

Sacramento's Homeless Camp: More Fiction Than Fact

SACRAMENTO--After Oprah's bright TV lights shined on our homeless tent city, outlets from "The Today Show" to South American newspapers picked up the story. Here, they said, was hard evidence that the recession was pushing families from home ownership to homelessness.

A reporter echoed this notion in a question to President Obama during last month's news conference: "With shelters at full capacity, tent cities are sprouting up across the country. In passing your stimulus package, you said that help was on the way, but what would you say to these families, especially children, who are sleeping under bridges and in tents across the country?"

The answer by our community organizer-in-chief focused on economic recovery plans; he did not question the reporter's premise other than to correctly note that "the homeless problem was bad even when the economy was good."

Perhaps Obama, like so many other Americans, had heard how the encampment near the American River sprang up as the economy tanked—a view pitched by some of my fellow homeless activists. As the story went, the tent city was populated by the "new face of the homeless," who would not be living there but for their recent loss of jobs and housing. Poignant and resonant, it was a news story that had it all—and that had it all wrong.

FICTION: Sacramento's tent city emerged in recent months as the economy declined.

FACT: People have lived along the American River since the Gold Rush; homeless people have camped there for decades.

FICTION: Parents and kids were driven from their homes and into shanties.

FACT: There were no children living in the encampment.



Justin Sullivan/Getty Images

FICTION: Tent residents were recession refugees new to the homeless scene.

FACT: The local homeless policy director said 90 percent of encampment residents were "chronically homeless"—single individuals living on the streets for extended periods.

FICTION: Cities like Sacramento should create central city homeless encampments like Dignity Village, a successful project in Portland, Ore.

FACT: After a multitude of problems, Dignity Village was removed from downtown several years ago and is now located about as close to Portland's airport runways as you can get without a boarding pass.

Sacramento officials recently cleared the remnants of the camp after offering 100 temporary beds and 50 long-term shelter beds. Which got Sacramento out of the headlines, but didn't do much for the estimated 1,200 unsheltered homeless people in the region.

These people are less conspicuous now, but what's clear is that both those who argued for or against the tent city relied on the sort of simplistic explanations and quick-fix remedies that trivialize the causes and minimize the consequences of homelessness.

Homelessness is a real and stubborn problem, and one that is devastating for a relatively small number of people, many of whom struggle with mental illness, addiction and domestic violence. But even in these tough times, it is not only a lack of commitment that slows our response to their challenges; it is also a lack of clarity.

Some localities trying to address the problem get caught up in guilt trips and blame games and become distracted by divisive proposals like tent cities. Others, like Denver, Colo., focus on actual solutions; they are reinvesting millions of dollars saved from avoided public health costs to create transitional housing and support services that will save taxpayers even more money over time.

Several suggestions might move us further and faster in the right direction:

Ignore the “magnet effect:” This persistent myth only undermines our efforts to provide comprehensive, cost-effective and, yes, compassionate solutions to homelessness. Anecdotal evidence supported the mistaken view that Sacramento’s encampment was attracting homeless people from around the nation. However, research here and elsewhere is consistent with an extensive 2006 study that found more than three-quarters of the thousands of homeless people surveyed were still living in the community where they became homeless.

Avoid so-called temporary responses: Trailers on school playgrounds were called “temporary” classrooms before they became “portables,” even though they never move. Likewise, emergency shelters and tent cities that are presented as temporary inevitably become permanent. Approaching homelessness as if it were a short-term catastrophe like a flood is itself a recipe for disaster; yet a primary funder is none other than the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

Say good-bye to Horatio Alger: His rags-to-riches stories from the late 1800s shaped our society’s view that achievement results from diligent effort, and failure from the opposite. But examining the circumstances of latter-day cultural icons from the Beatles to Bill Gates, Malcolm Gladwell debunks this model of personal success. His latest book, *Outliers*, cites researchers who tracked highly intelligent people for decades. Their conclusion: accomplishment is “less about talent than about opportunity.”

Change the rules: Federal policy and funding concentrates on the chronically homeless- in a way that denies homeless parents with children the equal protections afforded by the U.S. Constitution’s 14th Amendment. Another misguided regulation makes homeless people with addictions who do not pursue residential treatment eligible for long-term housing programs and rent subsidies; those who do seek such treatment are denied access to those resources.

For three decades, we have approached America’s homeless problem the same way the captain of the Titanic approached the iceberg-looking at the most visible rather than the largest and most costly part of the problem.

It is wrong to criminalize homelessness, issuing citations and confiscating belongings when no affordable housing is available. It is senseless to sanction and fund tent cities that address only one symptom of homelessness – the lack of shelter – and none of its causes.

Worse, such shantytowns only further institutionalize homelessness by offering a seemingly cheap alternative to investments in low-cost housing, better schools and primary health care.

There is no question that our current financial crisis hits no one harder than low-wage employees and those whose disabilities render them unable to work. And certainly, the ranks of the homeless are rising as a result.

Yet it’s a testament to our economy’s vibrancy and our citizens’ resiliency that only about one percent of the population becomes homeless at any time. When they do, it’s best if we don’t get confused about how and why, or what can be done about it.

Robert V. Tobin is president and CEO of Cottage Housing Inc., which provides transitional housing and support services. His experience in community organizing began at home in Chicago as the 5th oldest of 17 children. www.cottagehousing.org