

## Homelessness: A Symptom of Poverty

Homelessness has been a pervasive problem in the United States since the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. In early Puritan colonies, homeless people and beggars were considered to be “a plague to civil society. [They] should be taken as enemies as this ordinance of God” (Fischer). While in many respects this view towards the homeless has softened, the problem is still as present as ever. According to the 2013 Idaho Homelessness report, 1,781 people were homeless in Idaho. One out of twenty children living in poverty are currently homeless. This statistic does not include those who are considered to be in “imminently in danger of being homeless” (Fischer). With staggering statistics like this, many are left to wonder what more we can do to counteract this epidemic. In the short term, Idaho state government needs to invest in permanent housing solutions and affordable healthcare, specifically targeted towards families and children. The ultimate goal would be to provide livable wages, access to affordable housing and health care, and benefits to those who are physically incapable of working.

Major causes of homelessness include mental illness, drug addiction, poverty, lack of job opportunity, and a lack of affordable housing (“Why are People Homeless?”). I would like to add that for many people it is also an issue of finding stable housing. My senior year of high school, my mother pressed legal charges against me that were untrue. Rather than jeopardize my future, I chose to move out of our home. I searched Craigslist and found a woman named Dawn to move in with. We bonded over baking, our shared love of cats, and our favorite novels. Two weeks into living with her, I went on a school trip to Seattle. While enjoying the magnificent spectacle that is Cirque Du Soleil, I received a text from my roommate back in Idaho. She unfairly criticized me and gave me a thirty six hour warning to

move out of her house. I immediately went into a panic. I had no family in the state, I had spent all of my money on moving costs, and I wasn't even in the state of Idaho to pack up my belongings. I was left financially isolated and without a place to live. Any thoughts of enjoying the rest of my trip quickly faded away. Many homeless face a similar struggle. Although it didn't feel like it at the time, my situation was fairly fortunate. Imagine if we were to add to my story the cycle of mental illness/drug addiction that affects so many chronically homeless citizens. Searching for a job, furthering your education or receiving medical care while simultaneously searching for one's next meal is an almost impossible journey to undertake. My life became focused solely on survival. To complicate matters for the average homeless citizen, many shelters or assistance programs require drug testing. While these measures are intended to better those who are homeless, they tend to isolate those who are physically addicted to drugs and who have no access to rehabilitation facilities or drug counseling.

After I got kicked out of Dawn's home, I stayed with a friend who let me sleep on her couch. The following Monday I entered the counseling office fraught with nerves. Mrs. Johnson, the counselor at Meridian High School, greeted me with compassion. She offered me help through the McKinney-Vento Assistance Act, which provides assistance for homeless students in primary education. This act defines homelessness as "any student who lacks a regular, fixed, and permanent nighttime residence" ("McKinney Vento Act"). Obviously, I now fit the criteria. This act was passed in 1987, and contained titles to provide health care, food, shelter, job training, and education for the homeless. For me specifically, it provided food, gas money, and a toiletries budget. The act itself also includes specific provisions extending the Veterans job training act. This act has been revised four different times

throughout the 1980's and 90's. While these reforms initially expanded the funding, homelessness persists among society. Part of the problem lies with the fact that throughout the 1990's, the government has slowly cut funding to this act. The federal government has cut homelessness relief funding by 28% since 1995 ("Mckinney Vento Act").

Oftentimes I think people tend to detach themselves from those on the streets. People justify not giving food/money to panhandlers with excuses such as "They should stop being lazy and get a job" or the ever popular "They should lay off the dope and start giving back!" We rarely take the time to empathize with those suffering far more than we are. I know I certainly had an unintentional air of superiority. After all, homelessness could never happen to me. I was a good person who worked hard. Then the end of my senior year, the unthinkable happened: I found myself homeless. As hopeless as my situation felt, however, I was one of the lucky ones. I had a job, friends who provided a couch for me to sleep on, and I had access to programs that helped supplement my income. Even with all of the privileges I had, my focus on education completely stopped. My main concerns became finding a permanent place to live, intricately planning my budget, and picking up more shifts at work in order to cover moving expenses. Not only that, but many of the traditional experiences high school seniors have, I never got to experience. My life became one of stress and worry.. Most of my memories are tainted with feelings of anxiety and hopelessness. As a recent young adult, I was thrown into a world of responsibility, bills, and being completely responsible for my own well-being. Overwhelmed by the prospect of being on the streets, my year became very difficult.

Still there are children younger than I was dealing with more dire circumstances. While programs such as the Mckinney-Vento Act may require more funding, I believe a

child's life comes without a price tag. No child should have a worse lot in life because of circumstances beyond their control. For the short time I was homeless, I was tempted to give up. To come into the adult world and so quickly "fail", as I felt I had done, was devastating. I was overwhelmed by guilt. I felt I could have done something to prevent this. This guilt made it difficult to accept help. I hated being a burden on others. I couldn't stand the thought of making my friends go out of their way for me. Luckily, I had adults and peers encouraging me and telling me my circumstances would get better. They reassured me that sometimes things happen beyond our control and that I could still come back from this. They made sure I knew that I was worthy of help. This encouragement, along with the financial assistance my high school granted me, enabled me to climb out of a hole of anxiousness and move forward. I am now a graduate from high school and pursuing a degree in anthropology. Not only that, but I spend my time shaping children's lives. It's not hard to imagine where I would be without other's generosity. Too many young children and adults face the cycle of poverty without the emotional and financial support I received. Too many people are lost to poverty.

Investment should be made into permanent housing solutions, such as the ones found in Salt Lake City, Utah. By allowing the homeless a place to stay without stipulation, you are granting an opportunity and a source of stability that can enable them to get back on their feet, find a job, and begin contributing to society again. In 2005, Utah had 1,932 chronically homeless people (Rascon). This is 151 more people than Idaho claims. The Utah ten year plan known as "Housing First" has so far cut chronic homelessness by 91% by providing free housing for the homeless and resources to address drug abuse, poor work habits, abuse, and any number of other issues. Of the 178 people still without a home, a majority of them have declined services and prefer instead to stay on the streets (Cortez). Some critical of this

program question the cost effectiveness of this program. According to recent reports, it costs \$19,208 to care for a chronically homeless person according to the Homeless Task Force. To house a homeless person it costs the state only \$7,800 (Rascon). Not only is this solution more humane, it is also more cost effective. Utah has become a major role model for decreasing homelessness across the nation. The approach they have utilized has effectively addressed individual issues instead of trying to make blanket improvements. With job counseling, medical help, and housing these people are well on their way to becoming active and viable members of society again.

Idaho has no known program like this. While Idaho does have multiple homeless shelters, most programs and grants are provided by the federal government. Among these are programs to help people with severe disabilities pay rent, permanent supportive housing (similar to what is found in Salt Lake), and transitional housing (“Homelessness Prevention and Assistance”). The Idaho government is severely lacking in state sponsored relief.

I believe Idaho should adopt the Housing First program idea. The United States Interagency Council on Homelessness sums up the program as follows, “Housing First is an approach that offers permanent, affordable housing as quickly as possible for individuals and families experiencing homelessness, and then provides the supportive services and connections to the community-based supports people need to keep their housing and avoid returning to homelessness” (“Housing First”). This program does not require any sobriety test, “housing readiness” tests, or proof of income. This is permanent housing trying to minimize barriers to housing access. It also provides comprehensive and affordable mental healthcare and resources for those suffering from substance abuse. The Interagency Council recommends that each person is treated individually and is under no contract or obligation to

stay within in the living quarters at any time. Each person should be assigned a case-worker and be given whatever resources are necessary (i.e. clothes, food, household supplies). A crucial part of the success of this program is maintaining positive relationships with landlords and housing providers. This website also illustrates how exactly states can carry out this program. “Housing first permanent housing programs can be... implemented by creating set-asides within affordable housing developments that receive investments of public funding or leverage private investments using Low Income Housing Tax Credits” (“Housing First”).

Homelessness is a widespread and terrifying condition to be in. Homelessness isn't merely being without shelter, it is a symptom of isolating poverty. Without a home, maintaining a job becomes increasingly difficult. Without a source of income, food and medications become a struggle to afford. Add these together and you have a recipe for desperation which leads to violence, crime, and drug abuse. To combat this, the federal government should increase funding to homelessness programs. I fear, however, that this funding wouldn't be passed quickly enough. It's time that Idaho takes a stand against poverty in our state. It's time that we stop turning a blind eye to the pain and suffering of our fellow humans. No person should ever have to fear where their next meal will come from, or where they will sleep that night. By following Utah's example, I believe that we can see as much success in combatting homelessness as they did.



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