

HOBOS, BUMS, BAG LADIES, STREET PEOPLE:

NOW WHAT THE HOMELESS NEED IS MORE ACCURATE TERMINOLOGY

by Francis Baumli, Ph.D.

Warren Farrell's The Myth of Male Power (1993) is, in my opinion, his best book. But I have always been skeptical about, and disappointed by, its little section which deals with homeless men.¹ I thought it too brief, looked into his several sources and found them too vague, and while I appreciated his note of alarm about how this problem affects men, I never felt that he had truly dealt with the problem of homeless men. Still, I appreciated his attempt at providing sound statistics, e.g., "Ninety-six percent of the adult homeless in San Francisco are men. In other cities it is less—a median of 85 percent men."² I also appreciated his trenchant observation: "Remember when almost all the homeless were men? We called them 'bums.' Then some women appeared. We called the women 'bag ladies.' When about 15 percent were women, we called them 'homeless' and we suddenly began to care."³ This latter statement, although insightful, in my opinion scarcely does more than scratch the surface of

the problem. As for these statistics: I have traveled widely, and have made it a point to observe the plight of the homeless, and what I always felt I was seeing involved something much worse for men than what was suggested by Farrell's statistics.

We must acknowledge that Farrell's statistics are now outdated. Another problem, though, is that I do not believe they were accurate to begin with. I do not blame Farrell for this. The problems with such data have been multi-faceted. How do you gather such data and judge whether it is accurate? You are relying on census bureau figures, private studies, and the very different perspectives of the many individuals who gather this data. Do they merely count aggressive beggars who are badgering them for money? Or do they hike along a river and try to talk to the often angry, or morose, or psychotic people sleeping under bridges?

I realized that a radical new approach is needed for trying to answer the question (and solve the problem) as to what percentage of our homeless are men compared to how many are women. I began pondering the nature of the terminology as it applies to this question. Having grown up in rural Northwest Missouri,

I remembered the hobos who traveled through. They were rural, traveling bums. They might stop at a farm house and offer to do work for food. They might then sleep in the hayloft of the barn. When they left the next day there was a good chance they had stolen one or two items from the household. Later I would discover that bums also lived in cities. They sat on curbs with their feet in the gutter, a bottle of wine in their hands, and they slept in alleys or in shelters. But during my younger days, and even now, while I have read about, though rarely have met, homeless women, I virtually never see homeless women living on the streets. In fact, I have only known of two: An old woman here in Saint Louis who had her lucid moments but was generally psychotic. And a young woman in Columbia, Missouri who seemed psychotic, was seriously anorexic, ate out of a dumpster behind a pizza joint, and often slept in that same dumpster. Two women on the street! Yet 15 percent of the homeless are women? How could I reconcile my observation with these statistics?

I realized that I needed to start posing some questions—the right questions. My wife is a physician with a specialty in Family Practice who works at a

Community Health Care Center. (A nice way of saying it is a place that serves the poor.) A significant number of their patient population is classified as homeless. And what is the criterion for being classified this way? Only that the person does not have a permanent mailing address. This is all it takes for such people to be termed homeless and receive free medical care. (And of course an undetermined number of people lie, claiming to be homeless when actually they are not, for the sake of getting that free medical care.)

I asked questions, not only of my wife but also of other doctors, and began figuring out that these homeless people tend to fall into three categories. There are those who indeed have no permanent mailing address, but nevertheless have living accommodations. One person might be an unemployed man who lives with one relative for a few weeks, then when his welcome wears thin, he goes to live with another relative. At each of these places he has ample food, a shower every night, a comfortable bed, warmth in the winter, air-conditioning in the summer. Another such person might be a runaway teenager who has found a matrix of friends she can depend on, and she does what is called "couch

surfing," going from one place to another each night, sleeping on their couch or in a spare bedroom. She too enjoys the amenities of a home while being classified as homeless. Another such person is an old man who lived with the lay workers at a monastery for a few weeks, then went to a convent a few miles away for a few weeks, and now is living in a free room at the local priest's parsonage. Since he doesn't know how long he will be able to stay there, he does not consider this a permanent address.

It appears that a significant percentage of this kind of homeless people are women. Especially young women. Mind you, I would not want to be living such a lifestyle myself, but I here make the claim that this kind of homeless person has the most comfortable (or the least uncomfortable) of the lifestyles which define homeless people.

There is a second population that is in worse shape. They are homeless too, in the sense that they do not have a permanent mailing address. Like the first class of homeless people, they have found lodging, although it is less comfortable. Usually this lodging is in shelters set up especially for the homeless. Some

of these shelters allow the residents to stay 24 hours a day (I have found this true in most shelters that have women and children as residents), but most such shelters allow the residents to stay only for supper, a night's sleep, breakfast, and then they must leave for the day. (I have found this to be the case with most shelters that have only adult men as residents.) This group of people occupies a lower class, so to speak, than the first; but at least they do have a mattress to sleep on at night, they are warm in the winter, and usually there is some food and some availability of cleaning facilities.

Then there is a third class of the homeless whose circumstances are even more dire, and for want of a better term, I call them "street people." This means, very simply, that they are living on the streets—although sometimes this does not literally mean "street." Perhaps these people are on the streets during the day and at night they sleep on a heating vent, in a doorway, or in a cardboard box in an alley. Sometimes they do not quite live on the street because they congregate along rivers, sleep under the bridges that go over rivers, or they live near truck stops and

sleep under highway overpasses in filthy sleeping bags or in a nearby farm shed until the owner discovers them and kicks them out. These people occupy the lowest class of the homeless, and they are the ones I call street people.

But I have found that even street people fall into two classes. There are the street people who end up in this unfortunate situation only briefly. For example, I knew a family that was abruptly evicted from their home when the bank foreclosed. For one night they slept on the front lawn to watch over their belongings. The next day, relatives helped them move most of their belongings. The father then slept there alone the second night to watch over the rest of their belongings which were fetched the following day. Another example involves a woman with three children whom I met at a Goodwill. She had fled her home because of a bad (though not abusive) marriage, and was there asking for help. The personnel of this entire store (both male and female) were busy trying to help her. She had spent the previous night sleeping in a park with her three children, but this day the Goodwill employees had already found her a tiny apartment, and were busy

fitting the children with clothing and finding furnishings for the apartment. I found out about this because I had gone to the store with three mattresses I was planning to donate, but was told that because of health rules Goodwill could no longer take bedding of any kind. However, one industrious worker took me aside, told me the plight of this woman and her three children, and asked me if I would haul the three mattresses to the apartment which was only a short distance away. So I drove there in my pickup, managed by myself (with considerable difficulty) to get the three mattresses up a flight of narrow stairs, and thus this homeless family, after one night on the street, although now still homeless by legal definition nevertheless had lodging. Another example involved a man who was going through a divorce, had to leave the family home, and decided to sleep in his car. He did so the first night, but the next day his car was impounded by his wife's divorce lawyers. So for a full week he would sneak back to the family home at night and sleep in the very spacious (but empty) doghouse in the backyard without his wife knowing about it. (Yes; he literally slept in the doghouse. This actually

happened!) A week later, he finally swallowed his pride (part of which involved accepting the fact that the situation was not going to change), went to visit his brother, told him what had happened, and was invited to live there.

These homeless people are, if I may use the phrase and thus appear (sic) callous, what I call "temporary street people." I do not deny that they are having a terrible time. They are scared, cold, hungry, and what is perhaps worst, they can not feel sure but that this state of being temporarily on the street may be permanent. But as events turn out, it is not permanent. They find shelter, lodging, some degree of security.

Then there are those I call the "permanent street people." These are the dregs of society, and they are the lowest class of the homeless. They are often mentally ill or addicted to illegal drugs, they are social outcasts, they are dirty and hungry and tired and have no hopes for bettering themselves. They sleep on damp riverbanks under bridges, or on cold concrete in alleyways while huddled in boxes, or on heating vents where everyone walking by can see them. They might occasionally get food at a soup kitchen or by

begging, but just as likely their food is found in dumpsters, in garbage cans, or they steal their food and sometimes hope to get caught so they can have a night's lodging in a jail cell. They may be psychotic enough they do not want lodging that is more comfortable. They may be prone to violence, and because of this, may have been kicked out of every shelter they otherwise might have been able to stay in. Or they may feel so ashamed and depressed that they can not bear to let other people see them this way, so they shun all human contact except for living in proximity to other people who are just as down and out as they are. They go weeks without a decent meal, months without safe or comfortable lodging, years without bathing. They can not afford medical care, and have no means for traveling to a place where they might be able to get free medical care. Ordinary people are afraid of them, or contemptuous toward them, and society keeps them at a distance. Police in cities patrol the alleys during the day and destroy the boxes these people sleep in. A stranded motorist under an overpass sees them and calls the police on his cell phone; the police come and order the street people sleeping there to move along. People

sic their dogs on them. Our society treats them like animals, and they are on the street permanently.

Yes. Permanently. Or nearly so. Let us try and set forth a useful criterion here. Let us state that "permanent street people" are on the street at least 300 days of the year. People who spend less time on the street are "temporary street people." What about the people who fall somewhere in between these two categories? For example, someone who is on the street 250 days a year? Allow me to make the observation (readily acknowledging that this claim is not based on as much carefully gathered empirical data as I would prefer) that there is not much of a population "in between" the two categories of those who are on the street at least 300 days a year and those who are on the street fewer than 300 days a year. From what I have observed, this "in between" area is extremely rare. "Permanent street people" actually are almost always on the street much more than 300 days a year. "Temporary street people" are rarely there more than a couple of weeks.

And how do these two categories discriminate between men and women? Again my claims are based on

what I myself have witnessed, what I have been told by street people themselves, or what doctors and police have told me. I think a safe estimate is that, when we look at how men and women comprise the populations of those who are temporarily on the street and those who are permanently on the street, more than 90 percent of those who are permanently on the street are men and about 80 percent of those who are temporarily on the street are men. In truth, I believe that ten years ago the number of people on the street permanently was more than 95 percent men, while people on the street temporarily were about 90 percent men. But my wife, whose clinic has for its patients such a large number of homeless people, observes that the number of women who are street people has risen dramatically over the last few years and continues to rise, because most women on the street are drug addicts "turning tricks" for their drug money.⁴ In response to what my wife told me I observed that women, since they so often are the recipients of chivalry, probably do not end up on the streets even when they are prostituting themselves for drug money. She countered that such women do not get chivalrous treatment because when they are allowed to

stay at someone's place, they bring their problems with them. When they arrive they are strung out on drugs and they bring their drug supply with them. Also they may bring in customers, or a violent boyfriend, or other prostitutes they know. Soon they get kicked out and no one wants to have anything to do with them. They end up sleeping in doorways, alleys, etc. just as men do when they are permanently on the street.

Still, for this third class of people, I must here emphasize my current estimate: I believe that of those on the streets temporarily at least 80 percent are men, and of those on the street permanently at least 90 percent are men. I welcome data that would prove me wrong. As for how percentages work out in the other (less difficult) two categories of the homeless, I can not hazard an estimate. I have seen too many studies, with results so vastly inconsistent, that I trust neither that data nor my own ability to decipher the true implications of that data with a worthy degree of accuracy.

Allow me to emphasize that in no way am I minimizing the difficulties of any of these people who are homeless. But I am stating that there are some very

telling class differences which apply to different kinds of homelessness. A 19-year-old girl who is couch-surfing with friends for a year may be homeless, and this may happen because she fled a difficult home life, but her lifestyle scarcely has the level of suffering a mother of the same age, with two children, is experiencing while living in a shelter. But even the suffering experienced by members of these two classes does not approach the suffering experienced by members of the third class: the true street people. And even here there are two subclasses: the temporary street people, and the permanent street people.

In describing these two subclasses, we need to be very careful about defining the sort of people who really do belong in these classes. For example, the rock icon of the 1960s and 1970s, Marianne Faithfull, during the early '70s spent two years on the Soho Streets of London. She has many times—in interviews and in writing—dramatized her plight by referring to herself as living on the streets during that Soho time when she was battling a cocaine habit and a heroine addiction. Yes; it appears she had a serious drug problem that could have been fatal. But was she really

a homeless person? Did she meet the criterion of not having a permanent mailing address of her own? My research into this question did not yield a clear answer. Was she really a street person? If she was, then she was a street person only temporarily and intermittently. She, during this very time, was being helped by many personal friends, plus by people like David Bowie, Keith Richards, even her ex-lover Mick Jagger, not to mention other entertainment luminaries such as record-producer Mike Leander who helped her produce part of an album during this very time. So when Marianne Faithfull passes out on the street for the night because she used too much heroine, but then the next day is rescued by friends or by the driver of Mick Jagger's limousine, this scarcely involves the same level of suffering experienced by a divorced man who has permanently become a malnourished wino, without a friend in the world, now living in a cardboard box behind a warehouse.

The point being made here involves how important it is to not obfuscate this entire topic with self-serving, or gender-serving, dramatics. This topic needs sound data, and this data must be gathered carefully.

Scholarly research on the homeless needs to make careful distinctions, gather data accordingly, and then accurately describe what the status of these various homeless people actually is, what their gender make-up is, and the duration of their status as homeless persons. I am certain that if anyone could succeed in doing a census of these various classes of the homeless, the results would point to the alarming fact that, among homeless people, the vast majority of permanent street people are men.

But of course, we live in a society which is chronically and gleefully sexist toward men. Much of this sexism is so habitual as to be reflexive, and much of it is so normative as to be enjoyably acceptable. This means that, once the true data about homeless people emerges, and shows that most of those who live permanently on the street are men, then we would be in the position of having to address the next disturbing question: namely, in our sexist society, how many people would even care about the plight of men who live permanently on the street?

¹ Warren Farrell, The Myth of Male Power: Why Men Are the Disposable Sex (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), pp. 208-209.

² Ibid., p. 208.

³ Ibid., p. 209.

⁴ For these observations, my wife uses her agency's latest statistics which were gathered at the end of the year 2011. Of their 19,000 total patient population, 521 are classified as homeless. This is about 3 percent, or, to be more exact, 2.74 percent.

It bears noting that these statistics do not take into account those who have failed to be identified as homeless, nor does it estimate those who identify themselves as homeless in order to get free medical care but actually are not homeless, and it cannot, of course, take into account people who are living in that locale but can not even get transportation to this health facility and hence can not be identified as homeless.

For clarity's sake, I again note that for these patients to be identified as homeless, all they have to do is claim that they do not have a permanent mailing address.

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