Webster’s dictionary defines “homelessness” as “having no home or no permanent place of residence,” but in American society, the term has taken on many other meanings. It would seem that “homeless” has become synonymous with “derelict”, “criminal”, “drug addict”, or “blight”. Unfortunately, it’s easy to scapegoat homeless people and to direct anger at them for piles of garbage, violent behavior, loitering, and a litany of other things over which they have little control. It seems like the only thing that non-homeless people can agree on aside from the fact that homelessness is a problem is that something needs to be done about it. Opinions on what should be done about it vary widely, but looking at the definition of the word, one solution becomes crystal clear: give homeless people homes.

The idea of providing unconditional, permanent housing to those experiencing homelessness is not a new one. It was first popularized by Sam Tsemberis and Pathway to Housing in New York in the 1990s and has been successfully implemented in many cities in Europe and a few in the United States. The idea is simple: Give people permanent housing first and sort out the causes of their chronic homelessness afterwards. This is exactly how Salt Lake City, Utah reduced their local homeless population by 91% over a ten-year period from 2005 to 2015. (McEvers) One of the biggest roadblocks to implementing this type of program in more places is a lack of affordable housing units. For instance, according to the non-profit, Housing Oregon, “there are nearly 250,000 families in Oregon who make less than $33,000 a year and need affordable housing, yet there are only 143,000 units available for them. (Hoop)” This statistic doesn’t even begin to consider the homeless population who aren’t employed, so there’s a lot of work that needs to be done in order to be able to provide housing to those in need.

Ironically, as a whole, the United States doesn’t have a chronic lack of housing. Even though housing vacancy rates are near record lows, there were 16 million vacant housing units in the US in 2020. (Channel et al.) With a homeless population just over 500,000 in 2022, that amounts to enough vacant residences to give each homeless person in the country twenty-seven each, let alone just one. Granted, a large percentage of these properties are off-market homes, secondary residences such as vacation homes, foreclosures, etc. (Calli et al.), but if even one third of them would be able to be allocated to house those in need, the homeless population would be reduced to next to nothing.

Critics to this idea claim that this kind of social safety net “teaches dependency” over self-sufficiency (Cassaday). After all, why should someone work if they can just get a home for free and have everything handed to them? However, considering 40% of unsheltered homeless people were employed between 2011 and 2018 and over half of those living in shelters had gainful employment (Meyer et al.). Unfortunately, according to the National Low Income Housing Coalition, workers making the federal minimum wage of $7.25 per hour can’t afford rent in 91% of the United States. In fact, the same study found that workers would need to make at least $17-23 an hour in order to afford rent in half of the states in the country (Aurand).

Another common counter argument to unconditional housing for the homeless is people’s opposition to living around drug addicts. In reality, only 26% of homeless people reported using drugs other than alcohol (Mando). Even if that number were higher, most of the roughly 50% of the homeless population who reported regular drug or alcohol use, most cited homelessness as a motivating factor in their substance abuse. Here’s where money comes back into the picture. The average cost to incarcerate a person for one year in the United States is approximately $39,000 (Quresh). The average cost of rent in the United States in 2023 is at a record high of $2,000 per month, on average (Ellis). When extrapolated over twelve months, that comes to approximately $24,000. This means that even with skyrocketing rental prices, it’s still about $15,000 cheaper per annum to put someone in a rental unit than it is to put them in prison. Here’s the kicker: The average price of drug rehabilitation services in the US is about $13,000 per year, per person (Woods), which means that if every homeless person were housed in a unit whose rent was $2,000 per month, there would be enough money left over to attain drug treatment for them and still have money left over.

It’s important to remember that homeless people are just that: people. They haven’t lost their humanity because they’ve fallen into hard times financially. They are not inferior to the rest of the population because they’ve fallen through the cracks. The rest of society has a moral and ethical obligation see them back onto the path of well-being which extends far beyond the scope of the size of the price tag for doing so. Society as a whole is uplifted when the least fortunate are treated with compassion. Homelessness has grave health effects which lead to higher incidence and severity of illness and injury and ultimately results in a thirty-year decrease in life expectancy among those experiencing homelessness. (Watts) In a society that is obsessed with innovation that’s a lot of potential inventors, entrepreneurs and valuable members of the workforce that are left to suffer this unnecessary imbalance.

Homelessness has many causes and, therefore, will need to have many solutions operating in tandem to make a dent in the problem. However, if one of the core catalysts for a person becoming homeless is simply the fact that they cannot afford a home or there aren’t enough available, then doing everything possible to provide stable housing to those in need must be a cornerstone strategy in combating the systemic problem that is homelessness, no matter the cost. This, paired with affordable and accessible addiction and mental health services, would make a significant dent in the homelessness crisis in the United States. Compassion and a higher standard of care are not only cheaper to the taxpayer, but they are much more compassionate and realistic alternatives than simply, scapegoating, criminalizing, or imprisoning those experiencing homelessness.

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