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Homelessness in America

Timothy D. Naegele *

Poverty, and living in vehicles or on the streets or wherever, has reached epidemic proportions in the United States, resembling the Great Depression era for many. The author believes that there are a myriad of causes, including untreated mental health problems, the absence of work or homes or other dwellings at affordable prices, and – to be blunt – a lifestyle that encourages that way of living. The Brooke Amendment and the Housing

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Allowance program that morphed into the Section 8 housing program have been vital in providing a critical safety net for many. But, the author says, existing federal programs are not enough; and severe budgetary and bureaucratic constraints challenge even the most creative seekers of solutions to these problems. Banks and other financial institutions partner with housing authorities and builders, but vastly more is needed. The author shares examples of possible solutions in this article, and discusses how Congress and America’s financial institutions can help.

It had been raining hard, and I took a walk outside in small-town America and passed by what appeared to be a grocery or other cart stacked high with someone’s earthly possessions. No one was around; and it was covered with plastic in part, to protect it from the water. When I came back that way, 15 or so minutes later, the cart and its user were gone. Not far away, on another night, I saw someone wrapped up in a sleeping bag like a mummy, stretched out on hard concrete in an office-building courtyard. A homeless male is often present in the same courtyard, at least part of each night. Earlier, I saw him near a small lake that is miles away. He wheeled his bike and little trailer by; and he must be very cold, especially at night.

Two homeless women serve as striking examples, too. One, an elderly woman in the bushes near a Costco warehouse was sorting out massive quantities of her possessions, which were spread out in front of her. Later I saw a female uniformed police officer talking with her. Another woman watched dogs play at a dog park, where their owners tended to them caringly. Before that and later, I saw her sitting beside a small mound of her possessions on a lawn, next to a busy street as cars passed by.

So go the homeless in the United States today, human beings existing largely in the shadows, and trying to survive amidst deprivation, humiliation and often staggeringly-difficult weather conditions with little or no money, food or shelter. The elderly, with Social Security retirement benefits being inadequate to cover the cost of housing⁴ – and Section 8 housing constituting no viable alternative even for veterans² – and families with young children, provide a broad spectrum and set of excruciating challenges.

¹ Yearly benefit increases have been offset by increased Medicare premiums, thus leaving recipients with no net gains, while the cost of housing and other essentials have risen dramatically.

² The author wrote the Brooke Amendment for public housing, and the Experimental Housing Allowance Program that morphed into Section 8 housing. The latter program provides for “HUD-VASH, a housing voucher program by the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development and Veterans Administration, [which] gives out a certain number of Section 8 subsidized housing vouchers to eligible homeless and otherwise vulnerable U.S. armed forces
Yet so much wealth is nearby, whose recipients often avert their eyes from such sights, like Americans did years ago when my mother was in a wheelchair and people looked away from her. Pity and shame were all they gave, and had, or so it seemed to a young elementary school student. After all, we were living within a few miles of Los Angeles’ fabled “Tinseltown,” or “Hollywood,”

My parents were a “golden couple” with everything going for them. My father was in real estate; and he bought part of the Al Jolson-Ruby Keeler estate in Encino, California, which he planned to subdivide – keeping one of the building sites for us. Plans were completed for a new, lovely home on it. Then, like a bolt of lightning out of the blue, my mother was determined to have the convergence of two rare skin diseases: *Lichen Sclerosus et Atrophicus* and scleroderma. They were diagnosed by doctors at the Scripps Clinic in La Jolla, California, and later treated by doctors who had been trained at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, the state in which my parents were born and raised and where they met in grade school. These conditions occurred before the advent of health insurance, which would have helped our family financially. They affected only the right side of her body; and she came to my sixth grade graduation in a wheelchair. Such conditions ceased abruptly when she had her right leg amputated; and she learned to walk with an artificial leg.

Years later, during the Vietnam War, she organized volunteers at the Red Cross’ offices in Westwood, California, where we lived and where the UCLA campus is located. She was honored for the work that she had done by being named the local chapter’s “Woman of the Year,” in helping U.S. military families and their service members in the war zone connect and cope with the stresses of family emergencies in the states, and emergencies that the service members encountered in Vietnam, Cambodia and elsewhere that the U.S. was engaged. My father worked seven days a week to pay the staggering medical and other bills; and my parents are my only heroes in life.

Today, as a result of the federal Americans with Disabilities Act and other statutes, monumental changes have been made, which were not thought possible when my mother and father struggled with her wheelchair and other issues. For example, accessibility requirements have been levied on public accommodations, which means that simple things like curbs at the corners of streets have been rebuilt into ramps to accommodate wheelchairs; buses today have lifts for such wheelchairs; and the list goes on and on.


It is not too far-fetched to believe that the needs of the homeless can be addressed in a similar comprehensive manner.

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3 My parents were a “golden couple” with everything going for them. My father was in real estate; and he bought part of the Al Jolson-Ruby Keeler estate in Encino, California, which he planned to subdivide – keeping one of the building sites for us. Plans were completed for a new, lovely home on it. Then, like a bolt of lightning out of the blue, my mother was determined to have the convergence of two rare skin diseases: *Lichen Sclerosus et Atrophicus* and scleroderma. They were diagnosed by doctors at the Scripps Clinic in La Jolla, California, and later treated by doctors who had been trained at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, the state in which my parents were born and raised and where they met in grade school. These conditions occurred before the advent of health insurance, which would have helped our family financially. They affected only the right side of her body; and she came to my sixth grade graduation in a wheelchair. Such conditions ceased abruptly when she had her right leg amputated; and she learned to walk with an artificial leg.

where perfect bodies were the lore and bread-and-butter of its movie and television industries. Stigmas attached to those with disabilities – being less than perfect meant not “fitting in” – that much was crystal clear.

Today, homelessness has reached epidemic proportions. On January 7, 2020, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (“HUD”) released its 2019 Annual Homeless Assessment Report to the Congress, which was certified by HUD Secretary Ben Carson. It found that “567,715 persons experienced homelessness on a single night in 2019, an increase of 14,885 people since 2018[, while] homelessness among veterans and families with children continued to fall, declining 2.1 percent and 4.8 percent, respectively, in 2019.”

It added:

There is significant local variation reported from different parts of the country. Twenty-nine states and the District of Columbia reported declines in homelessness between 2018 and 2019, while 21 states reported increases in the number of persons experiencing homelessness. Homelessness in California increased by 21,306 people, or 16.4 percent, which is more than the total national increase of every other state combined.

“The Trump Administration is committed to working with local communities to find effective ways to end homelessness,” said HUD Secretary Ben Carson. “HUD will continue these efforts to help end the suffering of our most vulnerable neighbors in the most compassionate way possible.” “As we look across our nation, we see great progress, but we’re also seeing a continued increase in street homelessness along our West Coast where the cost of housing is extremely high,” said HUD Secretary Ben Carson. “In fact, homelessness in California is at a crisis level and needs to be addressed by local and state leaders with crisis-like urgency. Addressing these challenges will require a broader, community-wide response that engages every level of government to compassionately house our most vulnerable fellow citizens.”

HUD’s national estimate is based upon data reported by approximately 3,000 cities and counties across the nation. Every year on a single night

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in January, planning agencies called “Continuums of Care” (COC), along with tens of thousands of volunteers, seek to identify the number of individuals and families living in emergency shelters, transitional housing programs, and in unsheltered settings. These one-night “snapshot” counts, as well as full-year counts and data from other sources (U.S. Housing Survey, Department of Education), are crucial in understanding the scope of homelessness and measuring progress toward reducing it.

**Key Findings**

On a single night in January 2019, state and local planning agencies (Continuums of Care) reported:

- **567,715 people** were homeless, representing an overall 2.7 percent increase from 2018 but a nearly 11 percent decline since 2010.
- **37,085 veterans** were reported as homeless, a decline of 2.1 percent from 2018 and 50 percent since 2010.
- **53,692 families with children** experienced homelessness last January, down nearly 5 percent from 2018 and more than 32 percent since 2010.
- Homelessness increased in California by 21,306 people, or 16.4 percent, accounting for more than the entire national increase.
- The estimated number of persons experiencing long-term, chronic homelessness increased 8.5 percent between 2018 and 2019. This increase was concentrated on the West Coast, with the largest increases in California. The number of unaccompanied homeless youth and children in 2019 is estimated to be 35,038, a 3.6 percent decline since 2018.

**Homelessness in California**

California reported a large increase of 21,306 persons experiencing homelessness, or 16.4 percent. Last year’s increases are particularly noteworthy among unsheltered individuals and the chronically homeless.

**Veteran Homelessness**

Homelessness among Veterans is half of what was reported in 2010. Last year alone, the number of veterans experiencing homelessness declined by 2.1 percent. These declines are the result of intense planning and targeted interventions, including the close collaboration between HUD and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (“VA”). Both agencies jointly administer the HUD-VA Supportive Housing (“HUD-VASH”) Program, which combines permanent HUD rental assistance with case management and clinical services.
provided by the VA. This year, more than 4,400 veterans, many experiencing chronic forms of homelessness, will find permanent housing and critically needed support services through the HUD-VASH program. An additional 50,000 veterans found permanent housing and supportive services through VA’s continuum of homeless programs.

**Family Homelessness**

Local communities continue to report declines in homelessness among families with children in the U.S. In January of 2019, there were 53,692 family households with children experiencing homelessness, a decline of five percent between 2018 and 2019, and 32 percent between 2007 and 2019. Following HUD’s guidance and data-driven evidence and best practices, local planners are increasingly relying upon interventions to move families into permanent housing more quickly and at lower cost. Communities are using more robust coordinated entry efforts, which have proven to be an effective response in helping families experiencing temporary crises as well as those enduring the most chronic forms of homelessness.

**Chronic Homelessness**

Long-term or chronic homelessness among individuals with disabilities grew 8.5 percent since 2018, while falling 9.4 percent below the levels reported in 2010. This longer trend is due in large measure to more permanent supportive housing opportunities available for people with disabling health conditions who otherwise continually cycle through local shelters or the streets.  

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6 See supra n.5 (emphasis in original; chart omitted); see also https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/20/us/politics/homelessness-trump-california.html (“Homelessness Rises 2.7 Percent, Driven by California’s Crisis, Report Says” – “Ben Carson, the secretary of housing and urban development, blamed welfare programs that he said fostered dependency and despair. . . . Mr. Carson said policies that allowed people to sleep on streets, bridges and other public places were not compassionate. Such policies are creating a ‘health hazard,’ he said, discouraging homeless people from going ’to the places that are actually designed to help them get out of that situation’” – “We know that there is a lot of homelessness in California, but we also know there’s a lot of homelessness nationally, and what’s driving that is increased housing costs,” said Maria Foscarinis, the founder and executive director of the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty”) and https://apnews.com/8014471051d96583dd3b4da8cc52c095 (“HUD reporting 2.7% percent uptick in homeless population” – “The federal government is reporting a 2.7% increase in the nation’s homeless population driven by a spike in California” – “HUD said the increase seen in its January snapshot was caused ‘entirely’ by a 16.4% increase in California’s homeless population” – “The states with the highest rates were New York, Hawaii, California, Oregon and Washington. The District of Columbia had a homelessness rate of 94 per 10,000 people, more than twice as high as New York”) and https://www.latimes.com/politics/story/20191216/supremecourtletsstandrulingthatprotectshomelesswhosleeponsidewalk (“Supreme Court refuses to hear a case about where homeless can sleep”) and https://reason.com/video/
While this data and the conclusions seem positive and uplifting, the author defies anyone – much less the finest trained lawyers in America – to pick their way through the bureaucratic nightmare that is the HUD-VASH Program, its forms and requirements.\textsuperscript{7}

America's homeless face a multitude of challenges, from (1) complex mental and physical health needs, to (2) food and shelter and basic nutrition, to (3) the need for warmth during inclement weather, and (4) safety from those who might seek to pillage what little they have, and to (5) family members who are sometimes indifferent, or have effectively turned their backs on the plight of their homeless relatives, having problems and multifarious challenges of their own.\textsuperscript{8}

They are today's lepers, both forgotten and spurned; and their stories are often tragic. Peter Edelman has written in the UK's \textit{Guardian}:

\begin{quote}
[I]n America, 10 million people, representing two-thirds of all current and former offenders in the country, owe governments a total of $50bn in accumulated fines, fees and other impositions. . . . As a result, poor people lose their liberty and often lose their jobs, are frequently barred from a host of public benefits, may lose custody of their children, and may even lose their right to vote. . . . The use of law enforcement both to criminalize homelessness and to drive the homeless entirely out of cities is increasing, as municipalities enact ever more punitive measures due to shortages of funds for housing and other services. . . . Budget cuts have also led to the further deterioration of mental health and addiction treatment services, making the police the first responders and
\end{quote}

\begin{flushright}
\textsc{losangelesisspendingover1billiontohousethehomelessitsfailing/#} ("Los Angeles Is Spending Over $1 Billion To House the Homeless. It's Failing") and \textsc{https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-7834965/California-salon-owner-welcomes-Trump-intervention-growing-homelessness-crisis.html} ("California salon owner welcomes a Trump intervention on the growing homelessness crisis after the president accused the state of incompetence and insisted they should 'politely' ask for his help" – "A salon owner who claims she was forced to close up shop due to California’s homelessness crisis says she would welcome a Donald Trump intervention after the president accused the Golden State’s governor of not being able to handle the problem").
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\textsuperscript{7} See also supra n.2.

\textsuperscript{8} This may get exponentially worse now that the coronavirus has become a nationwide and global pandemic, destroying whole economies and populations.

\textit{See also} \textsc{https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8125825/California-rents-RVs-hotel-rooms-protect-homeless-coronavirus-outbreak.html} ("California rents RVs and hotel rooms to protect the homeless during coronavirus outbreak").

Also, prison populations nationally and globally may be massive incubators for the virus, creating catastrophes unto themselves. \textit{See infra} n.9.
jails and prisons the de facto mental hospitals, again with a special impact on minorities and low-income people.\(^9\)

They stand on the side of roads and freeways, holding up signs and seeking help. Granted, some may be seeking handouts rather than working. But many are in desperate need. Like the biblical Mary and Joseph, many or perhaps most are turned away everywhere, albeit with some receiving a helping hand from total strangers – like that storied night in Bethlehem. Each in his or her own way is courageous for “making it” and just surviving.\(^10\) Lots of Americans, including members of the legal profession, may scoff at this conclusion. What they do not realize, much less comprehend fully, is that tragedy could strike them or a loved one at any moment, as it did my family when I was very young.\(^11\)

In an article entitled “RV Living Grows as Latest Consequence of Housing Crisis,” perhaps the \textit{Wall Street Journal} described the best of living experiences for many of them:

Across the Western U.S., rising home prices have pushed more people who can’t afford houses or apartments to live in vehicles, including RVs. In Los Angeles, 16,500 people called a vehicle their home last year, according to local counts. In San Francisco the figure was 1,800, up 45\% from 2017, and in Santa Clara County, which includes Mountain View, the number nearly tripled over that same time frame.


\(^10\) There are very few public restrooms or showers available for the homeless or any other Americans to use. For example, one local YMCA, which shut down completely because of the coronavirus, had charged $12.00 to shower there on a one-time, “Day Pass” basis. Thus, it is not surprising that defecation takes place in public, and that the sanitary conditions of the homeless are decidedly unhealthy. They often have no other choices. Many homeless are (or were) able to use the restrooms at McDonalds’ all-night restaurants and similar businesses.

\(^11\) See supra n.3.
to 1,747. There are no reliable national figures on the trend. . . .

An estimated half a million people are homeless in the U.S., with the problem most acute along the Northeastern seaboard and West Coast where housing costs are highest, White House officials said in a 2019 report. If the problem has an epicenter, it is the San Francisco Bay Area, the nation’s most expensive housing market, where median housing prices have nearly doubled to about $1 million over the past eight years, according to real-estate listing service Zillow.

As with homeless encampments that block sidewalks, RV living is creating its own tensions. . . .

In Seattle, where an estimated 2,147 people live in vehicles, the city is weighing a plan to tow and destroy unsafe RVs. The Bend, Ore., city council last year passed an ordinance to shorten the time vehicles can be parked in any one location to three days from five. Los Angeles in July reinstated a ban on people sleeping in vehicles overnight. . . .

Several local governments have begun to treat RVs as a special case, creating parking lots with portable toilets or showers to temporarily accommodate them. But those efforts have so far tended to be small in scale, such as San Francisco’s Vehicle Triage Center, intended for 30 vehicles. . . .

Decades-old RVs and campers, which make up the majority of those seen on city streets, can often be acquired for a few thousand dollars, not much more than two months’ rent in many of the West’s expensive cities. While RV parks often provide electric and water hookups, RV owners say parks tend to discriminate against older vehicles, leaving the streets as the only option.12

It is worth repeating: “living in an RV is considered a step up by many people without shelter[,] from living on the street.” Also, as noted previously:

If the average American cannot afford a home without stretching himself or herself (or themselves) to the utmost financial limits, how can we expect the poor (e.g., elderly) to have decent shelter, much less housing? If workers in California’s fabled Silicon Valley are forced to live in RVs because affordable housing is not available, how can we ever expect to alleviate the plight of our great nation’s homeless?13

13 See Timothy D. Naegele, The Brooke Amendment And Section 8 Housing: Revisited, 136
EXPERIENCES IN OTHER COUNTRIES

Before returning to the issues facing the United States, it is useful to discuss briefly the history of homelessness globally, and the attempts to address it in other countries. Feast and famine have existed side-by-side with war and peace since shortly after people first inhabited the Earth. Survival of the fittest underlies human history, and the history of other animals on this planet. In the 20th Century alone, millions were killed before and during World War II.

It is estimated that the former Soviet Union’s Joseph Stalin was responsible for the deaths of more than 30 million men, women and children – his own countrymen – including millions during the collectivization of the Soviet farms in the 1930s. China’s Mao Tse-tung was directly responsible for an estimated 30 to 40 million deaths between 1958 and 1960, as a result of what Mao’s regime hailed as the “Great Leap Forward.” Mao’s crimes involved Chinese peasants, many of whom died of hunger from man-made famines under collectivist orders that stripped them of all private possessions.

Recently, refugees from the war-torn Middle East, most notably Syria, have fled to the safety that they perceived in Europe. Many of them have died along the route, as a result of what in Mexico are referred to as “coyotes,” or those who take money from and exploit refugees on a global basis. Perhaps two young boys, Aylan and Galip Kurdi – who died in the waters near the Turkish resort of Bodrum, trying to escape – symbolize millions who have given their lives in the quest for freedom, safety and a better life.14

THE BROOKE AMENDMENT AND SECTION 8 HOUSING

The author has discussed many of these issues in an earlier article for The Banking Law Journal.15 The Brooke Amendment and the Housing Allowance


15 See Timothy D. Naegele, The Brooke Amendment And Section 8 Housing: Revisited, 136
program that morphed into the Section 8 housing program have been vital in providing a critical safety net for many. As noted previously:

[T]he Brooke Amendment capped the payment of rent at 25 percent of a person’s income, with the federal government paying the difference; and it provided funds to improve public housing, and to assure the safety of its residents.

Section 8 was envisioned as giving “vouchers” to those who qualified for public housing, and permitting them to find housing anywhere, with the federal government subsidizing their rents when the 25-percent-of-income threshold was passed. Taken together, the Brooke Amendment and Section 8 were America’s answer to the needs of decent housing for its poor. Today, there are two million voucher families. . . .

The problem is that vouchers are largely “tethered” to specific housing projects, rather than allowing the poor to obtain decent and safe housing wherever it is located. Like receiving Social Security retirement benefits, where the recipient can use the monies as he or she sees fit, the late Senator Brooke and the author envisioned vouchers as being used in the same way.

In addition to HUD bureaucrats, perhaps the “vested interests” that have opposed the simplicity of vouchers for the poor can be described best as follows:

[M]ortgage lenders, appraisers, packagers, Wall Street investment bankers, bond rating firms, guarantors, and their counsel, taking advantage of very low-income people beguiled by the American home-ownership dream.

. . . Arguably the goals of these vested interests (e.g., the builders of what become “ghettos”) are antithetical to the needs of the poor – and certainly those of the elderly poor.16

Indeed, as the author asked previously:

Query why public housing authorities are involved at all? Why does HUD not give the vouchers directly to those who qualify for them, and pay their landlords directly, for use wherever decent and safe housing

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is found? Yes, millions of payments would be involved, but the Treasury does that every month with Social Security retirement benefits. . . .

[T]he Brooke Amendment and the Experimental Housing Allowance Program that morphed into Section 8 were not intended to create new welfare programs, or dependency – except to the extent that the disabled or elderly (including veterans) are involved who may be near the end of their lives.17

As noted herein, the author defies anyone to pick their way through the bureaucratic nightmare that is the HUD-VASH Program, its forms and requirements. If highly-skilled lawyers are unable to understand the gibberish, how can the homeless – much less homeless elderly veterans – be expected to do so?18

Perhaps the experiences in California, and specifically in Los Angeles, are illustrative of how severe the challenges have become, and how illusive are the solutions even when money is thrown at the problems. Indeed, it is fair to ask: why give another penny to Los Angeles when more than $1 billion has been wasted already?19

Existing federal programs are not enough; and severe budgetary and bureaucratic constraints challenge even the most creative seekers of solutions to these problems. Banks and other financial institutions partner

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18 See *supra* notes 2 and 7.

19 Compare https://reason.com/video/losangelesisspendingover1billiontohousethehomelessissfailing/# (“Los Angeles Is Spending Over $1 Billion To House the Homeless. It's Failing”) and https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-7834965/California-salon-owner-welcomes-Trump-intervention-growing-homelessness-crisis.html (“California salon owner welcomes a Trump intervention on the growing homelessness crisis after the president accused the state of incompetence and insisted they should ‘politely’ ask for his help” – “A salon owner who claims she was forced to close up shop due to California’s homelessness crisis says she would welcome a Donald Trump intervention after the president accused the Golden State’s governor of not being able to handle the problem”) with https://californiaglobe.com/section-2/feds-stepping-in-on-californias-homeless-crisis/ (“Feds Stepping in on California’s Homeless Crisis” – “Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti announced . . . that he and the federal government have reached a preliminary agreement with the Trump administration on a joint plan to help combat the city’s homelessness crisis by erecting temporary shelters. . . . Dr. Ben Carson, U.S. Housing and Urban Development Secretary, believes ‘[h]ousing is one big problem in California, but he said that California is not approaching the homeless and transient problem correctly by allowing the massive tent cities to flourish; he said it costs cities less to get the homeless off the street than to deal with filthy homeless encampments and the ensuing health and disease concerns. . . .”).
with housing authorities and builders, but vastly more is needed. Clearly, Congress and America’s financial institutions can and must help more.

As the author noted previously:

When the Brooke Amendment, the Experimental Housing Allowance Program and Section 8 were conceived, they were in the vanguard and at the cutting edge of creative thinking; and they represented the very best solutions that were at hand. Today, it is necessary to think “outside the box” again, and rethink the problems and solutions, because with the passage of time they have grown exponentially greater and far more crippling and complex.\textsuperscript{20}

\textbf{CONCLUSION}

Again, it is not too far-fetched to believe that the needs of the homeless can be addressed in a comprehensive manner – just like the needs of others with disabilities became a national priority with the enactment of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and other laws.\textsuperscript{21} First, there must be a national consensus that homelessness is an acute problem in the United States, which it is. Then, the executive, legislative and administrative processes must coalesce and begin to bring about concrete and tangible legislative and actual changes, with respect to how the homeless and their needs are addressed. Without a national consensus undergirding the processes, concrete results may be illusive, nonexistent and disappointing.

Young, well-educated families are being hit hard too, especially because of the coronavirus, and this includes those with young children. They are often saddled with enormous student debts, which require servicing; they cannot afford to buy, so they are forced to rent places in which to live; rentals have gone sky high; and many fall through the cracks and become homeless. Indeed, homelessness is reaching and affecting those up and down the economic spectrum or ladder. It is truly an American tragedy in the 21st Century. The United States cannot allow present conditions to deteriorate further, with no relief in sight. Forget the “unsightliness” of the homeless. They are human beings just like the rest of us, who have fallen through the cracks and societal safety nets, and are often “shell-shocked” in terms of dealing with life.\textsuperscript{22}


\textsuperscript{21} See supra n.3.

\textsuperscript{22} Possibly the biggest single issue for the homeless – involving their dignity and self-respect
The global effects of the coronavirus on the lives of the homeless may be catastrophic. Many will not survive.\(^\text{23}\) For those Americans who have never been homeless (except perhaps in their college years), and never thought they would be, the virus has changed lives dramatically, from an economic standpoint alone. Vast numbers are out of work, and may never find jobs again. In its starkest terms, non-homeless need to realize that one of the biggest day-to-day issues for the homeless – aside from the paramount matters of finding whatever food they can, and shelter especially in the case of inclement weather – involves their dignity and self-respect, and entails basic necessities such as cleanliness and finding showers and bathrooms to use during times when the coronavirus may severely limit their options.

Please consider the following:

Going through the trash receptacles at a local park was a homeless woman who had been pushing two small carts with her earthy possessions on them. Young girls were playing volleyball in the park; women were pushing their babies in strollers; and still other women were setting up a nice picnic around one of the picnic tables only feet away from the trash bin through which she had been rummaging. All of them were seemingly oblivious to the fact that she was there, or even existed as a human being.

Will this be anyone we know? Absent is basic hygiene – way past the point of embarrassment. Imagine doing this day-after-day, year-after-year, with no relief in sight – living in freezing or near-freezing temperatures and trying to find a place to sleep and something to eat, which is why the numbers of homeless have swelled in temperate climates such as along or near California’s coast.

Homelessness in America and globally transcends age, race, gender, ethnicity, religious affiliations, nationalities and political beliefs – and it is our problem, as human beings.


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