

Teagan Burkhart
Stacie Cone
History 12
9/11/2024

historical and modern responses to homelessness

While there are differences between how people have historically responded to homeless people and how they respond to them today, most of the strategies used are similar, such as making them find a new place to live, finding people to take care of them and imprisoning them.

The most popular strategy for dealing with homelessness is to remove the homeless from the area in which they are currently living. Historically, this was seen in the poor laws in English poor laws; “vagrants and beggars to be put in the stock for three day and nights given only bread and water and then ‘warned out - admonished to return to the hundred where they were born or last lived” (Ensign 15). Through this quote, we can see how towns (hundred) would remove the homeless people that were currently living there by sending them away back to where they came from because as long as they were not in their town, they were not a problem and they did not exist. Today, we are disbanding homeless encampments; “Too often, homeless residents experience forced evictions or “sweeps” of the encampments, usually with little notice and no provision of alternative housing”(Tars 6-44). While the modern response does not force the homeless person to move to a new town, it still forces them to move somewhere else for the same reason: if they can't see them, then they don't exist. The historical response might seem worse as it forces the homeless person to possibly travel a long distance it is actually the modern response that causes more harm as when performing sweeps of encampments, the police often take away tents, resulting in loss of shelter, and can often lead to the destruction of important documents showing that there is no goal other than getting the homeless to leave whereas the goal of the historical response is to move the homeless to a place where they might have family that could take care of them.

Teagan Burkhart
Stacie Cone
History 12
9/11/2024

Another response is finding someone to take care of the homeless. While many homeless are able to care for themselves, it is often thought that they are not capable of this. The Elizabethan poor laws had a solution for this; “The Elizabethan poor laws established the duty to support mandating the primary responsibility for the care and support of a poor person was the person family’ (Ensign 16). This response is only partially effective as it is possible that their family has either all died or is also too poor to take care of them. The solution to these problems was to auction them off. Today, there are no laws that establish who has to care for a homeless person. Sometimes, they will couch surf or go to a shelter. While some of the shelters are government-run, most of the time, they are private organizations. Today, the government does not force anyone to care for the homeless, which is a good thing as many of the previously mentioned auctions were just thinly veiled slave auctions to get the homeless off of the streets rather than imprisoning them to get them off of the streets.

Another way of getting the homeless off the street and out of sight is by imprisoning them. Historically, we did not imprison them in jail for committing a crime but rather in an asylum, as it was believed that many homeless people had mental illnesses. These people were restrained and given drugs such as morphine. Traditional medical practices of the time, such as blood-letting, were also performed on these patients as it was believed that this would help fix their mental illness. We know now that these strategies do not work. Today, however, we put the homeless in jail for “doing what any human being must do to survive, like sleeping, resting, and eating” (Tars 6-44). This can have negative results for the person who was put in jail as they would not be able to pay their fines, resulting in a longer stay, or they might lose their job because they are not able to go to work. It also gives them a criminal record that will make it

Teagan Burkhart

Stacie Cone

History 12

9/11/2024

harder for them to find jobs in the future. While these two responses have different outcomes, they are still both imprisoning the homeless.

It is clear that there are differences between how people have historically responded to homeless people and how they respond to them today, but overall, the similarities outweigh the differences. Such as the similarities between the poor laws forcing the homeless to go back to their hometown and the sweeping of encampments, the finding of people to care for the homeless, and the ways that people imprison the homeless.