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Homelessness on Los Angeles' Skid Row: A Theory of [Responsibility]

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements of the University Honors Program
of Loyola Marymount University

by

Savannah Woolston

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Homelessness on Los Angeles' Skid Row: A Theory of [Responsibility]

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Advisor: Professor Andrew Dilts

Abstract:

The pervasion of "personal choice" and "personal responsibility" language in research on homelessness is incorrect and damaging because it causes us to look at homelessness as the result of the personal flaws and failings of those who experience it, instead of as a societal structure that leads some people to be precariously housed and others to be better able to overcome obstacles such as mental illness and losing a job. This assumption of personal responsibility falsely portrays homelessness as something that everyone is equally at risk of experiencing and ignores alternate accounts of responsibility that would call into question our current policies. I take up the experience of homelessness from the point of view of those who experience it directly in order to retheorize responsibility and examine root causes of poverty and homelessness on Los Angeles' "Skid Row." Based on interviews with people who reside or have resided within Skid Row, I take up how respondents—as themselves theorists of their own experience—understand responsibility both in the abstract and in terms of their own situation. I turn to them to identify institutional improvements and changes in societal norms that could alleviate the problem, and offer new conceptions of responsibility that can be used to rethink policy directives and how we do research on homelessness. I develop an account of responsibility that allows us to rethink conditions that perpetuate cycles of chronic homelessness and critique institutions and systems that fail to take responsibility for their role in preventing individuals from rising out of Skid Row. By incorporating theories of homelessness and responsibility from homeless individuals themselves, I lay out a new way of looking at who or what is responsible for homelessness in order for society to address the problem differently.

I. Introduction

Much of the literature on homelessness depicts people who are experiencing homelessness as sources of labor; housed and paid when their work is needed, and left to fend for themselves with limited government assistance when it is not (Rossi, 1989; Tobias, 2003; Depastino, 2003). While this explanation for homelessness is valid, it does not tell the whole story, and it fails to explain the homelessness epidemic we've seen in recent decades. It leaves out the explanation of how we come to view individuals in our society as "not our problem." It is not enough to just say that society views the lowest strata as convenient sources of labor. As Colamn McCarthy wrote in the Washington Post in 1981, "America has a permanent refugee class, people driven into the streets," and I want to know why we've¹ allowed that to happen (Bogard, 2015, p. 35).

There are many theories about how we've gotten to this point, but I will focus on three: the relationship between "the home" and citizenship, purposeful political exclusion, and social control. Leonard Feldman (2004), Kathleen Arnold (2004), Peter Rossi (1989), and Charles Hoch and Robert Slayton (1990) discuss the way defining a home and what it means to have a home has a strong impact on our conception of what it means to be a full member of society. Those who have a home and those who do not have a home are separated from each other, not just because of the surface level fact that one of them has a home and the other does not, but because of what that says about them as a person and as a member of society. As Arnold writes, "The representation of the home as problem free

¹ When I use the language of "we," "our," "people," and "society" throughout this paper, I am not referring to or including people who are experiencing homelessness. The "we" would include everyone from government leaders, to the media, to anyone whose perspective on homelessness is that of someone outside of the community of those experiencing homelessness. It is necessary to note that I, as the writer, am not a person experiencing homelessness.

and a site of withdrawal inevitably displaces tension, anxiety, and struggle onto the homeless, thus construing them as the opposite of citizens, normality, and humanness” (p. 19). Political exclusion theories from theorists such as Feldman and Arnold argue that homelessness helps establish “the boundaries of inclusion,” enabling people to better establish their own citizenship and sense of inclusion in society by being able to point to who is not included (p. 4). It says that we need to see this stark contrast and engage in this social distancing in order to understand our own place. Social control theorists such as Randall Amster (2004) argue that society creates control-oriented social structures in order to establish stability and order by creating laws that disenfranchise anyone who engages in behavior that threatens the traditional fabric of society.

While many agree that homelessness is a problem, there is a lack of consensus on how to address it. I argue that this is because we cannot decide who is responsible for the conditions that lead to homelessness—individuals, or society as a whole? In this thesis, I seek to answer the question: Who is responsible for homelessness? In answering “who,” I will lay out a new understanding of what we mean by responsibility and what it means to hold someone or something responsible for homelessness, both in the aggregate and in the particular. I will do this through an in-depth analysis of current theories of homelessness, an evaluation of personal responsibility and societal responsibility narratives on homelessness, and in-person interviews with individuals who are currently experiencing homelessness on Los Angeles’ Skid Row.

The normative conclusion I will draw and argue for is that society must take greater responsibility for the less fortunate, and that only by taking more active responsibility for the inequality that runs rampant in our society—through changes in both public policy and

our understanding of societal structures and their role in creating homelessness—will we bring justice. My intention is to unmask the intense acts of self-preservation—preservation of one’s own privilege and place in society, typically cloaked in discussions about who is “worthy” of being helped—that are done in order to avoid addressing the root causes of homelessness and do something meaningful about them. As Timmer, Eitzen, and Talley (1994) explain in *Paths to Homelessness*, “Neither blaming the victim nor compassion will end homelessness. Structural transformation is required, and this will not occur without major modifications in public policy” (p. 190).

In this first chapter, I will outline the history of homelessness in America. As you will see, the history of how we came to understand homelessness in the way we do today is intertwined with our understanding of who is responsible for homelessness. I will then go on to lay out the current state of homelessness in America today, including the statistics and demographics on who is homeless, what most people believe causes homelessness, what has brought us to the homelessness crisis we are currently facing, and the standard responses, solutions, and existing policies we have seen in regards to “fixing” the homeless population. I also focus on the case of Skid Row to relate the national picture of homelessness to my specific study in this area of Los Angeles. I will conclude chapter one with a brief statement about the methods I will use to conduct the research portion of this project.

I want to make note here that when I use the phrases “the homeless,” “the homeless population,” “homeless people,” and “people who are homeless” throughout this paper, I do not mean to imply that “homeless” is what defines a person. “Homeless” is a condition that someone is experiencing, not who a person is. In many places, I am specific and state

“people who are experiencing homelessness,” meaning that an individual or group does not currently have access to a permanent and stable residence. However, in trying to blend the writing of the other authors I have incorporated into this chapter and be consistent with their claims, at times I use the language of the literature instead of what I feel is a more accurate way to refer to those experiencing homelessness.

II. History of Homelessness

Society’s repeated failure to face and solve the problem of homelessness stems directly from the work that is done through the way we define homelessness. Our obsession with narrowing, defining, and pinpointing exactly who we’re talking about when we say *homeless* also defines our reaction and the way we situate ourselves in relation to people who are homeless. The way society has defined homelessness and individuals who are homeless throughout the history of this country has constantly changed: vagrants, hobos, tramps, bums, outcasts, deviants, wanderers, street people, skid rowers (Kusmer, 2002; Depastino, 2003; Rossi, 1989). It is only since about 1982 that we began referring to people who are without homes as *homeless*, and even still our definition of what that means is constantly changing (Rossi, 1989). In this chapter, I will demonstrate how we came to understand ‘homelessness’ in the way we do today.

In Peter Rossi’s (1989) *Down and Out in America*, he discusses the fact that homelessness is a matter of degree: from those who are “precariously housed” to those who are experiencing “literal homelessness” (p. 9). Precarious housing includes shelters, crashing with family members, jail, and the hospital, to name a few; and literal homelessness means being without access to any customary dwelling—having to sleep on

sidewalks, in the entry ways of buildings, or in parks. Rossi states that anyone who falls into either of these categories is experiencing extreme poverty, deprivation, and vulnerability. However, he acknowledges that most of the literature, research, and proposed solutions focus on the more narrow group of those who are literally homeless, those we have to face because we walk past them living and sleeping on sidewalks, in parks, in vacant lots and buildings, in vehicles, and in “camps” or groups near and under structures like bridges that provide some form of shelter.

Within the group of the literal homeless, people tend to then make the distinction between victims of homelessness—“ordinary people down on their luck and therefore deserving of public attention”—and those who *deserve* the conditions they’re in—individuals who promote “countercultural habits and values such as laziness, irresponsibility, criminality, and the rejection of family life” (DePastino, 2003, pg. 96). This distinction gives an even smaller picture of the huge problem that is homelessness. It allows society to only take responsibility for, and share extra resources with that small sect of people, distinguishing the pitiful poor from the unworthy poor. This definition also defines the boundaries of who we consider part of our community, providing assistance based on who we view as officially “one of us.”

Homelessness in the United States is as old as the North American colonies. Kenneth Kusmer (2002) wrote in *Down and Out on the Road: The Homeless in American History* about homelessness in the context of the Puritans of Massachusetts Bay Colony. Already in the 16th and 17th centuries, distinctions were being made between different types of destitute people:

The poor, the sick, and those unable to care for themselves because of age or debility were considered part of the community, and it was the responsibility of godly Christians to care for them. The wandering poor, however, were different. They had broken the bonds of community and rejected the idea of diligently working in a calling. (p. 19)

Mass immigration from Europe to America throughout the 1700s left countless people without homes as indigenous people were displaced and many new arrivals struggled to find work and housing (Kusmer, 2002). Periods of expansion, war, and the building of huge infrastructure has created an ebb and flow of the homeless problem over the course of the last 300 years. During the Civil War period and both WWI and WWII, those who were without work or a home were often swept up into the armed forces and provided temporary “relief” (Rossi, 1989). However, until WWII, they often came home to find themselves worse off: still homeless, but now a veteran with afflictions both physical and emotional (Depastino, 2003).

In the post-Civil War period, construction of railroads and the rise of commercial agriculture created a demand for workers who were willing to travel across the country to work wherever they were needed. However, a problem also arose that “in the immediate postwar period, a considerable number of former soldiers slid into a life of vagrancy or petty crime,” with the 1870s marking the beginning of vagrancy being recognized as a national issue (Kusmer 2002, p. 37). Much of the stigma about homeless people is a result of this time period because even though many became homeless due to factory shutdowns or other factors outside their control, “the new vagrants were often perceived as something

subhuman or, at best, uncivilized” as they traveled around the country in search of work (p. 43).

The idea of “skid row” came into being after World War I, as soldiers returned home and the labor market plummeted, “an isolated enclave of damaged white men who had failed to take up their proper roles as family breadwinners” sought to disaffiliate from society (DePastino 2003, p. 231). This period of high homelessness was exacerbated by the Great Depression, and then relieved by World War II. The term “Skid Row” applies to many inner-city districts across the country with a long history of serving as a place to sleep for migrants and those who do not have a permanent residence (Cazares, 2009). The Skid Row in Los Angeles came about during industrialization and the railroad era in the 1870s when single, male migrant workers from the East coast saw this area filled with attractive job opportunities. The area was formed around a rail yard and station that bars and small hotels were built around (“Los Angeles’ Skid Row”, 2005). However, when the Great Depression hit in the 1930s, the workers were left homeless. Today, the area is filled with people who are unemployed, individuals struggling with addiction and psychological trauma, and abandoned families (Cazares, 2009).

Unlike in the aftermath of previous wars, we seemed to at least momentarily understand the need to take care of veterans in the post-World War II era. The GI Bill gave veterans a monetary cushion when they returned home and the opportunity to get an education instead of falling back off the map until their labor was needed again. “By 1950 the suburban ideal had become a reality for a solid majority of American families who rushed to claim the material and social benefits of homeownership. Within these new homes, nuclear family life flourished as never before. Marriage and birth rates soared”

(DePastino 2003, p. 221). However, the GI Bill could not solve the lack of affordable housing problem, and as the United States jumped into the Korean and Vietnam Wars, a new generation of homeless veterans emerged (Markee 2003, p. 2).

The homeless crisis we are currently experiencing, with levels of homelessness rising at alarming rates across the nation and specifically in cities like Los Angeles, has been explained by many as a consequence of some of President Ronald Reagan's economic policies "that included a massive defunding of federal social welfare and housing programs at precisely the time when poverty rates were soaring" (Depastino 2003, p. 252). A study done by Martha Burt in 1997 found that rates of homelessness rates tripled between 1981 and 1989 and have continued to climb since ("How Many People Experience Homelessness?", 2009). Our current homeless crisis is characterized by a disproportionate impact on women, children, immigrants, and people of color; a mixture of responses ranging from those that believe the homeless are lazy drunks, to those who seek to provide charity to the homeless; and a passion by many to truly understand homelessness in order to properly alleviate it.

The history of homelessness can be discussed in dates and time periods, wars and availability of labor, policies and cultures, and crises and periods of relief. However, the true history of homelessness is the history of how our current idea of homelessness came to be. It is the history of defining who is "homeless," who we cannot bear to let live that way, and what, precisely, constitutes "good enough" when it comes to ensuring people have "housing," regardless of the time period. We are where we are today in our understanding of homelessness because of the level of responsibility our current definitions force us to take on. Defining homelessness has always been about deciding where we believe societal

responsibility for these conditions ends and people's own responsibility for their conditions begins.

III. Statistics

The difficulty with producing accurate statistics

One of the main things that quickly becomes clear to those who research homelessness is that it is nearly impossible to pin down hard facts about who is homeless, which will make this section interesting as I attempt to give a snapshot of the current state of homelessness in the United States. The reason this task of explaining the demographic makeup of the homeless population is so difficult has to do with three main factors. First, the definition of what constitutes homelessness varies across studies of the phenomenon (Aldeia, 2013). Additionally, underserved populations are difficult to count when it comes to both the census, and university and independent studies (“How Many People Experience Homelessness”, 2009). And finally, specific groups including both the government and independent organizations may be motivated to report the data in certain ways to show either that their work is making an impact or to support conclusions they are drawing about what causes homelessness (Aldeia, 2013).

Reports from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and similar agencies that generate reports on poverty and homelessness, across every presidential administration, show homeless counts lower than those from studies done at universities or by homeless advocacy groups. HUD’s 2013 report states that on a given night, around 610,000 people are homeless in the United States (Henry & Morris, 2013). However, more liberal estimates from studies done by advocates for the homeless involve

looser definitions of homelessness and more generous reporting of the figures. For groups like these, including the Urban Institute which has performed many studies of this nature, there is consensus that on any given night the homeless population is closer to 800,000 people; with the total number of people who experience homelessness—including both those who are homeless for long periods of time and those who cycle in and out—in a year ranging from 2.3 million to 3.5 million people, depending on who is being counted (McNamara, 2008).

For those who seek to provide an accurate representation of the homeless problem, the complications with counting the homeless population have to do with the temporary nature of homelessness and the fact that many people who are homeless are purposefully not easily found (Foreman, 2015). Even when studies are performed outside of the institution of government, which often attempts to make the problem seem smaller than it is in order to justify doing little to alleviate it, or seeks to show figures that make it look like an administration succeeded in decreasing the amount of homeless people, it can be difficult to produce an accurate picture of the problem.

Most studies focus on the people who are homeless who are easy to find, including those who are in shelters, frequent soup kitchens, participate in programs and seek services to help alleviate their own situation, and those who sleep in visible places such as on the street. However, a national study of people who had formerly experienced homelessness found that “the most common places people who had been homeless stayed were vehicles (59.2%) and makeshift housing, such as tents, boxes, caves, or boxcars (24.6%)” (“How Many People Experience Homelessness?”, 2009). It is incredibly difficult to

count the “hidden” homeless, which can lead to underestimates of the real homeless population.

Another issue that can arise is that “snapshot” pictures of homelessness make it difficult to produce statistics that reflect the temporary nature of homelessness. The number of people who experience chronic homelessness is routinely over-estimated because studies often just show numbers of who is homeless at a particular time, while over time “some people will find housing and escape homelessness while new people will lose housing and become homeless” (“How Many People Experience Homelessness?”, 2009).

What is at least a little easier to identify is the number of people living in poverty. The relationship between poverty and homelessness is described well by Peter Rossi (1989): “Homelessness is more properly viewed as the most aggravated state of a more prevalent problem, extreme poverty...The extremely poor constitute the pool from which the homeless are drawn” (p. 8). The most recent Census Bureau data from 2014 estimates that 14.8 percent of the overall U.S. population lives below the poverty line, which is equivalent to around 46.7 million people (DeNavas-Walt & Proctor, 2013). As one might expect, poverty does not affect all people living within the United States equally. For non-Hispanic Whites, the poverty rate is closer to 10.1 percent, while it soars to 26.2 percent for Blacks and 23.6 percent for Hispanics. In the United States, one in every three children who are Black and one in every four children who are Latino lives in poverty, while the number is closer to one in seven for children who are White (Lin & Harris, 2008).

In addition, women experience poverty at slightly greater levels than men, with the rate being 16.4 and 13.1 percent respectively. Another group that experiences poverty at a

disproportionate rate is children under the age of 18, who make up 23.3 percent of the total population, but 33.3 percent of the population living in poverty (DeNavas-Walt & Proctor, 2013). Finally, poverty is experienced more heavily by those who were not born in the United States, and even more so by those who have not become naturalized citizens. The poverty rate is 14.2 percent for native-born people and 18.5 percent for those who are foreign born. About half of the people in this population have become naturalized citizens. The poverty rate within this group is 11.9 percent for foreign born individualized who have become naturalized, but 24.2 percent for those who are not United States citizens (DeNavas-Walt & Proctor, 2013).

The demographics

For most of U.S. history, homelessness has impacted mostly single men. However, recent research shows that “the fastest growing group of homeless is families with children” (Nunez, 1996, p. 3). This transition began in the 1980s, with the number of children living in poverty increasing by more than three million in that decade. Families with children currently make up around 36 percent of the homeless population, with 58 percent of those in families being children under the age of 18 (Henry & Morris, 2013). The number of women who are homeless is also increasing, with current levels being somewhere around 32 percent of the total homeless population (McNamara, 2008). On this note, “approximately half of all women and children experiencing homelessness are fleeing domestic violence” (“Who Is Homeless?”, 2007). The racial makeup of the homeless population is also racially disproportionate; the best estimates being that the homeless population is 42 percent Black, 39 percent White, 13 percent Hispanic, 4 percent Native American and 2 percent Asian (“How Many People Experience Homelessness?”, 2009).

As I will discuss further in later sections, identifying and labeling segments of the population as mentally ill is incredibly difficult, especially because what constitutes mental illness is constantly changing and much of the mental health data available comes from self-reporting or snapshots of who seeks help and services for their illness. In addition, this kind of labeling can be damaging, as most agree that the number of mentally ill individuals who require some sort of institutionalization and cannot live in the community is significantly lower than the total population of those with mental health issues. Reports indicate that anywhere from 26 to 39 percent of the homeless population suffers from serious mental illness ("How Many People Experience Homelessness?", 2009; McNamara, 2008). A 2003 estimate from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration states that around 38 percent of people who are homeless are dependent on alcohol and 26 percent abuse other drugs ("Substance Abuse and Homelessness.", 2009).

In addition to people of color, other groups of people who experience homelessness at higher rates than the rest of the population are veterans, immigrants, and people who identify as LGBT. Although only 34% of the entire adult male population has served in the armed forces, research indicates that closer to 40% of homeless men are veterans ("Who Is Homeless?", 2007). As difficult as it is to find statistics on the homeless population, it is even more difficult to find statistics on the immigrant community within that population, for the same reason that they are often distrustful and purposefully trying not to be found. However, many scholars agree that homelessness affects those who were not born in America at a higher rate than it does those who were (Rosenheck, Bassuk & Saloman, 2000).

LGBT youth make up a disproportionate amount of the population of youth who are homeless. Although there are also issues obtaining accurate reports of the percentage of the population who identifies as LGBT, the consensus is that an accurate measurement lies somewhere between 3 and 10 percent of the population (Ray, 2006). The Department of Health and Human Services (DHS) estimates that there are somewhere between 575,000 and 1.6 million homeless and runaway youth each year. Of this, between 20 and 40 percent identify as LGBT (Eisenberg, 2012).

Skid Row

Los Angeles is home to around 82,000 people who are homeless each night, with Skid Row—a 50-block and 0.4 square mile-area of downtown Los Angeles from 3rd and 7th Streets to the North and South, and Alameda and Main to the East and West—containing 9,000 of these individuals (Falvo, 2006). Similar to nationwide statistics, around 39 percent of the Los Angeles homeless population is Black, 29 percent are White, and 25 percent are Hispanic or Latino (“Los Angeles’ Skid Row”, 2005). Homelessness in Los Angeles is increasing every year, with levels rising by 11% between January of 2015 and January of 2016 (Holland and Jamison, 2016).

In Skid Row, 76 percent of people live below the poverty line, compared with the 22.6 percent average in all of Los Angeles (“Skid Row Neighborhood in Los Angeles”, 2013). Only 18.2 percent of the people on Skid Row were not born in the U.S., compared to 39 percent in all of Los Angeles (“Skid Row Neighborhood in Los Angeles”, 2013). The population of Skid Row is primarily Black males, however, as with trends nationwide, the number of women and children has increased in recent years. About 20 percent of the Skid

Row population is made up of veterans, and many suffer from addiction and other mental illnesses (“Los Angeles’ Skid Row”, 2005).

IV. Causes

This aspect of my literature review may be the most difficult to write as I seek to do justice to the people and the subject I am studying. Accounting for what causes homelessness is difficult, political, and complicated. There are numerous narratives that try to explain the modern homelessness problem; and for every conclusion that can be drawn about factors that lead a person to homelessness, you will find a story or even an entire study that defies the stereotypes and conclusions that previous studies have generated. The main schools of thought about what causes homelessness are homelessness as a “personal choice”; homelessness as a result of mental health and addiction; homelessness as a consequence of a shortage of affordable housing; and homelessness as a loss of social and welfare programs.

While most of these explanations for homelessness have some degree of merit, the literature gives more weight to some than others. For example, mental health and addiction’s affect on homelessness is consistently over-estimated, and the idea that people are “choosing” to live in homelessness based upon their actions ignores structural inequality and compounded obstacles that prevent people from being on equal footing with one another (Aldeia, 2013). The true evidence points to the fact that it has been changes in public policies resulting in a lack of affordable housing that have caused homelessness, not a lack of personal responsibility on the part of those who are homeless. As written in the book *Paths to Homelessness: Extreme Poverty and the Urban Housing Crisis*: “people are

homeless not because of their individual flaws but because of structural arrangements and trends that result in extreme impoverishment and a shortage of affordable housing” (Timmer, Eitzen & Talley, 1994, p. 15).

Although many of the causes of homelessness can be credited to racism, selfish and ignorant public policies aimed at cutting spending without caring for the less fortunate, and maintaining a societal structure defined by socioeconomic status, some of the factors that have led to homelessness were the result of different social problems being solved. For instance, the end of single-room occupancies (SROs) and involuntary-commitment to institutions for people with mental illness have both been credited as causes of homelessness, but have also been applauded. The end of these traditions, while having led to increased homelessness because nothing has risen up in place of mental wards and SROs, is often lauded as a good thing because of the incredibly poor treatment of individuals who were institutionalized for mental illness and the dehumanizing conditions in SROs.

Personal choice

The idea that homelessness is a personal choice—including the notion that if someone is poor, they must have made a mistake to get to that place—perpetuates the problematic structure that is in place in the United States, and specifically on Los Angeles’ Skid Row (Arnold, 2004, p. 52). This thinking is often credited to Ronald Reagan, who exacerbated the housing crisis by slashing social welfare programs because he believed that “homelessness was a ‘choice’ made by those who preferred that ‘lifestyle’” (Roberts, 1988). Further, many hold the belief that people who are homeless or live on Skid Row do so because they are lazy and do not want to work, when in fact research indicates that 44

percent of adults who are homeless work at some point each month and one fifth of the homeless population in Los Angeles has jobs, low-paying as they may be (Falvo, 2006).

Some scholars, such as Christopher Jencks, author of *The Homeless*, argue that social welfare programs actually create homelessness because they make people dependent. He writes, “the homeless are not just passive victims. They make choices, like everyone else” (104). Although many experts on the issue of homelessness rightly believe that things like emergency shelter can prolong the homelessness problem by not addressing it at its root and finding long-term solutions, it is absolutely necessary to have programs and services in place to give underserved people a leg up (Burt, 2001; Bogard, 2015). Ideas like Jencks’ perpetuate the myth that equal opportunity exists in America. This is incorrect, as explained by an idea coined by Ann Chih Lin and David R. Harris in *The Colors of Poverty* called the “disadvantages cascade.” This idea says that “difficult but solvable problems...exacerbate and are exacerbated by other disadvantages...By contrast, advantages insulate...The presence of enough advantages makes it easier to cushion the negative impact of single disadvantages” (2008, p. 3). Still very present racial disparities, racial discrimination, and racial prejudice create a situation where, regardless of individual personality traits and character, some people are able to succeed more easily than others based on irrelevant characteristics such as a person’s race. “The disproportionate representation of minorities among the homeless suggests that racial discrimination is a significant contributing factor” (Robertson & Greenblatt, 1992, p. 5). People have been, and currently are, regularly discriminated against because of their gender, sexuality, and skin color; all characteristics that are outside the control of a person, and objectively have no effect on their ability or character. As Joe Soss writes in *The Colors of Poverty*, “race

continues to influence the kinds of societal institutions that individuals encounter and the kinds of institutional positions they occupy” (Lin & Harris, 2008, p. 294).

Addiction and mental illness

Healthcare, and particularly mental health care, is a subject of constant debate in this country as we continue to learn new things about the issue. In 1955, 522,150 people with mental illness were institutionalized. By 1980, that number dropped 80 percent in a process many refer to as “deinstitutionalization,” where mental institutions were closed down and people were discharged without having adequate resources to survive in communities without public assistance (Nunez, 1996, p. 9). As Marjorie J. Robertson and Milton Greenblatt wrote in *Homelessness: A National Perspective*, “deinstitutionalization does not necessarily lead to homelessness... however, the shortcomings in the deinstitutionalization movement have contributed to a significant increase in homelessness,” with homelessness occurring because people lost their access to housing and their support and care system (1992, p. 8) “The mental health system has failed to divert services, resources, and budget funds from hospital-based care to community care at the same rate as it has discharged patients to the community” (Robertson & Greenblatt, 1992, p. 8). Healthcare is incredibly expensive, so without access to affordable health care coverage and readily available services, “a serious illness or disability can start a downward spiral into homelessness, beginning with a lost job, depletion of savings to pay for care, and eventual eviction” (“Why Are People Homeless?”, 2009).

One of the most damaging misconceptions about homelessness is the belief that only the people living on Skid Row—the minorities and the homeless—are perpetuating the problem of the rampant sale and consumption of drugs there. However, the problem with

drugs in the United States is not particular to one race or another, nor to one economic status; and on Skid Row in particular is perpetuated by wealthy and mostly white people who drive from the financial district nearby to Skid Row to buy cocaine (Slovick, 2008). In addition, although statistically rates of alcohol and drug abuse within the homeless population are disproportionately high, the National Coalition for the Homeless reports that addiction is only a small piece of the explanation for the sharp rise in homelessness in recent decades (2009). Addiction can increase the risk of homelessness for those with precarious housing—such as those living in shelters, with family members, or in low-wage jobs. In addition, addiction can make it more difficult for those who are homeless to rise out of those conditions because they cannot afford treatment and the addiction can be exacerbated by the fact that a person's basic needs are not being met. However, many people with addiction never become homeless, so to assume causation here would be incorrect and could potentially apply a damaging stigma to homeless individuals and those with other mental illnesses ("Why Are People Homeless?", 2009)

In short, there is a class bias involved here. When homeless people do have mental difficulties or problems with alcohol, these situations are identified as the cause of their homelessness. But when well-housed middle-class and upper-middle-class people are mentally ill or alcoholic it is identified as an unfortunate situation requiring attention and treatment. Clearly, then, the source of homelessness is not behavior—mental illness or alcoholism—but the different social class context for the behavior (Timmer, Eitzen & Talley 1994, p. 14).

Reports indicate that anywhere from 26 to 29 percent of the homeless population suffers from mental illness and around 20-35 percent are dependent on alcohol (“Who Is Homeless?”, 2007). While this is higher than the general population—anywhere from 8 to 20 percent depending on the definition of mental illness and alcoholism, substance abuse is often a result of homelessness, not a cause (“Substance Abuse and Homelessness”, 2009).

Shortage of jobs and affordable housing

A 1999 study by the Interagency Council on the Homeless (ICH) and carried about by Urban Institute researchers found that “not being able to pay the rent and loss of a job were most frequently stated as precipitating causes of homelessness by homeless people” (McNamara, 2008, pg. 122). In 1950, two-thirds of the population in America could afford to buy a home. By 1986, that percentage had dropped to merely one-quarter of the overall population (Robertson & Greenblatt, 1992). A housing crisis explained by all sorts of economic factors was indeed occurring, but it is undeniable that policies, namely those of Presidents Nixon, Reagan, Bush, and Clinton (and especially Reagan), were what ultimately brought the crisis in the housing market to an epidemic of homelessness nationwide (Timmer, Eitzen & Talley, 1994; Robertson & Greenblatt, 1992; “Why Are People Homeless”, 2009).

From 1939 to 1973, public housing units were largely available for people who were unable to afford non-subsidized housing. However, over the following two decades, President Richard Nixon began, and then in 1981 President Ronald Reagan continued, cutting housing programs and selling off public housing units, “decimat[ing] the supply of low-income housing” (Nunez, 1996, p. 26). President Reagan slashed funding for HUD by more than 75 percent, bringing funding for housing assistance crashing down from \$32.2

billion at the beginning of the 1980s to just \$7.8 billion by the end of the decade (Nunez, 1996).

The federal definition of affordable housing is a one or two-bedroom apartment that costs 30 percent of a person's income ("The State of the Nation's Housing", 2009). Today, for 12 million Americans, "more than 50 percent of their salaries go towards renting or housing costs, resulting in sacrifices in other essential areas like health care and savings" ("Why Are People Homeless?", 2009). Affordable housing shortages further intensify this problem, making it so even those who are willing to spend over half of their income on housing cannot find a place to live and end up having to rent or wait years for Section 8 Vouchers. Especially due to the fact that federal funding for this kind of government subsidized housing dropped almost 50 percent from 1980 to 2003, and around 200,000 rental housing units are destroyed each year to make room for gentrified neighborhoods, most poor families are constantly struggling to find and maintain a permanent residence ("Why Are People Homeless?", 2009).

Loss of social and welfare programs

Similar to the new housing policies, Presidents Reagan and Bush implemented funding cuts to pretty much every social program meant to keep low-income individuals afloat. Reagan's Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1981 slashed or capped federal funding for a whole array of social programs, effectively "dismantling the "safety net" that had long supported the nation's poor and disadvantaged" and resulting in "the loss of programs that had both prevented and broken the cycle of poverty" (Nunez, 1996, p. 8). Nearly half a million families lost federal assistance payments, one million lost food stamps, a half million people fell below the poverty line, and more than 350,000 people lost their

Social Security Disability Income benefits during Reagan's presidency (Robertson & Greenblatt, 1992).

Another crucial program that was cut and replaced with an inadequate substitute was the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program, "the largest cash assistance program for poor families with children" ("Why Are People Homeless?", 2009). It was repealed in 1996 and replaced by The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, which authorized Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). By 2005, TANF was only assisting a third of the children AFDC was helping, and continues today to be an insufficient source of grants for families who desperately need assistance in the form of things like food stamps.

Many turn to recessions to explain the rise in homelessness, however recent data shows that even a healthy economy does not solve the problem of homelessness, meaning that other factors keep the system in place even when the country is not in economic distress. As Robertson and Greenblatt (1992) report about the most recent recession, "by various economic indicators, the recession has receded and unemployment has decreased. Yet the number of homeless people has increased during the same period" (6). A shortage of funds for necessary social programs, and flaws in the administration of such services—including requiring a fixed address in order to receive services from some agencies—have created a situation where rising out of homelessness is incredibly difficult and levels of assistance from the government are highly inadequate to deal with the problem.

V. Responses to Homelessness

Instead of building affordable housing, we sweep those who are homeless out of the public eye. Instead of improving our failing education system, we criticize the uneducated for not working harder. As we charge full-speed-ahead into dangerous levels of inequality, causing too many to lose their jobs and become unable to afford vital services, we throw the poor, unemployed, and mentally ill in prison. Everyone seems to acknowledge that homelessness is a problem, and a growing one at that. As I discussed in the previous section, however, there are a whole array of beliefs that various scholars and experts hold about what exactly causes homelessness. And there is even less agreement on how to best address the issue, and especially who is responsible for fixing it.

It is difficult to comprehend how poverty could be this extreme in one of the richest economies in the world; how we could treat people as if they are “undeserving of the respect and equality of treatment afforded human beings” (Huey, 2007, p. 2,316). The main problem is that we are not focused on solutions, and oftentimes our reforms and “solutions” to homelessness have also been a cause of the problem they sought to rectify. In this section, I will identify the standard responses, proposed solutions, and existing homeless policies and programs. The main responses fall under the following categories: programs for those with mental illness, substance abuse problems, or other undesirable character traits; charity; policing and criminalization; and “Housing First” models.

Mental health and addiction

Although I discussed in a previous section the idea that there is rampant mental illness among the homeless population is a serious misconception, treatment for mental illness and addiction problems is one of the main places service providers have directed

their efforts. While there is no doubt that these services can be helpful for those struggling with mental health, problems like alcoholism only exist within a minority of those who are homeless—around 20-35% (Rossi, p. 32). Focusing research and resources around the problem of mental health makes it seem like these are issues that affect the majority of those who are homeless, applying an inaccurate stigma to the entire population. In fact, most people who are homeless are *not* mentally ill, “but rather are caught in a cycle of low-paying, dead-end jobs,” with very little security that could help keep them afloat (Robertson & Greenblatt, 1992, p. 118).

In addition, people who are homeless typically identify mental illness as fairly low in the hierarchy of services they need. “Mental health or substance abuse treatment is far down on their lists of priorities. First priority generally goes to housing, food, clothing, and money. It’s unrealistic to expect homeless people to participate fully in treatment programs until these basic needs have been met” (Robertson & Greenblatt, 1992, p. 104). Many people in the general population in America are wary of seeking help for mental illness and substance abuse, so it is understandable that people in less fortunate and more unstable circumstances are as well.

The main methods mental health services are provided are through outreach, case management, clinical services and rehabilitation programs, and voluntary or involuntary hospitalization. People are often sought out on the streets or enticed by shelters and service providers with the offer of food and a warm bed if they agree to participate in some sort of rehabilitation program. However, these programs are overwhelmingly unsuccessful for a variety of reasons; namely that they do not address the root cause of the problem. Another reason these programs have not seen huge success is due to the fact that many of

those who are homeless shy away from these programs due to negative past experiences with mental health services. And finally, much of the failure is because “compliance with a course of medication is difficult for homeless persons” due to the fact that the life of a person who is homeless can often be hectic and unpredictable (Robertson & Greenblatt, 1992, p. 113).

“Personal choice” responses

A common response to homelessness, especially from those who view the condition of homelessness as entirely, or at least largely, the fault of the individual experiencing it, is to attach conditions to offers of treatment and shelter. Practices including drug tests for food stamps, sobriety in order to receive food from a shelter, and the “fault standard” that was attached to the welfare reform of 1996 began in the 1990s as the homeless population was rapidly increasing. The fault standard required individuals and families to “demonstrate that they had not had more than 30 days’ notice of their impending homelessness, and thus had not been able to prevent it, effectively presuming that personal resourcefulness—as opposed to external resources such as the availability of affordable housing—was the key to avoiding homelessness” (McNamara, 2008, p. 119).

As the number of homeless people grew throughout the 80s and 90s, society began to grow weary of seeing homeless people on the streets (Feldman, 2004). These feelings led to a phenomenon social activists coined “compassion fatigue,” where individuals—frustrated by seemingly unsolvable homelessness and afraid that streets filled with homeless people would discourage business and tourism—shifted from compassion towards the homeless to wanting them gone from the streets at any cost (Parker, 1998). In 1993, New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani cracked down on what he called “quality of life”

crimes, “citing even the squeegee men who wash windshields for spare change.” In Alabama, firefighters used their powerful hoses to wash away homeless encampments. And in Chicago, sidewalks leading into downtown were fenced to keep the homeless out; just to name a few examples of these new practices (Parker, 1998; Harcourt, 2001).

Charity

Charity as a response to homelessness has a long history. In the 16th and 17th centuries we find writing that indicates people felt that those in a community who were unable to care for themselves were the “responsibility of godly Christians” (Kusmer, 2002, p. 19). However, even in those times, that charity only extended to those who were already considered part of the community. And this act of charity served to reinforce community boundaries between who is in the fold and who is not. Hoch and Slayton refer to this approach to the homeless population as the “politics of compassion,” where we believe the poor are “overcome by a combination of their own vulnerabilities and changing circumstances” which causes us to focus “public attention on individual vulnerabilities rather than on the institutional roots of homelessness” (Timmer, Eitzen & Talley, 1994, p. 17).

Charity is a patchy solution to homelessness and often does more for those doing the service than those on the receiving end (Hobson, 2010, p. 185). Charity may temporarily pacify a few growling stomachs and put a couple smiles on faces, but the feeling of satisfaction that comes with doing a kind act for someone else endures much longer than any feelings of contentment experienced by the individual being “helped.” Another problem with charity as a solution to homelessness is that it allows society to feel

that it has “done its part” to help out those who are homeless without ever having to face the real problem and come up with real, effective solutions.

Policing and Criminalization

When looking at laws and policies that criminalize homelessness and create over-policing of that population, we typically see three main types of laws: those which prohibit begging, those which prohibit aggressive panhandling, and those which ban sitting or lying in public spaces. In addition, things like public intoxication, being a “public nuisance,” and sleeping on the streets are examples of citable offenses (Robertson & Greenblatt, 1992, p. 111).

Of the three areas of criminalization, it is sweeps of homeless areas that are the most unsettling. Sweeps essentially bring the full power of city officials and law enforcement down upon homeless encampments, raising issues of citizenship, use of space, and constitutional rights...Advocates for the homeless had to remind the officials that the homeless are part of the public also and removing them from temporary shelter and destroying personal items does little to help. (McNamara, 2008, p. 52-53)

Recent years have seen a trend towards even more of a “law and order” approach, with these policies growing more strict and unforgiving (38). Between 2002 and 2005, out of the 67 cities surveyed in the National Coalition for the Homeless (NCH) and the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty (NLCHP), there was an increase of between 10 and 20 percent in laws criminalizing the homeless (McNamara, 2008, p. 48).

Another problem with over-policing the homeless is that police officers are able to

see nearly all activities and behaviors within this population and cite or ticket people for things that individuals living in the broader population who have an enclosed space of their own would never receive a ticket for. The physical appearance of those who are homeless causes them to be more heavily scrutinized, and since the possessions of a person who is homeless are often visible, it makes it easier to implicate them in theft crimes. In addition, this stepped up policing creates the stigma that the homeless population is disproportionately violent and criminal, when in fact these individuals are more often the victims of violent crime than the perpetrators (National Coalition for the Homeless). And when crimes are committed by those who are homeless, many times the crimes are part of a survival strategy for the individual who committed the act.

In 2007, the city of Los Angeles implemented the Safer Cities Initiative, adding 50 police officers and pumping money into the area to try and clean up the streets of Skid Row. However, this stepped-up policing “has only pushed homeless farther away from vital social services concentrated in the skid row area” (Helfand, 2007). It has caused the “criminalization of homelessness” where people are jailed for having nowhere else to go (MacDonald, 2007). While some improvements have been made if you look at the crime statistics alone, Skid Row has become “like a miniature police state” (“The Safer Cities Initiative”, 2011, p. 5). The law of innocent until proven guilty has ceased to apply to these people; they are harassed on a regular basis and are persecuted for petty crimes such as jaywalking or tossing a cigarette butt on the ground; things that most people regularly get away with. “Skid rowers are often arrested, not for what they have done, but for what they are: skid rowers” (Gammage, 1972).

Cruel and unusual punishments and procedures are rampant on Skid Row with

everything from outrageous fines to hospitals dumping mentally ill patients on Skid Row so they do not have to deal with them anymore. Many people are given tickets for not being able to cross the street fast enough due to disabilities such as having a wheelchair, and end up with monetary penalties they cannot pay. This often results in “a fine increase, a suspended license, and/or a warrant for arrest. For many, it also [leads] to a loss of benefits, housing, jobs, and services” (“The Safer Cities Initiative”, 2011, p. 6). These unfair practices look like what some would call “homeless cleansing...The current solution is to house people in the county jail, state prison, and displace them” (Slovick, 2008).

The 1980s saw a huge period of gentrification, and subsequent policy changes aimed at sweeping the homeless population off the streets. The most likely reason for this is that downtown Los Angeles had recently been revitalized, causing real estate value to skyrocket in the areas around Skid Row. “Before their numbers swelled in public space, thereby increasing their visibility, many of the urban poor had remained segregated within distinct...neighborhoods frequently avoided by the working classes,” Laura Huey (2007) writes, explaining why there would be a shift in policy on Skid Row from containment to cleanup. She continues to describe how a problem like this could be ignored for so long: “Too often, what cannot be seen is of little social, personal, political or intellectual consequence” (p. 2305).

With stigmas about the criminal nature of an individual or group applied to those who are homeless—and especially homeless youth—we have seen peoples’ concern for business and tourism outweigh their concern for both truth and the less fortunate. From letters to the editor describing homeless youth as “dark, menacing, and frighteningly mysterious” to an increase in the laws and policies I have just described, “The sentiment is

that the homeless should be hidden away from society. They, the 'dirty homeless people' ought to be put somewhere where 'regular' people don't have to see them" (McNamara, 2008, p. 47). This statement was given in 2005 by an individual who was homeless in a report from the Center for the Prevention of Hate Violence, and is an example of the way people view the homeless as a problem they would like to keep 'out of sight, out of mind.'

Housing

As Robert McNamara (2008) wrote in his book *Homelessness in America*, lack of affordable housing is the "primary driver of homelessness in the United States...both because there is an inadequate supply of affordable housing and because incomes are so low that households cannot pay for the housing that is available" (p. 13). Of course, building more affordable housing and helping people afford the housing that already exists will not solve the entire problem, but it is a good start and is the best solution we have implemented thus far. As many scholars agree, shelters and especially emergency shelters are not a viable or effective long-term solution to the problem of homelessness (Burt, 2001; Gottfried, 1999). In fact, emergency shelter can often make matters worse, by taking resources from more long terms solutions and by giving society just enough peace of mind about homelessness by providing everyone on the street with a bed around Christmastime, for example (McNamara, 2008, p. 3). Practices like these are necessary to ensure people, especially those with children, are not left with no other option but to sleep on the street, but they end up temporarily satisfying the public's need to feel like things are okay, and then those individuals who are homeless are left right back where they started.

As Cynthia Bogard wrote in *Seasons Such as These: How Homelessness Took Shape in America*:

The focus on shelter, rather than housing, enabled homelessness to become constructed as a prevalent social problem. Many in the market-based American culture might disagree that permanent housing is a public responsibility. Preventing people from freezing to death by offering part of the country's social safety net. Beyond being a viable public policy idea because it calls for only a modest response to the problem, providing shelter satisfies a basic moral impulse of civilized society. (2015, p. 197)

In Laura Parker's (1998) article *Homeless Find the Streets Growing Colder*, an individual who is homeless is quoted saying, "The thing about homelessness is it's so time-consuming... Your stuff is not in the same place. You have to take a shower here. Then you have to travel halfway across town to get breakfast. Then if you need any clothes, you have to go somewhere else." This exemplifies why housing is so important. Unless accompanied by the availability of other programs and assistance such as wage increases, child-care subsidies, Head Start, TANF assistance, Medicaid, welfare programs such as food stamps, and job training, housing will not be enough. However, giving those who are currently unable the ability to meet their basic needs is the first step in helping to keep them afloat.

One program that has had success in the cities that have implemented it—Salt Lake City, Denver, and Boston; to name a few—is the "Housing First" model. Housing First is an approach that "puts an immediate and primary focus on helping individuals and families quickly access and then sustain housing...[it] is a client-driven strategy that provides immediate access to an apartment without requiring initial participation in psychiatric treatment or treatment for sobriety" (McNamara, 2008, p. 4). Housing First has been criticized as a one-size-fits-all approach that doesn't address every aspect of homelessness

in every city, but as I said, it is a good start when paired with other important social services and a commitment by local governments to fund Housing First programs fully for more than a few years. One of these critical services would be providing people with more of a transition from places like jails and hospitals into housing. “Public systems or institutions...too often “graduate” people directly into the homeless system,” without giving them the tools to “have stable housing and some means for maintaining it” (p. 5). A more comprehensive package of housing and support services is often referred to as “permanent supportive housing” (p. 4).

VIII. Methods

This thesis seeks to call into question our current policies on homelessness. In chapter one, I have begun to critique the existing research and literature on homelessness that supposes that people who are homeless are personally responsible for their condition. I have explained the current state of homelessness both nationwide and specifically in Los Angeles, and evaluated the legitimacy of many perceived causes of homelessness, including low levels of personal motivation, mental health and addiction, and lack of affordable housing. I have also critiqued many existing policies regarding homelessness and solutions to this problem that have already been proposed or implemented.

The methods I will employ to develop alternate accounts of responsibility and ultimately address the problems with the current focus of homeless literature and research will be through a combination of theoretical inquiry and survey research. My goal of laying out a new way of looking at who or what is responsible for homelessness will be accomplished through three steps: providing an analysis of John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice*

that shows how homeless cannot exist in a just society; relating existing theories of responsibility, property, and freedom to the question of who or what is responsible for homelessness; and conducting in-person interviews with individuals currently experiencing homelessness on Los Angeles' Skid Row, and interviews with individuals who have not experienced homelessness.

In my literature review, I have explained the main components of existing theories of homelessness, which are: the way the having a home or not having a home defines a person's "citizenship," political exclusion, and social control. In chapter two, I explain John Rawls' principles of a just society and how each of the theories of homelessness I have touched on define the utility of homelessness. In chapter three, I build a theory of responsibility from an assessment of John Rawls' account of justice as fairness, conceptions of property, and the idea of freedom that shows where personal responsibility ends and societal responsibility begins in relation to homelessness and ensuring everyone has the opportunity to live the life they desire for themselves.

Finally, I incorporate what the individuals who are homeless that I spoke with say about personal responsibility and societal responsibility in order to better explain the failures of existing homeless policies and programs, and flesh out a new way of looking at homelessness that will allow us to research and address the problem differently in the future. I take up how respondents—as themselves theorists of their own experience—understand responsibility both in the abstract and in terms of their own situation.

I identified 10 respondents on Los Angeles' Skid Row who are currently without homes to talk to me about their current situation and homelessness in the broader sense. I sought a mix of ages, genders, and ethnicities in order to get the most representative

sample and a diverse set of testimonies. I then identified 10 more respondents who do have access to a home and asked them many of the same questions I asked the first group. This second group of respondents was identified in the financial district of Los Angeles that is near Skid Row, outside the L.A. Central Library. I stopped every third person and asked if they had a few minutes to speak with me about homelessness. Everyone was offered \$15 in compensation for their time, which ranged from 5 to 45 minutes depending on how long a person was willing to talk to me.

The questions I asked related to each respondent's view of personal responsibility, societal responsibility, and their own personal work ethic. I also asked questions about their views on the issue of homelessness and its causes, what they think of policies such as Los Angeles' proclaimed initiative to provide more funding for homelessness, and whose responsibility it is to alleviate the problem of homelessness for those who experience it.

The questions were as follows:

1. Do you have a place that you consider home?
2. Do you have a place to sleep at night?
3. How long have you been without permanent housing?
4. What do you consider to be the main cause of your homelessness?
5. What main thing(s) do you think would lift you out of homelessness? (Group 1)
What main thing(s) should we do to solve the problem of homelessness? (Group 2)
6. Are you employed?
7. What does responsibility mean to you? Describe responsibility in the broad sense.
8. Tell me about your own sense of personal responsibility and describe your work ethic.
9. If you were able to help, would you feel a sense of responsibility toward those who cannot provide for themselves?
10. What is society's responsibility to people who are homeless?

Group 1, individuals who do not have homes and currently reside on Los Angeles' Skid Row were asked all 10 questions. Group 2, individuals who do have access to a

permanent residence, were asked the second form of question 5 and questions 6-10. Using John Rawls' principles of justice as a framework, and incorporating I create an understanding of society's responsibility to people who are homeless.

CHAPTER TWO

A THEORY OF JUSTICE

According to John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice*, true justice can only be achieved through equal citizenship. In contrast to utilitarianism which seeks the greatest good for the greatest number, Rawlsian justice "denies that the loss of freedom for some is made right by a greater good shared by others...It does not allow that the sacrifices imposed on a few are outweighed by the larger sum of advantages enjoyed by many" (p. 3). Rawls' theory of a just society is one where "major social institutions distribute fundamental rights and duties and determine the division of advantages of social cooperation" in a way that doesn't subject one group to injustice in order for another group to prosper (p. 6). One person's 'good life' cannot come at the expense of another person. As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." In this chapter, I will explain Rawls' account of justice as fairness in order to lay a foundation upon which to build a theory of Rawlsian responsibility as it pertains to homelessness. I will then argue that homelessness cannot exist in a just society, and the only acceptable response to homelessness is to abolish it. Homelessness, according to my reading of John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice*, cannot be reformed, fixed, or alleviated.

Before I go any further, it is important to note that the foundation of Rawlsian society relies on the idea that people are better off when they enter into a rule-governed community together. Rawls and many other social contract theorists believe that the particular rules of conduct that "specify a system of cooperation" should be "designed to advance the good of those taking part in it" (p. 4). In addition, Rawls writes, "the more advantaged...recognize that the well-being of each depends on a scheme of social

cooperation without which no one could have a satisfactory life” (p. 88). In this paper, I take these assertions to be true and consent to the idea that there exists a societal structure that is better for everyone than if citizens did not enter into a social contract with one another, in order to effectively take up the project of engaging with principles of justice and the idea of a just society.

The Veil of Ignorance

Rawls is not concerned with mitigating inequalities that stem from individual characteristics, choices, and talents; but instead with inequalities that develop at the most basic level of our society—what he calls the “basic structure.” His main criticism of our society is that “men born into different positions have different expectations of life determined, in part, by the political system as well as by economic and social circumstances. In this way the institutions of society favor certain starting places over others. These are especially deep inequalities” (p. 7). Inequalities that determine peoples’ life prospects before they have a chance to make their own choices and utilize their individual abilities and talents are especially troubling for Rawls. He is most concerned with the rules of the game being fair for each person because of his theory of the “veil of ignorance,” which demands us to think about whether a society can truly be considered fair and just if there are social positions that people would want to get rid of if there was a chance they would have to endure them themselves.

The veil of ignorance is an interesting thought experiment that asks what the principles of society would be if they were designed by people who did not know what position in society they would end up in; having knowledge of basic facts about life and society, but not about one’s own endowments. Rawls calls this time of thinking and

creating the “original position.” He argues that if a rational person is not sure where they will fall, it is reasonable to assume that they are more likely to want equalities and inequalities to benefit everyone instead of a select and privileged few that they may or may not be one of; and so, in the original position, risk-averse and rational human beings will develop a society that does not exploit the lowest strata of that society.

The veil of ignorance has received criticism from scholars such as Iris Marion Young and Martha Nussbaum for its inability to be inclusive and take into account all of the factors that go into a person’s self-identity, world view, and preferences. Young (1990) writes, “The veil of ignorance removes any differentiating characteristics among individuals, and thus ensures that all will reason from identical assumptions and the same universal point of view” (p. 101). However, for the purpose of this paper, I will take the veil of ignorance for what it is—a thought experiment aimed at understanding which positions in society reasonable individuals would never want to experience themselves. I justify this standpoint using the work of other Rawlsian scholars, such as Dr. Adam Cureton, who is known for his work titled *A Rawlsian Perspective on Justice for the Disabled*. Cureton (2008) calls *A Theory of Justice* a “limited project” that Rawls undertakes, with the “explicit aim [of] find[ing] principles of justice, which are to govern the basic structures of a closed, well-ordered society that exists under reasonably favorable conditions” (p. 2). These favorable conditions include:

A sufficiently large group of moderately selfish people who are roughly equal in physical and mental ability and who live together at the same time in the same definite territory under conditions of moderate scarcity of

resources...[and] have a capacity for a conception of the good and suffer minor limitations in their cognitive abilities (Cureton, p. 6).

Where Rawls is criticized for over-generalizing the experiences and identities of people in a diverse society, and ignoring those who are incapable of rational thoughts, Cureton says, “Once we develop an appropriate conception of justice for a society like that, Rawlsians hope that we can make certain revisions, qualifications and additions to the theory to then find principles of justice for a more realistic society.” (p. 3). I intend to do my work on homelessness from a Rawlsian perspective, developing an account of how a just, Rawlsian society should treat the condition of homelessness.

Principles of Justice

John Rawls has two principles of justice, as outlined in *A Theory of Justice*. The first is that “each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive scheme of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar scheme of liberty for others” (p. 53). This means that we should place priority and importance on ensuring equality—in terms of guaranteeing equal opportunity both in theory and in application; and securing access to primary social goods and basic rights and liberties for every member of society. The second principle says that “social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both (a) reasonably expected to be to everyone’s advantage, and (b) attached to positions and offices open to all” (p. 53). This means that any inequalities in wealth or income that occur must transpire after equal opportunity is assured, and be to the benefit of the least advantaged² in society.

The foundation of Rawlsian society is basic rights, basic liberties, and equality of opportunity. Basic rights and liberties are political liberties, including the right to vote and

² I delve deeper into the concept of the ‘least advantaged’ later on.

hold public office, and all First Amendment rights; “liberty of conscience and freedom of thought”; personal freedoms and the right to bodily and emotional integrity and dignity; and the rights and liberties afforded by the rule of law (p. 53). Equality of opportunity means that barriers such as those that stem from class differences do not prevent people from having the opportunity to acquire knowledge, skills, and experiences. In addition, Rawls also believes in every person’s right to what he calls chief or primary social goods. On top of the rights and liberties aforementioned, primary goods include opportunity, income, and wealth. Rawls asks us to imagine “a hypothetical initial arrangement in which all the social primary goods are equally distributed: everyone has similar rights and duties, and income and wealth are evenly shared” (p. 55). He calls on society to “try to find a rendering of them which treats everyone equally as a moral person, and which does not weight men’s share in the benefits and burdens of social cooperation according to their social fortune or their luck in the natural lottery” (p. 65). He believes that an initial just distribution of rights and goods would be enough to prevent unjust inequalities from occurring in society.

Rawls’ theory of a just basic structure stems from creating the principles of justice behind the veil of ignorance, and he seeks a structure where inequalities do not occur at the foundational level of society—the “original position.” A Rawlsian account of social justice tells us that every single person in society, regardless of their initial position, should be able to achieve success and create the life they desire for themselves if they are so motivated to do so. It is the “American Dream” that has never been realized because the foundation of our country was cognitively dissonant—the rules of the game were never fair; liberty and justice for all was preached, but never practiced.

Equal Basic Liberties and Fair Equality of Opportunity

A key aspect of a Rawlsian society is that everyone in it must experience “equal citizenship”—meaning they fully enjoy basic rights, basic liberties, and equality of opportunity. Rawls writes:

positions are to be not only open in a formal sense, but that all should have a fair chance to attain them...We might say that those with similar abilities and skills should have similar life chances. More specifically, assuming that there is a distribution of natural assets, those who are at the same level of talent and ability, and have the same willingness to use them, should have the same prospects of success regardless of their initial place in the social system (p. 63).

From my standpoint, homelessness precludes individuals from doing this. Homelessness makes people unable to exercise their political rights, to be treated equally under the rule of law, and to possess bodily integrity.

According to Rawls, people are entitled to an array of political freedoms such as voting, holding public office, and assembling to express or defend ideas (p. 53). While there are few explicit laws or formal barriers, per se, against people experiencing homeless engaging politically (requiring a permanent address in order to register to vote would be a formal barrier, however, many places allow individuals to register at shelters or even just cross streets—wherever the person rests their head at night), there are countless informal barriers. For one, as I discussed in Chapter One, being homeless is incredibly time-consuming. A person who has to spend their entire day acquiring the means to meet their

basic needs surely cannot be expected to have the time to take political action, or even further, to feel safe doing so. For example, my ability and willingness to engage politically depends on the fact that I have the time and resources to educate myself about issues, candidates, and my rights; and my experience of life and law enforcement thus far allows me to feel sure that my political action will not result in harmful retaliation against me from those in power. To drive this point home, I turn to Jeremy Waldron's (1991) *Homelessness and the Issue of Freedom*. In this text, he discusses how saying there is equal opportunity is not the same as it being there in practice:

The juridical fact that a person is not legally barred from becoming a tenant or a proprietor does not mean that there is any realistic prospect of that happening. Whether it happens depends, among other things, on how he can present himself, how reliable and respectable he appears, what skills and abilities he can deploy, how much time, effort, and mobility he can invest in a search for housing, assistance, and employment, and so on...We could say equally that it is hard to get a job when one appears filthy, that many of the benefits of social and economic interaction cannot be obtained without an address or without a way of receiving telephone calls, that a person cannot take all his possessions with him in a shopping cart when he goes for an interview but he may have nowhere to leave them, that those who have become homeless become so because they have run out of cash altogether and so of course do not have available the up-front fees and deposits that landlords require from potential tenants, and so on" (p. 322-323).

The other aspects of Rawlsian liberty are also infringed upon by the condition of homelessness. Living conditions such as sleeping unprotected from the elements and other people, and inconsistent access to restrooms or showers violate bodily integrity. In addition, unjust laws that target or disproportionately affect the homeless population—such as those discussed in Chapter One—violate the right to be treated equally under the rule of law. While many laws are technically enforced equally regardless of who the individual breaking the law is, “only poor people are punished for deviating from them in the eyes of state officials” (Young, p. 6).

Another aspect of equal opportunity are the “legitimate expectations” for life that people develop in a just society based on the social institutions and norms presented to them. Rawls believes that people should be free to develop these expectations and pursue them. He writes, “given a just system of cooperation as a framework of public rules, and the expectations set up by it, those who, with the prospect of improving their condition, have done what the system announces it will reward are entitled to have their expectations met” (p. 88). This is equal opportunity in practice—having the ability to see what opportunities are available, and having freedom equal to the freedom of others in society to set a goal and attempt to achieve it, as long as that goal does not infringe upon the rights and freedoms of others in society. As Rawls writes, “Each person has an equal right to a fully adequate scheme of equal basic liberties which is compatible with a similar scheme of liberties for all” (p. 291).

RAWLS AND HOMELESSNESS

In Funmilola Omole's (2004) Concordia Masters thesis titled *Political Theory and Justice: Homelessness in Montreal and Problems with Liberal Democracy*, he writes:

Rawls would argue that homelessness, as a form of inequality, is justifiable in modern democracies if expectations of the better off benefit the homeless in society...Rawls's theory permits inequality in liberal deliberative democracies as long as they are to the benefit of the least favored.³

Homelessness therefore, Rawls would argue, is justifiable if the homeless benefit from the wealth of the society (p. 70).

However, I believe that it is a symptomatic misreading of Rawls to name homelessness as the position of the "least favored" because it implies that Rawls believes homelessness can exist in a just society; that there are things we can do to make homelessness just. Substituting homelessness for the position of the least advantaged is a reasonable misunderstanding that does not take into account Rawls' fundamental claim that, behind the veil of ignorance, we are to choose which inequalities are to be allowed and which are outside of a just society. In addition, due to the requirement of equal opportunity and the liberty principle, homelessness is not an acceptable social position to find. To put it simply, we cannot fix homelessness by giving those experiencing it more rights, benefits, or services.

³ To prevent confusion, note that the terms "least favored" and "least advantaged" are used interchangeably by Rawls.

The Least Advantaged

A key piece of *A Theory of Justice* is this idea of the “least advantaged” players in a society. Rawls believes that an inequality is only justified if it is to the benefit of the least advantaged. He is vague about what that benefit looks like in practice—some have argued that it can be welfare benefits that come from taxes, while others have argued that it could be charitable donations made by those who have money to spare (Omole, p. 72)—but he says, “social and economic inequalities, for example inequalities of wealth and authority, are just only if they result in compensating benefits for everyone, and in particular for the least advantaged members of society” (p. 13).

In section 17 of chapter two in *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls clarifies that he does not believe we have to even out all disadvantages in order for society to be fair. Instead he says, “undeserved inequalities call for redress; and since inequalities of birth and natural endowment are undeserved, these inequalities are to be somehow compensated for” (p. 86). Rawls gives the example of strengthening public education to “improve the long-term expectation of the least favored” (p. 87). However, I believe that the “least favored” Rawls refers to here cannot possibly include people who are homeless. He defines the least advantaged as “persons whose family and class origins are more disadvantaged than others, whose natural endowments (as realized) permit them to fare less well, and whose fortune and luck in the course of life turn out to be less happy...based on social primary goods” (p. 83). While this definition alone could be used to describe individuals experiencing homelessness, Rawls’ process of designating the least advantaged in society and, further, selecting which social positions in society are acceptable and just, should lead

to the exclusion of those experiencing homelessness from the definition of the least advantaged.

It is difficult to justify the position of the least advantaged at all, but, as Rawls states, people have a right to gain from their personal traits, which will inevitably breed acceptable levels of inequality. He says:

The more advantaged have a right to their natural assets, as does everyone else; this right is covered by the first principle under the basic liberty protecting the integrity of the person. And so the more advantaged are entitled to whatever they can acquire in accordance with the rules of a fair system of social cooperation (p. 88).

I will not undertake the endeavor of identifying the lowest acceptable level of the least advantaged. However, I will show that it is possible and justifiable by Rawls' theory of a just society to draw the line at homelessness. Putting the theoretical designation of the least advantaged into practice, the least favored could include those on the lower end of the wealth spectrum—as long as they have equal opportunity and their basic needs met—because Rawls acknowledges that “the distribution of wealth and income need not be equal” as long as it is “to everyone’s advantage, and at the same time, positions of authority and responsibility [are] accessible to all” (p. 53). In addition, individuals with both physical and mental handicaps could be considered a faction of the least advantaged that must be provided for and protected from inequalities that cause them further harm. Adam Cureton’s (2008) work addresses the issue of whether Rawls’ principles of justice can apply to people who are disabled. He argues that yes, they can, due to Rawls’ discussion of

“the principles of paternalism” (Rawls, p. 219). Cureton writes, “Principles of paternalism would most likely require, for example, that severely disabled people are treated with dignity and respect, and that they are afforded adequate opportunities to exercise their capabilities” (p. 16). He says that a society can still be considered just even if it contains individuals whose physical and mental states are not equal to everyone else’s, as long as the decisions made for the person and the benefits provided them allow the person to “lead a life that we reasonably think she would choose for herself were she thinking clearly” (p. 16).

In contrast to these kinds of hindrances, homelessness is not an acceptable social position to find and is outside of an acceptable society because it does not allow people to pursue the life they desire for themselves. While it is possible for those with fewer financial resources to imagine a life for themselves and chase that vision as long as they have equal opportunity and equal access to the necessary resources; or for those who are disabled to have reasonable accommodations made for them that allow them to live a good life, homelessness generally prevents individuals from attaining for their own lives the reasonable and legitimate expectations that they are able to envision.

Homelessness cannot be reformed the way institutions like education or mental health care can. A Rawlsian society would not “fix” homelessness by giving people more rights; it would require an end of the existence of the condition of homelessness in order for there to be true Rawlsian justice. I tease out the concept of the least advantaged and who those people actually are in real society, in order to make the argument that people who are experiencing homelessness fall beneath even that designation; that people who are homeless have “slipped through the cracks” in our flawed social fabric. In the following

sections, I will show that the social position of homelessness is in violation of, and incompatible with, a Rawlsian basic structure, and to do anything short of abolishing homelessness is to misunderstand what Rawls calls for. I will argue this conclusion through the application of true liberty and equal opportunity, and an analysis of the difference principle and the idea of the existence of a social minimum in society.

Social Minimums

Rawls' idea of a "social minimum" is explained by Jeremy Waldron as "a level of material well-being beneath which no member of society should be allowed to fall...a certain minimum provision necessary for people to lead decent and tolerable lives" (Waldron 1986, p. 21). I argue that employing Rawls' framework demands we implement a social minimum and work towards the abolition of the social position of "homeless" in order to mitigate the negative effects of inequality and "ensure that no one is advantaged or disadvantaged...by the outcome of natural chance or the contingency of social circumstances" (Rawls, p. 11). Rawls says that it is difficult to determine exact social minimums—things like the poverty line—but the concept of having a threshold beneath which it is unacceptable for a member of society to be situated is relevant to my work on homelessness. Although Rawls does not view social minimums as a principle of justice because that seems a little barbaric—as Waldron (1986) wrote, "Is this all that the poor are entitled to? No more than is necessary to keep them from revolt? (p. 31)—I will use this "minimum standard of well-being" to argue for eliminating homelessness (Waldron 1986, p. 24).

In addition to the fact that homelessness is incongruous with the liberty and equality principles, homelessness would not survive as a relevant social position in the

thought experiment that is the veil of ignorance. Rawls uses the analogy of cutting a cake into pieces for everyone to eat in order to demonstrate the veil of ignorance. He explains that if someone is cutting a cake and they have to choose their piece last, they will cut the cake equally to ensure they get the largest share possible for themselves. This is the same with the original position. If everyone got to pick from a list of positions in society that you had created, and you had to pick last, what would you want (and not want) on the list? And if you knew that there would be individuals who had less and individuals who had more because of all the factors that happen at the stages after the basic structure is established, there are provisions you'd want in place to make sure that even if you were, let's say poor for our example, you could not end up without access to basic rights and liberties. Rawls writes, "Some selection of relevant positions is necessary for a coherent theory of social justice and the ones chosen should accord with its first principles. By selecting the so-called starting places one follows out the idea of mitigating the effects of natural accident and social circumstance" (p. 85).

The Difference Principle

Acknowledging that inequalities can and will occur, and that these inequalities do not necessarily produce injustice, Rawls introduces the "difference principle," which is the idea behind the second principle of justice, stating that any disadvantage (or inequality) must be to the benefit of the least advantaged. It matters that the difference principle is a principle of justice for Rawls and the theory of social minimums is not. Setting a minimum level of existence is important and integral, however, it is insufficient for ensuring Rawlsian justice. The difference principle enhances the idea that an inequality is justified if no one gets hurt, by saying that no one being harmed or made worse off by an inequality is not

enough; instead, an inequality is only justified if everyone benefits. The difference principle acknowledges that inequality in and of itself is not a good thing, so there must be a system in place that requires inequality to truly be a rising tide that lifts all boats if it is to exist in a justice as fairness society.

The difference principle requires some level of enlightened self-interest for individuals in society to feel compelled to consent to it. To explain this concept, I use the example of wealthy people justifying progressive taxation. The difference principle demands that wealthier individuals understand that the structure of the society that they're a part of (say, capitalist, instead of communist) has allowed them to make more money than others, and so they owe something in return. In addition, the difference principle demands that wealthy people engage in the veil of ignorance thought experiment so that they expect to be taxed at a higher rate because that is what they would've agreed to if they didn't know if they would be the least advantaged or most advantaged.

Abolishing Homelessness

It is interesting to me that homelessness is not mentioned in John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice*, because it seems so clear that homelessness could not be a social position in a just society. As I have explained, it violates equal liberty and opportunity, even if accommodations are made to give people experiencing homeless more rights, decent treatment by both law enforcement and civilians, and access to either charitable or governmental benefits and welfare. Although Rawls doesn't argue against homelessness directly, it seems to me that that is what his words mean when he discusses true equality. When reading the following passage, replace the word 'this' in the first sentence with 'homelessness.'

The principle of open positions forbids **this**. It expresses the conviction that if some places were not open on a basis fair to all, those kept out would be right in feeling unjustly treated even though they benefited from the greater efforts of those who were allowed to hold them. They would be justified in their complaint not only because they were excluded from certain external rewards of office but because they were debarred from experiencing the realization of self which comes from a skillful and devoted exercise of social duties. They would be deprived of one of the main forms of human good (p. 73).

Many have used theories of justice to talk about improving homelessness, when in fact, homelessness has no place in a just community. In his discussion of the veil of ignorance, the original position, and establishing social minimums, Rawls is essentially demanding that society work to eliminate homelessness when selecting the relevant social positions that are allowed to exist in a just society. Homelessness fails the test at every level, and we must work to not just make homelessness palatable for those who have to witness it, but to ensure that no one in our community can possibly end up without access to permanent, supportive housing; creating a world such that homelessness is not possible. This paper seeks to pose the following question: If the policies we have in place now come from the mindset that homelessness is a condition that is acceptable in society as long as services such as conditional welfare and emergency shelters are available to some, what would our policies look like if our fundamental assumption was that homelessness in and of itself is a violation of basic human rights?

THE UTILITY OF HOMELESSNESS

Now that I have made clear the fact that homelessness cannot exist in a just, Rawlsian society, I intend to briefly touch on the main schools of thought on why homelessness continues to exist at increasing levels. These are: deriving value from the population of those experiencing homelessness, purposeful political exclusion in order to solidify the “in group’s” sense of identify and citizenship, and social control.

The Value of Homelessness

In Craig Willse’s (2015) *The Value of Homelessness: Managing Surplus Life in the United States*, Willse writes, “The category of homeless carries with it capital excess and turmoil, anti-black racism, the everydayness of police occupation, and the transformation of urban space into consumption enclaves” (p. 9). In addition, he coins the term “surplus life,” which is a combination of Karl Marx’s idea of surplus labor and Michel Foucault’s conceptions of biopower. Willse writes that everyone—especially people who do have housing—benefit from the fact that homelessness exists and the management and use of those bodies to create ideal societal conditions for landlords and other wealthy people. Willse writes that we have “an economy that extracts value from the abandonment of entire populations of people” (p. 13). Managing the homeless instead of truly working to end the condition of homelessness serves countless purposes including excluding people from housing markets entirely in order to artificially drive up housing costs, deflating wages and keeping competition for low-wage jobs high by providing sources of cheap labor, perpetuating the entire “homeless services industry” that Willse argues is actually the foundation of the entire housing market, and allowing us to focus housing policy on

“what to do with the homeless?” rather than “what to do about the shortage of affordable housing?” (p. 4).

Political Exclusion

In Arnold's text *Homelessness, Citizenship, and Identity*, she discusses Hannah Arendt's concept of “stateless” people, which, by Arendt's definition, basically means people who lack a concrete tie to the state. Arnold explains that “homelessness connotes...economic dependence and irrationality and hence unfitness for citizenship,” making homelessness not only a physical condition, but also equivalent to political exclusion (p. 17-18). Individuals are not only physically pushed out and excluded from the state they are a part of, but they do not have the opportunity or ability to enjoy the benefits of full citizenship.

Leonard Feldman, in his book *Citizens Without Shelter*, has an interesting theory here because he explains this exclusion and ‘war on the homeless’ as a “mechanism for constituting and securing a public, establishing the boundaries of inclusion, and producing an abject body against which the proper, public body of the citizen can stand” (p. 4). This theory states that people are able to define their own citizenship and sense of inclusion in society by being able to point to who is not included in society. Although most people believe poverty and homelessness are despondent conditions that should be alleviated, those who are not experiencing homelessness and poverty also—maybe even subconsciously—find comfort in knowing that they must be included in society because they are not at the bottom. There is a sense of comfort that comes from being able to see a thing and say, “Well, I must be doing alright because I can see that there are people below me.”

Another aspect of the purposeful exclusion theory is that people distance themselves from those who are not like them, because “the Other” threatens their conception of what society should look like and how people within that society should live. In Randall Amster’s *Street People and the Contested Realms of Public Space*, he quotes another writer named Talmadge Wright who said:

In effect street people, camping in parks, who exhibit appearances at odds with middle class comportment, evoke fears of 'contamination' and disgust, a reminder of the power of abjection. Homeless persons embody the social fear of privileged consumers, fear for their families, for their children, fear that 'those' people will harm them and therefore must be placed as far away as possible from safe neighborhoods (Amster, p. 112).

Amster calls this phenomenon “social distancing” and it reflects peoples’ need to distance themselves from “defiled people and defiled places” because they threaten the social order (112).

Social Control

Social control theories often arise to explain time periods following severe periods of instability, where there is a great need for social order. However, these periods of extreme social control often create social control-oriented societal structures that are impossible to tear down, and anything outside of the traditional fabric of society is deemed as a “threat to the social order” forevermore (Amster, p. 115). Amster and Feldman echo each other on this front, stating that everything from welfare-state programs, to

criminalization laws, to shelters, to prisons are all part of an elaborate social control structure. One great example or case study on social control is in Amster's text. He writes:

In Atlanta, a group of business executives and civic leaders have proposed a 'safeguard zone' to enforce 'quality of life' crime ordinances in order to 'provide significant control of the movement of street persons, transients, hangers-on, loiterers, and street vendors." The logical flaw in the "official" position is all too apparent. "But if criminal behavior begins . . ." "We punish only the criminal." "It is aimed at the lawless." All of these statements were made in reference to conduct such as sitting on sidewalks or sleeping in public that, before passage of this recent spate of laws, had heretofore been perfectly legal and generally seen as innocent acts. Now, by virtue of law prohibiting sitting or sleeping, an entire category of people is made "criminal" for acts committed before the law existed. The lesson? If you want to eliminate a particular social class or subculture or deviant group, locate some behavior that is largely unique to that group and make it illegal (p. 116).

The last line of this example is the most powerful and impactful, explaining the power the government has when it is operating under a social control structure. Essentially, it is not laws applied equally to all people that some people break and then become excluded from society. No, it is the other way around, where laws are created for the purpose of disenfranchising a group of people.

Rawls' Omission—My Contribution

The fact that Rawls does not confront head on the idea of housing and the issue of homelessness is problematic because he fails to address what we do for people who are outside the basic minimal conditions in society. This omission leaves room for individuals to find justifications for “acceptable” levels and conditions of homelessness, and allows us to continue to avoid confronting the fact that homelessness makes us feel more secure. The productivity and utility of homelessness is the reason it is allowed to persist in a society that supposedly strives for justice and equality. However, we can do better. I argue that as a society we must admit our role in the obvious structural failure that is homelessness, work to understand the moral agreement we make as members of a community, and alter our conception of what it means to take responsibility. In the next chapter, I do this through the theory of responsibility I generate via the framework of Rawls and the personal stories of those experiencing homelessness on Los Angeles' Skid Row.

CHAPTER THREE

A THEORY OF [RESPONSIBILITY]

“I think that responsibility tends to be put on the individual, but the responsibility [lies] in the systemic oppression. Have you walked on Skid Row? The majority of folks are black males. And there’s a long history to that... When I hear the word responsibility in regards to homelessness and Skid Row, I think of the county—of the city, specifically—and a lack of responsibility that’s been taken by the city” (R4)⁴.

Robert McNamara’s *Homelessness in America* refers to a poll from 2007 which found that “90% of New York City residents believe that everyone has a basic right to shelter [and] 72% believe that as long as homelessness persists, the United States is not living up to its values” (p. 128). However, despite these statements of responsibility towards homeless individuals, the last 30-40 years of public policy have seen very little in the way of a shift *toward* government taking responsibility for underserved populations. Instead, the government has created ordinances aimed at “removing an unpleasant problem” and left much of the care for these individuals up to churches, nonprofits, and other charities (p. 48).

Using John Rawls’ *A Theory of Justice* as a framework for what a just society should look like, I will show that the government is responsible for ensuring homelessness does not persist in the United States. As I laid out in the last chapter, a just society is one in which homelessness cannot exist because it would not withstand the veil of ignorance thought experiment (assuming that reasonable people would choose equality, fairness, and

⁴ Interviewees from the personal interviews I conducted on Skid Row and the L.A. Central Library will remain anonymous. The individuals I am incorporating into my paper have been assigned numbers (1-6) that I will use to refer to them throughout this chapter.

Citation:

Respondent 4. Interview by Savannah Woolston. Personal interview. L.A. Central Library, March 7, 2016.

the best possible life situation for everyone if they didn't know where in society they would end up), is a condition that violates Rawls' justice principles, and is a state that is below an acceptable social minimum. In this chapter, I will explain that the existence of homelessness in the U.S. reflects our government's failure to uphold its duties and responsibilities, and why the government must take greater responsibility for the least advantaged through changes in public policy.

Introduction to Responsibility

In *Responsibility for Justice*, Iris Marion Young (2011) writes, "The last twenty years have seen the triumph of a more individualist understanding of social relations that weakens or even destroys this idea of collective responsibility. Welfare policy discourse in the United States has led this shift" (p. 9). Personal responsibility discourse and a focus on individual work ethic as the sole way to behave as a citizen of the United States has led to a situation where, as Young writes, "Moral responsibility for every circumstance in a society can presumably be assigned by describing the limits of each person's sphere of personal responsibility...there are no positive responsibilities persons have in relation to one another" (p. 10-11).

Kathleen Arnold's text *Homelessness, Citizenship, and Identity: The Uncanniness of Late Modernity* describes citizenship as having a "fiduciary nature," where the political institution is the trustee and all of the citizens are beneficiaries. This understanding of society lets people feel self-righteous about their disdain for those who are homeless because they "brought it on themselves" by not holding up their end of the bargain. Individuals who buy into this conception of society see the poor as parasites who take hand outs, "taking from us and not giving back" (Arnold, p. 52). This understanding "seeks to

deny the structural dependency” of individuals on the state, by defining the relationship between citizens and the state as one between creditor and debtor (p. 53). Under this thinking, it makes sense how personal responsibility language would appear because all other factors besides the ‘tit for tat’ relationship between individuals and the government are discounted, making individuals seem personally responsible for changing their own situation.

If the policies that emerge from a “personal responsibility” model of homelessness look like criminalization and conditional welfare, what would they look like if our conception of responsibility for homelessness were put on the government and those involved with creating and perpetuating the structures and institutions of our society? As Young writes, there are “policy consequences of this discourse of personal responsibility” (p. 3). As I explained in previous sections, personal responsibility and personal choice language typically lead to programs that seek to “fix” people, and policies that criminalize homelessness—making the homeless lifestyle an unwelcome part of society. In Leonard Feldman’s *Citizens Without Shelter*, he quotes Samira Kawash’s *The Homeless Body*, which reads:

Since the magnitude of the problem of homelessness came into widespread public consciousness in the early 1980s, the discourse surrounding the homeless has slowly shifted from a guilty compassion to an exhausted and often vengeful disavowal. Communal responses to homelessness in the 1990s aim not to eliminate the causes of homelessness, but to eliminate the homeless themselves by denying them any place (Feldman, p. 2).

Feldman says that this shift marked the transition from compassion to “compassion fatigue” in the early 1980s, which led to new “public-space” ordinances, including laws, bans, and restrictions like the ones I mentioned in Chapter One on sleeping in public places and panhandling (p. 2).

Hoch and Slayton introduce another understanding of responsibility in regards to homelessness, in *New Homeless and Old*, that is much different than the personal responsibility understanding. They write, “we find the suffering endured by the homeless to be undeserved, but not for the sorts of reasons offered in the popular human interest stories. The problem with these stories is that they focus public attention on *individual* vulnerabilities rather than the *institutional* roots of homelessness” (p. 5). In Hoch and Slayton’s text, they encourage society to view the homeless as “group of disadvantaged citizens,” instead of a group of people defined by their own personal flaws and failings (p. 232). Instead of viewing those who are homeless as responsible for their situation, Hoch and Slayton find these individuals to be suffering from a societal structure that was not built to serve or benefit everyone equally.

On one of my trips down to Skid Row, I spoke with a homeless veteran who served in the United States military for 20 years. When I asked him about responsibility, he replied: “Responsibility means everything to me. You have to watch your stuff, you have to watch your life, you have to watch your income...you are responsible for children... In this life, responsibility is everything... If I have a job, I will do it to the best of my abilities. One hundred percent, all the time. Like I said, responsibility is everything to me” (R6)⁵. This definition of responsibility is not far off from my own, and certainly doesn’t sound like a

⁵ Respondent 6. Interview by Savannah Woolston. Personal interview. Skid Row, March 7, 2016.

response that would come from someone who was experiencing homeless due to a lack of personal responsibility. So when I asked this vet why he is now two and a half years without access to permanent housing, I was unsurprised to hear his response. “They make it so hard to get housing... They made a lot of red tape... You can’t get housing because you don’t have this, this, this, this, and this. Or you don’t qualify, even though you have everything. It’s just a crazy system,” he said.

Another individual I spoke with explained her experience with responsibility,

“Responsibility means taking care of, like, your main concerns for your life. Life for me, I just got out of a psych hospital so like that’s why I’m trying to find some place to go... For me, right now, I’m on mental health... I used to work, but now I’m in a mental health program, so I’m just making sure I go to my appointments on time. That for me is responsibility—making sure I show up and do everything I need to do” (R1)⁶.

Although I conducted interviews with the purpose of creating a new theory of responsibility as it pertains to homelessness from the ideas and words people who are experts of their own experience with homelessness—and not with the purpose of collecting statistical data on whether people who are homeless are lacking a strong sense of personal responsibility—stories and testimony like these reinforce an alternative idea of responsibility that is held up by experts like Timmer, Eitzen, and Talley, authors of *Paths to Homelessness*. They write, “Neither blaming the victim nor compassion will end homelessness. Structural transformation is required, and this will not occur without major

⁶ Respondent 1. Interview by Savannah Woolston. Personal interview. L.A. Central Library, March 7, 2016.

modifications in public policy” (p. 190). This view of who is responsible for homelessness essentially says that government institutions should and must play a role in giving people the opportunity to climb up the economic ladder and out of homelessness.

Introduction to Property

As I discussed in Chapter One, the work we do through language and definitions is incredibly powerful. Similar to working to define what it means to be homeless, defining a home and what it means to have a home has a strong impact on our conception of what it means to be a full member of society. In Peter Rossi’s (1989) *Down and Out in America*, he writes that the Oxford Unabridged Dictionary contains three pages worth of definitions for the word home, with nearly all of them emphasizing “the close association with the themes of safety, family, love, shelter, comfort, rest, sleep, warmth, affection, food, and sociability” (p. 14). Since the United States formed—both informally and formally—having a home and owning property has dictated important societal structures including who has power, who can vote, and who sits in the higher strata of society. Society has long been concerned with defining what we mean by the home and what constitutes shelter, so it is no surprise that our definition of “what constitutes the floor of housing adequacy and decency below which no member of our society should be permitted to sink without being offered some alternative” has been meticulously thought out (p. 12).

Not having a home “positions the poor as debtors to society,” and people often become socially defined by whether and what kind of housing they have access to (Arnold, p. 48). Essentially, one’s housing status, even today in the 21st century, still defines how politically engaged a person is able to be. As Martin Whiteford writes in *Street*

Homelessness and Social Exclusion:

The interlacing of street homelessness and social exclusion was based on the recognition that rough sleepers experience often extreme and entrenched dislocation and exclusion from mainstream social interactions, practices and spaces, which directly affects their capacity to engage as full and active citizens (p. 13).

The division between the housed and unhoused is discussed by Hoch and Slayton when they examine how much weight we put behind having a conventional home; discussing that by narrowing and defining what an acceptable home looks like, we do damage to the entire low-income housing market by tearing down things like single room occupancy hotels (SROs) because we view them as “breeding grounds for social disease” (p. 9). Feldman writes about the residential hotels: “These developments ought to be encouraged, not simply because they provide shelter to needy bodies, but also because they resist the building of social walls between citizen-homeowners and bare life” (p. 136).

In Jeremy Waldron’s (2004) piece, *Property and Ownership*, he articulates these harmful divisions and distinctions as arising from private property. He writes that opposed to common property systems where “resources are governed by rules whose point is to make them available for use by all or any members of the society,” or collective property systems where “the community as a whole determines how important resources are to be used,” private property, “is continually in need of public justification—first, because it empowers individuals to make decisions about the use of scarce resource in a way that is not necessarily sensitive to others’ needs or the public good; and second, because it does not merely permit that but deploys public force at public expense to uphold it” (Waldron 2004). Private property systems—although justified by arguments such as Garrett Hardin’s

(1968) ‘tragedy of the commons’ where, if no one has the exclusive responsibility over a chunk of land or property, no one will take care of it or some will have to do a disproportionate amount of work to maintain it—Waldron criticizes private property systems for the fact that

“In most private property systems, there are some individuals who own little or nothing, and who are entirely at the mercy of others. So when it is said that ‘people in general’ are better off under private property arrangements, we have to ask ‘Which people? Everyone? The majority? Or just a small class of owners whose prosperity is so great as to offset the consequent immiseration of the others in an aggregative utilitarian calculus?’” (Waldron 2004).

Private Property and the Creation of Unfreedom

In the United States and societies like ours, there is a combination of private property (i.e. homes), common property (i.e. streets and parks), and collective property (i.e. military bases). However, private property is our overarching system, and has negative side effects that taint the entire interplay of the different types of property and influence the restrictions placed on public forms of property. A person who has access to a home that they call their own has a different conception about what is appropriate use of and behavior to display on public property than if they did not have access to private property. As Waldron (1991) writes,

Legislators voted for by people who own private places in which they can do all these things are increasingly deciding to make public places available only

for activities other than these primal human tasks. The streets and subways, they say, are for commuting from home to office. They are not for sleeping; sleeping is something one does at home. The parks are for recreations like walking and informal ball-games, things for which one's own yard is a little too confined. Parks are not for cooking or urinating; again, these are things one does at home. Since the public and the private are complementary, the activities performed in public are to be the complement of those appropriately performed in private. This complementarity works fine for those who have the benefit of both sorts of places. However, it is disastrous for those who must live their whole lives on common land (p. 301).

For those who have a private place to tend to their basic needs, public spaces seem inappropriate venues for performing tasks like sleeping, showering, and using the restroom.

These ideas about public property are harmful not just because they stigmatize those who use public property differently than what is considered normal, but because they result in restrictions in the form of laws placed on public property. Los Angeles Municipal Code 41.18 sections a and d, titled "Sidewalks, Pedestrian Subways – Loitering" is a perfect example of this kind of law. It reads:

(a) No person shall stand in or upon any street, sidewalk or other public way open for pedestrian travel or otherwise occupy any portion thereof in such a manner as to annoy or molest any pedestrian thereon or so as to obstruct or unreasonably interfere with the free passage of pedestrians.

(d) No person shall sit, lie or sleep in or upon any street, sidewalk or other public way.

Although selectively enforced, especially in a place like Skid Row, these laws are always available for law enforcement to use when they wish to “cleanup”⁷ an area and are in place because, as Waldron (1991) writes, “People do not want to be confronted with the sight of the homeless—it is uncomfortable for the well-off to be reminded of the human price that is paid for a social structure like theirs—and they are willing to deprive those people of their last opportunity to sleep in order to protect themselves from this discomfort” (p. 314).

Another issue with these laws is the fact that, although they appear to apply equally to everyone, their application only matters to a select group of people—those who have nowhere else besides sidewalks to sit, lie, or sleep. Feldman writes about these kinds of sidewalk restrictions and other laws—referred to as camping bans—that bar people from sleeping in tents, sleeping bags, or other outdoor shelters that they construct,

“From the standpoint of someone who is excluded from all private spaces, someone who has no private dwelling space...someone who must take care of all his or her bodily needs in public spaces—sleeping, resting, eating, urinating, defecating—is a “picnic” of a categorical order different from sleeping? Thus, despite asserting that the camping law is nondiscriminatory (in preventing homeless and housed alike from sleeping in public)...the court unwittingly exposes...the discriminatory bias that lurks beneath the

⁷ Phrases like “cleanup” and “sanitize” in regards to areas of town or specific streets should always be scrutinized. It often means that a new burden will be placed on individuals experiencing homelessness, causing them to have to unnecessarily relocate, get rid of their belongings, and/or experience harassment by law enforcement (Vaillancourt 2012).

universalistic rhetoric of the camping ban. If legitimate dwelling is confined to the space of homes, homeless dwelling becomes an “improper use” of public space.” (p. 144).

The impact of these bans on dwelling in public spaces cannot be overstated. In a society where there are only two kinds of spaces—private property spaces, whose use is restricted to the owner and anyone the owner allows access; and public property spaces, which typically have restrictions in the form of laws like the ones I have mentioned placed on them—those who do not have access to private property are forced to seek refuge in places they are able to be in as uninterrupted a fashion as possible. Oftentimes, the only available place is a sidewalk, and even then people are often forced to be constantly moving, as they may be breaking laws or city ordinances if they stay still. As Waldron (1991) writes, “Their freedom depends on common property in a way that ours does not” (p. 302).

Taking this one step further, Waldron discusses the fact that “No one is free to perform an action unless there is somewhere he is free to perform it” (Waldron 1991, p. 296). I am free to perform the basic task of, let’s say, walking, but only in specific places or at specific times. I may not walk through a crosswalk unless I have the “Walk” signal, and I may not walk through an airport unless I am given explicit permission to do so. Any action that I feel free to perform, I am actually only conditionally free to perform—that condition being having a space I am free to perform the action in. This freedom or unfreedom can take different forms. In some instances, I am unfree to do an action or be in a specific place because it will cause harm to me or I am physically unable to do so. In others, however—and this is typically the case with private property that does not belong to me—my

unfreedom is made clear to me by the fact that if I attempt to be in a space that I do not have ownership of, I can be penalized. The owner of the private property I am attempting to be in or use can forcibly prevent me from entering or taking the property. Waldron writes, "Without a home, a person's freedom is his freedom to act in public, in places governed by common property rules. That is the difference between our freedom and the freedom of the homeless" (p. 311).

In case the previous example that I used—the action of walking—does not make this problem crystal clear, I turn to the example Waldron uses of tending to basic needs. I feel free to use the restroom, sleep, and take a shower because I have a place (my home) that I am able to do this without anyone being able to stop me. However, if I didn't have a home, I would have to find other places—public places—to do these things. Since, for example, urinating or defecating in public is not allowed in public, and in a city like Los Angeles there is a shortage of public restrooms, people who do not have a private place to use the restroom may have to pay to perform this basic and necessary task. When I am in a city that is not my own, I often pop into a coffee shop to use the restroom, after I pay for a coffee in order to get the bathroom code. While this three dollars that I have to spend in order to relieve myself may feel like a small inconvenience to me, this situation could lead people to have to spend a good portion of their money buying access to spaces where they are free to perform their basic necessities. Waldron writes,

Since private places and public places between them exhaust all the places that there are, there is nowhere that these actions may be performed by the homeless person. And since freedom to perform a concrete action requires freedom to perform it at some place, it follows that the homeless person does

not have the freedom to perform them. If sleeping is prohibited in public places, then sleeping is comprehensively prohibited to the homeless. If urinating is prohibited in public places (and if there are no public lavatories) then the homeless are simply unfree to urinate. These are not altogether comfortable conclusions, and they are certainly not comfortable for those who have to live with them (Waldron 1991, p. 315).

Tending to one's basic needs is a requirement for existence. So, in the most direct terms, if a person is unable to tend to their basic needs, they are unable to exist. A person's unfreedom is not just unfreedom in a vague and abstract sense; it is a very tangible feeling of freedom that determines whether a person is able to be alive. As Craig Willse writes in *The Value of Homelessness*, "thinking of systems of housing insecurity and housing deprivation, of a house as a technology that makes live and lets die...The house generates inside and outside of it possibilities for life and experiences of near death" (p. 6).

Moving from Personal to Societal Responsibility

After concluding that homelessness is inherently unfreedom, and a most damaging form of unfreedom because it interferes with basic existence, Waldron (1991) writes,

Now one question we face as a society—a broad question of justice and social policy—is whether we are willing to tolerate an economic system in which large numbers of people are homeless. Since the answer is evidently, "Yes," the question that remains is whether we are willing to allow those who are in this predicament to act as free agents, looking after their own needs, in public places—the only space available to them. It is a deeply frightening fact about

the modern United States that those who have homes and jobs are willing to answer "Yes" to the first question and "No" to the second (p. 304).

Why is it so difficult for people to feel that others deserve the same benefits and treatments that they desire for themselves? Why do we shy away from feeling responsible for others when we would hope that if the tables were turned, someone would take responsibility for us? As one of the individuals that I spoke with who is experiencing homelessness on Skid Row said, "They know how they treated us down here. And they don't want to be treated like that" (R5⁸). Homelessness fails the veil of ignorance thought experiment.

As I discussed in Chapter Two, U.S. society is sometimes cognitively dissonant; we recognize that the condition of homelessness is abysmal, yet cannot seem to make a genuine commitment to prevent it. Maybe it seems like too large a task, or maybe people think it's not their problem; but when I turn to the experts—those who live on Skid Row or do work with and for those who live there—I hear answers. I hear a plea for society to take responsibility for the fact that, "When we speak of "the homeless," we mobilize a pathological category that directs attention to an individual, as if living without housing is a personal experience rather than a social phenomenon" (Willse, p. 3).

When asked what society's responsibility towards those who are homeless is, one currently homeless respondent said, "Society's responsibility is...to offer people alternatives. Like here on Skid Row, there aren't many alternatives besides selling drugs... It's a vicious cycle down here" (R6). Another said, "There's no unity. If there was unity, there would be no homelessness because people would feel obligated to help their brothers

⁸ Respondent 5. Interview by Savannah Woolston. Personal interview. Skid Row, March 14, 2016.

and sisters” (R5). Not to oversimplify the issue of homelessness to a lack of caring for each other, but we are truly lacking that, and our policies reflect that lack of caring.

When I was conducting interviews, I posed a question to all of my respondents asking who, broadly, is responsible for homelessness—churches, charities, individuals, or the government? When speaking with individuals who are not experiencing homelessness, I often got answers similar to one that I got from a young man outside of the library downtown. He said, “It’s all of our responsibility, as humanity” (R3)⁹. To give the benefit of the doubt, this man (and the many others that I interviewed who gave similar answers to this question¹⁰) hopes that everyone will pitch in and do their part to alleviate the problem of homeless. But to analyze this answer more pessimistically (and maybe more realistically), the “all of us” in his answer means not him specifically. If everyone is responsible, no one is personally responsible for sacrificing their own comfort in order to achieve equality. When everyone is responsible, we imply that the problem is too large to be solved by me, and thus, neglect any responsibility we personally have to the situation.

When I asked this same question of individuals who reside on Skid Row, I almost always received a more pointed answer: the government. “The government,” one respondent said, “They should open up some of these parking garages here and they should let the homeless people move in” (R6). In the words of another:

⁹ Respondent 3. Interview by Savannah Woolston. Personal interview. L.A. Central Library, March 7, 2016.

¹⁰ One interviewee not currently experiencing homelessness did not give the lofty “humanity” answer, however. She said, instead, “It’s government’s role...One hundred fucking fifty percent. They’re the ones who made this mess, they’re the ones that need to clean it up... Skid Row is a containment zone. Skid Row is an area that was made to keep people away from others. And that was made by the government” (R4).

“The police come out here and throw all your shit away... They’ll tell you, “Okay you gotta get up at 6 o’clock” and if you’re not up they arrest you and throw your shit away and you gotta start back over...They’re not doing it the right way. If you’re going to stop homelessness, you don’t put [people] in jail, throw all their shit away, and expect them to find something the next day when they get out. That makes no sense. It makes us have to start all over... It’s the government. The government created homelessness” (R5).

In her words, not only is the government currently not helping alleviate, eliminate, or abolish the problem of homelessness, they are part of the problem and are actively standing in the way of the solution.

In Conclusion: My Theory of Responsibility

When held up against Rawls’ principles of justice, homeless does not pass muster. It fails the test of the veil of ignorance, it fails to be a position above an acceptable social minimum, and it violates equal opportunity and equality under the rule of law. As Iris Marion Young writes, “by insisting that individual needy people can move up the economic ladder if they try...[people] assume that the background conditions within which poor people act are not unjust,” and I believe I have shown that they are, in fact, unjust (p. 4). As one interviewee said, “There’s no such thing as justice in this environment... As soon as we get up one level, you take it from us. We can’t build because...we get a little inch better and then, there you go, taking the tent again” (R2¹¹). And as another said, “Some people don’t

¹¹ Respondent 2. Interview by Savannah Woolston. Personal interview. Skid Row, March 14, 2016.

want other people to get ahead,” and unfortunately our basic societal structure reflects that mentality (R6).

When listing all of the atrocities that can be found happening on Skid Row and to homeless people all across the country, many feel that something needs to be done about this, regardless of whether they have experienced inequity and exploitation of this degree before. However, while there is an apparent desire to ensure the humane treatment of all people, there is an even stronger underlying sentiment that it is impossible to change a system of inequality, and that the responsibility for doing so is “not my problem” because, if I had a role in the creation of homelessness, it was an accident.

There is a widely held belief in the U.S. that disparity gives people incentive to work harder, and so instead of abolishing the entire structure of privilege and domination to “rectify inequities and achieve real equality,” we simply redistribute resources just enough to put our minds at ease (Harris 1993, p. 289). The violation of freedom and equality that homelessness inflicts on the least advantaged brings them down from the designation of the least advantaged to a position that is outside of acceptable society. Homelessness is not the result of a poor work ethic or a lack of responsibility, but a life devoid of equal opportunity. When asked whether individuals who are homeless have a different or less strong work ethic than individuals who have been able to avoid homelessness, one respondent said that work ethic “stem[s] from opportunity...People who are given opportunities, people who are given a second chance...Ultimately, work ethic stems from opportunity” (R4).

When I set out to do research on this topic, I wondered why—when over half of the respondents in Dr. Fernando Guerra’s 2014 survey of homelessness in Los Angeles

reported that they believe we deal with homelessness in L.A. poorly—we have such a hard time coming up with and committing to an adequate solution. Initially, I thought the answer was that we cannot decide who is responsible for solving the problem, but upon completing my research, I know that this is not the whole truth. It's not solely that we don't know who is responsible—although the debate over personal responsibility is part of it—it is also that our responsibility to those who are experiencing homelessness demands an uncomfortable response from those of us not afflicted by homelessness.

The intended and unintended consequences of policies that allow me to live my daily life without being inconvenienced by the sight of a person experiencing homelessness has created a situation of life-threatening unfreedom for those experiencing homelessness that we can no longer turn a blind eye from. As Waldron writes,

The rich person does not intend that there should be nowhere the tramp is allowed to urinate (indeed, he probably hopes that there is somewhere—provided it is not in his back yard). And similarly for each proprietor in turn. None of them intends that the tramp should never be allowed to urinate. That just happens, in an invisible hand sort of way, as a result of each proprietor saying, in effect, “Anywhere but here.” Though each particular unfreedom involves an intentional restraint, their cumulation is not in itself the product of anyone's intention” (Waldron 1991, p. 316).

This is the soft indictment of society and privileged individuals' role in the perpetuation of homelessness. A harsher indictment sounds like this:

those who impose a ban on these activities in public places certainly do know very well what the result of that will be: that the homeless will have almost nowhere to go, in the territory subject to their jurisdiction. Indeed the aim—again, as we all know—is often to drive them out of the jurisdiction so that some other city or state has to take care of the problem. Even where this is not intentional, still the intentional infliction of harm is not the only thing we blame people for. “I didn’t mean to,” is not the all-purpose excuse it is often taken to be. We blame people for recklessness and negligence, and certainly the promoters of these ordinances are quite reckless whether they leave the homeless anywhere to go or not” (Waldron 1991, p. 317-318).

Homelessness—resulting from gentrification, from a lack of affordable housing, from exploiting cheap labor and those willing to work for less, from a lack of investment in education and healthcare, and countless other systemic reasons—is unacceptable and a violation of our values and human rights. Whether a person’s involvement in a system that allows for homelessness is an unintentional side effect of how they go through life, or a direct result of selfishness on behalf of those who have much and will go to any length to protect their place in society, the current status quo of attributing homelessness to the personal flaws and failings of those who experience it allows far too much injustice to occur. We are truly all responsible for holding the government accountable for commitments to its citizens—to provide services necessary for people to not just survive, but to achieve the life they desire for themselves and have their freedom protected and autonomy respected—it repeatedly fails to uphold. Government must take greater

responsibility for the least advantaged through changes in public policy that seek to abolish homelessness, not make it more bearable.

Going Forward

After shifting our mentality away from personal responsibility-based policies of criminalization, containment, and conditional welfare, what we need is a genuine commitment from the government to make public space truly public, and to create and fully fund permanent, supportive, and affordable housing for those who need it. One of the people I interviewed said to me about the city of Los Angeles, “They’ve allocated \$100 million for homelessness in Skid Row. What has happened to those dollars? ... As soon as they’ve been allocated, whose pockets did the dollars actually go in? I feel like it went to the new laws... They said that they was building places for the homeless” (R5). This is not what genuine commitment looks like.

Although this project’s goal was not to provide actual public policy recommendations to solve homelessness, I feel it’s not complete without some sort of directive. As Feldman writes,

Public policy should be oriented toward enabling dwelling, not criminalizing it or reducing it to the stripped-down client relationship of the shelter. Solutions to homelessness should build upon the efforts by homeless persons to create sustaining habits rather than, as in shelterization, seeking to disrupt these efforts by isolating the individual homeless person (whether as bare life or as client with pathologies) for treatment and shelter (p. 147-148).

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