered to be homeless, with millions of those in the United States and Europe (Hubley, 2014). Homelessness is the condition of being without fixed, regular, and adequate shelter, though nuanced definitions exist. In Minnesota, homelessness means that one lacks a permanent dwelling for one or more nights. People become homeless for individual reasons, such as substance abuse, physical or mental disability, unemployment, or criminal record, and structural reasons. People living in poverty and people of color are disproportionately at risk for homelessness.

The nature of homelessness can be chronic, transitional, or episodic (National Coalition for the Homeless (NCH), 2014). Chronic homelessness describes those people who may be entrenched in the shelter system; temporary shelters resemble long-term housing because stays are frequent. The chronically homeless are generally those people suffering from mental or physical disabilities or substance abuse and are often chronically unemployed (NCH 2014). Transitional homelessness accounts for far more of the homeless population. Individuals become without shelter for a short period of time, often because of an event of losing one’s job, encountering a health issue, or losing a spouse. Thirdly, episodic homelessness describes people who come in and out of homelessness in episodes; they are most likely to be young but, unlike the transitional homelessness, are chronically unemployed (NCH 2014).

In the state of Minnesota, an estimated 14,000 people are without shelter on any given night. This number is estimated from a count taken of 10,214 homeless adults, youth, and children on one night out of the year (Wilder 2013). This count is the exact number of people in shelters on that night, and therefore misses any homeless individual not in shelter that evening (who may have been staying with a friend or sleeping outside). The Wilder Foundation estimates that nearly 40,000 individuals are homeless in Minnesota at some point during the year (Wilder, 2013). Homelessness is commonly assumed to be an urban phenomenon because of the visibility and concentration of homeless individuals in urban areas. However, the problem is often unseen in rural areas and may be uncounted, because of the uneven shelter distribution. Defining homelessness and accounting for a transitory and stigmatized population pose problems in having accurate numbers of people who are homeless (Williams, 2011).

Homelessness affects adults, families, children, youth, the elderly, and societies as a whole. Poverty puts one at a much higher risk of becoming homeless. In Minnesota, youth are the most at risk for homelessness, comprising 46% of the homeless population (Wilder, 2013). Homeless children and youth’s schooling may be interrupted. People of color are overrepresented in the homeless population; racial disparities are more pronounced in Minnesota than in almost any other state (Wilder, 2013). About one in 10 homeless adults have served in the military (Wilder, 2013). Homeless individuals may experience hunger, mental health issues, as well as societal rejection and stigma because of their lack of permanent shelter.
There are both individual and structural causes of homelessness cited in scholarship and in policy. Individual causes include substance misuse/abuse, unemployment, low income, victimization, physical or mental disability, domestic violence, or experience in the criminal justice system (NCH, 2014). Structurally, the lack of affordable housing and the insufficient minimum wage contribute to the difficulty of finding housing (Gould, 2010). There was a 22% increase in Minnesota’s homeless counts from 2006 to 2009, attributed to the Great Recession (Wilder, 2013).

Many policy makers, charities, and people recognize homelessness as a problem. Extensive federal and state legislation exists to address the issue of housing and the causes of homelessness (including the federal HEARTH Act and the Minnesota Homeless Youth Act). However, some scholarship and policy makers emphasize structural or individual causes over the other, sometimes ignoring the empirical realities in favor of worldview (Cronly, 2010). It is important also to note that homelessness is not necessarily placelessness; certain homeless individuals consider themselves to have and live in a home, even though it may not fit the legislative definition of permanent housing (i.e., a camp or shelter built by the river or in the woods). Homelessness is also stigmatized; the stereotype of homelessness is often that of the urban, older male. However, it is recognized in Minnesota that statistically, families, children, and unaccompanied youth account for a large portion of the homeless population. Increasingly, there is research and legislation regarding those at risk of homelessness and a greater effort to prevent people from sleeping a night without permanent shelter.

References


