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Unevolved: Modern Homelessness Reflects History

Many Seattleites may view homelessness as a modern issue, resulting from modern economical problems, but surprisingly, homelessness is a part of Seattle's history, and can be traced back to the first hundred people who formed our city. Josephine Ensign's book, *Skid Road*, discusses how in 1853, census data shows that there were around 50 people living in the area that would become Seattle, and the city's history shows that an additional 51st person was homeless (Ensign, 14)¹. From the very foundations of the city of Seattle, homelessness was apparent, meaning Seattle has been exposed to the issue of homelessness for almost 170 years. Although modern-day society is better informed on issues surrounding homelessness; medically, systematically, and legally; government opinions and legalities surrounding the criminalization of homeless people have stayed relatively the same as they used to be, with the legal and moral goals being to remove the homeless population, instead of solving the issues that put them on the street in the first place.

In the 1800s when the first white settlers arrived in Washington from England and other countries in Europe, they brought laws and practices from those places with them, including English Poor Laws and guidelines for the treatment of homeless and impoverished people.² These poor laws were cruel in many ways, painting poverty as criminal and the homeless as "sinners" and "undeserving" as well as "insane," with asylums "shackling patients in unheated rooms and depriving them of food and medical care," among other cruelties inflicted on patients in early European asylums (Ensign, 23). One of the positive things that has evolved from these

¹ Ensign, Josephine. *Skid Road* Josephine Ensign. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021.

² Ensign, Josephine. *Skid Road* Josephine Ensign. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021.
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failed attempts at combatting mental illness has been medical breakthroughs and a safer and more humane approach to mental health, including issues that effect homeless people psychologically. Although the minuscule powers governing the early Seattle area had little intention of imprisoning the mentally ill, they did carry over many morals from similar practices, including the criminalization of poor and homeless people.

Starting over in a new location, the original white European settlers had the opportunity to form their own laws and put systems in place to better prevent homelessness, but chose to stick with the Poor Laws from Europe, weaving practices and morals from Feudalist European society into the early Pacific Northwestern laws. In the European 18th and 19th centuries, "Poverty was considered an individual and not a societal or economic system failure", with Poor Laws supporting the notion of "the view of poverty as a crime" (Ensign, 18)³. This toxic way of framing people who can't support themselves as criminal perpetuates the idea that they are suffering as a consequence of themselves, instead of societal injustice, and therefore not worthy of help. Unfortunately these cruel and unfair legal stereotypes continue to put stress on homeless people today, as the government did little to adapt these laws to apply to modern society and the city of Seattle. Every day, homeless people are arrested, pushed further from owning a home, and traumatized by the legal system,⁴ according to a paper by Eric Tars, a director of the national homelessness response, making "homelessness harder to exit", due to "criminal and civil punishment serv[ing] no constructive purpose" (Tars, 6). This shows that the ancient Poor Laws of Feudalist England are disturbingly similar in morality and from a legal standpoint to how society deals with homelessness today.

Overall, the people of Seattle have taken some steps towards a more humane treatment of homeless people, including improving mental health care, providing aid for people experiencing homelessness, and being aware of the systems in place preventing people from

³ Ensign, Josephine. *Skid Road* Josephine Ensign. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021.

⁴ Tars, Eric. "Criminalization of Homelessness." *National Low Income Housing Coalition*, 2024, pp. 43–47.

living the lives they deserve to be living. Despite those improvements, however, the way Seattle approaches homeless issues closely resembles frameworks from early European society, including criminalizing and arresting people for being homeless and trapping them in fines and fees, erasing their chances and hopes of owning an address, causing the deterioration of their mental and physical health as a consequence. All of these barriers that push homeless people away from homes are due to systems that can be traced back through history, and the notion that if homelessness isn't seen as much, it is improved. Ignoring the problem and punishing the people who suffer as a result of it is a historical issue that shows up throughout migration patterns, and these beliefs are unfortunately and deeply ingrained in the laws of Seattle.

