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Homeless in Seattle

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Most people seem to have an opinion on what to do about homelessness. Many are quick to deem ideas as too "liberal" or "conservative" and dispute the likelihood of their efficacy. One such idea that some concede on is that the approach to homelessness now sure feels different than what it used to be. It seems there are also some notable differences, though, many claim that the trends in treatment to the homeless population are derived from historical practices. Individuals experiencing homelessness continue to suffer from frequent forced movements, but today, they are just made to leave locations they inhabit and can face legal ramifications for noncompliance, while in the 1850s, they were forced into more programs intended for assistance.

Today, homelessness is often approached by legally pushing people who are afflicted out of sight, without much thought to providing assistance. Perhaps in order to sustain a business, or make use of public land – like parks, for example – a new trend has emerged within small individual communities, and their homeless populations that were immediately apparent. Eric Tars explains in "The Criminalization of Homelessness" how "communities faced with increasingly visible homelessness began pushing homeless persons out of public view with laws criminalizing life-sustaining acts such as selfsheltering ("camping"), sleeping, resting, eating, or asking for donations" (Tars 43). The notion that these acts have been criminalized in response to "increasingly visible" homelessness suggests that the movements of the homeless exist primarily to mask the issue in particular areas rather than work to solve it as a whole. It is, undoubtedly, desirable to a small business owner to remove an encampment in front of their door or for parents to push for a clearing of a park they frequent with their children; however, it cannot be ignored that these short-term "fixes" also perpetuate the very issue they strive to rectify. Ultimately, these forced movements provide extra hardship on those already struggling, and makes them less likely to get into housing, which is often demonstrated by the eventual return of the same, or other homeless individuals

who have been again pushed from another area. Specifically, the method of criminalizing a host of natural human activities imposes a substantial amount of additional hardship. Those who have been deemed to be sleeping, resting, drinking, etc.. illicitly may receive fines and/or court fees that may "amount to hundreds, or even thousands, of dollars. Without the resources to pay, homeless people may be subject to additional jail time" (Tars 45). The fact that homeless individuals may owe "hundreds or thousands of dollars" undoubtedly means that these removals incite excess harm. It stands to reason that anyone currently unable to afford any kind of housing would be far less capable after receiving such fines, which are given for activities legal for many. The approach taken by many governing bodies today – municipal, and beyond – mostly just exacerbates the issue in the long run.

In the past, more intentional procedures beyond simple relocation occurred to deal with the issue of homelessness. Homeless people were definitely still forced away from areas they resided in, but it seems the approach was more intentional about doing something about the issue. Take, for example, the case of Seattle's Edward Moore, who was discovered to be homeless in the mid-1850s. The city "likely found him in his tent, unable to walk, and carried him along the frozen muddy beach at low tide to the town's one rooming house" (Ensign 13). Ensign's description of Moore being "carried" to a rooming house provides a slightly different image of the movement of a homeless person, as it suggests a greater effort to assist. Of course Moore, like the homeless of today, likely had no say in his movement, but nonetheless, he was accompanied by individuals seeing that he was attended to, in a matter that sought to improve his quality of life. Moore was not subject to fines for his existence, and was moved to an actual destination, as opposed to the approach of today mainly stipulating that homeless people just go elsewhere. In theory, Moore's treatments should have given him a greater chance at achieving housing than is offered to the homeless of today. Additionally, the sentiment among residents contained a more targeted approach. Business owners in the 1850s likely also did not care for Moore spending excessive time in front of their shops, but nonetheless, "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" (Ensign 29). The fact that the other residents privately "collected donations" to return Moore back to his

family shows a different sentiment in the community's response to homelessness, in that it displays an actual objective as to what should happen to him. While residents and business owners of today and the 1850s probably share the main desire to move the homeless elsewhere, elsewhere had a destination in the 1850s. Given that Moore was said to have family in Massachusetts, it makes sense that he may be better off there if he was deemed unable to support himself. Moore also suffered from copious relocation, though his movements were in response to planned efforts of assistance.

Homeless people in the present-day and the 1850s constantly had to move around at the will of the housed, however today the movements are typically just imposed by penalization for existing in one place, whereas in the 1850s they were intentionally carried out with the intent to do something. Today, many people, understandably, want less of a presence of homelessness in their visible sphere of activity. Unfortunately, the methods imposed prioritize making it invisible, and often, worsen the issue by increasing the financial burden on those already struggling. In the 1850s, Edward Moore was carried to a rooming house, and after persisting to seem unable to support himself, was sent to family who could care for him. The methods used in response to Moore were, however, imperfect, and likely caused him much harm in practice. Many of the ways society sought to treat him probably induced excessive trauma, and in actuality did nothing to help his net state. Additionally, it just is not feasible to expend the efforts made for one man with the amount of homeless people today. Nonetheless, society as a whole did seem to change its approach to the situation. Somewhere along the line, the presence of viable plans for improving the situations endured by homeless people dwindled, to the point where the response is basically denial until the issue hits one's door, requiring a revamp of supreme denial to move it away. Perhaps society should strive to rekindle the spirit of problem-solving. Seattlites certainly seemed to have little problem doing what they thought was necessary for Moore. It will not always be right, but efforts thought to be right will probably have more success than those without any thought.

Works Cited

Ensign, Josephine. *Skid Road*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021.

Tars, Eric. "Criminalization of Homelessness." *National Low Income Housing Coalition*, 2024.