REVIEW


The United States is experiencing a growing population of homeless people who do not share most of the benefits of capitalism, do not exert many of their rights as citizens, and have few, if any, opportunities to realize their human potential. For them, basic human needs such as shelter and food, not to mention emotional security, are generally inaccessible. Their physical health is frequently compromised, and the delivery of adequate health and other human services to them is complicated at best. They are also exposed to a variety of conditions that threaten their families in social, moral, and spiritual terms. Americans living in these conditions can now be counted in the millions, although these numbers represent only rough estimates. Included are men, women, and children, alone or in families, usually dependent on social programs for survival. Among them, children have been pointed out as the most affected.

Homelessness as a mass phenomenon or a perceived significant social malady is a relatively new problem in this country. Homeless people, including children, have been mentioned and even highlighted in the American media as early as the 1860s, as Boxill points out in her introduction. Nevertheless, following society's tradition of tackling a problem only when it reaches alarming proportions, it was not until the late 1980s that the phenomenon began to be discussed intensely in the social services arena and to catch the attention of the society at large.

Today, homelessness is a "hot" issue. The 1990 national census tried to count homeless people for the first time, and discussions on the topic have appeared in political and scholarly discourse, academic research and curricula, and social policy programs. Because of its increasing importance, literature and research on the theme have boomed. Relatively little of this literature, however, has been dedicated to the particular problems of homeless families as units and, more especially, to the consequences of homelessness for children. Homeless Children: The Watchers and the Waiters fills this gap
very appropriately, being exclusively dedicated to the effects of homelessness on children, and its appearance is certainly timely in light of the above. It includes eight articles approaching a variety of psychosocial aspects of the practical and underlying problems of homeless families' daily lives, presents historical analyses of structural causes of homelessness in the U.S., and gives a view of the problem abroad.

Nancy Boxill, volume editor, gives a short introduction on the different aspects to be approached and on how they are presented. The reader's attention is immediately called to the fact that the presentation does not restrict itself to social services. It includes analyses of living conditions in which an aesthetic sense and an acute sensitivity for the existential are necessary. Boxill sets an attractive tone in writing style that is maintained through the eight articles that follow. They are orchestrated in a sequence that avoids redundancy while establishing comfortable transitions from one article to the next.

In the first article, Rivlin provokes a reconsideration of the most typical approaches to the problems of homeless children. She criticizes the dubious posture of our societal structures, which tell us on paper that children have a right to a stable, safe, and secure home, nourishment, schooling, health care, and protection, while neglecting in various ways to provide these in practice. She calls our attention to the frightening implications of the absence of these basic necessities.

She also explores the significance of settings, including the analysis of concepts and phenomena such as "personal space and stimulation within it," "territoriality," their relationship to "place identity," and "attachment to place." This leads to an explanation of the fundamental importance and the continuing power of places in people's lives. Her critique of society includes its denial to the homeless children of America the opportunity to build these and other important connections, as a result of school bureaucracy and other weaknesses in community services. Her analysis is strong and well-founded, and is very critical of services, professionals, and societal organizations in regard to both their actions and their intentions.

The next article, written by Bassuk and Gallagher, approaches the impact of homelessness on children from another angle. They present characteristics of homeless families based on a Massachusetts study of 80 such families with 151 children, who were interviewed in 1985. They take as a special point of analysis specific developmental problems suffered by the children and relate them to the stresses of shelter living. This is also considered in relation to mothers' behaviors and all of these are said to be implicated in alterations of the family dynamics that are potentially harmful for the children's development. Conclusions are followed by brief recommendations on the nature and