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Homeless in Seattle

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Homelessness has been a problem throughout the United States since the very beginning. In the past, things such as Elizabethan Poor Laws were created, completely heartless and barbaric in the modern lens. However, are the modern responses to homelessness all that different? Though both historical and modern responses to homelessness create laws and narratives that place the responsibility of caring for the homeless upon someone else, historical responses poorly attempted to amend homelessness, featuring cruel systems of servitude, whereas modern solutions include entirely ignoring the issues and moving them to alternate locations.

Historical responses to the homeless were cruel and inhumane, but they did attempt to resolve the issues. The most prominent methods of dealing with the vagabonds, the word for the homeless back then, were based on the Elizabethan Poor Laws. These laws often placed the burden of care on the vagabond's family, but if "[they] did not exist or could not support their family member, the local parish could auction off the care of the pauper to the lowest bidder at a public auction—a thinly veiled version of slavery" (Ensign 16). Realizing that the homeless often did not have family to care for them, the Elizabethan took the opportunity to maximize profit. Being sold into indentured servitude meant being branded with the mark of ones parish and even being sent to work at other faraway colonies. In *Skid Road*, a novel by Josephine Ensign, we hear the story of Edward Moore, the first homeless individual in Seattle. Moore did not receive very good care from the public. He was generally ignored by the public, only receiving care after nearly dying, after which he was promptly dumped back to the streets. Eventually, Moore fell victim to becoming an auction item, but "either no one in Seattle wanted to care for Moore or that the bids were too high... the residents of Seattle—King County collected private

donations, bought Moore a new set of clothes, and paid a ship's captain to transport him back to Boston via San Francisco" (Ensign 29). Once the residents of Seattle realized that nobody was willing to take the eyesore that was Moore off the streets, they all worked together to push him away, to make him somewhere and someone else's problem. However, this does show that although the cruel system of the Poor Laws was intended to push the responsibility of care to someone else, they did technically acknowledge the issue and remove the "vagabonds" from the streets and in Moore's case, even attempt to return them home.

Modern solutions to homelessness, though they may be more socially acceptable to our time, are still inhumane and, unlike historical methods, actually make no attempts to solve the issue. The most prominent modern method is criminalization, the process of creating a law that makes it illegal for people suffering from homelessness to do simple actions, such as sleeping or sheltering. The result of these laws are "forced evictions or "sweeps" of the encampments, usually with little notice and no provision of alternative housing, frequently resulting in the destruction of important documents, medicines, and what little shelter the residents have" (Tars 6-44). These cruel, constant "sweeps" push the homeless communities around, continuously uprooting them and destroying chances of a return to housing. Nowadays, people see homelessness as even more of an eyesore than before, and the constant disgust and inconsiderateness directed towards the homeless dehumanizes beyond belief. People's attempts to support them are completely insignificant compared to the sheer amount of people who only feel disdain for them. In this way, modern responses are different from historical ones, not only completely ignoring but aggravating the issues presented.

Comparing historical and modern responses to homelessness shows that though a lot has changed, little has truly changed in the treatment of the homeless community. Laws continue to be passed, criminalizing them, making it impossible for redemption. Moreover, though there is no way to pardon the completely inhumane historical methods, they may have been more effective at removing people from the streets than modern systems. Overall,

historical and modern methods are strikingly similar, but modern ones could be improved by learning from the mistakes and effects of historical methods by making more active attempts to support recovery and less criminalization.