Homelessness Essay, Research Paper

Homelessness

Homelessness is a growing problem in the United States. Countless people wonder the streets, sleep in boxes, and wonder where their next meal will come from. As a sociologist working on the Nation Coalition for the Homeless (NCH), I would address four main concerns: the links between poverty and the homelessness, links between unemployment and homelessness, lack of governmental support for the homeless, and lack of affordable, and satisfactory housing for the homeless.

Poverty and homelessness are go hand in hand. Webster?s Collegiate Dictionary defines poverty as the state of one who lacks a usual or socially acceptable amount of money or material possessions. Those who live in poverty are often unable to pay for basic needs: housing, food, childcare, healthcare, and education. If those living in poverty can chose to live in a house, or one of the above needs, they usually chose homelessness. There are also those where a serious illness will throw them into poverty, and for those the unavoidable chose is homelessness. Those who are employed and in poverty, live from paycheck to paycheck, and missing a paycheck, or losing a job can leave them to live on the streets. As a sociologist I would wonder why the number of those who are poor has not increased recently, the poverty level has. People in poverty are living with less and less money. From 1995-1997 the number of people living in extreme poverty has increased by 500,000, with 41% of poor people living with an income less than half of the poverty level. People are living with less and less, and their choice to afford other amenities, rather than homes, has drastically affected the rate of homelessness.

?For many work proves no escape from poverty? (NCH). Even with America?s economy is ?booming? and unemployment is at it?s low, homelessness is still a serious and continually growing factor in the United States. The facts are that those with out a job are usually those who end up on the street. NCH blames this on falling incomes and jobs with much fewer benefits. Even with minimum wage contentiously increasing, it?s value has decreased- it is 18.1% less than in 1979. This does not correlate with the fact that since 1979 living costs have greatly risen, and people are earning less than in 1979. These declines in wages cause even working people problems in affording housing. In every state one of the fifty states more than minimum wage is required to afford a simple one to two bedroom apartment at Fair Market Rent. A minimum wage worker would have to work an eighty-seven hour week to afford a simple two-bedroom apartment at 30% of their income (which is the federal definition for affordable housing). In fact 40% of households in sub-standardized housing, have one working person in the household with half of their income going to rent. In fact one out of every five people living in homeless shelters are full-time employees. Studies show that this time will not improve this matter, with the predicated job-growth, most of the jobs available will pay below minimum wage. My main worry is that benefits of economic growth go mainly to those who need it least, those at the top of the income and wealth distributions. Those who need it most are living in the streets, wondering where their next meal will come from, and those who relieve it live in the lap of luxury. That?s justice for you.

Where is the governmental aide for the homeless? That?s is a growing question catalyzed by the decrease in the availability and value of public assistance. In fact the largest cash assistance program to poor families with children, Aide to Families with Dependant Children (AFDC) was repealed and replaced. This was due to declining benefits for families because of because if increasing inflation. This beneficial program was replaced with a program called Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). However this new program is causing many problems. TANF benefits are 1/3 of the poverty level for a family of three. Welfare alone cannot bring a person out of poverty and into a home. Even those who welfare has helped struggle after going off welfare, with many ending up on the streets. Even programs that have shown to reduce homelessness have been cut or reduced in many states. General Assistance, a public assistance for single poor people, has been all but eliminated in most states, even though it has been shown to keep people off the streets. Even those who are disabled are helped to no avail. Disabled people with Supplemental Security Income must put 69% of the benefits to housing even if their total benefits are not enough to cover a one-bedroom apartment. This means that if a person is unable to afford a house, and living on the streets they are only able to receive 31% of the benefits they should be receiving. In my opinion more public funding and aide should be devoted to reduce homelessness.

?Housing assistance can make the difference between stable housing, precarious housing, or no housing at all.? (NCH). People needing low income housing and the availability of housing is different. From 1973 to 1997 5.8 million low-rent housing units went off market. From 1995-1997 the low income rent increased by 20%. Since their are a few affordable housing, rent absorbs renters income and leads to overcrowding and sub-standardized living, and lastly puts those who are not able to afford or find housing on the streets. This factor has forced many into homelessness and put many at risk for homelessness. More people need assisted housing that are able to receive it, only about 1/3 of those who apply for help receive it. Those who do need assistance must wait 22-33 months to receive assistance. These long wait times meant overcrowding of shelters which allows less space for other homeless people, which forces them onto the streets. As a sociologist I would wonder why there are no benefits going towards those who most need it, if it would improve homelessness. The answer lies in the fact that in 1994 ^1% of housing benefits went to the top 5th of households, where the bottom 5th percentile of households only received 18% of the funding.

When I first thought of homeless people, I imagined they put themselves on the streets. My personal view was that there were mostly drug-addicts, uneducated, and lazy people who were on the streets. I believe they had made the choices that put them on the streets. All of the above facts surprised me because now I know that it is a mostly unavoidable factor. Those who are on the streets are forced on the streets because of financial burdens. Society as a whole should recognize that this is a problem that they can change. It is not a purely individual basis, as I have proved in my paper.