



Those Who Suffer

by Ashley Bleoaja

Imagine a small child. Born far from affluency but manages to barely float above poverty level. The child has several siblings. The child hopes to engage in normal activities with fellow students. Everything seems fairly normal, but truly, this child is far more likely to become homeless because he suffers from a mental illness. People with poor mental health are more susceptible to the three main factors that can lead to homelessness: poverty, disaffiliation, and personal vulnerability. Because they often lack the capacity to sustain employment, they have little income. Delusional thinking may lead them to withdraw from friends, family and other people. This loss of support leaves them fewer coping resources in times of trouble. Mental illness can also impair a person's ability to be resilient and resourceful; it can cloud thinking and impair judgment. (HomelessHub, Mental Health) These issues have been the source of over 25% of homelessness in the United States.

Those who suffer from mental illness such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder are particularly vulnerable to homelessness because they often unintentionally push away caregivers, family, and friends who may be the force keeping that person from becoming homeless. Mental illnesses prevent some from forming and maintaining stable relationships or cause those with mental health disabilities to misinterpret others' guidance and react irrationally. These factors often isolate those with disabilities and thus makes them more prone to end up homeless. According to the National Coalition for the

Homeless, poor mental health may also affect physical health, especially for people who are already homeless. Mental illness may cause people to neglect taking the necessary precautions against disease. When combined with inadequate hygiene due to homelessness, this may lead to physical problems such as respiratory infections, skin diseases, or exposure to tuberculosis or HIV. In addition, half of the mentally ill homeless population in the United States also suffers from substance abuse and dependence (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration).

Many homeless who suffer from a mental health disability are willing to accept treatment and services. Cities who coordinate well with mental health service providers are more likely to combat homelessness. Unfortunately, proper mental health services are not provided to those who need it and would greatly benefit from such resources. Even if homeless individuals with mental illnesses are provided with housing, they are unlikely to achieve residential stability and remain off the streets unless they have access to continued treatment and services. Homeless with mental disabilities are in need of more care because they face greater challenges than others in similar situations. According to the National Coalition for the Homeless, research has shown that supported housing is effective for people with mental illnesses. In addition to housing, supported housing programs offer services such as mental health treatment, physical health care, education and employment opportunities, peer support, and daily living and money management skills training. Successful supported housing programs include outreach and engagement workers, a variety of flexible treatment options to choose from, and services to help people reintegrate into their communities. (National Mental Health Association, 2006) With proper funding, such housing programs could be more widely offered to the homeless and decrease the rate of homelessness across American cities.

Resources:

HomelessHub, Mental Health,
<http://homelesshub.ca/about-homelessness/topics/mental-health>

National Coalition for the Homeless, Mental Illness and Homelessness,
http://nationalhomeless.org/factsheets/Mental_Illness.pdf