



Destigmatizing Drug Abuse in the Homeless Population

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“Don’t give him money, he’ll probably just spend it on drugs,” says a well-dressed woman to her husband, her voice echoing over the blare of taxi horns and the rustle of shuffling feet. I’m on spring break in Chicago with my best friends, trying to forget about our college stresses by shopping on the Magnificent Mile. I don’t know why this particular woman’s remark stood out to me, but it certainly changed my perspective for the better. Here we were, in one of the most expensive shopping districts in the world, ignoring each and every homeless person that sat in front of every designer store. This is a stark contrast seen in urban areas across the United States. The woman’s statement isn’t too far off from our nation’s general consensus of the homeless; we make ourselves feel better by not helping them. This is a very backwards idea. Although we may think our money will be used for malicious activities, they will probably just buy food with it. Our ignorance is further fueled by stereotypes of homeless people and addiction.

It is true that an addiction to illegal drugs can lead to homelessness. In 2007, drug addiction was listed as the main reason for homelessness in two-thirds of the subjects studied (The National Coalition for the Homeless, 2009). People suffering from substance abuse will do

anything to get a hold of their drug of choice, no matter the repercussions or cost. According to 12 Keys Rehab, a heroin addiction can cost \$150 to \$200 a day (2016). The effects of drug use can cause people to lose their jobs, and eventually they will be unable to afford housing. Having no other alternative, these people end up on the streets, with no access to treatment.

On the other hand, homelessness can actually cause the addiction. A majority of the homeless population are mentally ill. Many people suffering from disorders such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, or depression abuse illegal drugs as a type of self-medication (12 Step Rehab, 2016). It is difficult to live with these mental disorders without housing and treatment, so they see these drugs as a coping mechanism. Instead of helping them, however, they push them further into debt and homelessness.

The treatment of substance abuse is very expensive, and not always accessible. Michael's House reports that a meager 25% of homeless people with addiction will actually seek treatment (n.d.). There are many reasons for this, one being as simple as survival. A homeless person would rather spend their limited amount of money on necessities like food and shelter rather than on therapy and rehabilitation. Even if they seek help, such as an AA meeting, a lack of social support can impair the effects of treatment. Because illegal drug use is so common amongst our homeless population, as high as 26% (12 Step Rehab, 2016), it is difficult for someone to quit without relapse. If everyone is doing it, they think that they need to as well, to fit in with the group. We as a nation need to find a way to make treatment more accessible and affordable.

There are several possibilities to help lower the rate of illegal drug addiction in our homeless population. Typically, researchers have argued that either access to housing or access to treatment is more important than the other. I believe that they are both equally necessary to help a homeless person with an illegal drug addiction. We should focus on finding them housing

with accessible treatment; this way two struggles will be alleviated simultaneously. Most importantly, I think that we as a nation need to eliminate the stereotype of addictions and homeless people. If we continue to stigmatize this population, they will never be brave and confident enough to seek treatment for themselves.

References

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