

Homelessness

The homeless epidemic is a serious problem in nearly every major city across the country. According to the US Department of Housing and Urban Development, there are over 500,000 people experiencing homelessness on any given night. It's a difficult challenge to tackle precisely because it is so multi-faceted, both in terms of its causes and its far-reaching effects. Homelessness affects not only the people who must struggle to survive on the street, but also the business owners or residents in the neighborhoods. Petty crime and drug abuse are common. While many factors have contributed to the rise in homeless rates, one of the most profound is the lack of adequate social support services.

By definition, a homeless person is someone without a permanent home. They may seek shelter in parking garages, ATM vestibules, and subway stations. On a purely practical level, if a city can provide enough homeless shelters and other forms of affordable housing, the people who would otherwise sleep on the streets can sleep far more safely with a consistent roof over their heads.

Social support services, whether they are funded publicly or privately, would be able to tackle many of the immediate and long-term challenges that face people experiencing homelessness. In addition to providing adequate and reliable shelter, services like drug counselling, treatment for physical or emotional abuse, and career counselling can address some of the factors that lead to homelessness.

The individual stories of each person going through homelessness will vary. What is often found, though, is that the homelessness came about because of a series of events. A person may unexpectedly lose their job, which may lead to family problems at home, which may lead to drug abuse as a coping mechanism, which may lead to further financial stress, and so on. Appropriate social services at any point in this process may be able to prevent homelessness from becoming this person's reality.

The effects of homelessness are equally complex and can be mirror images of the root causes. Because the person is experiencing homelessness, this may put profound strain on personal relationships. Drug abuse can become an issue, as the person seeks some way of coping with the pain and hardship of living on the streets. This leads to a downward spiral that drives the person deeper and deeper into the depths of crippling poverty and isolation.

The impact extends well beyond the individual, too. As homelessness becomes an increasingly visible issue in a neighborhood, home values can plummet. Middle and working class families may move out, providing a bigger opening for various forms of crime. Businesses may close as the area becomes too prone to theft and property crime.

Every city, every neighborhood faces unique challenges when it comes to homelessness. While the specific root causes can vary between individuals, the lack of adequate social services is a leading contributor. The right social services can address, reduce or even remove some of these other underlying causes. With powerful effects for both the individual and society at large, homelessness is a pressing issue and one that must be approached with tact and compassion.