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Understanding the Concept of Homelessness

*Images and observations of contemporary homelessness
abound but they cannot substitute for a thoroughgoing
review of the subject. (Hopper & Hamberg, 1984, p. 7)*



In this introductory chapter, we complete a number of stocktaking assignments. Our goal is to explore the idea of homelessness from a variety of perspectives so that the reader develops a well-grounded understanding of the concept of homelessness in the United States.¹ We reveal that the idea is a good deal more complex than is often assumed and we explain why this is the case. We present a collection of typologies that have been used to study and portray homelessness and we highlight well-accepted definitions of the phenomenon. We also introduce various “frames” that can be used to describe homelessness at the start of the 21st century. In the second chapter of Part I (Chapter 2), we provide an historical analysis of homelessness in the United States. In the third chapter of Part I (Chapter 3), we explore the demographics of homelessness and populate categories of homelessness with data from an assortment of research studies.

❖ HOMELESSNESS AS A COMPLEX CONCEPT

Homelessness is an immensely complex and multidimensional social problem. (Stronge, 1992a, p. 3)



Definitional quandaries have long plagued discussions of American homelessness. (Hopper, 2003, p. 15)



As we discuss throughout this volume, homelessness and poverty are intricately linked. So too are homelessness and mobility (Peroff, 1987). Thus, in many ways homelessness is complex because it is not a distinct idea but rather a segment of the larger mosaic of the underclass (Hopper & Hamberg, 1984; Swick, 2004). It is an added risk factor in the equation of failure for individuals, families, and children, “a condition which compounds the issues faced by families in poverty” (Schmitz, Wagner, & Menke, 2001, p. 69). Relatedly, it is a point on a housed continuum that shares many features with close neighbors such as prehomelessness and being precariously housed (Hopper & Hamberg, 1984; Shlay & Rossi, 1992) and with situations confronted by foster care youngsters and children from migrant families (Swick, 2004). As such, at times “the line between being homeless and being domiciled is a fuzzy boundary” (Kusmer, 2002; Shlay & Rossi, 1992, p. 133).

Beyond this, a number of factors add to the “complexity, subjectivity, and ambiguity of homelessness” (James & Lopez, 2003, p. 129). The issue of definition merits special attention here (Hallett, 2007; Jencks, 1994; Johnson, 1988; Mihaly, 1991; Shane, 1996). According to scholars in this area, while the construct may appear rather simple, “the social interactions and constructions related to the concept are complex” (Jahiel, 1992d, p. 4) and “defining homelessness is an illusive task” (Stronge, 1992a, p. 7): “The definition of who is homeless has been as much a subject of debate as the question of how many homeless there are” (Peroff, 1987, p. 37). To be sure, while “defining who is homeless may seem fairly straightforward, the issues are as complex as they are in defining . . . other important constructs in clinical psychology” (Toro, 1998, p. 121). According to Hopper and Baumohl (1996), for example,

homelessness is a term that covers a big territory. Indeed, as we reviewed the record of the past, we were struck by the disparate phenomena indexed by the term at one time or another. It seems that homelessness is at best an odd-job word, pressed into service to impose order on a hodgepodge of social dislocation, extreme poverty, seasonal or itinerant work, and unconventional ways of life. (p. 3)

Not surprisingly, then, “because research [has] offered little consensus on definitions of homeless experiences” (Ringwalt, Greene, Robertson, & McPheeters, 1998, p. 1326), “definitions of what is meant by homelessness vary from study to study” (Stefl, 1987, p. 47): “There is no standard or uniform definition of homelessness that has been agreed on by researchers or policy makers” (Mawhinney-Rhoads & Stahler, 2006, p. 289; Mihaly, 1991); definitions “differ widely” (Burt, 2001, p. 4). As Johnson (1988) cautions, “operationalizing the concept of homelessness, i.e., providing a standard definition to measure the phenomenon, has not been accomplished in more than 80 years of research” (p. 32).

Complexity issues are amplified when we turn our analytic lenses on definitions of youth homelessness. To begin with, as Whitbeck and Hoyt (1999) conclude, “defining homelessness among young people is even more difficult than for adults” (p. 3): “There is no consensus on a definition of homelessness for youth” (Russell, 1998, p. 7).

Many unhoused young people have homes they can return to—if not the home they left, then that of a relative or family of a friend. Many drift in and out of settings that may or may not include adult caretakers, changing environments frequently with little adult monitoring. A significant proportion cannot return home and literally have no family that will take them in. Even these children may have institutional options for housing from which they have run or become disenchanted by rules, multiple moves, or a “revolving door” of caseworkers and foster parents. Homelessness for young people is a continuum that ranges from living at home with parents and running away for a night to independently making one’s way on the streets. In between, there are stays with friends, stays with relatives, foster care, group homes, juvenile detention, and a range of shelter options, both supervised and unsupervised. The duration of being unhoused may be as short as a single night. (Whitbeck & Hoyt, 1999, pp. 3–4)

Indeed, the term “homeless children” is ambiguous (Burt, Aron, Lee, & Valente, 2001, p. 139). In a technical and legal sense, “youth homelessness” is impossible (Caton, 1986) for, as Russell (1998) correctly observes, minors are either in the custody of their parents/guardians “or the state via the child welfare system” (pp. 9–10).

There is no agreed-upon framework for capturing the key components of unaccompanied youth, either runaways or throwaways (Rotheram-Borus, 1991). Even basic definitions such as determining whether a homeless youth is a runaway or a throwaway “frequently depend entirely on whether the information [is] gathered from the youth . . . or the caretakers” (Hammer, Finkelhor, & Sedlak, 2002, p. 2; Levine, Metzendorf, & VanBoskirk, 1986). Studies employ different definitions and often fail to provide specific operational criteria (Brennan, Huizinga, & Elliott, 1978;

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Ensign & Bell, 2004). Not surprisingly, therefore, many of the categories used in the youth homelessness literature are not mutually exclusive (Aviles & Helfrich, 1991; Hallett, 2007; Moore, 2007); “there are several overlapping subgroups” (Rotheram-Borus, 1991, p. 24). Thus, distinctions are often arbitrary (Rotheram-Borus, 1991; Russell, 1998) and fluid (Tierney, Gupton, & Hallett, 2008). For example, Hammer and colleagues (2002) conclude “that the distinction between runaway and throwaway [is] less than clear cut. Many youth have both runaway and throwaway elements” (p. 2).

Of particular interest on the definitional front is “how tightly or loosely the definitional boundaries are drawn” (Peroff, 1987, p. 34). Burt and colleagues (2001) refer to this as

balancing two horns of a dilemma. If the definitions are too inclusive, they become useless; the phenomenon becomes too diffuse, ultimately covering too many people. With homelessness, this tendency is manifested by definitions that threaten to include the entire population in poverty, or everyone who is poorly housed. But if the definitions are too specific, they focus too exclusively on the homelessness of the moment. They can lead to policies and practices that are ameliorative but not preventive, that fail to address the larger question of desperate poverty and the pool of people at high risk for periodic bouts of literal homelessness. (p. 6)

In the research, we find that “definitions range from ones that follow a strict interpretation to ones that encompass a much broader perspective” (Stronge, 1992a, p. 7). As a consequence, “‘homelessness’ can have several different connotations. It can simply refer to a lack of one’s own stable residence where one can sleep and receive mail. A broader sociological definition of homelessness may include a recognition of the quality of interactions and of material and social supports a person has” (Jackson, 2000; Ropers, 1988, p. 175; Wright, Capsi, Moffitt, & Silva, 1998). We see that even in “contemporary definitions of homelessness [that] are more directly linked to the housing situation of persons . . . there is [still] much disagreement on detail” (Shlay & Rossi, 1992, p. 132). For example, as we report later, the U.S. Department of Education employs a broader definition of homelessness, one that includes persons “doubled up” with friends or relatives, than does the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).² In some definitions, foster children in temporary placements are counted and in others they are not (Iowa Department of Education, 2004b). The same is true of citizens in jails and hospitals (Emerson & Lovitt, 2003; Jahiel, 1992d).

Also contributing to definitional complexity is the fact that definitions have changed over time. As “social values concerning what constitutes adequate housing situations” (Shlay & Rossi, 1992, p. 132) have evolved, what might be labeled as “homelessness” today might have been considered

merely “marginally housed” in the past (Peroff, 1987).³ For example, the key idea in homelessness of having a home and living with a family that held sway through the first 75 years of the 20th century—and the idea of “homelessness defined in terms of personal ties and relationships to the broader society” (Shlay & Rossi, 1992, p. 132)—has given way today to the idea of having a fixed address (Jencks, 1994). So too definitions have been adjusted to attend to the massive arrival of homeless families beginning in the 1980s (Hopper & Hamberg, 1984; Jozefowicz-Simbeni & Israel, 2006; Kozol, 1988; Mawhinney-Rhoads & Stahler, 2006).

Complexity in the construct of homelessness can also be traced to the variety of professions that study displaced persons and to the array of different lenses used to examine and describe the phenomenon and its prevention and/or management. While this multifaceted approach is often enriching, because agents from different traditions, backgrounds, and areas of study use different lenses, lenses that influence what is seen, and often have different goals, it also produces some confusion and leads to a variety of inconsistencies; it complexifies homelessness. That is, while using multiple frames is almost always a desirable strategy to understand constructs such as homelessness, doing so can also create pieces of understanding that do not fit well together. In this area, we learn that professionals from all the following domains have contributed to the creation of the complex mosaic known as homelessness: mental health specialists, criminologists and law enforcement personnel, social service agents, educators, medical practitioners (nurses and doctors), religious actors, community organizers, lawyers, and politicians.⁴ On the discipline side of the ledger, theoretical insights from political science, anthropology, psychology, sociology, social psychology, biology, economics, and history, among other areas of study, are employed in illuminating the construct of homelessness. We find on occasion that unique insights from these diverse professions and disciplines make it difficult to form a coherent narrative. Ideas at times conflict. As we see later, this is true across the homelessness landscape—in definitions of the problem, in unpacking causes, in examining impact, and in designing solution strategies.

Homelessness is also complex because of the simple fact that the population here is heterogeneous (Boesky, Toro, & Bukowski, 1997; Hartman, 1986; Kipke, Palmer, La France, & O’Connor, 1997). While 50 years ago Levinson (1963) documented that “the situation today in the field of homelessness [was] somewhat similar to what was found to be true in psychiatric studies years ago when all mentally ill patients were thrown into one category called ‘insane’ and treated accordingly” (p. 592), we know now that the “homeless are not one undifferentiated mass” (Stronge, 2000, p. 7). The population is heterogeneous in nature on the one hand because it is made up of discernable subgroups such as “battered and abandoned women, single mothers, evicted families, single unemployed and older women, deinstitutionalized mental patients, illegal immigrants, street youth, drug addicts, alcoholics, and those living on skid row” (Karabanow,

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2004, p. 20). It is also heterogeneous because there are “striking differences among homeless individuals and their circumstances” (Snow & Anderson, 1993, p. 7): “People’s experiences of homelessness vary considerably” (Burt et al., 2001, p. 161) and “each experience of being homeless is different” (Douglass, 1996, p. 745). Burt and associates (2001) capture this second understanding of homelessness when they explain that

for virtually every characteristic, other than extreme poverty, the common denominator of homelessness, it is rare for half, or even one-third of homeless clients to have the characteristic in common. Even factors thought to be strongly associated with the probability of homelessness, such as childhood abuse or neglect and out-of-home placement, characterize only about one-quarter of homeless people. Clearly this level of diversity, and widely varying point of vulnerability to homelessness, given extreme poverty, belie the idea of a “homeless population.” (p. 93)

And as we explore in detail in the last chapters of the book, considerable variety in demographics, causes, and impacts also means significant diversity in solutions to the problems of homelessness (James & Lopez, 2003).

Finally, as we demonstrate in the second half of this chapter, measurement issues and “the type of data used in calculations” (Burt et al., 2001, p. 4) complexify understanding of homelessness (Aron & Fitchen, 1996; Rafferty, 1995; Ringwalt, Greene, Robertson, & McPheeters, 1998).

❖ TOWARD A DEFINITION

Definitions are necessary, though, from several perspectives. (Burt et al., 2001, p. 6)



The various definitions of homelessness fall into two groups: some of them try to incorporate a concept of the social meaning or causes of homelessness, thus associating the definition with theories of homelessness; others propose criteria of place to be used in designating people as homeless. (Jahiel, 1992d, p. 1)



Americans have used the word “homeless” in something like its modern sense for roughly 150 years. Most often, its meaning is literal and prosaic: the absence of a domicile. (Hopper & Baumohl, 1996, p. 3)



A simple, commonsensical definition of homelessness is the absence of a home or lack of a stable, dependable, source of housing. (Johnson, 1988, p. 33)



We have already reported that “there is no single, generally accepted definition of homelessness” (Hombs, 2001, p. 6), either in general or for youth in particular (Whitbeck & Hoyt, 1999). We confirmed that the definitional issue is complex and contested (Jencks, 1994). Nonetheless, as Burt and colleagues (2001) assert, the definition of homelessness is important for a variety of reasons:

From the perspective of immediate action, definitions identify who is eligible to receive whatever assistance is available specifically for homeless people. From a research perspective, definitions identify who should be counted and described. And from a policy perspective, definitions identify who should be planned for and what policies will be most relevant to the type of assistance needed. (p. 6)

Perhaps the best place to begin is with official definitions provided by the government as these provide frameworks for addressing the problems of homeless adults and young people. According to HUD, the term “homeless” or “homeless individual or homeless person” includes the following:

1. An individual who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence; and
2. An individual who has a primary nighttime residence that is
 - A. a supervised publicly or privately operated shelter designed to provide temporary living accommodations (including welfare hotels, congregate shelters, and transitional housing for the mentally ill);
 - B. an institution that provides a temporary residence for individuals intended to be institutionalized; or
 - C. a public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings.

According to the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (Title X, Part C, of the No Child Left Behind Act), homelessness for children and youths

- A. means individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence (within the meaning of section 103(a)(1)); and
- B. includes—
 - (i) children and youths who are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a

- similar reason; are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative adequate accommodations; are living in emergency or transitional shelters; are abandoned in hospitals; or are awaiting foster care placement;
- (ii) children and youths who have a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings (within the meaning of section 103(a)(2)(C));
 - (iii) children and youths who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings; and
 - (iv) migratory children (as such term is defined in section 1309 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965) who qualify as homeless for the purposes of this subtitle because the children are living in circumstances described in clauses (i) through (iii).

While Karabanow (2004) and Burt and colleagues (2001) remind us that analysts have uncovered “three elements separately or in combination [that] characterize homelessness . . . the transience or instability of *place*, the instability or absence of connections to *family*, and the instability of *housing*” (Burt et al., 2001, p. 2), it is abundantly clear that the official treatment of homelessness attends exclusively to the housing aspect of homelessness (Jackson, 2000). Thus, in general, “the term ‘homeless’ is actually a catchword that focuses our attention on only one aspect of the individual’s plight: lack of residence” (Karabanow, 2004, p. 20). Embedded in the “homeless” aspect of homelessness is an understanding of “a home as a residence to which one is entitled; for which one has responsibility; over which one exerts control, including the right to decide whom to admit; and which has a certain degree of permanency” (Jahiel, 1992d, p. 3).

Half of the homeless portrait highlights what homeless persons are missing, that is, the idea that “homelessness is a lack of permanent housing” (Duffield, Heybach, & Julianelle, 2007, p. 3; Jackson, 2004, p. 2). These individuals “lack what society defines as a normal place to live” (Hartman, 1986, p. 71). The other half of the picture spotlights where the homeless stay. Here we see that “homeless populations are identified by their need for nighttime shelter” (Caton, 1986, p. 64) and by where they sleep. Or, more precisely, “homelessness is based on a person’s sleeping arrangements” (Burt et al., 2001, p. 6). Thus, in general, “homelessness is defined as including anyone whose night residence is either in a shelter, on the street or in another public place” (Eddowes & Hranitz, 1989, p. 197). Using this definition, Roth, Toomey, and First (1992) hold that homeless people can be further “categorized by the degree to which they appear exposed to the elements” (p. 204).

A key element in homeless definitions, official and otherwise, returns us to our earlier discussion of definitional complexity and to the distinction between the narrowness or expansiveness of efforts to corral homelessness. Of particular importance here is the fact that the HUD definition presented earlier “is limited to persons who are living on the streets or who are staying in shelters” (Duffield et al., 2007, p. 8). On the other hand, “the broader McKinney-Vento Act definition of homeless includes those living doubled up with friends and families” (National Center for Homeless Education, 2006a, p. 5). Whether one attends only to the “literal homeless” (Toro, 1998, p. 121), “conventionally defined as people living on the street or in shelters” (Aron & Fitchen, 1996, p. 81), or uses the “more inclusive” (Dworsky, 2008, p. 16) definition in McKinney-Vento is consequential: “People who double up with other households because they have nowhere else to go constitute a larger group than all of the McKinney Act categories taken together” (Jahiel, 1992d, p. 2). Therefore, by including doubled-up individuals and families we significantly expand the homeless population, both exacerbating the social ill of homelessness and intensifying demands for preventing and/or treating the problem.

In this volume, we appropriate the broader definition of homelessness found in the McKinney-Vento legislation. While we acknowledge the dangers of overcounting associated with this decision (see Jencks, 1994; Stronge, 1992a) and the accompanying assessment problem of distinguishing the homeless from the marginally housed, we follow this pathway for two reasons. First, on the ideological front, it is consistent with the demands for social justice for children and youth. Second, on the practical front, it is the definition that educational agencies are required to employ. Thus, for the purposes of this volume,

persons/families are homeless when they do not have their own home. This broad definition encompasses doubling up with friends or family, living in a temporary hotel room that one cannot develop into one’s own home, living in a shelter, or spending the nights in one’s car, a park, the streets, or public buildings. Homelessness is life without one’s own home. (Jahiel, 1987, p. 99)

❖ FRAMEWORKS FOR UNDERSTANDING

The process by which members of some empirical domain are categorized and ordered in terms of their similarities and differences is called typologizing. The resulting classificatory scheme directs the observer’s attention to certain aspects of the phenomenon under study. (Snow & Anderson, 1993, pp. 36–37)



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In response to diversity, various attempts to classify or categorize homeless persons have been developed. (Stefl, 1987, p. 50)



Over the last quarter century, a number of theoretical and grounded frameworks for understanding homelessness have been created, some of which have already been introduced. For example, many analysts have suggested that for single adults, families, and unaccompanied youth “on any given night, the homeless can be divided into two groups: those who sleep in free shelters (the ‘shelter homeless’) and those who sleep in places not intended for human habitation, such as bus stations, subway trains, automobiles, doorways, and abandoned buildings. Those who sleep outside shelters are generally known as the ‘street homeless’” (Jencks, 1994, p. 4). This is the on-and-off-the-street categorical divide (Hagan & McCarthy, 1997). We have also touched upon the two-part framework featuring “literal homelessness,” which includes both shelter-housed and street-based homeless persons (Ensign & Bell, 2004), and “hidden homeless,” which captures those living doubled up with relatives or friends. Snow and Anderson (1993), in turn, have forged a design underscoring three aspects of homelessness: “a residential dimension; a familial-support dimension; and a role-based dignity and moral-worth dimension” (p. 7). Hartman (1986) explores six dimensions of homelessness: “age, household composition, cause of homelessness, duration of homelessness, disability, [and] future prospects” (p. 71). Mallett, Rosenthal, Myers, Milburn, and Rotheram-Borus (2004) frame homelessness based on mode of leaving, personal characteristics, and subculture. Stronge (2000) highlights nighttime location and duration. Stefl (1987) maintains that homelessness can be understood by examining the following categories: sleeping accommodations, time on the street, causes of homelessness, severity of the problem, personal characteristics, and life history. Based on the last two dimensions, Fischer and Breakey (cited in Stefl, 1987) designate four groups of homeless individuals: “the chronically mentally ill, chronic alcoholics, street people, and the situationally distressed” (p. 52). Based on the “severity” dimension, Jahiel (1987) concludes that we can distinguish between benign and malignant homeless conditions:

Benign homelessness means that the state of homelessness causes relatively little hardship, lasts for a relatively short time, and does not recur soon, and it is relatively easy to gain back a home and a stable tenure of that home. Malignant homelessness means that the state of homelessness is associated with considerable hardship or even permanent damage to the person who is homeless, it lasts for a relatively long time or recurs at short intervals, extraordinary efforts must be expended to gain back a home with stable tenure, and these efforts are often unsuccessful. (p. 100)

Snow and Anderson (1993) array a host of elements of homelessness under three subcultural dimensions: lifestyle dimensions, cognitive dimensions, and a temporal dimension (p. 41). Rotheram-Borus (1991) suggests that a framework for unaccompanied youth can be forged using material from five sources: “the intended length of stay away from home; personal and social characteristics that include behavioral and attitudinal factors; cognitive structure and belief system; whether youth leave on their own accord or are pushed out; and whether there is escalation to criminal offenses” (p. 31).

Building on the work of these and other scholars, we argue that homelessness can best be understood using the four broad constructs (and assorted subelements) that anchor this volume: demographics, causes, impacts, and solution strategies. Later and in Chapter 3, we examine homelessness via demographics. Here we introduce some of the central demographic concepts—household composition, residency, and severity—while in Chapter 3 we populate these categories and others (e.g., age, race) using data from across the homeless literature. In Chapter 4, we delve into the impacts of homelessness. And in the final chapters, we turn to an analysis of schooling-based strategies designed to prevent and/or alleviate the consequences of homelessness.

Household Composition

The most well-established framework divides individuals experiencing homelessness into three groups: single adults, families with children (i.e., accompanied children), and unaccompanied youth (The National Center on Family Homelessness [NCFH], 2009; Toro, 1998). Single adults, in turn, are often clustered into subcategories. For example, Anderson (cited in Bahr, 1973) describes five types of homeless: the seasonal worker, the occasional worker, the wandering tramp, the bum, and the home guard (p. 110).

Homeless Families and Children

Homeless children and youth are found in the second and third groups, those attached to a homeless family (accompanied homeless children) and those away from home and on their own (unaccompanied youth). *Homeless families* are defined “as one or more adults with one or more children in their charge” (Shinn & Weitzman, 1996, p. 109). Thus, *homeless children*⁵ are usually those “from birth to age 18 who are accompanied by one or more parents or caregivers” (Bassuk, Rubin, & Lauriat, 1986; Iowa Department of Education, 2004a; NCFH, 2009, p. 5). And, as Shane (1996) documents,

the *familial* homeless, or homeless families with children, are of all kinds: one adult (mother, father, grandparent, other); two adults

(with biological, step-, adopted, or common-law parents, unrelated partner, or other relationship); three generations (grandparent, parent, and child[ren]). They stay in every conceivable place—tents, cars, trucks, abandoned buildings, handmade shacks, shelters, and so on. The children, although predominantly younger, are of all ages—neonates through teenagers. There can be one child or many children in the family. (p. 4)

Unaccompanied Youth

The phrase *unaccompanied youth* is, as Moore (2007) clarifies, an umbrella term for a large assortment of young people (Julianelle, 2007; Rotheram-Borus, Mahler, Koopman, & Langabeer, 1996). It is a “generic term to refer to minors who are outside a family or an institutional setting and who are unaccompanied by a parent or legal guardian” (Robertson, 1992, p. 288). It includes youngsters living on the street, in shelters, in group homes, and those doubled up with friends or relatives.

Runaways

While a variety of typologies, often with common dimensions, are used to capture the phenomenon of youth homelessness, nearly all analysts describe three categories of the unaccompanied homeless: runaway homeless, throwaway homeless, and system homeless (Barry, Ensign, & Lippek, 2002). McCaskill, Toro, and Wolfe (1998) define *runaways* as those young people “who [leave] home for at least 24 hours without their parents’ permission and whose parents [do] not know their whereabouts” (p. 308). Based on criteria “such as degree of school success, existence of peer influences and/or supports, the degree of criminal behavior involved, and the extent to which the individual is committed to street life” (Rothman, 1991, p. 106), a number of conceptual and empirical efforts have been undertaken to describe homeless runaways. Brennan (cited in Whitbeck & Hoyt, 1999, and in Rotheram-Borus, 1991) has built a typology featuring six different portraits of runaway homeless based on behavioral and attitudinal factors: self-confident and unrestrained runaway youth; well-adjusted runaway youth; youth who have failed at home and in school and who are involved in delinquent behavior; youth who are fleeing excessive parent control; young, highly regulated and negatively influenced youth; and young and unrestrained youth. Brennan et al. (1978) also use motivation to craft a typology of six types of runaways:

Victims are beset by assaultive, abusing parents. They feel undefended and endangered. *Exiles* experience high levels of nonviolent parent rejection. The third of these types, the *rebels*, is described as being involved in long-standing authority struggles, while at the same time being still psychologically tied

to the parents. All three of these runaway types might well be subsumed by Homer's "running from" concept. The *fugitive* appears to be escaping from some negative consequence of his or her own behavior, e.g., arrest, punishment, fear of facing parents, and so forth. The implication is that the child has placed himself/herself in serious trouble, perhaps through deviant behavior, and is attempting to escape the expected consequences. The *refugee* is simply the young person who does not have a family and who is escaping some institution or foster home in which he or she has been placed. The *immigrant* is the young person who has grown up, who is psychologically independent from his/her parents, and who is ready to live the life of an emancipated adult. (p. 253)

Whitbeck and Hoyt (1999) highlight a number of typologies that appeared in the early literature on runaways:

Berger and Schmidt (1958) dichotomize runaways into "spontaneous and reactive runaways." The spontaneous group[s] were adventurers; the reactive groups were running from problems. Homer (1973) also suggested that there were essentially two types of runaways: those running to something and those running from something. The "running to" group[s] were viewed as adventurers or pleasure seekers. Other typologies innocently downplayed the seriousness of most runaways. Haupt and Offord (1972) distinguished between "gesture runaways," who were making a cry for help and "real runaways," who intended to escape a particular situation. Similarly, Shellow and colleagues (Shellow, Schamp, Liebow, & Unger, 1967) categorized runaways into those who were "pathological" and those who were "normal." The "pathological" young person was on the run for personal or family troubles and was a chronic runner. The "normal" runaway left home only one or two times, did not evidence high levels of family troubles, and showed little delinquent behavior. The Scientific Analysis Corporation (1974; cited in Brennan, 1980) identified three types of runaways: the "sick," the "bad," and the "free." The "sick" referred to those with identifiable psychopathology, the "bad" were those who engaged in delinquent behaviors, and the "free" were those who were engaged in pleasure-seeking, adventure, or exploration. (pp. 5-6)

In an empirically grounded typology "based on where and with whom they congregated and slept during the day and night and how they spent most of their time" (Mallett et al., 2004, p. 337), Mallett and associates (2004) used cluster analysis to deduce four groups of runaways (and other

homeless youth): partnered, socially engaged, service connected–harm avoidant, and transgressive (p. 337).

Throwaways

Throwaway youth, on the other hand, “are young persons who have been told to leave home by a parent or guardian and are away overnight and prevented from returning home” (Hallett, 2007, p. 3; Powers & Jaklitsch, 1993). A special category of throwaways is “intervention seekers” (Boeskey et al., 1997, p. 22), those youngsters “whose parents asked them to leave home temporarily with the understanding that the adolescent would return home after a short period of time” (McCaskill et al., 1998, pp. 308–309).

System Youth

Homeless “adolescents who have been in and out of government systems such as juvenile justice and foster care are referred to as system youth” (Hallett, 2007, p. 3), although as we noted previously, youngsters in long-term foster care are not considered homeless. System youth, as MacLean, Embry, and Cauce (1999) inform us, “are those from family environments that were deemed dangerous enough to necessitate removal from the home and whose subsequent residential placements were unsuccessful” (p. 2). That is, “system kids become homeless when their social service placements are problematic” (Rotheram-Borus, 1991, p. 24).

Within these three classifications—runaway, throwaway, and system youth—special conditions are highlighted at times. For example, in the “throwaway” category, Hammer and associates (2002) single out “permanently abandoned” (p. 5) youth, those youngsters whose families have dissolved around them. Across all three classifications, reviewers describe “street kids” (Pearce, 1995, p. 16), a characterization that refers to youths “who spend all of their time in various public places” (Baron, Kennedy, & Forde, 2001, p. 767): “Most of these youth are underemployed/unemployed, often lack a permanent residence, and spend significant amounts of time without shelter” (Baron & Hartnagel, 1998, p. 166). In addition, as we demonstrate throughout this volume, homeless youth are often defined by the same categories used to examine homelessness more generally, for example, causes and experiences on the street.

Residency

Given the centrality of housing in the homeless narrative, where persons reside (or place-based understandings of displacement [Jahiel, 1992d; Johnson, 1988]) is a critical dimension of homelessness—for individuals, families, and unaccompanied youth. Indeed, “the residential dimension” (Snow & Anderson, 1993, p. 7) is generally the primary basis for conceptualizing homelessness.

Analysts typically divide homeless persons into various categories based on where they sleep at night (Hombs, 2001; Stefl, 1987), “their customary sleeping arrangements” (Snow & Anderson, 1993, p. 42), or places where they seek refuge (Tierney et al., 2008). In Chapter 2, we provide data on where the various groups of homeless reside, with the caveat that people move fluidly through various sleeping arrangements (e.g., in a transient hotel at some times, doubled up with friends or relatives at another time, and perhaps on the street at still a third point in time). Here we introduce the categories used in our residency analysis.

One category incorporates what scholars call the “sheltered homeless” (Ropers, 1988, p. 68). This includes individuals and families using shelter space, both emergency and transitional and temporary hotel space made available by service providers. A second category of sleeping arrangements captures what Stefl (1987) refers to as “resource people” (p. 51). These include persons doubling up with families or friends, couch surfing through different homes, or staying in cheap hotels/motels without public assistance—those without kitchen facilities and often with public bathrooms (Tierney et al., 2008), hotels that “most observers agree do not provide the kind of ‘adequate shelter’ or community ties that constitute a home” (Ropers, 1988, p. 67; Stefl, 1987; Wright et al., 1998). The final category is “street people,” those homeless persons who “sleep rough” (Snow & Anderson, 1993, p. 42), that is, in public spaces not intended as dwellings, such as under bridges, in parks, in abandoned buildings, in cars, and so forth (Hagan & McCarthy, 1997; Julianelle, 2007).

Researchers and reformers sometimes stretch these groupings across a continuum “ranging from a complete absence of shelter to living arrangements approximating home-like conditions” (National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, 2004a; Stefl, 1987, p. 50). Stefl (1987) illustrates this idea using a study of homelessness in Ohio:

1. Limited or no shelter. This would include people who sleep on park benches, under bridges, or in cardboard boxes.
2. Use of cars, abandoned buildings, or public facilities.
3. Shelters or missions designed specifically to house homeless persons.
4. Flophouses or cheap hotels with limited stay and minimal fee.
5. Cheap hotels with longer-term rates. However, residence would be limited to less than one month. (p. 50)

Johnson (1988) provides a similar “residency” continuum, but one that incorporates a sixth category, that is, marginally housed (e.g., living in public housing). As we discussed earlier, the demarcation line between poor people who are inadequately housed and the homeless on the end of the continuum with some home-like conditions is blurry and shifting

(Jahiel, 1992b), especially for families: “Homeless families are in many ways very similar to other poor families who do not become homeless” (National Alliance to End Homelessness [NAEH], 2007, p. 1) and “a homeless person looks similar to a low-income housing tenant or other poor person” (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2009, p. 24).

Severity of Homelessness

Four concepts allow us to develop a sense of the depth of homelessness among those on the wrong side of the housing divide. The first we illustrated earlier in the discussion of “residency.” Specifically, we observed that some sleeping arrangements (e.g., doubling up) have more “home-like” elements than do others (e.g., sleeping in one’s car). Accordingly, most analysts assert that “homeless persons finding refuge on the street or in public places are the most severely deprived” (Johnson, 1988, p. 40) of all homeless individuals.⁶

Because “a central question in studying homelessness is whether being homeless is a temporary, transitional, or episodic condition lasting a relatively short period of time or whether it is a permanent and chronic problem” (Shlay & Rossi, 1992, p. 141), length of time homeless (duration) and number of incidents of homelessness are the second and third elements in the homelessness severity equation (Burt et al., 2001), recognizing that “duration . . . is confounded by the seeming intermittent character of the experience” (Shlay & Rossi, 1992, p. 141) and that, as we see later, these two elements are often combined.

To begin with, scholars, policy makers, and social service providers often partition the homeless based on the amount of time they have been displaced. Shane (1996), for example, divides homeless youth into five groups: short term, midterm, long term, sporadic, and chronic. Other analysts use three categories: long term or chronic, episodic, and transitional (Johnson, 1988; NAEH, 2003; Ropers, 1988). According to the U.S. Conference of Mayors (2008), chronic homeless are those individuals “who have been living on the streets or in shelter[s] either continuously for the last two years or intermittently for the last five years” (p. 20). Most analysts put the demarcation line for chronic homelessness at one year (Pires & Silber, 1991; Rollinson & Pardeck, 2006). In either case,

the category of chronic homelessness is reserved for people who have relied on shelters or lived on the streets for many months or years, and usually have multiple barriers to securing stable employment and housing. They may have only a few distinct spells of homelessness, but each lasts a very long time. (Burt et al., 2001, p. 164)

Episodic homeless individuals, in turn, “are those who frequently experience periods of being homed and then homeless” (Rollinson &

Pardeck, 2006, p. 7), “a tendency to cycle into and out of homelessness repeatedly, and for varying lengths of time” (Burt et al., 2001, p. 164; Mawhinney-Rhoads & Stahler, 2006; Russell, 1998). Transitional homeless persons “include individuals or families who are homeless only once or twice and usually for a relatively short time (Burt, 2001, p. 164); they have no history of homelessness (Ropers, 1988).

Earlier, we reported that sleeping rough or street homelessness is considered more severe than sheltered homelessness. Here we add that severity is likely to increase with each episode of homelessness: “In other words, each time a person becomes homeless, he/she will have fewer and fewer resources that can decrease the severity of the homeless condition” (Johnson, 1988, p. 39). Johnson (1988) goes on to argue that

putting these two dimensions together, the shorter the experience of homelessness and the farther away the experience is from literal homelessness, the less severe it will be. Inversely, the longer the experience of homelessness and the closer the experience is to literal homelessness, the more severe it will be. (pp. 37–38)

We also know from the literature that length is consequential (Shane, 1996), that “the duration of homelessness is an important factor that influences the intensity of the effect on an individual’s physical and mental health” (Ropers, 1988, p. 179). Also, there are important consequences in terms of need for services; and, as we report in the last part of the book, needs of individuals in the various duration groups often differ in important ways (United Way of New York City, 2002; U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2009).

The fourth and final piece in the “severity” narrative focuses on the nature of the experiences homeless individuals have in shelters and on the streets. For some, homelessness offers many more difficult challenges than it does for others. We turn to this dimension of homelessness in Part III when we drill down to examine the impact of homelessness on single adults, families with children, and homeless youth.

❖ UNDERSTANDING THE COUNTING PROCESS

Counting persons who are homeless is a notoriously difficult task fraught with definitional and technical challenges. (NAEH, 2003, p. 4)



Determining how many homeless people there are is quite complex. (Burt et al., 2001, p. 28)



Homeless youth are difficult to track.
(Ennett, Bailey, & Federman, 1999, p. 76)



To develop a full understanding of homeless persons, it is instructive to understand the scope and nature of the phenomenon. As we demonstrate here, however, this turns out to be a less-than-straightforward assignment, one fraught with a variety of difficulties. In the balance of the chapter, we attend to some theoretical and practical issues in the counting and arraying of America's homeless. This analysis is designed to inform interpretation in Chapter 2, where we present counting and arraying information across an assortment of demographic categories.

We begin with an overarching caution. Regardless of where the numbers take us, there is consensus in the literature about one critical point. As Mihaly (1991) states it: "What is indisputable is that there are too many homeless families, the numbers are large and growing, and there is a homelessness problem greater than at any time in recent history" (p. 4); "there is no disputing the dramatic proliferation" (Snow & Anderson, 1993, p. 233) of homeless persons in the country. Kozol (1988) offers a variation on this caution when he warns against forgetting what the numbers mean:

We would be wise, however, to avoid the numbers game. Any search for the "right number" carries the assumption that we may at last arrive at an acceptable number. There is no acceptable number. Whether the number is 1 million or 4 million or the administration's estimate of less than a million, there are too many homeless people in America. (pp. 12–13)

Starting with this caveat, we hold with Peroff (1987) that

it is still useful to have some idea of the size and composition of the homeless population from a policy perspective. Such information is needed to improve our understanding about this group in our society and to tailor more effectively both public and private responses to meet the needs of the homeless population. (p. 33)

An Overview

Perhaps no other population in the United States is as difficult to count as the homeless, making "collection of definitive data in this area extremely difficult" (Shane, 1996, p. 13). As Hope and Young (1986) conclude, "the problems in counting the homeless are legion" (p. 19): "Finding the homeless is not easy" (Peroff, 1987, p. 40) and, as a consequence, "estimating the number of homeless children and youth poses problems" (Penuel & Davey, 1998, p. 4).

Counting the homeless and thus developing accurate demographic portraits “depends entirely on where the homeless are counted, how representative the study is, and who is considered homeless” (Johnson, 1988, p. 49). Different studies address these issues in different ways. Thus, because of “different definitions of who the homeless are, the time intervals in counting, and the variations in geographic coverage” (Rollinson & Pardeck, 2006, p. 8), differences across research reports are often quite large. Variations that we report in Chapter 3 can also be traced to the use of different methodological approaches employed in research studies (Greene, Ringwalt, & Iachan, 1997), such as difference in “the definition of the population under study, varied and limited methods for producing population estimates, and lack of a mechanism for centralized reporting” (Russell, 1998, p. 7).

Turning specifically to the demographics of children and unaccompanied youth, Ringwalt, Greene, Robertson, and McPheeters (1998); Moore (2007); and Whitman, Accardo, Boyert, and Kendagor (1990) expose the challenges in crafting an accurate narrative for these populations:

Obtaining reliable data on homeless children is hampered by factors such as the transiency of the population, the intermittence of the homeless status, erratic availability and use of existing support services, and the crisis conditions that affect observation and testing in any sample shelter population. (Whitman et al., 1990, p. 516)

“Contradictory definitions of what constitutes homelessness, an absence of standardized methodology for sampling homeless youths, and an over reliance on data from shelters and agencies” (Ringwalt, Greene, Robertson, & McPheeters, 1998, p. 1325) all complicate the documentation work. So too does “youth’s inability to consent for participation in studies and a lack of comparison groups” (Moore, 2007, p. 6).

Counting Concerns

Difficulties Associated With Definitions

Earlier we discussed “the definitional problem” (Hombs, 2001, p. 8) in the homeless literature. What should be clear from that analysis is that the size of the homeless population has a good deal to do with the definition employed (Myers & Popp, 2003; U.S. Department of Education, 2000); size “will be larger or smaller depending on one’s definition of homelessness” (Burt et al., 2001, p. 7). More specifically, “variations in the definition of ‘homeless’ contribute to wide fluctuations in population estimates” (Russell, 1998, p. 8). For example, some studies define homelessness in ways that pull in a good number of marginally housed persons, thus ratcheting up estimates. Other reports exclude individuals and families that are doubled up with relatives or friends, thus significantly depressing calculations of the homeless population.

Difficulties Finding Homeless Persons

Analysts from across the ideological spectrum highlight a central difficulty in counting the homeless: “Homeless people are, of course, impossible to count” (Kozol, 1988, p. 13) because “finding them is not easy” (Peroff, 1987, p. 40), and “the affected population is by nature difficult to track” (National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, 2004b, p. 6): Going to doors “to count people doesn’t work with families that have no doors” (Mihaly, 1991, p. 2); “they have no address beyond a shelter bed, room number, tent, or cave” (Kozol, 1988, p. 13). And, as Hopper and Hamberg (1984) remind us, “homeless people cannot be tagged like geese and their patterns of migration charted” (p. 7). The consequence is “that a substantial percentage of the homeless population is simply not accessible to researchers” (Stefl, 1987, p. 47) and, therefore, many are uncounted. In summary, the “finding” problem arises from the fact that “the majority of homeless persons are invisible, they are unseen” (Medcalf, 2008, p. 8).

The Unseen by Choice

In many cases, homeless persons are unseen because they do not wish to be seen (Cunningham, 2003; Hombs & Snyder, 1982; Raleigh-DuRoff, 2004). According to analysts, “many homeless people work very hard to obscure their homelessness” (Hombs, 2001, p. 8), “either because being homeless is stigmatizing or because they fear the imposition of unwanted social control” (Link, Phelan, Bresnahan, Stueve, Moore, & Susser, 1995, p. 348). Mihaly (1991) contends, for example, that “many families hesitate to identify themselves as homeless because they are embarrassed, or because parents are afraid that they will be labeled neglectful and their children will be taken from them and placed in foster care” (p. 37). In a similar vein, many unaccompanied youth “deliberately avoid shelters and social agencies” (Taylor, Lydon, Bougie, & Johannsen, 2004, p. 1) where they could be seen because of “mistrust of persons in authority” (Aviles & Helfrich, 1991, p. 332) and for fear of being reunited with abusive families (Auerswald & Eyre, 2002; Moore, 2007; Ringwalt, Greene, Robertson, & McPheeters, 1998). In addition, “confidentiality regarding the illegality/criminality of lifestyle and coping activities may play a significant part in [the] homeless choosing to ‘remain hidden’” (Kidd & Scrimenti, 2004, p. 338). Other homeless persons choose invisibility to “conceal the places where they sleep because they fear being harassed or victimized” (Peroff, 1987, p. 39). And, as Medcalf (2008) observes, “the people who do not wish to be counted among the homeless become very skilled at remaining hidden” (p. 10).

The Unseen by Lifestyle

Many other homeless individuals remain unseen because they are in residency arrangements that make it difficult for them to be found (Rollinson

& Pardeck, 2006; Vissing, 2004; Ziesemer, Marcoux, & Marwell, 1994). There is ample evidence, for example, that it is easier to count the sheltered homeless than the street homeless. Thus, many individuals sleeping rough, those “in unstable housing arrangements and those living in vehicles and makeshift housing are excluded” (National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, 2004a, p. 7). Counts often “miss the so-called ‘hidden’ homeless who sleep in automobiles, on the roofs of tenements, in campgrounds, or in other places that researchers cannot effectively search. Since they focus on literal homelessness, surveys also miss people who double up with kin or other network members rather than stay in shelters or on the streets” (Link et al., 1995, p. 347). We know also that “others achieve invisibility by sleeping in abandoned buildings, in cars parked behind shopping malls, or in tents in the woods. As revealed by the definitional problem, the homelessness of many others is hidden by precarious housing arrangements with friends or families” (Hombs, 2001, p. 8).

Relatedly, because homelessness is often considered to be an urban problem, there is considerable agreement in the literature that rural homelessness remains cloaked (Aron & Fitchen, 1996; Link, Phelan, Stueve, Moore, Bresnahan, & Struening, 1996; Rollinson & Pardeck, 2006). Finally, some analysts contend that homeless youth may remain uncounted because of the legal requirement of parental consent, or, more accurately, the inability of researchers to garner consent on a regular basis (Moore, 2007).

The Unseen by Movement

Counting homeless persons is also made difficult by the fact that homelessness is fluid (Burt et al., 2001; Hombs, 2001), “people move in and out of homelessness over time” (Rollinson & Pardeck, 2006, p. 9), and “estimating the size of this mobile and changing population is difficult” (Ringwalt, Greene, Robertson, & McPheeters, 1998, p. 1325), a task that Baron and associates (2001) label as “impossible” (p. 767). “Transient lifestyles” (Raleigh-DuRoff, 2004, p. 561) of many homeless compound the problem of fluidity, making counting even more problematic (Moore, 2007). All of this means, as we will see shortly, that when snapshot methods are used to count the homeless, underestimations result.

Difficulties Associated With the Counters

How many homeless persons one sees also depends at times on who is doing the looking. That is, a political thread runs through the census-taking work (Johnson, 1988), or, as Shlay and Rossi (1992) report, “counting the homeless is especially political” (p. 132), and Shinn and Weitzman (1996) acknowledge “estimates . . . of the homeless are shaped by social policy” (p. 109). In the domain of the homeless, Jencks (1994) observes that we would do well to “distinguish between scientific and political

numbers" (p. 3). The former, he explains, are "accompanied by enough documentation so you can tell who counted what, whereas political numbers are not" (p. 3). Following this line, and as we document in Chapter 2, we find that at times, government agencies have delivered what are considered low estimates of the homeless population, while advocates for the homeless at times stand accused of overcounting homeless persons (Link et al., 1995), sometimes dramatically, in attempts to "secure better services for their clients" (Kidd & Scriminti, 2004, p. 132).

Counting is linked inexorably with the research designs employed to study homelessness. While it is beyond the scope or purpose of this volume to provide a critique of homeless research, it is important to note here that some of the variation in homeless estimates is attributable to the less-than-robust designs found across studies of homelessness (Brennan et al., 1978; Burt et al., 2001; McCaskill et al., 1998). Sampling problems and instrumentation weaknesses in particular have characterized the field (Johnson, 1988; Koegel, Burnam, & Baumohl, 1996; Russell, 1998), leading to diverse answers about the number of homeless persons and the diverse set of experiences these displaced individuals confront.

Difficulties Associated With the Timing of Counts

The homeless literature is ribboned with analyses of and cautions about timing issues in reaching accurate counts of housing displaced persons (Burt et al., 2001; Hombs, 2001). At the most base level, there are important fluctuations in homelessness by time of year (season) (Greene, Ennett, & Ringwalt, 1999). A census completed in the winter months may underestimate the number of homeless persons while counts taken in warmer months may overdocument the homeless population.

The major issue in "the controversy surrounding enumeration of the homeless revolves around whether or not a count is a point-in-time measurement (a point prevalence estimate) or a count of the number of persons experiencing homelessness during the course of one year (annual incidence estimate)" (Johnson, 1988, p. 50). Not surprisingly, given the fluid and transient nature of homelessness, "the second number is almost always a much larger figure. For example, in a particular locality, there may be 100 persons homeless on an average night; the number of those who are homeless at some point in time during the month could be 300; and the annual total could be in the thousands" (Peroff, 1987, p. 35).

Burt and associates (2001) reveal that because "it is very difficult to find most homeless people if you give yourself one day to do it" (p. 25) (i.e., "point-in-time count[ing] has inherent limits" ([Hombs, 2001, p. 8]), "data reflecting a longer period—for example, one year—capture many of the people experiencing short-term crises who leave homelessness as well as the additional people entering short-term homelessness" (Burt, 2001, p. 4). The consensus is that while "point-in-time data are the best way to

understand the magnitude of homelessness on a daily basis" (NAEH, 2003, p. 4), they are inadequate in portraying the full scope of the homeless problem; that to "discover the dimensions of the problem it is important to count homeless people over an extended period of time in a community, rather than to undertake a count on a one-day or one-night basis" (Hombs, 2001, p. 6): "Period prevalence estimates are particularly important for planning purposes because they include individuals who experience short-term episodes of homelessness" (Ringwalt, Greene, Robertson, & McPheeters, 1998, p. 1326). Shinn and Weitzman (1996) provide a nice encapsulation of the issue as follows:

Homelessness is more like a river than a lake. Most people do not stay homeless forever: on any given day, some find housing and others become homeless. Thus, far more people are homeless over an extended period of time than on any given night. To estimate the numbers of people homeless over a period of time, we must examine both the capacity of the river and its speed of flow. (p. 110)

What We Know About the Numbers

Before we review the demographic data in Chapter 3, given the analysis just provided, we can cull out several themes associated with counting homeless people in the United States—caveats for our voyage if you will. First, findings (i.e., numbers) are often controversial (Alker, 1992): "There has been enormous controversy over the numbers since homelessness began to burgeon in the early 1980s" (Hombs, 2001, p. 7); "findings are often contradictory and it is difficult to acquire a realistic picture of homelessness" (Moore, 2007, p. 6). Debates about numbers rage (Mihaly, 1991; Snow & Anderson, 1993): "Estimation of the prevalence of homelessness is fraught with problems and, no matter which method is used, it is likely to be criticized by someone" (Toro, 1998, p. 120). Or, as Rollinson and Pardeck (2006) describe the estimation landscape, the difficulties we outlined earlier "leave nearly all attempts at counting open to criticism" (p. 8).

Second, existing estimates need to be consumed guardedly (Brennan et al., 1978; Shlay & Rossi, 1992; Whitbeck & Hoyt, 1999):

With invisibility established as a necessary protective cover, and an infinite number of places to hide at night, the only reasonable and honest answer to the question of how many homeless people there are in the United States is this: there is no one who knows for sure and only a handful can venture an intelligent estimate. (Hombs & Snyder, 1982, p. 9)

"Since the numbers provided by various researchers and agencies that have investigated this question are as varied as the purposes and

methodologies employed in their quests" (Stronge, 1992a, p. 9), it is "fair to say that substantial uncertainty persists over the numbers" (Rollinson & Pardeck, 2006, p. 8). Thus, it is extremely difficult to interpret the available data (Kidd & Scrimenti, 2004, p. 331).

Third, given variations in definitions, measurement strategies, census takers, homeless groups, and so forth, in the body of available studies, it is very difficult to aggregate results across research reports (Greene et al., 1997; Johnson, 1988).

Finally, there is a consensus that given the extensive use of point-in-time methods, the temporary and episodically homeless are undercounted and those who remain homeless for a long time are overrepresented in homeless counts (Moore, 2007; Ringwalt, Greene, Robertson, & McPheeters, 1998; Shinn & Weitzman, 1996). Or more concretely, "the proportion of those who have been homeless for a long time [is] exaggerated" (Burt et al., 2001, p. 163). This is the case "simply because point-in-time snapshots cannot adequately represent the large number of persons who are homeless for only short periods" (Burt et al., 2001, p. 162).

A Note on Heterogeneity

There are two generalizations in the scholarship about individuals on the wrong side of the housing divide. First, almost all of them are poor. Second, the homeless are not a single entity but rather a "highly heterogeneous group" (Bassuk, 1984; Jahiel, 1992d; Johnson, 1988, p. 55). We examine the poverty issue in Chapter 2. Here we drive home lesson number two: "If there is one point of agreement about the homeless, it is that they do not constitute a homogeneous population" (Snow & Anderson, 1993, p. 36)⁷: "Perhaps the most important findings of this research are that homelessness is a multifaceted issue, that homeless people have a variety of problems and needs, and that the homeless population contains subtypes that need to be distinguished so that the phenomenon of homelessness can be understood more fully" (Roth et al., 1992, p. 210). Research reviewed in Chapter 2 shows that "variations exist in the homeless population on such basic dimensions as sex, race, and age" (Roth et al., 1992, p. 199). The homeless population is "heterogeneous with respect to the duration of homelessness, marital history, ethnicity, education, previous occupation, socioeconomic status, welfare experience, geographic mobility, current means of subsistence, health status, alcohol or drug use, mental disorder, and history of criminal actions or victimization. About the only common feature is extreme poverty" (Jahiel, 1992c, p. 12).

Equally important, there is considerable diversity within the various disaggregated homeless subgroups (Kipke et al., 1997); that is, "even within subgroups, characteristics may differ considerably" (Burt et al., 2001, p. 63). As an example, we know that street youth are quite varied on many dimensions (Auerswald & Eyre, 2002; Hammer et al., 2002). Youngsters on

the street make up a “population [that] is heterogeneous in nature and comprised of different subcultural groups” (Kipke et al., 1997, p. 658), “youth who have diverse life experiences and reasons for living or spending time on the street” (Kipke et al., 1997, p. 657).

❖ CONCLUSION

In this introductory chapter, we unpacked the concept of homelessness as a prelude to examining the history of homelessness in Chapter 2. We reported that what appears oftentimes as a rather simple and straightforward idea is actually quite complex and nuanced. We explored the place of definitional problems in the complexity narrative. We also observed that the variety of lenses used to understand and prevent homelessness helps complexify the concept. We revealed how the diverse nature of the homeless population makes understanding more difficult to secure. Next we developed an initial definition of homelessness, employing both the general literature and official government documents on homelessness. In the third part of the chapter, we presented the framework that we use in this volume to portray homelessness and the strategies to cushion its effects or to prevent it altogether. We broke off three concepts for analysis: household composition, residency, and severity. We turn to the other components of the framework (causes, impacts, and solutions) in later parts of the book. We closed with an extensive discussion on the enumeration of the homeless, documenting that counting homeless persons is an incredibly uneven process. In Chapter 3, we review the demographics in the homeless chronicle, keeping in mind definitions, insights, and cautions presented in this chapter. Before we do so, however, we provide a brief history of homelessness in the United States.

❖ NOTES

1. While we acknowledge that homelessness is an international problem (Brickner, 1985; Farrow, Deisher, Brown, Kulig, & Kipke, 1992; Glasser, 1994; Spence, Stephens, & Parks, 2004), our focus herein is on the United States.

2. Jencks (1994) argues that we should be attentive to separating voluntarily and involuntarily doubled-up individuals and families in counts of homelessness.

3. We examine the history of homelessness in Chapter 2.

4. Roth et al. (1992) remind us, however, that “the major analysis of the homeless issue has been developed in the mental health field” (p. 200).

5. In this book, we use the word “children” for accompanied homeless minors and the word “youth” for unaccompanied homeless minors.

6. This is not always as clear as it appears, however. For example, a number of studies confirm that some homeless persons find shelters and cheap hotels to be more dangerous (i.e., less home-like) than sleeping in public spaces (Jencks, 1994; Stefl, 1987).

7. Shlay and Rossi (1992) acknowledge, however, that when contrasted with the general population, the homeless do appear as a more homogeneous population.