

The homeless: London's neglected community

Directed by Alex Brown (P'25), the American Soup Kitchen at the American International Church supports individuals struggling with homelessness in London.

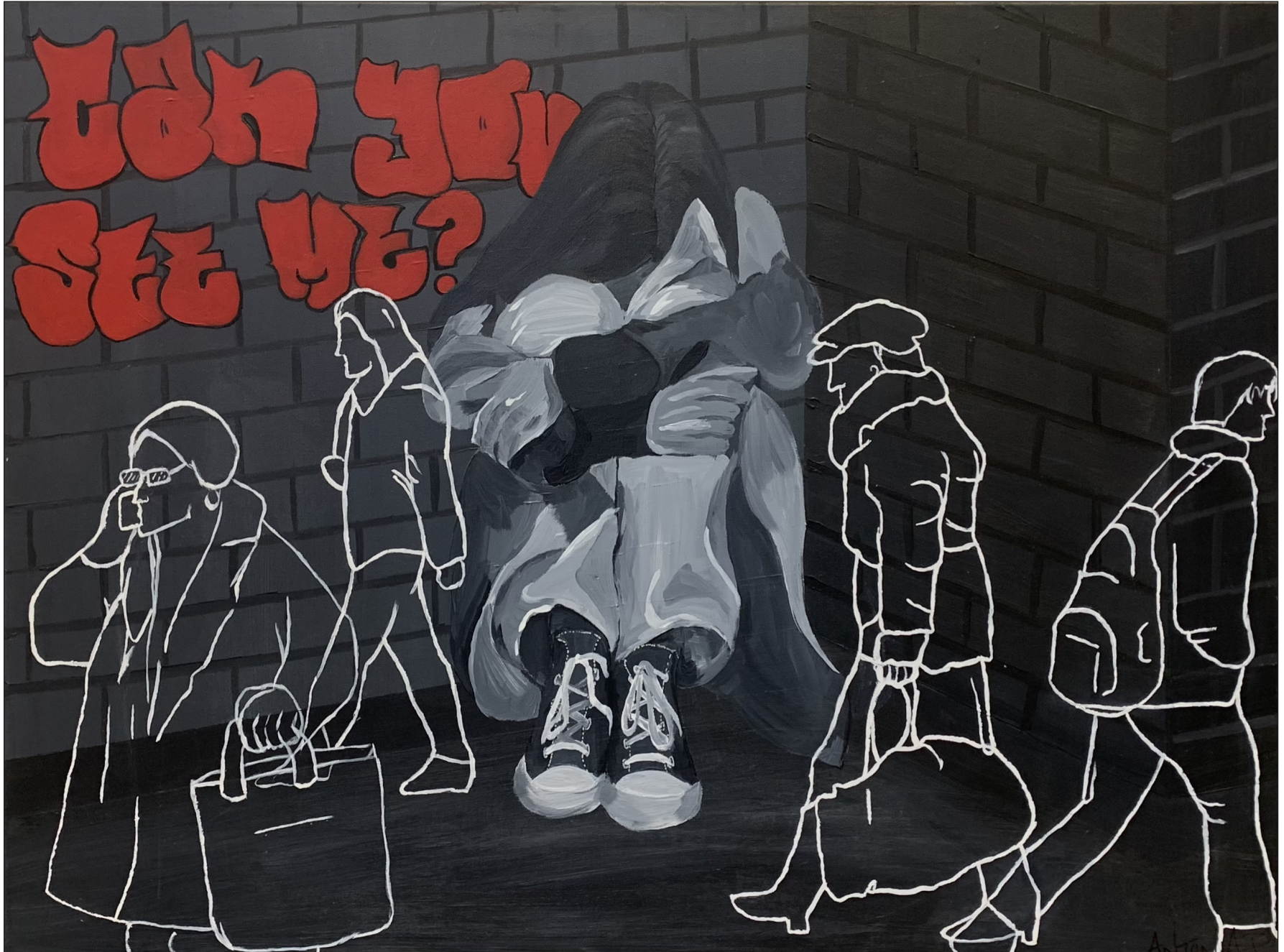


Illustration by Antonia Pavoncelli

By the numbers...

1 in 52 people living in London are homeless.

A person who is homeless is...

17x more likely to be a victim of a violent crime.

9x more likely to commit suicide.

Source: Streets of London

“There’s not much else to lose, so I might as well make the most of life.”

– Katie



Katie said she has utilized the Soup Kitchen for around five years now. She said despite spending so much time as a rough sleeper, she continues to maintain a positive outlook on life.

Photo by Eden Leavey

Eden Leavey /
Features Editor: Print

Established in 1986, the American Soup Kitchen provides resources for rough sleepers – people who live on the streets due to homelessness. More than 11,000 people sleep rough on London streets annually, per Streets of London.

Volunteering

Director of the Soup Kitchen Alex Brown (P’25) said he saw an opportunity to express generosity that inspired him to begin volunteer work at the Soup Kitchen in 2015.

“We should all give back in our own way, and I’m fortunate enough to be able to run an organization,” Brown said. “I get to do it every day, which is fantastic.”

Lulu Hogan (’25), who visited the Soup Kitchen for the first time during a Community Service Day, said the experience was “completely eye-opening.” Hogan said she assisted by cleaning out the pantry, organizing various areas and painting the areas of the main gathering area with colorful graffiti.

“Our goal was to clean out the homeless shelter and make it a more homely comfortable place for people to be,” Hogan said.

Jessie Doleman (’22) said she has also been attending Community Service Days at the Soup Kitchen for the past few years and began volunteering every Saturday since October 2019.

“I work in the kitchen a lot, so we prepare the meals and then we serve,” Doleman said. “It’s really fulfilling, and I think it’s a way for me to be able to give back.”

Meanwhile, Amanda Lourie (’24) said she visited the Soup Kitchen to understand its operations as a part of the Health 10 course curriculum. Despite not having previously volunteered,

Lourie said she was familiar with the environment as she prepares meals for rough sleepers at her local synagogue every Sunday.

“Being Jewish, we really value giving back to the community and so charity is so important,” Lourie said. “Helping at my synagogue regularly makes me feel more connected.”

Severity of homelessness

Brown said the combination of the pandemic and the subsequent economic challenges – namely inflation – that have arisen in the U.K. has resulted in a spike of Soup Kitchen guests. He said the number of daily guests grew from 90 to 160, but since the end of the COVID-19 lockdown, the population has not dipped.

When visiting the Soup Kitchen, Hogan said she was saddened by the guests’ lack of available medical resources outside of the organization. She said one woman she interacted with had run out of injury ointment after suffering a severe burn.

Hogan said after speaking to the woman, her group bought medicine from a nearby pharmacy to help with the burn. She said the woman’s relief to be able to treat her injury has stuck with her.

Lourie said she has also noticed the scarcity of affordable food that is nourishing, furthering the health struggle for the unemployed and minimum wage workers. In the hope of tackling this lack of nutrients, Lourie said her synagogue aims to prepare food that helps rough sleepers maintain a balanced diet.

“Something that we strive to do is cook a meal which is very nutritious and warm, and something that homeless people also enjoy eating,” Lourie said. “It’s so important that people who have the privileges of having a warm home-cooked meal will be able to share this with people who can’t afford to or are financially insecure.”

Furthermore, Doleman said homeless people not only struggle to gain access to basic resources

but are more likely to face ongoing internal battles due to mental illness and addiction. She said these predisposed issues often go unnoticed by the general public.

“People don’t care to actually look at the issue, they just want to look down on homeless people without realizing that drug addiction is, of course, an addiction and mental health is a disease,” Doleman said. “People just see them on the street and don’t really do anything.”

Brown said people who are homeless are often predisposed to mental illness and addiction on account of adverse childhood experiences that leave detrimental impacts.

In addition, Lourie said there are legal structures in place that make reaching out for help more difficult for rough sleepers.

“Homeless people suffer from government restrictions,” Lourie said. “They’re unable to fill out job applications, there’s a lack of medical care and there’s a negligence of their presence and importance from the wider community.”

Thus, Brown said the Soup Kitchen aims to help new guests find housing quickly as one’s first few days living on the streets elicit the most anxiety. He said the more time one spends as a rough sleeper, the less urgency they feel to reclaim stability because they adjust to the uncertainty of homelessness.

Stigmatization

Lourie said given the various uncharted barriers rough sleepers face that render escaping the streets tougher than necessary, society often makes stereotypical presumptions about people without stable housing.

“People often don’t take action to help the

homeless in their community because of the stigma that they put themselves in a situation where they are homeless,” Lourie said. “There are assumptions about people with insecure housing that they either have substance abuse disorders or they’re unwilling to take action and find a job.”

Moreover, Hogan said members of higher socioeconomic communities tend to “associate the word ‘homeless’ with disgust or fear” because they view poverty and instability as foreign territory.

“It comes from how people are brought up and the fact that they’re not actually learning about how people can get into these situations,” Hogan said.

“It’s not in a dirty or disgusting way, it can be in quite normal ways. Without that education, then you’re inherently going to end up in a place where you have a relatively closed mindset.”

Brown said a prevailing misconception exists that rough sleepers become homeless at their own discretion from unmotivation. In reality, he said people often find themselves in perilous situations as a result of financial instability or abusive relationships.

“A prevalent thought is that if you’re homeless, it’s a choice, or you’re screwed up somewhere, or you’re lazy,” Brown said. “That’s a lot of people’s thinking and it’s so far from the truth.”

Consequently, Doleman said many disregard rough sleepers when walking past them. She said homeless people suffer from a lack of human interaction and when volunteering, she said she tries to connect with as many guests from the Soup Kitchen as possible.

“Most important is having a conversation with somebody who gets ignored and glared at on the street,” Doleman said. “We just talk about the weather or their days or the food. It’s not really

People often don’t take action to help the homeless.

– Amanda Lourie (’24)

“It’s hard to stay hopeful when you’ve been homeless for 15 years.”

– Will



Will said he has traveled all over the U.K. as a rough sleeper. He said he has become pessimistic about the country’s ability to fight the homeless crisis over the years.

Photo by Eden Leavey



The Soup Kitchen provides free nutritious meals, clothing, toiletries and a sense of belonging to over 150 rough sleepers daily.

Source: American Soup Kitchen

any specific conversation that matters, just casual conversation.

Echoing Doleman, Brown said looking beyond prejudices is crucial for cultivating an inclusive community.

“We have so much more in common than we think we do sometimes,” Brown said. “Stereotypes are unfortunate, but they’re their reality.”

Combating homelessness

Doleman said the homeless crisis would be better attended to if more privileged individuals contributed their energy to helping at organizations like the Soup Kitchen.

“I have loved volunteering, and more people should do it because the impact is so great,” Doleman said. “We need to look outside of our bubble of wealth and see that there are problems in this world that we can help with. These problems could be made a lot better with people who have resources like the ones we have at ASL.”

In addition, Hogan said one cannot truly understand the extent to which homelessness impacts a person’s life until they volunteer at an organization and interact with rough sleepers. She said there is an ever-pressing need for more support to fight the homeless crisis.

“Until you’re really in those places, you don’t really understand the severity of the situation and so the only way to completely see what’s going on is to be there,” Hogan said. “Especially for the people in our community, which can be a very compact group of people, to sort of reach out of your comfort zone a little bit, because it is going to be a little bit uncomfortable, and participate in experiences like that, it’s really important.”

Even so, Hogan said if smaller actions become

widespread across privileged communities, they can also have a big impact through distribution.

“Even donating old – but in very good condition – items can really help to one make somebody’s day and life a little bit more comfortable,” Hogan said. “Donating would be probably the first step in making a difference after opening your eyes to the issue.”

Alternatively, Lourie said maintaining small interactions with rough sleepers is imperative for lowering their inclination to drug addiction and mental illness.

“A big problem that people who are homeless experience is feelings of loneliness and I think the bare minimum would just be saying ‘hi,’ and give them a smile or offer a snack that you have on hand,” Lourie said. “Make them feel heard and seen because they are people and they do suffer from a lack of human dignity.”

Brown said society needs to overcome the disconnect that divides us socioeconomically.

“We always have financial needs, food needs, clothing needs,” Brown said. “There’s a ton of the things we need every day, but something everyone can do, regardless of social status, is just acknowledge people with compassion and empathy, and that’s free.”

Ultimately, Doleman said the priority ought to be raising awareness for homelessness and developing a stronger understanding of the issue among socioeconomically privileged communities like the school.

“People need to donate and people need to volunteer,” Doleman said. “But most of all, people need to care.”

“We need to look outside of our bubble of wealth.”

- Jessie Doleman ('22)

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Graphics by Eden Leavey

The Soup Kitchen launched Europe’s first ever on-site mental health drop-in center within a soup kitchen to combat its guests’ mental health struggles.

Source: American Soup Kitchen

Levels of action to take against the homeless crisis

Level One

Acknowledge rough sleepers on the street with a smile or a “have a nice day” as you walk past. Give them some spare change or offer to buy them a snack if you are able.

Level Two

Donate minimally worn clothes, non-perishable food items and toiletries to organizations that supply resources for the homeless.

Level Three

Volunteer at a local soup kitchen or homeless shelter. Even spending a few hours providing for others in need can have an impact.

Level Four

Give donations to charitable organizations. Although this option requires a larger sum of money, charity donations combat the homeless crisis more effectively than giving directly to people on the street.

Source: American Soup Kitchen