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An insider's account of homelessness

By Steve Heilig

If all of the homeless people in the United States formed their own city, its population would be very close to that of San Francisco -- about 750,000. About 40 percent of those people are part of homeless families. And many, many more people would be moving in and out of the "homeless city" as their economic and other circumstances improved or decayed.

Such big numbers are an abstraction, but every person has a life story. Lisa Gray-Garcia recounts hers in her memoir "Criminal of Poverty: Growing Up Homeless in America," and how any reader reacts to it may tell more about the reader than the author.

Born the daughter of a successful but "very odd" surfer-psychiatrist who abandons his family in Los Angeles when she is 4 years old, Gray-Garcia recalls this period as the end of a "mini-chapter of privilege, comfort and security" for her mother, whose own mother struggled with a lifetime of poverty, and writes that "at four years old I wasn't really sure what happened, I just wanted my mama to stop crying."

Thus begins their saga of scrabbling to keep any kind of home, moving to Fresno, Mexico, back to Los Angeles and then up to the San Francisco Bay Area in the 1980s. Lisa and her mother attempt businesses such as making and selling clothes, to stores and on the street, with marginal success but are beset by constant setbacks from borderline slumlords, overdue bills, police, broken cars, illness without health insurance and various human predators, "crisis building upon crisis," as she summarizes the vicious circle.

Lisa skips a whole year of school to bring in money, resorts to shoplifting and gets busted, and learns many ways of hustling for survival short of actual prostitution. In fact, she avoids any sort of entanglements with men. Hearing the voices of schoolgirls, she recalls longing "to worry about my clothes, homework, boys. ... The desperate bone-aching desire to be normal, to go back to school, to have friends, and to not have to worry about money ever again."

Instead, she keeps working at selling T-shirts (illegally), eventually on Telegraph Avenue in Berkeley, where she again gets arrested for overdue parking and "fix-it" tickets, or DWP -- "driving while poor." She dreams of suicide and violence, and, when she is called "trash" by a landlord, "I just cringed, agreeing with his assessment as most beaten down people do, loathing myself and my mother for our poverty even more than he did."

After yet another eviction, one she calls illegal, Lisa and her mother decided to move into places "without paying any money at all. I later found out this was called 'squatting,' and it had been done successfully by other very low-income families and later transformed through several forms of resistance into something called 'homesteading.' "

From her now-politicized language, this might be seen as a turning point for Lisa. Although she has always worked hard to support her dysfunctional mother, they both

begin to see their struggle in a broader context, via courses they visit at local colleges and "personal-as-political" art projects they mount in their storefront living spaces. Financial survival remains a constant strain, but a chance meeting with a sympathetic public-interest attorney allows her to write her way out of some community service and of her "trash" self-image. "Without Osha Neumann's innovative advocacy, I would never have had the privilege to write, to think, my vocation as a writer would never have occurred to me; and this is why I always refer to his help as the first intervention, or in some circles, the first miracle."

Encouraged, radicalized, emboldened, Lisa has some of her essays published, founds the innovative San Francisco magazine *Poor*, obtains grant funding for projects, teaches others about poverty issues and achieves a degree of renown as an activist and example of perseverance. Not that this resolves her problems. She is still poor, she must lie to get her aching teeth treated at UCSF, her mother's physical and mental health declines, and "nothing had really changed and yet everything had changed" as she continues to sell T-shirts on the street to keep them housed in a Tenderloin apartment.

Gray-Garcia tells her multigenerational story of poverty in unpolished prose, but it all rings even truer for that. Her nascent political analysis of why she and so many others become homeless might seem shallow and replete with stock slogans, but that isn't the point. Some readers might agree with an editor who rejected one of Gray-Garcia's stories because of "too much misery"; her book conveys a sense of hopelessness. As a guest writer admitted with some shame in *The Chronicle* recently after yet another encounter with a homeless person, "my compassion ran out years ago." The problem is just too big, and usually, impersonal.

Billionaire Warren Buffett recently acknowledged in the *New York Times* that "class warfare" does exist in the United States but that "it's my class, the rich class, that's making war, and we're winning." Here's one story from the losing side. Contrary to some enduring American mythologies, Gray-Garcia shows that it is possible to be smart, work hard, avoid the perils of addiction, violence, HIV and so many other afflictions that beset the poor, and still get stuck in a lifetime of poverty.

Steve Heilig is on the staffs of the San Francisco Medical Society and *Commonweal*.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2007/02/05/DDGFNNTJ0J1.DTL>

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Criminal of Poverty

Growing Up Homeless
in America

By Tiny, a.k.a. Lisa Gray-Garcia

CITY LIGHTS; 287 Pages; \$15.95 PAPERBACK