

BY  
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# BUMS

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EARTHLINK.  
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BACK IN 2000 OR SO, A FREELANCE JOB BROUGHT ME TO DOWNTOWN SAN FRANCISCO FOR A TWO-WEEK STAY...

THIS WAS AT THE HEIGHT OF THAT CITY'S "HOMELESS CRISIS," AND THE 10-BLOCK WALK FROM MY HOTEL TO MY PLACE OF EMPLOYMENT WAS CHOKED WITH CRAZED STREET PEOPLE...

THEY ALL SEEMED TO HAVE AN EXAGGERATED SENSE OF ENTITLEMENT, PUTTING ON LOUD AIR GUITAR CONCERTS WHILE PRACTICALLY DEMANDING CHANGE FROM PASSERS-BY...



ONE DAY I SMELLED THE MOST DELICIOUS FOOD IN A NEARBY PARK. I FOLLOWED THE SCENT, INTENT ON BUYING WHATEVER IT WAS I SMELLED COOKING...



... ONLY TO COME ACROSS AN OUTDOOR SOUP KITCHEN RUN BY AFFLUENT-LOOKING HOUSEWIVES WHO WERE GIVING THEIR GOURMET CREATIONS TO THOSE SAME OBNOXIOUS STREET CRAZIES FOR FREE!

NO LONGER ABLE TO CONTAIN MYSELF, I COMPLAINED BITTERLY ABOUT THIS ONCE I REACHED THE ANIMATION STUDIO, AND IT TURNED OUT I WASN'T THE ONLY ONE WHO HAD REACHED HIS BREAKING POINT...



WHO ARE THESE PEOPLE? WHERE DID THEY ALL COME FROM? AND WHY ARE THERE SUDDENLY FEWER OF THEM NOW? WELL, FIRST OF ALL, WHEN TALKING ABOUT "BUMS," I AM IN NO WAY REFERRING TO ANY OF THE FOLLOWING:



SYMPATHETIC, THERE-BUT-FOR-THE-GRACE-OF-GOD TYPES LIKE THESE MAKE UP AROUND 90 PERCENT OF THE OFFICIAL "HOMELESS" POPULATION AT ANY GIVEN TIME. THEY ALSO ARE RARELY HOMELESS FOR LONGER THAN SIX MONTHS.

ALSO, THERE ARE SO MANY CHARITIES AND AGENCIES THAT ARE READY AND EAGER TO HELP PEOPLE IN NEED WHO ASKS FOR HELP THAT IT'S ALMOST IMPOSSIBLE FOR ANYONE TO GO HUNGRY IN THE U.S. THESE DAYS...



ALL THOSE PEOPLE HOLDING SIGNS AND GLARING AT YOU AT BUSY INTERSECTIONS ARE NOT ONLY WELL-FED, THEY ALSO AREN'T HOMELESS. THEY'RE JUST LAZY JERKS!

MOST OF THE MORE OBNOXIOUS STREET PEOPLE YOU RUN INTO AREN'T HOMELESS EITHER. THEY'RE JUST PIMPS, CON ARTISTS, AND SMALL-TIME CROOKS WHO "HIDE" AMONG THE HOMELESS POPULATION TO AVOID DETECTION AND TO EXPLOIT THE SERVICES SET UP TO HELP THE NEEDY...



THESE PREDATORS ALSO USE AND ABUSE THE REAL HOMELESS, OFTEN TO A TRULY HORRIFIC DEGREE.

THIS POOR FELLOW IS ONE OF THE CHRONIC "10 PERCENTERS" — THOSE TRAGIC SOULS WHO LIVE MOST OF THEIR ADULT LIVES WITHOUT ANY PERMANENT SHELTER...



MOST OF THEM ARE MALE, AND THEY TEND TO ABUSE DRUGS AND ALCOHOL, THOUGH WHAT THEY ALL HAVE IN COMMON IS THAT THEY SUFFER FROM ONE OF MORE TYPES OF DEBILITATING MENTAL ILLNESS.

THEY ALSO MOSTLY COME FROM POOR, DYSFUNCTIONAL, AND/OR ABUSIVE FAMILIES WHERE NO ONE IS WILLING OR ABLE TO DEAL WITH THEIR MENTAL PROBLEMS, WHICH IS HOW THEY WIND UP ON THE STREET IN THE FIRST PLACE...



THE MYTH OF THE CAREFREE HOBO WHO CHOOSES TO LIVE UNDER THE STARS IS JUST THAT: A MYTH! ANYONE WHO'D OPT FOR SUCH A WRETCHED LIFE IS CRAZY BY DEFINITION!

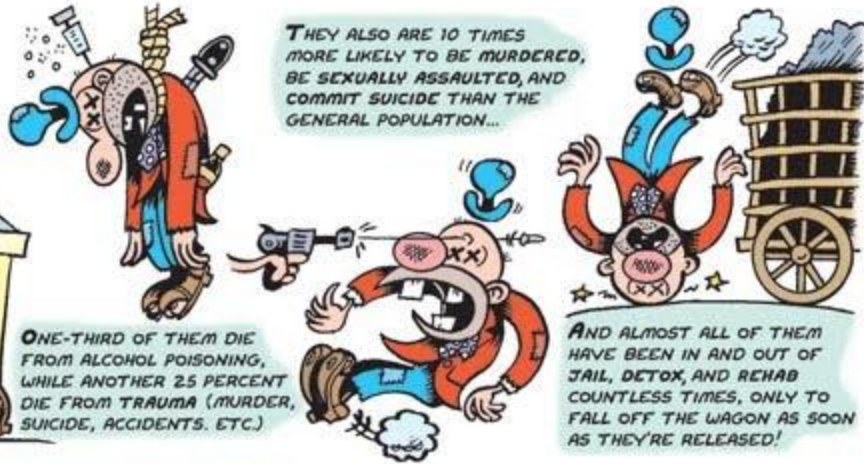
**MORE SAD BUM FACTS:**

THE LIFE EXPECTANCY OF A CHRONICALLY HOMELESS PERSON IN THE U.S. IS 47...



ONE-THIRD OF THEM DIE FROM ALCOHOL POISONING, WHILE ANOTHER 25 PERCENT DIE FROM TRAUMA (MURDER, SUICIDE, ACCIDENTS, ETC.)

THEY ALSO ARE 10 TIMES MORE LIKELY TO BE MURDERED, BE SEXUALLY ASSAULTED, AND COMMIT SUICIDE THAN THE GENERAL POPULATION...



AND ALMOST ALL OF THEM HAVE BEEN IN AND OUT OF JAIL, DETOX, AND REHAB COUNTLESS TIMES, ONLY TO FALL OFF THE WAGON AS SOON AS THEY'RE RELEASED!

THEY ALSO COST THE REST OF US A FORTUNE IN EMERGENCY HEALTH CARE -- IN SOME CASES UP TO \$100,000 A YEAR!



FOR EXAMPLE, A RESIDENT OF A SEATTLE HOMELESS SHELTER WHO SUFFERED FROM EMPHYSEMA WOUND UP IN THE E.R. EVERY TIME SHE SMOKED A CIGARETTE -- ONLY SHE INSISTED ON SMOKING EVERY DAY!

HOSPITALS ARE SO OVERWHELMED BY THESE REPEAT VISITORS AND THEIR SELF-INFLICTED WOUNDS THAT MANY OF THEM NO LONGER OFFER EMERGENCY SERVICES AT ALL...



I ONCE SHARED A HOSPITAL ROOM WITH A WINO WHO BROKE HIS LEGS (AFTER DRUNKENLY FALLING IN FRONT OF AN AMBULANCE!). YET THE NURSES REFUSED TO LET HIM USE A WHEELCHAIR, CLAIMING HE DIDN'T DESERVE ONE!

MANY CITIES, INCLUDING SAN FRANCISCO AND SEATTLE, RECENTLY HAVE ADOPTED A POLICY CALLED "HOUSING FIRST," WHICH PROVIDES A FREE ROOM FOR CHRONICALLY HOMELESS ALCOHOLICS WITHOUT ANY SOBRIETY REQUIREMENTS...



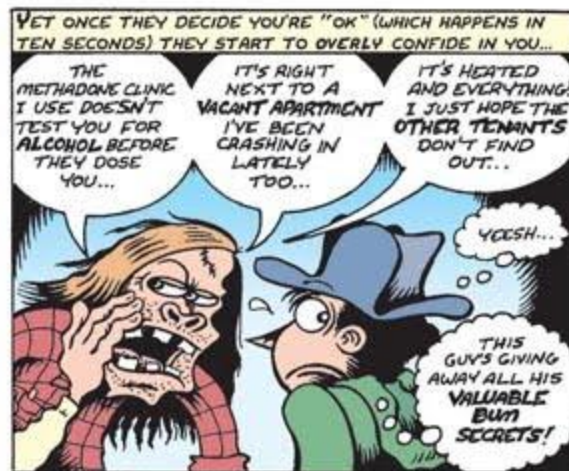
THESE BARE-BONES "BUNKS FOR DRUNKS" ALREADY HAVE DRASTICALLY REDUCED THE NUMBER OF EMERGENCY ROOM VISITS FOR THEIR RESIDENTS SIMPLY BY ALLOWING THEM TO GET HAMMERED INDOORS FOR A CHANGE.

CRITICS DERIDE THIS APPROACH AS "REWARDING" DRUNKS BEFORE THEY MANAGE TO GET SOBER, WHICH IGNORES THE FACT THAT THESE GUYS WILL NEVER BE SOBER...

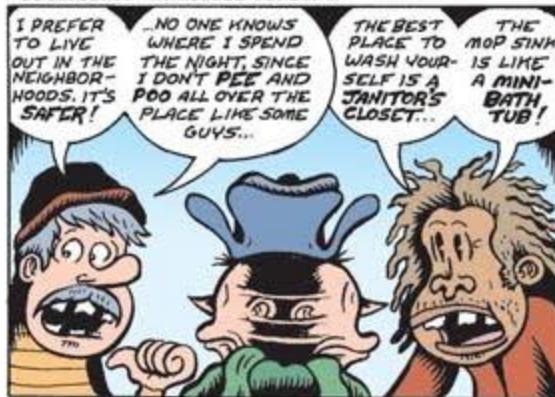


THE SAD TRUTH IS THAT THERE IS NO "CURE" FOR CHRONIC HOMELESSNESS. ALL WE CAN DO IS APPLY BAND-AIDS, TO REDUCE THE COSTS AND RISKS.

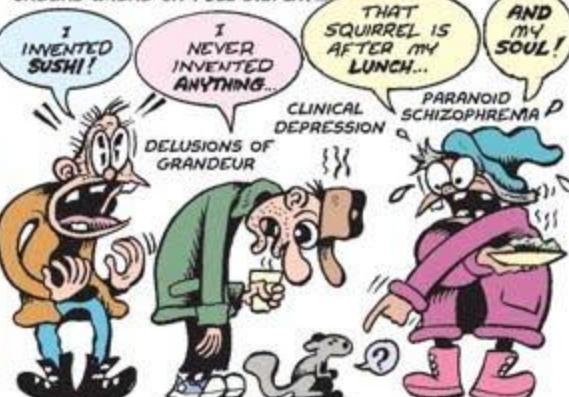
**THE LIGHTER SIDE OF BUMS DEPT.:** AFTER SPENDING A DAY WITH A GROUP OF CHRONIC "10 PERCENTERS" AT A LOCAL FOOD KITCHEN, I CAME AWAY WITH A FEW SWEEPING GENERALIZATIONS, SUCH AS...



I ALSO RECEIVED A LOT OF FREE ADVICE ON HOW TO BE A "SUCCESSFUL" HOMELESS PERSON...



AND ALL THE CLASSIC SIGNS OF THE USUAL MENTAL DISORDERS WERE ON FULL DISPLAY...



THEY ARE ABLE TO FIND HUMOR IN THEIR OWN SITUATIONS, NO MATTER HOW ABYSMAL THEY GET...



BUT THE MOST DISTURBING THING ABOUT HANGING OUT WITH HOMELESS PEOPLE IS THE POSSIBILITY, NO MATTER HOW REMOTE, THAT YOU COULD BECOME ONE YOURSELF...

