Homelessness and Mental Illness

Millions of people around the United States suffer from mental illnesses. According to a 2019 survey conducted by the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), approximately 51.5 million adults in the United States have a mental illness, ranging from mild to severe. This means that almost a fifth of the country's population suffers from mental health issues. This number is especially saturated within the nation's homeless populations. A 2016 report conducted by the NYC Continuum of Care, for example, found that 11,091 homeless New Yorkers suffer from mental illnesses. This includes an alarming 24.3 percent of New York City adult shelter residents suffering from severe mental health issues.

As documented above, almost a fourth of homeless shelter residents in NYC are psychiatrically disabled. This number, however, does not include individuals who are suffering from mental illnesses and are unable to gain necessary shelter and care. The NYC Coalition and Legal Aid testified that "on 35 out of the first 120 days of 2017, the City's Department of Homeless Services reported zero mental health bed vacancies for homeless men. [O]n 18 days, they had zero vacant mental health beds for women" (Simone 2017). This means that the thousands of homeless individuals on the streets who were psychiatrically disabled were denied any chance of a safe space or recovery.

New York City, and cities around the United States, need to - and can - do better. Having a secure and stable shelter, as well as proper medication and mental health care, is imperative to an individual's recovery from a mental health illness. More mental health beds are required at homeless shelters around the nation, as well as more staff to manage these beds. People affected by homelessness deserve to live with a healthy mind, and if they are to arrive at this point, they must first be given the resources to recover.

By Nicole Alesso