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## Perspectives of Employed People Experiencing Homelessness of Self and Being Homeless: Challenging Socially Constructed Perceptions and Stereotypes

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# Perspectives of Employed People Experiencing Homelessness of Self and Being Homeless: Challenging Socially Constructed Perceptions and Stereotypes

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*In a study that sought to identify the multiple factors resulting in homelessness from the perspective of 65 individuals in Calgary, Alberta, Canada who were both employed and homeless, we found that participants' perceptions of being homeless emerged as a major theme which impacts their entry to and exit from homelessness. Four sub-themes related to these perceptions were identified: (1) perceptions of self and situation; (2) impact of being homeless on self-reflection; (3) aspects of hope to consider; and (4) perspectives on having a permanent residence. Analytically, these findings help challenge present stereotypes about homelessness and usefully inform social service delivery organizations.*

**Key words:** *homelessness, service delivery, employment, perceptions, social work*

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Negative public perspectives and stereotypes of homelessness is a significant issue that needs to be addressed to help eliminate the stigma attached to people who are homeless and to the shelters that provide services (Forte, 2002; Oakley, 2002; Phelan, Link, Moore, & Stueve, 1997; Rosenthal, 2000; Takahashi, McElroy, & Rowe, 2002). Many stereotypes are anchored to non-empirical assumptions. As a partial corrective, the present paper challenges some stereotypes surrounding homelessness by examining the experience of individuals who are homeless and employed—a cohort about which there is little scholarly and public policy analysis.

Public perception during the early and mid-20th century considered the homeless man living in “skid row” districts of America’s major urban centers as “lazy” and uninterested in permanent work (Kusmer, 2002). In his historical study of homelessness in the United States, Kusmer found that people who were homeless have often been employed while homeless, and he identifies aspects of the changing labor market—in particular the loss of low-skill jobs—as having an influence on the affordability of housing. Such a solely macro-level discussion hinders our ability to challenge societal perceptions of homelessness. While it is important that we recognize aspects of the changing labor market and how people fit in (or do not) because of their competency and skill levels, such a finite discussion is easily misinterpreted and unhelpfully applied within policy initiatives and local service delivery.

Even earlier sociological studies on homelessness helped perpetuate some stereotypes. Many studies only described the characteristics of homeless populations living in skid row areas and focused on general behaviors (such as alcoholism) to categorize the population (see Kusmer, 2002). Few researchers described the experiences and perceptions of those living in these communities; however, those studies that did explore this aspect found interesting and noteworthy results. For example, some earlier research found that the residents in skid row neighborhoods, just like people living within more mainstream housing, wanted to live independent lives (Kusmer, 2002).

Stigma negatively influences the emotional well-being of those in society who are homeless, and also the ability of these

individuals to obtain help and support in their time of need. As these earlier studies demonstrated, societal perceptions of homelessness have a direct impact on the resources and types of support people experiencing homelessness receive and the nature of their interactions with service delivery (Applewhite, 1997; Dluhy, 1990; Goldberg & Simpson, 1995; Medina, Gutierrez, & Vega, 1997; Sosin & Bruni, 2000). Recent research has shown that perceptions and attitudes control how community members interact with shelter service systems, having a direct impact on the type of service (e.g., supported housing, dormitory emergency shelter services, clinical services) that people experiencing homelessness are offered (Graham, Walsh, & Sandalack, 2008; Shier, Walsh, & Graham, 2007). As a result of these negative perceptions, an individual's needs may not be met, and individualized solutions can often be overlooked (Zufferey & Kerr, 2004).

Service delivery is important in the process of re-housing (Ferguson, Wu, Dryrness, & Metz-Spruijt, 2007; Lindsey, 1996; Rife, First, Greenlee, Miller, & Feichter, 1991). Failure to recognize perceptions and stereotypes results in at least two outcomes. The first is that service delivery can be inflexible—that it cannot adjust intervention methods to the changing needs that arise as new subgroups of people experiencing homelessness emerge (Kutza & Keigher, 1991). The second, as is the case for employed people experiencing homelessness, is the creation of subgroups that are poorly serviced and not necessarily appropriate for the services they do receive.

In recent years, a growing corpus of research has explored homelessness from the perspective of those people experiencing homelessness (Baumann, 1993; Elias & Inui, 1993; Gibson, 1991; Zufferey & Kerr, 2004). Greater effort has been made to document lived experiences to provide alternative perspectives of people living homeless, whether in shelters or on the streets (Butler, 1993; Kosor & Kendal-Wilson, 2002; McNaughton, 2008; Morris & Heffren, 1988; Scott & Sturk, 2000), and some studies have even shown that these perspectives are drastically different from those held by service providers and the wider community (de Oliveira, Baizerman, & Pellet, 1992). The underlying theoretical concept that motivates much of this exploration is that public perceptions influence an individual's social

situation. Perceptions of homelessness can have an impact on how individuals interact with service delivery, with other informal supports, and with the wider community.

Further research needs to understand how these perceptions have an impact on individuals' entrance into and exit from homelessness. With that agenda in mind, the present article discusses results from a study that sought to better understand pathways to and from homelessness from the perspective of people who were employed and homeless in Calgary, Alberta, Canada. Calgary is a major Canadian urban center of one million residents located in a region that has been the epicenter of the Canadian oil industry; it is a site that is uniquely positioned to provide insight into the experiences of those who are homeless and employed. Although Calgary experienced a continual increase in unemployment similar to the national increase over the study period, its unemployment rate was still below the national average during our period of data collection. For example, Statistics Canada indicated that the Calgary unemployment rate went from 3.7% to 3.9% between November and December 2008, while the national rate rose from 6.3% to 6.6% (Alberta Employment and Immigration, 2008). This trend continued throughout this study: in June 2009, the unemployment rate in Calgary had risen to 6.6%, while the national average had risen to 8.6% (Alberta Employment and Immigration, 2009).

Our research into employed people experiencing homelessness was motivated by two other reasons. The first concerns our interest in understanding how people who work experience the possibility of access to adequate stable housing. The second reason is rooted in a more analytical context. By focusing on the employed homeless, we can better appreciate the phenomenon of homelessness as it intersects with housing, the labor market, and service delivery. Moreover, the subjective understanding of employed homeless people helps to link macro-level analytical discussions of homelessness with micro-level experiences—a useful outcome for scholars and policy makers alike (Clapham, 2003).

## Methods

This research is based on interviews conducted between November 2008 and February 2009 with 65 people, all 18 years old or older, who identified themselves as being employed and homeless and who were using homelessness services in Calgary, Alberta, Canada. Since four of the recorded interviews could not be transcribed, the final sample for coding consisted of 61 people (25 females and 36 males). Local service organizations in Calgary estimate that approximately 6 out of 10 people experiencing homelessness in this city are employed in some capacity.

The growth in Calgary's homeless population is staggering. In 2006, the number of people experiencing homelessness had grown to 3,436, a 740% increase since 1994 (Laird, 2007). More recently, after the 2008 homelessness count in Calgary, it was estimated that 4,060 people were absolutely homeless (i.e., accessing emergency shelters or sleeping outside with no permanent residence of their own) [Stroick, Hubac, & Richter-Salomons, 2008]. For purposes of our work, homelessness is based on the physical conditions in which individuals negotiate shelter: not having a "roof"; living in a homeless shelter facility or similar institutional setting; staying in these institutions for extended periods of time because there is no other accommodating situation; residing in places that are not long-term solutions to homelessness; staying with friends; or "squatting"—taking up residence illegally in an abandoned building or using land illegally to build shelter (Kleniewski, 2002). The researchers selected participants using a targeted snowball sampling of current clients of one of three service-providing organizations in Calgary participating in the study. Two of the organizations were homeless shelters, and one was a community-based resource center. All three offered a mix of programs.

Researchers selected participants on the basis of their current employment status. Initially we sought participants who identified themselves as being employed full-time. However, after the first several interviews we realized that our view of what constituted employment was biased. Considering only formal full-time jobs as employment did not provide a

true picture of the relationship between the respondents' employment and their experience of homelessness. The situation of homelessness has a direct impact on the type (permanent or temporary) and nature (part-time, casual, or full-time) of employment available to people experiencing homelessness. Consequently, we extended our criteria to include more informal types of employment. Of the 61 participants, 14 were employed in a full-time capacity, 6 in a part-time capacity, and 25 in casual or temporary employment situations. Many of the casual or temporary workers were working full-time, but in different job locations and positions from one day to the next. One participant was identified as self-employed, and 15 reported being unemployed at present but had recent histories of full-time or part-time employment. In this last category of participants, some reported being laid off from their positions of paid employment or being on unpaid medical or maternity leave, and others reported working only sporadically, through temporary employment agencies.

Data were collected using standard ethnographic techniques (Fetterman, 1998, 2008; Holstein & Gubrium, 1995; Patton, 1990; Seidman, 1991). Interviews were conducted in person using a semi-structured, open-ended interview guide. The interviews lasted approximately one hour. Questions prompted respondents to describe their housing, employment, and job training history, to identify factors that they considered as having an impact on their present situation of being homeless, and to give their perspective on how being homeless affects other aspects of their lives. Reporting here eliminates identifying characteristics such as place, date, and sex.

Data were analyzed using qualitative methods. The transcriptions and the interviewer notes taken throughout the interview process were examined. Analytic induction and constant comparison strategies (see Goetz & Lecompte, 1984; Glasser & Strauss, 1967) were used to detect patterns within the transcribed interviews. Specifically, emergent themes (see for example: Charmaz, 2000; Williams, 2008) and patterns (see for example: Creswell, 2009; Fetterman, 2008) were identified within the transcribed interviews with a focus on the factors that respondents identified as having an impact on their present housing situation. The first step in the coding process

was to read through all the interviews with the objective of identifying common themes. The themes were coded and the data were searched for instances of the same or similar phenomena. Finally, the data were translated into more general working hypotheses that were refined until all instances of contradictions, similarities, and differences were explained, thus increasing the dependability and consistency of the findings. The research team collaboratively worked on this stage of research to maintain the credibility criteria of the study (i.e., discussing the rationale for determining particular codes that emerged).

The present paper reports on one major category emerging from the data: perceptions have an impact on homelessness. The findings about respondents' perceptions of their situations and the impact of societal views on their homelessness are described below and supported by selected quotations. These findings help to challenge socially held perceptions of the situation of homelessness and people who are homeless.

## Findings

Respondents in this study provided their own perspectives of being homeless. We find many of these excerpts help to challenge some of the stigma that is attached, at both societal and individual levels, to people experiencing homelessness. In particular, the fact that each respondent was employed in some capacity or had very recent employment histories helps to challenge public perceptions about employment and homelessness—well beyond simplistic entitlement failure and inadequate supply. More specifically, the data highlight how employed people experiencing homelessness are impacted by their present situation and how they perceive themselves. Four primary themes emerged from these data: (1) perspective of self and being homeless (i.e., being homeless impacts how I perceive myself); (2) impact of being homeless on self-reflection (i.e., being homeless impacts my personal outlook and/or personal development); (3) aspects of hope when homeless (i.e., I have hope of getting out of this situation); and (4) perspective of the meaning of a permanent residence (i.e., I want to have a permanent residence because it offers safety, distance



from negative influences and interactions, stability, privacy, and/or independence).

### *Perspective of Self and Situation*

Studies that seek to get at perspectives about homelessness and people experiencing homelessness have tended to focus on the attitudes of people who do not fit such a category, examining instead the local community, public perception, professional attitudes, and service delivery experiences (Belcher, Deforge, & Zanis, 2005; Brooks, Milburn, Rotherman, & Witkin, 2004; Powers-Costello & Swick, 2008; Somerman, 1993; Tompsett, Toro, Guzicki, Manrique, & Zatakia, 2006). Alternatively, this study focused on gaining insight into respondents' own perspectives of themselves, their experience of being homeless, and the overall social situation. Some respondents described being embarrassed about being homeless, while others provided insight into being homeless and staying at shelters for help-seeking reasons. Also, some respondents provided insight into how they view themselves while in this situation of homelessness.

With regard to embarrassment, respondents described their reluctance to tell other people about their present situation:

Oh, yeah, my current situation is embarrassing—I mean for me to contact anybody and say, “Yeah, I’m back in a shelter”—for the simple fact that throughout the years, I’ve been an addict—and [with] the lying and mistrust that comes along with being an addict. Then all of a sudden I try to straighten up, and I go on the right and narrow, and then all of a sudden back in the shelter again. So right now, it’s embarrassing for me to phone and say, “Hey, I tried the right way and it’s not working.” (64)

Like this respondent, others also considered a judgment from other people as a fuel for their embarrassment:

I wouldn’t mind saying I’m at the Seed because it is decent here. But I do have a little problem admitting it because I’m embarrassed. [People will ask] “Why are you in a shelter? How old are you? What’s wrong with you?” [It is just the] mistakes I have made (26).

The condition of the shelter was also embarrassing for some respondents:

There is no privacy or freedom here. It is scary, very scary. I don't know what is worse, camping on the outside of the building or being inside the building. I mean, I've never camped outside. I'm too terrified, paranoid. But even being on the inside of the building, it is like being in an adult day care. It is kind of humiliating, sometimes degrading. But at the same time, it is home. It was really depressing for me to have to come back here. (28)

It is clear from these excerpts that the respondents are embarrassed about being homeless and embarrassed about being in the shelter. For many respondents, being in the shelter was necessary to gain help with their present situation. Respondents were accessing shelters because the alternatives—sleeping outside or using less formal supports such as family and friends—were less appealing or helpful:

I decided to come here and ask for help [after respondent went to a temporary employment agency that could not provide any work] because I really do not want to live on the streets. I mean it is not a place for somebody my age to begin with, and second of all, I am trying to realize that I am better than that. (10)

For many respondents, accessing shelters was a part of the process of seeking help to become permanently housed and deal with other personal issues that had developed within their lives: "This shelter has really helped me out. I am getting fed while I am working. My first paycheck is in another two weeks. Then I'll be on my own" (17).

Some respondents were accessing the shelters as a result of personal crisis. For example, one respondent, dealing with the grief and depression that resulted from the death of a brother, ended up living in a shelter in Calgary while working through issues related to mental well-being that were affecting other aspects of his/her life.

It is just a matter of patience. And it is not all negative.

There is a lot of positivity here. For example, my brother passing on. I have been searching because I was wandering about—all of a sudden I am wondering what happens—where you go. So I have really been searching that out [here]. (1)

Another respondent was unable to function at work—the stress was overwhelming, significantly affecting his/her emotional and mental well-being. This individual explained the need to be within the shelter while working through these issues:

I think I'm happier now, believe it or not. Perhaps not happier, but more of a free spirit. I do not have the same worries as I did once before [in a previous job] with (respondent describes requirements of employment), and I don't have that inner tension and that inner turmoil. I worked in a job that I hated working at for the last 14 years. I hated working there. Dealing day in and day out ... it turned me into a very explosive person. (29)

A final theme respondents identified was that the situation had a direct impact on their overall outlook on themselves. For example, stereotypes respondents had of people who are homeless affected their overall outlook when they themselves became homeless:

The first time I felt really depressed. I felt, "Oh, I am a drunk." That's always what I thought a drunk was—an alcoholic, a person on the street who didn't have a home. I thought, "Oh, no! I am a drunk." (25)

Some respondents maintained positive outlooks of themselves within the stereotypes:

Me, I am not a bum, and I am not an idiot. I made some mistakes in life, but if anyone judged me I'd have a lot to say about it. I would not just shut up and hide in a corner. There are hundreds of people like me that do not deserve to be stereotyped. They deserve a second chance. They deserve someone who thinks they are better. (58)

Many respondents also discussed the impact of judgments from other people. For example, some highlighted how judgments impact the way they perceive behaviors, both their own and those of other people who are homeless:

For a lot of us, it is just that we are here. You can beat me over the head all you want; I have to figure this out myself, and thank you for offering. [Nonetheless] you know I'm going to try to be as nice as I can. It is not the end of the world: I do not have to be a bad person because I am homeless. I do not have to be mean and scream and yell and tantrum like a three-year-old either. (39)

Furthermore, other respondents described how they interact with other people and their awareness of these public perceptions:

[Sometimes] you get hassled. I mean like, "Oh, these guys walking down the street—they're from the hostel." Everybody hits the panic button. We are not all criminals; there are a lot of good, hard-working honest people like myself that are just trying to start over and build a life for themselves the best way they can in these days and times. (65)

The respondents' perspectives can help provide clarification of the situation of being homeless that may speak to common stereotypes. An example is the embarrassment respondents expressed about the use of shelter services. The source of such embarrassment is speculative, and further research could usefully explore this aspect, but it can be seen to stem from societal perceptions of homelessness: perceptions held by the wider social community and by individuals who interact with people experiencing homelessness. Without generalizing these findings to all individuals experiencing homelessness, we must still recognize the importance of the subjective experiences of people who are homeless; these include embarrassment and how this feeling affects their behavior and their interactions with other people and within the community at large.

Furthermore, respondents provided insight into the help-seeking relationship. Many recognized that they need some social support, and their rationale for using shelter services was not just that they were homeless, but also that being in those shelters was providing social support around issues that were compounding—issues, problems, or situations of the types that lead to homelessness. The alternative perspective that their statements provide is that people are accessing services that are needed: services that are not available within the mainstream social welfare system until a person reaches the point of losing his or her permanent residence.

### *Impact of Situation on Self-reflection*

Previous research has found that people experiencing homelessness have a devalued sense of self, which impacts their own personal identity (Boydell, Goering, & Morell-Bellai, 2000). Respondents here provided further insight into how being homeless affects their self-reflection. Some respondents described the impact of being homeless on personal outlooks, and others described the impact on personal development.

With regard to the impact on personal outlooks, central is the impact on the respondents' self-worth. For some respondents, certain factors associated with homelessness had a negative impact on self-worth. One factor identified was the ability to maintain adequate hygiene:

Your hygiene and stuff brings up your self-esteem; you do not feel so down on yourself. Every time you feel down, you go out and have a drink because you do not really care anymore—you are dirty, stinky, all greasy. There are times where you just hide in the bushes and drink your beer because you do not want to be around nobody because you are full of shame. When you are clean and stuff, it gives you more self-esteem to go out there and walk around and use the computers and print out resumes and walk around and drop off your resumes at job sites. They actually look at you different: like not as a homeless gangster or a bum. They actually reach out and they shake your hand. (35)

Also, some respondents highlighted ways in which the environment of the shelters and their interactions with other

shelter guests had an impact on overall self-worth:

It is really hard in the mornings, as people are really grumpy down there. There is nothing really to be happy about; you are waking up in a filthy environment with a whole bunch of strangers you don't even know. All you are trying to do is better yourself, but it is like, what is the point anymore? Why care? (10)

A further consideration is the perception of just being in these shelters and being without a home. One respondent described his feelings:

I wouldn't find myself caught dead in that place before—when I was employed, when my life was on track and everything was ok. To end up there—[it's] like you almost want to kill yourself. Because you just don't know, because you stand on the street one day, and you have absolutely no direction: you don't know where to go at all. (58)

Other respondents described the emotional hardship of becoming homeless and the subsequent impact on self-worth. For example:

I felt like a failure again because after ending up homeless when I was single, I said I am never going to do that again; I am going to be on my toes, it is not going to happen, and then it did happen. I beat myself up about it, and at first, the last few nights I was at the apartment before we came here, knowing that it was going to have to be the inevitable, some nights were spent crying, waking up through the night. Not eating just because I didn't want to have to face the fact. (56)

Respondents also said that being homeless changed their overall perceptions of themselves:

I think I am more tolerant of others now. I think I have come into a part of me that I didn't actually know before. I would say I have more compassion for people now—more of an understanding. I'm not quite so quick

to judge. I was very judgmental before. But then I lived in my own little sphere. (29)

I mean, you change as a human being when you lose your home and you have to stay at these shelters. All your beliefs are different now. Before, if you had any judgments towards people on the streets—you sometimes saw a person that was dirty and was picking up bottles—I would be like, “Oh, they’re picking up bottles,” and my friends would be like, “Oh my God!”—you know. I would be so ashamed and stuff, but now you look at them and it’s like, wow. You know, I’ve been there, I’ve been around these people, and they are actual human beings. They are good people. (58)

Also, some respondents found that being homeless changed their sense of values:

I have actually taken good from being homeless. Before, I had a crappy car, and I hated driving it. I would take a crappy car now and be like, “This is the greatest ride. It gets me somewhere—I don’t have to take a bus. It is perfect.” So it has been a learning experience which has probably been good for me. I needed it. (11)

Being homeless also affected the personal development of some respondents: their overall self-esteem and their inner strength. With regard to self-esteem, one respondent said:

To a point it [being homeless] does [affect my self-esteem]. Of course it does, but to keep that self-esteem—just because you are homeless does not mean you have to look homeless. ... That is part of self-esteem, right? How people are going to perceive you. (24)

Homelessness has a lot to do with self-esteem, but so do the public perceptions of people who are homeless. Many respondents similarly described the impact of public perceptions on self-esteem:

A lot of people out there look down on people that are homeless. “Oh, look at them! Look at how dirty their

coat is," or how dirty this and that. That is wrong to even say stuff like that to a homeless person because they have no idea what it is like to be homeless. If you put them in your shoes, how do you think they would feel? They probably would not like it if someone looked down on them. So people up there should not look down on homeless people because it is not a nice thing to make that homeless person feel that big [respondent makes gesture demonstrating being made to feel small or insignificant]. (37)

I have noticed that my appearance has been a lot different [now, being homeless]; I am not myself, really, like I used to be. Just when I am outside and people see where I am, you can tell they look down on you. I have never had anybody do that to me before, and I have never felt that before, so it is hard. (55)

Some respondents spoke of how their inner strength was affected by being homeless. The struggles involved with being homeless provide a challenge that has helped their personal development:

You learn to be stronger, stand up for yourself, like I never used to. I used to cower and hide ... Like you learn to get strong. (20)

My saying is whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger. That is the way I feel, so I definitely feel stronger now because every day I am fighting a battle ... I am getting there, so it makes me stronger. It's hard, but I am doing it. (21)

The respondents' statements demonstrate that being homeless can affect their personal outlook and personal development in both positive and negative ways. An understanding of the implications of the homeless situation for people can usefully be applied to methods of intervention. These personal implications provide further evidence that public perceptions of homelessness have a direct impact on the ability of people to exit that situation. For example, various aspects associated with being homeless affected respondents' self-worth and their



self-esteem, and in some cases, their personal development. For some respondents, the situation of homelessness acts as a further barrier to undertaking those tasks necessary to become re-housed.

It is also important to note that respondents described positive developments and positive outlooks as a result of being homeless. Social service practitioners taking empowerment-based approaches to service delivery might usefully explore some of these positive meanings when working with people.

### *Aspects of Hope within the Situation*

Historically, perceptions of people experiencing homelessness have included the belief that homeless people lack hope—that is, they lack a vision of the future, dreams, or aspirations (Kusmer, 2002). Recent studies have shown that this is not true (de Oliveira et al., 1992; Kosor & Kendal-Wilson, 2002). Some respondents participating in our research add to this literature by providing insight into the factors that affect a person's hope of getting out of the situation of homelessness.

Respondents identified two aspects for consideration. The first relates directly to the person's outlook on being homeless:

I have a lot of hope that a lot of people do not have because I used to have a life; I remember what it was like. I have a lot more hope than other people. People ask me, "How can you be so happy when you're out here?" Where I come from, it is pretty damn cold at night. A lot of people do not see the morning. I am very happy to see the sunrise. I am so happy sometimes even when I stay out all night. I'm very happy to see the sun rise, and I thank God for it. I got a better chance to do it right, which means I will probably mess it up before midnight, but a chance to try and get it right anyway.  
(3)

Another hopeful aspect for consideration is the perspective on addiction. The way this respondent perceived the situation and understood the consequences of addiction was sufficient to maintain hope. Other respondents' outlooks similarly affected hope:

I would rather have my own place. It would be a lot easier. But, you know, because of the situation, I have to do what I need to do and get my place and hopefully be out of here soon. I just hope for the best, and that is what I am doing. (21)

The second consideration identified by respondents is the role of personal goals in maintaining hope to become permanently housed. For some respondents, maintaining the personal goal of getting out of the situation was important:

All I know is I need to find a pathway to get into a shelter, like get a place to live, and that's it. I know I can do it, so that's not an obstacle for me—like I know I can find a place, I know I'm going to get there. Sure it will take time, but I'll get there. That is something that I want, so I just have to keep struggling at it and I'm sure I'll get there. (8)

Another point to consider, as identified by respondents, is related to personal goals for issues that are exacerbating the respondents' housing situations. Some respondents referred to working through emotional issues with family members, or to personal crises like addictions. One respondent, for example, described how being in control of the addictions gave hope of getting out of the situation of homelessness:

Just the fact that I'm getting physically stronger and I kind of like the feeling, and you know ... I wake up in the morning with a clear head and you know. See, with crack cocaine, you can be out there: you can go on a run. God, I think the longest one I was on was eight days. No sleep, you know, and so you can imagine: you go to sleep, and even when you wake up after that, you still feel rotten. I don't have that anymore. (13)

Respondents' insight around hope provides direction for service delivery organizations to think about effective ways to interact with people experiencing homelessness, and provides to the wider community some perspective on what people experiencing homelessness want. With regard to service intervention, the respondents suggest the need to maintain

particular outlooks and set personal goals. Incorporating these aspects into service delivery might usefully influence perceptions of self-reflection that respondents identified, essentially challenging negative images of self-worth and improving overall self-esteem. Furthermore, such an approach—one that promotes hope—might also usefully facilitate commitment to the process of becoming re-housed.

### *Perspective on the Meaning of a Permanent Residence*

A perception within society is that people experiencing homelessness do not have the desire to live in mainstream housing. Research has shown that this is not true (Busch, 2002). Some respondents in this study provided insight into what the meaning of having a permanent residence was for them. Five common sub-themes emerged from participants' comments on the meaning of housing: safety, distance from negative influences and interactions, stability, privacy, and independence.

Respondents stated that with a permanent residence comes safety. They included several aspects of personal safety, such as personal health, physical well-being, and safety from others:

Having a permanent residence will help me big time. It would help me get a doctor and dentist. I could try then and get a bus pass instead of hopping trains or buses to go to work. I would have a safe environment so you do not have to worry about getting robbed or getting beat up. Basically that would be very good for me. (6)

Other respondents also described negative interactions that are more likely to occur when a person is homeless. They said that having a more permanent residence helps to disassociate them from those negative influences and interactions and maintain other positive aspects of their life, such as employment. One respondent stated:

I figure once I get a place, then I'll be away from the crowd. This is important because once you start drinking and you are drinking with everybody you are basically stuck in there, because your decision making is gone. You want to just stay and party all night. But when you're at your house, it is a lot easier to just have

a couple of beers, watch the hockey game, eat supper, and then go to bed. So I'm hoping that once I get out of here, I'll be able to maintain more of a steady employment with that guy. (11)

This respondent and others described having an element of normality. Some respondents said that permanent residence allows them to participate in other socially-based activities—activities in which they cannot participate in their present situation of crisis.

Permanent residency also offers the comfort of stability that is missing when a person is homeless. Many respondents communicated the desire for stability with permanent residency. One described the impact of instability on personal outlook and behavior:

Instability has a lot to do with the kind of life style that we've all led, right? I mean, if you don't have a place to go at night, who cares? If you don't have any appointments to keep or a schedule—if your life is unstable, you tend to be unstable and make bad choices. I do, anyways. (24)

The fourth sub-theme was a desire for the privacy that comes with having a more permanent residence. Not having privacy within the shelters has a direct impact on people, and privacy is something that they would get, through having their own residence, that respondents would appreciate:

Well, it brings you down being in a situation like this because of the fact that you really have no privacy. You cannot just up and go lay down if you want. If you have a girlfriend, you cannot lay on the couch and cuddle or whatever. You can't—there's a lot of restrictions that aren't fun. But at the same time, I'm lucky to have a place like I have right now. (23)

An advantage related to privacy that individuals have with their own residence is that of independence, which is the fifth sub-theme. The previous respondent partially described this relationship with regard to restrictions in the shelter. Other

respondents described the desire for independence, which they perceive as coming with permanent housing. For example:

It would be better to have your own place; you can sit back on the couch and watch TV if you want. If you wanted to go out and wanted to come back, you could. You wouldn't have to have 300 people sitting around you. It would be nice to have a friend over if you want, instead of always having other people around. (25)

These aspects that respondents desire in stable permanent housing suggest a similarity between people who are without a permanent residence and those that have one. Recognizing these aspects is important to the process of changing public perception and also to working effectively with people experiencing homelessness: this recognition allows practitioners to compare what they have to what these respondents do not have while staying in the shelters. The perspectives that these respondents provide can improve others' understanding of what it means to be homeless and what people experiencing homelessness no longer experience.

## Conclusion

Many studies that seek the perspectives of people experiencing homelessness focus on the particular needs of homeless sub-populations (Anderson, Stuttford, & Vostanis, 2006; Anucha, 2005; Carroll & Trull, 2002; Freund & Hawkins, 2004; Goldberg, 1999). While that research is useful, it tends to elaborate on only the systemic issues of the situation, or the particular resources that an individual or sub-group requires. Of course, it is important to understand these systemic aspects and the required resources, as they help direct service delivery in potentially meaningful ways. Missing, however, is an account of people's perceptions of themselves while homeless, their perspectives of what it means being homeless, and the personal impact of the situation. The alternative focus identified here—placing emphasis on individual perceptions and experiences of homeless people—makes it possible to challenge some of the socially contrived perceptions or stereotypes of homelessness, as well as those assumptions that in turn

influence policy development, service delivery, or both. Our study is obviously not representative of all people experiencing homelessness, nor is it representative of all employed people experiencing homelessness.

However, with these responses, we gain new perspectives on how a particularly large subgroup of homeless people—employed people experiencing homelessness—perceive their present situation and the role of services. People access social services for multiple reasons, and respondents highlighted the critical importance of many of these services. We should point out, too, that homelessness prevention—access to services prior to being homeless—is especially germane.

Our research also helps us to better understand the possibility of hope among the employed homeless. Our respondents confirmed that service practitioners and the wider community promote the conditions in which a person experiencing homelessness can develop a sense of hopeful change; this could be a useful segue into a positive pathway of housing. Furthermore, respondents' perspectives on what having a house means for them provided insight into the similarity between their perceptions and those of people who have a permanent residence. Respondents pointed out positive social interactions, independence, stability, privacy, and safety as desired aspects of securing and maintaining permanent housing. These insights, in turn, are useful for service delivery organizations and policy makers helping people to work through other personal and systemic issues and barriers that impede their transition back into a situation of permanent residency.

Our research identifies several factors that policy actors and service delivery organizations could consider for effective responses to homelessness. More effort is needed to help people who experience crisis in their lives, those who have inadequate skills to deal with crisis, and those who are coping with issues that may later result in crisis. Equally important is the fact that social service and social science scholarship has long understood how systemic or social environmental factors elevate individual risk of homelessness (Hocking & Lawrence, 2000), but this is not the only level that needs to be addressed. Our respondents identified some very personal features of their present situations—unique circumstances based on

the individual experiences and relationships of each person throughout life. Unless we recognize the many aspects of perception at micro and macro levels of practice, we cannot solve the immediate problems people are presenting—problems that are very much a part of these respondents' present situations, as are social environment factors such as inadequate affordable housing, labor market shortages, insufficient resources, and minimal service delivery opportunities. The reflections of these participants on their present situations help us to challenge many stereotypes about people who are homeless, but they also point to the role that present practices in education and intervention play in maintaining these stereotypes. We can use these insights to inform better methods of intervention and policy development.

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