

READING

2 The Lives of Homeless Women



Reading Discussion Questions

It is estimated that there are as many as 3.5 million homeless people in the United States. The exact number is impossible to ascertain. The homeless include not only women, but men and children as well. Single-parent families, often headed by the mother, are common, and entire families being among the homeless are not uncommon.

(1) A sociologist has many different research methods from which to choose. Was participant observation the best method for Liebow to utilize in his research on homeless women? Why or why not?

(2) What are some of the problems any researcher encounters when using participant observation as a research methodology? How are these further complicated by a male researcher conducting research on a population exclusively composed of homeless women?

- (3) What are some practical solutions to alleviate the plight of the homeless? How are the needs of homeless women different from, and similar to, the needs of homeless men? What are some issues homeless women have in common with women who may not be homeless, but who are in the lower socio-economic classes?
- (4) Durkheim and other sociologists have concluded that if a social problem persists in society (such as crime, deviance, or in this case, homelessness), it must have functional benefits for society. What functional benefits do the homeless provide for society? (Hint: Many of the same benefits the homeless provide are also provided by the poor.)
- (5) Even though it is impossible to accurately count the number of homeless people in a city, region, or nation, what are some techniques that can be used to make more accurate estimates? What are some of the reasons for the fluctuating number of homeless people that comprise this population?

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Individual Exercises

(1) Research the location of homeless shelters in either your hometown area or near the university. Call one of the shelters and volunteer. Explain that this is a project for your sociology course. The shelter may have a volunteer coordinator who can assist you in this effort and direct you to providing a service that best fits your qualifications and interests and the needs of the shelter. Explain that you are only expecting to volunteer for a specified time, such as ten or twelve hours over three or four days.

(2) Following your volunteer experience, be prepared to write a short report on your impressions of the shelter, its operation, and the needs of the homeless.

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Group Classroom Exercises

- (1) Assign several members of the class the responsibility of researching the location of homeless shelters within a twenty-mile radius of the university, collecting the telephone numbers as well as addresses. Then assign other members of the class the job of contacting the director of each shelter to schedule a personal interview to discuss a class project that will address the needs of the homeless. Each shelter interview can be conducted by two or three members of the class. When this phase of the project is completed, have each student who was a part of an interview team meet with a small group of other students to brainstorm things the student body can do to assist the shelter. Have the class analyze the various projects suggested and choose one. Develop an operational plan of action to make the project a reality.

- (2) Most communities have some form of food bank that helps to feed the homeless and provide food to the poor. Conduct a drive to collect canned goods and dry goods to be delivered to a shelter. Most students, even those living in dormitories, have canned and dry goods in their rooms for snacks. Off-campus students usually purchase food that they can donate to the collection.

- (3) Investigate whether the university food service contractor can assist with a “fasting day.” Students will donate their evening meal on a specified day. The food service contractor will then make a donation to a homeless shelter for the equivalent of the meals donated by students and not consumed. Logistics need to be worked out on how the meals will be “donated” and counted.

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Multiple Choice Questions

- (1) Where was the research on homeless women conducted?
 - a. *A small city just outside of Washington, D.C.
 - b. A suburb south of Philadelphia
 - c. Inner city Chicago
 - d. A suburb of Los Angeles

- (2) What was the actual name of the shelter where the researcher collected most of his data on homeless women?
 - a. Heaven's Gate
 - b. *The Refuge
 - c. The Harbor Light
 - d. The City Mission

- (3) For more than twenty years, Elliot Liebow worked as a[n] _____ with the National Institute of Mental Health.
 - a. Social worker
 - b. Therapist
 - c. *Anthropologist
 - d. Clinical psychologist

- (4) What method did Liebow use to provide "loans" to the homeless women in need of cash assistance?
 - a. He established a system of low-interest loans with a local bank and served as the co-signer to ensure the loans.
 - b. He used the money from his social security checks.
 - c. He received a grant from the National Institute of Mental Health.
 - d. *He established a "revolving fund" of money that he personally donated, to be loaned and returned.

- (5) What was the first position Liebow held that introduced him to working with the homeless?
 - a. He was the director of the National Institute of Mental Health.
 - b. He was a social worker in Detroit assigned to assist the homeless.
 - c. He was a sociology professor who "recruited" homeless people to speak to his classes.
 - d. *He was a volunteer at a soup kitchen where he served on the lines.

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True/False Questions

- (1) The researcher primarily relied upon surveys as his method to collect data on the homeless.
 - a. True
 - b. *False

- (2) Liebow began his study of the homeless as a part of his doctoral dissertation.
 - a. True
 - b. *False

- (3) Liebow began his work with the homeless after he retired from a position with the National Institute of Mental Health.
 - a. *True
 - b. False

- (4) Liebow believed that mental illness, alcoholism, and drug addiction were inappropriate explanations for the cause of homelessness.
 - a. *True
 - b. False

- (5) Because of the negative ramifications and dependency it could create, Liebow never loaned cash money to the homeless women he studied.
 - a. True
 - b. *False