

# States of the Union

## 'IS THE NEXT STEP PENN STATION?'

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS



ONE RAINY morning Dorothy Lykes, not knowing where else to turn, telephoned the Gray Panther office in New York City. Roger Sanjek tells the story in his report on "Federal Housing Programs and Their Impact on Homelessness" (1982):

"Mrs. Lykes was 78, terminally ill with cancer and weighed 70 pounds. Her husband was in the hospital, also terminally ill. Most of their Social Security was going for his hospital bills. The city had taken possession of their Bronx home, which they bought in the 1950s, because they could not pay the

property taxes. Nor could they pay the \$300 a month rent the city was asking from them for living in their own home. Mrs. Lykes asked: 'Is the next step for me to move to Penn Station?'"

It was not so idle a fear. Increasingly now, our older citizens are being forced to move out of their single rooms, their rented apartments, even their own homes—places and neighborhoods they have lived in for generations. And in more cases than is generally recognized these refugees have no place to go. To the pain of relinquishment is thus added the nightmare of homelessness.

Nor was Mrs. Lykes' reference to Penn Station at all far-fetched, as the notebooks of Ellen Baxter and Kim Hopper make clear (*Private Lives, Public Spaces*, 1981):

"Penn Station: ... an elderly black woman carrying three bags was sobbing and wincing each time she took a step on her extremely swollen leg.... For the past nine years she had worked for a couple as a live-in domestic on the East Side. The lady of the house recently became ill and was placed in a nursing home.... They no longer can afford to pay her because of hospital costs."

People on Social Security or Supplemental Security Income (SSI) can find themselves left out in the cold, too—eloquent testimony to the weakness of our old-age pension system. Here are Baxter and Hopper again:

"Subway entrance: An impeccably dressed, small-framed woman in her late 60s stood quietly in the entrance-way at 2 A.M.... She had 'no place to go nights.' She said that ... with rents so high she couldn't afford both a place to stay and food to eat. She picks up a Social Security check at the bank every month but it is barely enough to get by on."

The exact total of homeless Americans remains in dispute. A 1984 Housing and Urban Development (HUD) study placed it at 350,000, but few believed so low a figure. "I think we should just dismiss the HUD report and go on," snapped Congresswoman Rose Oakar (D-Ohio), "because it is so absurd, why even relate to it?" The Community for Creative Non-Violence (CCNV), a Washington-based organization that has spearheaded the drive for more shelters nationwide, claims the total is closer to 3 million, and growing every year.

Whatever their number, a surprising proportion belongs to the ranks of the aged. The New York Coalition for the Homeless reports that in the Northeast states it has studied, elderly people make up about 30 per cent of the unhoused. Mary Ellen Hombs and Mitch Snyder note in their CCNV analysis that those who "populate our city streets" are mainly "the old, the sick, the mentally ill, the unemployed, the disabled, the

displaced and the disenfranchised....” Sometimes a single individual will embody all seven characteristics.

Like the rest of our society, street people have developed a hierarchy of sorts, and the elderly are always on the bottom. They are easy prey to predators and pestilences. To cite a single instance, doctors at the Los Angeles County Medical Center see as many as 125 hypothermia cases each year, and most of the afflicted are aged and homeless. “Hypothermia” means reduced core-body temperature, which is caused by undue exposure to the cold. It can be fatal. Among the most vulnerable elderly, states Dr. William Clem of Los Angeles, an authority on the subject, “exposure to temperatures of even 50 degrees Fahrenheit, particularly ... in combination with ... dampness, can result in hypothermia.”

Nor can the municipal and charitable shelters any longer shield their elderly supplicants. A 1984 Gray Panthers’ survey, called “Crowded Out,” observes: “As the epidemic of homelessness sweeps younger and stronger men and women into the city’s shelter system, the elderly homeless ... are being driven out by sheer fright. Massive human warehouses cannot protect the frail....”

Often it is difficult to distinguish the homeless from everyone else. Baxter and Hopper found that “Their presence during late night hours when commuters have gone home and stores have closed ... is the only telling sign. After midnight is a prime time for research.”

Hombs and Snyder have placed special emphasis on the invisibility of the elderly, which makes them all the easier to discount: “Thus, the older woman next to you on the bus may be going nowhere in particular, riding only to keep warm or dry or seated.... In the world of the streets, invisibility equals access, and those who can pass unnoticed into public places ... suffer less abuse and harassment.... Consequently, one can find homeless people who sleep sitting up to prevent their clothing from being wrinkled....”

The anxiety to escape public notice has its ironic parallel in the attitude of

Federal officials. HUD’s absurdly low estimate of the total number of street people, and Ronald Reagan’s widely quoted opinion that most of them are “homeless by choice,” both seem calculated to persuade the rest of us that we live in the best of all possible worlds, where there are no victims to be found other than self-chosen ones.

**T**HE AGED homeless, in particular, have been generously doused with vanishing cream. Carol Bauer, a HUD functionary, assured a Congressional committee, for example, that “our current programs are adequate to provide a coordinated package of housing choices designed to prevent the elderly from entering the homeless category.” (Bauer’s title would have delighted Nikolai Gogol. She is Executive Assistant to the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy, Financial Management and Administration.)

In fact, the range of housing choices available to the poor of all ages has been steadily shrinking for the better part of two decades, thanks mainly to intensive redevelopment of low-income neighborhoods. During the 1970s, to cite some discouraging statistics compiled by HUD’s Low Income Housing Information Service, the number of moderate-rental units nationwide fell from an estimated 5.1 million to 1.2 million. At the same time, median rents for low-income households rose by 148 per cent, from \$72 to \$179 a month. At the higher rent a family with an annual income of \$3,000 is left only \$72 each month to meet other expenses.

“The bottom line,” says Cushing N. Dolbeare, founder of the National Low Income Housing Coalition, “is that there are 4 million more renter households with incomes below \$7,000 than there are units renting for \$146 per month or less, including utilities, which is what a household with a \$7,000 income can afford to pay [one-fourth of its income].”

Displacement, in short, has been one major consequence of gentrification. Roberta Youmans, an attorney with the National Housing Law Project, has estimated that 2.5 million households are displaced each year, “some through

publicly or privately financed redevelopment, others through abandonment.” If older residents have suffered disproportionately, it may be because they frequently occupy precisely those sites deemed ripest for demolition.

Single room occupancy hotels are a case in point. “The majority of SRO tenants,” Youmans notes, “are elderly and they represent the poorest of the poor.... Yet this valuable, often preferred type of housing is disappearing in record numbers.” She goes on to offer some telling examples:

“In San Francisco, 4,000 SRO units were demolished to make way for a convention center as part of the Federally funded Yerba Buena urban renewal project. In Denver, the Skyline Urban Renewal project caused a large loss of SROs. Since 1960 Seattle has lost one half of its downtown housing stock, including SROs. Portland lost 1,055 [SROs] since 1970 and New York City is close to losing its entire stock. Chicago has lost 3,000 SROs in the last decade, whereas in Hartford the last SRO has just been sold.”

Lessons from all this are not hard to draw. They have less to do with our shelter programs, inadequate as these have been, than with our development programs, which must bear much of the blame for the homelessness epidemic. Especially as regards the aged poor—the group least able to withstand the cruel exactions of the private housing market—our public policies have strayed disastrously wide of the mark. The upshot has been not only widespread homelessness but equally widespread neglect of dwellings still occupied by older and poorer Americans. A recent University of Michigan study places the number of substandard dwelling units occupied by older Americans at 1.3 million, and predicts that by the year 2000 it will have increased to nearly 2 million.

It seems clear that the nation will continue to be haunted by homelessness so long as it fails to provide adequate, affordable housing for the poor of all ages. Every shack and tenement is an invitation to social catastrophe; every slum-dweller is a candidate for the streets.