

WHO REALLY CARES? EMPATHY TOWARD THOSE WHO ARE HOMELESS

by

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DEDICATION

This is dedicated with the intent to bring light to those who are currently struggling, have struggled, and will struggle with homelessness.

I also dedicate this to Big Daddy, Emma, Hannah Grandma, Gigi, and Danny.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I hope life treats you well and sends people along the way to remind you that you matter and are still a wonderful gift that is meant to contribute to life. The light is at the end of the tunnel, and you will see goodness in the land of the living. I would also like to dedicate this book to those who I have lost along the way, I know they pushed me to this finish line.

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ABSTRACT

In the three years I have been at Texas State University, I have noticed an increase in the number of homeless people. I have watched other Texas State students walk by these individuals, seeming not even to notice them or their needs. There are many problems that people who are homeless face; violence, food insecurity, and mental illness/substance abuse are just three of the issues that plague the homeless community. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent job losses that followed, many young people have found themselves without a stable living situation and are classified as homeless. I compiled existing research, including interviews on those who are homeless—including some Texas State students—as well as those who work with the homeless population, like social workers, journalists, doctors, and YouTubers. My hope is all of us who care about those who are without homes can work together to find a solution to end homelessness.

INTRODUCTION

Through the utilization of previous research including but not limited to academic journals, global and national statistics on people who are homeless, philanthropic organizations who help those who are homeless, a contemporary source of a YouTube creator who conducts interviews with people who are homeless, as well as my own experience of volunteering with people who are homeless, I have been able to answer the questions which probed my mind for this research.

The first time I encountered a person who was homeless I was about eight years old, and I always wondered why I saw people on the streets. Seeing people who were homeless and without adequate resources made me develop a desire to help people. Growing up in Texas, Houston to be exact, I lived in the inner city and during the holidays I would notice an influx of people who were homeless, whether they were sleeping under the bridges of the highway, standing in front buildings begging for food, or even waiting at the traffic lights attempting to clean car windows. After the holidays ended, I saw fewer people on the street because they would have moved on or unfortunately passed away because of the weather. Seeing a person who was homeless in any capacity began to prick my heart. I would save my allowance to give holiday items to local homeless shelters; I currently volunteer at homeless shelters, and I have always loved to hear their stories. It

is so important to understand why people are the way they are, which is why I majored in Anthropology, but it is more so the growth one receives from hearing from real people sharing in their truth. Some things that everything has not always been wonderful.

I understand and value individuals who are the same and different from me. Everyone matters and deserves to live without concern about having food, shelter, and a safe environment. I feel it so important to understand the reason people are where they are in life. I know that not every outcome in life is a direct result of one's actions. People end up homeless because of many factors which will be discussed later. For my research, I wanted to focus on the following questions: what does it mean to be homeless? Does homelessness only affect adults? How common is homelessness and what groups does it impact the most? Who are the "helpers" when one finds themselves in a state of homelessness? What are some desires from a person who is homeless and what are some ways that they could feel more support from their community? How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted those who are homelessness?

To continue, we each have our stories to tell but I wanted to focus on people who are homeless and those who work with those who are homeless. I will also highlight the issues that people who are homeless struggle with and shine light on how the COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately affected people who are homeless. I will be sharing stories, interviews, data, and perspectives on people who are homeless through the outlets of academic journals, social workers, doctors, and even a YouTuber who uses their platform to uplift and enlighten the world of those who are struggling with homelessness. Before I share my findings, I want to note the importance of saying 'people who are

homeless' versus 'homeless people;' it is quite simple, individuals who are homeless are people, we want to humanize them.

TERMS FOR INDIVIDUALS WHO ARE HOMELESS

A person who is homeless is having an experience of being homeless but, that is not all they are. It is important to humanize any individual struggling with homelessness. Avoid cliches. It is important to always put the person first. There is an article titled, "Why We Don't Use the Terms 'the Homeless' or 'Homeless People,'" by Father Joe's Villages, a non-profit in San Diego dedicated to assisting those who are homeless in their community. The article discusses why it matters to use affirming terms such as "woman who is homeless" versus "homeless woman" or "individuals living on the street" instead of "bums/street people" (Father Joe's Villages 2). The non-profit continues with adding "It is about being "empathetically correct": humanizing people who are often forgotten, objectified, and stigmatized by society" (Father Joe's Villages 3). We must educate ourselves so that if there is ever a time where an individual who is homeless is needing an advocate, they are certain that though they may not be in that space, they are recognized in that space with respect.

PROBLEM

There has been much research to try and eradicate homelessness in America. There are many factors that contribute to an individual struggling with homelessness. According to Medline Plus in their section on "Homeless Health Concerns" they list out a plethora of reasons for homelessness. The reasons listed are due to "poverty, unemployment,

unaffordable housing, mental and substance abuse disorders, trauma and violence, justice-system involvement, sudden serious illness, divorce, death of a parent or partner, and disabilities” (HHC 2021). Author Joy Moses writes in an article titled, “COVID-19 and the State of Homelessness” which discusses the “[substantial] number of people experiencing homelessness and under-resourced” facilities to assist in mending the gap of people who are homeless (Moses 1). Moses continues noting the high impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the economy and overall health of the nation stating that there could be a “growing population [of people who are homeless] over the course of a year” (Moses 2). The state of people who are homeless already increases each day, but the harsh reality is, “17 out of every 10,000 people in America” experienced homelessness in 2019 and that number continues to increase (Moses 3). When I think of my campus, there are approximately 30,000 or so students. That means, according to the calculation cited above, approximately 50 students could be homeless here. The population of people in America is one of the highest in the world and therefore results in a higher amount of people who are homeless.

As it was previously mentioned, the population of individuals who are struggling with homelessness increases each day. Homelessness is an issue locally, nationally, and even globally. Homelessness needs to be discussed more in order to combat the stereotypes and shift the conversation of what means to be categorized as homeless. There are general things that an individual needs to survive in the best state. Of course, it is unrealistic to believe that everyone will live their lives thriving in the best way possible. However, homelessness has an issue of discriminating against human beings. One does not get to choose the day they will be homeless. Individuals who are experiencing

homelessness are humans in need of compassion. On a smaller scale, there are still many groups who make up the population of people who are homeless. Now we will discuss most of those groups.

CHILDREN WHO ARE HOMELESS

There are some people in the world who see innocence in children and the importance of having a safe and stable childhood. Unfortunately, many children are having to grow up faster than they should because their community and support systems have failed them. In an article by Pam Fessler, “[the] Growth of Homelessness During 2020 Was ‘Devastating’ Even Before the Pandemic,” they discuss the hard-core numbers of people who are homeless or may struggle with homelessness. Fessler shares that “in January 2020, there were more than 580,000 [people] who were homeless” and that was documented at the top of the year 2020 (Fessler 2). When one puts into the perspective that from 2016-2020, approximately four hundred people were impacted by homelessness each day during those four years.

Sometimes it is hard to grasp the severity of how many people struggle with homelessness. It is even harder to imagine how homelessness impacts community circles across the globe. However, it is important to note that homelessness impact adult individuals but also children and youth.

According to Fessler over “106,000 children were homeless during the once-a-year count... [and about] 11,000 were living outside” (Fessler 2). This means that those 11,000 or so children were not living in a shelter or group home. I always reflect to being

in elementary school and seeing a friend in my class named Linda. Her clothes were always too small, and she only wore sandals, even in the colder months. Even when her feet were hanging off the front of her shoes, she wore her sandals. No matter if the weather was warm, cold, rainy, or cloudy Linda wore those sandals. I remember someone calling her out at recess saying, “Why do you wear baby clothes? None of your stuff fits and you always wear the same pair of shoes. For Christmas that is what you should ask for, a new pair of shoes!” I stood in disbelief as my friend Linda shuttered in silence and made no remark as some of the kids around her laughed.

It did not matter how many correct answers Linda got on her test, how kind of a friend she was to her peers, she was seen solely by her appearance. She was a young girl with limited options. I wish I knew what I know now, and I could have supported my friend Linda in a better way. Recently, my little sister told me about a friend of hers who brings a trash bag to school filled with her clothes and shoes. My sister shared how she feels bad because the girl always has a stench on her clothing and her hair is never done. I told her about my friend Linda and reminded her to show her friend at school extra compassion. We never know what could be going on with a person but as I grew and learned, children can too be homeless.

Children who are homeless are also extremely impacted by the homeless programs. The National Alliance on the “State of Homelessness: 2021 Edition” discusses how “children are often a priority for homeless services systems. However, young people not living with their families do not enjoy the same access to services— [50%] of unaccompanied homeless youth are unsheltered” (“State of Homelessness: 2021 Edition - National

Alliance to ...” 2021). The fact that half of the children who are experiencing homelessness are unhoused and, on the street, horrific to imagine. Just as it may be difficult to imagine, it is even more unfortunate to live that experience.

STUDENTS WHO ARE HOMELESS

To continue the topic of homeless youth, there are students on my campus at Texas State University who are homeless. I was made aware of students who are homeless when attending a session during my training as a Resident Assistant. I had no clue prior to my job that there were students who slept in their cars and were even in some of my classes. The generalization that the homeless population is solely comprised of drug-addicts and old people who wasted their lives away from bad decisions is untrue. This false understanding of what it means to be homeless plays on the stigmatism that many college students could not be homeless because of campus housing. In an article by Laura Figi titled, “HOME Center provides firsthand aid for homeless in San Marcos” Figi shares a story of a homeless student at Texas State University; an individual named Hannah Durrance held a sign in the quad saying, “I’m a single mother. I work 62 hours per week. I’m a full-time college student. I have a 3.2 GPA and I am homeless;” she then states that she was ignored, abandoned, and even had the police called on her (Fig 1).

It is unfortunate that as vulnerable as Durrance could be, she shared her sad truth, and she was ignored and told “[she] could not receive any donations,” and that is what stuck with her (Fig 1). She was treated with a lack of concern and dignity by her community, peers, and university.

The inclusion of this story is to bring to light the harsh reality for some students. Just because someone can afford to pay their car note and/or buy food for themselves does not mean they are not struggling with homelessness.

MINORITIES WHO ARE HOMELESS

Additionally, it is extremely difficult to read the statistics but to live as a statistic I can only imagine to be even more disheartening. As I have researched through countless articles and physically viewed homeless shelters. I have seen a high percentage of African American and Latinx populations within spaces for people who are homeless. Fessler discusses the disproportionate effect that homelessness has on African American people; the author states “39% of the total [of people who are homeless are also black,] 23% of those who were homeless last year identified as Hispanic” (Fessler 2). It is imperative to note that one of main reasons that African Americans are such a high percentage of the people who are homeless in America is in part due to institutionalized racism, a lack of financial literacy, as well as equitable accessibility to resources. To foster an improvement of social stature within minority communities, tough conversations must be had. There need to be more young minorities learning about financial literacy so that they may develop healthy financial habits. Equally important in these conversations should be a focus on equal pay, higher minimum wage, and better benefits.

The National Alliance to End Homelessness, created a pamphlet of data titled, “How the Pandemic Changes Things for the Homelessness Sector, COVID-19: THEN AND NOW.” The pamphlet states pre-pandemic “racial inequality has caused disproportionate

homelessness among minority groups” and post-pandemic: “systematic inequalities could exacerbate existing racial disparities” (COVID-19 THEN AND NOW 1). There is a direct correlation between institutionalized racism in America and homelessness within minorities. The way that homelessness impacts Black and Latinx communities says a lot about the foundational values and freedoms in America. It is some-what a separate conversation to have regarding racial inequality issues in America, but still truly relevant to this discussion. In a recent publication by The National Alliance on the “State of Homelessness: 2021 Edition” they discuss populations that are most at-risk of struggling with homelessness. The organization states that minority groups are more likely to experience “higher unemployment rates, lower incomes, less access to healthcare, and a higher incarceration rate [which are high factors that lead to] homelessness among people of color” (State of Homelessness: 2021 Edition 2). A disproportionate number of minorities lacking disposable income based off the above listed factors. So, in the case a minority individual ends up homeless, there are many things to hold accountable for that result.

TRUE STORY: AMANDA ON SKID ROW

Furthermore, there is a high percentage of people experiencing homelessness in California, skid row to be exact, and they are suffering. There are so many stories to be told and memories that were made on the streets of California. The city of dreams is the city of nightmares for many people experiencing homelessness. Skid Row can be described as one of the most dangerous places to live in California. Those who can afford to have a tent do, while others sleep in whatever they can find. There are people

who feel the only way to cope with their difficulties caused by homelessness is with narcotics.

There are many names and faces that I will never meet to hear their stories, but there was one who took me by surprise. There is a YouTube channel titled, “Soft White Underbelly” which “interviews and [shares] portraits of the human condition by photographer, Mark Laita” (Laita 2016). Since the start of this channel, Mark Laita has been conducting many interviews of residents on skid row. Laita has helped share the stories of prostitutes, drug addicts, pimps, strippers, sexual abuse survivors, incest survivors, and people who are homeless. Soft White Underbelly has allowed for the understanding of individuals in some of the lowest times of their lives to be seen.

There are two terms that are incredibly important when discussing individuals are homeless. The two concepts are visibility and invisibility. It matters that people are not only seen and heard but also feel seen and heard. Mark Laita provides a space of safety and honesty for people who are often rejected and ignored by their families and communities to be seen. The individual who I will be focusing on today goes by the name of Amanda. Over the course of 16 months, Mark Laita has shared Amanda with the world. Her story on being homeless, drug addicted, seeking recovery, and then passing away is the depth of why I feel the topic of empathizing toward individuals who are homeless to be so significant. Amber’s life mattered even though she was not a brilliant doctor or a teacher in education, but she was a teacher of life. Her life served as a living example of how life can be when individuals stop caring for others.

Now Amanda did not lack a support system, over a series of twelve videos, five of the videos were solely spoken by her father and an activist dedicated to helping Amanda. However, she was struggling so hard that it did not matter who reached out. People can only receive help when they want. Through the entire documented timeline of Amanda, I will only be utilizing the interviews in which Amanda shares her own story.

Amanda begins telling her story in December of 2019. She shares of growing up with her grandparents due to her father being unable to care for her. She shares of attending college. As Amanda and Laita continue, the conversation Amanda shares, “I moved in with my boyfriend it was a tricky situation. I did some things that I regret, it wasn't really a good situation. So, we broke up and I moved out here on Skid Row” (Laita 2019).

Amanda makes it clear that her break up and unstable homelife has caused her to be out on the streets of Skid Row fending for herself. As Laita asks Amanda “how long have you been out here [on the streets]?” Amanda replies “two years” (Laita 2019). She has been stuck in a cycle of prostitution and drug abuse. After sharing jobs of working at places like PetSmart, she shares with Laita her reason for prostituting stating that it “supports all [the] bills and drug habits” (Laita 2019). As a prostitute there is much danger in her line of work, Amanda even states how she feels as if she is “dodging murder” each day (Laita). She is in a state of fear because of her experience as a person who is homeless, and the measures she goes to of selling her body to support herself and her addictions.

To uncover more layers of Amanda, in the second interview in March of 2020, Amanda shows up with a black eye and appears much slimmer in appearance than initially.

Amanda states the reason she has a black eye is because on a “date,” which is code for

when one is solicited for prostitution, she “asked him to get [more crack and he beat her up]” (Laita 2020). She also shares that she grew up with an ‘Aunt and Uncle because [her dad was] a molester” (Laita 2020). The conversation continues as Mark Laita realizes that he has spoken with her before. He asks Amanda, “did I already talk to you...You look vastly different than before” to which she replies, “no” (Laita 2020). Amanda then shares about her mother. She says, “My mom died in a fire [but I grew up telling people lies about her just to seem normal]” and she also identifies her age to be “twenty-three” versus “twenty-four” (Laita 2020). It is apparent that the drugs Amanda is on has her speaking out of term and frankly unable to articulate clear thoughts to make sense.

Continuing, Amanda appears in the next video of April 2020 with the same weight build as the last video, but her teeth are missing from the entire top row. She also has difficulty following along in this video as she constantly utters different scenarios in her head as to why her voice hoarse. She blames her voice being gone because she “goes so hard” and “tells the truth so much” and this is a part of a governmental mission to silence her (Laita 2020). There seems to be a lack of understanding as well as sense of reality for her. She has allowed external things to contribute to her understanding of herself. Continuing, the next video is uploaded June 23, 2020, is the next video of Amanda. She states, “I know I should be murdered because I am not fitting in” (Laita 2020). To hear those words really weight heavy of how many other people feel that way in life. She is so young and has so much to offer to the world, but her sense of self and purpose are altered by her poor decisions. However, her poor decisions were a tough choice given her circumstances of being an individual suffering from homelessness. So, with options on Skid Row being so limited, does one really have an easy choice?

As the videos of Amanda progress, the next one is uploaded August of 202. She ends up in a mental hospital and it was shared that she has a case of schizophrenia which attributes to the reason she makes up so many stories. Similarly, to other people who are homeless, mental health issues are typical. In this video, Amanda has not been on drugs and Laita notices that Amanda, “seem[s] more clearheaded than [I have] ever seen you” (Laita 2020). Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, there are more people than ever who are dealing with homelessness. There are more people who could be potentially struggling like Amanda. There is a quick way to make money on the streets and people need money to take care of themselves. The pandemic caused a pause on a lot of things, but life kept happening. Life keeps happening regardless of an individual's circumstances which is why we must care more about those who are homeless.

Concluding the discussion of Amanda, the next two videos were filmed a few months apart and Amanda was said to have had “seven months” of sobriety before she passed away (Laita 2021). She was remembered as being “homeless too long” as stated by an author of article titled, “RIP AMANDA: SOFT WHITE UNDERBELLY: AMANDA HAS PASSED AWAY” (Gupta 1). Amanda’s life will be remembered and hopefully people like her were able to see themselves and clean themselves up or reach out from their community and receive help from their community sooner. It is important that when we show up for others, we can build a community catered to the love of all.

ERADICATING HOMELESSNESS

Unfortunately, Amanda is a tragic example of how homelessness can lead to many factors that contribute to the downfall of intelligent people. Homelessness impacts

everyone differently. As we discussed the many subfields within the culture of homelessness, we must remember to be compassionate. There is more than one way for a person to become homeless. Not everyone who is homeless struggles with addiction. There are so many facets that play into a human being and regardless of their circumstances, being homeless should not define them. Not only should social workers, and homeless shelter directors continue to help those who are homeless, but everyone should take a part in assisting those who are homelessness. This means government officials, community activists, and every other “helper” to assist in the eradication of homelessness. If there is a need somewhere, and one can assist in alleviating that burden for another, then one should. Everyone is important. Support in any way can go a long way. So, the next time you see a person struggling with homelessness, I hope you do not ignore their struggle. Because if no one cared for you, where would you be?

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