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## **Are the economically poor information poor? Does the digital divide affect the homeless and access to information?**

**Abstract:** Homeless persons lack economic capital, but it is less clear whether they concomitantly lack important information capital. The basic information needed by the homeless is not available on the Internet as this is information controlled by governmental social services agencies. But does this result in a state of information poverty? This paper examines the issues of how the lack of access to information technology does not affect how the homeless access basic needs level information. The study investigates the information needs of the homeless, information sources, and information-seeking behaviors within the analytical constructs of information outsiders and insiders and the theory of information poverty posed by Chatman. The study explores the differences in information seeking pursuits based on whether the catalyst for the search is internally or externally motivated. Finally, the paper speculates on whether making basic level needs information available via the Internet would be useful and/or used.

Data was gathered from homeless parents in six family shelters in Indianapolis, Indiana, five family shelters in Seattle, Washington, and one family shelter in Greensboro, North Carolina. Twenty in-depth interviews and extensive field note data were content analyzed. The majority of respondents lacked necessary computer skills to access computer-based information; however they did not portray themselves as information poor. Those who had experienced periods of prior homelessness considered themselves information insiders. Those experiencing homelessness for the first time did portray themselves as information outsiders, but this was not tied to the lack of digital information access. Information needs were frequently tied to the need to acquire basic resources and when these resources were in scarce supply, information was not shared among the homeless. If the informant knew of resources needed by another family but this was something they did not need, they readily shared resource information with each other. The main information needs were related to finding permanent, stable housing, helping children (health, education, etc.), finding a job, dealing with finances (bad credit, handling money), and coping with substance abuse and domestic violence.

Information seeking was mainly accomplished by activating social network support resources, although these networks are very small. Most information was accessed through social services caseworkers and friends. Information needs resulting from internal catalysts were frequently more vigorously pursued than those imposed externally, often by social services caseworkers. While some informants portrayed self-protective behaviors others divulged information which could be potentially damaging personally. The majority of informants did not perceive themselves to be devoid of helpful information due to the lack of useful sources.

The homeless may lack needed financial resources, but this does not necessarily translate to a lack of access to their most frequently articulated information needs. Much more research is needed to determine if higher level needs information or other types of information needs are sought by the various homeless sub-populations and whether this lack of access to digital media impedes information seeking.

**Résumé:** Les sans-abri souffrent d'un manque de moyens financiers, mais il est moins facile de déterminer s'ils souffrent également d'un manque d'information. Les informations de base dont les sans-abri ont besoin ne sont pas disponibles sur Internet puisque ces informations sont régies par les services

sociaux gouvernementaux, mais est-ce que cela a pour conséquence de provoquer l'info-pauvreté ? Cet article étudie comment le manque d'accès aux technologies de l'information n'affecte en rien la façon dont les sans-abri se procurent les informations de base dont ils ont besoin. Cette étude examine les besoins informationnels des sans-abri, les sources d'informations et les comportements informationnels à l'intérieur des concepts analytiques informationnels internes et externes et la théorie de l'info-pauvreté proposée par Chatman. Cette étude explore les différences au niveau du repérage d'information selon que l'élément déclencheur de la recherche est une motivation interne ou externe. Finalement, cet article s'interroge sur l'utilité de rendre les différents besoins informationnels de base des sans-abri disponibles sur Internet.

Des données ont été recueillies parmi les parents de six abris familiaux d'Indianapolis, Indiana, de cinq abris de Seattle, Washington et un abri de Greensboro, Caroline du Nord. Le contenu de vingt entrevues en profondeur et d'un très grand nombre de données recueillies sur le terrain a été ensuite examiné. La majorité des répondants ne possédaient pas les habilités informatiques nécessaires pour accéder à l'information numérique, cependant ces personnes ne se considéraient pas comme info-pauvres. Les individus ayant déjà vécu des expériences de sans-abri auparavant se considéraient comme les fournisseurs internes de l'information, alors que les individus se retrouvant sans foyer pour la première fois de leur vie se voyaient plutôt comme les fournisseurs externes de l'information, mais tout cela n'avait aucun lien avec le manque d'accès à l'information numérique.

Les besoins informationnels étaient souvent reliés au besoin d'acquérir les ressources de base et lorsque ces ressources se faisaient rares, l'information était peu partagée parmi les sans-abri. Si l'informateur connaissait les besoins d'une autre famille, mais que ces besoins n'étaient pas vraiment nécessaires, l'information était alors facilement partagée entre eux. Les principaux besoins informationnels concernaient la recherche d'un hébergement permanent et stable, l'aide aux enfants (santé, éducation, etc.), la recherche d'un travail, les transactions financières (mauvais crédit, l'utilisation de l'argent) et la résolution de problèmes de consommation de drogues, d'alcool ou de violence familiale.

Le repérage d'information était principalement accompli par l'utilisation des ressources des réseaux sociaux de soutien, malgré le fait que ces réseaux sont très limités. La majorité des informations sont obtenues grâce aux travailleurs sociaux chargés de cas et par des amis. Les besoins informationnels résultant d'un facteur interne étaient plus fréquemment recherchés que les besoins provoqués par des facteurs externes, souvent par les travailleurs sociaux. Alors que parfois certains informateurs démontrent un comportement d'autoprotection envers l'information, certains autres individus partagent les informations même si cela peut leur être potentiellement préjudiciable. La majorité des informateurs ne se considéraient pas dépourvus de ressources informationnelles malgré le manque évident.

Les sans-abri manquent peut-être de ressources financières de premier ordre, mais cela ne signifie pas une inaccessibilité totale aux sources primaires pouvant combler leurs besoins informationnels de base. Des études supplémentaires sont nécessaires afin de déterminer si des besoins informationnels de plus haut niveau ou d'autres types de besoins informationnels sont recherchés par les diverses sous-populations de sans-abri et si le manque d'accessibilité aux ressources électroniques entrave le repérage d'information.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Since the early to mid-1990s in the United States, the growth of Internet use has raised social concerns as to whether one of the outcomes of access is the bifurcation of "information haves" and "information have-nots" which has come to known as the "digital divide." Information have-nots are most frequently conceptualized as the economic poor. As a result, information policy makers and politicians have focused on funding the connection of public schools and public libraries to the Internet in large numbers as a way of mediating the digital divide. Meraz (2001) notes that "It [the digital divide] is, after all, a trendy topic. As problems go, the digital divide is sexy, and all types of government and institutional leaders like to talk about solving it."

Wiring public funded institutions would thus help close the information gap between the economically disadvantaged, the digital have-nots, and those who can directly access the Internet from home. Underlying this issue is a strong assumption that a lack of access to digital information would lead to information poverty. Current researchers appear to accept that important, valuable, and useful information exists in digital form and is accessible via the Internet and the World Wide Web. Few articles have been written questioning the assumption that the Internet actually provides access to the information that is needed or being sought in everyday life by those living at or under the poverty line in the United States.

The purpose of this paper is *not* to argue whether the digital divide exists or not between the affluent who are financially able to purchase home computers and home Internet access and those unable to afford this technology. Obviously, information access is affected by the lack of Internet connectivity. This paper *will* however, examine how valuable and useful an information-seeking tool the Internet would be in the everyday lives of homeless families.

Three research questions are posed to help clarify these assumptions of the value of digital information to homeless families:

1. What information needs and which information sources are homeless parents pursuing in everyday life?
2. Does a lack of Internet access result in homeless families being "information
3. poor" in terms of their everyday life information seeking?
4. Do homeless parents perceive themselves to be "information poor" because they lack access to digital information?

The paper will first provide some background information on the current state of homelessness in America in order to provide a needed context to analyze the effect of the digital divide. The next section of the paper will review current articles in library and information science literature that discuss the digital divide, particularly the impact on the economically poor. Study methodology, data analysis and study findings will then be presented.

## **2. HOMELESSNESS IN THE UNITED STATES**

Prior to 1980, homelessness in the U.S. was affected primarily by economic conditions. The periods following the Civil War and World War I, and the period of 1880-1910 when large numbers of immigrants arrived in America, were times of economic recession and the result was a concomitant growth in the numbers of the homeless. When the economy improved, the numbers of those experiencing homelessness dropped accordingly.

Post 1980, however, the numbers of those homeless in the U.S. has stayed fairly stable even though during the 1980s and 1990s the economy rose to record levels of productivity and personal wealth. Families have been the fastest growing sub-population of the homeless over the past decade. The Temporary Assistance to Needy Families Act of 1996 (TANF) succeeded the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program. For the homeless, when TANF benefits and food stamps are combined, the result is that families still live below the poverty level in all 50 states (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2002).

In order to understand why this new generation of the homeless are proving to be resistant to economic factors, we must examine the demographics of homelessness, causes of homelessness, and estimates of how many people are homeless.

Although often referred to as a single entity ("the homeless") several sub-populations exist and these differences become important when addressing everyday information needs and information seeking. The demographics of homelessness provide insight:

- Approximately 2 million adults are homeless in the U.S.
- Among single homeless persons, more are male than female
- 40% of homeless adults served in the military
- Mental illness afflicts 22% of homeless adults while 34% experience addiction disorders
- 50% are African American
- 35% are Caucasian
- 12 % are Hispanic
- 2% are Native-American
- only 1 % are Asian
- 25.3% of the urban homeless are children under 18
- 4% are unaccompanied minors
- In 2000, 11.3% of the U.S. population (31.1 million persons) lived below the poverty level
- 1 in 4 homeless persons is employed

Poverty and a lack of affordable housing are primary causes of homelessness although other factors also contribute. A lack of affordable health care, job loss, domestic violence, mental illness and addiction disorders either singly or in combination can lead to persons becoming homeless. Most families are considered "multi-crisis" homeless, meaning that most become homeless due to multiple factors. Treating the underlying causal problems then becomes critical in overcoming homelessness (U.S. Mayors Conference, 2001; National Coalition for the Homeless, 2002).

Currently, the numbers of the homeless seems to be increasing once again due to the downturn in the U.S. economy. Unemployment rates are increasing while others who have lost jobs are finding positions but at lower salaries and benefits. In most cities a minimum wage earner must work 89 hours a week simply to afford a two-bedroom apartment at fair market value at the recommended 30% of income rate.

The homeless lack the needed economic capital to gain stable housing. However, it is less clear what role the digital divide plays in their becoming homeless or remaining homeless.

### **3. LITERATURE ON THE "DIGITAL DIVIDE"**

A search in Library Literature yielded 1028 article hits on the digital divide. The majority of articles focus on the economic aspect of the digital divide and concerns over the social consequences of the separation of information haves and information have-nots. Much of the information is found in the professional library literature. Trends in the literature focus on the numbers of those connected to the Internet and those who are not, the size of the gap, who is connected and who is not, and the government's role and responsibility in bridging the gap. Another major trend in the literature focuses on how libraries can aid in lessening the impact of the digital divide on the poor. The number of research studies found under the heading "digital divide" is small; more of the research-focused studies are found in the area of "social informatics."

Government reports and foundation reports are also well represented in the literature. In "A Nation Online (2001)" the U.S. Department of Commerce reports that as of August 2000, 51% of all U.S. households (53.7 million households) own a personal computer. Of these households, 41.5% have Internet access. Household income plays a major role in whether a computer is owned. In households earning an income above \$75,000, 77.7% own computers and have Internet access. In households earning \$50,000 to \$74, 999, 60.9% are connected to the Internet. Forty-six percent of households earning \$35,000-\$49,000 have access to the Internet. Traditionally underserved populations, although improving in numbers, are still under represented. African-American households represent 23.5% of the connected, 23.6% of Latino families are connected, and 56.8% of Asian Americans access the Internet. Interpretations of this report vary. The current administration portrays the gap as narrowing. Others disagree that the figures represent progress. Reports on the government's role in addressing the digital divide (Dickard, 2002; Benton Foundation 2002) focus on concerns that the perception that conditions have improved so much that programs will be eliminated. Dickard concludes that "Retrenchment on bridging the digital divide will hamper economic development and dampen digital opportunity for disconnected Americans."

The issue of access has been raised by various authors. Blau (2002) states that simply "giving people access to a computer attached to the Internet only begins to get at the divide" and the question of training becomes critical. Libraries are promoted by several authors as ways to aid in reducing the effects of the digital divide. Libraries are more apt to be used by African American and Hispanics to access the Internet (Oder, 2002). As reported earlier, African Americans and

Hispanics are over-represented in the numbers of the homeless so this information might represent a way that underserved information populations are attempting to bridge the digital divide. However, not everyone feels that simply making Internet access available in libraries resolves the digital gap. "[T]he only way we can truly measure the digital divide is by assessing Internet access in the home. The home is where most personal business is conducted and is where the sharpest divide still exists between those who have computers and access to the Internet at home and those that do not "(Digital Divide Still a Concern, 2002).

Authors concerned that the digital divide still exists in the U.S. have gone even further to term the problem as "information apartheid" (Davis, 2001) or a "racial ravine" as Larry Irving, administrator of the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) describes the situation.

Some Americans are opting out of becoming Internet users. According to Lenhart (2003):

- 54% of those not online believe the Internet is a dangerous thing
- 51% of those not online say they do not think they are missing anything by staying away from the Internet
- 39% of those not online say the Internet is too expensive
- 36% of those not online express concern that the online world is a confusing and hard place to negotiate
- "Net Dropouts" make up about 13% of the not-online population. Younger adults are the most likely to have dropped or lost Internet access.
- Net Dropouts are relatively young, tend to have less education than Internet users and come from households with less income
- Seniors are clearly the largest group who are not online with adults 60 or over making up a full 43% of all adults not online.

Lenhart's information is interesting in that the homeless report not connecting to the Internet due to cost, that they are not missing anything, that they find it hard to negotiate and some qualify as "net drop-outs." This opting out of using the Internet also begs the question of whether the digital divide truly is an economic issue as, presumably, those not accessing the Internet could also be considered "information poor."

Finally, although most authors focused on the digital divide and computers, Taglang (2001) reports on a more useful information technology for the homeless. In several cities around the U.S. not-for-profit organizations are providing "communications connections" using low-tech, low-cost voice mail access. Voice mail is "an essential tool for people in search of shelter, jobs and services: a phone number where a potential landlord or employer, a social service worker or child's teacher can leave a message." Shelter residents also receive information on health care, food stamps, and various appointments. Many shelters only have one phone to be used by all the residents and in the past, availability of access to the phone, a lack of privacy for conversation, and poor message taking have been problematic for the homeless. The solution of providing voice mail does not directly address the issue of the digital divide, but does demonstrate that there are low-tech, low-cost solutions that sometimes prove more efficient and effective than Internet access.

#### **4. METHODOLOGY**

A qualitative approach was undertaken to gather data to answer the research questions concerning everyday life information needs, information-seeking behaviors and information sources of the homeless, the lack of Internet access and "information poverty" and whether homeless parents perceived themselves to be information poor.

Data was gathered through interviews and participant observation. Twenty-five in-depth interviews of homeless parents living in shelters in Indianapolis (Indiana), Seattle (Washington) and Greensboro (North Carolina) elicited responses regarding everyday information needs, information-seeking and information sources. Questions posed asked about daily activities, problems being addressed, and sources consulted. Interview data and observation notes were content analyzed using a coding scheme adapted from Dervin's "Information Needs of the Average Citizen" (Hersberger, 2001).

Interview data was also analyzed using a framework developed from Chatman's Theory of Information Poverty (1996), comprised of six propositions that can serve as barriers to finding needed information.

From the data analysis, a pattern emerges of a complex daily existence of homeless parents engaged in efforts to find stable housing for their families, and generally improve their quality of life.

Findings are limited and not generalizable but they may be transferable. The twelve shelters in the study did not provide Internet access, but there might well be shelters that do. Further research is needed to determine whether shelters provide information access and if they do not, why.

#### **5. FINDINGS - INFORMATION NEEDS AND INFORMATION SOURCES**

Everyday life of homeless parents living in shelters in the United States consists primarily of a series of searches for social service resources (such as subsidized housing, healthcare, food stamps, subsidized daycare, etc.) that will provide needed assistance to either maintain the status quo (expressive actions) or to improve their quality of living (instrumental actions). Although emergency shelters provide the base levels needs of food, shelter, and frequently clothing, shelter rules and regulations can be strict and families are working to become autonomous as soon as possible.

The quest for resources mainly focus on the following five areas:

- finding permanent, stable housing
- helping children, family relationships (health, education, etc.)
- finding a job
- repairing bad credit histories, finding more money
- dealing with substance abuse and/or domestic violence.

Other reported resource needs include legal and transportation assistance. Information needs and information seeking behaviors are closely tied to this daily search for needed resources.

This paper does not posit that information does not exist in a digital format that might be of value in aiding homeless parents with their problems. For example, health information might certainly be of value. However, other than for Marla (pseudonym of a participant in Indianapolis) and three families interviewed in Seattle, the majority of the residents interviewed did not view the Internet as a major source of needed information. Marla reported looking up information on Prozac on a public library computer after being prescribed the drug by her doctor. The three families in Seattle were very computer savvy and also used the public library computers to find some information as well as for recreational purposes.

Information sources primarily consist of formal and informal personal sources. Formal sources reported were social service agency personnel, members of the clergy, healthcare officials and education officials. Informal sources consulted consisted of family members and friends. Other shelter residents were also sometimes considered sources of information. In a study that examined the perceived value of information as social capital (see Lin, 2001, for an in depth discussion of social capital) and the utilization of social support networks to generate information capital, Hersberger and Pettigrew (2001) found that the social networks of the homeless families interviewed were small, ranging from 2-21 network contacts. Some of the informants reported that they purposefully kept their social connections to a small number due to past problems with associating with friends who had encouraged negative behaviors (crime, drugs, drinking, etc.). However, the issue for the homeless parents was not necessarily the quantity of information sources, but rather whether they were able to determine which contacts could provide information that led to the gaining or maintaining of needed resources.

Rather surprisingly, the mode of information seeking reported as the most valuable was face-to-face contact. Telephone contact was the second most preferred method. Informants reported that they wanted to have the full attention of the person to whom they were speaking as they were too often put on hold when speaking on the phone, or they perceived that the person on the phone was busy doing other tasks. Informants stated that the most useful interaction would be to speak with a person face to face and to then receive needed information in writing, especially when directions or instructions were involved.

The distinction between formal and informal personal information sources is somewhat blurred for shelter residents. Informants, when mapping their information capital sources on a social network map, often placed shelter staff, social service agency staff, and clergy staff as "friends." Often, the manner in which staff personnel listened to their problems and needs and responded determined a sense of value and even sense of friendship.

The welfare system in the United States requires that recipients maintain contact with various social workers and these "caseworkers" often require recipients to gather information in order to receive needed services. For example, before a family can receive a Section VIII (subsidized housing) voucher, they often must prove that they have sought other forms of housing assistance and that they have been turned down for that assistance. Many such information needs are

generated by others, not by the homeless parent. Some parents resent being made to do what they see as frustrating searches, especially to document that they have been rejected by certain service providers. Information seeking seemed to be more energetically pursued when the catalyst for doing so was internally motivated rather than externally. Informants reported that it was discouraging to have to spend a lot of time and energy "tracking down a piece of paper that just says you aren't good enough to help" said one informant.

Some emergency shelters identify information needs and then bring in an expert to provide information in an attempt to help resolve some problems. Often these are mandatory meetings. The researcher observed a few information sessions in Indianapolis shelters. One session was focused on dealing with a bad credit history. A local bank official explained the process of setting up an account to fund a secured credit card. Several of the residents napped through the session while another resident was enthusiastically supporting the idea, although she made it clear that she did not know how she would accumulate the \$300 recommended to establish the account. Another resident participated only by commenting frequently that credit was an evil thing and that she would never, ever, use credit to purchase anything. One other resident loudly proclaimed that only \$85.00 (for outstanding back rent payments) stood between her staying and leaving the shelter and if she had the money, she wouldn't still be in the shelter. Informants *did* mention having bad credit histories as a problem, but what they were seeking was *not* information on repairing credit histories, but rather money to pay the bills. Out of 22 people attending the session, only one seemed to present an attitude of wanting to know this information. When asked later about the session, residents said it was a waste of time, that they could have been out looking for housing rather than listening to someone tell them how to do something they couldn't possibly do. They did indicate that they appreciated the attempt to help, but they reported having too much to do to waste time this way (field notes). An information session on birth control, presented by Planned Parenthood, had a lively discussion, but it was unclear whether residents were convinced that using a female condom would work for them. A third mandatory session topic was on domestic violence. The males in attendance declared that they didn't need this information, that they did not abuse their wives. Again, some of the women entered into the discussion but the point they made was that they would never let a man treat them like that. In an interview with a shelter director in Greensboro, Mark Sumerford (personal communication, March 26, 2003) reported that his shelter had ceased to hold such sessions as residents resisted attending the meetings and failed to pay attention to guest speakers. However, when a resident asked for information on dealing with domestic violence, shelter staff would provide contact resources and reported that often residents followed through on information seeking at an individual level. More research is needed to examine catalysts that result in information seeking, especially when the catalyst is generated internally by the individual or externally by others.

Resource assistance for the homeless is limited. The demand for aid far exceeds what the federal, state, and local government agencies can provide. Other non-profit agencies, some state but mainly local entities, attempt to fill the unmet needs of homeless families, but requests still far outpace availability. Due to this excess of need, some social service agencies tend not to overly publicize availability of resources in fear of being overrun with requests. Other agencies might have a web presence in order to publicize available services, but the homeless interviewed often acquired this same information through caseworkers or other personal contacts rather than

thinking to look for it online. Interestingly, social service agency personnel reported that sometimes they found information about local resources online but mainly they heard about resources from other agency staff members.

Shelter residents interviewed and observed consistently sought information from interpersonal sources in order to gain resources to help with finding housing, finding jobs, dealing with education problems, dealing with health problems and finding support from family and friends in dealing with relationship problems. Although the residents, with the exception of families at one shelter in Seattle, did not seek information on the Internet, some shelter and social service agency staff did and they shared this information with those with whom they were working. As such, homeless parents in emergency family shelters seldom seek information on the Internet. Does this disconnect result in information poverty? Do the shelter residents feel that they are information have-nots in general, and specifically, do they feel that a lack of Internet access plays a role in being labeled an information have-not?

## **6. FINDINGS - INFORMATION POVERTY**

Chatman's (1996) work on information insiders and information outsiders established six propositions that examine reasons that people fail to acquire needed information. Each of the six propositions is analyzed individually to determine whether homeless parents are information poor and whether the lack of access to the Internet might also result in their being affected by the digital divide.

*Proposition 1:* People who are defined as information poor perceive themselves to be devoid of any sources that might help them.

When asked whether they felt that a lack of information sources existed in their daily lives, most homeless shelter residents reported that they felt that they had access to plenty of information. Others reported they felt overwhelmed by the amount of information given them by shelter staff, social service agency staff, clergy, and health care providers. No one reported that a lack of information contributed to his or her everyday problems. What they emphatically reported was that a lack of resources was the issue. Getting a list of landlords that accept subsidized housing vouchers was easy; finding a place to rent was hard due to low availability.

*Proposition 2:* Information poverty is partially associated with class distinction. That is, the condition of information poverty is influenced by outsiders who withhold privileged access to information.

A distinct bifurcation emerged concerning a sense of being an information insider or outsider beyond the distinction posited here by Chatman. Shelter residents who had experienced homelessness before, or had been involved with the welfare system previously, established themselves as information insiders in terms of "knowing the system." Those experiencing homelessness for the first time and/or having to seek welfare supports for the first time, presented themselves very much as information outsiders. However, some residents did report that they felt that some staff members at the various agencies withheld information and/or resources based on their "playing favorites" with various families. The researcher was unable to

document whether this was simply a perception that helped with coping with rejection, or whether staff members did make decisions based on whom they "liked" or "disliked." Again, the link between information needs and resource needs was extremely close.

*Proposition 3:* Information poverty is determined by self-protective behaviors, which are used in response to social norms.

Again, results were mixed in terms of the use of self-protective behaviors resulting in a lack of information gained. In order to gain needed resources from social service agencies, residents were quite used to discussing their problems. As a result, residents often volunteered information on sensitive topics to the researcher. One resident told the researcher that her fiancé was sought on a bench warrant by the courts issued for failing to show up in court. When he arrived at the shelter, the resident asked the researcher if she wanted to come and meet him (field notes). Protective behavior would have resulted in not sharing such information with the researcher. Few residents seemed to invoke self-protective behaviors with staff members, although they often complained about other shelter residents being nosy and wanting to know "their business."

*Proposition 4:* Both secrecy and deception are self-protecting mechanisms due to a sense of mistrust regarding the interest or ability of others to provide useful information.

Similar to the response to Proposition 3, secrecy and deception are seldom employed when interacting with those providing information or resources, especially if they lead to a denial of needed services. Deception is more likely attempted to gain information or resources for which that the informant was not eligible.

*Proposition 5:* A decision to risk exposure about our true problems is often not taken due to a perception that negative consequences outweigh benefits.

Problems concerning housing, employment, and healthcare for children were areas where risk of exposure concerning true problems were not a consideration when sharing or seeking information. However, information seeking and information sharing concerning domestic violence, substance abuse, legal issues, and bad credit were sometimes more problematic. Again, there was less reluctance to seek or share information with resource providers than with other shelter residents. For example, shelter residents often reported that they shared sensitive information with shelter staff and the public health nurse that they did not want the others in the shelter to know about. The need for information or resource assistance outweighed the concern over possible negative consequences.

*Proposition 6:* New knowledge will be selectively introduced into the information world of poor people. A condition that influences this process is the relevance of that information in response to everyday problems and concerns.

This final proposition is directly relevant to the issue of homelessness and the digital divide. Homeless parents living in emergency family shelters with their families perceived little that was relevant to their efforts to find stable subsidized housing, employment, subsidized daycare, food stamps, transportation or legal needs on the Internet. Some did not know how to access the

Internet, others had some experience but perceived that the local nature of social service providers made searching the Internet for help with problems a luxury in terms of time spent rather than a necessity. Transportation to a library to access the Internet was a problem for some of those residents who knew how to access digital information.

When asked if they felt information poor, none of the residents answered in the affirmative. If anything, they felt they might be suffering from information overload due to the propensity of service providers to share information with them whether sought directly or not. When asked if they felt that a lack of access to the Internet had a negative impact on their information seeking efforts, all except the three living in the one Seattle shelter, reported that they felt the impact to be minimal. The Seattle residents used the Internet at the local public library to seek information on employment, healthcare and "whatever they wanted to find." Three residents of the 22 interviewed enjoyed using the Internet, mainly for more recreational information seeking (information about television shows, music and movies for example). The other residents reported that gaining needed resources was tied to interacting in person with various personnel of local agencies so they saw little need to waste time trying to get to the library to use a computer. Those who had used the Internet previously expressed some concern over the credibility of information found on the Internet. Health information was the main type of information identified in relation to this question. Medicaid assistance allowed residents to gain access to healthcare professionals as needed, but more frequently information dealing with specific needs (a child with chickenpox, for example) was sought from shelter staff, other mothers in the shelter, relatives or friends. Credibility was established and the information exchanged became trusted due to the experience factor related to an information source who had just undergone the same problem.

In summary, homeless parents living in emergency family shelters did not perceive themselves to be either information poor or affected directly by the lack of access to digital information. One resident actually became agitated at the questioning stating, "I'm so tired of people thinking just because we're poor we ain't got nothing. I know lots of stuff. I ask people lots of questions all the time. Just cause I don't have much money don't mean much- I got a lot of love for my kids and that's all that matters." (Monique, field notes)

## **7. CONCLUSIONS**

The homeless lack sufficient economic resources to live in stable housing with their families. The literature on the digital divide most frequently identifies the economically disadvantaged as being most vulnerable to negative affects from the inability to find needed information in electronic formats.

This study provides some insights into the background of homelessness in the United States and also into the everyday life information seeking of homeless parents living in emergency shelters. The parents observed and interviewed did perceive themselves to be negatively affected by limited access to the Internet.

Reasons given for not using the Internet at the public library included transportation difficulties, not knowing how to use the Internet, and a concern for privacy. Only 6 of the 25 residents interviewed reported having sought information in digital form. Three reported using the Internet at the library 2 or more times a week. Of the 19 other residents interviewed, most said that they didn't know how to use computers very well. Shelter residents without a high school diploma were most likely to not have sought digital information. However, they did note that their children were learning how to use computers at school and that they would ask them to help if they felt they needed to find something on the Internet.

Of the current generation of students learning how to find information using computers in school, some will become homeless and they might seek more access to digital information more than the adults observed in this study. A study conducted by Mehra, Bishop, Bazzell and Smith (2002) aimed to improve access to health information and services for Black women. Collaborative efforts between the Afya project and a grassroots group called SisterNet provided awareness of health services and information that are available through digital technologies. Training current shelter residents to find digital information is a possibility. But first the individuals would need to determine that the pursuit would be relevant to some need.

None of the shelters where research access was granted provided access to the Internet although some did have computers for residents to use to type resumes and for children to do homework or practice typing. When asked why a local shelter did not provide Internet access, a director replied, "Two reasons. The first is cost, of course. The second is, most just don't want to have to deal with the problem of access questionable sites on the Internet" (Mark Sumerford, personal communication, March 26, 2003).

In the future, as more computer literate children grow up and become homeless, there could be a higher demand for access to digital information technologies. For now, the lack of access to digital information does not seem to negatively affect the everyday life of homeless parents. Having access to the Internet would be a luxury, but it is not perceived as a need at this time.

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