Introduction

This study investigates the sources of homelessness in the 1980's, within both the dynamic structuring processes of the political economy, and the personal experiences of homeless men and women. Observing significant demographic shifts in the homeless population since the days of "skid row," questions are asked about the growing presence of young adults, blacks, and women among the homeless. Looking specifically at the case of Philadelphia, an assessment is made of the trends in economic development that would explain why young adults in the city, particularly African Americans, were at increased risk of residential instability in the 1980's. Having established the significance of this context, a research project is undertaken to interview homeless men and women about their biographical experiences in housing and income, and regarding their residential choices leading to homelessness. This particular research approach developed from the recognition of certain shortcomings in the professional literature on homelessness, and from my personal involvement with the homeless issue, as a shelter provider, advocate, researcher and community organizer.

The literature on homelessness has been dominated by studies of the deviant characteristics of homeless people. Very often, these studies are interpreted as providing evidence that deviant characteristics are the leading or primary causes of homelessness. However, this approach has failed to provide any evidence showing how such discovered deviance leads to homelessness, or how such deviance combines with other factors to lead to homelessness. Political advocates for the homeless, and some

studies of the housing and income problems facing urban residents, have alternatively claimed that homelessness is primarily a consequence of social and economic inequalities that have undermined the stability of certain demographic groups. But again, such claims have been made without providing evidence that these inequalities have direct relevance to the experiences of homeless people. Hence, in the existing literature on homelessness and in public discourse, there is, on the one hand, a reductionistic emphasis on the causal influence of the individual traits of homeless people, and on the other hand, a deterministic emphasis on the causal role of larger social and economic inequalities. Recognizing that, taken independently, neither of these positions is sufficient as a causal framework, and that these positions are not mutually exclusive, this study investigates how homelessness develops in the life experiences of homeless people, accounting for their own choices and characteristics - deviant or otherwise - and including attention to the social and economic conditions that influence residential instability. In this way, the individual traits and choices of homeless people can be understood in the context of the social and domestic situations in which homelessness develops.

This study of the immediate personal and social circumstances of the homeless as individuals would be incomplete if it were not supplemented with a more "ecological" perspective on those circumstances facing the homeless as a demographic group. Such a perspective is provided in the second chapter of this dissertation. Though the homelessness of individuals and the dramatic stories of their residential instability are very enlightening regarding the immediate sources of homelessness, the homelessness of young adults, particularly blacks, as a group, requires separate attention to better understand how these individual stories fit within the larger processes of historical and economic change. Therefore, the second chapter explores the historical development of

poverty, unemployment and housing difficulties faced by young urban blacks in Philadelphia. By examining trends in suburbanization, deindustrialization, black urban in-migration, declining housing affordability, youth underemployment and undertraining, and delayed household formation, a critical context is provided for understanding that the individual problems of the homeless have developed as part of a larger demographic phenomenon of residential instability among young and poor adults. Hence, the homelessness of individuals, as well as their choices and characteristics, can be understood not just from within specific domestic circumstances in which homelessness develops, but from within the larger social and economic contexts facing the households from which homeless people come.

As has been explained, this research project was derived in part from the recognition of major shortcomings in the existing literature on homelessness. In addition, this research has been significantly informed by my professional experience as a shelter provider and homeless advocate, and from my friendship and work with homeless people. In 1982, I began my involvement with the homeless as a volunteer at a shelter and soup kitchen in the city of Philadelphia. Along with other members of the Franciscan community which managed these services, I had basic questions about this impoverished condition amidst a society which I had previously known only from the relative comforts of suburban living. Consequently, I joined members of the Franciscan community in study and reflection on the political and economic sources of the poverty and violence which we witnessed in our daily work. As a group, we resolved that the United States government had failed to consider the many needs of the poor, and that the enormous resources devoted to the military dramatically reflected the misplaced priorities of our government. Having reached this conclusion, many of us organized and participated in protest actions against defense projects and military installations in the

Philadelphia area, hoping to call attention to the human costs of a militarized economy. But despite our protest actions and our service efforts, in those few years of my own involvement, the numbers of persons seeking services from our organization began to rise beyond our capacity for provision, and President Ronald Reagan offered successive budgets calling for increases in defense spending and cuts in domestic programs for the poor - all with the support of most Americans. I realized that the problem of poverty and inequality in American society had far more complex sources than were being addressed in either the political or service actions in which I had previously participated. Therefore, when planning for graduate training in Psychology, I decided to study further the sources of inequality in the United States and its effects on neighborhood and community organization.

During my graduate studies at Boston College, I volunteered for a homeless advocacy organization in Boston - the Massachusetts Coalition For the Homeless. As a student intern with the Coalition, I helped with campaigns to raise welfare benefits and to expand social services to the homeless, while studying in graduate school the theoretical and political foundations to the design of social policy. I learned through this combination of experiences that deviance models of homelessness had serious political implications, as some academic studies of the homeless were used to deflect criticisms by various public authorities, and as a means of stigmatizing the homeless population. I also observed that while homeless families increasingly became the subjects of public sympathy and highly publicized campaigns by advocates, the single adult homeless remained the objects of portrayals as mentally ill and incompetent people, effectively limiting policy considerations for the single adults to the development of bigger and better emergency shelters. As my involvement with the issue deepened, I also realized that there was a close network among funding sources, government officials, advocates and shelter

providers that effectively excluded the perspectives of homeless people in the political processes that shaped advocacy efforts and social programs.

Amidst this learning process, I became aware of several initiatives to organize the homeless for self-advocacy. In particular, a group of homeless people in Philadelphia had recently formed the "Philadelphia-Delaware Valley Union of the Homeless," and announced that it was going to assist homeless people in cities around the country with similar efforts. This approach at "empowering" the homeless interested me, so I established contact with the leadership of the Philadelphia Union and volunteered to help with the organization of a Union local in the Boston area. After several meetings with the homeless leadership from Philadelphia, I applied for grants to fund the organizing effort in Boston. With enough money to support myself and the initial needs of the organization, I spent a summer in the network of soup kitchens and shelters in Boston. I held meetings with groups of homeless people to survey their concerns, to identify issues, and to organize protests at city agencies and abandoned buildings. In this process, I became aware that homeless people were most concerned about the living conditions in the shelters, about the need for low-cost housing, about safety and protection from police harassment, and about the restrictive policies of temporary labor agencies and the welfare department. With this range of issues to address, and after a few protest actions, the group established a leadership committee, and planned for the founding convention of our union local.

In the next two years I worked as an advisor to the National Union of the Homeless and the Boston local, and assisted people like myself who were organizing locals in other cities. I was appointed Director of Technical Assistance and Training by the National Executive Board, and consequently designed a leadership training program for homeless people that operated out of Philadelphia. In my two years of involvement with the

national office, six new locals were formed, and two major campaigns were organized to dramatize the needs of homeless people. I stopped my organizational involvement with the homeless in 1988 to focus on the research project reported in this dissertation, though my work continues to be informed by those experiences.

In conclusion, this range of involvement has shown me the complexity of the homeless problem and the diverse perspectives from which it is understood. Having been a shelter provider, advocate, organizer and researcher, I have had a unique opportunity to observe the homeless problem from multiple frames of reference, and to observe the processes by which political and professional agendas influence the treatment of homelessness in public policy and scientific research. Therefore, the research reported in this dissertation should likewise be understood as growing out of my professional experiences and interests. More specifically, over the past eight years I have observed that the single adult homeless, despite their majority status among the homeless population, are the least sympathetically understood - by advocates, researchers, service providers and the general public. Their condition is commonly explained in simplistic terms, and the historical contexts of their impoverishment is frequently ignored. For that reason, this dissertation represents my attempt to investigate the sources of homelessness among single adults, both in a larger historical, social and economic framework, and within the life experiences of the men and women who are its victims.