

**HOMELESSNESS IN THE 21ST CENTURY:
MANAGING THE IMPACT ON THE MID-SIZED AGENCY**

JOURNAL ARTICLE

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This Command College Independent Study Project is a FUTURES study of a particular emerging issue in law enforcement. Its purpose is NOT to predict the future, but rather to project a number of possible scenarios for strategic planning consideration.

Defining the future differs from analyzing the past because the future has not yet happened. In this project, useful alternatives have been formulated systematically so that the planner can respond to a range of possible future environments.

Managing the future means influencing the future--creating it, constraining it, adapting to it. A futures study points the way.

The views and conclusions expressed in the Command College project are those of the author and are not necessarily those of the Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST).

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INTRODUCTION

"...groups of sodden men went out... to beg for food, to beg for relief, to steal, to lie. And under the begging, and under the cringing, a hopeless anger began to smolder. And in the little towns, pity for the sodden men changed to anger, an anger at the hungry people changed to fear of them...and the comfortable people in tight houses felt pity at first, and then distaste, and finally hatred."

Although John Steinbeck wrote this paragraph in 1939, he could have been describing the United States today. There is not one major city in this country where people have not been confronted by the sight of persons who talk to themselves, crouch in doorways, and beg for food. In the early 1980's the emotion was pity and amazement that such spectacles could exist in the richest country on earth. By the 1990's the pity had changed to frustration and the frustration is now changing to anger.

Behind all these emotions lies the assumption that this problem is temporary. These people, whose presence is more offensive than their poverty, would surely go away. After all, goes the argument, they are either the victim of Reagan economics or drunken bums who are too lazy to work. Whatever the perspective, the question now is not when will they go away, but if they will go away. It seems entirely probable that the homeless population will be permanent fixture in this country for the foreseeable future.

The causes of homelessness are both varied and complex. The collapse of state mental health systems, the crack cocaine epidemic, and the breakdown of the extended family are the most apparent symptoms of deep-rooted social ills. As a society, we are in transition from an industrial economy to an information based

history."² This shift, coupled with urban redevelopment projects in most major cities, has resulted in the displacement of a great many persons from the urban core.

There are a great number of misconceptions about homelessness. One of these is the belief that the greatest impact is visited upon women and children. Author and activist Peter Marin argues that homelessness primarily impacts single men. He describes these people as marginalized men³. Other researchers have suggested that no less than 75% of the homeless population consists of single men⁴.

Marginalized men are those men who for decades have provided the heavy muscle labor for our society. They tended to be single, their work patterns were the precursor of the modern day laborer, and they resided in single-room occupancy housing (SRO's) in downtown areas. The need for these men and for the heavy labor they have traditionally provided is steadily being eliminated by the transition to the information based economy.

Another factor has been the dismantling of the mental health systems of every state in the union. The resulting exodus of former mental patients has greatly contributed to the numbers of homeless persons on the street. In "A Nation in Denial", Alice Baum and Donald Burnes state that between 33%-50% of all homeless persons suffer from some form of mental illness.⁵ However, it is not so much the numbers of homeless as their often bizarre behaviors which have the greatest impact on the public perception. The outrage produced by these behaviors contributes greatly to the growing public anxiety around the homeless issue.

As great as the previously mentioned factors have been, the destructive force

inflicted by crack cocaine is unmatched. Not only has it sent people to the street in increasing numbers, but their addiction tends to keep these people away from those social service agencies who are attempting to help them. According to a 1991 study in New York, 66% of homeless persons residing in general purpose shelters tested positive for cocaine.⁶ Further, addicted persons are more likely to resort to criminal activities to finance their addiction, with the resulting increase in public perception of the homeless as being a criminal element which should be feared.

In dealing with this segment of the homeless population, the proactive solution would be to implement a two-pronged approach consisting of aggressive enforcement against the distribution network and the establishment of a full range of treatment facilities. As a society, we have not viewed these two solutions as parts of a greater whole. Instead, often driven by political rhetoric, we have viewed them from an either/or perspective.

Mental health and addiction are the major players among the various identified causes of homelessness, but the issues of affordable housing and jobs cannot be ignored. There is much rhetoric and little hard data around the concept of the invisible homeless. These are the persons who do not live in the parks and sleep in doorways. Very often they have a car or enough funds to only be outside one or two weeks per month.

Their needs are often not acknowledged because they are not seen. Activists often do not see them and philosophical hard-liners do not acknowledge them. They are invisible because it is mutually convenient that they be so.

In the midst of questions about causes and solutions has emerged a philosophy among both the homeless and their advocates that persons have a right to choose to be homeless. This concept has complicated this issue significantly. Charles Sykes in his work, A Nation of Victims, argues quite eloquently that there is very little evidence to support the idea that homeless advocates are actually striving to end homelessness. Rather these advocates see homelessness as the direct result of social factors far beyond the control of the individual homeless person. Therefore, goes the argument according to Sykes, the suggestion that homeless persons need to be encouraged to move beyond homelessness is nothing more than blaming the victim. As such, it is an untenable position⁷.

Such an orientation represents a significant departure from the traditional view of homelessness which carried as its underlying assumption the premise that being homeless was both temporary and undesirable. The obligation of society has traditionally been perceived as a duty to augment the individual's resources and to assist in providing an orderly transition out of the homeless state. If a person has a right to be homeless, then the next logical question is to inquire as to the obligation of society to financially support that lifestyle.

NARRATIVE

Homeless persons have traditionally been seen as victims of a variety of societal ills. Assistance to them was not seen as a right, since the concept that a person might choose to be homeless was foreign to most social thinking, but rather the duty of a humane society. The presumed transitory nature of homelessness

precluded any serious thought about the rights of such a group.

The concept that persons have a right to choose to be homeless presents many new challenges for the future. Arguments around the use of public lands (i.e. parks and beaches), for example, are grounded in the notion that the homeless persons in question have no other options available to them. The forcible removal of such persons from lodging in a city park is seen as inhumane because the persons affected by the ordinances are operating from a position of either limited choice or no choice whatsoever.

However, if these persons have chosen to be homeless, what is their claim on the right to use public land? Does the traditional view of the role of American government as a protector of the downtrodden apply when the persons in question are downtrodden as a result of their own choices? The number of potential futures increases dramatically when the concept of voluntary homelessness is introduced into the equation.

Over the next five to ten years, society will continue to debate these issues. This debate will be far more than an intellectual exercise. Instead, the resulting decisions will determine how a democratic society deals with a disfranchised segment of the population. Whatever the ultimate outcome, the challenge to law enforcement will be significant.

Estimates as to the actual number of homeless are highly suspect. However, there is little question that there has been a steady rate of increase over the past 15 years⁸. There is little reason to believe that this trend will be reversed during the next

ten years. This country will have a permanent homeless population for the foreseeable future.

What is less certain, but critically significant, is the demographic breakdown of the future homeless community. Currently the mentally ill, the substance addicted, and the dually-diagnosed (those persons who are both addicted and mentally ill) account for between 70-80% of the homeless population⁹. There is currently no reliable data as to the number of voluntary homeless.

One of the difficulties in making a determination as to the level of voluntary homelessness is that a great many of the mentally ill homeless regard themselves as having chosen this particular lifestyle. Both political and legal issues will be raised by the suggestion that mentally ill persons are incapable of making such a choice.

Homelessness is not an emerging issue. It has been with us for some time. However, the concept of a permanent homeless population, particularly where a significant percentage of that population has voluntarily chosen such a lifestyle, is an emerging issue. There is a critical need to anticipate the impact of this population and deal with it in a constructive and mutually beneficial manner.

Forecasting research suggests three possible futures which have a strong likelihood of occurrence. One suggested scenario portrays a society in which a permanent homeless population is accommodated by the housed segment of that society.

A second suggests a deliberately chosen route of inaction. This scenario presents a future which is little more than an expanded version of the present. A

plan proposing inaction and indifference merits little discussion. The continuation of the policies and practices of the present would accomplish very little. The same questions being asked today will be asked again in ten years, albeit with a little more urgency.

The third alternative suggests some frightening possibilities with impacts far beyond the immediate issue of homelessness. This scenario offers a future in which constitutional democracy as it is currently practiced would be significantly altered. The likelihood of this scenario becoming reality is a function of the degree of pressure upon local law enforcement.

Law enforcement managers can expect to see more available resources consumed in dealing with the homeless population. A 1990 study in Santa Monica, California indicated that 26.9% of all radio calls involved homeless persons as either victims or witnesses¹⁰. By 1994 this number had risen to 32%. Jail bookings involving homeless suspects rose from 35% in 1990 to 46% in 1994.

As the homeless population continues to cluster in various locales, more and more law enforcement agencies can expect to feel similar impacts. Since there is nothing to suggest that these agencies can expect a dramatic influx of resources over the next ten years, this future does not offer much promise.

Any effective effort to manage this problem must include some methodology for factoring out the impacts of mental illness. The mentally ill homeless, particularly that small segment who exhibit bizarre, if not violent, behaviors have an impact on public perception far out of proportion to their numbers. The effect of such behaviors and,

public reaction to them, is an increase in pressure on local government, and therefore law enforcement, to engage in aggressive programs to remove these persons from the streets.

One of the aspects of human psychology which opens the door for the frightening future is the fact that fear usually triumphs over ideals, especially in the short run. Should the homeless population continue to grow as the data suggests, it is reasonable to expect that the mentally ill portion of that population will also continue to grow. If public fear reaches a critical level, there will be strong pressure to remove these frightening people from local streets. Whether any meaningful distinction will be made between the mentally ill and the general homeless population is problematic.

In the frightening future, a scenario involving a legal redefinition of constitutional rights is foreseeable. The outcome of such an event could easily be authorization to institutionalize the mentally ill. Whether such institutionalization would take the form of hospitals or detention camps might well be a function of economics more than treatment methodologies.

The ability and/or willingness of any society to make distinctions between types and degrees of mental illness is questionable. Once the detention centers, or other facilities designed for the incarceration of persons charged with non-criminal offenses, were opened and operational, the questions would center around operational issues rather than philosophical ones. The degree of justification necessary to authorize picking up any person not meeting the operative norms as to mental health would be minimal.

The next step in the frightening scenario involves the recognition that, having removed the mentally ill component from the homeless population, it would not be a difficult step to begin incarcerating the addicted component as well. Again, the distinction between detoxification and detention might well be open to interpretation.

Thus, given the figures described earlier, 70-80% of the homeless population might well be removed from community streets and placed in some form of detention facilities. Leaving aside the true nature of such facilities, there is present in this scenario a clear alteration of the constitution as we understand it today. The legal ability to involuntarily remove an entire segment of the population from the community has historical precedent. The Japanese internment camps of the Second World War provide ample historical precedent.

The author and lecturer FM2030 spoke of this age as evidencing the third great paradigm shift in human history¹¹. The other two were the renaissance and the industrial revolution. Such shifts always carry with them great disruption, both for society as a whole and the individuals affected. The homeless are a symptom of this disruption.

Two significant factors are forcing the homeless issue to a crisis point. The first is a political shift away from the traditional, compassion-based solutions. The November, 1994 elections formalized a shift in attitude which was already underway. The increase in local ordinances designed to regulate behaviors exhibited almost exclusively by homeless persons and the reduction and/or redirection of social service funding demonstrated the growing public frustration around this issue.

Secondly, there has been a rapid emergence of technologies which could facilitate both the delivery of social services and the ability to monitor the activities of individuals. Social service delivery has traditionally been focused on the front end of the delivery system, that is in the area of emergency food and shelter. The development of these technologies would expand the ability to deliver services across a much broader spectrum of the social service continuum.

There is a constructive scenario which would provide an opportunity to absorb this population and ease their distress. It would also provide society the means to mainstream some individuals and ensure a form of compensation for services received. This constructive alternative would seem to be one in which the presence of a permanent homeless population is accepted and accommodated.

While this path recognizes that perhaps people do have a right to be homeless, it does not suggest that they have a right to have that homelessness subsidized at public expense. This plan offers the opportunity for the development of a symbiotic relationship between the housed and homeless community.

The essence of the constructive plan centers around the development of regional centers which would provide food, shelter, and access to medical care. At the same time, the centers would be a clearing house for public works projects which needed to be addressed.

Critical to the success of this plan would be the proper utilization of various technologies including full-history ID cards and ATM technologies identifying the location of both available services and available work. This would provide a means of

monitoring the consumption of services by specific individuals. It would also allow a method for persons to reimburse society for services received.

This use of technology would maximize the potential for mobility by various individuals. It would also insure that there a contribution to the public good by those persons who had opted for a particular lifestyle.

Within the various regional shelters, the homeless would be offered the option of moving into semi-permanent shelters and receiving meaningful job training. This training, and the subsequent employment, would be brought about through public/private partnerships. It is anticipated that the program would be modeled by a local community and ultimately handed off to a regional working group. This group could be under the auspices of either the County or an appropriate regional board.

All social plans emerging from government carry the option of enforcement. This plan, or any other which attempts to provide services in exchange for goods received, is not an exception. Those individuals who refuse to contribute to the public works would be cut off from access to services. Should they opt to continue to impose on society, they would be subject to incarceration under a 21st century version of the vagrancy statutes. Such incarceration would be outside of the present jail systems and would be designed to provide an opportunity to develop those skills which would make it possible to be absorbed into the societal mainstream.

The advantages of this plan are several. First, it does not pose the threat to our constitutional form of government as did the frightening scenario. Rather it strives to deal appropriately with the needy while reinforcing the notion that any society has the

right to ask for some appropriate level of benefit for its largess. Secondly it does not attempt to blame the homeless nor does seek to pass judgement, particularly on the voluntarily homeless. Presently, there are too many instances in which needed services are denied because of a perceived larger issue, usually political in nature. This scenario simply identifies the needs of the various sectors of the homeless community and attempts to provide them.

Lastly, by recognizing that there are identifiable components within the homeless community, it allows societal resources to be better focused. By contrast, the frightening future did not concern itself with components other than as a means of justifying an already identified goal.

Clearly the need to factor out the mentally ill and addicted components of this population is no less critical in this more constructive scenario. The simplistic solution is to advocate for more hospitals and detoxification centers, but the ideal solution to this problem awaits discovery through future research.

The homeless problem shows no signs of abating. Indications are that the problem will continue to increase. As it does so, it will continue to impact law enforcement agencies significantly. Law enforcement will continue to struggle to balance the rights of both housed and homeless citizens. In so doing, the consumption of an often shrinking resource pool by this single issue will increase.

During the last decade, there has been a great deal of rhetoric about waging "war" against crime and drugs. This rhetoric had the advantage of allowing the semantic fantasy of dividing the world into good and evil. The homeless issue does

not permit such a simple division. Frustration is different from evil. The choices around homelessness, particularly for the law-enforcement manager, are not going to get easier. This is a societal problem with a human face.

Law enforcement's mission with respect to the homeless should be to keep both the homeless and the housed from harming each other, maintain public order, and participate in the process of hammering out solutions unique to each jurisdiction.

Accepting that doing nothing is a recipe for failure, two vastly different futures have been offered up for consideration. The first scenario, labelled the frightening future, is a vision in which societal frustration reaches a point where there is a willingness to suspend, or at least revise, the constitution so as to allow for the incarceration of both the mentally ill and drug addicted populations.

The goal of the frightening scenario is the removal of the majority of homeless persons from the presence of local communities. While mental health facilities and detoxification centers may result from this plan, they do not represent the ultimate goal. If they occur, they are merely incidental to the desired outcome.

The second scenario acknowledges the diversity of the homeless community. Different approaches are laid out and the homeless individual is allowed to choose from among several available options. Society fulfills its obligations by providing food, shelter, and access to job training. It also allows society to receive labor and services in exchange. This in turns permits the individual to contribute to the betterment of the local community.

Technology is utilized to follow the resource balance sheet among individuals. It

also allows for the existence of a nomadic population. At the same time an accurate record of services given and received is maintained. This provides the nomadic homeless the means to move from community to community in an organized and productive manner. Once the program truly becomes regional in nature, it is reasonable to expect that individual communities or areas, particularly those situated in urban areas, would not find themselves overwhelmed by large numbers of homeless persons.

A great many of the issues surrounding homelessness today are the result of attempting to graft old solutions onto new problems. Just as the collapse of the mental health system began with the advancement of the idea that there was no such thing as mental illness¹², so the future impacts of homelessness may well hinge on whether society accepts or rejects the idea of persons choosing to be homeless.

CONCLUSION

As is often the case with those issues around whom no clear consensus has developed, future solutions may be defined more in reaction to enforcement decisions than from any proactive legislation. Different stakeholders will call upon the local law enforcement agency to enforce various statutes in isolation; that is on case by case basis, rather than from a more holistic perspective.

The law enforcement manager of the 21st century will need to recognize such pressures early and avoid the tendency to merely react to the moment. The pressure for such action will be both internal and external. These types of cleavage issues tend to show up within an organization, particularly where the recruited workforce is

educated and conditioned to view themselves as problem solvers. These issues also tend to cause people to adopt a moral position from which it is difficult to induce philosophical shifting.

A great many issues remain to be addressed in this area. As previously mentioned, the need to reactivate workable mental health and detoxification systems should be studied in greater detail. Another area of significant concern is that of defining the political role that homeless persons should be allowed to play within local communities.

The problem of managing the impacts of homelessness, particularly a permanent homeless population, is one which law enforcement will play a critical role. Although not the ideal governmental agency for this task, local law enforcement agencies are critically positioned. In practice it will be the decisions of the law enforcement manager, in response to public pressures, which will determine which of the two discussed futures has the greater probability of becoming a reality.

If the law enforcement agency holds to hard-line enforcement practices, it is highly unlikely that a solution which seeks to accommodate a permanent homeless population can succeed. At worst, such actions will drive society towards the frightening future scenario. At best, there will be a standoff between the agency and local government, resulting in a continuation of indecision and political paralysis.

However, if the law enforcement manager can make the paradigm shift and participate in the process, there will be a much a greater chance for success. It presents a real opportunity to reverse the current drain of available resources. It also

presents the manager with the ability to move away from the crisis response mode which the problems engendered by homelessness tend to produce.

FM2030 spoke of change as being like a river.¹³ Like the river, the changes produced by the previously discussed transition, will occur. The question is not about controlling the change, but rather the impacts of the change.

The homeless are a symptom of this transition. We can divide our efforts between ignoring them and attempting to persuade them to move on. Such a policy is merely more of the status quo. The most critical component in all of this is the recognition that choices do exist.

The law enforcement manager has the option to choose participation in developing a future scenario which strikes at the heart of our constitutional democracy. In so doing, there is the risk of walking the path which leads us to the darker side of our profession. The other option is to both accept and manage the change. This path provides the opportunity to save resources and enhance the quality of life for local communities.

ENDNOTES

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2. FM2030, "Defining the Future", lecture to the POST Command College, San Marcos, California, May 26, 1993.
3. Peter Marin, "The Faces of Homelessness", seminar, Santa Monica, April 24, 1994.
4. Myron Magnet, The Dream and the Nightmare (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1993), 80.
5. Alice S. Baum and Donald W. Burnes, A Nation in Denial; the truth about homelessness (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1993), 23.
6. Christopher Jencks, The Homeless (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1994), 43.
7. Charles J. Sykes, A Nation of Victims; the decay of the american character (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 104-114.
8. Jencks, The Homeless, 17.
9. Baum and Burnes, A Nation in Denial, 20-26.
10. Barney Melekian, "Police and the Homeless", FBI Bulletin, November, 1990, 5.
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