

The Elderly and Homelessness

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When investigating homelessness, a lot of media attention is focused on the working-age population in America. The retired and elderly population are not represented in most of the data on poverty. While the proportion of this group who are living on the streets was once small, it is now growing at an extremely fast pace. They are a very vulnerable and weak population, and need all of the help and support we can give.

In 2014, there were 306,000 homeless people over the age of 50 in the US. According to the Department of Urban Housing and Development, this was a 20% increase from the numbers reported in 2007 (Nagourney, 2016). This makes sense, considering the nation's general

population as a whole is aging. A large portion of the elderly belong to the Baby Boomer Generation. These Baby Boomers have been on the streets for most of their lives.

Many Baby Boomers fell on hard times in the aftermath of one of many recessions in the 1980s and 70s (Nagourney, 2016). Once they were left unemployed, they were unable to get back on their feet financially. Several also fell victim to both the housing crisis and the crack cocaine epidemic (Nagourney, 2016). These are people who have suffered for most of their lives, and have never been given a chance to rehabilitate.

While it is very common, not all of the older homeless have histories on the street. Some were struggling to keep up with gentrification in cities. As their town became cleaner and safer, the cost of living reached an all-time high. Unable to afford their rent, the elderly ended up huddling in tents under overpasses, hidden away from wealthy residents and tourists. This is seen in cities across America; Los Angeles for instance, saw a 5.7% increase in homelessness in 2015 (Nagourney, 2016). I believe cities need to care for their current residents before they try to attract others to the area.

Older homeless people face more risks than the younger population. According to the National Coalition for the Homeless Elderly, they have “higher rates of geriatric syndromes, including problems performing daily activities, walking, vision and hearing, as well as falls and frailty when compared to the general population” (2018). This can make living on the streets near impossible for some people. The elderly is also more likely to show signs of mental illness. The onset of conditions such as depression and dementia can be detrimental to someone who is already struggling to survive.

Not all hope is lost when studying our nation’s aging homeless population. At age 65, they will be eligible for federal programs such as Social Security and Medicare (Hecht & Coyle,

2001). There is affordable housing set aside for elder Americans. Known as “Subsidized Housing,” a person is eligible to sign up at age 62. Unfortunately, for everyone occupied unit, there are at least nine senior citizens on the waiting list (NCHE, 2018). We as a nation need to brainstorm a solution to increase the number of units available for the homeless elderly.

We should not continue to ignore our older homeless population. They are often forgotten and left out of national studies and data. These people do not have the ability or means to fight for change on their own. We must recognize this as a major issue and pass legislation for helpful programs and housing.

References

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