

**Guerilla Photography For A Better Community  
By**

**Robert L. Terrell And Jean McIntosh**

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This paper addresses our ongoing media-based project, which is intended to exert a sustained, positive impact on local opinion regarding homelessness in San Francisco. The significance of the setting in which we are working is probably best understood within context of two distinguishing features. First, San Francisco has one of the highest-priced housing markets in the United States. Second, San Francisco is generally accorded the dubious honor of having a larger per capita cohort of homeless people than any other city in the United States. Given this, and the fact that San Francisco's high visibility in national and international circles of power that matter, we are convinced that any notable success we experience regarding our primary objective will exert positive influence on the overall struggle to eliminate chronic homelessness here in the United States, and other sectors around the world plagued by the same problem.

Having lived and traveled extensively in many sectors of the developed and developing world, we are very much aware that homelessness is a global problem. We are also aware that it is becoming an increasingly serious problem in every major city on earth. Several factors are responsible, including the cruelly exclusionary economic phenomenon commonly referred to as "globalization." Nonetheless, homelessness is also a product of local and national forces, which are being accelerated by the manner in which human beings are using smart technology to alter the ways in which they live and work. One of the most important results of the confluence of local, national and global economic factors is that a swelling tide of the earth's human populace is being rendered redundant, if not superfluous.

The net impact, even though it is rarely recognized as such, is that hundreds of millions of human beings around the planet are being uprooted. In Third World sectors of the earth this process is most readily apparent in the unprecedented number of human beings who are abandoning traditional modes of living and drifting into small towns and cities in search of better lives. In developed societies the process is most apparent in the swelling number of unemployed people scrounging on the streets of major cities, bereft of housing and coherent life plans.

**San Francisco Homelessness: A Strategic Overview**

It is probably true that San Francisco has always had a serious problem with homelessness. Thus, from the hectic early days in the mid 1800s when gold was discovered north of the city, affordable housing has always been difficult to obtain by average citizens. During the Gold Rush era, the city found it essentially impossible to house the tens of thousands of people who flooded into town in search of wealth and prosperity. Moreover, however fast

new residences were constructed, it was never quite fast enough to keep up with the expanding flood of immigrants, who hailed from every sector of the world. As the decades passed, the city acquired the accouterments and symbols of world-class wealth in its downtown shopping districts and gentrified, hilltop neighborhoods colonized by the wealthy. Shanty settlements, tent cities, ramshackle, hot bed hotels, and barely reputable rooming houses, were the sorts of places where the poorest members of the working classes were forced to seek shelter from the elements. Those without the funds to acquire lodging in such places, commonly slept in poorly lit street-side hutches--in much the same manner as those who are desperately poor do today.

During the Great Depression of the 1930s, huge throngs of homeless men, women and children congregated in desperate circumstances in San Francisco's city parks. Dorothea Lang's photographs of Depression era San Franciscans provide haunting images disturbingly similar to scenes commonly witnessed on the city's streets today. The situation had become so severe by 1938 that the city government created the San Francisco Housing Authority, which provided subsidized quarters for those who could not afford to house themselves. This mitigated the problem somewhat. But there was never enough money to eliminate homelessness. Even though San Francisco boomed during the postwar era of the 1950s and 60s, the city continued to build housing projects for those who couldn't afford to house themselves without government assistance.

The San Francisco Housing Authority currently manages approximately 6,600 housing units, which provide more or less permanent housing support for approximately 35,000 people. They are located in many sections of the city, and the layout and design of each particular set of units reflects the period in which it was built. As is commonly the case in major cities here in the United States, the housing projects managed by Housing Authority tend to be crudely built and poorly managed. Maintenance is generally inadequate, and many of the housing projects look disturbingly similar to prison compounds. In addition, the city's housing projects are routinely located in sectors that have numerous unattractive features, including the city's highest crime rates. Transportation is almost always a major problem for residents of the housing projects because they are off-the-beaten-track, where the municipal transportation system is concerned. Residents have few communities, including decent shopping centers, recreational facilities and opportunities for employment beyond menial, entry level jobs. The city's most troubled schools are the ones most closely associated with municipal housing projects.

Students who attend schools located near housing projects experience alarmingly high dropout rates, and their scores on standardized tests are invariably among the lowest in the city. Moreover, if anyone familiar with such scenes of poverty and deprivation here in the United States, will not be surprised by the fact that the vast majority of the men, women and children who reside in San Francisco's public housing projects are people of color. Their profound isolation and exclusion is made worse by the fact that most members of the city's white, middle and upper classes systematically avoid venturing into the sections of town inhabited by large number of poor people of color. This is true despite the fact that San Francisco is generally considered to be one of the most liberal, progressive city's in the nation. Of course, for those who see poor, colored neighborhoods as no-go territories, can reasonably explain that this is so because there is nothing for them to do there. There are no museums, notable galleries, distinguished malls, attractive boutiques, superb restaurants, etc.

Given the fact that there are so few amenities available in the sectors of the city in which housing projects are located, it should come as no surprise that they are setting for a wide variety of socially dysfunctional behavior. For example, in the neighborhoods in which public housing projects are located high unemployment, psychological disorientation, antisocial behavior and chronic, violent, criminal activity exist in abundance. Year in and year out, San Francisco's highest rates of burglary, violent assaults and murder are routinely registered in such neighborhoods. Everyone familiar with the complex web of social and political pathologies which govern the realities of life inside South Africa's black townships, or the rage-provoking race-based ghettos which house France's poor, nonwhite residents, is also familiar with equivalent locations in San Francisco. A public housing project is "ground zero" for most of those locations. One is moved to note the obvious: same system, same problems

One of the most important results of the manner in which San Francisco deploys and manages its public housing is the fact that their residents tend to be significantly excluded from participation in mainstream economic, social and political culture. The exclusion is not a matter of legal segregation, nor does stem from overt political harassment. It stems instead from subtle, and not so subtle, cultural biases that are deeply embedded in the city's collective memory and culture. Racial segregation used to be legal, and when it was it was rigorously enforced. The period during which this was the case established the social framework, political structure and residential territories for the city's many races and classes. It is also true that the city's political leaders practiced segregation and job discrimination for many more generations than they have been ostensibly committed to so-called "equal opportunity." Their accomplishments during the many generations when racial apartheid was a driving force in municipal affairs, whether it was aimed at Native Americans, African American, Chinese Americans, Japanese Americans, Philippine Americans, or, as has been the case most recently, Arab and Latino Americans, the die has been cast. People of color do get elected, but the dominant reality is that whites possess decisive control of political power in the city, even though they no longer constitute a majority of the city's population.

As has been the case sporadically for almost three quarters of a century, San Francis is constructing new public housing. Moreover, it should be noted that many of the public housing developments constructed in he city during the past decade are much nicer than those constructed in the past. Some are located in nice, middle-class neighborhoods. They are smaller. New public housing units are being constructed. But the number of people who need such housing far outstrips the number of available units. Moreover, every indication is that the situation will get worse in the years immediately ahead. We can cite the current numbers pertinent to homelessness to emphasize the point.

Municipal officials commonly acknowledge that San Francisco has approximately 15,000 homeless people, 3,000 of whom are chronically homeless. Because it does not have a sufficient number of public housing units to absorb the growing number of homeless residents, units in the homeless people and at least to house those who could no longer afford to do so for themselves. number of San Franciscans who have difficulty of obtainSan Francisco's homeless problem has been a topic of major concern for at least two decades. Initial public notice of the problem focused on the small, steady trickle of bag ladies, down and out alcoholics who

One of the most ironic aspects of San Francisco's chronic housing crisis is the fact that it tends to become worse during periods of prosperity and during recessions. Thus, homelessness surged during the decade of the Great Depression. This was also the case during the dot com boom of the 1990s. Thus, each time the city experiences economic privation (as was the case during the Great Depression) or success (as was the case during the recent dot com boom), average people find it extremely difficult to obtain affordable, adequate housing.

In order to put our work and commitment into proper perspective, it is probably appropriate that we present the background and setting most pertinent to our activities. The most important strategic point to be understood, according to Mayor Newsom, is that "homelessness has replaced the Golden Gate Bridge and the cable car as one of San Francisco's defining features." This sentiment is widely shared throughout the city. Most important, it has engendered broad agreement that the time has come to do whatever it takes to eliminate chronic homeless in San Francisco. The city's Ten Year Plan to Eliminate Chronic Homelessness summarized the predominant municipal consensus regarding this matter thusly: "San Franciscans consistently identify homelessness as the number one problem in San Francisco." The Ten Year Plan also notes that "voters have repeatedly sent a clear and overwhelming message to City Hall that they want change, and are willing to try any and all new approaches that look promising and do not perpetuate the status quo."

Despite the extreme sense that something definitive should be done to eliminate chronic homelessness in San Francisco, the problem persists. The reasons why are numerous and complicated.

Regarding the project addressed in this paper, we are motivated and sustained by commitment to the ethos conveyed by the mantra: "think globally, act locally." Most important, we are philosophically aligned with the exemplary values codified in Article 25, Section 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which asserts that: "Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself (sic) and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control."

Given the above, we feel correct in our assumption that chronic, mass homelessness in a society as wealthy as the United States constitutes an egregious violation of Human Rights. Our work is intended to make this point to as many San Francisco residents as possible. By doing so, we hope to engender civic action that will eventually culminate in the elimination of chronically homeless in this city, and in all others inspired by our example. It should also be noted that we are strong advocates of Participatory Democracy. Thus, we are convinced that the kinds of reforms necessary for eliminating chronic homeless must emanate from the demands of organized, ordinary citizens, who understand that little of importance will be accomplished without their active participation in identifying and implementing solutions.

We are using documentary photography as a primary medium for distributing information about homelessness. In addition, we regularly make use of a variety of other mediums. They include journalism, gallery exhibitions, flyers, posters, postcards, the broadcast

media and the internet. Our primary operational assumption is that documentary photography, socially responsible journalism and imaginatively designed messages distributed via the mass media, are powerful instruments that can be harnessed to engender effective social reforms.

The documentary photographs around which the project is constructed, were taken over a 15-year period, with primary emphasis placed on the past four. They graphically present the dire circumstances of the thousands of unfortunate individuals who struggle daily to survive on the streets of San Francisco via begging, begging and the sporadic kindness of strangers. As such, the photographs document the problems of present the poor, the diseased, the addicted, the disabled, the underemployed, the unemployed, and those on the verge of losing control of their brains, bodies and basic dignity.

Many of the photographs are gut wrenching. Nonetheless, they tend to engender compassion and hope. Most important, the photographs force viewers to question their own humanity, and the manner in which their lives and fates are intertwined with the desperate plight, and largely unmitigated suffering, of the unfortunate individuals suffering poverty and homelessness in their midst. The photographs also move viewers to ponder the complex array of social problems, political traditions and economic biases which determine winners and losers in San Francisco, where the cost of housing is so high that less than 10 percent of the city's residents can afford to purchase housing. We should also like to note that the documentary photographs which we have been distributing as broadly as possible throughout the city will galvanize citizens in ways which forces them to accept collective responsibility for the criminal neglect at the heart of the city chronic homelessness crisis.

The overall character and substance of our work can probably be best understood and appreciated within context of the complimentary literature and guerilla activities we develop and deploy to heighten the impact of the documentary photographs. These include grant proposals, panel discussions, lectures, interviews with print and broadcast journalists. We also produce news stories which focus community attention on critical dimensions of the homeless crisis, postcards featuring homeless people, press releases, gallery exhibitions which address local, national and global dimensions of the homeless crisis and guerilla posters, augmented with text from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Nonetheless, as indicated, homelessness remains a major problem in San Francisco. As a result, we understand and accept the fact that much more work remains to be done before San Francisco's chronic homelessness is actually eliminated. We realize that more years will probably pass before we prevail. No problem. We shall overcome. In the interim, we are focused on our immediate task of using documentary photographs, journalism and professionally designed messages presented in a variety of media to keep the problems of poverty and homelessness at or near the top of every socially responsible San Francisco agenda.

## **BackGround and Strategic Setting**

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north of the city, affordable housing has always been difficult to obtain by average citizens. During the Gold Rush era, the city found it essentially impossible to house the tens of thousands of people who flooded into town in search of wealth and prosperity. The problem of inadequate housing was never solved. As the decades passed, the city acquired the symbols of world-class wealth in downtown shopping districts and the gentrified hilltops colonized by the wealthy. Shanty settlements, tent cities, ramshackle, hot bed hotels and barely reputable rooming houses were the last refuges of those with meager funds down through the years. Nonetheless, homeless persisted.

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Thus, the economic boom which prevailed in the United States during the postwar era of the 1950s and 60s, the city was forced to construct huge housing projects. The city currently manages approximately 6,600 housing units. San Francisco currently provides more or less permanent housing support for approximately 35,000 people. Because such housing developments tend to be located in sectors that have numerous unattractive features, their impoverished residents tend to be significantly excluded from the city's mainstream economic, social and political culture. As a result, alienation, antisocial behavior and chronic criminal activities are rampant in the neighborhoods in which public housing projects are located.

New public housing units are being constructed. But the number of people who need such housing far outstrips the number of available units. Moreover, every indication is that the situation will get worse in the years immediately ahead. We can cite the current numbers pertinent to homelessness to emphasize the point.

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**PHOTOGRAPHY EXHIBITS:**

‘Our Streets Our People’ Exhibition Meridian Gallery, 2004 (San Francisco):  
collaboration with the American Friends Service Committee  
served on exhibit Coordinating Committee  
Participated in Meridian Weekly Lectures, Panels and Programs  
‘Our Streets Our People’ Postcard (2004)

‘Poverty in America Exhibition’, 2006 (California State Univeristy East Bay)  
Panel Discussion  
‘Poverty in America’ Postcard

GPAP: The Guerilla Poster Art Project (2006)

**MEDIA OUTREACH:**

Arts Monthly – ‘Our Streets Our People’ Review and Listing

Press Releases ‘Our Streets Our People’

San Francisco Bay View article on ‘Our Streeets Our People’ exhibit

KPFA – panel discussion on Bay area Homeless (2006)

Monthly ‘Street Spirit’ Articles and Photographs – ongoing since 2004.

Street Sheet Promo: “I Shoot Street People” (2004)

Special Street Spirit Edition promoting ‘Our Streets Our People’ exhibit (2004)

Guerilla Poster Art Project poster campaign (2006)

**UNFUNDED GRANT PROPOSALS:**

California Humanities Association

Vanguard Foundation Grant Proposal

Soros Grant Proposal

**POLITICAL ACTION:**

Served on Mayor's Council to Implement San Francisco's Ten-Year Plan to Eliminate Chronic Homelessness

Submitted Communications Plan

Submitted Letter to Mayor Gavin Newsom

Given the fact that homelessness remains a major problem in San Francisco, it is too soon to declare anything resembling success for the project. Nonetheless, there are numbers indications that we are exerting positive impact. One of the most notable indications that this is so is Bob's appointment to the Mayor's Council for the Implementation of the Ten-Year Plan to Eliminate Chronic Homelessness." His appointment to the Mayor's Council was at least partially engendered by the desire on the part of some members of the city's political establishment to get him to "stop taking those photographs." which are being prominently featured in local newspapers.

The proposed presentation will conclude with an assessment of the project's overall impact, and comments regarding techniques that might prove useful to others committed to using photography, art and nonviolent, direct action to engender reforms designed to eliminate endemic social problems.