

Unaffordable Housing & the Homeless

What Does the Data Say?

By

Rev. Dr. Todd F. Eklof

November 6, 2022

When human societies shifted from nomadic hunters and gatherers to agrarian farmers roughly 35-hundred years ago, so did the distribution of wealth. Prior to this, a particular hunter may have gotten the most game, or a particular gatherer may have collected more cowrie shells than anyone else, which would have meant they had a bit more than others. But, other than extra respect, appreciation, and recognition, they remained individuals within a community of relative equals who depended upon each other for their survival. But when agriculture allowed a few individuals to raise and grow most the food needed for everyone else, this dynamic changed. These few people had a lot more of what most everyone else needed and wanted, which made them wealthy and elite.

Unfortunately for the farmers, a few other individuals recognized this and decided to exploit them with heavy taxation. Monarchs, Kings, and Governors would also claim that the land upon which everyone in the kingdom or country lived, belonged to them, as did everything that was grown or hunted on it. This turned the initially wealthy growers into subsistence farmers, meaning they were barely left with enough to feed their own families, let alone their immediate communities. Most their produce was taken from the rural countryside to feed the mounting number of people living in cities. It was a forced redistribution of wealth conducted by exploiting the labor of others, a pattern that continues to this day.

Since most people want to feel good about themselves and that their actions are just, the rulers justified such exploitation by looking down about those they exploited and blamed them for their own woes. Since the growers were always rural, human society has since been the tale of City folk and Country folk, as allegorized in Aesop's fable about a city mouse that looks down upon its country cousin. "Pagan," for example, which many now believe refers to an ancient nature religion, comes from the Greek word *pagani* that simply means "farmers" or "country folk." Surely those in the countryside practiced different ways and had different beliefs than the city folk, which became a reason for their urban superiors to look down upon them. The very word, "peasant," which refers to the poorest among them, best translates to mean, "local inhabitants." The peasants were the local yokels who could be dismissed as stupid and backward.

Likewise, "heathen," comes from a word meaning "untilled land," and "savage" from the Latin word for "woods." Peasants, pagans, heathens, savages were all references to people who were looked down upon because they lived in and worked the land, the surrounding countryside, whom city dwellers depended upon for their groceries. The best and cheapest way to get them was to take them, which could only be done with a clean conscience by first dehumanizing and demonizing the growers, farmers, laborers, country folk as inferior beings with evil ways who deserved what they had coming. Believing one holds a superior

religion is also a reason used to justify the persecution of others. Those with pagan ways, heathen ways, savage ways, country ways offend the gods and should be punished for their sacrilege.

In his book, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, theologian William Herzog says ancient agrarian societies had a top tier and a bottom tier—the top tier comprised of very few compared to the many at the bottom tier. “The top tier,” he says, “was occupied by the ruler, the ruling class, retainers, and a few merchants,” who “controlled between 50 and 67 percent of the annual wealth of their societies.”¹ “The bottom tier was occupied by peasants, artisans, merchants, the unclean and the degraded, and, at the very bottom, the lowest of the lows, the expendables ...”² The ruling elite represented only 1 to 2 percent of the population, and the retainers, those they hired to protect their interests by exploiting everyone else, represented another 5 to 7 percent. So, the wealthiest people, as in our society, were the top one percent, while most the rest of the wealth went to the top 7 to 10 percent.

Merchants and artisans represented 8 to 15 percent of society, and may be likened to today’s upper middle class, although the bar for being upper could be extremely low. The majority of society, the peasants, the “local inhabitants,” comprised most the population, between 70 and 80 percent. Another 5 percent were among the unclean and degraded whose dire circumstances required them to undertake work that made them unfit for socializing with. These were among those Jesus was often criticized for publicly engaging with. Even lower than these untouchables, however, were the expendables, representing 5 to 15 percent of the population at any given time.³

Herzog says the expendables “were people with nothing left to sell but the energies of their bodies or their animal energies.”⁴ At best they were day laborers, hired on the spot for the meagerest of amounts, or, especially the women and children among them, became prostitutes or joined gangs of bandits. Whatever they did, the average life expectancy once becoming an expendable was less than six months, and everyone in the second tier always teetered on the edge of becoming socially expendable.

Today we’d like to think society has improved much since ancient times, and in many ways, it has. But in some important ways, as Herzog’s stratification suggests, things today are much the same as they were then. Today, according to a recent analysis from the Congressional Budget Office, “The 3 million people who make up the wealthiest 1% of Americans are collectively worth more than the 291 million that make up the bottom 90%.”⁵ After a 2017 study by the Institute for Policy Studies, based on Forbes 400 list of the wealthiest people and the Federal Reserve’s 2016 Survey of Consumer Finances, it was widely reported that the three wealthiest billionaires alone had more money than half the people in the country combined.⁶

Not that so few people being filthy rich is necessarily unjust. Nor is getting rid of billionaires necessarily going to do anything to solve poverty. Some people having way too much is not necessarily the cause of lots of people having too little. The problem, rather, is an economic system that doesn’t work well for the prosperity of all people. Had the vast

majority of our nation's citizens become more prosperous even as a few we becoming exorbitantly wealthy, there would be little to be concerned about, at least in this regard. But since the late 1980's, the rich have been getting richer while the poor have been getting poorer. And this means there is something wrong and, probably, unjust about our nation's economic system.

Just a year ago a Bloomberg news article stated that, "After years of declines, America's middle class now holds a smaller share of U.S. wealth than the top 1%."⁷ Middle Class America refers to those who earn between \$27,000 and \$141,000 a year, representing about 76-million households and 60-percent of the population. Among this class, the younger your generation, the less wealth you have. Those born between 1946 and 1964 have a median wealth of \$240,000. Those born between 1965 and 1980 have a median wealth of about \$121,000. And those born between 1981 and 1996, the millennials, have a median wealth of only \$27,000. Most the wealth accumulated by the middle class is contained in Home Equity and retirement funds, not disposable income.⁸ When these two sources of wealth are combined, the median amount of household wealth among the middle class is only \$200,000, although, according to the Census Bureau, 39 percent of households don't own a home, and 48 percent don't have retirement accounts. In short, as in ancient times, many within the Middle Class are on the verge of falling into poverty for a variety of reasons, including skyrocketing inflation.

Let's consider some of what has happened over just the past few years. The subprime lending scandal of 2008 was costly to working class Americans in many ways, including making it harder to qualify for home loans. This meant more Americans would have to rent, causing higher demand for rental properties, leading to rising costs, which continue to escalate today. By 2018, only ten years later, the average rental cost for a one to two-bedroom apartment in the U.S. reached \$1,405 per month.⁹ At today's wages, that's an impossible amount for millions of Americans.

Another reason for these escalating housing prices is that during the past seventy years, Americans, like most the rest of the world, are becoming city mice. In 1950, 64 percent of us lived in cities. Today, it's nearly 85 percent and rising.¹⁰ This exodus from the countryside has decimated rural communities, causing their equitized wealth to plummet, even as it has caused greater demand for housing in cities, resulting, again, in skyrocketing housing prices and shortages.

And, most recently, due to the economic impacts of COVID-19, including supply chain shortages and rising fuel costs, inflation is out of control, even after several attempts by the Fed to curtail it. That means things are tough for most Americans, not only the 60 percent in the Middle Class who are on the edge, but for the other 30 percent of Americans who have already fallen over the edge or never managed to rise above it to begin with.

Turning to our topic of homelessness, I have gone to such lengths to discuss the similarity between ancient agrarian societies and today's society because I want to dispel a misnomer, if not a prejudice, that many of us have been conditioned to believe, regarding homelessness and the homeless, namely, that homelessness is the result of addiction or mental illness. Just this week I met with a fellow who spoke very compassionately about the homeless and our need as a society to better help them by doing more to help with issues of

addiction and mental illness, but he did not say anything about those who might be homeless because they simply can't afford a home. I bring this up not to criticize him, but to point out how difficult it can be, even for those of us who want to help, to see past this stereotype.

But if it's true, that homelessness is mostly rooted in addiction and mental illness, then the fault lies with the individual, with the homeless person. If, however, it is rooted in poverty, the fault lies with our entire society and its economic failures. If it is caused by addiction and mental illness, then we can choose whether or not to help. To help is but an act of compassion for us, but not our responsibility because it is no fault of our own. On the other hand, we may choose not to help because we think even the smallest handout will only be used to buy more drugs or booze, or because we must leave mental illness to the experts, or to the police we pay to deal with any crime it might lead to.

But if homelessness is mostly caused by poverty because of an inadequate economic system, then the fault is shared by all of us, as is the responsibility to help. We can help by volunteering our time and resources to help those most in need, but we must also help by demanding more of our society, more of ourselves. This includes expecting our local, State, and Federal officials to make reasonable adjustments to our economy so that it works well for everyone, so that the bottom is never so low that we end up with our own modern version of an expendable class who have "nothing left to sell but the energies of their bodies or their animal energies," individuals whom we can choose or not choose to help out of circumstances we consider to be of their own making.

So, the question before us is, which is it? Is homelessness a self-induced crisis or is it the failure of our society? It's reasonable to conclude both must be true to some extent, so the real question is which is mostly true? Do most homeless people fit the stereotype or not? And even if they do, is helping merely a choice, or does it remain our obligation? Can we excuse ourselves from helping by fearing and criminalizing the homeless, often for just being homeless? As with the expendables of every age, do we criminalize them to justify the status quo and to relieve ourselves of any burden our society has for allowing a situation that leaves too many people out?

To begin to wrestle with these questions, it might surprise you to know the number of homeless people the U.S. is relatively small. According to recent surveys, there are just under 600,000 homeless people in the country, about 70-percent of whom are individuals and 30-percent are families with children.¹¹ While that's a lot, it's less than .2—that's point-2— percent of our population. And the number of homeless in our society is declining and has been since 2015. According to HUD (The Department of Housing and Urban Development), between 2020 and 2021, when the last survey was completed, the number decreased by 8 percent, a sharper decline than has been usual.¹²

This is obviously good news, but if true, why do tent cities appear to be cropping up in cities throughout the nation? Why does it look to us like homelessness is on the rise? Has there been a sudden increase in addiction and debilitating mental illnesses? Or does it seem more likely that as additional people move into cities, making housing less available and less affordable, that more people will end up sleeping on the streets or in shelters? I read a story a few years ago about a chef who worked in Seattle, where he couldn't afford to live. But

commuting every day from someplace far away enough to afford was also impossible. So, he stayed in the city and slept in his car. He is among many of the working poor, even the working Middle Class, like teachers, police officers, and firefighters who can no longer afford to live in the communities they serve.

According to a 2007 academic study, only 8 percent of the homeless in Los Angeles were homeless because of drug and alcohol problems. And only 7 percent were unable to find shelter because of their criminal records.¹³ The study found that most people become homeless for one of three reasons, “loss of material resources, loss of family or social connections, and loss of health.”¹⁴ Job loss, debilitating illnesses making it impossible to work, divorce causing a cut in income and benefits, and so on, were the kinds or reasons most people became homeless. They are people, like most Americans, living pay-check-to-pay-check, who were on the edge of destitution to begin with, not criminals, addicts, or too insane to be functional.

In the long ago past, those our societies pushed to the wayside were dismissed as untouchable, unclean, degraded, expendable and deserving of the circumstances they were in. In the more recent past, they were heathens forced to go live on the Reservation, or pushed into poor communities to live behind red lines with “their own kind,” or to the “other side of the tracks” were they could be overlooked by the rest of society. Today, when it comes to the homeless, we have been conditioned to lump everyone into a negative stereotype that frees us of our responsibility to help our neighbors, our fellow citizens, who are part of a society that simply doesn’t always work for everyone, including not every hardworking American, be they from in the city or in the woods. We live in a society in which wages have remained flat for decades, even as the demand for and costs of housing have steadily risen and are now out of reach for many Americans.

The solutions to this embarrassing and painful problem are numerous. What they need is adequate funding. Given that the number of us who are homeless is so small, less than .2 percent, the investment necessary to solve homelessness is also relatively little compared to other issues, like student loan forgiveness, dealing with 2 to 8 percent of those involved with Criminal Justice System, the rising costs of environmental disasters, and certainly far less than big tick items like Public Education, Policing, and the Military. We can afford to solve homelessness if we have the will to do so. Yet, today, the HUD budget isn’t half of what it was 45 years ago.¹⁵ As a 2020 Bloomberg article explains, over the years HUD’s “disinvestment in public housing and other housing programs ... forced more low-income people to compete in the Darwinian private housing market.”¹⁶ Which, in turn, forced many of them out of the market altogether and onto the streets or into shelters.

The problem, then, is not a lack of resources, but a lack of will. And this lack of will has been fostered by a false narrative and stereotype that lumps everyone who is homeless into the category of being addicts, insane, and, for that matter, criminal. The official definition of a homeless person is, “An individual or family who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence,” in other words, a place to sleep. Hence, as more communities deal with the problem by simply enacting laws prohibiting people from “camping” in public areas, being homeless itself becomes a criminal act. Now, in addition to facing poverty, hunger, the cold, the homeless must fear their own overwhelming, inevitable, and natural

urge to sleep because sleeping on the streets, even when you have no place else to go, is criminal.

Criminalizing sleep, putting boulders under overpasses, blocking off access to viaducts, dispersing tent cities and other encampments, won't make the problem go away. Nor will isolating our own neighborhoods by drawing redlines around them, succumbing to the fears our prejudices have caused in us. Let's own these fears, put them in perspective, and see through them to those who are standing on the other side. For dealing with homelessness is not a choice, it is our responsibility toward our fellow citizens and human beings who are facing difficulties that aren't necessarily of their own making, but because they are part of a system that doesn't yet work for everyone. And, as advanced as we have become, as much as we should have learned from the historic errors of our pasts, as much prosperity as our nation has experienced, as much wealth as it has, and as much as we all want to see ourselves as kind and just people, we must address homelessness by first acknowledging that in a society such as ours, nobody should be considered expendable.

¹ Herzog, William R., *Parables as Subversive Speech*, (Westminster/John Knox Pres, Louisville, KY, 1994) p. 65

² Ibid., p. 59.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., p. 65.

⁵ <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/the-bottom-half-of-america-has-half-the-wealth-it-did-30-years-ago/>

⁶ <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/11/09/gates-bezos-buffett-have-more-wealth-than-half-the-us-combined.html>

⁷ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-10-08/top-1-earners-hold-more-wealth-than-the-u-s-middle-class>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ <https://www.rentcafe.com/blog/rental-market/apartment-rent-report/rentcafe-apartment-market-report-june-2018/>

¹⁰ <https://css.umich.edu/publications/factsheets/built-environment/us-cities-factsheet>

¹¹ <https://endhomelessness.org/homelessness-in-america/homelessness-statistics/state-of-homelessness/>

¹² <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/sites/default/files/pdf/2021-AHAR-Part-1.pdf>

¹³ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2020-07-06/why-is-homelessness-such-a-problem-in-u-s-cities>

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.