



How Does Mental Illness Relate to Homelessness?

By Neha Yadav

Homelessness is a prevalent issue in American society, and as much as some government officials attempt to divert attention from it by forcing the homeless into hiding, covering up this problem will not solve it. Compassion will play a major role in resolving this issue, as many people refuse to acknowledge that homeless individuals are simply human beings who are less fortunate than the majority of Americans. However, compassion alone will not fix the issue of homelessness, as it is a broad issue that requires a comprehensive solution that counteracts the main factors exacerbating the problem of homelessness: poverty, substance abuse, lack of affordable healthcare, and mental illness. This article will focus on mental illness and its relationship to the homelessness crisis.

It has long been speculated that there is a correlation between mental health issues and homelessness. This speculation has come mainly from intuitions, as people based this assumption on the many mentally ill homeless people they had seen and the incongruity between the proportion of mentally ill homeless people and that of mentally ill people who were not homeless. Fortunately, there is now conclusive evidence to support this theory: the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration reports that “20 to 25% of the homeless population in the United States suffers from some form of severe mental illness,” in contrast to 6% of overall Americans (“Mental Illness. . .”). In fact, the first chapter of the

depressing story of homelessness among the mentally ill was written in the 1960s, when the policy of forcibly committing individuals with mental disorders into psychiatric hospitals was discontinued. As a result of the discontinuation of this policy, mentally impaired victims were released back into their communities, which were woefully bereft of community-based treatment centers; thus, these individuals eventually ended up on the streets (“The Health of the Homeless. . .”). Due to inadequate treatment for victims of mental health disorders, the saga of increased risk for homelessness among the mentally ill continues today.

In light of this issue, it is necessary to analyze steps that can be taken to remedy the problem of homelessness, or at least lessen its severity. A viable solution would be the implementation of a federally funded housing program for the homeless that provides continued mental health treatment as well. However, this plan has a few obstacles. First, mentally ill homeless people are different from mentally ill people who are not homeless, and these differences may prove to be difficult for healthcare workers. Overall, homeless individuals with mental health issues are more likely to be less cooperative, unkempt, unruly due to substance abuse, unable to attend treatment centers, and neglectful of showing up to appointments (“The Health of the Homeless. . .”). Therefore, it will be necessary to train psychiatrists and healthcare workers regarding how to correctly deal with the mentally ill homeless. This training will most likely require federal funds and will thus be difficult to implement unless such a solution garners federal support. Continuing on the subject of federal funds, it will be difficult to convince the government to allocate funding for the creation of shelters for the homeless that provide comprehensive mental health treatment.

Tackling this issue and ensuring that such measures are enacted in order to better the lives of the homeless requires the support not only of senators but of the American people as well. It is our duty to help our fellow human beings in their pursuit of a better life by advocating for the reform of the homeless system and encouraging our government to allocate funds towards this goal. Until the ignorance among the large populace surrounding this problem is dissipated, we will not have enough support to enact the necessary reforms to improve the condition of the homeless. Therefore, it is necessary to be aware of and spread awareness regarding this issue in order to garner support for mediating the crisis of homelessness, which is so prevalent in American society.

Works Cited

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