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From the Educator's Eye: Images of Homeless in Rural and Urban Middle-America

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Abstract

Poverty and homelessness are popularly conceptualized as urban phenomena. This tendency is reinforced by media and lack of academic research and persists despite increasing evidence that poverty and homelessness are as prevalent in rural as in urban areas. This paper compares data collected from educators in several rural and urban counties in Iowa. It looks at actual levels of poverty and reported homelessness, and compares the perceptions of the severity and causes of homelessness as reported by rural and urban educators. It concludes that the difficulties faced by poor people in rural areas are compounded by the tendency of small town and rural residents to accept popular conceptions of homelessness and to view poverty and homelessness as resulting from individual failings rather than from societal and community level problems

Homelessness In Rural America

Poverty and homelessness pose serious problems for rural areas and small towns of the United States. Those who have looked carefully at the countryside have found an abundance of

homelessness in rural America. In 1989 the Housing Assistance Council* estimated that up to 20 percent of the nations population living in rural America also lived in poverty. This twenty percent approximates the level of poverty found in American inner cities (Fitchen 1991).

Vissing (1996:9) points out that the existence and seriousness of rural homelessness has been noted by many respected organizations throughout the years (Coalition for the Homeless 1987; National Coalition for the Homeless 1989; Children's Defense Fund Mihaly 1991; and Housing Assistance Council 1990, 1992). Barak (1991:36) reported that "During the 1980s, a growing number of rural folks joined the ranks of the nation's homeless. Although nobody has ever attempted seriously to count the rural homeless, estimates are that the rural areas comprise about 10 to 20 percent of the total homeless populations." In 1997 the U.S. Bureau of the Census reported that the non-metropolitan poverty rate was higher than the rate inside metropolitan areas and higher than the national poverty rate (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1997). Keep in mind that homelessness among Native Americans and migrant workers, two of the nations' most impoverished populations, is a rural phenomenon (National Coalition for the Homeless 1997). Researchers now estimate that as much as a third of all homeless Americans live in small towns, and that children comprise an increasing proportion of that population (Vissing 1996:9).

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Further, as a result of increasing income disparities between rural and urban areas, rural poor are the most disadvantaged Americans (Baranick 1990).

By comparison to urban, rural poverty and homelessness are more likely to have been caused by systemic economic difficulties and less likely to be products of personal failings (Rogers and Weiher 1989). While rising family instability, depression, suicide, teen pregnancy, alcohol and drug abuse have been documented in rural areas (Helge 1992), a higher percentage of rural homelessness is attributable to economic reasons. Over 60 percent of the rural respondents to a 1990 Ohio study cited unemployment, eviction, cessation of government benefits or disaster as the primary reason for their homelessness. Family conflict and dissolution were cited by about 30 percent, while individual problems such as alcohol and drug abuse, were noted by only five percent as a cause of their homelessness (First, Rife and Toomey 1994).

A higher percentage of the rural poor have jobs, but due to low wages in the marketplace, even when working full-time, year-round, the residents of rural ghettos are far more likely than urban workers to remain trapped in poverty, due to low wages (Davidson 1990).

The 1980s farm crisis rippled throughout rural communities causing farm debt and foreclosures, small town business failures and displacement of entire families to larger commercial centers, increased unemployment and underemployment, lower salaries, rising cost of living, program cutbacks, and a shortage of adequate local housing (Fitchen 1992). Welfare access and the range of social services is more limited in rural areas, and thus is less effectively used to stave off homelessness. With the farm crisis, these

problems began to occur on a scale that overwhelmed the traditional local support network of friends and family, resulting in increasing rural homelessness (Blau 1992).

Rural Homeless - Unseen and Unrecognized

Despite such clear evidence that poverty and homelessness occur in rural and small town areas at levels comparable to urban areas, it is likely that very few people in the United States have considered the plight of homeless people in rural areas. In fact, it is doubtful if most Americans, including rural residents, even know that there are homeless people in rural areas. Rather the "image" of homelessness is uniquely urban. This lack of awareness has been created and reinforced by media, minimal academic research, government programs, smaller absolute numbers, and a set of values that emphasize the responsibility of individuals for their own welfare.

Media Images

The lack of awareness of rural poverty is due in part to media treatment of poverty and homelessness. Almost always news clips have centered on the human plight created by the decay of larger cities. Media news coverage has been dominated by homelessness in the large cities, resulting in cliché images of homelessness dominated by men drinking lunch from a paper sack, older women pushing shopping carts down a crowded sidewalk or unfortunate people sleeping in the recesses of doorways. The impression conveyed is that homelessness does not reach the hinterlands of rural America.

The media have not totally ignored serious issues of rural poverty. In the 1960s stories focusing on the Appalachian poor elicited concern from many Americans about the plight of poor

people living in rural communities. But this concern was soon supplanted as urban poverty in *The Other America* (Harrington 1963) became a media focus. Briefly in the 1980s newspapers and television tabloid shows focused on the "farm crisis" which was reducing many families to poverty and homelessness.

Serious news stories have not placed faces on rural poverty. Instead it is more likely that the images that are brought to mind by the mention of rural poverty derive from novels and situation comedies which give personality to locals and lifestyles unfamiliar to the largely urban population of the US. Steinbeck poignantly created awareness of the dust-bowl poor Oklahoman migrating to California; but most assume that as the dust bowl and depression ended, so too did such poverty. For many years, the television media trivialized the severity of rural poverty through popular images of rural poor boys skipping barefoot down a dirt roadway with a fishing pole over one shoulder. Then there was television's Beverly Hillbillies which presented a comedic image of happy but poor hillbillies who preferred the life of rural poverty even while living a life of wealth and glamour.

Lack of Academic Research

The "urban only" myth of homelessness survives in part due to relative paucity of academic research focusing on poverty and homelessness in rural areas. Even researchers who have tried to dispel other myths about homelessness, have left the urban myth unaddressed (Hope and Young 1986; Hoch and Slayton 1989). Some acknowledge the fact that homelessness is "not an exclusively urban phenomenon," but give no further attention to the topic because research has not been done (Wright 1989:39). A 1990 volume (Momeni 1990) on homelessness in fourteen states, all with sizable rural populations, almost totally ignored rural homelessness. Only one report indexed the term "rural" (Kunz

1990:94), noting that there has been no systematic effort to count the homeless in Missouri's rural areas, and adding that knowledge of rural homelessness is based largely on anecdotal evidence. Other reports in that volume at best acknowledged that rural and small town homelessness had risen and at worst asserted that homelessness was an urban problem. Many studies that purport to offer rural data in reality focus on homelessness in small cities in largely rural states. A two volume bibliography of homelessness (Henslin 1993) lists only fourteen articles published from 1903 through 1992 under the section rural Homelessness. Ironically, those represent only a fraction of the articles that have been published on this topic.

In *Broken Heartland : The Rise of Americas Rural Ghetto*, Osha Gray Davidson summarizes the issue (1990:80):

“Unfortunately, we can only guess at the true dimensions of rural homelessness because there has been no comprehensive, nationwide study of the problemAccording to most opinion leaders and policy makers, there simply is no problem of rural homelessness... ..When we do talk about rural homelessness, we usually focus on only the most visible and most easily understood part of the problem: those people who are living on the streets.”

Ironically, the definition of homelessness which has been constructed by academics and others is one of the factors that most confounds understanding of rural homelessness. Most definitions exclude all but the most visible homeless persons who live on the streets or in shelters. Such a narrow conceptualization is inadequate for the study of homelessness in urban areas, and fails more profoundly when used as a guide for examination of the

phenomenon in rural areas. As suggested by the National Coalition for the Homeless (1997:1), "Understanding rural homelessness requires a more flexible definition of homelessness." Homelessness in rural areas is not as visible; there are few shelters, and rather than living on the street, rural homeless persons are likely to live in abandoned buildings or cars or to double up with relative or friends.

Smaller Numbers and Lower Service Use

While rural areas have proportionally as many homeless, the absolute numbers are smaller, and thus are less commanding of community awareness. Rural poor people also use public services less frequently (Burt and Cohen 1989). Thus there are fewer official records, less formal funding and less awareness. The lower use of public services in small towns and rural areas is due to factors such as a greater likelihood that rural poor live in a two parent family (and thus have historically been ineligible for programs such as AFDC) (Davidson 1990:79), scarcity of social services and shelter programs, and greater reliance on relatives, friends and self-help strategies (Patton 1987; First et al. 1994).

Perceptions of Homelessness among Rural Residents

Despite higher poverty rates, rural and small town residents, including social service personnel, tend to deny the presence of homeless persons in their communities (Wright and Wright 1993 1997). Research has demonstrated that people who reside in rural communities often have different perceptions about the world and events that happen both inside and outside of their localities (Davidson 1990; Belden 1986). Political, religious, ethical, and social issues, for example, are usually approached from a more traditional or conservative perspective.

Do rural residents really look at poverty and homelessness in a way that differs from their urban counterparts? This paper examines data collected from a statewide sample of urban and rural educators in an effort to compare rural and urban perceptions of the existence, severity and causes of homelessness.

Methods

This study draws on data collected in a 1992 statewide study of homelessness in Iowa. School and social service agency personnel and shelter providers were mailed questionnaires asking about numbers of homeless and requesting their perceptions about a variety of issues related to homelessness in their community, county and state. Because returns from school officials were more complete and more representative of rural areas, this article reports only responses from school personnel. A total of 1176 (53 percent return rate) usable instruments were returned by school personnel.

Variables

Rural versus Urban Counties: In order to contrast rural with urban counties the density of Iowa's ninety-nine counties was calculated (see Table 1). The ten counties having the highest density per square mile were considered to be urban. Responses were received from 275 schools in the urban counties. The ten counties having the lowest density per square mile were categorized as rural. No rural county had a town larger than 3000 and eight of the ten rural counties had no town size 2500 or more. Responses were received from 45 rural schools.

Perceptions of Homeless: Respondents were asked to provide their perceptions of a number of issues related to homelessness. Specifically, they were asked for their perceptions of the severity of homelessness in their community and in comparison to other specified areas. They also were asked about their perceptions of the predominant causes of homelessness.

Hypotheses

We hypothesized that rural respondents would be more likely than urban respondents to perceive homelessness as less severe in their own community than in the city, less severe than in the past, less severe than in near-by communities, and less severe than in other parts the state or nation. We also hypothesized that they would be more likely than urban counterparts to perceive the causes of homelessness to be grounded in individual characteristics rather than structural or societal factors.

Results

Poverty Levels in Rural and Urban Counties

Rural poverty is a reality among the counties included in this study. Table 1 provides information about the characteristics of these urban and rural counties. Consistent with findings nationally, the rural counties of Iowa were more likely to exhibit high levels of poverty. The rural counties in this study account for seven of the 10 highest poverty level counties in the state. By comparison, the six counties with the lowest percentage below poverty were urban. Nine of the ten highest median income counties were urban.

Table 1. Characteristics of the 10 Rural and 10 Urban Counties in 1990

| Poverty Rank in State* | % Below Poverty | Median Income | 1990 Population | Population Density | Rural/Urban |
|------------------------|-----------------|---------------|-----------------|--------------------|-------------|
| 1 | 21.0% | \$18,105 | 8338 | 15.59 | Rural |
| 3 | 19.1 | 17,519 | 7,067 | 13.41 | Rural |
| 4 | 18.3 | 18,641 | 7,114 | 13.25 | Rural |
| 5 | 17.8 | 20,054 | 8,312 | 16.46 | Rural |
| 6 | 17.2 | 20,761 | 5,420 | 10.11 | Rural |
| 7 | 17.1 | 27,862 | 96,119 | 154.28 | Urban |
| 8.5 | 16.8 | 19,244 | 7,676 | 11.42 | Rural |
| 8.5 | 16.8 | 20,570 | 4,866 | 15.70 | Rural |
| 11 | 16.5 | 26,668 | 74,252 | 129.36 | Urban |
| 15 | 15.3 | 25,683 | 123,798 | 216.50 | Urban |
| 18 | 14.8 | 27,147 | 10,034 | 14.35 | Rural |
| 27.5 | 13.4 | 25,186 | 98,276 | 112.06 | Urban |
| 27.5 | 13.4 | 21,426 | 8,409 | 14.75 | Rural |
| 39 | 12.2 | 22,948 | 8,226 | 15.91 | Rural |
| 41 | 12.1 | 29,979 | 150,979 | 321.92 | Urban |
| 53 | 11.3 | 26,536 | 42,614 | 99.33 | Urban |
| 68 | 10.3 | 28,276 | 86,403 | 140.26 | Urban |
| 72 | 10.1 | 29,786 | 39,907 | 88.88 | Urban |
| 82 | 9.2 | 31,221 | 327,140 | 552.60 | Urban |
| 92 | 8.6 | 32,137 | 168,767 | 233.10 | Urban |

* Rank 1 indicates highest poverty rate.

Severity of Homelessness: Rural Versus Urban Perceptions

When rural and urban respondents were compared, several patterns emerged. Table 2 displays responses to the request that they evaluate the severity of homelessness in "their area" as severe,

moderate, mild or non-existent. The percentages of urban and rural respondents perceiving the problem as severe or moderate were approximately the same. The modal response among urban educators acknowledged the existence of homelessness by rating it as mild. By comparison, the majority (55.8%) of rural respondents perceived homelessness as "non-existent" in their area.

Table 2. Rural and Urban Educators' Perceptions of the Severity of Homelessness in Their Area-Percentages

| | Urban (n=275) | Rural (n=45) |
|---|------------------|-----------------|
| <i>Severity of Homelessness in area</i> | | |
| Severe | 2.0% | 0.0% |
| Moderate | 12.6 | 14.0 |
| Mild | 49.2 | 30.2 |
| Non-existent | 36.2 | 55.8 |

Respondents also were asked to compare the current severity of homelessness in their school attendance area with a year previous, with other near-by school areas, other parts of the state and other parts of the country (Table 3). Both rural and urban educators tended to take the middle of the road approach,

holding that little change had occurred. Urban educators were more likely than their rural counterparts to see the severity of homelessness as worse than a year ago (19% compared to 7%).

Table 3. Comparative Perceptions of the Severity of Homelessness Rural and Urban Educators - Percentages

| | Urban (n=275) | | | Rural (n=45) | | |
|--|------------------|------|--------|-----------------|------|--------|
| | worse | same | better | worse | same | better |
| Severity of Homelessness, compared with | | | | | | |
| a year ago | 19% | 75% | 6% | 7% | 86% | 7% |
| near-by school districts | 23 | 47 | 30 | 5 | 70 | 25 |
| other parts of the state | 16 | 34 | 50 | 15 | 28 | 58 |
| other parts of the country | 13 | 15 | 72 | 18 | 15 | 68 |

When asked to compare to other areas, the closer the comparison area, the more likely urban educators were, and the less likely rural educators were, to believe that their situation was worse. While 23 percent of urban respondents evaluated homelessness in their district as worse than in near-by districts, only 16% and 13% saw their area as worse than other parts of the state and other parts of the country respectively. By comparison, only 5% of the rural respondents perceived their district as worse than near-by districts,

but 15% and 18% perceived their problem as worse than other parts of the state and other parts of the country.

By comparison the perceptions that their district was better was very similar for rural and urban respondents. For both groups, the further the area of comparison, the more likely they were to perceive that their area was better. The percentage of urban and rural educators evaluating their district as "better" moved from 30% and 25% respectively when comparing to near-by districts, to 72% and 68% when comparing their district to other parts of the country.

While the questions asked do not permit definitive conclusions on this point, it is likely that in the largely rural state, both urban and rural educators were likely to be thinking of rural and small town school districts when comparing themselves to near-by districts. Urban educators, consistent with dominant images, were more likely to perceive homelessness as more severe in their district. Rural educators seldom saw their own situation as more severe than in near-by districts. Interestingly, rural educators were slightly more likely than their urban counterparts to perceive that homelessness in their area was more serious than in other parts of the country.

Causes of Homelessness: Rural Versus Urban Perception

Respondents also were asked about their perceptions of the "causes" of homelessness. They were provided a list of factors identified as causes of homelessness in open-ended response to a previous surveys and were asked (1) to indicate which they believed to be relevant causes in their area, and (2) for each cause identified, to indicate responsibility for the causes. The options provided were the (1) child, (2) parents and family, the (3) community, and (4) society. Table 4 compares assignment of

responsibility by urban and rural respondents.

The order of causes listed in Table 4 reflects the frequency with which each was selected as a cause by all respondents. Thus, family relations and communications was most often perceived as a cause, followed by lack of educational and job skills. Lack of affordable housing was selected least often.

Table 4. Causes of Homelessness: Rural versus Urban Educator's Perceptions - Percentages

| | Urban (n=275) | | Rural (n=45) | |
|---|-----------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|
| | Community/ Society | Child/ Parents | Community/ Society | Child/ Parents |
| (1) Family relations/communication | 5.0% | 95.0% | 0.0% | 100.0% |
| (2) Lack of educational/job skills | 7.9 | 92.1 | 4.0 | 96.0 |
| (3) Alcohol/drug dependency | 6.8 | 93.2 | 4.5 | 95.5 |
| (4) Lack of effort to deal with problem | 17.8 | 82.2 | 8.7 | 91.3 |
| (5) Low wages/income | 21.6 | 78.4 | 12.5 | 87.5 |
| (6) Illegal activities | 13.3 | 86.7 | 16.7 | 83.3 |
| (7) Welfare dependence | 22.0 | 78.0 | 23.8 | 76.2 |
| (8) Unemployment | 42.3 | 57.7 | 25.0 | 75.0 |
| (9) Lack of resources | 34.6 | 65.4 | 27.8 | 72.2 |
| (10) Economy | 54.6 | 45.4 | 33.3 | 66.7 |
| (11) Lack of supportive services | 52.0 | 48.0 | 38.9 | 61.1 |
| (12) Welfare structure | 50.4 | 49.6 | 42.1 | 57.9 |
| (13) Eviction | 33.6 | 66.4 | 46.2 | 53.8 |
| (14) Insufficient public assistance | 58.8 | 41.2 | 46.7 | 53.3 |
| (15) Deinstitutionalization | 63.6 | 36.4 | 50.0 | 50.0 |
| (16) Lack of affordable housing | 61.7 | 38.3 | 65.0 | 35.0 |

When asked to attribute responsibility for the causes of homelessness, educators overwhelmingly identified children and parents. The nine causes selected most often as causes were perceived by the majority of both urban and rural respondents to be the responsibility of the children and their parents. In other words, blame was attributed to the individual.

Urban educators were likely to perceive responsibility for six of the remaining seven causes as resting with the community or society rather than with the individual (the exception was "eviction" which they blamed on children and parents). However, the majority of rural educators assigned responsibility for all but one of the perceived causes (lack of affordable housing) to the individual. Even responsibility for the welfare structure, the economy, and lack of public assistance were attributed to children and families. Rural respondents were evenly divided on whether deinstitutionalization was the responsibility of children, parents and family or community and society.

Summary and Discussion

Do rural residents really look at poverty and homelessness in a way that differs from their urban counterparts? Or do they in fact accept the popular images of homelessness, and thus reject the evidences of homelessness in their own community? When queries are made about the incidence or magnitude of homelessness, rural respondents provide answers echoing the image that there are no homeless here. This denial persists despite accumulating evidence that rural poverty is more widespread and more disabling than its urban counterpart.

Severity of Homelessness: Perceptions and Reality

Comparison of the ten most rural and ten most urban counties of Iowa supported national research and most of our hypotheses. The rural counties were more likely to be ranked among the high poverty level counties of Iowa. They also had lower median incomes than did the urban counties.

Despite the generally less favorable economic conditions in their counties, rural respondents are more likely to perceive homelessness to be non-existent in their area. They also were less likely than their urban colleagues to perceive that homelessness was worse than the previous year or that it was worse than in nearby school districts. They were more likely to believe that their area was better off than other parts of the state. Rural educators, however, were more likely to believe that homelessness in their area was worse than in other parts of the country. The fact that these data were collected at the height of the "farm crisis" may have encouraged a sense that the state was worse off economically than were other parts of the country.

The findings of this study support the suggestion that there is a general lack of awareness of homelessness among both rural and urban educators in Iowa. It is clear that the perceptions that homelessness is non-existent is not consistent with available data.

A major purpose of the study from which these data are drawn solicited information from social service providers, educators and shelter personnel about numbers of homeless persons in Iowa's counties. Table 5 provides a summary of some of these data for the counties in the current report.

Table 5. Numbers Reported in Various Homeless Categories for Rural and Urban Counties

| Homeless Category | Rural Number | Urban Number |
|---|--------------|--------------|
| On the Street | 0 | 737 |
| Total Literally Homeless (on-the-street quasi-homeless or in a shelter) | 21 | 4474 |
| Transitional Housing or Doubled-up | 247 | 3877 |
| Near-Homeless | 3286 | 5147 |
| Total Homeless or Near-Homeless | 3554 | 13498 |

Popular conceptions of homelessness tend to include what we might call the literally homeless. This category includes people who live on-the-street, in makeshift shelters such as abandoned cars and building, or who are staying in homeless shelters. Respondents from the 10 most rural counties reported only 21 (.028% of the population) persons, while urban respondents reported 4,495 (.372% of the population), in these traditional homeless categories. Rural counties reported no one living on the street while respondents from the most urban counties reported a total of 737 people living on the streets.

When the definition of homelessness was broadened to include persons who were living in transitional housing or who were doubled-up (living with friends or relatives other than by choice) the numbers were considerably higher. With these categories included, rural counties reported 268 persons (.355% of the population) and urban counties reported 8,351 persons (.691% of the population). In addition, rural respondents reported 3,286

people would be homeless without entitlements provided and thus could be classified as near-homeless. Urban counties reported 5,147 near-homeless persons. These findings reinforce the notion that rural homelessness "looks different" than the popular images of the phenomenon. As suggested by the National Coalition for the Homeless (1997), we must develop a more flexible definition of homelessness if we are to gain any understanding of the phenomena in small towns and rural areas.

Cause and Responsibility for Homelessness

When asked about the causes of homelessness, rural residents attributed responsibility for almost all identified factors as resting with children and their families rather than with the community or society. By comparison, a majority of urban educators placed responsibility for the economy, lack of supportive services, the welfare structure, insufficiency of public assistance, deinstitutionalization and lack of affordable housing on community and societal agencies. The only factor identified by rural educators as resting within the sphere or responsibility of community and society was the lack of affordable housing.

The tendency of rural respondents to attribute responsibility, and by association blame, to individuals rather than perceiving them to be the result of broader societal or community based issues, is consistent with previous research that finds rural residents to be more conservative and more traditional. It is however inconsistent with research that finds that in fact rural poverty and homeless are more likely than the urban counterpart to have been caused by systemic economic difficulties and less likely to be products of personal failings.

Such attribution of responsibility to the individual rather than society is likely to lead to solutions that focus on behavior

modification and ignore the need to address systemic issues that limit economic opportunity. A lack of recognition of the severity of homelessness, combined with devaluing of any type of public assistance, suggests that rural communities may be less likely take advantage of resources that are available to address the underlying problems of poverty and homelessness.

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