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Single Room Housing Won't End Homelessness

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Single Room Housing Won't End Homelessness

Abstract

SROs might be the solution for some people, including the older and disabled homeless, but many others, including the masses of near-homeless (and soon-to-be-homeless) await a more imaginative solution that gives them a chance at stable household formation, adequately compensated labor, social protection from disability and unemployment, and that supports more diverse and mixed household arrangements than is represented in the proposed SRO solution.

Keywords

homelessness

Comments

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Letters

Single-Room Housing Won't End Homelessness

To the Editor:

In "The Homelessness Test" (editorial, March 1), you recognize that the loss in single room occupancy housing, or S.R.O.'s, has had a serious effect on the numbers of people living on the streets and in shelters. Mental health research on the homeless confirms that this housing shortage is more critical than "deinstitutionalization" and other mental health problems among the homeless.

Unfortunately, you assume that most of the homeless are mentally ill or older people who once lived in S.R.O. housing. You argue that the mentally ill homeless were deinstitutionalized, moved into S.R.O. housing, and when this housing was transferred to other uses, they and many other S.R.O. residents became homeless — a plausible sequence. However, my own research, and data from surveys of the homeless across the nation, suggest that for most of the homeless the sequence of events has been very different.

Most of the homeless are young adults, under age 45. Most have never lived in S.R.O. housing. Fewer than 15 percent have been hospitalized for mental disorders. And more than half the homeless population is homeless for less than six months.

You dismiss the causal role of deinstitutionalization in the 1960's and 70's because of its distance in time from the increasing homeless population of the 80's, but you fail to recognize that much of the loss in S.R.O. housing also took place before the 1980's. Though some people undoubtedly became homeless because of S.R.O. conversions — a deed that should be redressed — the evidence does not suggest the loss of S.R.O.'s as a widespread, direct source of homelessness. The real impact of lost S.R.O.'s on homelessness is that when a new segment of people became residentially unstable in the 1980's, they did not have this stock of cheap rooms to fall back on. What might have been hidden in the old problem of skid row homelessness became a

new problem of emergency shelter homelessness.

That most of the homeless are young adults, not mentally ill and have never lived in S.R.O. housing suggests wider causes of the homeless problem and more ambitious solutions than increasing the number of S.R.O. units. Poor, urban, young adults have seen two decades in which growth industries have favored better educated suburban populations and where the jobs available to unskilled workers have paid wages that have steadily declined against inflation (the value of the minimum wage declined 31 percent between 1980 and 1988).

Across the country, people who rely on public assistance have likewise seen the value of benefits deteriorate against inflation, nearly 50 percent since the early 1970's. Compounding declines in income among young, urban adults has been a sharp rise in the cost of housing. S.R.O.'s have disappeared, and standard rental apartments consume nearly 65 percent of the average poor household's income. This dramatic combination of forces pushed a new generation into residential instability and, ultimately, homelessness. Given the intense competition for resources in impoverished communities, it is no surprise that the disabled, the defiant and the deviant were the first and most likely to be squeezed out or forced to choose out.

How can we best understand this new group of people from whom the majority of the homeless comes? They are people who cannot afford to form new households. They are adults who are not settling new families or living in their own apartments at the rate their parents did.

While more S.R.O.'s would provide an option for them, do we want to institutionalize a new skid row? More important, is that what most homeless people want? Before the boom in emergency shelters in the 1980's, residents of S.R.O.'s used to be considered "homeless."

What really needs to be addressed is the marginal housing and income

status of a generation of young and poor adults. The homeless represent a small segment of a much larger problem of poverty and restricted opportunity reflected in the rapid turnover of the homeless population, in the increase in urban crime, in prison overcrowding and in the countless victims of the drug economy.

S.R.O.'s might be the solution for some people, including the older and disabled homeless, but many others, including the masses of near-homeless (and soon-to-be-homeless), await a more imaginative solution that gives them a chance at stable household formation, adequately compensated labor, social protection from disability and unemployment, and that supports more diverse and mixed household arrangements that is represented in the proposed S.R.O. solution.

DENNIS P. CULHANE
Needham, Mass., March 1, 1990
The writer has completed a doctoral dissertation on homelessness.

A Generation Adrift

To the Editor:

Your March 1 editorial attributes the rise of homeless people on the streets of New York City to the loss of single room occupancy housing. You recommend that the state spend some half a billion dollars to create 10,000 new S.R.O. rooms. As a contractor who has employed homeless laborers, and as a small New York City landlord, I believe your diagnosis and cure are off the mark.

Because of the increase in homeless people in major cities across the country it seems implausible to blame local events for the increase in New York. The homeless men I have employed are highly mobile, younger than 40, mostly black, poorly educated, some with mental health problems or a minor criminal record. All have alcohol and drug problems. They drift from city to city, working occasionally, staying with relatives where possible and winding up in the shelters only when they have exhausted their welcome elsewhere.

These are not the people who inhabit S.R.O.'s. Typical S.R.O. inhabitants are, in my experience, middle-aged to elderly and predominantly women. Nor would creating more S.R.O.'s help the young male homeless. These men cannot hang onto money from one day to the next. The only kind of housing they could use would be \$5-a-night flophouses — illegal under current housing codes.

If the loss of S.R.O.'s has not created the surge in homelessness, what has? My sense is that the young male drift

Warning Labels Pave Road to Censorship

To the Editor:

Robert C. Dean's letter supporting warning labels for rock recordings ("Don't Confuse Rock Lyrics With Free Speech," Feb. 16) states that labeling would not restrict, censor or in any way limit. This ignores the



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