

**Oral History Project**  
**Instructor: Lillian Duck**  
**Spring 2008**

**Contemporary Homelessness  
in America**

**Root Causes:**

**Federal Funding Cuts and Failure to Provide  
Adequate Funding to Affordable Housing**

**Interviewee:**

**Paul Boden**

Executive Director of Western Regional Advocacy Project

**Prepared by:**  
**Ahmed Alkhatib**

Paul Boden was born in Long Island, New York on September 14<sup>th</sup>, 1959. He was from a middle class, suburban family with four sisters. His parents were separated and his mother lived with the five children while his father lived elsewhere. Boden's mother was an executive director of a non-profit organization that worked to address poverty in the 1960's. The reason his parents were separated was because his father refused the idea that his wife was working. One day however, and while at work, his mother had a serious stroke, which left her in the hospital for five days, and on the fifth day, she passed away. Several weeks after this dramatic event, Paul's father moved back into the family home with his girlfriend and "kicked everybody out."<sup>1</sup> In other words, the family fell apart and Boden became homeless at the age of seventeen and he was left with nothing; that was in 1978. Boden had an unpleasant school experience K through 10<sup>th</sup> grade and got kicked out of many schools. He did not finish his high school education. He managed to get into a semester of college, but did not have an encouraging environment to continue, and soon after, he dropped out.



**Paul Boden**

\* Photo source: [PB]

Months after the death of his mother, Boden left the United States and traveled to Europe, particularly Denmark and France. He worked at restaurants and did a lot of "squatting" (occupy empty houses/apartments.) In 1982, he returned to the States. He was once again homeless and slept at his sisters' homes and crashed at any place where he could. In late 1982, early 1983, Boden left New York and moved to the Bay Area to live at his sister's home in Redwood City. Faced

<sup>1</sup> Paul Boden, Interview by Ahmed Alkhatib, San Francisco, CA. February 25<sup>th</sup>, 2008

with difficult circumstances in the San Francisco Bay Area, Boden had no choice but to do whatever he could to change his situation. He worked back and forth between different community centers and shelters in San Francisco. In January of 1983, he started volunteering at Central City Hospitality House, a community center that has served the homeless community in San Francisco's Tenderloin district since 1967. The center provides homeless and low-income people with resources, advocacy, and a variety of supportive services to ease individuals' homelessness. Paul worked at the front desk and did organizing work as well.

Boden also worked at Conard House, which was associated with mentally ill homeless people. Conard House is a place for residential treatment, and supportive housing services. He did case management for clients, "client advocacy." He worked with shelters and with poor clients who were enrolled in Section 8 Housing Programs. He received his first paycheck in 1983 from Hospitality House, after volunteering there for approximately nine months.

I asked Boden why there are so many homeless people in America. Homeless people are seen on the streets of almost every large city as well as in rural areas. Since the early 1980's, the number of homeless people has increased nationwide. Public emergency shelters began opening in 1983 across the United States in an attempt to cover the needs of the increasing homeless population. Since shelters opened, they have insufficiently housed and sheltered displaced people and as a result, the number of homeless people has been increasing ever since. Paul criticizes the media's focus on homeless individuals and the myth that homeless people choose the hard and ugly lifestyle on the street. The media has blamed

#### Squatting: (Occupying empty houses)

\* Photo source: [PB]



individual homeless people for their condition, and labeled them dysfunctional and unable to fit in society. Governmental responses have done little to nothing to stop the growth of homeless population across the nation.

Boden has seen homelessness grow in the country and witnessed more shelters opening and more people without housing, “Before massive homelessness emerged, people used to go home after dropping in at a community center for low-income and poor people.”<sup>2</sup> However, that was not the case in the early 1980’s when more people lost their homes and had nowhere to go. Demand increased for shelters and supportive services. According to Paul, there was no initial or real response to address the problem. The first governmental response to growing homelessness was in October of 1982, when the government started funding community centers to provide for homeless people.

Boden was different from the many individuals who are homeless. He did not have a drug addiction, nor was he a veteran. He gradually emerged from the condition of being homeless himself. When I asked him how he “got out,” he stated that he strongly believed he had some advantages, which distinguished him from other individuals. “I was a young white male, and I was literate. I knew how to read, write, organize, and I was passionate.”<sup>3</sup> He married to a woman who was doing a lot of work with mentally ill individuals. After their marriage in 1994, Paul and MaryKate moved into a 100 year-old house where they continue to live today. This event ended Paul’s episode with homelessness. But Paul’s work and the issue of homelessness were far from over.

In 1987, Boden helped start, with other individuals the San Francisco Coalition on Homelessness. The Coalition was a project of Hospitality House to establish more support for the homeless community in San Francisco. Boden was the executive director of the Coalition and would be so for the next 17 years. He gained valuable experience working with poor people and was continually pressuring San Francisco local government to properly address homelessness. The coalition has taken on civil rights projects, legal defense work to represent homeless individuals in the justice system, immigration and family supportive services/referrals, and a variety of advocacy work. Directing and organizing the Coalition had a great deal of challenges, which required

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Boden, Interview by Ahmed Alkhatib, San Francisco, CA. February 25<sup>th</sup>, 2008

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

Boden to fight many righteous battles to try to address homelessness and deliver his message. He fought discriminatory and unjust laws, which were unfair to homeless people. His message consistently emphasized governmental role in providing access to affordable housing. He believes that to be a major and a significant step towards ending homelessness.<sup>4</sup>

Boden believed that when massive homelessness emerged, public opinion around the time held a “widespread assumption that there was a recession, which was the cause for the increasing number of homeless people.”<sup>5</sup> The government viewed homelessness in the 1980s as a temporary problem. Responses were limited and did not address the root cause of the problem. The McKinney Act was passed by Congress in 1987, which provided only \$880 million in homeless assistance funding. Boden remarked in amusement, “Today, instead of restoring the \$52 Billions in cuts needed for affordable housing, only \$1.4 billion, [the largest amount ever allocated under The McKinney Homeless Assistance Act], is allocated to deal with the homeless problem.”<sup>6</sup>

In 2005, Boden founded a new non-profit after he left the Coalition on Homelessness. WRAP, Western Regional Advocacy Project, has published a report that has been highly acclaimed for using Federal Budget Data to analyze the economic perspective of homelessness. It is also well appreciated by many local and national homeless groups for its credibility. Currently, a copy of the report is in the Library of Congress.<sup>7</sup>

The Report “Without Housing,” shows a major connection between massive cuts to the funding for Department of Housing and Urban Development’s budget to build and provide access to affordable housing, and contemporary massive homelessness. According to the report, HUD’s budget went down in 1983 to \$18 billion after having an \$83 billion budget in 1978.<sup>8</sup> The Federal government stopped building, maintaining, and

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<sup>4</sup> Paul Boden, Interview by Ahmed Alkhatib, San Francisco, CA. February 25<sup>th</sup>, 2008

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Western Regional Advocacy Project, “Without Housing: Decades of Federal Housing Cutbacks, Massive Homelessness, and Policy Failures” San Francisco, 2006. Accessed on February 19<sup>th</sup>, 2008 11-15

<sup>7</sup> Paul Boden, Interview by Ahmed Alkhatib, San Francisco, CA. February 25<sup>th</sup>, 2008

<sup>8</sup> Western Regional Advocacy Project, “Without Housing: Decades of Federal Housing Cutbacks, Massive Homelessness, and Policy Failures” San Francisco, 2006. Accessed on February 19<sup>th</sup>, 2008 17-20

subsidizing sufficient affordable housing units, necessary to accommodate people with low-income. Boden is a fan of the New Deal era. He believes that government, via social programs, was dedicated to creating social infrastructure including housing programs and Federal subsidies were provided for affordable housing in cities and rural towns. Boden strongly suggests “The New Deal demonstrated the significance of governmental role in helping citizens out of the depression.”<sup>9</sup> After WWII and with the Cold War in motion, the United States Government changed several of its budget priorities. Even after the Soviet Union collapsed, the U.S. continues to spend more money on the military than all the nations of the world combined. “Increasing military spending,” said Paul “has caused a large decrease in social programs and services, and has weakened governmental commitments to those services.”<sup>10</sup>

Boden has been a strong advocate for addressing homelessness through housing, healthcare, education, and economic security. He strongly believes that housing is a “human right,” which governments are obligated to provide for their citizens. “The United States has a perspective that government is business and that government needs to support business, which will help the market to take care of people.”<sup>11</sup> Since the days of President Ronald Reagan, the United States government has been increasingly turning more responsibility to individuals regarding their wellbeing. Reaganomics believed that welfare and wasteful spending on programs promote laziness among poor people and discourage them from working and ‘pulling themselves up by the boot strap.’

Boden is frustrated with the grotesque fact that “good business and growing economy are the indicators for society’s well being in our country, instead of healthcare, education, and literacy.” “Inherently”, said Boden, “governments are expected to care for their people, but the United States government has been limiting its commitments to the distribution of wealth, education and social welfare by dismantling the New Deal’s programs.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Paul Boden, Interview by Ahmed Alkhatib, San Francisco, CA. February 25<sup>th</sup>, 2008

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

Boden confidently believes that ending homelessness is possible. “If the homeless population is reduced to the minimum via affordable housing and healthcare, very few people would choose to be homeless and whoever chooses to would be entitled to their choice.”<sup>13</sup> Boden believes that government has been trying to “obfuscate” homeless people. He argues that the government has been trying to hide homelessness and has been “providing pretense that the government is doing something.”<sup>14</sup> The bureaucracy alone, according to Boden, spends as much as \$ 5 million on pretense such as press releases, studies of homeless people, five and ten year plans to end homelessness, federal figures touring the country to provide fake promises, and many other wasteful actions, which do not help at all in addressing the root causes of homelessness.<sup>15</sup> On November 7<sup>th</sup>, 2007, HUD (Housing and Urban Development) announced in a News Release that there had been a drop in the number of “Chronically Homeless” people living on the nation’s streets. HUD’s release said that the decrease was largely attributed to an increase in supportive housing, while simultaneously, the Department of Education is reporting an increase in the number of homeless students attending public school.<sup>16</sup>

The Federal responses incorporated some transitional services to help homeless people “get back on their feet.” Addressing homelessness was more about charity and help to a “fallen” individual, rather than repair of a broken society or supplementing and regulating inadequate housing markets. The government’s approach to addressing the crisis has largely included redefining who is homeless in order to claim that the homeless population is decreasing. Shifting categories of homeless people changes the definition of who is homeless and distorts facts and figures, according to Boden. Some homeless people cannot receive services simply because they have not been homeless long enough or they are not “Chronically Homeless,” a term referring to people who have been either homeless for a year or more, or have had at least four episodes of homelessness in the past three years. A recent study by Department of Education found that 907,000 students

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<sup>13</sup> Paul Boden, Interview by Ahmed Alkhatib, San Francisco, CA. February 25<sup>th</sup>, 2008

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Padraig O’Malley, “Homelessness: New England & Beyond.” *New England Journal of Public Policy*. (Amherst, Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts, 1992). 35-50

<sup>16</sup> News Release. November 7<sup>th</sup>, 2007 <http://www.hud.gov/news/release.cfm?content=pr07-167.cfm&CFID=6638676&CFTOKEN=81891978> <Accessed: March 12<sup>th</sup>, 2008

who are attending public schools are homeless, while HUD has declared the total number of homeless people in the United States to only be 754,000.<sup>17</sup>

When asked how much credit he would give to governmental responses, Paul described how he felt about homelessness and governmental policies using a metaphor. “If somebody broke five windows in your home,” said Paul, “and then that somebody did not take accountability for breaking or fixing the windows; and the only accountable action that that person takes is taping one of the five windows; that person has obviously not fixed the five windows, nor did that person fix the taped window. That is how I feel the government has addressed homelessness.”<sup>18</sup>

Decades after the federal cuts, massive homelessness, and endless federal “Ten and Five year plans,” there has been an ongoing desire by local and state governments to see homeless people disappear from parks, streets, business districts and tourist areas. Major cities’ governments are trying to close parks and public spaces by establishing expanded camping restrictions and anti-homeless laws. Public parks, freeway underpasses and streets have witnessed closures, fencing, and police programs with old and new vagrancy laws targeted to remove homeless people from public view. Local governments are continually claiming that the homeless population is decreasing. Such claims are invalidated when shelters are turning away hundreds of people back to the streets because they do not have enough space.<sup>19</sup>

One major domino effect of massive homelessness is the incarceration of people who are homeless and/or suffer from mental illness. When I asked Boden whether that (incarceration) was connected with the failure to address homelessness, he responded that the incarceration of homeless people has been extremely high and courts were so overwhelmed, that new “homeless courts” were established to specifically deal with homeless people. “Local governments tend to use policing as away of controlling homeless people on the streets.”<sup>20</sup> I wondered how local governments are able to pull people off of the street.

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<sup>17</sup> Journalism Center on Children and families. Education: Fast Fact Available from: <http://www.journalismcenter.org/resources/education.cfm> <accessed: 4 October, 2007>

<sup>18</sup> Paul Boden, Interview by Ahmed Alkhatib, San Francisco, CA. February 25<sup>th</sup>, 2008

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

Paul then described the cycle, in which homeless people are first criminalized, and then systematically, jailed. It all starts with a homeless person receiving a ticket from a police officer for jaywalking, camping, loitering, and other “quality of life crimes.”

Sleeping, urinating, and drinking in public, blocking the sidewalk,

trespassing and few other infractions are known as “quality of life” or “status” crimes.<sup>21</sup>

Such crimes were never prosecuted, as it was considered unreasonable to apply resources and time to prosecute such crimes.<sup>22</sup> The tickets vary in the amount; some are as high as \$80 or \$126, which is beyond the affordable capacity of the majority of homeless people. The defendant would have to fight the ticket on his or her own. Often, homeless people have no legal representation in court since the offense is an infraction. The defendant either does not show up to court or fails to pay the ticket. Either way, a bench warrant is issued to arrest the person for “failure to appear” in court. At this point, it is no longer about the original infraction, which was camping, sleeping or loitering on the street, but rather “failure to appear” in court. The person serves time in jail and a misdemeanor is on the person’s record for life, which creates a problem for people accessing services.<sup>23</sup>

Often, the same homeless person stands in front of the same judge and since the judge knows the defendant from previous offenses, the sentence is more likely to be harsher than the first time. Many judges tell homeless defendants not to have any contact with



**Nancy Pelosi** attending an event in which Paul gave a speech about homelessness. \* Photo source: [PB]

<sup>21</sup> Amanda Witherell, “The crime of being homeless,” The San Francisco Bay Guardian, October 3, 2007. Available from: [http://www.sfbg.com/printable\\_entry.php?entry\\_id=4651](http://www.sfbg.com/printable_entry.php?entry_id=4651) (accessed March 19<sup>th</sup>, 2008).

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Paul Boden, Interview by Ahmed Alkhatib, San Francisco, CA. February 25<sup>th</sup>, 2008

police, but inevitably they do. This is the cycle that local governments have managed to devise to criminalize and eventually, remove homeless people from public view.<sup>24</sup>

Realizing that there needs to be a larger united voice addressing the issue, Boden recognizes that “there has to be a movement that says people should not be treated this way... not people of color, not laborers, not immigrants, not mentally ill people, not homeless people, and not physically disabled people”<sup>25</sup>

After understanding facts and events about the causes of contemporary homelessness, I sadly realize that a government that spends more money on military and war rather than social programs and the welfare of its citizens, is a government that is spiritually dead. Boden shared a similar view and said that affordable housing, healthcare, and economic security are “human rights, not profitable commodities.” He said that “any government that refuses to admit the basic concept of housing and healthcare being human rights is a government that is morally corrupt.”<sup>26</sup>

Seeing homeless people on the streets reminds me of a similar scene back in my home town of Gaza when I used to walk by displaced and homeless Palestinians who have lost their homes due to the war. The major difference however, is that this is the most powerful and richest country in the world.

Boden’s descriptions of his experiences with homelessness are rich with enthusiasm, frustration, and compassion. People need to get educated about homelessness and need to understand that homeless people do not choose to live, camp, or sleep on the streets, but have been forced to do so as a result of severe poverty and little to no access to affordable housing. Boden continues to do social justice work and hopes to increase public awareness about the issue of homelessness.

It is important to remember when addressing homelessness that it is not a solitary, isolated issue, but is rather connected to different issues and aspects of life. Homelessness, healthcare, and employment/economic security are issues, which all fall under the umbrella of poverty. When individuals are healthy and have a steady income, the risk of those individuals becoming homeless is very low. When the Federal Government eliminates housing funding, it is essentially eliminating an important

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<sup>24</sup> Paul Boden, Interview by Ahmed Alkhatib, San Francisco, CA. February 25<sup>th</sup>, 2008

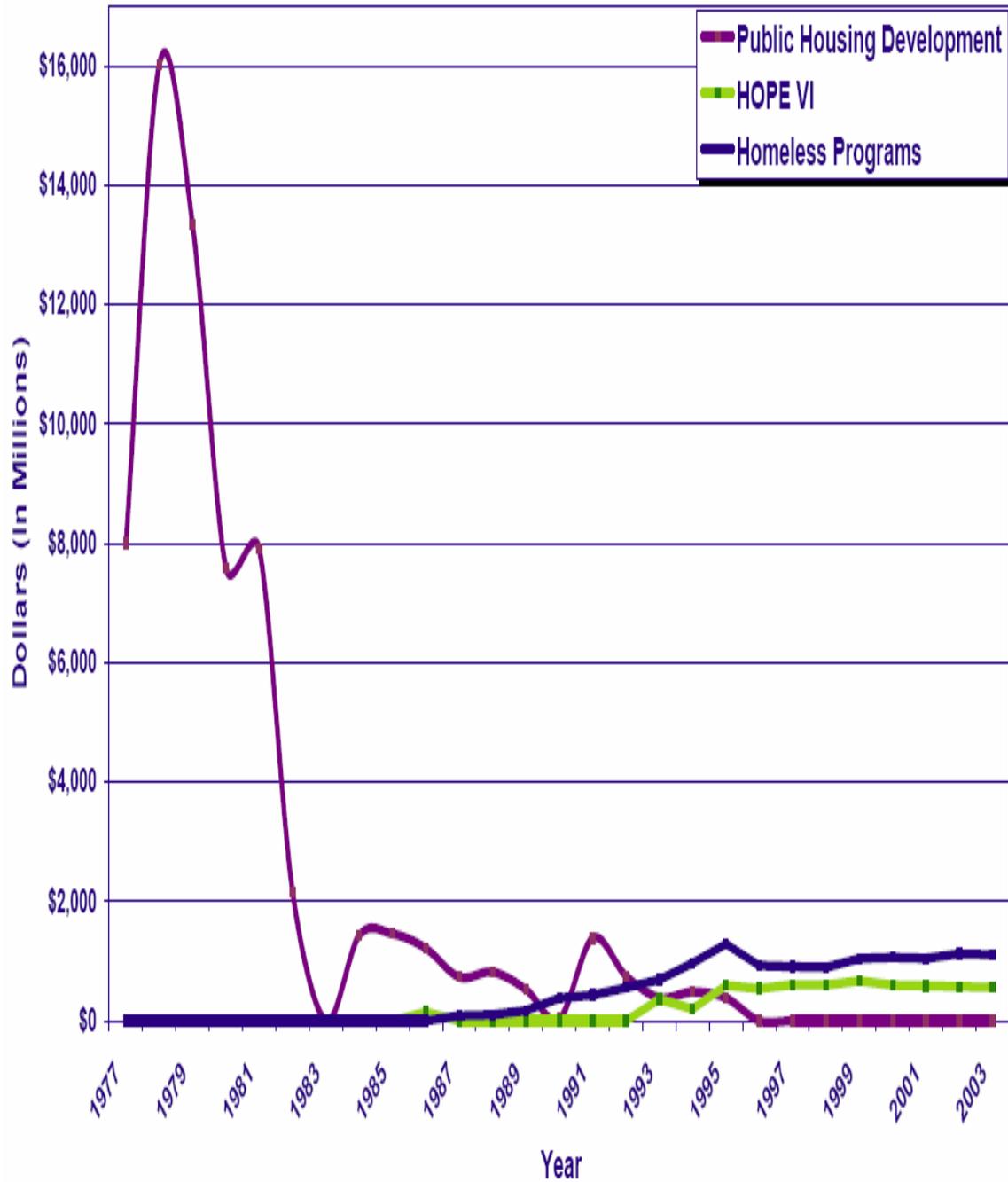
<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

contributor to society's welfare. There needs to be awareness that until basic human rights such as housing and healthcare stop being commodities, more people are in the danger zone of being homeless. Regardless of all the supportive services that can be provided, affordable housing is the single most important approach, to bring justice and wellbeing to the homeless and to keep hardship away from others.

• Reprinted with Permission from WRAP

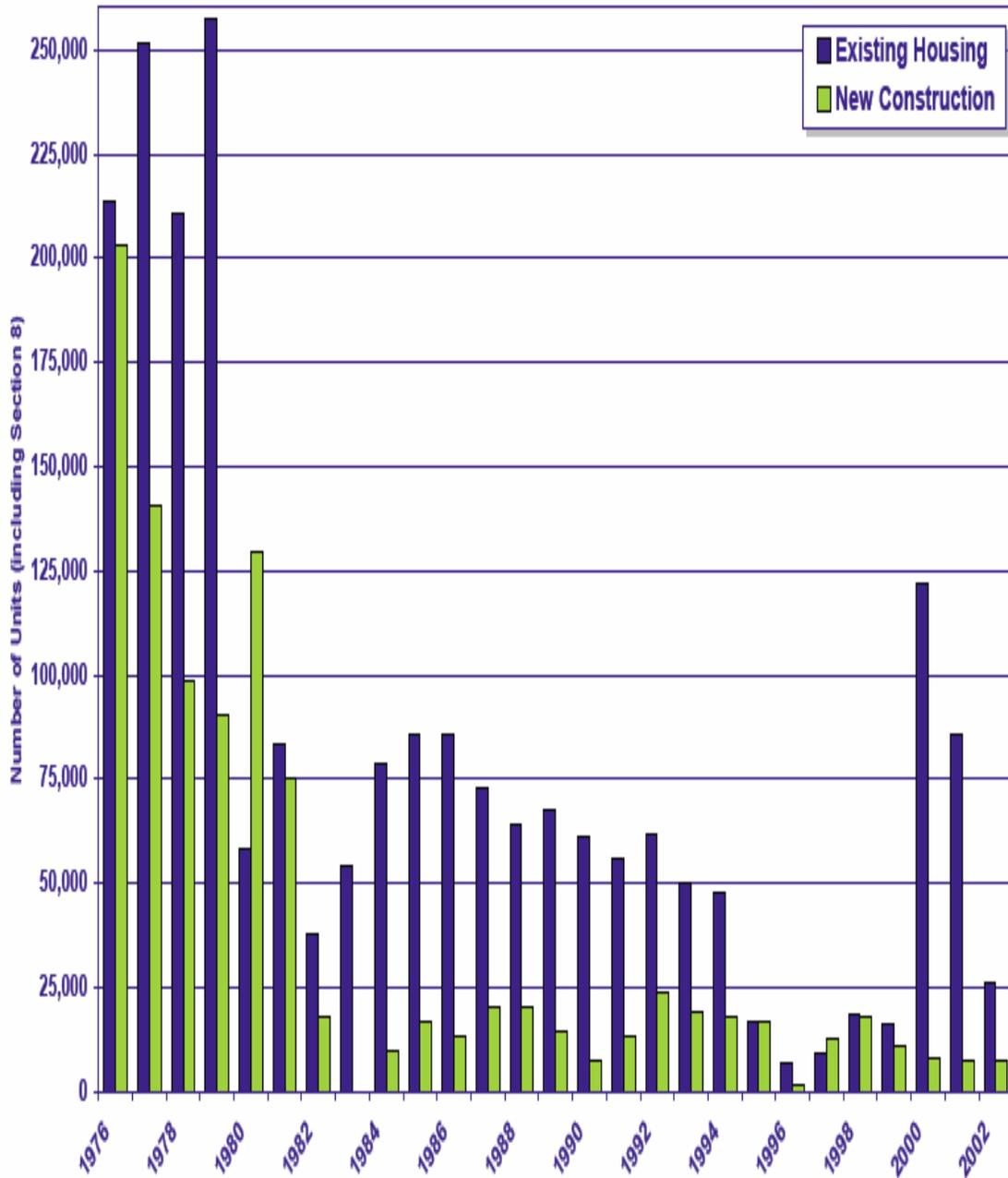
## Comparison of Funding for Homeless Programs, Public Housing Development, and Hope VI



Source: Without Housing Report. Appendix D – Artwork charts.

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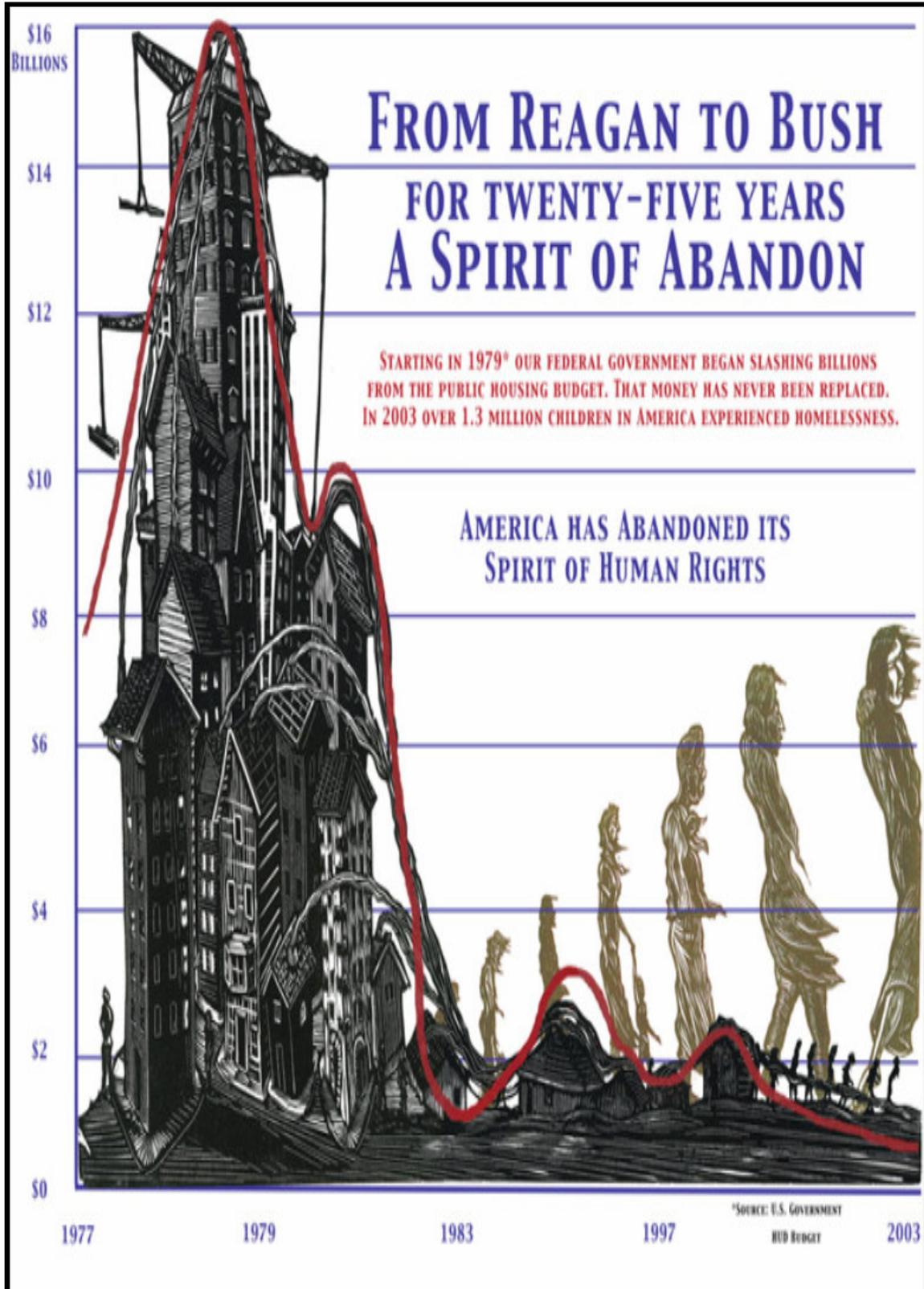
### HUD Subsidized Housing Units



In the 7 year period from 1976-1982, over 755,000 units of affordable housing were created by the Federal government. By comparison, over the next 20 years only 256,000 units of affordable housing were created by the Federal government.

Source: Without Housing Report. Appendix D – Artwork charts.

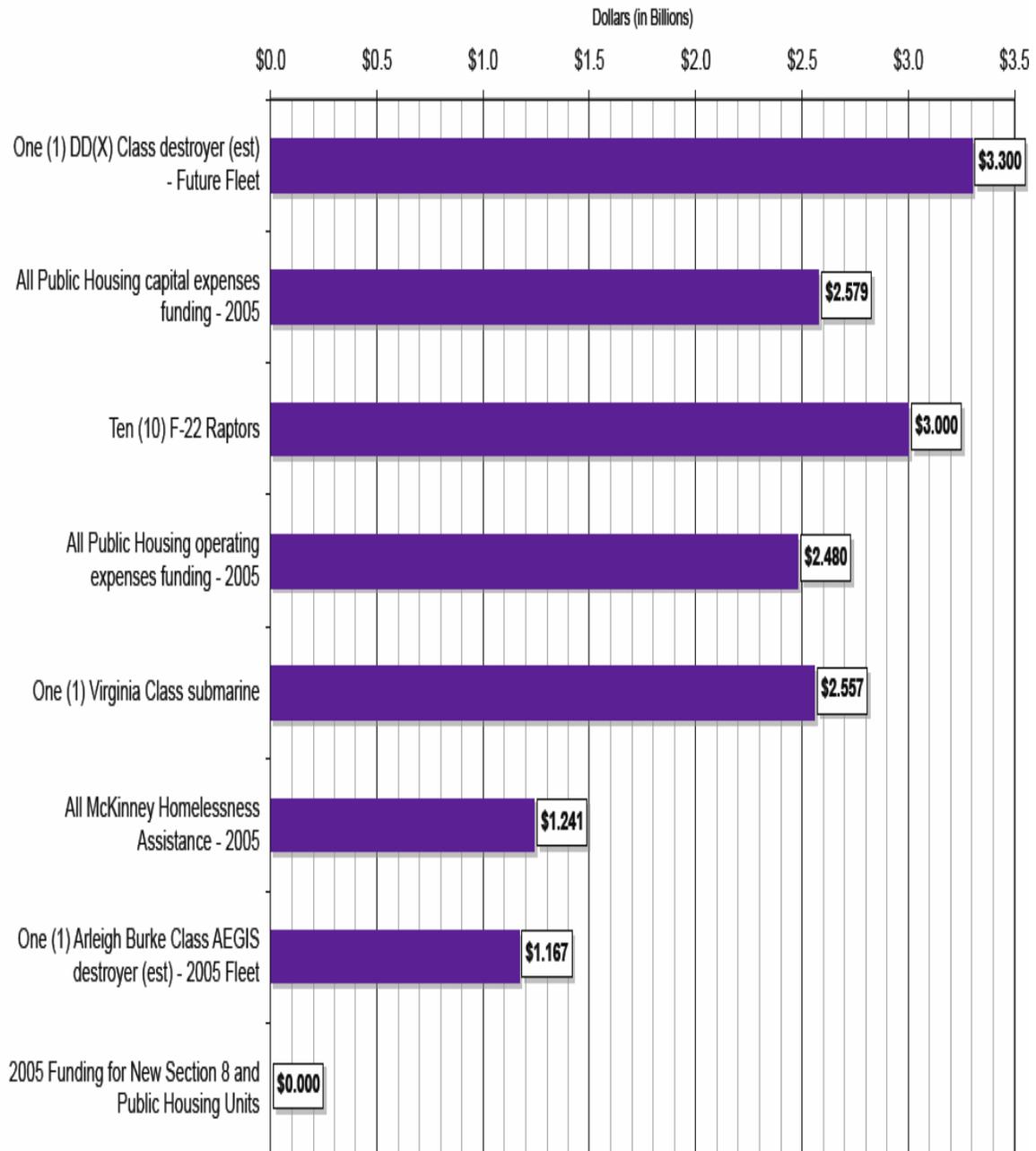
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Source: Without Housing Report. Appendix D – Artwork charts.

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Chart 11 - Comparison of Funding Priorities (ROUGHEST DRAFT)



\* figures are from the President's FY2007 Budget Proposal

\*\* there are 47 Arleigh Burke AEGIS destroyers in the fleet, and 14 more authorized

Source: Without Housing Report. Appendix D – Artwork charts.