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History 12

### Then vs. Now: Homelessness

Homelessness is visible in both the early 20th century and today because of profound societal failures. Looking at the story of Edward Moore, the first homeless person in Seattle, reveals how, despite our progress, we continue to repeat the same mistakes, leaving vulnerable individuals without the long-term support they need. Modern society has a better understanding of the reasons behind homelessness; however, the approach to solving it remains similar to the past: reactive, short-term fixes that fail to address the root of the problem. While homelessness in early 20th-century Seattle and today both reflect societal failures to address root causes, people in the past have been more uneducated on homelessness rather than people in the modern day, but nonetheless, the problem still isn't solved.

Both the early 20th century and modern-day times fail to address the root causes of homelessness. When Edward Moore arrived, the people of Seattle were unsure what to do with him in his current state. He received immediate assistance from local charities and social services, but the aid was short-term. Local authorities also became involved in Moore's case, but their efforts were short-lived too. After the physician, Dr. Burns of Steilacoom treated Moore, he learned that the government would not reimburse him for his work. Burns shipped Moore back to Seattle alone, and "afterward, it appears that he was left to fend for himself. He likely wandered around Seattle, lived off whatever handouts and foraged shellfish and berries he could find, and perhaps once again lived in a makeshift tent on the beach..." (Ensign 27). Moore experienced the cycle where he, once homeless, found himself in a continuous struggle to secure basic needs and stability. This problem is dominant historically, showing how the failure to address root causes eternalizes homelessness. A modern-day Bill was published called "Reducing Street Homelessness Model Bill, that diverted 'American Rescue Plan Act' funding away from long-term permanent housing solutions and toward short-term shelter facilities and encampment communities while also endorsing criminalization" (Tars). This reflects the early 20th-century response to Edward Moore, where he received

temporary aid that did not address his long-term needs. The modern bill, similar to the response to Moore's situation, prioritizes short-term shelter. In both cases, there is a failure to address the root causes of homelessness, such as economic inequality, lack of affordable housing, and mental health support. This system leaves individuals helpless in a cycle of homelessness, where they may find momentary ease but not the stability needed to improve their long-term situation.

In the past, people were less educated on homelessness. In Edward Moore's case, he was the first to bring attention to homelessness, and nobody knew what to do when it was brought up to the public. When first found, Edward was described as "insane and incapable of taking care of himself," and shortly after, the doctor who found him "promptly amputated most of Moore's toes with an axe" (Ensign 13). Society in the past tended to stigmatize homeless people, often seeing them as mentally unstable. Uneducated on what to do, Moore's toes were chopped off, showing the brutal methods used to handle the physical condition of homelessness. After going through phases to try and solve the issue of Edward Moore, he was shipped fifty miles to Steilacoom to be cared for by Matthew P. Burns. There, his hands were shackled. During this time, "Heroic measures, including bloodletting, purging, and blistering, were the main treatments for mental illness. These heroic measures were used in conjunction with restraint, including shackles, cuffs and straightjackets" (Ensign 20). There was a misunderstanding surrounding mental illness and homelessness. These methods reveal that society viewed people like Moore as uncontrollable rather than helpless individuals needing support. This situation shows the broader issue of a lack of education and awareness about homelessness. The treatment Moore received, much like the initial amputation of his toes, was reactive and short-term, echoing a time when homelessness and mental illness were poorly understood.

Today, homelessness is more understood, but that does not mean it is treated better. It is recognized as a complex issue influenced by economic inequality, mental health, addiction, and systemic failures. This increased awareness has changed public views, which has led to debates around the causes and solutions to homelessness. According to a growing body of research, "comparing the cost of

homelessness, including the cost of criminalization, with the cost of providing housing to homeless people shows that ending homelessness through housing is the most affordable option in the long run” (Tars 47). People today have access to resources to educate themselves. Currently, homelessness is all around us, so people generally have a greater knowledge of homelessness (what it is). However, despite this greater understanding, the criminalization of homelessness still survives in many areas, revealing a gap between awareness and action. Recently, “Former President Trump has been fearmongering around homelessness and made a nationwide camping ban and a push to put unhoused persons into “relocation camps”” (Tar 43). The criminalization of homelessness contradicts the progress society has made in understanding the issue. While people today might recognize that homelessness is not simply a result of laziness or insanity, policies that criminalize survival behaviors like sleeping outside suggest a continued unwillingness to engage with the systemic issues that contribute to homelessness fully.

Homelessness reflects a failure to address its root causes in both the past and present. Edward Moore’s experience in early 20th-century Seattle highlights how society’s short-term solutions have persisted. While today we may better understand the complexities behind homelessness, the criminalization and lack of systemic change show that meaningful progress is still needed. To truly break the cycle of homelessness, society must prioritize long-term solutions over temporary fixes.

Citations:

Tars, Eric. "Criminalization of Homelessness." *NATIONAL LOW INCOME HOUSING COALITION*, n.d.

Ensign, Josephine. *Skid road: On the frontier of health and homelessness in an American city*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021.