Alice Karas

History

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Structural and Systemic Causes of Homelessness

Kikisoblu (1820-1896) was a well-known member of the Duwamish tribe and is one of the many indigenous people affected by colonial expansion in Seattle. The indigenous Duwamish faced severe economic and social disadvantages as a result of colonial policies and practices. In 1855 the Duwamish Indians were forcibly removed from their ancestral lands in Seattle, as a result of the Treaty of Point Elliott, and relocated to reservation lands. Kikisoblu, the daughter of Chief Seattle, defied the edict and refused to leave, remaining among the white settlers until her death. While the structural and systemic causes of homelessness in Seattle during Kikisoblu’s time were primarily driven by colonial expansion and legal displacement, the factors contributing to modern homelessness in Seattle are economic inequality, housing shortages, and systemic failures, such as racism, that create barriers for minorities. However, systemic racism and social exclusion have contributed to homelessness across eras where minorities have been marginalized and denied opportunity contributing to ongoing structural inequality.

Homelessness in the late 1800s was largely caused by the displacement of Native Americans during colonial expansion, where European settlers moved westward across North America, displacing indigenous peoples through treaties, wars, and forced relocations. In Seattle, it is described, “The rush, which was more of a saunter, was by men to claim, settle, develop, and eventually own and sell land in and around Seattle. This was, after all, during the height of the manifest destiny march across the North American continent with the US government’s encouragement of settlement across the western frontier” (Ensign 35). Native populations, like Kikisoblu’s Duwamish tribe, were extracted from their ancestral lands by settlers who claimed and developed them. The settlers did not create public housing programs for displaced Native Americans, who were forcibly deprived of their land and access to housing. Kikisoblu lived in an area called Shantytown. “The residents of Shantytown included urban Indigenous people like Kikisoblu, recent immigrants, migrant workers, and families who were too poor to afford other housing options in Seattle – or who were excluded from their house due to race or ethnicity…The residents of Shantytown did not own their makeshift houses or the land their shacks were built on and were, essentially, squatters” (Ensign 35). Colonial expansion led to unstable living conditions for Indigenous people and other underprivileged communities. The residents of Shantytown identified as “squatters” highlights the systemic barriers, such as race and class, which blocked these vulnerable populations from accessing legal housing. The colonizers created racist laws and treaties that stripped the Native Americans, like Kikisoblu, of their property and their rights. “The Treaty of Point Elliott in 1855, of which Chief Seattle was a signatory, had designated reservations in outlying areas to which the Natives of Puget Sound were supposed to move and become ‘civilized’ by going to ‘Indian schools,’ learning to farm and owning parcels of land” (Ensign 49). After the Treaty of Point Elliott in 1855, which Chief Seattle signed, Native Americans were legally mandated to vacate their ancestral lands and move to reservations. Despite this, Kikisoblu stayed in the area, living in poverty on the edges of society. Kikisoblu’s decision to remain in Seattle relegated her to living in poverty on the edges of society. This history of systemic racism and law shows its direct ties to homelessness and social exclusion.

A combination of economic inequality, housing shortages, and institutional failures drives modern-day homelessness in Seattle. Many people experiencing homelessness today have been pushed out of the housing market due to unaffordable rents. In a recent study focusing on racism around homelessness, a person of color experiencing homelessness talked about housing, “Either the apartments I moved in weren’t well maintained, too high in rent. Extremely too high in rent, should I say. Just like I said, housing. It’s just awful” (SPARC 13). Today, even as “formal” segregation has ended, racial minorities still face significant barriers to housing due to systemic economic disparities. The respondent highlights the modern causes of homelessness in Seattle, emphasizing the structural and economic factors that have evolved since Kikisoblu's time. Unlike the 19th century, when Native populations were forcibly removed from their land, modern homelessness is driven largely by economic inequality, skyrocketing rents, and housing shortages. In modern times, Native Americans, African Americans, and other marginalized groups are still disproportionately affected by homelessness, but the causes are more subtle than in the past—rooted in systemic racism within the housing market, employment, and more. For example, “Racial disparities in behavioral health have been well-documented, including high rates of over-diagnosis or misdiagnosis of mental health issues, and service systems that were not designated to meet the needs of people of color” (SPARC 18). Unlike the obvious forms of exclusion seen in Kikisoblu’s time, where Indigenous people were forcibly removed from their lands, exclusion is embedded within societal institutions in the modern day. For example, racial disparities in behavioral health contribute to this ongoing marginalization. This systemic failure means that people from marginalized backgrounds are not only more likely to experience homelessness but also face obstacles in accessing the support they need to recover.

In both eras, systemic racism and social exclusion have played a central role in sustaining homelessness, which illustrates the fact that structural inequalities have endured across time. In the 19th century the lack of robust industry led to a lack of steady income or housing for Native Americans. Many women were relegated into prostitution at the time, often coming from backgrounds of poverty and sexual abuse. Most of them were of racial and ethnic minorities with no access to education or training for other types of paid work. “They often were lured into prostitution directly from poverty and homelessness, and ended up homeless again if they stopped work in the brothels due to age or illness” (Ensign 47). Native Americans were often trapped in a system that offered them no possible alternatives, and their marginalized status–due to ethnicity and race—made them more vulnerable. They were caught in a cycle - where a lack of education and training led to the lowest paid employment, which locked them into depressed social status. Today, while homelessness is also often tied to unemployment or underemployment, it is also a consequence of these structural injustices. “It is clear that sustained economic investment in communities of color is needed to counter centuries of being shut out of opportunities for wealth accumulation” (SPARC 17). While modern economic structures have evolved to provide employment rights and protections, underemployment remains a key driver of homelessness. Underemployment, which is prevalent among the homeless today, is where people are working but their jobs don’t pay enough to cover the cost of living. Underemployment often occurs in cities where rents and living expenses are high, like Seattle. While economic disparity can be a result of some individuals mismanaging their finances, it is also a result of structural inequities that have existed for hundreds of years. People from depressed communities are still feeling the effects of these types of long standing social exclusions leading to the inability to support themselves and cover the cost of living.

Looking at homelessness through the experiences of Kikisoblu’s Duwamish people and the realities faced by marginalized groups in Seattle, we can see a stubborn thread of systemic racism and social exclusion. In the late 19th century, Kikisoblu's people faced colonial expansion that displaced them with the use of force, seizing their ancestral lands. Although systemic discrimination is a little more subtle today, some underlying problems are similar. The factors contributing to modern homelessness are factors that affect racial minorities such as economic inequality, elevated rents, and systemic failures. Institutional racism continues to exist despite laws and policies that attempt to eliminate it. Therefore society still faces inequalities in access to housing, employment, and support services. When comparing historical homelessness with modern-day, it is clear that we need to continue to try to address the systemic problems that contribute to economic disparity and homelessness.

Citations:

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