

18 Dec 2009

Homeless in The Land of Dreams



A homeless person in San Diego, California
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As America experiences an increase in 'first-time' homelessness, activists bemoan city ordinances that keep charities from lending a helping hand, perpetuate laws that stigmatize the homeless and often lead to harassment, beatings, rapes and even human torching – much of which is available for your entertainment on 'reality TV,' Julianne Geiger writes for ISN Security Watch.

Watch.

By Julianne Geiger for ISN Security Watch

In 1987, the service system for the homeless received a serious upgrade - almost doubling the number of available beds nationwide in the 1990s, and increasing shelter capacity by 20 percent. Emergency food services, transitional and permanent housing with supportive services for the disabled also grew. Despite the improvements, 1 percent of America's population remains homeless on any given day.

In America, homelessness is considered a revolving-door crisis. It is quickly addressed with emergency food and shelter services, oftentimes temporary housing.

The good news is, in the latter half of 2008 and beginning of 2009, the US has experienced a decrease in the 'chronically homeless.' The bad news is that it seems to be completely negated by an increase in 'first-time' homelessness.

Beyond poverty and unemployment

There is more to being homeless than simply poverty and unemployment.

According to the US Conference of Mayors Report 2008, the most common shared characteristic among the homeless is severe mental illness. They account for nearly 30 percent of the homeless population, and only 12 percent of the actual population.

Other commonalities include those who have experienced domestic violence, those battling drug and alcohol addictions, war veterans and the physically disabled. Many of the homeless population are employed, yet find themselves homeless due to unaffordable housing, the rising cost of healthcare, or as the only visible alternative to domestic violence.

Neil Donovan, executive director of the National Coalition for the Homeless, told ISN Security Watch that the most common underlying causes of homelessness are unaffordable housing and insufficient living-wage jobs. Other commonalities such as mental illness and substance abuse are not causes, Donovan stresses, merely symptoms exacerbated among the homeless.

The politics of helping hands

A recent report on faith-based programs conducted by The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life showed that in 2009, 52 percent of registered voters felt that religious organizations were best able to feed the homeless. This is compared to 40 percent of registered voters who thought that religious groups were best able to feed the

homeless in 2001.

Alarmingly, only 21 percent of registered voters felt that the government was best able to feed the homeless, and 21 percent felt that non-religious groups were the best situated. This is down from 28 percent and 25 percent in 2001, respectively.

Although religious organizations may be at the forefront when it comes to supplying disenfranchised Americans with food and shelter, it is despite the many obstacles thrown in their way.

One Phoenix-based church was ordered to stop its pancake worship service in November when a judge ruled that the church was essentially operating a charity dining hall located in a primarily residential zone. Charity dining halls may only operate in commercial zones. The decision affected all Phoenix churches with food-outreach programs in residential areas. The church appealed but lost. The appellate court maintained that "feeding the homeless at a place of worship can be banned by city ordinance."

The ban on feeding the homeless did not stop there. The city of Las Vegas issued an ordinance making it illegal for anyone to feed the homeless in a public place, but was later dumped.

Orlando had a similar law that was also found to be unconstitutional after a two-year court battle. The court found "no rational basis for the ordinance."

Tulin Ozdeger, Civil Rights Program director for the National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty (NLCHP), told ISN Security Watch they are currently fighting similar laws in other cities, including one in Dallas that limits feeding the homeless to two locations within the city.

Prevention

Most programs such as food and shelter are related to servicing those who have already been displaced, but the trend is now shifting toward preventing the displacement before it happens.

One of these preventative programs is a federally funded rapid rehousing program, which is now being implemented nation-wide. The program is designed to stave off the inevitable housing loss of those who face eviction for reasons such as non-payment or failure to maintain. It is also a measure intended to quicken the pace of what used to be a year-long re-housing process for those who had been displaced. The process also included programs to remedy the original reasons for displacement.

Individual states are receiving the \$1.5 billion federal housing stimulus package in two parts: the prevention segment that helps renters who are in eminent danger of losing their home by providing up to three months of rent, and if necessary, by paying unpaid utility bills; and the rapid rehousing segment that helps displaced persons by providing a security deposit and by paying 12 or 15 months worth of rent.

Although in theory the stimulus package will address the needs of the otherwise-would-be-homeless, in an interview with ISN Security Watch, Donovan was quick to express respect for the Obama administration before equating the \$1.5 billion stimulus package to throwing a kid's life preserver at a drowning adult – it just won't be enough.

Trading immediate needs for preventative programs is not the answer, either, according to the National Coalition for the Homeless.

According to Donovan, pulling funds for emergency shelters in favor of preventative programs would be tantamount to "instituting physical fitness and good eating programs while ignoring people who are already obese."

It denies the existence of a segment of the population who already exist but who won't fit into the new program, he said. "We can't avoid or prevent misfortune."

Mark Criss, executive director of the City Rescue Mission of Lansing, Michigan, said his faith-based mission had an annual budget of \$1.2 million, that homeless seeking help there were treated as "guests" rather than "clients," and that "the homeless and working poor know the difference."

One reason faith-based groups are often more successful than government organizations in terms of helping the poor and homeless is that "our focus is to 'go where the need is', Criss told ISN Security Watch.

And, indeed, demand appears to be on the increase. Currently, the mission serves 90,000 meals a year, and demand for beds has increased by 20 percent annually for the past five years. Criss said that the mission currently houses up to 100 homeless, almost half of them women and children.

Criss said that around half of their 'guests' had drug or alcohol addictions, around one-fourth were mentally ill and the remainder were likely the victims of financial or family crises of some sort.

The Lansing rescue mission does not receive government funding, which Criss described as a "hindrance to sharing our faith and helping others."

Reality TV

Reality television is the newest rage, and the homeless are no exception. Tagged "bum-fight" videos, they are circulated on YouTube, through e-mails, and even \$20 DVDs thanks to producers Ryan McPherson, Zachary Bubeck, Daniel J Tanner and Michael Slyman.

McPherson and company produced a bum-fighting video along with several sequels, which are now illegal in the UK, New Zealand, and Canada. As part of a settlement, the producers have agreed to cease distribution.

But what is most disturbing about the videos is not the fact that they sold 300,000 copies prior to the settlement, or that they sold the rights to the film for nearly \$20 million – it is the snickering of the defendants when asked to comment on the sentencing: community service for the homeless.

The producers compensated a homeless war veteran with food in return for having him pull his own tooth out with a pair of pliers on camera. They also gave a couple of homeless men with a history of substance abuse a few drinks and a few dollars and then filmed them beating each other to the point of broken bones (the homeless men were honorably discharged servicemen who happened to be best friends). McPherson (17 at the time of the filmmaking) and Bubeck eventually served 180 days in jail for failing to serve the community service hours.

When ISN Security Watch asked Donovan why crimes against the homeless seemed so appealing to this younger age group, he said that the National Coalition for the Homeless had many employees who had formerly been homeless, so he didn't have to guess. On most occasions, he said, the homeless victims had been asleep and were attacked unprovoked, spray painted or beaten, for instance, out of boredom.

Better than TV

In 2008, [cars slowed to watch as a group of Cleveland teenagers beat a homeless man, Anthony Waters, until he staggered into a nearby towing company parking lot. Waters died at the hospital from his injuries.](#)

Unfortunately, this type of crime toward the homeless from this type of perpetrator is all too familiar in the US. [The National Coalition for the Homeless reports](#) that in 2007, 106 homeless were subjected to violent attacks – up 13 percent from 2006. The crimes took place in 22 different states and included severe attacks, 28 of which were fatal – up 40 percent from 2006.

Common forms of attacks against the homeless include shootings, stabbings, beatings, rapes and even human torching, and most of the homeless who experienced such attacks were either middle-aged or elderly.

Those responsible for these crimes against the homeless tend to be young men or boys. Eighty-six percent of those convicted were 25 or under, and 64 percent fell between the ages of 13 and 19. Motives range from

opportunity to boredom, from thrill-seeking to 'because-I-could.' Not all motives are categorized and tracked, as crimes against the homeless are not technically a hate crime - at least not yet.

The National Coalition for the Homeless and others are pushing for a Hate Crimes Statistics Act that would provide for better tracking of crimes against the homeless, similar to other hate crimes. The bill would not categorize crimes against the homeless as hate crimes, but would treat crimes as hate crimes for the purposes of tracking.

Criminalizing the homeless

It would be rare that a group of boys aged 13 – 18 would find it socially acceptable, let alone amusing to spray paint or beat just anyone. So why target the homeless?

Some American cities have made illegal certain actions that are typical of the homeless. Loitering, begging, camping or sleeping in public, sitting, or as mentioned above, feeding the homeless. Cities strive to clear streets, bus terminals and other public areas of the homeless population. Unfortunately, shelters are often full, and the homeless have nowhere else to go.

Making these actions illegal allows police to essentially sweep up the homeless and if desired, haul them off to jail.

"These are used to clear them out of places - out of site," Tulin Ozdeger told ISN Security Watch when referring to the various city ordinances. "In most cities, they are forced to sleep out - it essentially criminalizes the homeless."

Ozdeger believes this goes a long way to sending a message to the community that the homeless should be treated as "second-class citizens" and that "they are not to be treated like everyone else."

"We think more long-term solutions rather than laws that penalize are the answer," Ozdeger said. This includes more resources toward positive services such as shelters and less on the penal system, which are two to three times more costly than shelters.

Dawn of a new era?

In October, for the first time, national homeless advocates were invited to an Interagency Council on Homelessness meeting of cabinet secretaries to present policy recommendations for the National Strategic Plan to End Homelessness.

The advocates stressed that homelessness was a growing problem, which indicated a growing need for federal intervention. They also stressed the need for a focus of five fundamentals: housing, income, healthcare, education and civil rights. Finally, the advocates stressed that the plan needed to include opinions from all stakeholders, particularly the homeless.

"It blows my mind why we don't recognize it as a moral imperative that we have to act on," Donovan said.

Julianne Geiger is a freelance writer and editor based in the US.

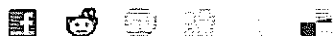


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