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MYTHS ABOUT THE HOMELESS

BY MICHAEL J. SOBIECH



Jay Gabbard

“WHAT COMES TO MIND WHEN I SAY THE WORD ‘HOMELESS’?” WHEN DR. JAY GABBARD, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF SOCIAL WORK AT WKU, ASKS THAT QUESTION, HE INITIALLY HEARS MOSTLY NEGATIVE RESPONSES: BUM, LAZY, DUMB, WINO, SCUM, SCAM ARTIST, LOSER, DIRTY,

CRAZY. BUT THROUGH HIS RESEARCH, HE HOPES TO DISPLACE SOME OF THE MYTHS ABOUT HOMELESSNESS, AN ESPECIALLY URGENT GOAL GIVEN THAT THE HOMELESS ARE NO LONGER JUST PEOPLE WITHOUT A HOME — THEY NOW ARE TARGETS OF HORRIFIC VIOLENCE.

Gabbard’s work began with stereotypes. “Throughout my life, I had heard all sorts of myths about the homeless, but I had never really had a personal connection with them.” That changed while he was working on his doctorate in social work at the University of Alabama. “Through my church, I started a ministry where some guys and I would drive to Birmingham and spend the night at the Firehouse Shelter. We’d help process the men off the street, get their bed linens ready and, in the morning, serve them breakfast,” he said.

At about the same time, Gabbard began serving on a community board in Tuscaloosa, which was composed of various providers of services to the homeless. “Those two experiences caused me to change the focus of my doctoral work from disabilities to homelessness.”

Initially, Dr. Gabbard’s research focused on a seldom-studied aspect in the life of the homeless — their spirituality and religiosity. For his dissertation, Gabbard (who, at one time, had planned on going to seminary) was able to combine his interests in spirituality with his interests in homelessness. “There wasn’t much in the literature about the religiousness of the homeless, but in my experience, it typically was very important to them — all different types of spirituality came up a great deal in my conversations with them. And since religion and spirituality is so important to the homeless, it should certainly be a part of the academic conversation.” Unfortunately, in contrast to the relative lack of awareness concerning their religiosity, negative stereotypes about the homeless abound. “Homelessness is not typically caused by just one factor; usually there are several issues that cause a person to live on the streets. This is why it’s one of the most complex social problems to study.” But the complexity of homelessness cannot be seen in the simplicity of its myths.

“I’m only a paycheck away from the street. That’s really not true — as long as you have a social support system. If you have family and friends who can take you in during a rough spot, you won’t become homeless. The problem is that some of the homeless burn bridges with family members who could help them; and some families who would help don’t have the resources to take them in because of their own poverty,” explained Gabbard.

“They like to be that way.’ Of course, that’s true for some. A small minority do prefer to live a ‘homeless life.’ But if you were to ask most of those on the streets if they prefer the ‘great outdoors’ to a warm, safe apartment with a job and security, they would choose a home over the street. Most would not choose a life of being ridiculed, poor, spat upon, called names, and in some cases, set on fire,” continued Gabbard.

“They are stupid.’ Over half have high school diplomas. I have met a number of homeless people who were college graduates, a few who went to graduate school, and even one with an earned doctorate,” Gabbard stated.

“They’re lazy.’ Some are lazy, but others have difficulty holding a job because they don’t have a fixed residence or because they have substance abuse or mental illness — about one third of the homeless have some type of mental illness. How can they hold down a job when these other issues are not addressed? You have to get on your feet before you can handle a job.” Gabbard concluded, “And I would add that many are far from lazy; they are quite resourceful because survival takes energy!”

Gabbard thinks people might be surprised to know that about 40% of homeless males in the United States are veterans, many of whom are suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress



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Disorder (PTSD). And the fastest-growing group among the homeless is single women with children, and the reason they’re on the street is because of domestic violence. They were not the primary breadwinner, and for many, the only place they had to turn was a shelter or the street.

“There are individual problems. But society doesn’t tend to think about what society contributes to the problem. Nor do we seem willing to spend money on people who are often seen as the dregs of society. But if we were proactive and did what we could on the front-end of the problem, we would actually save money,” said Gabbard. “The real problem is that we don’t address fundamental issues like a lack of affordable, low-income housing, the gentrification of poor neighborhoods, an abysmally low minimum wage, and the lack of adequate aftercare for individuals when they are

released from prisons and mental health facilities. What we have is a blame game and no one wins.”

Of great concern to Gabbard are not only the dehumanizing myths but also the increasing abuse against the homeless. According to the National Coalition for the Homeless (NCH), since 1999, 774 violent acts, in 235 cities, in 45 states and Puerto Rico, have been committed against the homeless — 217 of America’s homeless have died as a consequence of these acts of brutality.

“People have been set on fire, pushed in a river, and run over by cars,” said Gabbard. “We have had people film ‘bum fights’ where a couple of homeless guys are paid money to fight. We’ve even had people pay and film homeless people going to the bathroom on the street. The dehumanization of these homeless human beings is just appalling.”

The NCH reports that the criminals in these cases are more often younger and male. "Skin heads, other hate groups, and delinquent teens attack them because they think they are expendable," states Gabbard. "And some of the worst crimes are against the most vulnerable, such as homeless people suffering from schizophrenia."

Along with three of his students, Dr. Gabbard is currently coauthoring a comprehensive overview of the growing problem of hate crimes against the homeless. "We are looking at annual reports from the National Coalition for the Homeless, local reports of single incidents, and pertinent research in order to critically evaluate the etiology of the problem, the characteristics of offenders, motives behind the violence, the pervasiveness of the problem, recent legislative efforts, and proposed solutions.

Gabbard concluded, "We hope that our critical review of an apparently growing social problem will contribute our unique perspective as students of social work to the interdisciplinary

knowledge base on the problem of homelessness."

Helping people deal with violence is nothing new to Dr. Gabbard. Before he began his graduate work, he spent a year in a forensics hospital. "Most of the people there were accused of serious crimes — multiple murders, arson, rape. We worked with the forensic psychologists and psychiatrists to determine whether these people were competent to stand trial, criminally responsible, or not guilty by reason of insanity."

And now he plans to return to crime. "I understand the perspective of the homeless, but I want to understand the other side, too. What motivates people, especially the young, to be so violent toward the homeless?" And so this fall, Dr. Gabbard will return to the classroom not as a teacher but as a student. "I'm taking a criminology course here at WKU, and I'll probably end up getting an MA."

For Gabbard, the homeless are not just a problem to be studied — they are people to be helped. In 2008, after teaching an

elective graduate-level class on the subject, he and his students staffed a shelter in Owensboro, Kentucky. And this year, he and students are trying to help the homeless in Elizabethtown, Kentucky. "My students and I have been trying to raise money and community awareness of the need for an overnight shelter in Elizabethtown. One thing we have done, for instance, is have a sleep-out with students from WKU's Elizabethtown campus."

Of course, a hands-on approach to a situation that many turn away from is not unexpected in Gabbard, who came face-to-face with the homeless — and his own misconceptions — years ago in a Birmingham shelter: "The value for me in staying in that shelter was that I was able to see the social problem with no filter, which is something that I preach to my students here at WKU. If you want to know about a social problem, go experience it. Spend time with people in that situation because when you do, you'll find that it's a lot harder to stereotype problems — and people." ■

