

MENTAL ILLNESS AND HOMELESSNESS



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About the Author

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CHAPTER TWO

Challenges Faced by Mentally Ill Homeless People

John, a homeless man in Gainesville, Florida, shares the daily problems faced by thousands of people who live on the streets. These include obtaining nutritious food, finding transportation, and struggling to keep a few possessions. But John's serious mental illness makes everything more difficult. When outreach workers from Gainesville's Helping Hands Clinic (HHC) approached John and offered him assistance, he reacted with paranoia and erratic behavior. The workers persisted, however, until they felt they had made a connection with John and gained his trust.

But his psychosis nearly derailed the process. "When we attempted a second meeting with John, it was as if they had not met before," reports the HHC on its website. And simply getting him to the clinic, which is staffed with social workers, physicians, and nurse practitioners, was a major challenge. HHC goes on to observe:

We also invited John to visit Helping Hands' Monday night clinic for a meal and access to a clothing closet. In the big picture, though, getting to the clinic would involve taking a bus that stops three times before it reaches HHC, and a round trip could take approximately five hours to complete. . . . Added to that, for him, are problems related to homelessness in general. Having strong body odor, feeling invisible, and being abused by people he might encounter, are just a few of them.¹²

A Struggle to Survive

For the homeless with mental illness, every day is a struggle to survive. Homelessness is already linked with a greater than normal risk of death from many causes, including infectious diseases, heart disease, cancer, substance abuse, and accidental injury. For the mentally ill homeless, suicide is another major risk. In 2020, the *Psychiatric Times* reported that in a large sample of homeless adults, nearly 8 percent had attempted suicide within the past thirty days. People who are homeless and mentally ill face a constant challenge merely to take care of their basic needs, such as adequate food, water, and protection from the elements. Their psychiatric needs often are not a priority unless a crisis forces the issue.

“In the big picture, though, getting to the clinic would involve taking a bus that stops three times before it reaches HHC. . . . Added to that, for [John], are problems related to homelessness in general. Having strong body odor, feeling invisible, and being abused by people he might encounter, are just a few of them.”¹²

—Helping Hands Clinic in Gainesville, Florida

The state of being homeless also can help trigger some kinds of mental disorders. Homeless people can suffer from anxiety, depression, paranoia, trauma, and anhedonia, which is the inability to experience joy or pleasure. These conditions can drain away any motivation for seeking psychiatric care, even when it is desperately needed. The anxiety and stress can become like a crushing weight. “It took a real turn for my mental health,” says Janet Smith, who escaped the cycle of homelessness with the aid of Breaktime, an outreach group for homeless young people in Boston. “I felt that nobody wanted to help me, nobody wanted to do anything for me. I didn’t want to do anything for myself.”¹³

Lack of transportation is a constant concern. It makes it difficult for the homeless to keep mental health appointments, obtain medications, or tend to other medical needs. Public transportation presents more problems, as with John in Gainesville. Bus lines or streetcars may not exist, may be limited in their routes, or have haphazard service. Often, people living on the streets lack money

for fares. Figuring out how to get somewhere can seem like a monumental task.

Practical considerations that others take for granted can fall into a chaotic jumble. Even if the homeless mentally ill make it to a hospital or clinic, they need help accessing government resources that could pay for treatment, such as Medicaid or the Affordable Care Act. They may not even be aware such resources are available. Lack of a mailing address or bank account prevents them from applying for housing or other kinds of benefits. Perhaps surprisingly, homeless persons are likely to have a mobile phone; according to research at the University of Southern California's Price School of Public Policy, more than 94 percent do. But they struggle to keep the phone charged or keep from losing it due to neglect or theft. Their ability to receive text alerts about medical appointments or opportunities for care is limited. Internet use may be restricted to occasional visits to the public library.

There is also the perpetual stigma attached to homeless individuals with mental illness. They lose connection with the people around them and become social outcasts. They wear the same clothes for weeks on end and lack the means to bathe, brush their teeth, or get a haircut. Passersby avoid them instinctively.



Homeless people face obstacles every day. These include obtaining nutritious food, finding transportation, and struggling to keep a few possessions. Sometimes they are able to find outreach programs that can help.

Finding a Job While Homeless

Simply applying for a job can become an intricate hassle for the homeless. Vivien, a fifty-one-year-old woman who worked full-time as a delivery truck driver, lost her job due to complications from COVID-19. In 2022, she had been unsheltered for three months and living at the Central Arizona Shelter Services homeless shelter. Vivien was eager to seek work, but her situation kept throwing roadblocks in her way. Her lack of a laptop computer and reliable Wi-Fi made it hard to apply for jobs. With no data plan and limited minutes, her smartphone seemed much less smart than usual. Moreover, job-finding websites were filled with pop-up features and boxed videos that made her phone seize up.

Vivien increasingly felt the mental burden of depression and anxiety for the future. She swore that things were simpler during a previous short stint in prison rather than in her homeless predicament. “In prison I could ask someone to help me find work after, I could use computers to find something for when I got out,” she says. “Here, we are just on our own. Any issue I face, any hardship, I have to face it alone.”

Quoted in Natalie Florence and Heather Ross, “How Tech Can Make It Excruciatingly Hard to Apply for a Job While Homeless,” *Slate*, June 27, 2023. www.slate.com.

Run-ins with law enforcement tend to make them feel even more paranoid and isolated. “You don’t feel important anymore,” says Smith. “You don’t feel like you’re part of society. You don’t feel like you’re a part of anything. You feel like you’re being looked down on. . . . You can hear people mumbling, talking . . . they give a disgusted look. That right there can bring anybody down . . . [it] is 100% just crushing.”¹⁴

The Vicious Cycle of Homelessness

Mental illness is one of the root causes of homelessness, along with job loss, substance abuse, and lack of affordable housing. When people become homeless, they may think it is only a temporary setback. Some do manage to bounce back and find stable housing relatively quickly. But escaping the vicious cycle of homelessness can be extremely difficult. This is especially true when an individual has a severe mental illness, such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, or chronic depression. It can be nearly impossible for them to hold a job and thus keep up with financial responsibilities.

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