



A Downward Spiral: Homelessness and Health Problems

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Above the many indignities faced by being homeless, one of them stands out: the lack of good healthcare. The homeless population faces, unfortunately, a staggering number of health conditions, many of which are preventable or treatable. In addition, the state of homelessness or severe economic disadvantage can and oftentimes does prevent people from accessing medical treatment for preexisting conditions, such as diabetes, cancer, congenital disabilities, or heart disease, among others. On top of those difficulties, public health issues such as natural disasters or the widespread and ongoing COVID-19 pandemic can have a disproportionate impact on the homeless population. In this article, I will examine some of the common health problems affecting the homeless population, as well as possible solutions and sources of medical counseling, health care, and treatment.

One of the common problems homeless people face that contributes to their poor health is lack of adequate hygiene. Most public showers require some amount of payment, which is oftentimes impossible to produce for people living in desperate conditions on the street. However, there is a darker side to this denial of hygiene: when one is lacking cleanliness, infection and disease can very easily gain a powerful foothold. Infectious diseases, including many that have been already eradicated or are significantly less lethal in the general population, such as tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS. Other times, infectious diseases that prove to be significantly less lethal in the general population, such as bronchitis, can become silent killers of the homeless as they become chronic.

In addition to infectious diseases, many homeless people struggle to find adequate care for any preexisting conditions they might have. Chronic conditions such as heart disease and cancer

can easily and quickly become unmanageable when a person loses their source of housing. As a result of lacking funds to pay the necessary costs of treatment, many people sometimes have to choose between housing and medical care. Once on the streets, the physical stresses caused by exposure to the heat and cold, as well as a lack of safety and security, rapidly take their toll on any given individual's health. While the lifespan of the non-homeless population ranges into the 70s and 80s, homeless people only have an average lifespan of 52 years old.

Adding on to that, the stresses caused by homelessness can and often do heighten a person's susceptibility to mental illness. Illnesses like schizophrenia, substance abuse disorders depression, and anxiety often gain a stranglehold on the minds of people living on the street; and if those mental disorders were present before, the stress and poor living conditions of the state of being homeless quickly lead to a worsened condition.

The mental illnesses of the homeless, however, are oftentimes a double-edged sword. Once an individual has schizophrenia, addiction, or any other mental illness, the road out of homelessness instantly becomes longer and harder. Schizophrenia, addiction, and other mental illnesses often make it impossible for the individual in question to find a source of employment or housing, resulting in a toxic downward spiral that can quickly cause the person in question to lose control.

In conclusion, many health problems affect the homeless of today, and it is imperative that we fully address this as a society.

Citations

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