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### STREET LIFE

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### STREET NEWSPAPERS

“Street papers” refer to publications that address social issues and are sold by homeless and formerly homeless vendors or given free to the public. Street papers first appeared in the United States and abroad during the late 1980s and the 1990s. Even though editorial styles differ between papers, street papers are united in their attempts to increase public awareness about poverty issues and to empower homeless people through employment and other opportunities.

**STREET PAPERS AND AMERICAN ALTERNATIVE MEDIA**

Street papers are rooted in America’s rich history of alternative publications that serve socially and politically marginalized groups. Alternative media fill a gap in the media system by discussing issues that are generally ignored by mainstream media.

Historically, the American alternative media have communicated information both internally to minority groups and externally to the public. From the Civil War to the present day, abolitionists, utopians, pacifists, immigrants, feminists, and working-class radicals have used alternative media to voice causes and strengthen community ties. In fact, during the political movements in the 1960s, most issues were first communicated to audiences through alternative media.

Street papers are directly related to the yellow journalism press and radical workers’ media that proliferated from the early 1800s through the mid-1900s. The papers emerged largely in response to mainstream publications that ignored issues affecting common people. Many mainstream newspapers and magazines were reaching out to a politically middle-of-the-road readership and avoided covering topics such as workers’ strikes and slum conditions.

In response to this lack of coverage, the yellow journalism and workers’ papers investigated issues such as workers’ rights, living conditions of the urban poor, government corruption, and abuses by capitalist businesses. One such paper was Cincinnati’s *Hobo News*, published by the International Brotherhood Welfare Association from the late 1910s to the early 1920s. The paper printed items such as labor news and the personal stories of hoboes.

One prominent predecessor of contemporary street papers was *The Catholic Worker*, a New York-based newspaper founded in 1933 by Dorothy Day, a pacifist and journalist. The paper was connected to the wider Catholic Worker movement that Day also established. The movement established houses of hospitality in the poorer areas of cities and rural areas, where they are still providing food, clothing, and shelter to those in need.

Today there are other Catholic Worker communities in areas across the country that distribute their own journals and newsletters on a local level.

**THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF STREET PAPERS**

Even though street papers are grounded in America’s rich history of alternative media, they emerged directly out of the social and political environment of the 1980s. Homelessness in the United States worsened during the worldwide recession of the early and late 1980s for a number of reasons, including the shutting down of social welfare programs, the privatization of public housing, a general decrease in
affordable urban housing, and financial deficits at the local, state, and federal levels.

It is difficult to estimate the exact number of homeless people for several important reasons. First, it is difficult to define homelessness because homeless people live in situations ranging from shelters and friends’ homes to automobiles. Studies that count only the number of people on the streets or in shelters do not capture other situations. Second, homelessness is usually a temporary condition. The most accurate figures are those that measure how many people experience homelessness over time rather than the number of homeless people on a given night. According to Clinton Administration estimates, between 1989 and 1994, 7 million people were homeless on different occasions. The numbers increased by the late 1990s, and after the economic recession of the late 1990s, the Urban Institute estimated that 3.5 million people, 1.35 million of them children, were likely to experience homelessness in any given year.

As the number of homeless people increased from the early 1980s to the late 1990s, mainstream American media began to cover homelessness more frequently. Researchers who study the American media’s coverage of homelessness point out that the economic recession of the early 1980s was the point at which the media began to use the term “homeless person.” In fact, the phrase “homeless people” as a narrative category did not even appear in the New York Times Index until 1983, when it replaced older categories such as “vagrancy.” Homelessness coverage in major American newspapers and magazine increased again in 1986, when the national Hands Across America homelessness charity event was held.

The mainstream media frequently covered homelessness negatively as it increased from the early 1980s onward. For example, media researchers on homelessness have found that some journalists portray homeless people as criminals in negative news reports that describe, for instance, homeless people who are drug addicts or harass passersby on the street. Researchers also found that the mainstream media, which tend to cover homelessness mostly during holiday seasons and cold-weather spells in the contexts of charities, often blame homeless people for their situation and focus on individual qualities, like hard work, which supposedly could remove them from homelessness. When the media address homelessness as the result of an individual’s shortcomings, they do not analyze the wider social, political, and economic reasons for the existence of homelessness. Coupled with the increasing numbers of homeless people, these trends in the mainstream media’s coverage led to the development of street papers.

OVERVIEW OF AMERICAN STREET PAPERS

Although every street paper speaks to a geographical region’s readership and particular homelessness situation, street papers emerged all over America for three main reasons. First, most seek to provide alternative coverage about homeless people in order to educate the public about the condition’s larger social and political causes. Second, street papers aim to become one solution to homelessness by giving the homeless and formerly homeless vendors who sell the papers opportunities to earn income and develop job skills. Finally, many papers are connected to wider initiatives and social networks that provide housing assistance, drug and alcohol counseling, and other services.

There are currently more than fifty street papers in forty-seven cities across the United States and Canada. They take many forms, including newspapers, magazines, and newsletters, and tend to fall into two categories.

The first category includes the many papers that are written about homelessness and only include information of interest to a homeless audience. Such publications might have variable deadlines and might be written by a combination of homeless people and paid and unpaid employees. Some street papers, such as Chicago’s Journal of Ordinary Thought, publish only material written by homeless people and persons from other marginalized groups. These types of papers, which are often run by charities, are sometimes published as newsletters or stapled black-and-white booklets.

The second category of street papers includes for-profit papers that have glossy covers, color photo-
The success of Street News inspired other individuals, organizations, and cities to establish street papers. The success of many street papers reflects the important role that they fill in American media culture.

One prominent American street paper is San Francisco’s Street Sheet, which was founded in December 1989 by volunteers at San Francisco’s Coalition on Homelessness. The paper seeks to present information on homeless people that is not available in other news venues. It also aims to function as a space for homeless people’s expression. The paper originally appeared as a newsletter with a run of 500 copies. The paper expanded to a tabloid... into the 1990s. The American street paper movement traces its beginnings back to New York City’s Street News, which was established in October 1989. Founded by Hutchinson Persons, a rock musician from Elyria, Ohio, the paper began publication with 2,000 vendors and a monthly circulation of 100,000. It is still published today on an occasional basis. The paper’s development and editorial style provided a model for many street papers in the United States and abroad.

When Persons founded the paper, Street News was financially underwritten by Street Aid, a non-profit New York social advocacy agency that Persons founded in 1989 to help the homeless. The newspaper included virtually no advertising and carried columns and stories about New York life. Celebrities, staff writers, and freelance writers penned the articles and other features. In addition, homeless people contributed articles, poetry, and short stories, and helped with the editing process. By the time that Street News went for-profit in August 1992, the paper was published twice a month and approximately 200,000 issues a month were sold by 2,000 vendors. The paper experienced financial problems and underwent ownership changes in the early and mid-1990s, but it survived. Today, the forty-page paper, which costs $1.00, is published periodically and sold in the New York metro area and by mail subscription to readers elsewhere.

EXAMPLES OF SUCCESSFUL AMERICAN STREET PAPERS

The number of street papers in the United States and Canada steadily increased from the late 1980s...
Homeless Journalists Hone Their Reporting Skills

SAN FRANCISCO (ANS)—The homeless often have to settle for second best, but not when it comes to their own newspapers.

These street-based, free publications, which provide a forum for low-income and homeless people around the country, have traditionally been long on personal essays and short on hard news. That’s changing in San Francisco, where an innovative training program is helping homeless writers hone the tools of their trade.

It should come as no surprise that people with well-developed street smarts make for smart reporters.

More than 60 would-be correspondents have already completed the four-month program, called Raising Our Voices. All the graduates either are or have been homeless, are surviving on poverty-level income or are providing services to the poor.

For four hours every Tuesday, students learn the tools of the journalism trade: how to search public records and verify information, and the basics of Web and desktop publishing. Students also learn what makes a good story and how to write well.

By improving the quality and scope of information in papers like Street Sheet, which is a local sponsor of the program, organizers hope policy-makers, the mainstream media and other readers will pay more attention to the needs of America’s poor.

‘The main thing we’re trying to do is public education, and we feel there’s a level of instruction that can be gained by allowing people who are experiencing poverty to share with the public,’ said Chance Martin, editor of Street Sheet and a graduate of the program.

It turns out the students, many of whom live in shelters, are especially adept at investigative reporting. Because of their hard-earned street smarts, homeless men and women are not afraid of potentially dangerous situations that more mainstream reporters may shun, said Belinda Griswold, program director at the Media Alliance, which hosts the program.

Adam Clay Thompson, a staff writer for the San Francisco Bay Guardian who teaches in the program, says the students are insightful, informed and as talented as any of the students he’s taught at local community colleges.

“They’ve done incredible things—things that daily newspaper reporters don’t seem to do anymore, like dredging up quantities of records on charities they thought weren’t performing responsibly,” he said.

Students have broken stories on a police crackdown on Food Not Bombs, a group that feeds the homeless on city streets, and are about to publish a story on a social services agency whose financial procedures are in question, said Griswold.

The reporting model used in the program is ‘new journalism,’ which, unlike the objective stance sought by the mainstream media, advocates telling stories from a particular point of view. It’s the approach used by many alternative publications, including the Bay Guardian, for which Thompson writes. But it’s not a license to fabricate facts or hang a public official out to dry without evidence, he said.

“We do struggle for fairness and being able to back up anything that the writer is going to say.”

Raising Our Voices, which is free and includes dinner, may find its greatest long-term benefit in the personal satisfaction it affords reporters. Martin, who worked his way up from homeless advocate to Street Sheet contributor to newspaper editor, said the program countered the hopelessness of poverty.

“A person who’s gone through homelessness—I’ve been there—it’s devastating as far as the impact on self-confidence,” he said. “Regardless of what the instructor said, I was happy with what I wrote. It gave me a shot in the arm.”

The Big Issue of Britain

Britain’s street paper, The Big Issue, was cofounded in 1991 by Gordon Roddick, vice-president of The Body Shop, and John Bird, a friend of Roddick’s who had been homeless and a printer. The Body Shop initially funded the venture, providing that Bird would edit the magazine and that it would eventually become independent from The Body Shop. The Big Issue appeared in September 1991 as a monthly London magazine written by nine volunteers and part-time workers. Thirty homeless vendors sold the first run of 50,000 copies.

The Big Issue is now a glossy weekly magazine with a national circulation of 253,465. It has independent international, regional British, and Irish editions. The editorial, which is written by freelancers, paid staff, and volunteers, includes personality profiles, political commentary, and arts reviews. One central feature is “Street Lights,” which includes several pages of poems, short stories, and articles written by homeless people.

Following financial mismanagement and the late-1990s recession, The Big Issue reduced its staff size and moved its primary editorial offices from London to Manchester. However, as the world’s largest street paper, the magazine sets an example by educating audiences about homelessness and giving homeless people employment options.

—Teresa L. Heinz

Further Reading

the largest American street papers. Staffed by full-time and part-time journalists and volunteers, Street-Wise was founded in 1992 with the mission to provide employment to homeless people and enable them to reach self-sufficiency. After first hiring vendors in 1994, the paper expanded steadily and has since employed more than 3,600 vendors. It produced its first color edition in 1995, and the following year it expanded from a monthly to a biweekly publication with advertising. In 1998, the publication established the Work Empowerment Center as an information center for employment opportunities.

The rich diversity of these publications is reflected by other American street papers. Hasta Cuando, a free Chicago street paper, is bilingual. Miami’s monthly Homeless Voice is the only paper attached to a shelter. Seattle’s bimonthly Real Change, which has a circulation of more than 25,000, is part of the larger Real Change Homeless Empowerment Project. In addition to the paper, the project includes a homeless speaker’s bureau, a homeless art gallery and studio, computer facilities, and activist organizing projects. In Cincinnati, homeless and formerly homeless people write the majority of the material for the monthly StreetVibes, which is a sister paper of Cleveland’s Homeless Grapevine.

DIFFICULTIES FACED BY STREET PAPERS

Even though many street papers have become important parts of their communities, street papers often battle issues of financial survival and anti-homelessness legislation that make it difficult for vendors to sell the paper.

Like other alternative publications, some street papers are funded by public donations as well as social, political, and religious organizations. Some accept no advertising, but most include advertisements as one source of revenue.

Street papers have frequently been targets of anti-homelessness legislation. Street News battled such legislation in January 1994, when New York City’s Transit Authority announced that it would crack down on the number of homeless people in the subways. This was part of a citywide effort to remove panhandlers and unlicensed vendors from the subways. The law heavily damaged the publication for a time, because 70 percent of its readership bought the newspaper on the trains.

Cleveland’s Homeless Grapevine faced similar difficulties in the 1990s. Established in 1991 by a former Kent State University student, Fred Maier, the magazine was written by freelance and homeless writers and sold by homeless vendors. By the mid-1990s, the Grapevine was under police scrutiny for
violating Cleveland’s peddling ordinance. The ordinance required vendors to acquire licenses and wear identification badges before they could sell goods on city streets. After a Grapevine vendor was ticketed for selling the magazine without a license, the American Civil Liberties Union of Ohio argued that the licenses violated the First Amendment and constituted prior restraint against the paper, and the charges were later dropped. The monthly magazine, which now has a circulation of 5,000, is sold by twenty vendors who purchase the magazine for $.20 and sell it for $1.00.

THE FUTURE OF STREET PAPERS

As street papers become an established part of the media landscape, they are embracing opportunities for growth and change. The street paper movement was strengthened in the 1990s when papers joined together in coalitions. Following the lead of the International Network of Street Newspapers (INSP), which was founded in 1994, thirty-seven street papers from the United States and Canada met in Seattle in September 1997 to form the North American Street Newspaper Association (NASNA). The organization’s objective was to create a more united movement of street papers, uphold ethical standards for street papers, and provide assistance for new paper start-up projects. NASNA hosts an annual conference that includes skills-building workshops and other opportunities.

Helping to further expand the street paper movement, the Internet is making it possible for papers to publish electronically and share information, thus lowering production costs. The Street News Service (SNS) is jointly run by NASNA and AlterNet.org, an online magazine project of the Independent Media Institute. SNS archives features, essays, and news articles written by homeless and low-income writers. The material, which is also carried on AlterNet.org’s website, is collected from street papers nationwide for use in member street paper and alternative publications.

Street papers demonstrate how effectively alternative publications can serve as mouthpieces for marginalized groups. As they educate readers, street papers are bases for further community building and political activism.

—Teresa L. Heinz

Further Reading


**STREET YOUTH AND VIOLENCE**

*Street youth* is a term used to characterize young people who have run away or been expelled from their homes and/or spend all or much of their time in public locations. Most of these youth lack permanent residences, spend a great deal of time without shelter, and suffer from conditions of extreme deprivation. As a result, street youth are forced into risky lifestyles, spending much of their time in dangerous locations, where they often become involved in a range of violent activities, including assaults, robberies, and group fights. Their participation in violence is influenced by a host of factors: family histories, poverty, violent values, violent peers, and other street experiences, among them.

**BACKGROUND FACTORS**

To begin to understand street youth violence, it is important to explore the family backgrounds from which these youth are often drawn. Research suggests that many street youth grow up in families that utilize ineffective child-rearing strategies. First, there is evidence that parents of street youth do not monitor their children effectively and fail to recognize and sanction deviant behavior when it occurs. As a consequence, street youth may fail to develop self-control, leaving them more likely to be insensitive, physical, impulsive, short sighted, risk takers with low frustration tolerance. Evidence suggests that street youth with low self-control are more likely to engage in violent behaviors on the street.

Second, there is evidence that street youth are drawn from families in which there is a great deal of domestic violence. Further, many street youth have been repeatedly physically and/or sexually assaulted while living at home. These violent experiences not only influence street youth’s decisions to leave their homes for the streets, but also increase the likelihood of their being involved in violent offenses once on the street. These backgrounds provide models for aggressive interaction styles and serve to train street youth for violent behavior. Street youth may incorporate their parents’ aggressive behaviors, generalize it to other contexts, and adopt violence as a strategy for settling disputes or gaining compliance from others. These ideas about using violence to solve problems may also evolve into broader values that favor violence, leaving street youth more prone to violent behavior.

**HOMELESSNESS**

The experience of being homeless also increases the likelihood of violence. This relationship can be explained in a number of ways. First, homelessness places street youth in dangerous locations and risky situations in which violence is more likely to occur. Being on the street increases the likelihood that street youth will meet and associate with people who are themselves violent offenders. This exposure to violent offenders increases the probabilities that street youth will become involved in violent altercations. Second, being homeless severs a street youth’s ties to the conventional society. This isolation from the larger society can weaken street youth’s moral constraints and lower the inhibitions that restrict the use of violence.

The poverty associated with homelessness can also contribute to violent behavior on the street. First, the lack of financial resources can lead to violence. The inability to escape the stressful circumstances of homelessness can increase an emotional arousal that is often expressed as anger and can lead to aggressive behavior. Second, there is evidence that perceptions of injustice and unfairness over economic circumstances can generate feelings of resentment and hostility that street youth may express in the form of violent crime. Third, economic factors can motivate instrumental offenses like robbery through which