

Homelessness: The Consumer Stories

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Service providers and policy makers consistently seek to address Australia's growing issue of homelessness; an issue understood best by those who have their own lived experience. There is a stigma associated with homelessness, and typical expectations about 'homeless people' that comes with it. I am a young person with my own lived experience of homelessness. However, I have never lived 'on the streets'. I am educated, I am employed, and I have never fit the image of what most would expect from someone who is homeless. In 2015, I conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with six adults who have previously experienced homelessness in New South Wales in order to explore their experiences and perceptions of homelessness. It was confirmed that I was not alone. This research exposed experiences of homelessness that are vastly different from what people would expect, and the participant stories demonstrated the impact of stigma on their ability to exit homelessness.

Participants were aged from 24 to 60, and had experienced homelessness, in a number of forms including couch surfing, rough sleeping, camping, staying with friends, in refuges and sleeping in cars. Each participant shared personal stories of their experience of homelessness and the service they received. The lived experiences shared by participants provide valuable insight into the stigma and false perceptions that exist in relation to homelessness and the impact this has on their exit from homelessness.

Their Real Stories

This research explored society's assumptions about people experiencing homelessness, who they

are, and where they have come from. For this reason, it was important to hear from the participants, about who they are, beyond the label of 'homeless person' and allow them to share their story without assumptions.

Participants talked about being proud parents, their current employment, their education, and their commitment to advocating for people experiencing homelessness. 55-year-old Allan said he owned his own home, and his own business before becoming homeless, however he lost them both after his divorce.

60-year-old Robert experienced homeless when he left his partner, and 33-year-old Samantha experienced homelessness when she left her partner, due to domestic violence. 47-year-old Daniel slept rough underneath a bridge while he was experiencing homelessness. He said people yelled out to him to 'get a job' however, Daniel had been employed while experiencing homelessness.

35-year-old Naomi left home at the age of 15, and worked to support herself. Naomi too was employed while she was experiencing homelessness. Emily experienced homelessness at the age of 17. Emily was 24 when she was interviewed. She had gained full time employment and was living in a private rental property. These are only small parts of the participants' stories, which challenged the assumptions about homelessness.

Society's View

Participants were asked to explain their understanding of society's view of homelessness. Emily said: 'In terms of people living on the street, I think there's an obvious stereotype, a negative stereotype'. Naomi

described a 'rough looking individual, someone who doesn't present well, possibly doesn't have a lot of education'. Naomi went on to say 'people assume that homelessness means sleeping rough, on the streets, having mental health issues generally associated with drugs and alcohol'. Allan talked about the negative ideas in society. He said 'People have preconceived ideas that homelessness comes out of doing something wrong...' Further to this, Emily said that people experiencing homelessness were believed to be 'dole bludgers, they are lazy and they are the scum of the earth'.

Robert used the words of a friend, that had resonated with him. He said 'society spits at you with their eyes' to describe how the 'looks' and 'stares' he received from the public, when experiencing homelessness were so degrading, it was comparable to being spat on. These are the explanations of society's assumptions about homelessness, coming from the lived experiences of participants who had been labeled 'homeless'.

Social and Emotional Impact

Unsurprisingly, living with the homelessness stigma had a significant effect on people who had experienced homelessness. Participants talked about the social challenges they faced when experiencing homelessness, and the emotional challenges they continue to face after exiting homelessness. Participants talked about being socially isolated, staying away from people, and losing friends when they were experiencing homelessness.

Daniel talked about the ill-treatment he received while sleeping rough, and said 'Your self-

esteem just gets lower and lower', he referred to the treatment he received as 'a nail in the coffin' in addition to the emotional challenges he was already facing. Following Robert's comment about how society 'spits at you with their eyes', he said 'Its bloody hard. It tears away that little bit of pride, self-doubt, you know, acceptance in society', and went on to talk about the emotional impact '[dictating his] standards of achievement for life'.

Participants echoed common stories about choosing to not tell others that they were experiencing homelessness, and some explained they didn't want to have to go through the emotional challenge of explaining themselves. Naomi said she 'found it embarrassing and humiliating'. Samantha said 'I lied to everybody. I lied to real estates for fear of being judged differently because I know people can't help but have preconceived ideas, and I didn't need that on top of everything else.' Samantha said that even after exiting homelessness, 'It's still emotionally hard. It takes its toll on me.'

To these participants, their experience of homelessness was more than a battle to seek accommodation, they were also faced with significant social and emotional barriers.

Marginalisation

In addition to the social and emotional challenges, the homelessness stigma had a significant impact on participants' ability to overcome disadvantage, and exit homelessness. Participants talked about losing social connections, and support networks when experiencing homelessness. Naomi said 'when I had a stable address again, I did hear from friends that had stayed away'. Samantha spoke about her challenges finding rental properties, as a result of the stigma around homelessness. She said 'I thought I would be denied properties... they [real estate agents] would think that I have become homeless because I can't maintain my tenancy, and pay my bills and all those things'.

The stigma and negative perceptions about homelessness made it difficult for those seeking

employment. Naomi said 'I knew they [employers] threw my resume out as soon as they got it, because it didn't have an address on it, and I didn't want to explain why that was'. Allan also experienced challenges with employment. He talked about knowing his temporary employment would not be extended when his boss found out that he was experiencing homelessness. Allan said 'It didn't matter how well I was doing at the job, and if I was attending each day, but it all came down to that fact that he found out that I was homeless, and that wasn't acceptable in his [the employer's] mind' Allan believed that his employer would assume if '[he] couldn't be relied on at work if [he] couldn't be relied on to keep [his] accommodation.' In the experience of the participants, the homelessness stigma was driving them into further disadvantage.

Accessing Services

When facing challenges in their personal lives, challenges with employment, and housing, some approached specialist homelessness services to seek assistance. Participants found that services were catering to the type of 'homeless person' that fit society's assumptions, and they were often not eligible to receive assistance.

When experiencing homelessness, participants said they still did not fit the criteria of services they had tried to access, or simply did not fit the image of homelessness perceived by the service provider. Naomi said 'One of the biggest barriers was that I was well presented. My case didn't fit their idea of the profile of homelessness'. When Robert arrived at an event for people experiencing homelessness, neatly dressed in a suit, he was told: 'You don't look homeless'.

Participants found that if they had issues with drug or alcohol use, they would have been eligible for assistance with housing services. Daniel said people addicted to drugs and alcohol 'tend to get the much needed help' when it comes to homelessness services. Naomi had a similar experience to Daniel. She said: 'If I had drug, alcohol or legal issues, they could help me'.

Participants also talked about the judgment they experience when seeking services. Daniel said 'They just judge you. You are either an alcoholic or a drug user.' Allan felt like assumptions were made about him when he sought assistance from services. He said 'They'd [charities and other service staff] always speak to you like you've got a drug or alcohol problem. There was no issue there [with drugs or alcohol]'. Housing services told Allan they were 'proud' of his five years maintaining his tenancy. Allan said this felt 'condescending' for him, as he had previously lived in the one place for most of his life without any assistance. When seeking assistance from services, the stigma affected peoples' ability to receive help.

Conclusion

This research illustrates examples of people who have experienced homelessness, who have been stigmatised, and have continued to be marginalised in society. The perception of homelessness is a significant contributor to the marginalisation and disadvantage experienced by people facing homelessness. Furthermore, homeless service delivery is not immune from ideas in societies that stigmatise people experiencing homelessness. Participants in this research reported feelings of shame when seeking employment and housing. Maintaining secrecy about homelessness results in further marginalisation from supports including social networks, and specialist services.

Notably the impact of stigma continued to resonate even though the participants were no longer homeless. On the one hand, participants talked about being incorrectly judged as having drug and alcohol problems, when this was not the case. On the other hand, if participants did not fit the profile of a substance addict, they were denied services. Social and emotional support, as well as mental health service provision is important for health and well-being of people experiencing homelessness when the impact of stigma results in lower self-esteem for people already unable to access safe and secure accommodation.