



The Golden Years Aren't So Golden on the Streets

By Heather Stergos

As with most elements of the homeless community there are no definitive numbers on the number of elderly who are homeless, though the National Coalition for the Homeless states that there is a definite population of elderly living on the streets. While this component of the homeless community faces the same struggles that the rest of the homeless community do, they also face struggles unique to their own population.

A study conducted by the National Coalition for the Homeless found that conditions are so severe for those older individuals that a fifty-year-old will often possess physical traits, and physical ailments, typical of a seventy-year-old individual. The homeless community as a whole contends with issues such as chronic alcohol abuse, major psychiatric illness and chronic health problems along with a serious lack of proper healthcare. These issues are no different for the elder community of homeless, but unfortunately, they have additional chronic issues to deal with as well. For the elderly on the streets heart problems, high blood pressure and chronic pulmonary disease are among the most common medical problems encountered. These can be successfully treated for symptom modification, if not for cure, but the homeless do not have access typically to the kind of healthcare required to treat these debilitating illnesses. This causes them to be in more danger because they do not have the physical stamina to seek food or shelter, often end up malnourished and sleeping in the most unsafe conditions, as well as eating foods that increase their blood pressure even more, exacerbating their health issues. Urinary incontinence is another issue faced by many Americans generally, as they get older. Most people have access to the supplies needed to contend with this issue with modesty and their pride intact. However, this is not the case for the elderly on the streets who do not have access to such supplies. This often means that they must continue to wear soiled clothing, which in addition to creating more potential health problems, adds to the disdain and disgust with which the homeless are so often met with generally.

The elderly living on the streets also face the high risk of being victimized. According to the National Coalition for the Homeless, elderly individuals living on the streets, in shelters, and in transitional housing, face significantly increased risk of victimization. Part of the reason is due to their medical issues which often render them unable to ward off attacks or individuals who attempt to steal from them. In addition to health issues, the general issues around difficulty in moving quickly due to the aging process as well as arthritis, make it difficult for the elderly to move out of harms way or to fend off a potential attack.

Shelters, while offering some assistance to the elderly because they do provide meals and at least a place to sleep, often are not operated in ways that benefit the elderly. Many homeless shelters have a policy of being closed during the day, with the reasons being that many homeless people work during the day and are not in need during those hours, those who aren't working are required to be looking for work in order to stay at the shelter and shelters often do not have the staffing or financial resources to be open during the day. The problem is that for the elderly, working is no longer an option. They do not have anywhere to go during the day, leaving them on the streets and vulnerable. Shelters often have a policy that sets the time limit for the duration of an individual's stay, typically 30 days to three months, at the end of which they must leave the shelter. Many shelters also have a policy that people cannot return within 6-12 months of their initial stay. For the elderly, often sick, in pain from the issues of aging, such as arthritis, with no hope of work, nowhere to go, there are no options but to return to the streets where every meal, every hour, every movement, every search for a safe place to sleep or even rest for a few minutes, is a struggle. This is not the way for anyone to spend their "golden years".

The best way to help the elderly homeless is prevention. Employing staff at shelters who will advocate for the placement of the elderly in a nursing home or other affordable housing. Many cities have organizations that address the needs of the elderly, through donations of food, monetary donations and assistance in paying rent or utility bills. Look in your community for opportunities to help prevent the elderly from spending what should be peaceful years, in the chaotic world of the streets instead.

Source:

The National Coalition for the Homeless. (2018). *Homeless elder special concerns*. Retrieved from: <https://nationalhomeless.org/issues/elderly/>