Addressing the Needs of the Street Homeless

What you need to know

Homelessness has become an important social and political issue over the past 10 years. Ten thousand Canadians are homeless on any given night. Homeless people suffer more from physical and mental illness, substance abuse issues and tend to die earlier than the general public. The street homeless population, compared to the hidden homeless, is the most challenging homeless group to work with because of their complex needs and their minimal use of shelters, health-care facilities and social service agencies.

What is this research about?

This research studies the effectiveness of a multidisciplinary outreach team (MDOT) in meeting the housing and health-care needs of the street homeless population in Toronto. MDOT offers intensive transitional case management to clients whose complex psychiatric, health and substance use issues exceed the resources and expertise of other agencies providing street outreach and case management.

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KEYWORDS

street outreach, case management, social services

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What did the researchers do?

Twenty-five clients were interviewed at intake and then six months later to better understand the needs of street homeless people and to make possible improvements to the street outreach program. One case manager conducted all of the client assessment interviews at the clients' convenience. To better understand the clients' needs, data was collected on their housing history, substance use, and social and mental functioning. Socio-demographic information regarding clients' age, sex, race/ethnicity, education, employment and income was also collected. To be considered for the client group, individuals had to have been absolutely homeless, have had severe and ongoing mental illness and have not successfully responded to other programs.

> *Not all homeless people have the same needs. Different responses to homelessness must be used to reach as many individuals as possible.*
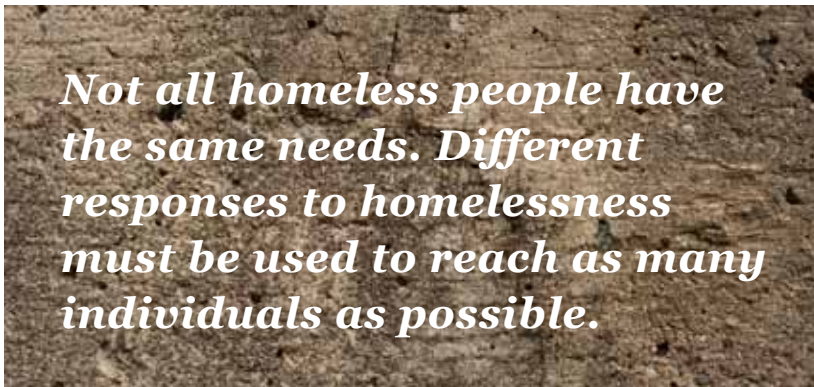
What did the researchers find?

Before the study, nine out of ten street homeless people interviewed said that they wanted permanent housing, and over twenty-six percent indicated that their mental health difficulties stood in the way of finding and securing housing. By combining housing, health-care and social work expertise through inter-sectoral collaboration, MDOT showcases that collaborative approaches to ending homelessness produced positive housing and functioning outcomes to street dwellers. The study suggested that these services must also be mobile and brought to the street to be effective. At the six months interview, more than two-thirds of the client group was no longer living on the street and only nine percent reported preferring to live on the street or in shelters. There were also obvious improvements in social, occupational and school functioning, and a moderate decrease in drug use.

HOW CAN YOU USE THIS RESEARCH?

This research can be used as an example of the advantages of collaborative street out-reach programs in addressing the complex housing and health care needs of street homeless individuals. This research can be used as a model by other social service agencies who have not had success meeting the needs of certain groups of homeless people. This research also stresses the fact that not all homeless people have the same needs, and that different responses to homelessness must be used to reach as many individuals as possible.

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