

Diversity and Homelessness: Minorities and Psychiatric Survivors

**Cheryl Forchuk, Elisabeth Jensen, Rick Csiernik,
Carolyn Gorlick, Susan L. Ray, Helene Berman,
Pamela McKane, and Libbey Joplin**

This study explores the intersecting vulnerabilities in individuals who are homeless and have psychiatric challenges. Psychiatric survivors are often perceived as a homogeneous group with similar needs. However, survivors with further minority status are likely to have additional concerns and needs that may not be met by the current systems of care. People further marginalized by visible/cultural minority-group status, sexual orientation, and/or disabilities are being studied through this line of research. While possessing any of these vulnerabilities can increase the risk for poverty and homelessness, the interaction among them is poorly understood, particularly in relation to housing and homelessness.

Goals

A key objective of the Homelessness and Diversity Issues in Canada initiative is to support policy-relevant research on homelessness in Canada as it relates to diversity. The project directly addresses this objective by examining the interplay between two issues related to diversity (mental illness and membership in a visible or cultural minority group) and homelessness. Students will have the opportunity to participate in research related to this understudied area. The participatory and interdisciplinary approach promotes the sharing of knowledge among researchers and the users of research.

Methods

The project has three stages:

1. Secondary analysis of data collected through the Community University Research Alliance on Housing and Mental Health. This data set includes interviews with 300 individuals conducted in 2004 and again in 2005. Of this sample, more than a quarter of respondents were interviewed in shelters. The data will be explored for racial/ethnic differences.

2. Critical ethnography, including focus groups and interviews with key informants representing minority groups and service providers working with members of minority groups.
3. Policy analysis will be informed by the first two phases. It will also include examination of municipal, provincial, and federal policies that relate to diversity issues (including refugee status, immigration, multi-cultural issues, and Aboriginal issues), housing and homelessness issues, income support, and mental health services.

Results

The quantitative results suggest that consumers consider their multiple disabilities as well as poverty to be major sources of their diversity. In particular, serious vision and learning problems influence their ability to procure employment and secure housing. The focus groups have led to several interesting findings. Families are increasingly joining the ranks of the homeless and believe they are not being well served by services for the homeless. Children's educational and health needs are not being adequately addressed by the current system. However, an overriding theme is that when participants experience feelings of being different, these most frequently arise from issues of class, rather than race, ethnicity, religion, age, marital status, or gender; while these other factors are important, being poor is what they consider the principal cause of their marginalization. The existence of disabilities is integrally related to the poverty. The language of "diversity" is often researcher-driven, and the central themes and challenges that have emerged from the participants' voices stem from the sense of chronic transience and uprooting, family disruption, and disconnections.

Community Partners

All the local shelters in London, Ontario (e.g., Men's Mission, Salvation Army, Unity Project), took part in the Diversity and Homeless study, as did culture-specific organizations such as Atlohsa, an Aboriginal shelter. Other participating community agencies included London Intercommunity Health Centre, London Community Resource Centre, Cross Cultural Learner Centre, Association for the Elimination of Hate, and Across Languages. These organizations are not culture-specific but serve culturally diverse populations. The shelters and cultural agencies were approached for assistance with the focus groups and interviews in particular. They played a key role in identifying policies that have an impact on the area of study.

Impact

The results of this study have been disseminated to the general public, scholars, politicians, and decision-makers through presentations at various conferences both locally and internationally. The study is raising awareness and increasing knowledge about the service needs of psychiatric consumers who are marginalized by virtue of their visible/cultural minority group status, sexual orientation, and/or disabilities. The study hosted an “all candidates” meeting in 2005 to address issues related to diversity and homelessness. In addition, a group of pro bono law students from the University of Western Ontario have been analyzing policies related to mental illness, housing, homelessness, income support, and diversity issues.

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Comments or queries may be directed to Cheryl Forchuk, London Health Sciences Centre – SSC Site, NR-C201, 375 South Street, London, Ontario N6A 4G5 Canada. Telephone: 519-685-8500, ext. 77034. E-mail: cforchuk@uwo.ca.

Cheryl Forchuk, RN, PhD, is Professor, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Western Ontario, and Scientist, Lawson Health Research Institute, London, Ontario, Canada. Elisabeth Jensen, RN, PhD, is Assistant Professor, School of Nursing, York University, Toronto, Ontario; and Scientist, Lawson Health Research Institute. Rick Csiernik, RSW, PhD, is Professor, School of Social Work, King's College, London. Carolyn Gorlick, MA, PhD, is Professor, School of Social Work, King's College. Susan L. Ray, RN, is a PhD candidate, Clinical Nurse Specialist/Nurse Practitioner, and Assistant Professor, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Western Ontario. Helene Berman, RN, PhD, is Associate Professor, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Western Ontario, and Scientist, Lawson Health Research Institute. Pamela McKane, MA, is a PhD student, Faculty of Political Science, York University. Libbey Joplin, BA, MTS, CAPPE, is Observateur démocratique d'Ontario/Observer of Democracy for Ontario, Institute in Management and Community Development, Concordia University, Montreal, Quebec, Canada.