

Homelessness: A Community Problem and a Community Solution

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ABSTRACT

This study was undertaken to determine what role, if any, members of the community can play in combating homelessness. Half of the participants work in direct contact with the homeless and the other half are people in the community, chosen at random.

Some participants were contacted through local and state agencies in which nine people were willing to be interviewed. The other half was selected at random, with the only requirement being that they have a history of employment and contribution to society.

The finding of this research showed that those who work with the homeless on a daily basis consider homelessness to be an epidemic that not only affects those afflicted but the community as a whole. The participants chosen at random believe that homelessness occurs but it's not a big problem and it's someone else's responsibility, mainly the government.

The findings show that there is a clear misperception of homelessness in the community at large. This misperception hinders the community's willingness to rally for the cause.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The question that I propose to study is what, if any, role the community should play in combating the problem of homelessness. For this study, homeless is defined as those typically poor and, sometimes, mentally ill people who are unable to maintain a place to live and, therefore, often may sleep in streets, parks, etc. (Webster's New World College Dictionary, 2001). The definition of mentally ill is unsound, unstable or "of unsound mind". According to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), some examples of mental illness are; anxiety disorders, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, depression and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). For the purpose of this study, community is defined as society at large (Merriam-Webster College Dictionary, 1993).

Homelessness in Maine, as well as the nation, has reached an all time high. The causes of homelessness are subject to opinion and the community perception of exactly who is homeless is inaccurate. The problem of homelessness is part of our community, whether we choose to see it or not. Regardless of who is homeless and why, it is our responsibility as members of our community to come together for a solution.

It is important that family, friends and the local governments advocate on behalf of the homeless. Not only do we need more services, but we need to help make sure that those in poverty know how to access what services that are currently available. Currently, there is a poor link between existing government resources and the homeless or the borderline homeless. This study may demonstrate how advocates, policy makers, social workers and members of the community can work together on decreasing the number of homeless on the streets.

The following review will discuss the history of homelessness. The literature will look at the proposed causes of homelessness while giving a clearer picture of who is a homeless person. It will talk about the obstacles in combating the increasing homeless rate.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to the Maine State Housing Authority, homelessness has changed markedly over the last three decades. Public homelessness first became a problem in the 1970's and now it is common to see people congregating in front of shelters and sleeping on park benches. Soup kitchens are locally packed to capacity. Shelters have doubled their capacity since 1993 and they turn people away every night due to lack of beds.

In 1987, Congress passed the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act. The plan was to coordinate twelve federal agencies, calling it the Interagency of the Homeless. Their first task was to estimate the number of homeless persons on any given night. Initially, it was thought that more than 600,000 people were homeless. The most recent count, decades later, is up to 750,000 living on the streets or in shelters. Two million people will be homeless annually.

The Counsel of the Homeless says that the homeless fall into two different categories. First, are those who have episodes of being homeless due to poverty. These people live paycheck to paycheck with no room for unexpected expenses or illness. We often refer to these people as the "working poor". Second, and some would argue the most important, are those who are mentally ill and those who have chronic substance abuse problems.

Extreme poverty is considered the primary cause the homeless epidemic. If you look back over the years, there have been uncontrollable changes to our economy. There have been changes in the labor market. Technology has made it difficult for those without a higher education to gain employment. With higher technology have come higher paying jobs, which go only to the educated. The rate of divorce has affected the labor market. The rate of single parent households has skyrocketed. More women need employment today than in the 1970's and 1980's. The inflated cost of childcare often prevents low income mothers from working outside of the home.

While the cost of living has increased, there has been a reduction in the amount of financial assistance for the poor. Almost every piece of literature written about homelessness agrees that the value of public assistance does not equal the cost of living. For example, in 1970 the monthly state benefit was \$700.00 and in 1992 the assistance declined to only \$435.00.

Sixty percent of all homeless people have a drug or alcohol dependency problem, while forty-five percent have a mental health diagnosis. It is not clear whether alcoholism and addiction are the cause or the effect of homelessness. Some would say it is both. While substance abuse may be the cause of why people live on the streets, it also provides a way for them to cope with street life.

Deinstitutionalization occurred during the late twentieth century and many institutions were shut down. This caused mainly people with mental retardation and mental illness to be integrated into mainstream society. These people were released to the general population with little support, financial security or life skills. We must increase access to mental health and substance abuse services. According to the National Resource Center on Homelessness and Mental Illness, “at least half of mentally ill homeless people are dually diagnosed with an alcohol or drug problem.” Changes need to take place at the local and statewide level to offer the services to help the mentally ill and addicts help themselves.

It's not only individuals who become homeless and destitute. Entire families are forced to live on the streets or in their car. The population of homeless families is increasing rapidly. The typical homeless family consists of a mother and two children under the age of five years old. An income significantly below poverty, lack of schooling and the cost of childcare are the biggest reasons. Another factor is that many times the women are victims of domestic violence.

It's a misconception that the homeless are that way because they want to be. Many, not all, homeless people are employed. In fact, sixty percent have a job and another fifty-four percent have some other form of income that just isn't enough.

Affordable housing is something that should be accessible to all Americans. The cost of renting in the 1970's and 1980's rose faster than the household income. It is our government's responsibility to provide adequate housing to those who would otherwise end up on the streets. Our government is accountable to us as Americans. We need to make them better assess the problem and get resources to those who need it most. There clearly isn't enough affordable housing when the average wait for Section 8 assistance is twenty-eight months.

RESEARCH METHOD

For this study, the researcher chose to look at the problem of homelessness and its public perception, which may hinder community action. This was a qualitative study that was exploratory. This researcher used a flexible method of research, using both random and nonrandom samples. Data collection was obtained by structured personal interviews. The information gathered from the interviews was reviewed by content analysis.

Sample

The first set of participants in this study is nine people who work directly with the homeless in some capacity. This researcher interviewed three housing counselors employed by the RAC Program (Rental Assistance Coupon Program), two homeless initiative coordinators and a HMIS (Housing Manager Initiatives Specialist) also interviewed were a Homeless Grants Coordinator, a Manager of the Homeless Initiatives and the RAC Program coordinator. The RAC program provides vouchers for temporary housing. Those interviewed serve as professional advocates for all of the homeless, regardless of age, race and gender.

The second set of participants in this study is nine random people from the community. They are all people who are employed long-term. Some of them have higher education. Some of the professions are a teacher, a dental assistant, a physician's assistant and deliverer for Federal Express. All of the participants have little or no intentional contact with the homeless.

Both sets of those interviewed were asked the same five questions individually.

Here are the questions:

1. How big is the problem of homelessness in Maine (on a scale from 1-10, ten being a state of emergency)?

2. How do people end up on the streets?
3. Is there anyone to blame? If so, who?
4. Who should be concerned about the problem of homelessness?
5. When was the last time you saw someone homeless and looked them in the eye?

Data Collection

The data was gathered by an open ended structured interview. The interview questions requested information regarding the attitude and perception of nine people close to the issue of homelessness and nine people chosen randomly in the community.

This interviewer kept a written record of the answers of all participants.

Limitations of the Study

One of the limitations of this study is that the total number of participants is eighteen. Interviewing a large number of people may have altered the findings. Another limitation is that no currently homeless people participated in the study. A face-to-face interview with homeless individuals and families would have been relevant to the research.

FINDINGS

A major finding in this study is that the attitudes of those who work with the homeless greatly differ from those who do not. The findings of this study illustrates that those members of the community chosen at random consider homelessness to be a small problem and someone else's responsibility. The findings from the five question asked are as follows

Nonrandom Participants

1. The average answer to how big is the problem of homelessness in Maine is a seven on a one to ten scale, ten being a state of emergency.

2. The answer to how do people end up on the streets varies. Here are some examples:

- Consequences of bad choices
- Substance abuse and mental illness
- Lack of affordable housing
- Domestic violence
- Lack of knowledge of available resources

3. The answer to is there anyone to blame also varies. Here are some examples:

- No one person or organization
- Society as a whole
- Lack of community responsibility
- Minimum wage is not enough to cover expenses

4. The findings for who should be concerned about homelessness are unanimous. The response was that everybody should be concerned. Many American are a paycheck or two away from being without a home.

5. The answers to when was the last time you saw someone homeless and looked them in the eye were consistent. All of the dates were within the last week.

Random Participants

1. The average answer to how big is the problem of homelessness in Maine is a four on a scale of one to ten, ten being a state of emergency.

2. The answer to how people end up on the streets varies. Here are some examples:

- unanticipated expenses and loss of job
- irresponsible parenting
- spending income on addictions
- being irresponsible, making poor choices

3. The answer to is there anyone to blame varies. Here are some examples:

- themselves
- government and state agencies
- the shelters
- no one

4. Results from the question who should be concerned about homelessness also vary.

- Everybody
- Only those who have low paying jobs
- The government

5. The answers to when was the last time you saw someone homeless and looked them in the eye range from “I don’t remember”, to two weeks ago and to a month ago.

DISCUSSION

It appears that the literature supports the findings. We as individuals and member of our community are ultimately responsible for our local and state government. If we as individuals reach out to the homeless as well as our representatives changes can be made. If we, as community, want to end homelessness, agencies, non-profit groups, policy makers and concerned citizens have to unite and come up with a thoroughly planned strategy.

There are many reasons people become homeless. According to the National Alliance to End Homelessness, approximately one third of the homeless are mentally ill. Other reasons are below poverty income and substance abuse. A wide variety of homeless are uneducated and desperately confused on knowing how to retrieve services to help them get back on their feet. Due to a faulty perception many people believe that the homeless chose to be that way.

As a community, there are many things we can do. Here are some examples:

1. Call or write state and local representatives asking for change. If enough people voice concern changes will be made because. After all, we vote them into office.
2. Donate to your local shelter. They can always use food, clothing, and bedding, along with personal hygiene supplies.
3. Donate funds directly to the shelter.
4. Use whatever skills and experiences you have. Maybe you could volunteer at places of learning to teach people to read. Speak out about domestic violence. We all have something to offer.
5. Instead of hiring big companies to do for you, such as lawn care, shoveling snow or painting your house, put the money directly into the community. Hire someone competent but needy to do the job.

The functionalist view homelessness as a problem with individuals and that being homeless serves some function in society. You can look at the fact that there are many jobs for those who provide help to the homeless. For example, if there weren't any homeless people then there wouldn't be any work for case managers, those in charge of shelters and food banks. The dysfunction causes function in society.

This researcher believes that we need to stamp out homelessness no matter what the cost. We need to reach out with compassion and concern because. They are people just like us and at any time we, too, could be in that situation.

CONCLUSION

It's a sad fact, but, the problem of homelessness has hit an all time high. Most of the people on the streets are uneducated, addicted to a substance, mentally ill or, some are working families that can't make ends meet. The literature in this study confirms that homelessness is reaching an epidemic.

The research in this study shows that there are misconceptions by society. The random participants of this study did not know the magnitude of the problem nor have they ever thought about it. It is everyone's responsibility to help end homelessness. Everyone has something to offer. For those people who donate money, that's great. But, for most of us, we can give our time, our voice and our commitment. Together we can make a difference.

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