

**CURA****reporter**

PUBLISHED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA, CENTER FOR URBAN AND REGIONAL AFFAIRS

## Homeless in Hennepin County

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"I just get tired... I see anymore that money ain't everything, but then you need the money to survive. But people that live in these houses and high rises (should) just stop and look at them (us): 'Who's down there? Where'd they come from, and who are they?' They should realize, because they're gonna turn out to be one of us one of these days."

In about 1983, public awareness of homeless people began to increase in the Twin Cities. Media attention that had focused on "bag ladies" and others sleeping on grates and in doorways in New York City and Washington, D.C. became local news as well. The traditional places of refuge for hoboes and "winos" in the Twin Cities experienced a new demand for assistance—a demand that they were unable to meet.

Churches responded with soup kitchens, food shelves, and emergency shelters.

Gradually the public sector joined the private in responding to the growing numbers whose presence could no longer be denied. The ranks of "winos" and "bag ladies" had been swelled by "the new homeless": persons caught in what was assumed to be temporary unemployment—unemployment spawned by an increasingly virulent recession.

Eventually it became evident that what had been perceived as an "emergency" situation had become a long-term reality. The diversity of experiences leading to homelessness seemed to grow as much as the increased demand for services. It was difficult for the general public to ignore the in-

creasingly visible existence of growing numbers of people in need of the basics: food, clothing, and shelter.

### The Homeless in History

Homelessness is not a new phenomenon. References to wayfayers and strangers exist in the Bible and the Koran. Feudalism's end forced many persons to wander for work. The Elizabethan Poor Laws validated as local responsibility that which long had been addressed by English parishes, the needs of the poor and the homeless, and granted taxation rights to the local community to provide the necessary services.

In America, industrialization drew people away from subsistence on the land, into a wage economy dependent on market demand and the availability of raw materials. Unemployment was the dark side of the promise of the new land of opportunity. As recessions multiplied, so did homelessness. Charity organizations and missions responded with soup kitchens. Beer cellars and cheap lodging houses were shelter for some; others slept outside or in jail during the winter.

The Great Depression of the 1930s drew many of the middle class into poverty and homelessness. Such New Deal approaches as Social Security and public works programs addressed the crisis; but the labor demands of World War II ended it.

Recently, homeless people have been increasing in numbers across the country. Their visibility and diversity verify that there is something new about the situation. They cannot be dismissed as a few "bag ladies" and "winos."

### The Current Situation

In the 1980s, studies were initiated that identified specific groups of homeless people. With some variation, the proportions are similar across the country: 20 to 30 percent are mentally ill; 30 to 50 percent, chemically dependent; and 30 to 50 percent, Vietnam veterans. Ethnicity varies by community, but the largest proportion commonly is white. The average age is between thirty-four and thirty-seven, a shift down from earlier periods. Eighty percent are single men, but homeless families are increasing: 20 to 25 percent of shelter users are children. The stereotype of the homeless person as a fifty-year-old male alcoholic is being challenged.

Given the impossibility of counting people staying in caves, abandoned buildings, cars, and under bridges, a census of the homeless has never been made. Most studies, locally and elsewhere, have focused on emergency shelter populations, although it is agreed that shelter users represent a small proportion of the homeless. Nation-

**Table 1. DEMOGRAPHICS OF THE HENNEPIN COUNTY HOMELESS INTERVIEWED**

	Number	Percent of Total
Gender		
female	5	14
male	31	86
Age*		
under 35	18	50
35 and over	18	50
Length of time homeless**		
1 year or less	17	49
1-5 years	6	17
6-10 years	9	25
over 10 years	3	8
Currently living		
outside or in car	19	53
shelter, friend, or relative	17	47
Women with children	0	0
Education		
high school or GED	23	64
beyond high school	10	28
literate	30	83
Mental illness		
severe	5	14
moderate	2	6
moderate	3	8
Chemical dependency		
active	20	56
recovering	10	28
not abusing	10	28
not abusing	16	44
Causative factors		
no control over	17	47
response to end of relationship	6	17
chemical abuse	8	22

\* Youngest = 20; oldest = 52; mean = 35.6.

\*\* Least = 1 month; most = 34 years; mean = 2.8 years.

ally, estimates of the homeless range from 250,000 to two or three million. In the Twin Cities, figures vary from a conservative 1,700 to 35,000. As sociologist Peter Rossi noted in the Jensen lectures at Duke University, "It hardly matters whether there are 3,000 to 30,000 homeless in Chicago; both represent formidable indications of a serious social problem."

Known is that the numbers of homeless people have increased dramatically since 1980, that the population of homeless is younger and includes more children, and that the reasons for homelessness are varied and complex. Factors that are generally accepted across the county as contributing to homelessness are: unemployment related to repeated recessions; the realities of a post-industrial society where there is less and less need for unskilled and low-skilled workers; redevelopment in core cities, which has severely reduced the low-cost housing stock; a 70 percent reduction in HUD funding for low-cost housing; lower real wages for the working poor; family violence; insufficient

community-based services for the mentally ill; and the Reagan administration's cutbacks in social services.

### A Study of Hennepin County Homeless

Although categories of homeless people have been identified, no study of how the homeless understand themselves and their situations has been made. It seemed to this researcher that such a study was essential if interventions initiated by the public and private sectors were to have a real chance of success.

I asked, what is the story about homelessness from the point of view of those who are homeless? What are their perceptions of how they came to be homeless? What has their experience been of life on the streets? And what do they perceive as helpful in getting off the streets?

For the purpose of this study, homelessness was defined as "being without permanent abode—a place to live for which the individual, or someone close to him or her, family or friend, has financial responsibility, be it rent, mortgage, taxes, or 'sweat equity'."

From November 1975 to July 1986, I was a participant observer in two of Minneapolis' drop-in centers for homeless and

**Cover photo: The newly homeless, like this couple at Catholic Charities' Branch II, are often full of hope and maintain a strong work ethic. Many are living temporarily with friends or relatives.**

other street people. The purpose was two-fold: to gather insights and information that would inform later interviews, and to become "a part of the woodwork," accepted and reasonably trusted by staff and clients. Careful field notes were made following each observation.

Following this period of participant observation, I interviewed thirty-six homeless people in-depth. No attempt at randomness was made, but the sampling was structured to reasonably reflect the known demographics of Hennepin County's homeless.

### Becoming Homeless

"I got laid off...in 1982. That's when [a farm machinery company] started going under. I mean, they really took a fall when all those interest rates were so high. ...the way the farmer goes, thus [the company] goes. So they have to let people go in order to survive themselves..."

"We drove to Phoenix to see my father's family but my father's family put me out."

"I was hired from Charleston, South Carolina, and they gave me a position at the naval base in Washington in '78. And they

did some reshuffling in that area and I was brought back to the Minneapolis area to be reassigned, and the reassignment never came about."

"Fighting. Fighting like with my boyfriend. He would kick me out. Then I'd have to go to a women's shelter...The people wouldn't want to hear my problems because I'd keep going back to the same guy that kicked me out..."

"I got out of there [the psychiatric unit] at two in the afternoon, to the streets again, broke, not knowing where I was going to stay..."

These voices of Hennepin County homeless people reflect factors known across the country as contributing to homelessness. Profiles of the people interviewed are reflected in their demographic data in Table 1. The themes that emerged from their stories will "fill in" these profiles.

The following must be noted at the outset. First, people who become homeless do not expect to remain homeless. Although permanent street residence may become a reality, and be gradually accepted, it was not an initial expectation for any of the people interviewed. Second, the work ethic remains strong among homeless people, a reminder that they are a part of the society and reflective of it. Finally, the process of surviving on the street is encompassing. Finding shelter, food, opportunities to bathe, and financial assistance take a great deal of time and red tape. This allows little time for job hunting, health care, or other necessities of life.

### Life on the Streets

"It's hard: it's boring. You're not really sure what you're gonna do next... if you're gonna make it from one day to the next...it's really an unsure world out there on the streets, 'cause you don't know what's gonna happen."

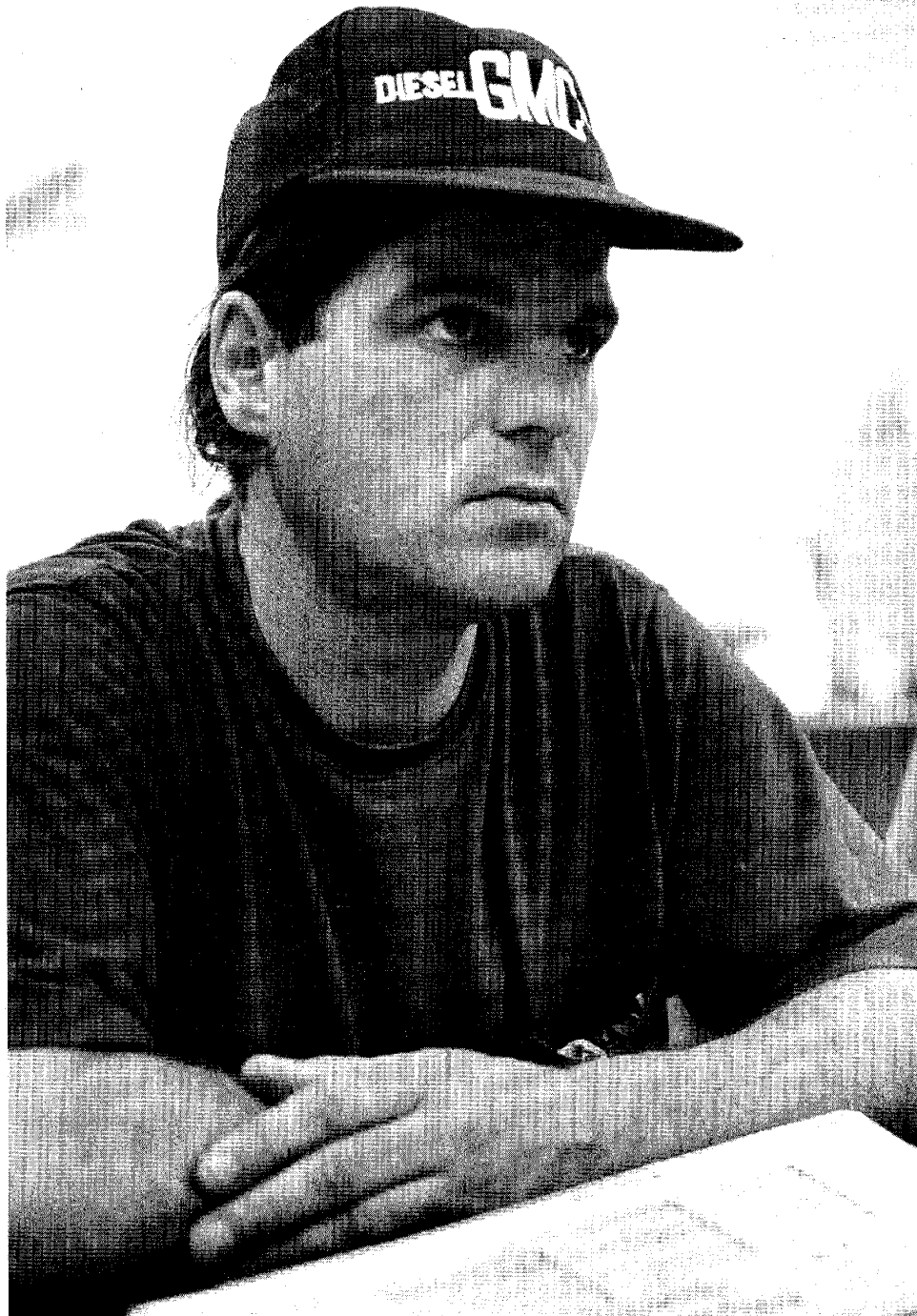
"It's just too hot to be carryin' that [pack] around with you...A lot of people they'll stash it in bushes, and that's how they get ripped off, too. To someone else that [pack] wouldn't mean very much, but it's pictures of my family and it's my sleepin' bag, my clothes..."

"It's hard, because there are so many people out there to take advantage of you. You have to be pretty careful. You're fighting the weather, the bugs, and everything else."

"It's hell being on the streets. [Hell is] when you're twenty-two years old and you're trying to make it on your own, and your parents don't want anything to do with you."

Strong negative themes emerged when describing what life is like when one is homeless. Being homeless is dangerous, requires constant alertness (one man told me he never sleeps fully), demands much waiting and patience, and is boring. The small minority who claim to have chosen the road for the "freedom" recognize, but learn to live with, the dangers.

"The advantage is...being free and doing what you want to do...See I was locked up for so many years of my life that I want to be free to do what the hell I want to do..."



**Those who have been homeless for longer, the Teeterers, most often live outside. They are discouraged, wanting to get off the streets but prevented by significant personal barriers.**

Many work short-term jobs as they travel around. Contrary to stereotype, most not only do not get welfare, but proudly eschew it.

**Survival: a Downward Spiral**

"When you're livin' out here...you got to worry about where your next meal gonna come from, whether you're gonna draw a high card...and get a spot at St. Stephen's, whether or not you can get down to Harbor Lights...before they close the doors...whether or not you can get a roof, whether or not you're going to get hurt next time you sleep in the bus box down-town...whether or not someone's gonna steal your little bit of money..."

Because survival is so time consuming, and its immediacy so encompassing, future orientation becomes a luxury for which there is neither time nor energy. What time is available for job hunting often proves fruitless, promoting a sense of hopelessness and powerlessness that depresses the strongest ego.

"Survival... if you get below that...you can really get off... Living is different from surviving. Surviving is close to giving up... It's hard to build back up then... You can't get away from the downward pull of survival."

At the beginning of being homeless, there is an assumption of temporariness, that "I will get out of this soon," and an unwillingness to identify with others who are homeless: "I don't want to look like most of these people do [street people], ever." and "There's not too many people like myself out there." As time passes, isolation from the larger community deepens with depression, feeding on itself, in a downward cycle.

But the need for human connection, for a sense of belonging, continues. For some, "the siren song of the streets," of the long-term homeless, connects: "You're o.k. We're o.k. It's *them* that's bad. They don't care. You can make it out here. Come join us, have a drink, party with us, you'll feel better." Not infrequently, there is a slide into a sub-culture where one does have a place, but a place that further isolates one from the mainstream. In this downward spiral, anger at one's situation is turned inward to depression, or outward, into violence. A twenty-year-old, spoke of his experience as a child on the road:

"It became a way of life for me...the only thing I could really relate to... 'cause I ain't never been anywhere except on the road. Now, I'm just starting to fit in with a bunch of tramps. It don't matter no more...anything."

**A Typology of the Homeless**

A dynamic continuum with a three group typology of homeless people emerged from the interviews. The continuum ranges from a passionate, energetic determination to get off the streets to an expectation of staying on the road "as long as I live."

At one end of the continuum, the *Resistors* were determined to leave the streets and saw no advantage to being without a

home. Second were the *Teeterers*, who wanted to leave the streets but faced significant personal barriers to doing so. A strong push from either direction or, perhaps, lack of encouragement might move these people to one side or the other. The smallest group, the *Accommodators*, expressed enjoyment of life on the road, had given up hope of rejoining the mainstream, and had accommodated to being without a permanent home.

As these divisions were examined, factors associated with one or another of the groups surfaced. They are summarized in Table 2.

● **The Resistors**, fighting to stabilize their lives, deeply disliked being on the streets. Homeless an average of just over two years, most slept inside, in shelters or with friends. They had little or no control over the circumstances that had made them homeless. Their use of alcohol was minimal; many were recovering alcoholics. Their stories expressed little sign that they came from dysfunctional families; most reflected positively on their childhoods and held realistic hopes and plans for changing their situation.

The Resistors were slightly older than the other two groups, and maintained a strong work ethic, affirming the perceptions of a key informant:

"When the older ones hit the streets, they're more determined to get off. They have more 'history,' a strong work ethic. And they are better able to care for themselves, and know where to go [for help]. They'll fight more for their independence. They also get put down more and they have more physical problems."

Most Resistors had finished high school or had earned a GED, and most wanted more education. Their literacy rate reflects the national average.

Boredom and depression were central to the Resistors' experiences of being

homeless. Yet, they expressed loneliness and isolation less than people in the other groups, perhaps because they had been homeless a shorter time, or because support networks continued for most of them.

● **The Teeterers**, in the middle of the continuum of homelessness, wished to get off the streets, but were prevented by significant personal barriers. Some were mentally ill, some chemically dependent, some illiterate, and many had significant health problems. Some had lost hope, but had not accommodated to homelessness.

Active chemical dependency was highest among this group, their condition suggesting progression on the downward spiral. The Teeterers were the youngest people on the continuum, their average age 32.1 years, and they seemed less mature, more naive, and more vulnerable.

Unlike the other groups, only a third were native to Minnesota. Their reasons for coming to the state were diverse: to find work (the publicized low unemployment rate attracts job hunters to the Twin Cities), to check out the state, to be near their children, and (for two) to get General Assistance. Yet most of the Teeterers were homeless for reasons beyond their control: release from a psychiatric ward to the streets, physical injuries, or lack of job opportunities at home. For some, relationship and alcohol problems had contributed to their situations.

Although the literacy rate among the Teeterers was slightly less than among the Resistors, their high school graduation/GED rate was comparable. Many wished for more education.

Most lived outside, but only a few expressed a positive attitude toward street life. Most disliked being homeless, yet they expressed little desire to have their own places.

The majority of Teeterers were receiv-

**Table 2. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CONTINUUM OF HOMELESSNESS**

	Resistors	Teeterers	Accommodators
Average length of time homeless	2.2 years	4.1 years	12.7 years
Attitude to being homeless	fighting to get off	ambivalent	accepting
Negative attitude toward homelessness	74%	55%	0%
Living where?	inside	majority outside	most outside
Reasons for homelessness	majority not of own making	largest group not of own making	half: own decision
Desiring more education	79%	45%	33%
Not wanting more education	16%	18%	50%
Literate	95%	82%	50%
Family dysfunction	42%	82%	67%
Childhood experience negative	29%	45%	83%
Desiring own place	84%	30%	17%
Realistic hopes for future	68%	27%	0%



**An increasing number of the homeless are families. Twenty to twenty-five percent of shelter users are children.**

ing General Assistance (\$203 a month). Although work was important to them, it was not a driving force as it was with the Resisters. All had work experience, but none had worked for long with one industry or organization.

Boredom and depression were reflected in their remarks. Evidence of severe family dysfunction was highest among this group. Their memories of childhood were often dismal.

"People ask me, 'Why don't you acknowledge your family?...' And I say, 'Why I don't have one...Somebody that would do that [beatings] to you, to a person?'"

The Teeterers were oriented to today and not the future. Their growing loss of hope and their clinging to survival seem to generate a fear of hoping, rather than concrete plans for the future.

"Discouraged" best describes this group. It was hard to determine whether the mental illness that many of them harbor was a response to their homelessness, or exacerbated by it. It seemed unlikely that any in this group could avoid the continued plunge into the life of the streets without support and assistance.

● **The Accommodators**, all male, and the smallest group on the continuum, had

given up. They no longer expected to be a part of the larger society, nor believed that there was a place for them in it or that they could make a contribution to it. They had accommodated to homelessness. Self-proclaimed tramps, they saw no other options for themselves.

Half claimed to have "chosen" the life of the road. This must be considered, however, in the context of a choice made at an early age. One man believed that his absence would provide more food for his eleven brothers and sisters. He left at the age of twelve. Another left at twelve after "bouncing in and out of foster and group homes." His memories of growing up were of living in a car, a motel, and, his fondest, a tent in the woods. "And at Christmastime, the freeway was my Christmas tree, 'cause of the lights."

The Accommodators had been homeless for an average of 12.7 years, almost six times longer than the Resisters. That hopelessness accelerates on a downward spiral appears to be verified by this group. Half did not graduate from high school and were illiterate. Only two were interested in more education. Half indicated some health problems, although only one seemed to have mental health problems. None was a

recovering substance abuser; half did not abuse. The picture of the drunken street bum is challenged by these men.

They believed that having a place of one's own was important to others, especially people with families, and that the streets were not a place for them. But for themselves, the streets were good enough. None had negative comments about their own homelessness, but their remarks were not devoid of negatives about their lifestyle.

"If you're not used to it, it can get kinda rough...You gotta watch yourself all the time, be on your p's and q's 'cause you don't know who's around you..."

Lack of meaningful relationship and repression of feelings is common among homeless people, and must contribute to the loneliness and isolation mentioned by all groups.

"[You're] looking at a guy here who does have feelings, but after this interview, they won't be showing, and there will be no sign of any feelings ever being mentioned after I walk away. I'll be back to my old asshole self: joking, railroad tramp."

The Accommodators described extremely unhappy childhoods. Only one spoke positively of his parents, directing his negative memories to family poverty in-



stead. All had work histories, and a work theme was strong for them all, with pride in their job history and mastery of skills. But stronger still was the desire to move around, to be free of the traditional responsibilities of society. Accommodators are represented by lack of hope and a sense of being outside the society.

### Recommendations from the Homeless

"It [government] should make more jobs for everyone...I cannot understand why I'm not working. By rights, I shouldn't be unemployed, but I am."

"I think there should be more low-income places...for people that only have \$203 a month. Affordable places."

"They won't spend \$50 a month to put a social worker in to help one person in this country. But they'll blow a million dollars to put an 'adviser' in Nicaragua..."

"That's what they [mentally ill people] need...once they get in [to a group home], a little supervision to make sure they're taking their medicine."

The comments of the homeless reflected both frustration and common sense. Interventions suggested were consistent with those of researchers around the country. Three primary themes emerged:

- 1) The federal government ought to take care of its own before sending money overseas, or spending it on the military. And it should be spent responsibly at home.
- 2) People should have the opportunity to earn money to provide a home for themselves and for their other basic needs.
- 3) Low-cost housing is needed in Minneapolis.

### Conclusions

This study produced a substantial amount of data. What stands out above all else is the relationship between how long people are homeless and the likelihood that they will reenter society. Apparently, the longer a person is homeless, the more hope is lost and the more alienation sets in. The effect of life on the streets may be to create a situational mental illness as survival comes to dominate one's world view. Or it may be that the individual chooses to "join rather than fight," adapting to circumstances and accommodating to a homeless lifestyle. Immediate intervention, then, is essential.

The diversity of life experiences that lead into homelessness reflect the complexity of this issue and verify that there are no simple or easy solutions.

### Recommendations

In order to address the situation of homelessness a comprehensive approach with three elements is required: emergency measures, rehabilitation services, and preventive policies.

• **Emergency measures** continue to be needed, but they also need to be fo-

cus. Those who are most vulnerable (women, children, youth, the mentally ill, and the elderly) need to be separated from the others for their own safety and to allow appropriate intervention. Emergency aid must be recognized as a first step, one that provides shelter and assessment, so that appropriate rehabilitation services can be provided. Stabilization is essential. This includes transitional housing and services directed to individual needs. The group served through emergency measures is most often the Resisters, and their hope and determination are a strength that will allow intervention to succeed. Emergency aid needs to be directed with that strength in mind.

• **Rehabilitation services** will vary depending on the individual. Case management, however, is critical. Slow to be implemented in Minnesota, this approach has been vital to effective services for the homeless in other states. One person is identified to coordinate services for the homeless client over an extended period of time. The services may relate to jobs, education, health, or therapy.

Assistance in finding jobs will be of little use if there are no jobs that fit the skills of those searching. People with low skills, and little training or experience have virtually no chance of earning a livable wage. Part-time jobs at minimum wage do not provide necessary stability. Yet in a post-industrial society there are not likely to be many jobs for low-skilled people. One approach is to upgrade the marketable skills of these people and help them find jobs through a job service. Public-private initiative is suggested. MEED (Minnesota Employment and Economic Development) has successfully placed approximately 20,000 people in jobs in the private sector. It may provide a model for this kind of service. A second model is the Supportive Work Program, piloted first in New York in the early 1980s. This program provides one-to-one support for new workers on the job until they are secure in their roles.

Community mental health services are essential to provide services for people with episodic problems and those who are chronically mentally ill. Accessible outpatient facilities, residential facilities, competent staff, and appropriate street services must be included.

Health maintenance services, particularly street services provided in shelters and drop-in centers, are necessary for homeless people. Without this, health care is limited to the emergency room, an expensive, short-term, and inappropriate approach.

Such services, together with soup kitchens, public bathing facilities, and the traditional missions may be the only way that the needs of the Accommodators can be addressed. It may be that they are not retrievable to the larger society, but the door should be left open by assuring access to services.

Such services will also be used by the Resisters. But for the Teeterers, longer on the streets and deeper in helplessness, an additional service is required: that of the street worker.

Until recently, there has been only one street worker for homeless people in Hennepin County. With McKinney monies, a unit of streetworkers is now being instituted. The close attention that these social workers can bring directly to the homeless, connecting them to needed services, and providing emotional support enroute, is essential for homeless people.

Finally, recommended by the homeless in all groups, is an approach that would cost little if anything. Respectful treatment by welfare personnel can make a difference. It can boost self-esteem and aid the client to break out of the downward spiral of depression and hopelessness.

• **Preventive policies** must first address housing. Permanent housing must follow transitional shelter. This requires that we increase the amount of affordable housing available in the Twin Cities. Minneapolis lost 1,300 low cost units between 1980 and 1985, with another 760 units likely to be lost by 1990. The McKnight Foundation, working with both of the Twin Cities, has begun to develop affordable housing. More is needed both for families and single adults. Lobbying at the federal and the state government levels will be required, as will public-private collaboration.

The creation of jobs is a second approach to dealing with the crisis of work for the low skilled. There is work to be done in our society. The infrastructure is in dire need of maintenance; public service or contract jobs with career ladders need to be developed. The Supportive Work Program model may prove useful.

Other policies that can help prevent homelessness are emergency grants for paying back-rent, an increase in jobs that pay livable wages, an increase in AFDC payments, and an increase in the minimum wage.

Homelessness is a complex, multifaceted issue. Solutions must be equally multifaceted. Most clear is that a societal commitment is needed to redirect our resources to help those who are so obviously in painful need. Without such commitment, the situation will worsen, the distance between rich and poor will widen even further, and we will have created a caste of "untouchables."

**Edwina Hertzberg is an associate professor of social work and director of faculty development at Augsburg College. Her concern for the homeless began with a faculty development internship at**