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Community Responses to Homelessness vs. Real and Effective Solutions

In cities across the country, streets are filled with homeless people and encampments, uglifying the city, making the housed feel uncomfortable, but most importantly, revealing the inequities of America’s society. Some policies that cities have implemented attempt permanent solutions to homelessness, even though they are not perfect, while others have only worsened the problem. Communities have a long way to go until their homelessness programs and policies minimize the problem in the most effective way possible. While some community responses to homelessness work to solve the problem, they often focus on easing the impacts of homelessness on housed people rather than using empathy for the homeless to create long-term solutions.

Communities often respond to homelessness by pushing the homeless around for the comfort of the housed, and the genuine efforts to improve life for the homeless and find them housing are currently not enough and brush nuances like race, mental health, and criminal record under the rug. In early Seattle, many homeless lived in small, wooded “shanties,” and when a fire broke out in 1889, the shanties were “ordered destroyed by the mayor in an attempt to stem the spread of the fire” ( Ensign 51). Seattle’s government felt the liberty to destroy the living quarters of the homeless, and this method failed to control the fire. Today, “sweeps” of homeless encampments – police forcing the homeless to vacate an area without giving them an alternative location – are a common occurrence. In both of these cases, the housed wanted the homeless to cease to exist because they presented a burden, but neither of these actions solved the problem in any sense. Communities and governments have created programs to find housing for the homeless, yet they are not effective for everyone. People of color, particularly Native Americans and Black people are massively overrepresented in the homeless population, yet senior managers of the homeless services workforce are 65% white, and only 12% Black and 0.4% Native American (SPARC). The decision-makers of homeless services do not represent or understand those that they serve, and because of their background, are not equipped to support homeless people of color in the unique challenges that they face. Someone with a felony on their record was given a voucher for low-income housing but said that “they won’t rent you a place to live because you have a felony on your background. So for me, I wasn’t able to use that voucher” (SPARC). Similarly, a co-op program for homeless people was meant to treat their mental health and then helped them find housing, but for one participant, “at the last day, they didn’t do the co-op because they said that my bipolar symptoms were too high. So then they discharged me to the street” (SPARC). While both of these programs help many exit homelessness, they do not support everyone; even with a felony or mental health struggles, one who is ready to restart their life and find stability should be able to do so. Cities have spent much of their resources on measures that do not solve homelessness, such as sweeps, and have also created programs that attempt permanent solutions to homelessness but need to do more to improve the programs and make them accessible to everyone.

Solutions to homelessness involve long-term investments, consideration of racial disparities and other backgrounds and factors that complicate exiting homelessness, and empathy for everyone experiencing homelessness – elements that city measures for homelessness either lack or do not address at all. While US cities do have programs for the homeless to get housing, SPARC found that these “housing options were often viewed as dangerous or unsuitable for habitation, so respondents would ‘choose’ to leave them, and housing placements associated with service programs were commonly too expensive to maintain without ongoing subsidies.” Instead of these housing options presenting long-term, sustainable solutions to reduce homelessness, they create a cycle of entering housing and being forced back onto the streets. In order to make real solutions out of these programs, cities need to invest more money into making the housing options better and more affordable, and as homelessness therefore decreases, cities will not need to spend as much money on homelesness. In order to reduce the barriers to finding employment and exiting homelessness for felons, SPARC recommends reforming the criminal justice system by “limiting the scope of background checks, sealing the records of non-violent offenders, and changing eligibility policies for housing subsidies.” Felons deserve equal opportunities to get back into housing, and these measures would help minimize bias against them and reduce homelessness overall by helping a portion of the homeless population find housing. SPARC also recommends to “create greater racial and ethnic diversity on boards of directors for local and national non-profit organizations working on homelessness.” The only people who can truly understand all of the effects and impacts of racism are those who have experienced it personally, so this would allow agencies to incorporate better policies to counteract racism. While communities have created some resources for the homeless, they need to be improved and expanded in order to present lasting solutions.

Despite the ways in which cities have exacerbated the homeless crisis, such as burning down Seattle’s wooden shanties and sweeps, they have helped to solve the problem by creating homeless shelters and programs to find people housing, but because these programs are not effective enough and are not accessible to everyone, homelessness still exists as a major problem. Homeless service boards do not have the diversity to deal with the overrepresentation of people of color on the streets, and the programs for homeless do not help everyone, particularly felons and people with mental health struggles enough. If cities improve their re-housing programs by investing in better quality housing and more subsidies, making them inclusive to everyone, and increasing the diversity of homeless service workers, then they will have a chance at significantly reducing the problem. Long-lasting solutions to homelessness will take time, investment, and a commitment to giving the homeless rights and dignity, but are very much possible.

Works Cited

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