

## THEIR CHOICE?

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[Assignment: Take a stand on a public issue and convince your readers that your position is right. You will need to find published materials which supply evidence from which you can draw conclusions or which state the arguments of other people who agree with you.]

(1) Meet "Joe," a 42-year-old artist who, when he was 24, killed his wife. Shortly thereafter he was put into an institution for the criminally insane and hospitalized for 16 years. After leaving the hospital, Joe lived inside a hollowed out tomb. Today Joe lives in the streets of Boston along with one million other mentally ill in America (Bussak 43).

(2) Meet Chris Sprowal, a middle-aged black divorced man with two children. After a business and marriage failure, Sprowal moved to New York City to find work. The only thing he found was cold streets and crowded shelters. Sprowal sleeps in libraries, courtrooms, and hospital lobbies, finding these places warm during the cold winter nights (Davis).

(3) Today the streets of America are filled with the homeless--approximately three million people. In the past five years, government officials and private groups have tried to meet the needs of the homeless. In New York City, for example, there are eighteen shelters; five years ago, only two existed. In 1982, only ten churches in New York provided beds; today, over 150 churches offer a total of 650 beds in over 60 shelters. Boston has doubled its capacity of beds in just two years (Bassuk 40-1). It is evident that the number of homeless people is continually increasing. Even though the federal budget allocates over 60 million dollars, and cities like New York and Philadelphia have spent over 216 million and 14 million dollars respectively, more aid and assistance in the form of housing and psychiatric care is needed for the homeless (Huntley).

(4) Many people have speculated about the source of this massive group of individualistic nomads. Ronald Reagan, in an interview on Good Morning America stated, "'What we [the administration] have found in this country--and maybe we're more aware of it now--is one problem that we've had, even in the best of times, and that is the people who are sleeping on the grates, the homeless are homeless, you might say, by choice'" (Wickenden 24, emphasis added). On the other hand, others attribute the homeless population to deinstitutionalization, dwindling supplies of affordable housing, continuing high unemployment, and decreasing welfare benefits (Wickenden 19).

(5) As many as one-third to one-half of the homeless come from a process called deinstitutionalization (Fustero 58). This process calls for removal of the mentally ill from institutions, and placing them into "the care of community mental-health centers, where they can continue their treatment in more humane social settings" (Fustero 58). This was a noble gesture initiated by the Kennedy administration in 1963 to slowly discharge those patients fit for community living from state and county mental hospitals into care homes and mental-health centers (Krauthammer 103). This dispersion with the aid of new psychiatric drugs and constant contact with the centers soon failed. Patients were released regardless of whether local facilities could provide adequate care, or even if the facilities did not exist. The new "miracle" drugs also proved to be less effective than most psychiatrists had hoped (Wickenden 24). In 1955, there were 559,000 patients in the state and county mental hospitals; after deinstitutionalization that number decreased to less than 125,000 patients (Bassuk 43). Initially, the mentally ill made it to health centers, but eventually, after lack of government aid, they ended up on the streets (Stern 294).

(6) The U.S. government also increased the causes of homelessness by shaving welfare benefits to the underprivileged. These deductions included cuts of \$700 million from low income energy assistance, \$1.8 billion from housing assistance, \$4.8 billion from families with dependent children, \$5.2 billion from child nutrition, and \$6.8 billion from food stamps (Wickenden 21). All these welfare benefit reductions hinder the ability of the poor to make it out of the streets and into homes--one might even say they hinder their "choice."

(7) The government also contributes to homelessness by failing to provide low cost housing for the poor. During the Johnson administration, the government was to provide six million low-income housing units, but fewer than half of those have been built. The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) reported that construction and renovation of low income housing had dwindled to 203,113 units in 1979 under the Carter administration, and under the Reagan administration that number has dipped to 55,120. Other alternatives of places to live are also decreasing. One such alternative is to be put on a waiting list for public housing, but even this is often fruitless. For example, the waiting list in Savannah, Georgia, is 4 years (Alter 22-4). Or one can live in single room occupancy hotels (SRO's), but even these are diminishing in number. Over 1.3 million rooms (nearly half of the total available) have been destroyed since 1970 (Nelson 27). One may choose to live in low-rent apartments, but according to the Community Services Society, 500,000 low-rent apartments are converted into high-cost condominiums every year (Wickenden 20). The Low Income Housing Information service also reports that the rental cost of these apartments totals up to 72 percent of a person's income if that person

makes less than 3,000 dollars (Bussak 41). The only other "choice" the poor have is the streets and shelters.

(8) After making the "choice" to live in the streets and shelters of America these homeless people often find it hard to collect benefits aimed towards them. For instance, 8 million dollars was set aside to turn military buildings into shelters, but only \$900,000 actually went to benefit the homeless. The other 7.21 million went to "military routine maintenance" (Chaze 54-5). Because they have no fixed address, the homeless find it to hard to receive welfare payments and food stamps, and in some states they don't even have the right to vote (Nelson 25).

(9) Although cities like Chicago, which provides 1,666 beds in over 40 facilities, and Washington, D.C., which has allocated 3.7 million dollars for a new shelter, have begun to help the homeless, other cities have treated the homeless in a less than humane manner (Thornton). Take, for instance, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, which dumps rat poison and chlorine bleach on the top of garbage to discourage the hungry homeless from loitering. Winnemucca, Nevada, is also taking action. The twenty member police force tosses "undesirables" into garbage pits or drives them deep into the desert and leaves them to starve and die. These measures have been taken to "clean up" the cities from "human litter" (Leo). Greenwich Village, New York, has placed barbed wire across the hot-air grates to discourage the homeless from sleeping on them during the winter (Krauthammer 103). Phoenix has established "anti-bum" legislation to discourage the homeless from taking up permanent residence in the streets. This includes fines for stealing garbage (Phoenix claims it as city property). The city has even managed to shut down most of the food programs and shelters in the area (Fustero 60).

(10) It seems the only time that we do recognize these people, this human litter, is when they attack one of us. In 1985, a woman walked into the Wall Street office of a currency trading firm and shot the owner. This caused stereotypical responses from the city labelling all the homeless as criminals. True, these people do get arrested more often than others, but it is mostly for misdemeanors. More often than not, these people are the victims of crime, not the perpetrators (Krauthammer 103). These people have a mortality rate three times the normal rate (Krauthammer 104).

(11) Once a new shelter or health-center does open up, there is a problem with community acceptance. Most people, as stated before, think all the homeless are criminals (Fustero 60). There is a problem of fear, stemming from businessmen who are afraid of decreased business and residents who are afraid of decreased property value and crime (Fustero 60). For example, in Washington, there was a referendum during the election of a public official. The referendum required the District to

provide shelter to everyone who requested it--it was passed by a resounding 72 percent. A few weeks after the referendum was passed, a proposition requesting a small shelter in the neighborhood was brought to a town meeting. It was turned down. Said one resident, "What do you mean, support services? I voted for Initiative 17 [the referendum], but I thought I was just voting for mattresses on the floor" (Wickenden 24).

(12) We, the United States (if we can call ourselves united), must recognize these people on the street as people. We must realize that it is not their "choice" to be on the streets, but the result of our foolish inability to see the results of our actions. The deinstitutionalization process must be completed and sufficient care must be provided to one million mentally-ill homeless who have no ability to care for themselves. The government should provide escape routes for the homeless so they have a chance to make it out of the streets. But above all, we must realize that the homeless are people who must be given a chance to live.

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