

MAPPING THE AMERICAN POLITICAL STREAM: THE STUART B. MCKINNEY HOMELESS ASSISTANCE ACT

By Betsy Carlson

Despite its historical presence in this country and around the world, homelessness was not addressed on a federal level in the United States until the 1980s, and only one piece of enacted legislation has been devoted solely to addressing homelessness. Investigating the political climate and the incremental steps necessary to induce federal action allows one to understand the government's response to this vulnerable population. This article details the events that precipitated the signing into law of the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act by Ronald Reagan in 1987.

Although homelessness has existed in the United States since the birth of the nation, until the 1980s, the problem was not directly addressed by the federal government. Less than 20 years ago, in July 1987, the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act (U.S. Public Law 100-77 [1987]) was passed, defining homelessness and legislating solutions for it (Hill, 2001, p. 1). Until this time, homelessness was addressed through state and local allocation of resources, as well as the continuance of common-law principles established originally in English Poor Laws (Katz, 1986). Advocating President Reagan's views, federal agencies took the stance that that "states and local jurisdictions were best equipped to handle their own homeless problems, and not the federal government" (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, n.d.).

The issue of homelessness was not new in the 1980s, nor was it a priority for President Reagan. Why, then, did Congress and the president authorize laws granting funding and rights to the homeless population? In fact, the passage of the McKinney Homeless Assistance Act in 1987 was not the result of a sudden increase in the presence of homeless individuals in the United States that year, but the result of a response to the perceived national crisis of

homelessness. This perception opened a political window of opportunity for advocates of legislation on the issue. Legislators succeeded in enacting the measure by linking the definition of the problem, the solution, and the movement of political actors.

IDENTIFICATION OF THE SOCIAL PROBLEM

The Causes of Homelessness

Deborah Stone (1989) explains that situations become defined as problems when influenced by human actions. An issue does not become identified as a problem until political actors lend support to address that issue and lobby for a solution. She claims that “our understanding of real situations is always mediated by ideas; those ideas in turn are created, changed, and fought over in politics” (1989, p. 282). As these political conversations occur, the attempts to assign causation often shift on a grid of purposeful or nonpurposeful actions and intended or unintended consequences; shifts occur as political actors seek to place responsibility for a social problem within the 4 quadrants of the grid: accidental, intentional, mechanical, and inadvertent causes. This article uses Stone’s model to examine homelessness as an issue that was advanced in the 1980s by political actors. It considers how the issue was “pushed” (Stone, 1989, p. 291) from 1 causal story to another as policy makers considered how or whether to address it. The article, further, applies John Kingdon’s (2003) notions of political incrementalism and policy windows for policy action.

Prior to the middle of the twentieth century, most of the homeless population fit into common stereotypes of the wino or the bag lady (Hill, 2001, p. 1). In the 1950s and 1960s, a number of policy shifts changed the makeup of the homeless population. States closed the mental health facilities that housed a severely mentally ill population, sending many of those without family or other supports into the streets (Hill, 2001, p. 91). These people were often more noticeable than the previous homeless population because their mental illnesses rendered their behavior more unusual (Hill, 2001, p. 92). Furthermore, some veterans returned from the Vietnam War with physical handicaps and mental trauma, but without resources to address their problems (Hill, 2001, pp. 103–104). Many ended up on the streets or in shelters. Economic conditions also played a role in the changing face of homelessness, as the recession of the early 1980s left many people unemployed and unable to pay rent or mortgages. Reagan’s support of reinvigorating the downtown areas of major cities led to the destruction of some low-income housing, and such changes further disadvantaged this population (Alter, 1984). Each of these

factors expanded the population on the streets. The homeless included more minorities, more women, and more families than ever before (Hombs, 1990, as cited in Hill, 2001, p. 5). Because the rise in homelessness had many causes, political actors pushed the issue from 1 causal story to another, attributing the problem to unemployment, lack of affordable housing, and inadequate mental health care. For example, while Reagan's plan to reinvigorate cities was not explicitly intended to decrease the housing supply for low-income individuals and families, that policy was, nonetheless, an inadvertent cause of the lack of housing and, therefore, of the rise in homelessness. Despite the federal government's efforts to depict the causes of homelessness as local problems and to advocate local solutions, events eventually moved the issue to the national agenda.

Pushing Homelessness to the National Agenda

As the problem of homelessness became more evident, localities struggled to address the issue. New York's governor Mario Cuomo issued a report in 1983 to address the rise of homelessness in New York City and across the country. He called for a national response to a problem that was overwhelming local resources. Despite Cuomo's (1983) call for federal assistance, there was little national acknowledgement of the rising problem of homelessness. Although the Federal Interagency Task Force on Food and Shelter for the Homeless was established in 1983, its role was merely to respond to requests for federal surplus blankets, cots, and clothing (Foscarinis, 1996, p. 161). The same year, after hearing testimony that homelessness was becoming a serious problem across the country, Congress authorized \$140 million for the Emergency Food and Shelter Program, to be run by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), without any new legislation attached (Foscarinis, 1996, p. 161). The relief was administered to the homeless as it would have been to disaster victims.

The formal federal response, surprisingly, did not come as a result of empirical appeals like the one made by Cuomo. Rather, it resulted from the emotive media coverage and political ideologies predicted by Stone. As Stone puts it, "Causal beliefs are quite sensitive to the way television news coverage portrays problems" (Stone, 1989, p. 293). Activist Mitch Snyder of Washington, D.C.'s Community for Creative Non-Violence brought homelessness into the political arena by attracting significant news coverage. In the mid-1980s, he began fasting to bring attention to the need for resources for the homeless. In 1984, Snyder lost 60 pounds in 51 days in order to bring public pressure on the government to renovate a federally owned building (Doan, 1986). At the time, the building was occupied by the homeless for use as a

shelter. After initial success, the pact to renovate the building collapsed. Snyder again took up the fight until the White House and Congress agreed to provide almost \$5 million for the project (Doan, 1986).

Snyder included the public in his efforts to address the problem of homelessness by creating a contested issue that people felt was socially significant (Cobb and Elder, 1975, p. 116). Public awareness also grew as a result of 2 events: the 1986 Hands Across America event and the 1987 Grate American Sleep-Out. Hands Across America involved nearly 5.5 million people in 16 states joining hands to raise consciousness about hunger and homelessness (*Time*, 1986). Likewise, the Grate American Sleep-Out event involved politicians and celebrities such as U.S. Representative Stewart McKinney, actor Martin Sheen, and Washington, D.C. Mayor Marion Barry, each of whom spent the night on steam grates outside the Library of Congress (*Time*, 1987). These events were effective in drawing a level of media and public attention to homelessness that Cuomo could not.

HOMELESSNESS ON THE NATIONAL POLITICAL AGENDA

Incrementalism

As publicity raised public awareness of homelessness, Congress continued to address the issue only incrementally. This response exemplifies what John Kingdon discusses as policy makers' preference to make "small, incremental, marginal adjustments" (2003, p. 79) because they have difficulty foreseeing the fallout from large-scale changes.

The Reagan administration's insistence that homelessness was not an issue of federal concern (Foscarinis, 1996, p. 161) resulted in legislation during the administration's first term that reflected this position. As a result, only incremental changes were made to address homelessness. As previously mentioned, the 1983 and 1984 allocations of \$140 million and \$70 million for the Emergency Food and Shelter Program under FEMA were insufficient to change the plight of the 3 million homeless and did not specifically address homelessness (Foscarinis, 1996, p. 161). In 1986, the proposed Homeless Persons' Survival Act (H.R. 286) included the needed "emergency relief, preventative measures and long-term solutions to homelessness" (Foscarinis, 1996, p. 161). However, the legislation was passed as the significantly less comprehensive Homeless Eligibility Clarification Act (U.S. Public Law 99-570 [1986]), which primarily reformed existing laws by removing the requirement that individuals have an address to be deemed eligible for Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), veterans' benefits, food stamps, or Medicaid (Foscarinis, 1996, p. 161).

The Homeless Housing Act (U.S. Public Law 99-500) was also passed in 1986. It funded 2 small programs, the Emergency Shelter Grants program and a transitional housing demonstration program for a total of \$15 million (Foscarinis, 1996, p. 161). None of these measures offered widespread reform to address the needs of the up to 3 million people then living on the streets.

Softening up the Political Consciousness

Homelessness remained on the political agenda through the 1980s. A series of events parallels Kingdon's (2003) description of a 3-pronged combination of problem, politics, and visible participants. Kingdon theorizes that policy entrepreneurs are responsible for "softening up" (2003, p. 117) the policy community and the larger public in order to ensure that when the opportunity arises, the entrepreneurs' proposed solutions will be considered for action and legislation. Kingdon quotes a high-level bureaucrat who said, "You have to create the right climate to get people to focus on the issue and face the issue. The lead time for that sort of thing is 2 to 6 years" (2003, p. 129). Kingdon notes that, within this time frame, proposals are often brought to the decision-making table, but the solution is not authorized. He posits that this is an important part of the process, as the proposal remains in the public arena (2003, p. 130).

Consistent with Kingdon's theory, the continued introduction of homeless provisions in Congress served to keep the problem of homelessness on the political agenda, despite the lack of significant legislative response to the issue. Congress could not ignore the series of events addressing homelessness in the United States. The introduction of the Homeless Persons' Survival Act, the widespread media coverage of Mitch Snyder's actions protesting homelessness, and public participation in events like The Grate American Sleep-Out consistently reminded policy makers of the growing presence of homelessness in the United States.

Homelessness Catches On

Kingdon also highlights the fact that some policy changes enacted in the political stream do not follow this incrementalism. Rather, a subject "catches on" (2003, p. 80), while others do not. He explains:

A combination of people is required to bring an idea to policy fruition.... Some actors bring to the policy process their political popularity; others, their expertise. Some bring their pragmatic sense of the possible; others their ability to attract attention (Kingdon, 2003, p. 76).

The incremental legislation enacted by Congress, and the publicity that homelessness was receiving, demonstrates that advocates for the homeless (including McKinney, Snyder, Sheen, Barry, and others) were able to bring the solution to homelessness to fruition.

Finally, also noteworthy is Kingdon's assertion that although issues may appear to arise suddenly, few policies are wholly new. Oftentimes, elements of a given policy are new but the entirety is a recombination of existing elements (Kingdon, 2003, p. 117). After significant campaigning by advocates throughout the winter of 1986–1987, in January 1987, Majority Leader Tom Foley introduced Title I of the Homeless Persons' Survival Act as Urgent Relief for the Homeless Act (H.R. 558; Foscarinis, 1996, p. 161). The title contained emergency relief provisions for shelter, transitional housing, mobile health care, and food. It passed in both houses of Congress that spring and was signed into law by President Reagan on July 22, 1987 as the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act of 1987.¹

Why Homelessness Caught On

Kingdon states that, ultimately, successful legislative proposals have 5 common characteristics: “technical feasibility, value acceptability within the policy community, tolerable cost, anticipated public acquiescence, and a reasonable chance for receptivity among elected decision makers” (2003, p. 131). In short, a policy solution must be able to address the problem that it proposes to address, must follow the norms of policy makers' beliefs such as the proper role of the federal government, must not require an inordinate amount of funding, must be acceptable to the broader public (not overly interfering with personal actions), and therefore, must be acceptable to elected officials.

The McKinney Act fulfilled each of Kingdon's criteria for success. The Act was feasible because it addressed emergency needs by providing services at preexisting locations; most of the 15 programs authorized were already in place but required more funding. These programs included emergency shelter, transitional housing, job training, primary health care, education, and some permanent housing (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2005). The Act was reviewed by several House and Senate committees and garnered bipartisan support. The cost of the legislation, although high (\$1 billion for 2 years), was acceptable to a public witnessing more and more homeless individuals on the streets. Millions of people from New York to California demonstrated their interest in addressing homelessness through participation in Hands Across America (*Time*, 1986). The obvious support of constituents lent the support of individual representatives in Congress, as well. The McKinney Act had all of

the key components identified by Kingdon. Perhaps this is why it was enacted so expediently; only 7 months separated its introduction from the signing ceremony in 1987.

ADVANCING THE ISSUE OF HOMELESSNESS

Amendments

The McKinney Homeless Assistance Act has been amended 5 times since its passage; the changes expand and strengthen the original legislation (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2005, p. 3). These amendments created the Shelter Plus Care housing assistance program, established educational rights for homeless children, and established safe havens for people who are not participating in supportive services (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2005, p. 3; see also Foscarinis, 1996, p. 161).² However, while the Act initially allocated just over \$1 billion for 2 years, only \$712 million was appropriated (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2005, p. 4). Funding for homeless assistance reached an all-time high at \$1.49 billion in fiscal year 1995. At that time, the grants were consolidated and have since been cut significantly. In fiscal year 1996, funding for McKinney Act programs was cut by 27 percent and several programs were eliminated (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2005, p. 4). As Kingdon (2003) predicted, political interest in homelessness has waned.

New Legislation

When the McKinney Act was introduced, Senator Albert Gore (D-TN) remarked:

[The McKinney legislation] is an essential first step toward establishing a national agenda for action to eradicate homelessness in America.... No one in this body should believe that the legislation we begin considering today is anything more than a first step toward reversing the record increase in homelessness (133 *Cong. Rec.* S 3660 [March 23, 1987]; see also National Coalition for the Homeless, 2005, p. 5).

Despite this admonishment, there has been no legislated action in Congress to address homelessness beyond this provision of emergency services.

Most notably, missing from all federal homeless legislation is an attempt to address the root causes of homelessness. Instead, federal efforts attempt to treat individual symptoms of the problem, focusing on emergency services rather than long-term solutions (Foscarinis, 1996, p. 171). Because these

causes have not been addressed, the homeless population is predicted to grow (Foscarinis, 1996, p. 171).

In 2002, President George W. Bush reactivated the Interagency Council on Homelessness with the goal of ending homelessness in 10 years (*Economist*, 2003). In spite of that goal, funding remains at less than \$110 million for 2 years (*Economist*, 2003). The campaign has been endorsed by the National Governors Association (U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, 2005) and the U.S. Conference of Mayors (*Economist*, 2003). A primary campaign goal is to move the chronically homeless (about 10 percent of the homeless population) from shelters to supportive housing (*Economist*, 2003). Thus far, evidence indicates that the cost of supportive housing per person per year is between \$13,500 and \$20,000. By contrast, the cost for emergency services, such as psychiatric care, hospital stays, shelters, and prisons, is \$40,500 per person per year (*Economist*, 2003). Clearly, it is cost effective in the long run to provide housing rather than emergency services.

In March 2004, the Samaritan Initiative Act (H.R. 4057; S. 2829) was introduced Rep. Rick Renzi (R-AZ) and Sen. Wayne Allard (R-CO). In April 2005, the Services for Ending Long-Term Homelessness Act (SELHA; S. 709; H.R. 1471) was introduced by Sen. Mike DeWine (R-OH) and Rep. Deborah Pryce (R-OH). Although neither bill has been enacted, both measures would fund supportive housing for chronically homeless populations. Both bills provide permanent housing for individuals, and SELHA includes a provision for families headed by disabled and frequently homeless individuals. These initiatives, valued at \$55 million for SELHA and \$200 million for the Samaritan Initiative (National Alliance to End Homelessness (NAEH), 2006), would begin to address the permanent housing issue.

Moving Forward

While the president has articulated his support of ending homelessness, the funding requested and set aside for the effort cannot meet the needs of the 3.5 million people who will experience homelessness this year. Requested funding will only cover supportive housing for 10,000 of the chronically homeless (NAEH, 2006); a good start. However, housing all of the chronically homeless is estimated to cost \$1.3 billion (NAEH, 2000).

It is the author's view that neither the Samaritan Initiative nor SELHA will be enacted by Congress. President Bush's agenda attempts to provide what he describes as an ownership society. This theme has surfaced in several of the administration's proposals (e.g., changes to social security, health care reform, homeownership; White House, 2004). As few policies support

impoverished populations, one doubts whether there will be political support for supportive housing for the chronically homeless. Instead, the introduction of these 2 acts has, in the words of Kingdon (2003), softened up the political stream. Much the same occurred in 1986; the Homeless Eligibility Clarification Act softened policy makers for later passage of the McKinney Act. Continued introduction of legislation to provide permanent housing and supportive services for the chronically homeless will result in the preparation of a solution that will appropriately seize the opportunity of one of Kingdon's (2003) open policy windows. Finally, such a window of opportunity must be opened by participants who can raise awareness of homelessness as an important national issue. Snyder did with his fasting, and others followed, sleeping on steam grates.

President Bush's 10-year plan to end homelessness and the legislation for permanent supportive housing are imperfect efforts. Nevertheless, they are steps toward the long-term solution to homelessness that Al Gore deemed necessary 18 years ago. With this appropriate solution, homeless advocates must be prepared to act upon the opening of a window for legislative action.

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NOTES

¹ Title I was renamed because Stewart B. McKinney, the chief republican sponsor of the bill, died before its passage (NCH, 2005). The act was later renamed the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act in 2002, with the inclusion of provisions to allow homeless children equal access to education (Institute for Children and Poverty, 2005).

² Amendments to the McKinney Homeless Assistance Act include the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Amendments Act of 1988 (U.S. Public Law 100-628), Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Amendments Act of 1990 (U.S. Public Law 101-645), Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Amendments Act of 1992 (U.S. Public Law 102-550), Improving America's Schools Act of 1994 (U.S. Public Law 103-382), and No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (U.S. Public Law 107-110).

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