Housing and Social Inclusion: Prerequisites to Health

Findings and conclusions from a research study supported by a Small SSHRC Grant
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Learning Objectives

- Needs and experiences of homeless persons in regards to housing and social inclusion
- Community-based strategies for effective health promotion and advocacy in collaboration with homeless clients
- We will:
- Discuss a study and its findings: Perceptions of homeless persons about homelessness and social exclusion
- Conclude with recommended approaches to health promotion of vulnerable populations arising from this study

Social Exclusion / Inclusion as Related to Homeless Persons

- Being socially included means participation in society based in human rights – including receiving public services
- Inclusion implies that there is also exclusion
- Questions: Who gets excluded, why and how?
- Who gets (re)included, why and how?
- What are the impacts on health and quality of life when feeling / being socially excluded?
- What is the meaning of social justice and how can it be achieved?

Homelessness and Social Exclusion

- Not having a home is a form of being socially excluded
- It combines usually with a cluster of other conditions, such as unemployment, lack of income, education, food security
- It leads to feeling / being dehumanized / unable to participate in 'normal' society
- You become the 'other'

The Study

- The following slides discuss a research study on perceptions of homeless people on the causes and effects of homelessness and what they need to get off the street

Central Questions of Study

- How do people become homeless?

- What supports are needed for them to get off and stay off the street?

- From their own perspectives what are recommended approaches to care for vulnerable persons?

Research Design

- Qualitative descriptive exploratory
- Semi-structured interviews with 25 homeless participants, living in shelters or on the street
- Setting: City parks, streets and drop-ins
- Time of interviews: Summer 2005
- Method: Taped recordings, field notes,transcriptions, thematic analysis
- Researcher and 2 research assistants (students)

What does it mean to be homeless?

❑ You experience:

■ Lack of privacy

■ Lack of shelter from elements

■ Hunger, lack of choice of food

■ Being excluded from public places

■ Lack of respect / visibility

■ Living in fear d/t lack of safety / security, violence

■ Lack of protection from abuse / violence

■ Increased health problems / pain

■ Limited /restricted access to healthcare

How homeless people are the 'other'

- In the next few slides compare the experiences of homeless people to your own or those of others you know:

  - How are your experiences similar and different from theirs?

How people become homeless

- Common answers to why someone becomes homeless:
    - "I could not pay the rent and therefore lost my place"
    - "I lost my job"
    - "I got divorced"
    - "The last place I lived in there was a crack house next door"

How people become homeless: chaotic background

- People are homeless for many different reasons. But usually we all get put into one category. It is not like they talk to you and ask you why. I grew up with Children's Aid, never met my Dad…I did not meet my Mom until I was 9. I spent 8 years with her and I have seen her twice since. The people on the street are nice to me, but it is the wrong kind of love. Someone can take advantage of you and that is the only kind of love I have ever experienced. It is rare that you find someone who is genuine and wants to help you. They want to help you and I sabotaged it. Because that is what I was told as a kid. You don't deserve it. It affects your mind, physically and emotionally, mentally… We all need human touch and to talk to somebody. And if you walk around by yourself all day and people pretend they don't notice you….you don't feel good about yourself. (31 year old man)

How people become homeless: poor quality accommodation

- I rented a room at this lady's place and she was super tight-assed with the rules. I like to party every once in a while. Finally, she just came to me and gave me the rest of my rent money…I got an alcohol problem too. When I start drinking to escape my reality, pain and loneliness, it washes it away. I feel happy. But then I come down the next day all depressed and start the cycle all over again. I like to get housing where, as long as you are not totally off the wall, you can move around a bit…I did not even have a TV in my room. It has got to be a comfortable situation….(49 year old man)

How people become homeless: abusive family situation

- I've always had abusive family and my ex is also very abusive. When I ran from that abuse with my daughter I ran to the government that told me it would help me. That's what they advertise to the rest of the world - what a peaceful place Canada is. So I ran into their arms, only to get the same verbal abuse… if not worse cause I wasn't expecting it… it hurts more. They deny you a bed, a towel, shampoo. Then they put you in very dangerous situations… I'm an innocent, I'm not a criminal, I'm not a drug addict, neither is my daughter, but they put us in with other people who are criminals. (40 year old woman)

Internalized Discourse of Self Blame: seeing self as 'other'

- "I always screw up again and end up on the street" (several failed attempts with housing)

- "I feel so ashamed of myself, I want to do so much better"

- "They won't listen – they think she's crazy"

Supports needed to get off and stay off the street

- "Affordable housing. If you can't stay there and buy food, you're just gonna end up back in the system."

- "To find your own place is almost impossible. The waiting list for affordable housing is long"

- "[you need]… a bit more money on the welfare cheque…reasonable rent and no bedbugs…I am okay with money management and a reasonable landlord too: I smoke dope and I drink beer"

Supports needed to get off and stay off the street

- "Most places they just rush to get you off the street. You're a statistic. They go: OK, he's off the street. Well, no one really follows it up, they don't know how you're doing. They think that's where it ends, off the street and that's that, but that's where it just begins" (63 year old man who had cycled in and out of homelessness since he was 8. He had serious health problems)

- "If the job would come, I know the money would come…"

Should we focus on individuals or the system?

- Social inclusion and exclusion relate to individuals
- Helping individuals to be (re)included in society is selective – who is in? who is out?
- It creates a new hierarchy where some with help fare better than those who fall through the cracks
- The structures that engender inequalities need to be changed in the long run to produce a just society
- An advocacy model is more equitable and effective – towards preventing exclusion in the first place

Conclusion: Expanding the Role of Healthcare Providers

- Listen and learn from those who are homeless about their needs

- Collaborate respectfully with them in designing appropriate care

- Supports are needed with job finding, retraining, obtaining social benefits and to ensure basic necessities, such as housing, food, education and healthcare

- HOWEVER: instead of only negotiating within the status quo, we need to work on CHANGING it

Conclusion: Social Justice

- We need to advocate for and co-create social environments that include everybody and are healthy for all

- Work, retraining, adequate wages, adequate social security, safe, affordable, healthy housing should be basic human rights not something obtained through selective inclusion

- Who better than nurses, as case managers who are grounded in community based principles, to collaborate with their clients and to advocate with them for social justice through healthy public policy?