

# 100 years after 1,000 homeless men

*The journals of a Chicago social worker from the early 1900s provides a haunting reminder of how quickly a life can take a turn for the worse*

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In 1911 William Taft was president of the United States and Carter Harrison Jr. was the first Chicago-born mayor of Chicago. The infamous Stockyards were in full swing and factory work abounded, but many Chicagoans slipped through the cracks of opportunity and became homeless. It was up to religious organizations and the Chicago Bureau of Charities to administer humanitarian aid.

At that time it was common to consider the homeless population "tramps" and "bums," or other easy-to-file away stereotypes.

One individual, Alice Solenberger, took a different approach. Mrs. Solenberger was in charge of the Central District of the Chicago Bureau of Charities, located in the South Loop. She interviewed men who were referred to her office to determine their individual need, and starting in the year 1900 she decided it would be useful to start collecting her case data on homeless men, as accurate demographic information was at best scarce and commonly non-existent.

Over the following 10 years she compiled 1000 interviews in all, but unfortunately died in December, 1910 before she could complete the forward section of her work. Regardless, in 1911 "One Thousand Homeless Men: A Study of Original Records," was published and soon became essential reading for those in the emerging field of social work.

The study is at once filled with both comprehensive statistics used to determine homeless trends and individual narratives that allow homeless men to become more than statistics-but human beings. Both aspects were at the time revelatory, especially by allowing homeless men to rise above stereotypes. As Francis H McLean mentions in the forward, "It portrays clearly where society has failed, where the individual has failed.

Previous to this work it was common to categorize homeless men into two categories: those who will work, and those who won't. Mrs. Solenberger created new categories that included: The crippled and maimed; those injured by industrial accidents; the insane; the feeble-minded; the epileptic; the elderly; the seasonal and casual laborer; chronic beggars; confirmed

wanderers; and finally homeless, vagrant and runaway boys. While many of these categories may sound horribly antiquated, the creation of these categories for her study was nonetheless a hugely progressive step in 1900.

The following is a selection excerpts from Solenberger's work, "One Thousand Homeless Men."

Solenberger defines a homeless man as "any man who has left one family group and not yet identified himself with another. It might include hundreds of men living in clubs, hotels, and boarding houses, and its use would not necessarily imply a forlorn or penniless condition. But for the purpose of this study the term will be used to designate those men of the homeless class who live in cheap lodging houses in the congested part of the city." Chicago was especially noteworthy for its lodging houses.

Solenberger continues, "All large cities and some small ones in these days have cheap lodging houses in which men many secure a night's lodging at a cost of from 10 to 25 cents. With the exception for Greater New York, the city of Chicago has a greater number of such houses and a larger floating transient population than any other city in the United States."

Largely due to serving as a central rail hub for the nation, "Among tramps and vagrants also, Chicago is a favorite rallying place." She also noted that "As in most other large cities, politicians are likely at election times to add to the comfort and security of a floating population whose votes may usually be counted upon in return for small favors."

Of this homeless population, Solenberger created the subcategories of "self-supporting, temporarily dependent, chronically dependent, and parasitic."

Regarding the physical condition of the homeless men, Solenberger counted 195 men who "were addicted to excessive use of drink and known to be drug users." 81 men were found to be "mentally unfit for work." 220 men were confirmed tramps or wanderers. 117 men were homeless, vagrant, or runaway boys. 254 men were

either temporarily or permanently crippled or maimed due to everything from birth defects to runaway horses, to jumping from windows during hotel fires.

She gives an example of the effects of one man's accident. "A man on his way to newly-found and much-needed work one day gave an expressman a lift in handling a heavy trunk. By some awkwardness it slipped and crushed his right thumb. A trifling accident, perhaps, but the sore thumb, although given the best of surgical care from the beginning, not merely lost the man the permanent job to which he was going when the accident occurred, but kept him from any other work for several weeks. In another very similar case, an injured thumb was not given proper care and the man ultimately lost his left arm." She chronicles several other heartbreaking cases where men suffered horrible accidents and were reduced from bright, capable working men into the chronically dependent.

Solenberger was troubled by the conditions that the chronically dependent endured. She believed that a man's self-respect was very much tied to his economic dependence, and that long-term housing at a lodging house was "morally poisonous."

In modern homeless efforts, the "housing first" model has become the most popular-theoretically, if a person has stable housing, they have a better chance for success in other areas of their life.

Solenberger's work supports this notion. "When men are homeless and are massed in great numbers in city lodging houses where there are practically no restraining and refining influences; where, in sharing a common living room they must of necessity associate with men who have long since become chronic tramps, confirmed beggars, or clever impostors...it is not surprising that many deteriorate rapidly and that such self-respect and decency as they may in the

