

EXCERPTED FROM

# Ending Homelessness: Why We Haven't, How We Can

edited by  
Donald W. Burnes  
and David L. DiLeo

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# 1

## Are We There Yet?

*Donald W. Burnes*

**I have spent most of the past thirty years working to address** homelessness. In 1993 my late wife, Alice Baum, and I wrote *A Nation in Denial: The Truth About Homelessness*, a book that represented the culmination of academic research and direct service. Twenty years later and still absorbed by the issue, I helped create the nonprofit Burnes Institute on Poverty and Homelessness, which is dedicated to policy research and program evaluation.

While puzzling over the possibility of a second book, I found myself asking these questions: Why aren't we closer to the goal of ending homelessness? What are the political, cultural, and programmatic barriers? Despite the billions of dollars spent by the private and public sectors, the hundreds of millions of paid and volunteer person-hours, and the countless words uttered and published imploring us to do better, the number of persons experiencing homelessness has not changed significantly in the past thirty-five years. Why? These fundamental questions are addressed in this volume and, with the help of nationally known experts in the field, I hope it will provide some compelling answers.

The United States has always struggled with its attitudes about those experiencing homelessness. Endless debates, repeated by successive generations, have been fueled by cycles of pity, distaste, fear, anger, and apathy felt by all, rich and poor, when there is destitution in our midst. Over time, homelessness has given rise to important policy questions. Should we provide direct financial assistance, or should we provide shelter? Should the help be compassionate and generous, or should it exercise social control by rewarding work and industry while punishing idleness and intemperance? Should assistance be an entitlement paid for by the general public through taxes, or should it be available only when it has been earned by work? Should helping

those experiencing homelessness be the responsibility of government, or should the primary source of help be private charitable organizations? Answers to these questions have often depended on the definition of who is worthy of assistance and who is not.

As Joel John Roberts, chief executive officer of PATH Partners, recently reported, between 2000 and 2013 we reduced the number of people experiencing homelessness by 90,000, from 700,000 to 610,000. At that rate, he calculates, it will take eighty-eight years to eliminate it (Roberts, 2014). Waiting that long is an abdication of our social responsibility and a forfeiture of an opportunity to leave a stronger, smarter, and more compassionate society to future generations.

Simple numbers about the magnitude of the problem are staggering. The National Low Income Housing Coalition (NLIHC, 2015, p.1) has declared that the current shortage of affordable rental units has now risen to 7.1 million for extremely low-income renters. This number does not include persons who are homeless. If we add the 400,000 homeless households, who by definition do not rent, the shortage of units climbs to about 7.5 million (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2015).

Every state, on average, would have to produce 150,000 units over the next ten years for us to eliminate the shortage of affordable housing units, and every one of those units would have to be specifically designated for those experiencing homelessness or households on the brink. This also assumes that there is no increase in the number of homeless and near-homeless households over that period of time. (Given the present political climate and our cultural tolerance for homelessness, there is no realistic chance of every state reaching this goal.)

The general rule of thumb according to the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) is that a household should spend no more than 30 percent of its total annual income on housing. Any household that does so is considered "housing challenged." Furthermore, if a household spends more than 50 percent of its income on housing, that household is considered "severely housing challenged" (NLIHC, 2015, p.1). If we now add the 6.6 million people that are severely housing challenged to the 7.5 million homeless and at risk of homelessness, we have roughly 14.2 million people who are either homeless, at significant risk of becoming homeless, or are severely housing challenged. That represents about 5 percent of our national population. A recent poll conducted in Denver indicated that almost half of the respondents knew a family member or friend who had experienced homelessness at some point in their life (Metz and Weigel, 2015). If this poll is at all representative of the country as a whole, that means that as many as 150,000,000 Americans have been homeless at some point in their lives.

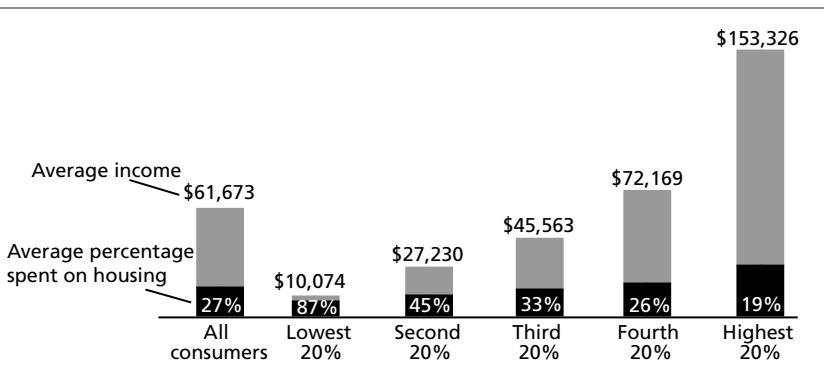
In its report on the state of homelessness, the National Alliance to End Homelessness (NAEH, 2013b) calculated the average amount of money

spent on housing as a percentage of average annual income and arrayed these calculations on a continuum. For the top 20 percent of housing consumers (i.e., families that either own or rent their homes), the average annual income was about \$153,300, and they spent on average approximately 19 percent on housing. For the bottom quintile, the average annual income was approximately \$10,100, and those households spent 87 percent of their income on housing, leaving them about \$1,000 per year for everything else, including food, health care, and clothing (see Figure 1.1). Talk about being severely housing challenged! What is more, since people experiencing homelessness and those staying with friends or family are not actual consumers of housing, they are not even included in these calculations.

These stark figures describe the current situation in the United States. The level of human and financial effort to end homelessness may well be at its highest level in the past thirty years, but we have made little real progress. Unless we change our level of effort by several orders of magnitude, we will not realize even our most conservative goals. It is not as though federal subsidies for housing are lacking. A recent working paper by the National Bureau of Economic Research suggests that federal support for low-income rental housing is less than 25 percent of the subsidies provided by the federal government to US homeowners, a whopping \$195 billion (NBER, 2015, p.1). A major portion of this amount is derived from the mortgage interest deduction for homeownership taxpayers. In short, homeowners, especially wealthier homeowners, receive four times as much in federal housing subsidies as do those who rent, especially those in poverty, and those experiencing homelessness are on the bottom rung of that ladder. Those who need the least help get four times as much as those who need it most.

More important than the numbers is the human dimension of homelessness, the personal stories documenting the circumstances and the tragedy of life without reliable shelter. Many of us have never had to live through such

**Figure 1.1 Housing Costs as a Percentage of Income, 2011**



an experience. We have no concept of what being homeless means, no concept of the hardships and the tribulations of such an existence. Our only direct contact with persons experiencing homelessness is with the panhandlers on street corners. Even there, the vast majority of us do everything we can to avoid engaging the panhandler when the light turns red. We stare at our dashboard or glance over at the car on our right; in fact, we try our best to ignore the panhandler. We look at but don't see them on the street corners waving cardboard signs, nor do we acknowledge them asleep on sidewalks or huddled in doorways. We may read about them in newspapers or watch stories about them on the TV news, but we have no direct connection with any of them. It's almost as though they don't exist.

It is not surprising that the street corner high flier represents our stereotype of the person experiencing homelessness. But the fact is that most of those experiencing homelessness are not panhandlers; many are women with families, some are runaway or throwaway youth, some are veterans suffering from the ravages of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), some have cognitive or physical disabilities, and all are sons and daughters of parents who love them. We as a nation marginalize them and do them and ourselves a terrible disservice by stereotyping them as drunken or mentally ill street people who are invading our public space.

Unfortunately, most of us think that people become homeless as a result of addictions, mental illness, or bad decisions. Our judgments may not include the fact that many of us housed citizens also have addictions, mental illness, or made bad decisions. What is the difference? The difference for the homeless is a lack of resources. Others of us think that those experiencing homelessness are on the streets because they choose to be there. In fact, few individuals with options choose life on the streets, and most of those who make that choice do so because their only alternative is the crowded and dangerous environment so typical of many of the emergency shelters that currently exist.

For reasons explored throughout this volume, we need a comprehensive cultural change in how we, as Americans and as members of a human family, feel about the systemic conditions that give rise to homelessness generally and about those persons actually experiencing homelessness. The civil rights movement changed how we felt about race, the disability movement altered how we perceived those with physical and cognitive challenges, and recent cultural forces have revolutionized how we feel about gay marriage. We need a similar kind of cultural tsunami to change our attitudes about homelessness. All of us need to interact directly with persons experiencing homelessness to learn about the hardships, disappointments, and tragedies that they endure on a daily basis.

While it is certainly the intent of this book to highlight important policy issues, it is also our intent to connect policy with practice and academic

research with boots on the ground. Although there is evidence about the effectiveness of some practices, there are still major holes in our understanding of the best ways to provide for the needs of everyone experiencing homelessness. Top-down policy pronouncements from Washington, DC, tend to maximize a one-size-fits-all approach, when local understanding negates this premise. If we are to develop sound policies, the hard-won knowledge about local complexities has to filter upward to national, state, and local policymakers.

Current homelessness services buzzwords include “best practices,” “evidence-based practice,” and “evidence-based policy” (EBPol). Although it may be only a semantic argument, the concept of best practice is unfortunate, since “best” is a superlative adjective that can never be guaranteed simply because the number of comparable practices is, in theory, infinite. EBPol, while an attractive option in the abstract, “has also been critiqued for being inherently undemocratic and disempowering” (Stanhope and Dunn, 2011, p. 277). Critics of social science tinkering charge that shaping programs based on empirical evidence is an exercise in power. Stanhope and Dunn add that “the claim to objectivity rests on technical skills, methods, information, and professional networks that historically have excluded those groups most vulnerable to poverty” (p. 277).

In our desire to bridge the chasm between policy and practice, we provide a range of intellectual perspectives from those who have experienced homelessness and those whose backgrounds and experience are quite removed from the social science expertise so often found in a volume like this. For this reason, we have included a first-person account from an individual who has experienced homelessness as well as chapters by noted researchers in the field, chapters by authors whose primary experience has been in on-the-ground programs, and an analysis of homelessness by a professor of history and the humanities. The addition of these perspectives enhances the value of this book and its ability to transcend the separation often found between theory and practice.

Unfortunately, evaluations done at most service agencies compound the separation between policy and practice. At a point where good solid outcome evaluations could amplify our understanding of homelessness and lead to good policies, service agencies collect only output data (i.e., numbers of persons served, numbers of units of service). For example, at Denver’s Road Home (DRH), the name given to the ten-year plan to end homelessness in the Mile High City (DRH, 2013), staff members have assiduously collected data on numbers of housing units built, numbers of outreach contacts, numbers of shelter and transitional housing beds, and now the number of permanent supported housing units available and filled. Clearly, these numbers are important and useful. But none of them illuminates the actual impact of any of these service units on the lives of those who are supposed to be benefiting from the services. Part of the problem is that there is no consensus about



exactly what the indicators of successful impacts are, and there is considerable disagreement about how best to collect and analyze the data. And in those relatively rare instances where good impact data are available, they seldom reach the hands of individuals who could put them to good use.

Finally, I call your attention to the work of the Burnes Center on Poverty and Homelessness, where we are committed to infusing the realities of everyday circumstances into the evaluation work and the policy research that we do. The research that our staff undertakes is intended to inform both policy and practice and is based on our understanding of local practices. As results of this work become available, we make every effort to disseminate them to policymakers and researchers.

### **About the Book**

In conceptualizing the book and in discussing the book with my coeditor, I was cognizant that most of the earlier edited volumes about homelessness deal exclusively with policy issues, or with agency and stakeholder practices, without much reflection on the actual lives of those experiencing homelessness. I strongly felt the need to include a chapter by a formerly homeless woman who could write about and reflect on her experiences as a way of bringing the whole issue into a sharper focus.

In Chapter 2, Michelle McHenry-Edrington provides an engagingly written account of a person who lost her home and experienced homelessness, “An Individual Experiences Homelessness.” Her narrative illustrates what homelessness often looks like and provides an example of the frustration and futility often felt by those experiencing homelessness when faced with systems that have accomplished little to address the issue over the past three decades. Her story also helps to contradict the commonly held stereotypes of the street corner bum and the panhandler.

Part 1, “Where Are We Now?” presents a picture of homelessness today—one that is significantly different from thirty years ago—and analyzes how the new demographic complexities might be addressed.

In Chapter 3, “The New Demographics of Homelessness,” Kerri Tobin and Joseph Murphy describe how the face of homelessness has changed dramatically over the past several decades. Once predominantly a problem of single men, homelessness has been perceptibly feminized, and Tobin and Murphy attempt to understand some basics about the new homeless, especially those who have suffered the ravages of the Great Recession. Although the characteristics of the population may have changed, the numbers have not been significantly reduced, and those at risk have increased substantially. In short, we as a nation have barely put a dent in the problem.

In Chapter 4, “Three Decades of American Homelessness,” Martha R. Burt examines the size and characteristics of homeless populations in the

United States over the past thirty-five years, when homelessness became a major public issue for the first time since the Great Depression. She discusses the intricacies of how we count those experiencing homelessness and provides an important perspective on Point-in-Time (PIT), annual, and lifetime prevalence counts. Because we have yet to substantially reduce homelessness, she suggests that every household with a worst case housing need be provided a rent subsidy for as long as necessary. According to Burt, “There can be little doubt that we would reduce homelessness substantially” (p. 65) if we made that a policy decision. All that is required is renewed political will.

Part 2, “What Have We Done (or Not Done)?” analyzes two important programmatic approaches to addressing homelessness, based on the experiences of two longtime and successful practitioners. The chapters in this section discuss the current efforts to provide housing and services across the country, and examine the accomplishments and the shortcomings in both arenas.

In Chapter 5, “A Housing First Approach,” Sam Tsemberis and Benjamin F. Henwood describe Pathways’ Housing First (PHF) as an effective, evidence-based, permanent housing program that also supports recovery for individuals with psychiatric disabilities and co-occurring addiction diagnoses. The program, based on the belief that housing is a basic human right, emphasizes self-determination, harm reduction, and recovery. Tsemberis and Henwood describe the challenges faced in implementing PHF at the individual, agency, community, and policy level as well as the opportunities missed in utilizing the program for wider impact.

In Chapter 6, “Special Needs Housing,” Richard L. Harris recounts his experiences at Central City Concern (CCC), a social service agency dedicated to helping those struggling with homelessness and poverty and one of the largest nonprofits in Portland, Oregon. He describes the development of the CCC housing and service model, especially the Alcohol and Drug Free Community (ADFC) concept, and some of the challenges that this model has experienced and addressed in the past. Harris also discusses the ten basic issues that agencies must face as they try to develop special needs housing. The ADFC concept is in direct opposition to the Housing First model, and the two programs stand in interesting juxtaposition to each other.

In Chapter 7, “Systems for Homelessness and Housing Assistance,” Jill Khadduri reviews the models for providing shelter and housing that have evolved since 1980. Specifically, she considers the extent to which housing subsidy programs are playing a role in ending homelessness and the opportunities that are available to do more. She is particularly troubled by the consequences of the failure to combine mainstream housing programs with those intended for people experiencing homelessness.

In Chapter 8, “Controversies in the Provision of Services,” Jason Adam Wasserman and Jeffrey Michael Clair describe various attempts to provide

social services to homeless individuals and the shift from housing ready to housing first programs. They detail the evolution of homeless services, examining how a diverse set of religious philosophies and values underpins many approaches to addressing homelessness. They conclude by highlighting several key contemporary social conflicts related to homeless service provision and discuss how efforts to provide services may also work to obviate the potential positive effects that many services could have.

Part 3, “Why Aren’t We Further?” identifies cultural and political impediments to addressing homelessness. The chapters in this section analyze various pieces of the homelessness puzzle—housing, employment, the law, and the social fabric—and describe how, as a nation, we have failed to understand the complexities of the issues and the magnitude of the problem, resulting in our failure to remedy the situation.

In Chapter 9, “How We’ve Learned to Embrace Homelessness,” David L. DiLeo explores the roots and evolution of the ethical and political norms that foster a popular ambivalence toward persons experiencing homelessness. He argues that there are powerful ideological foundations—many subconscious and unexamined—that explain the persistence of poverty and homelessness throughout US history. He asserts that the general public’s perception of homelessness as a benign, intractable, and, even providentially ordained, phenomenon diminishes the ability of advocates to compete for resources. Finally, he offers a strategy, which he terms “a conceptual reengagement,” to facilitate the expansion of homelessness coalitions (p. 154).

In Chapter 10, “Homelessness Is About Housing,” Sheila Crowley documents the major shortfall in the number of available units of low-income housing for those experiencing homelessness, thus creating a major barrier to our efforts. In addition, large numbers of residents spend substantially more of their income on housing than the recommended 30 percent. She describes the major federal housing initiatives and several of the most substantial housing tax breaks that benefit the wealthiest Americans, further exacerbating the economic inequality of our housing system.

In Chapter 11, “Work, Wages, Wealth, and the Roots of Homelessness,” Bristow Hardin identifies one of the significant impediments for people trying to move out of homelessness: the lack of income and wealth. Although an estimated 40 percent of the homeless work, it is most often at low-skilled, part-time, or day labor jobs with minimal paychecks and no benefits—wages that are far from sufficient to afford housing. Furthermore, over the past thirty years, we have seen a growing concentration of wealth among the richest Americans while the bottom 80 percent of all Americans hold only 5 percent of the nation’s wealth. Those experiencing homelessness, being on the lowest rung of the financial ladder, are hardest hit by this inequality and, as Hardin points out, this is directly related to a host of educational, health, and criminal justice issues.

Collin Jaquet Whelley and Kate Whelley McCabe discuss the rights and responsibilities of society to address and regulate homelessness in Chapter 12, “Rights, Responsibilities, and Homelessness.” They examine antihomeless laws and the political priorities that result from them; theoretical conceptions of homelessness that influence priorities and policy; political arguments in support of, and in opposition to, antihomeless laws; legal understandings of antihomeless laws; and ways to reorient government policies. They confidently suggest that a judicial approach to the rights of those experiencing homelessness may be the next frontier in the battle to end this social tragedy.

Part 4, “What Do We Do?” approaches the question—What next?—from the perspective of data and evaluation, public will and the media, coordinated planning, and collaborative funding. Without improvements in each of these areas, we are not likely to make much real progress.

In Chapter 13, “In Pursuit of Quality Data and Programs,” Tracey O’Brien argues that, to end homelessness, we will need to know much more about good programs and good practices. Our failure to generate reliable data often means that programmatic approaches continue to exist, virtually indefinitely, even when they are not particularly successful. She also discusses various federal data reporting requirements, their necessity, and the cost of meeting them. As she suggests, to have a real chance at accomplishing an end to homelessness, we need a vastly improved system of information and evaluation.

In Chapter 14, “Public Opinion, Politics, and the Media,” Paul A. Toro and Corissa Carlson discuss the interaction of public opinion, policy, the media, and professional research interests in homelessness over the past forty years. In their conclusion, Toro and Carlson state that “the extent of homelessness over the past four decades has been surprisingly robust and has shown little hope of a dramatic reduction anytime soon” (p. 243). In light of comparatively low-level coverage of the issue by the media and a relatively sympathetic public, they argue that we will successfully address the problem only if professionals and citizen advocates coordinate their efforts.

In Chapter 15, “Community Planning and the End of Homelessness,” Samantha Batko describes the movement to create ten-year plans to end homelessness, starting with the release of *A Plan, Not a Dream: How to End Homelessness in Ten Years* by the National Alliance to End Homelessness in 2000 (NAEH, 2000a). The effectiveness and impact of ten-year plans have varied greatly, but the process has paved the way for a new focus on measuring progress across a community, creating time lines, and developing benchmarks as central elements of a systems approach to addressing homelessness on both a federal and local level. Batko explores the efficacy of ten-year plans as tools to address homelessness, the expectations such plans produce, and the barriers that plans often encounter in mobilizing funding and political support.

In Chapter 16, “The Role of Funders,” Anne Miskey examines funding strategies to end homelessness, particularly the role that philanthropy has played. Unfortunately, according to Miskey, many funders focus on short-term, one-year grants, and they are reluctant to fund evaluation, research, and organizational capacity, to the real detriment of sustained comprehensive efforts to address homelessness. Further, she urges us to consider total service delivery systems, rather than individual agencies. Only when we do this, will we be able to mount the necessary effort to have a substantial impact on the issue.

In Chapter 17, “Where Do We Go from Here?” I revisit questions posed throughout the book. I draw heavily on the expertise provided by the chapter authors as well as my own experiences and observations. Readers are called on to consider individual and programmatic efforts to address homelessness, and to reflect on the broader cultural and political landscapes that will require much attention in the years ahead.