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**HISPANIC MIGRANT LABORER  
HOMELESSNESS IN NEBRASKA:  
EXAMINING AGRICULTURAL  
RESTRUCTURING AS ONE PATH TO  
HOMELESSNESS\***

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*Research on homelessness in the U.S. has proliferated over the past decade. Although this research has greatly increased our knowledge of homelessness, few studies have explored the paths to homelessness in rural, agricultural settings. Through a survey of 114 male homeless persons in Lincoln, Nebraska, we surmise the existence of a homeless sub-population, which makes up a large proportion of the homeless in Nebraska, and perhaps other similar rural agricultural states: Hispanic migrant laborers. We elaborate on a theoretical construct composed of agricultural structural changes and Nebraska geographic particularities that facilitate homelessness in this sub-population.*

### **Introduction**

Homelessness as a visible social and economic problem has plagued the United States since the 1980s. During this time period research on urban homelessness has proliferated dramatically. Comparatively, little research on rural and agricultural region homelessness has been undertaken. (Some of the best known rural homelessness studies include Fitchen 1992 and Frank and Street 1987). However, questions that

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continue to vex researchers include who are the homeless in rural, agricultural regions, and how do they become homeless? We argue that structural factors and geographic particularities must be examined in order to answer these questions.

After developing a theoretical construct for Great Plains agricultural worker homelessness we present the findings from a survey of homeless people implemented in Lincoln, Nebraska. From this survey we begin to identify characteristics of the homeless population in an agricultural region. We found that a disproportionately large share of the homeless men in Lincoln are Hispanic (and foreign born) migrant workers, traveling in search of employment. (In our findings we identify comparative non-Hispanic characteristics wherever possible.) Our analysis of homelessness in Lincoln provides a contextual understanding of migrant labor homelessness. We argue that homelessness among migrant laborers in Nebraska is a function of three inter-related factors: (1) agricultural sector restructuring, (2) the temporary nature of migrant labor, and (3) the unique setting of "Heartland" agricultural regions. We conclude with policy recommendations in terms of anticipating the impacts of agricultural-sector restructuring and providing services directed to this migrant worker sub-population of the homeless.

### Antecedents of Migrant Worker Homelessness

#### Structural Factors

Understanding Great Plains migrant labor homelessness in general, and Hispanic labor homelessness in particular, requires a contextual understanding of the structural changes that have taken place in the US agricultural and agro-industrial economy, and the concomitant changes that this has brought to the economies of rural areas.<sup>1</sup>

There have been three basic changes in the US economy in terms of the what, how and where of production: 1) a shift from agriculture and manufacturing toward service endeavors, 2) a merger into large units of production, and 3) regional, national and international re-deployment of capital, enabled by advances in technology and communications (Broadway 1990, pp. 321-322). Rural economies have undergone similar structural changes.

<sup>1</sup>The term "agricultural migrant worker," in Nebraska, refers both to farmworkers as well as migrant workers who are employed in food process in corporations (in particular, meat packing and processing).

A number of factors have contributed to the changes in the rural economies. First, food producers and processors have faced intensively competitive markets in conditions of inelastic or falling demand. Farm productivity has steadily increased over the past 50 years generating accumulations of surpluses and depressing farm markets (Mayer 1993). Increases in worldwide agricultural production and lower domestic price supports further contributed to the lowering of farm incomes, creating economic conditions in which agribusinesses succeeded while family farms struggled (Davidson 1990, p. 30). The result has been a general decline in farm employment (Majchrowicz 1993, p. 33) and a trend towards fewer, larger and more efficient farms (Carlin and Green 1988).

Simultaneously, employment in processing industries, particularly in the meat processing industry, has increased, as has employment in the agricultural service sector, and wholesale and retail trade industries. The increased mobility of capital due to advances in technology and communication resulted in service sector, wholesale and retail trade job growth shifting from non-metro to metro areas (where they could realize economies of scale and agglomeration, while being accessible because of improved road infrastructure), while technological improvements which allowed savings in transportation and labor costs shifted the location of the processing industries from the metro to the non-metro areas (Carlin and Green 1988).

This is exemplified by the meatpacking industry where the new procedures of boxed beef (beef that is packaged and shipped in smaller more easily transportable, compact boxes), improved refrigeration techniques (refrigerated truck trailers), and all-weather highway system (lessened the industry's traditional dependence on railroads as the primary means of transportation) have allowed the industry to move closer to the source of the raw inputs--the cattle of the Plains States (Brown 1994, p. 33; Broadway and Ward 1990). Improvements in the production process (assembly line approach) also allowed for simplification of tasks and the substitution of highly skilled labor (butchers) with employees having fewer skills, and lower wages.

At the same time, non-metro counties offered lower land and labor costs (non-unionized labor), and lower taxes. The US meatpacking industry has in effect evolved from an urban into a rural-based industry, characterized by large scale operations, reflecting the greater economies of scale associated with large packing plants, an increased concentration among few companies--the four largest firms increased their share of market cattle slaughtered from 24% to 53% between 1975 and 1991 (Brown 1994) -- and low wage labor -- between 1975 and 1990 real

wages for all U.S. manufacturing workers fell by 4.6% while that of red-meat packing production workers fell by 34% (Brown 1990, p. 34).

### Temporary Labor

This reorganization of agricultural businesses has brought about an expanded demand for temporary migrant labor. First of all, farm work is affected by seasonality. Labor intensive harvesting of fruits and vegetables results in "a temporal and spatial progression of concentrated harvest labor demand satisfied by domestic migrants, local workers, and foreign workers" (Emerson 1989, p. 617). High labor turn over is also a characteristic of processing plants, and a product of the distasteful, dangerous, and stressful nature of many meatpacking jobs, as well as the often illegal status of the workers or family members. Stull, Broadway, and Erickson (1992 p. 59) reported monthly turnover rates of 6-8% at IBP and Monfort plants--two of the largest firms in meatprocessing.)

Together, the highly competitive nature of the agricultural industries and its seasonal context have led to an increase in the use of temporary labor. Many corporate farms hire even more temporary and flexible laborers to keep their operating costs down. "A chief advantage to temporary and part-time hiring is the flexibility it affords in meeting seasonal or cyclical demand" (American work 1995, p. 5B). Further, temporary labor does not have to be paid benefits as they are generally deemed subcontractors. Legal and illegal immigrants and other transient workers often fill this need, further bidding down wages for all laborers. Sassen (1994, p.73) elaborates that restructuring of the global economy facilitated the "incorporation of illegal immigration into labor markets."

### Geographic Particularities

It is also necessary to understand the unique features of Nebraska's geographic context which would serve to facilitate homelessness. First of all, Nebraska is an agricultural state with a high demand for flexible temporary labor. Over 96 percent of Nebraska's total land area is in farm and ranch operations (Nebraska Department of Labor 1990). However, farm sector employment in the state declined by 21.7% between 1980 and 1990. Across the United States it declined 19.5%. Concomitantly, manufacturing employment grew by 5.25% in Nebraska during the same time period.

Employment in agricultural services in Nebraska grew by 70.7% between 1980 and 1991 (Turner and Crea 1994, p. 3). Food and kindred product manufacturing employment, concerned with preparing a product for purchase, grew by 10.2% from 1980 to 1990 (U.S. Bureau of the

Census 1980, 1992). These sorts of shifts in employment seem logical. As family farms declined in number, farm sector employment has decreased. Corporate farming uses less employees. However, agricultural services (such as seed and pesticide sales) and food processing have increased to meet the demand of the corporate farms. As such, total employment in Nebraska grew by 13.6% between 1980 and 1991.

The processing industry exhibits similar conditions. Meatpacking work is hard, dirty, low pay, and according to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, America's most hazardous industry throughout the 1980s (Broadway 1994, p. 41). Employers are therefore forced to seek labor among other social or demographic groups who are either indifferent to these job characteristics or powerless to resist them (Piore 1979): new unskilled immigrants (legal and illegal) and refugee groups (Broadway 1990, p. 323).

States in the Midwest, such as Nebraska, present an attractive location for these re-structured agri-industrial operations. The industry is close to the source of raw materials (e.g., minimize distance cattle travel), they are equidistant to the lucrative markets of the East and West coast, and they are usually "right-to-work" states (very little unionized labor). The one thing these locations lack is suitable labor force. For example, Nebraska's estimated 1996 population was 1,652,093 (Laukaitis 1997 p. 1D). In 1993 Nebraska was ranked 36th among the 50 states in terms of total population (Rand McNally 1993).

Employers faced with small pools of labor in non-metro counties turned to aggressive recruitment in areas which have large pools of available labor: the Southwest, Mexico, and Central America. Foreign labor is particularly attractive to the industry. Mexico's continuous economic woes have created a massive supply of labor attracted by the comparatively good wages offered (the local employment alternatives are worse) by industries, such as meatpacking, which ask very little questions, require little skill, or facility with the English language. To this pool was added large numbers of young Central American males fleeing war (Nicaragua and El Salvador) and political persecution (Guatemala).

As we indicated earlier, the term "agricultural migrant laborer," in Nebraska, refers both to farm workers as well as migrant workers who work in the food processing corporations (in particular, meat packing and processing). These are both integral components of Nebraska's agricultural sector. Nebraska corn, sugar beet, and apple growers are a large source of seasonal employment (NAF Multicultural Human

Development Corporation 1989). Further, Nebraska and Iowa have the largest geographic concentration of meatpacking facilities.

The Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) estimates that 25% of all employees at these meatpacking facilities do not have legal U.S. residence status (84 illegal 1995, p. 4c). Between September 1992, and August 1995, six major raids by the INS occurred at six different food processing and meatpacking plants in Nebraska. Among these raids was the largest single INS "bust" ever which occurred in Grand Island, Nebraska, in 1992 (Orenstein 1995, p. 1). In all, these raids netted over 800 illegal (predominantly Mexican) resident workers (a complementary number of workers "disappear" for a time during and after the raid).

The State's demographic changes reflect the agricultural restructuring and the need for migrant labor. Nebraska has been losing population. Between 1980 and 1990, net migration was a -6.4%, with the greatest loss occurring in the 25 to 44 age group (-10%). Only the state metropolitan areas of Lincoln and Omaha experienced net positive growth (8.1%) (Austin & Tan 1995, p. 4). The proportion of Nebraska's rural population declined from 37.1% in 1980 to 33.8% in 1990. This has led local analysts to conclude that "Job growth is far out pacing population growth" (Austin 1994, pp. 5). This is reflected in a statewide unemployment rate of 2.1% in 1990. Clearly, when these factors are taken together it is apparent that in the face of agricultural shifts, temporary labor is in high demand in Nebraska. It is needed to keep the agricultural sector thriving. However, temporary agricultural labor typically earns very low wages and has few housing opportunities, for example:

Many of the Scottsbluff [Nebraska] area growers no longer provide farmworker housing. Meeting OSHA housing standards often require costly repairs, and many decided not to incur that expense to house farm workers for such a short period of time during the year. As a result migrant workers coming to this area must find their own housing in communities which do not have a surplus supply of decent, affordable housing (NAF 1989, p. 4).

### Homelessness Literature

Historically, the television documentary "Harvest of Shame," aired in the 1950s, first brought national attention to the housing conditions of migrant farmworker life (Margolis 1981). Since that time there have been several updates to the program, but conditions for the laborers have remained virtually static. Because Nebraska is largely a rural state, contemporary studies of rural homelessness are important to understand the local situation. Frank and Streeter (1987; in Patton 1988) identified five types of rural homeless people. 1) The "traditional homeless" are

men who are disaffiliated from society and the labor force. 2) The "new poor" are often families who may have lost their jobs and have "few local employment opportunities." 3) The "mentally ill" may live in rural areas near state mental hospitals. 4) "Displaced farmers and farm-related workers", they suggest, become homeless due to farm foreclosures. Clearly, this category is relevant to an agricultural setting. Finally, they identify 5) "the new hermits" who prefer to be isolated and live alone, often in mountainous regions. Fitchen (1991, 1992) points to poverty status as the prevailing factor precipitating homelessness.

Given this understanding of agricultural restructuring, the geographic context of Nebraska, and the literature on agricultural homelessness, we wondered: How do these factors interact to affect the homeless in Lincoln, Nebraska, an urban area in a predominantly agricultural state? Who are the homeless in Lincoln, and why are they in Lincoln? Lincoln is the state capital which makes it a logical hub for people seeking services in the state of Nebraska. In order to find out about these factors among the homeless of Lincoln a survey was conducted.

### Data and Method

In 1993, the Lincoln-Lancaster County Health Department initiated a survey of homeless persons in Lincoln, Nebraska. Because rural areas of Nebraska provide limited services for the homeless, Lincoln serves as a migration destination for people needing assistance. Lincoln is the second largest city in the state of Nebraska with a population of approximately 192,000 people (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1992). The survey was undertaken in October and November which means that there is a possibility that some homeless people had already left the area because of the approaching winter. The purpose of the survey was to find out about demographic characteristics, as well as behavioral and health risks among the homeless.<sup>2</sup>

The data from this survey was collected by individual interviewers in face-to-face interviews. A total of 155 people were approached and asked four questions to determine whether they were eligible to participate in the survey:

- 1) Have you been without overnight shelter at least once during the past month?
- 2) At least once during the past month, have you stayed in a shelter?
- 3) At least once during the past month, have you stayed with a relative or friend because you had no where else to stay?

<sup>2</sup> An initial pilot survey was conducted at a homeless shelter in Omaha, Nebraska. Afterward, the survey questions were reworded for clarity.

4) At least once during the past month, have you used an abandoned house, building, or car for shelter?

Individuals that responded affirmatively to one or more of these questions were asked to participate in the study.<sup>3</sup> A total of 133 persons completed survey interviews. This response rate of 85% is comparable to other surveys of homeless individuals across the United States (Rahimian, Wolch, Koegel 1992, p. 1320). Further, this sample size is close to the 1990 census of homelessness figure for Lincoln, Nebraska of 182 (U.S. Department of Commerce 1991). This survey was translated into Spanish for monolingual Spanish-speaking respondents. Because only 18 female homeless persons were surveyed they were excluded from the sample for our discussion of survey results.

The sampling strategy for this survey was a non-random, purposive strategy, targeting emergency types of facilities known to serve homeless people, as well as locations in downtown Lincoln where homeless people are known to congregate.<sup>4</sup> Because homelessness in Lincoln is largely hidden it was not possible to randomly seek survey respondents.

**Characterization of the Homeless**

**Demographics**

A significant number of the homeless sample were Hispanic (20.9%). This is unusual since Hispanics make up only 2% of the population of the City of Lincoln, and 2.3% of the State of Nebraska (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1992). In the following sections we present the results of the survey for the homeless sample as a whole. We compare the Hispanic and non-Hispanic sample groups because of the existence of the large Hispanic sample. The general characteristics of our homeless sample is shown in Table 1.

<sup>3</sup> These questions attempted to correlate to the Stewart B. McKinney Act's definition of homelessness as someone "who lacks a fixed nighttime residence or whose nighttime residence is a temporary shelter, welfare hotel, transitional housing for the mentally ill, or any public or private place not designed as sleeping accommodations for human beings" (Katz, 1989, P.186).

<sup>4</sup> The sample breakdown of survey sites included of respondents were staying at the People's City Mission; 16.6% were at the Cornhusker Detoxification Center; 9.9% were on the streets in downtown Lincoln; 8.4% were at Daywatch Drop-in Center; 7.6% at the Lancaster County Correctional Facility; and 3.8% at the Gathering Place Drop-in Center.

**Table 1. General Characteristics of Homeless Sample**

Characteristic	Percentage		
	Total	Hispanic	Non-Hispanic
<b>Age</b>			
25	21.1	30.4	18.4
26 to 35	29.8	39.2	28.7
36 to 45	27.2	13.0	29.9
46 to 55	14.1	17.4	16.1
56 +	6.1	0	6.9
<b>Education</b>			
8th grade or less	18.8	47.8	10.3
9th to 11th grade	18.8	21.7	18.4
12th grade	40.2	21.7	44.8
Technical school	7.2	4.3	6.9
Some college	8.9	4.3	10.3
College	6.3	0	8.0
<b>Marital Status</b>			
Married	7.1	13.6	5.8
Divorced	31.9	18.2	33.3
Widowed	3.5	0	3.5
Separated	6.2	9.1	5.8
Never Married	48.7	59.1	48.3
Unmarried Couple	2.7	0	3.4
<b>Race</b>			
White	73.9	86.4	71.3
Black	9.9	0	12.6
Native American	11.7	4.5	13.8
Other	4.5	9.1	2.3
<b>Employed</b>	35.4	36.4	57.9
<b>Seeking Employment</b>	62.5	83.3	57.9

The homeless sample was relatively young, particularly the Hispanics. Overall, more than one-half of the respondents were 35 years of age or younger (35.1% between the ages of 30 and 39); very few were elderly (56+years old). This is slightly older than the age distribution found among Lincoln's male population (57.9% between ages of 18 and 35). The Hispanic homeless sample, however, was considerably younger than the non-Hispanic. Almost 70% of the

Hispanic population were 35 years of age or less, compared to 47.1% of non-Hispanic.<sup>5</sup>

Over one-third of the homeless sample (37.5%) had less than a high school education; almost one-quarter (22.3%) had more than a high school education. Only 11% of the city's general population (18 years of age and older)<sup>6</sup> had less than a high school education (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1992). Hispanics fared less well in education. Over two-thirds (69.5%) had less than a high school education compared to only 28.7% of non-Hispanics. While a quarter of the non-Hispanics had more than a high school education, only 8.6% of the Hispanics did (also reflects national pattern).

Most of the homeless group had never been married (48.7%), few were presently married (7.1%). Among Lincoln's male population (age 15 and over) 36.3% had never been married; 53.6% are presently married (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1992). Among homeless Hispanics, a higher proportion had never been married (59.1%). Married Hispanic men were next most prevalent (13.6%). With homeless non-Hispanics, those that have never been married was slightly less (48.3%) than Hispanics. Non-Hispanic married men were considerably less (5.8%).

A large proportion of our sample was white (73.9%). Just less than one-half (42.7%) of the homeless group were minorities (non-white or Hispanic). The fact that the white group and the minority group do not add up to 100% is due to the fact that many of the Hispanics identified themselves as "white" of Hispanic origin. In fact, almost one-half of the minorities (46.8%) were Hispanic. Lincoln has an overall minority rate of only 5% of the population.

Slightly over one-third (34.5%) of the homeless group were employed. Of those not employed, 62.5% reported actively seeking employment. Among Hispanics, 36.4% were employed. This was closely matched (34.5%) by non-Hispanic. However, a larger proportion of Hispanics (83.3% of those not employed) were actively seeking employment than non-Hispanics (57.9%).

Substance abuse was found in over one-half of the homeless group (57.9%), with Hispanics reporting a lower proportion of substance abuse (47.8%) than non-Hispanic (60.9%). This is consistent with Dorbusch's

<sup>5</sup> Nationally, Hispanics also tend to be younger than white non-Hispanics (Bureau of the Census, 1992).

<sup>6</sup> Information on educational attainment for males, 18 years of age and older is not readily available.

(1994) finding that substance abuse is much more common in white and African-American homeless families.

### Migration Characteristics

With respect to migration, the survey obtained information on how long individuals had been in Lincoln; where they were from; and their reason for being in Lincoln. The results are presented in Table 2.

Over one-half (57.7%) of the survey respondents were recent migrants, having arrived in Lincoln during the past year (43.2% had been in Lincoln 3 months or less). Less than one-third (30.6%) were long-term residents (lived more than 5 years in Lincoln). Hispanics exhibited greater mobility, with 85.7% having been in Lincoln for less than a year, compared to 45.3% of non-Hispanic.

Work was the most frequently given reason for being in Lincoln (43.9%) by our homeless sample. Over two-thirds of the Hispanics mentioned work as their reason for being in Lincoln. This contrasts with non-Hispanics, of whom 36.8% gave work as their reason for being in Lincoln, while 20.7% mentioned family as the reason.

Using the place where the survey respondent indicated they spent the majority of their life prior to age 18 as their place of origin, we noted that only about one-third (37.3%) of our homeless group are from Nebraska. This was even more pronounced among Hispanics, most of whom were raised outside the US. Figure 1 shows the places of origin of the two-thirds of our homeless respondents that are not from Nebraska.

**Table 2. Residence Characteristics of Homeless Sample**

Characteristic	Percentage		
	Total	Hispanic	Non-Hispanic
<b>How Long in Lincoln?</b>			
3 months	43.2	52.4	43.0
1 year	57.7	85.7	45.3
5 years	69.4	95.2	62.8
> 5 years	30.6	4.8	37.2
<b>Reason for being in Lincoln</b>			
Born	10.9	0	13.8
Work	43.9	68.2	36.8
Family	17.5	0	20.7
<b>Where Were You Raised?</b>			
U.S.	83.5	22.7	100.0
Nebraska	37.3	10	41.5
<b>Length of Time Out of Work</b>			
3 months	43.7	53.8	38.2
1 year	63.4	84.5	60.0
> 1 year	36.6	15.5	40.0
<b>Substance Abuse</b>	57.9	47.8	60.9

**Figure 1. Place of Origin of Homeless Sample**

Given that work was the most commonly given reason for being in Lincoln, it is also interesting to note that slightly less than one-half (43.7%) of those not working, had been out of work for less than three months; only about one-third (36.6%) had been without employment for over one year. This short-term unemployment characteristic was more pronounced among Hispanics.

## Discussion

The Lincoln homeless survey sample suggests a different composition of the homeless, than found in existing literature. This data points to the unique path that is taken to homelessness in Lincoln, Nebraska. Homelessness in Nebraska reflects the structural changes in the agricultural industry, including the temporary nature of migrant work, and the particular geographic features of Nebraska as an agricultural state. Data on the Lincoln homeless survey points to the considerable presence among the homeless of non-area (out of state and out of country) individuals and families (as indicated by the not so insignificant proportion of married individuals); mostly Hispanic, immigrant labor. They have been in Lincoln for a relatively short period of time; came looking for work (over one-third are employed); and among the unemployed, most are actively seeking employment and have been only a short time without employment.

Understanding Nebraska's agricultural setting and the global tendency toward temporary and low-cost labor provides a context for beginning to understand Hispanic migrant labor homelessness in an area where Hispanics compose a minuscule fraction of the population. Our findings suggest that the shifts in the agricultural sector and the demand for temporary, low-cost migrant labor serve as structural factors helping to promote homelessness in Nebraska.

While much of the demand for migrant agricultural labor occurs in the rural areas and small towns of Nebraska, homeless migrant laborers come to Lincoln because it is a major "hub" for the state. Lincoln is serviced by bus, train, and the Interstate Highway. It falls along the major east-west interstate (Interstate-80) through mid-America (and other food processing and agricultural states). (The link between homelessness and transportation routes in agricultural regions has been noted in the literature (Gaber 1996; Royal 1993) and further accentuates the migratory nature of homelessness in these areas.) Further, Lincoln has a well developed human services system which provides free food, shelter, and medical attention to people in need. Finally, the city serves as an information hub. People come to Lincoln to find out about employment opportunities throughout the State.

The survey findings and contextual understanding of agricultural migrant labor homelessness point toward several policy recommendations that should be considered by local, state, and federal agencies. We highlight a few policy recommendations which we feel are the most urgent. First, homelessness among agricultural migrant laborers needs to be recognized. Because of the transient nature of their work this

population often goes ignored. However, since they fit the McKinney Act definition of homelessness they are eligible to receive emergency services through McKinney funds. In particular, the state of Nebraska has not recognized (Hispanic) migrant laborers as a segment of the homeless population in any of the state's Comprehensive Homeless Assistance Plans (CHAP) or Comprehensive Housing Affordability Strategies (CHAS). Second, developing decent affordable housing for migrant laborers would eliminate their homeless condition. Further, allowing them to stay in the housing while they line up their next job, or having housing available before their next job begins, would also help mitigate the problem. Third, the state needs to provide services tailored specifically to the needs of migrant workers. While drug rehabilitation and mental health counseling may be needed by the general homeless population, for this segment of the homeless job assistance and transportation may be greater needs. Further, the state should consider scattering some of these services out of the Lincoln "hub" and into the rural regions where the demand for their labor occurs. More field research is needed in the rural parts of the state to determine how migrant workers end-up in Lincoln. Finally, the presence of significant numbers of Hispanic homeless migrant laborers suggests that service providers may need to be bilingual, and that an effort must be made to increase cultural competency among human service providers. In all, the findings from this survey are meant to help raise awareness of this currently unrecognized segment of the homeless population. The policy recommendations can help stem a rise in migrant labor homelessness as the agricultural sector continues to restructure and the global economy turns even more toward temporary and transient labor to fill openings.

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## FEMINIST CROSS-CULTURAL RESEARCH: OBSERVATIONS FROM A RESEARCH PROJECT IN GERMANY\*

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*Recent research indicates that the rapid imposition of West German structures (policy, economy, culture) on East Germany caused economic hardships and personal insecurities which leave many East German women feeling vulnerable. This essay depicts the experiences involved in conducting an ethnographic study to examine the situation of women East and West of the former German border. Secondary analysis, survey research, observation and interviews with women's representatives show significant differences in the actual and perceived consequences of unification for women's lives in East and West. The feminist nature of the research and the complex structure of German bureaucracy were often impediments to the progress of this study. Recommendations for researchers planning to do cross-national studies on women are discussed.*

### Introduction

According to Shulamit Reinharz (1992, p. 109) "cross-cultural research requires cooperative local political conditions that may be tenuous if studies concern women." Hence, the success of feminist research often depends on the degree of institutional cooperation in making information accessible to the researcher. Feminist research generally involves the following features: (a) the researcher is a self-identified and outspoken feminist; (b) the research is not only *about* women but *for* women; (c) the objective of the research is social change;

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