



# Over the Edge: The Growth of Homelessness in the 1980s

*Martha M. Burt*

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Often described as an emergency, homelessness in America is becoming a chronic condition that reflects an overall decline in the nation's standard of living and the general state of the economy. This is the disturbing conclusion drawn by Martha Burt in *Over the Edge*, a timely book that takes a clear-eyed look at the astonishing surge in the homeless population during the 1980s.

Assembling and analyzing data from 147 U.S. cities, Burt documents the increase in homelessness and proposes a comprehensive explanation of its causes, incorporating economic, personal, and policy determinants. Her unique research answers many provocative questions: Why did homelessness continue to spiral even after economic conditions improved in 1983? Why is it significantly greater in cities with both high poverty rates *and* high per capita income? What can be done about the problem?

Burt points to the significant catalysts of homelessness—the decline of manufacturing jobs in the inner city, the increased cost of living, the tight rental housing market, diminished household income, and reductions in public benefit programs—all of which exert pressures on the more vulnerable of the extremely poor. She looks at the special problems facing the homeless, including the growing number of mentally ill and chemically dependent individuals, and explains why certain groups—minorities and low-skilled men, single men and women, and families headed by women—are at greatest risk of becoming homeless. Burt's analysis reveals that homelessness arises from no single factor, but is instead perpetuated by pivotal interactions between external social and economic conditions and personal vulnerabilities.

From an understanding of these interactions, *Over the Edge* builds lucid, realistic recommendations for policymakers struggling to alleviate a situation of grave consequence for our entire society.



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