



Homelessness in America is a reality often overshadowed by the country's prosperity and wealth. It highlights the stark difference between the ideal American Dream and the harsh existence many Americans face daily. This essay will explore the rich history of homelessness in America and its many forms through the ages. There are tales of homelessness from the time of industrialization, the Great Depression, and more recent economic downturns. These prove that it's not just a modern issue. Different periods had their specific socioeconomic conditions, impacting the number and makeup of homeless people drastically. This illustrates how homelessness is a constantly evolving problem. When studying America's homeless, it reveals connections to broader social changes and issues, including economic policies, mental health, addiction, and poverty.

Early Homelessness: Colonial Period through the 18th Century

During the colonial period through the 18th century, homelessness was often viewed as a moral failing rather than a societal issue. Many colonies established "Poor Laws" to manage homelessness similar to England's Elizabethan Poor Law of 1601. They declared an obligation of parents and children to care for their sick or unemployed members. If families didn't meet this obligation, community overseers would place the vulnerable members into indentured servitude. Wandering "vagrants" were often whipped and sent on their way. By the 18th century, almshouses, or poorhouses, were created to provide labor to the colonies while serving as a refuge for the homeless. Conditions were harsh and treatment was often inhumane.

Colonial Period: Exploring the Roots of Homelessness

Without a proper system to help the poor, many people became homeless and landless. In the 1640s, the colonies tried to address homelessness by creating homes or workplaces for the poor. However, these places were not supportive; instead, they mistreated and discriminated against their residents. Racial discrimination also played a role in homelessness during this period. Many Native Americans were forced from their homes, causing them to be homeless. Upon their liberation, many African American slaves found themselves homeless and jobless. Thus, homelessness wasn't just a result of poverty but also a tool for social control and racial prejudice.

Housing Challenges in the 18th Century: A Historical Perspective

The number of people increased rapidly because of European immigrants, but houses were not built quickly enough. Start moving from rural areas to cities during the Industrial Revolution, and find affordable homes there. So, many new people and low-level workers stayed in packed, dirty places, causing the growth of slums. Unstable politics and repeated wars also made people lose their homes. Financial crises and no safety strategies for society made this issue worse. Some workers were evicted because they couldn't pay the rent and ended up living on the streets.

Homelessness during the Industrial Revolution (19th Century)

The move from farming to factory jobs made homelessness worse. In the time before industries, most Americans lived on small farms. They looked after themselves and their needs. When industries started to grow, people moved to cities for work. While some improved their lives and got richer, many others had to live in crowded cities with very bad living conditions. Find a way to live in a big city. Housing was hard to find, and there were no rules to help the poor. Many of them became homeless. This was the first time so many people in America were homeless. Those who owned the factories and businesses liked this because

they could pay these desperate people very little. This created a cycle of poverty and homelessness that was hard to stop. Unemployment and unfair pay, made worse by machines taking over jobs, also added to the problem. When people lost their jobs to machines, they also lost their homes.

Great Depression Era: The Rise of 'Hoovervilles'

They were named after President Herbert Hoover, who was often negatively associated with the Depression due to his handling of the economic crisis. These makeshift settlements highlighted the issues of poverty and desperation that fueled the nation's broad homelessness problem. The economy's crash led to serious job losses, with many people unable to afford housing. As a result, thousands of homeless Americans turned to alternative living, creating makeshift towns from scrap materials and cardboard. These towns, mockingly named 'Hoovervilles,' sprang up across the country, featuring crude huts under bridges, in parks, and on abandoned land. People living in Hoovervilles were mostly jobless men, but families in poverty were also present. Life was tough in these settlements without basic amenities like running water, electricity, or waste disposal, leading to unsanitary and unhealthy living conditions. Despite this, Hooverville inhabitants often showed a strong community spirit, setting up shared kitchens and even electing 'mayors.' Analyze the impact of both the Great Depression and the Hoovervilles on American poverty.

Post World War II and the 'Hidden Homeless'

Before the war, mostly middle-aged men who were thought to have personal failures were homeless. But after the war, there were many more 'hidden homeless.' These were families, children, women, and veterans who didn't have proper housing or were living temporarily somewhere. Several factors caused the number of 'hidden homeless' to spike after the war. War veterans returning home needed affordable housing, causing a housing crisis. The GI Bill of Rights tried to help by offering financial aid for veterans to buy homes, but it wasn't enough. Many veterans still ended up homeless or living in poor conditions. Fast industrial and city growth after the war made living and housing costs go up. Low-income groups found it hard to afford proper housing. Plus, people being released from mental health hospitals added to the homeless number. People started noticing the 'hidden homeless' issue more in the late 1970s and 80s. The label 'hidden homeless' was created to highlight the changing demographics and living situations of the homeless. These individuals weren't necessarily visible on the streets. They may have lived temporarily in motels, cars, or shelters, or stayed with relatives or friends. The problem of hidden homelessness still exists today.

1980s to Early 2000s: Policy Changes and Escalation of Homelessness

In the 1980s, President Reagan's administration made big cuts to federal funding for low-income housing. This drastic change led to a rise in poverty and homelessness across the country. By 1983, for instance, only a third of poor parenting families were able to secure a low-income housing unit. Also, the 1980s saw many mental health patients released into the public without proper support, causing even more homelessness. Take note that in the 1990s, homelessness was mostly seen amongst families with children, who replaced single men as the most affected demographic. This was due to factors like increased minimum wage, higher unemployment rates, and further cuts to welfare programs. By the early 2000s, homelessness continued to worsen due to higher housing costs, unchanged wages, and fewer affordable rental properties.

Modern Homelessness: Predominant Causes and Profiles

Different factors caused a surge in homelessness back then, including the economy getting worse, mentally ill people no longer getting institutional care, and low-cost housing becoming scarce. So let's tackle the root causes to deal with modern homelessness. Money is a big reason why many people are homeless today.

During the economic recessions of the early 1980s and late 2000s, many people lost their jobs and homes. If they didn't have savings or support networks, they often ended up on the streets. Also, housing is now a lot more expensive compared to salaries, making it hard for many Americans to afford a home. Another main reason for homelessness is how we treat mental health patients. Starting in the 1950s and getting worse in the 1980s, many patients were sent out of institutions and into communities without good ongoing care. This means a lot of homeless people now have mental health problems. City growth is another reason there's less affordable housing these days. As more wealth comes into cities, housing prices go up, and low-income people are forced out. Among homeless people, the largest group is made up of single adults who don't have jobs, have a history of drug misuse, or have mental health problems. But the group of homeless families with kids is growing the fastest, showing how hard it can be economically and how scarce affordable housing is. Many veterans are also homeless.

Bringing it All Together

Homelessness affects many people, from war veterans to women, kids, and those with mental illnesses. The main problem is that we're not properly handling the social and economic issues that lead to homelessness. Today's efforts to fight homelessness are certainly more caring and effective than the harsh steps taken in the past. Still, we're lacking enough affordable housing and money fairness, renewing homelessness today. We must take a bolder, all-inclusive tactic to fix this long-lasting issue—it's essential. This would include enhancing our public assistance programs, improving mental health services, and providing more low-cost housing.