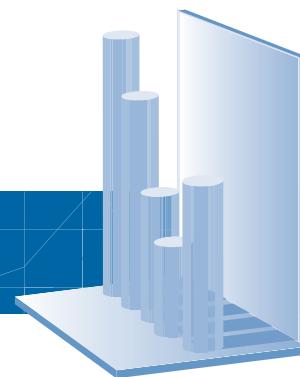




RESEARCH IN FOCUS

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AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT



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Homelessness: An American Tragedy

The homeless. We see them every day in almost every major U.S. city—men and women panhandling on street corners, living in squalor under bridges, or sleeping in parks, abandoned buildings, subway tunnels, or other public and private places. These individuals, referred to as *unsheltered homeless*, are, for many of us, the face of the American tragedy known as homelessness; however, they represent only one segment of this population.

Homelessness—the condition of people who lack fixed housing, usually because they cannot afford regular, safe, and adequate shelter—also includes people whose primary nighttime residence is a homeless shelter, the home of friends and relatives, or an institution that provides a temporary residence. These individuals are considered *sheltered homeless*. They are people like the single mother who unexpectedly loses her job and is unable to find another one in a tight employment market. After depleting her savings and other resources, she is unable to pay the rent and is evicted, so she moves her family into an emergency shelter. It's the young man battling mental illness, which makes it difficult for him to maintain steady employment, so he is regularly homeless and reduced to spending the night with family and friends and moving from shelter to shelter. And on any given day in the United States, an estimated 754,000 people are homeless, including about 200,000 children in homeless families and 344,744 unsheltered individuals.

Main Causes of Homelessness

Homelessness rose to the forefront of America's consciousness in the 1980s. Before then, it was the dark family secret that everyone knew about but never acknowledged. Once it gained prominence in our everyday lives, public outcry was loud, passions ignited, and people questioned how and why it could exist in modern society. Though recent studies reveal a comprehensive list of contributing factors—mental illness, substance abuse, low-paying jobs, unemployment, domestic violence, difficulty re-entering society after a prison sentence, moving from military to civilian status, and poverty—the lack of economic resources to deal with a variety of problems

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Navigating Urban Spatial Restrictions In Search of Private Space

Tucson, Arizona's comprehensive downtown revitalization effort seeks to attract more residents and tourists by adding new attractions, restaurants, offices, retail, and housing space. At the same time, efforts have increased to eliminate the presence of homeless individuals through increased restrictions on activities most often associated with homelessness, such as panhandling, camping on city land, and sleeping in public parks. In *Factors Influencing Homeless People's Perception and Use of Urban Space*, Doctoral Dissertation Research Grant (DDRG) recipient and University of Arizona graduate Martha Trenna Valado, Ph.D., confirms that these regulations do little to alleviate the city's homeless problem. Rather, it forces Tucson's homeless to adapt their daily routines to avoid prosecution and further frustrates their efforts to exit homelessness.

An Awakening

"When I moved to Tucson, I started noticing certain restrictions that were being passed, such as bans on sleeping in parks and sitting on sidewalks. It made me wonder, what are these people supposed to do?" remembers Dr. Valado, who received her doctorate in anthropology in spring 2006.

This interest in the homeless issue grew into her dissertation, for which Dr. Valado interviewed 60 homeless individuals living in Tucson about how they use public and private spaces. During the course of her 2-year fieldwork, Dr. Valado observed homeless people's daily activities and migration patterns to more fully comprehend the landscape that they navigate.

Life on the Streets

"As I conducted my research, the thing that surprised me most was the quantity and diversity of homeless activities that are restricted," remarks Dr. Valado. "City-owned lots are fenced off to prevent camping, public bathrooms are locked, special bus benches are installed to prevent

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Why are African Americans Overrepresented in the Homeless Population?



Dr. George R. Carter III

In 1980, the demographics of the homeless population began to shift. Previously comprised mostly of middle-aged, White males, the homeless population began to experience a significant increase in the number of African Americans. Today, the two populations contribute

nearly an equal number of members to the homeless population. What makes this statistic particularly interesting is the fact that African Americans appear to be overrepresented in the homeless population.

Consider this: African Americans (non-Hispanic) comprise 13 percent of the U.S. population, yet account for approximately 40 percent of the homeless population. In comparison, Whites (non-Hispanic) comprise approximately 79 percent of the U.S. population, and represent 41 percent of homeless individuals (1996 National Survey of Homeless Assistance Providers and Clients).

Why are African Americans overrepresented in the homeless population? This was the question Dr. George R. Carter III sought to answer in his doctoral dissertation.

Searching for an Answer

Conducting research that was supported by a 2004 U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Doctoral Dissertation Research Grant (DDRG), Dr. Carter spent 2 years examining the reasons for the overrepresentation of African Americans in the U.S. homeless population. What Dr. Carter discovered warrants a closer look at policy and the way information is gathered on the homeless population.

Through his research, Dr. Carter aimed to answer three questions:

- * Does residential segregation and access to fewer housing options push African Americans out of the housing market at higher rates than White Americans?
- * Does greater proximity to homeless services draw African Americans into the service-using homeless population at higher rates than White Americans?
- * Why are homeless shelters and services more likely to be placed in minority communities and how does racial framing at the community level influence placement decisions?

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and attain affordable housing are the main reasons people become homeless.

Homeless Demographics

While studies show that homelessness crosses all racial barriers, research has also revealed a disturbing disparity: minorities are disproportionately affected by homelessness. Approximately 63 percent of the homeless in inner cities are minorities—and mostly African Americans, who compose only 12.3 percent of the U.S. population but account for 45 percent of the national sheltered homeless population.

These sober and staggering statistics move beyond racial and ethnic minorities. A striking number of military veterans and disabled adults are also homeless. Veterans, who comprise only 12.6 percent of the U.S. population, account for 18.7 percent of the homeless population. And the disabled, who make up 19.3 percent of the U.S. population, comprise more than 25 percent of the homeless population.

Focus on Homelessness

The topic of homelessness has seen growing interest from doctoral students of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) Doctoral Dissertation

Research Grant (DDRG) program. Within recent years, at least 10 dissertations have been completed on this topic. This issue of *Research In Focus* highlights the work of two such students. In her dissertation *Factors Influencing Homeless People's Perception and Use of Urban Space*, DDRG grantee and University of Arizona graduate Martha Valado, Ph.D., explores the tactics that cities worldwide use to control homeless people's use of urban space. She suggests that these measures never fully accomplish their goal because homeless people develop ways to adapt to hostile landscapes. Valado interviewed 60 homeless people in Tucson, Arizona, for her research.

In his dissertation *From Exclusion to Destitution: Race, Affordable Housing, and Homelessness*, DDRG grantee and University of Michigan graduate George Carter, Ph.D., explains why African Americans are overrepresented in the homeless population. Carter tests previous theories that residential segregation, combined with a declining supply of affordable housing, serves to push low-income African Americans into homelessness and that greater access to homeless shelters pulls members of this population into homelessness at greater rates than Whites. The dissertation explores local cultural forces that influence where affordable housing and homeless services are placed.

To answer these questions, Dr. Carter conducted an extensive review of existing research; analyzed Ann Arbor, Michigan, newspapers published between 1967 and 2003; and spent countless hours reviewing and analyzing U.S. Census Bureau data. Dr. Carter's complete research findings are presented in his dissertation, *From Exclusion to Destitution: Race, Affordable Housing, and Homelessness*.



Dr. Carter

Findings Focus on Accessibility and Affordability

According to Dr. Carter, the overrepresentation of African Americans in the homeless population may be related to greater housing affordability problems (the push factor) and greater access to homeless services and facilities (the pull factor).

Dr. Carter discovered that by reducing the market in which African Americans make housing choices, higher rates of residential segregation push African Americans into homelessness at greater rates than Whites. High levels of residential segregation increase housing inadequacy and crowding in households with an African-American resident.

In addition, housing affordability, rather than housing quality, may be a stronger precipitating factor for African-American homelessness. Higher percentages of African-American homeless clients cited inability to pay rent as the primary reason for their homelessness. African-American homeless clients were more likely to live with others before they became homeless.

"Most homeless African Americans report that they contributed to their previous rent or mortgage, and almost two-thirds paid it all by themselves. These factors may have placed them more at risk to changes in their own employment situation," noted Dr. Carter. "To the extent that poor African Americans have greater housing affordability problems than poor White Americans, we can expect them to enter homelessness at greater rates than Whites."

Dr. Carter also found that greater access to homeless shelters pulls African Americans out of substandard

housing into homelessness at higher rates than Whites. According to Dr. Carter, previous research found that shelters are more likely to be placed in communities with high percentages of African Americans and other minorities. Also, not only do homeless African Americans have greater access to shelter space, they are less likely than Whites to migrate to use homeless services.

To examine the cultural factors that influence the location of affordable housing and homeless shelters, Dr. Carter analyzed local newspapers in Ann Arbor between 1967 and 2003. His review concluded that community opposition to affordable housing and homeless shelters was typically not framed in racial terms but more likely framed in terms of zoning. Dr. Carter cites that more research is required to establish a link between cultural framing and the placement of affordable housing and homeless shelters.

Dr. Carter's final conclusion was that the service-based approach to measuring the homeless may be partly responsible for the overrepresentation of African Americans in the homeless population. If White homeless persons have a difficult time finding homeless services, they will be less likely to use them, and these individuals will not appear in client data collected by service providers. By contrast, African-American homeless persons have greater access to homeless services and are more likely to use them and be counted as "homeless."

A Need to Revise Policy

In addition to focusing greater attention to affordable housing construction and rehabilitation in inner cities, Dr. Carter suggests a more equitable spatial distribution of homeless services across different racial communities. According to Dr. Carter, increasing the equitable distribution of homeless services would not only be a way to provide needed services to White homeless individuals and families who are not receiving them, but also to examine the extent to which the current location of homeless services may have biased estimates of the racial distribution of the homeless population.

"What is clear is that there is a relationship between high rates of residential segregation and African Americans living in substandard or overcrowded housing," asserted Dr. Carter. "I found that lower levels of segregation, higher availability of affordable housing, and higher homeownership rates were associated with higher quality housing for African Americans. Since increasing the quality of housing for all Americans should be the aim of national policy, stronger pro-integration and antidiscrimination policy must be adopted. To the extent that increasing the supply of affordable housing and homeownership also increases the living conditions of African Americans, policies supporting these aims should also be promoted."

sleeping, and signs denote when and how public property can be used. All of this makes it hard for homeless people to have a place to be.”

Dr. Valado’s research confirms and builds on what other scholars have found. Restrictions and deterrents serve only to move the homeless around and do not address the core issues that result in and contribute to homelessness. But more central to her findings is that homeless people, while cognizant of locations of private and public property and the limits placed on their activities, are forced to adapt their actions to meet basic needs.

“Homeless people constantly strategize to find or make private, safe, functional, comfortable, and supportive places for themselves in a landscape designed to exclude them,” reports Dr. Valado. Her interviews revealed four ways that homeless people adapt to restrictions on space in Tucson:

1. **Privatizing Public Space**—Homeless people seek to carve out private spaces of their own, favoring publicly owned land. For example, camps in tunnels or dry washes on city land.
2. **Self-Regulating for Safety**—In addition to navigating the legal restrictions on their use of space, the homeless must develop tactics to guard their personal safety. Adaptations include avoiding certain locations, grouping for mutual protection, and developing accepted codes of behavior.
3. **Seeking Functional and Comfortable Spaces** – Homeless individuals seek functional places that are close to stores and services frequented. They also seek spaces that provide physical, mental, and social comfort, such as parks and libraries.
4. **Building a Support System**—In addition to and sometimes in place of existing social service networks, Tucson’s longtime homeless population has developed a street network to meet basic needs by exchanging information and resources with other homeless people.

Giving the Homeless a Voice

Dr. Valado’s research has given the homeless a voice in Tucson’s homeless debates. “My research allowed me to make so many connections with others,” she says. Her regular attendance at the Tucson Planning Council for the Homeless while preparing for her dissertation resulted in her serving on a committee responsible for developing a 10-year plan to end homelessness. She still serves on the council, where she draws on her experiences talking with the homeless.

Her research has been well received by social service workers, law enforcement officials, and others serving Tucson’s homeless. And Dr. Valado believes that her DDRG grant helped contribute to this success. She used her grant to pay

interviewees, allowing her to glean richer and more in-depth information about homeless life. “Homeless people are often asked questions by reporters and others, but paying them validated the importance of what respondents said,” notes Dr. Valado. The grant also helped her hire 20 homeless respondents to document their daily life through journals and pictures. “The research assistants provided more inside information and a different means to confirm what I gathered in interviews. And service workers have commented that the first-hand accounts help them better approach and offer assistance to the homeless,” she says.



Martha Trenna Valado

Seeking Public Solutions

“My homelessness research was really about evaluating public policy, which led to my current job in program evaluation,” says Dr. Valado. “You can always find a way to criticize policy, but my research challenged me to make useful policy recommendations.” Her program evaluations have included reviewing abstinence education and drug treatment programs for state agencies and private charities.

Offering tangible policy solutions to the homeless problem is difficult. “Spatial restrictions make getting out of homelessness a lot harder,” observes Dr. Valado. “Because the homeless are constantly shifting from place to place, they don’t have a lot of time to access services. And being cited numerous times for sleeping illegally can result in felony charges, which makes getting a home or job much harder.” She concludes, though, that cities and social services can help reduce homelessness in several ways: by providing legal camping and daytime hangout locations; by offering all needed services at one location; and by investing more in a “housing first” approach, which places homeless people into housing before addressing their other problems.

For more information, contact Martha Trenna Valado at mtvalado@gmail.com

Research in Focus: Dissertations Focused on Homelessness

Bridges and Barriers to Housing for Chronically Homeless Street Dwellers: The Effects of Health and Substance Abuse Services on Housing Outcomes

Tatjana Meschede
University of Massachusetts Boston

Chronically homeless street dwellers have a variety of special needs that require attention in order to enable them to move into any type of housing, most likely supportive housing. The Boston Health Care for the Homeless Program identified a group of about 150 street dwellers in Boston at risk of death (based on criteria identified in prior research) and began an innovative model of providing primary care on the streets to this group. The effects of these homeless services combined with mainstream substance abuse services on housing outcomes are the focus of this dissertation. It also addresses the process by which chronically unsheltered homeless individuals connect with services and housing options.

No Place Like Home: Rehousing Homeless Families in an Age of Declining “Family Values”

Cynthia Jean Bogard
State University of New York at Stony Brook

This doctoral dissertation explores family homelessness and shelter policy in Westchester County, New York. It uses data from a 3-wave panel study of parents who became homeless in 1992, as well as data on the operation of 10 family shelters in Westchester County. County, state, and federal policy aimed at rehabilitating homeless families is also analyzed, and evidence from retrospective life course histories examines past lifestyles and living arrangements of parents who became homeless. The author argues that high-visibility, service-intensive shelters act as economic and ideological cover, enabling policymakers to offer a substantial proportion of homeless families long-term housing subsidies at the end of their stay in the homeless shelter.

Pathways Off the Streets: Homeless People and Their Use of Resources

Bradley R. Entner Wright
University of Wisconsin-Madison

This dissertation examines the processes by which homeless people leave the streets for conventional housing. The conceptual framework for this examination of homeless exiting is based on four propositions derived from rational choice theory: that homeless people are rational actors, that they vary in their possession of resources, that resources predict rates of exiting, and that homeless people vary in their ability and motivation to use their resources for housing.

The Changing Territories of Poverty and Opportunity: An Ethnographic Study of the San Francisco Housing Authority and HOPE VI

Jane Rongerude
University of California, Berkeley

In this dissertation, DDRG grantee Rongerude researches how local housing authorities use HOPE VI as a tool to reconstruct the territories of poverty and opportunity in a given community, focusing on multiscale schemes of poverty management as they are understood and implemented at the local level. She explores how the San Francisco Housing Authority—which has implemented four HOPE VI projects over the last 10 years and is currently in the middle of its fifth HOPE VI project—uses such a program to reconstruct the territories of poverty and opportunity within a specific urban area and how that work is affected by the functional arrangements of the institution itself. Rongerude learned about the relationship between the institutional arrangements of a local public housing authority implementing HOPE VI (this includes internal mission, procedures, and institutional relationships within and across scales regulatory processes) and the agency’s ability to transform the built environment of specific communities from isolated spaces of concentrated poverty to mixed-income, mixed-race communities with increased access to goods and services.

Collaborative Success and Community Culture: Cross-Sectoral Partnerships Addressing Homelessness in Omaha and Portland

Patrick McNamara
University of Nebraska at Omaha

This dissertation explores the impact of community culture on the success of cross-sectoral collaboratives addressing homelessness in Omaha, Nebraska, and Portland, Oregon. McNamara uses a comparative case study methodology to assess how the environment helps to make conditions conducive to collaboration among government, business, and nonprofits. Environmental conditions, examined by using the conceptual framework of community culture, differ in Omaha and Portland. Two collaboratives are compared in this dissertation: the Omaha Area Continuum of Care for the Homeless and Central City Concern, a Portland-based homeless service partnership. The concept of community culture is made operational by including three interrelated factors—social capital, community power, and political history—to assess the two cities. An evaluation of how community culture affects the success of the two collaboratives in achieving their goals is performed, and findings are drawn from a cross-case analysis.

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The Social Establishment of Homelessness: Social Policy and Individual Experience in the Development of a Social Problem

J. Jeff McConnell

State University of New York at Stony Brook

McConnell's research includes two case studies of divergent homeless populations, in the urban and suburban areas surrounding the New York metropolitan area. One is of the street-dwelling homeless, mainly single adult men, in Long Island communities. The other is of homeless families with children in the emergency housing system of Westchester County, north of New York City. Based on case studies of these two homeless groups, McConnell examines homelessness on three levels: survival strategies developed by the homeless to endure; the communities that are formed out of these strategies; and the ways in which social policy shapes these strategies and communities and determines the opportunities for and barriers to escaping homelessness.

Shelters, Soup Kitchens, and Supportive Housing: An Open Systems Analysis of the Field of Homeless Assistance Organizations

Nicole Esparza

Princeton University

This dissertation analyzes nonprofit organizations that assisted the homeless in 26 U.S. metropolitan areas from 1989 to 2002, exploring how social and political context affect the interorganizational dynamics and distribution of homeless services. To achieve this, Esparza employs a multimethod approach consisting of 60 interviews with executive directors, observations of city-wide task forces, and multiple sources of original time-series data on financial, operational, spatial, and network aspects of 4,765 organizations. This data provides analytical leverage to examine previously overlooked processes, and the multilevel context of the sample offers methodological improvements over previous studies.

HUD's Office of University Partnerships (OUP) provides grants to institutions of higher education to assist them and their partners with the implementation of a broad range of community development activities, including neighborhood revitalization, housing and economic development. It also provides grants to doctoral candidates to develop and conduct applied research on policy-relevant housing and urban development issues. This newsletter, *Research in Focus*, highlights the accomplishments of grantees in OUP's Doctoral Dissertation Research Grant and Early Doctoral Student Research Grant programs. It includes a variety of articles on past and current grantee dissertations and research.