

The War on Homelessness: How the Stigma of Illegal Substance Abuse Negatively Impacts Homeless People

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Mental illness, substance abuse, and homelessness are cyclical: each contributes to the others. Altogether, they make up a large stigma of fear and distrust in non-homeless Americans. Those that have both a mental illness and substance abuse have what is called a “dual diagnosis,” and the byproduct is a lethal cycle of dependency. Most people who walk by a homeless person automatically assume two things: they are not actively seeking employment, and they are taking drugs. Due to the rising number of homeless people, the second statement is true. According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), more than 50% of people seeking housing programs are addicted to an illegal substance, suffer from a mental illness, or have a dual diagnosis.

Illegal substance abuse has been a prevalent issue in Americans (not just the homeless) for decades. High stress levels in poorer populations contribute to substance abuse, and paired with living on the street away from loved ones and fighting for food, many use drugs as a coping mechanism. Since they are already homeless, obtaining the necessary treatments or governmental benefits are almost impossible as many who do not have a permanent

living situation do not have a steady source of income. It is factors such as this that many have shied away from helping homeless people they see on their commutes to work.

“I used to offer food to the homeless people I would run into on the street,” says Jessica L., who is employed in the city.

“But it got to the point where I was seeing the same people every day, and they would turn down my offers to buy them lunch or give them a snack. They wanted money, and I knew it wasn’t to buy their own food. It’s a shame that our country doesn’t try to do more to help these people, and it’s because I think we forget that they are people too, and they deserve our help.”

Currently, there are 554,000 homeless people in America, and that number is only growing. Just as the homeless population increases, so does the number of drug overdoses. More than 80% of these overdoses involved opioids and prescription painkillers, and have occurred in urban populations. Drug overdoses in homeless populations have become so customary that many have considered it an epidemic.

As previously stated, the cycle of homeless, mental illness, and substance abuse is a vicious one, and does not have to occur in that order. In many, instances once one falls in the line, the rest are sure to fall as well like a line of dominoes. But just because this is a significant number of homeless people, these percentages do not make up the entire population. Many homeless people are fully functioning, actively seeking employment, and have even overcome these challenges and now have a home. Now, more than ever, it is important to remain compassionate, selfless, and nonjudgmental towards society’s most vulnerable.

Sources:

<https://www.addictioncenter.com/addiction/homelessness/>

<https://sunrisehouse.com/addiction-demographics/homeless-population/>