

## **Life expectancy for the homeless is 64; Medicaid kicks in at 65**

*The Dallas Morning News, by Cindy J. Crain, May 24, 2016*

The first homeless census report I gave was in 2005. I was 42. And, in Tarrant County, so was the average age of homelessness.

In 2007, I was 44, and again so was the average homeless.

In my first State of the Homeless Address with the Metro Dallas Homeless Coalition this year, I made a joke that I could predict the average age of homelessness merely by knowing my own birthday.

This personal connection began to draw me deeper into my career. I was working with people with whom I shared many similar memories, experiences and world events. The homeless were my late-Baby-Boomer peers.

As I worked with the homeless, especially those experiencing unsheltered homelessness, I would look into the eyes of someone who physically appeared a decade older than me. But I knew when I asked the person's date of birth, it would be very close to my 1963. My immediate response would be "you and I are nearly the same age!" and our bond would begin.

In 2013, something started to change. I was just a little older than the mean. And in 2014, I was again a little more older.

I thought, maybe the number of homeless children was bumping the statistics? But no, those rates have been consistent and slightly reducing, holding around 26 to 29 percent of all homeless. And, we were the averaging age of only adult homeless, anyhow.

Maybe it was because of prioritizing the chronic homeless for housing, making them no longer homeless? No, those ages, as well as the new homeless, were constant.

Last week a colleague handed me an article by homeless research pioneer Dennis Culhane from Aging Today. The colleague remembered my jest during the 2016 State of the Homeless Address in Dallas, that I was clearly aging because I was 52, and the average age of Dallas' homeless adults was just under 48.

Culhane's piece stopped me cold. Now I knew why I was older than the new average. My homeless peers were beginning to die.

Culhane writes that in 1990 the peak age of homeless adults was 30, and in 2015, it was 55. People who are homeless have a life expectancy of 64 years, compared to our life expectancy of 78.

Culhane isolates this vulnerable late-Baby-Boomer cohort as "stubbornly associated" with homelessness. Research details their economic disadvantage due to crowding in the housing and labor markets following the back-to-back recessions in 1979 and 1981, my high school graduation year.

This followed with high rates of unemployment supplanted by an "underground economy of crime and illegal drug markets, resulting in addiction, violence, incarceration and community breakdown."

And homelessness began to flow.

Culhane continues that those born between 1953 and 1965 have a "lifelong accumulation of social disadvantage" and many now return to our community "after serving long prison terms and have seen little of the outside world for 15 or 20 years."

Indeed, homelessness is not an individual character flaw, it continues to be driven by a common economic, social and racial history.

The average age of the residents in the Interstate-45 encampment was closer to the national average of 50. Nearly 75 percent had experience in the criminal justice system. And the health, mental health and disabling conditions were ever present and worsening in their unsheltered condition.

Culhane identifies and affirms best practices that the newly formed City of Dallas Commission on Homelessness should prioritize: rapid rehousing, permanent supportive housing and assuring access to the special health and social services needs of this aging population.

Remember, for the majority of homeless, Medicaid will not kick in until age 65, and as we have learned, the average homeless adult won't make it past 64.

Homelessness puts an exceptional financial pressure on our indigent care and emergency services. Housing goes a long way toward stabilizing this vulnerable population because health conditions become more acute, chronic and costly with every passing day under the stress of homelessness.

*Cindy J. Crain is the chief executive of the Metro Dallas Homeless Coalition. Email: [Cindy.Crain@mdhadallas.org](mailto:Cindy.Crain@mdhadallas.org)*