

Brain injury a hidden factor in homelessness

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Something as simple as a bump on the head might be the difference between a home and a life on the street.

I was carpooling to work when we passed a homeless man with a cardboard sign on the side of the road. “Get a job!” belted one of my colleagues out the window, who up until that point I had had a crush on. We were a bunch of white, middle-class high school students with summer jobs at a moving company. What did we know about life on the street?

But making assumptions about situations we don’t understand is something humans are expert at. Almost a quarter of Canadians think homeless people are to blame for their circumstances and almost a fifth think their tragic flaw is laziness. You might think this yourself.

But what if I told you that many people become homeless for the same reason Sidney Crosby was sidelined from the NHL?

A recent study by St. Michael’s Hospital found that almost half of homeless men suffered a traumatic brain injury (TBI) and that 87 per cent of those injuries happened before the men lost their homes. The median age for a person’s first TBI was around 11 years old; assaults and sports were the most common culprits. Next time you want to yell “get a job”, picture a child hockey player who was body-checked too hard or your neighbour’s teen who was beat up on the way home from school.

It’s not as easy to lay blame when your bullseye has a human face. Mother Teresa summed it up best when she said: “If I look at the mass I will never act. If I look at the one, I will.” If you live in a city, you see homeless people all the time. To stare in the eyes of income inequality and ponder a failed mental health system is too much for a Monday morning. Rather than feel guilt on your coffee run, it’s easier to pretend homeless people are all just a bunch of lazy bums. That they’re fundamentally different from you or me.

But they’re not. Many are the grown-up versions of that 10-year-old hockey player or bullied teen. And seeing the homeless as relatable individuals, rather than a group of degenerates, is

crucial if we ever hope to get them off the streets. Take the study where researchers present people with statistics about starvation in Africa vs. details about a four-year-old child with “ribs showing through his taut dry skin.” Guess which scenario garnered more donations? Everyone with a heart – though especially parents – feels injustice at the sight of a small, innocent body wracked by starvation.

There’s a reason there have been countless campaigns to humanize the homeless and prove how Johnny-on-the-street is just like the rest of us. Viral videos show that a haircut and a suit transform a homeless person into a Wall Street banker.

And yet most people still find it hard to imagine themselves ending up a slave to strangers’ spare change.

This research could invalidate the “it’s their own fault” argument once and for all. But so far our indignation over concussions has been restricted to Sidney Crosby and his colleagues.

At least three previous studies have confirmed the correlation between TBIs and homelessness, yet we still only talk about hockey and football. Because of athlete suicides, we’re having a national debate about violence in sports. And we should. But concussions affect a much larger group.

Obviously the link between brain injuries and homelessness is not a straight line. The cognitive effects can exacerbate or trigger mental illness and addiction — issues that predispose someone to end up on the streets. But anecdotally the TBI theory resonates. The study was posted on the social news site Reddit and has more than 1,000 comments. One user wrote: “It sounds like you are describing my older half-brother. He was hit by a van while riding his bicycle when he was a teenager, and had a traumatic brain injury. He developed schizophrenia in his twenties. He was incredibly smart, he tutored Cal-Tech math wiz kids, but he was just bizarre and well, crazy. He’s been homeless in Southern California for decades and has multiple run-ins with the law.”

The findings have implications for health and social workers too. Doctors can better inform patients with TBIs about possible long-term symptoms. Frontline workers should be trained to look for signs of trauma.

The rest of us should use this research to confront the fallacy that most homeless people have only themselves to blame. Because it turns out the only thing that may separate us from them is a serious knock on the head.

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