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Common Misconceptions on Homelessness and why they are Incorrect

As a problem that almost every society suffers from, homelessness is caused by several things such as drug addiction, unemployment and being evicted from home by either a family member, a friend or even the landlord. The phenomena have diverse effects on victims such as a change in lifestyle, health problems and addiction to drugs. In the entire world, it would be almost impossible to determine the exact number of homeless people, but they are estimated to be millions. In towns and cities across the country, children, women, and men walk around dressed in rags often asking for food or begging for money. In most cases, they carry shopping bags stocked with all their personal belongings. Although governments throughout the world have created programs to minimize or reduce this number, Goldberg from *The Huffington Post* explains that the number of homeless high school students has hit a record high in the past few years. To this end, this persuasive essay discusses some misconceptions of homelessness and attempts to explain why they are incorrect. The major misconceptions are (1) one cannot be homeless if they are employed, (2) all homeless people are drug addicts and (3) all homeless people are uneducated.

William Bonnie's tale on '*Cracked*' (2013) proves that one does not have to be unemployed to be homeless. To summarise, he worked a job that kept him away for a week and used to live with a roommate. It happened that the checks that his roommate had been giving to the landlord were bouncing and the landlord never notified them concerning the same. The landlord one day turned up with eviction papers which rendered Bonnie homeless immediately. He had just graduated from university a few months before, and he had not

saved enough to buy himself a house or rent another at the time. In his article, he explains that not all homeless people are the way they are because “they are mentally ill, or maybe their parents kicked them out of the house for being gay when they were teenagers.” Bonnie was not mentally ill, he had a job, he had graduated from university with a degree in liberal arts, but none of these stopped him from being homeless. He was stable enough to own a car, which was now his new home, and he explains that being homeless and working at the same is not as cheap as one may think. For example, he had to purchase a camp stove and a mess kit which cost him \$150, he could not sleep in the middle of the town, and he still needed a place to shower once in a while. This means that he spent more on gas money (driving into the woods) and on youth hostels where he could at least “get access to running water and a mirror, for \$25 to \$50 a night.” To some extent, he manages to show how being homeless can be expensive.

Bonnie states two major facts that can change how one thinks towards homelessness. Thirty percent of homeless people are employed and that a significant proportion of people living in public shelters have full-time jobs (Bonnie 2). This dismisses the misconception that being employed disqualifies one from being homeless. He explains that even though these people still earn, the expenses associated with homelessness is enough to hinder a person from getting permanent housing. This fact disapproves another misconception of homeless that ‘being homeless is cheap.’ As Bonnie explains, expenses associated with homelessness especially when one is employed are significant enough to prevent one from acquiring long-term housing.

Not all homeless people are drug addicts, and not all homelessness cases have been caused by drug-related problems. As with Bonnie’s case, there was a misunderstanding between his roommate and the landlord which rendered him a victim even though he had a job and was able to pay his rent. The checks that his roommate was submitting had been

bouncing, and instead of the landlord notifying them early, he just turned with eviction papers. Bonnie was neither a drug addict and neither was his roommate unable to pay rent due to drug addiction. They were both sober and employed graduates who were rendered homeless due to a misunderstanding. However, it is worth noting that the relationship between homelessness and drug addiction can be an endless cycle. When one is rendered homeless by a situation similar to that of Bonnie, some individuals might find themselves stressed out and might turn to drugs as an escape plan to their misery. Bonnie came from a stable family, had a bachelor's degree and had a paying job which means that he never thought he could be homeless at some point in his life. When faced with a homelessness situation in a town away from home, there is a high chance that Bonnie will be stressed out and turn to alcohol to 'relieve himself from stress.' Given that homelessness can also be expensive, as discussed in the paragraphs above, the situation can go on for a significant amount of time which may render him addicted. With an already tight budget, he has to cater for his basic needs and at the same time, buy himself alcohol. This prolongs the homelessness situation to the point that turning back might be a challenge. Therefore, it is worth noting that although most homeless people have drug addiction problems, not all of them use drugs or are in that situation because of drug-related problems.

The third misconception is that all homeless people are uneducated and to some extent, that most of them are not in a correct state of mind. Goldberg's article discusses how homeless teenagers are more likely to attempt suicide or be hurt by partners. Statistics in her article indicate that 712 out of 5762 students in New York City experience some degree of homelessness. This means that about 12% of New York students either live in shelters, reside or crash temporally in other people's homes. This data partly rules out the misconception that most homeless people are uneducated. Goldberg highlights some of the challenges that these students face, including but not limited to inadequate sleep and nutrition, and high

chances of intimate partner violence. In an interview, one homeless student quotes how they are invited at times, "Hey, you alright? You can come stay with me." Unfortunately, the person inviting them may not be having bad intentions, but they are drug dealers (Goldberg). The environment in itself is not good even though the student might not take the drugs. Goldberg also states that the possibility of a homeless teen going to school hungry is twice as much as that of a well-housed student. Other statistics highlighted in the article show that a significant number of homeless people are educated, and if not, they are in the process of schooling.

In an article in *The New York Times*, Healy explains that although the number of homeless people has been reducing nationwide, the rise of camps in the West has become a serious problem due to a scarcity of subsidized apartments and rising housing costs. This report indicates that to be homeless, one does not need to be uneducated or unemployed and that many other factors can lead to homelessness. This means that homelessness is not only for the mentally ill, drug addicts, unemployed or uneducated but can also face even clean, employed and educated individuals. Reflecting back to Bonnie's article in *Cracked* (2013), it is evident that being educated cannot stop a person from being homeless. Bonnie had a bachelor's degree in liberal arts, was employed and even owned a car. Clearly, this shows that the misconception that homelessness is only for the uneducated is incorrect.

Keeping the above discussion in mind, my experience at the soup kitchen is a clear proof that the above misconceptions of homelessness are incorrect. When I was volunteering there, I witnessed a significant proportion of homeless people who appeared sober from drugs and had no mental illness. For example, others could even start a funny conversation concerning how spicy the food served was (which to some extent I found ironical) or how we should serve an amount of food based on the visitor's body size. Others could even tell us casually that they did not come for the food because of lack of money or family or friends,

but it was because of their tight budgets and saving money for other purposes such as education and health. According to me, most of our visitors were sober individuals and their homelessness situation was not caused by lack of proper education, employment or addiction to drugs. Therefore, it is safe to conclude that my findings when I was working at the soup kitchen dismiss the misconceptions mentioned above of homelessness.

In conclusion, the major misconceptions of homelessness that all homeless people are drug addicts, unemployed and uneducated are incorrect. Using the diverse aspects and examples discussed in the three articles by Bonnie, Goldberg, and Healy, it is evident that homelessness can be caused by many factors other than unemployment, lack of proper education, mental illness and drug addiction. Goldberg discusses challenges that homeless students go through and how a significant proportion of New York City students (12%) experience some degree of homelessness. This dismisses the misconception that homelessness is only for the uneducated. Bonnie's experience also proves that one does not have to be uneducated or unemployed to be homeless. Lastly, Hailey discusses how rising housing costs contributes to the development of camps and steps that states in America have been implementing to solve the problem in major cities.

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