

EARLY CHILDHOOD HOMELESSNESS:
THE EXPERIENCE AND AN ETHICAL RESPONSE

“For nine months an infant grows and grows in the womb... At the end an x-ray shows a small but developed body quite bent over on itself and cramped; yet so very much has happened—indeed, a whole new life has come into being. For some hundreds of thousands of American children that stretch of time, those months, represent the longest rest ever to be had, the longest stay in any one place.”

– *Robert Coles*, *Uprooted Children*

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Poverty Studies Capstone

Section I: Introduction

Early childhood homelessness is an experience that 2.5 million children are facing in America. To most Americans, the thought of a homeless child arouses empathy and frustration, yet society still has not implemented sound structures for the prevention and care of these children. Early childhood homelessness should not exist in our society. This paper examines the interlocking factors that bring families with young children to a place of homelessness. It then describes how homelessness influences a child's development and later economic outcomes. The interplay between these two realms gives insights into a homeless child's overall wellbeing. Once a clear picture of the causes and experience of early childhood homelessness emerges, a carefully constructed ethical framework will lead to an appropriate ethical response to this problem. This response prioritizes children's rights and demands certain people to guarantee a full set of human rights to these children. Finally, additional measures are suggested that are not ethically required, but would be beneficial this vulnerable population.

Section II: Literature Review

The literature on childhood homelessness focuses on three main topics: economic outcomes, developmental or mental health outcomes, and possible preventative or mitigating factors to address problems in either or both areas. Researchers have done extensive work to analyze outcomes, both in terms of economics and mental health. This research has continued to gain attention as economists and mental health professionals develop an understanding of how crucial the first few years of life are in determining later outcomes. With the popularity of Head Start and other early childhood interventions, researchers have been given new opportunities to explore this topic. As I summarize the existing literature I will discuss the general state of

childhood homelessness, the economic implications, the developmental implication, and finally I will expand on the missing piece of the literature.

2.1 State of Childhood Homelessness

The Obama administration set forth a plan called “Opening Doors” with the aim of ending chronic homelessness by 2015. That plan was started by the Bush administration and has continued to be pushed back every year that America does not reach its goal. A secondary component of this initiative was to end family homelessness by the year 2020. Even with these recent efforts, the latest reports show that, “family homelessness has reached record levels in many major cities, leading some officials to declare a state of emergency” (Duffield, 2016).



According to a report on the state of childhood homelessness from 2014, the absolute number of homeless children in America has increased since 2006 (see above). In 2006, 1 in 50 children were homeless, 1 in 45 in 2010, and 1 in 30 in 2013 (Bassuk, 2014). That means that in the last

10 years, the number of children who are homeless annually has increased by 1 million. The state of childhood homelessness is not encouraging.

2.2 Economic Implications

Researchers have consistently found strong associations between homelessness and negative economic outcomes. The main economic indicators used in these studies are educational outcomes and experiences. Consistently, researchers have found that homeless children tend to perform worse in almost every aspect of schooling (Hong 2012, Perlman 2010 and Masten 1997).

In terms of other indicators of economic well-being, the literature is quite sparse. Because homelessness is often difficult to separate from poverty, researchers have difficulty associating an early experience of homelessness with later economic outcomes like income, employment, job stability, etc. Though poverty and homelessness are distinctly different, they are correlated in many ways. With the necessary caution, the literature on early childhood poverty and later economic outcomes will help inform the possible long-term effects of homelessness.

2.3 Developmental Implications

The literature on the developmental effects of homelessness on young children is rich and informative. Psychologists, sociologists, and mental health specialists have studied child development so thoroughly that they are able to discuss in detail how homelessness, and especially the life experiences that are associated with homelessness, shape the course of a child's development. Throughout most of the literature, trauma is the main mechanism through which homelessness alters a child's development (Cutuli 2014, Holmes 2015, David 2012, and Mcloyd 1998). The literature agrees that children are at an extremely high risk of suffering from

developmental delays when they experience homelessness at a young age. However, most authors note that specific mitigating factors like a loving parent, nurturing environment, or early intervention might serve to protect against some of these negative effects (Cutuli, 2014). Because of this, some children are more resilient than others in the face of homelessness.

2.4 Missing Narrative in the Literature

The missing narrative in the literature is how these two arenas overlap, propel each other, or hinder each other. In what ways do the developmental and psychological effects interact with economic barriers to create a reality that looks entirely different from that apparent when considering a single one of these factors? In essence, researchers have not identified how the individual results of these studies have come together to either allow or prevent homeless children from having certain capabilities that make a life worthy of human dignity.

Section III: Methodology

Throughout this paper, I will explain through stories and research-based analysis why childhood homelessness exists in our society, how it alters children's life experiences, and what society should and can do about it. This paper will serve as both a narrative and theoretical model of childhood homelessness. As such, each part of Section IV starts with a quote from *Rachel and Her Children* by Jonathan Kozol, one of the first books written about families experiencing homelessness in America. The book is a personal testimony of Kozol's experience and reflections interviewing homeless families in Los Angeles.

Primarily, this paper will tell the story of childhood homelessness through personal testimony and synthesized research. Often when telling just a narrative, the reader is left to infer the hidden mechanisms that drive the main plot of the story. For example, a child born in poverty

finds him or herself homeless by the time they are 5, struggles in school, and may end up in prison. Society can take this story and fill in the gaps with assumptions that often find the child at fault for their own outcomes. My aim is to address what the social, cultural, psychological, and economic mechanisms are that lead children into, through, and out of homelessness, providing an honest and charitable perspective on childhood homelessness.

After giving the reader a clear picture of the life experiences of a homeless child, I will demonstrate the ethical obligations society has to these children using Martha Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach. The capabilities approach uses human rights and correlative duties to hold society accountable for guaranteeing everyone certain capabilities that make a life worthy of human dignity. I will use research-tested solutions from the literature that match Nussbaum's idea of providing necessary substantive freedoms for children. Finally, I will end the paper with a discussion on supplementary solutions to childhood homelessness. These may be above the threshold of "society's moral and ethical duties," but enable great deal of healing for some of America's most vulnerable people.

In order to accomplish these goals, I will use the existing literature from a variety of disciplines to synthesize the main mechanisms that propel a child through this narrative. The main disciplines I will use are Economics, Philosophy, Psychology, and Sociology. Economics will provide the framework to discuss inequality that leads to homelessness and extreme poverty. Psychology will be vital in determining how homelessness impacts the development of young children. Lastly, Sociology tells us how people relate to each other to form societal structures, barriers and norms. Many of these structure may create homelessness, and which perpetuate hardship for homeless children.

The crux of this paper will show how these disciplines work together to create a dynamic picture of the experience of childhood homelessness. In this way, I hope to paint the picture of the cage that is trapping children in homelessness-- where every individual wire may seem like an easy obstacle to overcome, but where all the wires working together leave children trapped inside cages all across America.

Section IV: Analysis

4.1 Who is Homeless?

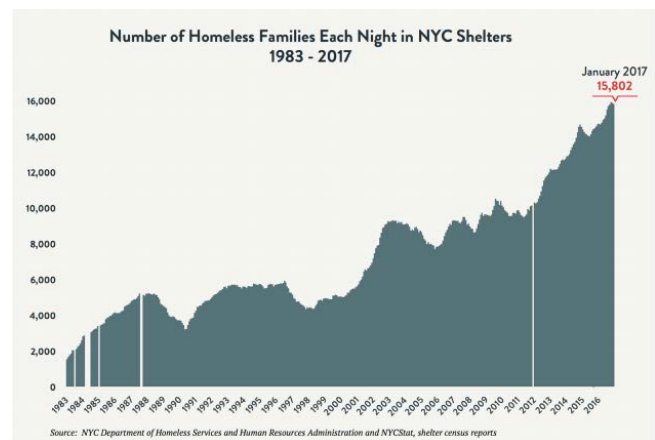
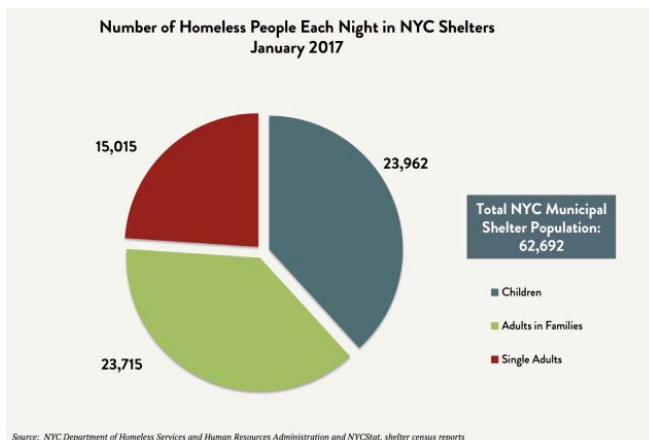
She cries. She weeps. She paces left and right and back and forth. Pivoting and turning suddenly to face me. Glaring straight into my eyes. A sudden halt. She looks up toward the cracked and yellowish ceiling of the room. Her children stand around her in a circle. Two little girls. A frightened boy. They stare at her, as I do, as her arms reach out – for what? They snap like snakes and coil back. Her hair is gray—a stiff and brush-like afro. Angelina is twelve years old, Stephen is eleven, Erica is nine. The youngest child, eleven months, is sitting on the floor. A neighbor’s child, six years old, sits in my lap and leans her head against my chest.¹

First, it is necessary to distinguish between poverty and homelessness. Though they are related, homelessness is distinctly different from poverty. Children and families experiencing homelessness are living in shelters, on the streets, doubling up with family friends, camping, or living in other environments that are not fit for human habitation (Duffield, 2016). Homelessness is the most extreme form of poverty and typically arises after some tipping point or major life event that pushes individuals out of their home. In this way, homelessness has an added layer of unexpected loss of dignity and security that poverty does not have. The reasons that some

¹ Throughout the analysis section, I have included excerpts from Jonathan Kozol’s famous book *Rachel and Her Children*. The book documents Kozol’s experience with Rachel, a homeless mother living in New York city. The passages are meant to illustrate the personal realities of homelessness within the often depersonalizing work of analyzing the homeless experience.

families and individuals are poor, yet housed, instead of poor and homeless will be a central theme throughout this analysis.

Though the homeless population used to consist primarily of single men, families now make up the largest percentage of the homeless population. Until the 1980s the homeless population was comprised of mostly middle-aged alcohol- or drug-abusing single men. (Schwean 1999). During the late 1970s and into the 1980s, the homeless population continued to grow, adding more diversity with it. The subsample of peoples with severe mental disabilities increased during these years in part because many state mental hospitals released their patients to return home.² At the same time, federal spending on affordable housing decreased, leaving many low-income individuals on the street. (Haskett et al 2014). It was in the early 1980s that many families started to experience homelessness.³ Now the homeless population is a heterogeneous mixture of single mothers, families, children, single men, and runaway youth.



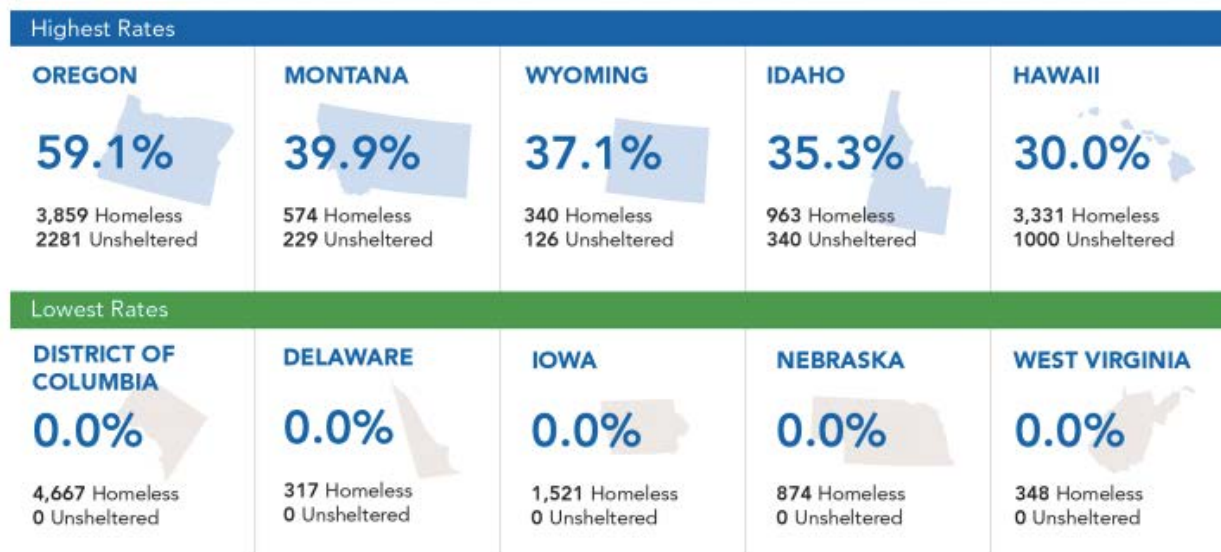
According to the latest data released in 2014, there are 2.5 million homeless children in America (Bassuk et al, 2014). That means that 1 in 30 children are homeless, and this number has been rising in recent years. 42% of homeless children are under the age of 6

² During the 1970s there was a push to de-institutionalize state mental hospitals and encourage patients to return home. However, once many of them returned home, they were met with “insufficient housing and social supports.” Many of these patients found themselves homeless (Haskett et al, 2014, page 4).

³ Kozol notes that homelessness has become ever more central to the experience of many Americans saying, “what was once a theater of the grotesque... has grown into the common misery of millions” (Kozol, 1988, page 4)

(greendoors.org). For example, in New York City, the number of families in homeless shelters has been rising at alarming rate. In January of 2017, it reached an all-time high of 15,802 families in shelters. Additionally, children comprised 38% of all people staying in shelters in 2017.

EXHIBIT 3.8: Highest and Lowest Rates of Unsheltered People in Families with Children By State, 2016



Though the numbers of homeless children are staggering at the national level, there is great diversity of childhood homelessness within states. Data from The 2016 Annual Homeless Assessment Report shows that access to shelters varies widely by states. In Oregon, almost 60% of homeless families with children are unsheltered and living in abandoned buildings or on the streets. On the other hand, D.C, Delaware, Iowa, Nebraska, and West Virginia do not have any unsheltered homeless families (Henry 2016). The numbers of homeless children are drastically different from state to state, and their experience is also different as well. In some states every homeless child is sheltered while in others, the majority of homeless families are unsheltered.

It is critical for us to think carefully about what this means both for the livelihood of these homeless children and for the future of our country. How has our country gotten to a place

where the majority of the homeless population consists of families?⁴ If 1 out of every 30 children experiences homelessness in their lifetime, a large increase over the last several decades, how will this change our nation (Bassuk, 2014)? The next few sections will hope to answer these questions.

4.2 What causes homelessness?

“If I can’t get out of here I’ll give them up. I have asked them: ‘Do you want to go away?’ I love my kids and, if I did that that, they would feel betrayed. They love me. They don’t want to go. If I did it, I would only do it to protect them. They’ll live anywhere with me. They’re innocent. Their minds are clean. They ain’t corrupt. They have a heart. All my kids love people. They love life. If they get a dime, a piece of my bread, they’ll share it. Letting them panhandle made me cry. I had been to welfare, told the lady that my baby ain’t got no Pampers, ain’t got nothing left to eat. I got rude and noisy and it’s not my style to do that but you learn that patience and politeness get you nowhere... “

The inclination to judge harshly the behavior of a parent under formidable stress seems to be much stronger than the willingness to castigate the policies that undermine the competence and ingenuity of many of these people in the first place.

There are many forces at work that push families to a place of homelessness. The reasons are complex and individual, often building over a lifetime. It is important to emphasize that every individual’s story is unique and complex. Each story involves many interlocking, overlapping, and confounding constraints that lead the person to a place of homelessness. And while each person’s story is unique, there are larger patterns and similarities among the stories. It is within these similarities that one can observe the major structural catalysts for homelessness.⁵

⁴ According to the pie chart above, published by The Coalition for the Homeless, 76% of homeless people staying in shelters were part of families in January 2017.

⁵ Miller contends that, “While social structural approaches avoid blaming the victim, they have the corresponding vice of denying the moral agency of the homeless person. Any approach to homelessness must hold these two perspectives in tension. Individualistic approaches to homelessness are inadequate unless they acknowledge the structural factors that produce homelessness; at the same time, structural approaches to

The population I am focusing on is children under 5. Most of these children live with some sort of parent/guardian, oftentimes their mother. The reasons that young children are homeless cannot be separated from the reasons their parents or primary caretakers are homeless as children of this age are almost entirely dependent upon their caretakers. As we explore the causes of childhood homelessness, we will essentially be looking into the causes of parental homelessness: the common avenues through which parents of young children, especially mothers, become homeless.

For many homeless families, homelessness begins with a lack of affordable housing. Simply put: people become homeless because they cannot afford housing. Since the 1980s there has been a consistent decrease in access to affordable housing. The supply of low-cost housing has been reduced so far that the price of housing is no longer within reach of the nation's poor.⁶ There are not enough houses along all portions of the income distribution to house all of America's citizens. According to The National Low Income Housing Coalition, the housing market is missing 7.3 million homes for extremely low incomes households (those earning at or below 30% of the median American income). In 2014, there were 10.5 million households that fell into this group, with only 3.2 million affordable rental units (Aurand, 2016). There is an extreme shortage of affordable housing. Given the current state of housing markets, the high cost of housing places a large burden on families' budgets. Many families spend the majority of their income on housing, sacrificing other important family purchases. In the same report, The NLIHC found that 75% of extremely low-income households were putting at least half of their income

homelessness must recognize that most adults live in situations that, however constrained continue to provide them with some personal choice and responsibility for their actions" (Miller 1993 pg. 12).

⁶ At the same time that the supply of low-cost housing was shrinking, wages were not growing for low income workers. Since 1973, wages have grown at a slower rate than worker productivity. Much of the benefits of increased worker productivity have gone to the top of the income distribution (<https://www.epi.org/productivity-pay-gap/>). This made the real cost of housing even higher than a simple shift in the housing market.

towards housing. They designated this as “severely cost burdened.” This compares to only 1% of non-low-income households being severely cost burdened by housing. As demonstrated, the cost of housing plays an extremely large role in creating the risk for homelessness. Lack of affordable housing is a structural problem that creates predictable homelessness.

Though affordable housing is a crucial component in homelessness, it is never the whole story. Though the housing market clearly shows us that *some* families will be homeless, it does not necessarily tell us *which* families will be homeless.⁷ More often than not, distinct vulnerabilities determine which families experience homelessness among all those at risk. These are families or parents that have few resources to, “buffer their descent onto the streets” (Buckner, 2014, pg 8). For a variety of reasons, they are the sub-population among the poor that are less likely to have well-paying stable jobs that would allow them to compete with equal footing in the housing market. (Buckner 2014, 11). Individuals with poor mental health and substance abuse problems often struggle to maintain a steady participation in the labor force. Also, women with children at home have more non-discretionary expenses while at the same time they are not able to work as much as they would without children. With higher non-housing expenses and lower earnings, the money left for housing is quickly depleted for these women. Women and nonwhite workers often face discrimination in the work force leading to reduced earnings vs. others in similar jobs. Lastly, many women experience domestic violence within their homes. If they make the hard decision to leave this home and escape abuse, they are often

⁷ John Buckner uses a “musical chair” analogy about the causes of homelessness that proves very helpful (Buckner, 2014). In any game of musical chairs, the structure is set up so that there are not enough chairs for every person. The ratio is not one to one. By this design, when the music stops there will always be at least 1 person without a chair. By looking at the ratio of chairs to people, we can even predict how many people will be left standing. However, the set-up of the game will only tell us that some will be homeless. To see *who* will be homeless, we must begin to look at the specific characteristics of each player, and the resources they have been endowed with which to play this game of musical chairs.

left extremely vulnerable socially and economically⁸. All of these factors are pathways through which we can identify those that are more likely to be homeless among those in poverty. In addition, poor families that end up being homeless have much smaller social networks. This not only negatively affects their ability to obtain and maintain a job, but also their ability to mitigate “near-homeless” experiences through the help of these social networks.

As we have seen, the housing market has created the inevitability of a homeless population. Certain avenues like domestic violence, discrimination, poor mental health, and substances abuse, strongly predict homelessness. Women with young children are an especially vulnerable group because of their position in society and added responsibility of caring for their children. These factors in themselves do not necessitate homelessness. Ultimately, there will always be a tipping point that pushes a family to homelessness. Given the housing market and specific vulnerabilities of this population, any significant shock or trauma is likely to cause homelessness. This could be a loss of job, medical expenses, the ending of a domestic partnership, or other traumatic experience that leaves a family with no other options.

One cannot say exactly why a person is homeless. It is simpler sometimes to point to just the housing market, or just one’s mental health problems, or even just a sudden shock in one’s life. Each of these causes alone would not be an accurate identification of the cause of the homelessness. Homelessness is a unique condition that is both rooted in the macro and made possible through the micro. It is highly personal yet inevitably structural. By walking through all the layers from nationwide housing markets to highly individualized shocks, one can see a more

⁸ Domestic violence is a pervasive problem that has real implication for homelessness. 1 in 5 women report being physically assaulted by an intimate partner in their lifetime. Often women attempt to find housing that is away from their abusers. This is a difficult task, especially when the woman has been relying on her intimate partner for financial support. For women, domestic violence is the leading “cause” of homelessness and is the single largest factor that leads women and their children to a place of homelessness. (Baker 2010)

complete picture of homelessness. It is a state of being that no one would choose for themselves, and that everyone has worked their entire lives to avoid. But for thousands of parents it is a state in which they find themselves this very night, often with young children falling asleep right next to them.

4.3 Developmental Implications

“There’s one thing. My children are still pure. They have a concept of life. Respect for life. But if you don’t get ‘em out of here they won’t have anything for long. If you get ‘em out right now. But if you don’t.. my girls are innocent still. They are unspoiled. Will they be that way for long? Try to keep ‘em in the room. But you can’t lock them up for long.”

People experience the greatest amount of development in the first 5 years of life. They go from being an infant, entirely dependent on a caregiver for their livelihood, to an independently thinking, moving, and acting young child. Developmental psychologists have long studied this process and have identified three main areas of child growth during the first 5 years (Volk, page 25):

1. Cognitive Development – “Acquiring the capacities that undergird communication and learning, including language development, reasoning, and problem solving”
2. Social Development – “Learning to relate well to others, including the ability to trust, form relationships, nurture, and resolve conflict constructively”
3. Emotional Development – “Negotiating the development of self-regulation skills, including behavior, emotions, and attention”

If all goes well, young children will have made significant progress in these three areas by the time they are 5. There are certain factors in a child’s life that will likely influence their development: risk, promotive, and protective (Cutuli 2014). Risk factors are influences that

increase the likelihood of negative developmental outcomes. Promotive factors do the exact opposite, encouraging positive outcomes. Lastly, protective factors act like safety nets, helping to mitigate the likelihood of risk factors leading to poor outcomes. For most children, these promotive and protective systems develop naturally, like a loving care taker or parent. If these systems are stable and functioning properly, children are often able to be resilient even with the presence of significant risk. However, when either these systems are not functioning well, or the risk is too great, the child may experience poor developmental outcomes. The absence or presence of these factors is most salient in the early years of life as development has a “cumulative nature” and, “early and consistent success... equips individuals with a more robust set of resources” (Cululi 2012, 117). Taken together, children develop well when they have low risk factors and strong promotive and protective factors during the early years of life. Experiencing homelessness as a young child, an experience where risk factors are high and support systems (promotive factors) are weakened, is a dangerous situation for any child to be in (Cutuli 2014).

Homeless children are exposed to many more risk factors than other children. Risk can be any form of adversity, trauma, or negative life experience that threatens development. These risk factors include experiences that lead to a child’s homelessness, or the experience of homelessness itself. As discussed earlier families often experience a traumatic life event like the loss of a job, domestic violence, or unforeseen medical expenses that pushes them into homelessness. The traumatic life event is, in itself, a significant risk factor. However, once a child is homeless additional risk factors continue to be added to their experience. The parents of homeless children are under an immense amount of stress, and this stress is a risk factor that negatively impacts children. Shelters are often noisy, crowded, and chaotic, not supporting the

child with a stable developmental environment. They do not offer adequate resources or safe places to explore (Volk 2014). The most important promotive and protective factor in a child's life is their primary caretaker, which is likely their mother. Because of the condition of homelessness, many mothers are not able to provide the social and emotional support that their young children need. These women face significant challenges and struggle to maintain their own well-being. Half of homeless mothers suffer from depression, and this mental illness, when untreated, can seriously compromise their ability to foster promotive and protective factors. (Volk 2014). Lastly, homelessness is characterized by a lack of stable community. Families that bounce between houses, the streets, and shelters are not able to foster long-term relationships with their communities. These relationships are important for establishing consistency and protecting young children from risk factors.

Early childhood homelessness is the trifecta of negative factors: extremely high risk factors, a low likelihood of promotive factors, and a low likelihood of protective factors. And when this happens to a young child, the stressors accumulate over a long period of time, which magnifies their effects.

A series of studies have confirmed this theory. Jelena Obradovic (2010) notes that homeless children, even more than socioeconomically disadvantaged children, show significant developmental delays and have higher rates of internalizing and externalizing behaviors. In addition, they are at higher risk for clinical levels of psychopathology. John C. Buckner (1999) also found that children experiencing homelessness had internalizing behavior problems and found that those problems increased with the length of the shelter stay. Both the studies and theories agree that children are at an extremely high risk of suffering from developmental delays when they experience homelessness at a young age.

4.4 Economic Implications

“They didn’t go to school last week. They didn’t have clean clothes. Why? Because the welfare missed my check. It’s supposed to come a week ago. It didn’t come. I get my check today. I want my kids to go to school. They shouldn’t miss a day. How they gonna go to school if they don’t get some clothes? I couldn’t wash. I didn’t have the money to buy food.”

The economic literature adds a depth of long-term measurable economic outcomes. Economists are more interested in key dependent variable outcomes that can measure economic well-being. They are interested in economic outcomes, like job security, educational attainment, health, and mortality changes that are associated with experiencing homelessness as a child. Understanding these outcomes is crucial to understanding the long-term effects of homelessness, and whether a homeless child may be expected to become an adult capable of achieving typical adult developmental milestones. Unfortunately, there is a major gap in the literature regarding adult economic outcomes for those who experience homelessness as children. In spite of the absence of published research findings on the topic, one can still draw conclusions from the literature about the economic implications of early childhood homelessness. The bulk of the economic literature focuses on health and educational outcomes for homeless children. These outcomes are then predictors of later economic outcomes. In that way, understanding the economic literature is like understanding a composition of functions, where secure housing is a function of employment which is a function of educational attainment and health which is then a function of homelessness.

The two primary avenues of interest available in this literature are poor health and lower educational attainment. Researchers have consistently found that homelessness and housing insecurity have been associated with lower health outcomes. In a cross-sectional study of young

children experiencing housing insecurity, researchers found that these children were at a significantly higher risk of having poor health (Cutts, et al 2011). Based on a caretaker's report of health, housing-insecure children did much worse. In addition, children under 3 were seen to have been affected the most. One mechanism that the researchers pointed to was food insecurity. The same families that were housing-insecure were also more likely to experience food insecurity. The variety of environments that children experience as they shift to different houses and shelters exposes them to many more environments than they would have otherwise encountered. This contributes to their poor health. A summary of all the research on homeless children notes that poor health outcomes is the most consistent area of research (Buckner 2008). All the relevant studies agree that homeless children are more likely to have health problem relative to both low-income children and middle-income children.

Research has also found that children who experience homelessness at any point in their early childhood have lower educational outcomes. Masten, et al, (1997) found that children who are homeless, especially during their early years of life, have had worse educational outcomes. They tend to move schools more often, have higher rates of absenteeism, and tend to have behavioral problems that negatively affect their performance in school. This study also found that there was a large overlap between those who students who had lower test score and those who were reported for having behavior problems. It is likely there is a cyclical interaction between these two outcomes. Other researchers including Perlman (2010) and Hong (2012) found similar results. Perlman (2010) noted that homelessness as a child is most salient during the toddler years. Children who experience their first episode of homelessness as a toddler were more likely to have academic problems in later years. Hong et al (2012) added that children who had experienced homelessness were more likely to receive special education services in school.

Though these studies find immediate negative outcomes, longitudinal studies will help elucidate the more “sticky” impacts of homelessness. One study published in the *Journal of School Psychology* assessed academic outcomes of formerly homeless children (Rafferty et al 2004). They found that children who had experienced homelessness were twice as likely to repeat a grade, more likely to have moved schools, and less likely to be planning for secondary education than their poor but housed peers.

Taken together, it is clear that homeless children are likely to be at a severe disadvantage in economic competition. Research suggests that children who experience homelessness are likely to have both poorer health and lower academic achievement. They are also more likely to have behavior problems. All of these studies point in the same direction: poor economic outcomes. Almost unanimously, the economic literature has concluded that health and education are primary inputs in human capital theory (Case, 2005). They are foundational for attaining and maintaining a well-paying job and advancing in a career. These are not arbitrary factors that are disjointed from well-being. Bodily health and education are arguably two of the most important predictors for well-being.

4.5 The intersection of poor economic and developmental outcomes

“Hardest time for me is the night. Nightmares. Somethin’s grabbin’ at me. Like a hand. Some spirit’s after me. It’s somethin’ that I don’t forget. I wake up in a sweat. I’m wonderin’ why I make these dreams. So I get up, turn on the light. I don’t go back to sleep until the day is breakin’. I look up an’ I be sayin’: ‘Sun is up. Now I can go to sleep.’

After the kids are up and they are dressed and go to school, then I lay down. I go to sleep. But I can’t sleep at night. After the sun go down makes me depressed. I want to turn the light on, move around.

Know that song – ‘Those Monday Blues’? I had that album once”

I said the title: “‘Monday Blues’?”

“I got ‘em every day. Lots of time, when I’m in pain, I think I am goin’ to die. That’s why I take a drink sometimes. I’m ‘fraid to die. I’m wonderin’: Am I dying?”

As different disciplines have sought to understand homelessness, the causes and implications of homelessness have become equally divided into individual diagnoses and prognoses.⁹ They are portioned into small packages that can easily be understood within each study and within each discipline, breaking homelessness into small cause and effect stories. Through these individual pieces of literature researchers and outsiders are able to deconstruct the complexities of homelessness to not only better understand them, but also to propose practical solutions. This is important work, and as such I have dedicated a large portion of this paper to explaining many of those smaller mechanisms that run through a homeless child’s experience. But we cannot stop there. It would be tempting and inaccurate to leave the conversation in small bits. The experience of homelessness is not at all captured in, for example, increased likelihood of being required to repeat a grade. Homelessness is more than having a mother suffer from domestic violence or substance abuse. Homelessness is more than an expectation of ending up with a mental health issue. Homelessness goes beyond having a pattern of incarceration in your family, of struggling to find a sense of peace in a seemingly endless stream of chaos. Homelessness not is more than a feeling of social isolation, or more than or dealing with constant food insecurity. It is not any one of those things. It is *all* of those things and more. The everyday reality of a homeless parent and a homeless child is a complex web of competing, defeating, and interlocking episodes. That is why homeless women were found to describe their lives as, “a remarkably constant stream of spirit breaking encounters” (Styron 2008 pg. 148). In order to

⁹ “Political and public discussion has seldom concerned itself with poverty as a basic condition of the life of a significant group of American society. Instead debate has focused on the social problems associated with poverty. —thus we have issues of the welfare crisis and welfare reform, street crime, crack cocaine, poor schools... births to unmarried teenage mothers, infant mortality, homelessness... Each problem has its own diagnosis, its own therapy, and its professionals hungry for funding. Poverty and the poor as a class get lost in the scramble for social problem definition and control” (Wilson, 11).

understand homelessness, one must dissect it, and then reconstitute it as the truly horrendous and inhumane experience that it is.

Section V: Human Rights and Correlative Duties

Enlightened policy is not persistent. It is spasmodic. For this reason, it does not prevail. What does prevail is an agenda of societal retaliation on the unsuccessful. When tragedies occur, good civic leaders honestly regret them; but tragedies that have been germinating for long years have never been addressed. The consequence is seen in the stifling of hope among poor children.

People in shelters feel like they are choking. The physical sense of being trapped, compacted, and concealed – but even more, the vivid recognition that they are objects of society's avoidance or contempt – creates panic that they can't get air into their lives, into their lungs. This panic is endemic. The choking sensation is described repeatedly by many adults and their children. Physicians often hear these words, 'I can't breathe,' in interviews with homeless patients. I hear this statement again and again. Sometimes it is literally the case.

The previous section focused on the experience of homelessness. It describes the causes and impacts of early childhood homelessness. The aim of this next section is to connect this newfound understanding to an ethical framework. So often, these two ideas are disjointed. Scholars will make strides in understanding the depth and breadth of the homeless experience, but not consider a response. At the same time, philosophers and ethicists may work hard to create sound theories that describe an ethical response to a phenomenon that they may not know much about. When we separate these two pieces within our own intellectual understanding, they both lose some of their meaning. This section will take advantage of the reader's particular position as one who has gained an understanding, albeit brief, of childhood homelessness.

The last section was meant to elucidate the interlocking and confining constructs that bring children to a place of homelessness. Once they become homeless they are likely to have to

serious developmental delays resulting from their exposure to trauma. These developmental delays exponentiate their effects as time progresses, leaving many children at an extreme disadvantage for the rest of their lives. Who, if anyone is obligated to do something about this? And if someone is obligated, what are they obligated to do?

Based on Martha Nussbaum's capabilities approach, all children have a right to shelter, and these rights deserve special priority in the fight against poverty and homelessness. Anything less would be denying the dignity of young children. Those with an interest, agency, and privilege are obligated to guarantee these human rights to young children. A society where this duty is not enacted is not a just society.

5.1 Innocence Principle

Apart from a human rights framework, the "innocence" principle is a prevalent justification for intervening in the lives of young homeless children. Before discussing a human rights ethical framework, it is necessary to debunk this commonly cited principle. The innocence principle argues that children are deserving of special rights because they are innocent and have not had a part in causing their own situation.¹⁰ It is easy to conclude, then, that those who have been trying earnestly to fulfil the American dream, but have been hindered by the structural forces, may be entitled to society's sympathy. That is what Miller calls the "worthy homeless" (Miller, 1993). These are the "virtuous" poor who seemingly are less guilty of their own poverty or homelessness. On the other hand, many find it exceedingly more difficult to advocate for the alcoholics, the drug abusers, and the felons to be treated with the same dignity as the "worthy"

¹⁰ Nussbaum expands on the idea of innocence within conversations on rights and entitlements, "The word 'innocence' is used in its more accurate meaning, as an antonym for 'guilt,' and the idea is suggests that people lose their claim to entitlements if they are not morally good or pure in some respects... when it is said that a nice person does not 'deserve' to be killed, with the implication that homicide is less grave if the victim is, say, a prostitute or a convict. We utterly reject this way of thinking" (Nussbaum 2012, pg. 572)

homeless. Using innocence as claim for special priority translates to the guilt of others disqualifying them from an end to their own suffering. That does not mean that individuals are not punished for harming others, and violating other's human rights. However, in the case of poverty and homeless the "worst and the weakest among us" is equally entitled to their rights (Nussbaum 2012, pg. 572-573). Innocence and guilt should have little to do with society's response to this type of suffering. Though often cited, and even cited by Rachel (see quote on page 13) from *Rachel and Her Children*, it cannot sustain and validate the dignity of all people. When considering society's obligation to homeless children, the "worthy" homeless cannot be the only ones that qualify. Instead of invoking the innocence principle, we must turn to another framework to think about the experience of homeless children.

5.2 Human Rights Theories

Homelessness is not just a social justice issue. It is a human rights issue. The term "human right" is often thrown around without a proper definition. Labelling an injustice as a "human rights violation" invokes a great deal of urgency and egregious amount of injustice. However, the definition of a right is typically not explicitly stated. Different theories of human rights predicate rights based on certain qualifications, and prescribe different substantive freedoms to all people. They make claims as to why human deserve rights, and what those exact rights are.

Many theories of human rights, particularly social contract theories, have left children out of the equation.¹¹ It is essential that we carefully consider what we mean by human rights in order to validate the need for intervention in this specific scenario. For many people, including Kant, humans are deserving of rights because they are capable of rational thought. According to Kant,

¹¹ The core of the following 3 paragraphs were developed for a previous course. They have been adapted to fit this particular argument.

beings capable of rationality are deserving of dignity and should never be merely treated as a means to an end. Instead, they should have some amount of worth that is not dependent on their usefulness (Kant, 1996). Clearly, this justification for human rights leaves out humans who lack forms of rational thinking, like young children who cannot yet form rational thoughts. In addition, social contract theories, specifically Rawls' theory of justice, precludes young children from even being part of the conversation. In his exercise of the veil of ignorance, Rawls assumes that all the people at the table are independent and hold a "normal" rational ability (Rawls, 1971). Typically, a young child cannot function fully as an independent rational being. Therefore, according to Rawls' thinking, people with different cognitive functions are not able to be part of the discussion when creating the guiding principles for a just society. Rather, their existence is an after-thought, an ex post modification to be made later. Presumably, the whole exercise of the veil of ignorance would fall apart if the agents involved were no longer self-interested independent rational beings.

Most theories of social justice are predicated on the fact that citizens in a community are of a certain level of rationality or agency. This undeniably leaves some people out, specifically children, people with disabilities, and the elderly. However, Martha Nussbaum, in *The Frontiers of Justice*, clearly sees the fallacies of these theories of social justice and works to create a system of thinking about justice and rights that includes all people. She argues that rationality and independence are very transient states that people go in and out of throughout their lives. People are typically only independent during the middle of their lives. However, as a baby, a young child, a person with a disability, or an elderly person, they are not fully independent. Independence, therefore, is a weak justification for membership of a community. Nussbaum also notes how Kantian approaches to well-being leave out some people, as well.

5.3 Capabilities Approach

Therefore, Martha Nussbaum proposes the Capabilities Approach, a theory of human entitlement that considers the inclusion of those persons with impairment *ex ante* instead of *ex post*. Their inclusion is built in the foundations of a just society instead of an adjustment to the assumed norm. This approach is built on the underlying dignity of humans. She contends that this dignity is not necessarily based on rationality, but on humans', "acknowledgement that we are needy temporal beings" with areas of vulnerability and need throughout different stages of life (Nussbaum, 2006, pg. 160). Since we all have universal needs and co-dependence, we all have human dignity that requires those needs to be met. Nussbaum also argues that humans are motivated by mutual advantage, as does Rawls, but that they are also benevolently motivated to seek justice for justice's intrinsic value. Out of these foundational principles, Nussbaum generates a list of entitlements for capabilities that make a life worthy of human dignity. She argues that these central capabilities are minimal requirements for a society to be considered just. If societies do not meet this minimal standard, then they are not treating their citizens according to the human dignity they deserve. If we are to fully advocate for the rights of children, Martha Nussbaum proposes the most comprehensive set of standards.

Her list of central capabilities provides clear goals for the well-being of all humans.¹² In addition, this list allows us to evaluate a person's life situation to determine if they are living a

¹² The Central Human Capabilities from *The Frontiers of Justice* by Martha Nussbaum (2006):

1. *Life*. Being able to live to the end of a human life of normal length; not dying prematurely, or before one's life is so reduced as to be not worth living.
2. *Bodily Health*. Being able to have good health, including reproductive health; to be adequately nourished; to have adequate shelter.
3. *Bodily Integrity*. Being able to move freely from place to place; to be secure against violent assault, including sexual assault and domestic violence; having opportunities for sexual satisfaction and for choice in matters of reproduction.
4. *Senses, Imagination, and Thought*. Being able to use the senses, to imagine, think, and reason—and to do these things in a "truly human" way, a way informed and cultivated by an adequate education, including, but by no means

life that is worthy of human dignity. We can use it as a tool to advocate for change and clearly articulate the injustices that are taking place.

5.4 Homeless Children's Human Rights Violations

Martha Nussbaum's list of ten central capabilities describe the capabilities that all lives should have in order to be considered lives worthy of human dignity. Without all of these ten capabilities, a human's rights are being violated. The experience of homeless children has been laid out in the previous sections. Researchers (and now you) are well aware of the consequences of homelessness as a young child. As demonstrated through research, young homeless children do not have the capability of Bodily Health, which includes adequate shelter, Sense, Imagination and Thought, Bodily Integrity, and Emotion:

limited to, literacy and basic mathematical and scientific training. Being able to use imagination and thought in connection with experiencing and producing works and events of one's own choice, religious, literary, musical, and so forth. Being able to use one's mind in ways protected by guarantees of freedom of expression with respect to both political and artistic speech, and freedom of religious exercise. Being able to have pleasurable experiences and to avoid nonbeneficial pain.

5. *Emotions*. Being able to have attachments to things and people outside ourselves; to love those who love and care for us, to grieve at their absence; in general, to love, to grieve, to experience longing, gratitude, and justified anger. Not having one's emotional development blighted by fear and anxiety. (Supporting this capability means supporting forms of human association that can be shown to be crucial in their development.)

6. *Practical Reason*. Being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's life. (This entails protection for the liberty of conscience and religious observance.)

7. *Affiliation*. (A) Being able to live with and toward others, to recognize and show concern for other human beings, to engage in various forms of social interaction; to be able to imagine the situation of another. (Protecting this capability means protecting institutions that constitute and nourish such forms of affiliation, and also protecting the freedom of assembly and political speech.) (B) Having the social bases of self-respect and nonhumiliation; being able to be treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others. This entails provisions of nondiscrimination on the basis of race, sex, sexual orientation, ethnicity, caste, religion, national origin.

8. *Other Species*. Being able to live with concern for and in relation to animals, plants, and the world of nature.

9. *Play*. Being able to laugh, to play, to enjoy recreational activities.

10. *Control over One's Environment*. (A) Political. Being able to participate effectively in political choices that govern one's life; having the right of political participation, protections of free speech and association. (B) Material. Being able to hold property (both land and movable goods), and having property rights on an equal basis with others; having the right to seek employment on an equal basis with others; having the freedom from unwarranted search and seizure. In work, being able to work as a human being, exercising practical reason and entering into meaningful relationships of mutual recognition with other workers.

Bodily Health – Homeless children do not have access to adequate shelter. They are living in and out of shelters that are often not acceptable for human habitation. Children, and ergo their parents, should have the capability to first have access to affordable housing, and then adequate shelter if they still experience homelessness. Homelessness undermines bodily health in other ways as well.

Sense, Imagination and Thought – Research has demonstrated that young children who experience homelessness suffer from less academic achievement. They do not stay in school as long, and they do worse in school. They often are part of special education programs and struggle to balance academic rigor and their family life. Because of their experiences as young children, their capabilities for sense, imagination, and thought are compromised.

Bodily Integrity – Many children are victims of physical violence while they are experiencing homelessness, or as a result of their homelessness.¹³

Affiliation – Lastly, homeless children suffer from mental health disorders at a much higher rate than most children. This has a negative impact on homeless children's ability to create meaningful connections and relationships later in life. In addition, homelessness is a humiliating experience. Because society often blames the homeless for their situation, being homeless is seen as a person's complete failure to succeed in society.

It must also be noted that "homelessness" is a diverse experience, and one cannot say that all children who experience homelessness are having their human rights violated. In some cities

¹³ "While homeless children and youth are more likely to witness or experience violence prior to homeless episodes, they are also exposed to violence due to the public nature of their lives and vulnerable living conditions associated with poverty, such as being on the streets, in shelters, doubling up with others, or crowded housing" (Aratani 2009)

and in some states, shelters are clean and humane, children have access to high quality preschools, and resources for their parents.¹⁴ Though not all of these capabilities are always lacking in every case, research has shown that homeless children are particularly susceptible to having these capabilities compromised. In many cases, being homeless as a child has later impacts that are not necessarily seen while a child is homeless. Human beings are born with a variety of capacities that need development. If they do not have sufficient space and resources, they will be fruitless and cutoff. During this early stage of life, capabilities are the most malleable, and later life outcomes are altered drastically because of these early years.

Homeless children often do not have all ten capabilities for a life worthy of human dignity. They have a smaller set of capabilities, and that is a human rights violation. Rights have corresponding duties for society. Without correlative duties rights would not be rights at all. For someone to have the right not to be killed, it implies that the other person has the duty to not kill them. In the same way, if children have the right to a safe and affordable living space, someone else has the duty to ensure that families have access to this living space. Who are these people? Anyone who has the power, privilege and interest is obligated to ensure that capability. That is, anyone with additional resources, a privileged place in society, and a reason or personal interest is obligated to help. Given that it is in everyone's best interest for homeless children to have these capabilities and that almost all people have more privilege and power than homeless children, the majority of people in this country are obligated to intervene. Nussbaum goes even

¹⁴ For example, in Baltimore, a place with high rates of poverty and homelessness, has a program that provides many of the capabilities that homeless children lack. There is a clean and respectful shelter called Vincent St. De Paul where families have private living spaces, adequate food and safe spaces to raise their children. On the first floor of the shelter, there is a therapeutic nursery that provides high quality free preschool interventions for all the children in the shelter. But in other parts of Baltimore, families are living secretly on the streets, or in huge dorm-style shelters with all the families in one large room. Their belongings are often stolen, and sickness runs rampant between families and children.

farther to argue that, where a capability is likely to have positive impacts on a community, and the state resources exist, “it is a moral imperative to provide [this capability] regardless of the expense involved” (Nussbaum 2012, pg. 586). In her view, a society with adequate resources has a moral imperative to provide these substantive freedoms to homeless children.¹⁵

Section VI: Conclusion and Next Steps

From this discussion it is clear that neither homeless children nor their parents are at fault for their homelessness. Losing one’s home often occurs because of an exogenous shock to an already fragile and vulnerable family. The experience of homelessness is often detrimental to a child life, affecting their development and later economic outcomes. From this understanding, and with careful consideration of human rights, it becomes clear that homeless children are extremely susceptible to experiencing a human rights violation. Though not all homeless children do, a large number of them live in inadequate spaces. As noted earlier, in 2016 there were 2,281 homeless people in families with children living unsheltered in Oregon alone (Henry 2016). There is still significant work to be done in order to guarantee these children their basic human rights.

These baseline duties are a necessary step for society to take. However, ensuring homeless children’s adequate shelter, health, education, and development is not all that society *can* do. Many researchers have found a variety of practices that are very beneficial to parents and

¹⁵As one tangible way to promote the human rights of these children is to support policies that prevent homelessness like the housing first movement. This is a school of thought that prioritizes housing as the primary need for homeless individuals. It provides housing regardless of one’s mental health, criminal record or sobriety. This initiative grants the capability of bodily integrity to both the “worthy” and “unworthy” poor by providing basic human rights unconditionally. Supporting, funding, or participating in this would be just one example of a way in which a person with the privilege, interest and power could work to ensure universal human rights to all people.

children who are homeless. First, promoting supportive housing has been shown to increase child well-being (Hong 2012). Shelter care, ranges from emergency shelters to transitional housing to permanent supportive housing. This third category of supportive housing is the most comprehensive and does not have a specified time limit and offers a variety of social services to assist families and children. These program have been affective at reducing school mobility and child protective services, and increasing school attendance and math achievement (Hong 2012).

Mindfulness practices have been shown to help homeless families and children create secure attachment and manage their stress (Alhusen 2017). A qualitative study showed that implementing mindfulness practices into the Therapeutic nursery for homeless children under the age of 4 have significant improvements in the child's behavior and the parents' relationship with the child (Alhusen 2017). Because mindfulness is inexpensive and easily accessible, it should be implemented in more shelter and preschools for homeless children and families.

From this discussion, it is clear that homeless children are at an extreme disadvantage because of their unique vulnerability to negative life experiences as homeless children. Though the reality of the situation is both sobering and disheartening, there is much to be hopeful about. With the necessary attention to this problem, society has the full ability to make significant changes to some of the worst social structures. When people with power, privilege and interest come to together and take the experience of early childhood homelessness seriously, the future will be a more joyful and just place.

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