

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

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Homelessness is a complex and emotionally provoking contemporary problem. To date organizational responses to this phenomenon have often been conflicting, contradictory, and ineffective. Current statistics and predictions substantiate that the homeless problem will increase in the next decade, with estimates on the number of homeless varying from six hundred thousand to three million. This increasing proportion of homeless citizens in the U.S. population poses many challenges for both health-care professions and the entire society. Health-care providers are becoming more and more concerned about the health needs of this vulnerable population for whom homelessness itself prevents access to health services and health maintenance. The number of homeless women with children is a particular concern, as they are now the fastest growing subgroup within the homeless population.

The lack of a permanent address and health insurance are two obvious barriers to health-care services for the homeless; other health-related problems such as substance abuse, alcoholism, and emotional disorders may further complicate the process of providing a coordinated plan of care. The environment in overcrowded shelters promotes the rapid spread of communicable diseases, upper respiratory infections, infestations of head lice, scabies, hepatitis, and tuberculosis. Of great concern are the homeless children who have often been subjected to physical, sexual, or emotional abuse and/or neglect, and who are more susceptible to disease because of malnutrition and lack of immunizations. Homeless women are also a vulnerable group, and one-third of them report they have been raped or are victims of domestic violence. Many of the homeless are caught in a cycle where health problems become a precipitating cause of their homelessness, and, in turn, the homeless condition causes a further decline in their health.

Before 1990 health-care professionals concerned with the homeless had to focus much of their effort on gathering a base of demographic data needed to plan relevant and cost-effective health services for this group. Health care for the homeless has become a special concern for many nurses, and several models for providing nursing care to the homeless are being implemented throughout the country.

Specifically, in 1989, the Special Project Grants Program in the Nursing Education Practices Resources Branch, Division of Nursing, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service, Health Resources and Services Administration, Bureau of Health Professions Administration had funded five special project grants to schools of nursing to demonstrate models that increase access to health care for this disadvantaged population. The Nursing Center for the Homeless, sponsored by the State University of New York at Buffalo School of Nursing, is one of those funded projects and it sponsored a national conference, entitled "Homelessness: An Issue for the Nineties," on May 3-4, 1990, in Buffalo, New York. The conference was co-sponsored by four of the other university programs funded by the Special Grants Program in the Nursing Education Practice Resources Branch, Division of Nursing, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Health Resources, Public Health Service and Services Administration, Bureau of Health Professions Administration. They include Pace University Lienhard School of Nursing, Pleasantville, New York; University of California at Los Angeles School of Nursing; Medical University of South Carolina School of Nursing, Charleston, South Carolina; and University of Kentucky College of Nursing, Lexington, Kentucky.

The purpose of the conference was to provide a forum for those health-care professionals actively involved in the administration and implementation of homeless projects. Papers were presented that addressed main topical areas. Through this publication, that information will now be shared with the growing number of nurses and other health-care professionals committed to active involvement in establishing and maintaining homeless health-care services. This book will be a resource for health professionals and others who seek information and reports of firsthand experiences about the current status of the homeless, their health-care needs, and various programs.

The keynote addresses and papers presented at the conference are included in this manuscript. Dr. Porter-O'Grady gives an excellent overview of the scope of the problem. Dr. Bob Prentice discusses the issues related to solutions of the problem and the critical importance of housing regulations and policies in effecting viable, preventive strategies. The current demographic profile and health needs of the homeless and the nurses' role in providing health care to this group are described. The other papers provide a rich source of firsthand information about the impact of homelessness on individuals, families, communities and the nation.

Topical areas include: demographics and characteristics of various homeless populations; issues related to homeless children; cost effectiveness of nurse managed clinics; considerations in the design, implementation and evaluation of a homeless nursing project; mental health and homelessness; selected contributions of various nursing roles in care of the homeless; and innovative approaches for nursing service, practice, and education.

Creative student learning activities are another focus of the presentations, and

reports of ongoing research will inform the reader about significant questions being addressed by nurses. Several nursing models also include collaborative practice designs. Nurses have assumed a leadership role in identifying and meeting the health and related needs of the diverse homeless population. This book demonstrates that nursing is on the cutting edge of meeting the challenges of the contemporary homeless issue.