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<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1s93h071>

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Publication Date

2006-10-01

Homelessness

How Did We Get Here and What Can We Do?

by Myrna Hant



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ON MAY 25, 1999, a 54-year-old homeless woman, Margaret Mitchell, was wheeling a shopping cart in an affluent neighborhood in Los Angeles. When two police officers came over to find out if she had stolen the cart, the 5'1" woman, obviously deranged, rummaged through her belongings, pulled out a screwdriver and began threatening the officers. One of the officers fired his gun and killed Ms. Mitchell. The reaction to the death catapulted the incident into national news, some argued because what happened was a raced event whose players were African American, Asian American and Caucasian. Besides the tragedy of such misdirected violence, the questions have to be asked: How do we tolerate so many homeless people on our streets and how can we ever find creative solutions?

The statistics in Los Angeles County alone testify to a social crisis that can no longer be ignored. In 2005, LAHSA (Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority) conducted an extensive count of the homeless in the County. According to their findings, there are between 88,000 and 90,000 homeless people in Los Angeles County and 14,000 shelter beds are available on any given night. Of the homeless population, 25% are families, most typically headed by a woman, and somewhere between 25 to 30% are females. Of the

chronically homeless, defined as “an unaccompanied individual with a disabling condition who has been continually homeless for one year or more or has experienced four or more episodes of homelessness within the past 3 years,” about 32% are women. The largest growth in the homeless population is women with children. Of the population of homeless women, 24% reported experiencing domestic violence.

The assumption that most of the homeless suffer from drug and/or alcohol addiction or from mental illness is not confirmed by data from LAHSA. Causes for homelessness include loss of job (24%), alcohol or drug use (21%), conflicts with family members (11%), mental illness issues (7%), and other causes (13%).

How Did We Get Here?

Frequently we hear about skid row in Los Angeles, an area that now houses up to 10,000 homeless people. (The term comes from Skid Road in Seattle, a street where logs were skidded into the water for delivery to a lumber mill. When the Depression came, the area declined and “skid row” became linked with bad neighborhoods.) Increasingly, though, neighborhoods, regardless of their affluence, are becoming saturated with the homeless.

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The size of the current homeless population can be in part attributed to low-wage jobs, working poor who cannot pay their bills, an egregious lack of affordable housing, and increasing globalization in recent years.

One of the most significant causes, though, is the Lanterman-Petris-Short Act, a California law enacted on July 1, 1972, which set a standard for mental-health assessment and treatment across the country. Essentially the law proclaimed that mentally impaired have the civil right to decide whether they should be placed in state-run mental hospitals for treatment, which precludes involuntary commitment for those with developmental disabilities or suffering from chronic alcoholism. Its long-term results were that the mentally impaired and alcoholics essentially were dumped onto the streets without any care at all. Advancements in pharmaceutical treatments for mental illness also hastened the closing of many state-run facilities, leaving a highly vulnerable population to fend for themselves. Such individuals often ended up in local jails and prison. Today the Custody Division of the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department has become the largest mental health institute in the country with a population of nearly 2,500 mentally ill inmates.

A dramatic occurrence in 2001, the death of a 19-year-old college student, Laura Wilcox, recently precipitated some legislative action. During a winter break from Haverford College, Laura was volunteering in a mental-health clinic in Nevada City when a man, who had been unwilling to seek treatment or take psychotropic medications, shot and killed her and two others. A California statute, which allows the courts to get involved in outpatient requirements for the mentally ill, entitled Laura's Law, went into effect on January 1, 2003. The statute included provisions for state funding, but each county must decide whether to implement such a program.

Are There Any Creative Solutions?

LA Police Chief William Bratton has long advocated a "broken windows" approach, based upon James Q. Wilson and George L. Kelling's article, "Broken Windows: The Police and Neighborhood Safety," in *The Atlantic Monthly* (March, 1982, 29–38), where the authors argue for fixing problems while they're small:

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The PATHMall offers homeless people over 20 on-site social service providers, including case management, substance abuse counseling, a job center, mental health services, legal advocacy, healthcare, and a hair salon

“Consider a building with a few broken windows. If the windows are not repaired, the tendency is for vandals to break a few more windows. Eventually, they may even break into the building and if it’s unoccupied, perhaps become squatters or light fires inside.” Bratton’s “broken windows” approach, although quite successful in New York City, has been mired in legal battles in Los Angeles. In an effort to solve small problems, some homeless agencies in Los Angeles have banded together to reduce the number of homeless who get arrested for quality-of-life ordinances (jaywalking and not showing up in court, public nuisance, and so on) by establishing a Homeless Court. Rather than jail time, sentences may stipulate social services or substance-abuse programs.

The U.S. will spend \$1.5 billion on the homeless in 2006 with two basic funding strategies. The first focuses on getting people quickly into permanent housing and providing supportive services immediately. The second strategy is to encourage collaborations among non-profit service agencies. In Los Angeles at present, there are over 90 agencies that provide services for the homeless.

One of the most unique solutions is an organization called P.A.T.H. (People Assisting the Homeless). It is a “mall” concept for the homeless. An individual can obtain all types of assistance—from hygiene (showers, hair salon, health clinic) to education (obtaining a GED) to job search skills to a court appearance for minor offenses to rehabilitation programs (mental or substance abuse) to temporary housing—in one building. P.A.T.H. currently serves 10,000 homeless individuals a year. Of those, 1200 receive mental health assistance, 500 find permanent employment, 850 receive health care, and thousands obtain food and haircuts. P.A.T.H.’s model is based upon “continuum of care,” a phrase popularized by Andrew Cuomo, who served as Secretary of Housing and Urban Development from 1997 to 2001: This continuum includes:

1. Street outreach caseworkers
2. Emergency housing program
3. Access to services
4. Transitional housing program; and ultimately, affordable housing.

Is homelessness a gendered issue? Yes, it is in the sense that a woman typically earns 74 cents to the dollar that a man earns. As a result, women are less likely to be able to pay their bills, especially when they are also much more likely to be supporting children. Since women are still more likely than men to hold low-paying jobs, they can be more subject to the vicissitudes of the economy. A divorced woman can see her economic lifestyle shrink as much as 75% from what it was while married, a far more precipitous loss than for a divorced man. And domestic violence, which is the cause for homelessness among almost one-quarter of women who become homeless, affects women disproportionately. Because the fastest growing population of the homeless is families, and homeless families are mostly composed of women and children, more services will be needed that take into account pediatric care and schooling. Homelessness is a societal problem, however, that requires creative and enduring solutions, regardless of whether the recipients are women or men.



Myrna Hant (shown above left with 2006 Renaissance Award winner Sheretta Thomas) is a CSW Research Scholar and Chair of the Board of P.A.T.H. (<http://www.ePATH.org>). In 2006, she established the CSW Renaissance Award, an undergraduate scholarship that rewards the rebirth of academic aspirations among women whose college careers were interrupted or delayed by family and/or career obligations and that encourages achievement in the pursuit of a bachelor’s degree at UCLA.