

Living on the Margins: Older Homeless Adults in Toronto

What you need to know

In addition to the lifelong elderly homeless population, there are now elderly people who are becoming homeless for the first time in their lives. Recently homeless older adults have different needs than those that have been homeless for a long time. However, current homelessness services tend to treat them as if they had been homeless a long time. Recently homeless older adults lack experience finding support for their recent needs and have trouble navigating their way through complex social service programs. Once homeless, older adults have a difficult time improving their situations.

What is this research about?

This research is about a growing number of elderly people in Toronto who are becoming homeless for the first time in their lives. It compares the health and wealth, housing history, and use of health and social services between the recent elderly homeless population and the long-term homeless population. This research suggests that not all older homeless people have always been homeless and that they do not all have the same needs.



Photo credit: Rosie Obeirne

KEYWORDS

elderly people, gerontology services, health, social services

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ARTICLE SOURCE

Lynn McDonald; Julie Dergal; Laura Cleghorn (2007). Living on the Margins: Older Homeless Adults in Toronto. *Journal of Gerontological Social Work*, 49 (1-2), pp. 19-46.

What did the researchers do?

The researchers studied data that had been previously collected from shelters in the Greater Toronto Area. They also interviewed 68 older homeless persons, held 30 in-depth interviews with both long-term and recently homeless older adults, and conducted 3 focus

groups with 27 service providers who deal directly with elderly homeless populations. The researchers sampled people 50 years of age or older who were living in shelters, living outdoors and those using food banks, drop-in centers and senior centers.

What did the researchers find?

Eviction, loss of income due to retirement, and widowhood were found to be the main causes of recent homelessness in older adults. The researchers also found that 55% of the recent older homeless population was born outside of Canada. They were more likely to be widowed or divorced than long term older homeless people who tended to remain single throughout their lives. Recent older homeless people were less likely to be in contact with ex-spouses and siblings, but tended to have more contact with children and grandchildren than the long-term older homeless population. They also tended to have slightly higher education levels and more recent ties to employment than the long-term older homeless population. The researchers found that the biggest difference between the

two groups was that recent older homeless people struggled with a lack of information about the homeless service system. Consequently, they used services that offered housing support, while the long-term homeless people tended to rely on temporary services like food banks and drop-ins.

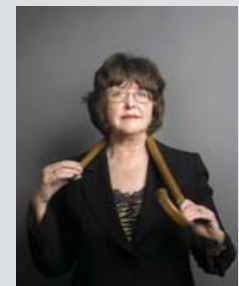


Photo credit: Homecaregiver Store

HOW CAN YOU USE THIS RESEARCH?

This research can be used to educate people about the increase in recent older homelessness and to highlight the diversity within the older homeless population. It can be used by social workers, health-care providers and gerontological service providers as a way to adapt their approaches to better support this vulnerable, and under studied group. This research can also be used to advocate for the partnership of homelessness and gerontology service sectors to nurture individuals over the long term instead of relying on temporary, emergency services.

ABOUT THE RESEARCHER



Lynn McDonald is a professor in the Faculty of Social Work and director of the Institute for Life Course and Aging at the University of Toronto. She is a co-author of the textbook, *Aging in Contemporary Canada*, 2nd edition and has been awarded the Governor General's Golden Jubilee medal for her contributions to Canadian gerontology.