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Journeys out of Homelessness: The Voices of Lived Experience

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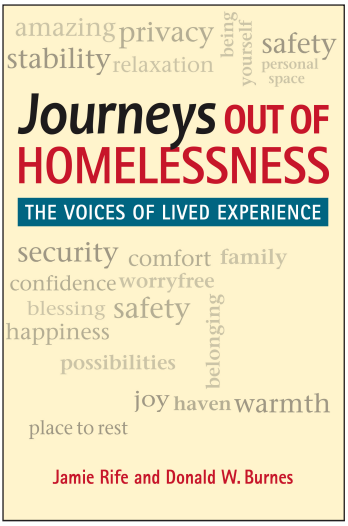

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1

Journeys out of Homelessness

To date, there has been a significant amount of literature written on the issue of homelessness, providing valuable insight, data, and in-depth research on this topic. Some of this work is qualitative in nature, including ethnographies and third-person accounts of life without a home.[1] Additionally, quantitative research, consisting of demographic and epidemiological data, outcome information, and thoughtful solutions, has added to our understanding.[2] Recent publications by the US Interagency Council on Homelessness (2018a, 2018b, 2018c, 2019) have specifically advocated for the increased use of such quantitative research. In a few cases, these two types of methodologies have been married to capture the experience of homelessness while providing implications and solutions (Wagner, 2018; Wasserman & Clair, 2010).[3]

However, one of the gaps in the current literature on homelessness, and the voice far too often absent in the discussion on how to solve homelessness, is the voice of individuals with lived experience. While it is valuable to shed light on their journeys in third person, as has been done by a number of researchers previously, this book instead provides an opportunity to hear directly from those affected by homelessness, as the contributors provide their own first-person accounts.

This book differs from others on the topic in another important way. Instead of focusing solely on the causes of homelessness and the experience of being without a home, this book asks the questions,

how have individuals gotten through their experiences of homelessness, and what are the factors that were particularly important in assisting them in becoming housed? Exploring how these nine individuals were able to move through homelessness provides guidance for policymakers, service providers, and others who are working to end homelessness.

We also strive to humanize an issue seen by most as abstract, a population of individuals largely ignored by society. For the average American, simply hearing the statistics on the magnitude of homelessness can lead to feeling overwhelmed. Additionally, even when informed on the issue, most have no idea where to start to make a difference; it seems insurmountable. In fact, the issue is not. Therefore, we seek in this book to assist readers in understanding the issue from both a historical and a research perspective—and seeing that homelessness is a solvable issue.

Although some readers may be inspired by the stories of resiliency contained within these covers, resiliency should not be confused with a solution. Homelessness has much deeper, more fundamental root causes that need to be addressed, evidenced by the current scale of the phenomenon in the United States. It is a result of systemic failings, not personality flaws, as illustrated throughout the contributors' stories.

What Is Homelessness?

To fully understand the issue of homelessness, one must first understand the term *homeless*. The word, at its root, literally means not having a home. In defining *home* themselves, the contributors used words and phrases such as: (1) a safe, secure, stable place; (2) no place I'd rather be; (3) home is my castle; (4) a place to keep all my stuff; (5) a place where I have some control over my environment; and (6) a place to build relationships. Therefore, in part, "homeless" can refer to a lack of these conditions.

Terms related to safety, stability, and security provide some insight into why this issue can cause such deep trauma. Safety and security are two of human beings' most fundamental needs. Without having these two essential needs met, it is difficult to grow and flourish as a member of society.

It is also important to note the adverse reaction many of the contributors had to the very term *homeless*. This, in large part, is due to the stereotypical images the term conjures up for the average person

and the stigma these images create. Contributors preferred various different phrasings, as seen throughout their chapters.

The Federal Definitions of Homelessness

One of the fundamental aspects of understanding homelessness is the variance between US federal agencies in how they define the issue. There are two overarching definitions utilized in the field, the first of which is used by the US Department of Education (USED) and, consequently, public schools throughout the country. Section 725(2) of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act defines "homeless children and youths" as individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence.

According to the USED definition, children must have a place they can go each night, not subject to change, that meets their safety and security needs. Protections under the educational definition of homelessness provide children and youth attending public school a particular set of federal rights to encourage school stability, something crucial for social and academic success.

Yet, the parents or guardians of these students, or even independent youth themselves, do not necessarily qualify for housing assistance as they may not meet the criteria for the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) definition of homelessness; this fact is one of the systemic difficulties in addressing root causes of homelessness. In many instances, the US Department of Education recognizes a family as living in a homeless situation, making them eligible for certain services, even though they do not meet the narrower definition of "literally homeless" under HUD and thus do not qualify for housing support, potentially leaving these children, youth, and families in a never-ending cycle of instability.

The most significant difference between the two definitions is the inclusion of those who are "doubled up" in the USED definition—individuals or families who are unable to maintain their own housing and are forced to live with different family members, friends, or others—but are generally excluded from the HUD definition. The doubled up are also recognized by the US Department of Health and Human Services (National Health Care for the Homeless Council, 2018); however, this population of those experiencing homelessness is generally not eligible for housing assistance, a loophole that leaves many, particularly families with children, in what one of the book's contributors refers to as the "in-between."

For the purposes of this book, all contributors met at least one of the federal definitions of homelessness. Some of them were "literally homeless," according to HUD's definition. Many of them also resided in places unfit for habitation, were doubled up, spent time in motels, or were homeless unaccompanied youth, bouncing from place to place.

Descriptors of Homelessness

Ever since its rise to public prominence in the late 1970s and early 1980s, researchers and writers have used diverse ways to describe this complex phenomenon. One of the most common is to define the issue in terms of various subpopulations: single adults, both men and women; families with children; families without children; veterans; youth and young adults; victims of domestic violence; seniors; and by race and ethnic background as well.

Starting with the seminal work of Dennis Culhane, Stephen Metraux, and others, a second set of descriptors has focused on length of time homeless (Culhane, Metraux, & Hadley, 2002; Culhane, Metraux, Park, Schretzman, & Velente, 2007). Now, according to Tobin and Murphy, "Most researchers use a typology that classifies homeless experiences as 'transitional, episodic, or chronic'" (2016, p. 39). Those whose experience of homelessness is transitional find themselves in that predicament for a single, relatively brief period of time. Others cycle in and out, experiencing a few episodes of homelessness. Chronics are defined as experiencing an episode of homelessness lasting over a year or having four episodes over the past three years. In addition, for a person to be classified as experiencing chronic homelessness, he or she must also have some type of disability. As Tobin and Murphy indicate, this typology has now become commonplace, and federal policy during the last twenty years has taken it to heart, focusing primarily on those experiencing chronic homelessness, including those who have served in the military.

Another typology of homelessness comes from the work of Teresa Gowan (2010). She divides the population into those described as "sin-talk," "sick-talk," and "system-talk." In their analysis of Gowan's work, Whelley and McCabe indicated that "these apt terms clarify the three dominant frameworks for understanding the causes of homelessness: the independent agency perspective, the individualized medical (medicalized) perspective, and the structural perspec-

tive" (2016, p. 207). Those who fall into the sin-talk category experience homelessness because they are somehow deficient, deviant, and/or have made bad choices. The medicalized perspective blames homelessness on the pathology or pathologies of the individual. According to the system-talk perspective, homelessness is caused by systemic/structural factors.

Whelley and McCabe (2016) added a fourth category to Gowan's typology, namely, "structure plus."

> In reality, individual free will, myriad pathologies, and systemic factors intersect and combine to explain the causes of homelessness. . . . Nor will one solution to homelessness emerge from such a combined perspective; structural elements must be addressed, but services should be molded to fit individual needs rather than being prescribed by service professionals, private agencies, public funding, or government agencies. (pp. 208–209)

Wasserman and Clair (2016), in describing their earlier work (2010), indicated that service agencies, particularly those associated with religious organizations, provide services that can be distinguished as working with sinners, working with the meek, and working for social justice (2016, p. 126).

The Extent of Homelessness

Data on the extent of homelessness in the United States vary between agencies, which creates large discrepancies in the reported numbers of individuals experiencing homelessness. The inclusion of the doubled up in the USED definition, and the exclusion of it from the HUD definition except under narrow circumstances, is the main cause for this discrepancy in annual reports. However, it is important to understand the breadth of the issue by examining both sets of data. The discrepancy between these two definitions also leads to unfortunate circumstances for those doubled up, as we will discuss in Chapter 4.

Public School Data

Each year public schools across the United States report on the number of enrolled students who are identified as experiencing homelessness. As of school year 2015–2016, the most recent data available, over 1.3 million children experienced homelessness (National

Center for Homeless Education, 2017a). That means approximately 2.5 percent of our nation's students do not have a fixed, regular, adequate nighttime residence. This number does not include their parents or guardians, or younger or older siblings not currently enrolled in school. If one adds in older and younger siblings and single adults and adult couples, we estimate there may be as many as 3.5–4 million persons experiencing homelessness across the United States, using the USED definition.

Approximately 14.4 percent of those 1.3 million homeless children resided in shelters or transitional housing, or they were awaiting foster care. Another 3.3 percent were unsheltered, meaning they were living in cars, parks, campgrounds, temporary trailers, or abandoned buildings; another 6.5 percent were living in hotels or motels due to a lack of adequate alternative accommodations. That leaves another 75.8 percent of children and families in doubled-up situations (National Center for Homeless Education, 2018). These families technically have a physical roof under which to sleep; however, these children may not have a bed, a quiet place to complete homework, or space to even unpack their belongings, or their entire family may be living in one bedroom. They have no lease, ownership, or control over their environment and are at the mercy of those with whom they reside. These situations are most often temporary, causing a family or child to bounce between multiple relatives or friends, certainly far from the "fixed" circumstances that the USED definition includes. Sometimes these living situations are also unsafe. Having a roof does not constitute having a home, as many of these families and their children are often less stable and less safe than those who meet the HUD definition of homelessness.

Included in this count were over 111,000 unaccompanied homeless youth identified, or those students experiencing homelessness while not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian during the 2015–2016 school year (National Center for Homeless Education, 2017b). Familial dysfunction is reported by unaccompanied youth as the primary reason for their leaving the home, including substance abuse, pregnancy, sexual orientation, sexual activity, aging out of foster care, and parental abuse. Additionally, these students are often left in a homeless situation due to the deportation, incarceration, illness, or death of their parent or guardian (National Center for Homeless Education, 2017c). These young people constitute one of our nation's most vulnerable populations; however, little attention and few resources are dedicated to them.

HUD Data

Even by HUD's narrower definition, the numbers of individuals experiencing homelessness are astounding. Each January, a national Point-in-Time (PIT) count is conducted in an attempt to estimate a deduplicated number of individuals experiencing homelessness. There are several limitations to this methodology (for an in-depth discussion of these, see O'Brien, 2016). While the efficacy of this method is debated regularly, it is the current standard for data collection and the basis for the Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress. In 2017, according to the PIT count, 553,742 individuals in the United States were homeless. This was the first time in seven years that the number had increased, largely fueled by increases in a handful of major cities. Family homelessness constituted 33 percent of that number, meaning 184,661 families with children were experiencing HUD's version of homelessness. Additionally, another 40,799 were unaccompanied youth, or individuals under the age of twenty-five not in the custody of a parent or guardian. Perhaps most shocking about these data is that while approximately 35 percent of the overall homeless population in the United States is unsheltered, among unaccompanied youth, this number rises to 55 percent (US Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2017a).

Trends in these data over time reflect the shifting demographics in our nation. The narrative of the panhandler on the street corner is not representative of this population, as you will see in subsequent chapters. Instead, a larger percentage of individuals counted during the PIT consists of women, families, children, and youth.

While the data demonstrate a growing need for concern, within these numbers lies proof that targeted efforts and adequate resourcing can make a substantial impact. A national and federal focus on ending veteran homelessness led to a decrease of 46 percent in the number of homeless veterans between 2010 and 2017 (US Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2017a). Nationally, a growing list of communities has statistically ended veteran homelessness, fueled by an infusion of resources, coordinated efforts, robust data, and support across sectors (US Interagency Council on Homelessness, 2018a). These efforts demonstrate that ending homelessness is in fact feasible with adequately resourced systems, coordinated solutions, and shared responsibility. If it can be done for veterans, it can be done for others as well.

Personal Versus Systemic Causes of Homelessness

There is a raging debate in this country about the causes of homelessness. Some argue that people become homeless as a result of personal problems, issues, or flaws. For example, Baum and Burnes suggested in *A Nation in Denial* (1993), based on a review of over 100 accounts and epidemiological studies, that a substantial majority of those experiencing homelessness suffer from untreated substance addiction and/or untreated mental illness, and they were widely criticized for being "neoliberal." Those who contend that personal issues cause homelessness point to data about the extent of mental illness, alcoholism, and drug addiction among those experiencing homelessness, and they argue that many of those without homes choose to be there. This perspective can be summarized as follows: individuals experiencing homelessness are either unmotivated, battling mental illness, struggling with alcohol or drug addiction, or in the situation due to a series of bad choices, including choosing to be homeless.

Others argue that homelessness generally is caused by a series of systemic factors over which individuals have little or no control. William Ryan, in his influential book *Blaming the Victim* (1976), argued that focusing on personal characteristics of those experiencing homelessness equates to blaming the victims of systemic forces. Additionally, there are *many more* housed persons who are unmotivated, battling mental illness, and struggling with alcohol or drug addiction, and who among us has never made a bad decision? Furthermore, except for a miniscule handful, data clearly show people do not choose the life of stigma, shame, rejection, and precariousness.

What, then, distinguishes between those who are housed and those who are not? The simple answer is resources: financial, housing, employment, nutritional, health care, childcare, educational, and transportation—that is, the resources needed to maintain some level of self-sufficiency and stability. These resources also include human resources, social capital, people who care, networks of support, a community on which to rely. We will discuss all of these in more detail in subsequent chapters.

For those who lean toward more systemic causes, it is true that homelessness can be traced to one word: poverty, both economic and social—a lack of resources. This dearth of resources can be credited to a number of systemic factors that are beyond individual control. There is a lack of adequate affordable housing, significant unemployment, underemployment, low wages, inadequate health care and health insurance, inadequate childcare, food insecurity and food

deserts, lack of access to education, and inadequate transportation. Racial discrimination reinforces all of these inadequacies, and all are aggravated by times of national economic distress, such as the Great Recession, and by growing economic inequality. Added together, these factors push many people into homelessness. (For an extended discussion of these and other forces, see Burnes & DiLeo, 2016).

In addition, there is the large cohort of individuals in extreme poverty who are at risk of becoming homeless. A recent study indicated that almost half of the randomly selected respondents in the United States would have to borrow to pay an unexpected expense of $400 (Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, 2017). Individuals experiencing homelessness and people in extreme poverty simply cannot borrow money. In short, we have not figured out a way to prevent homelessness due to the underlying issue of poverty.

Homelessness and Public Opinion

Four Hundred Years of Homelessness

To understand the current state of public opinion on homelessness, it is important to first look briefly at this issue's history. Many Americans seem to believe that homelessness in this country is a relatively new phenomenon caused by regressive governmental policies and the recessions that have plagued this country over the last forty years. The truth is that homelessness is not new. Throughout our history, people have lived on the margins. Starting in the earliest days of the colonies, Americans have viewed these individuals and families variously as a threat to their young society that was relegated to the poorhouses and almshouses made famous by the English; as the penniless immigrants who arrived on our shores in waves; as heroic rugged individuals forging west to open the frontier; as the wounded and bitter soldiers and freed slaves of the Civil War and its aftermath; as the hoboes who rode the recently constructed rails and lived in the shantytown hobohemias; as the destitute victims of the Great Depression; as the shameful derelicts of skid row; and, finally, as today's "new homeless." By the late 1970s, we were confronted with a growing surge of those experiencing homelessness, and the public consciousness of this phenomenon was raised, fueled in part by the very public displays of homelessness advocacy by such individuals as Mitch Snyder and Carol Fennelly of the Community for Creative Non-Violence.

Despite the debate about the causes of this huge influx of the destitute among us, there can be no denying the importance of several

factors. The huge growth in the overall US population—the Baby Boom—and its maturation in the late 1960s and 1970s meant that there were millions more people prone to the conditions created by inadequate housing, un-/underemployment, and the challenges for persons with substance abuse disorders or those grappling with mental illness.

Major and well-intended federal policies also unintentionally expanded the number of homeless. The deinstitutionalization of individuals diagnosed with a mental illness from state hospitals started in the Kennedy and Johnson years and left many former patients and inmates of state hospitals without housing and services, as the needed supply of community mental health facilities never materialized. The decriminalization of public intoxication left many public inebriates without shelter as former "drunk tanks" were never replaced by the necessary public detox facilities. Urban renewal and the destruction of skid rows dispersed those without a home throughout urban areas where their needed services, including housing and jobs, were very slow, if ever, to materialize. The Reagan administration oversaw significant cutbacks in funding for housing and other reductions in benefits for the very poor among us, and many of these cutbacks continue today. More recently, welfare reform, one of the signature accomplishments of the Clinton presidency, has reduced benefits for many poor families, forcing them either into homelessness or, at the very least, into utilizing services intended for the homeless. Finally, the recent Great Recession devastated many families, forcing them into foreclosure and then into battles for rental units, into emergency shelters and transitional housing, or onto the streets.

As the United States has struggled with its attitudes toward the homeless and how to help them, endless debates, repeated by each successive generation, have been fueled by a cycle of pity, distaste, fear, anger, and helplessness felt by all, rich and poor, when there is impoverishment, homelessness, and destitution in our midst. The questions remain the same: Should services provide direct financial assistance, or should they provide shelter? Should policies force the homeless into institutions or respect their freedom and right to self-determination? 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 the homeless be the responsibility of government, or should the primary source of help be private charitable organizations? The answers to all these questions have always depended on the definition of who is worthy of assistance

and who is not. (For a more extensive examination of the history of homelessness, see Chapters 6 and 7 in Baum & Burnes, 1993).

The Perception Gap

The central organizing theme throughout the history of homelessness in the United States has been the distinction between the "deserving" and the "undeserving" poor. Those who are deserving of our help are those whose housing circumstances are beyond their individual control, who are experiencing homelessness through no fault of their own. The undeserving are those whose homelessness is a direct consequence of something they have done to produce that result.

Rollinson and Pardeck (2006), in analyzing the worthy and the unworthy, indicated that the underpinnings of this unfortunate distinction can be traced back to religious roots. In comparison with much of Europe, where religious values and beliefs were tied closely to what the authors called the "Catholic ethic," US values have been tied more closely to a "Calvinistic ethic" that focuses on work and the "laziness" of the poor (p. 81). The authors went on to argue that these underlying values have significant implications for the way that countries think about and address the issue of homelessness.

The corollary to the distinction between deserving and undeserving is that those deemed undeserving do not generate public sympathy. Therefore, a fundamental solution to homelessness may lie in shifting perceptions of who is deserving or undeserving by addressing commonly held misconceptions about who experiences homelessness in this country and whether it derives from personal or systemic reasons.

Such misconceptions are, at one level, understandable. For most Americans, their only direct contact with homelessness comes from the individuals they actually see (i.e., panhandlers on street corners at traffic lights; individuals lying on sidewalks, in doorways, or in alleys; people walking along talking to or yelling at their unseen voices; or the prototypic bag ladies or gents, pushing shopping carts loaded with all their worldly possessions). These are the *visible* individuals experiencing homelessness, and, unfortunately, they reinforce the negative stereotypes. Many assume that they represent the total population of those without a home.

However, based on PIT and AHAR data, it is clear that they represent only about 15–20 percent of the total homeless population (Metro Denver Homeless Initiative, 2017; US Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2017a). The rest consist of families with children, runaway or throwaway youth, people in shelters and transitional

housing, people who work but do not earn enough to afford housing, members of the LGBTQ community, and others who are afraid to be seen. They are the *invisible* ones, and they make up the vast majority of the total population of persons experiencing homelessness.

Numerous studies conducted on public perception point to a large gap between public opinion on the causes of homelessness and the actual causes of it. Agans et al. (2011) found that in public perception polls, drug and alcohol abuse continues to be ranked top on the list of probable causes of homelessness. This was followed by mental illness, lack of affordable housing, economic systems favoring the wealthy, a lack of government assistance, illness/handicaps, and irresponsible behavior. This public perception was fueled by the deinstitutionalization of individuals receiving mental health treatment under the Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, and Reagan administrations (Baum & Burnes, 1993), as discussed earlier.

These perceptions do not accurately explain the current phenomenon of homelessness in the United States, however. In reality, based on the reasons articulated by those actually experiencing homelessness, the top causes of being without a home for families are, "(1) lack of affordable housing, (2) unemployment, (3) poverty, and (4) low wages." For individuals, "(1) lack of affordable housing, (2) unemployment, (3) poverty, (4) mental illness and the lack of needed services, and (5) substance abuse and the lack of needed services" top the list of reasons (National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, 2015, p. 3). Data repeatedly point to systemic factors as the leading causes of homelessness, indicating a wide gap between public perception and reality. This gap likely fuels some of the movements to criminalize homelessness and explains the general lack of public will to address it.

The Empathy Gap

Not surprisingly, the gap in perception leads to a lack of empathy among the general public for individuals experiencing homelessness. Gallop (2007) found that 85 percent of respondents from the general public listed drug and alcohol abuse as a major contributing factor to homelessness. This was followed by mental illness, post-traumatic stress disorder, and insufficient income at 67 percent, followed closely by job loss or unemployment. Lack of affordable housing was only mentioned by 48 percent.

People who rank drug and alcohol abuse as the top cause are statistically much less sympathetic to the issue (Agans et al., 2011). Those who rank a lack of access to affordable housing as the top cause

are much more sympathetic. Race, level of education, and perceived seriousness of the issue all play into an individual's level of sympathy. Whites tend to be less sympathetic than nonwhites. As an individual's level of education increases, they also display less sympathy toward this issue. Additionally, if individuals view homelessness as a serious issue, they are more likely to be sympathetic. People rated as sympathetic also felt the issue was getting worse and that the role of the government was larger in assisting these individuals. Perhaps most interesting, this research found people with lived experience were "70% more sympathetic than those never having a homeless spell" (Agans et al., 2011, p. 5943). Nonwhites with a high school diploma or less who have lived experience are among the most sympathetic to this issue. Unfortunately, they are also the least likely to be heard on this issue.

However, by giving voice to those with lived experience, perhaps we can begin to bridge these gaps and understand the reality of homelessness. Only through building empathy will people begin to see this issue for what it really is and help to spark a national movement toward ending it.

One of the most troubling yet unsurprising aspects of our book is the realization that many of the contributors experiencing homelessness as adults had done everything right; some even came from middle-class families and had savings, a support network, and retirement plans. Many had good jobs and nice homes and were the picture of what most Americans view as successful. Yet, they lost everything due to a series of circumstances outside their control, eventually finding themselves without a place to live. It could happen to any one of us. In fact, it does. Redefining the narrative of homelessness in this country is necessary to create a more empathetic understanding of this issue.

About the Book

Organization of the Book

A main purpose of this book is to give voice to persons with lived experience, a voice that is so often neglected in discussions of the issue, with the understanding that one of the important ways for the public to shift its thinking about homelessness is to see and hear stories about people who have been through it. A second purpose is to begin to identify those factors that are instrumental in helping people emerge from their homelessness. Therefore, the book is organized around the nine chapters that include a first-person narrative from each of our contributors. These stories include:

- an explanation of what led to the contributor's homelessness,
- an examination of what that experience was like,
- an identification of what helped them get through the experience, and
- an explication of what homelessness has meant to them.

In addition to the stories themselves, some of the contributors included implications relevant to their experience. We have amplified these implications to focus on what the stories mean about homelessness more generally and how better to address the issue.

The Contributors

Contributors to the book are both men and women, they come from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, they have experienced homelessness at different stages in life, and their catalysts for becoming unhoused vary extensively. These differences serve to remind us that the term *homelessness* has nuances and subtleties that we must recognize. There is not one homelessness narrative; there are literally hundreds of thousands, each one with a different twist. This heterogeneity is absolutely critical to understand, so that the differences can be part of any discussion on how to best end this tragedy. The old adage "one size fits all" simply does not apply here. The country needs lots of different sizes, lengths, widths, and depths in order to meet the needs of this heterogeneous population.

Each of the contributors was selected for inclusion for a very specific reason. Barb represents the trauma of childhood homelessness. Tim was a runaway youth who also experienced foster care. Marie was part of a couch-surfing family who spent time bouncing from one long-term motel to another. Tiffany experienced the failure of reasonable and appropriate out-of-home placements as a teenager. Blizzard's situation was the result of a negative foster care experience. Leanne, a veteran, was the victim of a severe economic downturn. Michelle, a black veteran, suffered from both racial bias and an administrative error, a not-uncommon occurrence. A family battle forced James into homelessness, where he received inadequate legal advice. Finally, Caroline's misdiagnosed physical illnesses absorbed her entire life savings and pushed her into homelessness.

Despite these varied immediate causes of homelessness, all of our contributors experienced similar factors that helped them get through homelessness to a greater or lesser degree, namely, important human connections. In some instances, the connections were indi-

viduals who cared, including family members or teachers. In other cases, it was one or another kind of support group that expanded the natural networks of support. In every case, a sense of community was vital. More than anything else, it was these human connections, social capital if you will, that provided the basis for emergence from homelessness. In some cases, social service systems played a role; in others, educational systems were important. However, at the most fundamental level, it was the human connection that was crucial.

As these contributors have emerged from their homelessness, most have moved into important employment situations. They are teaching, advocating for the homeless, working in other types of education-related fields, campaigning for changes in how we deal with homelessness, finishing their own education, and the like. What is of particular interest is that all of them are deeply and passionately interested in the issue of homelessness and are committed to trying to improve how we as a nation combat this scourge.

As contributors, some have chosen to publish their chapter under a pseudonym. We encouraged each of them to make this decision based on their own circumstances, level of comfort in sharing their story, and family dynamics. Some contributors had a powerful desire to publish under their own names, wanting their story told. Several opted to use a pseudonym, and specific identifying details have been removed from the story to protect their identity. We do not differentiate between the two, or indicate which stories are which.

In having initial conversations with both individuals who decided to participate and those who eventually decided not to, the level of shame, trauma, and emotional complexities associated with living without a home became increasingly clear. In fact, several people we spoke with and asked to contribute ultimately refused. This was generally due to complex family dynamics, the fact that they did not want to share this portion of their past for fear of what people might think, or that the trauma of living without a home was so overwhelming that they were not ready to have this in black and white for the world to read, even under a pseudonym.

Themes of This Book

The original intent of this book, and one overarching theme, was to hear from people who have had this experience and who are now permanently housed. The idea was for them to inform how we approach this issue, as they are the most qualified to do so. Additionally, as indicated in the stories, stability is a spectrum. In most of the contributors'

cases, they are now living in a safe, stable home. However, a few of them tiptoe on the edge of remaining housed, as is often the case with those who have experienced homelessness. The contributors represent a wide range on the continuum of stability. In meeting and listening to many of the contributors, they indicated that this is one of their biggest fears, even if they are permanently housed—the knowledge of how quickly that can change. This idea, the fluidity of housing, is another underlying theme of this book. That fear and realization are both evident in speaking with these contributors and are present throughout their stories as they move in and out of being stably housed.

Another theme, and perhaps one of the most powerful ones uncovered as a result of hearing these stories, is the role individuals played in the majority of the contributors ultimately becoming housed. Many of them had that one person, or handful of people, who helped equip them with a path out of homelessness. For some, it was an educator, some a family friend, or even a staff member at one of the agencies working with them. Mostly, it was just one person who believed in them. In trying to articulate this concept, we originally dubbed it "empowerment." We tested that terminology with the contributors, and one of them put it best in describing one of her people. She said, "It's not that she 'empowered' me. She didn't give me power. I already had my own power. She gave me the tools." This anecdote helps further strengthen the importance of hearing directly from individuals with lived experience, as there is always a danger in researchers unknowingly misrepresenting or potentially misinterpreting these experiences, inadvertently relaying misinformation regarding a certain issue, in the process of writing about them. In the final chapter, we explore at length this idea of "equipping" individuals as a potential policy and programmatic concept for ending homelessness.

Sampling

This book is not a representative sample of all homelessness variations, nor should it be considered a carefully controlled scientific study. Rather, it is a convenience sampling comprised of people who have experienced life without a home and met one of the federal definitions of homelessness discussed earlier in this chapter. Their experiences took place in various parts of the United States, though many occurred in our home state of Colorado; they were the result of a variety of circumstances, and they span from childhood to adulthood. We became familiar with each one of the contributors through our work—Don through the Burnes Center and Jamie through her work on homelessness at the local and state levels through the Continuum of Care.

We acknowledge this book does not address every one of the factors or living situations that comprise homelessness. In fact, it would be nearly impossible to do so. There is not a contribution from someone who is struggling with mental illness or a direct substance abuse disorder, though in the case of childhood and youth homelessness, these types of stories are portrayed through the eyes of the children whose parents struggled with these challenges. These are two voices we specifically sought to include, but we found such individuals disinclined to participate, understandably so. For similar reasons, we also did not include an individual who experienced homelessness as a result of escaping domestic violence. Additionally, we were unable to address all living situations, such as deeply exploring life in shelters or other transitional living situations, though some of our contributors reference this experience in their stories. We also recognize a larger discussion is needed on the disproportionate number of the LGBTQ community that experience homelessness, perhaps most disturbingly among America's youth.

While there are underlying themes, it would take volumes to explore all types of homelessness, for all subpopulations, and for all the various reasons one might find oneself unhoused. We acknowledge this limitation of the book and encourage readers to recognize that this is a small, geographically limited, nonrepresentative sample of the total population of people without homes. These stories do not, and cannot, speak for everyone experiencing homelessness. Therefore, it would be dangerous and irresponsible to characterize the entire issue of homelessness as framed within these pages. Narrative storytelling also inherently has certain limitations such as issues with the recollection of the subject, biases, and the danger of the facts being "remembered facts" and not necessarily historical truths (Polkinghorne, 2007). However, this book does provide unique and valuable insights into the experience through first-person explorations, and we do explore at length the factors that have helped our contributors move beyond homelessness. It is intended to provide readers with a more robust understanding of who might find themselves without a home and the reasons for it, as well as to combat the commonly held stereotypes on the issue that fuel misguided policy and practice.

The Stories

The stories in this book are raw. While some of the contributors have had experience and coaching in how to articulate their story and some stories are more refined than others, these are not professional writers, nor did we seek to deeply edit any of the stories. Due to the nature of

the subject, there are instances of strong language and disturbing content, but the personality and message of each contributor has been preserved to ensure the story is truly his or her own. Each contributor has a unique voice, leading to some chapters that may create strong reactions. We feel this individual flavor adds significantly to the authenticity of the book. It can be messy in places, but so is the topic itself.

The chapters are organized generally in chronological order by the age at which the experience occurred, starting with child and family homelessness. It seemed the only natural way to organize the stories while providing some sort of consistent flow and continuity.

The Conclusion

In the concluding chapter, we focus on two topics. First, we summarize briefly the major points that our contributors have raised in their various stories. Then we explore in more detail some of the important implications that have surfaced and what these may mean for creating new and diverse ways to address homelessness. Although there are some encouraging signs regarding how we are currently providing housing and services, the truth of the matter is that we seem to be managing the problem, but we are far from solving it. It is our fervent hope that through these brave voices of lived experience and the lessons that can be drawn from them, we may develop new ideas and strategies that will improve our ability to address this crisis.

Notes

1. See, for example, Baumohl, 1996; Blau, 1992; Desmond, 2016; Gladwell, 2006; Gowan, 2010; Hoch and Slayton, 1990; Jencks, 1994; Kozol, 1987; Kusmer, 2002; Liebow, 1993; Miller, 1991; Rollinson & Pardeck, 2006; Snow and Anderson, 1993; Williams, 2003; Wilson, 1987; Wright, 1989.

2. There are numerous examples of quantitative and epidemiological studies of homelessness. Ellen Bassuk, Martha Burt, Dennis Culhane, Jill Khadduri, Deborah Padgett, Peter Rossi, Mary Beth Shinn, and Paul Toro, among others, have written extensively on homelessness. Also, federal departments and national organizations routinely put out annual statistics about the characteristics of homelessness. For a recent and thorough examination of various aspects of the issue, see various chapters in Burnes & DiLeo, 2016.

3. It is interesting to note that, in scanning recent bibliographies of writing and research on homelessness, many of the citations are from before the turn of the twenty-first century. Despite recent advances in our understanding of homelessness and its many facets, we still rely on a literature that precedes much of the more nuanced and sophisticated enlightenment about the issue and those who are the victims of it.