The Population Looked at with a Blind Eye

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Introduction

When you have no home, food, water, extra clothes, access to healthcare or other resources necessary for survival, you are three times more likely to die on the streets.

Homelessness has been an issue in the United States for a very long time, but why is it not improving? The average life expectancy for a homeless person is about 50 years of age compared to the national average of around 79 years of age. The homeless population suffers from the same illnesses and health issues as the rest of the population, but at rates three to six times higher than the average person. These illnesses include, but are not limited to HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, influenza, cancer, heart disease, diabetes, and hypertension (MedlinePlus 2021). Research shows that the risk of death on the streets is only slightly affected by substance abuse or mental illness, the factors that increase their risk of death are difficulty getting rest, maintaining medications, eating, hygiene, and being affected by the elements.

People become homeless for many reasons, but the top five are lack of affordable housing, unemployment, poverty, mental illness, and substance abuse with a lack of necessary services. Each of these causes can and should be acted on to prevent this population from becoming homeless in the first place. Homelessness needs to not only be addressed in terms of the current crisis, but through acts that work towards prevention as well. Many may think that the government is responsible for addressing this, which is true, however, just expecting them

to make changes for us is clearly not effective. Regardless of their economic status, humans are humans. The public must do their part to make themselves aware of this issue, speak up about it, implement the Housing First method, and act to bring an end to the horrible conditions humans endure every day.

<div align="center">Types of Homelessness</div>

Homelessness may seem like a straightforward concept, but there are multiple types of homelessness present in society on a daily basis. Transitional Homelessness is the first and most common type of homelessness. This category of homelessness involves those suffering from it who have ended up in that place in their lives because of a major life change or catastrophic event such as job loss, a health condition, divorce, domestic abuse, a substance use disorder, or personal or family crisis, among many others, resulting in people being in unhoused situations for less than a year (Red Nose Day 2021). The individuals suffering from this type of homelessness are usually part of the younger generations and the LGBTQ+ community faces unique challenges and is often more likely to face violence, abuse, and exploitation. LGBTQ+ homelessness has been found to result most often from family rejection based on sexual orientation and gender identity (Red Nose Day 2021). Racial discrimination is also a barrier that is correlated with homelessness in some areas, with 56% of heads of households in the New York City shelter system being African American, 32% Hispanic, 7% white, less than 1% Asian American, and 4% of unknown race or ethnicity (Coalition for the Homeless 2022).

The next type of homelessness is Episodic Homelessness, which is when an individual is unhoused or experienced at least three periods of homelessness within the last 12 months.

Similar to transitional homelessness, many of those facing episodic homelessness are younger or dealing with a disability (Red Nose Day 2021). Some of the conditions that could lead to this are substance use disorder, mental illness, and other mental and/or physical health conditions. In some cases, some episodically unhoused people have seasonal or minimum wage income jobs, but they do not make enough money to support themselves fully. This category of homelessness has the potential to become chronic without adequate resources and support.

The third type of homelessness is Chronic Homelessness. This type includes those who are an unaccompanied homeless individual who has been homeless for more than a year and has a disabling condition that restricts their ability to escape homelessness (Red Nose Day 2021). This population is typically older and makes up about 17% of the general homeless population. Many of these individuals have long-term and complex health issues, along with living in parks, cars, the street, or other unsafe spaces that are not suitable for living.

The final type of homelessness is Hidden Homelessness. This consists of individuals who live with others temporarily and who lack a permanent home, deemed "hidden" because it is often unnoticed by others (Red Nose Day 2021). Since there is a lack of access to housing support resources for these individuals and cannot be identified accordingly, these struggling individuals are not included in national statistical data. The individuals with lack of housing usually come from a place of not being able to afford rent or other living expenses, so they reach out to friends and family for temporary stays. Consequently, this population is mostly younger people who experience a sudden change, trauma, or life challenge that results in the loss of a stable living condition. Younger people are often discriminated against when seeking

alternative housing, which contributes to the disproportionately high homelessness rate (Red Nose).

Overall, these four types of homelessness are very useful to keep in mind, as they each have different causes, but the main conditions leading to homelessness are lack of affordable housing, unemployment, poverty, mental illness, and substance abuse with lack of necessary services. Attacking this issue of homelessness where is begins is the only way this population can decrease going forward.

Health-Related Causes and Effects

People facing homelessness suffer from the exact same illnesses and diseases experienced by the average person, but at rates three to six times higher (NHCHC 2006). This includes, but is not limited to, HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, influenza, cancer, heart disease, diabetes, and hypertension (NHCHC 2006). Most of these illnesses can be treated or prevented entirely, but the crowded, poorly ventilated living conditions in many shelters, or the elements experienced on the streets, promote the spread of these diseases, and demote the recovery from them. This, on top of the difficulty getting rest, maintaining medications, eating well, hygiene, and staying warm prolong the diseases and exacerbate them, sometimes to the point of death. In New York City, a huge issue arises for the homeless population during the very cold winters. People battling homelessness experience frostbite, immersion foot, or hypothermia, and this puts them in a position that makes them have an eightfold risk of dying when compared to non-homeless individuals (NHCHC 2006). Further past just the illness, the homeless population has individuals die from unprovoked violence on the streets, also known

as hate crimes, along with falling victim to anti-homeless laws that criminalize them in public

spaces, enforcing the blind eye turned to these struggling humans from the general public.

Since insufficient income and lack of affordable housing are the leading causes of

homelessness, along with domestic violence, especially for women, the way towards

prevention of homelessness is implementing measures to decrease the likelihood of those

causes taking place. In this situation, it is important to act proactively, not just reactively to the

issue of homelessness. Lower income housing availability, spreading the word of domestic

violence support resources, mental health resources, volunteering in shelters, and donations to

organizations working against this global issue are some ways individuals can help. One concept

that should be addressed to decrease the size of the homeless population, while also helping to

prevent it in the first place, is Housing First. In previous years, people have had to show that

they deserve housing before getting the shelter that they so desperately need. However, this is

a fundamental human need for survival (USICH 2018). Housing First makes it so housing can be

provided to the individuals in need first, followed by support and resources to reintegrate into a

stable life in society. This is a proven approach that allows people experiencing homelessness to

obtain permanent housing as quickly as possible, along with providing people with the

supportive services and connections to community-based resources that they need to keep

their housing and avoid returning to homelessness (USICH 2018). Implementing this system

country-wide would lead to huge improvements for those suffering from these conditions in

the United States.

Furthermore, access to healthcare to treat the illnesses that everyday people live

through, but people struggling with homelessness die from, would aid to their life expectancy,

and support their journey to get permanent housing and careers drastically (USICH 2018). This care could be through ensuring access behavioral and mental health services, substance use disorder services, and preventative care methods for youth development as well (USICH 2018). Strengthening the crisis response system everywhere, especially low-income areas, is also an important part of the improvement of care for this population.

Ending the Stigma and Implementing Solutions

The first step to coming together to truly make an impact in helping this population is attacking and putting an end to the stigma that has been trained into citizens' minds about the homeless population. Despite the statistics and facts about the humans who are put through these awful conditions with seemingly no end to the cycle, the population has a certain invisibility to them, as the public in general seems to turn a blind eye to the population, ignoring them in public. Even worse than ignoring them and their vulnerability, is the fact that their existence and instability in life is often criminalized to "clean up" communities. Instead of helping these struggling people to "clean up" the community, they are put in jail or forced elsewhere to be out of the public eye (Unity Parenting and Counseling 2022). Stigmas often come from a place of misunderstanding which can be promoted by inaccurate or misleading information from representations in the media (Unity Parenting and Counseling 2022). These harmful stigmas can lead to stereotypes, discrimination, and prejudices that work against people trying to escape from homelessness.

A few common stigmas about people suffering from homelessness include being "dirty," "violent criminals," and "lazy, deserving," (Unity Parents and Counseling 2022). Without regular

access to bathing, cleanliness and hygiene are obviously going to be difficult for this population of humans. By assisting them by providing access to clean water and personal hygiene products, this can positively impact their physical and mental health, along with bettering their chances of finding a job. In terms of being thought of as "violent criminals," homeless individuals are found to be the victims or violence more often than the perpetrators of this violence (Unity Parents and Counseling 2022). No human is deserving of not having their most basic survival needs of shelter, food, water, clothing, warmth, and sleep. The result of that environment is completely out of their control and the mental health concerns that result from the stress and trauma from being homeless absolutely contribute to the inability to live independently or keep a job (Unity Parents and Counseling 2022). They need to get help and services to have their basic needs met before even fathoming holding down a job, it does not come down to laziness (Unity Parents and Counseling 2022). These stigmas and discrimination can lead to people keeping their situation and circumstances private, leading to not utilizing resources provided to help them, which further marginalizes the individuals. Humans are humans.

There is a solid three-step process to eliminate stigmas, which is required if trying to eliminate homelessness (Unity Parents and Counseling 2022). First, the stigmas must be rejected around homelessness, language must be changed when talking about this population, and housing should be approached differently. No one choses to be homeless, yet there are many "anti-homeless" laws that criminalize individuals for sitting or loitering in public spaces, which enhance the invisibility of the population. Additionally, these laws deprive the people battling homelessness of access to basic medical and social care that could contribute to

improving their way of life. One way to do this is to engage with people who are experiencing homelessness, such as during volunteering at a shelter, to further understand the context of their situation, which allows for the ability to approach the problem realistically, instead of from assumptions. The people experiencing homelessness should be referred to as just that, homelessness does not define them, and by not referring to them as such, it helps to reshape the view on the population. Many shelters implement a process of allowing individuals to stay in the shelter for a fixed period of time, with a fixed period of time that they cannot return. This has been proven ineffective, as it does not take into consideration each person's circumstances (Unity Parents and Counseling 2022). The "Housing Ready" approach is another problematic one. With this approach, individuals cannot receive permanent housing unless they achieve goals that are put in place universally to determine if they're "ready for housing." Having a permanent housing environment is not something that should be earned through generalized goals for the individuals. In contrast, Housing First, where everyone is automatically "housing ready," addresses the fact that people need basic resources such as food and a place to live before getting a job, budgeting, or addressing a substance use disorder or mental illness. This system allows for more people experiencing homelessness to get back on their feet with the supportive services they need.

Beyond eliminating the stigma and vouching for a Housing First program, there are many ways that individuals can get involved to make a difference with the issue of homelessness. This can start with volunteering at local homeless shelters, volunteering at soup kitchens or food pantries, and providing ways for these individuals to become more educated on the ways they can access mental and physical health resources, as well as housing programs

and job opportunities. With this piece comes a great deal of awareness that is necessary for

helping this worldwide issue, but it is important to not just stop there. After gaining this insight

and awareness, there are many different nonprofit organizations that work to prevent or end

homelessness through a variety of different approaches, such as Habitat for Humanity. Habitat

for Humanity works towards providing affordable, stable housing for those in need in over 70

countries worldwide since 1976, and their work has helped more than 39 million people

(Habitat for Humanity Leaders 2022). Additionally, Habitat for Humanity also provides

education programs from volunteers on sanitation, hygiene, water safety, and disaster

responses. Donating, or even better, volunteering for nonprofit organizations like this one is

incredibly helpful for making a difference in the people who struggle with homelessness' lives.

The National Alliance to End Homelessness also has a strong approach on how to

contribute to the end of homelessness. The first piece of this approach involves a coordinated

systems approach that requires using local data to make informed decisions about how to

effectively allocate services, resources, and programs to best fit the needs of those

experiencing homelessness in the community (National Alliance to End Homelessness 2021).

Permanent supportive housing is also an intervention that combines affordable housing

assistance with voluntary support to address that needs of chronically homeless people. These

services are meant to create an independent living environment with the skills to connect

people with community-based, affordable, healthcare, treatment, and employment services

(National Alliance to End Homelessness 2021). Investments in this permanent supportive

housing has helped decrease the number of chronically homeless people by 8% since 2007 and

research has demonstrated that this approach also increases housing stability and improves

overall health of these individuals (National Alliance to End Homelessness 2021). This cost-effective solution has also proven to lower public costs associated with crisis services such as homeless shelters, hospitals, jails, and prisons.

Additionally, an effective crisis response system that quickly identifies and connects people who are experiencing or are at risk of experiencing homelessness to housing assistance programs and other necessary services. This aligns a community and its programs and services around the goal of making homelessness rare and nonrecurring (National Alliance to End Homelessness 2021). There are five components to this crisis response system: outreach, coordinated entry, diversion and prevention, emergency shelters and interim housing, and permanent housing. Outreach involves outreach workers connecting people at risk of homelessness to coordinated entry, emergency services, and temporary shelter, along with working with other programs in the system to start the work to find people stable and permanent housing. Coordinated entry is the process that identifies, assesses, and refers people in crisis to the vital housing and assistance services. Diversion and prevention are important due to reduction in the size of the homeless population (National Alliance to End Homelessness 2021). Prevention aids households in preserving their current stable situations and diversion prevents homelessness for people who need shelter by helping them identify quick alternative housing arrangements or other services. Emergency shelters and interim housing, while not ideal, are helpful for temporary aid to bridge the gap before finding permanent housing (National Alliance to End Homelessness 2021). Permanent housing is an important part of this crisis response as well because the system must be able to connect

people struggling with homelessness with permanent housing programs in the area, such as Housing First, rapid re-housing, and permanent supportive housing.

There also must be efforts taken towards improving pathways to employment for low-skilled workers through investment in subsidized employment and programs funded under the current Workforce Investment and Opportunity Act (National Alliance to End Homelessness 2021). Support for those who do obtain employment is also important, such as childcare and transportation assistance. Additionally, the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) helps provide financial assistance more readily for some families to avoid homelessness (National Alliance to End Homelessness 2021). However, there should be more public policy put in place to make the barriers for the individuals and families who struggle to find housing or employment daily. Providing more entry-level job opportunities, funding nonprofit programs such as the National Alliance to End Homelessness or Habitat for Humanity, providing more affordable healthcare options for those who experience poverty and are uninsured, educating communities on ways to get involved to help this population, and so much more. Awareness across the board is the most important first step to finding a solution, but it cannot stop there, action must take place to truly make a difference for this struggling population.

Conclusion

In conclusion, homelessness is clearly a glaring issue, and it is not currently being addressed enough. The first step to helping this population through recovery to a stable life that provides them with basic survival needs is awareness. Even reading this paper is a step towards awareness. Learning about the stigma, discrimination, and horrible health and safety conditions these individuals must fight every day, is the preliminary step to putting a decrease

and eventually an end to these horrendous living circumstances. The next step is action. There are many opportunities for action, including, but not limited to: acting against the stigmas, implementing the Housing First program, volunteering or donating to nonprofit organizations, and providing individuals with the necessary resources they are lacking, such as food, shelter, water, healthcare, clothing. The stigma, stereotypes, and discrimination surrounding the homeless population is the biggest barrier, along with cost of living, that prevents these struggling individuals, from recovering from their heartbreaking living circumstances. Living the way these struggling individuals are, is not truly living, humans are humans, and just because they are struggling, does not mean their lives are worth any less than people with stability present in their lives.

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