
Guest Opinion: The seven symptoms of homeless living

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Homelessness is a symptom of a number of complex problems. That is why it is so hard to address. I can think of seven, which tend to be interrelated.

As each of these problems increase, the number of people who are homeless does, too. As these numbers start to overwhelm our systems, the problems grow.

1) Poverty: “The poor” have always been with us. They were once taken care of by family, churches, fraternal-aid organizations, and other charities, which could never do enough.

Gradually government-aid programs covered more of this need, but programs and budgets have been cut as taxpayers have balked.

2) Economics: After the Second World War, America was one of few developed countries not destroyed ... governments, infrastructure, economic system, population. We were able to employ workers to manufacture what others needed to get going again.

Following the end of the cold war, with American capital and technologies, less-developed countries of the world that achieved some political stability began making their own stuff, and ours, too, for less than we could, given our higher living standards.

So, Wall Street and Silicon Valley have profited greatly. But that prosperity has not been spread through the population. With less lucrative work for the middle class, the effort to maintain that standard of living has included supporting the household on multiple incomes, working multiple jobs, using up savings, curtailing or taking out huge loans for education, not saving for retirement, credit debt, never-ending mortgages, and ultimately for some, losing their houses.

While the Great Recession bail-out saved the economy, the money did not reach Main Street. Neither do the recent tax cuts. Wages have not nearly kept up with the cost of living.

3) Housing Prices: If folks who have more find your community to be the next desirable place to live, housing prices can vastly outpace inflation. Construction becomes high-end, older housing gets remodeled, and the least-expensive housing can give way to fire, decay, destruction and demolition.

Places people were able to afford disappear. Building codes (intended for safer, healthier, more-efficient, longer-lasting housing) boost new-home construction beyond the affordable.

- 4) Bad Luck: With more families on the edge of their income, it does not take much bad luck to become a catastrophe. Medical bills, accidents, being a victim of theft or fraud, car problems, debt loads, rent increases, family crisis, etc., are more than many can bear before they cannot maintain their home.
- 5) Mental Health: Years ago, “we” let folks with mental problems out of the old “asylums” to live in less-restrictive settings, as was their right. Unfortunately, we did not replace that old system with adequate community support for all. So many struggle as best they can without what it takes to maintain a stable life in today’s increasingly difficult society.
- 6) Addiction: When a chemical becomes someone’s overriding priority, it can be only a matter of time before they sacrifice everything they have and care for to fill that, eventually including their household. Not all people who are homeless are addicts, of course, but addiction can certainly lead there.
- 7) Division: Respect is the foundation of democracy and the rule of law. The majority listens to and respects the needs and rights of the minority. The minority, enjoying rights and feeling heard and represented, respects the resulting laws.

That’s the deal. When groups start disrespecting and expressing contempt for each other, the deal is broken. When the minority feels unheard, reviled and their rights undermined, they may no longer feel that the laws are theirs.

Less respect for the laws by minorities leads to “crackdowns” by majorities to enforce them. Obviously, this feeds back into the division and we develop a deteriorating society in a death spiral.

In this case of homelessness, these groups are “haves” and “have nots.”

These dynamics must be understood, if we are to successfully address homelessness and help those struggling with it. We may have to find solutions to some of the underlying problems to make much difference in this symptom.

It may help to realize that in a way, these folks are “below” the law, in the sense that you cannot punish a person back into having a home. They cannot pay fines, and we cannot commit them all to jail.

Even a more-benign forbearance is not much answer for those who can no longer afford or access the basics of roofs, bathrooms or trash service.

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