

Literature Review of the Stigma of People Experiencing Homelessness in Canada

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Abstract

I live in a community with a large homeless population. I witness and take part in conversations with community members and have noted that a seemingly large portion of them have little empathy, education, or understanding of what it means to be homeless. These conversations are often very polarizing, as there are many stigmas regarding the homeless population. I am passionate about promoting change. I want to educate the community, to help them understand and have empathy. In my attempt to decrease the stigmas that homeless people face, I have completed a literature review to research what these stigmas are and how to address them effectively. I aim to find ways to most effectively educate my community on homelessness.

Overview

I live in Kamloops, British Columbia, Canada, on Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc territory, situated within the unceded ancestral lands of the Secwépemc Nation. Like many other cities in Canada, Kamloops is a community with a large and growing homeless population. Homelessness, as defined by the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, is "the situation of an individual, family or community without stable, permanent, appropriate housing, or the immediate prospect, means and ability of acquiring it" (Gaetz et al., 2017). I regularly witness and participate in conversations regarding homelessness and have noted that many community members have little empathy, education, or understanding of what it means to be homeless. These conversations are often very polarizing and filled with stigma. The American Psychological Association defines stigma as "the negative social attitude attached to a characteristic of an individual" (2018).

I have become passionate about finding a way to change this. I want to educate my community, to help them understand and gain empathy. In my attempt to decrease the stigmas of homeless people, I have completed a literature review to research what these stigmas are and how to address them effectively. I aim to find ways to most effectively educate my community on homelessness.

Completing a Literature Review

I completed my literature review by searching MacEwan University's online library. To find relevant literature, I searched keywords including homeless population, stigma, homelessness, vulnerable, discrimination and victimization in different combinations. I limited my search field to peer-reviewed resources written or translated into English. I narrowed my results to resources published in Canada from 2012-2021. I prioritized recently published content over older content.

I also used web content from the Government of Canada, Statistics Canada, and the City of Kamloops.

Findings

Homelessness is on the rise both in Canada and internationally. “More than 235,000 people in Canada experience homelessness in any given year, and 25,000 to 35,000 people may be experiencing homelessness on any given night” (Stephenson et al., 2021). “Marginalized social groups, such as those who experience homelessness, disproportionately suffer stigma, discrimination and their associated adverse health, economic, and social effects” (Mejia-Lancheros et al., 2021, p. 2). My research results indicate that in Canada, there is a prevalent stigma surrounding the homeless population. The longitudinal study by Mejia-Lancheros et al. (2021) highlighted the stigmas associated with the homeless, such as being “mischaracterized as violent and dangerous, engaged in criminal activities, mentally ill or substance-dependent and are unfairly assigned responsibility for their housing insecurity” (p. 2). Furthermore, I reviewed the literature on how stigma affects people who are homeless, literature that dispels these stigmas, and how to minimize the presence of these stigmas.

Mejia-Lancheros et al. (2021) examined the effects of stigma on the homeless. The study used a Group-Based Trajectory Model to estimate the relationship between “discrimination and stigma with housing stability, recovery, quality of life, and community functioning” (p.1). The study showed a clear connection between housing and well-being outcomes and stigma, and stated that “stigma and discrimination create barriers to accessing employment, educational, networking, and health and social opportunities and services, which lead to socioeconomic marginalization, alienation, victimization, violence, oppression, segregation, poverty, lowered self-esteem, and poor health” (Mejia-Lancheros et al., 2021, p. 2).

Similar findings were published in Karmouzian et al.'s (2019) study of street-involved youth in Vancouver, who were “defined as being temporarily or absolutely without housing in the last six months” (p. 325). Karmouzian et al.'s 2019 longitudinal study “examine[s] the prevalence and correlates of perceived devaluation among street-involved youth longitudinally” and states that “the cumulative impact of experiencing several forms of stigma and discrimination in various settings ... contributes to the internalization of negative self-perception and increased risk of mental health conditions” (p. 325). The 2019 study concluded that “high perceived devaluation was extremely prevalent among street-involved youth in Vancouver” and that it “may be attributed to street-involved youth’s experiences of several layers of the stigma that include normative perceptions about street-involved youth’s risky sexual and drug use practices and multiple accounts of discriminatory behaviors associated with being street-entrenched” (Karmouzian et al., pp. 328-29).

While stigma vastly impacts the mental health of the homeless population, it also has adverse effects on their physical health. In a study completed by Jaworsky et al. (2016), it was found that:

Nearly 30% of homeless or vulnerably housed individuals suffer from at least two medical conditions, and this number doubles among individuals over 50 years of age....approximately half of homeless individuals report unmet medical care

needs....[These] reported barriers to receiving care for homeless and vulnerably housed individuals include prejudice and stigma (p. 667).

My review of the literature supports that stigma negatively impacts people who are homeless and can leave us with altered perceptions of the homeless population. One common stigma is that homeless people are dangerous, violent, or criminals. In my community, this idea is often publicized. In a letter printed in the local newspaper, one community member wrote:

The downtown core from Riverside Park to Seymour Street is unsafe or, at the least, certainly edgy — and not just at night. We all accept that homeless people need social connection and have rights, but not at the expense of the rest of society (Summers, 2021).

The local news station, CFJC Today Kamloops, interviewed Chris Ponti, Vice Chair of a community association to which a homeless encampment close by was set on fire. Ponti stated, “we’re definitely worried about an uptake to replace some of the materials, so we’re going to be warning our residents to be a little more vigilant — close the gates, lock the sheds, put your stuff away” (Klassen, 2021a). The same community association’s Chair, Julie Dormer, told local media that “it’s understandable that people are going to need to camp and sometimes it’s the best answer for them, and that’s fine....what she isn’t fine with is people setting up full-on camp sites — filled with some items she suspects are stolen” (Klassen, 2021b).

The reality, as supported by research by Richardson et al. (2015), Kennedy et al. (2017) and Gordon (2012), is that the homeless population is at a high risk of violence and theft. The interviewer analyzed data from participants over seven years and explained that homelessness is positively and significantly associated with exposure to violence. Of these exposures, Richardson et al. (2015) found that “strangers were the most common perpetrators of violence, and beatings were the most common types of violence” (p. 688). From this, Richardson et al. hypothesized that “the linkage between homelessness and violence may be the direct result of a loss of protective shelter, which could have otherwise prevented exposure to potential perpetrators” (2015, p. 690).

Kennedy et al. (2017) also discovered high levels of exposure to violence among the homeless population, stating:

Almost half of the study participants report[ed] experiencing at least one incident of physical or sexual violence over a median of 5.5 years of follow-up. In addition, we found that residential eviction was relatively common, with over one-fifth of participants reporting at least one eviction over the study period. In adjusted analyses, residential eviction was independently associated with significantly greater odds of experiencing violence” (pp. 6-7).

Gordon (2012) shares the results of a survey taken by 1000 Canadians that states “two-thirds of Canadians have felt frightened of homeless people” (Salvation Army, 2011, as cited in Gordon, 2012, p.262). This research of homeless people produced them experiencing high levels of theft and states that the common forms amongst them “include being ‘jumped’ and robbed by others, being pick-pocketed, having knapsacks and coats stolen in public places, or while sleeping outside and in shelters” (p.257). Each of these three sources highlights extreme vulnerabilities of the homeless population, contrary to common stigma.

A stigma commonly held by Canadians is that people who are homeless choose or want to be homeless. Gordon (2012) shares in his research that a survey of Canadians given by the Salvation Army (2011) revealed:

39 per cent believe most homeless people want to live on the streets, 29 per cent believe that a good work ethic is sufficient to escape homelessness, 19 per cent believe that homeless people are always to blame for their situation, 35 per cent believe that homeless people can always find work if they want to, and 17 per cent attribute homelessness to chronic laziness (p. 262).

In reality, as Gordon (2012) concluded, “most [homeless] people interviewed were dissatisfied and frustrated with their life situation, which they recognized as isolated from the communities that they inhabit” (p.261).

Typically, individuals become homeless due to circumstances, not choice. However, many of these circumstances include job loss or lack of affordable housing, 44% in Canada first experienced homelessness in their youth (Government of Canada, 2018, fig 1. and fig.13). In my community, 63% reported having experienced homelessness for the first time as a youth (City of Kamloops, 2021). Edalati et al. (2017) state that “exposure to adversity during childhood and adolescence is the primary trigger for leaving home and early homelessness. Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), including neglect, abuse, and family dysfunction, are overrepresented in the histories of homeless individuals” (p.1288). Furthermore, Edalati et al.’s 2017 study found that 50% of homeless people experienced more than four types of adverse childhood experiences, compared to only 12.5% in the general population.

Literature supports the widespread stigma of the homeless population and proves that these stigmas are false and negatively impactful. Further research examines the most effective ways to educate others and dispel these stigmas. Scheider (2014) discusses the importance of our language and how we frame the topic of homelessness. Scheider (2014) states that “a framework that casts individuals as personally responsible for their homelessness releases society from making any structural changes that might address problems of poverty and homelessness” (p.242). Interestingly, Scheider (2014) also finds that expressions of sympathy can “function to reproduce social inequalities rather than interrupt them. ...Sympathy is provided only by ‘us’ to ‘them’ [and therefore] plays a role in increasing social distance and sustaining relations of inequality (p.241-42). When discussing the possible solutions to homelessness, Schneider (2014) found that many Canadians had “both the position that government policy on homelessness is inadequate and the idea that individuals themselves are not really in a position to do something about it” (p. 244).

The idea of the Canadian Government needing to step up and do more to assist the homeless population is not unique. This is a commonly discussed topic and even a political pitch by politicians running in government elections. It has been claimed in the past that by explaining “the hidden costs of homelessness to the taxpayer, both progressive and conservative citizens will be more likely to support expanded government investment to address homelessness.” (Doberstein & Smith, 2019, p. 286). Although this seems logical, a vignette survey experiment by Doberstein and Smith (2019) discovered:

Rather than focusing on the costs of homelessness to the taxpayers, as many advocates and researchers are currently doing, advocates ought to instead focus on the stories of homeless individuals that describe how they became homeless and what their daily life

is like. Making it more vividly personal (rather than more abstract by framing the issue in terms of investment dollars and potential taxpayer savings)... (p.291).

Reflection

There is a substantial amount of literature on homeless people within Canada. The majority of study groups and statistics focused on the largest cities, such as Toronto and Vancouver. Homeless populations occupy rural areas of Canada, but they are represented much less in the literature. This gives us a somewhat limited ability to generalize conclusions.

Stigma, unfortunately, is sometimes ingrained very deeply in our culture. This can make it difficult to find impartial information. Much of the literature on homeless populations wasn't without drug use connections. It was difficult to find research on the homeless population without either association to drug use or referrals to them as people who use/inject drugs; statistics presented the same limitation.

The Government of Canada published extensive information and statistics from their Point in Time Count about the homeless population, though the majority of it was connected to drug use (2018). Focusing on drug usage further perpetuates stigma, contributes to society feeling released from any responsibility to act, and puts the blame on the individual for being homeless.

Conclusion

The compounded literature suggests that it would be advantageous to eliminate the stigma of the homeless population. Guided by best practices, sharing the personal stories of homeless individuals and appealing to the emotional side of society is an effective way to do this. Framing information and conversations to make the homeless population relatable and equal to the audience may culminate support and empathy. In this way, we can decrease stigma and educate our communities on homelessness.

I have taken this concluding result and implemented the approach in my own community. Over a period of six weeks, local newspaper Kamloops This Week published articles that I wrote about homeless individuals in Kamloops. With permission from the individuals of whom the articles were written about, details of their life, their perspectives, and a photo of them were included in each (Laitres, 2022).

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