



The Struggle of the Growing Elderly Homeless Population

By Plamedie Ifasso

When Horace Allong, 60 moved to Los Angeles after a divorce, he could not foresee that he would lose his wallet and identification two weeks into his arrival to the city. Allong struggled to find a job and is now forced to live in a tent. “It’s the first time I’ve been on the streets, so I’m learning.” Allong told *The New York Times*. Unfortunately, Allong isn’t an outlier because the homeless population is getting older. In 2014, 306,000 people over 50 were homeless. With this increasing trend, the number of elderly living on the streets will double by 2050.

It is not as easy as believing the stigma that people are lazy because there are complex reasons why anyone might be forced into such a harsh situation. People are not two-dimensional and neither are their struggles. Financial insecurity is the most common cause of homelessness, and with one tragedy, adults living in poverty can easily fall into the trap.

Although the issue of homelessness doesn’t look the same across the nation, it is continuing to spread in large cities where the cost of living is constantly raising. In 2015, around 20 percent of United States’ homeless population lived in California, and Los Angeles experienced a 5.7 percent increase in its homeless population. Justice in Aging, an organization dedicated to fighting poverty among the elderly, reported in 2016 that 8.7 million adults faced a high housing cost burden and 4.8 million had a severe cost burden revealing that many elderly adults live in areas they are struggling to pay.

If they lose their job, it can be hard for the older population to find a new one. The market does not offer a plate full of occupations for individuals over 50. “It’s all working against you. It costs money to interview for a job. You have to wear something nice, find a way to get there one time, clean up.” Angie Whitehurst, a formerly-homeless vendor for a street newspaper who struggle to find employment after suffering from a stroke, told *ThinkProgress*. “And if you don’t get it, which is usually the case, finding health insurance when you’re under 65 is nearly impossible. Who has time for that when you’re already dancing on air?”

Another common trigger for older adults is social vulnerabilities such as the collapse of a relationship whether it be because of a divorce or the death of a relative or partner. Isolation or lack of friends and family members can prompt homelessness because the older adult has a smaller network of people willing to help prevent them from falling into an extreme circumstance.

Once they start living outdoors, the elderly are presented with various challenges. Homelessness can take a toll on the healthiest of young people, so it can be even more dangerous for older individuals who are already suffering from chronic health issues. When you are homeless you can't accommodate the outdoors, so unhoused adults struggle with illnesses similar to housed adults 15 to 20 years older. Margot Kusher, a professor of medicine at University of California, San Francisco kept up with 350 homeless adults over 50 living in Oakland California in an effort to study the impacts of homelessness on the elderly. In the first 18 months, at least 15 of the participants died from diseases that kill members of the general public a decade later. Because of poor nutrition, low access to health care and stress, the elderly homeless population is aging prematurely. "A lot of these people have been healthy their whole lives." Kushel told ThinkProgress. "But it doesn't take long for their health to plummet once they're homeless."

People who struggle with chronic diseases have to make multiple trips to the doctor's office and stick to certain medication and diets, but adhering to a strict routine can be difficult when you can't control your living space. When you are homeless, you can't accommodate the outdoors which leads to older homeless adults having a lower life expectancy.

This tragic situation should not continue to be a reality for people. Once the homeless population have shelter, they have the opportunity for a good future. It is important to be educated in this types of issues, so that you can have a positive impact on the lives of the aging homeless population.

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