

The Potential Impacts of the Homeless on Public Lands¹

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Abstract: The multidimensional problem of the homeless population in San Bernardino and nearby counties in California is examined and its impacts on adjacent public lands. The characteristics of the homeless in the area are described, as well as possible implications of this population for public lands use. Issues related to the homeless population are examined, such as displacement of recreational uses, economic development, law enforcement, and population mobility.

In the western United States, as in other parts of the country, the problems of homelessness are readily apparent. In almost every community, the number of people homeless and on the streets has been increasing during the last 3 years (Dixon 1993). In some areas, the homeless are concentrated in urban areas only (Orange County Register 1993). However, in other areas the homeless not only affect the traditional urban areas, but may also impact public lands that are adjacent to or near urban areas. Some of these impacts are related to health problems, drug problems, increased crime, children not attending school, and the issue of trespass. To better understand the existing impacts of the homeless on public lands and the potential impacts from continued occupancy by this group, the socio-economic and demographic characteristics of this group of individuals should be studied. To this end, the Center for Community Affairs, in conjunction with the San Bernardino Homeless Coalition, commissioned a study on the homeless population in western San Bernardino County (traditionally known as the Inland Empire) and in the city of Pomona (located in the east end of Los Angeles County).

The objectives of this research were twofold. First, data concerning the socio-economic and demographic characteristics of the homeless were developed. Second, problems that this population present to urban and rural areas, as well as to public lands, were explored.

Study Area

Los Angeles, Riverside, and San Bernardino Counties all include large amounts of public land in the form of State parks, USDI National Parks and monuments, USDA National Forests, and USDI Bureau of Land Management resource

areas. Each of these public lands in the above-mentioned counties is either located right next to a large urban area or within an hour travel time from one.

The area selected for study included approximately seven small communities located within the Los Angeles urban milieu. These communities were Pomona, Montclair, Ontario, Upland, Rancho Cucamonga, Chino, and Chino Hills (*figure 1*). The communities comprise about 300 square miles. The total population of these communities is about 250,000 people (State of California 1992). The study area is located near the Angeles, San Bernardino, and Cleveland National Forests and is, in many places, not immediately adjacent to public lands. It is sufficiently close, however, so that speculations may be made from this and other data sources concerning the impacts on resources from the homeless, should larger numbers begin to occupy public lands.

Data Collection

Data collection occurred during the first 2 weeks of May 1993. Supporting data, collected by other researchers in the same geographic area in 1992 or 1993, are also presented for comparative purposes.

Sample Size, Randomness, and the Interview Process

The Coordinator of the San Bernardino County Coalition estimated that about 3,000 to 5,000 homeless people in the area were studied (San Bernardino County Homeless Coalition 1992). To make valid generalizations for a population of this size, the sample must contain about 325 to 350 people. The interview teams conducted 329 useable interviews; this number was of adequate size so that statements about the existing population and predictions of future impacts from this population on public lands near the study area could be made.

In many instances, inadequate sample size can present problems; but in this research, the concept of randomness was more problematic. Because those selected for interviews were drawn from the street as they were encountered, randomness in the selection process could not be guaranteed. This process therefore may have yielded potentially biased results. Nevertheless, the study does yield findings concerning the status of the homeless in the study area. These findings could form the basis for other studies conducted in a more structured way, which could yield statistically significant findings.

About 30 interview teams comprised of two to three student members from Economics classes at the California Polytechnic University-Pomona, were developed. The students were given instruction in interviewing techniques. Although

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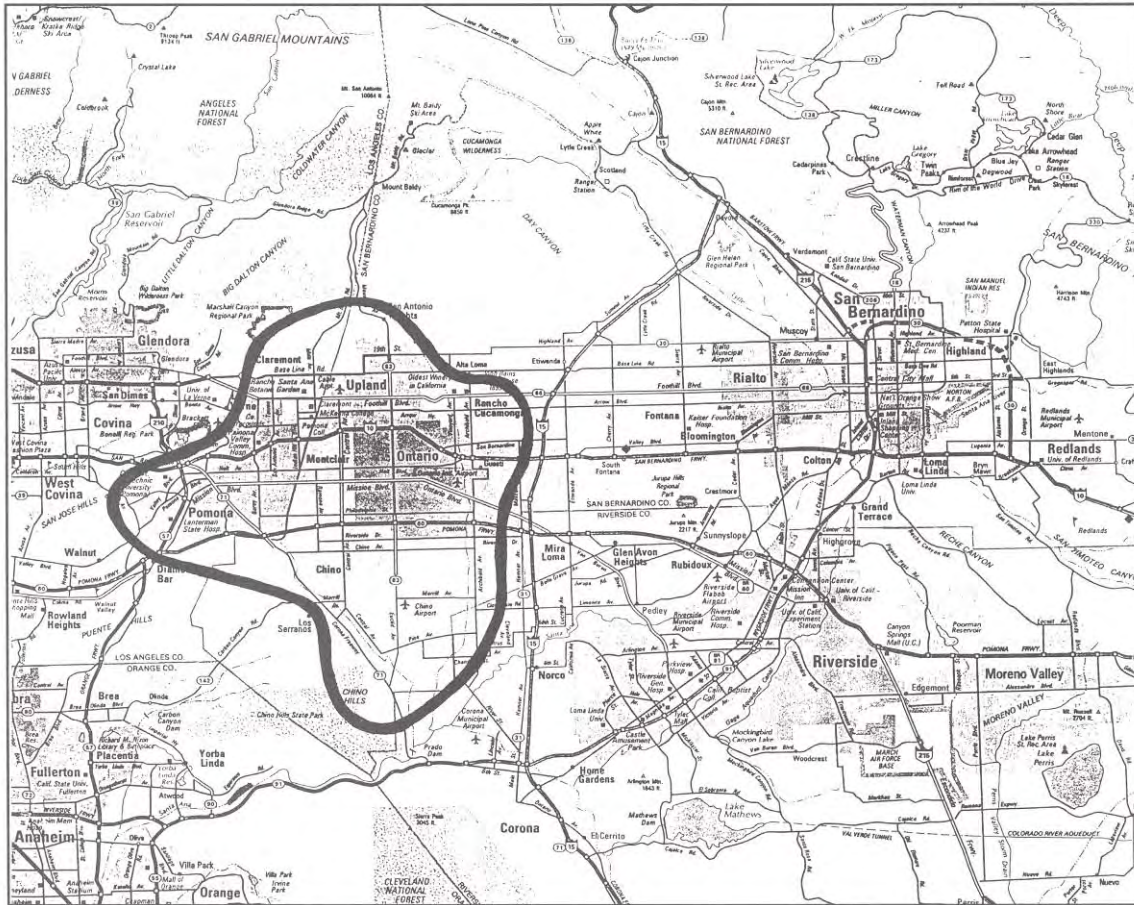


Figure 1—Map of the study area.

these teams used a structured questionnaire as a basic guide, team members were allowed to rephrase questions if needed. Several of the teams contained Spanish-speaking members who provided assistance in helping interviewees understand the questions. Each team was assigned an interview area derived from geographic data given to the authors by the Homeless Coalition Coordinator for San Bernardino County and the Social Services Department of the City of Pomona.

Analysis of the Data

The data were analyzed in the form of percentages and tabulated. Conclusions concerning the homeless were drawn from these data as well as other data available to us from the previous research of others in the study area. The implications of this information for urban areas and public lands were drawn solely from the data gathered and telephone interviews conducted with USDA Forest Service personnel.

Comparison of Current and Past Research Results

The data we developed and from this and from two other studies of the area (the San Bernardino Homeless Study and

the Redlands Family Service Study) were compared and contrasted (San Bernardino County Homeless 1993; Redlands Family Service Association 1993). These studies' results are included in this paper so that a more complete picture of the homeless in the study area counties can be presented.

Although some similarities in data do exist among the studies, the studies themselves surveyed differing homeless populations: the present study was conducted with street people; the San Bernardino County study (SBC) accessed many different types of homeless; and the Redlands Family Service Association study (FSA) primarily surveyed families. The three groups were compared, yielding many interesting characteristics of the homeless.

Gender, Age, and Ethnicity of the Homeless

The Blumner-Daugherty (B-D) and the San Bernardino County (SBC) data indicate that the majority of the homeless encountered in the interview process were males (*table 1*). The Redlands Family Service Association (FSA) data indicate that the majority were females. This difference may be explained by the FSA organization's clientele, which is primarily families. Often these families are headed by females. Thus, the clientele of the FSA provides a different population pool than either the B-D data or SBC data.

Table 1—Gender of the homeless interviewed in seven southern California communities.

Gender	B-D ¹	SBC ²	FSA ³
	-----percent-----		
Males	79.9	55	35.7
Females	20.1	45	64.3

¹Blumner-Daugherty data.

²San Bernardino County data.

³Redlands Family Service Association data.

The SBC and FSA data show a narrower differential in gender percentages than that of the B-D data. One possible explanation for this is that the B-D data were collected primarily from street people, most of whom are male. The other research data were collected from a variety of situations including, but not limited to the street, a feeding center, service providers, and shelters. While the B-D data may not offer a broad overview of all those homeless, it may give a better picture of those on the streets. This finding is important because street people may be more mobile than other homeless and could migrate more readily to public lands.

The average age of the homeless adults in all three studies indicates that those interviewed were mainly between the ages of 25 and 40 (table 2). The FSA data indicated that while the average age of the children in their study was about 7.52 years, the percentage of homeless comprised of children was not revealed. The SBC data indicate that of the total population surveyed, the number of people under the age of 18 was 32 percent. The B-D survey indicated that only about 5 percent of those surveyed were under the age of 20. Thus, because of some differences in the sample populations, statements about the significance of children as part of the homeless population are difficult to make.

The most divergent data from the studies were those indicating the number of whites who were homeless (table 3). Some possible explanations for this divergence might be the missions of the sponsoring agencies or the goals of the studies themselves. However, conclusions of importance can be drawn from all the data: the percentages of Hispanics and African-Americans as homeless differ greatly from their actual percentages in the American population—i.e., minorities comprise a higher portion of the homeless population than was expected.

Socio-spatial Characteristics of the Homeless

One question of interest to these researchers that also had been asked of those in the SBC survey addressed the issue of where the respondents sleep (table 4). The B-D data revealed that the majority of the homeless sleep “outside,” while the SBC data indicate that only 12 percent sleep outside and another 6 percent slept in “abandoned buildings.” The high number of homeless sleeping in cars, buildings, and outside present possible social service/law enforcement problems for all public agencies.

Table 2—Average age of the homeless

	B-D ¹	SBC ²	FSA ³
Average age of homeless adults	34	27.7	32

¹Blumner-Daugherty data.

²San Bernardino County data.

³Redlands Family Service Association data

Table 3—Ethnic background of the homeless

Ethnic Background	B-D ¹	SBC ²	FSA ³
	-----percent-----		
White	29.2	46	63.6
African-Amer	26.4	20	12.7
Hispanic	27.4	29	22.5
Native American	5.2	2	1.2
Asian-Pacific	4.6	1	0
Declined to State	4.6	0	0
Other	2.7	0	0

¹Blumner-Daugherty data.

²San Bernardino County data.

³Redlands Family Service Association data

Table 4—Where the homeless sleep

Location	B-D ¹	SBC ²
	----- percent -----	
Mission Shelter	6	0
Motel	9	16
Outside	8	16
With friends	37	12
Cars, buildings, etc	15	39
Other	12	18
	12	0

¹Blumner-Daugherty data.

²San Bernardino County data.

Two of the most common misconceptions about the homeless problem are that the people who are homeless have just become that way and that they migrate readily from one geographic area to another. Many also perceive that the homeless have migrated to California because of social service benefits available to them, and/or the benign weather (O’Hare 1987).

The three studies provide data on the length of time those interviewed have been homeless (table 5).

The homeless problem is not one that has only occurred in the last few months. The B-D and FSA studies indicate that many of those sampled have been homeless more than 4 years.

The length of time in the area is of some value in determining whether those homeless surveyed have migrated

Table 5—Length of time homeless

	Average time period
B-D	1 to 2 years
SBC	16 months
FSA	2 to 3 years

to California to obtain increased benefits or whether they are long-term residents. The B-D study was the only one that addressed this issue. It found that the majority of the homeless had been in the area for quite a while (*table 6*).

Unfortunately, no direct questions were asked concerning whether those surveyed were natives or whether they had migrated to California. However, the data do indicate that the majority of those surveyed had been in the area for a number of years indicating, perhaps, that although benefits and climate may not be the reasons the homeless came to California, these might be the reasons why they remain.

Socio-Economic Characteristics of the Homeless

All three studies obtained data on income. The studies reported major differences in income levels. The data presented by the FSA, which was reported in dollar figures only, revealed that most of the homeless families interviewed had incomes that might enable them, when combined with other forms of assistance, to rent or own a residence. We were not able, given the structure of the report, to classify the income data into “sources of income.” The FSA concluded that the majority of the homeless interviewed were homeless by choice and that they were abusing the system.

The B-D and SBC data indicate a different scenario. The conclusions drawn from these data were that the majority of homeless do not receive adequate funds to have regular shelter and that most are living “near the margin” (*table 7*).

Although the data show mixed results, those homeless interviewed in the SBC study received most of their income from welfare and food stamps. Similarly, the B-D study indicated that the majority of the homeless received their income from welfare, food stamps, and social security. Because of the depth of the questions in the B-D study, it was determined that 45 percent of those interviewed received no income. Further analysis of the data showed that these individuals received no income for two reasons: many of these individuals did not apply because it was a “hassle” to do so; and secondly, many did not have a permanent mailing address to receive the funds through the mail.

Only the B-D and SBC studies examined the reasons for homelessness. These studies found reasons most often cited for homelessness that included lack of employment, substance abuse, and the sharing of homes with others.

A final area of interest to these researchers--which was not addressed in the other studies--was skill levels in terms of occupation (*table 8*).

The vast majority of the homeless were unskilled or semi-skilled. This finding has important implications for the

Table 6—Length of time in the area

Time Period	Percentage of sample
Days	14.9
Months	22.3
Years	62.3

Table 7—Sources of income for the homeless

Most frequently cited source	B-D	SBC
	-----percent-----	
Food stamps	1.4	56
Welfare	22.3	52
Recycled goods	0	20
Veterans	3.8	2
Social Security	12.4	6
Workman’s Compensation	2.2	3
No income	45.9	15

Table 8—Skill level of the homeless

Skill level	Interviewees
Unskilled	150
Semi-skilled	110
Skilled	35
Technical	15
Management	18

California economy. As the economy recovers, less unskilled and semi-skilled employees will be needed as the economy shifts to more technical means of production. The long-term prospect for these workers is a continued decline in the labor force (Rossi 1989).

Implications for Public Service Providers

A large number of homeless in any given area present increased service demands on the providers of public services (Erikson and Wilhelm 1986). At present, most of the homeless nationwide are located in urban areas. However, many urban areas are located in close proximity to public lands of all types. If the samples used in this study described the approximate general homeless population of Southern California, the following conclusions about the homeless can be drawn:

- The homeless are relatively young.
- The homeless group contains a disproportionate number of Hispanics and African-Americans.

- The homeless have lived in the area more than 1 year.
- The homeless have little or no source of dependable income.
- Large numbers of homeless do not sleep in traditional shelters.
- The homeless have low occupational skill levels.
- Large numbers of homeless may have alcohol and substance abuse problems.

The Impacts of the Homeless on Public Lands

The results of the three studies show that the homeless have the potential to become an increasing presence on public lands. With their many and varied problems, the homeless present a source of problems for law enforcement agencies in urban and rural areas and on the public lands. For example, the Riverside County Sheriff in Hemet and health department officials have had to deal with homeless individuals who have been squatting on land near Idyllwild that is adjacent to the San Bernardino National Forest. In addition, in the San Bernardino area, squatters have located on land in the National Forest and present a source of violations such as exceeding the time limit for camping, unhealthy sanitary conditions, drug and alcohol problems, littering the area by building temporary shelters (much like the “Hoovervilles” of the Depression) (USDA Forest Service 1993).

We believe that if the economic situation in California continues to decline, the problem of squatters in the state’s National Forests and on other public lands will increase. We also believe that squatting on public lands outside designated camping areas will increase, resulting in the need to devote more public agency resources to law and code enforcement. This may occur as the number of squatters increases and the agencies attempt to control problems of vandalism, fire, crime, and drug use (USDA Forest Service 1993). The agencies may need to devote more resources to the training of personnel to deal with these problems.

Problems of Exceeding Campground Time Limitations

A growing problem, which has been substantiated by interviews with some public agency professionals, is that of the homeless exceeding campground time limitations. Homeless individuals commonly move into campgrounds on the public lands (USDA Forest Service 1993). However, in some instances, these individuals habitually exceed the campground limitation period of 14 days. The typical response is that these individuals simply move on to another district and repeat the cycle. Because detailed records are not kept of visitors to the public lands, the homeless who have been “evicted” from their campsite simply move on to two or three other districts first before returning to their first site (USDA Forest Service 1993).

Bizarre cases have also been reported involving groups of individuals who have decided that they are “mountain men,” living in wilderness areas, killing wildlife, and destroying vegetation. These trespassers are part of the homeless population (USDA Forest Service 1993), but they

are difficult to find because of the staffing limitations of most public agencies.

The implications for public agencies are many. The homeless have a right to use public lands, as do all citizens. However, to the extent that they exceed their visit limitations; build semi-permanent residences; and leave their collected belongings such as cans, bottles, and other forms of refuse on the public lands, they do cause problems for other visitors. Public agencies need to increase their enforcement personnel to help maintain the public lands so that these lands do not become major homeless encampments.

Minor Children

An increasing number of homeless families are now entering the public lands (USDA Forest Service 1993). As these families lose their homes, many of them have relocated on the public lands. This poses problems for compliance with school attendance laws.

In California, children must attend school until the age of 16 (State of California Education Code). In addition, parents must provide for these children until they are of the age of 18 (State of California Civil Code). Public agency officials must report the appearance of children on the public land to the local authorities if school attendance violations have occurred.

Substance Abuse and Emotional Problems

Substance abuse and emotional problems are increasing in the United States. The three studies of the homeless indicate that these two problems appear to be significant in homeless populations. Public agency professional need to be provided with training on how to deal with individuals or groups engaging in substance abuse and how to deal with visitors showing unusual behavior.

Conclusions

The long-term implications of the homeless on public lands can only be a matter of conjecture. Recovery for the California economy is predicted to occur in late 1994 or 1995 (Bank of America 1993). The economy, at present, is down-sizing and in many sectors, substituting capital for labor. Thus, the unskilled, semi-skilled and even some technically-trained workers will have difficulty finding employment in the future. Unless some major programs are begun for job retraining and employment relocation, the number of homeless will increase nationwide. This situation will be particularly great in California because of the closing of military bases and the shrinking of the defense sector. If the above conditions continue, possible implications for public lands in California would include:

- A potential increase in squatters on public land.
- A potential increase in the number of homeless exceeding the campground time limits.
- As families with young children become more common amongst the homeless, it may be necessary to have

coordination with several public agencies to deal with possible child abuse and school absences.

- If the homeless cannot find work because of their low skill levels—even as the economy improves—this group’s use of public lands may increase.
- Because of immigration, non-English speaking peoples with low skill levels may become homeless and turn to the public lands for shelter.
- To deal with non-English speaking peoples, public agencies will need to increase bilingual personnel.

Because of the exploratory nature of this research, additional information needs to be gathered on the homeless, specifically addressing the issues most likely to affect the use of public lands by the homeless. Only primary data gathering will determine if homeless population characteristics and problems from the urban homeless are very different from those of the homeless who are found on the public lands. If the data collected reveal similar socio-economic and demographic characteristics, then the suggested implications from our research will be confirmed. If they do not, then additional study needs to be done to determine the

precise nature of the socio-economic and demographic characteristics of those homeless who seek shelter on the nation’s public lands, and to develop solutions to a problem with important implications for public land managers.

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