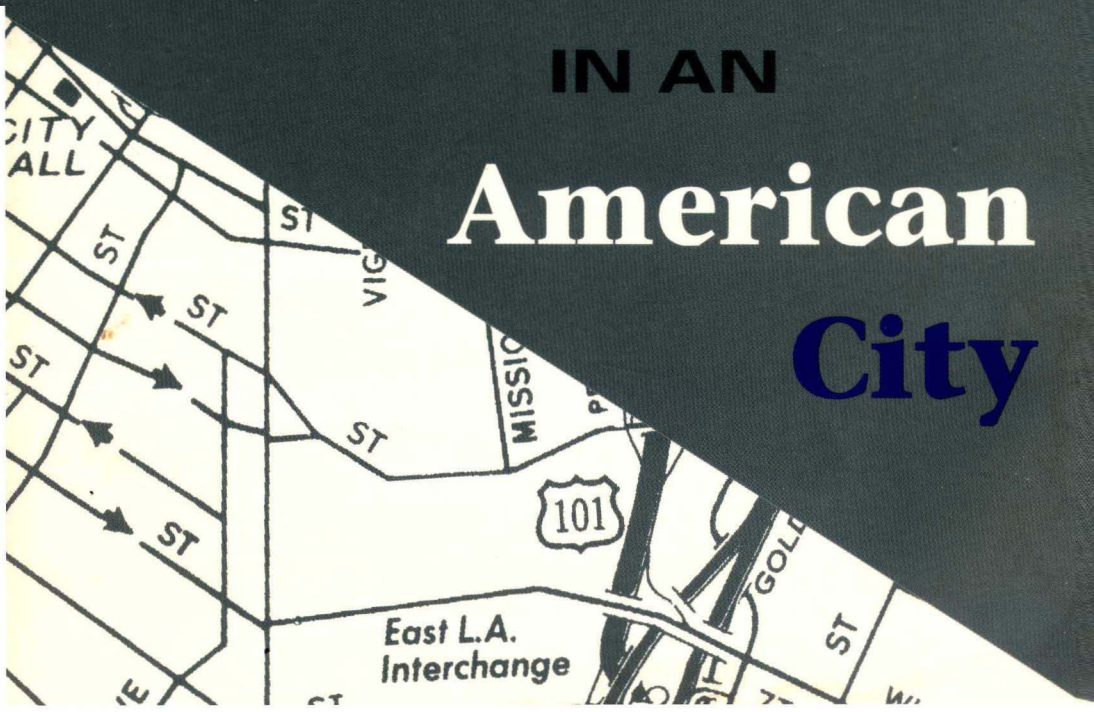
JENNIFER WOLCH AND MICHAEL DEAR

Malign NEGLECT

Homelessness IN AN American City



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PREFACE

Don't ever say that you ain't gonna be homeless. Don't ever say that you will not be living on the streets, because that's what I said. Look at me now. I don't care if you're rich, you're black, you're white, purple, green—don't ever say that. Don't ever let that come past your lips. You never know what the Man upstairs got planned for you.
—Dee, a homeless woman in Los Angeles

The crisis of homelessness that surfaced in American cities in the 1980s shows little sign of resolution. Indeed, most socioeconomic indicators point to a continuing deterioration: a persistent, nagging recession; fiscal crises in federal, state, and local government; continuing high levels of unemployment and underemployment; crises in the banking and savings and loan industries; a deepening erosion of the welfare state at a time when demand for assistance is skyrocketing; the disappearance of the federal government's affordable-housing initiatives; and socioeconomic polarization that further separates the haves from the have-nots. The inevitable, if depressing, point of departure in this book is that homelessness is likely to be with us for the foreseeable future.

This book tells important truths about homelessness in America. The truth is that homelessness has been caused by ne-

glect on the part of private interests, governments at all levels, and the community at large. We have attempted to document the systematic patterns of deliberate neglect that have caused the new homelessness, tracing them from the national level right down to the sidewalks of Los Angeles—often referred to as the "homelessness capital" of the United States.

Malign Neglect breaks new ground in telling the story of homelessness. We reveal how homelessness is a *process* involving global and local economic trends, macro and micro social forces, and a politics of rejection and apathy alleviated only rarely by a willingness to assist. We demonstrate that homelessness has a particular *place* in the national landscape, that it has been deliberately localized in specific neighborhoods, and that the paths into and out of homelessness are intimately linked to variations in local geography.

The story of one city's confrontation with the most severe social crisis of the 1980s lies at the heart of our narrative. The importance of place in the lives of the homeless struck us forcefully several years ago during a visit to Salpêtrière Hospital in Paris. Established in 1656, Salpêtrière is a landmark in the history of the treatment of the mentally disabled. The early buildings have since been swallowed up within the massive complex of a modern hospital, but the octagonal dome of the original church is preserved as a cultural center. During our visit, a theater group was rehearsing a play; they shared the space with a handful of homeless people. The irony that Salpêtrière was still acting as a place of refuge, more than three centuries after its foundation, was not lost on us. So we began our investigation of the place of homeless people in America. What we discovered forms the basis of this book.

Malign Neglect will enable readers to see homelessness from an entirely new perspective, one that has not been treated in the recent spate of books on the subject. We hope that interested scholars will want to understand the processes linking global to local in the "manufacture" of homelessness. We anticipate that practicing professionals will come to understand how their par-

ticular perspectives fit into the wider social context of homelessness, and thus be better able to serve their clients. We believe that the general reader will pick up this book in order to understand how homelessness occurs, and, as a consequence, never again "blame the victims" for being homeless. And finally, we are confident that our focus on Los Angeles will attract the attention of anyone interested in learning more about what we believe to be the most important understudied city in this country.

We began work on issues surrounding homelessness in the early 1980s. That this book should be necessary, almost a decade later, is a stunning indictment of our nation's unwillingness to confront the tragedy of homelessness. In the absence of fundamental change, the crisis of homelessness threatens to become a permanent feature of American public life. Although we believe this to be a realistic assessment, it is not a license for pessimism or apathy. The insistent premise of *Malign Neglect* is that neighborhood-based assistance can be rendered to the homeless in humane, affordable ways. As a nation, we simply need to face the truth about how and why we find ourselves in the present impasse, and to commit ourselves to solving the problem.

Homelessness: From Global to Local

One of the most important national trends in the 1980s was the enormous concentration of personal wealth in the United States. In an upsurge unparalleled since the late nineteenth century, the number of millionaires increased from 574,000 in 1980 to 1.3 million by 1988; the number of billionaires doubled, from twenty-six to fifty-two (Phillips, 1990, p. 10). At the same time, record numbers of Americans were cast into poverty and homelessness. The polarization of the national income distribution is one of the principal leitmotivs of the Reagan-Bush era. The gap between wealthy and poor regions also grew sharply during the 1980s. The principal beneficiaries of the shifting geography of affluence were business owners, corporate executives, skilled service-

industry professionals, and well-off retirees in upscale residential areas (Phillips, 1990, pp. 185–186). The losers were women, young people, and racial and ethnic minorities, especially those in areas that suffered from deindustrialization. The new homeless should be understood, therefore, as the most visible tip of a vast iceberg of poverty and deprivation calved out of the politics and economics of the 1980s.

Because adjustments in the national economy tend to be highly specific in regard to location, it is easy to understand how the distributions of unemployed, marginally housed, and homeless people vary with changing geographical circumstances. But equally important is the fact that the distribution of resources available to those in need is also highly dependent on place. One important consequence of the geographically uneven distribution of human services is that the communities that "manufacture" homelessness are frequently not the communities that end up caring for the homeless. There are two reasons for this. First, economic circumstance, illness, or disability often oblige people to seek employment or care in large urban centers; many remain to take up residence there. Second, many communities actively reject, even eject, their homeless. Such intolerance derives from "not-in-my-backyard" (NIMBY) sentiments, the wide variety of reasons invoked by neighborhoods to rationalize their rejection of unwanted people or things. As a consequence, many neighborhoods end up without the services that are essential to their well-being.

Today, homeless people are present in most cities, towns, and rural areas. They face an increasingly hostile general public, reputedly suffering from what the media call "compassion fatigue"—a jaded apathy brought about by the apparent intractability of the homelessness problem. Homeless people are thus placed in double jeopardy: as if the homeless condition itself were not an unbearable trial, when they turn to the community for help, the homeless find themselves stigmatized, isolated, and harassed. In many places, elements of their behavior have been

criminalized (for example, in local prohibitions against aggressive panhandling or sleeping in public).

Responding to rejection, some homeless people withdraw and become increasingly isolated from society. Others create loosely knit self-help communities from the remnants of their personal integrity and impoverished environs. For them, life on the "outside" becomes a richly textured fabric for survival, characterized by interlocking support networks that help them cope with the degradations of street life. These informal networks are sometimes helped, other times hindered, by the formal support networks that human service agencies provide. To those on the "inside," the homeless who congregate in parks, social service agencies, and suburban shopping malls or on skid row streets may not resemble a community in the traditional sense; nevertheless, they are.

For both the homeless and people with homes, the everyday experience of homelessness is intimately associated with time and place. For instance, a homeless man may be obliged to leave an overnight shelter at an early hour and spend long periods of time waiting in line to receive assistance or to find work. At specific times and places his life may intersect with that of a woman who has a home in a residential suburb, such as when she meets him panhandling at a bus stop or in a parking lot. Later, when she is back home, the likelihood that she will encounter another street person is relatively slim, except on the weekend, when she helps hand out free food to the homeless at a local shopping mall. The sense that the experience of homelessness is time- and place-bound is coupled with another important level of consciousness in public perceptions—the sense that, in some real (if opaque) way, the presence of a homeless person on the sidewalk is linked to broader national, even global, changes. Thus, the abandoned mother crouched with a crying baby, her eyes bruised and mouth bleeding, is a victim not only of domestic violence and family breakdown but also of the layoff suffered by her husband when the assembly plant where he worked moved permanently to an offshore location where wages

are a fraction of what they are at home. It may be difficult to make explicit global-local links in the biographies of each individual, but recognition of the roots of homelessness represents an essential touchstone in our investigation.

Overview of the Contents

We begin our investigations at the national level, by outlining in the Introduction a theory of homelessness that encompasses three fundamental levels and provides a rationale for the structure of the remainder of the book. First, homelessness is a result of economic restructuring and the collapse of the welfare state. In a cruel irony, during the past two decades, economic recession has increased the demand for welfare services at precisely the time such services were being subjected to debilitating cutbacks. Second, homelessness is a housing problem. Government-assisted affordable housing programs have been effectively eliminated, while conversion and demolition of the existing affordable stock has proceeded unhindered; at the same time, the demand for smaller, affordable units has skyrocketed. And finally, homelessness is a personal crisis. Individuals react differently to economic hardship and housing shortages; what may be a temporary setback for one person could be the start of a dizzying descent into homelessness for another.

In Part One, we explore in detail the origins of homelessness in Los Angeles. Chapter One begins the process of uncovering the many links in the chain connecting global forces to local outcomes. We examine the worldwide economic restructuring of the 1970s and 1980s, which resulted in widespread deterioration in wages and employment conditions for many workers and increased the numbers of working poor as well as the depth of their poverty. Communities devastated by economic restructuring are often established blue-collar and minority neighborhoods already blighted by inadequate education, health, and welfare resources. Others are low-income neighborhoods where the supply of affordable housing has been depleted by demoli-

tions, conversions, and urban-renewal programs. In Chapter Two, we investigate how declining real incomes and skyrocketing housing costs have combined to propel many poor families into the ranks of the precariously housed. Chapter Three shows how structural changes in the U.S. political economy and radical demographic shifts have produced an asymmetrical geography of low-wage jobs and affordable housing for unskilled and deskilled workers. Although low-skill jobs remain concentrated in the inner city, new low-skill jobs (mostly in the service sector) are being created at the suburban fringe, far from neighborhoods in which low-wage workers can afford to live. The result is a geographic mismatch of jobs and housing that engenders severe overcrowding and heightens the risk of homelessness for economically vulnerable workers and their families. At the same time that economic restructuring has cast large numbers of people out of work and onto the welfare rolls, the U.S. welfare state has itself undergone a radical transformation. As we outline in Chapter Four, these shifts have removed the safety net from beneath many in need.

Part Two focuses on the poverty of local responses to homelessness. Chapter Five demonstrates how across-the-board cutbacks and closures of services in a wide variety of social programs have resulted in an impoverished, highly uneven geography of shelter and service provision. This unevenness causes many difficulties of access for people in areas lacking such facilities. It severely curtails the choice of residential location for those in need and results in crowding and pressure on the resources of neighborhoods that host service facilities. It also raises questions of social justice and equity, because an uneven pattern of human services is unjust and impractical, and imposes unfair burdens on needy neighborhoods and individuals. Conventional wisdom holds that a backlash against the homeless has set in. As we show in Chapter Six, opposition is typically associated with concerns over personal safety and loss of neighborhood amenities, even though public debate is punctuated by voices in support of the homeless. Our experience of these debates,

detailed in Chapter Seven, suggests that battle lines are quickly drawn, and vitriolic turf battles ensue, usually to the detriment of the homeless.

In Part Three, we turn our attention to consider the plight of the homeless themselves. Chapter Eight reveals how the concatenation of long-term changes induced by economic and welfare state restructuring has completely altered the demographics of the homeless. Gone is the old stereotype of the homeless as a group of middle-aged male alcoholics who voluntarily drop out of mainstream society. The ranks of the homeless now include the young and old; women and children; the working poor and unemployed; drug addicts and the mentally disabled; veterans and battered women. The "democratization" of today's homeless population is testimony to the potency and reach of the current crisis. In Chapter Nine, we look at the ways in which homeless people deal with life on the outside. Individuals reach deep inside themselves and draw on personal strengths, learning to use the material resources that may be present in their local environment. Some are able to build social networks that replicate conventional communities. We show how resource-rich and resource-poor environments provide entirely antithetical experiences of homelessness. The lives of homeless women, an especially vulnerable group, are subjected to special scrutiny in Chapter Ten.

Finally, we conclude by spelling out the truths about homelessness in America—that in many ways it was an entirely predictable crisis; that homelessness is now a pervasive part of the national landscape, but most communities and elected officials have chosen to ignore it; and that although we are not short of ideas on how to solve the crisis, there is a singular absence of national will to address the problem.

Why Los Angeles?

An important feature of this study is our decision to focus the inquiry almost exclusively on the Los Angeles metropolitan area. This focus on a single locality is a logical necessity, given the

place- and time-specificity of the homeless condition. However, the particular choice of Los Angeles warrants further explanation.

As early as 1984, Los Angeles was dubbed the "homelessness capital" of the United States (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 1984). On the basis of scale alone, homelessness in the city and county of Los Angeles would merit our attention. In the United States, only New York City approaches Los Angeles in the extent of the problem. Yet there are other, equally compelling reasons for an emphasis on southern California. In the past, Los Angeles has typically been viewed as an exception to the patterns of metropolitan development. It stands in stark contrast to Chicago, for instance, which has universally been regarded as the prototypical industrial metropolis. However, as increasing scholarly attention has been directed toward L.A.'s five-county region, the dominance of the Chicago model has been challenged. The Los Angeles prototype—with its patterns of multicentered, dispersed, low-density growth—is perhaps a new paradigm of metropolitan growth. In appearance at least, Los Angeles bears a strong resemblance to other emerging "world cities," such as Mexico City and São Paulo, as well as to other fast-growing urban centers in the United States, including Atlanta, Phoenix, and Seattle.

The five-county region is now the second largest metropolis in the United States and eleventh in the world, in terms of population size. Its social heterogeneity, geographic sprawl, and economic vitality have encouraged an intense and effective localization of politics, work, personal life, and culture. One important consequence is the difficulty of formal urban governance. The region is split into many separate fiefdoms, their leaders in constant battle. As the urbanized area continues to expand geographically, local government becomes increasingly remote and less able to respond to grass-roots concerns. Consequently, formal and informal alliances have arisen to press their claims and the bifurcation of formal and informal politics has intensified. In an apparent paradox, the emergent localism has been facilitated by the appearance of a global capitalism that has accelerated the

flow of international capital and instituted an endless search for cheap labor on a world scale. The globalization of capitalism has connected the local ever more effectively to worldwide developments; yesterday's fluctuations in a local labor market somewhere in Asia may determine what happens in downtown L.A. tomorrow.

In social terms, Los Angeles can now fairly be characterized as a First World city flourishing atop a Third World city. A growing part of the population either is engaged in the "informal" economy or is paid poverty-level wages, often for part-time work, is only marginally housed by conventional standards, and is often homeless. The region is increasingly polarized according to class, income, race, and ethnicity. Finally, the erosion of the linkages (both horizontal and vertical) between branches of government; public aversion to dealing with social, economic, and political problems; and the rise of fiscal federalism have colluded in the decline of the commonwealth. The collapse of community is one reason Los Angeles is increasingly without a viable infrastructure.

Whether Los Angeles represents the model of twenty-first-century urban development is a question we shall leave for others to answer (see, for example, Garreau, 1991). It is already self-evident that southern California's emergent urbanism possesses more than local or regional significance (Davis, 1990; Dear, 1991). Los Angeles should no longer be regarded as an exceptional case. Given its implications as the prototype for future urban dynamics and its status as the homeless capital of the United States, it is preeminently qualified to serve as a laboratory for our analysis.

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