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Homeless at Mind

When the thought of homelessness enters one's mind, the initial image is "alcoholic men clustered on skid rows" (Fischer 1115). However, we have been blinded and raised to believe that homelessness is a way of life one has chosen or a punishment for ones wrongful actions. There are numerous reasons to why a person had been lead to the darkness and emptiness of what society has now titled homelessness; however, it is unlikely that one has willingly chosen this ruthless way of life. Homelessness is a result of hardships one was unable to overcome due to the situation and circumstances. Homelessness is never a way of life someone in their right mind would choose for themselves and or family. It is the outcome of various hardships and circumstances that someone at a point of their life was unable to overcome and also could not help themselves out of the darkness of homelessness.

To begin, homelessness is the product of stressful circumstances brought upon an individual who is incapacitated to manage them. In the novel, *The Tattooed Soldier* by Hector Tobar, the protagonist, Antonio Bernal, a Guatemalan refugee who was once surrounded by intellectual people and financial stability, has fled from his native country that has murder the ones he has loved the most and has now been lead into the emptiness of homelessness. After Antonio's apartment manager, Mr. Hwang, evicts Antonio and his roommate, Jose Juan, Antonio believes, "...he could only blame himself for this fiasco, for having failed at the mathematics of his finances" (Tobar 5). The drastic change from being an educated man to overnight becoming a

simple busboy prevents him to manage his new life and finances. Eviction, the lack of financial funds and having nowhere else to go is a factor that can lead to homelessness. The outcome of this stressful event has pulled Antonio into the emptiness of homelessness. Since they have no friends or relative in Los Angeles, they had no other option but to set up camp on the streets of Los Angeles. This provides the reader with evidence that homelessness is not a way of life one chooses, this lifestyle is developed by stressful events one cannot manage nor overcome.

As demonstrated in the novel, no one willingly chooses to be homeless; on the contrary, being homeless is unwanted and degrading. After the threat of eviction, Antonio thought to himself, "*Voy a ser uno de los "homeless."* It did not seem right to him that a man who had loved to read, a man with *Crimen y Castigo* and *El Idiota* and the countless other works of real literature scattered on the floor of his apartment, would be called this ugly word" (Tobar 5). With this statement, Antonio makes it clear that he is ashamed to be considered homeless and just the thought and sound of this idea fills his soul with embarrassment and disgust. Antonio's life became difficult after the murder of his family. This event created turning points which eventually lead him into homelessness. He lost his financial stability which resulted in eviction, and with nowhere else to go, homelessness. Antonio provides a demonstration that homelessness is not a way of life one chooses, but rather it is due to circumstances an individual is unable to maneuver themselves out of this situation.

Homelessness is not a choice; it is a lifestyle no one in their right mind would prefer over the safety of a warm home. The homeless skid rows could also be called "psychiatric dumping ground" (Fischer 1115). There have been studies conducted that show the presence of ADM (Mental health) disorders in homeless populations. Not only this, but there is also an emerging increase of a person having more than one disorder at the same time, which is also known as

comorbidity, within this “skid row” population. Many may argue that many homeless adults are in this position due to their alcohol addiction and aren’t willing to assume responsibility and take action. However, according to studies listed in the article, *The Epidemiology of Alcohol, Drug, and Mental Disorders among Homeless Persons*, “Recent studies estimate that about one half to three fourths of homeless adults have at least one ADM disorder...5% to 40% are mentally ill without associated alcohol or drug problems” (Fischer 1115). This shows that even though yes, some homeless adults are alcoholics, this may not be the primary cause of their homelessness. This is because there are also homeless adults who do not suffer from this or other addictions, but are mentally ill. This can be the explanation to why the homeless individual is in the streets.

If a homeless alcoholic is also suffering from a mental disorder this could prevent the individual to look for help. A great example is a homeless person suffering from Alzheimer’s disease because a person is unable to remember many things and is unable to change the side effect of their Alzheimer’s. The homeless person may in reality have relatives or somewhere safe to go, however, their illness does not allow him to remember where to go. Therefore, the individual is unable to help himself, and takes shelter in the street and remains homeless even though he did not choose to live this way simply that the individual had no other option due to the circumstances.

Many homeless individuals are trapped in the hollowness of homelessness. Many are unable to help themselves because they do not know there is something wrong with them. A great way to prevent homelessness is if a person and relatives are aware of any mental illnesses, therefore, providing assistance to the person and avoiding him to be homeless. However, that’s usually never the case. It’s also extremely difficult to test a homeless person. In addition, “an assessment by clinicians is expensive and time consuming” (Fischer 1116), because these

examinations are costly and require large amounts of time as well as cooperation these assessments are not usually used. Since there are no results, one is unable to identify if a person is homeless because they are mentally ill. It is also known that many homeless adults suffer from several kinds of illness not only mental but physical as well. For example, an individual can be extremely injured in his workplace causing him to be permanently unable to work but be denied any help or compensation. However, may not know where to go for assistance. Being unaware of federal program in which they are qualified for financial support, they are unable to work and without any financial help one can lose everything and become homeless.

Domestic violence, abusive parents, and other life-wrecking events can lead to life on the streets. Evidence provided by the Health Care for the Homeless (HCH) shows some signs that alcohol-dependent homeless people “may have had difficulties in childhood and adolescence” (Fischer 1120). This is an important key to the reasoning behind homelessness. For example if a person had a traumatic early life, those circumstances can the individual into alcoholism. When an individual becomes addicted to consuming alcohol he is unable to properly function with the outside world because “homeless alcohol-dependent persons have substantially higher prevalence of other psychiatric disorders and are more impaired in their social and vocational functioning” (Fischer, 1118). This leads to poor social lives and not being able to keep a job. With the individual unemployed and with no outside support the individual is most likely to find themselves on the streets.

Many people may also see the effect of the almost financial depression our country has been facing, but no one knows exactly the harmful effects it has brought to some. Many people lost their homes due to bank foreclosure as well as their jobs. Due to this recession, many undocumented immigrants have been left laid-off and unemployed. It is extremely difficult to

hold employment without a working permit in the United States. Without finding other means employment, an individual or family can only live on their savings for so long. Without a home and employment an individual is most likely to be guided into homelessness. According to Tracy Peressini's report, *Perceived Reasons for Homelessness in Canada*, there are seven common risk factors that cause or are a roadway to homelessness: "poverty, interpersonal conflict/violence, health (mental & physical), housing loss/affordability, addictions, deinstitutionalization and social safety net failure (lack of public/social support)" (3-4). These factors can vary throughout an individual. These are paths to homelessness because an individual only need one hardship they are unable to overcome to begin a domino effect. One thing leads to another and unfortunately leading many to homelessness they would have never wanted.

Many may argue that homelessness is the outcome of bad choices and dangerous behaviors. These behaviors can include drug, and alcohol addiction. However, what if their risky behaviors were due to traumatic experiences? While judging, some may not take into consideration what could have gone wrong in "bums" life, therefore, blame their homelessness on the "bums" addiction. However, studies show that "child abuse and victimization are also widespread among homeless youth: At least 73% have experienced physical abuse and one third has suffered sexual abuse prior to leaving home" (Tyler 477). Young people can be runaways, not because they are rebellious, but because they are running from a torturous life. No one ever stops to think that maybe the individual is homeless because he's running away from physical or sexual abuse. In addition, "drugs and alcohol serve many purposes for young people having to survive on the streets" (Tyler 476). To cope with living on the streets during cold season, many may be lead into a narcotic life. This is because it provides them with a feeling of warmth and relaxation. The abused victim might find the streets much safer than life at "home." That is not to

say they are homeless at their own will! They have been consumed into this way of life because of harmful circumstances and are fleeing from these abuses.

In conclusion, homelessness is not a way of life one willingly chooses. This life is due to the accumulation of stressful events an individual is incapable of overcoming. Even though, some may argue that it is the persons own fault for not looking for assistance, especially when they are suffering from an addiction. However, some may be incapable of reaching out for help because they may suffer from a mental disorder preventing them to help themselves out of the darkness of homelessness. The individual can have also gone through different difficulties in life to end up in the streets. For example, eviction, a mental illness, unemployment or violence could have been the key starter of their path into homelessness without them even expecting it.