Homelessness in Los Angeles County:

Assessing the Situation

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Abstract

On any given night, at least 578,000 people sleep on the street, according to federal numbers; this is a fact. The city with the highest concentration of homeless people in the United States is Los Angeles. The homeless population has been pushed by city officials out of downtown Metropolitan LA in an act of gentrification, into Skid row, where resources and needs are not being met. Behaviors and conditions associated with homeless individuals vary as drug and alcohol abuse is a common stereotype. The sociodemographic among homeless varies as well where women and youth are found to have the most needs unmet by the city.

Keywords: homeless, Skid row, gentrification, abuse, stereotype, women, youth
Introduction

Homelessness is a multifaceted issue that plagues hundreds of thousands of people each year and is a steadily increasing problem in American society today. There is no other place where the effects of homelessness are more evident than in the city of Los Angeles, California specifically within an area of downtown LA known as “Skid Row”. The problem of homelessness holds its historical roots in Skidrow, as this area was agricultural until the railroads first entered Los Angeles, in the 1870s. The railroads brought industrialization to the city and with it came a never-ending flow of short-term, typically single-male workers. The railroads themselves added to the transient nature of downtown as train crews “laid over” between assignments resulting in an influx of small hotel openings, brothels, and bars. Skid row’s proximity to the railroad also allowed for migrants primary introduction into Los Angeles, including those who migrated for economic resources from elsewhere in the United States. With the population of Los Angeles exponentially growing, the recession in the 1990s resulted in many middle class families breaking up, with both single adults on their own and single adults (mostly women) with children arriving in Skid Row and in need of shelter and other assistance. Missions and shelters sprung up, as temporary and permanent housing was heavily needed for these families.

Skidrow became a melting pot of low and no income families and individuals, many having problems with addiction, gang affiliation, mental disorders, and constant economic and social pressures associated with simply not having a
permanent place of residence. Exploration of different factors including reasons for homelessness, behavioral patterns among homeless, stereotypes, gentrification, healthcare and support, legality of homelessness, and age demographic all play crucial roles when discussing and analyzing the characteristics and margins of what it means to be “homeless”.

**Homelessness as a whole**

Countless studies have been undertaken in attempting to understand the primary reasons behind the origins of homelessness. Experts blame increasing rents, low wages, and very high unemployment rates as the homeless population increased 12% in the past two years in both the city and county of Los Angeles (LA Times, 2015). The increasing rent rates coincide with lack of affordable housing as the city’s affordable housing fund, which in 2008 totaled $108 million, plunged to $26 million in 2014 (et al. LA Times). Increasing political pressures on the homelessness issue has officials trying to provide more money, but political backing to build housing throughout the county has been a serious struggle. Los Angeles’ location is also a prime hotspot for the homeless community as far as climate is concerned; its warm weather and mild winters provide a more comfortable living seen for individuals and families without permanent residences.

The homeless population is not restricted to Skidrow however as an abundance of street encampments have sprung up lining freeways, and filling underpasses; the LA Homeless Services Authority (the forward most authority for serving under-served individuals) received 767 calls about street encampments in 2014, up 60% from the 479 in 2013 (et al. LA Times). Organizations who provide
services to the homeless on Skid Row say the situation there in terms of crime and health problems is the worst in years.

**Associated Behaviors and Conditions**

Lack of affordable housing is only the definition of homelessness, but the phrase encompasses many more factors a few of which include behaviors and conditions exhibited by homeless individuals. An interesting comparison of differential patterns of mental disorders among homeless in Madrid and Los Angeles was conducted (et al. Muñoz, 1998). The study assessed a number of mental disorders including major depression, dysthymia, cognitive impairment, and schizophrenia among 262 homeless people in Madrid and 1563 homeless people. The study concluded that most subjects across both cities first experienced symptoms of their mental disorders before first becoming homeless. The only significant difference was that all of the depressed adults in Madrid experienced depression prior to first becoming homeless, whereas this was the case for only 59.1% of LA depressed homeless people (et al. Muñoz, 1998). Cultural differences can be attributed to many of the differences in the data for mental disorders.

Muñoz and colleagues also conducted an empirical comparison of substance and alcohol dependence patterns in the homeless in Madrid and Los Angeles (et al. Muñoz, 2002). Each study was conducted independently in the respective city: The results show different sociodemographic profiles for each city based off of three categories including social, emotional, and health problems. The LA sample has significantly higher rates of health problems associated with use of opioids and alcohol, and a lower rate of emotional problems associated with alcohol. The
average age of sample individuals in Madrid were also higher than those of sample individuals in LA (Mean age, MA: 42.0, LA: 32.4) however the average years of schooling per individual differed slightly (Mean years of school, MA: 8.4, LA: 11.5). A number of other factors were included in the study including number of children, marital status, symptoms experienced previous to homelessness vs. post-homelessness, gender and employment rates. “While rates of substance dependence are high in both samples alcohol and drug problems are clearly more endemic among the LA homeless” (Muñoz, 2002). From these studies it can be concluded that associated behaviors (alcohol and drug dependency) and conditions (mental disorders) play a key role in the everyday lives of the homeless populations in both cities.

**Stereotypes**

Society tends to dehumanize the homeless population in America as common stereotypes of homeless include dangerous, criminals, blame for current condition, substance abuse and addiction, mentally ill, and a multitude of oppressive misconceptions. A study was conducted employing a field experiment to assess whether interpersonal contact changed individuals’ attitude of homeless individuals (et al. Knecht, 2009). Volunteers for Project Homeless—an event that provides social services to homeless—were given a pre- and post-survey regarding conceptions of the homeless population. After volunteering, respondents were far less likely to judge homeless on an individual characteristic basis (i.e. substance abuse or work aversion).
Stereotypes and actual number of homeless individuals were also assessed in a study undertaken by Michael Cousineau in Los Angeles County; via a phone survey, the study compares the formerly homeless with those who have never been homeless on several characteristics including socioeconomic status, citizenship, place of birth, length of stay in Los Angeles, and health status. Racial demographic was also taken into account with results of homelessness ranging in the high percentages when compared to total population within the African-American community. Stereotypes and thoughts on homeless correlation with substance abuse, mental condition, and addiction were prominent among individuals who had not experienced homelessness (Cousineau, 2001). There are few differences when comparing place of birth, citizenship status, or length of residence in the study as well, yet many homeless have been able to achieve at basic economic stability. Implications for the development of intervention and prevention programs are discussed for homeless that strongly correspond with the correlated stereotypes.

**Gentrification and Legality**

Despite the enormous problem of homelessness in Los Angeles County, little efforts have been made to thwart the problems, as there have been many propositions to address legislation regarding the homeless population; the homeless population has been pushed aside-almost quarantined inside of Skid row as the crime in downtown LA increases. As homeless population increases, friction is created between the wealthy. Nowhere is this more prevalent than downtown: “the forces of rapid gentrification are crashing up against the chronic poverty, homelessness and crime that have long been a part of life in the city center. Police
and residents say the influx of new lofts, luxury high-rise apartments, bars and eateries have made new downtown dwellers easy targets for street crime” (Poston et al. 2015). The gentrification including the rise in police force in downtown has cornered the homeless population in Skid row where police seldom stop even if a blatant crime is being committed. Police brutality and harassment are also very evident in Skid row (Poston et al. 2015).

It is technically illegal to be homeless in Los Angeles. As the number of people living in poverty jumped nearly 20 percent over the last decade, the country lost about 10,000 units of affordable public housing annually (Davis, 2015). With these drastic increases in numbers of homeless, one would think government officials would be making an effort to halt rising numbers however this is not the case: “The city council voted 14-1 to make it easier to confiscate the possessions of homeless people, reducing the three-day notice currently required to 24 hours (and subjecting bulky items, such as mattresses, to immediate removal)” (Davis, 2015). This promotes criminalization and enforcement of homeless people-denoting more tax payer funds towards imprisonment and search and seizure efforts-and makes it easier for police to take what little possessions the homeless have: “More than half the $100 million a year L.A. spends combatting homelessness — as much as $87.3 million — goes to the police, who use it to patrol homeless communities and put people in jail” (Davis, 2015). Garcetti, the mayor of Los Angeles claims that ending homelessness is one of his top priorities as mayor; however, these claims have not been fulfilled as the homeless population steadily increases per year.
Support

If the city politicians are not walking the walk when it comes to helping the homeless in Los Angeles, who is? Are there limits to this support? The answer lies in the missions of Skid row, many of which provide temporary housing, food, clothing, and support programs for drug and alcohol abuse. A few of these missions include The Midnight Mission and Fred Jordan Mission both of which have been in the area for over one hundred years, serving the community. Though there are support programs and missions in place for people living on the streets, there are significant limitations to this support. Finding support can be especially difficult for homeless women, which is known as one of the most needy groups of homeless people when it comes to public resources. A study was conducted by Teruya and colleagues assessing 1,331 homeless women’s health and health care disparities between different race and ethnicities including African American, Latina, and white women. The study explored other factors including predisposition to poor health based on unmet needs for medical care; they found that white, non-Latina women reported their unmet needs more often and women suffering from drug abuse, violence, or depression were most in need of care (Teruya, 2011). Women also were found to have more needs than men in general.

Youth

One of the chief concerns surrounding homelessness in Los Angeles is the sociodemographic statistic of youth that are homeless and in danger of becoming so. The number of homeless youth in Los Angeles continues to rise, with numbers
close to 9,000, though many experts and shelters say the total is much higher, citing the county’s failing child welfare system as the main cause. Los Angeles contains one welfare center bordering Macarthur Park in the Salvadorian district of the city however it is seldom utilized by individuals. According to the co-chair of the Hollywood Homeless Youth Partnership, Arlene Schneir, “about 40 percent of homeless youth in Hollywood have been removed from their families and placed in child welfare at some point in their life.” An estimated 200,000 youth under the age of 18 and thousands more ages 18-24 experience some type of homelessness every year in California; this statistic is astronomical when compared to homeless youth populations in other states. In 2013, there were approximately 9,000 homeless youth living in Los Angeles (Sacks, 2013).

A key problem that youth support agencies face is finding homeless youth in the city due to many being undocumented and at large; youth often fall through the cracks when discussing county-wide homeless counts. The city only has four registered drop-in centers specifically for youth and many of these centers are over capacity, provide limited educational support and intervention services. Homeless youth often tend to be products of foster care, abuse, and familial difficulties resulting in the need for resources that agencies just cannot provide (Zima, 1994). It could be argued that many of these youth remain homeless because finding help is too difficult and services are overflowing; there are many programs and organizations dedicated to aiding homeless youth but as Tara Reid, from the Children’s Hospital Los Angeles puts it “the whole system is like a ball of string; we all have our own color, but we can’t seem to get tied together” (Sacks, 2013).
Conclusion

Homelessness is an increasing problem across the United States and can be contributed to a lack of affordable housing; these issues have become an inert part of Los Angeles County as services within the city prohibit limit efforts to eradicate homelessness. With this being said, the Los Angeles city council and other political figures within the system have expressed concern regarding the problem, however, have not attempted to address it. Missions in Skid row and in downtown LA have sprung up in response but are not correlated with government money. A chief concern among the homeless lies within the demographic as more and more youth are falling through the educational and social cracks of the city. Homelessness will continue to plague Los Angeles as long as money and serious resources are not invested towards thwarting this difficult situation.
References


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