

# UNDERSTANDING HOMELESSNESS IN UNITED STATES : INSIGHT FROM THE HOMELESS TO HARVARD'S FILM

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## ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the factors that cause people to become homeless in the United States based on the analysis of the film "Homeless to Harvard". In addition, this study also aims to identify the motivation of the main character to overcome the factors that cause homelessness, as depicted in the film Homeless to Harvard's Film.

This study uses a qualitative approach because it allows researchers to explore the factors that cause homelessness. This qualitative approach is suitable because it allows researchers to explore the factors that cause homelessness in the United States. The data collection method used is observation, by watching films, recording relevant information, and storing evidence in the form of screen images. In addition, researchers also conducted a search for relevant literature to support the analysis of the problem. The theory used in this study uses 2 theories, namely, Sociology theory and the theory of three needs (David McClelland's). Sociology theory is used to determine the factors that cause homelessness and the theory of three needs (David McClelland) is used to determine the motivation of the main character to overcome homelessness. The data for this study consists of two types: primary data and secondary data. Primary data was obtained from the film "Homeless to Harvard" released on April 7, 2003, which is the main source for understanding the phenomenon of homelessness. While secondary data was obtained from various sources such as books, journals, and articles that support the analysis of the main problem.

A brief explanation of the results of this study are as follows. There are 4 factors that cause homelessness in the film. The factors that cause homelessness are poverty, drugs, economic problems, health problems and domestic violence. While the aspects that motivate the main characters in this film show a strong drive to achieve success through

the need for achievement, the need for affiliation, and the need for power. Thus, this study provides valuable insight into the complexity of the homeless problem in the United States and highlights the importance of collaborative efforts in addressing this problem.

Keywords: Homelessness, United States, Social Issues

## A. Introduction

Homelessness almost always involves people suffering desperate situations and extreme hardship. They frequently face intense pressure, substance misuse disorders, untreated mental illnesses, or unexpected repercussions of well-intentioned regulations since they must make decisions from a relatively small pool of options. In addition, According to Amore et al. (2013), rough sleeping, couch surfing, and living in shelters, women's refuges, automobiles, caravans, and tents are all considered to be forms of homelessness.

Homelessness is a problem that has recently gotten worse in the United States (Khatana et al. 2020). In the United States, more than millions people become homeless in a single night. According to The Council of Economic Advisors (2019), there were more than 500,000 homeless persons sleeping on the streets every night between 2007 and 2019. These people are most frequently seen in the central business districts of major US cities. Many of these people may be dealing with chronic homelessness, a state that has been the norm for them after experiencing it for a number of years. The prevalence of chronic homelessness has been well documented by volunteers and staff in homeless shelters.

According to the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) saw significant financial cuts in the 1980s, the number of people who were homeless increased by 200,000–500,000 per night (Jencks 1995). According to recent statistics, one American out of every 25 has at least once been homeless (Tsai 2018). Every year from 2007 to 2015, as housing costs increased in several cities, more people became homeless (Koh and O'Connell 2016). More than 130,000 persons received individual assistance from shelters in New York in 2018, a 59% increase from the preceding ten years (Coalition for the Homeless 2019).

Homeless to Harvard is a biographical film that narrates the remarkable journey of a woman named Liz Murray. The film tells the true story of Liz's struggles, experiencing a challenging childhood amidst a family facing numerous difficulties. Her father was a drug addict, while her mother also battled mental illness. Consequently, Liz found herself living as a homeless person on the streets of New York City.

Despite encountering various obstacles, Liz had a strong determination to change her destiny. She decided to reconstruct her life and immersed herself in education. The story encompasses Liz's journey to attain higher education, especially at Harvard University, an extraordinary achievement given her challenging background. The film captures Liz's resilience, endurance, and fighting spirit in overcoming poverty and the instability of her family. "Homeless to Harvard" inspires audiences with a message of hope and motivation, illustrating that the desire to learn and achieve dreams can overcome any obstacle.

## B. Methodology

This study is conducted to seek out the factors that cause homelessness people in the United States and motivate of the main character to overcome the factors that cause homelessness based on *Homeless to Harvard's*. Therefore, this research chose a qualitative approach. Craswell (2018) stated that qualitative research is a process to examine and comprehend the significance that different people or organizations assign to a social or human issue.

In this study, the writer uses two types of data to support the research, that is the primary data and the second data. In Primary Data, the writer collects the data source from scene and dialogue in *Homeless to Harvard* movie. The scene and dialogue in the

movie *Homeless to Harvard* are taken from the official website [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com). And then the secondary data is used to ease, support, and help the writer for analysing the main problem. In this research, the writer uses the secondary data from many sources such as books, journals, and articles.

In this research, the writer uses the observation method to collect the data for providing the relevant research. In collecting the data, the first thing that the writer does is searching, downloading, watching and saving the screenshot evidence of data obtained from the film *Homeless to Harvard*. The second thing is looking for several books, journals, articles, and similar undergraduate thesis that relate with research (Yin, 2011).

In this study, the writer uses the same or one subject but it will be analysed with more than one discipline. Based on the multidisciplinary approach, this research is going to comprise two theories. This research uses two main theories, namely sociological theory, and motivation theory. Sociological theory focuses on the study of society and the relationship between individuals and their social environment. In the context of my research, sociological theory can help me analyze how social factors affect the life and journey of the main character in the film, and Motivation theory is concerned with the factors that drive individuals to act and achieve their goals. In the context of the movie "*Homeless to Harvard*", motivation theory can help me understand what factors motivate the main characters to strive to overcome adversity and achieve their dreams.

## **C. Results and Discussion**

In this chapter, the writer would like to discuss the result of research. The writer will present the result of research in this chapter in some parts. The first analysis aims to find out the factors that cause homelessness based on *Homeless to Harvard*' Movie. The second analysis is about the psychological motivation of the main character to overcome homeless.

### **1. Factors that Cause of Homelessness**

In the film "*Homeless to Harvard*," various factors contributing to homelessness in the United States are depicted through the life of the protagonist, Liz Murray. Some key triggers for homelessness include health issues, substance addiction, economic insecurity, and domestic violence.

News about homelessness in the United States is increasingly being reported, published in several journals and even in the form of films. One of the Films covering homeless life in the United States is *Homeless to Harvard*. The results of the research on the meaning of the messages in the film *Homeless to Harvard*, which depicts various forms of homelessness, are reflected in several scenes within it. Based on the types of homelessness depicted, the researcher categorizes the scenes, including:

#### **a) Homelessness due to drug addiction**

Homelessness and addiction frequently coexist, and many people dealing with both difficulties are unable to receive the assistance they require. Homelessness-related pressures can lead to substance misuse. Addiction, on the

other hand, can increase the likelihood of homelessness. Furthermore, many homeless persons suffer from addiction and other co-occurring psychiatric issues, which can exacerbate their living conditions.

According to the National Coalition for the Homeless, homeless persons are more likely to suffer from substance misuse than non-homeless people. In many cases, substance misuse is caused by the stress of homelessness, not the other way around. Many people start using drugs or alcohol to deal with the difficulties of homelessness. This is demonstrated through the interactions of the characters in the film, which are built through the existing scenes, namely, scene



Picture 3. 1 (1.16-1.25) Scene Homeless due to drug addiction (source: <https://youtu.be/O0vbIvUSVaA?si=6Hv2ZUQ728jRvBxT>)

No	Visual	Dialog
1	The initial scene shows cigarette use and drug addiction.	“I loved my mother so much she wa a drug addict”
2	Scene of the film depicts the use of illegal drugs and injections, which represents the process of drug abuse.	“She was an alcoholic she was legally blind she was a schizphrenic”

One factor that led the main character Lizz Murray to experience hardships was her mother's addiction to drugs. In the opening scenes of the film, Liss's mother snatches money from her sibling's hand to buy drugs, even though that money was intended for their daily needs. Because of this, they were evicted from their home as they couldn't afford rent and house taxes. This also serves as one of the main factors contributing to homelessness in the United States.

### b) Homelessness due to Economic factors

Examining systematic racial, ethnic, and gender disparities in the United States economy, as well as access to government social infrastructure and income support programs--inequities that impede our economy's full development potential and societal well-being.

Homelessness is the most obvious and shocking manifestation of housing insecurity in the United States, yet millions more individuals live in precarious housing situations throughout the country. These financially vulnerable adults and families sometimes have to double or treble up in homes designated for single families or individuals. Many people are staying in their automobiles, outside encampments, or in makeshift shelters. Many others are only one paycheck or emergency away from losing their flat or house. Just as depicted in the movie

"Homeless to Harvard," where the main character couldn't afford proper food, decent clothing, and even had to sleep at the bus station.



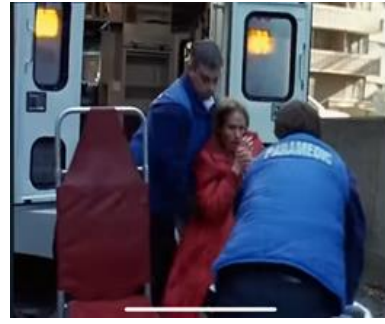
Picture 3. 2Scene (6.20 & 36.50m) Homelessness due to economic factors (source : <https://youtu.be/O0vbIvUSVaA?si=I8A3utnV55OoU6ro>)

No	Visual	Dialog
1	The scene shows Lizz Murray starving and eating leftovers in a garbage can.	“-“
2	scene shows lizz murray sleeping on the street.	“ _”

### c) Homelessness due to Illness

An injury or sickness might begin as a health condition but soon escalate into an employment issue owing to missing too much time from work, depleting sick leave, and/or being unable to keep a regular schedule or execute work functions. This is especially true for physically demanding occupations like construction, manufacturing, and other labor-intensive sectors. The loss of job due to bad health creates a vicious cycle: without finances to pay for health care (treatment, drugs, surgery, etc.), one cannot heal and return to work, and if one continues unwell, it is difficult to restore employment. Without money from employment, an accident or illness rapidly becomes a housing issue.

Once these personal safety nets are depleted, there are typically few choices for assistance with health care or housing. Finally, bad health can result in unemployment, poverty, and homelessness. Homelessness can result from an acute physical or behavioral health crises, as well as any long-term handicapping disease, and it can worsen chronic medical disorders. Chronic homelessness can occur when a person's health condition becomes incapacitating and permanent housing becomes too difficult to sustain without assistance. These scenes were chosen because they depict racial practices that occur regularly in society. The stark depiction of destitution in these sequences influences their selection. The director's choice of sequences illustrating different types of homelessness is based on their separation and classification inside the film Homeless to Harvard.



Picture 3. 3 scene (8.41-9.00m) Homelessness due to Illness(source : <https://youtu.be/O0vbIvUSVaA?si=6Hv2ZUQ728jRvBxT>)

No	Visual	Dialog
1	The scene show the mother of Lizz crying while saying she is suffering.	"I have AIDS"
2	The scene shows Mom Lizz being taken down by paramedics because of AIDS	"-"

In the Homeless to Harvard's Film, Liz grew up caring for her mother, who has HIV and uses drugs to cope with the agony. She spends every penny on drugs, while her children go hungry and eat out of garbage. She doesn't care as long as she gets her medications since she can't live without them, and despite her constant acting out, her girls, particularly Liz, adore her. Liz does her best to survive by living in abandoned apartments and eating out of trash, and she occasionally goes to school. Her flat is disorganized and unclean. Drugs were everywhere. It was usual for her to go into the kitchen and observe her parents injecting narcotics into their veins. Her parents were so desperate for a solution that they would sell everything for a little extra money. At the start of the film, her sister and mother are squabbling about the assistance money they have left. The girls claim to be hungry, but the mother takes the money from Liz's hand and convinces her that she "needs" the medications before smiling. The grin warmed Liz's heart and demonstrated how much she adores her mother.

#### d) Homelessness due to domestic violence

Youth, single adults, and homeless families are more likely to have experienced domestic abuse. For many, it is the direct cause of their homelessness. Survivors of domestic abuse may resort to homeless support agencies for a secure place to remain after exiting an abusive relationship. Others may resort to homeless support organizations because they lack the financial wherewithal to find or keep accommodation after leaving an abusive relationship.

Domestic abuse is a key contributing factor to America's homelessness. "Data is limited, but recent statistics suggest that on a single night in January 2016, 12 percent of the overall homeless population, 70,000 people, reported having experienced domestic violence at some point," according to the National Alliance to End Homelessness. "According to a research conducted in New York City, one in every five families suffered domestic abuse in the five years prior to entering shelter. 88 percent of families that experienced domestic abuse in the previous five years said it contributed to their homelessness 'a lot.'" As shown in the film,

Lizz Murray's encounter with violence in a public place resulted in several incidents of physical assault.



Picture 3. 4 Scene(2.30-2.45m) Homeless due to domestic violence (source : <https://youtu.be/O0vbIvUSVaA?si=6Hv2ZUQ728jRvBxT>)

No	Visual	Dialog
1	The scene where Lizz Murray experiences violence by two individuals.	“get out of here”
2		

### 1. Aspect that Motivate the Main Character

Liz Murray had to face difficult conditions, her mother was diagnosed with HIV and she was going to move to her grandfather's house. Because of the condition of her father who was unemployed and the house was very dirty, messy and unkempt and also reports from the school that Liz Murray Murray never went to school, finally officers from the social service finally decided to send Liz Murray to a children's shelter. In this place the conditions were much worse. Liz Murray was sometimes the victim of bullying seniors at the shelter. She also had to see acts of torture and even murder attempts from fellow shelter residents.

Unable to bear the conditions, Liz Murray finally had to run away from the place and join her mother at her grandfather's house. At her grandfather's house, Liz Murray enjoyed being with her mother again and started hanging out with her school friends. But as her mother's condition continued to deteriorate Liz Murray had to take care of her mother and again, she had to sacrifice her schooling. Her grandfather's temperament also led to Liz Murray being kicked out of the house and that's when at the age of 15 Liz Murray officially became homeless. Together with her school friend Chris (Makyla Smith) who is also homeless they live on the street, at bus stops, subway stations and anywhere they can shelter by relying on people's gifts by begging to survive. Sometimes they both have to steal from convenience stores to make ends meet. Amazingly, while homeless and uncertain about her future, Liz Murray didn't stop to read anything and everywhere.

A few days later when she was going to see her mother, she found out that her mother had died. The burial was even simpler and in very poor condition. But apparently this was the turning point for Liz Murray. Liz realized that it was time to pay attention and care for herself and her own future. Liz finally decided to go back to school and she chose to stay with Eva, the woman who gave her the encyclopaedias and told her not to be an idiot.



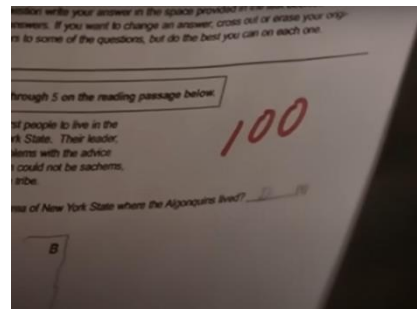
The next day she went to the school to enrol but she was late, an hour after the appointment made with the school. The excuses she tried to make about her lateness were not accepted. He was told by the school admin that the class was almost full and had been running for 3 weeks. But he managed to convince the admin that he really needed the opportunity to go to school. Eventually she was given the opportunity to speak to David, the decision maker, who was teaching. While waiting for David Liz Murray filled out her form and even wrote the required essay.

After teaching David was busy and did not receive Liz again. But Liz asked for only 30 seconds to talk to David. David said students should write a long essay and Liz showed that she had written it. Finally, David gave Liz the opportunity to speak. During the talk, Liz Murray explained her family background and her educational background. Liz explained well and even managed to convince David that she was smart, she could succeed but she needed the opportunity to be accepted into school. Liz Murray succeeded in making David sympathize with Liz. Eventually she was accepted.

#### a) Need of Achievement

Need for achievement are reflected the desire to undertake tasks that can be individually measured is evident in individuals driven by a strong need for achievement. Such individuals thrive on setting and attaining challenging objectives, often taking calculated risks to reach their goals. They appreciate receiving regular feedback on their progress and accomplishments and often prefer working independently.

In the film “Homeless to Harvard “Liz Murray demonstrates a high level of need for achievement. Despite coming from a difficult background and facing major challenges such as the loss of her parents, homelessness and an uncertain future, she is determined to succeed. Her intelligence and achievements in school are concrete evidence of her internal drive for high achievement.



Picture 3.5 Scene need of achievement (11.41) source:  
<https://youtu.be/O0vbIvUSVaA?si=XBCnnLCfOe2WdvX3>

No	Visual	Dialog
1	The scene when Liz Murray is a teenager and decides to go back to school after a long period of dropping out due to family problems.	<p>“-Teacher: how did you do that, you are never in school</p> <p>-Lizz Murray: I read a lot</p> <p>-Teacher: What do you read?</p> <p>-Lizz Murray: Encyclopedia”</p>

## b) Need of Affiliation

Individuals motivated by affiliation thrive in group settings where they can integrate seamlessly with the team rather than working independently. They tend to avoid uncertainty and risk, preferring to steer clear of situations where others may be endangered. They prioritize membership within a group and seek approval, often aligning their actions with the desires of other group members. Collaboration is preferred over competition.

Although Liz Murray experiences loneliness and loss, especially after losing her mother and living as a homeless person, there is also an inner need for social affiliation and relationships. She found emotional support from the people around her, such as Eva who gave her an encyclopedia and Dona who gave her a place to stay and The scene where Liz gets support and encouragement from a school counselor who notices her living situation. This shows Liz's need to feel accepted and connected to others.



Picture 3.5 Scene Need of Affiliation (56.10) Source  
: <https://youtu.be/O0vbIvUSVaA?si=lnfq1ybc85LSkkxg>

No	Visual	Dialog
1	The scene where Liz gets support and encouragement from a school counselor who notices her living situation. This shows Liz's need to feel accepted and connected to others.	<p>“-Teacher: Well, your grades are very good in elementary school</p> <p>-Lizz Murray: I know I’m smart I just have need the chance</p> <p>-Teacher: We have to meeting with your parent legal guardian, you get it</p>

**c) Need of Power**

The depicted need is evident in individuals who seek to exert influence over others. These individuals strive to be regarded as significant and possess a desire to direct and impact others, focusing on leveraging personal strengths and controlling others' actions. They enjoy orchestrating the efforts of multiple individuals to advance their objectives.

Although the need for power does not seem to be as prominent in Liz's struggle, in this context, her desire to change her own life and then impact others can be interpreted as a drive to influence situations and people around her. She took control of her own life, refused to be a victim of a difficult environment, and then inspired others with her life story.



*Picture 3.6 Scene Need of Power (1.22.23) Source :<https://youtu.be/O0vbIvUSVaA?si=34ROvxFVFOJey6c->*

No	Visual	Dialog
1	The scene where Liz gives the commencement speech at Harvard and the story of her struggle inspired many people. It reflects Liz's influence and power to motivate others.	<p>Everythings changed my life will never be the same and I don't know what else to say except for thank u</p> <p>Journalist : How'd you do this?</p> <p>Lizz Murray : My parent show me what the alternative was didn't</p> <p>Journalist: You ever fell sorry for yourself,kinda sleeping in subways,eating out of dumpsters</p> <p>Liss Murray: That had always been in my life,and I feel that I got lucky because any sense of security pulled out for under me so I was forced to look forward. I had to there was not going back and I reached where point that I just thought ,alright im gonna work as hard as possibly can and see what happens and now im going to collage and new York times going to say is going to say</p>

## D. Conclusion

In this study, the researcher has analyzed the factors that cause homelessness and what motivations influence the main character to overcome the factors that cause homelessness in the film *Homeless to Harvard*. The researcher concluded that there are several factors that cause homelessness.

The first factor that causes the main character Lizz Murray to experience difficulties is her mother who is (1) addicted to drugs. In the opening scene of the film, Lizz's mother snatches money from her sister to buy drugs, even though the money is intended for daily needs. Because of this, they were evicted from the house because they were unable to pay rent and taxes. This is also one of the main factors that causes homelessness in the United States. (2) Economic factor, Figure 3.8 as explained above, the scene shows how Lizz and her sister struggle with their mother to get money, so that the money can be used to buy food. However, when her mother gets money, she lies and leaves the house to buy drugs. Lizz, who follows her mother, then satisfies her hunger when she finds bread in the trash, and is also seen sleeping on the streets. (3) Health factor problems. Health is closely related to economic problems. Poor health can lead to job loss, which in turn worsens health conditions due to difficulties in accessing healthcare. One example of a scene that might reflect this is when Liz or a member of her family experiences serious health problems and cannot afford medical care. In such a scene, it might be shown that Liz or a member of her family falls ill or has an accident, but they do not have health insurance or sufficient funds to pay for medical care. This can lead to them going into further debt or losing their home due to having to use the money for urgent medical expenses. Picture 3.9 shows paramedics arriving at Liz's home to take her sick mother to the hospital due to complications from HIV. In the scene, it might be shown that Liz's family is panicking and anxious as they realize that her mother is getting sicker due to her illness. There might be an emotional moment where Liz feels hopeless or confused about how to deal with the situation.

Such a scene would highlight the additional challenges that Liz and her family face, in addition to the economic hardship, namely the serious health problems and the impact that this has on their lives. (4) Domestic violence factor, the film highlights the instability in Liz's family life caused by a variety of issues, including domestic violence. One scene that may reflect the impact of domestic violence is when Liz or her family members experience intense conflict or arguments in their home. While not directly showing acts of violence, the scene may indicate that their home environment is not safe or stable due to the ongoing conflict.

The second is the aspect that motivates the main character to overcome homelessness. (1) Need for achievement, in this film, the need for achievement is reflected in Liz's determination and efforts to improve her life despite facing great challenges. Despite being raised in difficult circumstances and being homeless, Liz has a dream of achieving a higher education. She sets a goal to enter a prestigious university like Harvard, and she works hard to achieve it despite the difficult environmental conditions. (2) Need for affiliation, The need for relatedness is reflected in Liz's relationships with several people who help her during her life journey, especially with her best friend, Chris. Even though she lives in difficult conditions, she still finds emotional support from the people around her, which gives her the drive to keep going. Picture 3.5 shows scene where Liz gets support and encouragement from a school counselor who notices her living situation. This shows Liz's need to feel accepted and connected to others. (3) Need for power does not seem to be as prominent in Liz's struggle, in this context, her desire to change her own life and then impact others can be interpreted as a drive to influence situations and people around her. She took control

of her own life, refused to be a victim of a difficult environment, and then inspired others with her life story.

The story of Liz Murray in "Homeless to Harvard" provides inspiration for overcoming homelessness through determination, perseverance, and a love for education. Despite facing life difficulties on the streets, Liz remained focused on education, eventually becoming the top student in her class and attending Harvard. Her journey demonstrates that hard work and dedication can help individuals overcome life challenges, even those stemming from homelessness.

In conclusion, the film "Homeless to Harvard" highlights the importance of addressing the root causes of homelessness and implementing comprehensive and sustainable solutions. By working together, government, non-governmental organizations, and communities can help individuals like Liz Murray overcome homelessness and build a better life.

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