

Geography 320

Dr. Rosenman

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### Justification for Final Project

There is a pandemic sweeping across cities all over the United States. You may be thinking that, given the unprecedented times that we are living in, it is Covid-19. And, while there is credibility to this assumption, I am referring to the issue of the rate of infection that so many homeless individuals have faced, are facing, and will continue to face. This is such an important and timely subject, which, unfortunately, is often overlooked or disregarded. For the purpose of this project, I have used examples pertaining to New York City, as there is a very large population of homeless people. Also, New York City has an ever-increasing number of coronavirus cases, thus rendering the homeless population even more vulnerable. Though the situation these days is extremely dire, and sometimes very grim, it is important to shed light on the heightened inequalities taking place in a large and wealthy city.

Homelessness among individuals is something that has been happening for a long time, but given the recent outbreak of COVID-19, they are slowly being forgotten about and left to die in tightly-packed shelters or out on the streets with little-to-no opportunity to practice social distancing. They often have a higher rate of serious health problems, constant exposure, and lack of access to bathrooms and running water needed to perform tasks as simple as washing their hands. Homeless individuals have a greater risk of dying relative to the general population, depending on age, gender, shelter status, and morbidity (Gambatese, et al., 2020). Nikita Stewart, of the New York Times, writes: "Most [adults] live in dormitories that are fertile fields for the virus, with beds close enough for people sleeping in them to hold hands" (Stewart, 2020). In any case, it would be nearly impossible for New York City to attain total prevention among those who are homeless, but, as a result of dilapidated shelters and general infrastructure, the city is trying to at least lower the risk. Dr. Brian King writes the following: "...relationships require greater

analysis to understand how disease transforms the interactions between social and environmental systems, and how these systems in turn shape disease management” (King, 2010). I would argue that homelessness can happen in varying degrees, depending on whether one is living on the street, in a shelter, or in a makeshift “home,” such a car or tent. Individuals who are considered to be “unsheltered;” that is, bedding down on the streets, in the subway, and in other public places are left particularly vulnerable. People who may be experiencing unsheltered homelessness “...may perceive staying in an encampment as a safer option than staying on their own in an unsheltered location or in an emergency shelter; however, encampments can create both real and perceived challenges for the people who stay in them as well as for neighbors and the broader community” (Cohen, et al., n.d.). In times of crisis, such as the one we are currently facing, homeless individuals’ decisions about where to stay represent smart, yet often painful, choices pertaining to what is available at that moment.

Lastly, pertaining to the idea of generational homelessness, students who are currently living in encampments or homeless shelters—with their families or relatives—are having to pay a tremendous price in order to obtain their education via online learning. While treating homeless individuals who have contracted COVID-19 is of the utmost importance, we must also consider the implications for school-aged students. Nikita Stewart writes, in ‘She’s 10...,’ that “...door-to-door polling [in New York City] showed that only 15 out of 79 families had a computer or tablet. There were 177 school-aged children living in the shelter and they attended more than 100 schools” (Stewart, 2020). It goes without saying that there is also often difficulty when it comes to finding WiFi, or even quiet, common spaces to complete assignments in. As always seems to be the case, poor and vulnerable students are left behind in a time of turmoil and fear.

Life during a pandemic is adversely difficult for everyone, but homeless people seem to be most at-risk during this time. Unfortunately, whether due to unawareness or perhaps ignorance, their lives tend to not have any value. But, I feel that this is not right,

and, therefore, wanted to structure my project around something meaningful and eye-opening.

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