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The Forgotten

Although homelessness exists everywhere, people chose to ignore it, both the obvious and the subtle aspects. They ignore the people asleep on the sidewalk or bench, the people pushing their possessions around in a cart, and the modern day Hoovervilles. Their eyes glance over the people sleeping in a car packed with all their belongings, or living in motels. They are the people society often looks away from and continue walking. They are a reminder of the ugly side of our society that people do not want to see. Those who have been criminalized and stereotyped by media. They are the homeless.

As I got older, I began noticing the homeless around me more and more. No matter what city I went to, whether it be a large city like San Francisco, a smaller city where people have more money like Walnut Creek, or cities where people have less money like Pittsburgh, the homeless never stopped escaping my view. Even at home, I would watch a television show where the homeless were either depicted as drug addicts, crazy, or if the show was trying to make a statement a veteran. The fact the homeless are everywhere led me to the question: Why has homelessness become so prevalent?

In 1961, the Federal Government created the national poverty line based off a theoretical food budget. At that time, people spent about one third of their income on food, meaning that if someone had to spend more than a third of their income on food, they were below the poverty

line. The same system still exists today; however, some problems now exist with this system. First, it does not consider geographical price differences, new costs that families face, or an increased number of single parent families. Also, although the measuring system has not changed, the spending patterns have changed. In 2009, families spent about 13 percent of their income on food and 34 percent on housing (Doak 1, 2). Upon finding this out, I was disheartened as I began to realize that a person who needed help may not receive it because the system of measuring poverty has not changed with time.

I also looked at the federal government's definition of homelessness. The federal government first defined homelessness in 1987 with the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act. In short, it defined a person as homeless if they lacked a regular and sufficient nighttime residence, such as people in shelters, hotels, the streets, and doubling up, where two families share a space meant for one, for the short term. It then had added expansions to prostitutes who stay in rooms paid for by clients, children in foster care, people in stable but inadequate housing, and the elderly staying with family because they cannot afford anywhere else (Doak 9-11). It is the government's definition of poverty and homelessness that determines whether someone can receive federal aid. After looking at the definition of homelessness, I began to learn that there are different types of homelessness.

Homelessness can be split into three types: chronic, episodic, and transitional. People tend to picture the chronically homeless when they think about homelessness. The chronically homeless tend to be older, have a disability or addiction, and spend most of their time in shelters or on the streets, but only make up a small portion of the homeless population. The second type is the episodic homeless, those who are in and out of homelessness. They tend to be young,

unemployed, and suffering from substance abuse or mental health issues. The last one makes up the largest portion of the homeless population: the transitional homeless. They tend to be young and have suffered from an unexpected event that caused them to become homeless (London).

What many people do not realize is how close they are to being homeless themselves. They simply carry the attitude of “it will never happen to me because I am not like them”. This is partly because of the harmful stereotypes that many people have about the homeless. Many Americans believe that a huge majority of the homeless are mentally ill and/or suffer from addiction, when only about 46 percent fall under these categories (London). One result of these misconceptions is that people do not think that they can become homeless when truthfully, they could be a paycheck or two away from being homeless themselves. In a year, about 3.5 million Americans are likely to experience some type of homelessness. The two leading causes of homelessness are a lack of affordable housing and a sudden crisis. These crises can include a sudden death in the family, car accident, unemployment, or medical bills (London). Even though in a given year only about 1 percent of the population in the United States experiences homelessness, it is still concerning how easily it can happen. Many of the major crises are largely out of one's control and can happen at any moment.

Transitional homeless, the largest portion of the homeless population, also contains the vast majority of families and children. Many people who think they will not become homeless will fall into this category if they do become homeless. When many people think about the homeless, they think of the single man or woman; in reality, it is not uncommon for an entire family to become homeless. All it takes is one of the common crises or for rents to rise faster and higher than the parents wages. In these cases, people are faced with a choice of what to pay for

and what to cut out, until it gets to the point of rent or other essentials of life, at which point people become homeless (Shaw, London). I got to see this first hand while volunteering at a local homeless shelter, Warm Winter Nights. This particular shelter is a family shelter, meaning that they cater to families with children as opposed to individual people. As a volunteer, I am meeting people from all walks of life and from all throughout the area. Many of them had become homeless because of hardships.

As a part of finding information, I interviewed the program manager of the family shelter Warm Winter Nights, Bill Shaw. As the children of the homeless families played in the next room, he explained his observations from working in the shelter for seven years. He says the three main causes for families ending up in the shelter are low paying jobs, increases in rent, and family issues. The price of rental properties in the area began to rise, but salaries did not; as a result parents are left with the choice of either paying rent or taking care of their kids. They often chose their children, leading to eviction and homelessness. Mr. Shaw further explained how many parents could not get a higher paying job because there was not enough care put into their education. As a result, many have not gone to a college or a trade school and have to compete against people in the job market who have and as a result, are not likely to get a better job. The other thing he talked about seeing was a breakdown in family units. He remembers growing up that if you needed a place to stay, your family would put you on a bus to Georgia to stay with your grandmother if that was needed. Now he watches families from the shelter leave to visit parents and siblings who do not help their family and it baffles him.

There are lesser known causes of homelessness. Adults between the ages of 50 and 64 make up a larger portion of the homeless population than one would think. They are put into this

situation because they are not old enough to qualify for Social Security and Medicare, but many suffer from geriatric difficulties such as dementia, vision loss, and limited mobility. Then, even after they reach 64 years of age, the benefits from Social Security are not necessarily enough to sustain a living wage. Another group that many people know are the veterans who make up a portion of the homeless. Veterans make up about 11 percent of the homeless population, as many of them suffer from physical and/or mental disabilities, and their skills from the military do not necessarily transfer over to the civilian world. Another cause is family conflicts, as people can become homeless while trying to escape domestic violence. Lastly, for children it can be because parents divorce, they are running from abuse, or they get kicked out for being part of the LGBTQ+ community (Reslock).

The National Low Income Housing Coalition, or NLIHC, found in 2015 that a minimum wage worker in any state could not afford a small one bedroom apartment on a normal 40 hour work week. In more than half the states in the United States, a person would have to work anywhere from a 61-79 hour week to make rent. Furthermore, in ten states, a worker would have to work 80 hours or more in order to make rent (Reslock). It is important to remember that minimum wage is supposed to be a living wage, meaning that one should be able to work a normal 40 hour workweek and be able to afford to live in the area.

The stereotype put on the homeless also helps hide how prevalent it is in society. As many people are unwilling to help because of ignorance about the homeless (Shaw). During the interview, Mr. Shaw recalled how he did a presentation to a local church youth group and he told them, “the person standing behind you in Safeway could be going back out their kid in the car where they are going to sleep in that night” and how the kid sitting next to them in class could be

homeless. After he said that, all the kids were shocked. He then explained how at each church he would tell the volunteers “they are just like you”, as many have asked him how they should interact with the people staying in the shelter. Then, when he would talk to them later, they would comment on “how they were just like them”. Although the homeless are people, the devastating truth is that the non homeless do not necessarily consider the homeless as humans, but rather something different from themselves.

In my interview with Warm Winter Nights Shelters volunteer, grant writer, and tutor, Jo Kerner, she hears the stories and thoughts of those who come through the shelter, explaining that many people who are homeless do not talk about being homeless. Adults do not tell the people at their work and children do not tell their friends or teachers at school. Some people do not even tell their families. She talked about how many are unwilling to talk about being homeless out of shame and fear. Because of stereotypes put on the homeless, many are afraid of what people will think about them. This fear also stops them from telling their stories which could help change the stereotype. At the same time people are not willing to help because of the stereotype.

By 2011, national concern about the homeless had decreased majorly since it became a high national concern in the 1980’s; even though the situation had become worse because of the recession and foreclosure crisis, making it where help is given mainly through faith based organizations (Doak 15,16). Many cities also began criminalizing homelessness by passing laws making it illegal to sleep, sit, or lie down in public places (Reslock). Many have seen on the news about the local police having to go onto some property or public space to get rid of the homeless and the tent city. Instead of trying to help solve a problem, often times it is pushed aside or the homeless are punished.

Many people then question about welfare programs. Why do the homeless not go to them for help? During my interview with Mr. Shaw, he explained to me that many have a hard time finding information of programs that can both help prevent homelessness and help those who are homeless. He has been able to create an ever expanding network simply because it is his job, but the average person does not have the resources or knowledge that he has developed over the years he has worked with the homeless. He also talked about how not all shelters are beneficial. The example he gave was that Warm Winter Nights is the only shelter in the east bay which does not separate families, meaning women and children do not get separated from men and boy 13 years old and older in other shelters. He told me about a family that he met that refused to go into a shelter that separated them from each other. It is also not uncommon for thefts, sexual assaults, violence, and disease to be rampant in shelters (Reslock).

Although that there are shelters and programs that are detrimental or where crime happens, not all shelters have these problems. Many are very helpful. They provide help that people need at that time. Shelters can help a lot giving people a chance to relax a little and lose some of their stress while they are looking for work and a place to live; they help families become families again as the parents are not a stressed and can spend time with their kids. They also can help provide a safe place for people to talk to other people who understand what their going through (Kerner).

As reflected on my research of the homelessness, I noticed that the information I found was often that wages do not match living costs and that sudden life events along with a lack of caring from society helps keep homelessness prevalent. If wages do not match up with living cost people can not live in a stable environment. Not to mention there are many sudden crises

that can make a person homeless which many do not realize. As a result, they do not think about the fact that they can end up in the same situation. Also, people do not necessarily care. They would rather ignore the problem because they are under the impression that it will never affect them. It is from this place of ignorance that there is a lack of help out there. This is also why people have many misconceptions about the homeless. Since they are not on drugs or mentally ill they will never be homeless in their minds. When I ask Bill Shaw how the public can help, he said, “go out and open your eyes, educate yourself, when you go to Berkeley or San Francisco, look around you, leave your comfort zone, and volunteer.” I believe that homelessness can be combated if people educate themselves and leave the place of ignorance behind. If that can be done people can get they help they need.

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