

Anna Mitchell

Homelessness: Who's Perspective?

The scene is played out in thousands of cities everyday, the world over. A disheveled looking man or woman, most likely a bit dirty, is rifling through a refuse container looking for his or her next meal, not seeming to notice the stares of those around him. Perhaps there is a disabled veteran living under a bridge or a mother and her children seeking shelter under a tree. Narrow this problem down to your state, your city or even your neighborhood. This is a reality for the people of Hawaii, one that is making itself better known. Although a fraction of the population in Hawaii is homeless, it is a noticeable few; anyone walking by Ala Moana Park or driving the Waianae coast can't help but notice. As a community it should be questioned: what is causing the "homeless situation", what can be done to reverse it and what are the communities' thoughts – including those of the homeless themselves?

My basic methodology was to conduct informal interviews with informants who were chosen at random. I chose to frequent areas that had a wide variety of people from all ages and walks of life, such as grocery stores and gas stations. I also, for the purpose of my research, chose to interview people who were in direct contact with homeless people as well as several homeless people. I interviewed people in and around Ala Moana Park and in the "Chinatown" area of Honolulu; in both of these areas the homeless are very visible. However, since people in these areas have almost daily visual contact, at the least, they might lend a different point-of-view. There were several circumstances during my research time that had an impact on public awareness of homeless people at large. These situations have helped to start a more open dialogue in public forums about the issue in general and what should or could be done to help reduce the burgeoning numbers of homeless people. In late March, Ala Moana Park was closed for cleaning and repair, forcing at least two hundred people from what is, essentially, their home. I believe this may have made it slightly easier to get responses from people, as this became a hot issue in the television and print media.

I was particularly interested in collecting data that reflected what everyday people thought about the homeless, their situation, how they got there and what the community or government should do, if anything, to help the nearly six thousand homeless people in Hawaii. My line of questioning was constructed to find out what they people did for a living, their rough age, where they lived and the questions mentioned above. When I interviewed homeless people,

of course, my questions had to be mended to work for their situation. I asked homeless people if they had a job, and if so where, how long they had been homeless, how long they thought they would stay homeless or if they even wanted to move into any type of permanent housing and also what they thought the government or community groups should do to help people who need or want assistance. From five different interview stations, Ala Moana Park, Chinatown, Safeway in Kailua, several spots in Chinatown and a gas station just outside of the main tourist strip in Waikiki, I interviewed thirty people. At Ala Moana Park and in Chinatown, I was able to interview eight homeless people. The ages of all my informants ranged from eighteen to seventy nine, with about four people from every age group in between. I tried to be as objective as possible when picking people to interview; I also tried to collect samples from as many apparent ethnicities as I could, although this was not a major factor in how I chose informants. Of course, some people that I tried to interview did not want to participate or just didn't have time.

People's answers to my questions were as varied as the people themselves. However, it provided an interesting glance at a small cross section of the population and got to the heart of an important issue here and around the world. The first place I began interviewing was at a Safeway grocery store in Kailua. This store is frequented by many people in and around the Aikahi area of Kailua, members of the military from Kaneohe Marine Corp Base and people who live in Kailua Town. This sampling of people was very helpful to the research, as these people, on average, had the least amount of direct contact with homeless people. Accordingly, their responses to my questions were very different from responses generated in areas with a higher presence of homeless people. Three out of five informants were between the ages of 30 and 50, held jobs in Honolulu and resided in homes in Kailua, two of which the people had just finished paying the homes off. These three tended to have the most liberal view of what should be done for the homeless people. They were largely in favor of allotting more money, possibly from excess property tax funds, to be spread among the shelter systems or to help provide more affordable, government subsidized housing. However, this sentiment was not one that was reserved to people in Kailua; I found that many people who had contact with the homeless felt that more should be done for people who want a home and would be willing to work for it and maintain it, as any other "housed" person would do. What was noticeable once the questioning progressed was that there was a marked split between people who felt empathy for the homeless and people who had different views about homeless people, namely that they are lazy and not deserving of the basic necessities in life, like food and shelter.

While almost all of the people I questioned felt at least a small amount of empathy for the homeless people, there were also undercurrents of other emotions that surfaced during my short, informal interview sessions. A little less than half (thirteen) of the people that I interviewed, with nine of them being interviewed in areas with a noticeable homeless population, there was the predominant feeling that “these people” should just “get a job and pay taxes like the rest of us.” When presented with the possibility that some of the homeless might be employed and trying to make a life for themselves, most of those people were not able or willing to accept that as a possibility or even a reality. It seemed easier for people who had contact with homeless people to dehumanize them and view them as some sort of animal or nonexistent entity. Getting people back on their feet through job-training or even basic life skills classes was one solution that was suggested by a majority (80%) of respondents. This would require large efforts by community groups like shelters and churches or more funding from federal and state assistance programs, something that almost half (18) of the respondents felt would be “too little, too late.”

When a problem gets a human face or humanistic attributes attached to it, it seems to make it more difficult to discount or ignore. However, since this is an issue dealing with our fellow man, it has been picked up as a political platform. Many politicians, as well as many of my informants, think that there is more that the government could or should do to provide housing or more shelter space for homeless citizens of Hawaii. Although there is a lot of space available in various shelters throughout the island, there is nowhere near enough affordable housing for anyone, especially people with a less than stable lifestyle. All of the thirty people I interviewed had homes or apartments that they were either in the process of paying off or renting on a contractual basis. This common thread did seem to give people a better understanding of the relevance of affordable housing. With many people paying off mortgages on homes with assessed values much higher than their “actual” value or people paying exorbitant amounts each month to rent homes, single rooms or one – three bedroom apartments (the cheapest amount I encountered with interviewees was one thousand/month for an efficiency apartment) most people were understanding of the fact that it is difficult to find affordable housing. In some instances, about a quarter of the people thought that high housing costs were no excuse for “squatting on public land” and “abusing the availability of parks and street corners.” Again, this sentiment was more prevalent when I interviewed in areas with a noticeable homeless presence.

While in areas that had homeless people around, I thought that interviewing them would provide a different view of the situation altogether. I was able to interview eight people who are

currently homeless, some by choice and some because that is the only option left for them. I interviewed four people in Chinatown and four people in Ala Moana Park with an even split of four males and four females, ranging in age from eighteen to fifty-four. Two of the females that were interviewed had children with them that lived in the park, sleeping under a makeshift tarpaulin tent. Sadly, those two women were homeless because they chose to leave abusive relationships and had no other housing options after a while. A common pattern within the homeless population seems to be a gradual loss of “unnecessary” amenities like cell phones and cable and then a more rapid decline in the loss of the necessary elements in life, such as a home phone, utilities, transportation and culminating in the loss of the person’s house or apartment and possibly their job as well. In three of the cases, the people were still holding down at least a part-time job, with one person working a forty-plus work week every week for money for clothing and food. Unfortunately, because these people do not have access to a phone or a car, they are unable to look for a room, apartment or house. A prevailing though within the homeless community is that they regard themselves “as people, too” and wish and hope that people would treat them as such. Many resent the label that they are lazy and “just don’t want too have a job like everyone else.” Unfortunately, for many, the stresses and trials in life are too great, due to many causes like mental illness or a lack of the proper life skills. In the case of the two women with children, prior to leaving their homes, they were employed and were helping bring income into the household. However, in the face of abuse and with their children in danger, they chose to move out of their home. After a while the hospitality of friends and family ran out and they were forced to live in Ala Moana Park and shelters. Both women kept their children, ages seven to twelve, in school and in what appeared to be healthy shape. I did not speak with the children themselves but, the women especially, gave me a lot of insight into being homeless. There appears to be a “kokua network” in place within the homeless community. Although a large number of homeless people are addicted to drugs or alcohol, they all still try to care for each other. People are ready and willing to give up food if there are hungry children or elders who need it more. Clothes are repaired or heavily altered and traded throughout the community as needed, especially with children’s clothes; of the roughly 6,000 homeless people in Hawaii, approximately 1,800 of those are children. The homeless that choose to spend their days in Chinatown also had a similar network. They seemed to share info on where there was free or cheap food or clothes available or they would travel en masse to shelters to shower or just “hang out.” They also spread the word of police roundups or any kind of interference by any authority

figures. The homeless I interviewed seemed keenly aware of the day-to-day goings on within their own community and in the areas they lived or frequented. They knew which shop owners were tolerant of their presence and likewise, which ones would call the police or use other threatening measures to rid them of the “homeless problem.”

The prevailing theme within the homeless community is that there should be more affordable housing available for people who are trying to get back on their feet. Although all eight of the people I interviewed thought that the shelters were helpful, they looked at them as only a temporary solution. Granted, three of the people interviewed enjoyed and even wanted to continue living in the park, but that does not seem to be the sentiment shared by the majority. One problem with living in a shelter, and indeed living on the street or in a park as well, is there is no permanence to it. The people I talked to did not have any means of establishing a place to receive mail, like SSI benefits or welfare, or even general mail that we all take for granted. The word “struggle” was one that peppered each conversation I had with a homeless person. Although all of them love Hawaii and feel blessed to live in such a beautiful place, for many the allure of a night spent under the stars on the beach or in a park begins to lose its charm after a few months, especially during the rainy season. The women and families with children seemed especially aware of their situation and wanted to find a remedy to their problem and others problem with finding housing as quickly and efficiently as possible.

Overall, there were an impressive amount of opinions expressed, from the military man who thought that, “all the homeless should be shipped off the island to fight in the war,” to the middle-aged business man who jogged every day in Ala Moana Park and said that he “gave money to every person he passed who looked like they needed a meal.” From one end of the island to another you can find the spirit of “Aloha” and also the sentiment that since there are millions of hard working folks who have somehow managed to keep their homes that everyone could, and should, be capable of doing the same thing. Although, for the most part, more than half of people interviewed were willing to spend more tax dollars on relief efforts for the homeless, there is still a growing sentiment that “these people” should do a little more for themselves. As usual, you also find the people who are stuck in the middle, who want to do more to help people but who can’t really afford to take anything out of their own pocket to do it. I found that homelessness is an issue that seems to be important to mainstream society, although it is not one that most people feel as though they can really do much about, as there is a feeling that perhaps it is something that would be better left to “the authorities.” Homelessness is a

serious issue that, fortunately, has been brought to the forefront by such actions as the closing of Ala Moana Park by the mayor of Honolulu. Events such as these will only continue to call attention to and hopefully, put a face to the “epidemic” known as homelessness.