Sadie Honig

Honors History 12

Compare and Contrast Essay

September 8, 2024

Compare and Contrast Responses to Homelessness

Throughout both historical and contemporary periods, the issue of determining responsibility for homeless individuals has continued to be a persistent debate. However, the societal approaches to familial, government, and individual responsibility have evolved significantly between the 1800's and present day. In the 19th century, families were frequently held responsible for individuals experiencing homelessness, whereas today, opportunities for support by the city government are more common, however the responsibility often falls on the individuals facing homelessness.

Homeless people are often deemed unable to care for themselves, and given to others to care for them. In the 19th century, homeless individuals who were unable to care for themselves, were often sent back to their families who were forced to care for them. Instead of using government management, they deem others in charge in order to remove them from a community population. In *Skid Road,* by Josehpine Ensign, Ensign begins by introducing Seattle's first homeless person, Edward Moore. Edward Moore, described as a 32 year old tent-dweller from Massachusetts, was a sailor left in Seattle by his captain. The town of Seattle, and the white pioneer leaders debated on what to do with Moore, and after attempts to send him elsewhere in Washington, they ultimately ended up sending Moore back to where he had family. Seattle and King-County residents were extremely eager to get rid of Edward Moore and, "collected private donations, bought Moore a new set of clothes, and paid a ship's captain to transport him back to Boston." (Ensign 29). In this situation, the residents, not the government, made the decision to force him out of their community, and attempted to re-unite him with his

family, even though they had not responded to attempts of contact. Along with Edward Moore's specific situation, in historical periods, specific laws were made to deem a family responsible for those experiencing homelessness. The English Poor Laws began in 1494 and stated that all male and female vagabonds must be, "admonished to return to the 'hundred' where they were born or last lived." (Ensign 15). Since the 1400's society has been unwilling to let poor or struggling people into their communities, even going as far as to produce laws to keep them out. The English Poor Laws developed overtime into the Elizabethan Poor laws which: "established the duty to support, mandating that the primary responsibility for the care and support of a poor person was that person's family." (Ensign 16). This law specifically marked families in charge of relatives 3 generations down the line struggling with homelessness, and if an individual did not have a family, they were auctioned off to the highest bidder. This historical pattern shows a reluctance to let homeless people survive within the community or provide support allowing them to stay, and instead puts a burden on the family to support one's needs no matter the family's situation.

In contemporary society, responsibility for homeless individuals remains a persistent debate, although support is often provided by the city or state government, yet still limited amounts of support are possible. Unlike in the 19th century, laws no longer dictate family's responsibilities to relatives struggling with homelessness, and instead government programs are often the most popular area of support. Government programs and shelters are often the only source of support provided to the unhoused population, and even then there are limited resources available, noted by Eric Tars as he writes; "most American cities have fewer emergency shelter beds than people who need shelter" (Tars). The lack of resources leaves homeless people responsible for themselves, no matter if they are deemed able to care for themselves or not, and although many homeless people are currently finding ways to survive on their own, the government continues to develop laws and regulations forcing homeless people to leave an area. Similar to the 19th century, communities do not want to see the homeless or

poor in their towns, and often push to remove the individuals from an area, instead of fixing the problem. In contemporary times, criminalization has grown significantly as a strategy to sweep unhoused people from an area as, "communities faced with increasingly visible homelessness began pushing homeless persons out of public view with laws criminalizing life-sustaining acts such as self-sheltering ('camping'), sleeping, resting, eating, or asking for donations" (Tars). Although responsibility has been placed upon the individuals struggling with homelessness, society has made it increasingly difficult to survive in this lifestyle, while also making it significantly more challenging to escape the lifestyle. Today's society provides government support and programs to homeless people, however many opportunities are limited and forced unhoused to care for themselves, even when survival is deemed criminal behavior.

The debate over who is responsible for homeless individuals has continued from the 19th century to today, though the approaches have altered significantly. In the 1800's, shown by the situation of Edward Moore in Seattle, responsibility for the homeless often fell on the family and local communities rather than city or state government. This specific approach was consistent with historical practices such as the Elizabethan Poor Laws which mandated that families support their poor relatives. Today, while government programs have largely replaced familial roles, they are frequently inadequate and limited. Modern support systems such as shelters are often overwhelmed, leaving homeless individuals to manage their own survival. Additionally, contemporary strategies also focus on removing homeless individuals from public spaces rather than addressing their needs. These regulations make it illegal for unhoused people to shelter in public places, as well as other activities necessary for survival. Although responsibility and approaches to dealing with homeless people have significantly changed between the 19th century and contemporary periods, the overall goal has stayed the same; to remove homeless and poor people from being visible and in public places.