Breaking Stereotypes: A Call for a New Movement to Empower the Homeless

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Abstract

Homelessness in America in 2020 does not look much different from homelessness in the early 2000s. In fact, the public acceptance of the social issue has only increased due to media efforts, the criminalization of the homeless, and avoided exposure. When looking at the development of homelessness, we can either attribute the problem to structural factors or individual factors. It is easier for the public to accept the problem as a result of individual actions instead of facing the reality that the society we belong to is why homelessness exists. Certain individual labels are more common in the homeless population, but those labels are not what cause homelessness, they merely describe who. By examining existing literature, conducting interviews with homeless women, and researching the effect of stigmatization, this paper works to break the current public opinion in order to illustrate the need to prioritize, humanize, and eliminate homelessness.

Study Background

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. A total of 5 women were interviewed in the hopes of illuminating some of the experiences common to homeless individuals. These women are all residents in a program that works to help women return to a life free of homelessness, abuse, addiction, and hopelessness. All interviews were voice recorded with the permission of respondents and transcripted for analysis. To preserve confidentiality, all identifying information included in this article has been changed. The name and the location of the program are also hidden to further protect the women.

A New Movement

Throughout history, there have been several monumental fights for basic rights by marginalized or oppressed groups. Women, such as Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, fought for the right to vote for decades. Supporters of the Suffrage Movement formed organizations, hosted rallies, and drafted declarations, eventually leading to the 19th amendment that granted women the right to vote. Now, 100 years later, women are still fighting for equal pay, reproductive rights, the end to discrimination in the workplace, and maternal leave, all issues that women and supporters of women feel are baseline rights. Similarly, the Civil Rights Movement, beginning in the late 1940s, demonstrates another movement where an oppressed group decided to fight for a change in the law. Activist Martin Luther King Jr. is most famously known for his fight against racial discrimination and segregation. Organized by black Americans, this movement resulted in the start of a culture change that people are still working and fighting for today.

The point in mentioning these two movements is that rights for the marginalized are not won without a fight, and at some point, the homeless population might have to fight to obtain a certain standard of living. Right now, homelessness is accepted in our nation. Most people look the other way as they do not want to face the reality that society may be to blame. It is easier to turn our heads, avoiding eye contact with the panhandler on the corner when our car is at the stoplight. The reality is that the stigmatization and stereotypes of the homeless population cause our society to attribute homelessness to the failures of the individual rather than structural failures (Lee et al., 2004). Through this paper, I am going to break some of the stereotypes associated with homeless individuals and families, argue for a greater focus on women in the reduction efforts, and prove that homelessness cannot be solved without a shift in culture and a new movement that

empowers those living on our streets. It is time our nation decides the standard of living in which all people deserve.

Pathway to Homelessness

In 1990, it was estimated that 13.5 million adults had been homeless at some point in their lives, and nearly 26 million if "doubling up," or couch surfing, was included. (Shinn & Khadduri, 2020). Some of the researched reasons for homelessness are a lack of affordable housing, housing discrimination, weak social ties, insufficient incomes that lead to rental or credit problems, substance abuse disorders, criminal history, and mental health (Finfgel-Connett et al.,2012). However, as stated by the 2019 White House Report on the state of homelessness in America, "there are millions of non-homeless Americans who face each problem as well," meaning there must be other factors to consider when looking at the pathway to homelessness (Council of Economic Advisors [CEA], 2019).

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), measured by the ACE Assessment, can be a pathway to homelessness for both men and women, but women have been found more likely to leave their homes due to gender-based violence. People that can "check the boxes" on four or more of these ten childhood experiences are "two to five times as likely to develop clinical depression, substance use disorders, suicidality, and numerous chronic health conditions including diabetes, cancer, and cardiovascular and respiratory diseases compared to people with no ACEs." Emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional neglect, physical neglect, household domestic violence, household mental illness, household substance use, parental separation or divorce, and having a parent or family member incarcerated are the ten experiences that make up this assessment. To illustrate the realistic effect of these experiences, research shows that one-third of homeless children have a parent who is in prison and children that live in poverty are five times as

likely to experience four ACEs than those in financially stable households. Additionally, one in eight people experience four or more, proving the pathway to negative health is not as rare as one would think. These experiences increase the chances of experiencing homelessness, being unemployed, and struggling to climb the education ladder (Brien et al., 2019).

Because of the large role that childhood can play in homelessness, I asked the women I interviewed, "Can you tell me a little about your childhood and your family? Were they there when you were struggling most?" The responses to these questions further ignited my frustration with the belief that homeless people are to blame for their own plight. One woman shared:

> No, none of my family were around the time I was homeless. I got in an abusive relationship when I turned 18 and me and my family kind of separated. We weren't really close knit anyway cause my grandmother who raised me passed away when I was 18, and so the rest of the family kind of just spread apart and didn't stay in contact.

A second woman said:

> Well, my childhood was good until I was 10 or 11 and my step-dad raped and molested me for two years. And, my mom remarried when I was 13, and I ran away from home because she chose the man over me. I felt like she didn't care about me, so I ran away from home … and I was in foster care from 14 to 18.

A third woman expressed:

> We were very poor. I was always the kid sitting by myself on the playground. I was dirty, I was poor, I was shy, and nobody would play me. I didn't have any friends, and they would call me ugly. My parents had five children -- I'm the second oldest, but I don't blame them. My dad left when I was 13, my mother abandoned me when I was 15, and I

was alone for three days with no electricity or anything. But, I had a job. I just kept going to work, and it worked out. But, I was really scared.

The stories of these three women include seven of the ten ACEs: emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional neglect, physical neglect, household domestic violence, and parental separation.

In comparison to men, homeless women are more likely to say they are homeless due to family conflicts rather than unemployment (Banyard & Graham-Bermann, 1995). One study specifically looking at the multidimensional issue of homelessness and women found that working women often reported having to care for a close family member with a chronic health condition or an abusive relationship as a factor that contributed to their life ending up on the streets. On the other hand, non-working women often reported difficult childhoods, histories of drug use, and crime as contributing factors (Phipps et al., 2019). The sad reality is that a history of childhood sexual abuse increases the odds of sexual and physical assault while experiencing homelessness. Sexual abuse during childhood as well as domestic violence in adulthood have also been shown to be related to the development of a substance abuse disorder. Domestic violence is the leading cause for women needing hospitalization in the United States (Goldberg, 1995). Each year, there are an estimated 1,200 deaths and 2 million injuries among women as a result of domestic violence. Acts of violence typically hurt a person's psychological and social state, leading to depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, poverty, and social isolation. A 2010 study on domestic violence, homelessness, and housing instability found that in a sample of women with abusive partners, 50 percent of working women reported loss of work. Abusers are known to stalk their victims forcing women to stray from their place of work to escape the violence (Baker et al., 2010).

The Current Population

In September 2019, the White House estimated that over half a million people were homeless on a single night in the United States. Around 63 percent of these nearly 568,000 individuals were in homeless shelters at night, whereas the other 37 percent were in unsheltered locations (CEA, 2019). While homeless individuals are stereotypically pictured to be male, women are one of the fastest growing populations within the total homeless population. In 1963, women represented only 3 percent of the total homeless population. By 2005, that number had reached 32 percent, and in 2019, 39 percent of those counted as homeless were women or girls (Phipps et al., 2019). From 2018 to 2019, there was a 15 percent increase in the number of women in the unsheltered homeless population compared to an eight percent increase among men. The majority of homeless families are also single-parent and female-headed (United States, 2019).

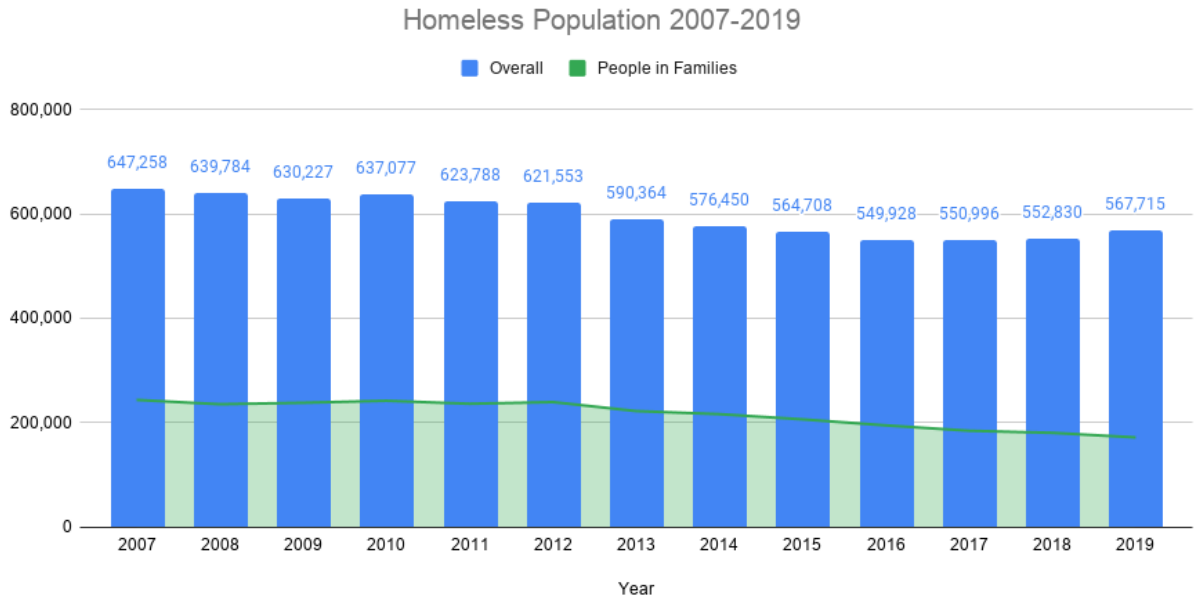

Figure 1: Homeless Population 2007-2019 (Data collected from the National Alliance to End Homelessness)

As shown in Figure 1, the total number of homeless people has declined since 2007, except for a slight increase in the last two years. There is the largest decrease between the years of 2012 and 2013, which scholars have partly given credit for this decline to the nation's first Federal strategy to prevent and end homelessness, the Opening Doors program. This program had a goal of ending chronic homelessness by 2015 and ending homelessness for families, youth, and children by the year 2020 (Vilsack, 2015). Between 2018 and 2019, the number of chronic homeless increased by 9 percent, although it is 20 percent lower than it was in 2007. Chronic homelessness applies to individuals with at least four time periods of homelessness in the course of three years with a total length exceeding twelve months. The number of families experiencing homelessness has also seen a 27 percent decline since 2007, but they still accounted for roughly a third of the total homeless population in 2018 (United States, 2019). Since the Opening Doors release in 2010, our nation has seen a decline, but the end of homelessness is considerably far away as we hit the 2020 mark. Why are we not seeing a steeper decline? What more can we, as a nation, do to end homelessness?

Barriers to Hope

According to an article examining the issues around the stigmatization of homelessness, social stigma occurs when there is unequal power. When there is a chance of a "loss of status," people tend to label, stereotype, and discriminate. Because the homeless do not work and contribute their share to the societal system, they are often cast away and labeled as useless. Belcher and DeForge (2012) write, "Another way to look at the issue is that society does not want the problem resolved. In a sense, homelessness points to a societal problem: the U.S. economy is inequitable and creates winners and losers." These authors point out the fact that services and policies in place for people experiencing homelessness give "subsistence," or the minimum level

to keep them alive, but not enough assistance to help them escape. I am not claiming that all stereotypes have no truth behind them; one-third of those that are homeless are victims of mental illness or addiction. But, that leaves another two-thirds that are not. To society, homeless individuals represent "the failure of a capitalist economic system" (Belcher and Deforge, 2012).

The public perceptions of people on the streets are that they are unclean, lazy, addicted to drugs, psychopathic, dangerous, and to blame for their homelessness. These attributes allow society to strip them of their value and claim they are "not worthy of equal rights and access to societal resources" (Belcher and Deforge, 2012). These stigmatizations are not hidden from the homeless themselves, contributing to the lack of self-esteem and hopelessness that the homeless feel. In my interviews, I asked the question, "What are some words that come to mind when you think of what it is like being homeless?" The responses of the women included the following words and phrases: frustrating, hopeless, out of control, lost, scared, unsure, hungry, broken, agitating, fearful, helpless, and without. They can detect the negativity each time someone turns their head when they drive down the token homeless street in a city or the disgust people portray when they make eye contact with that panhandler on the corner. And sadly, homeless individuals internalize the stigma.

The perception that homelessness equates to violence is one created from ignorance. However, it may not just be ignorance as Lyon-Callo (2001) believes that the shelters and services themselves may be contributing unknowingly to the community opposition to shelters. When shelters ask for donations or federal grants, they paint the homeless population as one with individual issues, not one suffering from systemic inequalities. They do this to maintain the support of their donors. Lyon-Callo (2001) says, "The notion of the 'the homeless' as a discursive category consisting of deviant, homeless people in need of professional reform and retraining was

reproduced and reinforced through these well-meaning efforts by the sheltering industry." With a public perception that homelessness is the result of individual flaws and decisions, "suggesting that homelessness may be a cost of capitalism clashes with the public perception created in large part by the government" (Belcher and DeForge, 2012). The United States has an individualistic culture with an "every man for himself" mindset. The "American Dream" is the belief that anyone can be successful, that opportunity is equally available for every American (Truong, 2012). However, "American Dream" success stories are the exception, not the rule. But, because we live in a modern industrialized country with a focus on power and money, Belcher and DeForge (2012) claim "poverty is not particularly appealing as a rallying point for change."

In the twenty-first century, the media carries incredible weight. When the media claims the majority of the homeless are substance abusers, the public do not question it. Due to a lack of education and a belief in media portrayal, "NIMBY," or "not in my backyard," has become the term for the popular community opposition to shelters. NIMBY efforts claim to support homeless shelters and solutions to homelessness, but only if the shelters and solutions are not placed in their neighborhoods and communities. Supporters of these efforts make statements such as, "Nice stories of redemption can't alleviate our fears" (Lyon-Callo, 2001). Statements such as that one come directly from the media. In general, there is a lack in the media of portrayal and conversation about the homeless, and when there is, it is most often negative. For example, in 2003, a $65,000 billboard campaign was issued in San Francisco in an attempt to stop panhandlers; the public was persuaded through the campaign that panhandlers carried sexually transmitted diseases and abused illegal substances. Additionally, in the 2012 study examining the media framing of homeless people in five cities, it was found that few news articles -- 8 percent in Los Angeles, 7 percent in Atlanta, 6 percent in Orlando, 7 percent in Portland, and 14 percent in Seattle -- portrayed the

homeless population positively (Truong, 2012). The “homeless” in the news are consistently grouped together as one; this faceless portrayal further allows the lack of compassion by the general public.

In addition to media efforts, the criminalization of homeless behavior prevents stereotypes from being broken. Since the 1970s, vagrancy laws have become more explicit. 1996 Atlanta charged $1,000 and up to a year in jail for sleeping in cars or public parks. Similarly, Dallas issued a law charging up to $2,000 and up to six months in jail for “sharing food with a homeless person without a permit,” because it “detracts from their desire to leave the streets.” Over the last several decades, laws continuously add restrictions to the allowed behavior of the homeless, further creating a culture that lacks tolerance for the homeless. Negative stereotypes are broadcasted to the public through these vagrancy laws. Policy makers state they are promoting public health and safety and protecting the “aesthetic,” but these statements are simply “justification for the discrimination” (Truong, 2012).

What Does Empowerment Do?

Simon (1994) believes the word “empowerment” has two opposite concepts depending on the political party using the term. One usage implies the gift of responsibility to people or putting them in charge of their own fate. This definition would blame the homeless and the impoverished for their plight. The other usage is the definition that social workers have committed to enacting, where larger institutions and communities sustain, rather than oppress, smaller groups and communities. In the field of social work there is a term, “client self-empowerment,” used to describe a practice that pulls the strengths and abilities of clients from their stories of what society deems as failures. The resources given to clients catalyze the “use of their own strengths in the

process of searching for and consolidating enhanced self-esteem, health, community, security, and personal and social power" (Simon 1994).

When a person is extremely poor, they have zero power; they are constantly getting turned away and constantly unable to do what they want to do. In our society that seems to put extreme focus on empowerment, rallying behind the empowerment of females or the LGBTQ community, we are missing a large group of people because of the cultural accepted stigmas. Without power, it is hard to have a voice that vocalizes loud enough to be heard. The homeless are not included in the political discussions that decide their fate. Conversations with these people, that have been subject to misjudgment and hate crimes, "can provide powerful and dynamic data that contribute to knowledge, fuel advocacy, and humanize homelessness" (Truong, 2012).

A 2012 study of perceived competency, or the "personally interpreted ability to make decisions, take action, and execute positive change in one's life," hypothesized that empowerment would emerge as a strategy for helping homeless women. They focused on the opposite ends of the competency spectrum. Low perceived competency led to "behavioral inertia," and an external locus of control. On the other end, high perceived competency led to "disruptive behavior," and the need to feel free, liberated, and in control. Both ends internally struggle with control and their minds enter a place of hopelessness as time progresses (Finfgeld-Connett et al., 2012). Empowerment allows the establishment of the middle competency level, that tends to be better at coping.

Finfgled-Connett (2012) investigates social services for homeless women and argues service providers should "build empowered alliances with homeless women," as the rules can either empower or disempower. There are limited studies that provide insight about the strengths, skills, and goals of homeless women in order to learn how to accomplish these alliances. However,

as shown in an article that analyzed the self-reported strengths of 64 mothers with children residing in a shelter, the showcasing of their strengths breaks stereotypes and illustrates the need for services and policies that empower (Banyard and Graham-Bermann, 1995). Have we asked homeless individuals what would help them? Have policy makers had conversations with the people they are creating policy for? We can research causes of homelessness over and over again, but the truth is that those problems that cause homelessness only represent part of the solution. Humans will always have problems, but it is whether or not we have the skills to work through those problems that determines the future.

Through my interviews with women in a program that does emphasize empowerment, one thing that repeatedly showed up was the word "hope." In the previous section, we see that stigmatization is a barrier to that feeling of hope as well as a barrier in ending homelessness in the United States. Homeless individuals are aware of the stigmas that are associated with homelessness, and so, in my interviews, I wanted to give the women a chance to speak on how they wished to be viewed. I posed the question, "What do you want people to see when they look at you or other people experiencing homelessness?" It was in the responses to this question that I saw hope surface. One woman simply stated she wanted society, "to see that people can change, and that there is hope." A second woman responded she wanted people to see "that there is hope, cause it is not the end for them. There is hope." A third woman wished people to see "a miracle in that there is hope. It can be turned around, it can be reversed, you don't have to stay stuck." The phrase "there is hope" is in all three of those responses. A fourth woman said:

> I want them to see that I have a heart, and I bleed the same way everyone else does. My addiction, my alcoholism, is the only difference between me and normal people. And my

choices have gotten me to where I am, and I own it. I own all responsibility to where my choices have led me, but I think I just need people to believe in me again.

While the word "hope" is not in her response, she mentions having people believe in her, or having support that in turn produces hope and confidence. The blame she puts on herself stems from what she has been repeatedly told by society.

By instilling hope, the women begin to believe their life can look differently, and they are not destined for life on the streets forever (Finfgeld-Connett et al., 2012). In my interviews, I also asked "What is one dream you have for yourself or your children if you have any?" One woman responded, "I just want restoration, nothing major. I just want me and my children to be able to live in peace and with joy, all under one roof." Another responded, "Right now, my dream is, 5 years from now, to have a ministry to help young teenagers with drug addiction and alcohol." A third woman responds, "I would just say my dream is to be a productive member of society and to be able to sustain success without going back to addiction … to break the cycle." When there is hope, we see a desire to break the cycle and contribute meaning to the world.

Real Needs and Solutions

When it comes to women, there are cultural stereotypes in place that call women "unreliable, illogical, emotionally unstable, and incapable of handling most mechanical, mathematical, competitive, or leadership tasks" (Goldberg, 1995). Females have a double standard; if they are confident and strong-willed, they are labeled "bitchy," and if they are gentle and passive, they are labeled "weak." There are cultural stereotypes toward women that insist females "ask" to be sexually taken advantage of when they are consistently drunk or addicted to drugs. It appears that the general consensus that is seen within the homeless population as the needs of women are left out of reduction strategies is that women are still subordinate to men.

Homeless women have different needs and face different challenges than homeless men that need to be considered when developing solutions and policies to help the homeless population. Currently, shelter staff are not adequately trained to assist homeless women and families with the trauma they frequently experience on the street (Banyard and Graham-Bermann, 1995). There is a lack of services that ask and help women deal with adverse childhood experiences, domestic violence, depression, and other traumas.

Instances of depression are more likely among those living below the poverty line. Stress builds to insurmountable levels when power and control disappear; there is stress to maintain a home and a job, to protect and care for family, and to live with some sense of comfort. Once homeless, there is a fear among women that treatment for depression will result in the loss of their children, if treatment is even affordable or attainable. Lifetime depression rates among homeless mothers ranges from 45 percent to 85 percent, yet there are limited programs that assist this population (Bassuk and Beardslee, 2014).

Domestic violence assistance programs are similarly lacking, and domestic violence often spirals into housing instability. Due to insufficient incomes, limited affordable housing, and housing discrimination, women run into hardship when trying to escape abuse. There are currently three options for domestic violence survivors in terms of housing: emergency shelters, transitional housing, and permanent housing. Domestic violence emergency shelters offer 24-hour protection and emotional support, but these shelters reach capacity quickly; the National Network to End Domestic Violence found 3,286 denied requests on a single day in 2008. Other emergency shelters not specifically designed for domestic violence typically require residents to leave during the day, leaving domestic violence survivors vulnerable to continued assault. Transitional and permanent subsidized housing offer housing to survivors for longer periods of time, however, there are

limitations. Permanent housing units, mostly funded by the Federal government, can have waiting lists up to several years. Once a voucher is obtained, there is limited time to find a place and a landlord that will accept a voucher. The Violence Against Women Act prevents discriminatory evictions of women because of domestic violence, but there are still studied incidences of this type of eviction (Baker et al., 2010).

Over the past decade, the government has used a "Housing First" model, attempting to house individuals first and then address issues such as substance use or domestic violence. There has been evidence to support this model does reduce the length of homelessness a person may experience, but there are not many recorded benefits on health outcomes. In fact, the 2019 White House Report does not credit Federal policy for the decline in the homeless population between 2007 and 2018. Instead, it states this decline "may be a result of an inconsistent definition of people living in transitional housing versus rapid rehousing, and a miscounting of the unsheltered homeless population (CEA, 2019). The White House is essentially admitting that the "decline" in homelessness in the United States may not be accurate.

Where do we go from here? The question still stands, "How does homelessness decline?" First and foremost, there is a call for increased compassion and decreased stigmatization from the public. According to the contact hypothesis, the attitudes of an in-group towards an out-group, in this case the out-group is the homeless population, change with contact. Through exposure, ignorance is replaced with knowledge thus breaking the stereotypes the in-group previously believed. A 2004 study investigated this hypothesis that exposure influences attitudes toward the homeless population in addition to the reverse, that attitudes influence exposure. The homeless population is a vulnerable one; with limited places to hide, their struggles are exposed to the public. Public attitudes toward the homeless are either avoidant and unfavorable or sympathetic and

somewhat accepting. Those that work to avoid the presence of homeless people by altering their drives or use of public transportation are considerably less sympathetic as they have less exposure. When policies are in place that limit the public exposure, or criminalize the homeless, the contact hypothesis proves that the public will be less sympathetic and less likely to support the rights of the homeless. The more a person is exposed to the out-group, or the homeless, the more likely they are to attribute homelessness to systemic causes rather than individual laziness (Lee et al., 2004). Figure 2 below shows the data from a survey issued after Think Tank's "Cost of Poverty Experience." This simulation allows the opportunity to gain a better understanding of the daily experiences of families in poverty. After the experience, the twenty-five survey respondents attribute broken policies and systems as the major cause, followed by a lack of resources, a lack of connections, a lack of knowledge, and poor choices (COPE, 2019).

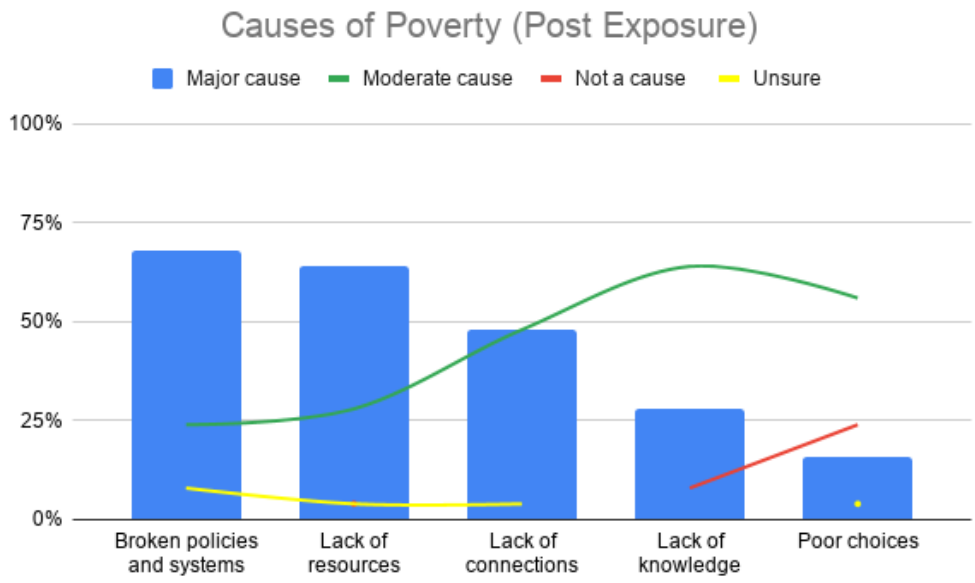

Figure 2: Causes of Poverty (Post Exposure)

Stigma is rooted from stereotypes and used to limit social change (Rayburn and Guittar, 2013). "Until society chooses to view poverty as unacceptable and not stigmatize those who

become its victims, homelessness will not likely disappear" (Belcher and DeForge, 2012). In order for homeless individuals, both men and women, to overcome stigma, there must be an increased focus on helping them discover self-worth and add meaning to their lives. When asked to identify strengths that aided their survival on the streets, current homeless women and those that have escaped homelessness listed pride, independence, resilience, coping skills, positivity, determination, self-worth, and hope (Phipps et al., 2019). There is a need to strengthen these traits in the homeless. There is a need for homeless mothers to be validated as mothers by teaching them parenting skills and giving childcare without threatening to take their children away from them. There is a need for service providers to analyze the complexity of life of the streets and the effects it has on problem solving abilities and coping skills. There is a need for women with histories of substance abuse to be treated as worthy of rehabilitation. There is a need to include the homeless in the conversation. And lastly, there is a need for a new standard of living that all people deserve.

Conclusions

Homeless women typically lack connection and feel betrayal from those closest to them. The difference between an abused woman on the streets versus an abused woman that never falls into homelessness is the lack of feeling loved, protected, and connected to at least one individual (Phipps et al., 2019). This paper can be read as a plea to help homeless individuals and families find connection and hope. With the recent events of 2020 and the economy taking a hit from COVID-19, there is an increased need to change old policies and create new ones to aid the homeless. More studies should be conducted to humanize the homeless and explain the complexity of the issue so that the public strays from the belief that homeless are dangerous, unmotivated, addicts, and unworthy of certain civil rights. The stereotypes of the homeless are a barrier that can

be changed through exposure, awareness, and conversation. Suit up, the fight is starting. A new movement has begun.

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