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On the Dark Side of the Street

(Book Review)

By Douglas J. Besharov

The Homeless

By Christopher Jencks

Harvard. 161 pp. \$ 17.95

HOMELESSNESS is the one social malady that most middle-class Americans are likely to confront, face to face. Drug addiction, teen pregnancy, underclass poverty, child abuse and even violent crime tend to be abstractions that we know about only because of the evening news or newspapers. But most of us have seen—and have been accosted by—homeless people in downtown business districts and, increasingly, in suburban ones as well.

Regular contact with the homeless, however, has not increased our understanding of them, their needs and what it would take to help them. Misconceptions and confusion abound, fueled by the cacophony of conflicting (and often im-plausible) claims of advocates, researchers, and politicians. As a result, most Americans have simply tuned out. We may still see the homeless, but we no longer really notice them.

To help identify solutions to this guilt-provoking social problem, Christopher Jencks, a professor of sociology at Northwestern University and a highly respected commentator on social conditions, explicates the social and personal forces that have led to so much homelessness in our society. With analytic objectivity and narrative clarity, he guides us through a maze of complex data to answer three basic questions: How many? Why? What can we do about them? Counts of the homeless have been surrounded by scientific uncertainty and political controversy, with advocates wanting to maximize the problem's size and conservatives wanting to minimize it. Remember the claims of advocates (such as Mitch Snyder) that there were 2 or 3 million homeless?

Jencks skillfully reviews the available scientific evidence, thin as it is, to reach an “educated guess” that the home-less population (living on the streets or in shelters) increased four-fold over the past 15 years, growing “from a bit over 100,000 in 1980 to around 200,000 in 1984 and 400,000 in 1987-88.” No wonder homelessness was big news in those years.

(If you want to inflate the number, Jencks points out, just include those who are doubled up in someone else's home, and you get millions more “homeless”; if you want to deflate the number,

don't count families living in temporary welfare hotels, and you reduce the number by about 40 percent.)

Jencks's unblinking analysis of this phenomenal rise in homelessness is sure to annoy liberals and conservatives alike. He finds that "the spread of homelessness among single adults was a by-product of five related changes: the elimination of involuntary [psychiatric] commitment, the eviction of mental hospital patients who had nowhere to go, the advent of crack, increases in long-term joblessness, and political restrictions on the creation of flophouses. Among families, three factors appear to have been important: the spread of single motherhood, the erosion of welfare recipients' purchasing power, and perhaps crack.

Contrary to the image that advocates have sought to convey, Jencks finds that the homeless are not "just like you and me." They suffer high rates of mental illness (about 25 percent), drug and alcohol abuse (about 33 percent), and other dysfunctional behaviors. Only about 3 percent are married couples. Interestingly, Jencks finds relatively minor effects from increased housing costs or supposed cutbacks in federal spending for low-income housing. (As Jencks points out, federal housing expenditures actually increased during the 1980s.) On the other hand, he estimates a 20 percent decline in homelessness between 1988 and 1990, as unemployment fell.

Unfortunately, *The Homeless* has a truncated feel to it. After bringing the reader to a much clearer understanding of the causes of homelessness (in 85 lucid and fact-filled pages plus two technical appendices), Jencks spends only 15 pages on what he calls "some partial solutions." This reviewer, at least, wishes that Jencks had used his considerable talents to present a more detailed agenda for reform.

For example, he outlines a provocative proposal to create a "day-labor market organized under public auspices" in which, in return for four hours of work, a homeless person "would get vouchers for a cubicle hotel and three meals, plus a dollar or two for spending money." He says that "malingering" should not be tolerated, but does he mean that homeless workers could be fired? Even the mentally ill? And, if so, where would they go?

Similarly, Jencks calls for an increase in the involuntary commitment of the mentally ill. But he does not explain exactly who among today's homeless would be locked up and on what grounds. And, alas, one of his major proposals, "making shelters habitable," seems to run counter to his conclusion that "efforts to improve living conditions among the homeless may even have pulled more single adults into the system." Jencks is a savvy and clear-thinking policy analyst, so this reviewer wished for a longer discussion that attempted to reconcile this contradiction.

Given Jencks's insightful understanding of the origins and scope of the problem, one hopes that he will return to this subject on another occasion to provide a fuller explanation of his proposals. In the meantime, this minor complaint should not obscure Jencks's achievement: an honest and illuminating portrait of homelessness in America. He may not have given us a complete road map for solving this distressingly complicated problem, but his superb book surely points us in the right direction.