Why the Homeless Stay Homeless: What You Need to Know

For anyone who lives near a major city in the United States, the sight of a homeless person is familiar. Whether when walking downtown or when stopped at the traffic light, the reality of homelessness is, for many, an expected, even normal, part of our everyday environment. Stereotypes and assumptions about the homeless abound. A particularly prevalent belief is that people who are experiencing homelessness are lazy or irresponsible and that they *could* pull themselves out of their circumstances if they just worked hard enough. Others argue that the homeless are victims of systemic problems in society, such as the failure of institutions, and that it is naive and unfair to hold them primarily responsible. Meanwhile, the problem of homelessness continues to grow. So who are the homeless, and why do they stay that way?

Where did homelessness come from?

There have probably always been people who are homeless, but homelessness today looks very different than it did way back before gentrification projects, the deinstitutionalization of mental health in the ‘80’s, war veterans, and the general struggles of urban life. In the Colonial era, the homeless were usually transients, who had to prove their ability to become productive and well-functioning members of society in order to be accepted into the community and given the help they needed to get back on their feet. Today, there are a lot of institutional and societal barriers to getting housing that go beyond any one individual’s responsibility to provide for themselves.

What kind of societal barriers to housing are there for the homeless?

Over 40% of the people who are homeless in the United States report having a disability that presents a significant barrier to housing. Lots of people lose their jobs when they develop a disability, injury, or illness, which, for some of them, means they can't afford rent. Secondly, about 20-25% of people who are homeless have a severe and persistent mental illness, which can make holding down a job or even being a functioning member of society difficult or impossible. Thirdly, approximately 60% of the younger homeless population have a history of abuse and violence towards them, making them vulnerable both physically and psychologically. Finally, there are a lot of stereotypes, assumptions, and biases against people who are homeless –so the longer you've been without a home the more difficult it can be to achieve permanent housing.

What are the significant institutional barriers to housing?

There are a lot of different factors at play here, but a lot of it boils down to a combination of inadequate social services and lack of organization around the issue. The people who end up on our streets are, rather often, the ones who fell through the cracks in our existing system –they lost their section 8 funding, their disability income, or their job, and now they're out of luck. When a person winds up homeless, they are often seen as wholly responsible for the problem, so they have to prove, somehow or another, that they deserve assistance. What this looks like in practice is a lot of jumping through hoops and standing in lines. Probably most of this isn't intentional, but it does create a barrier to fixing the problem. For example, when a person who is homeless applies for low-income housing, they get put on a waiting list. When a spot becomes available, they are sent a letter through the mail. Obviously, most people who are homeless don't have mailing addresses, so they have to find a friend or a church or someone who is willing to let them list their address instead. If the applicant does not respond promptly to the letter they are sent, they lose their spot.

Okay. I've heard about this low-income housing thing. Tell me more about how this works.

There are two main models for low-income, government-subsidized housing: housing ready and housing first. Housing ready starts from the idea that people need to be "ready" for housing (get clean, take their medication, etc.) before they can be offered housing. Housing first claims that housing is the most important thing, and that people are much more likely to get clean if they first have this one part of their lives under control. While housing ready might sometimes be an

appropriate approach, it can also create barriers to progress since it is much more difficult to get other elements of your life in order when you don't have a safe place to sleep at night.

In order to be eligible for government-subsidized housing, a person who is homeless needs to have identification proving that they are a U.S. citizen and California resident (usually a CA state ID and a social security card). Many people who are experiencing homelessness do not carry identification with them, so tracking down this information takes time. If the person in question has been homeless for a long time, then this process can be even more difficult. The application for low-income housing is remarkably confusing, and it can take a fair amount of time to complete. For those without reliable access to or facility with computers, this can be an intimidating process. Having a social worker or case manager to help with this process, and particularly to ensure that all of a person's preference points are in order, can sometimes make all the difference.

What are "preference points" and how do they work?

Preference points are a way of organizing and prioritizing people who are on one or more waiting lists for low-income housing. A person can get preference points for a variety of things, including being employed, having a physical or mental disability, being a veteran, or being homeless. When these points are registered on a housing application, they bump the applicant's name up or down on a waiting list for low-income housing. It is important to note that, if not all preference points are checked, a person can miss out on opportunities for housing. There have been cases here in Santa Barbara where vulnerable homeless individuals have been passed over for housing due to incomplete information on an application. This is one problem that could potentially be minimized or even eliminated if homeless people were to receive more one-on-one assistance with the process. It is also worth noting that having a criminal record can present a significant barrier to housing and that non–U.S. citizens are usually ineligible.

What difference does having a case manager make? Who gets a case manager and why?

Because the application process is so convoluted, a case manager can be an invaluable resource. Case managers work one-on-one with people who are homeless, offering assistance and information every step of the way. Perhaps the most important service that a case manager can

offer is being a reliable contact, both for the person who is homeless and the housing authorities. Case managers advocate for homeless individuals, and can follow-up with the person's applications to ensure that no opportunities are missed and that all information is accurate.

The unfortunate reality is that who gets a case manager in their corner can be largely arbitrary. The exception to this are homeless veterans, who get case managers through the Veteran's Association (VA). For all other people who are experiencing homelessness, getting a case manager is largely a matter of luck, not being a "difficult case", and being well-liked. Because organizations that work to help the homeless are typically under-resourced, over-worked, and underfunded, there are usually not enough competent people willing to help the large number of people who could benefit from assistance.

How many homeless are there in the United States? How do we know?

According to the Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress, on a single night in 2016, there were 549,928 people experiencing homelessness across the United States. According to a report from the Independent from 2015, approximately 1,455 of them reside in Santa Barbara county. This data was compiled from the Point-In-Time (PIT) count, which is an annual survey conducted by volunteers and local agencies across the United States. It is difficult to get accurate numbers through the Point-In-Time count, both because homeless people are notoriously difficult to find and because the different agencies that organize the count often have conflicting motivations. For example, in California, some organizations have an incentive for lower numbers, because their funding is tied to their efficacy and outcomes, while other organizations have an incentive for higher numbers, because their funding is based on demonstrated need. Faced with conflicting motivations, it is difficult to accurately assess the scope of the problem, much less investigate effective solutions to the barriers that the homeless face.

Why is the system of services for the homeless so convoluted?

Plausibly, a lot of it is due to a lack of dialogue across agencies, and to the reality that different sources of funding (county, federal, and private contributors) makes it difficult to establish expectations and standards of organizations across the board. Also, different organizations sometimes have different values, priorities, and interests, as seen in the separation between

housing ready and housing first models. Further, since homeless services *are* effective to an extent, there is little motivation or reward for taking the initiative to change the status quo. Those who work within these systems of services often have an absurd amount of duties and responsibilities, and, at the end of the day, they get paid (though probably not as much as they should) regardless of whether the system develops into a more efficient model or not.

There are a lot of problems in our country. Why is this issue important?

People who are homeless use a lot of resources. A recent study in Santa Clara county put the cost of homelessness at $520 million per year, which translates to up to $83,000 per homeless individual. Our tax dollars are already being used to deal with the homeless, whether through police departments, emergency medical services (EMS), jail costs, or more obvious homeless services such as shelters and soup kitchens, so it is important that we ensure that money is being spent as effectively as possible. From a more humanitarian standpoint, homelessness has connections to a wealth of other human rights issues, including mental illness, racism in the criminal justice system, domestic abuse, human trafficking, and abuses in the foster care system. In many ways, homelessness is the result of the failure of other systems, but that doesn't mean that homelessness isn't its own independent issue. At the end of the day, homelessness is important because the homeless are a diverse community of people with unique needs, hopes, values, and dreams –and their interests are not being sufficiently met by our society.

What can I do to help?

Get involved! There are a plethora of nonprofit organizations, shelters, and church projects out there—and they almost always need more volunteers. A few options here in Santa Barbara include the Central Coast Collaborative on Homelessness (C3H), Common Ground, and Street Health Outreach club at UC Santa Barbara. The more you learn about this issue, the more you will start to see how you can leverage your personal strengths to the best effect. You can raise awareness about homelessness through writing articles like this one, talking with friends and family, and posting on social media. You can contact your representatives and elected officials. One of the simplest things you can do is just to sit down with a homeless person some time, offer them something to eat, and listen to what they have to say. They aren't as scary as you think – and you just might learn something that surprises you.

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