

CONTRIBUTOR

If you think that you're safe from being made homeless, you're wrong

The Huffington Post, by Callum Hunter, Contributor, January 3, 2017 01:35 pm ET

Callum Hunter - I like a lot of things, especially my opinions.

This post is hosted on the Huffington Post's Contributor platform. Contributors control their own work and post freely to our site. If you need to flag this entry as abusive, send us an email.

Before I began volunteering with a homelessness shelter in Manchester city center, I had a number of assumptions about why people were homeless in modern day Britain. It was my assumption that homeless people were all quite similar in their experiences. That perhaps failings within the education system had resulted in people leaving school without any qualifications or guidance into how to find paid employment. That paid employment itself was sometimes so scarce that even unskilled work was unavailable. I assumed that some people might have been forced into severe financial debt because of government cuts and benefit sanctions that they had no choice but to live without a permanent roof above their heads. That the disease of drink and drug addiction must have played a significant part in both the cause and consequence of why an individual had to live without a home.

I was right to assume these things, of course. The factors I've just listed are indeed reasons why a person may be homeless in modern day Britain. But what is apparent to me now is that my assumptions alone barely scratch the surface - people are homeless for countless reasons. In fact, in working more closely with homeless people over recent months, I have come to realise that even myself, an educated and relatively savvy individual with a good relationship with my family is not immune from being made homeless - and if you're anything like me then neither are you.

Indeed, in volunteering I have been introduced to a mixture of homeless people - or 'service users' as they are referred to when they spend the night with us. Each individual I've met have different stories to tell as to why they have been made homeless. Some are not British nationals and have found it difficult to integrate into British society and have ultimately been unable to find employment, despite being fluent in English and holding good qualifications from their countries of birth. Others are British nationals with a lot of work experience and a willingness to find employment but who simply cannot get a job - a situation made worse because they have no family or friends to turn to for help and therefore have no choice but to seek help from charities and churches. Soon service users find themselves in what seems to be a never-ending cycle of travelling from warm place to warm place, shelter to shelter - rather than concentrating their efforts on trying to find a job - something that is perfectly understandable when you consider that being homeless means that simply surviving the freezing weather is an arduous task, particularly in winter.

At any rate, on my very first day of volunteering I was surprised to see one service user, a guy dressed in a suit - complete with a briefcase and polished shoes. At first I assumed he was a fellow volunteer but I was wrong. He was homeless, despite having a unique and very sellable skill of being a Web Designer. He was simply down on his luck and had ran out of money. His

partner had recently died and his family were not in a position where they could offer much help meaning he had no choice but to seek help from us. Despite this, he remained optimistic and I spent most of my shift talking with him about our time at university, our music tastes and what clubs we liked to go to around Manchester. A conversation I never anticipated having with a homeless person before this moment.

That same night I met a young guy who had recently landed an interview for an office job the following day. However, other than a few items of clothing he carried in a bag with him, he did not own any clothes other than what he had on his back. Unable to donate any appropriate office wear because the shelter simply did not have any, we were unable to help him other than by providing him with a hot meal and a warm bed. Nevertheless, he was by no means who I expected to meet on my first shift at the shelter - a guy around my age - feeling anxious and nervous about a job interview the following day, a situation I have found myself in several times throughout my life.

I've also met several ex-military guys who upon leaving the military found that they received little to no help from the government to begin building a new life for themselves. Something that is unbelievably unjustified and truly surprising considering that each of them signed up to serve our country in full knowledge that they may have to sacrifice their lives.

But this was not the most surprising thing that I encountered by working more closely with homeless people. The vast majority of the homeless people I've met through volunteering have been completely sober - alcohol consumption and drug use is uncommon among many people that I've got to know. I found this particularly surprising because what I originally assumed to be true - that alcohol and drug addiction was an experience that most homeless people shared - has turned out to be entirely inaccurate. Although I do not dispute the fact that alcohol and drug addiction is a major problem for many homeless people - particularly for the many homeless people I regularly encounter on the streets of Manchester, it is now apparent that I was absolutely wrong to assume that most homeless people must suffer from alcohol and drug additions.

Indeed, I have come to realize that there exists a sort of homelessness that is not regularly seen in our day to day lives. What is typically discussed in the media about homelessness in Britain completely ignores certain aspects of why some people have been made homeless. Though I have always felt like homelessness is an issue that oppresses our shared humanity, it was not until I started to work more closely with homeless people and began to learn their stories that I have come to realize that each and every one of us is at risk of being homeless. Eradicating homelessness for good is therefore in our collective interest. You simply cannot guarantee that you yourself won't become a '*service user*' one day.