

# Jena marshall

Sociology, Poverty



Jena Marshall SOC 145 - Social Inequalities Professor Eskapoulli March 16, 2013 Final Paper INTRODUCTION Over the last few decades homelessness has become an increasingly visible problem within the United States. According to the U. S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, we are now experiencing a period when extremely low-income housing needs are at an all-time high. While some communities are beginning to see reductions in chronic homelessness, in many communities family homelessness is exploding, and families with children are the fastest growing segment of the homeless population. On average it is believed that on any given night in the United States, 633, 784 people are experiencing homelessness, 239, 403 of which are families. Although no single factor can be held solely responsible for the current rates of homelessness, recent exploration through social science attributes the increase to a combination of structural inequalities inherent within the social institutions of the United States. In today's society, inequalities seen within the educational system, combined with the declining purchasing power of low-wage jobs and a decrease in the availability of affordable family housing, largely influence the prevalence of homelessness. The book Angela Whitiker's Climb, written by Isabel Wilkerson, offers a clear portrayal of the role poverty and education play in creating or restricting financial opportunity. The book shows how impoverished communities are at a disadvantage for receiving a quality education, which limits future financial opportunity and the ability to rise out of poverty. This cycle perpetuates poverty throughout one's lifetime, as well as limiting the ability of future generations to achieve socio-economic mobility (Wilkerson Pg. 224). Angela book also shows how education is linked

to financial security and is a critical factor in obtaining better living conditions. The declining purchasing power of low-wage jobs in today economy is another factor that has had an extremely negative impact on individuals and families ability to maintain a permanent residence. " In this country, no state offers a minimum wage sufficient to allow a family with one full-time worker adequate earnings (at 30% of income) to afford the federal fair-market rent for a two-bedroom apartment. In fact, in 24 states, even families with two full-time minimum wage earners have insufficient income to meet fair-market rents without exceeding the 30% of income threshold for affordability. " (Anderson, 2003) The consequences of such conditions are visible in the current rate of homeless in the United States. Unfortunately, for the many individuals and families who lose their home, it is even more difficult to get back into rental housing as many property owners will not rent to tenants that have a poor history credit or a previous eviction, and they often require security deposits along with first and last month's rent. In today's society, it can be reasonably argued that the primary cause of homelessness is the growing gap between housing costs and income, especially for the lower class. For the large percentage of Americans who struggle to support themselves on minimum wage every year the decreasing availability of low-cost housing has made finding a permanent living situation almost impossible. According to research done by Anderson and his colleagues, " the number of un-subsidized units affordable to extremely low-income households is currently 1. 2 million, while the number of extremely low-income households is estimated at 4. 5 million, which suggest a 3. 3 million unit deficit of affordable housing units in the United States". This

shortage leaves thousands of people, especially families and single mothers, struggling to make ends meet and vulnerable to any type of personal or financial setback. Unfortunately, the lack of an adequate income, combined with scarce affordable housing, is at the root cause of thousands of people left on the streets every day. Because of the wide range of social stratification within the United States, it is not a surprise that there is a greater prevalence of homelessness for certain demographics. According to notes from class lecture, 33% of the homeless population are families with children, 17% of homeless individuals are single females, and 28% of homeless individuals are veterans. The Book *Structured Inequality in the United States* by David Baker discusses the role that race, ethnicity, and gender play in poverty and homelessness. "The limited access of racial and ethnic groups and women to valued resources such as education constrains their ability to alter their social position in society" (Baker, Pg. 5). Currently, the number of homeless families with children reflect the most substantial increase in the homeless population and continued growth can be expected if a solution to the lack of affordable housing is not implemented. The inequality in demographic distribution is an extreme cause for concern, and holds serious consequences for the families and the youth of our nation. "Family residential instability is associated with children's poor attendance and performance in school; not having a primary source of medical care; lacking preventive health services (child immunizations), and suffering from various acute and chronic medical conditions, sexual assault, and violence. (Anderson, 2003) While there have been many theorized "solutions" to homelessness in America, I believe that the book *A New Poverty: Homeless*

Families in America, by Ralph Da Costa Nunez , offers strategies which are more useful, through the structural deficit model of looking at homelessness, and therefore offering more practical solution. In his book, Nunez calls for a change in the national homeless policy through the transformation of the emergency shelter system into comprehensive residential-educational-employment training centers. These centers would be child focused and family based, similar to the organization Casa Esperanza, which my group volunteered at. He logically contends that with education, family preservation services, and job training, homeless families can more easily become self-sufficient (Nunez). When looking at homelessness as an issue, one must consider both the cause and the consequences of this most serious social problem. Casa Esperanza as an organization does a great job at combating against both aspects of homelessness through the support and assistance they provide. By providing shelter to individuals who don't have anywhere else to live, as well as vital resources such as food, hygiene materials, and hygiene services, the organization helps reduce the consequences of being homeless for many individuals. However, Casa Esperanza also makes a genuine effort to address the origin of homelessness for many individuals through their rehabilitative steps, designed to help implement changes necessary to achieve self sufficiency. In current times, shelters like Casa Esperanza are crucial in fighting against the stratification caused by the disparity of wealth, and the growing gap between housing costs and income. DISCUSSION The organization our group chose to volunteer for was Casa Esperanza Homeless Center. This organization is a local, non-profit, collaborative community effort, which works to fight against

socioeconomic inequality by offering an array of services, emphasizing on emotional and physical health for the poor and the homeless. Casa Esperanza's main goal is to assist homeless individuals and families in achieving self-sufficiency, by helping as many as possible access the services they need to transition to stable employment and permanent living conditions. With this larger picture in mind, the services offered at this facility include, but are not limited to, drug and alcohol counseling, mental health care, housing and job placement assistance, and the critical gift of temporary food and shelter. In addition to these services, specific programs at Casa Esperanza are designed to target and provide support for factors associated with socioeconomic inequality. These programs include the Street Outreach Program, the Day Center Program, the Transitional Shelter Program, and the Winter Shelter Program. The Street Outreach Program helps provide a network for homeless individuals by a process through which workers comb the streets of Santa Barbara every day, aiming to build relationships that allow the homeless to seek shelter for the first time. The lack of networks and/or support systems are a crucial difference between the general population and the homeless population, and this is often a key aspect if these individuals ending up on the streets. The Day Center Program helps provide valuable resources, which are often otherwise unavailable, along with a community support system. The center offers food, clothing, medical care, job development, social services, life coaching, substance abuse recovery, and other vital services that assist members/clients into permanent housing. As even a short period of homelessness can have serious consequences such as depression, depletion of resources and

networks, as well as child neglect, the support from this program helps individuals and families get back on their feet, hopefully ending the cycle of homelessness. The Transitional Shelter Program aims to provide opportunity to homeless individuals and encourage self motivation. The center provides immediate opportunities for those willing and otherwise capable of achieving self-sufficiency. This program provides a variety of supportive services to help the homeless stabilize and to assist them in utilizing other community-based resources and services. By providing these opportunities, homeless individuals are given access to a path towards upward mobility which would otherwise be nearly impossible. The Winter Shelter Program has two hundred beds available from December 1st to March 31st, to shelter homeless individuals and families from extreme temperatures on the streets. The program includes breakfast, dinner, hygiene services, and medical support. By providing these resources, individuals are given a safe place to sleep, along with access to basic human necessities, and are able to lessen the effects of their homelessness. In addition to these centers and programs, living, employment, and personal transitions are facilitated by the staff and volunteers. They are committed to building trusting relationships with the homeless, providing emotional support and practical solution which encourage them to seek, find, and make use of the help they need. This multi tiered approach to the problem helps to address the interwoven causes and to prevent individual and family crisis leading to renewed homelessness. Because of the broad nature of the support provided at Casa Esperanza, the organization assists a variety of people, working against a number of social injustices associated with socioeconomic inequality. While the organization

directly addresses socioeconomic issues, it also indirectly provides support against the affects of discrimination, disability, displacement, and a number of other social institution issues which facilitate homelessness. My group chose to volunteer at a homeless shelter because we wanted to work for an organization in which our contributions would manifest into immediate and visible results. We were looking for "hands on" involvement, where we could personally work with, and for, the members of the community most in need of our support. Casa Esperanza turned out to be a great choice for volunteering and provided us a deeply impactful and enriching experience. Through our volunteer efforts, we were personally involved with the process of making and providing food to homeless individuals, where we got firsthand experience with the population we were helping. This invaluable experience provided us a fuller understanding of the causes and effects of homelessness, and its accompanying social injustices. In addition, we were able to witness firsthand, the positive effect of activism on individual lives and the community as a whole. During our volunteer experience at Casa Esperanza our group helped cook in the kitchen every Wednesday from 8:30am till 11:00am, with responsibilities which included cutting and prepping vegetables, cutting bread, making pies, making lemonade, making pasta from scratch, and cooking salmon and other meats. We helped to prep and cook the day's lunch and amenities, and because Casa Esperanza serves daily 200+ people per meal, three sets of hands were very useful to the head chef. There was always an abundance of work for my group to do and we always left wishing that we were able to offer more assistance. When we first started volunteering at Casa Esperanza we felt that we were simply



acquaintances who had come together for the purpose of this class. However, as the weeks went on and we gained experiences together, we became surprisingly close. Our conversations, while we were cutting vegetables or doing other various cooking tasks, turned from light and casual to personal and deep. We all conversed about our shared human experiences and social backgrounds, and how they might relate to topics and lectures from class. We also bonded over how rewarding we found our volunteer work to be and over what we found interesting about the shelter and its cohabitants. Together we learned that there were more factors than we had anticipated associated with homelessness, and witnessing the life circumstances of many of the individuals at the shelter had a great effect on all of us. Common themes we identified with people from the shelter were devalued self esteem, domestic abuse, divorce, drug use, death within the immediate family, immigration status/limitations, and a general lack of family or support networks. By the end of our volunteer program my group members and I grew very fond of the staff and individuals at Casa Esperanza, and we were glad that we had chosen to become involved with this organization. We also agreed that we would like to continue volunteering at the shelter in the future, as our schedules permitted. There is an obvious and critical need for better funding for this program. While Casa Esperanza has a great base structure and excellent programs, offering a variety of individual steps to assist in becoming self reliant, the organization needs greater outreach in order for the public to gain a further understanding of the impact of homelessness on our society in general, and to obtain the financial resources which are greatly needed. CONCLUSION In today's

society the origins, structure, and consequences of homelessness can be attributed to three factors: the inequalities seen within the educational system, the declining purchasing power of low-wage jobs, and a decrease in the availability of affordable family housing. While all three factors function separately, they are often interwoven and attribute to high rates of homelessness. For education, systematic inequalities work together to limit future employment opportunities for many impoverish community members. The long term effects of such disadvantage limit social mobility, and increase the probability of homelessness. In addition the declining value of income for lower class families coupled with an increasing scarcity of affordable housing, has led to a large rates of homelessness among impoverished communities, especially for families. Overall, while my group's contributions at Casa Esperanza were only a tiny drop in the huge bucket of social need and injustice, we were able to personally feel the reward of choosing to make a difference. By helping to provide a secure source of food to these individuals, we were able to help them better utilize their time and available resources, such as money, to promote themselves and to move toward a better life situation. By providing certain resources, Casa Esperanza helps in breaking the cycle of homelessness, and allows an opportunity for self sufficiency and social mobility, which is desperately needed.

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