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housing and social protection systems for all to

address homelessness

Statement submitted by Psychological Study of Social Issues., non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRIBUTIONS TO AFFORDABLE HOUSING AND SOCIAL PROTECTION SYSTEMS

Homelessness is a growing global crisis (Busch-Geertsema, et.al. 2016). According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (1966), homelessness involves a violation of the right to an adequate standard of living including adequate housing, employment, health and security. The homeless includes families, women, children, youth, the elderly, racial/ethnic minorities, the disabled, migrants and refugees (Scutella & Johnson, 2018).

In the Outcome Document of the World Summit for Social Development (1995), Member States of the United Nations agreed that the goal of social development is to enhance the quality of life for all people, including freedom from homelessness and inadequate housing. Since that time, governments have committed themselves to ensuring the right to affordable housing for everyone by 2030 (Goal 11.1, United Nations Sustainable Development Agenda, 2015) through policies and approaches that achieve the right to adequate housing without discrimination (The New Urban Agenda, 2016). Despite its global severity, homelessness has not been addressed with the urgency required by government policies/programs implemented through multi-stakeholder partnerships.

Psychological evidence and theory provide an essential perspective on homelessness: individuals who experience homelessness are more likely to experience psychological trauma, suicide, social isolation, and the physical deprivation it causes (Scutella & Johnson, 2018; Johnstone, et.al. 2018). Prejudice towards people who are homeless is rooted in dehumanization (Harris & Fiske, 2006) and contributes to further social isolation (Johnstone, et.al. 2015). These negative outcomes occur whether people are displaced due to disasters, economic causes, or unjust housing policies. This statement focuses on psychological and social processes for counteracting the traumatic effects of homelessness for all people including those experiencing evictions and other housing insecurities, migrants/refugees, and those forced to migrate due to climate change.

Traumatic Effects of Evictions and other Housing Insecurities

The impact of housing insecurities on health and well-being is evident in the foreclosure and eviction crisis in developed countries beginning in 2007. This event affected approximately three million people in the United States alone by 2010. Populations in Southern Europe also experienced significant increases in those precariously housed. Housing insecurity due to threats of or actual evictions are associated with higher incidence of mental health problems (Bambridge, Carrizales, 2017; Vasquez-Vera, et. al., 2017).

Homelessness rooted in poverty may be particularly difficult to reverse, due to challenges of obtaining sufficient income to secure adequate housing as well as the risk of increasing psychological distress the longer a person remains homeless. Whereas homeless men experience more distress at the onset of homelessness, psychological distress continually increases for women, over the homeless experience (Scutella & Johnson, 2018). Domestic violence presents a dual effect: emotional and perhaps physical trauma to violence and additional emotional and psychological distress due to housing insecurity (Baker et. al. (2010).

Traumatic Effects of Homelessness for Migrants and Refugees

Worldwide racist and xenophobic reactions to refugees and migrants lead to violations of their human rights and prevent their full participation in society. Migrants and refugees searching for safety within Europe, Africa, Asia, South and North America tell similar stories of trauma. Children traveling unaccompanied or with their families are exposed to harrowing acts of violence, including murder of family members, rape, torture, near death experiences and other horrific acts (Flood & Coyne, 2019). Such traumatic experiences are re-lived as individuals seek access to transit and destination countries. Cameroonian asylum seekers in South Africa found that the ability to retell such stories accurately and convincingly might win a new home but did little to address the longer-term impact of the trauma (Pineseh & Mulu, 2016).

Trauma experienced by migrants/refugees seeking to secure housing is compounded by poverty, isolation, and discriminatory rental practices (Baker et.al. 2010). Migrant/refugee status may render them ineligible for resources, resulting in unsafe housing options that increase the persistence of housing instability (Mayock, Sheridan & Parker, 2012).

Traumatic Effects of Forced Migration Due to Climate Change

People are at a higher risk of psychological distress when modes of daily living are suddenly and drastically undermined (Whittington, 2010; Giddens, 1984). Researchers have documented the multiple psychological and emotional impacts on people forced to migrate due to climate change including nervous breakdowns, depression, sleep disorders and anxiety. A study of Aboriginals in New South Wales, Australia, forced from their homes by severe droughts documented their loss of employment in and spiritual connections to their rural homelands and resulting trauma, despair and increased suicide attempts (Pearce et. al., 2015). Similar distress, hopelessness and behavioral problems have been found among farm families and their children in New South Wales, related to markedly lower rainfalls (Pearce, et. al., 2015; Carnie, et. al., 2011).

RECOMMENDATIONS

We recommend that Member States, UN agencies, NGOs, civil society and humanitarian groups:

- Implement human rights policies and programs to provide safe, affordable housing and health and social services to combat the traumatic effects of homelessness.
- Ensure that all housing, health and social services are implemented according to ethical principles respecting the human rights and dignity of homeless people.
- Provide housing and supportive services early, following the onset of homelessness, so that adults, families and children do not remain entrenched in homelessness.
- Ensure that migrant/refugee children especially those under age five, are not separated from families for more than four to eight weeks.
- Provide access to education for all children, including migrant/refugee children, as the most effective tool for integrating them into host societies.
- Create partnerships with governments, United Nations agencies, civil society and humanitarian organizations, and other stakeholders to generate resources for reducing homelessness.

- Provide migrant/refugee children who are separated from families with nurturing caregivers in supportive environments.
- Promote culturally relevant programs to support the mental health and psychosocial well-being of adults, children and families exposed to homelessness.
- Provide mental healthcare to the homeless with a sensitivity to how the intersection of various kinds of housing discrimination affects their vulnerability to trauma.
- Provide trained psychologists and mental health counselors to provide competent, non-discriminatory mental health services to homeless people.
- Provide problem solving, stress management and cognitive behavioral training for homeless people with difficult childhood histories and maladaptive coping styles.
- Provide psychological and mental health training and supervision for staff of homeless services.
- Provide services to promote the psychosocial recovery and well-being of homeless women, girls and children who experience physical, sexual or psychological violence.
- Support the empowerment and resilience of homeless people.
- Promote the empowerment and resilience of homeless people through education and training about human rights and through working cooperatively to advocate for and manage resources.
- Promote training for homeless people about income generating activities, life skills, and a psychological sense of efficacy/control over living conditions as a buffer against homelessness.
- Provide access to decent jobs with living wages for housing insecure/homeless people.
- Enable homeless people, including migrants and refugees, to participate in decisions affecting their well-being.
- Eliminate racism, xenophobia and other forms of discrimination affecting the homeless.
- Engage local communities in counteracting prejudices, abuses and violence against the homeless by developing and implementing socially inclusive housing policies and practices.
- Collaborate with a sustainable, supportive network of activist groups to protect the homeless against discriminatory housing practices and to advocate for their well-being.
- Combat racist, xenophobic policies and practices by investigating and exposing their negative consequences on the homeless.
- Launch media campaigns to educate communities for social inclusion of the homeless by discouraging incitement to racial, ethnic or other prejudices about the homeless in public discourse.
- Provide opportunities for the homeless to tell their stories for the purpose of changing the negative narratives prevalent about them in society.

The statement has been endorsed by:

European Health Psychology Society

Institute for Multicultural Counseling and Educational Services, Inc.

International Council of Psychologists

International Union of Psychological Science
