

# Invisible Homeless Poor of America

## The Plight of American War Veterans

○ Richa Gulati

For many Americans there exist two popular images of India. The first is “exotic India,” replete with colourful saris, masala-laden food, and Bollywood Bhangra. This version of India has steadily become a part of the American mainstream consciousness following the international success of recent Indian crossover books and films, such as *Monsoon Wedding*, which are celebrated for their vibrant depiction of India. The popularity of these media coincides with India’s new fashionable status abroad. Celebrities and the young alike frequent trendy yoga studios and don *bindis* as the latest accessory.

The second version of India, however, is in sharp contrast to the benign picture described above. Instead, this image is of destitute India: full of dirt, pollution, and people. The people are often portrayed in the media as homeless and hungry. I found an example of this perception on my recent trip from home in the U.S. to Delhi as a summer volunteer for MANUSHI while reading the popular travel series titled *Lonely Planet Guide to Delhi*. Under the highlighted title “Dangers and Annoyances,” I came across “begging” listed prominently as the first annoyance. The lengthy warning begins with the phrase, “whenever you turn in India you are likely to be confronted by beggars, handicapped, disfigured, or kids...”

True to the guide’s sentiments, I was confronted with poverty soon after stepping outside of Delhi’s airport. The poor slept on sidewalks, in their rickshaws, and generally wherever else they found available space. Despite terrifying traffic conditions, children approached vehicles stopped at traffic lights to ask for spare change. Frequently, their request for money appeared to be turned down by drivers who simply ignored their pitiful pleas. My travel companions instructed me to ignore my instinct to give money to the children. They confidently told me that everyone in India knew that these children were a part of enormous begging-rings led by a millionaire beggar who deliberately maimed children to make them all the more pitiable. To contribute to their fund would only encourage this horrible

practice. Thank God, I thought to myself, that I see fewer homeless children in America. And then in a flash I was reminded of a very different variety of homeless beggars found in the US whose plight remains hidden from even their own fellow citizens.

### Well Hidden Poverty

In contrast to India, the streets of many suburban American towns appear virtually free from visible signs of homelessness and begging because of city zoning ordinances. These municipal laws, passed by locally elected city councils, restrict various types of housing to different parts of town. The goals of zoning are in a constant tension. On one hand, many cities are mandated to provide affordable housing for all residents, including the poor. On the other hand, cities want to attract affluent residents in order to raise their tax revenues. As a result, subsidised low-income housing is usually relegated to specific parts of town, often away from middle income and affluent neighbourhoods. Therefore, the poor remain largely out of sight of the average citizen. Those homeless that the average citizen does see, commonly under a highway overpass or in liberal university campuses, are often single males with cardboard signs and little else.

### The Despised Homeless

Even these historically tolerant areas of town have begun to view the homeless as a scourge in society. Recent legislation in liberal university



**Under recent Austin law, it is a crime to sleep in public places, called a “camping ban.”... It is a law directly aimed at the homeless.**

towns of Austin, Texas and Berkeley, California has made it even more difficult for the homeless to find shelter. For example, under a recent Austin law, it is a crime to sleep in public places, called a “camping ban.” Yet trespassing law already exists for both private and public property, which any property owner could enforce without an additional “camping ban.” Thus, the law effectively criminalises the need to sleep. It is a law directly aimed at the homeless, who are the only members of society likely to sleep under a store’s awning. It grants the police extra power to force these citizens further out of the sight of the average citizen than they are already.

A scarcity of affordable housing exacerbates problems for the homeless. A 2003 Harvard University Report titled “The State of the Nation’s Housing” describes the housing situation for the bottom fifth of income earners as “grim.” With long-term income levels stagnating and housing costs soaring, the search for affordable housing has an increasing number of citizens without a home. The study shows that between 1997 and 2001, the number of lower to middle income families spending half or more of their earnings on housing has increased by over 700,000 families. Although single-family home ownership is at an all time high across the nation, construction of multifamily units is on a decline. A lack of affordable rental housing options, rising utility costs and property taxes, and a “ballooning federal deficit” that has limited housing assistance funds, leave the poor, who cannot afford single

family housing, with few options for shelter.

Just as India has circulated popular stories explaining begging and homelessness as “millionaire begging rings,” America, too, has popular myths regarding the begging homeless. It is a common perception that they are lazy, unwilling workers who, if you give them your hard-earned money, will squander it on liquor and drugs. Popular images of beggars depict them with brown paper bags that conceal bottles of alcohol. Why give them money, when after all, it is perceived that everyone who wants to work can get a job in America?

### **Dumped after Wars**

Who are the homeless in America? Shockingly, contrary to popular belief around the world and even in America itself, many of the homeless are U.S. war veterans. The United States Department of Veteran’s Affairs (“VA”) estimates that about one-third of the adult homeless population has served in the Armed Forces. As a result, the VA states that on any given day, as many as 250,000 veterans are living on the streets or in shelters and that twice as many have experienced homelessness throughout the course of any given year in the last decade. Additionally, according to the VA veterans are a high-risk group for homelessness due to “poverty, lack of support from family and friends, and dismal living conditions in cheap hotels or overcrowded substandard housing.” Currently there are more homeless male and female Vietnam War veterans than the 58,000 service persons that died during the war. Forty-seven percent of homeless veterans served in Vietnam; others have served in a variety of wars ranging from World War II, Korea, and even in the U.S. military-led anti-drug efforts across South America.

Additional statistics reported by the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans (“NCHV”) supports this dismal picture. The vast majority of the homeless are single males (females account for 2-3 percent of the homeless veteran population). Nearly 45 percent suffer from some form of mental illness and 70 percent also battle substance abuse. Although reports differ on whether a direct link exists between Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (“PTSD”) as a result of military service and homelessness, some of the homeless suffering from PTSD are unable to readjust to civilian life and are in need of psychiatric care. Over 67 percent of homeless veterans served in the military for at least 3 years. Additionally, despite negative assumptions of some regarding the quality of their service, an astounding 89 percent received an honorable discharge.

How is it possible that the wealthiest country in the world is not able to provide for the basic needs of its servicemen it requires for battle? The VA, as reported by the U.S. Office of Budget and Management, spent \$59.6 billion dollars in 2003 and operated the largest direct health care system in the country with 163 VA hospitals across the U.S. (<http://w3.access.gpo.gov/usbudget/fy2004/pdf/budget/va.pdf>) President Bush’s requested increase for the 2004 fiscal budget is the largest

**Who are the homeless in America? Shockingly, contrary to popular belief...many of the homeless are U.S. war veterans...about one-third of the adult homeless population has served in the Armed Forces.**

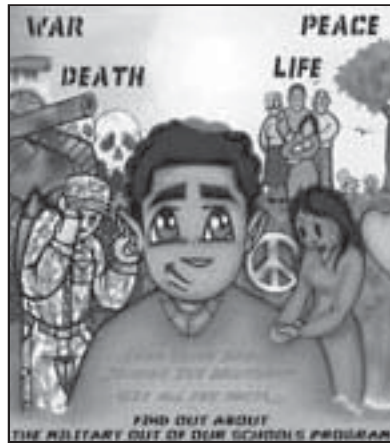
**Currently there are more homeless male and female Vietnam War veterans than the 58,000 servicepersons that died during the war.**

increase to have ever been requested by any president-with a stated focus in the budget request on increasing health care access and, ironically, burial services for the rapidly aging veteran population. However, the budget request acknowledged “on the immediate horizon veteran’s healthcare and other costs have continued to rise.” This questions whether the VA will even be able to maintain its current level of health care in light of soaring increases in health care costs, much less pursue its stated goal of increasing access. In fact, the NCHV reports that despite its budget, with over 500,000 veterans over the course of one year experiencing homelessness, the VA reaches only 10 percent of those in need. (<http://www.nchv.org/background.cfm>)

Part of the outreach problem is that the VA relies on a system of self-help in which veterans must first be aware of the services that the VA provides and secondly want help in order to receive care. This latter requirement presents the most difficulty for battling the plague of veteran homelessness. High rates of mental illness and substance abuse within the community means that few are likely to desire, much less understand, that they need help. Although the VA has outreach efforts, such as providing funds for one day “Stand Down” rallies to increase homeless awareness, these short events do not meet long-term needs. Many of these needs of veterans are instead met through community groups staffed by local volunteers as opposed to the official government agency

charged with the duty to care for them. Like most NGO’s, the groups are limited in their capacity to help all those veterans who need it due to a chronic lack of funds. As a result, a reliance on NGOs to provide critical care for this community is still inadequate.

It seems impossible that homelessness afflicts the most well funded-and feared military in the world. However, recent changes in the perception and recruitment tactics of the military help explain the phenomenon. In many countries, like India, a career in the military is prestigious; the benefits, both material



and social including a rise in social status, make the military a highly sought-after job. I have been informed by friends in India that veterans of the Indian army receive a generous package after military service, including free medical care and subsidised purchases of daily necessities from military stores for the veteran and his family for his entire lifetime. Most of them find it relatively easy to get jobs in the private sector because they are perceived as a more disciplined work force.

By contrast, the image of the American military that was transformed into a volunteer army after Vietnam radically changed, negatively affecting their benefit levels and political leverage. The US government’s decision to move to a better paid volunteer army from a required universal

service draft based army was made in part to reduce opposition to the draft by college students that became prominent during the Vietnam war. Currently, the solid middle and upper classes rarely enter the military, except for a small minority in officer positions. This was not true during the Second World War, for example.

For some among the poor, enlistment in the new army has provided them with major opportunities they would not otherwise have had. These include improvements in pay over previous military pay schedules, less discrimination for minorities of color in training and advancement on merit for those with commitment to the military and the relevant skills. Even though the US military claims to be fairly selective in recruiting among the poor, including those of colour, admitting mostly those who are fairly good prospects and rejecting those who have been in trouble in serious ways, yet it is unable to attract many well educated young men. Unfortunately, for many of those recruited who leave the armed services in just a few years, there is a lack of support needed to make the transition to civilian life successfully.

A study of demographics in the military revealed that the majority of college students are not interested in joining the armed forces, apart from the elite academies of West Point and the Air Force and Naval Academies in Colorado Springs and Annapolis, respectively. For this reason, the military is thought to not spend much on college recruitment.<sup>1</sup> The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that there are 1.4 million active duty men and women in the U.S Armed Forces, with an additional 1.2 million active reservists and National Guard members as of January 31<sup>st</sup>, 2003. Waning interest in military enlistment by other than the poor and minorities coupled with a demand for large numbers of active duty military personnel has forced the Armed Forces

**The military now targets its recruitment efforts at a younger audience, mainly “at-risk” youth, who are defined as teenagers between the ages of 13 to 18 who are “at risk” of dropping out of high school.**

to refocus its recruitment strategy. As a result, the military now targets its recruitment efforts at a younger audience, mainly “at-risk” youth, who are defined as teenagers between the ages of 13 to 18 who are “at risk” of dropping out of high school. The US Army News Service reports that an overwhelming one out of nine youths drop out of high school each year, for a total of 1 million students annually, or 2,800 students per day. Defining this problem as a “crisis for American youth,” the Armed Forces has begun programs throughout the country, such as the National Guard’s “Operation Graduation” and Junior ROTC, which provide “order and discipline” programs for at-risk students. Critics of these programs contend that the military has no place in the school system and that its “discipline programs,” which combine military training with school work, are nothing but a thinly-veiled recruitment tactic. The argument has some credibility since the military has recently provided large funds for these programs, which have rapidly spread across the country among poorer school districts, and has subsequently reported high rates of Armed Forces enlistment from the schools in which they have a program.

<sup>1</sup>Manning the American Military: Demographics and National Security, Martin Binkin, May 1990 [http://www.npg.org/forum\\_series/manning\\_military.htm](http://www.npg.org/forum_series/manning_military.htm)

Why is this issue pertinent to veteran homelessness? The VA has stated that veteran homelessness is largely attributable to the lack of necessary family support structures when members are discharged from service as opposed to India, few join the military as a career, but rather serve an average of 11 years for officers and 8 years for the enlisted. The military’s “at-risk” programs are specifically targeted toward economically disadvantaged youth, which in America is also disproportionately comprised of minorities. For example, nearly fifty-four percent of the JROTC’s recruitment programs are people of colour. Many of these vulnerable teens are from single parent households, underprivileged backgrounds, or high crime areas, and therefore easily susceptible to the lure of security offered by the military. Upon return to civilian life, these young men and women are even less likely than their more affluent counterparts from a generation ago to have the proper support to resume life. Instead, having gone straight from high school to military service, they have little to no experience in finding or keeping a job. Often having come from unstable domestic backgrounds, the families of these young

**Rather than receiving an education, these youths [war veterans] often turn, or return, to a life of drugs or crime, which can ultimately render them homeless.**

recruits are often unable or unwilling to help when they return.

### **Poor in Education**

Although the military successfully recruits on the premise of education during or after service, few veterans are actually able to take advantage of what the military offers. For example, many obstacles lie in the way of collecting college funding under the Montgomery GI Bill, such as test scores, grades, and funding caps. Two-thirds of these at-risk youth never complete any higher education after their military service. Whether attributable to a lack of institutional emphasis on education by the military, poor funds, or their disadvantaged backgrounds, these programs are not necessarily “the way out” into a better life as advertised. Rather than receiving an education, these youths often turn,

### **Life on a Minimum Wage**

Contrary to popular belief, the homeless community in America is not restricted to those without work who subsist on handouts. Many full-time minimum wage earners, who comprise the bottom quintile of wage earners in the U.S., still cannot afford basic necessities for themselves and their families. Northwest Harvest, a Seattle based non-profit, reports that in Washington State, a full time minimum wage job pays \$13,978 a year; the Federal Minimum Wage is currently \$5.15 per hour. With the Earned Income Tax Credit, the monthly income would only be \$1,377. The following items below are average estimates per month for essential needs, whose cost exceeds the amount earned per month.

1. Food: \$394 (Based on USDA Low Cost Food Plan)
2. Rent: \$724 (Central Puget Sound 2000 Report)
3. Heat/Electricity: \$203 (Consumer Expenditure Survey)
4. After School Child Care: \$600 (Children’s Defense Fund)
5. Transportation (Public): \$75
6. Telephone: \$25 per month



or return, to a life of drugs or crime, which can ultimately render them homeless.

### **Minorities Most Vulnerable**

“At risk” recruitment and consequential homelessness also disproportionately affect minorities. It is no secret that disadvantaged communities across the U.S. are disproportionately over-represented by poorer African-Americans, Hispanics, Native Americans, and Asian-Pacific Islanders. According to reports published by Third World Outreach, although enlistment of Hispanics is at an all time high, only three percent of commissioned officers are Hispanic; 88 percent are white. The situation is the same for other minority groups, demonstrating that minorities “rescued” from at risk communities have an increased likelihood of serving in the front lines and working low-paying military jobs. Not surprisingly, the VA reports that minorities are over-represented in homelessness statistics as well: an overwhelming 56 percent of homeless are African-Americans and Hispanics.

### **Jingoism at Whose Cost?**

For many around the world, there is a pervasive image of America as the land of plenty in which there are no poor. This image, promulgated by American exports of sitcoms, movies, and pop-stars overshadow a stark reality that poverty knows no borders. Sadly, despite a surge in patriotism and subsequent rise in enlistment and service in the military after the events of September 11, awareness of the plight of veterans has not increased. Accordingly, on May 1, 2003 U.S. President George W. Bush made the following remarks regarding military service aboard the USS Abraham Lincoln:

Our nation and our coalition are proud of the accomplishment of the Iraqi war-yes, it is you, the members of the United States Military who achieved it. Your courage, your willingness to face danger for your country and for each

## **A Profile of a Homeless American**

Universities across the U.S. often promote volunteerism as a part of higher education. As an undergraduate at the University of Texas at Austin, I was privileged to work with the Student Volunteer Center, a well-staffed, organized, and committed group of advisors who helped students coordinate volunteer projects for the needy. As a third year student, I chaired the annual Student Hunger Awareness Week, a week long campaign that raised food for the homeless during the holiday season. The project was my first real exposure to the homeless in Austin, which opened my eyes to the life of those living below the poverty line in the wealthiest country in the world. Shame and humiliation are common feelings expressed by the homeless. Even those who worked back-breaking hours at full-time low paying jobs were often embarrassed to be on welfare. American society cruelly stigmatizes the poor who begin to internalize feelings of worthlessness.

I remember vividly meeting James (name changed), a homeless father of two who worked as a day-labourer. In the early morning hours, many poor and illegal immigrants gather at certain street corners at which time trucks will drive by to pick them up. If they are lucky enough to be picked up by a truck, they will spend the day in the brutal Texas heat working manual labour jobs at various construction sites. They are paid a fixed amount for the day-perhaps \$40 for an entire day's work. The pay is enough just for food, but rent, school fees, and other amenities were always lacking. The uncertainty of the job, which amounted to conditions like those of migrant workers, left James living out of the back of a friend's car. His children stayed with a friend while he brought them earnings to pay for food. On days without work, James would rely on shelters and kitchens to make ends meet. He had no hopes for a better future, but worked for the sake of his children. More than anything, he seemed determined that his sons would not end up like him, although without stable family conditions and education, his children were falling behind. Accepting a box of canned goods, collected and distributed by students for the Thanksgiving holidays, his eyes were cast down as if in submission to the vicious cycle of poverty.

other, made this day possible. Because of you, our nation is more secure. Because of you, the tyrant has fallen, and Iraq is free. ([www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/05/Iraq](http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/05/Iraq))

Recent events in Iraq demonstrate that America is still willing to put its youth into battle and risk casualties in order to triumph in its “War on Terrorism” which has no

foreseeable end in the near future. Regardless of the justifications for the war, the government is willing to praise its military before and during battle, but judging by the astonishing number of homeless veterans on the streets, has a diminishing commitment to them when they return home.

In India, the homeless abound; few are unaware of poverty. Therefore, residents of India can make a conscious choice about whether or not to help the poor. In the United States, however, homeless veterans are a large group of the needy whom few Americans are aware of. As silent sufferers of homelessness, they are even less likely to receive the help they deserve and need. □

**The author is a student at Harvard Law School.**

**Despite a surge in patriotism and subsequent rise in enlistment and service in the military after the events of September 11, awareness of the plight of veterans has not increased.**