HOMELESSNESS OF INDIAN CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS AND PSYCHIC ILLNESSES

Resource Person at the Moscow Mental Health Congress 2021

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What is Homelessness?

Homelessness is when a person lacks a fixed, regular and adequate residence.

Homelessness describes the situation of an individual or family without stable, permanent, appropriate housing, or the immediate prospect, means and ability of acquiring it.

It is the result of systemic or societal barriers, a lack of affordable and appropriate housing, the individual/household's financial, mental, cognitive, behavioral or physical challenges, and/or racism and discrimination.

The causes of homelessness

Homelessness is usually the result of the cumulative impact of a number of factors, rather than a single cause.

Structural factors

Structural Factors: are broad systemic economic and societal issues that occur at a societal level that affect opportunities, social environments, and outcomes for individuals.

1. Poverty
2. Discrimination
3. Lack of affordable housing
4. Impact of colonialism on Indigenous Peoples

Systems failures

It refers to those situations where inadequate policy and service delivery contribute to the likelihood that someone will become homeless.

1. Barriers to accessing public systems restricted activity
2. Failed transitions from publicly funded institutions and systems
3. Silos and gaps both within and between government funded departments and systems, and also within non-profit sectors

Individual and relational factors

It refers to the personal circumstances that place people at risk of homelessness, and may include:

1. Personal or family crisis
2. Housing insecurity
3. Interpersonal and relational problems
4. Persistent and disabling conditions
5. Interpersonal violence
6. Trauma

Consequences of being homeless

When society refers to homelessness, causes and consequences are so interwoven that in most of the cases unintended consequences are triggered when trying to help.

There is no particular moment when someone becomes homeless, in most of the cases is a series of factors that accumulate one over the other, and it becomes more difficult to realize which were the ground causes of the problem.

Some structural causes of homelessness were identified for example the lack of affordable housing, social housing shortage, policies regarding housing, among others.

At the same time, structural consequences pop up also in the map as social exclusion, hate crimes, aporophobia, Stigma, among others.

Being homeless and socially excluded

Being homeless a person loses access to many essential rights and opportunities as housing, healthcare, civic and democratic participation, etc.

Having no roof over our heads is living in conditions that challenge our human dignity, basic needs and threaten our life itself.

Living in social exclusion means the lack of access or full access to opportunities and resources, generally offered to everyone as part of the society.

Aporophobia is fear of poverty and of poor people. It is the disgust and hostility toward poor people, those without resources or who are helpless.

Social stigma, the disapproval of a person based on physical or behavioral characteristics that distinguish them from others.

Homelessness as a problem

The problem is that people think it seems to be no problem.

The problem of homelessness and housing exclusion refers to the failure of society to ensure that adequate systems, funding and support are in place so that all people, even in crisis situations, have access to housing.

The goal of ending homelessness is to ensure housing stability, which means people have a fixed address and housing that is appropriate (affordable, safe, adequately maintained, accessible and suitable in size), and includes required services as needed (supportive), in addition to income and supports.

People at risk of homelessness

Many peoples are at risk of homelessness. Risk factors include poverty, personal crises, discrimination, a lack of affordable housing, insecurity of tenure and/or the inappropriateness of their current housing.

The combination of rising housing costs and stagnating incomes mean that many peoples are close to the edge, paying too much of their income on housing. It is in this context that personal crises can lead individuals and families to lose their housing and become homeless.

Too many peoples are living on the margins and are just one small disaster or missed pay cheque away from homelessness.

It should be noted that for many people homelessness is not a static state but rather a fluid experience, where one's shelter circumstances and options may shift and change quite dramatically and with frequency.

We include 'at risk' of homelessness not because we want to count this population, but because understanding risk factors facilitates prevention."

Who is most likely to be evicted?

"Inadequate income and employment are well established risk factors contributing to people cycling in and out of homelessness. Supporting both those at risk, as well as formerly homeless people, to earn an income and obtain an education is key to addressing housing stability in the long term."

- Education – Many of those who experience homelessness have not completed high school, which puts them at a competitive disadvantage in the labour market. As such, for those who are interested, there should be supports for (re)engagement with education.

- Employment training – Some individuals who are homeless have had few employment opportunities and may benefit from training that will support them to get the kinds of jobs they desire.
- Income and employment – Many individuals will not need support in the form of education and training – they just need access to employment. On the other hand, many other individuals will need income supports because they may not be easily employable in the short, medium, or long term due to illness, injury, or other forms of incapacitation.

How many peoples are homeless?

United Nations Habitat Report (2015) has estimated that nearly 100 million people of the world are homeless and another 1.6 billion people 'lacked adequate housing' (UNHR, 2015). In reality, there is no country and virtually no city in the world without the presence of 'sidewalk dwellers' (Mukhopadhyay et al. 1994).

However, it is almost impossible to trace the actual magnitude of homelessness as large section of the population remains invisible due to their shifting nature, coupled with the fear of eviction by the civic authorities (Roy Chowdhury, 1999).

How many peoples are homeless?
 (INDIA)

There are an estimated 1.8 million homeless people in India, with 52% based in urban areas. A further 73 million families lack access to decent housing (IGH, 2018; Habitat, 2019).

In 2017, government authorities demolished 53,700 homes, evicting 260,000 people for reasons such as slum-free 'city beautification' projects, despite the government's 'Housing for All-2022' scheme (HLRN, 2018).

Nearly 2.9 million people were displaced through natural disasters and violence in 2018 (Internal Displacement, 2019).

Homelessness as psychic trauma

Most mental health literature on homelessness has focused on characteristics that may be risk factors for homelessness.

Homelessness itself is a risk factor for emotional disorder and use the construct of psychological trauma--focusing on social disaffiliation and learned helplessness--to understand the potential effects of homelessness.

Psychological trauma is likely among homeless individuals and families for three reasons.

(a) The sudden or gradual loss of one's home can be a stressor of sufficient severity to produce symptoms of psychological trauma.

(b) The conditions of shelter life may produce trauma symptoms.

(c) Many homeless people--particularly women become homeless after experiencing physical and sexual abuse and consequent psychological trauma.

Psychological trauma as a consequence of homelessness

Many runaway and homeless youth (RHY) have left their homes or caregivers due to distress from abuse and victimization only to face additional trauma on the streets.

Due to adverse early childhood experiences involving trauma or chronic stress and the likelihood of exposure to trauma while on the streets, many RHY run a high risk of developing posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Trauma and exposure to chronic stress are risk factors that can contribute to an individual's propensity for developing PTSD (Bender et al., 2015).

Chronic stress in childhood or the absence of a supportive caregiving relationship can result in physiological, behavioral, and emotional stress-related vulnerabilities to a wide variety of physical and mental illnesses (Connor et al., 2015).

Social Disaffiliation, Learned Helplessness.

Most discussions of the mental health issues associated with homelessness address intrapsychic and interpersonal risk factors for homelessness.

The psychological effects of losing one's home and entering the ranks of the homeless are less well understood. We believe that many homeless individuals and families may be suffering both short- and long-term psychological devastation wrought by homelessness itself.

How trauma and homelessness are interlinked

Trauma and homelessness are connected in at least three ways.

Firstly, trauma is prevalent in the narrative of many people's pathway to homelessness. Research has shown that people who are homeless are likely to have experienced some form of trauma, often in childhood. 85% of those in touch with criminal justice, substance misuse and homelessness services have experienced trauma as children.

Secondly, trauma often happens during homelessness, for example by being a victim or witness of an attack, sexual assault or any other violent event. People can also be re-traumatized by services that leave them feeling powerless and controlled; for example, if they lack privacy and are being challenged in demanding ways.

Thirdly, homelessness itself can be considered a trauma in multiple ways. Often the loss of a home together with loss of family connections and social roles can be traumatic. This is because "like other traumas, becoming homeless frequently renders people unable to control their daily lives".

Social exclusion activates the same neurological systems as physical trauma, with a similar impact on people.

Added to this, homelessness can be such an additional stress in the life of a person that it can erode the person's coping mechanisms and the stress that it causes can rise to a level of trauma.

Adverse childhood experiences (ACE)

Compound or complex trauma very often results from adverse childhood experiences. ACEs refer to experiences during childhood that are considered maltreatment, for instance sexual, physical or emotional abuse or neglect.

ACEs can also stem from living with an adult with mental illness, substance abuse problems or criminality or if domestic violence is committed in the household.

These ACEs have long lasting impact, especially because they happen in a developmentally vulnerable period in one's life. The earlier in life trauma occurs, the more damaging the consequences are likely to be.

It can disrupt children's basic biological regulatory systems and their normal attachment systems, especially if the perpetrator is a person whom they trusted and had strong emotional ties with. Insecure attachment strongly impacts upon the ability to have healthy social relationships in adulthood.

Recommendations

1. All Communities should develop and implement clear plans to end homelessness, supported by all levels of government.
2. levels of government must work to increase the supply of affordable housing.
3. Communities – and all levels of government – should embrace Housing First.
4. Eliminating chronic and episodic homelessness should be prioritized.
5. Ending Aboriginal Homelessness should be prioritized as both a distinct category of action and part of the overall strategy to end homelessness.
6. Introduce more comprehensive data collection, performance monitoring, analysis and research.

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