

Seeing homelessness is a common thing among the inhabitants of present-day Seattle. Seeing tents and cars full of belongings is an everyday occurrence. It is so common that most people don't even bat an eye when they see a new encampment, and if they do, it is typically to complain to officials to move the encampment to a place where it does not inconvenience them. This process of Sweeping is detailed quite well in Eric Tars' "The Criminalization of Homelessness." It reflects well on a society that, for all of its complaining, seems intent on keeping homelessness around. Throughout this essay, I will analyze material from Josephine Ensign's "Skid Road," along with references to Tars' aforementioned work, to explain why and how those who become homeless are kept homeless.

Though approaches to dealing with homelessness have certainly changed over time, certain throughlines consistently appear as the roots of empathy and aid or derision and exploitation for the homeless. In Western Society, humanity has become intimately entwined with the ability to work and to produce. Those who can provide some utility through labor are treated far more favorably than those unable or unwilling, whom we cast aside like broken tools or incarcerate in one form or another for their labor.

An early example was the Elizabethan poor laws, which determined who among the poor deserved assistance and who would be put to work. After providing the details of these laws, Ensign notes: "It is worth noting that these laws were made by the landed gentry, who had a vested interest in maintaining a pool of local laboring poor people to perform low paying, dangerous, and unpleasant work" (Ensign 16). This interest was reflected in the laws themselves and even more so in their execution, with Ensign mentioning one instance of a boatful of homeless children being shipped to a colony for work. This practice of exploiting the poor for labor continued into North America, such that the practice was mentioned in an amendment to

policy by the early Washington Territory government. Ensign writes: “In the preamble, they refer to the issue of the reliance of an increasing number of seamen in Washington Territory... Remembering the by then well-established American practice of conscripting able bodied male paupers as sailors, this fact is not surprising” (Ensign 26). The practice of obtaining labor from the poor dates back to the Elizabethan poverty laws, and there is a clear example of it being applied in the early stages of colonialist Washington Territory. Note that it is only the able-bodied paupers who are conscripted, which shows that force is used to extract labor from the poor if they are unwilling, and those who are unable are simply left to the state or their communities to take care of.

These patterns continue today, as Tars shows in his work. A few pages in, Tars addresses disparities across marginalized identities regarding homeless people. After racial statistics, Tars mentions, “Other marginalized groups that disproportionately experience homelessness, including people with disabilities and LGBTQ+ individuals, are also at risk of being discriminatorily targeted and affected by criminalization” (Tars 65). These two groups mentioned are critical to demonstrating the underlying sentiments and root causes of the ostracization required for homelessness. Disabled people are very clearly impacted by our society's focus on labor, as disabilities are quite literally impairments to the labor one can perform. While the path to dehumanization and inferiority may be less obvious for members of the LGBTQ+ community, it is vital to remember that for decades, LGBTQ+ people were viewed as threats to societal order and, more importantly, the traditional family structure. The traditional family structure is a bastion of labor necessary for the functioning of a capitalist society, with men exchanging their labor to pay for their survival and women dependent on providing domestic labor to a man to provide for her. While progress has been made, the ramifications of

sexism, homophobia, and the traditional family still color our perceptions today, and it is important to understand that these are more instances of public empathy being withheld from those who are perceived as useless or dangerous to systems of capital.

In conclusion, homeless people are not homeless by chance, and it is important to recognize that some benefit from a large population of people struggling to meet basic needs. Ensign and Tars' work has illustrated that to address homelessness; we must either make homelessness an equal burden on everyone or we must eliminate the ability to exploit and profit off of human desperation. Until we do so, people will continue to face homelessness year after year.