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# The Major Social Problem of Homelessness in America

Although the problem of homelessness may look of low analytical value among the researchers, this challenge has been considered catastrophic in America. With about 60, 000 veterans, 2.5 million children and 2.5% of the homeless adults respectively, it is indisputable that homelessness is a grand challenge in America (Henwood, 2015). As a result of this challenge, there has been fundamental shift; that is, ending the problem instead of managing it. Over the past decades, the government has failed even in managing this challenge, simply because the interventions of helping this population are tied up to responding to individual needs. At other times, it is because the homeless have been inappropriately defined as criminals, uneducated and those who voluntarily choose to stay on streets making it difficult to find amicable solution. It is because of the above reasons that the profession social work has been found important and compelling. The paper will therefore focus on exploring the historical and current trends of social welfares and political legislatives to find out how they have responded to the above challenge. In this way, the study will be able to justify the need for social welfare system; more especially the social workers in ending the challenge.

## Historical Background

The history of homelessness in America can be traced can be traced as far the as history can tell. Nevertheless, people often make reference of 18th century, the time when this problem became well known. During this period, the issue of homelessness was attributed to industrial revolution. Americans would migrate to urban areas to seek the newly created employment opportunities in the established manufacturing and production industries. Conversely, industrialization contributed to displacement. Other factors that facilitated the displacement include civil wars, natural calamities, racial inequalities and disenfranchised policies. For instance, in the year 1920, massive flooding at Mississippi displaced about 1.3 million people (Gonyea, 2010).

Throughout the American history, unlike the social organizations the policy makers have focused more on homeless “unworthy poor” people neglecting the worthy poor. Worthy poor refers to the people who poor simply because of perversity, willfulness and laziness. On the other hand, unworthy poor refers to people whose poverty occurs out of their control. Although these categories are considered as a biased thing of the past, they were used to define the most needy homeless who should be given priority of aid. For instance, in 20th century the government adopted a practice known as “passing on” (currently known as bus therapy) as an aid for the widows, immigrants and orphans. Later, the practice was criticized for being unfavorable and biased (Toro, 2007). After the trumpet sounded louder, there was intervention

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of Charity Organization Society (COS) who demanded moral treatment of the worthy poor.

Remarkably, the years 1930 to 1950 were characterized by many policies of addressing the issue of homelessness. One of the major policies was to establish the “skid row” in areas of downtown. An example is Los Angeles skid row which accommodated about 17, 7000 homeless adults. The policy makers also introduced the loan programs to help the population settled in these areas to build small houses and single rooms hotels. Nevertheless, the population of homeless in urban areas continued to escalate, more especially from the policy makers’ decision to renovate the cities; which would see many small houses demolished to pave a way for construction of the modern buildings. This was not just a housing policy, simply because the policy makers would force all the homeless to be re-relocated from cities and only few would be temporarily be settled in organizations such as salvations army.

Even with above the above mentioned settlement, urban and housing policies, the social welfare seemed discontented with the fact that, the government assumed the issue of homelessness had significantly diminished. Still, the government did not well define its strategy of affordable housing. Besides, the period between end of 1960s and mid 1970s was characterized by hard economic times also referred to “Great Depression” times. This means because majority of homeless could not afford the cost of housing, they moved to the public places, that is, in other cities and skid rows. By the year 1976, even the built shelter accommodations could not manage settle the homeless population. Bachman, (2010), estimates that, by the year 1977 the number of beds had increased from 275, 000 to 609,000 in the same sheltered accommodations (Leginski, 2007).

In the 1978, a sharp contrast between homelessness and opportunities for all expounded. At this time, the issue of homelessness was redefined as a challenge that calls an immediate attention of social welfares. This was first seen when several social forces called upon the government to respond to homeless veterans; who were largely neglected and to address the challenge of over increasing number of people glowing in sheltered accommodation. It is during the same period that the discipline of social work started to research and document the scope of the problem. More importantly, the social research organizations made considerable efforts to define the nature of the problem. Example of such organizations includes the Robert Johnson Foundation. Far from carrying out homelessness related researches, the foundation also focused on establishing media to raise awareness of the nature of the problem. These include characteristics, causal factors, and consequences of the problem (nature). Equally important, the foundation would advocate the government to “bury” the old myth of unworthy and worthy poor people.

Following the strong “wind” from the social welfare groups, the government amended the Homeless Assistance Act of 1987. The act was to see that emergency shelters and delivery

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housing were established more especially among with disabilities. Still, the act facilitated the establishment of supportive programs such basic skills training for homelessness, creating more job opportunities. These initiatives were later replaced by Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. One of the major step taken by TANF was to cut the housing expenditures from \$ 90 billion to 30\$ billion in the year 2000. Nevertheless, the homelessness problem continued to intensify according to the study carried out by scholars from various disciplines. Examples of such researchers include Spellman (2007) who reveled that, the number of homeless had rose from 6.2 million in the year 1970 to 8.6 million in the year 2000. The Economic Policy Institute attributed such a challenge to decrease in minimum wages. The institute produced a statistical report indicating that, since the year 1979 the wage had decreased with about 26% despite the fact that manufacture industries had maintained the working hours. Still, the social groups and unions were limited in number and did not reflect much power to influence the political system (Wilkins, & Anderson, 2007).

At the end of 1900s, the social institutions were almost convinced that the federal and local governments were unable to provide amicable solution. The social welfares started accusing the policy makers over lack of long-term structural problems. These social began to brand government as failure; simple because it provided temporary and recurring solutions. The government had also failed to develop an affirmative action to assist homeless in other interrelated areas of healthcare, nutrition and education.

## **Current Trend**

As noted from the above study, the social workers little influenced the political system. This is simply because there only existed limited number of social unions with insignificant compelling power to the government. But in the beginning of the 21st century, the government makes a significant shift by established strong link and supporting the social workers to leverage and eradicate homelessness (Henwood, 2015). Example of such ways is contracting social workers either as an individual or an organization to provide Assessment record of Homeless People. Contrary, the homelessness is still a continuing social problem even at present time. For instance, in January 2016 the Economic Policy Institute released one of the most debatable results indicating that, on a given night there are about 549, 928 homeless people in the United States. The study also revealed that, among the above number only 68% are sheltered. Still controversial, the study indicates that, out of the above number, there are 22% children, 69% adults, 10% veterans, 35% chronically ill individuals. But then again, the participation of the social workers has considerably reduced the homelessness nationally. For instance, the number of homeless has declined almost by 15% since the year 2015 (Leginski, 2007) (see figure 1).

**Source: U.S Department of Housing and Urban Development**

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Most important is how the social workers have intervened on ensuring there is affordable housing and adequate income, provision of social services, prohibiting discrimination and advocating reforms in the existing policies that have been underlying structural causes of homelessness. For instance, since the year 2008; the time when federal government began counting of homeless, the social workers in American Bar Association (ABA) have been hitting the street corners to help the government have a clear picture of the homelessness. Similar cases have been witnessed among the voluntary individual social workers. Example of such individuals includes Van Cooten. Equally important, the social workers have moved a milestone step in coercing the government to implement the Right to Adequate Housing. Notably, the social workers do not mean the government to go building for each homeless person. Instead, the social workers are advocating for government to cut the taxes, provide job opportunities and eliminate all forms of discrimination as permanent solutions of the tide of homelessness.

Whether through the public, government and private participation the social workers have been calling for implementation of adequate housing policy for all. That is, the policy should have the capacity to impact on all homeless including the veterans, older families, street children, mental ill, chronically ill, disabled and single individuals. The social workers further recommends the above policy to be aligned along the line of habitability, affordability, access to services, provision of tenure as security and infrastructures. Unlike the last decades, the social workers have sought the sources of their power to influence the law makers. This can be reflected from their strategy of collaborating with lawyers and public health agencies to influence the legislative bodies to enforce the existing laws and housing policies. Nevertheless, at most times the government have been found corporative and supporting more especially when requested to set priorities of the housing polices and funding the initiative programs. In fact, only few cases related to lack of corporation are experienced, more especially when legal technicalities are experienced (Henwood, 2015).

For the case of social services; the area that many people believe is the key role of social workers, many efforts are seen to be undertaken to help the homeless. Most of these services take the trajectory path of addressing the personal problems related to the issue of homelessness. For example, the professional social workers have been struggling to help the victims recover from trauma, depression, family conflicts and post-traumatic conditions. These services have proved very useful more especially when serving the homeless families. In more complex circumstances, professional social workers have volunteered to support healthy parenting. For instance, in the year 2014 the United way collaborated with Seimer Institute of family to identify and mitigate the risks related to homelessness. In what is referred to as multigenerational approach, the social workers in the above social organizations have been working with stakeholders and schools to prevent homelessness and family stability.

Although currently more demands continues being placed on provision of emergency services,

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charity work, risk management programs, provision of healthcare and reforming the housing policies, lack of sufficient funding remains the major challenge of establishing the long-term structured solution. This explains why the challenge of homelessness still remains a major social issue in 21st century. Still, there is a question of worthy poor, a term which can still be considered relevant in 21st century. In relations to this, the social workers have not defined possible ways of helping this category of homeless people; considering that it is their choice to remain in such situations. Nevertheless, the social workers more specifically the professional psychologist believes addressing the psychological needs of an individual can be one way of ending this catastrophe.

## Conclusion

Conclusively, the issue of homelessness has been a major social problem in American history. This is in a way that, despite lacking of shelters the homeless are also presented with other interrelated problems such as poor healthcare, nutrition, insecurities, drug addiction and education. The problem has been intensified by the fact that, the political system and social workers had remained disjointed since 1880s to the beginning of 20th century. The only existing social workers during this period were also limited in number and had insignificant compelling power to the government. As the challenge continued to escalate, the government made significant shift in 21st century; that is, to establish a strong link social workers to leverage and eradicate homelessness. Although a long-lasting solutions has not yet being established, it's remarkable that the social workers have been if the forefront to mitigate the challenge. This has been possible more especially through their interventions on ensuring there is affordable housing and adequate income, provision of social services, prohibiting discrimination and advocating reforms in the existing policies that have been underlying structural causes of homelessness. The government, local community and private sectors should therefore consider support the programs and initiatives put forward by social workers. This will be only roadmap to success on the issue of homelessness.

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