

## IT'S A GRAY AREA: 'The meaning is in the shadows'

By **JAMES P. GRAY**

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**T**he receptionist where I work recently loaned me a book about homelessness titled "The Meaning is in the Shadows," by Peter McVerry, who is a Jesuit priest in Ireland.

Although as a judge I have dealt for a long time with issues of homeless people, I never before saw them in as realistic a light as presented in this book. But now I see that McVerry is right, society mostly sweeps the entire homelessness issue out of our view, which leaves it hidden in the shadows.

Revealingly, McVerry argues that the hardest part of homelessness is actually not sleeping without a bed, or being cold at night, or even being completely bored with nothing to do and nowhere to go. Instead, the hardest part is having the fact pushed upon them continually that if they were to die right now, no one would care — or even really notice. And that fundamental fact defines their lives, and takes away their dignity and their hope.

This situation often leads people to try to escape the pain of their everyday lives by using illicit drugs. Doing that enables them to feel miserable only some of the time, instead of all of the time. But unfortunately it often also leads them to getting hooked on the drugs, which brings on many added problems.

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In addition, 25% of the people nationwide who are homeless are generally diagnosed with severe mental health problems, and probably another 25% have similar problems that are undiagnosed. Of course, the largest mental health facility in Orange County, and almost all other counties, is the county jail. But this is the most expensive way to deal with mental illness, and it does untold damage to these mentally fragile people.

Obviously, it is hard to obtain consistent statistics on the subject of homelessness. But a study was conducted showing that on Jan. 25, 2007, there were 3,649 people in homeless shelters in Orange County, and that the average homeless person enters into a shelter about seven times per year.

Of those studied, 56% were female and 44% male, and about 370 were diagnosed as being severely mentally ill, 150 had the AIDS virus, 675 were veterans, 330 were chronic substance abusers, and 250 were chronically homeless.

Of course, those numbers have probably increased with these recent problems in our economy, and this also does not include those people who had no shelter at all.

Our county's Housing and Community Services Department reports that the homeless are often wrongly portrayed just as panhandlers asking for money. On the contrary, the homeless population here mostly consists of working families and individuals. Nevertheless, many live in cars, parks, motels, under bridges, and in homeless shelters, trying to maintain their dignity while they struggle to survive. And, just like in Ireland, they mostly remain hidden.

But the most notable problem we are facing today which we have not seen before in our history is the number of children who are homeless. In the time period of 2007 to 2008, our county Department of Education identified a total of 16,422 children and youth (pre-K to 12th grade) who were homeless. Their definition of homelessness was different from Housing and Community Services because it included 15,175 who were in doubled or tripled-up housing due to economic hardship.

But it also included 388 children living in homeless shelters, 60 living in cars, parks or campgrounds, and 787 in motels. Not surprisingly, the school districts in Santa Ana and Anaheim had the most homeless children, with 6,731 and 3,259, respectively, but the Newport-Mesa district had 115.

So what should be done about this situation? As a Libertarian, the first thing I want to make clear is that we should not be required to do anything.

But we will respond to the needs of these people voluntarily because we want to, not because we have to. Why? Because that is the type of people we are. So we should provide them with a safety net below which they should not be allowed to fall.

But having said that, the answer is also not to reward panhandling. I confess that I am not always able to stop myself, particularly for down-and-out women (I know this is sexist), but I try. Basically, it does not serve anyone's best interest to support begging on the streets. Instead, I tell these people that I make donations to the Orange County Rescue Mission, and this great organization can provide them with food boxes and groceries, as well as more long-term care and assistance. So they should go there (They are located at One Hope Drive, Tustin, CA 92782). Nevertheless, when I make that comment, I try to greet the people pleasantly, look them in the eye, and treat them like the human beings they are. And I recommend you do the same. We cannot expect to breed or maintain respect for our society from the homeless unless society also shows respect for them.

Traditionally when the American people are confronted by a problem there is an outpouring of support. But today, American charitable giving is under attack because the federal government is reducing the tax deductions for those gifts, and at the same time is increasing its own funding in these same charitable areas. That means that we are sending our tax dollars to Washington, where they are then "magnanimously" distributed by politicians. No one gains by this system except the politicians, and this practice should be curtailed.

Homelessness is not an issue that should stay in the shadows. Yes, Orange County has 68 emergency and transitional shelters that currently offer 3,400 beds, as well as another 1,875 supportive housing beds in other facilities, so some of the temporary needs of these people are being met. But whether for humane, religious, or even practical reasons, we should keep ourselves aware of the homelessness issue by keeping it out in the open. And as caring Americans we should be sure that the fundamental needs of homeless people are met, especially in these difficult economic times.

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