Understanding of homelessness

Phrases like the ‘working homeless,’ ‘doubled up,’ ‘homeless youth’ and others are becoming more common, amplifying the need to address the problem and create lasting change.

By **Saeed Richardson**Saeed Richardson | November 8, 2019

Several years ago, I found myself serving as an individual development specialist at the Cara Program, an organization centered on helping people obtain full-time, long-term career opportunities. I worked the front lines as a counselor for my first-year Master of Social Work field placement. I wanted to ensure that the experiences circumscribing their employment — family dynamics, mental health wellness, sight and hearing accommodations, support for children, and residential status — were well managed. I met with individuals when they first arrived, directed them to support services, visited them regularly post-placement. And I listened. A lot.

I recall one of the gentlemen I served, who showed up every day with an incredibly positive attitude. Each day he’d arrive to the center on time, impressively dressed from a wardrobe of slacks, button-ups, jackets, and ties that made me envious. However, as the day progressed, he would wear down, struggle to stay awake, and by day’s end, there was little to no positivity at all. I vividly remember his stories of having to be “in place” at the Pacific Garden Mission every evening by 10:00 p.m., then struggle to fall asleep because of the talking, random noises, and crying he would hear well past midnight. Then he would wake as early as 4:30 a.m. to exit the facility by the required morning deadline. Every day he departed, he prayed the few possessions he owned would still be near his bed when he returned in the evening. And while all the official documentation standards qualified him as having residency, he was homeless.

Having served as a pastor for 20 years, more times than I can recall I’ve opened the doors to my church and found someone sleeping under the awning of the entrance. As recent as this past Sunday, I saw new visitors in our worship service — with bags or a suitcase in tow — struggling to stay awake because they simply needed a warm place to settle for a few hours and a bite to eat. No doubt, we’ve all had moments of stopping a car at a busy intersection or merely walking through the streets of Chicago, encountering someone asking for food or money.

For many of us, examples like these pervade our views of homelessness. However, the true impact and reach of this reality are far more extensive. Phrases like “working homeless,” “doubled up,” “homeless poor,” and “homeless youth,” among others expose the complexity and challenges this problem requires that can cannot simply be solved by giving people jobs.

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People can become homeless for myriad reasons. Loss of employment, economic crisis, domestic violence, medical emergencies, mental health crises, and exiting the incarceration system among way too many other circumstances can lead to homelessness. Furthermore, people can be homeless and not visually appear to be so. They may have jobs, attend schools and college, attend church and social gatherings, and may even wear suits to work. Regardless of cause or appearance, they all lack a home.

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development’s (HUD)  narrowly reports that 552,830 people experienced homelessness in a single night in 2018. For Illinois, that number is 10,643. HUD’s definition of homelessness is often cited as authoritative but is also the least comprehensive. Those statistics do not take into account the overwhelming numbers of individuals who are temporarily doubled-up or sharing another’s residence.

Given the broader definition, in Illinois alone, the total count increases to 164,969 — a 1450% difference. The National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty reports 2.5 to 3.5 million individuals are annually in the “sheltered” homeless population: those living in shelters, transitional homes, and makeshift outdoor shelters, or “tent cities.” More than 7.4 million individuals nationally (nearly 300,000 in Illinois) are estimated to be on the brink of homelessness, often living in the homes of others according to “The Souls of Poor Folk” report by the Poor People’s Campaign.

In the report, William Darity from Duke University’s Sanford School of Public Policy challenges the status quo perspective on homelessness. “Indeed, close to half the individuals who are homeless in the United States actually have jobs: the problem is the jobs pay very poorly.” He continues his discussion about the working poor by exposing how the reality that uncertainty of hours, fluctuations in payment and salaries, and absence of quality work environments perpetuate and pull people into “toxic conditions” of homelessness.

As someone who has seen and experienced this firsthand, and has family members who are in this very state of flux between working homeless and shared occupancy status, I appreciate that there is more research on this issue and that our definitions are being expanding. However, there is still so much more to be done.

In no way do I wish to minimize the complexity of the issue, nor reduce the solution down to a three-point sermon, however, there are ways community leaders must begin to impact the problem of homelessness. We must realize that our definitions and presuppositions about homelessness are not always comprehensive. What we think about this issue is reflected in what we speak and communicate. We must be willing to challenge and change the narrative that parks the homeless problem in a box comprising only people who live without shelter on the streets and expand that narrative.

We must also find meaningful pathways to engage in the issue. In the same ways our schools are beginning to acknowledge the rights of, build resources for, and even offer accommodations and support services for the many children in public schools who are homeless, so too must our faith communities and congregations. Yes, the scope is broad — children, seniors, people with mental health challenges, families, single parents, individuals with disabilities, the formerly incarcerated — and to create lasting change, work must come from multiple vantage points, but we must all find a pathway to impact the problem.

The homeless are not the problem — homelessness is! As we walk throughout our daily lives, our eyes may very well deceive us. Outfit, vehicle, job status, and personal composure are not exclusive indicators of housing status. Understanding there are a significant number of factors that presuppose and direct people into this circumstance is just the start to engaging a horrifically pervasive problem.