

Soc. 697B  
Spring, 2000  
Wed. 4:30-7:00

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Hours:MTW10-11;W1:3-2:30&appt

## **THE SOCIOLOGY OF HOMELESSNESS**

During the last two decades, the reemergence of homelessness as a social problem drew the attention of many social researchers. Social scientists described the experience of being homeless and the extent of homelessness; they investigated the causes and consequences of homelessness, and they recommended ameliorative social policies. They have examined homelessness from many different angles, so that their scholarship touches such related sociological topics as the origins of mental illness, the treatment of substance abuse, the impact of the environment, the determinants of service satisfaction, and the difficulties of self-report measures.

The primary goal of this course is to learn about homelessness from a sociological perspective. Our primary means to achieve this goal will be to read and discuss exemplary research on homelessness, to dialogue with some guest speakers--both social scientists and practitioners--about this research, and to study some problems in depth for a research paper. I will also present findings from research on homelessness in which I have participated during the last 15 years. The course focus is largely on homeless single adults, but we will study some issues concerning homeless families and children and youth.

Specific course objectives are:

- 1) To enrich understanding of the phenomenon of homelessness, in part by connecting it to sociological theory;
- 2) To learn the major research findings and controversies concerning homelessness;
- 3) To evaluate the utility of different perspectives, programs, and policies about homelessness;
- 4) To improve understanding of research methods.

### **TEXTS**

Jencks, Christopher. 1994. The Homeless. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Rossi, Peter H. 1989. Down and Out in America: The Origins of Homelessness. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Schutt, Russell K. and Gerald R. Garrett. 1992. Responding to the Homeless: Policy and Practice. New York: Plenum Press.

Snow, David A. and Leon Anderson. 1993. Down on Their Luck: A Study of Homeless Street People. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Research on Homelessness. University of Massachusetts Boston coursepack.

NB: All books are on reserve in the Healey Library.

Each of the four required books presents a different sociological perspective on homelessness and illustrates different research methods. Some of our best insights into the complexities of homelessness and the possibilities for investigating it will emerge from our comparison of these texts. Jencks uses a secondary analysis of data sources and published research to evaluate the relative importance of different possible causes of homelessness. His conclusions diverge sharply on some key points from those of the other authors. Peter Rossi, a leading evaluation researcher, reports the results of a classic survey of homeless persons in Chicago. He uses this survey and other studies of persons who were poor but housed to identify the primary characteristics that put individuals at risk of homelessness. Snow and Anderson report the results of an extensive ethnographic study of homeless persons in Austin, Texas. They used participant observation as well as qualitative interviews to develop a rich, inductively based understanding of homeless street people. Schutt and Garrett review the published research on homelessness and related problems and offer guidelines for shelter staff.

The coursepack readings focus our attention on some of the most interesting questions concerning homelessness and illustrate a range of specific research methods used to answer these questions. Each coursepack article is an important contribution to the research literature that will enrich our understanding of issues raised in the books. You will read at least one coursepack article in most weeks.

Please keep up with the assigned reading. The quality of the class will be determined in part by your readiness to engage in class discussion about the readings.

### **CLASS SESSIONS AND COURSE ORGANIZATION**

Most class sessions will consist of an introductory presentation by me, some class discussion, one or more student presentations, and a research presentation by me or an outside speaker. I will review the major issues pertaining to the topic of the week and, often, present some findings from my research on one of those issues. You will answer questions about the readings that I distribute in advance (see below) and discuss your answers with other students. One student will lead the discussion of each coursepack article. Outside speakers will share experiences in working with homeless persons or conducting research about homelessness. We will devote much of the last class sessions to student paper presentations.

Discussion will be an important element in this course. Because many aspects of the topic of homelessness are controversial and touch on some very strong beliefs, it will be very important throughout the course to respect the expressed opinions of every other class participant, both other students and guest speakers. Our goal is to improve our knowledge about homelessness and our understanding of sociological theories and methods, and perhaps to examine critically our prior beliefs about homelessness. We can all learn from reading about and listening respectfully to a range of opinions, without being too judgmental and without becoming advocates for particular positions or actions.

The course content is organized in four units. The first unit introduces the topic of homelessness, pertinent sociological theories, and some of the current controversies about

homelessness. The second unit presents research on the individual causes of homelessness, while the third unit focuses on structural causes of homelessness. The final unit examines services for homeless persons, both their quality and effects.

### ASSIGNMENTS AND GRADES

Your course grade will be based on two short essays, a take home midterm exam, a research paper, and your class presentations and debate. One short essay will review and critique one of the assigned coursepack articles. Each student will present an article critique essay in class and lead a related class discussion, after prior consultation with me. The second *short essay* will answer “critical questions” concerning the course readings. They will extend the type of work that you do each week in preparation for class. The critical questions are identified in the syllabus. You may be able to use some portion of the material you prepare for this second essay in a class debate. Students who do not participate in the debate will be expected to prepare at least one question for the debaters that is based on the assigned readings. The *class presentation* grade will also take into account weekly participation in discussion, the article presentation, your debate contribution, and your presentation of work on your research paper.

The *research paper* should focus on a policy proposal made in the last week of the course reading assignments and that pertains to one of the weekly course topics. This paper must draw on course readings as well as other social science research published in books and journal articles. For the purpose of this paper, newspaper and magazine articles will not be acceptable sources (although they might be used for an illustration). The bulk of the paper will present and critique research that is relevant to the policy proposal in order to make a case for or against the proposal. You should plan on selecting the policy focus for this paper by mid-semester and then begin to search the literature and read relevant new material well before the end of the term. You should make an appointment to speak with me about your paper after the midterm. I will expect you to have identified several possible policy topics by the time of our meeting. At some point after our meeting, when you have reviewed some relevant literature, you will make a short presentation to the class about your paper. You can conduct some background interviews for this paper with academic experts and/or with shelter staff. In some special circumstances, you may also be able to interview homeless or formerly homeless individuals. You will need to discuss these plans with me well in advance of the time when you need to conduct the interviews. This interview material cannot substitute for readings from the research literature, but it could enrich your paper and allow you to reduce somewhat the number of academic sources you use.

The *take home midterm exam* will require that you answer several questions about the course readings.

#### Grading

Short Essay I:	10%
Short Essay II:	10%
Research Paper:	40%
Presentations (inc. debate):	15%
Midterm Exam:	25%

## COURSE OUTLINE

### **INTRODUCTION TO HOMELESSNESS**

#### **The Experience of Homelessness and Popular Perceptions, Week 1 (January 26)**

Rossi, Chapter 1

Coursepack:

Lee, Barrett A., Sue Hinze Jones and David W. Lewis. 1990. "Public Beliefs About the Causes of Homelessness." Social Forces, 69:253-265.

Video: Schutt, Russell K. and G.R. Garrett. 1987. Working with the Homeless: A Video Based Training Experience. Boston: University of Massachusetts at Boston. Videotape.

Handouts: Student survey; Service provider quotes; Video discussion questions.

#### **Homelessness: History and Overview, Week 2 (February 2)**

Rossi, Chapter 2

Schutt and Garrett, Chapter 1

Snow & Anderson, Chapter 2

Coursepack:

Wong,-Yin-Ling-Irene; Piliavin,-Irving. 1997. "A Dynamic Analysis of Homeless-Domicile Transitions." Social Problems, 44:408-423.

Critical Question: Should homelessness be explained with individual characteristics or social structure?

Handouts: HUD Survey Highlights

#### **Methods: Counting, Measuring, Investigating the Homeless, Week 3 (February 9)**

Jencks, Chapters 1-2

Rossi, Chapter 3; Appendix B

Snow & Anderson, Chapter 1

Coursepack:

Link,-Bruce; Phelan,-Jo; Bresnahan,-Michaeline; Stueve,-Ann; Moore,-Robert; Susser,-Ezra. 1995. "Lifetime and Five-Year Prevalence of Homelessness in the United States: New Evidence on an Old Debate." American-Journal-of-Orthopsychiatry, 65:347-354.

Projects: Anchor; HUD Survey; Boston Annual Homeless Census; Shelter Surveys

Guest Speaker: Center for Survey Research

Handouts: Survey tools; census guidelines.

## **HEALTH PROBLEMS AND HOMELESSNESS**

### **Deinstitutionalization and Mental Illness, Week 4 (February 16)**

Jencks, Chapter 3

Rossi, Chapter 6

Schutt and Garrett, Chapter 4

Snow & Anderson, Chapter 7

Projects: Boston Shelter Guest Survey; MMHC, McKinney, MA Deinstitutionalization Study

Guest Speakers: Service providers

Critical Question: What role does mental illness play in homelessness?

### **Substance Abuse, Week 5 (February 23)**

Jencks, Chapter 4

Schutt and Garrett, Chapters 5, 6

Coursepack:.

Devine, Joel A. and James D. Wright. 1997. "Losing the Housing Game: The Leveling Effects of Substance Abuse." American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 67:618-631.

Projects: Shelter Survey; Stabilization Services

Guest Panel: Stephanie Hartwell, Ph.D., Gerald Garrett, Ph.D., Bill Sylvestri

Handouts: Garrett article; Hartwell article; Sylvestri thesis abstract.

Critical Question: Why are rates of substance abuse so high among homeless persons?

### **Health Care & AIDS Prevention, Week 6 (March 1)**

Schutt and Garrett, Chapter 7

Coursepack:

Bourgois, Philippe, Mark Lettiere, and James Quesada. 1997. "Social Misery and the Sanctions of Substance Abuse: Confronting HIV Risk Among Homeless Heroin Addicts in San Francisco." Social Problems, 44:155-173.

Projects: LifeLines HIV/AIDS Prevention Project.

Guest Speakers: Deborah Milbauer, MPH

Handouts: Lifelines report excerpts.

Critical Question: Can health promotion be effective among homeless persons?

### **Homeless Families, Children and Social Support, Week 7 (March 8)**

Jencks, Chapter 7

Snow & Anderson, Chapter 6

Coursepack:

Bassuk,-Ellen-L.. John C. Buckner, Linda F. Weinreb, Angela Browne, Shari S. Bassuk, Ree Dawson, and Jennifer N. Perloff. 1997. "Homelessness in Female-Headed Families: Childhood and Adult Risk and Protective Factors." American Journal of Public Health, 87:241-248.

Schutt,-Russell-K.; Meschede,-Tatjana; Rierdan,-Jill. 1994. "Distress, Suicidal Thoughts, and Social Support among Homeless Adults." Journal-of-Health-and-Social-Behavior, 35:134-142.

Projects: Parenting in Public

Guest Speakers: Donna Haig Friedman

Critical Question: What distinguishes homelessness among families and individuals?

### **SPRING BREAK (March 15)**

### **STRUCTURAL PROBLEMS AND HOMELESSNESS**

#### **Income and Employment, Week 8 (March 22)**

Jencks, Chapter 5

Rossi, Chapters 4, 5

Snow & Anderson, Chapters 4, 5.

Projects: Impact; Long Island; VA CWT.

Guest Speakers: Chris Gillespie, Lorenzo Boyd.

Critical Question: What difference does work make?

#### **Housing, Week 9 (March 29)**

Jencks, Chapters 6, 8, 9

Schutt and Garrett, Chapter 8

Snow & Anderson, Chapter 8

Projects: McKinney.  
Guest Panel: housing providers.

Critical Question: Is regular housing preferable?

**Debate I: Disability or Social Structure? Week 10 (April 5)**

**SERVICES & SOCIAL POLICIES**

**Shelters, Staff, Case Management, and Other Services, Week 11 (April 12)**

Jencks, Chapter 10  
Schutt and Garrett, Chapters 2, 3  
Snow & Anderson, Chapters 3, 9

Coursepack:

Friedman,-Bruce-D. 1994. "No Place Like Home: A Study of Two Homeless Shelters." Journal-of-Social-Distress-and-the-Homeless, 3:321-339.

Projects: MA Shelter Survey; staff survey; McKinney.

Shelter Tour & Discussion.

Critical Question: How can shelters be part of the solution?

**Service and Residential Preferences and Satisfaction, Week 12 (April 19)**

Coursepack:

Marshall,-Grant-N.; Burnam,-M.-Audrey; Koegel,-Paul; Sullivan-Greer;  
Benjamin,-Bernadette. 1996. "Objective Life Circumstances and Life Satisfaction: Results from the Course of Homelessness Study." Journal-of-Health-and-Social-Behavior, 37:44-58.

Project: McKinney; Boston shelter survey; multi-site.

Critical Question: Should housing and services reflect user preferences and satisfaction?

**Social Policies, Week 13 (April 26)**

Jencks, Chapter 11

Rossi, Chapter 7

Schutt and Garrett, Chapter 9

Coursepack:

Ellickson, Robert-C. 1990. "The Homelessness Muddle." Public-Interest, 99:45-60.

Hopper, Kim. 1998. "Housing the Homeless." Social Policy, 28:64-67.

Debate II: Emergency or Rehabilitative Policies?

Guest Speaker: Homelessness advocate

Critical Question: Housing, housing, and anything else?

Student Presentations, Week 14 (May 3)