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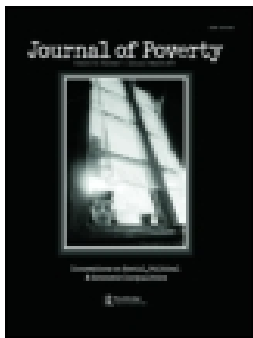
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Where's the Housing? Housing and Income Outcomes of a Transitional Program to End Homelessness

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ABSTRACT

This project examined the effectiveness of a transitional program in breaking the cycle of homelessness. Within a community-based research approach, the authors conducted a case study to describe the program and participants within a context in which housing is largely unavailable and unaffordable. Although most participants successfully transitioned to housing few transitioned from homelessness to economic self-sufficiency in market housing and participants remained in poverty. Evaluations of housing programs can “blame the victim” or “blame the program” when measures of success are not achieved. Interventions to address homelessness require attention to the system-level forces that create and sustain poverty and inequities.

KEYWORDS

transitional housing; interim housing; homelessness; case study; housing outcomes

Introduction

In Canada, an estimated 235,000 people experience homelessness in a given year (Gaetz, DeJ, Richter, & Redman, 2016). Homelessness is marked by extreme poverty and social exclusion, with those experiencing homelessness more likely to also experience poor physical and mental health and as a result of their living conditions, age and die prematurely (Fazel, Geddes, & Kushel, 2014; Frankish, Hwang, & Quantz, 2009; Hwang, Wilkins, Tjepkema, O'Campo, & Dunn, 2009).

Homelessness in Canada is a significant concern, and nongovernmental agencies and governments, in collaboration with others, are seeking ways to effectively respond. As homelessness has increased in the past decades (Begin, Casavant, Chenier, & Dupuis, 1999; Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2009) policy agendas often focus on assessing the needs, often through local enumerations such as homeless counts, to mobilize action (Collins, 2010; Jocoy, 2013). There has also been a focus on systemic responses and development of community 10-year plans to end homelessness (Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness, 2012; Gaetz, 2010; National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2000). These responses often

emphasize the importance of Housing First as a response that places people directly into permanent housing with individualized supports (Gaetz, Gulliver, & Richter, 2014; Goering et al., 2014).

In evaluations of housing programs to end homelessness, the primary indicators of success have usually been the attainment and maintenance of housing and self-sufficiency, without significant attention to the broader sociopolitical economic context in which such interventions are implemented (Pauly, Carlson, & Perkin, 2012; Pauly, Wallace, & Perkin, 2014). In this article, we report on outcomes related to housing and income for the first 5 years of operation of one interim program (termed a “transitional program”) that had an aim of supporting exits from homelessness in a community in which permanent affordable housing is largely unavailable and unaffordable (Albert & Penna, 2015; Pauly, Cross, Vallance, & Stiles, 2013). We specifically took into account the broader socioeconomic context in which the program was being implemented to understand the impact of these factors on the success of participants in exiting homelessness. Below, we outline the purpose and background of the research, provide an overview of the methodology, and present findings followed by a discussion of the implications of these findings for the health and well-being of participants.

Research purpose

In this project, the interim/transitional program is part of the emergency shelter system. The goal of the program is to support exits from homelessness. The research began with the question, “Can the provision of transitional shelter effectively support individuals’ transitions from homelessness to stabilized housing and reduce relapses back to the streets and emergency shelters?” One of the specific objectives of the project was to assess the effectiveness of the program in improving health; access to housing, income, and services for individuals experiencing homelessness; and using emergency shelters. In this article, we report on outcomes related to housing and income for the first 5 years of operation of the program within a broader socioeconomic context and in relation to other programs that support exits from homelessness.

Background – transitional programs, housing, and homelessness

Homelessness interventions, such as Housing First programs, are being implemented in a housing context characterized by the very systemic and structural conditions that have led to the production of homelessness in the first place (Katz, Zerger, & Hwang, 2017). The erosion of social housing and privatization of the housing market, gentrification, deinstitutionalization, and changes to income and welfare policies have all contributed to the creation of

homelessness in Canada (Gaetz, 2010; Shapcott, 2009). As Hulchanski (2009) points out, homelessness and housing instability are produced by “dehousing processes and mechanisms” (p. 4) as a result of public disinvestments in social housing and income support. Further, colonial processes and other injustices that systematically disadvantage Canada’s Indigenous peoples and perpetuate racism affect access to resources and determinants of health including housing and income (Allan & Smylie, 2015; Reading & Wien, 2009).

Although Housing First is an evidence-based approach to supporting exits from homelessness, Housing First requires an available and affordable housing supply to be effective (Zerger et al., 2014). Housing First programs, which focus on direct and permanent placement, still rely on transitional or interim accommodation when direct placement into permanent housing is not available. Indeed, research has emphasized “the need for and meaning of temporary residential settings” as an important factor in Housing First programs, as participants will typically move between different housing situations, often residing in temporary accommodations while securing their next permanent accommodation (Zerger et al., 2014, p. 436). Thus, interim housing is an important option when permanent housing is unavailable as part of Housing First programs with an emphasis on rapid rehousing and supports. However, little is known about the effectiveness of interim housing programs and their implementation in a sociopolitical context in which there has been an erosion of income assistance and social housing with increasing privatization of the housing market.

The program of focus in this research is referred to as a “transitional shelter” by the organization that runs the program to clearly distinguish it from transitional housing for women and families experiencing violence and permanent/supportive housing options. The term *transitional shelter* was adopted in part because the program is funded as part of the emergency shelter system and provides an alternative type of temporary accommodation for residents seeking exits from homelessness. The program also provides additional one-on-one supports and case management services.

Transitional shelter is often time limited and can be directly focused on supporting moves to permanent housing rather than emphasizing housing readiness.¹ In transitional shelter and transitional housing, residents do not have the same scope of rights to retain their housing as those in more permanent housing settings (Novac, Brown, & Bourbonnais, 2004). However, interim or transitional programs for people experiencing homelessness can vary widely and the design and service delivery offerings are diverse. Basic program design differences include geographic location and target population. Spatial location of programs differs in that some are scattered site (i.e., individual homes located throughout an area), whereas other programs are centralized in one building. Programs may also differ in

that some serve a broad spectrum of people experiencing homelessness, while other programs are designed to serve specific groups of people experiencing homelessness, such as youth, people living with HIV/AIDS, or women with experiences of domestic violence (Baker, Billhardt, Warren, Rollins, & Glass, 2010; Brown & Wilderson, 2010; Sosin, George, & Grossman, 2012; Tsai, Mares, & Rosenheck, 2010).

Evaluating transitional programs

In a review of evaluations of homelessness interventions, several authors in their conclusions highlighted the importance of an available and adequate supply of housing and income as essential to breaking the cycle of poverty and homelessness (DeVerteuil, 2005; Fischer, 2000; Poulsen, 2000). These evaluations suggest that structural supports, namely, income and housing, play an important role in the effectiveness of transitional programs and exits from homelessness. Thus, evaluations of transitional programs often do not incorporate contextual factors that affect a resident's or program's ability to achieve the goal of exiting from homelessness. Acknowledging the role of housing supply when evaluating transitional housing requires a methodological approach that can capture the socioeconomic context in which the resident and program are located (Pauly et al., 2014).

Methods

We used an overall community-based participatory research (CBPR) approach combined with a case study design. Israel, Schulz, Parker, and Becker (1998, 2001) define CBPR as a collaborative approach to research that equitably involves the community in all aspects of the research process. This process enables the sharing of expertise, responsibilities, and ownership to increase understanding of the phenomenon under study and to use the knowledge gained to benefit the community involved (Israel et al., 1998; Israel, Schulz, Parker, & Becker, 2001). The research was conducted collaboratively by academic and community-based research partners. Transitional housing staff members were full participants on the research team, and this process is described more fully elsewhere (Wallace, Pauly, Perkin, & Ranftt, 2015).

A single case-study research design allowed us to explore the transitional program as a single case while also investigating the broader context in which this homelessness intervention is situated. According to Yin (2009, 2003), case study research is “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (Yin, 2009, p. 18). Case study methodology is valuable because of its flexibility and

rigor and is often used to develop theory, evaluate programs, and design interventions (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Case study designs incorporate multiple sources of data and follow a form of replication logic and causality through the use of pattern matching and testing of hypotheses. The use of an explanatory case study methodology as described by Yin (2003) facilitated investigating individual resident change while also investigating the socio-economic context that shapes housing realities for homeless and low-income individuals.

Data collection

This project draws on various sources of data about the program and the broader socioeconomic context in which it operates. Data were collected from intake and follow-up surveys of residents, exit summaries prepared by staff, focus groups with staff, qualitative interviews with housing providers, aggregated data collected by shelters as part of their program administration, and local socioeconomic indices. In this article, we report results from the first 5 years of the program, focusing on intake and follow-up data from residents, exit data from staff, comparable aggregated shelter data, and local socioeconomic indices.

Data collection began when the transitional program opened its doors in 2008 (Table 1). Between February 2008 and April 2013, 148 individuals entered the program. Upon intake, all residents completed a short form required by the agency funder and at this point could consent to have their information included in the evaluation. One hundred and nineteen people consented to participate, and of those who consented to participate, 111 also completed our more detailed intake survey designed for the evaluation. Resident-completed exit surveys were implemented, however, the completion rate was low (50 after 5 years). Thus, to address the shortage of exit data, the

Table 1. Sample Sizes.

	Number of Surveys	Inclusion Criteria
Standard intake form	119	Consent to participate in study. Entered program between February 1, 2008 and April 30, 2013
Intake survey	111	Consent to participate in study. Entered program between February 1, 2008 and April 30, 2013
Exit survey	50	Consent to participate in study. Entered and left the program between February 1, 2008 and April 30, 2013
Exit summaries	107	Entered and left the program between February 1, 2008 and April 30, 2013
Follow-up interviews	51	Consent to participate in study. Entered the program between February 1, 2008 and April 30, 2013. Follow ups were completed 6 months or more after leaving the program.

Note. Sample sizes vary for individual questions because not all respondents filled out all questions, and because of changes to the survey design during the initial stages.

staff completed exit summaries for those who had entered and left the program between February 1, 2008 and April 30, 2013. These 107 exit summaries are the only non-self-reported data on program participants included.

Researchers conducted follow-up interviews with 51 participants, or 34% of those who entered the program. To be eligible for a follow-up interview, participants had to have entered the program in the first 5 years of its operation, had to have left the program at least 6 months prior to the follow-up interview, and had to have previously consented to have their information included in the evaluation. Although the number of follow-up interviews is limited, it is considerable given the challenges of following up with people experiencing housing instability and appropriate for a case study design.

The quantitative data were entered into SPSS version 23.0 and descriptive statistics were generated. We also secured aggregate data on the overall emergency shelter population and the population served by two other homelessness outreach programs from the same intake forms used in this study. Table 2 presents data for (1) the population accessing emergency shelter programs in the region, (2) the population housed through a regional shelter outreach program, and (3) general population data for the region.

Table 2. Demographic Characteristics.

		Transitional Shelter (2008–2013) (%)	Emergency Shelter Stays (2010–2011) ^a (%)	Emergency Shelter Outreach Program ^b (2010–2011) (%)	BC Homelessness Outreach ^b (2010–2011) (%)	General Population, Victoria CMA (2010) ^c
Age	19–36	25.5	42	23.0	26	24.7
	37–55	61.9	48	60	59	27.4
	56 and older	12.7	10	17	15	30.4
	Average or Medium	Average age: 44	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Gender ^d :	Male:	65.8	72	69	62	48.7
	Female:	34.2	28	31	38	51.3%
	Transgender	None.	< 1	N/A	N/A	NA
Identifying as Aboriginal		14.0	22	18	31	3.4%
Self-reported addictions		62.8	58	61	57	NA
Self-reported disability		31.3	44	50	58	NA
Self-reported mental health condition		56.0	45	53	57	NA

Note: BC = British Columbia; CMA = Census Metropolitan Area.

a. These numbers reflect records not individuals. Individuals receive a new client record if they go to a different shelter or outreach site.

b. From data prepared by BC Housing and represents Victoria CMA BC Housing Funded Emergency Shelters) Year-Round and Seasonal Shelters.

c. Data generated from BC Stats population query function (www.bcstats.gov.bc.ca).

d. BC Housing gives the options “male,” “female,” and “transgender” in their questionnaire.

Findings

The case of the transitional program and the socio-economic context

The transitional program in this study is located in a 15-bed rooming house in a midsized urban city in Canada (Victoria, British Columbia). Eligible participants are identified from the local emergency shelter program and are currently homeless and seeking to exit homelessness. The program provides accommodation and employs case management as a key strategy. Staff work intensively with residents to develop individualized action plans with a goal of moving away from chronic or cyclical homelessness and into sustainable, long-term housing. The program includes limited supports on exit such as rent supplements (up to a year), monthly grocery vouchers, and bus passes. Where possible, staff provide support to former residents through outreach to maintain housing and social supports.

Victoria, BC, had and continues to have a very challenging housing market (Albert & Penna, 2015; Pauly, Cross, Vallance, Wynn-Williams, & Stiles, 2013). During the period of the study, the vacancy rate for market housing was 1.5%, which increased only marginally from 1.4% in the previous year. Overall, average rent for a bachelor suite was \$665 (Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2010). Bachelor suites are virtually unavailable with vacancy rates of under 1% during this time. Rents vary through the region, with the cheapest bachelor option costing \$584, with at a vacancy rate of 0%. Single individuals on social assistance in receipt of \$375 per month (as the shelter portion of their social assistance benefits) will find even the lowest market rental option unaffordable. At the end of the 2010/2011 fiscal year, 1,377 households were on waiting lists for subsidized housing in the region (BC Housing, 2011).

Although new subsidized housing units have been built, emergency shelter programs operated at 95% capacity, up from 86% in 2008 in 2010/11, whereas 1,958 unique individuals accessed approximately 200 emergency shelter beds; the majority using emergency shelter three or more times during the year (Pauly, Thompson, Kerr Suthin, & Jackson, 2011). These numbers suggest that people move through a variety of housing situations (e.g., from shelters to couch surfing to housing and then back to shelters and so on). In 2013, there were more than 1,600 unique individuals using emergency shelters throughout the year and more than 1,455 people on the waiting list for subsidized housing. Although the vacancy rate improved by 2013 to 2.2%, overall, the vacancy rate for rentals at the low end of market (i.e., less than \$700 per month) was much lower, at less than 1% (Pauly et al., 2013). The situation has remained relatively unchanged with significant concerns regarding a growing number of people experiencing homelessness in 2016 and an estimated 1,400 people homeless on a single night (Albert, Penna, Pagan, & Pauly, 2016). As well, the establishment of Super InTent

City, a homeless encampment, for 10 months between 2015 and 2016 further highlighted the crisis in lack of affordable housing.

Participant profiles at intake

The average age of participants was 44 years. 65.8% of people entering the program identified as male and 34.2% female. Residents came from a variety of backgrounds, including some who were recent immigrants without Canadian citizenship and 14.0% of participants self-identified as Aboriginal.

The standardized intake process includes asking participants to self-identify if they experience addictions, mental health issues, or disabilities. Although some authors have suggested that transitional programs will preferentially take in clients who are identified as the most likely to be successful in obtaining housing, referred to as “creaming,” data collected at the transitional program indicate that this is not occurring (Burt, 2006). At the transitional program, 62.8% of participants reported addiction issues and 56.0% reported mental health issues. In comparison, the general emergency shelter and the emergency shelter outreach program data indicate 61% of participants reporting addictions and 53% reporting mental health issues whereas the other outreach program, with more of a focus on homeless families, reports similar rates of addiction (57%), and mental health issues (57%). The rate of self-reported disabilities is lower in the transitional program than in the other programs. This may be due to the physical environment of the house, which has stairs to enter the building as well as to access the bedrooms and is not accessible to people who need assistance climbing stairs. These data indicate that the program is serving a population with similar rates of mental health conditions and substance use, and lower rates of self-identified disabilities than the population in emergency shelters and the population accessing housing supports through the region’s homelessness outreach programs (see Table 2).

Housing at program exit and follow-up

Table 3 presents the participants’ housing situations at exit and at follow-up. Individuals entering the transitional program were emergency sheltered or provisionally sheltered as per the *Canadian Definition of Homelessness* (Canadian Homelessness Research Network, 2012). In the 60 days prior to intake, approximately one third (34.7%) of residents had resided in a substance use recovery or treatment program. This suggests that the program was particularly meeting a need for those seeking to recover from problematic substance use; if the transitional shelter program had not been there, these same individuals would likely have exited to the street or emergency shelters in the absence of available permanent housing.

Table 3. Housing Outcomes.

	At Intake (<i>N</i> = 111)	At Exit Summaries ^a (<i>n</i> = 107)	At Follow-Up (<i>n</i> = 51)
Apartment in market housing		9.3% (10)	23.5% (12)
Hotel or rooming house		4.7% (5)	3.9% (2)
Friends/family		12.1% (13)	0%
Apartment in market housing with rent supplement		24.3% (26)	23.5% (12)
Social/supportive housing		13.1% (14)	33.4% (17)
Recovery/treatment program		0.9% (1)	2.0% (1)
Homeless	100%	28% (30)	13.7% (7)
Other		7.5% (8)	
Total	100%	100%	100%

Note. a. Exit summaries completed by staff.

According to exit summaries, two out of three (69.8%) participants moved into some form of stable housing after leaving the program. However, this includes participants (12.1%) who moved in with family or friends with the adequacy of their housing unknown. In some cases, living with family or friends would be considered inadequate if the housing was overcrowded or temporary (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2009). Also, housing at exit could not be determined for 4.7% of residents (often because the participant left the city).

Omitting these unknown housing situations, just more than one half (51.4%) of all participants exited to housing, however, the majority were housed with rent supplements (24.3%), or in subsidized or supportive housing (13.1%), where rent is typically well below market rates. Thus, few exited to housing without supports or to economic self-sufficiency. One fourth (24.3%) returned to the emergency shelters, homelessness, or couch surfing, and one person (0.9%) exited to a recovery or treatment program.

At follow-up interviews (*N* = 51) conducted 6 months or more after participants left the program, 43 individuals (84.3%) reported being housed in some form of permanent housing and eight (15.7%) were homeless or in a recovery/treatment program. It is likely that former participants who had housing at the time of the follow-up interviews are over-represented as they were easier to contact. However, transitional program staff, because of their close relationship with the single largest emergency shelter in the region (run by the same organization), did have opportunities to follow-up with those who returned to the shelters. Approximately one third of those interviewed at 6 months (33.4%) were living in social or supportive housing and another (23.5%) were in receipt of rent supplements. This means that more than one half of those interviewed at follow-up (56.9%) had transitioned into housing with some level of income support; either receiving rent supplements, or living in subsidized, social, or supportive housing. About one fourth (23.5%) of participants interviewed at follow-up were renting a house or apartment in market housing without rental subsidies, and another (3.9%) were paying market rents in a rooming house (with an average rent of \$410.00). These

findings seem to indicate that market housing was out of reach for the majority of participants in the absence of subsidized rents.

In the 6-month follow-up interviews we also asked participants to describe their housing history in the 6 months since exiting the program. Most (64.7%) had been consistently housed since exiting the transitional program, and eight (15.8%) reported moving more than twice and with some eventually moving into social housing. Still, 21.6% of respondents reported experiencing an episode of homelessness after exiting the transitional program. For the follow-up interviewees, it is clear that housing success is most often the outcome of a facilitated transition to housing with income supports or more affordable, subsidized housing. The overall findings highlight that at follow-up individuals achieved a higher level of housing independence with income and community supports rather than economic independence in market housing.

Income

Sources of income (individuals often had multiple sources) are presented in Table 4. At intake, a primary source of income for individuals was some form of income assistance benefit with 68.3% receiving temporary, disability, or persistent multiple barriers income assistance from the province. This is similar to 66% of individuals in the general shelter population who are also on some form of income assistance.

This finding suggests several things. First, that the transitional shelter residents are similar in terms of income sources to those in the general shelter population. In other words, shelter clients eligible for income assistance were not being preferentially accepted into the transitional program.

Table 4. Sources of income.

Sources of income	Transitional Program (2008–2013)			Emergency Shelter Population (2010/11) %
	Intake % (n)	Exit Summaries ^a % (n)	Follow-up % (n)	
Employment	21.5 (17)	42.5 (45)	47.1 (24)	14.0
Employment insurance	10.7 (8)	0	2.0 (1)	5.0
Income assistance – temporary	46.5 (40)	34.9 (37)	21.6 (11)	31.0
Income assistance – disability	19.0 (15)	31.1 (33)	39.2 (20)	18.0
Income assistance – PPMB	2.8 (2)	3.8 (4)	9.8 (5)	5.0
Old age security	1.4 (1)	0.9 (1)	3.9 (2)	1.0
Canada pension plan	9.7 (7)	5.7 (6)	9.8 (5)	6.0
No income	24.3 (17)	0	0	21.0
Other ^b	9.6 (7)	2.8 (3)	13.7 (7)	6.0

Note. PPMB = persons with persistent and multiple barriers.

Some people reported more than one source of income. Percentages do not add up to 100%.

a. As reported by staff, other data is self-reported.

b. Others include: private pension, savings, income from family/friends

Secondly, the number of individuals on income assistance in the emergency shelters highlights potential housing affordability issues for those on income assistance. After coming to the transitional program, some people did apply for disability benefits, and few were relying on temporary benefits. As discussed previously, single individuals on social assistance receive \$375 for the shelter portion of benefits though many pay more than the allocated portion for rent. Social and subsidized housing is available at a cost of \$375 per month but there are long wait lists for social housing. In this region, as mentioned previously, the average monthly cost of a bachelor suite was \$665, almost double the amount available through income assistance.

Income assistance is a source of income for most individuals at exit (69.8%) and follow-up (70.6%). However, there is an obvious shift from temporary benefits to disability benefits from intake to exit and follow-up. The percentage of participants accessing disability benefits doubles, and the percentage receiving temporary benefits is reduced by one half. Almost one half of participants had income from employment at exit (42.5%) and follow-up (47.1%) that is higher than the general shelter population (14%) and the transitional shelter clients at intake (21.5%). This increase in employment suggests that opportunities for employment may be facilitated by participation in the program.

At follow-up, just less than one half (47.1%) of respondents assess their income as just enough to live on, whereas a similar proportion (43.1%) report their income is not sufficient for basic needs. About one half of respondents lived in housing where rent is geared to income or where monthly rent supplements are received, possibly influencing the perception that income is just enough to afford rent and basics. At intake, exit and follow-up, about one half of respondents reported having financial debts and many (at least one half for each period of the survey) of these individuals report not being able to afford repayment of debts.

Although just more than one half of respondents (58.8%) at follow-up report not experiencing hunger since leaving the transitional program, about one fourth (27.5%) reported feeling hungry at least once in an average week because they could not get enough food. Further, greater than one half of the respondents at follow-up (68.6%) access food banks, meal programs, or drop-in centers for food. These numbers suggest that individuals continue to live in poverty despite improvements in their housing status, and food security appears to be a significant issue.

Limitations

There are a number of limitations of this research. First, the government housing database for the emergency shelter population and homeless outreach program is continually changing as more information comes in

from services providers. This data is based on records, not individuals (one individual may have two or more records), does not include all outreach and housing providers, and there is potential for duplication. The data related to mental health and addictions are based on provider observations or are self-reported and not diagnoses based on standardized criteria.

The transitional program data is also limited. The intake and exit surveys were in some cases completed by participants (not staff or researchers), and there may have been inconsistent interpretation of some questions. All data, except staff-completed exit summaries, are self-reported. Given the number of individuals who entered the program, the number of follow-up interviews, though small, represents nearly one half the eligible past residents. Finally, it is unclear if or how racism and other forms of discrimination continue to operate in the eligibility and selection of program participants and to what extent individuals are able to access the transitional program.

Discussion

Lack of attention to structural factors such as housing availability and income adequacy in evaluations of housing programs can in effect “blame the victim” or “blame the program” when individual or program measures of success are not achieved. In such instances, individual-level criteria for success are the primary focus, instead of the social context, which is viewed as external to the effects of the program and therefore beyond the scope of evaluations. In the current political context of homeless counts and plans to end homelessness there are potential risks of calculating successes regardless of the systematic contexts that create and sustain homelessness. Interventions addressing homelessness are better understood when research and program design incorporates contextual factors such as income adequacy, housing availability and affordability, health indicators, and access to health services. In this article, we explored access to housing and income supports for participants in a transitional program. Below we discuss a number of propositions that were set out at the beginning of the research.

The transitional program is serving a similar population to the general shelter population

Creaming, known as the preferential acceptance into the program of participants deemed most easily housed, has been identified as a concern in conducting evaluations of transitional housing programs (Burt, 2006). Demographic data from the transitional program, the city’s emergency

homeless shelters, and the regional homeless outreach programs indicate that the population served by the transitional program had similar mental health and addiction needs and lower levels of self-identified disability than the general shelter population and the population served by other outreach programs. These findings, along with findings related to income, refute possible claims that the transitional program is “creaming” those clients most likely to be successfully housed from emergency shelters.

The transitional program is housing formerly homeless participants

Of the participants interviewed at follow-up, more than 80% were housed in permanent housing. This measure of success indicates that the program is achieving its primary objective. As well, it shows that in a housing market like Victoria, BC, this transitional program fills an important role in the region’s housing system. Housing First programs have neither replaced the need for a transitional program such as this one nor assumed entire responsibility for housing formerly homeless individuals.

Housing First programs have demonstrated exemplary rates of housing success, close to 90% (Appel, Tsemberis, Joseph, Stefancic, & Lambert-Wacey, 2012; Gulcur, Stefancic, Shinn, Tsemberis, & Fischer, 2003; Pearson, Montgomery, & Locke, 2009; Stefancic & Tsemberis, 2007; Tsemberis, Kent, & Respress, 2012). As described previously, there is a dearth of affordable housing available in the region, and the importance of transitional programs may be increased in markets where there is a lack of affordable housing (Barrow & Zimmer, 1999). This increased role is borne out in the Victoria, BC, region. Authors are aware that even though a Housing First program was operating in the region, it also relied heavily on transitional programs in the absence of affordable and available housing (Gaetz, Scott, & Gulliver, 2013). As well, evidence from other research in the region has found that there are more than 277 people who identify as homeless on the waiting list for social supported housing (Norman & Pauly, 2016).

The transition from homeless to housed is facilitated by access to subsidized housing and income supports

It is clear that housing success is most often the outcome of a facilitated transition to income supports and housing that is subsidized. Most individuals were not transitioning from homelessness to economic self-sufficiency in market housing; rather, the exit from homelessness was most often into housing with subsidies and ongoing income supports. At follow-up, one third of participants contacted (33.4%) were living in social or supportive housing units and 23.5% were receiving rent supplements. This highlights the importance of including the socioeconomic context in evaluations of such programs rather than relying

primarily on measures limited to number of people who exit to housing and indicators of individual self-sufficiency. Clearly, in a context where housing is largely unavailable and unaffordable, nonmarket housing, rent supplements, and income supports make a significant difference in achieving housing outcomes. However, little is known about the way in which programs such as transitional programs operate or clients' perspectives on these programs. It has been proposed that future research could employ realist approaches to evaluation that reveal the mechanisms that produce various outcomes (Pauly et al., 2014).

Participants continue to live in poverty

As Katz, Zerger, and Hwang (2017) point out, Housing First discourse has the potential to obscure the macropolicy issues that contribute to homelessness such as the disinvestment in affordable housing and public policy that results in withdrawals of income and resources or systematically disadvantages some individuals through systemic processes such as racism, stigma, and discrimination. The majority of individuals in the emergency shelters and the transitional program are receiving some form of social assistance as their main source of income. While in the transitional program, more participants received income from employment and more are receiving disability benefits rather than temporary income assistance. Overall, we found that participants' incomes were inadequate for market rental housing and economic self-sufficiency. Participants may transition out of homelessness, but they appear not to transition out of poverty. Once housed, food security remains a concern and the costs of market rental housing must be offset by vital supports such as rent supplements, food vouchers, and bus passes. Of particular concern is that some supports such as rental supplements are time limited, which could contribute to a return to homelessness.

Conclusions

Interventions to address homelessness require consideration of the system-level forces that create and sustain poverty, homelessness, and inequities. A focus on the individual in defining the problem (homeless counts) and planning the responses (plans to end homelessness) can detract needed attention to the contexts of housing availability and affordability, income adequacy, and social and health supports. Evaluations of housing programs can in effect "blame the victim" or "blame the program" when individual or program measures of success are not achieved. This study found that though individual measures of housing success were achieved, these were not transitions to market housing and economic self-sufficiency. Rather, in the context of housing and income inadequacy the transition to housing was most often into housing with subsidies and ongoing income supports, and individuals

largely remained in poverty and accessing food and transportation supports. In these contexts, transitional programs are and will continue to be a necessary response to homelessness in the absence of affordable housing. A focus on investments in housing supply, social assistance, and income adequacy and inequities must dominate housing responses and evaluations.

Note

1. Housing readiness, in contrast, imposes requirements on individuals to fulfill before they are transitioned into permanent housing, such as treatment or sobriety (Gaetz et al., 2013, i.e., Housing First in Canada toolkit).

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