

YOUTH HOMELESSNESS IN THE UNITED STATES

Samar Al-Robyai

Sr .Naseera

1/26/2015

Senior Project

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A life Without Anything

Exploitation, alienation, poverty, disempowerment, fragmenting and debilitating labor, production for the profit of a few — much less harsh homelessness, starvation, and degradation — are not like gravity. They arise from institutional relations established by human beings. New institutions, also established by human beings, can generate other vastly superior outcomes. Defining and working to attain those new institutions ought to be our economic agenda. (Albert, 2010, Empower Quotes, para.1)

Youth homelessness has become a significant issue that is rampant across the U.S. It has stolen and ruined the lives of many American youths who will no longer exist if they are not given the proper care. Approximately more than 1.6 million children in the U.S. experience homelessness, meaning that one in 45 children are homeless each year (Bassuk, Murphy, Coupe, Kenney &, Beach, 2010, p.9). Aside from the U.S., Michigan itself has been ranked the nation's fourth highest increase just in the past decade (Shellenbarger, 2014). Homelessness comes with a price: not only are they on their own facing this world alone, but they begin to develop psychological and emotional turmoil that have a significant impact on their lives, leading them to undesirable paths. This is shocking, yet an eye opener to how and what this world has become. If we were to follow the Prophet's (PBUH) teachings that are mentioned in various ahadith and clear our hearts and minds from all the false statements, we could all work together to fix what we ruined and go

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back to what we had established in the first place. We must establish justice and equality for all so that our people and youth do not suffer because of our selfishness and blindness. Therefore, the United States as a society must ensure that today's youth are provided basic rights – such as education, healthcare, food, water, and shelter – to secure the future of our generation and to change the broken paths into concrete futures.

What Constitutes Youth Homelessness?

What constitutes youth homelessness? The first answer that might come to one's mind is a teenager who lives on the streets and has no home. However, homelessness does not necessarily mean you are living on the streets. It has more than one definition and is characterized by extreme poverty and lack of stable housing. According to the National Coalition for the Homeless (NCH, 2007), homeless youth are abandoned youth who in particular are under the age of eighteen and do not have a parent, guardian, or institutional residence (p. 1).

The amount of homeless youth anticipated by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention in the US Department of Justice is approximately 1,682,900 homeless and runaway youth (NCH, 2007). This significant number is evenly divided amongst males and females, and the greater parts of them are between the ages of 15 and 17 (Molino, 2007, as cited in NCH, 2007).

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The National Health Care for the Homeless Council (HCH, n.d.) states that the definition of homelessness varies according to the different departments of the U.S. government.

According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), there are many circumstances that constitute youth homelessness, which can be found in the Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing Act of 2009 (as cited by HCH, n.d.), some of which are not having a regular and stable place to stay during the night and an individual who has a crucial sleeping habitation which is a public or private place that has not been intended for human beings to sleep and live in, such as: a car, park, neglected building, bus or train station, airport, or camping ground. Someone living in a motel, hotel, congregate shelter or a transitional housing, which is only a temporary living arrangement, is also considered homeless. Also according to HUD, being a homeless youth can mean belonging to a family that will soon lose or will be evicted from their home and will no longer have a place where they can rely on to sleep in every night but rather they will have to settle for temporarily living in neglected buildings and places that are not in any way intended to be a living space for any human, such as the streets (as cited in HCH, n.d.).

A broader definition of homelessness found in the Public Health Service Act (as cited in HCH, n.d.) is used by health centers funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS): homeless youth are people who have experienced a long-term period without

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living in permanent housing and jumping from one temporarily place to the next. This has been the case for many of the homeless youth. In addition, if a person is “doubled up,” which, as defined by the HRSA/Bureau of Primary Health Care (as cited in HCH, n.d.), refers to a condition where individuals are incapable of sustaining their housing situation and are forced to stay with multiple friends and extended family members, then they are also considered homeless by the HHS (*NATIONAL HEALTH CARES FOR THE HOMELESS COUNCIL*, 2009).

Homelessness has been defined in many ways, many of which are out of one’s will and control, which means that most of all the homeless people out there are not to be blamed. They need to be provided with help, whether their homelessness is caused by personal, structural, economic, or social factors. Any situation that has been identified as a cause to being homeless plays a major and significant role as to how these individuals live on a daily basis. Whether it be a lack of health care, food, water, education, and/or shelter, homeless youth are being denied basic human rights to an adequate standard of living, which in the long run will affect them and the U.S. as a whole and a society.

Personal Causes

The causes of homelessness are intricate and numerous. According to Shelter (2014), the housing and homelessness charity, homelessness is the outcome of a number of economic and social factors that impact an individual or family at a personal, economic, structural, and social

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level. Individual factors, as well as family and institutional backgrounds, constitute many of the personal causes of homelessness. Many of the individual factors include lack of education and social support, debts, and poor physical and mental health. Another factor is the family's background. Many homeless youth come from families who have had previous experience of family homelessness, and had broken apart, conceivably due to having parents with drug or alcohol problems or even yet, sexual and physical abuse in childhood or adolescence (Shelter, 2014).

Sexual abuse is by far one of the most serious causes of homelessness. The National Network for Youth (n.d.) in a pamphlet entitled "Homeless Youth in America: Who are they?" states, "According to a study conducted by the US Department of Health and Human Services, 21-40% of homeless youth have been sexually abused before running away" (p.2). These young people are trying to escape from oppression, violence, and the next attempt at distressing infringement against their body (The National Network for Youth, n.d., p.2).

In addition to these personal factors dealing with family backgrounds, an institutional factor causing youth homelessness is running out of time in foster care or, as it is known, "aging out" of foster care (National Network for Youth, n.d. p. 2). Approximately 12 to 36 percent of youth who have to leave the foster care system at the ages of 18 or 21 become homeless, which turned out to be approximately 28,000 homeless youth in 2010 (National Network for Youth, n.d., p.2).

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Personal causes might be issues that can be solved, but if there is no one working to help them, our society is at a great loss. Once a young person is out on the streets and has no one to go to and no support, it likely means that the person does not have any place to go to for education. There is no one to help these individuals go back to school and finish their education which could help them start a better life. Moreover, problems bigger than education are economic issues, which can sometimes lead to two different possible outcomes: one is starving to death, or another is becoming a thief and turning into something one is not, which once again are not good for that individual or the U.S. as a whole.

Structural Causes

Economic and social issues are both structural causes that, along with personal causes, play a significant role in youth homelessness. According to Shelter (2014), the housing and homeless charity organization, poverty, lack of affordable housing, and unemployment are some of the many problems that are a part of structural causes. Moreover, according to the Homelessness Resource Center (n.d.), “A critical shortage of housing that is affordable, safe and stable directly contributes to homelessness. The millions of families and individuals living in "core need" (paying more than 50% of their income on housing) are at serious risk of homelessness, as are families and individuals spending more than 30% of their income on housing” (Causes of Homelessness section, para. 7). Lack of affordable housing has become a

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rampant issue across the U.S. Many people are unable to stay on track with their bills, aside from their monthly payments of rent or even mortgage. This inability to pay off the bills and rent assures us that they are not given the basic living rights due to the lack of money, which can later lead to homelessness and poverty.

Poverty has become the greater issue to many of the problems happening all around; it contributes a lot to youth homelessness. According to the American Psychological Association the U.S. Census Bureau data has concluded that the “U.S. poverty rate rose to 15.1 percent (46.2 million) in 2010, an increase from 14.3 percent (approximately 43.6 million) in 2009 and the highest level since 1993. In 2008, 13.2 percent (39.8 million) Americans lived in relative poverty” (APA, n.d., Effects of poverty, hunger, and homelessness on children and youth, p.2). The number of people living in poverty just keeps increasing as the years come, which is a significant role in youth homelessness, as it has been stated by the APA: “U.S. Census data reveals that from 2009 to 2010, the total number of children under age 18 living in poverty increased to 16.4 million from 15.5 million. Child poverty rose from 20.7 percent in 2009, to 22 percent in 2010, and this is the highest it has ever been since 1993” (APA, n.d., Effects of Poverty, Hunger, and Homelessness on children and youth, p.2).

Poverty is not only the leading problem of youth homelessness, but it is also the platform to many other issues that come about from poverty and youth homelessness. For example, living

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a life as a child in poverty and homelessness, is not something normal that that the average child goes through in their life. Homeless children living a life different than the lives they see around them ensures that these children go through behavioral problems and psychological problems, which leads to a plethora of consequences due to the stress put on their lives at a very young age.

Consequences of Youth Homelessness

Mental health. Mental health problems are a serious issue concerning many of the youth who encounter hardships such as homelessness and poverty. Depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem are many of the few mental health problems that affect most homeless youth. As a result of these problems, many of the youth turn to scary and deadly choices to forget about their lives. According to the National Network for Youth Issue Brief, “Forty-five percent of homeless youth reported mental health problems in the past year. “50 to 56 percent youth reported mental health problems over their lifetime. Mental health problems are as much as eleven times higher for homeless youth than for the general population. “The rates of major depression, conduct disorder, and post-traumatic stress syndrome are 3 times as high among runaway youth as among the general population of youth and 32% of homeless youth have attempted suicide” (Team 314, n.d., Run to End Youth Homelessness,p.1).

Criminal activity. Living in a world where you are in desperate need for anything, even if it was a sandwich or a drink, you will take whatever you can get; however, being in a

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desperate situation can lead to criminal activities most of the time because our youth are left with no other choice and they are not given the proper resources to keep them from doing such a thing. It has been stated by the NN4Y that “23 percent of homeless youth report stealing, 14 percent of homeless youth have forced entry to a residence, 20 percent of homeless youth report dealing drugs, Runaway and homeless youth experience rape and assault rates 2 to 3 times higher than the general population of youth and it costs \$53,665 to maintain a youth in the criminal justice system for one year, but only \$5,887 to permanently move a homeless youth off the streets (Team314, n.d., Run to End Youth Homelessness, p.1).

Education and unemployment. Barriers to education and employment are by far a detrimental consequence. It does not only ruin an individual’s future, but it makes it less likely to make it in this world and to change one’s life from worse to better. However, there is still hope in everything no matter what the odds are. There are solutions that, if followed, it would more likely make a change and will turn all of these consequences into the past and will provide brighter futures for those who want to change their lives.

Solutions

A perfect world can never exist but an improved world can. Not everything is fixed in one day; therefore, steps must be taken until we as a society achieve what we want. Youth homelessness is a very sensitive topic that needs time until it becomes a topic that no longer

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exists. The first step to change is to be united as a society and to care for one another. The bigger problems will become easier if we can overcome the smaller ones. According to the book written by Tavis Smiley and Cornel West they have proposed THE THREE P'S: PRIORITY ,PLAN, PATH(Smiley & West, The Rich and the Rest Of US, p200). Which is a great set of code to follow. Many of the solution can be developed through this set of code that has been proposed. However it ought to come from the government so that we can ensure that many homeless youth benefit, such as making more jobs so that people are less likely to lose their jobs and become homeless; making education affordable so that our youth can get back up and find what they lost and make it up through education; and more affordable housing plans due to the amount of homeless people out there who are in dire need. On the other hand, the government has done many things that has helped our society in tremendous ways and has reduced the amount of homeless by a significant amount.

Moreover, if we were to follow and live by the words of Allah (SWT) and the teachings of our beloved Prophet, we would live in a world with harmony and peace. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) has taught us throughout his life how to treat people and how to help people improve their lives and stand back up.

Islamic Perspective

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As the Prophet (PBUH) said, “None of you truly believes until he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself.”(Hadith Al-Bukarhi and Muslim) This saying is very deep. It applies to everything, meaning would you like it for yourself to be homelessness, starving, uneducated, and freezing? No, would be the answer; no one ever wants to be put in that situation. Therefore, if you see someone going through something that you would never wish to be put in, then you should try to help even in the simplest way possible. Moreover, another saying of the Prophet (PBUH) is, “He who eats his fill while his neighbor goes without food is not a believer”(Reported by al-Tabarani and al-Bazzar with a hasan isnad). Many of these homeless youth who go days without proper food can sometimes be the people down your street. Therefore, the least you can do is be considerate and caring.

Conclusion

Youth homelessness is a rampant issue across the U.S. It has become an issue that has affected and taken many lives of our youth. Youth homelessness comes along with many consequences. It has affected many of the homeless youths’ mental and physical health. The youth of America are living on the streets with no help or any resources to go to for help so that our youth can get their lives back on track. Therefore, we as a society must improve our resources and make it available to anyone who needs help, yet we must also stand together as a society and be there for our homeless youth by providing basic humanity. Giving or even helping

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our homeless youth find places to help themselves is better than doing nothing and being a part of an unjust society. Therefore, the United States as a society must ensure that today's youth are provided basic rights – such as education, healthcare, food, water, and shelter – to secure the future of our generation and to change the broken paths into concrete futures.

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Hadih Al-Bukarhi and Musim

Al-Tabarani and al-Bazzar with a hasan isnad