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# The Homeless

OPPOSING VIEWPOINTS®

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“Congress shall make  
no law . . . abridging the  
freedom of speech, or of  
the press.”

*First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution*

The basic foundation of our democracy is the First Amendment guarantee of freedom of expression. The Opposing Viewpoints Series is dedicated to the concept of this basic freedom and the idea that it is more important to practice it than to enshrine it.

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# Why Consider Opposing Viewpoints?

*“The only way in which a human being can make some approach to knowing the whole of a subject is by hearing what can be said about it by persons of every variety of opinion and studying all modes in which it can be looked at by every character of mind. No wise man ever acquired his wisdom in any mode but this.”*

John Stuart Mill

In our media-intensive culture it is not difficult to find differing opinions. Thousands of newspapers and magazines and dozens of radio and television talk shows resound with differing points of view. The difficulty lies in deciding which opinion to agree with and which “experts” seem the most credible. The more inundated we become with differing opinions and claims, the more essential it is to hone critical reading and thinking skills to evaluate these ideas. Opposing Viewpoints books address this problem directly by presenting stimulating debates that can be used to enhance and teach these skills. The varied opinions contained in each book examine many different aspects of a single issue. While examining these conveniently edited opposing views, readers can develop critical thinking skills such as the ability to compare and contrast authors’ credibility, facts, argumentation styles, use of persuasive techniques, and other stylistic tools. In short, the Opposing Viewpoints Series is an ideal way to attain the higher-level thinking and reading skills so essential in a culture of diverse and contradictory opinions.

In addition to providing a tool for critical thinking, Opposing Viewpoints books challenge readers to question their own strongly held opinions and assumptions. Most people form their opinions on the basis of upbringing, peer pressure, and personal, cultural, or professional bias. By reading carefully balanced opposing views, readers must directly confront new ideas as well as the opinions of those with whom they disagree. This is not to simplistically argue that every-

one who reads opposing views will—or should—change his or her opinion. Instead, the series enhances readers' understanding of their own views by encouraging confrontation with opposing ideas. Careful examination of others' views can lead to the readers' understanding of the logical inconsistencies in their own opinions, perspective on why they hold an opinion, and the consideration of the possibility that their opinion requires further evaluation.

## **Evaluating Other Opinions**

To ensure that this type of examination occurs, *Opposing Viewpoints* books present all types of opinions. Prominent spokespeople on different sides of each issue as well as well-known professionals from many disciplines challenge the reader. An additional goal of the series is to provide a forum for other, less known, or even unpopular viewpoints. The opinion of an ordinary person who has had to make the decision to cut off life support from a terminally ill relative, for example, may be just as valuable and provide just as much insight as a medical ethicist's professional opinion. The editors have two additional purposes in including these less known views. One, the editors encourage readers to respect others' opinions—even when not enhanced by professional credibility. It is only by reading or listening to and objectively evaluating others' ideas that one can determine whether they are worthy of consideration. Two, the inclusion of such viewpoints encourages the important critical thinking skill of objectively evaluating an author's credentials and bias. This evaluation will illuminate an author's reasons for taking a particular stance on an issue and will aid in readers' evaluation of the author's ideas.

It is our hope that these books will give readers a deeper understanding of the issues debated and an appreciation of the complexity of even seemingly simple issues when good and honest people disagree. This awareness is particularly important in a democratic society such as ours in which people enter into public debate to determine the common good. Those with whom one disagrees should not be regarded as enemies but rather as people whose views deserve careful examination and may shed light on one's own.

Thomas Jefferson once said that “difference of opinion leads to inquiry, and inquiry to truth.” Jefferson, a broadly educated man, argued that “if a nation expects to be ignorant and free . . . it expects what never was and never will be.” As individuals and as a nation, it is imperative that we consider the opinions of others and examine them with skill and discernment. The Opposing Viewpoints Series is intended to help readers achieve this goal.

David L. Bender and Bruno Leone,  
Founders

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Greenhaven Press anthologies primarily consist of previously published material taken from a variety of sources, including periodicals, books, scholarly journals, newspapers, government documents, and position papers from private and public organizations. These original sources are often edited for length and to ensure their accessibility for a young adult audience. The anthology editors also change the original titles of these works in order to clearly present the main thesis of each viewpoint and to explicitly indicate the opinion presented in the viewpoint. These alterations are made in consideration of both the reading and comprehension levels of a young adult audience. Every effort is made to ensure that Greenhaven Press accurately reflects the original intent of the authors included in this anthology.

# Introduction

*“[Criminalizing homeless people] isn’t only inhumane and potentially unconstitutional, but it’s also senseless and ineffective.”*

—*Maria Foscarinis*, Christian Science Monitor,  
December 9, 1999

*“Experience tells us strong enforcement against quality-of-life crimes makes [cities] safer in every way.”*

—*Richard Riordan*, Los Angeles Times, January 29, 1997

In Orlando, Florida, being homeless is becoming increasingly difficult. Since February 1997, anyone wishing to panhandle on the streets must wear a laminated panhandling permit issued by the police department. Homeless people who hold permits are restricted from panhandling in certain areas—including bus depots, train stations, public parks, and sports arenas—and must follow a lengthy set of guidelines. They cannot, as commentator Eric Brosch writes,

approach people at ATMs or in vehicles, or come within three feet of the person solicited. They can’t use obscenities, follow people, or work in pairs. Panhandlers may not make false representations, which include: stating that the donation is required for a need that does not exist or that the solicitor is from out of town and stranded when it is not true, wearing a military uniform without having served, pretending to be disabled or using “any make-up or device to simulate any deformity.” Furthermore, it is illegal to beg “for a specific purpose and then spend the funds received for a different purpose.”

Homeless people who panhandle without an official permit, or who break any of the rules, may be required to pay fines of up to \$500—a stiff penalty for someone whose source of income is panhandling—or can be arrested and may spend up to 60 days in jail.

Orlando is just one of many cities that are applying legal sanctions to homeless people who live on the streets. New York City mayor Rudy Giuliani began the effort in the mid-1990s with “quality-of-life” ordinances that forbid the home-

less from sleeping in public parks and ticket what he calls “squeegee terrorists” who wash car windows in hopes of receiving a handout. In 1999, after a homeless man injured a woman by slamming her head with a brick, Giuliani ordered that homeless people who refused city-provided shelter would face arrest. Under the mayor’s new policy, homeless people must work for their shelter; if the head of a homeless family will not work, the family’s children may be sent to foster care.

Other cities following Giuliani’s approach include Chicago, where policymakers recently erected giant chain-link fences around a downtown area to prevent vagrants from loitering there, and Cleveland, where homeless people sleeping on the sidewalks are subject to arrest. Even San Francisco, considered to be one of the most tolerant cities in the nation, now bans homeless people from camping in parks or sleeping in doorways, arrests people who give food to the homeless without a permit, and recently considered a proposal to confiscate homeless people’s shopping carts.

Some contend that local governments’ attempts to crack down on the homeless reflect the widespread view that, in today’s booming economy, homelessness is the result of laziness. Paul Boden, director of the San Francisco Coalition on Homelessness, says that “there is an attitude that with unemployment at record lows, with the stock market at record highs, if you’re poor, it’s your own damn fault.” As a result, claim *U.S. News & World Report* writers Warren Cohen and Mike Tharp, the public has little tolerance for homelessness. “[I]nstead of sympathy,” they write, “street dwellers are attracting hostility. Residents are sick of being hassled by ever more aggressive cadgers, and vendors say mendicants are hurting business.”

Proponents of measures to crack down on homelessness argue that the homeless are a public nuisance whose presence on the streets harms businesses, impedes the rehabilitation of dilapidated urban areas, and makes life unpleasant—or even dangerous—for other citizens. Furthermore, city officials contend, the new ordinances force homeless individuals to seek the assistance they need—be it alcohol or drug treatment, mental health care, or employment services.

Advocates for the homeless, on the other hand, argue that such laws rob homeless people of their civil rights and their dignity. As stated by the *Safety Network*, a publication of the National Coalition for the Homeless,

These city ordinances . . . are misguided because they seek to hide homeless people, not to end homelessness. They are unjust because they seek to punish people for being poor. They are, in effect, persecution because people who are homeless do not have the option to rest, sleep, and set down belongings in private. People who are forced to live on the streets have very few choices: Are these cities asking people who are homeless to choose *not to exist*!?

Moreover, maintain critics, city ordinances that target the homeless are a waste of resources. Carol Sobel, an attorney with the Southern California branch of the American Civil Liberties Union, asks, “What is it you want your police to be doing? We don’t have enough people working on homicides. . . . Do we want to shift the limited resources that we have to arresting somebody who washes somebody’s window without permission?” Sobel and other opponents of the new laws argue that instead of wasting money trying to “hide” the homeless, the government should use its economic resources to address the causes of homelessness, such as low wages and lack of affordable housing.

With the numbers of homeless rising despite widespread prosperity—a 2000 study by the Urban Institute reports that as many as 3.5 million people are homeless, compared to 1.8 million in 1987—the problem of homelessness is once again in the public limelight. In *The Homeless: Opposing Viewpoints*, various commentators, including people who have experienced homelessness themselves, examine the causes of homelessness and offer proposals for reducing the problem. Chapters address the following questions: Is Homelessness a Serious Problem? What Are the Causes of Homelessness? What Housing Options Would Benefit the Homeless? and How Should Society Deal with the Homeless? Throughout these chapters, authors debate the plight of those who live in the shadowy margins of society.

**CHAPTER**

**1**

**Is Homelessness a  
Serious Problem?**

# Chapter Preface

How many people in the United States are homeless? Because statistics documenting the extent of homelessness vary widely, there is no easy answer to this question. For example, the National Coalition for the Homeless and the Urban Institute estimate that on an average night there are over 700,000 people sleeping on the streets or in homeless shelters. Other organizations, however, argue that this number is exaggerated, and that in truth only 300,000 people are homeless on any given night.

The difficulty in determining the number of homeless people in the United States is caused in part by disparities in the definition of homelessness. Some experts in the field assert that there are two broad categories of homelessness, which sometimes overlap. The first category, episodic homelessness, refers to people who are temporarily homeless because of extreme poverty. Homeless people in this category often experience problems such as a lack of job prospects or domestic violence; however, according to the Department of Health and Human Services, “their persistent poverty is the decisive factor that turns unforeseen crises, or even minor setbacks, into bouts of homelessness.” Oftentimes, the episodically homeless are only homeless for brief periods of time.

The chronically homeless, who comprise the second category, are those for whom homelessness has become a way of life. Like the episodic homeless, they lack financial resources; however, because their homelessness generally stems from severe mental illness, alcohol or drug addiction, or persistent health problems, they are less likely to regain a stable living situation.

Some commentators argue that because the episodically homeless are usually undercounted by statisticians, the problem of homelessness is more serious than the numbers indicate. Other analysts maintain that episodic homelessness is not a grave problem, since many who fall into this category eventually escape homelessness. The following chapter offers conflicting opinions on the seriousness of homelessness in America.



*“Lack of jobs, lack of income, lack of housing, drug addiction, mental illness, and now lack of welfare and social services contribute to the misery and homelessness of approximately 730,000 people in the U.S. on a given day.”*

## Homelessness Is a Serious Problem for Society

*Washington Spectator*

Although homelessness has largely faded from the public's consciousness, the problem continues to worsen, argues the *Washington Spectator* in the following viewpoint. Lack of adequate-paying jobs, affordable housing, welfare, and services for the mentally ill have left society's poorest members with no place to go. The *Washington Spectator* is a semi-monthly publication of the Public Concern Foundation, a nonprofit organization that champions progressive values.

As you read, consider the following questions:

1. What attitude do most Americans take toward the homeless, according to the author?
2. As stated by the author, what evidence exists that the poor live in substandard housing?
3. How many people seek homeless shelter in an average winter month, according to the *Washington Spectator*?

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