



A Hidden Cause of Homelessness: Mental Illness

May 16th, 2018 | Amanda Curnow

“At the root of this dilemma is the way we view mental health in this country. Whether an illness affects your heart, your leg or your brain, it’s still an illness, and there should be no distraction” (Obama & Jones, 2010). First Lady Michelle Obama once wrote this to explain the stigma surrounding mental illness in the United States. While people from a multitude of backgrounds have been diagnosed with them, the prevalence of mental disorders amongst the homeless, in particular, is staggering. As reported by the National Coalition for the Homeless, approximately 20 to 25% of US homeless people are considered to be severely mentally ill. When analyzing the entire population, only 6% of the nation’s citizens suffer from severe mental disorders (2016). It should not come as a surprise, then, that mental illness is one of the leading causes of homelessness in the United States.

A majority of the mentally ill homeless population are suffering from what are considered to be severe mental disorders. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, these disorders are defined as: “a mental, behavioral, or emotional disorder resulting in serious functional impairment, which substantially interferes with or limits one or more major life activities” (2017). These diagnoses include, but are not limited

to: bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, and major depressive disorder. Having these disorders can cause a person to lose their ability to complete typical day-to-day tasks, and may lead someone to isolate themselves from friends and family. Schizophrenia, for instance, is especially debilitating. In the US, 1% of people are affected by schizophrenia. In the homeless population, however, this rate is a whopping 20% (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2015). People with this disorder tend to lose touch with reality, forming delusions and hallucinations. Severe mental illness plagues the United States' population of homeless people.

To many, it might seem confusing why a struggling person would fail to seek treatment in the first place. They may believe that if a person had started therapy or medication as soon as their disorder began, then they could avoid homelessness altogether. This proactive mentality is simply not a realistic solution. A patient suffering from the aforementioned disorder schizophrenia, namely, could fall prey to their own delusions and hallucinations. One defining character of this disorder is hearing voices, which could warn the patient of nonexistent danger, and could persuade them not to tell anyone else. Similarly, Delusions of Persecution can cause a person with schizophrenia to think that an agency like the FBI is out to get them and their loved ones. Understandably, this can lead a person to flee their friends and family, and leave their old lives behind. Jobless and alone, they end up on the street, afraid to ask anyone for help because everyone is mistakenly viewed as a threat to them. Even if they were to seek out treatment, there are not many resources currently accessible to the homeless. Several government agencies are trying to fix this with local programs, such as the Step Up project in Santa Monica, CA.

The Step Up on Second Apartments were built in 1995 to support and house the city's mentally ill homeless. They currently provide housing and counseling to 267 residents, and program leaders plan to build similar locations across the country (Holland, 2017). While the main goal for the residents aged 50+ is to stay in stabilized housing, many of the young occupants eventually go to school, get jobs, and sometimes are able to live independently. The cost to Santa Monica residents is not too extreme, either. The apartments are actually saving the city money on police, hospitals, and jail costs. As long as they move forward with developing Step Up nationally, this could be a very beneficial solution to alleviating the struggles faced by mentally ill disadvantaged people.

Many patients are diagnosed with severe mental illnesses each day. Several of these people will have access to top therapists and the most effective medication available. Those who are not privileged enough, however, will suffer, and fall behind. Many homeless people are on the streets simply because they did not have access to treatment soon enough, if at all. The most beneficial way to help out the mentally homeless population is to supply housing and counseling. <https://www.homelessshelterdirectory.org/> is a website available for people to find resources and shelters in their state. Just like Michelle Obama said, mental illness is as much of a disease as anything else, and it should be treated as such.

References

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