

Addiction to Wealth and Power: Homelessness as a Symptom of a Great Societal Addiction

Executive Summary

Wealth, the acquiring, retaining, and consuming of it, stands as one of the most pervasive forms of *approved* societal addiction since the beginning of civilization. The symptoms of a society ripening for an addiction-fed decline are not obvious because they subtly hide behind validation, idealization, stereotypes, and social structures.

Homelessness acts as a lens through which we can view how society has grown to overvalue wealth and power and under value the need to provide access to growth opportunities for those in the most impoverished conditions. How society responds to and works towards a solution to homelessness reveals the symptoms of a century's long illness.

The cure for the addiction comes in a change in understanding and attitude as we, as individuals, government agencies, and corporate entities are guided to realize that various degrees of abundance and over-abundance can be used in a way that has the potential to fulfill both the receiver *and* the giver. Identifying, acknowledging, and changing how wealth is viewed and used can treat the core illness. The elimination of the addiction comes through continued effort to face the idealized values of wealth and power, which will be the catalyst to reduce symptoms, like homelessness, that dehumanize and demoralize vulnerable populations.

Background: The Symptoms of Illness

People with addiction continually engage in compulsive, self-centered, and excessive pleasurable behaviors despite harmful or diminishing pleasurable consequences.¹ An alcoholic continues to drink even though it damages professional and personal relationships. The smoker continues to use cigarettes even though they have been diagnosed with lung disease. An addict who is fully consumed by their addiction does not see their destructive behavior as a problem even when they lie, steal, or manipulate those around them to gain access to the object of their obsession. To the addicted person, survival relies on acquiring more. Essentially, the addiction obscures the human conscience.

Society's addiction does not come from simply having wealth. The problem is a misplaced value on wealth that stems from how wealth is viewed, related to,² and then used, no matter the level of it acquired. Overvaluing fame, social media followers,³ or material possessions can have the same misguided effect on the conscience.

At that point, wealth subconsciously becomes an indicator of self-worth, which is only as high as the number of dollars of net worth. To lose that wealth would be to lose a sense of self. Mental and emotional security then rely on continued access to wealth as well as *growing* access to it to boost the ego.

Validation need not come most dominantly from wealth; there is another alternative. Validation can come from the success or potential healing power that wealth offers the person holding it and

from the significant importance and opportunity when it can be used to help others help themselves and society.

Resolution: Addiction is Here Among Us

Everyone has something to offer and give to promote and create change. Everyone can offer the highest and best value to their own lives and those around them. The dominant motivational system will naturally change when people see the impact their wealth can have for the empowerment of others.

Equating self-worth with wealth creates a subtle subconscious belief that those with less wealth may be worth less as human beings. Those subconscious biases obscure the effect that a lack of training and opportunities can have as well as undervaluing what those with less wealth have to offer.

Addiction to wealth subtly ventures into unhealthy territory when there is a lack of recognition and acknowledgment of the harmful consequences of subconscious beliefs and attitudes that govern how we think and feel. It is like someone addicted to alcohol tearing through their closet looking for the last hidden bottle of vodka. To the addicted person, it is not a problem. It is just what they do. Societies can tear through their own closets in search of ‘more,’ discarding people just as the alcoholic discards clothing, boxes, and shoes in search of a bottle. But when they get more, like the alcoholic, it does not bring happiness. The bottle of addiction is empty and only leaves the addict wanting more.

The homeless, marginalized groups, and minorities might be tossed aside like clothing in the closet where they don’t have access to education, health care, job opportunities, geographic locations with better employment options, and social connections at the same level as those in a higher income bracket. Without those opportunities, they cannot attain greater wealth, show how they can naturally develop skill sets, nor create a family legacy on which to build more wealth. But the system in which they live and function doesn’t create those opportunities at equal levels.

Making the Change by Remembering Who We Are as a Nation and World

Deviant behaviors due to addiction to wealth span all social and economic classes.⁴ Anyone can succumb to money’s siren call. It triggers classic addictive behaviors like lying, dishonesty, and manipulating. Parents who bribe their children’s way into elite universities, insider trading, pyramid schemes, and other methods of gaining or securing “more” might seem like an acceptable means to those involved as they hold and gain more wealth. A socially accepted addiction ignores the opportunity, and some would be able to understand human responsibility, we all have, no matter our income level, to care for others, especially the most vulnerable.

For those in poverty, opportunities can promote healing. As a society, if individuals can gain a greater psychological education that helps them reflect on their relationship to wealth and how it can help both themselves and others, they can find that place inside themselves where they feel satisfied and safe with what they have, unlocking the addiction to an endless need for more. With less desire to acquire more, the doorway to identifying systemic barriers and problems and ways

to overcome them opens and widens. The key is that the change does not come from guilt, but from a real seeing and understanding that there is a hidden joy in promoting policies and programs that encourage opportunities for those most in need.

There are already models on which to base the needed changes. Homelessness in Trieste, Italy is almost non-existent. Their most vulnerable citizens receive medical care, adequate nutrition, and are provided housing options with various levels of treatment or assistance if needed.⁵ They are perceived as valuable members of their society who deserve love and consideration.

The German prison system, which has an incredibly small rate of recidivism, bases its success on rehabilitating inmates rather than punishing them.⁶ The guard-prisoner relationship is one of support as guards are trained to work with those with mental health issues. Inmates have private rooms, family visits, social interaction, access to health care, education, regular exercise, and good nutrition. Of course, the homeless are not inmates by any means. But the Germans are looking at the whole person to meet their emotional, psychological, and physical needs to help them reenter society.

Community First in Austin, Texas, and the Kensington Campus in Lancaster, California, take a whole person approach, too. Community First features a 51-acre community for those coming out of homelessness. The community includes community spaces, access to health care, and options for job training. The Kensington Campus also provides a supportive housing apartment community that features community spaces, gardens, and landscaping. Located in Lancaster, California, the apartment complex features twenty-five one-bedroom units for the homeless and chronically homeless with disabilities.

The proposal for long-term supportive housing as discussed in [previous white papers](#) includes integrating these similar ideals and practices from existing successful programs like that in Trieste, Germany, Austin, and Lancaster to create a sense of community that provides the guidance, training, dignity, and vision for how people can optimize their lifestyle and develop self-discipline.

Society does not consciously discard the homeless, but if these people are dominantly seen as a problem to be solved instead of acting within a *systemic problem* to be solved, we miss possible solutions. By acknowledging and facing the overvaluing or addiction to wealth and power, there is an ability to look for ways to equalize opportunities for vulnerable populations. After all, the Declaration of Independence states that we all have the right to the equal pursuit of happiness. Chasing after empty wealth hurts everyone, and to fuel the addiction to wealth is to limit the understanding of how those with low, limited, or non-existent incomes can reach their greatest potential and happiness with changes in housing, policy, education, governmental, and banking institutions. Society's collective conscience knows there is more that can be done.

Conclusion: A Different Approach

Illnesses have cures. It can take time, but the first step is acknowledging the problem. Addiction exists. The income gap between upper-income U.S. households and the middle and lower-income households in pre-COVID society grew.⁷ It is too soon mid to post-COVID to know how

that gap has changed, but chances are it has continued to grow as job and financial losses skew towards those with mid to lower incomes.

At this time in the midst of a pandemic, when jobs, homes, and dignity are so easily lost, and uncertainty knocks at everyone's door, we need a change in how we perceive stereotypes and the role of wealth in our society. A sense of responsibility to address those who have less, no matter our own or others' social or economic status, would shift attitudes and act as a treatment for an illness that has persisted for centuries. As history has shown, civilizations disappear when access to wealth does not grow at more equal rates among its citizens. People need food and shelter, but to really close the wealth gap, they need more.

Policies that equalize opportunity and access to adequate health care, nutrition, education, job training, and transportation provide opportunities for lasting, generational change. Fiscal policies that provide minimum income security and tax laws that remove barriers to education, housing, and other basic necessities create opportunities for everyone to use their talents for the benefit of themselves and society as a whole. For the homeless, there is an opportunity to create a permanent supportive housing program that is designed to meet the diverse needs of human existence. A system with practices and policies that create stability, security, and wealth for everyone is one that is built to last. It is one that supports the psychological wellbeing as well as the physical and fiscal health of society and can spread on a national and global scale.

Robert Strock is a teacher, psychotherapist, author, and humanitarian and has developed a unique approach to communication, contemplation, and inquiry. He promotes national and international conversations on healing, having been a featured speaker at the UN, contributed in global documentaries, and runs a thriving private practice for business, non-profit, entertainment industry and government leaders, as well as caregivers in a variety of fields.

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Open the Dialogue: The issues surrounding homelessness are many and complex. I invite all those who are interested in ending homelessness, addressing our relationship as a society to wealth, and other issues raised in this white paper to please reach out. Contact me at robertstrock.org.

¹ American Society of Addiction Medication – Definition of Addiction. <https://www.asam.org/Quality-Science/definition-of-addiction>

² Lamont, M. (2019). From ‘having’ to ‘being’: self-worth and the current crisis of American society. *The British Journal of Sociology*, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/1468-4446.12667>

³ Sabik, N.J. et al. (2020). When self-worth depends on social media feedback: Associations with psychological well-being. *Sex Roles* 82, pp. 411-421 <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs11199-019-01062-8>

⁴ Johnson, W., et al. (2006). How money buys happiness: Genetic and environmental processes linking finances and life satisfaction. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 90, pp. 680-691.
https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/721c/7f2cbee17db22760eb86a5f8602ceb508a3b.pdf?_ga=2.121292225.892750686.1601060276-2049285908.1600362633

⁵ Waters, R. (2020). The old asylum is gone: Today a mental health system serves all. *Health Affairs*.
<https://www.healthaffairs.org/doi/10.1377/hlthaff.2019.01671>

⁶ Subramanian, R., et al. Sentencing and prison practices in Germany and the Netherlands: Implications for the United States. Vera Institute of Justice Center on Sentencing and Corrections.
<https://www.prisonpolicy.org/scans/vera/european-american-prison-report-v3.pdf>

⁷ Schaeffer, K., (2020). 6 facts about economic inequality in the U.S. Pew Research Center.
<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/02/07/6-facts-about-economic-inequality-in-the-u-s/>