

From the keyboard of Joe Gardner.

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Homelessness is a symptom of other problems. As Drexel Smith pointed out, generally, 1/3 are mentally ill, 1/3 are addicted to drugs or alcohol. The remaining suffer from a combination of mental illness and use drugs and alcohol to medicate themselves. A smaller percentage are people who experience misfortune due to a lack of literacy or loss of a job, eviction or fleeing circumstances such as domestic violence. The latter folks in the spectrum generally don't remain homeless for long. They move in with others and get back on their feet.



If you talk to those on the street, they might tell you they like the lifestyle and freedom. My experience is there is always some underlying root cause that put them on the street. More accurately, they avoid the structured shelter environment because it conflicts with their ability to feed their addictions. It is almost always one of the outlined issues of addiction or mental illness.

Just about every city in California has some degree of homeless in their community. Other cities have more of a problem due to poor public policy that includes the lack of enforcement of long established laws against trespassing, camping and public health violations. Another reason is lack of resources for mental treatment. There are not enough long-term care beds for the mentally ill. Our emergency rooms become the band-aid treatment centers for homeless people with acute mental illness and drug overdoses. Some psychotropic medications that could help someone with mental illness costs hundreds of dollars and are not covered by insurance. Couple that with well-intended efforts and policies by politicians and government officials to “help” the homeless, some cities attract more homeless people from other areas to their communities. Word gets out about freebies and handouts. That's why 1/3 of the nation's poor live in our state. “No strings attached” entitlement policies attract the poor for free cash stipends and food vouchers. Once local governments and compassionate but misguided people lay out the welcome mat, the residual problem of visible homelessness grows. There is a critical need for welfare or entitlement reform in California.



A key reason we have this state-wide problem of homelessness is because of the collapsing of the criminal justice system brought on by a progressive legislature, social justice advocates and an acquiescent governor that have pushed forward prison realignment (AB109) Proposition 47 and now Proposition 57. Tens of thousands that should still be in prison have now become “free-range” probationers. The result is criminal recidivism. Moving many felony crimes to misdemeanor status has made it nearly impossible to prosecute anyone. Add in overcrowding in

our jail system and arrested “misdemeanor” offenders are merely given citations and reluctantly set free by law enforcement to commit crimes to support their drug habits or sometimes violently act out their untreated mental illness on the innocent public. Peace officers have little incentive to arrest and do hours

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of paperwork just to see the arrestee walk out of the jail with a ticket that will turn into a warrant because the offender is not responsible enough to appear in court.

Courts can be the last chance for intervention. It can force the prosecuted to alcohol and drug rehabilitation. They can impose mental health treatment and monitored probation to set people on the path of sobriety, stability, and wellness. Court actions instill an individual sense of personal responsibility and accountability. The courts can't do any of that if the arrested never make it to the court room.

The City of West Covina fares well in comparison to other cities that have attracted the homeless such as Los Angeles. Unfortunately, local cities can do little to fix the issues of homelessness except be earnest advocates for change either at the ballot box or bending the ear of an elected state official. The responsibility and solutions rest solely at the feet of State government. Many of those elected public servants have been architects of social experiments at the expense of the safety and fiscal wellbeing of the average California citizen. We are seeing the tainted fruits of their bad policy decisions.

We need to be watchful and learn from the mistakes of others so that we can avoid attracting problems to our city.

Joe Gardner,

Forced by necessity to be an expert on homelessness