
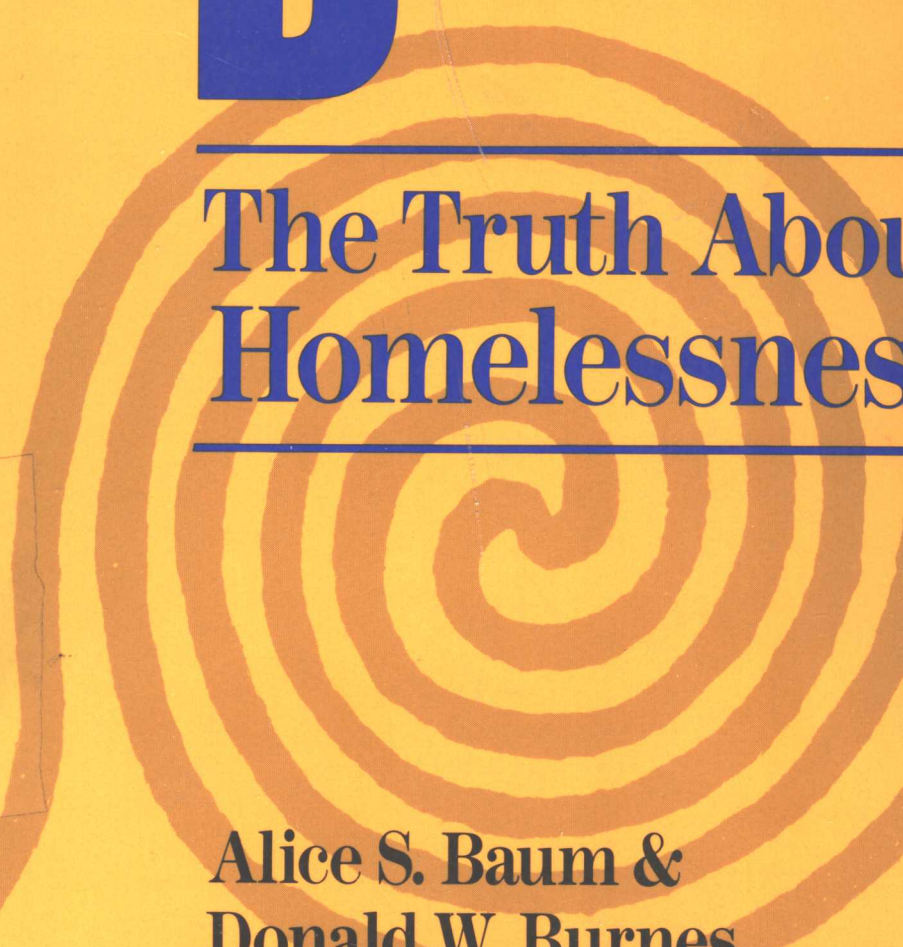


A Nation in **D**enial

The Truth About
Homelessness

Alice S. Baum &
Donald W. Burnes



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This book is dedicated to Button, Ralph, Brenda, Tim, Donald,
Loraine, Richard, Charles, Jimmy, Donald, Steve, Edith,
Ted, Shannon, Patricia, Arthur, Archie, Joe, Zollie, Henry, Jerome,
and the other homeless people with whom we worked
and from whom we learned the importance of telling the truth.

Preface

On August 24, 1992, Hurricane Andrew hit southern Florida and Louisiana and left in its wake an unparalleled path of destruction and devastation. The costliest natural disaster in U.S. history, Hurricane Andrew damaged or destroyed 137,500 homes, leaving an estimated 250,000 people literally homeless.

Something deep in the American psyche is touched when devastation and disaster strike members of our society. The nation's immediate response to this disaster epitomized the powerful American tradition of citizens assuming responsibility for helping members of society who are in trouble. Calls for donations of goods, money, and services were met with such generosity that officials were initially overwhelmed with the task of distributing and accounting for all the contributions. Roads leading to devastated communities became gridlocked with vehicles from around the country filled with people wanting to help, trained relief workers ready to volunteer their expertise, and shipments of food, clothing, medical supplies, building materials, and even ice. In the November/December 1992 issue of *Psychology Today*, John Carnes, a psychologist helping families cope with the traumatic effects of the hurricane, reported seeing more U.S. flags being displayed in affected communities than he had seen at the height of Desert Storm.

The homelessness created by Hurricane Andrew presents a stark contrast to that of the men, women, and children whom Americans have called "the homeless" since the early 1980s and confirms the need to reexamine "homelessness" in America today. Although the problem for both groups is described as being without homes, the impediments that prevent "the homeless" from establishing independent and self-sufficient lives are much more complex than the lack of housing that they share with the hurricane victims. The people who lost their homes to the hurricane needed exactly the kinds of emergency help that have been provided to America's homeless for more than a decade: temporary shelter, food, clothing, and financial assistance. The tragedy of homelessness in America in the 1980s and 1990s is that this kind of help has proven to be insufficient to address the multiple problems of the vast majority of the people called "the homeless."

Just three months after they were constructed, the last of the tent cities was closed and most hurricane victims had either found alternative housing or had moved into mobile homes provided by the federal government as interim housing. Ironically, on the same weekend in late October 1992 that the last of the emergency shelters in the tent cities in Florida was being

dismantled, about 600 people in Omaha and Lincoln, Nebraska, slept outdoors in freezing temperatures to draw attention to homelessness in America. One participant told a local television reporter that spending only one night on the streets was an insignificant sacrifice compared to the years that America's homeless people have suffered in shelters and on the streets. Why is it that most of the people who lost their homes to Hurricane Andrew resettled into new housing in just three months, while hundreds of thousands of others remain homeless for years?

Complete economic and psychological recovery from the tragedy of Hurricane Andrew will take energy, money, and enormous stamina, but the expectation is that in time most hurricane victims will rebuild their homes and their lives. Why is it that so many people in this nation do not have the same expectation for America's "homeless"? Why has there never been the same sense of urgency to help "the homeless" reconstruct their lives as was evidenced in the days and weeks following Hurricane Andrew? Why does America persist in describing the problems of "the homeless" in terms of poverty and lack of housing, when the evidence overwhelmingly suggests that other problems prevent "the homeless" from working and maintaining permanent housing? Why is there a sense of fatalistic inevitability that America's "homeless" will always have marginal lives, dependent on shelters, soup kitchens, and clothing distributions? Why is it that, despite the tradition of deep concern for the needy in our society, the problem of homelessness has proven so intractable?

We have written this book to answer these complex questions.

*Alice S. Baum
Donald W. Burnes*

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We are indebted to Barbara Deard who patiently transcribed the six hours of taped interviews that are the basis for Chapter 4. Without her assistance this chapter could not have been written.

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The editorial staff at Westview Press provided the most professional help for which writers could ask. Katherine Streckfus edited our work with extreme sensitivity to the subject and helped turn our manuscript into a truly readable document. Shena Redmond paid dedicated attention to detail and oversaw the completion of our work with great talent and expertise.

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A.S.B.

D.W.B.

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Introduction

In the early 1980s, America became aware of the homeless. Although homelessness was not new to this country, the sight of men, women, and children living on the streets and in shelters was shocking to a nation that only twenty years earlier had declared War on Poverty. Now, despite public outrage, media attention, and political debate about homelessness, the American public seems no closer to understanding the problem or its causes. Moreover, despite all the time, energy, and money spent to address the issue, the United States has come no closer to relieving the misery on the streets or even to having viable ideas about what to do.

While the 1980s were marked by compassion for the homeless, the 1990s seem to have become the decade of antihomelessness. Most people are showing less sympathy for the homeless than before, and officials regularly sweep street people from downtown areas. As public attention shifts away from homelessness and turns to other domestic issues, the United States seems ready to admit that it has failed the homeless and, having tried to provide help for so long with so few results, the general public seems to feel it has little else to offer.

It is our belief that, in fact, American society has never really tried to help today's homeless, because, for the various reasons we will explore in this book, people have been unwilling and unable to admit the truth about the nature of homelessness in America today and have therefore failed to pursue appropriate remedies. Instead, policymakers and advocates have used the horror of homelessness to advance a variety of political agendas that have less to do with homelessness than with the nationwide shift away from policies intended to eliminate persistent and lingering poverty in America.

When homelessness first became an issue of national concern, the U.S. political scene was changing dramatically. The electorate had sent a conservative governing majority to Washington with a mandate to cut taxes, to scale back government's intrusion into local affairs, and to enact massive reductions in the amount of money spent to help America's dependent poor. Many social analysts and advocates for the homeless made the convincing case that these changes in federal policy were directly linked to the increase in homelessness. They further asserted that homelessness was a manifestation of

the crumbling social safety net that had, however inadequately, kept most of the poorest Americans from total destitution for generations. Homelessness, thus defined, required structural solutions: policies that assured full employment at increased wages, that restored funding for social welfare programs, and that created additional affordable housing subsidized by more generous federal funding. At the very least, the homeless and the hungry had a right to emergency shelter and food.

In 1986, we began work at a church-based organization created to help the poor and homeless in Washington, D.C. Our first task was to improve the emergency programs already in place: an emergency food pantry, an emergency financial assistance program intended to pay overdue rent and utility bills, and a job placement program. Our second task was to add transitional programs such as job readiness training, budget management, adult education, and referrals to permanent housing where possible. We believed that these programs would help our clients overcome the poverty and homelessness that were the result of massive cutbacks in social programs, changes in the postindustrial job market, and most important, the deplorable shortage of affordable housing. For three years, in our respective roles as executive director and substance abuse counselor, we worked with many of the homeless people who sought help at our center. As we came to know them, they shared the stories of their lives with us, we met members of their families, we hired several to work with us at the center, and we developed close and trusting friendships with many.

Our daily experiences over this three-year period presented startling contradictions to our initial views about their needs. We were confronted by problems that were not directly related to the structural, economic, and social forces that were so frequently cited and that provided the content of the political debate about homelessness. What we saw instead were people frustrated and angered by personal lives out of control. They were entrapped by alcohol and drug addictions, mental illness, lack of education and skills, and self-esteem so low it was often manifested as self-hate.

Through these experiences we learned a lesson that many people find very hard to accept, namely, that the help that many well-intentioned people were trying to provide to these troubled human beings was, in fact, of little or no help at all. We learned that helping the poor and the homeless without admitting the truth of their situation often increases their misery, their sense of isolation, and their hopelessness and does little to help them make the changes in their lives that can empower them to break the cycle of homelessness.

Meanwhile, newspapers, magazines, books, and television programs reported stories of homeless two-parent rust-belt families temporarily down on their luck or of homeless individuals who had recently been laid off from permanent employment. These stories led policymakers, politicians, and advocates to frame the issue as one of people not having homes and therefore

being “homeless.” None of these descriptions bore any resemblance to the people we knew. Nor were they consistent with the emerging research, which documented that up to 85 percent of all homeless adults suffer from chronic alcoholism, drug addiction, mental illness, or some combination of the three, often complicated by serious medical problems.

Denial

Ronald L. Rogers and Chandler Scott McMillin, in their book *Free Someone You Love from Alcohol and Other Drugs* (1992), defined denial as “the inability to recognize a problem in the face of compelling evidence.” America is in deep denial about homelessness. There is compelling evidence that the primary issue is not the lack of homes for the homeless; the homeless need access to treatment and medical help for the conditions that prevent them from being able to maintain themselves independently in jobs and housing.

Denial takes many forms. Some advocates fear that admitting the extent of substance abuse and mental illness among the homeless would generate a backlash of retribution against those whose plight they are trying to relieve. Many are afraid of “blaming the victim” for their condition of homelessness and prefer to present the issue in strictly economic, political, and systemic terms. Some researchers, afraid of being criticized for “medicalizing” the problem, develop contorted explanations of homelessness that often bear little relationship to their own findings and thus undermine the very nature of scientific inquiry.

Policymakers and the general public may be fearful about acknowledging problems for which there are few guaranteed remedies and that are so pervasive in society that overcoming them seems beyond reach. Finally, among advocates as well as in policymaking circles and in the general public, some people are wedded to the social remedies designed over the past twenty-five years and prefer to focus on those few homeless people who can immediately benefit from job training, education, transitional and low-income housing, and community or political organizing. Regrettably, many seem to be unaware of the ability of homeless alcoholics to get sober, of homeless addicts to recover, and of the homeless mentally ill to benefit from treatment, medication, therapy, and rehabilitation and therefore accept these conditions as ones about which nothing can be done.

Paradoxically, during the same years that this country has stubbornly refused to acknowledge substance abuse and mental illness among the homeless, middle-class Americans have enjoyed greater access to increasing numbers of residential and in-hospital treatment programs for alcoholism and addictions and have been using health insurance and employee assistance programs to pay for them. When alcoholism, drug addiction, mental illness, and domestic violence strike family members, most families do everything

possible to provide treatment and support, while society leaves those most disabled by these problems to their own devices because it is unwilling to acknowledge the role these problems play in their lives.

Not only are we a nation in denial, but our denial is selective.

Toward an Honest Understanding

If policy debates about homelessness continue to be misguided and uninformed, the problem of homelessness can only continue unabated. Our purpose in writing this book is to inform the future debate so that it will be based on a more honest understanding of the homeless, who they are, and what needs to be done to help them escape from the tragedy of crippled lives. In the following pages, we review scientific research, but this book is not primarily a review of the scientific literature. We analyze many political perspectives and reports, but we have not written a policy manual or a political treatise. Readers who are expecting a policy blueprint for solving the problem of homelessness will not find one, even though we include model policies and examples of programs that work. Our firm belief is that before America can develop effective policy, Americans must first come to some basic agreement about the nature of homelessness today and its real causes.

As we began to write this book, we came to understand the importance of the stories of the homeless people with whom we had worked. Although we have changed their names and altered some of the details to protect their privacy, we have included their stories so that they too can be part of our effort to overcome the denial about homelessness. In most cases, we knew these men and women well, having spent extensive time with them as we tried to understand their situations and their real needs. In one case, we asked a man we call Franklin to tell us about his experiences at a Washington, D.C., shelter; we have used the transcript of his six hours of conversation with us as the basis for Chapter 4.

These stories are not like the romanticized tales found in the media and the popular literature; they are neither fictions created for the purpose of illustration nor reports based on one-time interviews. Rather, they are individual stories that were revealed to us over time. For example, William taught us what it means to be “on the stick,” that is, what it means to be homeless; like so many of the homeless, he needed alcohol treatment and health care to help him solve the problems that kept him entrapped in joblessness and despair.

When we first met William, he had just been asked to leave the rooming house—again—because he was drinking—again. Before he could try to find work, William needed surgery on his leg, which had been injured in an alcohol-related accident

several years ago. One night, his buddy died while they were drinking in an abandoned car. William and his friends were sorry that Jimmy died, but they knew that either he or some other member of their bottle gang would die soon. Someone always died; someone always had one more drink, the one that proved to be the last. William was a homeless alcoholic, and homeless alcoholics know people who die.

Unfortunately, there are few victories among the stories we share with the readers of this book, because the help that was needed was rarely available, and in most cases, these individuals' lives are still filled with alcohol, drugs, and mental illness. We have dedicated this book to these men and women, even though some have died since we started our work.

A necessary first step in developing an honest understanding about homelessness is to look realistically at what the research reveals and what our experience has told us about the homeless. This is the purpose of Part One, where we describe homelessness as it is today in detail. In Chapter 1, we talk about who the homeless are, examine the alcoholism, drug addiction, and mental illness that fill their lives, and discuss how these problems affect their physical health and their ability to work. The picture that emerges is a compelling one.

Chapter 2 introduces the connection between homelessness and the baby boom, the population explosion that has overwhelmed society's institutions in new ways with each decade. We examine the extent to which the baby boom was more than merely a demographic phenomenon by looking at the social and political forces of the era—in particular, the counterculture—that challenged the value systems of settled society and endangered its most troubled members, many of whom joined the ranks of the homeless. Chapter 3 continues our examination of the baby boom era but focuses instead on the emergence of the underclass in America's inner cities—people living in increasingly deserted inner cities where hopelessness, poverty, drugs, and crime are inextricably connected to multigenerational welfare dependency, family violence, and in some cases, homelessness.

Having completed a review of the basic problems, in Chapter 4 we spend a day with Franklin, who describes the difficulty of trying to maintain his personal dignity in a system that paradoxically seems to dehumanize the very individuals that it seeks to help. Franklin makes real the daily horrors of a life filled with alcohol, drugs, mental illness, and a system that is completely unprepared to respond to the medical and social needs of seriously impaired human beings. In Chapter 5, we review the components of that system—the services now in place to help the homeless. By understanding the inadequacy of our efforts to help the homeless, readers may begin to see why America is becoming frustrated, angry, and even bored and why people seem to be walking away from a monumental social problem that shows no sign of diminishing.

In Part Two, we step back to place homelessness in a historical and social context. In Chapter 6, we review the history of homelessness from colonial days, through the exploration of the West, the gold rush, the industrialization of the late nineteenth century, and the Great Depression. We look at the struggle to empower America's disenfranchised poor that began in the 1960s and changed the way society addresses social policy issues by focusing on economic and social systems instead of personal problems—a change in focus that often produced unintended consequences for the homeless by fraying the decades-old safety net of skid row and other institutions that had developed to meet the needs of the most disadvantaged Americans.

The analysis of the past 350 years leads us to an examination of the past decade and, in Chapter 7, we turn our attention to the politics surrounding the plight of the homeless. At the center of the politics of homelessness was the homelessness movement, a group of political and social activists on the Left who were searching for a new cause as the Vietnam War and Watergate receded from America's consciousness. These advocates for the homeless enlisted the media to persuade America that the homeless, like other Americans, are victims of the postindustrial economy of the Reagan years. These individuals redefined homelessness to mean needing only shelter and housing, thus confusing poverty with disabling conditions. Our examination of the politics of homelessness leads to an exploration in Chapter 8 of the extent to which the homelessness movement influenced the research community during the 1980s. We examine how the movement caused many analysts to shy away from acknowledging the extent of substance abuse and mental illness as causes of homelessness and how the movement compelled analysts to focus instead on issues and solutions better suited to the problems faced by America's working poor. In this examination, we raise a central question: If poverty is the cause of homelessness, why are there so many very poor people in the United States who are not homeless?

For an answer to this question, we turn to Part Three, where we present a more reasoned analysis of homelessness and encourage different strategies for addressing this profound social problem and the personal problems that help to cause it. Chapter 9 begins with a review of the most universal characteristic of homelessness, the alienation of homeless people from society and its institutions. We then describe how the stigma surrounding alcoholism, drug addiction, and mental illness leads some into homelessness. Finally, we examine a variety of major shifts in attitudes and policies that have helped to increase homelessness: deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill, decriminalization of alcoholism, gentrification of both skid row and of treatment services, and the extent to which the population explosion of the baby boom exacerbated the effects of all of these policies.

In Chapter 10 we lay out a new agenda for responding to homelessness. We begin by arguing that the word "homeless" should not be used because

it deceives us and does not inform our thinking about the complexities of modern homelessness. We identify some promising programmatic approaches currently being used by substance abuse treatment professionals and by psychiatrists and other mental health professionals committed to working with homeless individuals and families, taking into account the special complexities that homelessness introduces into the processes of treatment, follow-up care, and long-term rehabilitation.

If there is one unifying theme in this book, it is that America's homeless, the people living in shelters and on the streets, deserve better treatment than they are receiving. We stand firm in our belief that in order for our society to begin to solve the problems of homelessness, it must stop making distinctions between the deserving and the undeserving poor and must stop denying the extent of alcoholism, drug addiction, and mental illness among the homeless. Unless the nation overcomes this denial, the homeless will continue to suffer lives of misery and desperation. Denial and indifference to the truth about the homeless have already exaggerated the divisions between the "haves" and the "have-nots" in our society; staying on the present course will only divide us further. Since the earliest days of our democracy, American ideals have included not only equality and justice, but also a commitment to share responsibility for the common good. Ultimately, the quality of life for all Americans depends on our ability to recognize that everyone shares in the destiny of homeless men, women, and children, our most needy citizens.