Examining Homelessness

Down and Out in America. The Origins of Homelessness. PETER H. ROSSI. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1989. xii, 247 pp. $15.95.

Perhaps no social problem in the United States has generated as much research among social scientists during the 1980s as has homelessness. This research has focused on five central issues: the size of the homeless population; the demographic composition and social, psychological, and physical characteristics of the homeless; the differences between the "old homeless" of the 1950s and '60s and the "new homeless" of the '80s; the reasons for the increase in homelessness in the '80s; and the development of social programs that might alleviate the problem. *Down and Out in America* addresses these issues and is noteworthy in several regards: it is based more thoroughly than previous studies on sampling theory; it provides a comparative analysis of today's homeless not only with those of the '50s and '60s but also with the domiciled extremely poor, who, it is argued, make up the stratum from which most of the homeless come; and its central conclusions regarding the size of the homeless population and particularly the key determinants of homelessness are bold and ripe for debate. Given these qualities and the prominence of its author among social scientists, this book is likely to be widely read and to help mold general understanding of the problem of homelessness. It thus warrants careful assessment.

Estimates of the size of the homeless population have varied widely, ranging nationally from a low of 250,000 to 350,000 (Department of Housing and Urban Development) to a high of 1.5 to 3 million (Community for Creative Non-Violence). Such discrepancies reflect differences in both semantics and estimation procedures. But even when definitions and procedures coincide, the numbers are still often at variance. Rossi contends that this is because most studies are based on seriously flawed sampling strategies. In order to remedy this problem, Rossi and his research associates applied the principles of sampling theory to a survey of Chicago's homeless conducted over a two-week period in the fall of 1985 and again in the winter of 1986. This study, which provides the core data for the book, focused on what Rossi terms the "literally homeless"—those who sleep in shelters or in private or public places not intended as dwellings, such as bus stations, lobbies, or abandoned buildings. The sampling strategy underlying the survey of these literally homeless was two-staged. First, in addition to counting all sheltered homeless on the designated nights of the survey, a probability sample of shelters was drawn from among all Chicago shelters for both seasons and a sample of shelter residents was then surveyed within each of the shelters in the sample. The construction of the street sample was more complicated, consisting first of drawing a stratified, random sample of city blocks based on their prior designation by the city police as having a high, medium, or low probability of containing homeless persons. These blocks were then canvased in the dead of the night (between 1:00 and 6:00 a.m.) in order to ensure maximal separation between the street homeless and the sheltered homeless and reduce the chance of counting the same person twice. Interviewers, accompanied by off-duty police officers dressed in plain clothes but carrying revolvers, were instructed to query each homeless person they encountered, offering $1 to those submitting to a screening interview and $5 to those agreeing to a longer interview schedule identical to the one used earlier in the evening with shelter occupants.

On the basis of these procedures, Rossi estimates that in Chicago there averaged between 2020 and 2722 homeless on any given night in 1985–86 and between 4600 and 7000 homeless annually. Although Rossi did not conduct a national count, his review of existing national estimates considered in conjunction with his Chicago findings prompted him to conclude that "the most believable national estimate is that at least 300,000 people are homeless each night in this country, and possibly as many as 400,000 to 500,000," depending on the street-to-shelter ratios and the growth rates used (p. 70). These estimates are consistent with those propounded by HUD in the mid-'80s, but they fall far short of other estimates as well as the expectations of many service providers and homeless advocates.

Regarding the characteristics and conditions of today's homeless, Rossi reports that though the "new homeless" share the conditions of extreme poverty, dependence on welfare and charity services, and high levels of disability and social isolation with the "old homeless," they are distinctive in several ways: they are no longer concentrated in Skid Row areas and suffer more basic shelter deprivation; they are younger, with the preponderance of the population concentrated in the early years of adulthood; they include a much higher proportion of women and minority members; and a smaller proportion work steadily or intermittently, so that overall they have considerably less income than their earlier counterparts, many of whom were elderly men with small but stable pensions.

In explaining homelessness, Rossi attends to two distinct sets of causes: broad structural factors and personal disabilities. The structural factors include the decline of low-income conventional and single-room-occupancy housing, changes in the labor market that have diminished the need for unskilled labor that Skid Row habitués traditionally filled, and the erosion of public welfare benefits during the past two decades. These factors alone, we are told, do not make persons homeless, but they increase an individual's economic marginality, pushing him or her into the ranks of the extremely poor. To understand who among the extremely poor is likely to become homeless, attention must be turned, Rossi contends, to the characteristics of the homeless themselves. "No matter what the availability of inexpensive housing," he argues, "personal characteristics are likely to explain who become homeless" (p. 144). Five predisposing disabilities are identified: physical health problems, mental illness, substance abuse (namely alcoholism), criminal behavior, and lack of social support, which is posited as a result of one or more of the other disabilities. As Rossi sees it, "Those with mental illness, severe alcoholism, and criminal records do not make good housemates and are eased out from under the protective wing of their relatives and friends" (p. 179). Thus, if it were not for a number of personal disabilities among some of the extremely poor, the ranks of the homeless would be considerably less.

On the basis of this diagnostic analysis, Rossi proposes a two-tiered set of recommendations for attacking the problem of homelessness. The first tier consists of short-term measures aimed at ameliorating the condition of the current homeless without drastically modifying existing institutional structures, such as making it easier for them

to obtain benefits for which they are already eligible. The second tier entails more radical long-term measures aimed at the reduction of extreme poverty, which Rossi contends is the breeding ground for homelessness.

Down and Out in America provides an informative and far-reaching account of contemporary homelessness. But it is also one that invites a number of critical questions and alternative interpretations. Its estimates of the size of the homeless population both in Chicago and nationally can be challenged, for example, on the basis of several considerations. First, how it was determined that fewer than one in ten of the people encountered on the streets between 1:00 and 6:00 a.m. were actually homeless is unclear. Was the determination based on casual observation or verbal inquiry? If the latter, it seems plausible that a significant number disavowed their homeless status because of fear or suspicion of the interviewers. Additionally, Rossi's procedures do not fully account for two categories of the literal homeless: the street homeless who try to get out of harm's way at night and thus avoid detection and those who occasionally spend the night in a cheap motel or hotel by themselves or with others. Both of these groupings, which constitute a portion of the "hidden homeless," are acknowledged by Rossi but not fully incorporated into his actual estimates. The question of how many of these hidden homeless were missed, and by what factor the estimates should be inflated, thus remains. For these reasons estimates such as Rossi's, which have already generated debate, should be regarded as lower-boundary estimates at best.

A second and more serious issue concerns the incidence of disability among the homeless. Rossi, as well as others, indicates that it is considerable, with the vast majority of homeless having one or more disabilities. But several considerations prompt the question whether the magnitude of disability has been overestimated. First, it seems probable that it is the most functional homeless who are most likely to succeed in concealing themselves, leaving the more disabled more likely to be identified. If so, the incidence of disability among the street homeless would be exaggerated by the surveys.

Second, we wonder if restless or drowsy persons interviewed by strangers in the middle of the night are not likely to be anxious or even bitter over such intrusions during this culturally defined "time out" period. Such anxiety might manifest itself in their responses, even though they agreed to be interviewed, and thereby color the findings. After all, it is easy to imagine how we might respond to a pollster's phone call in the dead of the night. Should we expect the homeless to respond any differently to such nocturnal intrusions, even when awake and compensated for the inconvenience? (It is worth noting that, whatever the methodological utility of such procedures, they represent an indignity that would not be tolerated in research on the domiciled and raise ethical questions about procedural liberties sometimes taken with marginal populations.)

A third troublesome aspect of the disability research concerns the use of batteries of questions standardized on domiciled populations and the decontextualized interpretation of the responses. Can a high score on a depression scale among the homeless be interpreted as representing disability in the same fashion as among the domiciled? More concretely, might not evidence of abnormal thought patterns and affective states among the homeless, such as depression and passivity, be better understood as the result of the trials of homelessness rather than as the effects of mental illness, and thus interpreted as contextually normal rather than pathological? Taken together, these concerns provide good reason to suspect that reports of disability on the streets have been misunderstood and unwittingly exaggerated.

Finally, these concerns lead to what we regard as the book's most questionable contention: that those among the domiciled extremely poor who become homeless are those with one or more serious disabilities. Though the incidence of disability among the homeless may be considerably higher than among the extremely poor, to argue in the absence of longitudinal or panel data that the disabilities identified are the primary determinants of homelessness is premature. And such a conclusion is especially doubtful when the disabilities in question can also be precipitated by the condition of homelessness itself. That these disabilities are in part a consequence of the brutalizing experience of homelessness thus strikes us as an equally plausible interpretation to the one trumpeted by Rossi.

For those interested in the problem of homelessness and its connection to poverty more generally, *Down and Out in America* is certainly a book to read. It is a significant contribution to the discourse on homelessness in contemporary America, but it is one that is likely to fan rather than douse the flames of controversy regarding this pressing problem.

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Information from Ice

The Environmental Record in Glaciers and Ice Sheets. H. OESCHGER and C. C. LANGWAY, JR., Eds. Wiley-Interscience, New York, 1989. xvi, 400 pp., illus. $98. Dahlem Workshop Physical, Chemical, and Earth Sciences Research Reports. Based on a workshop, Berlin, March 1988.

When at a Dahlem Conference more than a decade ago alteration of global chemical cycles by humans was examined the need for information on earlier atmospheres and climates was evident. Aside from study by way of sediments and sedimentary rocks, the then-emerging techniques of glacier coring seemed to offer the most promise for producing such information. The complexities of ice systems were great, but the need for information was a strong driver and pioneering work was under way. The workshop here reported goes a long way in vindicating that promise, at the same time verifying the complexity of the system and the wealth of information yet hidden.

This book, prepared by some of the pioneers of a new scientific adventure, is a welcome consolidation of information developed to date in what must still be considered a science in its infancy. It conveys from different points of view a sense of the variables involved in the formation and movement of glacial ice and the kinds of information, each with its own usefulness and limitations, held in the various glaciers. It also covers methodology and presents examples of recent findings and unexplored pathways.

The massive glaciers of Antarctica and Greenland, potentially storing information from their local environments for 150 million years or more, also hold information on atmospheric constituents of long residence time for which the rate of meridional transfer is sufficient to provide a "global" value. In addition to annual information and trends over decades or centuries, these polar glaciers considered together should reflect relatively long-period processes such as the precession of the equinoxes and changes in the obliquity of the ecliptic, or even variation in the eccentricity of Earth's orbit. The "alpine" glaciers (those between the 60th parallels), although they pose special problems in interpretation, offer information on other sorts of processes. Their characters differ greatly. The Quelccaya Ice Cap in the Peruvian Andes (14°S, 71°W), is sharply varved and in addition to giving local climate information is well positioned to identify effects of El Niño and the Little Ice Age. The Mt. Logan ice field in the Canadian St. Elias Mountains, by contrast, samples the long fetch of the Pacific Ocean and is less influenced by local human activities. It pro-