Why does homelessness still occur in the UK today?

There are many factors that contribute to homelessness still occurring in the UK today, including social, economic, and individual problems, stereotypical views of those affected by homelessness, the way the issue is dealt with – both on a large a smaller scale – and multi-agency collaboration.

Definitions of homelessness vary worldwide, with many believing it should only be labelled as such in the direst of situations – like being on the streets with nowhere to go at all. However, that is not the case. In the UK, you can be classed as homeless even with a roof over your head. This includes staying with friends or family (couch surfing), staying in a hostel, night shelter or bed and breakfast, squatting or living somewhere where your mental/physical health is at risk (living in a place of domestic abuse or housing without running water and electricity).

There are four main categories of which homelessness is sorted; chronic homelessness is defined as being homeless for over a year – people who struggle with this usually have an issue preventing them from finding somewhere to stay, such as a mental illness or physical disability. Episodic homelessness is defined as an individual who has experienced homelessness at least three times within a year (which will become chronic after four episodes) and is often linked to young people battling drug addiction. Transitional homelessness is a more common form found when a person goes through a sudden and catastrophic event – such as losing a job – and is homeless while looking for a new job. Hidden homelessness is often left unreported, and individuals placed under this category are those who are couch-surfing with no permanent housing.(1)

These can be caused by a great deal of different factors, which can vary from domestic abuse to drug misuse. In the report published by Housing Rights (9 April 2019), it is stated that the causes of homelessness and rough sleeping can be divided into two groupings: structural factors – societal and economic problems affecting the surroundings - and individual factors – personal circumstances, such as relationship breakdown (domestic/ physical abuse), addiction, traumatic events and mental and/or physical health issues. These causes and their according categories are the main reasons homelessness still occurs in the UK (as well as countless countries worldwide).

Structural factors include unaffordable housing (e.g., costly rent, higher mortgage rates and regulations, especially for first time buyers); lack of employment/ well-paying jobs; and reduced welfare provisions. These are usually the underlying causes to vagrancy and why it occurs, as people affected by individual factors are more susceptible to struggle with these problems. (2)

Contrary to the widely believed stereotype, not all homeless people have individual factors that led to them becoming homeless. Until the 1960s, there was a popular notion that it was all down to the person's own doing, and obscured systematic and structural problems that contribute to the social problems mentioned. This stereotype of ‘mad or bad’ (mentally ill or a criminal; struggling with addictions) limits peoples’ understanding of the causes of homelessness, which limits the help given to those who need it as they are viewed as undeserving. This contributed to the happening of vagrancy in the UK in the past – and still does, as the stereotypes are still broadly maintained presently – and caused many to believe that this was a problem that began and ended on an individual basis. (3)

From the 1960s onwards, however, the concept of individualism diminished; there was a shift of focus, and academics and practitioners started debating whether or not homelessness was caused as a consequence of personal deficiency or structural injustice. This made support more available as more attention was brought to systematic issues, and vast amounts of financial and human resources have been put towards the cause. A few solutions that have been found to help that Peter Mackie, Sarah Johnsen, and Jenny Wood outlined in ‘Ending Street Homelessness, What Works and Why We Don’t Do It’ (2019) (4), include housing-led solutions and person-centered solutions with help catered specifically for an individual and action taken before homelessness occurs.

Housing-led solutions are interventions where permanent housing is provided without preconditions (before substance abuse or mental illness treatment). This has been found to be more beneficial than the staircase method – a method where housing was only offered to the homeless person after they completed a series of steps, which often included treatment and aimed for sobriety -, as individuals who have found themselves addicted to drugs find it more desirable. However, it is expensive and therefore limited, and people may argue that this method is unfair and unreliable as people given housing may not fulfil their side of the agreement and instead continue to misuse drugs. This is mostly untrue – as the majority of agencies set up targets and offer person-centered support as long as it is needed. Another reason why this method is not widely put into action is due to the lack of available and/or settled housing suitable. People may also refer to the ‘mad or bad’ stereotype again and suggest that those entrenched in the rough sleeping lifestyle who require assistance escaping it are somewhat unworthy, suggesting the available homes should go towards others who are close to becoming homeless to fix the problem before it starts.

Person-centered solutions are when individuals are allocated a budget – usually of about £2,000 - £3,000 – and allows them to spend it on a wide, and monitored, variety of items that help make living conditions more humane and hygienic. A disadvantage and argument against this strategy would be that although it is a cheaper alternative to housing-led solutions, it still does not make for a very inexpensive substitute. This is outweighed by the advantage of how effective it has found to be compared to the staircase method – especially as it has proved itself to encourage rough sleepers into privately owned temporary accommodation; like caravans that can be bought; or employment that will allow a better quality of life. This could lower the occurrence of homelessness in the UK, but it can only be put into action with people who are rough sleepers – which is a small minority of homelessness as a whole. This means that on top of having to select few people due to possible lack of funding, the group helped hardly contributes to solving the issue as a whole.

As direct and individual help is not always available due to lack of funding or resources, it is also important for smaller interventions to be put in place. This includes a vast number of different strategies, such as homeless hostels and Civil Injunctions. Although these are widely viewed as positive, with only advantages to them, they actually may hinder progress in stopping homelessness. The aforementioned two are not the only ways in which smaller scale interventions are carried out, nevertheless they will be the ones focused on.

While homeless hostels do provide a place of temporary housing for many people, they may stunt progress as it could cause individuals to become too dependent on the conditions – only to be discarded back into the rough sleeping lifestyle. This may trigger some to have distrust in the system, and possibly lead to them disregarding and rejecting help later on.

Civil injunctions are an order issued by a court demanding the withdrawal of ‘nuisance behaviour’, and they allow the police to interfere with rough sleeping and relocate those who do it. This further contributes to the ‘bad’ stereotype and criminalises homelessness and could actually cause legal issues if the person being obtained refuses to comply or even get violent. If they were to serve time in prison it could actually worsen the problems they were facing beforehand. Released offenders are more likely to end up homeless. This is highlighted in the Crisis UK’s ‘prison leavers’ report (5), where 41% of the rough sleeping individuals they spoke to had served a sentence in the past.

As homelessness can be caused by multiple problems at once, it is essential for companies to work together in order to provide required support. This is where multi-agency collaboration is useful. It allows for multiple agencies to come together in order to tackle an issue together. However, this can lead to issues where there are disagreements in how to handle certain prospects of a problem faced, or even where companies compete over helping an individual for the funding money. It can also meet with disaster if companies pull out due to lack of resources, leaving the person they were helping back on the streets and – again – with a sense of distrust for the system and those who attempt to help them. There are also many advantages to this sort of intervention, such as if the parties involved work together efficiently it will make for a suitable and well-organised solution to tackling homelessness.

In conclusion, homelessness occurs due to a wide variety of reasons. When looked into deeper it reveals itself to be a very complex problem, one that cannot be solved in one easy way. It contains four main categories – of which were covered in this essay – that in turn are caused by a number of different structural and individual factors. It is not an occurrence purely by just bad luck or bad choices alone, and the belief of such (e.g., the ‘mad or bad’ stereotype) can be damaging to the efforts of stopping the occurrence of homelessness. On top of this, even the current solutions can be detrimental. This may cause homelessness to continue to occur as it creates a sense of distrust towards those trying to help them, or for them to turn down help in disconcert of possibly having to undergo treatments to obtain sobriety. As individual interventions are not available to everyone affected by vagrancy, it is important to have smaller, inexpensive interventions in place. This can be significantly detrimental to the ways individuals affected by this large-scale problem are viewed – especially as things like civil injunctions criminalise those it is put into action against and harden the stereotypical viewpoint of all homeless people being mad or bad. Multi-agency collaboration is a good way to deal with multiple issues at once, as it allows for multiple companies to contribute towards efforts of helping diminish homelessness. On another hand, it can easily go wrong if companies are unable to work in a team or do not have the resources available to continue – which could cause them to pull out of their sides of the deal. This (again) will integrate a sense of distrust towards assistance offered, causing many to turn down offers that could get them away from rough sleeping. It is hard to say what exactly could solve homelessness, or even just limit the scale of which it occurs yearly. That in itself contributes to its occurrence, and in order to come up with suitable ideas you have got to look at the problem in its entirety.

References:

1. https://joinpdx.org/the-many-forms-of-homelessness/
2. https://www.housingrights.org.uk/news/research/causes-homelessness-rough-sleeping
3. https://www.crisis.org.uk/ending-homelessness/the-plan-to-end-homelessness-full-version/background/chapter-4-public-attitudes-and-homelessness/
4. https://www.usf.edu/cbcs/mhlp/tac/documents/supportive-housing/ending-street-homelessness.pdf (pages 3-7)
5. https://www.crisis.org.uk/ending-homelessness/law-and-rights/prison-leavers/