

The Experience of Being Unsheltered in Atlanta

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Abstract

This study was an examination of the experiences of unsheltered homeless men with social services providers, and faith as a resource for coping. The themes that emerged were difficulties and complexities of being unsheltered, barriers to becoming sheltered, specific needs of unsheltered men, and how faith sustains and encouraged the unsheltered.

Problem

In the United States alone, it is estimated that in any given year 3.5 million people are experiencing homelessness (Shelton, Taylor, Bonner, & van den Bree, 2009). In 2013, there were 17,000 literal homeless in Georgia (Henry et al., 2014).

Literal homeless are both those individuals who use shelters (the sheltered) and those who live outside, in tents, cars, parks, or the street (the unsheltered).

- There is very little research on unsheltered homeless. Less is known about their coping techniques
- To adequately address homelessness, a greater understanding is needed about the root reasons as to why individuals remain unsheltered
- Several communities vowed to eradicate homelessness by 2013, however the problem remains prevalent. Georgia had one of the highest unsheltered rates in 2013 (Henry, Cortes, & Morris, 2013; Lewis, 2014)
- The remedies in place are ineffective in helping individuals move from being homeless to becoming sheltered

Purpose

To explore the lived experiences of unsheltered homeless men in Atlanta, age 45 and older. to understand why they remain unsheltered, what social networks are available to them, and how spirituality or faith impacts their lives.

Relevant Literature

Unsheltered homeless have higher rates of mental illness, substance abuse, more severe physical ailments, higher incarceration, hospitalization and suicide rates (Irwin, LaGory, Ritchey, & Fitzpatrick, 2008).

In Fiscal Year 2013-2014, \$37 million were allocated for homeless outreach programs in the Georgia area, however, only .4% reported they received any of the homeless housing benefits (Georgia Department of Community Affairs, 2014).

Housing First programs reduce processing time, eliminate rigid rules, and provide participants with a sense of independence. These programs have been found to be successful and effective (Tsemberis, Gulcur, & Nakae, 2004) because individuals in the program have housing, coupled with a sense of self control and self reliance (Jost, Levitt, & Porcu, 2011; Wolf, et al., 2001).

Theoretical Framework

Social constructivism and the theory of social capital were the guiding frameworks.

- Social constructivism explains the unique experiences of the unsheltered. They are a subculture who have shared language, norms and rules
- Theory of social capital explains how limited social relationships impedes positive outcomes for unsheltered individuals

Research Questions

RQ 1: What are the lived experiences of unsheltered homeless persons in Atlanta, Georgia?

RQ 2: What are the lived experiences of unsheltered homeless persons within the social network available to the homeless population in Atlanta, Georgia?

Procedures

A phenomenological approach was taken to explore the lived experience of unsheltered men. Participants were:

- Between 45 and 63 years old
- Mostly African American (1 Caucasian)
- Native Georgians (2 from Alabama)
- Unsheltered 1 month up to 15 years
- In contact with family

Face-to-face interviews were conducted at the Central Outreach and Advocacy Center in Atlanta, Georgia.

Data Analysis

Interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed.

Trustworthiness strategies used were:

- Triangulation using the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS)
- Reflexive journaling
- External audits

Using the Giorgi inductive data analysis method, 4 themes, 10 subthemes and 8 sub-subthemes emerged.

Findings

None of the men reported having a mental illness or using drugs. Most of the men reported they wanted to work.

The men described navigating social services as complicated, difficult, burdensome, and frustrating.

The **reasons for remaining unsheltered** were

- Deplorable and dangerous conditions of shelters
- Inability to work/look for work and get to shelters on time to secure a bed
- Being disqualified from shelter use because they receive SSI/Disability or had drug felonies
- Pride

Faith was an important resource to coping

- Seven of the eight men relied on the faith to sustain them
- Those with strong faith were the most optimistic and expressed gratitude

Limitations

- All interviews were conducted in one sitting instead of multiple sittings. Richer data could have emerged as greater trust was developed
- Women and younger unsheltered men were excluded
- A more diverse group may have shown different results

Conclusions

Study findings are conclusive and confirm some of the existing research including:

- Many participants felt that living outside is safer than using homeless shelters
- The needs of many homeless are not being met despite the millions of dollars allocated for homeless programs and outreach
- Many homeless are not only in need of suitable shelter, but also viable employment and training

Recommendations include:

- More research on unsheltered homeless
- Sensitivity training for social service providers who work directly with homeless
- The implementation of more Housing First programs
- More job and skills training opportunities
- Investigations into the current conditions homeless shelters

Social Change Implications

By understanding why some homeless remain unsheltered, more suitable and effective interventions and remedies can be implemented. Additionally, this paves the way for unsheltered to not only become sheltered, but also productive, independent and self reliant members of society.

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