

Homelessness & Mental Health Consumer Survivors

Policy Issue: The issue of defining the term of homelessness within Canada remains to be a very complex task. In respect of the mental health consumer/survivor community the issue remains that there are a large number of homeless people who are living with severe and persistent mental illness in Canada.

Why Is This An Issue?: The issues are derived from many social and economic barriers for those living with mental illness. All levels of government practices, policies and procedures are responsible for the gaps within the social system. These issues touch on all domains of life and determinants of health for the mental health consumer/survivor population.

Components of the Issue: The turning point in the research was in 1987 when the United Nations declared that this was the Year of Shelter for the Homelessness. That was in keeping with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: "Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of one's self and one's family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond one's control". It is stated in this declaration that the right to a home must be seen as a basic humanitarian principle. Furthermore the United Nations states that homelessness is "hardship in the midst of plenty".

From 1987 and on the research then began to define homelessness in three main sub-groups:

- 1) the chronically homeless group includes people who live on the periphery of society and who often face problems with drug or alcohol abuse or mental illness
- 2) the cyclically homeless group includes individuals who have lost their dwelling as a result of some change in their situation, such as loss of a job, a move, a prison term or a hospital stay. Those who must from time to time use safe-houses or soup kitchens including women who are victims of family violence, runaway youths, and persons who are unemployed or recently released from a detention center or psychiatric institution.
- 3) the temporarily homeless group includes those who are without accommodation for a relatively short period. Likely to be included in this category are persons who lose their home as a result of a disaster (fire, flood, war) and those whose economic and personal situation is altered by, e.g. separation or loss of job. Some researchers do not consider this group as being truly homeless and exclude them from their studies, therefore will only propose two sub-groups, one consisting of the chronically and permanently homeless and one consisting of the occasionally and temporarily homeless. Overall the growing number of homeless globally shows the most recent estimates, as published by international organizations, are alarming. On a world scale, it is estimated that more than one billion people are poorly housed and that 100 million of them are literally living on the street. According to a UNICEF report, every night there are 850,000 homeless people in Germany and 750,000 in the United States. In Canada's largest city, Toronto, emergency shelters for the homeless took in an

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average of 6,500 persons each night in 1997. The experts agree that, in addition to its constant growth, the homeless population has over the past 20 years or so has undergone some substantial changes. In North America, for example, the homeless population includes a large and growing number of women, youth, families, mentally ill people, new immigrants, members of various ethnic communities; and in Canada it includes, many Aboriginal people.

Target Audience of the Policy: All consumer/survivors of mental health services, service providers, all levels of government and the general public in Canada.

Analysis: It is the position of CCAMHR that the answers to this social issue cannot be determined within the narrow scope of the consumer/survivor movement but needs to be addressed by all levels of the social system within Canada. The issues that are being summarized in the research is that although it is hard to count the homeless, a number of signs since the 1980's indicate that homelessness in Canada has been growing and affecting a wider segment of the population; the fact that certain groups appeared for the first time in shelters and soup kitchens for the homeless; the overloading of shelters; and the constant increase in the demand for services in these areas relating to serving the needs of the homeless. Homelessness has been increasingly linked to the numerous concerns in the areas of criminality, public health and the economy where we are seeing that these concerns, because they tend to result in measures aimed strictly at the homeless, are leading to greater social control over this population. This increased control, which is often seen in a regulation of public space, promotes the criminalization of the homeless and consequently helps to reinforce the popular image of them as deviants. Some researchers and writers argue that, by criminalizing the living conditions of those who live in extreme poverty, we are to a large degree fostering their marginal status in society. There is no consensus as to the scope of the phenomenon, its causes and remedies, or even on the composition of the homeless population. Although the explanations multiply and become more complex as our knowledge of the subject deepens, there is much debate as to the relative weight that must be given to the various contributing factors, such as poverty, shortage of low cost housing, drug and alcohol abuse and mental illness. This is no doubt why, notwithstanding the range of studies on homelessness, many continue to be ignorant about the overall phenomenon and what can be done to overcome it.

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Recommendations: CCAMHR advocates and actively pursues the following recommendations to address the issues of homelessness within the mental health consumer/survivor community within Canada by endorsing the following:

- 1) that whether as cause or as consequence of ill health, homelessness has emerged as a fundamental health issue for Canadians and that all levels of government must be lobbied to recognize that services are needed at all levels of the system to address the issues that present as barriers for people to access adequate, safe, accessible and affordable housing that is linked to employability, community support, personal health care and access to health services;
- 2) that the federal government work in partnership with provincial and territorial governments to foster national approaches to health programs and services for the homeless;
- 3) that the federal government respond to the health needs to those homeless who are members of those groups that fall within specific authority (First Nations, veterans, the mentally ill, etc.);
- 4) that the federal government monitor and administer the Canada Health Act and its 5 principles – accessibility, portability, comprehensiveness, public administration and universality – in a manner that encompasses the needs of the homeless;
- 5) that the federal government direct spending to specific programs and initiatives through clearly delineated strategies for helping the homeless;
- 6) that the federal government provide funding for research and evaluation initiatives focused on the homeless within such bodies as the Medical Research Council and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.

Policy Statement: That the CCAMHR adopt a policy statement that states that all mental health consumer/survivors living in Canada be entitled to adequate, safe, accessible and affordable housing

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