



Mental Illness in Homeless Populations

It's obvious that homelessness is a difficult part of someone's life. It's a point in someone's life full of uncertainty and turmoil. The issues of homelessness are only increased if someone enters homelessness without a support system of any kind, whether it be financial, mental, or otherwise. I've stated in my previous articles that issues like this are why many homeless peoples resort to drugs and alcohol to numb issues they have in their daily life. It also may be an explanation for why mental illness rates in homeless populations are so high.

“About a quarter to a third of the homeless have a serious mental illness — usually schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, or severe depression — and the proportion is growing” (Harvard Health Publishing). Another organization presented numbers similar to Harvard's, saying that “a 2007 survey by the National Alliance to End Homelessness reported that there were approximately 744,000 homeless persons in the US...Numerous studies have reported that approximately one-third of homeless persons have a serious mental illness, mostly schizophrenia or bipolar disorder...there are approximately 250,000 homeless persons with serious mental illnesses in the US” (Mental Illness Policy). For some reason, mental illness runs rampant throughout homeless populations in the United States, but the question is, why?

Much like other issues affecting homeless populations, mental illness can be the cause or effect of homelessness. It's easy to understand why it could come from homelessness, as those who are chronically homeless (i.e people who have experienced homelessness for at least a year or repeatedly experienced homelessness) may develop mental illnesses for several reasons. The distress and toil homelessness takes on people is an understandable cause for mental illness, especially for those without support systems. The most common mental illnesses among people

experiencing homelessness are “depression and bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, anxiety disorders and substance abuse disorders” (Brain & Behavior Research Foundation). All of which can be direct causes of each other, and, if someone had the disease prior to becoming homeless, could be accentuated by homelessness. However, it’s not often that people discuss how mental illnesses can lead to homelessness. It’s important to realize that one’s mental health can directly affect their ability to function and hold stable housing, if serious enough. If a pattern of limited functionality continues, those with severe mental health issues may end up homeless. Another cause of homelessness linked with mental illness can be seen with limited beds in psychiatric hospitals, as data published by Markowitz in 2006 found correlations between the two. Studies in Massachusetts and Ohio also found that “27-36% of the discharges from state mental hospitals became homeless within six months” (Mental Illness Policy).

Mental Illness is obviously no laughing matter. It’s something serious that can destroy someone’s life in a heartbeat. It’s difficult to get through and it’s even more difficult to reach out and get help for. The fact that, in the homeless population, the number suffering from mental illnesses is so high is worrying and painful to think about. To think that, a group already going through so much hardship and insecurity suffers even more with issues regarding their mental health is so disappointing, as it makes me question what institution is enabling this to occur. Why is the number of homeless Americans suffering from mental illnesses so high? Why isn’t more money being put into institutions and programs that target this marginalized group and grant counseling and support? And if such institutions do exist, why aren’t they marketed more and not more well known? In issues such as this one, we must not be simple bystanders. When one person in a crowd of bystanders takes action, change can be made. Change must be made.

Sources:

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