

## BRIEFING PAPER **War and Homelessness**

### **How American Wars Create Homelessness Among United States Armed Forces Veterans**

It is axiomatic that wars create homelessness in the territories where combat occurs. Every war that the United States has been involved in, from the Revolutionary War to Desert Storm, has at least temporarily displaced populations and destroyed the homes of civilians. Even the “undeclared” wars that the United States has sponsored and supported, in Latin America and elsewhere, produced hundreds of thousands of refugees and uprooted rural and urban populations. However, since the Civil War there have been no sustained military battles fought on United States territory, so most Americans have no first-hand contact with the immediate impact of homelessness resulting from war.

In contrast, our armed forces veterans do have first-hand experience with homelessness that is a direct consequence of American military and domestic policies. This briefing paper provides an overview of the impact of homelessness on armed forces veterans, both historically and currently. Throughout American history there has been high incidence of homelessness among veterans, primarily as a result of combat-related disabilities and trauma and the failure of government benefits to provide adequate housing assistance for low-income and disabled veterans. The paper concludes that, absent a dramatic change in Federal policies, the war on Iraq will create a new generation of homeless veterans.

### **War and Homeless Veterans in American History**

Homelessness in the United States dates back to the colonial era, and rising numbers of “vagabonds” were noted in urban areas in the wake of the Revolutionary War. New York City Mayor Richard Varick noted in 1784 that “Vagrants multiply on our Hands to an amazing Degree,” and overcrowding in jails, workhouses, and almshouses led to the construction of a new four-story facility in 1796.<sup>1</sup> However, as noticeable as the rise in homelessness was in the cities and in the Northeast, it was, according to historian Kenneth Kusmer, mitigated in the rural South by the expansion of the system of slave labor.<sup>2</sup>

The post-Civil War era witnessed a much more significant growth in homelessness nationwide. Indeed, as Kusmer notes, “even the words ‘tramp’ and ‘bum,’ as applied to the homeless, can be traced to the Civil War era.”<sup>3</sup> One reason was the enormous economic dislocation generated by the war and the succeeding economic recession, and by the 1870s “vagrancy” was recognized as a national issue. Many of the new nomads riding the rails and congregating in cities were Civil War veterans, and many had suffered physical injuries and trauma during the war. As the early 1870s recession deepened, many cities responded by creating new anti-vagrancy legislation. In 1874 the number of reported vagrants in Boston was 98,263, more than three times the number just two years earlier. From 1874 to 1878 the number of vagrancy arrests in New York City rose by half.<sup>4</sup>

The homelessness crisis of the Great Depression, which affected many World War I veterans, was dramatically abated in the early 1940s by the enlistment of tens of thousands of Americans in the armed forces and by the wartime economic upswing. In New York City, according to Kusmer, “In one two-month period in 1943, 100 Bowery residents joined the armed forces, while another 200 acquired jobs in hospitals, restaurants, or on the railroads.”<sup>5</sup> With the end of World War II, however, homelessness re-emerged as a significant problem in many cities. In New York City, demand for emergency shelter rose in the late 1940s, with as many as 900 men bedding down in the Lodging House Annex (later the Municipal Shelter) on East 3rd Street in the 1948-49 winter.<sup>6</sup> Homelessness would have continued to affect many thousands of World War II veterans were it not for the national economic upturn and the benefits provided by the G.I. Bill.

With the advent of the Vietnam War, however, the link between homelessness and military veterans finally came to the attention of the general public. As Kusmer writes, “Only a few years after the end of the war...a new wave of homeless persons, mostly in their 20s and 30s and disproportionately black or Hispanic, began to appear on city street corners. Many were Vietnam veterans, unable to find work after being discharged.”<sup>7</sup> By the late 1970s, when modern homelessness fully emerged, a significant portion of the homeless men seen sleeping outdoors in vast numbers in New York City and other large cities were armed forces veterans. Many veterans suffered from post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), substance abuse disorders, and physical disabilities caused by their experiences in combat.

The 1991 Gulf War, the last major conventional war involving the United States military, also left many veterans recovering from physical and mental disabilities and confronting homelessness. A 1997 survey of 1,200 homeless veterans nationwide who resided at mission shelters found that 10 percent of them were Gulf War veterans.<sup>8</sup> In New York City, homeless service providers also reported assisting significant numbers of Desert Storm veterans.

### **The Current Status of Homeless Veterans**

The United States Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) estimates that on a given night some 250,000 veterans are homeless nationwide, and that as many as half a million veterans experience homelessness in the course of a year; this represents around two percent of all living American veterans. All but 3 percent of homeless veterans are men, and 56 percent are black or Latino. Approximately 45 percent suffer from mental illness, and more than two-thirds suffer from substance abuse disorders. More than two-thirds of homeless veterans served in the armed forces for at least three years, and 47 percent served in the Vietnam War.<sup>9</sup>

According to a 1996 nationwide survey of homeless people and service providers, 33 percent of the male homeless population is comprised of veterans, and 23 percent of the total homeless population is made up of veterans.<sup>10</sup> In New York City, nearly one of every ten municipal shelter beds for homeless single men is set aside for homeless veterans, and annually thousands of homeless veterans utilize municipal and private shelters or reside in public spaces.<sup>11</sup>

The principal cause of homelessness among veterans is the failure of VA disability benefits and other public benefits to provide adequate and appropriate housing assistance.<sup>12</sup> According to the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans, the VA’s homeless programs assist only 40,000 veterans each year, less than 10 percent of the estimated number of veterans who experience homelessness annually.<sup>13</sup> Given the high prevalence of mental illness and other disabilities among homeless veterans, the need for supportive housing (i.e., housing with on-site support services for individuals living with mental illness and other disabilities) and affordable housing assistance is critical. Nevertheless, VA benefits and other public benefits are not adequate to allow most veterans – particularly those in urban areas like New York City – to afford rental housing, and the supply of supportive housing nationally for disabled homeless individuals is woefully inadequate.

### **The War on Iraq Will Create a New Generation of Homeless Veterans**

Without a dramatic change in Federal policies – including substantial increases in housing assistance and supportive housing investments for homeless and at-risk veterans – there is no doubt that the war on Iraq will create a new generation of homeless veterans. More than 200,000 members of the United States armed forces are currently stationed in the Persian Gulf, and many more may potentially serve in the area in the likely event of a prolonged United States occupation of the region.

There are a number of steps the Federal government and the Congress could take to prevent homelessness among veterans. These would include:

- ***Mandating adequate housing assistance as part of the package of veterans benefits.*** This could be accomplished by augmenting existing VA benefits or by establishing an entitlement to rental housing vouchers for income-eligible veterans.
- ***Providing an adequate supply of supportive housing for homeless veterans.*** This could be accomplished by expanding funding for existing VA and Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) supportive housing programs.

Unfortunately, the Bush Administration's current budget proposal for VA and HUD funding is woefully inadequate. The Bush proposal actually reduces funding for vital Federal housing programs, and proposes changes to the housing voucher program that threaten its long-term viability. In short, there is no indication that changes in Federal policies necessary to prevent a new wave of homelessness among American veterans are even a remote possibility. Indeed, it is much more likely that the current direction of Bush Administration budget policies will contribute to increased homelessness among veterans as well as low-income families and individuals.

Of course, the most immediate and effective way to prevent homelessness among a new generation of armed forces veterans would be to bring the troops currently stationed in Iraq and the Persian Gulf back home. Finally, it is essential to recall that the war effort will displace countless Iraqis and destroy an untold number of Iraqi homes. Aside from the political challenges that will confront post-war Iraq, the rebuilding effort must address the housing needs (as well as the nutritional and health care needs) of the Iraqi population and of refugees to avert a wave of homelessness in the Persian Gulf region.

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<sup>1</sup> Kusmer, Kenneth, (2002), *Down and Out, on the Road: The Homeless in American History* (Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 16.

<sup>2</sup> Kusmer (2002), p. 16.

<sup>3</sup> Kusmer (2002), p. 37.

<sup>4</sup> Kusmer (2002), pp. 36-37.

<sup>5</sup> Kusmer (2002), p. 224.

<sup>6</sup> Hopper, Kim (2003), *Reckoning with Homelessness* (Cornell University Press, 2003), pp. 44-45.

<sup>7</sup> Kusmer (2002), pp. 243-244.

<sup>8</sup> International Union of Gospel Missions, Veteran's survey (October 1997). Available at <http://www.agrm.org/news/veterans.html>.

<sup>9</sup> United States Department of Veterans Affairs, "Overview of Homelessness." Available at <http://www.va.gov>.

<sup>10</sup> Burt, Martha R. et al, *Homelessness: Programs and the People They Serve* (Summary Report, Findings of the National Survey of Homeless Assistance Providers and Clients) (Urban Institute, 1999). Available at <http://www.urban.org>.

<sup>11</sup> New York City Department of Homeless Services, shelter census reports (2003).

<sup>12</sup> In fact, the Department of Veterans Affairs did not create specific programs to assist homeless veterans until 1987.

<sup>13</sup> National Coalition for Homeless Veterans, "Background and Statistics." Available at <http://www.nchv.org/background.cfm>.