

THE MISCONCEPTION OF THE HOMELESS

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In today's society, the media and the overall public persona displayed when discussing homeless individuals is that of people who are addicted to a narcotic or alcohol, and who therefore could better themselves if they only tried. Would you consider a child capable of being part of this community? Or a woman with two children, who is employed as a nurse's assistant at a nursing home? What about a newly discharged veteran from the recent wars?

All of these people and others are part of the current homeless population crisis. In my district alone, which is a fairly small area in regards to population, there are over 100 children in our schools who are homeless and who relocate from day to day to various homes in order to have a place to sleep. Shocking? It should be. This is not what President Lyndon B. Johnson envisioned being possible when he instituted the assistance programs of the 1960s. Another President, Franklin D. Roosevelt, stated plainly, "The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much: it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little."

Many locations refuse to include the children as a part of the homeless population in their Point in Time surveys, as they 'have a place to sleep.' However, if a child does not know at which place they will sleep, then this is not the normal lifestyle of a child in elementary school; this is a homeless child. It also places an undue stress on the child, which impacts their learning potential. Likewise, the nurse's assistant would not be included in the homeless population, even though she and her children live out of their car as her wages are not enough to pay for utilities, rent, and food. As we

have seen in the unemployment statistics, the failure to include these homeless individuals in the statistics provides only a portion of the true numbers.

Due to the misconception of who is in the homeless population, organizations that attempt to provide assistance to the homeless population are plagued with city councils who feel the homeless to be undesirable derelicts who should be incarcerated if they appear in that community. Most notoriously, councils and neighborhoods agree that there should be assistance for these people, but each precinct declares this care should be provided 'not in my backyard.' The moving of the assistance for the homeless to the most impoverished and derelict regions of the city only encourages those who are homeless in the better neighborhoods to conceal this as much as possible to avoid the legal ramifications. The recent action of cities in creating homeless concentration camps only adds to the stigmatization of being homeless.

Additionally, the homeless assistance programs are designed by the government with major metropolitan areas in mind. For those regions which are smaller and rural, the dynamics that are in place are hard to reduce to where they may be applied to the homeless of the region. The government presumes that there will be several shelters in place for the homeless. In reality, in smaller areas there are few to no shelters in place, leaving the homeless to the elements in dire weather.

"And sometimes people don't realize that 90 percent of the persistent poverty counties are located in rural America."

-Tom Vilsack, Secretary of Agriculture

Finally, there is that portion of the population who, although technically not homeless, are penniless when their monthly debts are paid. Many of the people in the geriatric population fall into this category, and find that after they pay their expenses, they are left with less than \$50 for their month's groceries, transportation and medications. At the same time, most will not qualify for more than \$25 in food stamps, leaving them to decide what they will do without each month. Many of these are widows who have outlived their husbands, but are located half a nation away from relatives.

"Loneliness and the feeling of being unwanted is the most terrible poverty."

-Mother Teresa

We, as a nation, have to assess this problem. If our city councils will not engage in programs to assist the entire homeless population, then it is up to the community at large to seek a solution. A prime example of this was the reaction of the boat owners in New York, who, without call or compensation began to evacuate people from Manhattan after 9/11. This is a shining symbol of how we as a nation are to behave when we see another American in crisis.

"You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God (2 Corinthians 9:11)."

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