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Responses to Homeless in Nashville, TN: People, Places, and Perceptions

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Abstract: Although scholars debate over the number of homeless in the United States, there is a substantial population whose vulnerability needs to be addressed. Nashville, Tennessee, is a city that has struggled with effectively combating homelessness. Both public and private initiatives have had limited success. Informed by the Structure versus Agency discourse, this meta-analysis relies on interviews to examine opinions about homelessness from insider and outsider perspectives about one non-profit initiative, *The Contributor*, an entrepreneurial newspaper sold in Nashville by homeless vendors. This study also considers the implications of a model initiative, *House of Hope*, implemented in San Antonio, Texas, that provides aid to homeless people. Findings suggest that perceptions among both vendors and students are more favorable when homeless persons are considered entrepreneurs rather than people seeking handouts. Moreover, vendors realize the benefits of selling newspapers, but consider it a short-term job. Although students are more likely to associate homelessness with structural forces such as unemployment and inequality, few mention the lack of affordable housing as an obstacle. Furthermore, despite their overall favorable views of homeless vendors, students tend to suggest that individual initiative is the way to escape homelessness. However, responses from residents of *House of Hope* suggest the importance of both individual agency and macro-level initiatives to effectively combat homelessness. Results show several short- and long-term strategies that Nashville, TN, and cities like it might adopt to improve the socioeconomic viability of homeless populations.

Keywords: homelessness, entrepreneurs, vendors

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INTRODUCTION

Although scholars debate how to both appropriately define homelessness and account for the number of homeless people in the United States (U.S.), it is indisputable that increasing numbers of people are vulnerable to this situation (Ravenhill, 2008; Todd, 2006; Tompkins, 2009; Toro & Warren, 1999; Wasserman, 2010). A variety of structural forces, such as poverty, healthcare inequities, and a limited stock of low-cost housing can push individuals into homelessness and compound their vulnerability (Barnes & Jaret, 2003). Despite local initiatives and community group responses, homelessness persists. Efforts by public officials in Nashville, TN, have been largely ineffective in addressing this social problem and non-profit organizations have been unable to combat the issue on a grand scale. How have homeless people responded to this dilemma? What are insider and outsider perceptions about them in Nashville? And are their existing strategies used in other cities that could inform Nashville's dilemma? I rely on Structure versus Agency as a theoretical framework in this meta-analysis to respond to these three research issues.

Specifically, this study focuses on the presence and some of the experiences of homeless people in Nashville, TN, by closely evaluating one private, non-profit organization, *The Contributor* that strives to aid homeless persons in Nashville (*The Contributor*, 2011) and an alternative response to this same social problem in San Antonio, TX. *The Contributor* is a newspaper sold by street vendors who are either currently or formerly homeless; it aims to provide vendors with income as well as increase awareness of homelessness among non-homeless residents. A purposive sample of fifteen interviews that includes street vendors and students from a private school in the southeast provide perceptions

of homelessness in Nashville in general and views about homeless vendors in particular. Moreover, it is important to assess other viable responses to homelessness. Thus interviews with the developer of another response to homelessness, *House of Hope* in San Antonio, TX, and a purposive sample of five homeless residents of the facility provide insight about varied possible strategies to combat this social problem. To my knowledge, a comparative study of this type has not been performed to consider varied perceptions and responses to U.S. homelessness.

ACCOUNTING FOR HOMELESSNESS IN THE U.S.

There is no definitive answer, but it is estimated that there are between 600,000 to 2.5 million homeless people in the U.S. (McCarty, 2005). Link et al. (1994) find that about 14 percent or 26 million Americans report a lifetime prevalence (i.e., having been homeless at any time in life) of homelessness. Furthermore, 4.6 report 5-year prevalence (i.e., having been homeless sometime in the last five years). This figure equates to about 8.5 million people in the U.S. Furthermore, in a study conducted in Alameda County, CA, over a one-year period, 18 percent of homeless respondents were continuously homeless, 36 percent exited homelessness and maintained a residence, and 46 percent was episodically homeless (Sosin, 2003). This analysis illustrates the varied ways homelessness can be experienced.

According to Archer (2011), when demographic differences are considered, about seventy percent of homeless people are male and 30 percent are female. When race is assessed, about 42 percent are African American, 39 percent are White, 13 percent are Hispanic, 4 percent are Native American, and 2 percent are Asian (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2009).

Homeless African Americans and Hispanics are more predominant in urban areas, while Whites and Native Americans who are homeless are more apt to live in rural areas. Moreover, about 40 percent of homeless are former veterans, 16 percent are mental health patients, and 60 percent are substance abusers (Archer, 2011; National Coalition for the Homeless, 2009b). One implication of the juvenilization of poverty is the increasingly growing segments of the homeless that include families with children (Child Welfare League of America, 2011; Hays, 2003; National Coalition for the Homeless, 2009a). On average, families are known to experience more sustained periods of being homeless, suggesting that homelessness among families may be more chronic (Sosin, 2003).

One reason many families are forced into homelessness is the shortage of affordable housing units in the U.S. (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2009a). The federal housing policy has continually failed to address the needs of low-income households, making it even more difficult for many poor and/or working class people to locate affordable accommodations (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2009b). Unable to afford housing, especially for an entire family, such people may find themselves on the streets or in shelters. Moreover, a growing problem is that shelters are over capacity and cannot accommodate such families. On average, the number of homeless people in a city greatly exceeds the number of spaces in emergency shelters or transitional housing units (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2009). All factors combined, this impoverished population usually lacks any other option than to live on the streets.

In addition to the lack of low-cost housing stock, other precipitating factors correlated with homelessness are addiction, mental illness, and poverty (Archer, 2011;

Barnes & Jaret, 2003; Ravenhill, 2008; Todd, 2006; Tompkins, 2009; Toro & Warren, 1999; Wasserman, 2010). Sosin (2003) suggests that homelessness is shaped by multiple factors including a deficit in personal resources, the impact of economic market forces on the most financially vulnerable, and individual traits. Research also confirms both the difficulty in determining the number of U.S. homeless and the debates stemming from inconsistent definitions, which vary depending on “the nature of the living arrangements that constitute homelessness and the length of time one must live in such arrangements to be considered homeless” (Toro & Warren, 1999, p. 122). Toro and Warren’s (1999) meta-analysis uncovered major discrepancies. For example, the 1990 U.S. census claimed 230,000 homeless in the U.S. Yet other studies claimed as many as 13.5 million. These results suggest that, despite the inability for accuracy, “homelessness would still be a social problem of catastrophic proportions” (Toro & Warren 1999, p. 126). The above summary also shows that homelessness is a national problem that cuts across race, gender, family type, and location. This study focuses on one response to homelessness in Nashville, TN, as well as another viable option in San Antonio, TX.

THE STRUCTURE VERSUS AGENCY DISCOURSE

The Structure vs. Agency discourse is a lens through which homelessness can be examined. Structural forces are macro-level institutions, organizations, and ideologies that influence individuals at a micro-level. Agency is free will or the ability to make choices in one’s life. Structural forces can place populations in vulnerable positions; how people invoke their agency influences the ability to combat negative systemic forces. For example, Toro et al. (1991)

introduce the following four ecological principles central to homelessness and discuss implications for policy initiatives; adaptation, cycling of resources, interdependence, and succession. Adaptation considers social context and the individual's relationship to it. In this study, the social context constitutes the ecological environment in which a homeless person lives and the forces that are at work in their lives. Cycling of resources constitutes the resources that are available to a community and how they are utilized in relation to the homeless of that community. The interdependence principle "suggests that any system can be viewed as a series of interdependent components" that "[involve] various ripples in the life space" (Toro et al., 1991 p. 1212). Finally, the succession principle demonstrates that the situations of the homeless are always transitioning and changing and must be addressed accordingly. Based on these four primary ecological principles, the authors recognize the obligation to address the needs of homelessness through multiple levels of analysis that include interventions, policies, context-specific responses, and efforts to assess and meet individual needs. Two of the most pressing systemic forces tied to continued homelessness in the U.S. are lack of low-cost housing and poverty (Barnes & Jaret, 2003; Ravenhill, 2008; Sosin, 2003; Todd, 2006; Tompkins, 2009; Wasserman, 2010).

In a capitalist economy characterized by competition, upward mobility is difficult when one finds oneself at the bottom of the *ladder*. The recent recession has only worsened problems for persons who work daily in low-waged jobs and who must contend with mounting healthcare costs and housing costs that take up a disproportionate percentage of their meager incomes (Barnes & Jaret, 2003; Hays, 2003; Sosin, 2003; Wilson, 1996, 1999). Job loss, increased

rents, or a dramatic health expense can result in homelessness (Archer, 2011; Barnes & Jaret, 2003; Ravenhill, 2008; Todd, 2006; Tompkins, 2009; Toro & Warren, 1999; Wasserman, 2010). Even poor and near poor people, who do not face these problems, must compete for the limited stock of affordable housing in the U.S. The transition from manufacturing to service jobs has also taken its toll on people who are more vulnerable to employment and residential change (Hays, 2003; Wilson, 1996, 1999). The former writer describes the domino effect, "one problem leading to another and compounding it, until too many dominoes fall and the situation becomes impossible to manage" (Hays, 2003:411). This tendency is also called interdependence (Toro et al., 1991). In light of the intersectionality of problems associated with housing, employment, family trauma, and in some instances, mental illness, it stands to reason that multiple response methods are needed that require involvement by non-homeless people as well as homeless people at macro- and micro-levels. My analysis attempts to examine several possible strategies and the perceptions of people involved.

STUDY CONTEXT: HOMELESSNESS IN NASHVILLE, TN

The Contributor: Entrepreneurship among the Homeless

Homelessness is prevalent in Nashville, TN.¹ Nashville has 8 homeless persons to every thousand people. Comparatively, Los Angeles, CA, has the highest concentration of homeless people of any city in the U.S. with 10 homeless to every thousand people. Although sizably smaller in population, Nashville still has a notable concentration of homeless people (Archer, 2011). In 2005, Nashville pledged to respond through a ten-year plan to eliminate chronic homelessness (Metropolitan Government of Nashville and

Davidson County, 2005). However, by 2009, the homeless population had doubled from 2,000 to 4,000 people (Phillips, 2009). Also, of the 1,944 housing units that the city pledged to construct, only 252 were built. Although this public initiative has fallen behind on its promises, several non-profit organizations have intervened to aid the homeless – including housing via Room in the Inn and Nashville Rescue Mission, and Siloam Family Healthcare.

This study focuses on a non-profit economic initiative that partners Nashville's homeless with other concerned residents. *The Contributor, Inc.* is a 501c3 non-profit organization that prints a newspaper twice monthly to accomplish the following objectives: “[provide] a diversity of perspectives and information on the condition of homelessness while highlighting the contributions of homeless and formally homeless individuals; [provide] homeless and formally homeless vendors with a source of income; and, [create] community between vendors and customers” (taken from <http://thecontributor.org/>). Based on its sales arena, *The Contributor* is referred to as a “street newspaper” by its originators; this grassroots effort is largely supported by donor contributions. Similar street papers exist in 80 cities around the world, all striving to give a voice to the homeless and unemployed. However, *The Contributor* is the only street paper of its kind in the city of Nashville (Wiedmer, 2010). The newspaper includes traditional stories, personal interest pieces, and other information directly or indirectly related to homelessness. It is common to also have articles by homeless persons. Vendors purchase *The Contributor* for \$0.25 each and can sell them for up to \$1.00. Although soliciting for money is against the law in Nashville, selling *The Contributor* is considered an entrepreneurial effort and vendors strategically locate

themselves around the city, particularly in high traffic locales. According to its website, as the highest-circulating street newspaper of its kind in North America, *The Contributor* has an average monthly circulation of 100,000 copies and about 400 active vendors each month. Vendors are independent contractors and selling *The Contributor* is a real job. Vendors must complete an interview process and a two-hour training class before receiving their first badge and papers. Selling the paper is done entirely outdoors. Vendors are micro-business owners who are responsible for maintaining their business daily. This includes maintaining a steady stock of newspapers and running their business.²

Research Methodology and Analytical Process

The first phase of my research focuses on views about *The Contributor* by vendors and local college students. During the fall of 2011, I conducted a survey of thirteen undergraduate students from a private, medium-sized university in the southeastern United States (an estimated 12,000 students). I also interviewed two newspaper vendors during that same period (no payment or gift was provided for participation). A total of fifteen persons were interviewed during this first phase. These were both convenience and purposive samples because I sought participants based on certain criteria. The homeless population in Nashville is often hidden, transient, and difficult to penetrate, therefore I interviewed the first homeless newspaper vendors that agreed to complete the survey. The students were chosen based on their willingness to participate and their criteria as undergraduate students at a local university. The surveys sought to gain insight on the thoughts of students on homelessness in Nashville in general, as well as their

perceptions of homeless people who both do and do not sell *The Contributor*.

Six of the participants were male, seven female; nine were White; two were African American; one was Hispanic/Latino; and one self-classified as Other. Surveys included four open-ended and four close-ended questions (a sample survey is provided in the appendix). The two vendors of *The Contributor* were both male and White, ages 28 and 52 years old. The 52 year old had been selling the newspaper for a little over a month, while the 28-year-old had been selling it for nearly a year. The interviews consisted of conversations regarding their personal experiences selling *The Contributor*, reasons for doing so, and how selling the paper had affected their lives.² I interviewed the vendors while they stood on the streets selling the papers. Both student and vendor responses were analyzed using content analysis to identify and uncover common themes and patterns. This common qualitative approach seeks to uncover meanings in the interview responses as well as identify emergent representative quotes, patterns, and themes associated with homelessness, agency, and structural forces that influence this social problem (Krippendorf, 1980).

Case Study: A Successful Public Initiative

In the second project phase, after examining the limitations of Nashville's ten-year plan, I investigated an initiative to aid the homeless in San Antonio, TX. This case study included gathering secondary data about the history of the project and its current profile as well as interviewing Ron Anthony, a principal architect at Overton Partners & Architects in San Antonio. He and his firm designed *House of Hope* (pseudonym), a homeless center and transitional center in the city. Anthony provided information during an in-person interview that lasted about one hour during

which he shared his research findings, a PowerPoint presentation on the homeless and *House of Hope*, and anecdotal perceptions from his experiences working with homelessness. I also drew upon five interviews conducted by a volunteer at *House of Hope* (a sample survey is provided in the appendix). She interviewed homeless people who utilized the services at *House of Hope*. Several persons were official members of their transitional programs. This sample was also purposive and convenient because she specifically interviewed willing House of Hope participants. Content analysis was used to examine interview responses. Both phases of this project enable me to assess short- and long-term strategies to respond to homelessness as efforts to bridge structure and agency. Findings may also facilitate the development of more effective strategies to significantly reduce homelessness in Nashville and cities like it. Research findings are provided below.

OUTCOMES ON HOMELESSNESS: RESEARCH FINDINGS

Vendor Perspectives and Student Perceptions

What are some of the *insider* perspectives about homeless and personal agency; how do outsiders feel about this dynamic? *The Contributor* vendor interviews provide insight into the daily experiences of people who are attempting to invoke their agency despite a myriad of personal challenges. First, readers should note that, because selling the papers is their only source of revenue, both vendors requested that the interviews take place while they sold their papers. This decision informs my broader examination of the reality of homelessness as well as the agentic perspectives of the vendors. Both men explain that selling the newspaper provides income to rent inexpensive hotel

rooms or apartments for most nights, purchase food, and occasionally allow for the purchase of items such as cigarettes or clothing. Each of the vendors stresses the fact that selling *The Contributor* is not their permanent form of employment, but rather a transitional job. According to the 52-year-old vendor, "I can't find any other work, so this is a good job in the meantime." His comment informs the reality of the 8 percent unemployment rate in Nashville, the difficulties less formally educated persons can have locating employment in this new global economy – particularly during recessionary times – and the limited low-cost housing in the city (Ehrenreich, 2001; Hays, 2003; MacLeod, 1995; Ravenhill, 2008; Sosin, 2003; Todd, 2006; Tompkins, 2009; Wasserman, 2010; Wilson, 1996).

The following quote from the same vendor alludes to the important, yet transitive role *The Contributor* plays; "I am always looking for other more permanent work with a more stable income." The other vendor describes the context that led to his current post;

I hiked to Nashville, stayed at a mission a couple of nights, but wanted to get out...I saw people selling it [*The Contributor*] and looked into it...income fluctuates, but it is steady work...I meet lots of people, most are indifferent, but some are really generous and supportive. (White male, 28 years old)

The above comment illustrates some of the financial benefits as well as the drawbacks of vendor life. In addition to monetary benefits, the above vendor says that selling newspapers has resulted in valuable work skills such as being able to work with different people. The second vendor (52-year-old White male) explains how he began selling newspapers; "[I have] no permanent address, so it's difficult." Yet, he continues, "I like the people I meet [and] it gives me some work to do everyday." However, when asked about his future as a vendor, this same man describes selling *The Contributor*

as, "somewhat – more of a stepping stone until I am able to get more work."

Both vendors mention that selling the newspaper provides valuable job experience for their futures and distinguishes them from their homeless peers who are not working to escape homelessness in a similar way. One vendor ends his interview as follows, "I've learned so much about interacting with people and how to communicate." The latter comment implies that, in addition to helping Nashville homeless residents in securing basic instrumental needs such as temporary shelter, food, and clothing, the entrepreneurial aspects of selling *The Contributor* can translate into job skills as well as expressive outcomes such as personal pride and self-efficacy during a difficult time. Although neither vendor considers selling newspapers long-term employment, it represents a short-term employment stop gap to combat long-term homelessness for its vendors. The above comments illustrate the varied and valuable role *The Contributor* plays in helping homeless vendors structure their day and maintain self-efficacy (Wilson, 1996). As might be expected, the primary theme most commonly mentioned by both vendors is the need for gainful employment in order to locate permanent housing. Although they realize that selling newspapers is a short-term solution, both men seem optimistic about their futures and are appreciative of the funds selling *The Contributor* provides.

Outsider views about the homeless can be harsh, particularly from persons who believe that each individual determines his or her own destiny; even poor people sometimes hold such views (MacLeod, 1995). To assess these possibilities, I survey undergraduate students from a private liberal arts university in the southeastern U.S. What are their views about *The Contributor* and its vendors? I am also interested in whether and how their views can be related to the

Structure vs. Agency discourse. First, overall, student responses and opinions are fairly stable across all thirteen participants. Next, the vast majority of students (62 percent or 8 out of 13) associate homelessness with structural forces such as the poor economy, systemic inequalities, and unemployment. Furthermore, of the remaining students whose explanations focus on individual choices such as alcoholism, failure to get an education, or lack of initiative, slightly more females than males associate homelessness with individual initiative. The following representative quote from a 21-year-old White, male junior positions structure over agency as he describes this social problem;

Systemic inequalities such as chronic poverty, mental illness, political/economic factors like a struggling economy, recession, lack of jobs, issues with minimum wage...homelessness can be avoided, or at least alleviated, by support and rehabilitation of the already homeless and the changing of judicial and social systems that lead others toward extreme poverty and homelessness.

This student's detailed response suggests some understanding of the complexities of homelessness; it also provides remedies that take both social forces and individual agency into consideration. Another student's response further describes complexities as well as remedies that rely on both changes in social forces and individual decisions;

Lack of access to resources: education, healthcare (and healthy food), stability – starting out at such a disadvantage in the American capitalistic economy: structural violence – the political and economic framework of society: brokenness of the home – lack of father-figure and prevalence of single-parent families. I don't think homelessness can ever entirely be avoided. While some are externally driven into poverty and homelessness, others are self-inflicted because of lack of: education, male leadership, community cohesion, and support groups. (White male, 20 years old, junior)

The next representative quote points to two common factors and the beliefs among most respondents that it will be difficult to end homelessness;

I think that mental illness and maybe job loss are primary factors. I know that a lot of veterans are homeless. I'm not sure that it can be avoided. Sometimes it just happens. (African American female, 18 years old, sophomore)

Several females comment that the presence and close proximity of homeless people in Nashville somewhat frighten them and causes concern for their personal safety – one so much so that she will not purchase the newspapers. However, another female describes homelessness as follows, “they are not as unlike us as many of us like to think they are.” This latter comment contrasts with some anecdotal perceptions about youth views on homeless in general and those from this specific university in particular. However, the prior views show some of the continued insider-outsider distinctions made about homeless persons. Furthermore, 62 percent of the participants mention, based on their own observations, that homelessness is a prevalent problem in Nashville. Four students believe that homelessness is a phenomenon that can never completely be remedied. Interestingly, despite majority views that social forces are most probably the cause of homelessness, *only one* student specifically mention inadequate housing as an important factor;

I think homelessness can be caused by unemployment and the difficulty of getting a job, as well as a lack of motivation. [How can it be avoided?] Possibly by programs that give homeless people jobs and provide housing. I'm honestly not 100 percent sure. (White female, 19 years old, sophomore)

The following 19-year-old White female sophomore provides the most common remedy that stresses individual choices: “I think it can be avoided by getting a good

education, having motivation, and understanding the benefits of hard work.” Although she and most of her peers are sympathetic about this social problem, it is still common for them to directly or indirectly “blame the victim” in their responses (West, 1993). Such responses are informed by a common belief in individual choice as an overriding influence of more systemic problems (Ehrenreich, 2001; Hays, 2003; MacLeod, 1995). In general, the most common solution to prevent homelessness is for persons to get a good education and is likely informed by students’ current presence in college and belief that it will provide them with a stable lifestyle and future.

Another important finding shows that all thirteen students are more likely to purchase *The Contributor* than to support a homeless person through monetary or food donations. Furthermore, vendors of *The Contributor* were described as “bold”, “hard-working”, “proactive”, and “motivated.” The following representative quotes illustrate favorable support for varied reasons;

I like it... [I am more likely to] purchase *The Contributor*. I feel like it is an easier and legitimate way to help the homeless. (African American male, 21 years old, senior)

The next student’s views are informed by additional knowledge and hands on experiences;

I think it’s a really good idea! I took a course over the summer about homelessness in Chicago and got to use the sales from the newspapers we sold to pay for our meals. It’s actually a lot harder than it looks, and I respect them for having to work so hard. [Q: more likely to buy the newspaper rather than give money/food?] I’m probably more likely to purchase *The Contributor* because it helps the entire organization so that all the employees get a paycheck. (African American female, 18 years old, sophomore)

And the following White male 20-year-old junior associates selling the newspaper with

“entrepreneurial endeavors rather than begging.” He continues;

I think homeless people selling *The Contributor* are bold and proactive. It is a great way to raise awareness of the homeless issue in Nashville both as they are physically selling it and within the articles of the paper itself. These people are acknowledging their need and doing something about it to improve their lives.

Yet another student believes poor choices largely result in homelessness and is concerned that vendors actually can prolong their situation;

A lack of education and proper development at an early age causes social ignorance from which homelessness stems. Improving public education I think is the best course of action to avoid homelessness....[purchasing *The Contributor*] I think it is double sided – in one way it helps teach the principles of working for a salary, but it also stabilizes the homeless lifestyle, encouraging it in one way. (White male, 20 years old, junior)

The above representative quotes show the varied ways students feel about homelessness and remedies for the social problem. Yet most consider selling *The Contributor* to be a viable short-term solution to a long-term problem. Thus just as the vendors interviewed here consider themselves more favorably based on their individual-level responses to homelessness, students have similar perceptions. Yet it is important to note that it is uncommon for neither vendors nor students in this study to specifically mention the need for additional low-cost housing to respond to this social problem.

House of Hope as a Long-term Response

Despite the more short-term benefits of non-profit initiatives such as *The Contributor*, other initiatives are needed to respond to the multiple factors that usually result in homelessness. The *House of Hope* is considered one such option. Interviewing Ron Anthony about his work with homeless

people reveals many ideas about how one city has created a unique initiative. After providing demographic information on homelessness, Ron explains his work with *House of Hope*, the largest and most comprehensive homeless center in the U.S. *House of Hope* is located on a 37-acre campus in downtown San Antonio, TX. According to Anthony, since it opened, the number of homeless people in San Antonio has been reduced from 6,000 to 100 people and crime rates in the downtown area have been reduced by 28 percent. Furthermore, Anthony explains that in the average American city, each homeless person costs taxpayers about \$50,000 dollars per year to support – this estimate reflects minimal services to the homeless associated with prison bail, emergency medical care, and damage costs. Therefore, before *House of Hope*, San Antonio was losing about \$300 million annually. Thus the \$100 million initial project, including regular maintenance and sustainability costs, is believed to be saving the city an estimated \$200 million annually. However, Anthony is quick to comment that, more importantly than monetary savings, he perceives *House of Hope* as an example of a partnership between homeless persons and other concerned citizens to provide safe spaces as members of the former group transition out of tough times (Todd, 2006; Tompkins, 2009; Wasserman, 2010).

The facility is unique because it is a public-private joint venture; the city funded the project, but the efforts by nonprofit organizations maintain and serve the facility. Anthony expresses that “one of the biggest challenges is to get service providers to work together,” but this effort has been key to the success of *House of Hope*. The campus provides the homeless with most of the services they need in one location, including but not limited to: mixed gender and age housing; medical, dental, and

mental health care; GED courses; legal assistance for reacquiring identification; a pet kennel; and comfortable outdoor spaces. Its design focuses on collaboration and flexibility. Anthony stresses the need to “design flexibly because the needs of the homeless change.” Anthony and his partners planned *House of Hope* such that the facility could “walk” with homeless persons through their transition, providing housing ranging from outdoor covered spaces to private apartment complexes. Indoor spaces have movable furniture and walls to accommodate the changing populations and services for people who visit the campus. According to Anthony, “housing does not work without the provision of transformational services.” Providing most of the necessary facilities and services in one space has been crucial to the success of this initiative. In addition to partnering with local non-profit organizations, residents of *House of Hope* partner with each other and facility workers to maintain the property and their personal spaces. By doing so, all persons involved understand their value in helping to sustain the facility.

Interviews with five homeless people involved with the *House of Hope* reveal how this establishment has affected their lives and enhanced their stability. Their responses indicate how *House of Hope's* transitional programs are designed to closely work with homeless people through the entire process of getting off the streets. However, the programs are highly contingent upon involvement by homeless people themselves who must actively participate in their own development. One White male 30-year-old affirms, “one only gets out from the program what they put in.” This statement reveals the importance of homeless people invoking their agency to overcome their situation. It is true that some participants have no desire to participate in

the shelter's more involved programs, but rather frequent *House of Hope* each night to sleep in outdoor covered spaces and receive free food and showers. However, most interviewees are either already full members of the transitional shelter or are sleeping at *House of Hope* nightly waiting for a program vacancy. The following quote explains this situation;

There are two parts to the shelter: they offer covered outdoor shelter and tarps for sleeping and also provide food and showers. That's the first part. The second part requires full membership and that's when you get in the programs. Most people sleep in the shelter to get the ball rolling for the other part, then they can become a member. (African American male, 35 years old).

The "second part" of *House of Hope* requires members to return to the shelter on a daily basis, swipe in with a membership card and take a breathalyzer test. These participants are placed in more permanent housing, ranging from bunk rooms to personal apartments, and they also are admitted to different transitional and training programs to help them find gainful employment and "get back on their feet." These services require a lot of commitment on the participant's part, but ultimately allow homeless people to start down the path to independence. One woman explains the positives and negatives;

You always have your positives and negatives in living in a shelter, but living here relieves a lot of stress and is a much better place than the streets for my family. Mostly, [*House of Hope*] does give me opportunities for advancement and gives my family hope for the future. (African American female, 31 years old)

House of Hope's goal is to get their residents in and out of their programs, so that they can move on and be independent members of society. This also creates availability for other homeless people on their waiting list to be admitted to their programs. The project endeavors to both

systemically combat homelessness and train homeless people for the work force and for life as contributing members to society. A White female, age 45 states, "*House of Hope* provides me with housing and training as I look for work. Ultimately, it will prepare me for my work and for society." These findings suggest that faculty and residents are both working together to end homelessness in San Antonio, TX.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The diverse aspects of this study suggest various propositions for addressing homelessness in general but most specifically in Nashville, TN. Although it is difficult to determine the actual number of homeless in the nation, the homeless population is undeniably present and vulnerable. Their vulnerability is heightened by a number of structural forces, as well as the intersection of such forces that work against them. Initiatives by the city of Nashville have proven unsuccessful in alleviating homelessness and private, nonprofit organizations have been unable to provide a viable solution. So, what could be an effective strategy for the city?

The Contributor appears to allow for some positive progress in the lives of the homeless. For most students in this study, people who sell the newspaper are believed to have more initiative and drive than their counterparts who do not. Although the majority of the homeless population is in similar economic predicaments, those who sell *The Contributor* may have more favorable reputations and possibly increase their opportunities for gainful employment. In the eyes of the sample students, the fact that the vendors are hard-working people who are trying to provide for themselves is a reminder that they are not unlike other people in society. Interestingly, some students espoused West's (1993) notion of common humanness and Americanness that

must be evident to effectively respond to social problems tied to race, class, and gender inequality. Yet students' remedies for homelessness focus more on individual agency (i.e., getting an education, hard work), than structural forces, illustrating the difficulty even empathetic people can have determining comprehensive solutions for social problems like homelessness. Lastly, few students or vendors associate homelessness with lack of low-cost housing. This result suggests the possible tendency to emphasize the role of both broader economic reasons such as limited employment and the recession or individual agency rather than understand and stress important, tangential factors such as housing stock.

Furthermore, vendors of *The Contributor* interviewed here have aspirations for their futures. They recognize the experience and training that selling the newspaper provides them in regards to future employment, and they are hopeful that such an opportunity will present itself. Scholars such as McLeod (1987) state that aspirations are key to increasing one's perceptions that, despite current problems, she or he will be able to achieve life goals – in this case, gainful employment and stable housing. Without aspirations, is it often difficult to realize one's agency. However, *The Contributor* is not a lasting, sustainable solution. Both vendors recognize this fact and hope that they could find more permanent employment and housing in the future. Despite their initiative, their situations show that aspirations are not enough nor are individual-level entrepreneurial ventures. More long-term systemic responses to homelessness, such as *House of Hope*, are required (Barnes & Jaret, 2003; Todd, 2006; Tompkins, 2009; Wasserman, 2010).

According to these findings, success of *House of Hope* is attributable to a number of

aspects of the facility. By providing most of the necessary transitional services in one space, the center attempts to address many of the structural forces that are working against homeless people and increasing their vulnerability. It strives to respond to poverty by providing safe housing, meals, education, and opportunities for employment. It provides needed healthcare services such as dental care, mental health services, intervention programs, and general medical care. Also, it responds to the growing number of homeless families by providing mixed gender and age housing to allow families to remain intact. The center recognizes the intersection of many structural forces, or the nexus of vulnerability, that is often present in the lives of the homeless and attempts to combat it. Finally, the facility is prepared for changes its residents may encounter over time. In other words, *House of Hope* appears equipped to face the principle of succession that is often an ecological part of the transition process for homeless people (Toro et al., 1991).

A strong argument can be made that the *House of Hope* has become a meso-level structural force that has potential as a model for other cities to follow. Although it requires homeless people to choose to enter its doors and become member of its programs, such agency is only possible if places like *House of Hope* exist. This suggests that systemic change, at both the macro- and meso-level are required to combat homelessness. Because Nashville's current ten-year plan has not reached its goals and non-profit organizations like *The Contributor* are limited in their effects, a public-private joint venture like the *House of Hope* may be a possible strategy. Such a venture could be on a smaller scale, considering Nashville is not nearly the size of San Antonio. A comprehensive shelter, funded by the city and run by nonprofits,

could combine the efforts of people who are currently working independently, with minimal success, to combat homelessness.

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APPENDICES

Vulnerable Populations: Survey

I am a student in HOD-2690-03: Vulnerable Populations this semester. For my analytical paper and class project, I am analyzing Nashville's homeless population and [University's name] students' perceptions of this population. This survey serves to find out what students think about the homeless population in general and those who sell *The Contributor* newspaper. This is a totally voluntary survey (do not place your name on it). There are no right or wrong answers and your honesty is greatly appreciated. Thank you for your participation.

1. Age _____
2. Gender: _____ Female _____ Male
3. Classification (check one):
_____ Freshman
_____ Sophomore
_____ Junior
_____ Senior
_____ Other (_____)
4. Race (check one):
_____ White
_____ Black/African American
_____ Hispanic/Latino
_____ Asian
_____ Other (_____)
5. What do you think are the primary factors that cause homelessness? How do you think homelessness can be avoided?
6. What are your thoughts about homeless people in Nashville?
7. What are your thoughts about homeless people selling *The Contributor*?
8. Are you more likely to give a homeless person money/food or more likely to purchase *The Contributor* from them? Why are you more likely to do one than the other?

House of Hope Participants: Survey

This survey is for a student in HOD-2690-03: Vulnerable Populations. For her analytical paper and class project, she is analyzing how the House of Hope has provided opportunities and chances for advancement. This is a totally voluntary survey (do not place your name on it). There are no right or wrong answers and your honesty is greatly appreciated. Thank you for your participation.

1. Age: _____

2. Gender: ____Female ____Male

3. Race (check one):

____White

____Black/African American

____Hispanic/Latino

____Asian

____Other (_____)

4. Time of involvement with House of Hope_____

5. How did you come to know House of Hope and decide to participate in its programs?

6. What programs are you involved in? How have they affected your quality of life and/or economic stability?

7. In what other ways has House of Hope influenced your day-to-day life?

8. Do you think working with House of Hope is allowing for your advancement in society? Why or why not?

¹ In 2010, the 13-county Nashville metropolitan area had a population of about 1,589,934 persons.

² The vendor survey was a modified version of the student survey that excluded questions 3 and 8.