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Why are the Homeless without Homes?

Senior Thesis for the Honors Program

Nathaniel V.C. Young

Advisor: John Krieg

May 19, 2006

HONORS THESIS

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Date 6-12-06

Prologue

I'd like to introduce you to myself two years ago. I'm a five foot seven inches tall kid who regularly reports his height at five-eight. My hair is almost always just a little too long to call neat but not long enough to call free spirited. Every four or five days I have a window of 10 hours when you'd call my chin clean-shaven. I am awesome and ready for anything.

I lead a Bible study for college aged guys. Most of our meetings consist of me and my co-leader throwing out well thought questions to which the guys typically throw back savvy Bible-speak answers. Everything they say is right. To this day I still love this group of guys for their courage and their heart; but few of them had that revolutionist spirit I desperately sought. These guys, myself included, needed something to jolt us from our Christian ghetto. We needed something to shake us awake, to give relevancy to our discussions.

The answer came one night when someone, I can't remember exactly who now, suggested we make some sandwiches and give them to the homeless. With the courage only a junior has, I said why not. What's grown from this experiment in servitude is my own academic and personal maturation. A more realistic understanding of humanity, not cynical, but honest, has replaced a desperate desire for how I wished the world to look.

I'd like to introduce you to myself today. I'm five foot eight, almost, and wear short, neat hair. Two years ago I wrote an empirical paper about the structural causes of homelessness. I wanted very badly to show that homelessness was a condition forced on an unfortunate subset of society who's only real crime was being poor. Since that time

I've volunteered regularly on Saturday nights at a homeless outreach in downtown Bellingham, called Salt on the Street (Salt). I've chronicled many of my experiences from that first year in the ethnography appearing in the second chapter of this work. I believe is Salt appropriately likened to the Hindu depiction of Creation: A lotus blossom continually sprouting, blooming, and dying in an endless cycle. Each Saturday is new and unique as its own creation. We set up tents and trailers in an empty parking lot and at the end of the night tear them down, each white tent canvas falling like the petals of the lotus. Yet, each night is relatively the same, sharing similar traits with any other Saturday. For this reason I won't say that you aren't missing anything from the lack of a formal account of that second year; but, I can confirm that the ethnography still offers an accurate portrait of my experience at Salt.

I ask you, then, to read the following documents as a single work, spanning years and many seasons of blossoms. I still stand by the results and conclusions of both papers, allowing the small caveat that, having spent two years handing out the same packages of socks, underwear, and clean shirt to Salt's regulars, Saturday after Saturday, I now believe a degree of utility maximization goes into some individuals' incidence of homelessness.

Chapter I

The Effect of Housing Markets and Income Distribution on the Rates of American Homelessness

Today a universal fixture in American cities is the visibly homeless. They are Americans who catch sickness, starve, live, and die on the street. This paper examines a possible explanation for why some Americans experience homelessness.

The common explanation during the last two decades of the 20th century was circumstantial in nature rather than structural. Mental illness and substance abuse often dominated the discussion on homelessness (Quigley et al. 2001). These responses are correct to a large extent. Schoeni and Koegel reported approximately 25% of a surveyed sample of Los Angeles homeless in 1990 were mentally ill. Two thirds of those surveyed reported being chronic substance abusers while 17% exhibited both mental illness and substance abuse. Many of the homeless surveyed lacked a high school education, suffered from domestic strife, and did not carry health insurance (Schoeni and Koegel, 1998).

The presence of addiction and hopelessness complicates the determination of other contributors to the incidence of homelessness. The conspicuous nature of these illnesses threatens to distract attention from important and potentially manageable economic factors. Identifying these economic influences and assessing the magnitude of their impact is the focus of this paper.

In 1996, Brendan O'Flaherty published his influential book, *Making Room: The Economics of Homelessness*; he argues therein that housing markets, affected by income distributions, significantly contribute to the incidence of homelessness. As the rate of the

population living in poverty increases, as it had dramatically from 1980 to 1983 and again from 1989 to 1993 with a gradual trough between (Hoynes, et.al. 2006), the demand for low quality housing rises. The higher demand raises the rents for low income housing. Meanwhile, a dwindling of the middle class decreases the demand for middle income housing, reducing its quantity produced. The amount of middle income housing depreciating into low income housing by the passage of time lessens, resulting in supply shortages and exacerbating the increase in rent on the low income housing. An individual experiencing extreme poverty might be indifferent to consuming the poorest quality of housing at the market rate or freeing up his or her resources by living homeless without rent. Lowering the ratio of middle-class people to poor people raises rents and moves those at or near the indifference level into homelessness (O'Flaherty, 1996). O'Flaherty argues that homelessness results from individuals making rational decisions on housing consumption under extremely limited incomes.¹

Quigley, Raphael, and Smolensky (2001) examine the influence of housing markets on homelessness. Their results show tighter housing markets associate positively with higher incidence of homelessness. Measurements of housing costs, such as median gross rent, fair market rent, and the ratio of these rent levels to income, yield significant positive coefficients. Rates of housing vacancy exhibit significant negative effects on homelessness as do colder temperatures. The study also includes a measurement of income inequality which suggests a positive relationship with homelessness.

¹ A survey conducted by the United States Department of Health and Human Services on homeless in Washington, D.C. showed a mean monthly income of only \$313.02 (DC*MADS, 1991).

The Model

To examine the causes of homelessness this paper analyzes observations of housing costs, vacancy rates, temperature, and income for the one hundred largest cities in the United States in the year 2000.² The relatively small number of observations in my data set and the inherent errors and difficulties in acquiring accurate measures of homelessness necessitates the use of a simple model.

The model regresses the rate of homelessness on the natural log of the Fair Market Rent (FMR) for a one bedroom housing unit, the average temperature in March, the median age, the ratio of median household income to mean household income, and the vacancy rate. The ratio of the median income to the mean income measures income inequality. The ratio is preferable to the difference because the former is unaffected by the size of the incomes involved, providing a linear estimator. Hoynes, et al similarly use the ratio of median weekly wage to the 20th percentile of weekly wage as a measure of inequality in their recently published work on poverty in America (Hoynes, et al. 2006). The model is illustrated by the equation below:

$$\text{Homeless Rate} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Ln}(\text{Fair Market Rent}_{1\text{Bedroom}}) + \beta_2 \text{Temperature}_{\text{March}} + \beta_3 \\ \text{Median Age} + \beta_4 \text{MedHHY}/\text{MeanHHY} + \beta_5 \text{Vacancy Rate}$$

² Much of the data collected was available at the county, rather than municipal level. This did not pose an issue for cities besides New York. Rather than residing in one county as most all the other one hundred largest cities do, this largest city divides itself across its many boroughs such as Brooklyn, Queens, Kings, etc. New York is excluded as an observation instead of trying to assimilate the different measurements across boroughs or use homelessness counts at the county level which I felt would introduce unnecessary error into the regression.

O’Flaherty’s theory suggests that homelessness in the last part of the 20th century largely results from housing market tightness. Therefore, the fair market rent is likely to be positively associated with levels of homelessness. Quigley (1996) finds that fair market rents yield positive and significant coefficients with relative consistency. Positive coefficients are anticipated for the natural log of fair market rents which will provide the elasticity of fair market rents to homelessness.

Quigley (1996) includes measurements of winter weather and finds a significant positive effect of temperature on homelessness. Colder temperatures are associated with lower incidence of homelessness. This study includes the average temperature for March, 2000, when the homeless counts were taken, and expect a positive coefficient.

The median age of the citizens in the counties or metropolitan survey areas (MSAs) of the cities in the sample, as determined by the 2000 census, are included to examine potential demographic affects on homelessness. Older populations are generally associated with greater wealth.

Figure 1, right, shows the mean household income for the sample cities by median age. The trend line demonstrates the expected behavior of a positive correlation between the median age and the mean income for this sample. O’Flaherty (1996) suggests that services to the homeless are normal goods to

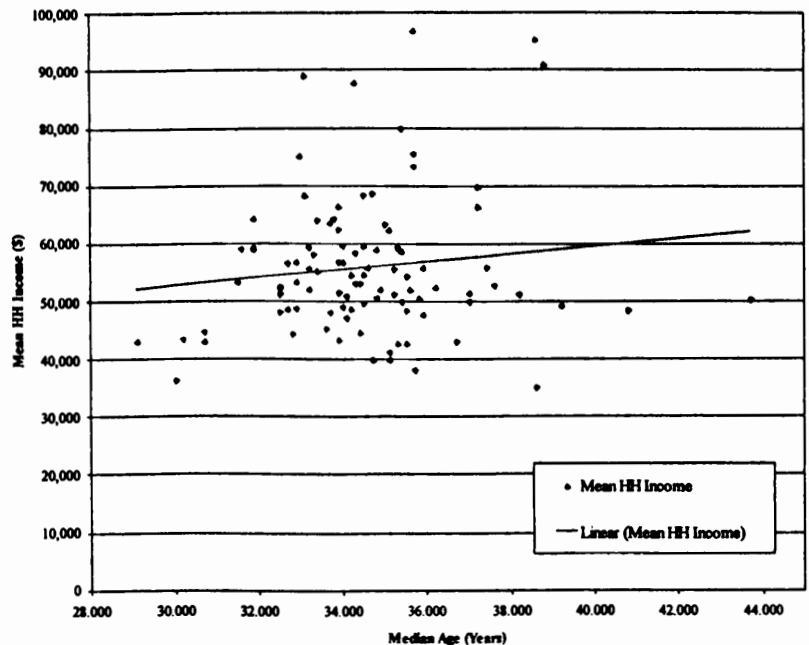


Figure 1: Mean HH Income by Median Age

individuals and society. If older populations provide a larger tax base, the counties receiving these larger resources might provide programs such as shelters and soup kitchens that would attract migratory homeless to the area from other parts of the country (Cragg and O'Flaherty 1999). Higher median ages therefore are likely associated with higher levels of homelessness, even though homelessness itself has lower average ages.

The ratio of median household income to mean household income appears in the model to proxy for the number of poor people in a population relative to the middle and upper classes. As is typical in studies of income distribution, for each observation, the median local income lies below the mean.³ This indicates the distribution of household incomes is skewed with the thick tail at the lower end of the distribution. A higher median income relative to mean income produces a ratio closer to one and indicates fewer people with very high incomes relative to people with very low incomes. The further the median income lies from the mean, the greater is the concentration of poor households to wealthy ones. Using much more sophisticated measurements of income distribution, O'Flaherty (1996) shows that a lower ratio of middle-class incomes to poor incomes is associated with a higher incidence of homelessness. This is in accordance with his theory that lower ratios representing a smaller middle class will correspond to greater demand for low-income housing and a smaller supply which pushes up rents resulting in more homelessness. In this study, a ratio of median household income to mean household income closer to one suggests a larger middle class. Therefore, a negative coefficient is expected.

³ The median and mean household incomes are taken for the metropolitan survey areas, or at the county level when MSA data were unavailable, from the American Community Survey portion of the government census for 2000.

The vacancy rate offers another measurement of housing market tightness. High vacancy rates are likely associated with looser housing markets and less homelessness. Quigley (1996) finds vacancy rates show predominantly negative association with lower rates of homelessness. Vacancy rates are included in this model to test the validity of these findings.

The Data

This study assesses each city's level of homelessness by taking the percentages of the cities' populations living in homelessness calculated from data taken for the 2000 census.⁴ Although the average rate of homelessness for the sample is only 0.66%, the actual rates of each city varies greatly from 0.075% to 1.584%, for Irving, TX and Seattle, WA, respectively. For a city the size of Seattle, a rate of 0.66% would mean 3,717 people living on the street. In reality, Seattle's sample high rate of 1.584%,

⁴The definition and measuring strategies of homelessness varies greatly from census to census and between counts taken at national as opposed to local levels. The 2000 census refers to homelessness as "other, noninstitutionalized group quarters." This vague term includes those living in emergency and transitional shelters, defined as "permanent and emergency housing, missions, Salvation Army shelters, transitional shelters, hotels and motels used to shelter people without conventional housing, and similar places known to have people without conventional housing staying overnight. Also included are shelters that operate on a first come, first-serve basis where people must leave in the morning and have no guaranteed bed for the next night OR where people know that they have a bed for a specified period of time (even if they leave the building every day)" Census (2000). The emergency and transitional shelters count also includes people staying at places offering temporary shelter during times of intense cold and runaway or neglected children shelters who lack conventional housing. The homeless count also includes those staying in shelters for victims of domestic abuse. Counts from these institutions were taken for those staying over night on March 27, 2000.

Soup kitchen and mobile food van patrons on March 28, 2000 were also included in the homeless count. Finally, a census was taken of "targeted non-sheltered outdoor locations" on March 29, 2000. These were open outdoor locations where people spending the night were not likely to have visited soup kitchens, mobile food vans, or shelters on the previous nights. They do not include pay-for-use camping sites, post-offices, hospital emergency rooms, or all-night commercial sits such as theaters, diners, etc. This measurement of homelessness undoubtedly undercounts the population of homeless in each city. However, the uniformity and simultaneity of the count, taken between March 27 to March 29, should provide a relatively uniform error across observations. The count does not take into consideration the seasonality of homelessness; but reliable time series data on homelessness over the course of a year at the national level does not exist.

translates to 8,921 people living homeless. These numbers testify to the relevancy of homelessness as a concern in the Pacific Northwest and the nation at large, not just in large East Coast or Southern cities. Tacoma experiences the 8th largest homeless rate at 1.20% and 2,318 homeless people. Descriptive statistics of the homelessness rate, including the means and standard errors of exogenous variables, can be found in Table 1.

To estimate the effect of housing costs on homelessness the study includes the

Fair Market Rent (FMR) of a one bedroom housing unit, as published for the 2001 fiscal year by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). The FMR is set for the HUD voucher program to determine appropriate subsidy levels for program participants. FMR estimates

Variable	Description	
Homeless Rate	Percent of population experiencing homelessness March 27-29, 2000	0.006597 (0.003100)
Fair Market Rent _{1Bedroom}	Estimate of rent plus utilities for privately owned non-luxury rental housing (dollars)	566.7374 (151.3107)
Temperature _{March}	Mean temperature for March (°F)	49.76869 (10.40677)
Median Age	Median age of county population from 2000 census (Years)	34.52626 (2.238193)
Median HH Y	Median household income (dollars)	42104.15 (8709.687)
Mean HH Y	Mean household income (dollars)	55601.03 (11595.00)
MedHHY/MeanHHY	Ratio of median household income to mean household income (dollars)	0.758664 (0.049036)
Vacancy Rate	Percent of housing units standing vacant from 2000 census	6.872727 (2.671956)
Population	County population from 2000 census	490730.3 (510675.3)
Poverty Rate	Percent of population living in poverty in 2000	13.5798 (4.572008)

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics
Standard errors in parenthesis.

the rent plus utilities, excluding phone service, for privately owned non-luxury rental housing with “suitable amenities” which is sanitary and safe in a geographic region assumedly sharing a single housing market. FMRs are set at the dollar amount which forty or fifty percent of standard quality housing units could be rented for in that area, termed the 40th or 50th percentile rent. These percentiles are drawn from a distribution of rents paid for housing units by renters living there fifteen months or less. Adjustments

are made for new and substandard housing units. The one bedroom FMR is used because it is more likely to affect the decisions of homeless persons who would likely seek the smallest accommodations possible due to limited incomes.⁵ The average FMR of a one bedroom apartment is \$566.74 a month.

The Temperature_{March} variable is the average temperature for each city during the month of March, the month in which the homeless counts were taken.⁶ All averages are determined from data collected over at least ten years. The lowest temperature in the sample is 25°F, the highest temperature is 74°F, and the mean temperature is 49.77°F for the month of March.

The Median Age variable expresses the median age of the citizens in the county or metropolitan survey area (MSA) of the city in question, as determined by the 2000 census. The highest median comes from St. Petersburg, FL at 43.7 years old. Norfolk, VA boasts the youngest median age of 29.1, while the average median age is 34.53 years. Norfolk experiences the 8th lowest rate of homelessness in the sample, while St. Petersburg experiences the 25th highest, loosely supporting the theory that homelessness is positively associated with older populations.

To further examine the effect of housing markets on homelessness this study includes the percentage of vacant housing units in the city's county, or MSA when county data was unavailable. A housing unit is considered vacant if no one is living in

⁵ The HUD performs extensive adjusting of FMRs centered on two bedroom housing units. The rents of one bedroom units are adjusted according to bedroom size relative to two bedroom units and excluded if its rent exceeds the two bedroom rate. Further, adequate information is only collected on two bedroom units. The FMR of a one bedroom housing unit is largely determined using percentages centered on two bedroom rates, although adjustments are made in consideration of census data. A model including both two bedroom and one bedroom FMRs was estimated; but the two bedroom variable exhibited a variance inflation factor of 36.8, indicating multicollinearity.

⁶Data for this variable was collected from the websites: <http://www.weatherbase.com/weather/state.php3?c=US&s=&refer=> and <http://www.worldclimate.com/cgi-bin/grid.pl?gr=N33W117>.

the housing unit at the time of the survey unless the occupants are only temporarily absent.⁷ The average vacancy rate for the sample is 6.87%.

As stated previously, for each observation, the median local income lies below the mean as is typical in studies of income distribution.⁸ The average median household income for the survey is \$42,104.15. The average mean household income is much higher at \$55,601.03, and the average ratio of median household income to mean household income is just over $\frac{3}{4}$ at 0.76.

⁷ Vacation homes and units occupied by individuals who usually reside elsewhere are also considered vacant. Newly constructed units that are safe from the elements also qualify as vacant. Homeless shelters, lodging houses, and barracks are not defined as a housing unit and are not counted in measurements of vacancy.

⁸ The median and mean household incomes are taken for the metropolitan survey areas, or at the county level when MSA data were unavailable, from the American Community Survey portion of the government census for 2000.

Results

The results, corrected for heteroskedasticity, are shown in Table 2. Three variables proved significant: Ln(Fair Market Rent_{1Bedroom}), the coefficient of which represents the elasticity of the FMR on homelessness, Median Age, and Vacancy Rate.

The FMR variable yields a positive coefficient as expected. The coefficient on the natural log of the FMR indicates an elasticity of 0.33%. For a 1%

increase in the FMR of a one bedroom housing unit, the rate of homelessness will increase by 0.33%. Table 3, on page 14, presents the dollar increase in the FMR required to increase homelessness by 1% for the five largest and five smallest cities by population in the sample, excluding New York due to the difficulty of assimilating the information from its many boroughs in a meaningful way. Table 4 at the end of this chapter presents the dollar increase in the FMR required to increase homelessness by 1% for all 99 cities in the sample. The average increase in rent for a 1% increase in homelessness for all 99

Variable	OLS 1	OLS 2	OLS 3
Ln(Fair Market Rent _{1Bedroom})	0.003283** (0.001600)	0.003304** (0.001669)	0.003324** (0.001450)
Temperature _{March}	-4.45E-05 (2.95E-05)	-4.45E-05 (2.97E-05)	-4.39E-05 (3.09E-05)
Median Age	0.00035*** (0.000135)	0.000348*** (0.000140)	0.000493*** (0.000147)
MedHHY/MeanHHY	-0.006888 (0.007873)	-0.006985 (0.008268)	-0.001646 (0.006450)
Vacancy Rate	0.000221* (0.000129)	0.000221* (0.000130)	3.34E-05 (0.000150)
Population		-4.59E-11 (4.82E-10)	
Poverty Rate			0.000205*** (8.24E-05)
N	99	99	99
R ²	0.186422	0.186473	0.237892
F-stat	4.261974 (0.001558)	3.514644 (0.003554)	4.786313 (0.000273)

Table 2: OLS Estimates of Exogenous Variables

OLS 1 and OLS 2 corrected for heteroskedasticity using White's correction. OLS 3 did not exhibit heteroskedasticity using White's Test. Standard errors shown in parenthesis except on F-stat which shows probability. *{***}*** represents significance at the 90%, 95%, and 99% levels respectfully. All regressions were estimated with a constant.

cities is only \$17.17. The 1% increase in homelessness for the cities in the sample translates into 3,229 new homeless people. A 1% increase in homelessness for Seattle, Portland, Tacoma, and Spokane results in 181 new people on the street.

The variable representing the median age produces the expected significant positive coefficient. The coefficient on this variable, however, is quite small. The results suggest that an increase in the median age by one year increases the homelessness rate 0.03 percentage points. Inversely, the median age would need to increase by over 33% to produce even a 1% increase in the rate of homelessness. For example, the median age of Seattle would need to rise from 37.2 to 49.6 years, 5.9 years above the sample maximum, to correspond with 89 more people living homeless.

The vacancy rate variable yields an unexpected positive and significant coefficient. The results suggest that as the vacancy rate increases so do the levels of homelessness. Quigley et al. (2001) experience a similar phenomenon in their regressions using homeless families with children as their dependent variable. Their dataset only contained fifty observations of homelessness in families with children, which they suspect produces the strange results. Finding likely explanations for these results proves difficult. The unexpected results in Quigley’s study suggest the average size of

Rank	City	2000 FMR _{1Bedroom}	2000 Homeless Rate	\$ Increased to raise homeless 1%	People moved into homelessness
2	Los Angeles city	\$618.00	0.79%	\$18.73	292.64
3	Chicago city	\$711.00	0.56%	\$21.54	163.37
4	Houston city	\$529.00	0.52%	\$16.03	101.32
5	Philadelphia city	\$657.00	0.83%	\$19.91	126.66
6	Phoenix city	\$544.00	0.67%	\$16.48	88.92
96	Spokane city	\$436.00	0.98%	\$13.21	19.14
97	Augusta-Richmond County	\$465.00	1.30%	\$14.09	25.29
98	Glendale city	\$618.00	0.59%	\$18.73	11.49
99	Tacoma city	\$482.00	1.20%	\$14.60	23.18
100	Irving city	\$647.00	0.08%	\$19.60	1.44
Totals				\$172.92	853.45

Table 3: Increase in FMR to increase homeless rate by 1% for five largest and smallest sample cities

vacant housing units is important since families require more bedrooms.

Surprisingly, the average temperature yields an insignificant coefficient, as does the ratio of median household income to mean household income. The model includes the ratio of incomes because O'Flaherty's theory suggests it affects housing demands and rents. However, since this is a measurement of housing markets, albeit an indirect one, multicollinearity might exist between the income ratio, the FMR, and the vacancy rate. A larger data set would likely provide stronger results for both the income ratio and the temperature.

Another possible influence on the rate of homelessness is the size of a city's population. Larger cities might provide greater work opportunities that could attract the homeless. Alternatively, a large population might increase the difficulty of processing applications for assistance and allow more poor people to "slip through the cracks." The population of the county in which the city resides is added to the model to examine population effects. This data, taken from the 2000 census, includes homeless individuals. The results of this regression, corrected for heteroskedasticity, are shown in Table 2 under OLS 2. Adding the variable to the model fails to produce significant changes to the results. These findings support the notion that homelessness results from housing market conditions

The percentage of a population experiencing poverty also likely affects the incidence of homelessness in that population. Higher levels of poverty should be associated with higher levels of homelessness. OLS 3 introduces a poverty variable expressing the percentages of the county populations living below the poverty threshold

as defined by the 2000 census.⁹ The regression tests negative for heteroskedasticity using White's test and is left uncorrected. Introducing the poverty rate into the model produces a significant positive coefficient at the 1% confidence level. The vacancy rate drops out of significance, the coefficient on the median age rises slightly, the FMR coefficient stays relatively constant and the other variables remain insignificant. Homelessness and poverty intuitively share a very strong correlation that likely overshadows the other influences on homelessness in such a limited data set. The endurance of a significant coefficient on the FMR despite the introduction of poverty into the model reinforces the argument that housing markets exert a sizable influence on homeless rates.

If the price elasticity of the poverty rate, i.e. how much does the poverty rate change relative to the amount of money spent to combat it, could be determined, a comparison could be made between FMR subsidization and fighting poverty. Lowering the FMR of an area, which is equal to offering greater housing subsidization, may decrease homelessness more efficiently than targeting a lower poverty rate. The issue then, of course, becomes whether decreasing homelessness increases the total welfare of society over decreasing poverty. Such an issue is a topic for another paper.

Conclusion

The results of the model suggest that local housing markets influence the incidence of homelessness in their areas. This is particularly interesting because it implies that economic theory applies to a portion of society commonly associated with

⁹ Poverty is determined using thresholds based on family income and household characteristics such as the number of people in a household and the age of those people. The thresholds are uniform across the country.

irrational decision making. In actuality, the findings affirm the humanity of the homeless as utility maximizers. In any population of homeless individuals, some are likely interested in finding affordable housing while others, either due to discouragement or unusual tastes resulting from addiction, are content with their current bundle of goods. If the homeless are indeed rational consumers, as the work of O'Flaherty, Quigley, and this study suggests, then subsidy based policies can be adopted to affect the consumption habits of at least the subset seeking housing.

Reactionary responses to the presence of homelessness, such as shelters, do not address causes of homelessness. While emergency housing and soup kitchens provide a humane and often necessary public service in caring for the downtrodden of society, they also provide adverse incentives to stay on the street (Cragg and O'Flaherty 1999). The problem remains that shelters do not reduce homelessness but merely provide temporary havens from the pain of the streets. Even if providing shelters is a cheaper alternative to subsidized housing in the short run, the money is not going towards reducing homelessness. In the long run, society might spend more due to the chronically homeless it partially creates than it would on moving people into their own homes. A subsidized housing and voucher program is favorable to a mass of institutionalized homeless. Remember from the calculations in Table 3, the findings suggest that lowering the median rent of non-luxury housing in Seattle by \$19.46 can move 89 people out of a life of hunger, isolation, and personal danger that is homelessness.

For others on the street, no voucher program or housing subsidy will alter their consumption decisions. Whether by mental illness, addiction, or simply a set of preferences alien to most, some homeless have found contentment, or at least

complacency, on the street. If this complacency derives from a malevolent mixture of hopelessness and helplessness is a topic for still another paper. Preventing that first necessity to move into homelessness might save a portion of our society who is guilty of little more than being poor. Homeless rates around or below one percent should not be cause for indifference but inspiration. Properly funded and managed housing programs, along with a wide array of counseling and increased social consciousness, may assist in alleviating an excessively painful malady of society.

Table 4: Increase in FMR to increase homeless rate by 1% for 99 sample cities

Rank	City	2000 FMR _{1Bedroom}	2000 Homeless Rate	\$ Increased to raise homeless 1%	People moved into homelessness
2	Los Angeles city	\$618.00	0.79%	\$18.73	292.64
3	Chicago city	\$711.00	0.56%	\$21.54	163.37
4	Houston city	\$529.00	0.52%	\$16.03	101.32
5	Philadelphia city	\$657.00	0.83%	\$19.91	126.66
6	Phoenix city	\$544.00	0.67%	\$16.48	88.92
7	San Diego city	\$716.00	0.77%	\$21.69	94.34
8	Dallas city	\$647.00	0.34%	\$19.60	40.4
9	San Antonio city	\$461.00	0.42%	\$13.97	48.3
10	Detroit city	\$598.00	0.85%	\$18.12	81.04
11	San Jose city	\$1,199.00	0.53%	\$36.33	47.24
12	Indianapolis city	\$465.00	0.37%	\$14.09	28.99
13	San Francisco city	\$1,154.00	1.49%	\$34.97	115.95
14	Jacksonville city	\$530.00	0.32%	\$16.06	23.59
15	Columbus city	\$471.00	0.35%	\$14.27	24.77
16	Austin city	\$645.00	0.64%	\$19.54	41.88
17	Baltimore city	\$542.00	0.59%	\$16.42	38.55
18	Memphis city	\$462.00	0.39%	\$14.00	25.64
19	Milwaukee city	\$504.00	0.53%	\$15.27	31.81
20	Boston city	\$782.00	1.04%	\$23.69	61.45
21	Washington city	\$773.00	1.28%	\$23.42	73.49
22	El Paso city	\$451.00	0.28%	\$13.67	16.04
23	Seattle city	\$639.00	1.58%	\$19.36	89.21
24	Denver city	\$625.00	0.81%	\$18.94	44.97
25	Nashville-Davidson	\$520.00	0.47%	\$15.76	25.39
26	Charlotte city	\$585.00	0.42%	\$17.73	22.45
27	Fort Worth city	\$521.00	0.35%	\$15.79	18.83
28	Portland city	\$592.00	0.92%	\$17.94	48.81
29	Oklahoma City city	\$422.00	0.46%	\$12.79	23.43
30	Tucson city	\$470.00	0.77%	\$14.24	37.26
31	New Orleans city	\$423.00	0.59%	\$12.82	28.83
32	Las Vegas city	\$636.00	0.58%	\$19.27	27.69
33	Cleveland city	\$555.00	0.77%	\$16.82	36.95
34	Long Beach city	\$618.00	0.98%	\$18.73	45.17
35	Albuquerque city	\$505.00	0.71%	\$15.30	31.74
36	Kansas City city	\$526.00	0.62%	\$15.94	27.58
37	Fresno city	\$433.00	0.51%	\$13.12	21.75
38	Virginia Beach city	\$535.00	0.13%	\$16.21	5.55
39	Atlanta city	\$720.00	1.55%	\$21.82	64.56
40	Sacramento city	\$547.00	0.78%	\$16.57	31.72
41	Oakland city	\$921.00	0.94%	\$27.91	37.49
42	Mesa city	\$544.00	0.43%	\$16.48	16.91
43	Tulsa city	\$427.00	0.52%	\$12.94	20.48
44	Omaha city	\$469.00	0.52%	\$14.21	20.11

45	Minneapolis city	\$580.00	1.26%	\$17.57	48.4
46	Honolulu CDP	\$713.00	1.19%	\$21.60	44.24
47	Miami city	\$616.00	0.87%	\$18.66	31.52
48	Colorado Springs city	\$486.00	0.38%	\$14.73	13.8
49	St. Louis city	\$429.00	0.90%	\$13.00	31.3
50	Wichita city	\$425.00	0.37%	\$12.88	12.85
51	Santa Ana city	\$845.00	0.63%	\$25.60	21.42
52	Pittsburgh city	\$476.00	0.68%	\$14.42	22.88
53	Arlington city	\$521.00	0.18%	\$15.79	5.97
54	Cincinnati city	\$416.00	0.71%	\$12.60	23.38
55	Anaheim city	\$845.00	0.76%	\$25.60	25.06
56	Toledo city	\$444.00	0.56%	\$13.45	17.49
57	Tampa city	\$557.00	0.57%	\$16.88	17.2
58	Buffalo city	\$453.00	0.66%	\$13.73	19.21
59	St. Paul city	\$580.00	0.94%	\$17.57	26.87
60	Corpus Christi city	\$438.00	0.63%	\$13.27	17.56
61	Aurora city	\$625.00	0.18%	\$18.94	4.87
62	Raleigh city	\$643.00	0.60%	\$19.48	16.7
63	Newark city	\$777.00	0.72%	\$23.54	19.71
64	Lexington-Fayette	\$435.00	0.51%	\$13.18	13.24
65	Anchorage municipality	\$599.00	0.96%	\$18.15	24.97
66	Louisville city	\$415.00	0.89%	\$12.57	22.86
67	Riverside city	\$508.00	0.82%	\$15.39	21.03
68	St. Petersburg city	\$557.00	0.85%	\$16.88	21.01
69	Bakersfield city	\$419.00	0.65%	\$12.70	16.18
70	Stockton city	\$477.00	0.71%	\$14.45	17.23
71	Birmingham city	\$454.00	1.16%	\$13.76	28.09
72	Jersey City city	\$709.00	0.37%	\$21.48	8.94
73	Norfolk city	\$535.00	0.31%	\$16.21	7.2
74	Baton Rouge city	\$404.00	0.60%	\$12.24	13.66
75	Hialeah city	\$616.00	0.60%	\$18.66	13.48
76	Lincoln city	\$408.00	0.39%	\$12.36	8.8
77	Greensboro city	\$472.00	0.70%	\$14.30	15.61
78	Plano city	\$647.00	0.16%	\$19.60	3.48
79	Rochester city	\$504.00	0.89%	\$15.27	19.66
80	Glendale city	\$544.00	0.37%	\$16.48	8.16
81	Akron city	\$469.00	0.47%	\$14.21	10.15
82	Garland city	\$647.00	0.22%	\$19.60	4.8
83	Madison city	\$559.00	0.61%	\$16.94	12.67
84	Fort Wayne city	\$414.00	0.67%	\$12.54	13.74
85	Fremont city	\$921.00	0.49%	\$27.91	10.04
86	Scottsdale city	\$544.00	0.58%	\$16.48	11.75
87	Montgomery city	\$429.00	0.42%	\$13.00	8.43
88	Shreveport city	\$392.00	0.57%	\$11.88	11.49
89	Lubbock city	\$390.00	0.48%	\$11.82	9.6
90	Chesapeake city	\$535.00	0.30%	\$16.21	5.91
91	Mobile city	\$430.00	0.44%	\$13.03	8.83
92	Des Moines city	\$458.00	0.73%	\$13.88	14.6

93	Grand Rapids city	\$492.00	0.87%	\$14.91	17.14
94	Richmond city	\$576.00	1.21%	\$17.45	23.87
95	Yonkers city	\$939.00	0.38%	\$28.45	7.44
96	Spokane city	\$436.00	0.98%	\$13.21	19.14
97	Augusta-Richmond County	\$465.00	1.30%	\$14.09	25.29
98	Glendale city	\$618.00	0.59%	\$18.73	11.49
99	Tacoma city	\$482.00	1.20%	\$14.60	23.18
100	Irving city	\$647.00	0.08%	\$19.60	1.44
Totals				\$1,700.04	3,228.30

Interlude

What does it mean to be homeless? It means invisibility. It means living as a specter others smell more than see. It means living as a minority with no banner to wave. The term “Homeless” transcends gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, and age. In absolute terms, more white men are categorized as homeless than any other demographic. In percentages, traditional minorities show a stronger presence. But traditional divisions mean little next to the prefix “Homeless.” Indeed, nothing is often attached to the term. How many times do you hear, “the homeless” as opposed to “homeless people?” Our phraseology has almost erased their very humanity.

When I volunteer on Saturday nights, the first time volunteers often eye me with dis-ease and masked fear. They can’t tell if I’m homeless or a fellow volunteer. The very “otherness” of the homeless rubs off on you after awhile. My fiancé’s cousins ask her, “Is Nate normal?”

I initially envisioned this project with a significant portion dedicated to myself as an undercover agent, walking the streets in a large Mexican poncho, sleeping a weekend in an alley, learning what it really meant to be homeless. My experiences have taught me two things: First, the homeless are already more like what we typically refer to as normal society than any of us in that society expects. Second, no dress-up time can bridge the gap left over with the same grace as approaching a homeless person with honesty and an open mind.

I’ve talked with college educated individuals living on the street because they felt stifled by society. I’ve talked with others who could not read or write who were seeking

employment and peace corps positions to help them piece their lives back together. I've talked Marx and Smith, Karl Sagan and Daniel Quinn, with people eating free chili and wearing a handout sweatshirt. There are no typical homeless any more than there are typical college students. Most share some similar traits, but no two stories are exactly alike.

As I've gotten to know more people who are homeless, I doubt the universal effectiveness of things such as housing vouchers more and more. Perhaps such safety nets could catch the recent dis-housed. I suspect, however, people soon adjust to their new lives, begin utility maximizing by taking advantage of free jeans and meals, and join the ranks of the discouraged house hunters, much like the discouraged unemployed.

At that point, the battle shifts from changing broader financial and market conditions to altering individual preferences. I remember vividly working with a man tying rebar in Eastern Washington. He made the same \$14.75 an hour as me, perhaps more. At night, he slept in a tent hidden behind an encircling of old tires in some back lot. He would work until he had made enough money to coast for awhile, then quit and go on his way, hoping he'd be hired back when his cash ran out.

This man had the opportunity to live in a halfway house for five dollars a day as a caretaker for the yard. He chose his tent because the weather was fair and he didn't want to live by the house rules. I never heard what the rules were, but most shelters and halfway house programs require no drugs and alcohol, and have a curfew.

One day while we were working, he got around to talking about spiritual things. He told me he had had a vision when he was a teenager. He said the devil had come to him and pointed down a long valley, beckoning him to follow. Then a bright dazzling

light that made him dizzy shone above. He said the light was an angel, pointing him over mountains in the far distance. He stood between the two, waiting to decide.

At the time, I had nodded furiously, grunting “Mmhmm, Mmhmm,” hoping he would just finish talking and stop being crazy. My experiences since that time have taught me to appreciate the perceptiveness of his observation, or legitimacy of his vision, depending on how you feel about visions. I suspect the majority of individuals who I would term regulars at Salt, beside the elderly, share a similar incident of decision making, though not perhaps in the avatar of divine beckoning. They are tugged after by their preferences. The structured day of steady work costs too much for the luxury of housing and sufficient clothing. Rehab, counseling, perhaps just humility, whatever the lifestyle change, many don’t regard the change worth the changed life.

The following chapter offers a composite of several of my experiences during my first year at Salt. I do not intend to argue for certain policy changes or to create any one interpretation of life at a homelessness outreach. I *do* hope to provide a better understanding of what homelessness and homelessness aid is like. All characters are actual people. The names of the homeless have been changed to protect their privacy and the trust between them and the author.

Chapter II

“Where Hunger is Ugly”¹⁰

Bob Dylan’s “A Hard Rain’s A’gonna Fall” plays in the car as I turn left onto Lakeway Drive. Listening to the opening lines, “*Oh, where have you been my blue eyed son...?*” I feel quiet and anticipant. The clock on the dashboard reads 7:13pm. At Railroad Street in Old Downtown Bellingham I turn right. The street is known for its drug dealers and rumored prostitutes who emerge at night. Four or five guys in their late teens with shaved heads are getting into a fight on the next street corner close to where I want to park. Parking my car under a street light at the opposite end of the block, I see two police cars arrive. They break up the fight and talk to the men, boys really, who hurl profanities and blame at each other. I lock my wallet and cell phone in the glove box.

Around the corner, across from the bus terminal sits a parking lot that charges a buck-fifty the first hour or all day for three. During the day the lot hosts only a handful of cars and little sparrows who hop nervously back and forth pecking at bits of seed or crumbs on the pavement too small to notice. The lot looks small in sunlight with only seventeen parking slots and one handicap space. Old brick buildings border the lot on the east and west. A chain link fence topped with barbed wire runs across the back. At the fringe of the lot weeds sprout through the cracks in the asphalt, punctuated by patches of long grass in some places. Tonight the birds are gone; and different wanderers gather at the lot. They too seek food and rest from their ceaseless sojourn. I know some will approach me timidly, others brazenly, each hoping for something to get them through the week, or perhaps just the night. Tonight, the lot hosts “Salt.”

¹⁰ Title and sub-headings are taken from the lyrics of “A Hard Rain’s A’gonna Fall” by Bob Dylan.

“Salt,” as dubbed by its regular volunteers and attendees, refers to “Salt on the Street,” a local church’s ministry designed to reach out to the homeless and needy of the Bellingham area. The ministry meets every Saturday night at seven o’clock until about ten forty-five at an empty lot in the downtown area of Bellingham. The lot lies just beyond a stretch of bars and nightclubs frequented by the area’s university students. With gelled hair and short skirts, the students appear to live in another world. The ministry allegedly hasn’t missed a night since its birth five years ago, even for Christmas a few years ago.

“Oh, what did you see, my darling young one?”

Some regulars I recognize from Salt talk on the sidewalk as I cross the street across from the terminal. Kevin, a guy in his late twenties I guess, with a bald head and a thin mustache-goatee tells a story.

“Yeah, she’s fuckin’ crazy. She just pulled her underwear down, squatted, and took a shit on the sidewalk! Ha, they wouldn’t let her in the store so she just shit on the sidewalk. She doesn’t know! Ha! Fuckin’ crazy.”

People are gathering in the lot. A long white trailer with “Salt on the Street” written in black block letters on its side already sits in front of the loading dock, still attached to a large white U-haul type truck. On the opposite side of the lot, volunteers and homeless set up white tent coverings, like the ones at high school track meets, over band and audio equipment. To the left more people work on erecting a prayer tent with side tarps. In front of the trailer two long fold out tables sit end to end under more coverings. High school aged girls arrange tank tops, short sleeve t-shirts, and other light

clothing from tubs and black garbage bags on the tables. One girl takes piles of jackets with hangers already in them and hooks them on a fold down rack attached to the side of the trailer. In the back corner down from the trailer, people set up tables for hotdogs, juice, water, and condiments. Volunteers with black shirts arrange cheap plastic chairs in the center of the lot around several long tables. I'm a little late at 7:20 and the set up is almost complete.

Ashley, my girlfriend, accompanies me as usual. She stands at five foot even, an inch shorter since a car accident freshman year, and can't weigh over 110 pounds. Ashley went on a mission trip to New York during spring break of her junior year of college, where she took food for and talked to homeless people. Her experience there, and a desire to keep an eye on me, fuels her interest in Salt.

Squeezing my hand she asks if I remember our first night at Salt. I chuckle recalling my severe nervousness. She admits she was nervous too, at least before we got there.

"Remember how we sat in your room and prayed for ten minutes that we'd be safe?" Yes, I remember that too. The first time we came to Salt I insisted we keep our winter gloves on the whole night to keep us safe from diseases. Perhaps my fear lay in the potential infectiousness of the "otherness." While the directive proved overzealous in retrospect, the trailer keeps an entire rack of antibacterial disinfectant gel over the sink for such sanitation concerns.

Walking up to the trailer I pick out regulars; the frail man in the long black trench coat with the long white beard, John who sits at the off-ramp on Lakeway, the bald man with the names of his daughters tattooed on his neck. They mix into the crowd of people

milling around chairs and collecting near the clothing tables for first dibs. Vickie, who coordinates most of the efforts around the trailer, recognizes us. She stands about 5'4 with short brown hair and a round face accented by round glass frames. Vickie looks around forty-five years old.

“Hey guys! Glad you could make it!” Vickie was the first person at Salt I talked to when I started volunteering last November. Mistaking me as homeless, she told me the trailer wasn't open yet and to be patient. I was wearing fifty dollar jeans, one-hundred-fifteen dollar shoes, and a one-hundred-fifty dollar jacket. Discerning homeless and needy people sometimes proves impossible.

Ashley and I work in the trailer handing out clothes, toiletries, blankets, and personal products such as glasses, Bibles, rain ponchos, hats, gloves, etc. Socks, underwear, and jeans are the clothing items in highest demand. We also offer soap, shampoo, conditioner, toothbrushes, toothpaste, razors, feminine hygiene products, laundry detergent, diapers, some first aid supplies, lotion, and garbage bags.

At the door, Paul, a Latino man on the downhill side of his middle years hurriedly greets us with hand shakes as he walks out to the back of the moving truck.

“Ashley and Nate. How is our power duo?” Duane calls from inside the trailer. The friendly title is a promotion from “The nice young couple,” we earned our second week in the trailer. The “power” part likely refers to Ashley and my efforts in sorting all the clothes and building a spreadsheet to help in restocking. Duane must be in his mid to late sixties and wears a black apron. His name and Salt's simple insignia of the ministry name and a white cross shows in stitching across the front.

Duane was one of seven people who attended a mission trip to Atlanta five years ago to work with the homeless. The team brought a new passion and vision back to Bellingham. Of the seven founders, Duane remains the last who still attends Salt every week. He hands out chili, muffins, and pizza from the back window of the trailer.

Vickie asks me to take two large rubber maid containers of shoes and boots out for unloading. I carry the tubs down and the small army of high school girls goes to work sorting the men's clothing from the women's and folding them for the tables.

Back in the trailer, Ashley pulls donated clothes out of black garbage bags. Large wooden shelving with dividers for men's clothing line the back wall of the trailer. The bottom shelves hold pants with even numbers thirty to thirty-eight written in black sharpie under the individual slots. The shelves above those have markings small to XL and a place for sweatshirts. Identical shelves on the adjoining wall hold women's pants and shirts in inverse order with pant legs covering up most of the shirts. The women's pants dividers are only marked "Small" to "XL" which makes it almost impossible to find a size. As a guy, how do I know if a size fifteen constitutes a medium or a large? Ashley places the clothing in their proper pigeon holes.

"Okay! Let's circle up! Let's get in the circle!" Ken, the ring master and general manager of the site, calls everyone together. One of the volunteers asks Duane if they should stay behind to finish preparing the chili. Duane tells him no, everyone circles up, and instructs Ashley and me to leave our bags of clothes.

Ashley and I step down from the trailer and I get my first chance to really notice the crowd. Two guys walk through the center of the forming circle. Adorned in black, their faces are covered in white and black make-up. I assume they are after the sinister

clown look, which I've heard called "crunking" after the Insane Clown Posse. Instead they are two skulls passing amongst the living. A shiver starts down my spine, the two symbolizing all the death I see on the emaciated bodies and vacuum gazes in the circle.

"Hook it up, let's hook up! Everyone in the circle! Let's hook it up!" People find their way into the circle. Others split up to make room for more. I feel hands on either side of me, flesh against flesh, and I think about what a difference that alone makes. The night I wore my winter gloves, Salt happened everywhere around me but not *in* me. The woman holding my right hand trembles. The fine wrinkles around and behind the big glasses places the woman's age in the upper fifties. A laminated ID badge hangs clipped to her jacket. As Ken starts to speak again, she strokes my hand with her thumb. I am uncomfortable. Reading the mental illness on her face, seeing her age and how alone she seems, pity stirs in my chest. I feel bad for my concern in how she makes me feel. Everyday, this woman must endure ostracism and marginalization. I remain uncomfortable, all the same.

"And what did you hear my blue-eyed son?"

"I'D LIKE TO WELCOME EVERYONE TO SALT ON THE STREET," Ken booms from the opposite side of the circle. He looks like a misplaced biker from the eighties with a short goatee and mullet covered by a black hat with the same Salt logo as Duane's apron. A black shirt with matching logo is tucked into blue jeans which are in turn covered with black leather chaps. I know from the identical shirts Ashley and I wear that his back reads,

**The hands and feet of
Jesus on the street
Matthew 25:35-40**

“We’ve got plenty of fellowship and fun for you tonight, along with food and clothes if you need them.” Ken explains the layout of Salt. Hot dogs and juice are in the back. The trailer dishes up chili, pizza, and salad; along with clothing and toiletry items at the door. Ken asks people to only take what they need so no one goes without.

“We also ask that if you choose to drink or drug that you take it somewhere else. We want this to be a safe place tonight where people can get a good meal and have some fellowship.” In addition, he instructs anyone wanting prayer to grab a volunteer wearing a Salt hat or shirt. If the person prefers, they may leave their written prayer request in the prayer tent and people will pray for them throughout the week.

Ken finishes the introduction explaining the worship and message at Salt. People are free to sing along and listen as they choose. Chairs along the front wait for anyone who can’t hear the speaker but would like to. If the speaker’s message prompts anyone to talk more about their life or faith they should pick out any of the volunteers.

“Oh, and don’t smoke in front of the trailer, it irritates the people inside.”

Ken rattles off the rote message each Saturday night. The predictability of the speech provides a much needed structure to the night. The dynamical nature of Salt leaves it in perpetual shift, always dying, always in creation. The introduction and prayer signals the beginning of that mysterious time pregnant with potential. For the next two and a half hours people don’t need to feel on the street. They belong. Their lives might be changed. As a server, the time brings focus as I reflect on the goal of changing lives.

Ken prays that the food will nourish the bodies of the people attending tonight. He hopes they will open their hearts to what God might be speaking to them, that they might find a better way to live. An older Native American man with tattoos up his entire

neck paces around the inside of the circle near Ken. Individuals and groups often choose not to link up during prayer but usually they stand or sit still near a table or on the outside of the circle. I feel the clammy hand to my right stroking mine with the thumb and I wish Ken would hurry up and say “Amen.”

As soon as he does, the woman holding my hand turns to me and speaks through heavily slurred speech. I can’t understand her. The thick consonants of the woman’s speech come at me. I think the woman wants a jacket so I point her to the rack.

“Rachel? You don’t need a jacket. You have plenty of jackets at home.” Vickie’s voice rains over my shoulder. She walks over and rubs Rachel’s arm. Through thick marmbled speech Rachel makes her plea. Vickie stands steadfast in her refusal.

Relieved from the responsibility and stroking hand of Rachel I return to the black garbage bags of clothes in the trailer. Vickie steps through the door and explains that Rachel suffers from a mental illness. Even though blankets, clothes, and jackets pack her apartment her caretakers deliver her to Salt each week because she thinks she always needs more. “It’s part of her sickness,” Vickie says.

I dig into the next black garbage bag. The overwhelming smell of mildew hits my face. A shaggy wet blanket sits folded inside. Vickie is talking to Duane so I set the blanket aside and get into the next bag. A strange odor wafts from this one too. Pulling out the first pair of jeans, I see streaks of dirt and something stuck to the leg. I hold it up and peck at it with my fingernail. It peels off and I realize I have just picked at a dried worm.

I throw the jeans back in the bag and interrupt Vickie’s conversation. The news about the worm surprises her. She looks in the bag with the rotting blanket and jerks her

head back in disgust. She instructs me to tie the bags back up. They'll take them back to the shop later.

“How can people give things like that?!” Duane vents his disgust over the wormy clothes.

Sometimes people bring things in just off the street to donate. Such items need to be examined closely since many are urine soaked or unwashed. These bags came from Mt. Vernon where they collect most of their donations. One of the members from Salt travels each Monday to pick up the donations and take them to the shop.

The “shop” belongs to Duane. Located only a block up from the lot, Duane’s auto body shop serves as a staging ground to Salt. I carried bags of extra clothes there once with Vickie and Ashley when the trailer got too full. Duane dedicates an entire back room to store Salt supplies such as clothing, razors, toothpaste, coolers, backpacks, blankets and other odds and ends.

“Who did you meet, my darling young one?”

Jeff enters the trailer and gives a muffled, “Hi guys.” He speaks with a thick speech impediment which I have developed an understanding of over time. Jeff is a tall and lanky volunteer with orange-ish hair and a tiny diamond stud in his left ear. He looks about thirty-five but I hear he is actually closer to fifty. Initially I thought Jeff’s speech was merely a heavy Carolinian accent until I learned Jeff was born and raised in North Bellingham. Jeff works in an auto body shop similar to Duane’s as a sweeper. The other volunteers at Salt speculate Jeff earns minimum wage. Jeff on the other hand, states he earns forty dollars an hour which the volunteers contribute to his confusion with working

forty hours a week. Even at minimum wage, Jeff always has some new toy to show off or talk about. Tonight the new drum set Jeff is lending to Salt takes center stage.

“Have you seen the drum set?” Jeff asks in a voice that sounds like he’s trying to talk through his nose. “That’s my drum set.”

Vickie responds with positive affirmation as Ashley and I again nod our heads with agreement.

“That’s my drumset. Those are my drums,” Jeff restates.

More nodding from the peanut gallery.

“You’ve got all the hook-ups, you’re The Man, Jeff,” Vickie continues the praise but Jeff misses it. He looks out the door in distraction at the big bald guy playing his drums for worship. The drums punctuate the electric guitar and vocal team. Seven people are playing tonight. “You’re The Man!” Vickie tries again.

“Yeah, I know. I’m The Man!” Jeff grins at the attention. Everyone in the trailer laughs. “I’m The Man!” He picks up the theme with fervor. I have mixed reactions to the encounter because the trailer volunteers are clearly laughing about Jeff’s simple nature. Yet I feel they aren’t making fun of him. As they smile at him and Vickie rubs his back with a quick hand, I get the sense they are merely pleased with the opportunity to make Jeff feel important.

A middle-aged aged woman in jeans and a black shirt interrupts the scene. She wants a pair of size fourteen jeans, “flare.” Rummaging through the pigeon hole marked medium I see size twelves, fifteens, sixteens, a pair of size tens that are misplaced, more twelves. Black jeans, blue jeans, a pair of sweats, a pair of tan ladies slacks-the

compartment pushes capacity and needs to be emptied for the shop again. Finally I emerge from the pile. I smile holding the jeans out in triumph.

“Ummm, those aren’t flare. Don’t you have anything flare or bootcut? I really don’t wear anything that grips tight around the ankle.” My face sinks as I study her in complete bewilderment. Somehow I must have transported into a sales position at American Eagle. Since we don’t have a line Ashley and I start going back through the shelf. With jeans hanging all over my arms I realize how little need the woman must be in if she can ask for style specific pants. I tell her the pair of fourteens is all we have. She graciously thanks us saying she’ll come back after we have more time to look.

A giant woman wearing black stretch pants and a large pink t-shirt appears at the door demanding a pair of men’s socks. Her feet are too big for women’s socks. Ashley, literally half the woman’s weight at most, explains our policy of giving men’s clothing to men and women’s to women. The woman insists on men’s socks. I step between the two of them with the women’s sock tub as the situation escalates. Ashley appeases no one, despite her size.

To my relief I find a pair of misplaced men’s socks and hand them to the woman. She rejects them without even a look. My impatience and frustration flow as I tell her those socks will fit her. If she doesn’t want them she won’t be getting socks.

I turn my back on the woman in a risky attempt to signal the end of the discussion. Just as I expected to feel a club-like hand on the back of my neck, a thin voice breaks instead. “Uhhh, hi. Can I have a pair of socks and some shorts?” One of our regulars stands at the door. A rosy flush crawls up the back of the man’s neck with little flares and explosions over his face from the left side. His plastic looking face

identifies him as a burn victim. His short fingers grab the men's briefs and socks I hand to him. The skin twists with webbing between the fingers, formed after being melted and cooled.

"Can I have some shampoo, a toothbrush, and toothpaste too, please?" His frail frame matches the tiny polite voice he brings every week. I give him the things and ask if I can get him anything else. He says that will do it and I wish him a good week in departure.

Another man waits at the door asking for socks. When I give them to him he hands them to the large woman in the pink t-shirt from earlier. He walks away chuckling leaving her to glare at me.

Salt's policies may seem impractical sometimes but all are founded on good intentions and trial under fire. The two most controversial policies are the gender to gender clothing and only giving clothes to those present. Almost every Saturday kids come asking for clothes for their dad. Men ask for a pair of jeans for their buddy in the chili line. Women ask for clothes for their boyfriend, husband or son who works nights and can't make it. Every Saturday we need to deny them because most want the clothes for themselves. I just turned another woman away who wanted jeans for her sick son. This is the third week running he's been in bed with a 102 degree temperature due to strep. Never a degree more; never one less.

"It looks like I'm being harsh," Vickie defends the policy. "But otherwise we run out of clothes. Some people, like that last woman, lie to us every week. They're chronic liars. That's why I keep track." I heard this mantra repeated by Vickie every Saturday for my first month in the trailer. I think she did it to prepare me to be cold and convince

herself of its necessity. Vickie works as a counselor, having graduate degrees from Berkeley. I believe turning people away causes great inner conflict with her hope to save everyone. She tries to develop just and effective policies.

I scan the crowd in a moment of downtime and see a young guy, about high school aged, running through the crowd with handcuffs holding his wrists together behind his back. People are turning to watch him as he weaves between them.

I tell Vickie about the handcuffed guy staring out the door in confusion. Facing Ashley and Vickie I see the same look of disbelief as I feel on my own face.

“Stay here for a sec,” I say to Ashley as I step out of the trailer not really sure what it is I think I’ll do. Looking at the kid again I see he’s smiling. He continues to dart through the people making for the back corner of the lot. Crap, I think, knowing the cyclone fence blocks the corner leaving the guy nowhere to go. Then I see about five other kids about the same age in the corner. One of them is working on the handcuffs which I now realize are fake. Relieved and feeling duped I walk back to the trailer.

I inform the others of the hoax.

“If you’re here long enough, you’ll see some pretty intense things,” Vickie chuckles.

A man holding one of the dessert trays stands at the door. As part of the meal, Salt volunteers go through the crowds with trays of sliced muffins, brownies, cookies, coffee cake and other sweets. When their trays are empty, they come back to the trailer for Duane to load them up again.

Vickie teases the man, saying we shouldn’t refill him because he will only come back for more.

“That’s right!” The man agrees. He has on the Salt hat but not the shirt. “I get it done. I’m a worker.” The man starts talking faster. His voice elevates into a squeak as he waits for the tray. “Vote for me for President! And I’ll work for you! Vote for me! Vote for me! Vote for me!” The man continues even after he has the tray.

Ashley and I have our appeasing nods and smiles on full blast hoping he’ll tire and leave. Vickie grimaces. “Well, you couldn’t mess things up more than the present guy.”

The mock candidate laughs and walks away with the fresh tray after a couple more “Vote for me’s.” I’ve noticed that the line between volunteer and homeless, between server and served is often indistinguishable at Salt. The people who help set up, tear down, and carry trays are often regulars who just want something to do. I wonder if some of the volunteers are previous homeless persons themselves. One volunteer, who I haven’t seen tonight, takes hot cocoa packets, muffins, cookies, chips, and other things Duane can package home with her every week when she leaves. Most of the volunteers eat something while at Salt; a chili dog, pizza, or at least a muffin. Up until now I haven’t accepted any of the foods offered to me. I like to eat just before coming so I don’t take any food from someone who might actually need it.

Tonight, however, I sense a touch of suspicion, or perhaps hurt, in Duane’s face as I decline the offer to go get a hotdog. Remembering from my cultural anthropology class how important sharing food can be in establishing relationships, I change my mind and say I’m a little hungry after all.

I walk over and ask for a hotdog from what looks like a father-son combo. Father-son, mother-daughter, small group leader-Bible study member, are fairly common

units at Salt. I think people in the Christian culture look for opportunities to instill that “Heart of a Servant,” as I’ve heard it referred to, in those they mentor. I have only my own experience to base that assumption on. I got involved in homeless outreach because I led a group of guys in a Bible study who knew how to read scripture but not care for others. In an attempt to teach them the important role serving has in life, I took about eight of them to make and hand out sandwiches to homeless living in Vancouver, BC. The trip impacted me more than those for whom it was intended.

I accept the hotdog from the father who smiles at me with that hopeful change-the-world attitude. The son, about eleven years old, looks around with a mix of confusion and discomfort. He might be a little young yet; Salt definitely pushes the PG-13 rating. That admitted, however, I see five year old children and younger every Saturday coming for food and clothing.

Now I’m in the situation I dread most at Salt. I’m standing around with no one to talk to and nothing I’m confident in talking about. Near the trailer people know me. The volunteers recognize me. The regulars know I’m the guy who hands out socks. Here, I am on my own without my position at the trailer to hide behind. I feel exposed.

In the corner stands an easel with a painting by a local Christian artist. A calendar displaying his art hangs in the trailer. He comes to Salt regularly but this is my first time inspecting his work. I know very little about art appreciation other than I rarely appreciate Christian artists. Looking at what appears to be a painting of light showering ocean waves through a crack in two cliffs in the background, I feel my taste affirmed.

A woman walks up beside me to admire the painting. Attempting small talk, I compliment the painting and offer my ocean waves interpretation. She abruptly tells me

no, and faces me with incredulousness. The painting depicts a man and five angels kneeling before a window. I look at her inquisitively, searching for sarcasm. Being teased and jerked around by volunteers and homeless alike during my first several weeks at Salt left me with a less than naïve trust. Confident in my earlier appraisal, I tell her she must be messing with me. She spins to face me and forcefully reasserts her claim.

“Can’t you see that?!”

I turn back to the painting for a quick second look. I still see the waves and cliffs. I feel her glaring into my profile. She studies me as I desperately try to see the picture she sees. In the dim light the waves begin to seem more bulging than smooth until finally the six figures snap into focus.

“There they are! Yeah,” I exclaim in triumph. “I can see them. I guess I’m not much of an art connoisseur. I need to build my appreciation.”

“You need to open your mind, not be so closed in your thinking,” she convicts me.

I throw several compliments at the work to alleviate the look of suspicion she gives me. Soon she confesses that with better light she would take a picture of the painting with her mobile phone. She would like to hang it in her living room. I am barely able to choke down a quick lecture regarding the need to support starving artists—even Thomas Kincaid knock-offs—when I realize the setting might be inappropriate.

I’m thankful for my silence as the woman, Jaclyn, shares the story of her flight from domestic violence. She was moved to the Lummi reservation from California through an inter-tribal alliance. She is not native herself but her sons and abusive

husband are. She shares with me the difficulty of not knowing anyone and learning to let go of her sons so they can grow up.

“Still no guns,” she tells me. “That’s hard because my oldest boy wants to go hunting with Bud. Bud knows all that stuff and would be safe but I just don’t like guns.”

I nod as if I know Bud and can relate to life on the run.

“I’m just starting to get the use of my left side back to normal. My husband shot me in the chest.” She drops the bomb and studies my face for reaction. Moments like these are forks in the road. If I show horror, discomfort, amazement the story of her dead-beat, beat-em up husband might eclipse everything. I’ll be a garbage dumpster for her to bilge her rage and misfortune. Sometimes people need to do that; but, I’ve learned through years of leading small groups and leadership camps, now is not the time. I hold a steady gaze right into her eyes. After a slightly pregnant pause, Jaclyn continues her story. She talks about taking her sons fishing as a compromise until she gets brave enough to let them go hunting. She shares how the oldest boy won’t trust anyone. As she tells me her hopes I realize I made the right move, earned her trust, and made a friend.

**“I met one man who was wounded in love,
I met another man who was wounded with hatred”**

After excusing myself from my discussion with Jaclyn, I walk back through people sitting at tables and standing drinking coffee to the trailer. Ashley’s forehead is scrunched together over her nose and the corners of her lips are tight.

Ashley tells me a man came while I was gone and sang a song to her. He did not threaten her or say lewd things; but at Salt, even innocent acts can feel sinister. People seek outlets for their dying dreams and bruised hearts at Salt. The poor man who sang his song for Ashley likely has no where else to sing it. Ashley holds me close and puts her head against my chest. The fear climbs my veins to my heart as I ponder the man's innocence.

Ken comes through the door and joins Duane, another volunteer named Amery, and Vickie at the "kitchen" end of the trailer. I keep my focus on Ashley with small talk as we continue to wait on people needing socks and underwear. I think back to my own underwear and sock consumption. In my four years of college, I remember buying one package of white socks, four pairs of short socks, and nine pairs of white underwear, six of which happened to be earlier that day. Some people ask for new socks and underwear every week. My belief in bad luck has diminished drastically in the last few months.

The conversation in the back of the trailer rises with the emotions of its four participants. I can pick out shards of the discussion between serving people at the door.

Duane: If a person shows up four or five times to church that's enough to be a member...

Ken: I know. We gotta get the pastors down here. Not to stop by, not for half an hour, for the whole night. They need to eat with these people, talk with 'em, pray with 'em. They just don't understand what's going on ...

I lose the conversation for a while. When I pick it back up Ken and Duane continue to dominate the floor. The current topic appears to be a woman from Salt who attends the sponsor church quite frequently. I get the sense she annoys one of the pastors because she always sits behind him. The problem was exacerbated last Sunday by the

woman having a seizure. Duane defends the woman saying it's not her fault she had a seizure.

Ken affirms Duane's conviction, "I know, but Pastor A _____ says it's because she was drinking. NO, I said, she drinks so she can feel normal. She had a seizure because she's sick... They just don't understand what we're doing down here."

Ken's cell phone rings and he takes it, nodding a goodbye to the group. Duane goes back to attending the food, Amery leaves to attend the prayer tent, new volunteers, and her other duties, leaving Vickie with Ashley and me.

I ask Vickie if Salt's sponsor church is wavering on its support. The church provides fifteen thousands dollars of financial backing to the ministry each year. Individual donations account for roughly another fifteen thousand dollars annually. In addition, the church approves the ministry and advertises it to the congregation.

Vickie informs me the lack of support regards bringing people from Salt to church. In November when I first came to Salt I often heard Ken arranging rides for people to get to church. I suddenly realize I haven't heard these offers since I came back in March. Salt brings people from different walks of life together, including pedophiles and sex offenders. The church allowed Salt people to attend, provided they kept a chaperone. Either the amount of willing chaperones decreased or the church recanted its policy. Apparently, the church was comfortable reaching out as long as those they caught didn't reach back in.

The night is winding down. I watch the crowd through the frame of the trailer's door. The scene looks similar to my own college's quad. Friends sit around talking and laughing. A man flirts with a woman near the corner. Others stand off to the side

holding their meals up to their mouth. But everything twists in different directions at Salt. Those sitting at tables laugh in manic desperation as a member recounts a story laced with profanity. Then they suddenly fall silent absorbed in some inward dilemma. The woman being cooed wears a white button up blouse with only the top button done. Her belly rolls over the top of her short cut-off jeans, her braless bosom held precariously by the thinly stretched material. The suitor swoons over her again and again, causing her to lean back and giggle. His feet shift back and forth quickly as he attempts to maintain his balance and his act. The men standing alone eating will stand there forever. Finishing the food, they stand perfectly still, staring into the crowd with vacant eyes. For two hours they will stand motionless, oblivious to everything, perhaps because they can. Salt provides the only safe haven many of these people will encounter this week.

From the corner of my eye I see a man approaching me. People move out of his way as he makes for the trailer. Red and black paint covers the brown skin of his Native American face. Around his neck hang two steel pipes. What I thought was a bike lock I now see are homemade num chucks. He's at the door of the trailer swaying back and forth shouting, "30-32 shorts! 30...30-32 shorts!"

Ashley can't understand what he's saying. I don't want to turn my back on him because of the two skull crushing pipes around his neck. Still shouting his size the man climbs up the box stair and into the trailer with us. His blood red cheeks are a few inches from mine. We are the same height but he has 30 pounds of muscle on me at least. His deeply sunken eyes scan back and forth, only able to fix on me every other time. When they do he assaults me with more booze heavy shouts.

I back up trying to make room in the tiny trailer, barely mindful to stay between the warring Indian and Ashley. “Hey, Geronimo! You can’t come in here!” Vickie shouts this quasi-racial slur from the other end of the trailer. I prepare myself to grab or push the Indian, whatever would do the best job of preserving my life, as Vickie walks over and puts a hand firmly on his chest. Her words carry power and gentleness intertwined. Vickie continues calling the man Geronimo until I realize that is his name. She assures Geronimo we will serve him after he steps out of the trailer.

Geronimo backs down onto the box outside the door until one foot touches the ground. He will retreat no further. The tall high school guys helping the girls at the clothes table maintain a watchful eye on the warrior. Geronimo continues to rock back and forth, his head swaying as he shouts demands. Neither Ashley nor I can understand him so we give him socks, underwear, and a bag to put them in. Each time I hand him an article he grunts and glares at me with suspicion.

Done at the trailer, Geronimo stumbles over to the tables to find a new t-shirt. The high school girls and tall skinny high school guys keep their heads rigidly forward as if they don’t notice the war painted Indian with num chucks rummaging through their table. Glad to have him away from the trailer and wanting him to stay there, I step down to hand him a white t-shirt I find. Examining the pink writing on the front, he decides to try it on. He tears his old black shirt with wolves in an attempt to remove it.

“Oh fuck...shit...tore my shirt...shit...fuck...” Geronimo struggles with the new shirt. I shoot a knowing smile at the high school sentinels who ignore me as well. I return to the trailer, satisfied the clothes adequately placated Geronimo.

Ashley and I watch our painted acquaintance demonstrate his num chuck skills and kicking ability to some of the volunteers. When the num chucks almost hit a woman standing near by, a forty year old volunteer almost a foot taller than Geronimo tells him to stop. Ready to fight, Geronimo gets under the volunteer's face. Others step in and tell the volunteer to go clean a table where chili spilt, while they calm down the warrior.

Duane laughs as he tells Ashley and me about when he met Geronimo. Before getting the trailer, Salt was only a group of people delivering sandwiches to people around Railroad. Even then Geronimo demonstrated his "kickboxing" for the volunteers. "He'd spin and jump and kick until he landed on his...well, you-know-what," Duane laughs. "Then we'd tell him, 'Do it again Geronimo!'" Duane laughs again at his memory from the young ministry.

Vickie leans in and tells us we need to be forceful with Geronimo. He always comes intoxicated, belligerent, and violent. I didn't know how forceful I could be without him exploding. Vickie tells me just to tell him no and hope enough people are around if he goes sideways. Looking at the man dancing around again, kicking and flailing, I try to imagine jester make-up, rather than war paint, covers his face. My imagination doesn't give much help.

Just as the night seems to quiet down, with Ashley leaning against me watching children in the lot, shouts come from the street side of the trailer. Leaning out the window I see two larger men yelling at each other. A woman with a wide belly goes between the two of them. She swears at one man and eggs on the other man to fight him. I wait to see what will come of the encounter. Seeing the men walk toward each other, I

yell into the trailer at Duane and Vickie that we have a fight. I jump out of the trailer feeling my right arm pulled behind me. Ashley has my right sleeve firmly in her grip.

“Ashley, let go. Stay here.” She releases my sleeve. Running into the closing fifteen foot space between the two men I tell them not to fight. Twisting my head quickly between the two of them I plead, “Please don’t fight.” I don’t know what to do. I’m surprised other Salt people aren’t around yet to break it up. I stay between the two men walking sideways towards the end of the lot. A volunteer from Church on the Street, another homeless ministry, tells them just to take it somewhere else. The men exchange words, most of which I miss. Standing between the men and caught in the dilemma of choosing to stay or let them fight, time is fleeting. Both men are dangerously close with me still between them. The man to my left suddenly turns and bolts down the street. The other man hesitates then chases after him. I ask the Church on the Street volunteer what we should do. He says not to worry about it since they aren’t here.

Back in the trailer Ashley hugs me and says sorry for grabbing me. “I should have let you go. It was just a reaction.” I ask Vickie what to do about the fight.

“There was a fight?” she asks. Apparently Ashley and I were only ones who saw the fight. Vickie walks with me to the corner of the lot. The men are gone, along with our chance to help them. Twice tonight I’ve been in the middle of violence and neither time do I feel I handled it particularly well. I’m surprised by my fear of being in a fight. Growing up I never backed down from anyone and actually avoided a lot of fights that way. Tonight I let both situations completely run over me. The events remind me how little control any of us have at Salt.

“And it’s a hard rain a-gonna fall”

The night at Salt quickly draws to an end. Geronimo wipes his war paint off with a damp paper towel from Ashley. I carry tubs of clothing back in from the two tables out front. Teams of four go around tearing down the tent covering. Volunteers carry tables and chairs back to the truck. All the while the worship band continues to play.

Most of the people being served disappeared into the dark streets half an hour ago. With the trailer closing down Ashley and I are free to mingle with those left of the crowd. Ashley finds a few children and sits on a concrete curb talking and reading to them. The amount of kids and families at Salt amazes us. Infants, two year olds, pre-teens can all be seen on any given night. Tonight Ashley reads to a one-year old, a four year old, and an eight year old.

Sitting at one of the last tables, a big man with a green stocking cap and thick red beard holds a boy in his lap. I walk over and ask if I can sit with him. He says yes without ever looking away from the worship team. The man looks like a Scandinavian fisherman. He watches the team with one collapsed eye. When the eye occasionally opens, I see that it is turned up and outward staring into nothingness. I wonder what that eye might actually see.

The legs of the boy in the man’s lap hang over the edge of the chair. A blanket completely covers the sleeping boy. Only black sneakers and silky brown hair, like mine as a child, show at either end. The man’s giant hands and thick wrists stick out from the sleeves of his jacket. The knarred and swollen fingers of his hand gently stroke the boy’s hair and then rest from their labor. The fingers twitch and move out of unison, as though

years of breaks and smashing left them forgetful of each other. Once in a while the man's head bows to lightly kiss the silky hair.

I learn the man's name is Chris and the four year old boy is Bobby. I ask if Bobby is his son.

"No...he is just my friend. I've known him since he was a baby. I bring him toys...books and things. He loves me. And I love him." Chris turns back toward the music.

I turn my head away too, in reverence of what I've heard. Two men sitting before me in such different stages of life; poverty, revealed as the great equalizer. I think about what that boy must mean to Chris. He gives him a purpose and place in this world. Chris: friend of Bobby and protector of sleep. I think about the boy, so innocent and trusting as to fall asleep in the arms of a homeless man.

The song ends and Chris's giant hand leaves Bobby's head and applauds THUMP! THUMP! THUMP! on the plastic table. The unexpected explosions jolt me. The image of Chris and Bobby, so sacred in a way, mingles with the violence of earlier. Gentleness and brutality thrust together capturing the essence of the night. Each person's life full of beauty and scarring. Innocence and evil meet in places like Salt.

Chris moves Bobby onto his shoulder and carries him to a chair right in front of the worship team. I stand up and walk around in reflection of the moment. When I look back, Chris and Bobby are the only two left listening to the worship. The team plays *Amazing Grace*, the closing song of every night. Amery walks around away from people, singing and praying, as is her custom during the song.

With the worship team's equipment torn down and loaded up, the trailer locked and secured, those left from the night circle up again to pray. Tonight there are only eight of us left. Tom, a white haired man in his early fifties, closes us in prayer. He asks God to bless the souls of those who came this week to receive service. He hopes that they were able to leave tonight with more than clothes and a full stomach. After praying that God would bless the volunteers and watch after all of us this week, the servers and the served, we all say "Amen."

When I first came to Salt the prayer at the end seemed too religious. A lot of words were spent on Jesus entering the lives of the homeless. Protection, nourishment, and their physical needs seemed to be neglected. As I watch the same people return week after week asking for underwear, toothpaste, diapers, I realize a life change *is* needed. More food and warmer clothes don't solve the problem. They are like a damp washcloth to an AIDS patient.

I hold Ashley's hand walking back to our cars. Generally we drive together but tonight I had to meet her here. We hug and tell each other "I love you." I kiss her goodbye and she gets inside her car. I wait for her to pull out before I leave.

Bob Dylan starts playing on the stereo again. Driving back down Railroad I see college kids just heading to the bars. The clock on the dashboard reads 10:46. I think about all the people I hear during the day on campus, who talk about how intolerant Christians are of others. The diseased, drugged, and drunk faces at the trailer door cross my mind. Women who sell their bodies to buy food or drugs are not uncommon at Salt. The Christians I saw tonight were not intolerant. They were offering an uncovered hand

to people rejected by the world. People so far marginalized we no longer refer to them as people, but as a term, “homeless.”

Raindrops begin spattering my windshield as the final stanza of Dylan’s song plays. *“Oh, what’ll you do now, my blue-eyed son?...I’m a-goin’ back out ‘fore the rain starts a-fallin’...But I’ll know my song well before I start singin’.”* I don’t know if a solution to homelessness exists for the age in which we live. From what I’ve seen at Salt, ending homelessness requires much more from the public at large. Giving clothes and food alleviates pain but comes no closer to ending homelessness as wearing a pin on Martin Luther King, Jr. Day ends racism. Salt facilitates the dynamic flowing of lives into one another. Every new week the volunteers and homeless pour out their lives to one another. Each supports the other as best they can. Doing that does a lot.

Thinking over the night, the things I’ve seen, the words I’ve heard, the people I’ve met, I must agree with Mister Dylan. *“It’s a hard, it’s a hard, it’s a hard rain’s a-gonna fall.”*

Conclusion

The previous chapters examine homelessness from two very different angles. The first chapter argues that housing market conditions influence the incidence of homelessness. When the extremely poor, by developed world standards, are subjected to tight housing markets and high rents, some are forced out by their limited budgets. Altering the market conditions for these individuals through greater housing subsidization for the poor will likely prevent some from becoming homeless and move others off of the street. A subset of the homeless, albeit a large one, will remain unaffected by the subsidization for reasons speculated later.

In the second chapter, the culture and lives of individuals living homelessly are presented simultaneously with the lives of those serving at an outreach. This study attaches faces and names to the term “Homeless,” though attempts to remain neutral in the evaluation of the culture. The chapter reveals that individuals visit outreaches for numerous reasons ranging from domestic violence and addiction, to what often appears as “working the system.” People ask for jeans from certain designers or with a certain cut. When the specifications are not met by stock, they refuse differently styled jeans appropriately sized. This behavior fails to exhibit the nature of “emergency” often used in the description of shelter, food, and clothing made available to the homeless.

The good performed by outreaches, such as Salt, should not be overlooked with a cynical eye for the abuses of charity. For many who attend Salt, the outreach is family, for servers and served alike. Salt is a pocket of safety in a life of adversity. It is three and a half hours of being the norm in dirty second or third hand clothes while carrying a duffle bag with all of your worldly belongings. Salt, ironically named, is a balm for both

emotional and physical wounds. Indeed, it has been all of these things for me at least once over the past two years, with the exception of the clothing and duffle bag.

Taking the two studies together, I now realize homelessness is an individual experience aggregated into a cultural phenomenon. Subsidized housing will not affect people without homes uniformly; because, homeless people do not share uniform preferences. The studies suggest that homeless individuals are utility maximizers. Some are without homes because they have no other alternatives. Others are without homes because the opportunity cost of paying rent is too high when faced with an alternative bundle of goods. The latter are already maximizing their utility by being homeless. Whether it is right for us to critique their bundle is beyond the scope of this paper.

The existence of a group who are homeless by choice, however, suggests that the presence of shelters and other aid to the homeless generates adverse incentives. By lowering the cost of being homeless (starvation, nakedness, etc.), more people will choose to be homeless than would otherwise.

Is this then an argument against aid to the homeless? No. As Jagdish Bhagwati wrote in his *Defense of Globalization*, “You do not cut off your nose to stop a nose drip.” Adverse incentives will need to be addressed by outreach directors to increase efficiency, but should not result in the termination of programs. The greater danger presented by individuals using aid to subsidize their preferences is the undermining effect it has on the public’s empathy. Salt attempts to combat the practice of subsidized homelessness by limiting the quantity of goods given to one individual per night and emphasizing a message of lifestyle change in their sermons.

The remarkable aspect of this study, at least to the younger version of myself I introduced in the prologue, is subtle but powerful. The first chapter found that factors such as the price of housing influence housing consumption amongst the homeless, which implies rational decision making. The second part of the study shows “the homeless” is a composite of individual utility maximizers with diverse preferences. This in part explains the relatively weak influence of factors shown in the first study that should logically affect homeless individuals seeking housing; not all homeless individuals prefer housing. The remarkable aspect appears in the revealed utility maximization and rational decision making present in both studies. Both traits are assumptions in economic theory of how humans make decisions. This work is a roundabout economic proof of the humanity of the homeless. The work also demonstrates the validity of applying economic theory to the behavior of homelessness once uncommon preferences are taken into account.

The humanity of the homeless may not seem like something needing proof until you think of people passed out in a doorway with others walking by or stepping over them indifferently. When I was in Washington, DC this past summer, I paid for a homeless man’s meal at a fast food restaurant. As I left, the manager chased after me out the door. He asked that I not do that again and gave me two gift certificates as payment. While the manager’s concern about generating a group of homeless in front of his store demanding free meals is legitimate, a part of me cannot accept being paid to not feed someone who obviously suffered from starvation and mental illness. The belief that homeless individuals are human, I would argue, is nearly universal. The understanding

and acceptance of that fact, and acting on it in appropriate ways, I would argue, is far less common.

Finally, justifying the application of economic theory to homelessness opens the doors to an area of study largely undeveloped. This justification should spur on hope and encouragement for the possibility of helping the underprivileged in a privileged nation. I have been greatly edified in both my time with the homeless and the time spent studying their statistics. Speaking with someone who fights for survival on a regular basis and faces adversities unknown beyond my realm of experience is most humbling. Talking with a person who spends more time thinking about their next meal instead of a new computer or gadget also provides a unique and rare perspective of my life.

Why are the homeless without homes? For many, because they prefer other areas of consumption or leisure to paying for rent. For others, because they are too poor and disadvantaged to pull themselves off the streets without assistance. Subsidized housing, shelters, food, and aid can help the latter in this case and should be a priority of society. Allowing the former to pursue their liberties, without allowing them to consume emergency aid as a subsidy for their lifestyle, is the challenge for those who would help the needy. The challenge lies before us, and the lives of American citizens hang in the balance. Let the future judge our actions.

A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall

Words and Music by Bob Dylan
1963 Warner Bros. Inc
Renewed 1991 Special Rider Music

Oh, where have you been, my blue-eyed son?
Oh, where have you been, my darling young one?
I've stumbled on the side of twelve misty mountains,
I've walked and I've crawled on six crooked highways,
I've stepped in the middle of seven sad forests,
I've been out in front of a dozen dead oceans,
I've been ten thousand miles in the mouth of a graveyard,
And it's a hard, and it's a hard, it's a hard, and it's a hard,
And it's a hard rain's a-gonna fall.

Oh, what did you see, my blue-eyed son?
Oh, what did you see, my darling young one?
I saw a newborn baby with wild wolves all around it,
I saw a highway of diamonds with nobody on it,
I saw a black branch with blood that kept drippin',
I saw a room full of men with their hammers a-bleedin',
I saw a white ladder all covered with water,
I saw ten thousand talkers whose tongues were all broken,
I saw guns and sharp swords in the hands of young children,
And it's a hard, and it's a hard, it's a hard, it's a hard,
And it's a hard rain's a-gonna fall.

And what did you hear, my blue-eyed son?
And what did you hear, my darling young one?
I heard the sound of a thunder, it roared out a warnin',
Heard the roar of a wave that could drown the whole world,
Heard one hundred drummers whose hands were a-blazin',
Heard ten thousand whisperin' and nobody listenin',
Heard one person starve, I heard many people laughin',
Heard the song of a poet who died in the gutter,
Heard the sound of a clown who cried in the alley,
And it's a hard, and it's a hard, it's a hard, it's a hard,
And it's a hard rain's a-gonna fall.

Oh, who did you meet, my blue-eyed son?
Who did you meet, my darling young one?
I met a young child beside a dead pony,
I met a white man who walked a black dog,
I met a young woman whose body was burning,

I met a young girl, she gave me a rainbow,
I met one man who was wounded in love,
I met another man who was wounded with hatred,
And it's a hard, it's a hard, it's a hard, it's a hard,
It's a hard rain's a-gonna fall.

Oh, what'll you do now, my blue-eyed son?
Oh, what'll you do now, my darling young one?
I'm a-goin' back out 'fore the rain starts a-fallin',
I'll walk to the depths of the deepest black forest,
Where the people are many and their hands are all empty,
Where the pellets of poison are flooding their waters,
Where the home in the valley meets the damp dirty prison,
Where the executioner's face is always well hidden,
Where hunger is ugly, where souls are forgotten,
Where black is the color, where none is the number,
And I'll tell it and think it and speak it and breathe it,
And reflect it from the mountain so all souls can see it,
Then I'll stand on the ocean until I start sinkin',
But I'll know my song well before I start singin',
And it's a hard, it's a hard, it's a hard, it's a hard,
It's a hard rain's a-gonna fall.

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