The state of Oregon has seen an increase in their homeless population every year since 2010[1]. As the number of people in this marginalized demographic grows, so to does the public’s animosity toward them. Business owners claim they “scare away customers”. Worried parents are wary about their kids having to pass by a group of tents and piles of garbage on their way to school in their otherwise middle-class home. While these concerns are valid from a particular point of view, is it appropriate to blame the people experiencing homelessness? Is it possible that the anger and outrage might be displaced? It’s difficult sometimes for those who are lucky enough to have the ability to make ends meet to empathize with those to whom that privilege isn’t available, so let’s explore some of the root causes of homelessness in Oregon.

Houseless individuals are often stigmatized as lazy, drug-addicted, mentally ill or sometimes all three. This definitely makes it easier to direct anger at them, but do all homeless folks fall into these categories? Due in part to Oregon’s 2020 passing of Measure 110, which decriminalized the minor possession of drugs in hopes of arresting fewer people annually[2], 60% of the 193 the homeless people who died in Multnomah County 2021 involved illicit substances[3]. However, according to Portland’s 2022 Point In Time report, of the roughly eighteen-hundred unsheltered individuals polled, 83% percent of them was afflicted by one or more disabling conditions and just over a third suffered from three or more[4]. In contrast, just over a third suffered from either substance abuse or mental health disorders.

The report concluded that the main cause of the nearly 30% increase in the homeless population between 2019 and 2022 was COVID-19. Just over 25% of respondents cited COVID-19 as a reason they were living outside instead of in shelters or transitional housing. Considering that mortality rates for homeless populations were between 0.3% and 1.9% higher than average[5], it’s plain to see that the pandemic had a compounding effect on the number of people experiencing homelessness in recent years.

So why don’t homeless folks just get a job, work hard and find themselves a cheap place to rent? The truth is, for many, that’s a goal that is well out of reach. 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[6]. These are families that already have jobs and are working hard to make ends meet. While legislation has been passed in Oregon to cap rent increases, the average cost to rent an apartment in Portland has increased 64% since 2006[7]. New developments are in constant construction, but many buildings only reserve a small portion of units for affordable housing, prioritizing units that can make more money.

While it’s reasonable to want to protect one’s family and community, expressing anger toward homeless people is probably not the best use of energy. The vitriol that has befallen those less-fortunate individuals only makes it harder for them to find stable footing in society, especially given the odds that are stacked against them. Access to affordable housing as well as mental health and addiction services is essential for the situation to turn around in an effective way.

**Sources**

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