

Introduction

Although there is no agreed-upon definition of homelessness across disciplines or countries, the Canadian Homelessness Research Network (2012) defines homelessness as “individuals without stable, permanent, appropriate housing, or the immediate prospect, means, and ability to acquire it” (para. 9). Homelessness is recognized as a global phenomenon that deprives individuals of the necessities of daily life: food, water, shelter, clothing, health care, and social inclusion (Busch-Geertsema et al., 2016). This literature review explores existing research around instances of homelessness in older adult populations. The research demonstrates that homelessness among older adults will significantly increase in the coming decades due to accelerated population aging and continued economic vulnerability into old age without appropriate prevention and policy response (Grenier et al., 2016).

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (2017) defines homelessness in various ways, e.g., a chronically homeless individual “refers to an individual with a disability who has been continuously homeless for one year or more or has experienced at least four episodes of homelessness in the last three years where the combined length of time homeless in those occasions is at least 12 months” (pg. 2). Every year, over three million people experience homelessness in the USA (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2007; Ng et al., 2013).

Researchers estimate that over 550,000 individuals in the USA and between 150,000 and 300,000 in Canada experience homelessness (Carson, 2016). In addition to these statistics, adults over fifty make up almost half of the homeless population, an increase of about 10 percent over the 1990s (Brown et al., 2015; Culhane et al., 2013). Collectively, population aging, a trend of first-time homelessness at mid-life, and continued economic vulnerability into old age, indicate that without appropriate prevention and policy response, homelessness among older adults will

significantly increase in the coming decades, perhaps even doubling over the next 30 years (Murphy, 2018).

As the symbolism of home possession is connected to positive ideas of both citizenship and dignity in America (Arnold, 2004), unhoused older adults often face stigma because of their homeless status. Previous research has identified that homeless individuals are often perceived as less than, and are a commonly dehumanized population (Bastian et al.) The negative perceptions, stereotypes, and beliefs communicated to society often dictate actions and public policy.

Governmental policy-makers and advocates for the homeless working for non-governmental organizations addressing the issue play vital roles in communicating messages about ways to address the homelessness crisis. In turn, these messages affect the financial resources made available to address this ongoing crisis (Salem, 2015).

Ageism and Prejudices toward Homelessness

The article “Intersections of Ageism and Homelessness Among Older Adults: Implications for Policy, Practice, and Research” (Weldrick & Canham, 2023) states that due to the scarcity of affordable housing there will likely be a rise in the overall homeless population. According to the study, a growing number of older people are expected to experience homelessness for the first time later in life and are expected to remain homeless as they age. Along with the marginalization experienced due to the mere fact of being homeless, the diversity that exists within the older population means that members of some groups may experience additional adverse effects and a disparity in the availability of services. This should become a pressing concern for decision-makers, gerontologists, and housing advocates alike (Weldrick & Canham, 2023).

“A Literature Review of Homelessness and Aging: Suggestions for a Policy and

Practice-Relevant Research Agenda" (Grenier et al., 2016) indicated that one of the most prevalent problems needing research is the lack of consensus as to the exact definition of "older adults". Some researchers define older adults as individuals over the age of sixty-five. Other researchers take a different approach; by accounting for the health and mortality disparities between the general population and homeless adults, they define older homeless adults as individuals over the age of forty (Crane & Warnes, 2001; D'Cruz et al., 2007; McDonald et al., 2007). Including this wide range of ages may make it difficult to reach conclusions about the experiences of any of the subgroups of the older population. Because there are many different pathways into homelessness, as well as the fact that the older homeless population happens to be a particularly heterogeneous group, another limiting factor researchers encounter is discovering a significantly identifiable common pathway to their homeless circumstances (Burns, 2016; Perry, 2016). In addition, homeless older adults often experience victimization and physical, mental, and behavioral challenges. These challenges have a profound cost both to the homeless individuals as well as to society as a whole (Crane & Warnes, 2001; Dietz & Wright, 2005; Grenier et al., 2016a; McDonald et al., 2007). Research also demonstrates that older adults experiencing homelessness report feeling devalued, dehumanized, and forgotten. They are at greater risk of adverse life experiences when compared to individuals with stable housing. (Brown et al., 2015). Rather than categorizing homeless older adults with their younger counterparts (Gaetz et al., 2013; Perry, 2016), researchers need to understand their lived experiences if policies are to adequately address the pathways into and barriers to exiting homelessness (Grenier, 2016).

In the existing literature, studies of the older adult homeless populations have been primarily quantitative. These studies have mostly relied upon the reporting expertise of service

providers and professionals. Few qualitative studies have contributed to the knowledge base. It is rare to hear from individuals personally experiencing discriminatory actions or behavior in settings such as shelters. Social workers and clients have long acknowledged that excluding client voices in these studies unnecessarily damages relationships but, without the opportunity to share their perspectives, this neglect leaves clients feeling exploited. (Otiniano Verissimo et al., 2021).

Based on the constructivist-grounded theory, the study "Oscillating In and Out of Place: Experiences of Older Adults Residing in Homeless Shelters" addressed gaps in the current homelessness literature by exploring the first-time homelessness experiences of fifteen older adults living in Montreal (Burns, 2016). The study interrogated the ways in which societal perceptions of homelessness shape access to housing, health, and social services, as well as perceptions of self. The study revealed that homelessness evoked intense feelings of despair, anger, and frustration in the subjects. Shelter life both helped and hindered the subjects' ability to deal with the stigma associated with homelessness and to process the grief associated with the loss of a home, in order to move forward. By reframing homelessness as a normalized experience of grief, the study helped shift negative perceptions of aging and homelessness towards understanding homelessness as an intense period of loss, which requires validation, empathy, compassion, care, and support. The study suggests that by adapting shelter design, policies and programming to ensure that shelter life does not exacerbate and extend grief reaction, individuals may more readily move through their grief in order to gain a more positive sense of self which in turn can aid them to find and maintain stable housing (Burns, 2016).

The Intersection of Age, Unhoused Status, and LGTBQ+ Identity

Although LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, and Queer) people make up 20–40% of homeless populations, discriminatory attitudes faced by older homeless LGBTQ+ adults are an under-explored area of housing and homelessness studies. Much of the existing literature focuses on specific elements of LGBTQI+ homelessness. Researchers do not consider intersections of these elements; instead, they consider discrete categories of discriminatory behavior. An intersectional-systems approach to homelessness research is required in order to develop well-informed, culturally sensitive homeless support programs for older LGBTIQ+ adults (Fraser et al., 2019).

LGBTIQ+ individuals experience homelessness at far greater levels than their non-LGBTIQ+ counterparts. Recent papers have outlined the relationships between factors relating to LGBTIQ+ homelessness and have proposed a systems-thinking approach through which to view them. The three main groupings they propose to examine the problem are 1) the proximate causes of homelessness, 2) system failures in early life, and 3) experiences during homelessness. This systems-thinking approach to LGBTIQ+ homelessness can be used to develop well-informed, culturally sensitive support programs, particularly about early life intervention, in order to prevent system failures (Redcay et al., 2019).

The Intersection of Age and Unhoused Status Faced by Older Adults of Color

Individuals who occupy multiple marginalized statuses are believed to be at an increased risk of experiencing homelessness at some period during their lifetime. Among a sample of U.S. adult respondents from the second Wave of the NES Survey between the years 2004 and 2005 on Alcohol and Related Conditions, those who reported discrimination were more likely to experience homelessness in comparison to those who did not report discrimination even after adjusting for additional social demographic criteria like depression. Experiencing discrimination

was identified as having an association with an increased chance of homelessness in this same NES study. The probability that an individual would experience homelessness increased among African American, Native American, and Latinx adults, with experiences of discrimination attributed to characteristics such as race/ethnicity, gender, and religion (Rhee & Rosenheck, 2020).

“Racial Inequity and Homelessness: Findings from the SPARC Study” (Olivet et al., 2021) further examined racial inequities and their associations with homelessness in the United States. The study was conducted using mixed-methods and was conducted in eight communities. The study examined whether race and ethnicity had association with housing outcomes by surveying individuals in poverty and comparing the race and ethnicity of those experiencing homelessness to the general population. The findings of the study indicated that that Black and Native-identified peoples were the most overrepresented among those experiencing homelessness in each community. The data suggested that among various communities studied, for people of color, factors associated with homelessness included economic immobility, racism and discrimination within homeless services and involvement in multiple systems, including the criminal justice system (Olivet et al., 2021).

Discussion

Robust studies of homeless populations give policy teams and advocates for the homeless the necessary data to make compelling arguments to lawmakers about the need to support them. Many studies have been conducted which examine the various forms of discrimination faced by homeless people in general. The discrimination faced by people experiencing the intersectionality of ageism and biases related to their homeless status has received much less attention.

A review of the research conducted by Willison et al. (2023) shows that older homeless adults face significantly higher rates of dehumanizing treatment compared to their younger peers. Willison's findings indicate that there are existing biases within homeless shelters and healthcare settings that disadvantage older adults. Staff unwillingness to provide care to older adults as well as the fact that the services available are often geared to the younger homeless population can also adversely affect older homeless adults in care settings and medical facilities. Biases also affect the prioritization of institutional policies focused on homeless populations. Cultural competency within staff training methods has not been explored, and focus groups for service providers, which might reveal existing biases and suggest solutions, have not yet been conducted.

The Burns study (2016) emphasizes the importance of the overarching narrative understanding of the lived experiences of older homeless adults held by those providing their care. Studies indicate that, as of now, homeless older adults are not in control of their narrative. They are given very few opportunities to voice their lived experiences. Burns' research suggests that advocates should explore ways to incorporate the narratives of the people facing homelessness into their advocacy efforts to challenge biased perceptions within the field and improve the care afforded to older adults seeking refuge.

Weldrick and Canham (2023) and Olivet et al. (2021) both acknowledge in their papers the vulnerability of LGBTQ+ and older adults of color within the homeless population. Principally, their studies highlight the fact that individuals occupying multiple marginalized statuses are at an increased risk of experiencing homelessness at some period during their lifetime. There seems to be little research suggesting that advocacy efforts are designed to address ways to overcome the intersectional disadvantages these identified groups face.

Research estimates that over 550,000 people in the USA and between 150,000 and 300,000 Canadians currently experience homelessness (Carson, 2016). Research also indicates a lack of data on older homeless populations, and little has been done to explore policy solutions to address their needs. Existing policies, such as limited access to affordable housing or social security benefits, inadvertently contribute to the issue of ageism experienced through homelessness. Solutions to ameliorate these policies deserve to be explored in a more in-depth manner. Such a conversation could lead to policy changes or preventative measures that reduce homelessness among the aging population.

Recommendations for Future Research

Based upon the findings of this literature review, future research should be directed to obtaining better estimates of older homeless populations and then identifying differences in the risk factors faced by older and younger homeless populations. It is crucial to identify which socio-demographic groups are over-represented in the overall homeless population and to determine which systemic barriers those groups face. Understanding how their needs correspond to, or differ from, what is known about older homeless people is also necessary. Research should extend to the overall aging homeless populations but also explore particular factors affecting historically marginalized groups. By obtaining this information, we can work towards addressing the unique needs of older homeless individuals and reducing homelessness among this vulnerable population.

Conclusion

Homelessness among older adults is an increasingly significant issue. Factors such as stagnant wages and an increasingly tightening housing market, combined with the fact that older employees are most often the first to be let go during periods of recession, have led to the fact

that as of 2017, people over the age of 50 make up more than 33% of the shelter population in the United States. The symbolism of possessing a home is often culturally connected to the concepts of belonging, citizenship, and dignity. In the western world, generally, and in the United States in particular, unhoused adults face significant stigma due to our cultural emphasis on housing as central to our identities. Discriminatory attitudes faced by aging populations are often exacerbated when they are also identified as members of other stigmatized groups. Older adults of color and those identifying as members of the LGBTQ+ community face increased risk of discrimination, abuse, and the further dehumanization that homeless individuals already experience.

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