

## Critical Thinking Questions for Comparing the Plight of Serfs with the Homeless

**Directions:** After discussing each transparency as a class, read the background information aloud in your group. Then discuss the following critical thinking questions in your small group. Appoint a Presenter to tell the rest of the class about your discussion. Rotate the role of Presenter so that everyone has a chance to address the whole class.

### Background information on food for Critical Thinking Question A:

**Serf:** The diet of the European serf was poor, especially in the winter time when there was no fruit or fresh vegetables. During the spring and summer, most serfs had tiny gardens in which they grew such vegetables as cabbage, turnips, onions, peas, beans, and leeks. Serfs also raised barley, oats, and rye to be made into bread, cider, and ale (beer). Meals would consist of porridge or soup, into which they dipped pieces of coarse dark bread, since most serfs had few teeth to chew anything hard. Many serfs owned hens, geese, hogs, and one or two cows, plus oxen to pull their plow. However, because farm animals were valuable for more than their meat, only a few were slaughtered during the fall to provide food for the winter. Furthermore, since serfs were forbidden to hunt, meat was often eaten only when the lord of the manor gave a feast. In the worst of times, serfs would sometimes be forced to eat bark and roots from the manor woodlands.

**Homeless:** A major challenge for homeless people is finding food. The federal government gives Food Stamps to help some homeless people. These are used to purchase food at stores. The federal government also distributes coupons called food vouchers to social service agencies, groups who help homeless people. Unfortunately, each agency receives only five or six of these food coupons each month. Vouchers, like stamps, can be used at stores to purchase groceries. Churches and groups like the Salvation Army give “food boxes,” which might include canned soups and beans, canned peaches or applesauce, potatoes, cereal, juice boxes, powdered milk, a can of tuna fish or chicken, crackers, and oatmeal. These boxes feed one person for three to four days. Because some food comes in cans and is not ready to eat, these boxes are often given to people with homes. Many homeless people visit soup kitchens or “meal sites” for a hot meal. A typical soup kitchen meal might include a hot soup with rice or vegetables, bread, mashed potatoes, and hot coffee. A church might offer one meal a week, but many cities have a different soup kitchen site for each day of the week. Still, many homeless must search through trash bins, find discarded food, or panhandle (beg for money) to feed themselves.

**Critical Thinking Question A:** Which individual—a medieval serf or a homeless person today—do you think has a better situation regarding food? Why?

**Background information on shelter for Critical Thinking Question B:**

**Serf:** Serfs lived in small, dark cottages of one or two rooms. These huts were built of “wattle and daub,” which consisted of a wooden framework that was covered by flexible strips of oak or willow. These strips were covered with a mixture of clay, straw, and cow dung. Homes were easily built and could be moved or destroyed with little effort. Thieves were known to dig through the walls of serf homes. Most of these houses had only one room in which the entire family ate and slept together. The floor was earthen and covered with straw. The fireplace was in the center of the room. The smoke escaped, as best it could, through a hole in the roof. The serf’s few possessions included: three or four benches and stools, a table, a chest, one or two iron or brass pots, a little pottery, linen towels, wool blankets, and iron tools.

**Homeless:** Finding shelter at night is difficult for the homeless. Many apply to stay in homeless shelters. These are often open areas with 10 to 500 cots arranged in even rows. Some shelters are for specific types of people, such as veterans or women. Most shelters have a night curfew, little privacy, and restrictions on behavior. A few homeless people receive motel vouchers from the government. These are rare and each social service agency receives only four or five vouchers a month. Some homeless families can find transitional housing. The federal government sponsors apartments or group homes for short-term stays. Homeless people and families can only stay for sixteen days in these homes while they look for a permanent home. A growing number of homeless people sleep in their cars or at the homes of friends. People without any of these options sleep wherever they can—in parks, near heating grates on sidewalks, or under freeways.

**Critical Thinking Question B:** Which individual—a medieval serf or a homeless person today—do you think has a better situation regarding shelter? Why?

**Background information on clothing for Critical Thinking Question C:**

**Serf:** The male serf wore a wool tunic (one piece dress) with a belt and woolen hose underneath to protect his legs. He often wore a canvas bag around his neck to store seed in and a straw hat to protect his head from the sun. The women wore loose blouses and long dresses. When a woman worked in the field beside her husband, she would tuck the front of her skirt into her belt to free her legs. Women wore cloth head coverings instead of hats. Baths were unheard of, and water never touched the serfs or their clothing except when they were caught out in the rain.

**Homeless:** Finding inexpensive clothing today is very difficult. Because the homeless spend much of their time outside, warm clothes are crucial. While there is some free clothing at homeless shelters, the items are often torn, too thin, or dirty—and cleanliness is important to stay healthy and to find jobs. Many homeless buy clothing at thrift stores or at the Salvation Army stores where used clothing is offered at lower prices. Certain church groups receive donations from clothing companies, and distribute the clothes through clothing banks. With a referral from a social service agency, homeless people can pick out a jacket, shirt, a pair of pants, socks, shoes, and underwear at clothing banks. Baby clothes are donated by many stores for homeless parents. In some cities, homeless street vendors sell spare and used clothing at very low prices.

**Critical Thinking Question C:** Which individual—a medieval serf or a homeless person today—do you think has a better situation regarding clothing? Why?

**Background information on personal safety for Critical Thinking Question D:**

**Serf:** In return for a serf's hard work in farming the lord's land, the lord promised the serf protection. This protection was supposed to come from the lord and his knights. In time of war the serfs and their livestock were to retreat inside the walls of the lord's castle. Often, however, this protection was not provided, and serfs were constantly in danger from bands of vicious thieves who roamed the countryside. During hard times, some knights even joined these marauding bands. If a serf had a complaint, the lord's chief official, the steward, organized a trial, where disputes were settled according to the customs of the manor. The quality of justice varied greatly from one manor to the next—on some manors a serf caught stealing or beating the lord's favorite horse might be killed without ever appearing in court.

**Homeless:** Protection from violence and harassment is a major concern for homeless. Homeless are victims of muggings, beatings, rape, and homicide. While the police provide protection for homeless as they do other citizens, certain circumstances can make homeless hesitant to call the police. For example, some areas have laws that put the police and homeless in opposition to each other. These laws require police to arrest or remove the homeless instead of protecting or aiding them. Agencies that work specifically toward protecting the homeless include shelters and Legal Aid Societies, which offer free legal advice and have lawyers who donate their time to help the homeless. Many homeless people are mentally ill, and are unable to care for themselves. These people are often considered dangerous and are sometimes jailed rather than taken to a psychiatric ward.

**Critical Thinking Question D:** Which individual—a medieval serf or a homeless person today—do you think has a better situation regarding personal safety? Why?