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**Shrinking Cities**

In recent years, my father has treaded the poverty line, and more lately than ever, we have worried about the true reality of losing our home. My father owns his own business, and since his income relies on whether or not his clients can pay *their* bills, his ability to pay *our* bills depends on that gamble. This has always been a serious issue in my family, but lately is has been worse than ever before. Every day I come home, the first thing I do is get the mail to go through it and find all the unpaid bills that aren’t even mine (nor something a daughter needs to worry about) so I can determine when and if I should start packing my things and search for another place to live.

I have started to notice that the level of homeless persons within our city has risen drastically over the past few years and have assumed the reason for this was always due to the same circumstances we have endured for some time. However, I have discovered through research and by applying the theory of intersectionality, that not every person has the same reasons for homelessness and there are many reasons attributed to homelessness within Toledo and surrounding areas (i.e. disabilities, violence, patterns of homelessness, medical conditions, loss of jobs, etc…). Nonetheless, homelessness is a real issue within our community.

Thinking of homelessness in a more broad and recent context, shrinking cities have become a very real problem for many cities all around the country and is just one of the reasons for homelessness on the rise. The first thing to investigate is why all these people are moving and causing shrinking cities we are now witnessing. As Wikipedia states, “the size of some cities has declined, despite a growth in [world population](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_population). Cities shrink when economic investment moves elsewhere in the world or when governmental policy creates a cycle of [disinvestment](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Disinvestment).” It seems after much investigation that the country attributes most of this problem to businesses relocating overseas and those subsequent jobs being sent overseas along with them; this is most prevalent in the rust belt which consists of “parts of the [Northeastern United States](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Northeastern_United_States), [Mid-Atlantic States](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mid-Atlantic_States), and portions of the [Upper Midwest](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Upper_Midwest)” according to Wikipedia.

However, when you think about all these jobs being sent overseas, you may not see just how big of a problem this is, especially if it is not an issue you have had the pleasure to deal with in your family and have been sheltered from the problem. To put this into perspective, “a third of Ohioans are unable to afford food, housing, clothes and other necessities,” according to Spinelli.

Imagine for a second that one day you have a good paying job, are able to pay your bills and life is harmonious for you, but the next day when you go into work, you discover that your company is moving overseas and all of a sudden you are out of a job. What do you do? You look for another job of course. However, when you live in a state whose unemployment rate has risen from about 3.5% in 2001 to about 11.5% in 2009 and has a population of 11,485,910 people, which estimates into roughly 1,320,879 people who are currently unemployed in Ohio, your chances of finding another job quickly does not look too promising.

This can be an even more prevalent problem when you think about race, gender and sex. If a white male seeks out a job within a shrinking community that has high unemployment rates, he is more likely to receive a job than a black female pursuing the same opening and yet needs the income just as much, if not more. If you think about this for a second, it starts to present a real problem for many minorities and underprivileged people. Ponder the situation of a single mother who losses her job and can’t afford housing anymore and when she gets kicked onto the streets, she has to protect her children and yet cannot seem to find a job.

To prove this theory, “a third of the faces walking down the street are reflected in only 8% of a profession,” according to Grumet who has studied the career path of a CPA, as well as the fact that 54% of the homeless population in Toledo are men and yet 68% are women (a 14% disparity) and around 70% of those women are black according to Claire Heath.

So if you lose your job, can’t find another job and therefore can’t pay your bills, what do you do? Many Americans can say their solution would be to move in with family; as my solution would be this as well. However, if you have no money and no family, consistent with a good portion of our population, you are once again stuck. This is just a simple example of how one may *easily* end up in poverty and become homeless. This is happening all over our communities and causing the shrinking cities we are now seeing.

But we know all this and even if we don’t understand *all* the reasons for it, it is a very real problem within our communities. The question now becomes what to do about all the abandoned land, houses and buildings. According to Detroit - Building the Green City, “the answer may not lie in the corporations, but may lie with the vacant land.” Detroit for example which has 40 square miles of vacant land which equates to the size of San Francisco! What do you do with all this abandoned land?

As of right now, “vegetation has taken over and wildlife has moved back into the city as there are no new business to claim the land and no influx of people to repopulate it. Urban/organic gardening has become huge within Detroit, as well as many other cities, and has become a huge industry within itself. We must learn what it would take to transform land into a self sustaining green city.”

If you consider this proposal for a second, it can start to make some real sense. Think back to the theoretical (and yet very real) black single mother who has no home, job or family. If you cannot afford food, what better solution than to be able to find an abandoned piece of land and use it to grow food to feed your family and hopefully may others within your community as well. Water falls from the sky, dirt is free and seeds can be easily saved to use each year. A garden is easy and cheap (almost free) to sustain, the problem is finding land.

Our class conducted a group interview with an individual who works with homeless people of Toledo on a day today basis (Claire Heath). I devised a few questions for her in order to gain a better understanding of how people become homeless and what hope there is for them to get out of their situations. My questions for Heath and the subsequent answers are as follows:

1. What is the most common reason, currently, for people being displaced? *There is no one main reason as to why people are displaced. Some obvious reason include but are not limited to disabilities, violence, patterns of homelessness, medical conditions, loss of jobs, etc… But it is important to keep in mind that no one’s story is the same*.
2. Once they are displaced, where do they go?  *Toledo has a few organizations to help the homeless community including the Cherry Street Mission, Neighborhood Properties Inc., the Sparrows Nest and the Good Samaritan.*
3. What kinds of programs are there for the children when it comes to meals, school expenses, clothing, etc…? *There are programs which work specifically with children to prevent the cyclical cycle of homelessness we see in children of homeless parents.*
4. How much is the percentage of homeless persons in Toledo rising? *There has been an exponential increase in homeless persons in Toledo. The program Heath works for used to have 3 tiers for homeless persons and each had a certain number of beds and private rooms for those who help out within the program. Each tier has now been filled past its previous capacity and beds are being put into all rooms (even private rooms) to fill the building to the maximum possible capacity due to the exponential increase in homeless numbers.*
5. Do those who are homeless get assistance with travel to and from their job if they have one? *There is public transportation available to the community.*

Although the interview with Heath was very informative, it would be nice to have been able to interview a real homeless woman of Toledo and my only question to her would have been “tell me *your* story.” While Heath works with homeless persons of Toledo, she is not homeless herself which means that some information she has provided may be skewed due to the fact that people always interpret information in a way that they can identify with. The worst part is that it is inevitable that information is missing which we may never understand and these stories may be lost forever.

The most important information I took away from Heath’s interview is that people become homeless for a very wide variety of reasons. Within Toledo however, organizations such as the Sparrows Nest and the Cherry Street Mission are now realizing the importance of creating sustainable communities and currently have fenced areas where volunteers come to show homeless communities how to start and maintain a sustainable garden to feed themselves and their families.

There may be other options to help correct this imbalance, but there is never one answer. Shrinking cities is a relatively new and yet prevalent problem here in our own community. Urban/organic sustainable gardens are just one answer to a solution for rebuilding and sustaining these shrinking communities along with ongoing education for the underprivileged and homeless via the numerous programs within our own city (i.e. Sparrow’s Nest, Cherry Street Mission, IHN, etc…). There is still hope for our community; we just have to put in the effort o make it happen!

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