Why does homelessness still occur in the UK today?

To understand why homelessness still occurs in the UK today we must understand what homelessness actually is. Homelessness is the lack of a safe and suitable residence. When a person thinks about homelessness, they most often think of the general stereotype of a person on the streets quite literally without a home. However, this is not always the case. Many homeless people are not visibly homeless such as people in a night shelter (a temporary bed, usually within a large building), in a homeless hostel (a shelter that provides temporary accommodation), or sofa surfing (staying with a friend, living on their floor or sofa). The term hidden homelessness is not entirely accurate as it is another generalisation that has led to more cases of homelessness in the UK [1]. Someone may have a visible affliction caused by domestic violence, which can make their state of homelessness visible to others, yet they are still defined as being in the category of hidden homelessness. These people are living in temporary accommodation with no secure tenancy of their own and are legally homeless in the eyes of the government [2]. According to ‘the hidden truth about homelessness’ 9% of homeless people left their home because of abuse from a relative or partner [3]. These people are trapped in an unsafe environment with no safe space to escape to. Homelessness can also include people breaking the law in order to have access to shelter. Squatting and imprisonment are two examples of this. Some people use squatting (illegally staying in an unoccupied building) to take shelter and some people commit crimes in order to go to prison as it is often easier than being out on the streets.

There are numerous stereotypes surrounding homelessness, many of them stemming from a misunderstanding and lack of education on the subject. As an example, all homeless people are drug addicts and alcohol abusers – this is not true. While some may have become homeless due to their addictions and others may have started to rely on alcohol and drugs to help them through the process of homelessness, not all people use drugs and alcohol, instead they turn to the shelters and soup kitchens for help and support. This false information can lead to charities trying to find a simple solution, which is another reason stereotypes can be so harmful. Another widely believed stereotype is that they are all criminals. This idea comes from the different ways homelessness is handled; some homeless people may choose to commit a crime to go to prison in order to have access to accommodation and free food. Police often move the homeless on, which can lead to the misunderstanding that homelessness is a deviant act. The idea that all homeless people are too lazy to work is another stereotype. There are a broad number of reasons why this statement is false beginning with illness. Both physical and mental illnesses can affect one’s ability to obtain an interview though this is not true for all homeless people and is in itself is a stereotype that all homeless people are mentally ill. Among other factors that contribute to the inability of getting a job are: visibly homeless people don’t have an address they can use for an application, some homeless people have criminal records that prevent them from applying to certain jobs, homeless people may not be able to find jobs due to not always having reliable access to the internet and therefore job opportunities. These common stereotypes lead to misconceptions which can cause the problem to grow further. If people are miseducated on the subject, they cannot find root causes and put a stop to the problem which is why it keeps growing and is still an issue in the UK today.

What causes homelessness? At first, one may debate that homelessness is caused by bad luck, or bad choices. The problem with this is that it is a complex mixture of both and therefore cannot be categorized as one or the other. For example, one could become ill. No one chooses to be sick however one may become sick due to a prolonged unhealthy lifestyle and choices that led them to be severely ill. They may have chosen to smoke, or drink alcohol, or take drugs but no one chooses the consequences of those actions, they choose the risk of having a consequence. The risk of addiction can lead people to spend their money on the substance the are addicted to, rather than on other, more important things such as rent, bills and savings. On top of this, problems with mental health begin to occur, this is what makes it harder for a homeless person to live a life of safety and security. This then ends up being an extremely complicated mix of the two. This definition from study.com [5] gives a broad and literal sense of homelessness, ignoring hidden homelessness. ‘homelessness - not having a permanent home or place of residence’. This brings into question the safety of the residence. A person experiencing domestic violence has a permanent home, it is however, unsafe. The same goes for a large number of people all trying to live in a house with insufficient rooms, such as twenty people to four bedrooms. They too all have a place of residence, but it is not suitable for living in. A third example of homelessness that isn’t defined by this quote is a person who lives somewhere without all the necessary requirements to live e.g. no kitchen. These people have a permanent residence, but it is not fit for their basic needs. The information on this website is accessible to anyone, meaning its false definition will be spread. This combined with more false information among other websites contributes greatly to the misinformation and therefore growth of homelessness in the UK.

There are viewpoints which are too simple and broad to be used in defining homelessness. For example, ‘The majority of homeless people are older, white men’ [A] According to Crisis, the majority of homeless people are male (84%) and of a white background (80%). However, the largest age group of men and women of all ethnicities combined was 31-40 years old (30%) [4]. ‘Sleeping every night in your best friend’s sofa means you are homeless’ [A]. This can be true in certain circumstances, but if it is a long-term agreement then this statement is false. There could be many reasons the friend is staying there every night other than being homeless, such as there was only one bedroom in the apartment that they both pay rent for. ‘Being placed in a homeless hostel means you are no longer homeless’ [A]. This is only meant to be a temporary accommodation until the person is back on their feet and able to own their own accommodation. ‘Staying long-term in a bed and breakfast makes you homeless.’ [A] A person could have several reasons to need to stay long-term in a bed and breakfast. For example: an employee on a business trip. As long as they have a safe residence to return to, they are not considered homeless. ‘Renting a room in a large house where you need to share a kitchen and bathroom with others means you are homeless’ [A]. One example of this is university students. They rent a room in a house, and all share the bathroom and kitchen, these people are not homeless. However, if there are a disproportionate number of people for the number of bedrooms, such as twenty people and four bedrooms, these people would be considered homeless as there are too many people for this to be considered a safe environment. ‘Children can never be homeless’[A] – the organisation ‘Centrepoint’ was set up specifically to help homeless young people. According to their website, [6] over 103,000 homeless young people approached their local council for help last year. ‘Anyone could become homeless if they lose their job’[A] – yes, this is true. It is an overly broad statement however it highlights the fact that anyone has the potential to become homeless if they do not have a job. One may have never had a job before and therefore cannot lose it but still become homeless. One may have a job that pays so little, their basic needs become unaffordable and therefore become homelessness without ever having lost their job. There isn’t a straightforward answer as to what causes homelessness. To be able to fix a problem you must understand it. If you don’t understand and try to find one broad cause and one easy solution for this complex issue, it won’t work. Misunderstandings such as these the exacerbate the problem of homelessness.

A simple approach that has been taken, is by the charitable organization: Housing First. This organisation gives people who are homeless a stable home to allow them to rebuild their lives [7]. This at first sounds like a good idea; give the homeless a home. However, it is much more complex than that. Homeless people may have more than one problem. People who are given a home aren’t automatically given a job, while it may be helpful to have an address and easier to be presentable in an interview, the person will still have to put in weeks of work before a pay-check. For people with no money who are placed into accommodation and expected to be able to pay the rent, this is a big problem. Then there are the homeless who may suffer from addiction problems. Being given a home won’t immediately be an end to this person’s dilemmas, they will need rehabilitation services, support to help guide them in how to spend their money and a job to pay the upcoming rent and various other bills.

Being given a house may result in the person being unable to pay the rent and losing their accommodation all over again, however, it also inspires the homeless to take steps in solving their other issues. According to the ONS [8], 48.5% of people in 2018 said they experienced housing difficulties due to family relationship problems. A charity such as housing first is an easy solution for this one circumstance.

Another simple process is bringing addicted homeless people into rehabilitation centres. Although, just rehab alone could be worse for the individual in question. They go through the process of abstaining from what caused the addiction and, ideally, by the end of this they should have a clean slate that allows them to receive interviews and eventually a job. The flaws with this plan are that once the programme is complete, the homeless person is on their own, they still may not have a house or the money to afford even the cheapest accommodation. This, along with other factors like a criminal record and no other support provided may lead the individual to fall back into their old ways, causing them more distress than before. In some situations, such as the example just given, these simple approaches could turn out worse for the individual. Applying these approaches to every case of homeless then continues the problem.

Homelessness still occurs in the UK today due to a lack of understanding and education in the subject area, and lack of governmental support and charitable unity. This lack of understanding stems from false stereotypes which then create a lack of unified support. A suitable response would be to set up a centre in every city that the homeless can easily access. Each homeless person would be given a tailored response to suit their circumstances and a list of resources. Contained in the list of resources would be a list of suitable accommodation that fits all necessary requirements to live while also being affordable, several places to go and people to call for help – rehabilitation centres, people who help the homeless look for jobs, where to apply for a return ticket. This centre would contain a soup kitchen, a library with computers and access to internet and night accommodation with showers and bathrooms. New clothes could be given to the homeless that have been donated by charitable organisations. All of this using government funding. This would take multi-agency collaboration (two or more organisations joining together to create a more resourceful and supportive way of helping people), although this is not always helpful. These collaborations may result in disagreements about the best way to move forward, and some homeless people may not want or need help from both agencies at once, such as a rehabilitation centre and a soup kitchen when the person doesn’t have any addictions but just needs a hot meal. There are, however, quite a few advantages too. When agencies collaborate, there is a larger variety of help and support and companies that work together can come up with new ideas or improvements to current plans when hearing from one another. It also makes it easier for homeless people to find the support they need. Overall, I would say multi agency collaboration is a useful technique to reduce the number of homeless people.

In conclusion, there is no one simple answer as to why homelessness still occurs in the UK today but there is plenty of evidence to suggest that it is because of inequality and made worse by misconceptions and false stereotypes.

References

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