Homelessness

Imagine yourself on the street alone, scared, cold, and hungry. When I think of homeless that’s how I imagine feeling. Homeless people are people in poverty stuck in a tough situation in rough conditions. Many people like to generalize homeless people as drug addicts who are in poverty because of a deadly drug problem. Did you know that only 33% of homeless people are substance abusers? That’s less than half (*Hurwitz 28).* There are so many different circumstances besides drug abuse that causes a person to become homeless. Homelessness is a big issue; not only does it take a toll on the mental state of people due to things like stress, but as the rates seem to grow, it seems that there more and more bans being put in place, making things even more difficult for the homeless.

Homelessness is a growing issue, and each year the population of those living on the street increases. In 1970 there were 25.4 million homeless people in the United States. In the next 5 years, the homeless population grew by 6.5 million people, because in 1975 the number of homeless people counted for was 31.9 million people (*Hurwitz 27*)*.* These populations are centralized in certain areas; in 2013 the percentage of homeless people in California, New York, Florida, Texas, and Massachusetts made up 51% of the homeless population in the United States. California had the largest percentage out of the five states with 22%. New York had 13%, and Florida had 8%. Texas had 5% and Massachusetts had the smallest percentage with 3% (*Housing*)*.* Some may question whether certain demographics have a greater homeless population than others. In 1996 there was survey of twenty-nine cities conducted by the U.S Conference of Mayors. It showed that 57% of the homeless population was African American, 10% were Hispanic, 2% were Native American, and 1% was Asian (*Gottfried 40*). Before that in 1993-1994 a study by the Interagency showed that African Americans were 40% of the homeless population (*Gottfried, 40*)*.* In another survey, this one of twenty-four cities, it was shown that the average time for a person to remain homeless was seven months. It was also reported that 87% of cases shows that the time people remain homeless has progressed to a greater number recently (*Housing*). Interestingly enough, there are more homeless men than women; there are five times as many homeless men than homeless women (*Gottfried 39*). The overall homeless population for 2013 was 610,042 people. Out of all of those people 394,698 of them were sheltered, and 215,344 or 35% of them were unsheltered. There were 387,845 who were individual adults. The total number of people in families was 222,197 or 36% with a total of 70,960 different households. Also, there is 58,063 were veterans, and 46,924 were youth. Chronic individuals had a total of 92,593 people, and those who were chronic, but also in a family, had a number of 16,539 people (*Chapter*).

 A variety of factors contribute to becoming homeless, and contrary to what many may think, it doesn’t all come back to drugs. A big problem named on countless websites was the rise in cost of rent. In 2000-2009, 40% of renters were facing foreclosure. Also, in 2000-2009 there was a 41% increase in the rent for a two-bedroom house/apartment. A constant issue is the sudden amount of unemployment. There are people in poverty out there who get by paycheck to paycheck, and when they lose their job, they are no longer able to provide for their families (Gottfried *pg. 63*). According to a 1997 Toronto Study of 300 shelters, 34% of people became homeless because they either lost their job or are just not making enough to keep up with the cost of their monthly rent. Another cause is mental illness; a study has shown that 4% of homeless people are in that situation because of their mental illness (*Mental*). Alcoholism is a cause of homelessness, but not for everybody; I saw a video on YouTube where $100 was given to a homeless man to hunt for evidence of how homeless people really spent their money. At first, when we made his first stop at a liquor store, people thought he had wasted the money on alcohol, but he actually used it to buy food to hand to other homeless people in the park. This homeless man had quit his job to take care of his ill parents. They died 2 weeks apart, and with health insurance bills, he was unable to pay everything and ended up being left without a home (*Watch*). While, not everyone’s story may be this heartfelt, it goes to show that not every person on the street is homeless because they are lazy and never went to school, or abuse drugs. There are some other reasons people could be homeless that are a bit shameful and embarrassing for them. These things include having to avoid debt collectors, having crimes to conceal, and even warrants out for their arrest for not paying their alimony (*Gottfried pg. 38*).

 I have always wondered how homelessness affects humans on a deeper level than just the basics such as physical discomfort and hunger. In a survey across British Columbia, taken in 2006, it was shown that 4% of non-homeless male youth and 10% of non-homeless female youth have attempted suicide. In contrast, 15% of homeless male youth and 30% of homeless female youth have attempted suicide. This shows that youth who were homeless had a lot more stress to deal with that really took a major toll on them. Particularly in just Ottawa, Ontario located in Canada, 4% of non-homeless male youth and 21% of homeless male youth attempted suicide. For both genders of youth, 34% of non-homeless youth and 43% of homeless youth had suicidal thoughts. Also from a study done in Ottawa, Ontario they found that only 20% of non-homeless male youth showed depressive symptoms compared to the 39% of homeless male youth who also showed the same symptoms. The study also did a report on the percentage of people who internalizing behavior problems. While 44% of homeless male youth had this behavior issues, only 24% of non-homeless male youth had the same type of problems. These studies show us that having to deal with living on the street and in a shelter takes a toll on kids. Not only do they have to deal with the normal stress and possible drama of school and friends, but also have to deal with being moved from their home and the embarrassment that goes with it. According to Raymond Pillsbury, a counselor at Rochester Middle School, tiredness, antsiness, and being less focused are signs he sees in kids experience homelessness. Based on a report from the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, half of homeless school-age children deal with depression, anxiety, and withdrawal. Although, while dealing with the embarrassment of trying to hide the fact that they are homeless is a big issue for children, it’s not all about that for younger children. For them it’s about missing their bed, toys, and pets. They are often sad and tend to cry over nothing. By the age of eight, one in three homeless children have a mental disorder (*Fosters*). For older people, drugs become a stress relief. Homeless veterans have very high substance abuse, but they are least likely to have psychiatric disorders.

 People do not have to be anyone special to help the homeless; there are small simple gestures that anybody can do that make all the difference.People can help out in their community with the homeless by simply participating in local food and toy drives. Another way to help out is volunteering at local shelters, soup kitchens, and follow-up programs. Everyone has at least one article of clothing in their closet that they no longer wear, by donating their old clothes to organizations that help to distribute resources to those who can’t afford their own. Also, in places like Corvallis there is a “bottle law” where cans and bottles can be refunded for money in which you can donate to help out the homeless buy food. Try to remember that homeless people are humans and have feelings. Treating them with respect, and be kind and courteous is the least you can do. Even something as a little as a smile can help to brighten up their day, the golden rule is to treat them how you would want to be treated if you were in their situation. Educate yourself on the homeless, find out what they need, talk to them, notice them (*35 Ways*).

 Laws play a big role in the way our society runs, but how do those laws affect the homeless?There are camping bans in multiple cities statewide. This law prohibits people from setting up structures like tents in places like under bridges, abandoned lots, and deep within forests and parks. This is a problem because for a lot of homeless people they rely on places like this to find shelter (*The*). There are many anti-homeless laws being put in place by legislators. From an article published in November of 2014, the information was provided about how many cities statewide have current bans that act against the homeless. For example, 100 cities have a ban on sitting or lying in public spaces. Cities aren’t making it all easy for homeless people who cannot make it to a shelter. For families who only have a car left, they cannot even take shelter in that. Sleeping in your car is illegal in eighty-one cities. The consequence for breaking either of these laws is either a $1000 fine or six months in jail. In Florida they have a law that got Arnold, an innocent man arrest for trying to do the good deed of feeding the homeless. The law states that, “ ‘feeding sites’ must be 500 feet away from residential properties, and cannot be within 500 feet of each other” (*About Us*).

 Many people around the U.S team up to create organizations that help to improve the lives of the homeless.One of the organizations is called the National Alliance to End Homelessness. This organization was found in 1982 by a group of community leaders who were concerned about the well being of the homeless people; it was not until 1987 that it got its name. They help the homeless by working collaboratively with the public, the private, and local capacity and nonprofits to work on strengthening homeless programs, helping with the fight to end homelessness (*About Us*). Stand Up For Kids is another organization helping out in communities. This national non-profit charity helps struggling homeless kids by giving them the support they need to succeed as they mature into adults, teaching them life skills to help stabilize and improve their lives by giving them the tools for a bright future (*About Standup*)

Evidently the life of a homeless person can be filled with much stress and trauma. A lot of us like to generalize the homeless and label a lot of them as low education people with drug problems, which is not always true. While many community members are out on a mission to help the homeless, many laws are out to make their lives even more difficult. With more and more people losing their jobs, homelessness is becoming a bigger and more serious issue, creating more stress for people and causing issue both mentally and socially. That’s why we must team up as a community to help out and not let some of these difficult laws get in the way.

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