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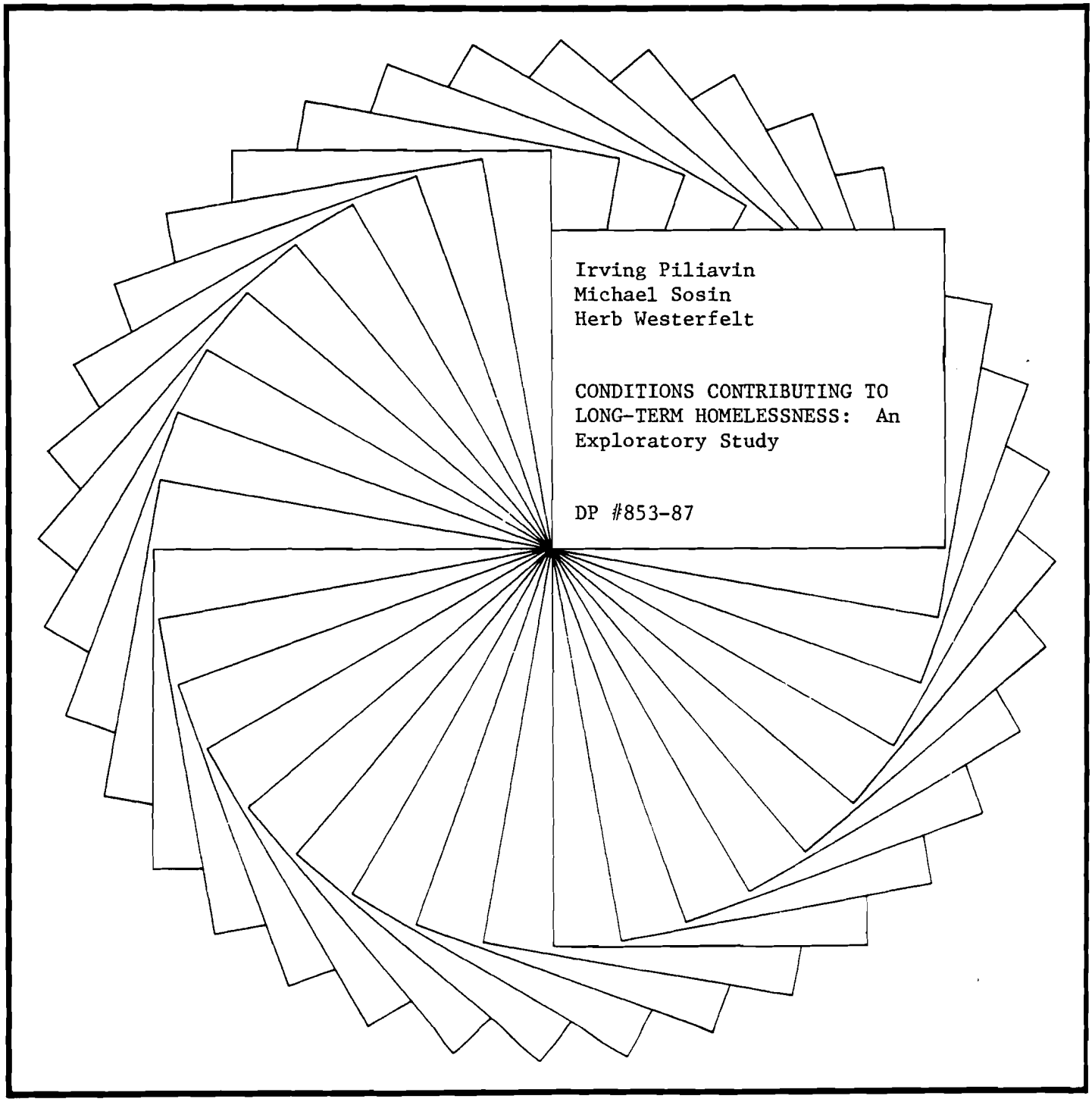

The Duration of Homeless Careers:

An Exploratory Study

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Abstract

In this paper we examine the duration of homeless careers. We build a model of career length based on four conceptual frameworks: institutional disaffiliation, psychological dysfunction, human capital deficit, and cultural identification. Using survey data from a sample of 331 individuals in Minneapolis, we estimate a structural equation model of homeless career onset and duration. We find that conditioned on age, people who have less consistent work histories, experienced childhood foster care, and currently express less discomfort with life on the streets have longer homeless careers. Contrary to our hypothesis we find that people who experienced pre-homeless psychiatric hospitalization had relatively shorter homeless careers and people who suffered from severe symptoms of alcoholism had homeless careers no different in average length than those of other sample members.

The Duration of Homeless Careers: An Exploratory Study[1]

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Affiliation

During the past decade, homelessness in the United States has become recognized by policy makers, social scientists, and the general citizenry as one of the nation's major social problems. Despite this recognition, the scholarly literature on homelessness remains limited both in quantity and quality. The literature consists almost entirely of univariate descriptions of samples of homeless persons in various communities, case studies of homeless individuals or families, and speculative essays on how changes in employment opportunities, housing markets, and mental health services have altered the size and character of the homeless population. Almost totally absent are systematic empirical studies of these as well as other issues concerning the individual characteristics and experiences that increase the likelihood of becoming homeless, the circumstances leading to lengthy homeless careers, and the conditions enhancing individuals' chances for exiting homelessness.

This paper addresses one of the latter concerns, namely the conditions affecting the duration of individuals' homeless careers. Our research is motivated by the hypothesis, advanced but not tested, that individuals with longer homeless careers differ systematically from those with comparatively shorter careers (Redburn and Buss 1986; U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development 1984).[2] We focus on the duration of homeless careers rather than the causes of (or vulnerability to) homelessness for three reasons. First, research on vulnerability requires a non-homeless comparison group, but finding an appropriate contrast group presents extremely complex conceptual and logistical problems whose solutions, if possible, are beyond the scope of this investigation. Second, results of research that predicts duration of homeless careers from characteristics of individuals may have implications for predicting onset of homelessness. That is, if characteristics which affect career duration are also overrepresented among the homeless population in

general, we might surmise that they are pertinent to the onset of homelessness as well. Third, the study of homeless careers has substantial policy significance: in providing information on the experiences that prolong homelessness, it may suggest which policies and programs are likely to shorten homeless careers.

Our investigation is based on the general assumption that, at the level of the individual, sustained homelessness reflects an estrangement from conventional institutions of society, and that this estrangement comes about in four interrelated ways. First, individuals can suffer a psychological or emotional disorder, which in turn hampers their attempts to participate fully in conventional society (Bogue 1963; Levinson 1957; McCook 1893; Sutherland and Locke 1936). Second, individuals can fail to invest in education, job training, or other forms of human capital, and consequently, remain at a competitive disadvantage in the labor market (Sutherland and Locke 1936; Rooney 1970). Third, individuals can become physically or emotionally disaffiliated from conventional institutions such as the family (Bahr and Caplow 1973). Fourth, individuals can come to identify with street life, becoming "comfortable" in leading a homeless existence rather than a more conventional existence (Wallace 1965).

In the analyses to follow, we build and empirically test a model that views homeless career length as a function of the four sources of estrangement outlined above: psychological dysfunction, human capital deficiency, institutional disaffiliation, and cultural identification. We proceed in five sections. After a brief background discussion, we present our theoretical framework and specify testable hypotheses. We follow with a discussion of our sample, variables, and estimation procedures. We then present findings from our analyses and conclude with a discussion of the implications of our results.

BACKGROUND

Studies of homelessness in communities throughout the United States find that homeless populations disproportionately consist of individuals who have problem-laden personal histories and who suffer numerous physical and emotional disorders (Bahr and Caplow 1973; Bogue 1963; Levinson 1957; McCook 1893; Sutherland and Locke 1936). Although recent reports suggest some changes in this portrayal–arguing primarily that relative increases in the number of evicted families have changed the makeup of the homeless population--empirical work continues to document high rates of personal problems and debilitating conditions among homeless individuals.[3] Despite this repeated documentation, research has not systematically investigated whether these conditions are causally related to the onset of homelessness and to the duration of homeless careers. Consequently, assertions as to the conditions contributing to homelessness are virtually without systematic empirical support.

The closest approximations to studies of homeless careers are three investigations that use cross-tabulations to examine the association between the length of individuals' current homeless spells and certain demographic characteristics. Rossi, Fisher, and Willis (1986) examined the relevance of gender and age; Roth et al. (1985) investigated the importance of gender, race, and education; and Farr, Koegel, and Burnam (1986) studied the significance of prior homeless experiences. Several characteristics were found to be related to reported durations of current homeless spells. Females, blacks, and individuals less than 40 years of age reported shorter current spells than did males, whites, and those over 40. The results, however, are problematic not only because they are based on simple bivariate associations, but also because determinants of current homeless spell durations may not be the determinants of homeless career durations. This follows from research indicating that most homeless people at a given point in time have had prior spells of homelessness (Farr, Koegel, and

Burnam 1986; Morse et al. 1985) and that the number of homeless spells experienced by people--a plausible proxy for total time homeless--is unrelated to the time they have spent in their current homeless spells (Morse et al. 1985).

The current state of theory parallels that of empirical research. While some analysts have hypothesized that individual characteristics and experiences are related to homeless career lengths (Snow and Anderson 1987; Redburn and Buss 1986), they fail to identify these characteristics and experiences. They also fail to identify the criteria (e.g., time spent in one's current homeless spell or the total time spent in all of one's homeless spells) by which homeless career lengths should be measured.

In view of the paucity of theory and research on homeless careers, the concepts we employ to guide our analysis of career duration are drawn from a subset of the frameworks used to explain the onset of homelessness. The entire range of such frameworks can be organized into two classes. The first class, based loosely on national time trend data, attributes changes in the size and composition of the homeless population to changes in a variety of economic, political, and social welfare programs since the late 1960s (Hopper and Hamberg 1984; Hopper, Susser, and Conover 1985; Freeman and Hall 1987; Hope and Young 1986).[4] The second class, based on surveys of homeless individuals in various U.S. communities, focuses on personal characteristics presumed to be linked to the probability that individuals will become homeless (Bahr and Caplow 1973; Sutherland and Locke 1936; Wallace 1965). Given the focus of this investigation, we borrow from the latter group for conceptual guidance. We should emphasize that the conceptual frameworks are essentially untested even as explanations of the onset of homelessness. Nevertheless, the frameworks are theoretically plausible, and therefore constitute a logical point of departure for developing a general model of sustained homelessness.

Conceptual Model and Empirical Hypotheses. The causal model we employ, depicted in the diagram of Figure 1, specifies homeless career length as a function of each of the following explanatory frameworks: institutional disaffiliation, psychological dysfunction, lack of human capital, and cultural identification. The first and last of these imply that homelessness is intrinsically long term; thus they directly address the issue of chronicity. Our use of the other two frameworks assumes that conditions associated with onset of homelessness are also associated with persistence. We briefly describe each framework, list the empirical measures we employ as indicators of its major concepts, and state our hypotheses about the relationship of these measures to long-term homelessness. Although we present the perspectives serially, we do not mean to imply that the frameworks are necessarily competing or incompatible explanations for long-term homelessness. In our analyses, we will explore not only the effects of these general frameworks on homeless career length, but also the causal interrelationships among the frameworks themselves.

Institutional disaffiliation. Perhaps the most systematically developed thesis on the conditions leading to homelessness, institutional disaffiliation, also implicitly addresses the problem of chronicity. In the original work of Bahr and Caplow (1973), the central concept of the model--disaffiliation--refers to the weakening of ties to the institutions of society. According to Bahr and Caplow, chronically homeless individuals lack "the bonds that link settled persons to a network of interconnected structures" (p. 55). Disaffiliation may be a product of various circumstances, including lifetime isolation, traumatic external forces, or even voluntary withdrawal; but once experienced, it leaves the individual beyond the reach of organized society. For the disaffiliated, the likelihood of undertaking conventional roles, in contrast to maintaining their estranged status, is extremely low.

After Bahr and Caplow (1973) reported little empirical support for their model, interest in the concept of disaffiliation appeared to wane. Little mention of the disaffiliation thesis is found in

subsequent studies of the homeless.[5] Nevertheless, we resurrect the concept in our analysis because of the possibility that Bahr and Caplow's rejection of the model was premature. This possibility arises for several reasons. First and most important, several findings reported by Bahr and Caplow actually appear to support the model. Specifically, homeless men, in contrast to those who were domiciled, reported they were more likely to be never married, socially withdrawn as youths, currently friendless, and without family contact (Bahr and Caplow 1973: pp. 60-61). Second, the findings reported by Bahr and Caplow--all in the form of bivariate cross-tabulations--may have reflected the biasing effects of uncontrolled variables, leading to suppressor effects as well as spurious correlations. Third, Bahr and Caplow did not distinguish those individuals within their samples who were short-term homeless from those who were long-term. This raises the possibility that they have underestimated the true relationships between chronic homelessness and its causes.

The indicators of disaffiliation that we employ involve objective measures of isolation rather than subjective measures of anomia and thus are similar to several used by Bahr and Caplow. These measures refer to marital and parental history, current living arrangements (i.e., alone or otherwise), and extent of current contacts with family members. In addition, two of our indicators measure experiences reflecting the lessening of ties to society. The first measures criminal history; the second taps childhood placement in foster care facilities including foster homes, group homes, and institutions. We assume that involvement in crime results from attenuation of an individual's bonds to conventional institutions of society (Briar and Piliavin 1965; Hirschi 1969) and that foster care placement both reflects and contributes to the rupture of family ties (Festinger 1983).

Hypothesis 1: Homeless career lengths are longer among individuals who:

a. Have experienced childhood foster care placement

b. Have been involved in serious crime

c. Have not formed families

d. Have little current family contact

e. Currently live alone.

Psychological dysfunction. Arguments linking homelessness to one or another form of psychological dysfunction have an exceptionally long history in the United States. During the nineteenth century, discussions from this perspective were often cast in strong moral terms, attributing homelessness to laziness, depravity, and other characteristics presumed to be morally reprehensible (Bull 1886; Wayland 1877), as well as to less disparaging conditions such as imbecility, high temper, and, simply, heredity (Leonard 1966). More recent versions of this approach emphasize the effects of alcoholism, drug abuse (Farr, Koegel, and Burnam 1986; U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development 1984; Rossi, 1989), and mental illness (Bassuk 1984; Lamb 1984; Rossi, 1989, Wright, 1989).[6] And while early researchers assumed that the character defects they identified were sufficient conditions for homelessness (Bull 1886), present-day researchers regard such problems only as conditions that make individuals vulnerable to homelessness (Arce and Vergare 1984). Although the degree to which these psychological problems actually lead to the onset of homelessness remains to be studied empirically, we can examine here the possibility that the psychological conditions prolong homelessness. Our measures of dysfunction include alcohol abuse, psychiatric hospitalization, and utilization of treatment facilities for drug or alcohol addiction.

Hypothesis 2: Homeless career lengths are longer among those individuals who:

a. Have experienced prior psychiatric hospitalization

b. Are currently engaged in alcohol abuse.

Human capital. Hypotheses linking homelessness to the absence of capacities required for sustained employment are also of long standing. Sutherland and Locke (1936) argued that a large proportion of homeless men during the Great Depression were without shelter because they were unskilled and poorly educated. Thirty-five years later, Rooney (1970) linked homelessness during the

1960s to the declining need for unskilled workers following World War II. Most recently, Rossi (1989) attributed an apparent upsurge of young people among the homeless in the 1980s to the lack of employment opportunities for unskilled workers under 35 years of age. We examine the effect of human capital on homeless career length using measures of individuals' education, training, and work histories. We hypothesize that those homeless individuals who have invested less time in education, training, and previous work are less likely to be in a position of financial independence, and consequently, are more likely to be have longer homeless careers.

Hypothesis 3: Homeless career lengths are longer among those individuals who:

a. Have less education and training

b. Have shorter work histories.

Cultural identification. This thesis, more than any other employed here, provides an explicit explanation for the persistence rather than onset of homelessness. It has been argued (Wallace 1965) that in order to survive on the streets, individuals must assimilate a street culture--the information, values, associations, and lifestyle preferences--that supports and gives meaning to life on the street. But according to Wallace (1965) and Caplow (1970), assimilating the requisites for survival on the streets leads individuals to lose the requisites for reentry to conventional society. In acquiring the knowledge, values, and friendships required for life within the homeless society, individuals are pulled toward that society (Wallace 1965: pp. 163-164) and find it difficult to leave (Caplow 1970: p. 5).

Drawing on the argument of Wallace (1965) and Caplow (1970), we hypothesize that individuals who become more adapted to the streets, more knowledgeable about street life, and more identified with other homeless persons will have longer homeless careers.

Hypothesis 4: Homeless career lengths are longer among those individuals who:

a. Identify and interact more with other homeless individuals

b. Are more knowledgeable about and adapted to life "on the streets."

As noted above, although these four explanatory frameworks represent analytically distinguishable causal mechanisms, they do not constitute mutually exclusive perspectives. Furthermore, the explanatory variables of interest here clearly reflect a chronological ordering. This suggests the possibility that homeless career length is the product of a developmental process in which the effects of early life events on chronic homelessness are mediated by subsequent experiences. For example, it may be that foster care leads to alcohol abuse, which in turn leads to initiation into homelessness, followed by acculturation to street life, and ultimately to chronic homelessness. In similar fashion, limited education may lead to poor employment history, then alcoholism and, again, long-term homelessness. By estimating block recursive equations, in which the predictors of long-term homelessness are ordered sequentially by their assumed chronological order, we investigate both the relative significance of our four frameworks as well as the possibility that long-term homelessness is the product of developmental processes.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYTIC PROCEDURES

The data we analyze were obtained in interviews with a sample of 331 homeless individuals, aged 18 years and over, who were present at some time in Minneapolis during the period between mid-December 1985 and late January 1986.[7] To qualify for inclusion in the sample, an individual at the time of interview had to meet one of the following criteria:

1. Residence for at least one day, and without rent payment, in a social agency offering temporary shelter.
2. Residence for at least one day in unconventional accommodations, including abandoned or public buildings, automobiles, and shanties.

3. Residence for less than a week with a friend or relative, intending to stay no more than two weeks and having no permanent residence.

4. Residence in selected board-and-lodge facilities for less than seven days, intending to stay no more than two weeks, with rent being paid by a social service agency.[8]

We selected our respondents from the population utilizing the four drop-in centers, five free-meal programs, and eight overnight shelters situated in the commercial area of the city. Research interviewers visited each of these agencies at various times over the survey period and held brief eligibility interviews with people using the agencies at the time of the visit. Our final sample consists of individuals who met one of the criteria of homelessness noted above and who subsequently appeared for a scheduled full-length interview concerning his or her homeless career.

The degree to which our sample represents the homeless population in Minneapolis cannot be directly ascertained. A major unknown involves possible selectivity by homeless individuals in the use of the agencies tapped by our sampling procedures. Although we can offer no rigorous demonstration that sample selection bias is absent, several studies have indicated that agencies which dispense food and offer drop-in services draw from a very broad segment of the homeless population--much broader than that segment whose members utilize only shelters--and perhaps one which coincides with the homeless population itself (Koegel and Burnam 1987; Rossi, Fisher, and Willis 1986). These conclusions lead us to believe that the biases in our sample are modest.

The interviews were conducted by personnel from social agencies serving the Minneapolis homeless. Occasionally, communication problems caused interviews to go beyond the intended one-hour duration; only rarely did respondents' agitation cause interviews to be terminated prematurely. Data collected in the interviews focused in large part on personal attributes and experiences derived from our four theoretical frameworks.

Our use of a cross-section design to study homeless career length poses three analytic problems common to these designs: differential cohort effects, right censoring, and attrition bias. The possibility of cohort effects arises because individuals of different ages may have been exposed to different conditions affecting homeless career vulnerability and duration. The right censoring difficulty reflects the fact that our survey cannot determine when sample members' homeless careers will terminate; consequently, the careers of all sample members must be seen as incomplete. The attrition bias problem derives from the absence from our sample of recently homeless people whose last homeless spell terminated prior to our survey. If the homeless careers of these individuals are affected by phenomena different from those affecting the career durations of sample members, our results will be biased.

We deal with the preceding problems in limited, but we believe, plausible fashion. Following conventional practice, we used sample members' age to control for cohort effects under the assumption that age captures the effects of time varying structural and historical forces relevant to entrance and persistence in homelessness. Given the absence of information on termination of sample members' homeless careers, we necessarily deal with the right censoring problem by postulate. Specifically we assume that the processes affecting career durations beyond the range captured by observation do not change. Finally, and again because we lack data to do otherwise, we assume the forces affecting the homeless career durations of recently but not currently homeless individuals are the same as those affecting the career durations of our sample members.

In noting the limitations of our approach to the cohort, attrition, and censoring problems, we recognize that these problems are in general more adequately dealt with through implementation of longitudinal studies utilizing samples whose members are beginning the careers of interest. However, these strategies are often not feasible. In the study of homeless careers, this would require sampling

individuals at the beginning of their first homeless spell and subsequently retaining contact with them for the rest of their lives. The costs and logistical problems of such an effort are clearly prohibitive.

The Sample. Table 1 presents data on sample members' background and demographic attributes including all those that we employ in our analysis of long-term homelessness. The latter set of variables is partitioned by our conceptual frameworks. The modal image of our respondents is similar to that of other studies of the homeless in Midwestern urban areas (Rossi, Fisher, and Willis 1986; Roth et al. 1985). That is, the sample is dominated by men who are living alone, who are in their early 30s, who have limited educational achievements, and who have meager employment histories. The proportion of females and families in this sample, lower than in homeless samples drawn elsewhere, may be due to the relatively modest housing costs and liberal welfare benefits in Minneapolis.

Three features of the Minneapolis sample deserve special mention. First, although respondents on average experienced their first homeless spell five to six years before being contacted by our research team, they reported a mean total time homeless of less than three years. Even allowing for the possibility of errors in their estimates of time homeless, the data suggest that homelessness for many of these individuals is not a permanent state. This is in accord with the results of Farr, Koegel, and Burnam (1986) and Morse et al. (1985).

Second, a large proportion of the respondents reported having been in some form of foster care placement prior to their 18th birthday.[9] While the prevalence of such individuals in the national population is probably no more than 3 percent, among the Minneapolis homeless it was 39.4 percent for whites, 23.9 percent for blacks, and 54.1 percent for Native Americans.[10]

Third, because we asked dates of first hospitalization and first homeless episode, we were able to determine which event occurred first. Approximately 12 percent of the sample experienced a psychiatric hospitalization prior to their first episode of homelessness, while 5 percent experienced

their first hospitalization sometime after their initial homeless episode. The relatively small percentage of former psychiatric hospital patients in our sample (approximately 18 percent) contradicts the assertions in the press and elsewhere that mentally ill persons constitute a large segment of the homeless population (Arce et al. 1983; Bassuk 1984). This contradiction can be attributed to several factors. First, most prior studies of homeless individuals have relied on seriously flawed sampling procedures (Snow et al. 1986). Second, the criteria used to designate mental illness vary from study to study, leading to inconsistent estimates of mental illness among the homeless population (Robertson 1986). Third, our estimates, based on the criterion of hospitalization rather than on diagnoses of psychiatric distress, may reflect only the prevalence of the more severe instances of mental illness. Our estimates agree with several other studies that use similar criteria (Rossi, Fisher, and Willis 1986; Snow et al. 1986).

Estimation Procedures. Because of the dearth of prior research on the topic, there are few guidelines to specify the appropriate measure of homeless career duration. One relatively simple measure, the length of individuals' current homeless spells, is likely to be misleading. As noted earlier, the majority of homeless people experience more than one homeless spell. Thus, unless there exists a correspondence between spell lengths and career lengths, the former cannot serve as an indicator of the latter. That this correspondence is unlikely is suggested by the finding of Farr, Koegel and Burnam (1986) that the number of spells individuals claim to have experienced--a plausible proxy for homeless career length--is unrelated to the duration of individuals' current homeless spells.

Ideally, one would want detailed event history data on homelessness, including the precise dates of onset and termination and the length of each spell of homelessness. With such data, one could distinguish not only the long-term homeless person from the short-term person by aggregating spells, but also distinguish the person whose homeless career consists of numerous brief spells from

another whose career consists of one long spell. We did not seek this level of detail because we assumed that it would be subject to validity and reliability problems. Our measure of homeless career duration is based on two data items supplied by respondents: the date at which they reported they first became homeless and the percentage of time they reported to have spent being homeless since then. We constructed a simple variable of total time homeless by counting the number of days intervening between the start of respondents' first homeless experience and the date they were interviewed, multiplying this number by the reported percentage of time subsequently spent homeless, and dividing the result by 365. This variable, YEARS HOMELESS, is correlated significantly with percentage of time homeless ($r=.61$). We use YEARS HOMELESS as our criterion of homeless duration because percentage of time homeless falsely implies that first-time homeless people, irrespective of the brevity of their homeless careers, have more enduring, serious, or chronic homeless careers than those with careers that are episodic but sum to extensive periods of time.

To facilitate the interpretation of our initially large array of predictor variables, we completed a confirmatory factor analysis, testing alternative specifications of the latent factors underlying our observed measures. The resulting model, derived from our conceptual frameworks, consists of nine factors with multiple indicators. Our path model, depicted in Figure 2, employed as predictors these nine factors (weighted linear composites based on factor score regressions) plus five single indicator constructs.[11]

Causal Model The model portrayed in Figure 2 contains eight equations using three blocks of variables arranged chronologically. The first block of variables is exogenous to the model and includes events known or presumed to have occurred prior to initial onset of homelessness (e.g. childhood foster placement, pre-homeless psychiatric hospitalization, early family formation, education/training) or characteristics that remain stable over the life course. We assume that these variables affect length of homeless career directly, and also indirectly through the subsequent block of

endogenous predictors. Included in the exogenous set is the age of sample members at the time of interview. We employ this variable as a measure of the time sample members are exposed to the threat of homelessness.

The second block of variables taps, in part, selected behaviors and living styles, which could have begun either at the same time or after the onset of first homelessness (e.g. criminal involvement, severe alcoholism). The block also includes variables measuring sample members' current circumstances and self-perceptions. We assume the variables in this set affect homeless career lengths directly, and also mediate the effects of variables specified to occur earlier in the causal chain. We include in this block the age of onset of homeless. This variable will tell us whether our exogenous variables affect homeless duration only indirectly by affecting age of onset. Finally, the third block contains a single outcome variable, YEARS HOMELESS, measured by the years sample members report they have been homeless as an adult.

Conditional on the time ordering specified by the model, causal inferences are clear. Nevertheless, in some instances there may be reason to question that specification and therefore our inferences. This should not be a problem for inferences concerning our exogenous variables since they refer to demographic characteristics that do not change or to experiences (childhood foster care, family formation) that generally occurred early in life. However, our endogenous predictor variables and some of our exogenous variables (time worked, family formation) may be reciprocally related to years of homelessness. If so, our estimates of the former would be biased upward. If we find that these variables have substantial effects on our measure of homeless career length, we cannot rule out the possibility that our causal inferences are contaminated by reciprocal causation. But, just as important, if we find that these variables have no effects on career length, we can make confident inferences, since reciprocal causation is unlikely to suppress an effect (assuming, as hypothesized, that effects have the same sign). We take account of these considerations in reporting our findings.

RESULTS

Effects on Homeless Career Length. Table 2 reports the parameter estimates of our recursive model predicting YEARS HOMELESS (Figure 2). Equation 1 consists of reduced-form coefficients of our exogenous variables predicting career length. We find that while homeless careers are longer for older respondents, they are not significantly affected by gender or ethnicity. As hypothesized by the institutional disaffiliation framework, career lengths are longer among those who have experienced childhood foster care. Furthermore, as hypothesized by the human capital framework, careers are longer for sample members who report smaller amounts of time employed since their first employment. Contrary to our hypotheses, however, formal education and early family formation have no effect on homeless career duration. Finally, while pre-homeless psychiatric hospitalization was hypothesized to increase homeless career duration, it is in fact associated with a decrease in duration.

Equation 2 adds the second block of predictor variables and constitutes the structural form. The coefficients indicate that only two variables in the second block, AGE FIRST HOMELESS and STREET ADAPTATION have significant effects on YEARS HOMELESS. The introduction of block 2 variables also has virtually no effect on the parameter estimates associated with the exogenous set.

The failure of most endogenous variables to significantly affect YEARS HOMELESS in our model contrasts with the fact that, with the exception of CURRENT FAMILY CONTACT, all had significant bivariate correlations (from .18 to .24) with YEARS HOMELESS. Explanation of these null results is suggested by the data in Table 3. Table entries are unstandardized parameter estimates reflecting the effects of the exogenous (row) variables in equations predicting the block 2 (column) variables. All of the block 2 variables are significantly predicted by variables that also predict YEARS HOMELESS. Moreover, several of these predictors (AGE, MALE, BLACK, NATIVE AMERICAN and CHILDHOOD FOSTER CARE) are clearly causally prior to YEARS HOMELESS

as well as to the block 2 variables. The implications of these results seem clear. In this sample of homeless people, the bivariate correlations observed between YEARS HOMELESS and our measures of crime, alcohol abuse, current living conditions and homeless acculturation are spurious.[12]

Effects on Age First Homeless. The data in Table 3 reveal only three variables relevant to the age at which people first become homeless: current age, gender, and the percentage of time people have spent employed since their first employment. These findings are not surprising. Older people, females and those who report having spent greater portions of their lives employed all report their homeless careers began at later ages.

The preceding analyses assume that the effects of our predictor variables are linear and continuous throughout the distribution of homeless career length. However, two groups of investigators have suggested the hypothesis that the process generating long-term homelessness is a non-linear and discontinuous function (Redburn and Buss 1986; Snow and Anderson 1987). That is, individuals with certain or sufficiently severe attributes and experiences are vulnerable not simply to homelessness but to "chronic" or "long-term" homelessness. We tested this hypothesis by using a different specification of homeless career length in which respondents were assigned to one of two categories, long-term homeless or short-term homeless, depending on whether their homeless careers exceeded a given threshold. Using this dichotomy as our criterion, we estimated logistic regressions using the same predictors as employed in our linear models.[13] While Redburn and Buss (1986) and Snow and Anderson (1987) have speculated that the threshold for long-term homelessness is two years, we employed two alternative thresholds to designate the long-term homeless: homelessness of two years duration and homelessness of three years. The logistic regressions in both cases provided results remarkably similar to those of our linear structural equation models shown in Table 2. Most important, all of the significant direct effects on homeless career length observed in the models of Table 2 were significant and of the same sign in the logit models.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Our analyses reveal four principal findings. First, we find that childhood placement in foster care substantially increases the length of homeless careers. Second, contrary to our expectations, net of the other variables in the model, pre-homeless psychiatric hospitalization reduces the length of homeless careers. Third, time worked reduces the length of time homeless; however, we cannot rule out the possibility that this effect is due to the effect of homelessness on time worked. Fourth, several variables often viewed as important determinants of homeless careers have little effect on career length. These variables included, most notably, symptoms of alcohol abuse. The positive finding of foster care and the negative impact of pre-homeless psychiatric hospitalization warrant additional comment.

The impact of foster placement may be attributable to several mechanisms. It may be that many young people put in foster homes, group homes, and institutions have severe emotional or behavioral problems which, if not lessened by these experiences, make them vulnerable to various adult problems and crises, including long-term homelessness. Alternatively, foster care may itself be debilitating, leaving recipients relatively less able to manage independently as adults. Finally, young people who receive foster care may have weak family ties, generated perhaps not only by the conditions prompting the care, but by the experience of care itself. In effect, individuals with foster care backgrounds would be more likely to lack family support networks that could supply long-term assistance at times of economic crisis. They would, therefore, be more vulnerable at such times to becoming homeless. The comparative validity of these explanations cannot be assessed with our data and, in fact, require long-term study of foster care graduates. While such investigations have been reported, all have extremely serious sample attrition problems and none attend to the problem of homelessness (Fanshel, Finch, and Grundy 1990; Festinger 1983).

The unanticipated negative effect of pre-homeless psychiatric hospitalization on homeless career duration may be explained by the composition of the remaining members of the sample. These comprise two subgroups: individuals who had never been hospitalized (82% of the total sample) and those who experienced psychiatric hospitalizations but only after their first homeless experience (5% of the total sample). Controlling for the effects of other factors, the average career duration of the post-homeless hospitalized was 3.7 years longer than that of the pre-homeless hospitalized and 2.4 years longer than that of the never hospitalized. A one-way analysis of variance indicates that the average career durations of the three groups differ significantly ($p < .05$). This result, once identified, may appear to be both obvious and artifactual since, unlike other sample members, the post-homeless hospitalized must have experienced at least two homeless spells. Nevertheless, the average number of reported spells within this group (2.4) is not reliably different from that for the remaining members of the sample (2.3). Nor is it that the members of this group are significantly older on average (34.6 years) than other sample members (32.0 years). A possible explanation for the longer homeless careers of the post-homeless hospitalized may be found in the observations by Estroff (1985) and Snow et al. (1986) that public officials at times place long-term homeless people in psychiatric hospitals even if they do not suffer from mental illness. According to Snow et al. (1986) this practice may reflect the effort to control the behavior of the homeless and the desire of the medical profession to maintain hegemony in the treatment of deviant populations.

Finally, although variables from our four conceptual frameworks account for some variance in our measure of homeless career length, much remains unexplained. To some degree this may be due to the failure of our instruments to measure more adequately and fully the concepts implied by the frameworks. However, it is possible that individual frailty, deficit and trauma--the phenomena implied by our frameworks--may represent only a subset of the conditions making people vulnerable to homelessness and subsequently lengthy homeless careers.

Another subset is implied by our findings on foster care and family formation and involves an extension of the vulnerability conditions identified by Rossi's (1989) argument that the homeless include many individuals whose families deny them support because they lack resources or tolerance for the problematic behavior that may accompany economic dependence. Our results suggest the denial of family support can be rooted in events that may precede homelessness by many years. The relationship to these more distal events remains to be determined.

Notes

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[2]The short-term career verses long-term career distinction is made in related fields as well. For example, poverty researchers distinguish between short- and long-run poverty, the conditions leading to the latter recognized as being relevant to theoretical and policy issues not necessarily addressed by those leading to the former. Similarly, a number of criminologists have referred to the concept of "career" in an effort to distinguish those offenders whose criminal activities, relative to other offenders, are more frequent and endure for longer time periods and whose identification is relevant to theoretical and policy issues not dealt with by the identification of "more casual" offenders (Duncan 1984; Blumstein and Cohen 1987).

[3]The notion of a high rate here is used relative to the general population. Appropriate comparison groups are rarely developed in studies of the homeless, and comparison is often simply to the general population.

[4]Systematic empirical study of the effects on homelessness of economic and social policy changes requires use of multiple samples of homeless people across communities and preferably over time. Perhaps because of the substantial costs and complexities of such investigations, they have yet to be undertaken.

[5]Two limited exceptions are found in the studies of Lee (1978) and LaGory et al. (1989). In neither case, however, is the hypothesis linking disaffiliation to homelessness directly tested. Lee (1978) simply assumes the hypothesis to be valid. LaGory et al. (1989) seemingly suggest otherwise with their finding that most members of their homeless sample report having at least occasional family and friend contacts. It is questionable, however, whether limited contacts whose substance is unknown can be interpreted to imply the absence of disaffiliation.

[6]This is not to say that there are no equivalent modern-day versions of the focus on personality problems or laziness. See Main (1983).

[7]Two groups of otherwise eligible individuals were excluded from the sample: those under age 18 and women who had left a permanent residence because of spousal abuse or conflict and were living in a shelter for battered women.

[8]The first two criteria are commonly employed by those who study homeless populations. The third and fourth criteria are not and require some justification. We recognized prior to initiating data collection that homeless people might, with considerable frequency, "get off the streets" temporarily by getting accommodations with friends or relatives or through receipt of short-term rent vouchers from social agencies. We assumed that if these "departures" could be anticipated to be very brief, then the actors involved should still be considered homeless. Our decision to set two weeks as the threshold for "very brief" is obviously arbitrary. However, we believe that this criterion leads to fewer problems of classification than one which regards as non-homeless the people who make short-term exits.

[9]By foster placement we refer to out-of-home care provided by families, group homes or institutions under the supervision of social service agencies. The observed link between early foster care and homelessness is not unique to this study. In a study of the Chicago homeless, Sosin, Colson, and Grossman (1988) report that 14 percent of the homeless sample had been in out-of-home care; Susser, Struening, and Conover (1987) find that 23 percent of their New York homeless sample had been in foster care.

[10]The estimates of out-of-home care in the United States represent the median of "expert" guesses of child welfare scholars in government and academia whose assistance we requested.

[11]Three considerations led us to employ a path model and linear composites rather than maximum likelihood procedures in estimating the model depicted in Figure 2. First, the former approach requires weaker distributional assumptions than does MLE. Second, the large number of parameter

estimates required by MLE and our relatively small sample could lead to estimates having very large standard errors. Third, as noted in the text we eventually test the results based on the path model against those based on a logit model. The use of linear composites to designate factors is compatible with logistic regression models. The factor score regression composites are as follows:

NO FAMILY FORMATION = .349 x never married + .303 x never had children
CRIMINAL HISTORY = .185 x prison + .683 x crime
ALONE NOW = .283 x alone + .186 x not married + .496 x not with child
CURRENT FAMILY CONTACT = .437 x no shelter + .186 x no cash + .147 x no information
EDUCATION/TRAINING = .221 x education + .411 x license + .279 x special training
CURRENT ALCOHOL ABUSE = .427 x binge + .450 x symptoms
HOMELESS IDENTIFICATION = .178 x commonality + .301 x visits + .204 x food
STREET ADAPTATION = .151 x friendly + .318 x easy to get food + .184 x no danger + .251 x easy to find sleep

Details of our estimation procedures are available on request to the first author.

[12]The surprising finding that severe alcohol abuse was unrelated to YEARS HOMELESS suggested the possibility that our measure of abuse was insensitive to sample members' drinking patterns. However, when we employed in our model a straightforward measure of these patterns--individuals' self-report of current daily consumption of alcoholic beverages as standardized to alcohol equivalents (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1983)--it too had no effect on YEARS HOMELESS.

[13]Our logistic regression analysis also addresses two statistical issues: whether our linear models are robust to (1) departures from normally distributed disturbances; and (2) the influence of statistical outliers (extreme scores on the dependent variable). By dichotomizing the length of homeless careers into chronic versus non-chronic, we relax the assumption of normally distributed disturbances and also reduce the effect of statistical outliers. Our results suggest that the estimates of our linear models are robust to each of these assumptions.

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Table 1

Sample Members' Demographic and Background Attributes
(N = 331)[a]

DEMOGRAPHIC ATTRIBUTES	
Age (mean years)	32.4
Sex	
Male	84.8%
Female	15.2%
Race	
Black	27.0%
Native American	22.4%
White	43.3%
Other	7.3%
Military Experience	35.4%
HUMAN CAPITAL	
Education (mean years)	10.9
Earned a trade or professional license	20.2%
Received special occupational training	53.8%
Percent time worked since first job (mean)	56.0%
INSTITUTIONAL DISAFFILIATION	
Never married	52.3%
Never had children	47.4%
Currently living alone	81.6%
Currently not married	92.0%
Currently not with children	95.1%
Received no shelter from family in past 30 days	81.0%
Received no cash from family in past 30 days	78.4%
Received no information from family on shelter or food sources	88.7%
Ever convicted of a crime as an adult	53.8%
Ever in prison	20.6%
Ever in childhood foster care placement	38.6%
PSYCHOLOGICAL DYSFUNCTION	
Any late stage alcoholism symptom	40.2%
Binge drinker	39.5%
No prior psychiatric hospitalization	81.6%
Pre-homelessness psychiatric hospitalization	12.4%
Post-homelessness psychiatric hospitalization	5.3%

Table 1, continued

CULTURAL IDENTIFICATION	
Sense of commonality with other homeless individuals	70.5%
Number of visits with homeless friends in past 30 days (mean)	17.8
Received food from homeless friends in past 30 days	31.5%
View street people as friendly	68.5%
Report easy access to food while on the streets	62.7%
View streets as not dangerous	14.0%
Report easy access to shelter while on the streets	27.5%
HOMELESS HISTORY	
Age first homeless	
mean years	26.9
median years	25.0
Prior homeless spells	57.1%
Time since first homeless spell	
mean years	5.6
median years	3.0
Total time homeless	
mean years	2.8
median years	1.0

*The total N for particular attributes may differ slightly due to missing data.

Table 2

Unstandardized Parameter Estimates of Models
Predicting Years of Homelessness
(N=331)

Independent Variables	Equation 1	Equation 2
Age	.130 ***	.548 ***
	(.027)	(.037)
Male	.741	-.836
	(.647)	(.555)
Black	-.962 *	-.538
	(.527)	(.419)
Native American	.637	.259
	(.558)	(.462)
Education/Training	-.294	-1.110
	(.907)	(.705)
Childhood Foster Care	1.500 ***	1.051 ***
	(.466)	(.363)
No Family Formation	.452	.796
	(.895)	(.717)
Time Worked	-.444 ***	-.194 ***
	(.093)	(.075)
Pre-Homeless Psychiatric Hospitalization	-1.306 **	-1.203 **
	(.665)	(.525)
Age First Homeless		-.502 ***
		(.035)
Criminal History		-.177
		(.905)
Alone Now		.640
		(1.273)
Current Family Contact		.679
		(.726)
Homeless Identification		-.016
		(.110)
Street Identification		2.642 ***
		(1.132)
Severe Alcohol Symptoms		-.919
		(.614)
R^2	.188	.527

* $p < .10$
** $p < .05$
*** $p < .01$

Standard errors appear in parentheses.

Table 3

Unstandardized Parameter Estimates Predicting Intervening Endogenous Variables
(N=331)

	Dependent Variables						
Independent Variables	Age First Homeless	Criminal History	Alone Now	Current Family Contact	Homeless Identification	Street Identification	Severe Alcoholic Symptoms
Age	.840 ***	.002	.004 ***	.001	.025 **	.001	.002
	(.035)	(.001)	(.001)	(.002)	(.011)	(.001)	(.002)
Male	-2.945 ***	.185 ***	.146 ***	.062	.318	.071 ***	.203
	(.833)	(.033)	(.022)	(.038	(.263)	(.026)	(.049)
Black	.579	-.095 ***	-.034 *	.004	.048	-.072 ***	-.068 *
	(.678)	(.027)	(.018)	(.031)	(.215)	(.021)	(.040)
Native American	-1.169	.007	.021	-.119 ***	.808 ***	.037 *	.247 ***
	(.718)	(.028)	(.019)	(.033)	(.227)	(.022)	(.042)
Education/Training	-1.472	.067	-.001	-.097	.039	-.046	-1.472
	(1.168)	(.046)	(.031)	(.054)	(.370)	(.036)	(.068)
Childhood Foster Care	-.833	.065 ***	-.005	-.027	.219	.022	-.010
	(.600)	(.023)	(.016)	(.028)	(.190)	(.018)	(.035)
No Family Formation	1.395	-.110 **	.116 ***	.002	.103	.030	-.202 ***
	(1.153)	(.045)	(.031)	(.053)	(.365)	(.035)	(.067)
Time Worked	.542 ***	-.017 ***	-.003	.007	-.043	-.007	-.037 ***
	(.119)	(.005)	(.003)	(.006)	(.038)	(.004)	(.007)
Pre-Homeless Psychiatric Hospitalization	-.143	.048	.072 ***	.025	-.033	-.067 ***	.057
	(.856)	(.033)	(.023)	(.040)	(.271)	(.026)	(.050)
R^2	.734	.190	.246	.094	.090	.126	.256

* $p < .10$
** $p < .05$
*** $p < .01$

Standard errors appear in parentheses.