



Homeless: Not One Size Fits All

By Heather Stergos

When many of us here the word “homeless” applied to a person, a specific story often come mind immediately. This individual must have lost their job, lost their house, never had a house or doesn’t want to work. Those are often the first thoughts of many people when they think of “homeless”. However, this is not always the face of “homeless”.

In just one day in 2016 over 31, 500 women fleeing domestic violence situations found refuge in either a shelter or a transitional housing program. These were the lucky ones who had resources to go to in their city and who knew that they had resources out there that could help them. Many women fleeing domestic violence do not have resources they can use nor do many of them know that is an option, so they are immediately on the street. Often these are women who have minimum wage paying jobs that they have now lost in order to flee to safety and others often do not have a job because they have been home raising children. In order to save their lives, they are forced into an often more dangerous situation of living on the streets.

Runaways are another group of “homeless” who technically, have a house available to them that they can live in, but it is not safe for them, so they end up on the street. In 2016 there were over 40,000 runaways living on the street between the ages of 18 -20. This is a very rough estimate since it is assumed that there are many more who are not accounted for. These young people often have not graduated from college and find themselves in a situation where life on the streets is often safer than what they were faced with in their own house.

Additionally, in 2016 there were an estimated 89,000 youth under the age of 18 living on the streets without a parent or guardian or another adult. These children are sometimes runaways but are often children who were dumped or left by their parents who were either unable or unwilling to care for them any longer. These children sleep under benches, in playgrounds, in tunnels and often spend much of their days digging in trash cans for food. They are overlooked by social services who, once on the street, have a very difficult time locating these children and therefore are unable to find resources for them.

Veterans comprise 70% of the homeless population, according to the National Network for Youth. These individuals often suffer from undiagnosed or untreated mental health issues that prevent them from maintaining organized functioning and interpersonal relationship, which makes domestic living situations difficult. Though

there are many in this category often are unable to hold down a job, resulting in them being homeless, many leave their home due to mental illness or an inability to maintain those interpersonal relationships in their lives.

These numbers serve as a reminder that there is no single definition or story that is attached to the word “homeless”, Most live much more complicated existences than simply losing a house or a job. There are a wide variety of circumstances, life experiences and situations that live behind that word “homeless” and by seeing the word as meaning one thing and one thing only, is to deprive each and every person who is homeless, of their story, their circumstances. This serves no purpose other than perpetuating the single-minded stereotype of “the homeless”. So, the next time you encounter an individual who is living on the street, shelter, transitional housing, consider that they have a story that is just as vivid and real as our own. Consider that “homeless” is not a one size fits all description. Take the time to smile at the person and to remember that they have a life, they are a life and until you ask, you don’t know their story. Take the time to ask.

Reference

National Network for Youth. (2016). *Homeless in america*. Retrieved from:
<https://www.nn4youth.org/learn/how-many-homeless/>