

ACT Practice Activity

America's Mentally Ill Homeless

Exam ID: 5919

America's Mentally Ill Homeless

1 This passage on America's mentally ill homeless people is adapted from an essay written by Henry G. Cisneros, Secretary of the Department of Housing and Urban Development during the Clinton administration.

2 On any given night in the United States, an estimated 600,000 people are homeless. Of those, approximately 200,000 suffer from serious mental illness. Unfortunately, these are facts that no longer hold surprise for most Americans. We have grown accustomed to the sight of the wild eyed, dirt-covered man on the corner. We have become used to averting our gaze from the toothless old woman who mutters to herself at the bus stop and wears many layers of clothes even in warm weather. We are no longer as shocked as we once were at the sight of small children crouched beside their parents, panhandling on some of our busiest streets.

3 A Gallup poll recently reported that although most Americans feel compassion for homeless men and women they encounter on the street, many are puzzled, not knowing how to react to this growing problem that seemed to emerge out of nowhere. Some cities have dealt with their homeless populations by jailing individuals for sitting on the streets or sleeping in parks. Other cities, citing public health concerns, have bulldozed encampments and shantytowns built under city bridges.

4 Unable to find a simple, inexpensive solution to the problem, many individuals and communities prefer to pretend that it does not exist. While there is no single solution for this problem, some responses have been more successful than others. When combined, these responses have, in the past decade, made a tremendous difference in the lives of homeless Americans.

5 Because homeless men and women are still so visible in our communities, few people realize that over the past decade the number of homeless people helped by the government has increased by more than 1,000 percent. Few seem to know that a major shift in thinking about and creating programs to address homelessness has occurred on the national and local levels, resulting in unprecedented success in dealing with the problems faced by this population. Few people realize that this approach, which we call the *Continuum of Care*, has resulted in a major shift of national priorities away from emergency shelter services toward long-term solutions such as transitional and permanent housing, job training, and medical and mental health services.

6 It is difficult to imagine a more dangerous or more distressing combination of problems to befall any one person than to be homeless and to suffer from a severe mental illness. Yet those who are homeless and mentally ill are often diagnosed with many accompanying disabilities—such as drug addiction, alcoholism, HIV/AIDS, diabetes, and tuberculosis. Mentally ill homeless people tend to be the sickest, the most ragged, and the most difficult people for society to accept. In addition, because rationality itself is compromised by mental illness, they are often the least able to help themselves, either economically or medically, and thus they slide more deeply into danger.

7 Who are mentally ill homeless persons, and how do they survive? They are among the poorest people in our nation, earning or receiving in Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and other benefits an average annual income of \$4,200. While most would like to work, this population faces some of the highest barriers to employment. It is estimated that one-half of the mentally ill homeless people suffer from drug and alcohol abuse, and many use substances as a method of self-medication. An estimated 4 percent to 14 percent of adults in family shelters have spent time in mental hospitals.

8 Because mentally ill homeless men and women are vulnerable to attack, they are often victims of violent crime. Some of the crimes against them are examples of the worst behavior imaginable. But many mentally ill homeless also come into contact with the criminal justice system as offenders, arrested as they engage in such illegal activities as trespassing, petty theft, shoplifting, and prostitution—often crimes of survival under the most desperate of conditions, and a direct result of their mental illness.

9 These individuals suffer from severe mental illness such as schizophrenia, mood disorders, severe depression, and personality disorders. Given consistent medical and psychosocial treatment along with stable housing, many of them could again function at a high level. But such stability and consistent care are impossible to achieve when one is homeless. Thus homelessness and mental illness become a vicious cycle, one compounding the other in a vortex of suffering for the individual. Unfortunately, without mental health treatment and related support services, it is difficult for mentally ill homeless persons to gain access to, and remain in, permanent housing. Often they face stigma associated with their illness and discrimination by potential landlords or neighbors. All of these factors make individuals with serious mental illness extremely vulnerable to homelessness and difficult to help once they become homeless.

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- According to the passage, Americans' attitude toward the homeless has changed from:
 - surprise to familiarity
 - horror to regret
 - discomfort to understanding
 - awareness to irritation
- It is reasonable to infer from the passage that homelessness in America is a problem that occurs mostly in:
 - specific neighborhoods of various cities.
 - urban areas.
 - communities containing homeless shelters.
 - streets and parks near mental hospitals.
- The author states that homelessness came about:
 - as an aftereffect of an economic downturn.
 - because of changes in the laws related to mental illness.
 - in conditions that took America by surprise.
 - as a consequence of crowding in America's cities.
- Which of the following community efforts has made a "tremendous difference" (line 27) in the lives of the homeless?
 - Removing homeless people from the streets and parks
 - Passing anti-vagrancy laws
 - Expanding the powers of social agencies
 - Implementing a variety of different strategies
- The claim that "the number of homeless people helped by the government has increased" (lines 31-32) means that:
 - better education has managed to shrink the homeless population.
 - many new homeless shelters have been built.
 - the government has expanded its welfare programs.
 - forward-looking policies to solve the homeless problem have been successfully put into practice.
- In lines 48-49, "drug addiction, alcoholism, HIV/AIDS, diabetes, and tuberculosis" are mentioned as examples of:
 - disabilities that strike people who cannot afford to take care of themselves medically.
 - the dangers that many mentally ill people are subject to.
 - the fate of people whose homelessness has been caused by mental illness.
 - disabilities that often grow out of homelessness and mental illness.
- The passage suggests that homelessness and mental illness are linked because:
 - most homeless people tend to be mentally ill.
 - homeless mentally ill people are usually rejected by society.
 - many mentally ill people, unable to take care of their basic needs, become homeless.
 - homelessness has been known to cause mental illness.
- By asserting that many mentally ill homeless people have "contact with the criminal justice system" (lines 71-72), the author is pointing out that many mentally ill homeless men and women:
 - have been treated like criminals by the police and the courts.
 - tend to report to the police when victimized by criminals.
 - have been driven to commit crimes in order to survive.
 - look to the police and courts to save them from abuse by society.
- As it is used in line 85, the word *vortex* most nearly means:
 - inescapable trap.
 - ambush.
 - overabundance.
 - struggle.
- Which of the following statements best describes the author's method and purpose?
 - Conveying a series of observations and facts in an attempt to inform readers how mental illness makes solving the problem of homelessness more difficult
 - Presenting a series of facts and personal opinions designed to persuade readers to support increase funding for social services for the homeless and mentally ill people
 - Collecting a series of research findings meant to show the positive effects of government programs regarding the homeless
 - Constructing an argument based on emotion meant to move readers to take steps to help the homeless