

## HOMELESS: EXPOSE THE MYTHS

Joseph Perkins

Joseph Perkins (b. 1960) is a regular columnist for *The San Diego Union Tribune*.

Back in the days when the homeless problem was in vogue, I decided to investigate for myself whether economic policies were to blame for the growing legions of street people who seemed to have invaded America's cities.

So, I spent a night at New York's Grand Central Station, which was a favorite gathering place for many of the city's homeless.

I quickly discovered that contrary to the news reportage at that time, the homeless were not "people like you and me" who simply had fallen upon hard times. I saw no yuppies in threadbare suits sifting through the trash bins. I saw no middle-class families huddled on benches.

What I did see were dozens upon dozens of pitiable men and women who were suffering from some dysfunction or another. Some were afflicted with mental problems. Others were drug or alcohol abusers. Clearly their homelessness owed not to economic dislocation, but simply to self-destruction.

It is now eight years later, yet homeless advocates continue to promulgate the myth that homelessness is primarily an economic problem rather than a mental health and substance-abuse problem.

Among the more prominent purveyors of this misinformation is the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty. It notes that 40 percent of the poor people spend two-thirds of their income on housing. "This means that for growing millions of Americans, a missed paycheck, a health crisis or a high utility bill brings the threat of homelessness," the lawyers assert.

The law center advocates were less happy with President Clinton's recent executive order calling for a homeless plan to be developed within nine months. They saw no reason why he shouldn't have given his imprimatur to a plan that they already have drawn up.

So what is the lawyers' solution? Have the federal government turn over former military bases and other vacant property to the homeless. Create a jobs program for them. Give them income assistance. Offer them day care and health care.

It's the typical liberal response to a problem—spend more money, create programs. They miss the boat. In 1963, there were as many poor people as there are today. Yet, in 1963, the only homeless people were the occasional bums and hobos.

Two things happened between 1963 and 1993 to give us today's homeless population: All but the most dangerous patients were disgorged from state mental hospitals, and illegal drug use exploded.

This is borne out by a 1992 survey concluded by the U. S. Conference of Mayors. The mayors found that 28 percent of the homeless population in the cities were mentally ill and 42 percent substance abusers.

This means that at least seven of ten street people have either a mental or chemical problem. Even if the economy were booming, jobs were plentiful and affordable housing

abundant, these unfortunate probably would still be out on the streets.

By linking homelessness to poverty, advocates obscure the real root of the problem. If we really wanted to help the homeless, we would pay far more attention to their mental health and substance abuse problems.

## THE FACTS

1. How did the author find out whether government policies were really to blame for the growing number of street people—as often claimed by liberals?
2. What was the author's first discovery? How long did this discovery take?
3. What about the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty annoys the author?
4. According to the author, what happened between 1963 and the present to change the statistics concerning the homeless population?
5. What is the author's answer to ur desire to help the homeless?

## THE STRATEGIES

1. In your view, does the brevity of the essay affects its ability to convince? Why or why not?
2. Why does the author word his proposition as a conditional clause ("If we really wanted to help the homeless ...") What might an alternate wording be?
3. How does the author maintain coherence between paragraphs 10 and 11?
4. To what does the word *myths* in the title of the essay refer?
5. how would you describe the author's style of writing?

## THE ISSUES

1. The author says that in 1963, the only homeless people were occasional bums and hobos. How are bums and hobos different from today's homeless?
2. How much influence do economic policies have on people's standard of living?
3. What is the author's most compelling support for his proposition?

4. In your opinion, which is more effective—the liberals' response of spending more money on programs for the homeless or the conservatives' response of tending to their mental illnesses? Give reasons for your stance.

**Source:** *Readings For Writers* by McCuen-Metherell and Winkler