The General Public's Perception
of a Local Homeless Crisis: Why Help?

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Is there really a "homeless" problem? If so, why does it matter to me? Better yet, why does it matter to the next person that I be the one to become involved? A currently growing issue in Turlock and the surrounding areas is homelessness. At this point in time, this issue has manifested itself into a stage of crisis that is worthy of the attention of those beyond the previously invested local not-for-profit organizations. Sociologically, the movement that has occurred in recent months concerning the local homeless crisis can be categorized by the theory of sounding the alarm. Turlock is experiencing stage three of this theory in which the crisis and concern is mobilized through many avenues of communication ranging from personal accounts to public medium. For a social movement to flourish, stage three is the most appropriate for the nourishment of and further exposure of the concern at hand. In this case, the concern is the local homeless crisis. There is a problem, and it is in need of serious recognition by the general public. It is hypothesized that if the general public has an accurate perception of the local homeless crisis they will be more willing to offer their assistance and become involved either financially or otherwise.

Turlock, like most cities, has a growing homeless population. Homelessness is a national problem affecting cities of all size and in all parts of the country. Surveys show that Turlock and the surrounding area's homeless population nearly doubled from 441 in 1996 to nearly 800 in 2003. At this time, there are an estimated 571 chronically homeless individuals in Turlock alone, and 240 of those are children under the age of 18. Homelessness is a complex and almost intractable problem with many causes. Among these are: drug or alcohol addiction, poverty, low-wage employment, mental and physical illness, job loss, breakup of household relationships and lifestyle choice. Based on years of experience with various programs designed to address homelessness, there appears to be a general consensus that managing the problem to reduce the impact of the homeless on the community and the homeless population itself is the best outcome that can be expected of any program.

For the past four years, Turlock, using federal housing funds administered by the city and Stanislaus County, has financially supported the operation of a cold weather emergency shelter for the homeless. The homeless shelter is a direct response to the humanitarian and public health needs associated with closure of homeless encampments and the public safety needs of business and homeowners who have to deal with the homeless sleeping in and around their homes and businesses. The general public consists of a population of people who have an established perception of those homeless and will base their helping behavior in accordance with that perception.

Literature. In the 1980s homeless people finally captured the attention of the public, the media and the social work profession (Hopps, 1989). The literature on the subject has burgeoned in the last decades. Descriptive studies and numerical counts of homeless people have taken place in many large metropolitan areas and urban states in the United States (Proch & Taber, 1987). A careful examination of the reactions of key actors in the greater United States to the problem of homelessness will create a broader

understanding of the types of barriers and obstacles that must be overcome in Turlock before successful interventions can be implemented. In this analysis, to a certain degree, a conceptual perspective that emphasizes the evolution of a social problem over time shows how a community can react to a social problem. As Stern (1984) pointed out, homelessness no longer exists independently as a set of objective social and economical conditions. Instead, homelessness is going through the steps of becoming defined collectively as a public problem by society. It has been observed that the steps that most social problems go through in a community determine their fate.

The literature in relation to homelessness is sizeable and is generally characterized by little consensus on key issues. For example, disagreement exists about the causes of homelessness which are argued to range from rent control (Tucker, 1987) to shortages of federal housing subsidies (Marcuse, 1987) to urban gentrification (Kasinitz, 1984) to general economic downturn (Carlson, 1987) to deinstitutionalization (Belcher, 1989) and family violence (Crystal, 1986). Although rates of disabilities such as alcohol abuse and mental illness appear high in homeless populations, epidemiological data show substantial (although not equally high) rates of comparable disabilities for nonhomeless populations (Meyers et al., 1984). Disagreement may also arise due to disparate definitions of "homeless" which do not correlate well with one another and differing research methods that yield different results.

Reviews of services often describe a comprehensive intervention as including prevention, crisis support, transitional programming, and permanent housing (e.g., Kaufman, 1984). Comprehensive solutions, however desirable, are likely to be unrealistic since advocates must focus funding, time, energy, influence, and other resources on a small set of high-priority solutions. Activists must answer questions such as, "To reduce and prevent homelessness, should advocacy be focused upon funding for mental health treatment or low-income housing?" Unfortunately, the literature on homelessness does not provide definitive answers.

Dluhy (1990) found that community leaders knew little about homeless persons and had little sympathy for them. The project reported here illustrates uses and limitations of the research literature for advocacy. Selected research was summarized and distributed to citizen-participants on the Task Force (mostly community leaders; see below). Literature educated citizen participants about heterogeneity of homeless populations, reducing the possibility of stereotyping, and about potential interventions. However, literature did *not* confirm or exclude major hypotheses about (1) the composition of homeless populations, (2) causes of homelessness, (3) interventions proven most effective, or (4) likely costs of intervention (e.g., attracting more homeless to high-quality services). These issues were the focus of debate as in most communities where homelessness is an issue, such as Turlock.

Method. Methodologically, this research will include a historical overview of the homeless crisis as it has evolved in Turlock and in various comparable places in the United States, which will lay the groundwork for the proposed field research. The majority of the data gathered for the purpose of examining the correlation between the general public's perspective of the homeless crisis and their willingness to and motivation to become involved will be through a survey and interview process. These surveys will be administered to large numbers of the general public within Turlock and gathered from a variety of sources such as faith-based communities (churches), college classes, and other organized gatherings to provide for diversity in the sample. Also in the beginning stages are connections with the local

nonprofit organizations that are currently combating the homeless crisis on a daily basis. From these organizations and the representatives that I am able to speak with, I hope to gather current and relevant information about the homeless population within Turlock to construct an accurate description for my research. In addition, these connections will be used to formulate appropriate survey questions and to evaluate the current levels of involvement of the general public. Three of the local nonprofit organizations that are potential contributors to this research are the We Care Homeless Shelter, the Salvation Army, and the United Samaritans Foundation. Also available for participation in this research is a group of local church leaders that is in the first phase of establishing a Turlock based Union Gospel Mission.

Additionally, I have had my own personal experiences with the homeless population, locally and in other urban settings. I plan on continuing my involvement, which will give me especially original insight into the crisis, allow me to formulate an accurate perspective of the issues at hand and the individual persons involved, and provide the general public with well-educated and experienced information about the homeless population.

Discussion. I have yet to conduct my research. However, I have finished research regarding the influence of the gender of the homeless individual and causality of homelessness on perception of the homeless. In this research I approached the importance of the Perception of the homeless as held by the general public as it is integral for consideration by the local committee that has recently been formed to address the homeless crisis in Turlock, CA, and the surrounding areas. The gender of the homeless individual and the causality of homelessness are important factors in the foundation of perceptions of the homeless. It was hypothesized that male homeless individuals who are homeless due to controllable causality will be most negatively perceived. 502 participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (male homeless individual vs. female homeless individual) x 2 (controlled causality vs. uncontrolled causality), between participant design. The participants read a short scenario of a homeless individual with the manipulated variables of gender and causality of homelessness. The causality of homelessness was indicated in the scenario as being: (1) a controlled cause or personal, avoidable fault of the individual (i.e. homelessness due to the individual's substance addiction to methamphetamines); or (2) an uncontrolled cause or unpredicted situation (i.e. homelessness due to the sudden rise of and inability to afford an adjustable rate mortgage loan). There were no significant results derived from the interaction of the variables, yet there were significant results for ancillary hypotheses regarding the influence of causality of homelessness on perceptions of fault, external validity of the homeless scenario, and community burden. Though gender did not influence the perceptions of the participants, the controllability of the cause of homelessness for the homeless individuals did have significance. Regardless of gender, the homeless individuals who are homeless mainly due to a perceivably controllable circumstance (defined in the present study as an addiction to methamphetamines) are perceived much more negatively than those who are homeless mainly due to an uncontrollable and unforeseen circumstance (defined in the present study as the individual's inability to afford the unpredicted and sudden rise of an adjustable rate mortgage loan for his or her house).

Conclusion. In my previous research, the homeless individual described as homeless due to a controllable cause is perceived as being at fault for his or her homelessness.

This finding of the fault of homelessness being placed upon the homeless individual as a function of deservedness supports the previous research. The just world hypothesis is a possible explanation for this perception and previous research suggests that whether successful or not, people are deemed responsible for their own socioeconomic fate (Main, 1998). The "just world" hypothesis can also offer explanation for the other negative findings regarding the responsibility for the homeless individual's well-being, the amount of external validity of the homeless individual's story as told in the scenario, and the burden placed upon the community of the homeless individual.

At this time, however, it is not possible to conclude anything about my hypothesis for the present research. Right now it seems most important to introduce the homeless crisis as an issue that is the responsibility of each individual, not just the responsibility of nonprofit organizations or communities who have become involved. The importance of this revelation, that there is a problem and that it does matter to the individual and to others in society that one becomes involved in the journey to a solution for the problem, is key to this research. It seems to me that many people have been able to dissect the homeless crisis, survey the public, observe the homeless individuals, and crunch the numbers—but now it is time for a change. I am not out to do more research; I am out to approach a crisis and to urge others in my community to join me. At this point in time, we, as the community called Turlock, are the authors of the fate of the homelessness that surrounds us.

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