Why Does Homelessness Still Occur in the UK Today?

Homelessness is the state of having no home, according to oxford dictionary, but you can be qualified as homeless even if you are staying in a permanent shelter. This will be covering What counts as a suitable home, Stereotypical notions of homelessness, discussing key debates around causation, The interacting factors, tackling homelessness and a conclusion answering why homelessness still occurs today.

What Counts as a Suitable Home?

A suitable house usually needs all common areas maintained as well as keeping electrical, plumbing, sanitary, heating, ventilating, air-conditioning systems operating safely. Also using reasonable amounts of water and heat at the right times [O’Connell, Unknown][1]. This also includes a roof with sturdy structuring such as walls and floors.

Stereotypical Notions of Homelessness

Stereotypes are a well heard simplified belief or idea about a certain group of people. There are many stereotypes that sprout from homelessness, although most are negative. Stereotypes are detrimental towards society’s concept of homelessness; most have heard at least one of these before which is why some people would rather not help, as in their mind all they would be doing is ‘fuelling their addiction’. This perception are what majority of people think when they see a homeless person even if it is not factual. Multiple well heard stereotypes exist such as: ‘Every homeless person lives on the street’ [2]. 2688 homeless people go ‘unsheltered’ in a single night as of Autumn 2020, but some people are neither sheltered or unsheltered but end up staying in their cars overnight or double upping at a friend’s house, these situations are considered unhealthy and unsustainable. Since 2010 the rough sleeping figure was increased by 52% and has only been decreased by 37% from 2019 to 2020 [3].

Another common misconception is that ‘Most homeless people are addicts’ [2], however only 17% of people who are homeless suffer from chronic substance use disorder according to the U.S Department of Health. Mental health and substance issues can be related as people who lack treatment may try to ‘self-medicate’ themselves with drugs or alcohol [Ruiz-Grossman,2018]. Most people think this since a lot of homeless people on the streets are usually seen with bottles of some sort leading to the fact that people don’t spare change because they would just think that they would spend it on alcohol or drugs. Sometimes this would affect getting a job too as most employers probably don’t want an alcoholic dragging down their reputation.

A lot of people also say ‘Why don’t homeless people just get a job’ but this may be due to the fact that they either can’t or don’t want one. There has been a real-life case of a 54-year-old man who has been given job and help offers but he has declined them, so there is no reason as to why this couldn’t be the case for others too. 55% percent of homeless families in temporary accommodation in England are working, being over half this makes this stereotype quite targeted as most people already do, trying to or can’t get a job. Even those trying to get a job would have a very hard time doing so, most jobs require cars or reliable devices which the majority of people suffering without a house lack and due to the this they also don’t have an address which most employer applicants need. Since most employers haven’t helped make an effect on the employment rate meaning homelessness keeps occurring due to the lack of income.

Discussing Key Debates around Causation

Causation is the action of causing something, in this case it is the causation of homelessness, but there is a surprising number of reasons that one could end up like this. Some are forced into homelessness, this could be due to poverty, unsuitable housing or maybe when somebody comes out of prison or from the army. Between January and March 2019 about 6000 people became homeless after fleeing domestic abuse [Richardson, 2019][4] this is 1 in 8 of the number of known homeless people. This has been described as going from one ‘Hellhole’ to another.

More than 10% of people coming out of prison end up homeless in the months following their incarceration, but being homeless, or unstably housed can increase risk of reoffending [Mckernan, 2016][5]. Several may believe that in this case homelessness is deserved, which could be the case of maybe a murderer, but those who could have been falsely accused would just be losing their house.” This is like saying overweight people should be forced to buy a second seat on airplanes because they view obesity as a choice and a lack of self-control. Others argue obesity can be a medical condition beyond the victim's control, therefore the seat should be free” [Jones, 2007]. However, in this case the ex-convicts don’t get a choice.

Unsuitable housing is usually the terms given to a household that is maybe overcrowded or poor in quality and not considered ‘adequate’. It is also said that if you have trouble paying rent then that is considered unstable. But the neighbourhood also influences whether the house is considered sufficient, for example a high crime rate or a lack of jobs would not be nice to live near especially if raising a child. Pair any of these together and the government could consider you homeless. This isn’t always just the victim being lazy as you can have no control over the improvements of your home or if any health issues appear you are usually forced to move but this only becomes a problem if the person cannot afford to rent or buy a house. There is those who would do nothing to try and make their home habitable again due to multiple possible reasons like lack of money and possibly personal issues too. Homelessness percentages keep getting negatively affected because of few peoples lack of care for themselves. As for post-prison homelessness the U.K crime rates have increased by 31.46% from 2014-2018 making this form of home loss occur more today [6].

Interacting Factors

Housing prices are a lot harsher when working at minimum wage or when living off benefits, this being because of the already high and increasing house prices crossing over with buyers who make little to no money. Interacting is to act in such a way as to influence each other. The minimum wage as of April 2021 in the U.K is £8.91 for those who are 23 and over [GOV.UK, 2021][7], this with the average age people move out is 28 [No Author, 2021], they would not end up making enough money to be able to buy a house as well as the basic needs a person requires for living along with making a house ‘suitable’.

This situation becomes even tougher if you were working at minimum wage with a child where you have another person to raise and feed. In fact, of all the homeless men, 7% live with at least one child, 41% of which are under the age of 18 [8].

As previously mentioned, mental health issues can escalate addictions as they are not getting the right treatment or help, addictions can actually cause some of these issues. Alcohol abuse can make people experience symptoms of depression, anxiety, psychosis, and antisocial behaviour usually as a result of the intoxication but could be because of withdrawals [Shivani, Date Unknown]. Loneliness can also cause issues, it leads to higher risks of high blood pressure, heart disease, Alzheimer’s disease, anxiety, depression and sometimes death [9]. As of 2015 there was 200,000 homeless people living alone on the streets, meaning that any of these things or more could have been making them suffer even more than just living on the streets. An estimated 20-25% of the homeless are mentally ill but others estimate that almost one third of the people suffering through homelessness have some sort of mental illness.

Tackling Homelessness

Many places all over the world have set up temporary accommodation, more commonly known as homeless shelters. These are usually rooms with bunk beds and maybe a small kitchen, they will provide food, water and warmth, however, most of the time they will only let you stay the night. There are few hotels that hold rooms for homeless people, often being free. There is a hotel in Shrewsbury that goes by the name of ‘Prince Rupert hotel’ and in early 2020 opened its doors, once again, to rough sleepers.

Soup kitchens – which also go by the names meal centre or food kitchen - are helping the homeless too because they will serve everyone who turns up, their prime purpose is to give a nutritious meal to anyone, primarily those in poverty. Due to this Westminster Council has tried to sanction soup kitchens. In 2007, the council proposed a bill to make it illegal to serve the homeless free food therefore closing all soup kitchens in central London, this is an example of why homelessness still regularly occurs today.

Countless solutions have been proposed by the community, one of those being Rapid Re-Housing. This solution provides a short-term rental service, with goals in mind to increase self-sufficiency and keep people housed. Offered no matter of previous criminal records or unemployment while giving people their basic needs. Claimed to be a primary solution to homelessness and has been effective at keeping people in permanent housing and in a safe place. The problem with this is the absence of unlimited housing, Rapid Re-housing won’t solve homelessness because of the space issues and most homeless people who have been on the streets for up to a couple years wouldn’t be very open to the idea of sharing a house – the thing that has been lacked for a margin of their lives [10].

Charities are a prime money raising technique and there are many to help homeless people too. A charity is considered an organisation that is established for charitable purposes only, therefore charity fraud in the U.K is taken very seriously by courts and these fake charities will simply steal your money by taking advantage of your generosity. In London alone there are 22 charities all working to help homelessness even by just a little bit, St Mungo’s, Glass Door and various other charities across England aid in protecting rough sleepers through the government’s Everyone In scheme during the first national lockdown, when people were struggling even more with a higher unemployment rate [Lobb, Geraghty, 2020][11].

Another solution that the public believe would end homelessness in the U.K is to build 100,500 new social homes every year for 15 years to help those at risk of losing homes and those with low income. This solution seems effective although expensive.

Finland has eliminated homelessness by applying the ‘Housing First’ scheme, with only 4,886 people on the streets as of 2020, and is currently the only European country with a decline of homeless people. This scheme is where you give a homeless person a house, ignoring any preconditions, with no requirement to solve your issues and then when they own the house/flat they can seek the help they need themselves [12].

Conclusion

Overall, there is no single reason as to why homelessness still occurs today, but once you add up the minor reasons it becomes clear as a problem. Looking back, you can infer that stereotypes negatively effect most people’s viewpoints, making it harder to convince them to help homeless people. This links in with charity as well, some may believe what they are donating too could be fake or perhaps that they don’t think it’s worth the money that they work so hard to earn.

Finland is living homeless free because they took the smart approach, if the U.K were to copy Finland’s techniques then homelessness would be declining today.

If the council is trying to shut down homelessness help services, then they are clearly not trying to invest in a change to assist the rough sleepers or the domestic violence victims, instead they just let the stereotypes infect the public as an oppose to telling them to make a difference.

[1] - <https://www.nolo.com/legal-encyclopedia/free-books/renters-rights-book/chapter7-2.html>

[2] - <https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/homeless-stereotypes-myths-housing-crisis_n_5c05a9a7e4b0cd916faefb18?ri18n=true>

[3] - <https://www.homeless.org.uk/facts/homelessness-in-numbers/rough-sleeping/rough-sleeping-our-analysis>

[4] - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-49661575>

[5] - <https://www.voa.org/homelessness-and-prisoner-reentry>

[6] - <https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/GBR/united-kingdom/crime-rate-statistics>

[7] - <https://www.gov.uk/national-minimum-wage-rates>

[8]- <https://www.greendoors.org/facts/family-homelessness.php#:~:text=Among%20all%20homeless%20men%2C%2041,least%20one%20of%20their%20children>

[9] - <https://www.nia.nih.gov/news/social-isolation-loneliness-older-people-pose-health-risks#:~:text=Research%20has%20linked%20social%20isolation,Alzheimer's%20disease%2C%20and%20even%20death>.

[10]- <https://endhomelessness.org/ending-homelessness/solutions/rapid-re-housing/>

[11] - <https://www.bigissue.com/latest/which-charities-are-helping-fight-homelessness-in-the-uk/>

[12]- <https://housingfirsteurope.eu/countries/finland/>