



The Special Challenges of the Elderly Homeless

Andrew Stahl

Homelessness among the elderly has been on the rise and presents policy makers and social services with special challenges which are not present in younger homeless individuals. In 2014, over 31% of the nation's homeless population, or about 306,000 people, was over 50 years old, according to the New York Times. The number of homeless over 50 seems to be on the rise, for a variety of reasons. One is the aging of the previously homeless population: as Baby Boomers grow older, the number of previously homeless over 50 also rises. Another factor is people who become homeless for the first time when they are elderly, often from the high cost of housing, economic downturns, and medical problems. Many also have children, but for some reason cannot rely on them for financial or housing support, often because their children are struggling financially, or they have lost contact with them.

The elderly are exposed to many of the risk factors that contribute to homelessness, and often lack a safety net. They often live alone, with children moved out and oftentimes spouses dead or divorced. Furthermore, they cannot easily get jobs after retirement, since they are often too old to rejoin the workforce or change careers in the case of an economic downturn. Finally, as the cost of housing rises, particularly in areas like Los Angeles and New York, the elderly are exposed to homelessness as their retirement savings prove insufficient.

Elderly homeless present special challenges for social services and policy makers trying to help combat homelessness, especially when it comes to medical problems. The elderly are confronted with increasing health issues which require expensive and recurring treatment. Homelessness can compound these issues and make treatment more difficult, as it can be difficult to both afford the treatment and come in consistently for it. Substance abuse issues,

particularly prevalent among the homeless, present even greater health issues and can lead to preexisting health conditions to worsen. The stresses and exposure of homelessness, furthermore, have been suggested to lead to early onset of geriatric conditions such as dementia.

Of particular concern when it comes to elderly homeless is people between the ages of 50-64, because they are faced with worsening health while not being eligible for government programs such as Medicare and Social Security. These issues mean that providers for homeless populations need to reconsider what services they need to provide. Health concerns, especially, need to be accounted for. Elderly homeless place special burdens on shelters, and as their numbers continue to rise shelters will be forced to face the challenge they pose. Any potential solutions will have to take local circumstances into account, since the causes and circumstances of homelessness vary across locations. The needs of L.A. will not be the same as a small town.

However, the unique challenges of homelessness among the elderly require several things to be kept in mind among shelters and policy makers. They place strains on shelters, for example, by requiring more resources than other homeless populations, and are oftentimes less likely to escape homelessness and therefore require more permanent solutions than shelters can provide. Their health needs are particularly difficult to handle effectively given the challenges of homelessness, and since they are often chronic require lifelong solutions. These issues require both local and national changes to address them.

References:

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