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May 1996

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NICHES OF HOMELESSNESS IN RURAL NEBRASKA: BOLSTERING EXISTING UNDERSTANDINGS

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Abstract. *Rural homelessness, particularly in the Great Plains region, is under-researched. Most current understandings of homelessness are based on research in metropolitan regions. This paper suggests that the general structural frameworks, which have been developed to model homelessness in metropolitan areas, can serve as a useful starting point for understanding rural homelessness in Nebraska. By using a "key informant" survey of homeless service providers in Nebraska it is clear that there are several niches of homeless persons (Native Americans, migrant workers, meat-packing workers, and transients) present in Nebraska that are not discussed in the existing literature.*

The problem of homelessness continues to plague cities, towns, and rural areas across the United States. In Nebraska what does the problem of rural homelessness look like? Who are the homeless and why are they homeless? Clearly, exploring the causes and consequences of homelessness is a first step toward effectively dealing with this problem.

Several authors have developed typologies and frameworks for examining and explaining homelessness (Frank and Streeter 1987; Fitchen 1992; Wolch et al. 1988; Laws and Lord 1990; Burt 1992). While these typologies and frameworks provide a generic understanding of homelessness, they rarely address the particular factors that contribute to homelessness in particular geographic areas. Geographically contextual understanding is important, since forces leading to homelessness are apt to vary in their influence according to the economic and social factors that arise from the geography of a particular locale or region. The causes and magnitude of the homelessness problem can be expected to differ between as well as within urban and rural settings across the nation. For example, economic and social characteristics of potential relevance to the incidence of homelessness perhaps differ between rural areas that are more or less specialized in different types of agricultural land uses.

This paper focuses on the question: "Who are the rural homeless in Nebraska?" Before this question can be addressed directly, however, it is relevant to first summarize previous research on the likely causes of homelessness and the typical characteristics of homeless persons or families. Most previous research on homelessness was conducted in predominantly metropolitan regions of the United States, so that there may be important niches of homelessness in rural Nebraska that are not adequately described in the literature. Nevertheless, general structural frameworks which have been developed to model homelessness in metropolitan regions can serve as useful background information (e.g., Wolch et al. 1988; Laws and Lord 1990; Burt 1992). Previous findings regarding patterns and problems of homelessness in mainly rural areas elsewhere in the United States also provide information which is important for comparative purposes (e.g., Frank and Streeter 1987; Fitchen 1991, 1992; First et al. 1994).

The main portions of the paper then discuss the research design and major findings from a "key informant" survey of officials associated with public and private institutions which offer assistance and services to homeless persons within the state of Nebraska. The survey interviews were conducted in 1993 and 1995. The results demonstrate that there are specific niches of homelessness which are unique to Nebraska and the Great Plains region, and which do not fit well into the general descriptive and explanatory frameworks which have been previously presented in the literature. Finally, the paper discusses why these niches of rural homelessness are important for social scientific as well as for public policy reasons. The argument is made that more research on homelessness in Nebraska and the Great Plains would better inform policy and program decision-making regarding the causes and consequences of this diverse social problem.

General Framework for Understanding Homelessness

Several general schemata or frameworks for understanding homelessness have been offered in the literature by writers including Wolch et al. (1988), Laws and Lord (1990), and Burt (1992). To a large extent, these schemata have emerged from research conducted in heavily populated metropolitan settings.

Wolch et al.'s (1988) framework for understanding urban homelessness identifies three successively more restricted sets of factors contributing to homelessness. First, broad-scaled economic, social, and political changes in

society can serve as catalysts which tend to increase the incidence of homelessness. Structural economic changes including deindustrialization can lead to economic down-sizing and job loss in particular sectors of the economy (Harrison and Bluestone 1988; Massey and Meegan 1982). Since different regions exhibit different industrial specializations, economic restructuring can impact regions differentially. Structural social changes which can impact homelessness can originate from policy decisions to deinstitutionalize people with problems of mental illness. Deinstitutionalization tends to increase the potential demand for low-cost housing by releasing persons with human service needs into the general population.

Broad-scale social, economic, and political processes can influence the size of the population in need of low-cost housing and those at risk of homelessness. However, these demand-side influences are not necessarily balanced by supply-side factors which influence the cost and availability of affordable housing. The supply of low-cost housing can be influenced by increases or cutbacks in public housing or rent-subsidy programs, public or private gentrification of residential neighborhoods, urban renewal, organized community opposition to constructing low-cost housing in particular communities, or changes in building codes or building practices (Dear 1991).

According to Wolch et al. (1988), the combination of heightened demand for and diminished supply of low-cost housing can increase the size of the "at-risk" population potentially unable to satisfy the need for access to affordable housing. Then, an "adverse event," such as job loss, eviction, domestic violence, or divorce, can push an at-risk individual or family over the line into the undesirable circumstance of actual homelessness.

Laws and Lord's (1990) homeless framework refines the one presented by Wolch et al. (1988) by asserting that homelessness can result from change in three structures: the economy, the state, and space. The restructuring of the economy again refers to deindustrialization. The restructuring of the state deals with changes in the governmental welfare state which lead to reductions in "safety-net" expenditures and cuts in benefits to individuals and families in need (Schwartz 1988; Katz 1989). Finally, changes in space involve alterations to the built environment, including urban renewal, gentrification, and suburbanization, which tend to increase supplies of higher cost housing and to diminish supplies of more affordable housing. In the absence of subsidies, high construction costs usually mean that very little new housing can be added profitably at the low end of the housing price

scale. Thus, additions to the housing stock tend to occur at the upper end of the price scale, while reductions in the housing stock tend to occur at the affordable end of the scale.

Burt's (1992) framework for understanding homelessness takes a somewhat different approach. She looks at measurable factors that can help identify the size of the homeless or near homeless population in a region or community. These measures include income and benefits, poverty, employment status, housing variables, household resources, and cost of living. She suggests that with such information it is possible to estimate the homelessness rate for a particular area. Estimates are usually necessary because there have been few formal efforts to actually enumerate homeless populations.

To summarize from the general frameworks that have been described, it can be expected that the overall incidence of homelessness can be explained at least partially by looking at five features:

- (1) declines in the economic base of an area;
- (2) declines in government spending for human services and housing;
- (3) alterations in physical community structure;
- (4) limited sources of personal income for individuals; and
- (5) limited supplies of affordable housing.

Rural Homelessness

Overall frameworks derived from research in urban settings are useful for broadly characterizing the patterns and problems of homelessness. However, important questions can be raised about the transferability of generalizations from urban to rural settings. In particular, do the same social, economic, and location factors which have been observed to be at work in urban settings work similarly in rural settings to place rural residents with specific characteristics and circumstances "at-risk" of suffering undesirably from homelessness?

There has been some debate about who should be numbered among the rural homeless population. As Patton (1988) points out, it is clearly a matter of basic definition that people without housing are homeless, but it is less clear whether people who are temporarily housed should be deemed to suffer from homelessness. The issue is by no means merely semantic, since the incidence and therefore the potential policy implications of homelessness will differ depending upon how the condition is operationally defined.

In addition, as Fitchen (1991) points out, discussions of rural homelessness sometimes address instable or unsuitable rural housing conditions as much or more than an actual lack of housing. In other words, being housed in severely substandard housing can be little better than not being housed at all. Lollis' statement (National Coalition for the Homeless, 1987b:6) reflects this quandary: "We have a whole lot of people living in conditions as bad as living on a steam grate, but we don't call them homeless."

The Housing Assistance Council (1990:1) attempts a resolution to the problematic definitional issues by proposing that:

homelessness (rural and urban) be conceptualized as a continuum of unsuitable living situations ranging from a complete lack of shelter to severely inadequate housing conditions. A common denominator to many of these situations, compatible with the concept of homelessness, is that the household has no legal residence.

Several typologies derived from studies of rural homeless populations in various parts of the United States can be found in the literature. These typologies appear to have varying degrees of relevance to the Great Plains region. For example, Frank and Streeter (1987) identified five categories of rural homeless people. First, the "traditional homeless" category is composed primarily of transient men who are disaffiliated from society and the labor force. The second category, "the new poor," includes families whose primary wage-earners are employed part-time or who have lost their jobs and face uncertain employment prospects. Third, are the "mentally ill," who often concentrate in rural communities which contain or are situated near state mental hospitals. The fourth category of "displaced farmers and farm-related workers" is composed of persons who become homeless due to farm foreclosures. The final category that Frank and Streeter (1988) identify is "the new hermits," which comprises isolated individuals who have chosen to live alone, usually in mountainous areas.

Fitchen's studies (1991, 1992) of rural homelessness in upstate New York categorized rural people who are homeless or on the brink of homelessness into three different categories. These categories are as follows:

- (1) rural people who were raised in poverty or have been poor for many years and are now raising the next generation in poverty;

- (2) rural people who had previously not been poor but have recently fallen into poverty; and
- (3) poor people who had previously lived in urban settings but who had moved to rural settings because of the high costs and deteriorated quality of life in urban centers.

First et al.'s (1994) study of rural homelessness in Ohio, undertaken for the National Institute of Mental Health, yielded five primary groupings of rural homeless persons. These groupings were as follows:

- (1) young families;
- (2) employed individuals who earn too little to afford housing;
- (3) women unable to work due to child care responsibilities;
- (4) older, and sometimes disabled, men; and
- (5) disabled people without social networks.

These typologies appear to have been intended to both categorize the types and characteristics of persons likely to become homeless in rural areas, and also to highlight some of the factors which contribute to the incidence of homelessness in rural settings. As First et al. (1994:106) point out, an increase in "[r]ural homelessness is a symptom of the growth in rural poverty."

An important set of forces that contributed to rural homelessness in the 1980s involved the "farm crisis." Indeed, as Patton noted near the end of that decade (1988):

Parts of rural America are facing their worst economic crisis since the Great Depression. In the last few years, the rural economy has been dealt a series of economic setbacks. Farm foreclosures have been taking place at a staggering rate: 650,000 foreclosures have occurred since 1981 and another 2,000 farmers give up farming each week.

At about the same time, the National Coalition for the Homeless (1987a:12) asserted that

[H]omelessness—recognized as the absence of a permanent place to live—applies to thousands of rural Iowans crowded into inadequate housing due to the recent economic crisis in rural Iowa.

While the farm crisis was a major factor in accelerating rural homelessness during the 1980s, agricultural conditions have improved since then. Nevertheless, a significant amount of poverty in rural farming areas continues to be deemed a chronic problem rather than merely a temporary problem. However, farm foreclosures are no longer considered the dominant factor pushing people into homelessness (Galvin 1993).

It seems apparent that varied conditions in rural areas in different parts of the United States requires attention to circumstances that are geographically specific. For example, Frank and Streeter's (1987) category of "new hermits" is probably very relevant in the Appalachian region, but is perhaps less appropriate for an investigation of homelessness in the Great Plains. Conversely, migrant farmworkers with unmet housing needs are probably more numerous in the agricultural Great Plains, than in Appalachia where forestry and mining are principal rural activities. As the Housing Assistance Council (1990:3) has noted "[d]ata from two largely rural states (Wyoming and Vermont) indicate that characteristics of the homeless population are not uniform from one area to another and needs may vary dramatically."

Method for Determining Homelessness in Rural Nebraska

Official state documents were consulted in order to form a basic picture of homelessness in rural Nebraska. Documents consulted included the *Comprehensive Homeless Assistance Plan* (Nebraska Department of Social Services 1990), the *Comprehensive Housing Assistance Strategy* (Nebraska Department of Economic Development 1991), the *Brief Inventory of Homeless Facilities and Services* (Nebraska Department of Social Services 1992b), and the *Annual Homeless Activity Report* (Nebraska Department of Social Services 1992a).

It soon became apparent that a more detailed picture of patterns and problems of homelessness in rural Nebraska could not be drawn unless data from published documents could be supplemented with additional information. A telephone survey using a modified "snowball sample" technique (Denzin 1989) was therefore envisioned. As attention was focused on rural homelessness, homeless issues related to the Lincoln and Omaha metropolitan areas were excluded from survey investigation.

Each service provider identified in the *Comprehensive Homeless Assistance Plan* (Nebraska Department of Social Services 1990) or the *Brief Inventory of Homeless Facilities and Services* (Nebraska Department of Social Services 1992b) and located outside of Lincoln or Omaha was con-

tacted for a telephone interview using a structured interview guide. All of the service providers listed agreed to participate in the study, and the telephone interviews were undertaken in 1993 and 1995. Further, the State Departments of Social Services and of Economic Development, and all nine Community Action Agencies which receive funds for homeless assistance also were contacted in 1993. The telephone survey responses identified other public and private homeless service providers, so that the original interviews led to further structured interviews with officials at Union Pacific Railroad, Burlington Northern, the Nebraska Association of Farmworkers, and the Nebraska State Patrol.

In all, informants from 35 separate service providers were interviewed regarding rural homelessness in Nebraska. Many informants were contacted several times between 1993 and 1995. Similar data collection methods have been used in other studies. Indeed, according to Toomey et al. (1993:24), "[m]ost estimates of rural homelessness have been made by interviewing key informants and using service delivery records." Also, the methodology is similar to that used by the State of Nebraska in 1995 to collect information on homelessness (Mabin 1995). For the state's study, a mail-out/mail-back questionnaire was distributed to human service agencies across the state.

The area deemed "rural" for this study includes all locales in Nebraska except Omaha and Lincoln. The U.S. Bureau of Census classes areas with less than 2,500 population as rural, places with 2,500 to 50,000 population as urban, and places with 50,000 people or more as metropolitan. "Rural" thus coincides with the Census nonmetropolitan rural and urban categories for purposes of this research.

The structured interview guide used for this research directed that respondents be asked to provide their perceptions of the numbers and demographic characteristics of the homeless people in each of their areas. It also asked for the service provision respondents' views on why and how homeless people had arrived in their communities. The interview also asked for respondents' descriptions of homeless services available, where most homeless people stay, local policies, estimates of numbers of homeless people, and for suggestions as to who else should be contacted.

The definition of a homeless person adopted for this study followed the federal definition as established in the Stewart B. McKinney Act of 1987 (P.L. 100-77): "an individual who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence." This definition does not specifically include persons who are inadequately or precariously housed (Patton 1988; Fitchen 1991), but it does include persons in temporary shelter.

Niches of Rural Homelessness in Nebraska

The review of published documents and the information collected via the snowball sample interviews with key informants led to the finding that there are niches or groups of rural homeless people in Nebraska who are overlooked or not well described in the literature. In particular, four additional distinctive niches of rural homelessness can be identified in this Great Plains state; these include: Native Americans, migrant farmworkers, meat-packing workers, and transients. Moreover, as an accompanying map of Nebraska illustrates, these niches of homelessness exhibit specific locational and geographical patterns (Fig.1). Each of these niches of rural homelessness in Nebraska is described below.

Native Americans

Many Native Americans endure conditions of extreme poverty, yet their needs are often overlooked in the literature on patterns and problems of homelessness. Only rarely are Native Americans specifically mentioned in relation to issues of homelessness (Housing Assistance Council 1990; Royal 1993).

Several Indian Reservations are located not far from the Missouri River in eastern Nebraska. These include the Santee Reservation near Niobrara, the Winnebago and Omaha Reservations near Wayne, and part of the Iowa, Sac and Fox Reservation near Falls City. However, the Pine Ridge Sioux and Rosebud Sioux Reservations, which are located just to the north in the state of South Dakota seem to account for substantially higher numbers of homeless persons in rural Nebraska.

The Pine Ridge Reservation, which abuts northwestern Nebraska, has become notorious for having one of the highest poverty rates in the entire United States (Kilborn 1992). According to the last decennial census (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1990, 1993), Shannon County, South Dakota, which covers much of the Pine Ridge Reservation, had a 63.1% poverty rate in 1989. This compares to a national poverty rate in 1989 of 13.1% for all races, and of 30.9% for Native Americans.

The high poverty rate prices many people out of the market for conventionally financed housing. Typically, there are more than 2,000 families on the Pine Ridge tribal Housing Authority's waiting list at any given time. While waiting for Authority housing, many families and friends are forced to double-up in substandard units. "We've come across houses where there's

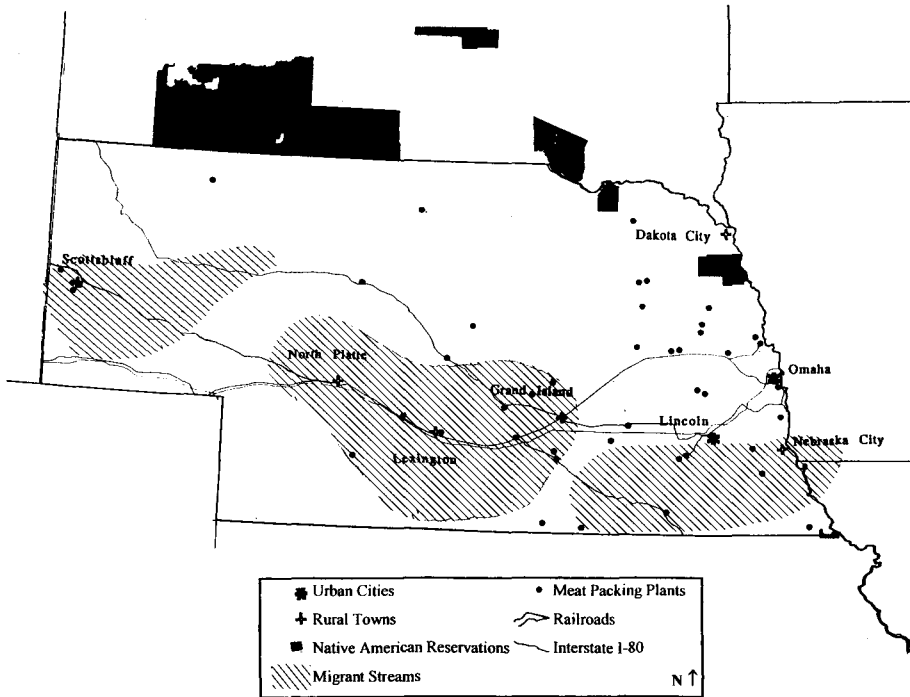


Figure 1. Geographic patterns of niches of rural homelessness in Nebraska.

16 people in three bedrooms,” according to one observer quoted in the *Omaha World-Herald* (Kilborn 1992). The U.S. Census generally classes dwellings with 1.01 or more persons per room as “overcrowded.”

Conditions on the Pine Ridge Reservation can exert deleterious spill-over impacts on nearby rural communities in Nebraska. Native Americans who head south in search of work or a better life may spend time in Chadron. Chadron, Nebraska, with a 1990 population of 5,588 people (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1990), is located approximately 30 miles southeast of the Pine Ridge Reservation, and is the largest town close to the reservation.

Reportedly, there have been deaths of homeless people in Chadron nearly every winter in recent years (Horse 1993). In 1990, the town opened

an 18-bed shelter for homeless people. In emergencies, the shelter can be converted to provide as many as 34 beds. The shelter's clientele in 1992 was 85% Native American, 13% white, and 2% Hispanic (Horse, 1993). The *Annual Homeless Activity Report* (Nebraska Department of Social Services 1992a) chronicles that a total of 208 person-nights were spent in the Chadron Homeless Shelter during the five month period from July to November 1992. Sixty-eight percent of these person-nights (141 person-nights) were by Native Americans.

Rural communities in north-central Nebraska also are impacted by spill-over conditions from the Rosebud Sioux Reservation. Todd County, South Dakota, which encompasses most of the area within the Rosebud Sioux Reservation, had the tenth highest poverty rate in the United States in 1989, with a 50.2% of residents below the poverty threshold (Kilborn 1992). People heading south from the Rosebud Reservation often wind up in Valentine, Nebraska. Valentine is a town of 2,826 people (U.S. Census of Population 1990) located 10 miles south of the reservation. According to a local informant who was interviewed in the course of this research, some homeless people have died of exposure in Valentine during recent winters (Dredge 1993).

In December 1991 the citizens of the town organized to open a Cold Weather Shelter in Valentine (O'Keefe 1993). During the 1991-92 winter, Valentine's Cold Weather Shelter provided 140 person-nights of shelter for homeless people. Almost 60% of those sheltered were Native Americans. During the following 1992-93 winter, the Valentine Shelter provided 290 person-nights of shelter. Over 70% of those sheltered during the 1992-93 winter were Native Americans (O'Keefe 1993).

Although the proportions are less than the two-thirds or greater proportions reported for Chadron and Valentine, other rural Nebraska communities are also places where Native Americans sometimes experience homelessness. The 1992 *Annual Homeless Activity Report* (Nebraska Department of Social Services 1992a) estimated that 207 persons, or 6% of the state's total annual projected homeless population of 3,676 was Native American. In comparison, less than 1% of the state's total population is Native American, although 5% of Chadron's and 4% of Valentine's population are Native American (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1990).

Regarding circumstances sometimes faced by black persons in inner-city metropolitan settings, Wilson (1987:60) pointed to "social isolation" which "makes it more difficult for those who are looking for jobs to be tied into the job network." As Burt (1992) asserted, inner-city residents who are living on the edge have a greater chance of slipping into homelessness. The

evidence from the Pine Ridge and Rosebud Reservations as well as from nearby communities in Nebraska suggests that rural Native Americans not only suffer social isolation, but also suffer additional obstacles of actual geographical isolation as well.

Migrant Agricultural Workers

A second usually overlooked niche of rural homelessness in Nebraska involves migrant agricultural workers who enter the state to tend or harvest crops. Perhaps because migrant agricultural workers are not year-round residents in any one location, the issue of their homelessness is only addressed by a few authors (Patton 1988; Housing Assistance Council 1990). However, migrant workers appear to comprise a sizeable proportion of the total homeless population of Nebraska.

As illustrated in Figure 1, three distinct concentrations of migrant agricultural workers can be found in Nebraska (Reynoso 1993b). The "Eastern Stream," composed of migrant agricultural workers temporarily employed in the south-eastern part of the state roughly between Nebraska City and Geneva, is composed primarily of blacks from the Caribbean who work in apple orchards and field crops. Eastern Stream workers are in the state from the summer until early November. The "Central Stream," or those who work primarily in the central part of the state from about Grand Island to near North Platte, are most frequently Hispanics of Mexican or South American descent. Central Stream workers are usually in Nebraska for a short time, from mid-July to mid-August, for corn detasseling, which is a tiring manual operation needed to yield hybrid seedcorn. Finally, the "western stream" also is comprised primarily of Hispanics of Mexican or South American origin. The Western Stream enters a zone near Scottsbluff to work the sugar beet crop. The work lasts from May to August, but some early Western Stream migrants show up as early as March, to try to ensure work and to find local housing. The problem of finding short term housing is particularly acute in less densely settled central and western Nebraska, especially since about 90% of migrant farmworkers bring their families with them (Reynoso 1993a).

Nebraska's Multicultural Human Development Corporation, previously known as the Nebraska Association of Farmworkers (NAF), was formed to aid the migrant workers. Based in North Platte, the Multicultural Human Development Corporation sees approximately 750 migrant families or almost 5,000 individuals each year needing social services. Needed services



Figure 2. Homeless family living in van and tent in Scottsbluff, Nebraska. The family was in Scottsbluff to work the sugar beet crop. Photograph courtesy of NAF Multicultural Human Development Corporation, North Platte, Nebraska.

include food, housing, money, or other aid. The town of North Platte itself, which also provides services for homeless migrant farmworkers, reported that 201 migrant farmworkers received services during the period from July 1991 to June 1992. Sixty-two percent of those served were of Hispanic origin, according to the *Annual Homeless Activity Report* (Nebraska Department of Social Services 1992a).

A 1989 survey conducted by the NAF among Western Stream migrant farmworkers in the Scottsbluff area found that 20% of the 113 total respondents had been unable to find adequate housing (NAF 1989). A majority of these families wound up living in a public park, and sleeping in a car, truck or tent (Fig. 2).

Migrant farmworkers perform an important role in the state's economy, by providing low-cost labor to Nebraska farmers and agribusiness enterprises. However, neither private farm-owners nor public state and local

governmental institutions have been able to satisfy the housing needs of these workers by offering adequate, low-cost housing to temporarily shelter the migrant farmworkers and their families. Regarding conditions in the Scottsbluff area, the NAF (1989:12) noted that:

Years ago the sugar company's field man would be responsible for finding workers housing and jobs. This is no longer the case. Many of the Scottsbluff area growers no longer provide farmworker housing. Meeting OSHA housing standards often requires costly repairs, and many decided not to incur that expense to house farmworkers for such a short period of time during the year. As a result, migrant workers coming to this area must find their own housing in communities which do not have a surplus supply of decent, affordable housing.

Meat-packing Workers

The meat-packing industry is another sector of the Nebraska rural economy that relies heavily on low-skilled, low-cost laborers. As reviewed above, metropolitan-based investigations of patterns and problems of homelessness often have pointed to industrial restructuring or deindustrialization as potential causal factors (Wolch et al. 1988; Blau 1992). Similar dynamics appear to surround the meat-packing industry. According to Stull, Broadway, and Erickson (1992:39):

Meat-packing is clearly representative of structural changes in the wider U.S. economy. Technical innovations and capital mobility have enabled the new packing companies to locate in rural areas close to feedlots in right-to-work states and away from unionized urban areas.

Sixty-nine meat-packing plants operated in Nebraska near the start of the present decade (Lamphear 1992). Fifty-two, or 75%, of these plants are located in rural communities (Nebraska Department of Economic Development 1993). These plants are often of strikingly large scale in relation to the populations of their host communities. Indeed, there are even instances in which the reported number of workers at a plant actually exceeds the Census enumerated population of the host town (Table 1). Such numbers imply enormous pressures on a host community's public and private infrastructure.

TABLE 1
LARGEST MEAT-PACKING PLANTS IN RURAL NEBRASKA

Plant	Employees	Town	Population
IBP	>2,500	Dakota City	1,470
Monfort	1,000-2,499	Grand Island	39,386
IBP	1,000-2,499	Lexington	8,556
Excel	1,000-2,499	Schuyler	4,052
Farmland Foods	1,000-2,499	Crete	4,841

Sources: Lamphear 1992; Nebraska Department of Economic Development (NDED) 1993; U.S. Census 1990; *Lincoln Journal* 1993.

Moreover, the meat-packing industry tends to exhibit considerable sensitivity to business-cycle and other economic fluctuations. Accordingly, total employment in meat-packing in the state of Nebraska drifted downward from 9,400 jobs in 1972 to 8,900 jobs in 1987 (Lamphear 1992). Then, meat-packing employment appears to have grown dramatically in the state, in part, it seems, as more unionized plants were closed in such nearby states as Minnesota or Iowa. The Nebraska Department of Economic Development unofficially estimated that meat-packing employment was up to 16,000 in 1992 (Lamphear 1992).

Meat-packing is clearly an example of an economically cyclical and geographically footloose industry which can exert enormous local impacts. Often, the community's labor pool falls well short of the needs of a newly opened or newly relocated meat-packing plant. Stull, Broadway, and Erickson (1992:42) describe what an IBP plant in Garden City, Kansas did when faced with this problem:

Lacking an adequate local labor force, IBP recruited far and wide running newspaper advertisements and television commercials in other packing towns and sending recruiters to areas of high unemployment.

Another IBP plant was newly located in Lexington, Nebraska in November 1990. The opening occurred several months after the town's population had been enumerated in April 1990 for the U.S. Census of Population.

A short time later, the town went to the expense of a special population enumeration, in the hope that it might become eligible for greater funding from the state and federal governments (*Lincoln Journal* 1993). The special U.S. Census enumeration results demonstrated that Lexington's population had ballooned 30% in just three years—from 6,601 in 1990 to 8,556 in 1993 (*Lincoln Journal* 1993). The IBP plant doubtless was responsible for this dramatic as well as stressful growth.

Among the problems with this sort of growth is that small towns have a limited supply of affordable housing. Newly arriving workers often have to wait for a job opening and then for their first paycheck. In the meantime they can be temporarily homeless. According to a Multicultural Development Corporation spokesperson (Reynoso 1993a):

People come into the state expecting to get a job in meat-packing and find themselves homeless. There is a high turnover in meat-packing, but often times you have to get on a waiting list.

In Andreas' (1994:20) book on the meatpacking town of Greeley, Colorado, a Monfort employee is quoted as commenting as follows on homelessness among meatpacking employees:

They're caught out in the cold without a home or hope. I know ten people who sleep in an abandoned mobile home on the North Side or in an unused warehouse only a few blocks from affluent businesses downtown.

Regarding the Nebraska town that became host to the new IBP plant, Andreas (1994:22) remarked, "There's not enough housing in Lexington and they're living out of their cars."

The only homeless shelter in Lexington, the Haven House, reported 844 visitors in 1992 (Romero 1993). Of these, 660 were men, 83 were women, and 101 were children; a majority were from Mexico and Central America. Many immigrant meatpacking workers are poor in their own country. For example, in describing one worker, Orenstein (1995:1a) wrote that "Her family was homeless in Mexico until her husband began working illegally in the United States seven years ago." Ninety percent of Haven House's temporary residents came to Lexington looking for a job with IBP (Romero 1993). Haven House attempts to help their clients by translating and helping with forms and "taking them to the IBP plant and putting a word

in for them” (Romero 1993). But Haven House employees report that there is not enough low-income housing available in Lexington; until this situation is improved in-migrants hoping to gain employment at the IBP plant are likely to continue to experience homelessness.

Transients

Another sometimes overlooked niche among Nebraska’s rural homeless are “transients” who arrive by various means of transport, including rail. Recent urban-based literature has attested that railriding “hobos” comprise a much diminished and very small proportion of homeless persons in most metropolitan regions. But railriding transients continue to be observable in rural Nebraska, however.

The railroad riders who experience homelessness in Nebraska usually are in-transit. The majority of freight trains that go through Nebraska are either going to or from Kansas City, the coal fields of Wyoming, or Chicago (Trandahl 1993). North Platte, Nebraska (population 23,100) has the largest railyard in the country, known as Bailey Yard (Trandahl 1993). Between August 1991 and July 1992, 446 people were removed from trains at Bailey Yard (Shrewsbury 1992). Because there is no shelter in North Platte, homeless people are not encouraged to stay in town long. The homeless are serviced by North Platte’s Salvation Army. Those seeking assistance are required to fill out a “non-resident card” with their name and Social Security number. This information is checked through the police department’s National Crime Information Center system to see if the person is wanted for a crime. If everything checks out, the homeless person or family can get some food, clothing, and a voucher for shelter, as well as a voucher for gasoline if they have arrived by personal transport (Shrewsbury 1992).

The Salvation Army in North Platte served 633 homeless people between May and mid-August 1992. While some of these people came from the railyard, others were highway transients. Highway transients are the second main type of transients in Nebraska.

Interstate-80, which crosses Nebraska from Omaha on the east into Wyoming on the west, is a major transcontinental route. Of the three interstate highways that traverse the Great Plains region—I-70 through Kansas; I-80 through Nebraska; and I-90 through South Dakota—I-80 has the highest average daily traffic counts. Daily traffic counts from I-80 west of Lincoln, which exclude commuter traffic between Nebraska’s two largest

cities, indicate an average of 16,800 vehicles; comparable figures are 9,160 for I-70 and 4,250 for I-90 (Nebraska Department of Roads 1992).

There is no official count of the number of rural homeless people in Nebraska who were passing through on the interstate, but the Nebraska State Patrol often encounters these people. According to a Patrol spokesperson (Hagemeyer 1993):

If they are stranded we can give them a Salvation Army voucher for gas money. Our patrol officers carry vouchers in their cars. They will search first, to make sure that they do not have any money. . . . If they have children with them, and they are stranded, we can put them up in a hotel, and pay for one meal.

Most of the urban-based literature has failed to note a geographical correlation between proximity to an interstate highway or railyard and the prevalence of homelessness, but this association is quite conspicuous in rural Nebraska. Similarly, rural communities in Wyoming further west along I-80 also see large numbers of homeless transient individuals and families (Royal 1993).

Conclusions

What does all this tell us about rural homelessness in the Great Plains? From the analysis of documents and key informant data collected for this research, Native Americans, migrant farmworkers, meat-packing workers, and transients emerged as notable niches of rural homelessness in Nebraska. These niches have been overlooked in the research literature and neglected in policy-making discussions. While persons in each of these categories can be found in other areas, salient features of the Great Plains make homeless persons in these groups especially conspicuous within the Great Plains region. Agriculture and meat-processing industries with heavy but temporally and spatially fluctuating demands for low-skilled workers, major transcontinental railroads and highways, and the presence of Native American reservations are features of the state of Nebraska which seem very conducive to heightened risks of homelessness.

Referring back to the three general frameworks for understanding homelessness which were reviewed earlier (Wolch et al. 1988; Laws and Lord 1990; Burt 1992), it is clear that although these models help provide a macro-level understanding of who may be at risk of experiencing

homelessness, they fail to sharply differentiate specific populations relevant to the Great Plains. As previously noted, these predominantly urban-based frameworks explain homelessness by looking at several structural features:

- (1) declines in the local economic base;
- (2) diminished governmental support for human services, including reduced provision of residential mental health facilities;
- (3) alterations in physical community structure;
- (4) limited sources of income for individuals; and
- (5) limited or diminished supplies of affordable low-cost housing in areas of need.

In Nebraska, additional propositions are needed to identify forces which actually lead to rural homelessness.

Moreover, the existing typologies offer only a partial view of “who” is likely to be homeless in rural Nebraska. Previous studies which have pointed to potential links between agricultural land use and higher risks of homelessness are certainly relevant. However, because rural homelessness is spread out over vast regions other indicators of potential problems leading to homelessness in the Great Plains also must be identified. From the findings reported in this paper, four additional factors that help to create a more complete picture of rural homelessness in Nebraska include:

- (1) rural boom towns with limited affordable housing;
- (2) major transportation routes which channel transient populations;
- (3) persistent poverty pockets on reservations for Native Americans; and
- (4) areas that attract and use low-skilled, low-wage migrant or immigrant labor.

In Nebraska, greater attention to communities exhibiting these features clearly could lead to better targeting of services aimed at assisting potential rural homeless populations. This could translate into more effective policy-making and better channeling of assistance funds.

While most rural homeless people are white, several of the niches of rural homelessness that are most conspicuous in Nebraska include large numbers of minority homeless people. Services geared to meet the needs of minorities in rural communities need to be strengthened.

A question can be raised as to why these niches have been neglected in the literature as well as by state governments. The fact that many of the people in these niches are either transients or minorities, or both, points to one reason why they may be ignored. State governments in the Great Plains need to be more attentive to the fact that agriculture and meat processing plants employ large pools of immigrant labor. State governments which have failed to require provision of adequate housing for migrant farm-workers also often offer tax or expenditure incentives for large scale meat-packing plants to locate in small rural communities. Thus, state governments have contributed to several of the conditions which have been observed to lead to rural homelessness. Policy efforts which address these incongruities ought to be developed.

In the future, research that incorporates service provider interviews, service records, homeless counts, and homeless person interviews should be conducted to provide even more specifics about patterns and problems of rural homelessness in the Great Plains. Additional unnoticed niches of rural homelessness perhaps can be identified in other subregions of the Great Plains. If so, this information would help states, localities, and private charitable service providers better serve the needs of all segments of the rural homeless. It also would help to move the research agenda on rural homelessness even further beyond the general understandings provided by the existing mainly urban-based frameworks and typologies.

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