

Diversity in the Context of Homelessness

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BACKGROUND

- The number of homeless people in Canada is estimated to be about 300,000 (National Housing and Homelessness Network, 2007)
- Many people affected by homelessness in our community are members of disadvantaged communities facing barriers including poverty, discrimination, stigma, and a general lack of affordable and supported housing options (London Homeless Coalition, Ontario, Canada, 2004)

THE PROBLEM

- The homeless population is diverse and far from a homogeneous group
- Psychiatric survivors are often perceived as a homogenous group with similar needs
- However, survivors from ethno-cultural minority groups are likely to have additional concerns and needs that may not be met by the current systems of care

METHODS

PHASE 1: Secondary analysis of survey data

- Analysis of data collected through the ‘Housing and Mental Health Community University Research Alliance’ Data from 2004-2005 (N =320)
- A community sample of individuals diagnosed with a mental illness for a minimum of a year
- Comparisons between housed and homeless groups and exploration of issues related to diversity

PHASE 2: Critical Ethnography

- Focus groups (7 consumer & 8 service provider groups) and interviews with key informants representing minority groups and service providers working with this population

RESULTS

- Housed (n=215) and Homeless (n=132)

- Women were significantly more likely to be housed ($\chi^2 = 22.840, df = 1, p = .000$)
- Homeless people were significantly younger than housed people ($t=2.019, df = 318, p = .044$)

Marital Status

- Majority of people were un-partnered. Only 3% were married/common-law & 61.5% never married

Ethnicity

- In the preceding 2 years, people who were First Nations or of mixed culture/ethnicity showed a trend toward significantly more housing changes ($f=2.605, df = 2.249, p = .055$)

Sexual Orientation

- There was no significant difference between housed and homeless people

Education

- Only 42.7% completed high school and 10.2% some post-secondary

Disability

	Homeless n=99 (100%)	Housed N=215 (100%)
Visually Impaired	29 (29.3%)	95 (44.2%)
Physically Disabled	39 (39.4%)	87 (40.5%)
Hearing Disabled	1 (1.0%)	43 (20.0%)
Learning Disabled	33 (33.3%)	80 (37.2%)
Psychiatrically Disabled	60 (60.6%)	158 (73.5%)
Other Disability	7 (7.0%)	3 (1.4%)

Health Services

- Rates of service access varied, but sample was generally high users of health care services, reflecting poor health
- Housed women were most likely to see a family physician, while homeless women were least likely
- There was no difference between groups on the basis of visible minority status in the use of ER or hospitalization services

RESULTS

- From a policy, programming, and participant perspective, poverty is the central construct that shapes the lives of homeless individuals

- Homelessness not a static condition.

- Continually striving to ‘connect’ to people and programs but connections that are established are tenuous and loneliness is a powerful construct.

- Intersecting Vulnerabilities

- Process by which people are ‘marked’ as different in effect sustains homelessness.

- ensures that those who are homeless will remain homeless.

- Widespread perception that programs and services are antithetical to family life.

CONCLUSIONS

- It is best to look at the issue of diversity and difference in terms of intersecting inequalities

- People’s identities are multiple and cannot be understood by one marker such as gender but not ethnicity, or class but not race.

- Service organizations have addressed the issue of ‘cultural sensitivity’ but their approaches largely continue to mask structural inequalities
- Emphasis is largely at the level of the individual

REFERENCES:

London Homeless Coalition (2004). Community Plan for Homelessness in London.
<http://londonhomelesscoalition.ca/homelessness.html#plan>
 National Housing and Homelessness Network (2007).