

Social Problems Exacerbated by the Covid-19 Pandemic of 2020

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ARTICLE INFO

Received: January 30, 2021

Received in revised from: April 27, 2021

Accepted: May 01, 2021

Published online: May 23, 2021

ABSTRACT

This paper describes housing, food, and health insecurities exacerbated by the 2020 Covid-19 Pandemic. It explores the problems large cities face while managing information, distributing aid, and providing for isolated citizens. Inclusive housing, cooperative projects and incentives to curtail gentrification and favelization within cities, will be explored as well as new forms of vigilantism and social action.

Key words: cities – Covid-19 – social problems – institutional solutions

To cite this article: Klein, A. M. (2021). Social Problems Exacerbated by the Covid-19 Pandemic of 2020. *Urbana*, 22, 1-8. Retrieved from <http://www.urbanauapp.org/>

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Introduction

The spring of 2020 resulted in a life-style change that affected the entire world. As the surge of the Covid-19 Pandemic extended throughout the planet, confinement, curfews, working-from-home, online schoolrooms, and lockdowns became the norm. The impact of the Pandemic resulted in job-loss, home-evictions, exclusion, and countless social issues.

The rise in tent-cities (favelization) (Angelini, 2016; Kertzer, 2014) exclusionary practices (gentrification), and inclusionary practices (cooperativism) (Curl, 2009) are explored. A positive form of vigilantism (Abrams, 1999) also emerged as people stopped accusing others but looking out for each other. Real-life scenarios during epidemics of this stature (Acevedo-Garcia, 2020; Perri et al, 2020; Schwartz, et al, 2009) are also narrated from a humanistic and anecdotal perspective.

Methodology

This paper is based on empirical and anecdotal research as investigative options were curtailed by the 2020 Covid-19 Pandemic. In-person meetings, library searches, and other forms of data gathering were affected by lockdowns, curfews, and social-distancing measures enforced in major cities world-wide. Information was garnered from observation and lived experiences (Geertz, 1973) honoring a tradition of humanistic and empirical approaches to research. Materials were accessed remotely, by telephone, online, and by direct conversations.

Issues of Vigilantism (Positive and Negative), Exclusion, Favelization (Tent-Cities) and Institutional Solutions Dealing with Itineracy During the Pandemic.

Vigilantism

Issues of vigilantism (Abrams, 1999) surged during the Pandemic as social-distancing measures were propagated world-wide. While people became habituated to following these epidemiologic measures (Acevedo-Garcia, 2000) and participating in the curtailment of cross-contamination they also became each other's observer. Vigilantism became a leitmotif as law-abiding citizens became accusers, law-enforcement agents became fine-collectors, and employers monitored workers limiting their free circulation within cities.

A negative form of vigilantism produced trepidation amongst us as we felt the intrusion of heavy scrutiny, inspection, and probable accusations and infractions. We no longer circulated as freely as before the Pandemic. Nations world-wide issued new guidelines as the Pandemic soared from a first to a third wave. Within the peer-scrutiny that most of us experienced, a positive form of vigilantism was brewing as well. The negative form of vigilantism translated into individuals becoming accusers of others, while the positive form favored individuals who were transforming into partners and collaborators.

Exclusion & Favelization

Housing exclusion, and income insecurity were also issues experienced during the Pandemic. Some nations practiced new forms of tenant-protection, minimized home-evictions, and regulated rental board actions protecting people from homelessness. In my city, the gentrification of the downtown core made it impossible for long-time city-dwellers to continue occupying the social housing in neighborhoods adjacent to social services. These homes were

now converted into expensive condos and their service areas transitioned into trendy shops selling unaffordable merchandise targeted to tourists and short-term visitors. This gentrification process has recently transformed the inner city into a visitor's paradise which has exacerbated the rate of infection. Fortunately, local governments curtailed temporary housing permits, closed borders to visitors and applied higher taxes to building developers to discourage the construction of these trendy and unaffordable city hubs.

Dealing with Itineracy

Precarity among wage-earners was rampant despite governmental assistance. The recently unemployed who qualified for assistance were guaranteed income supplements. Employers who met the requirements were also guaranteed basic assistance to stay afloat. However, as in all organized countries, individuals in distress are eligible for assistance, but the means to access the various programs are not always available. In many cases, either through lack of clear communication, availability of assistive services or sheer misinformation, many qualified and eligible people were left out of these assistive measures.

Despite the multiple housing assistive measures, at one point, community centers ran out of space, resources, and mechanisms for housing displaced people. Itinerance became the norm as families moved from shelter to shelter. In my city, when social housing became unavailable, and temporary shelters reached capacity, vacated hotels and hospitals became temporary headquarters for the displaced. At saturation point, when no other space was available, a surge in informal dwellings, shanty towns, and tent-cities appeared.

These tent-cities were growing quickly and became the news of the day. Journalists and reporters visited the various tent-city communities and interviewed people living in these precarious conditions. They pointed out the lack of safety and accessibility to basic services. Journalism was at its best as these reports resulted in immediate improvements to the living conditions. Temporary sanitation units were provided as well as basic resources.

I viewed the various newscasts and listened to what respondents had to say. Basically, they claimed that qualifying conditions for institutional assistance were often discriminatory and unattainable. They also shared that institutional shelters did not provide for their pets, belongings, and extended families creating separation-anxiety amongst them. I can state that favelization was reaching the first world during the 2020 Pandemic. As well, favela-like communities continued surviving despite the many constraints because within them there was a shared sense of caring and belonging that manifested itself as a positive form of vigilantism.

This form of positive vigilantism was what kept these communities together. When asked, (personal conversation with a tent-city community group within my city) respondents affirmed that a sense of belonging held them together. As well, they had opportunities to share resources, and enjoyed looking out for each other. At one point the city provided such services as portable toilets, warming stations, and food-distribution. Unfortunately, there was a fire. The entire tent-city was vacated. In response, the city opened shelters at hotel wings, empty social housing facilities, and hospitals. However, these recently homeless communities refused to accept institutional safe havens because they were either too restrictive or inhospitable.

Institutional Solutions

Interested in finding out about these institutional solutions, I interviewed a few willing individuals through the fall and winter of 2000. One of these itinerant individuals approached me on the street for assistance. He told me that he did not have enough money to buy a mask and could therefore not access services. Another person I encountered spent the night at my building foyer seeking its warmth. I spoke to him and offered him support. He told me he was too cold to walk up to the hospital on his own. Yet another individual who approached me as I was waiting in line to access a building told me he had lost his identification papers and would not be allowed into the shelter. On my daily walks around the block, I pass a church that offers free meals to people in need as long as they line up in time, wear a mask, and not show signs of intoxication. The fact that these regulations are exclusionary leaves even more itinerant people curbside. Again, in hopes of addressing the problem of substance abuse, vacated hospitals created safe spaces for that population, again with too many regulations. As I have pointed out, during the Pandemic it was almost impossible to interview people on site or to access any of these service facilities as everything was in lockdown. Hence, these examples that I have shared come from my own lived experiences (Geertz, 1973). I conclude that institutions provide regulated services and for those who do not comply, human nature provides a sense of care and belonging that translates into a positive form of vigilantism.

As I continued to interview itinerant people, they revealed such facts as impossible deadlines for entry, strict regulations, and early vacating hours. As well, they expressed discomfort about being in such close quarters preferring instead to stay outdoors as much as possible. Their greatest need was where to store their belongings, since they carry them at all times.

Discussion

Temporary institutional solutions were like bandages and resulted in exclusionary measures. Many displaced people drifted from place to place during the day. There was no place to go within the city as malls, libraries, and public spaces were on lockdown. Itinerant people with pets had an even harder time accessing public facilities. Again, too many rules, unattainable schedules, and in-flexible institutional regulations were deterrents for itinerant people who felt intimidated and excluded them from these services.

We could all sympathize with people enduring these extreme changes (Acevedo-Garcia, 2000) during confinement due to the Pandemic. Our own livelihoods drastically changed since we had to endure socially distanced line-ups to purchase basic foods, medications, and other necessities. Vulnerable citizens aged sixty-five and over were not allowed to leave their homes unless they could show a valid reason. Basic businesses were closed, office buildings were emptied as people worked from home, shopping malls were deserted, and life as we knew it changed. Our lives during the Pandemic were in many ways similar to the lives of a homeless person, as events were unpredictable on a daily basis (Perri et al, 2020).

As a point of discussion, this will be an ongoing problem that needs to be addressed by city authorities. Perhaps after the problems exacerbated by the Pandemic, they have realized this and have learned new ways of coping with and managing this problem. Some feasible solutions have already been tested (Bacher, J.C. 1993; Schwartz, H. et al, 2009; Tiesdell, S. 2004). These incentives include the creation of more inclusive social housing, a census of

itinerant people and what their needs are. As well, city authorities need to work with building developers to negotiate the construction of affordable housing. Shelters and temporary facilities need to cater to participants' necessities. Attitudes to homelessness, itineracy, and displacement need to change as these situations can happen to anybody. This became evident during the Pandemic. In the next section I provide suggestions for change based on research on sustainable international programs.

Sustainable Solutions

The surge of unemployment, homelessness, and the many other problems exacerbated by the Pandemic needed to be addressed. Governments who could afford it in first-world countries offered stay-at-home incentives for workers, lowered tax-bases for businesses, and tried to sustain the economy. Some countries even went as far as creating a median salary for all. This included displaced persons who were on record and could be reached. Negotiations were made with building developers and city officials to start solving this issue now. However, all of these solutions will be effective in the near future once health restrictions are lifted.

Inclusionary measures and cooperativism (Curl, 2009) come to mind as solutions to the afore-mentioned problems. Within my own city, a cooperative housing project (Kowaluk, et al, 2012) has existed since 1968. It is based on positive vigilantism as each participant monitors his/her own behavior and that of others. Inclusionary practices assist dwellers through educational training and support. Evictions do not exist as compliant dwellers and their families who fulfill their obligations can remain within the cooperative for a lifetime.

My research on sustainable and inclusive housing (Bacher, 1993) points out that one of the needs of residents is the tenure and sustainability of their homes. Housing security is key for neighborhoods to thrive. This includes continuity, keeping homes in good repair, and abiding by rules, building codes, and city regulations. Many countries have created lasting neighborhoods that provide housing assurances based on the needs and lifestyles of their dwellers.

To illustrate, in China land is acquired near cities in exchange for arable land in the peripheries, offering housing closer to where citizens work. In Los Angeles, motels have been re-purposed to create housing options for people who work the fields. In London, training incentives have been created so that eligible workers can upgrade their skills and become current and employable. In Denver, Colorado the "Green Roof" incentive promotes the use of solar panels on building roofs to reduce costs. In India, new building materials are created from recyclables for insulation. In Bulgaria, housing incentives are created for non-owners so that their earned income contributes to home ownership. In Bristol, UK a tenure system exists whereby eligible people can rent to buy. And, in many other cities in the world subsidized housing is provided for those who are eligible thus promoting ownership and participation.

Key to success in all of the above solutions is the fact that inclusivity-oriented incentives guarantee that:

1. People are supported.
2. People are valued and included.
3. People have equal access to opportunity.
4. Marginalization and isolation are avoided.

To illustrate, such incentives exist in Edinburgh, Scotland (2016) “Social Bite” offering homes, support, and work. “The Ear” in Seoul Korea (2013) is based on the idea of communication. In “Mae Tao”, Thailand (2014) they have shelters for displaced people. The “One Stop Shop” in Lisbon (2005) provides help to immigrants. The “Sibodam” in Amsterdam sells communal, public and private housing. “Green Spaces” built in the 1980’s in Pennsylvania, U.S.A. is one of the first properly designed housing options of its time. The “Open Homes” concept within the Airbnb platform (2017) ensures homes are provided for registered people in need. Finally, the “Aconchego” program in Portugal (2004) attempts to create and find a common ground for needy people. The issues addressed here are integration and affordability.

Conclusion

Worldwide, nations have coped with housing shortages for many years. Belgium, for one, has created 280,000 units in the past forty years. Chile holds a record of housing incentives that exist for over thirty years. Rent control enables the Netherlands to produce 2.4 million units. In Mexico, families are subsidized to build their own units. In Spain, housing is guaranteed within its constitution. In the U.S.A. subsidized housing is a federally run program enabling those eligible to afford housing. Vienna, in Austria is recognized world-wide as the most successful program lasting eighty years to date.

The Pandemic has shed new light on this prescient problem. Temporary solutions will not make it go away. Institutions are adapting to the new needs of displaced citizens. Results will not be seen immediately. Experts are sounding out the details of the problems, sustainable examples are proof that there are solutions, the world has to evolve within this new era, and humanity must prevail.

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