Homeless Canadians’ Perspectives on Homelessness in Calgary

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Abstract

Since the 1990s, homelessness has increased in Canada, but the strategies of the government and public health service providers to manage the situation have had limited success. Researchers have also noted the lack of inclusion of those experiencing homelessness in homelessness research to better understand and develop a solution to the issue. The purpose of this phenomenological study—framed by social cognitive theory, reciprocal determinism, and symbolic interaction—was to understand homelessness from the perspectives of people who do not have homes. Data were collected from open-ended interviews with a purposeful sample of 15 individuals who were homeless. Several themes emerged after interview data were transcribed via hand coding and analyzed using cognitive data analysis. The prominent themes were: lack of money, home, privacy, and support; discrimination of all kinds; mental illness and addiction; the need for a review of housing policy that addresses rent, mortgage qualification criteria, and house tax; and the creation of awareness of government support systems and the services that they provide. Public health service providers and designated authorities can use the findings of this study to understand the phenomenon from the perspective of people who are experiencing homelessness, which can influence the development of better homelessness reduction strategies that could improve the lives of those experiencing homelessness and their communities. Because homelessness is a public health issue, bringing it under control could positively impact the health and safety of the public.

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**Homeless Canadians’ Perspectives on Homelessness in Calgary**

Homelessness across Canada has continuously increased since 1992 (Calgary Homeless Foundation, 2012; Hubac & Stroick, 2007; Komarnicki, 2014), and researchers have observed a steady rise in Calgary’s homeless population (Osuji, 2009). The strategies to manage the situation have achieved limited success, perhaps due to insufficient research data (Awosoga, Belanger, & Head, 2013), especially from qualitative studies focused on the experience of those affected. Existing homelessness strategies and policies have been developed based on individual risk factors, marginalization, exclusion, and economics (Frankish, Hwang, & Quantz, 2009). For example, the homelessness partnering strategy encourages longer-term solutions and provides direct funding to communities to reduce and prevent homelessness, and the Housing First intervention programs are focused on moving people to permanent homes first before placing them in support services based on individual need (Gaetz, 2013; Gaetz, Guilliver, & Ritcher, 2014). Another example is a10-year strategy (2008-2018) by the Calgary Committee to end homelessness by focusing on having shelters for emergency temporary sheltering only to ensure that no one slept outside and no one remained in an emergency shelter for more than 7 days without moving to a safe, decent home (Gaetz, 2013; Gaetz, Donaldson, Guilliver, & Ritcher, 2013; Calgary Homeless Hub, 2008).

Current research is not sufficient to support policy decisions and implementation (Awosoga et al., 2013; Calgary Homeless Foundation, 2013). The management of homelessness in Calgary can be improved by learning from those experiencing homelessness (Hubac & Stroick, 2007). The Canadian Homelessness Research Network (2013) suggested that understanding the breadth and depth of the homeless phenomenon is the key to responding to it. In the current study, we explored the meaning of homelessness from the perspectives of those experiencing homelessness using a phenomenological approach. This research fills a gap in the literature on homelessness in Canada and generates information that could be useful in finding solution to homelessness (Donovan & Shinseki, 2013). Deeper comprehension could support homeless strategies and be integrated into development of policies or strategies that keep more people off the street and place more in permanent residences. Success with placing people in homeless situations into permanent homes contributes to the improvement of health and safety of those involved including the community (Donovan & Shinseki, 2013; Flisher, Hetrick, McGorry, & Patel, 2007).

**What is Homelessness**

Homelessness is a situation where someone has lost their home and has no means to get another one. People may be temporarily at extended family members’ or friends’ homes; living in substandard buildings that lack heating and/or toilets; sleeping in couches, cars, caravans, and/or in the corridors of a public building; and sleeping on the street (National Healthcare for Homeless Council, 2014). Homelessness involves having no money, job, family, friend, or community to provide support for a living (Ahajumobi, 2017). The homeless population consists of women fleeing from violence (65% of homeless women); people with jobs (40% of the homeless population, or 1,400 persons per night); children under 18 years old (about 300 per night), and people who are homeless because of income-related issues (Calgary Homeless Foundation, 2013; Hubac & Stroick, 2007).

**Prevalence**

Homelessness has continuously increased in the city of Calgary. Over 3,000 people are homeless in Calgary every night, and there were 3,555 people without homes in October of 2014 (Calgary Homeless Foundation, 2014a). This population was comprised of children younger than 18, people between 18 and 64, women, people from the First Nations, and families (Calgary Homeless Foundation, 2014a). The population of homeless people in Calgary is continuously rising along with the housing demand. From 2010 to 2014, the demand for more housing rose from 8,500 to over 20,000 houses (Frankish et al., 2009).

There has been an increase of homeless people in shelters, which has decreased the number of those in jails and hospitals. The Calgary Homeless Foundation (2013) stated that between 2008 and 2012, the population of homeless rose from 1,512 to 1,715 in emergency shelters and increased from 1,224 to 1,260 in transitional housing (i.e., short-term, supportive housing). During this period, the numbers of those in the hospital and jail systems dropped from 296 to 151, a 49% decrease, suggesting that accommodation in shelters and permanent homes decreases the tendency to get into trouble or be exposed to diseases (Calgary Homeless Foundation, 2013). The population of the homeless sleeping outside also dropped from 569 to 64 (88%) during this same period (Calgary Homeless Foundation, 2013). Table 1 shows the history of the rise in homelessness in Calgary from 1992 (447) to 2014 (3,555).

Table 1

*Homeless Statistics from 1992 to 2014*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Demographic | Year |
| 1992 | 1994 | 1996 | 1998 | 2000 | 2002 | 2004 | 2006 | 2008 | 2012 | 2014 |
| Homelessness population | 447 | 461 | 615 | 988 | 1,296 | 1,737 | 2,597 | 3,436 | 3,601 | 3,190 | 3,555 |
| Rough sleepers  | 5 | 41 | 30 | 38 | 168 | 117 | 127 | 429 | 569 | 64 | 182 |
| Children |  |  |  | 70 | 129 | 115 | 218 | 304 | 384 | 81 | 434 |
| Women |  | 75 | 147 | 138 | 256 | 286 | 602 | 766 | 770 | 773 | 882 |
| Youth |  | 20 | 37 | 28 | 85 | 196 | 219 | 296 | 100 | 195 | 271 |
| Families |  | 25 | 28 | 36 | 30 | 42 | 104 | 104 | 197 | 160 | 211 |
| First Nations |  | 101 | 121 | 182 | 251 | 252 | 382 | 593 | 371 | 509 | 515 |

*Note.* Information from Calgary Homeless Foundation (2012); Hubac and Stroick (2007); Komarnicki (2014).

 From the table and charts, it is easy to see, a steady increase in the population of homelessness from 447 in 1992 to 3555 in 2014; except in 2012 when it dropped slightly and picked up again in 2014. Same with rough sleepers (RS), it grew from 5 in 1992 to 182 in 2014. In 2012, the RS dropped sharply to 64 and tripled to 182, in 2014. Population of children followed similar pattern with the three above rose from 70 in 1988 to 434 in 2014, with a sharp drop to 81 in 2012, and multiplication of the 81 by 5.4 times in 2014. The population of homeless women maintained a steady rise from 75 in 1994 to 882 in 2014. Same with youth population, it grew from progressively from 20 in 1994 to 271 in 2014. Yet, families grew from 25 in 1994 to 211 in 2014, with a sudden drop to 160 in 2012. And First Nation population has known no drop but, progressively increased from 101 in 1994 to 515 in 2014. The populations of women, youth and first nations did not show any drop in 2012; even though other populations of people in homeless situation indicated slight to significant drops in 2012. Also, the population of children soured in 2014 to 434 from 81 in 2012, which was an excess of five times increase. **Maintenance Cost and Health Problems**

There is a high prevalence of healthcare needs among the people experiencing homelessness that include mental health and addiction, which make the living conditions of people in a homeless situation difficult (Campbell, Gibson, O’Neill, & Thurston, 2015; Ganesh, 2013). Researchers have suggested that more innovative solutions that include diverse groups of those in a homeless situation are required to address healthcare, advocacy, and other needs of those experiencing homelessness (Campbell et al., 2015). A condition like homelessness that affects the social, economic, mental, psychological, and physical health of the people is a public and community health concern (Donovan & Shinseki, 2013; Flisher et al., 2007). Further, homelessness costs the Canadian government between $4.5 to $6 billion dollars each year partially because of the high cost of maintaining homeless shelters (Frankish et al., 2009).

Interventions

The city of Calgary has made several interventions to end homelessness such as the homelessness partnering strategy and the Home First intervention program (Gaetz, 2013; Gaetz et al., 2014). The latest homelessness intervention, sponsored by the government, was a 10-year strategy to ensure that no one slept outside in Calgary and no one remained in an emergency shelter more than 7 days without moving to a safe, decent home (Gaetz, 2013; Gaetz et al., 2013). This intervention achieved some level of success at keeping people off the street but not in placing them in permanent homes (Gaetz, 2013). The Home First interventions were also only tested in small cities in Canada based on studies in the United States (Aubry, Chener, Ecker, & Tette, 2014). Thus, despite these strategies and policies, a continuous rise in the homeless population suggests a need for more studies on the topic (Aubry et al., 2014; Gaetz, 2013; Komarnicki, 2014).

**Gaps**

Researchers have indicated a gap in homelessness research, strategies to combat the issue, and policy development (Frankish et al., 2009; Gaetz, 2013). An in-depth understanding of the causes of homelessness could result in more strategies to lower the average cost of housing, provide service to the affected, and improve all homelessness-related policies (Awosoga et al., 2013; Calgary Homeless Foundation, 2013; Frankish et al., 2009; Hubac & Stroick, 2007). Further research could also assist people to exit homelessness (Calgary Homeless Foundation, 2013; Frankish et al., 2009).

The current qualitative study plays a significant role in learning about and understanding a phenomenon as well as problem-solving (see Polit & Beck, 2014). More studies on homelessness can provide more evidence to support policy decisions and improve strategies to end homelessness (Awosoga et al., 2013; Aubry et al., 2014; Komarnicki, 2014). The current study provides evidence from the perspectives of those in homeless situations from diverse backgrounds—men, women without children, women with children, youth, people of the First Nations, and the employed homeless (see Gaetz, 2013; Osuji, 2009). The results of this study also add to the homeless literature in Calgary (see Awosoga et al., 2013; Calgary Homeless Foundation, 2013; Hubac & Stroick, 2007).

**Theoretical Foundations**

The theory used in conducting this study was social cognitive theory. The proponents of this theory believe that the combination of a person’s previous experiences (e.g., observations, reinforcement, expectations, self-efficacy, and expectancies) influence an individual’s behavior (Bandura, 2001). Additionally, the theory suggests that a person is capable of action, and to achieve a healthy outcome, a person needs to know about a behavior and how to behave in the same way (Bandura, 2001). Further, behavioral knowledge and ability (behavioral capability) marks an individual’s capacity to anticipate an outcome from situations (Mckenzie, Neiger, & Thackeray, 2009), which can be referred to as expectancy (Baranowski et al., 2002). Additionally, reinforcement is an integral component of social cognitive theory and can be self-motivated or rewarded (i.e., intrinsic; Baranowski et al., 2002). Reinforcement can also be indirect or motivated through direct reinforcement or verbal feedback (Baranowski et al., 2002).

Reciprocal determinism was also an important part of the theoretical foundation and refers to how a person’s change in behavior impacts the environment in a reciprocal manner (Boston University, 2013). An individual’s behaviors both influence and are influenced by the environment (Boston University, 2013). Additionally, reciprocal determinism involves the interplay between an individual’s ability to acquire skills and a desire to alter a behavior (Bandura, 1989; Boston University, 2013). Individual characteristics and behaviors as well as environment led the participants to homelessness, but their experience taught them lessons that empower them to change behaviors that are not healthy and support them to exit homelessness.

Authors also used the principle of symbolic interaction (SI) in this study. SI describes how facts or symbols are generated through human interactions and are usually given meanings based on the perceptions of the people involved (Mead, 2009). The SI construct supported seeking the meaning participants give to homelessness based on their experiences. SI suggests that an individual has two sides: *I* and *Me* (Wiebe, Durpos, & Mills, 2010). *Me* is the attitude of the people in an individual’s environment that influence behavior, and *I* is an aspect of a person who responds to the behavior (Mead, 2009). In this study, the *I* and *Me* aspects prompted participants into homelessness, and the *Me* aspects need to be modified to overcome homelessness.

**Research Questions**

Research Question 1: What are the lived experiences of people in a homeless situation?

Research Question 2: What are the life events that keep people in a homeless situation?

Research Question 3: How would people in a homeless situation describe a shelter that would meet their shelter needs?

Methods

Before collecting data, we contacted a homeless agency’s director of research for data collection through mail, telephone, and an in-person visitation. During the in-person visitation, we explained the study and its goal as well as answered questions. We also inquired about the procedure for meeting clients and an acceptable time duration and date for interviews. The agency agreed to partner with us, and we presented my flyer to post where it would be visible. We also requested permission to use a secure room for meetings with participants on interview days.

We collected data through in-depth interviews from those who stayed in a shelter because in the shelter they have protection rather than being alone on the street (see Abdi, 2014; Boyce & Neale, 2006; Mertens, 2015, p. 455). Participants were purposefully selected based on their ability to communicate and providing a diverse representation of those experiencing homelessness. Participants consisted of Canadians who were aged 18 to 65, currently experiencing homelessness who came from diverse ethnicities and racial backgrounds—Caucasians, First Nations, Africans, Asians, Europeans, Canadians, Americans, and South Americans. Among them were employed, unemployed, underemployed, pregnant women, family, veterans, and women and men who were separated or divorced. For our interviews, we used rooms that supported a private and comfortable environment. We used voice recording, notes, and member checking to verify the data before they were analyzed (see Creswell, 2011, p. 191).

We used a phenomenological design to conduct this study because it supported learning from participants’ shared experiences of what homelessness meant to them (see Hoffman, 2014; Holstein & Gubrium, 1984; Sokolowski, 2000). Further, hermeneutic phenomenology principles were used for retrieving, analyzing, and interpreting the perspective experience of respondents in a homeless situation (see Communication Theory, n.d.; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Manen, 1990). These principles helped see participants’ experiences from their viewpoint (Blumer, 1969). We used hand coding (i.e., identifying concepts and categories) and cognitive knowledge for data sorting, thematic grouping, categories assembling, and analysis of the data transcription. The use of data analysis software was not necessary. We only analyzed prominent participant statements among the themes to generate meaning from the data (see Creswell, 2011, p. 184; Moustakas, 1994).

**Results**

This section includes interview data from the 15 participants. For data analysis, we used a hand-coding process. A cognitive process was used for data sorting to identify significant variables from the interviews, coding, theme assembling, category placement, theme clustering, data analysis, and synthesis. We organized the themes in three major groups, which represent the research questions: the lived experiences of those experiencing homelessness; life events or variables that keep people in homelessness, which were further subgrouped into government-, domestic-, and shelter-related variables; and a shelter that meets needs of the participants. The following prominent themes also address the three research questions: lack of money, home, privacy, and support; discrimination; mental illness and addiction; and the need for a review of housing policy that addresses rent and mortgage qualification criteria and house tax as well as better awareness of government support systems and the services that they provide.

**Research Question 1**

Table 2 contains the themes of the lived experiences of those experiencing homelessness, which aligned with Research Question 1.

Table 2

Lived Experiences of Those Experiencing Homelessness

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | Participant statements |
| No money, home, privacy, or support. | “having nowhere you call your home” “It takes away your privacy, you never get your privacy” “It means that you don’t have your own place, privacy, “ “…no job, financial problem, unemployment and … temporary jobs, no money for bus, food, and everything that you need to live. “Left alone…no family, no friend by your side, no support from anywhere” |
| Unsafe situation that subjects someone to victimization and abuse | “Tough, difficulty to get all that you need to live, clothing, housing and anything that you need, not good, very stressful, drive somebody over the edge, hard situations, A situation that is difficult to get out of, something that you don’t like, being in helpless situation.” “Prone to run into danger” |
| Discrimination | “Racial tension, …Facing discrimination including racial”“…why is there a large population of homelessness in your country? there is problem here. there is a real issue, racism, sexism, etc…”  |
| Place of freedom and no freedom | “re-gaining your freedom from abusive person and from dangerous environment,” “whoever that pushed me into homelessness made me to be free” “…rediscovering oneself, new birth, fresh start after losing everything” “It is like an isolated place. It keeps people isolated from the community.” |
| Mental illness and addiction | “Lots of schizophrenia, not having medication for Psychiatric problem. Alcoholism and addiction of all kinds, depression, becoming drunk” |

Many themes were prominent about the lived experiences of the people in homeless situation. For example, participants expressed that a person in need of a home has no money, home, privacy and support. He or she has lost everything and hope for surviving without external help. It is also a situation where people are subject to victimization and abuse as well as discrimination. Many participants expressed that they have suffered hardship from people on the street, service providers, and law enforcement, and they do not always get the help they need due to their race or gender. Some stated that often when there is a dispute between a Caucasian and non-Caucasian, the non-Caucasian will receive penalty and the Caucasian will go free even if they started the trouble. Some are targeted and picked up by the cops at random, and they have to go through legal processes that requires money that they do not have for bail and lawyers. Further, if they go to jail, the criminal record will affect future chances of getting a job or home. Some were raped when on the street, some face street fights regularly to defend themselves, and some have lost valuable items to thieves. Participants also expressed that mental illness and addiction led to homelessness or is caused by being homeless.

Even in shelters, participants expressed that it is a difficult situation due to lack of freedom because the shelters are regulated. Sleeping, eating, and showering follows shelter rules rather than when people want. However, to some participants, it is a place of freedom because when they were with abusive spouses, they had no freedom and safety.

**Research Question 2**

In answering the question concerning how people become homeless, several themes emerged, which were organized as government, domestic, or shelter. Table 3 shows the government-related variables, Table 4 shows the domestic-related variables, and Table 5 the shelter-related variables.

Table 3

Government-Related Variables that Lead People into Homelessness

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Government-related variables | Participant statements |
| Discrimination, racism, and sexism are barriers to employment, getting a house, and receiving services | “Police sometimes, pick up on a lot of people. they put you into trouble, our color, we get regular abuse for nothing. …they pay them to give ticket on people, and if you get one ticket, you need a lawyer, jury to help you. All these need money” “…government targeting people… it is the government that make people to commit crime” “…there is really, not anything for white women in need of home.” |
| Child support takes 65% of people’s income  | “Payment of child maintenance and child support, I have a job that I was paying child maintenance for $900 for three children and my income was $1,400. After child maintenance, I was left with only $500. I can’t afford my own place.” |
| Credit bureau and criminal records affect employment, rent, and mortgage | “if you cannot pay your rent and bills, they send your name to credit bureau, you cannot get a job, rent or get mortgage and even though you eventually get a job, you cannot rent or get a mortgage because, your name is already with credit bureau” |
| Lack of affordable housing, rent and mortgage qualification criteria, and house tax | “qualifications to get rent, or mortgage, to get references, high rent, …high rent and mortgage conditions, criteria, and taxes. you can’t get Alberta Works rent if you don’t have any address” “They can repair those buildings for shelter and low cost housing, and affordable housing” |
| Lack of and discriminatory support systems | “There should be a government help for someone on the street. There should be a help for someone in need without having to be asked a thousand questions. For these questions, 75% of the homeless give up on themselves” |
| Economic recession, high cost of living, and fixed income  | “Recession is a problem, people lose their homes.” “high rent and high cost of living” |
| Welfare and other benefit payers to give grace period to the homeless before withholding payment | “Get welfare whether you are here or not and give you time to find a home.” “Because, shelter gives clients food and shelter, you don’t get income support from Alberta Works”  |
| Lack of awareness of government support systems | “No one tells you about being homeless, the shelters, and services they offer. Like I said in my own case, I am not entitled to work. I f I can’t work, what is the need of the job fair?”  |

**Government-related variables.** Several themes appeared as government-related variables that lead people into homelessness.

***Discrimination, racism, and sexism.*** Some participants expressed that discrimination was the cause of their homelessness. For example, there was discrimination in employment, securing a house, and even at the shelter. First nations people and Africans were especially affected by this. From participants’ experiences, discrimination needs to end to enable people to leave homelessness.

***Child support.*** Child support takes 65% of people’s income, making it hard for them to have enough money for rent and to live. Participants suggested that it will be beneficial for the government to review the child support policy. Although it ensures that children are taken care of, it affects people’s well-being to the point where they do not have a home or job to pay child support.

***Credit bureau and criminal record policy.*** Respondents stated that they were homeless because when they lost their jobs and had no money to pay a simple phone plan, their names were submitted to credit bureau, which disqualifies them from getting good employment and getting a house. Further, some stated that insurance will refuse to pay for repairs in a car accident for minority individuals.

***Lack of affordable housing, rent, and mortgage qualification criteria, and house tax.*** There were few affordable housing options in the city, and to some who may qualify, credit bureau and criminal records prevented them from getting it. Additionally, participants indicated that the house tax is too high. Participants expressed that government can enable affordability of housing through making available low-cost housing, reviewing rent and housing conditions, and reducing house tax.

***Lack of government support system and discriminatory support system.*** Some refuse to go to the shelter either because of ego or discriminatory treatment that they receive at the shelter. Participants stated that some get encouraging treatment and support and left homelessness quick, and some get the opposite.

***Economic recession, high cost of living, a fixed income, and new taxes.*** Respondents recognized that the economic recession in Alberta from the drop in oil prices cost many their jobs, and personal and family income led them to homelessness. Additionally, they noted that there is a high cost of living in Calgary because some could not afford high cost of a home and utilities (electricity, water, sanitation, and gas). Some also have fixed income like pension or compensation entitlements, and none of the two can qualify someone to rent a house or get a mortgage. Participants expressed that charging new (additional tax) can render people homeless. Respondents suggested that it is crucial for government to stop increasing taxes and lower taxes and the cost of utilities.

***Lack of awareness of shelter and government support system.*** Many of the participants did not know about shelters and government support systems, the services that they render, and where they are located before they became homeless. Many slept on the streets and in their cars for as long as 1 year before being brought to a shelter. Respondents suggested that the government needs to create awareness of the shelters and support services so that people can avoid homelessness (see Ahajumobi, 2017).

**Domestic-related themes.** Several themes emerged from the domestic variables that lead people into homelessness (see Table 4).

Table 4

Domestic-Related Variables that Lead People into Homelessness

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Domestic-related variables  | Participant statements  |
| No money, fixed income, and no family support  | “Loss of job, loss of income, financial situation” “We only get $1,200 per month; rent is $1,00, and $200 is not enough to feed three mouths” |
| Unsafe environment and home, bad roommate | “I had a bad roommate that stole and cashed my check…I left and came here” “All my exes abused me. I lost my kids, my home, which brought me here.” |
| Addictions, mental illness, bad habits, bad friends  | “It was one lady who is an addict, she got me into it” “…it has to be addiction”“mental problems, …lots of schizophrenia, not having medications for Psychiatric problem. Alcoholism, addiction of all kinds“Bad habit and keeping bad friends. That is the only one that led me to homelessness” |
| Divorce and separation  | “see divorce, eviction, separations; I think majority of people will fall into one of them” |
| Poor financial management and social skills |  “I made wrong choices too in the past. I spoke to some elders in this place. They have shown me how to turn my anger and negative feeling into positive” “…some homeless get welfare, and AISH, and yet, they have addiction and are homeless. They collect their benefits and spend it on drugs, alcohol, and gambling, and all kinds of addiction. they need help with rehabilitation, and with supervised spending of their income to avoid wasting the money, and placing themselves at higher risks”  |
| Eviction  | “see, divorce, eviction, separations. I think majority of the people will fall into one of them” “you cannot pay rent” “I lose my home,” “I lost my house”  |
| Unemployment and lack of employment skills | “If they have training every other week, a am…, if they have training tools to help people change their lives, like courses, and classes, menu management courses.”“Lack of more job skills” “lose your job”  |
| Lack of awareness shelters and government support systems | “lack of awareness, not knowing who to turn to when in serious need”  |

***No money, fixed income, and no family support.*** Participants stated that they had no money because they lose their jobs, so they became homeless. Some hinted that their income was fixed (i.e., pension and entitlement), which could not keep up with the rising cost of living after the economic recession. Respondents expressed that pension or entitlement needs to go up to help them exit homelessness.

***Unsafe environment and home and/or bad roommate.*** Respondents stated that they were living in an environment that is unhealthy, so they opted to live on the street. Some stated that they were abused by their spouses, and some hinted that their roommates had drug issues or were prostitutes, and sometimes their items or money went missing. Participants stated that to depart homelessness, people need a safe living environment.

***Addictions, mental illness, bad habits, and bad friends.*** Some participants stated that addiction was the main reason they were homeless because they could not keep their jobs and could not pay for rent or mortgage. Some mentioned that keeping bad friends was the key reason they were homeless because their friends introduced them to drugs and gambling.

***Separation and divorce.*** Participants stated that they were homeless because of divorce or separation, which led to paying child support that they could not afford along with rent. Some stated that their spouses evicted them and because they could not afford separate rents and cost of living. Thus, the participants indicated a need to review policy on separation and divorce to address homelessness.

***Poor or lack of financial management skills and social skills.*** Some respondents stated that their pension or income was enough to sustain a living; however, because they do not manage their funds well, they run out of money quickly. They could not retain their homes and pay for a living because they spent money on gambling, friends, or unnecessary things. Participants stated that important for financial management training or support to help sustain a dignified living.

***Eviction.*** Participants stated that they were evicted because they could not pay rent or because of a spouse or friend. Because they did not have other support, they became homeless. However, participants suggested that even if someone is evicted, if he or she had enough money or good paid job, they may not be homeless.

***Unemployment and lack of employment skills.*** Respondents expressed that they became homeless because they were not employed, underemployed, or lost their jobs. Some were affected by the economic recession, but because they do not have other employment skills, they stayed unemployed for many years and remained homeless. Based on participants’ responses, regular full-time employment is needed for people to exit homelessness.

***Lack of awareness of shelter and government support systems.*** All participants stated that before they became homeless, they did not know about shelters and other government support systems and the services that they provide, so they lived on the street and in their cars for as long as 1 year before going to a shelter. From the participants’ experiences, it is necessary for people to explore the resources available for people in need of financial help because homelessness could happen to anyone. Further, it is essential that the government creates better awareness of the shelters and government support services.

**Shelter-related themes.** The following themes were developed about shelter-related reasons why people became homeless (see Table 5).

Table 5

Shelter-Related Variables that Keep people in Homelessness

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Shelter-related variables | Participant statements  |
| Caring and people-oriented professionally trained staff  | ““I think they should hire more counsellors” “if we have one-on-one discussion with counsellors. It is hard to get one, more counsellors are needed, so that people could get help, and resources from the community when they need one” “They should have motivational speakers and motivational support” “…getting motivational speakers and people to motivate you” “…75% of the homeless give up on themselves |
| Accommodation and resources | “not enough tables and chairs. Every morning, there is a fight about tables and chairs. they need to build a bigger shelter, no enough spaces, more accommodation” “more spaces, nutrition, beds, beddings, marts”“they need a bigger shelter, a swimming pool, more nurses and doctors”“Transportation, we don’t have money for transport most of us” “…, for doctors appoints and others. |
| Agency policy on addiction and alcohol | “you are not allowed to come in here if you are not sober” “Now they allow them and place them in a pen, like a play pen” “…they leave people in the cold…-50. Many die in extreme cold”  |
| Lack of categories of homeless to serve the homeless better and lack of shelter for families | “they have no homeless shelter for families” “we are not allowed to hug, hold hands, or kiss, or do what married people do because it makes others jealous” “they should put people with addiction and mental illness separate…those on wheel chair separate” “even seniors are here”  |
| Long waiting, too many questions, and unnecessary protocols | “when people are homeless and they come here, they should go straight and give them help they need”. “not pushing people here and there” “…asking you a thousand questions many are not necessary” “…people should receive the help the need say, from one week time they enter shelter, everyone’s need is different” |
| Security, safety, and privacy concerns | ”I lost a jacket here, and cell phone. there are security issues here. The security checked and said that they didn’t see anything. Now, I have a locker to secure my stuff. that makes me feel better” “It takes away your privacy, … It is like a jail but, you never committed a crime. I don’t like it.” |
| Lack of skills training for job skills, financial management, and behavioral skills | “If they have training every other week, a am…, if they have training tools to help people change their lives, like courses, and classes, menu management courses.”“Lack of job skills,” “lose your job”  |

***Caring and people-oriented staff who are professionally trained like counselors, case workers, security staff, motivational speakers, and motivational support workers.*** From experience, participants believed that trained staff are essential to help people exit homelessness. Service providers require professional training, empathy, and a desire to assist people exit homelessness. Approaching people with a discriminatory or negative attitude affects whether they will cooperate or make an effort to depart homelessness.

***Insufficient space and resources.*** Participants said that there was not enough space and resources at the shelter. Additionally, respondents expressed that some staff treated the resources like they were personally paid for, rather than from tax payers. Participants suggested increasing the shelter funding, accommodation, and other resources including food to enable people exit homelessness.

***Agency policy on addiction and alcohol.*** Agency policy forbids people from entering the shelter when they are drunk or intoxicated. However, participants commented that this places lives at risks, especially when people have no place to stay in extreme weather conditions. Respondents stated that shelters should accept those who are drunk but place them in different rooms with staff to attend to them. From the experience of participants, they need a warm space and resources, detoxification, and rehabilitation.

***Lack of categories of homelessness and lack of shelter for family.*** Participants suggested that homeless shelters should be run in different categories because the needs of people in need of homes varies. Some do not need to spend as much time at a shelter and just need training or employment. Others need more rehabilitation or treatment. Additionally, some families or pregnant women have immediate needs. Further, some families are not allowed to kiss or hug for fear of making others jealous, which compounds their feelings about their situation and makes it harder to depart homelessness.

***Wait time.*** People who met the acceptance requirements of the shelter were accepted right away. There is no wait time, and people were taken in as soon as they arrived at the shelter after proper documentation and if they were sober. Participants applaud shelters for this; however, they said it was a challenge to leave, and some have stayed at the shelter for as long as 20 years.

***Security.*** To some respondents, they were safe to be at the shelter because it offers protection. Others stated that the security at the shelter was poor. Some have brought in prohibited items, and some stated that they lost valuable items like cell phones and jackets because they lack private and secure place to keep their items and security cameras could not detect who stole the items. Losing some of these items caused grief and pain, which delayed exiting homelessness. Participants suggested that better shelter security such as secure lockers and space is necessary for a positive shelter experience to enable them exiting homelessness.

***Lack of training for job skills, financial management, and behavioral and social skills.*** Participants also suggested that many have no home because of absence of necessary skills.

**Research Question 3**

The results for Research Question 3 show how a shelter meets the needs of the homeless. In Table 6, the theme is itemized with a total of nine prominent themes.

Table 6

Shelter That Meets the Needs of the Homeless

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Variables | Participant statements |
| Hours of operation | “it is about the shelter that opens-up all day 24-seven.” |
| Accommodation and more resources | Every morning, there is a fight about tables and chairs. No enough tables and chairs, they need to build a bigger shelter, no enough spaces, more accommodation” “more spaces, nutrition, beds, beddings, marts” |
| Privacy, warm, safe, and secure place | “I lost a jacket here, and cell phone. there are security issues here. The security checked and said that they didn’t see anything. Now, I have a locker to secure my stuff. that makes me feel better”“It takes away your privacy, …It is like a jail but, you never committed a crime. I don’t like it.”“…better searchers and tight security about stuffs coming into the shelter”  |
| Caring and people-oriented professionally trained staff, counselors, case workers, security staff, motivational speakers, and motivational workers | “…talking to counselors” “They make you see that you need to fight a bit harder to get out of here” “It depends on who is working that day. There are some good people and some bad people.”“They should have motivational speakers and motivational support”“…getting motivational speakers and people to motivate you” “75% of the homeless give up on themselves” |
| Absence of sports, recreational, and wellness programs  | “recreation facilities, going for an hour work, play volley ball etc.”“the wellness classes, and gardening group because, it is peaceful” “There is homeless games, soccer and sports for the world homeless. They should promote homeless sporting activities in the shelters in Alberta, and Canada. Another World Homeless Soccer and sport for female and male with addictions is coming up in Scotland in 2017. They should participate by promoting and training us to participate in theses games. I am a homeless soccer player. I really, prefer to get up and go and play soccer than to go and drink.” |
| Employment office  | “I like that they have office here where you can get out and work” “It was not that I cannot work”  |
| Information office  | “CUPS Help people with damage deposits, identification same as Alberta works, Red Cross. They help with identification, medical treatment, and sometimes they help with transportation…I don’t think everyone knows all these, any of these services”  |
| Skills training on job, financial management, behavior and anger management, and guidance on spending | “if they have training tools to help people change their lives, like courses, classes, money management courses” “Lack of more job skills” “by getting more training to help me obtain more employment.”“They collect their benefits and spend it on drugs, alcohol, and gambling, and all kinds of addiction. They need help with supervised spending of their income to avoid wasting the money and placing themselves at higher risks” “Harnessing their money could help” “Setting goals, and teaching people how to set goals, conduct themselves well, anger management” |
| Hygiene and maintenance culture of shelters | “Bed bugs, maintenance, they need to update things inside the building, maintenance should take place every 6 months to 2 years” “More exterminator for bugs (hygiene)”  |

***Hours of operation.*** Participants stated that some shelters run 24 hours. To respondents, this was beneficial because sometimes people could be kicked out in the middle of the night. Additionally, people who were resisting to seek help from shelter could decide anytime to go and ask for help from a shelter.

***Sufficient space, resources, and security and privacy.*** Respondents suggested that it would be more beneficial for shelter to receive more resources including finances to meet the needs of people seeking for homes. Increasing finances can increase accommodation space for each individual to give them some level of privacy, safety, and warmth. Availability of these can support individuals in departing homelessness.

***Caring and people-oriented staff who are professionally trained.*** Respondents suggested that shelter service providers need to be trained on how to handle people at the shelter with fragile emotional situations, which helps to encourage and support. Additionally, respondents stated that including motivational speakers and motivational support staff in the staffing of shelter can make a difference. Because people at the shelter assume a position of defeat, getting out of their situation can depend on the staff.

***Sport, recreation, and wellness activities.*** Participants stated that having sporting, recreational and wellness activities at the shelter is necessary. Some stated that they started having feeling and a desire to get better after participating in this type of program. Respondents also stated that there is world soccer competition for male and female experiencing addiction, and these programs can help with addiction because they will prefer to engage in sports and recreational activities rather than doing drugs. Simply winning a competition could provide enough money for people to depart homelessness.

***Employment and information office.*** All participants were pleased with the employment office at the shelter because it helps them get employment, though the employment was temporary or casual. However, they prefer full-time employment to exit homelessness. Respondents also stated that an information office was beneficial because it helps them to know where to go to seek help to leave homelessness. For example, CUPS for needs of identification, medicals, transportation, and Alberta works and Red Cross for housing and income support.

***Skills training for jobs, financial management, and behavior.*** Respondents expressed that skills training was critical to depart homelessness. Some had limited job skills, so when they lost their jobs they could not secure another job. Some also became homeless because of not managing their money well and anger management issues that caused them divorce and separation then homelessness.

**Discussion**

A description and synthesis of the major themes of this study and findings of previous studies will follow in the next sections. The two prominent themes from participant responses were no money and discrimination. All other emergent themes centered on these two themes of how to get money to exit homelessness and how discrimination was standing in the way. Themes were developed from axial coding of interview data that were analyzed and coded as nodes before placing them into categories. Several of the themes overlapped; however, except for money and discrimination, no responses surfaced in all research questions.

**Theme 1: No Money, Home, Privacy, or Support**

In the lived experiences of people in homeless situations, this theme emerged as having nothing—no money, home, privacy, or support. As a life event that keeps people in homelessness, the theme appeared as unemployment and a lack of employment skills and fixed income with no family support. Regarding a shelter that meets their needs, the theme of money surfaced as insufficient space and lack of resources and privacy (see Ahajumobi, 2017). This finding is congruent with previous studies (Calgary Homeless Foundation, 2013; Hubac & Stroick, 2007).

**Theme 2: Discrimination**

Discrimination was also a central issue emerging in response to all three research questions. Gaetz et al. (2013) supported this theme, stating that discrimination is an obstacle to obtaining employment and other support services, which affects non-White racial and ethnic groups the most. In the current study, participants of African and First Nation descent expressed that their homelessness was due to racial discrimination or hatred. Participants added that discrimination is also a barrier to getting homes and receiving services. Researchers have also identified discrimination as a structural cause of homelessness that denies the opportunity to gain economic and social autonomy and stability that could prevent homelessness (Bloom, Finfgeld-Connect, & Johnson, 2012; Gaetz et al., 2013).

**Theme 3: Mental Illness and Addiction**

All participants mentioned mental illness and addiction, including gambling. Participants stated that some picked up the behavior prior to becoming homeless while struggling with finances, unhealthy relationships, or an unsafe living environment. Some developed mental illness and addiction after they became homeless because of the stress and stigma. Some also reported becoming addicted because of bad friends. Additionally, some people with mental illness are homeless because they cannot manage their income well enough to live independently, and others have no income at all. All participants stated that mental disorders are common among the people at the shelter, especially schizophrenia, and having access to medication is a concern. Previous researchers have also revealed that mental illnesses and addiction are high among the people experiencing homelessness (Bloom et al., 2012; Campbell et al., 2015; Donovan & Shinseki, 2013; Flisher et al., 2007; Gaetz et al., 2013; Ganesh, 2013).

**Theme 4: Child Support, Credit Bureau and Criminal Records, and Housing Tax**

Child support was a government- and domestic-related variable that keeps people in homelessness. Participants paid 65% of their income for child support, which left only 35% of their income to live on, making it difficult to depart homelessness. Relationship factors such as family break-ups as a cause of homelessness has also been supported by previous research (Woolley, 2015), though child support is a new theme from this study. Participants specified that amending child support is necessary to help overcome homelessness. The participants also specified that credit bureau and criminal records affect employment and qualifying for rent or a mortgage (see Ahajumobi, 2017).

**Theme 5: Inefficient and Discriminatory Government Support Systems as well as Lack of Support System Awareness**

The participants stated that the absence of efficient support systems, including family, community, and the government, can be a cause of homelessness. A lack of awareness of the support systems was also an issue. Awareness is necessary to inform the people experiencing homelessness and the community about the shelters, support systems, and the services they provide (see Ahajumobi 2017). Better awareness was a new finding that was not reported by other researchers.

**Theme 6: Caring and People-Oriented Trained Staff**

The participants reported that a trained and caring staff is central to the people at the shelter overcoming homelessness. If the people at the shelter know that the staff care and want to assist them in getting out of homelessness, then people at the shelter will cooperate, feel motivated, and do their best to exit homelessness. However, negative staff attitudes can make bad habits worse. This factor was stated by all participants but two. This was a new finding not suggested by earlier researchers.

The respondents expressed a desire for training shelter staff to a professional level. Gaetz et al. (2013) indicated that professional training and improved strategic planning is achievable for shelter staff but only when based on appropriate evidence. Respondents also encouraged having motivational speakers and motivational support staff (see Ahajumobi, 2017). This theme occurred in response to all research questions but one, and it was a new finding not suggested by previous researchers.

**Theme 7: Training on Job Skills, Anger Management Skills, and Spending**

Lack of skills was expressed by the respondents as a cause for people at the shelter becoming homeless. Providing training on these skills to the people at the shelter would aid them in overcoming homelessness (see Ahajumobi, 2017).

**Theme 8: Sports, Recreational, and Wellness Programs**

The respondents expressed that having sports, recreation, and wellness programs at the shelter is important to help people depart homelessness. Participants stated that they would prefer to play sports or games than do drugs (see Ahajumobi, 2017). This finding was new; it was not reported by previous authors. This finding was new, it was not suggested by other authors.

**Theme 9: Improve Security, Safety, Privacy, Hygiene, and Maintenance of Shelters**

From participants’ experience, homeless shelters need to be safe, secure, offer reasonable privacy, and maintain hygiene. If people have poor health conditions, they cannot exit homelessness. This finding is concurrent with previous research that suggests the prevalence of health issues among individuals who are homeless (Campbell et al., 2015; Ganesh, 2013).

**Theme 10: Long Wait Periods and Unnecessary Questions and Protocols**

Experience informed participants that long waiting, and unnecessary questions and protocols will keep people more in homelessness. Some will rather not seek help than answer the questions. This is a new finding that was not reported by previous authors.

**Summary**

Based on the 10 prominent themes, the environment affects people in homeless situations and their experiences affect the environment, which aligns with social cognitive theory and reciprocal determinism. Additionally, from the participants’ lived experiences and their meaning, symbolic interaction construct was apparent. Thus, homelessness can be understood from their perspectives, which supports the phenomenological approach of this study.

**Recommendations for Further Studies**

We recommend that researchers conduct studies on lung diseases and mental illness prevalence, including schizophrenia, dementia, depression, and addiction, among people in a homeless situation and how to control these illnesses. Conducting more studies to determine how to categorize the homeless in service-delivery to meet their various needs is also important to ending homelessness.

**Implications**

The results of this study to have significant implications for the homeless, public, researchers, service providers, and policy makers. The findings also add to the body of homeless literature in Calgary and Canada, especially regarding the perspectives of those experiencing homelessness. The findings may help in keeping people off the street and placing them in permanent residences. Successfully placing people in permanent homes contributes to the health and safety of those involved (see Donovan & Shinseki, 2013) as well as the City of Calgary.

**Limitations and Trustworthiness**

We did not measure relationships or count population in this study. We only conducted an interpretational analysis of the interview data from the lived experiences of people in a homeless situation. Additionally, some respondents who shared experiences could have missed the point or focus of the conversation, which was addressed through triangulation (see Moustakas, 1994; Newton & Rudestam, 2007, p. 40).

We selected the respondents purposefully (see Newton & Rudestam, 2007, p. 107), ensuring that samples were selected from Canadian people from diverse ethno-racial backgrounds living at a shelter who saw our poster announcement, came for our information session, and consented to participate. The room was secure and conducive for safety and privacy. Participants were also informed to share only the experiences that they want to share and stop sharing whenever they wanted and indicate that by a wave of hand. They received a gift card token from us after each meeting.

Because this study was qualitative and subjective, biases were likely. We obtained the data based on the individuals’ present and past homeless experiences (i.e., retrospective), which they may have forgotten, overstated, or understated. We collected data and reflexively interpreted it, which could also be a potential source of bias (see Abdi, 2014; Mertens, 2015, p. 454; Moustakas, 1994; Newton & Rudestam, 2007, p. 40). To mitigate this possible bias, we cross-checked the interview data by taking notes and voice recording for member checking before proceeding with data analysis. We were transparent and objective in analyzing, interpreting, and reporting the data, and we tried to avoid personal influence and bias. Further, phenomenological studies are naturally prone to bias (Newton & Rudestam, 2007, p. 39); however, the credibility of this study lies in its consistency in measuring what it was set to measure and its replicability (see Newton & Rudestam, 2007, p. 113). It is important to mention that authors give different interpretations to phenomenological studies; the nature of our questions and answers provided by respondents may not have addressed all interpretations given to phenomenology. We further confirmed the validity of this study through detailed data description and by including discrepant outcomes (see Creswell, 2011).

**Conclusion**

Homelessness means that a person has no money or anybody and are exposed to danger and abuse. The participants’ experiences suggest that there is no one single variable that leads or keep people into homelessness. Discrimination, money issues, housing policies, and environmental/structural and domestic variables lead and keep people into homelessness. Considering the government related variables that lead people into homelessness, participants also suggested that policymakers need to review the government policies on employment, housing, divorce and separation, child support, criminal records, credit bureaus, and the provision of skills training to assist people exiting homelessness. Additionally, professionally trained, people-oriented staff including motivational speakers and motivational support staff are critical to ending homelessness. And a safe, secure and good hygienic shelter with adequate privacy and recreational activities among others meets the needs of people at the shelter. Thus, this study provides information about homelessness that can benefit the homeless, public, researchers, public health service providers, and policymakers by influencing homeless and public health strategies and policy decisions. The results of this study also add to the body of homeless literature in Calgary and Canada.

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