'They spit at you with their eyes' - Experiences of homelessness in New South Wales

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The Street Life Gemma Lee

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About the Author

Melissa Wolfshoerndl is a member of the PIAC Homeless Consumer Advisory Committee, StreetCare, having joined StreetCare in 2014. After experiencing homelessness as a young person, she used her experiences as an active volunteer with a number of youth organisations in Western Sydney and as a member of the NSW Youth Advisory Council from 2012-2013. She recently successfully completed her Bachelor of Social Work with Honours at Western Sydney University.

Status of this Report

This report is an adapted version of a thesis produced by the author for her Honours degree in Social Work with the Western Sydney University. The author and her supervisor were responsible for the research methodology design and implementation. The views expressed in the report are those of the author based on her research.

The content of this report reflects the initiatives and insight of the author in conducting high standard qualitative research for her Honours degree thesis. PIAC's role in preparing this report has been for the HPLS Senior Policy Officer to assist the author in reviewing the original thesis and editing the original text. In undertaking this task, he has been careful to ensure that the author's approach to the research and analysis has been maintained.

Contents

The Public Interest Advocacy Centre

The Public Interest Advocacy Centre (PIAC) is an independent, non-profit law and policy organisation that works for a fair, just and democratic society, empowering citizens, consumers and communities by taking strategic action on public interest issues.

PIAC identifies public interest issues and, where possible and appropriate, works co-operatively with other organisations to advocate for individuals and groups affected. PIAC seeks to:

- expose and redress unjust or unsafe practices, deficient laws or policies;
- promote accountable, transparent and responsive government;
- encourage, influence and inform public debate on issues affecting legal and democratic rights;
- promote the development of law that reflects the public interest;
- develop and assist community organisations with a public interest focus to pursue the interests of the communities they represent;
- develop models to respond to unmet legal need; and
- maintain an effective and sustainable organisation.

Established in July 1982 as an initiative of the (then) Law Foundation of New South Wales, with support from the NSW Legal Aid Commission, PIAC was the first, and remains the only broadly based public interest legal centre in Australia. Financial support for PIAC comes primarily from the NSW Public Purpose Fund and the Commonwealth and State Community Legal Services Program. PIAC also receives funding from NSW Trade and Investment for its work on energy and water, and from Allens for its Indigenous Justice Program. PIAC also generates income from project and case grants, seminars, consultancy fees, donations and recovery of costs in legal actions.

PIAC'S Homeless Persons' Legal Service

Since it commenced in 2004, the Homeless Persons' Legal Service (HPLS) has provided legal assistance to more than 5,400 people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, on over 10,000 occasions. In 2015 alone, HPLS helped over 700 people with a range of civil and criminal law matters. Of these, 22 per cent displayed some form of mental illness or self-identified as having a mental illness.

HPLS provides free legal advice through the 14 legal advice clinics it operates throughout metropolitan Sydney, outer western Sydney and the Hunter, which are based at homelessness services and welfare agencies.

In 2008 HPLS commenced a criminal law advocacy project, involving the employment of specialist criminal law advocate solicitor to provide legal representation for homeless people charged with criminal offences.

Since commencing in 2008, the HPLS Solicitor Advocate has provided court representation to 543 individual clients in 846 matters. From January 2010 to June 2015, the HPLS Solicitor Advocate provided court representation to 406 individual clients facing criminal charges. Of these, 47 per cent disclosed that they had a mental illness.

StreetCare, the HPLS Consumer Advisory Committee

In 2009 PIAC established its homeless consumer advisory committee, StreetCare. PIAC believes that the active involvement of people who have experienced homelessness leads to the development of more effective public policy in response to issues facing homeless people. In addition, this involvement empowers consumers, and is a practical recognition of their right to take part in the conduct of public affairs, as enshrined in Article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

StreetCare is made up of ten people who reflect the diversity of homelessness in NSW, and includes men, women, transgender people, young people, Aboriginal people, and representatives from inner Sydney, outer suburbs and rural and regional areas.

StreetCare enables PIAC to obtain direct input from homeless people into its policy advocacy. StreetCare also provides a mechanism for PIAC to engage actively with other people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, to facilitate their input into public policy and law reform initiatives.

Over the last six years StreetCare members have been involved in government policy advisory committees, giving advice to the highest levels of the NSW Government on issues such as the reform of specialist homelessness services in NSW, the revised Protocol for Homeless People in Public Places, appropriate methods of interaction between law enforcement officials and homeless people, and the lack of transitional support services for people exiting in prison without stable, long-term accommodation supports.

Introduction

One in every two hundred Australians is homeless each night.[1] Those experiencing homelessness are subject to marginalisation,[2] which is exacerbated by public perceptions of homelessness.[3] The common beliefs and assumptions of the public regarding homelessness influence how people experiencing homelessness are treated and accepted within the community. However, such perceptions differ vastly from the lived experiences of homelessness.[4]

Whilst there is substantial literature highlighting the society's negative views about homelessness,[5] there is little literature available which explores the impact of this stigma on people who have been homeless.[6] This study has sought to investigate the lived experiences of people who have been homeless in New South Wales, and to understand the extent and impact of negative views and perceptions on people who have experienced homelessness.

This report documents the experiences of people who have previously been homeless, and who continue to experience being marginalised and stigmatised in society. Common societal perceptions of homelessness were shown to significantly contribute to the marginalisation and disadvantage experienced by people who had been homeless. Some of these stigmatising perceptions of homeless people were also identified in some specialist homeless services – the very services established to assist homeless people.

Feelings of shame presented significant barriers for participants pursuing employment or housing opportunities, and also often resulted in them being marginalised or excluded from social networks and support services, as they wanted to maintain secrecy about their experiences of homelessness.

[1] Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2011), *Census of population and housing: estimating homelessness, Australia*, cat. No. 2049.0, December, viewed 11 April 2015, <http://abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/2049.0Main%20Features22011>.

[2] Kidd, S (2007), 'Youth homelessness and social stigma', *Journal of Youth Adolescence*, vol. 36, no. 3, pp. 291-299, viewed 3 November 2015, <http://link.springer.com.ezproxy.uws.edu.au/article/10.1007/s10964-006-9100-3>.

[3] Phelan, J, Link, B, Moore, R, and Stueve, A (1997), 'The stigma of homelessness: the impact of the label "homelessness" on attitudes toward poor persons', *American Sociological Association*, vol.60, no. 4, pp. 323-337.

[4] Phillips, L (2015), 'Homelessness: perception of causes and solutions', *Journal of Poverty*, vol. 19, no. 1, pp. 1-19, viewed 17 September 2015, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10875549.2014.951981#.VGrt>.

[5] Marks, A (2009), 'Homelessness and identity/difference processes', *Homeless Voices*, vol. 22, no. 7, pp. 21-22, viewed 3 November 2014, <http://search.informit.com.au.ezproxy.uws.edu.au/fullText;dn=654079857880749;res=IELFSC>; Homelessness Australia 2014, 'Perceptions of homelessness', *Homelessness Australia*, viewed 11 November 2014, <http://www.homelessnessaustralia.org.au/images/publications/policy/Perceptions_of_homelessness_2014.pdf >; Belcher, J and DeForge, B (2012), 'Social stigma and homelessness: the limits of social change', *Journal of Human Behaviour in the Social Environment*, vol. 22, no. 8, pp. 929-946, viewed 24 July 2015, <http://web.b.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.uws.edu.au/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=3758108f-011e-4ebd-bfde-215331fd06ef%40sessionmgr113&vid=1&hid=124>.

[6] Zufferey, C, and Kerr, L (2004), 'Identity and everyday experiences of homelessness: some implications for social work', *Australian Social Work*, vol. 57, no. 4, pp. 343-353, viewed 16 July 2015, <http://www-tandfonline-com.ezproxy.uws.edu.au/doi/abs/10.1111/j.0312-407X.2004.00164.x#.VjCbCWQrly4>.

This report adopts the following definition of homelessness: the lack of adequate access to safe and secure housing.[7] This definition includes three categories of homelessness: primary, secondary, and tertiary. Primary homelessness is defined as 'on the street or an improvised dwelling', Secondary homelessness is 'frequently moving between temporary accommodation', for example shelters, refuges or couch surfing, and Tertiary homelessness refers to 'staying in accommodation that falls below minimum community standards, for example caravan parks. This style of categorising is widely used in Australian policy and literature, as well as by peak bodies such as Homelessness NSW, and the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS).

Review of the literature

Perceptions and realities of homelessness

There is a wide range of literature exploring public perceptions of homelessness.[8] Such perceptions are influenced by the day-to-day lives that are on display in the public space.[9] This is due to the high concentration of 'public' homelessness such as people 'sleeping rough' and living on the streets of inner Sydney and other major cities.[10] Common stereotypes of people who are homeless are typically those of middle-aged men who are unemployed, poorly dressed and living on the streets.[11]

In reality, the leading cause of homelessness in Australia is domestic violence, experienced predominantly by women between the ages of twenty-five and fifty-four. Few of these women sleep rough, most stay in houses with other people and families.[12] Despite rough sleepers making up only six per cent of people experiencing homelessness in Australia,[13] Zufferey notes that Australian government policy responses to homelessness focus on rough sleepers with limited consideration of other forms of homelessness.[14]

A common criticism of homelessness policy is that it often prioritises service provision toward male rough-sleepers.[15] In addition, specialist homelessness services often fail to recognise the unique, and diverse experiences of people experiencing homelessness.[16] Sandstrom suggests that stereotypes and assumptions about homelessness often lead to less visible and at-risk populations disappearing in policy debates.[17] Referred to as 'hidden homelessness', this includes people who couch surf, live in overcrowded housing and other forms of temporary

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[7] Chamberlain, C and Mackenzie, D (2008), 'Youth homelessness 2006: [census of homeless school students], *Youth Studies Australia*, vol. 21, no. 1, pp.17-25; Commonwealth of Australia 2008, *The road to home, white paper on homelessness*, Commonwealth Government of Australia, Canberra; NSW Government 2008, A way home: reducing homelessness in NSW, *NSW Homelessness Action Plan 2009-2014*, NSW Government, Sydney; Marks (2009), above n 5.

[8] Homelessness Australia (2014), above n 5; Marks (2009), above n 5; Phillips (2015), above n 4.,

[9] Homelessness Australia (2009), *Resourcing responses to homelessness: case studies from homelessness Australia*, Dickson, ACT.

[10] Ibid; Commonwealth of Australia (2008), above n 7.

[11] Homelessness Australia (2014), above n 5; Sandstrom, K (2012), 'Coming out from the shadows: responding to young people experiencing 'hidden homelessness'', *Parity,* vol. 25, no. 3, pp. 30-31.

[12] Homelessness Australia (2014), above n 5.

[13] ABS (2011), above n 1.

[14] Zufferey, C (2011), 'Homelessness, social policy, and social work: a way forward', *Australian Social Work*, vol. 64, no. 3, pp. 241-244.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Zufferey, and Kerr (2004), above n 6.

[17] Sandstrom (2012), above n 11.

accommodation.[18] Sandstrom also suggests that while people experiencing hidden homelessness may have a roof over their head, their safety and security is not guaranteed.[19] The lack of data and statistics on 'hidden homelessness' serves to reinforce common community perceptions of homelessness. It should be noted however, that the recent reforms to specialist homelessness services in New South Wales attempt to address this, by focusing on the experiences of women at risk of homelessness due to domestic violence.[20]

Analyses of secondary data indicate that a common perception in the community is that people experiencing homelessness are of little value to society, that they are to blame for being homeless, and that they are incapable of changing or achieving anything beyond their homelessness.[21] Belcher and Deforge argue that it is the societal image of homelessness that has caused the belief that the individual is to blame for their own homelessness. Further, '…people become and remain homeless in part because society views it as acceptable'.[22] These perceptions can have a detrimental affect on the individuals experiencing homelessness.[23]

Social stigma

Negative stereotypes about homelessness lead to consideration about impacts of social stigma. Social stigma is the spoiling of one's identity, and limits social acceptance.[24] This often takes the form of stereotypes and labelling.[25] People experiencing homelessness are often referred to as 'the homeless' and, thus, their defining characteristic becomes their homelessness, rather than other personal attributes.[26]

Marks suggests that being labeled as 'homeless' has a significant impact on a person's ability to overcome marginalisation and disadvantage.[27] Such stigma is confirmed in Australian and international literature.[28] Stigmatisation acts as a significant structural barrier for people experiencing homelessness.

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[18] Ibid; Knox, L (2010), 'Hidden homelessness: Supported residential services as a default option for individuals with an ABI' *Parity*, vol. 23, no. 1, pp. 15-16, viewed 14 October 2015, <http://search.informit.com.au.ezproxy.uws.edu.au/fullText;dn=137493676528278;res=IELFSC>.

[19] Sandstrom (2012), above n 11.

[20] NSW Family and Community Services (2012), Going home staying home: Reform plan, viewed 14 June 2015, <http://www.housing.nsw.gov.au/NR/rdonlyres/F015C82C-B9E7-490C-AB3A-75828BAED085/0/GoingHomeStayingHomeReformPlan.pdf>.

[21] Belcher and DeForge (2012), above n 5; Parsell, C (2011), 'Homeless identities: enacted and ascribed', *The British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 62, no. 3, pp. 442-461, viewed 21 January 2015, < http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com.ezproxy.uws.edu.au/doi/10.1111/j.1468-4446.2011.01373.x/abstract>.

[22] Belcher and DeForge (2012), above n 5, 930.

[23] Homelessness Australia (2009), above n 9.

[24] Phelan et al (1997), above n 3; Belcher and DeForge (2012), above n 5.

[25] Corrigan, P, Morris, S, Larson, J, Rafacz, J, Wassel, A, Michaels, P et. al (2010), 'Self-stigma and coming out about ones mental illness', *Journal of Community Psychology*, vol. 38, no. 3, pp. 259-275.Phelan et al (1997), above n 3; Belcher and DeForge (2012), above n 5.

[26] Belcher and DeForge (2012), above n 5; Parsell (2011), above n 21.

[27] Marks (2009), above n 5.

[28] Chamberlain, C and Johnson, G (2011), 'Pathways into adult homelessness', *Journal of Sociology*, vol. 29, no. 1, pp. 60-77, viewed 8 April 2015, <http://jos.sagepub.com.ezproxy.uws.edu.au/content/49/1/60>; Belcher and DeForge (2012), above n 5; Schneider, B and Remillard, C (2013), 'Caring about homelessness: how identity work maintains the stigma of homelessness' *Text & Talk: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Language, Discourse & Communication Studies*, vol. 33, no. 1, pp. 95-113; Phillips (2015), above n 4.

Impacts of homelessness and housing

According to Gilbert, homelessness is one of the most extreme manifestations of social exclusion.[29] In the Australian Government's 2008 White Paper on Homelessness, issued under former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, the impacts of homelessness include erosion of individual stability and social connections, making it harder to maintain education and employment, and retain contact with family and friends.[30] The process of re-engaging with society is challenging and, for this reason, it is suggested that the disadvantage and marginalisation associated with homelessness may continue after an individual is housed.[31]

Homelessness leaves individuals vulnerable to long-term unemployment and chronic ill health and can lead to social exclusion and marginalisation.[32] Social networks can be (re)established once safe and secure housing is obtained.[33] However, the stigma associated with being homeless may severely hamper these connections.[34]

Research undertaken in New South Wales by Darcy et. al in 2012 explored the outcomes of rough sleepers after becoming housed. The research showed an overall increase in the wellbeing, specifically 'improvement in how they felt after being housed',[35] and an overall increase in social re-engagement including regaining or increasing contact with family members. The feeling of 'getting back to normal' after being housed, and having a space of their own was important for the participants. One participant explained that 'normal living', to them, was 'just a little unit or bedsitter…not being cramped up in a pub'.[36] It is clear that being housed enables people to develop social networks less accessible when homeless.

Identity

According to Marks, identity is more than solely one's perception of themselves, but also how they are recognised by society as a result of the group of people with whom they are associated. Homelessness is considered an all-encompassing feature of an individual's identity and has been described as an 'identity in itself' and one that is determined by difference.[37] In the cases of individuals who are homeless, the primary difference they experience from mainstream society is their lack of housing.

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[29] Gilbert, T (2010), 'Homelessness and social inclusion: bringing them in from the margins', *Parity*, vol. 23, no. 4, pp. 17-18.

[30] Commonwealth of Australia (2008), above n 7; Homelessness Australia 2013, 'Homelessness in australia', *Homelessness Australia*, viewed 22 July 2015, <http://www.homelessnessaustralia.org.au/images/publications/Fact_Sheets/Homelessness_in_Australia_v2.pdf>.

[31] Marks (2009), above n 5; James-Nevell, S (2012), 'Long-term homelessness and social inclusion' *Parity*, vol. 25, no. 5, pp. 19-20, viewed 28 August 2015, <http://search.informit.com.au.ezproxy.uws.edu.au/fullText;dn=920831048348335;res=IELFSC>.

[32] Homelessness Australia (2013), above n 30; Gilbert (2010), above n 29; Rossi, P H, Wright, J D, Fisher, G A, and Willis, G (1987), 'The urban homeless: estimating the composition and size', *Health Reference Center Academic*, vol. 235, pp. 1336.

[33] Gilbert (2010), above n 29.

[34] Marks (2009), above n 5.

[35] Darcy, M, Drake, G, Blunden, H, Steinwede, J, and University of Western Sydney (2014), *Rough sleepers in Parramatta: from street to home: Final report,* Urban Research Centre, Penrith South, NSW, 47.

[36] Drake, G, Blunden, H, and Darcy, M (2012), 'Rough sleepers in Parramatta: from street to home', *In for the long haul: Ending long-tern homelessness*, Parity, vol. 25, no. 5, 25.

[37] Marks (2009), above n 5, 21; Belcher and DeForge (2012), above n 5; Parsell (2011), above n 21.

The label of homelessness is a critical component of an individual's identity, and has a substantial effect on an individual's ability to overcome marginalisation. Thus, the label of homelessness and the accompanying societal stigma is a major factor in defining one's identity. Marks' contributions on the 'homeless' identity have been important for the research because of the acknowledgement of links between social views and experiences of homelessness, and the implications this has for one's identity.[38]

Locality

Locality plays an important role in the research of both experiences and public perceptions of homelessness. As mentioned, public perceptions of homelessness are largely influenced by the visibility of homelessness, especially those sleeping rough in public spaces. This is particularly prevalent in major cities such as Sydney where the concentration of public homelessness is high.[39] However, there is limited literature exploring issues of identity and homelessness in Australia. Furthermore, where information is available, it is not specifically relevant to the NSW urban population, the focus of this report.[40]

It is acknowledged that homelessness, and perceptions of homelessness vary based on location.[41] This means that experiences of homelessness may differ depending on the country, city, town or region. Experiences of homelessness also differ depending on age and gender. Locality is important, as is the need for transparency. This study focuses on urban New South Wales and will provide important insights into homelessness in this location.

The issue of homelessness is larger than what can be seen by the public, and affects a wide range of social groups. The literature confirms disjunctions between perceptions and realities of homelessness. A number of social issues have been identified, including stigma, public perceptions of homelessness, marginalisation and disadvantage. This research aims to draw these strands together to highlight a gap in knowledge about personal experiences of homelessness and the impact of societal perceptions on people's lives after they have been housed.

Research design

Research focus

The aim of this research was to explore experiences of homelessness in urban New South Wales. The author's initial interest was in exploring societal perceptions of homelessness and the impact of these perceptions on the identity of individuals who have been homeless. Such an exploration was in line with Marks' argument that 'Homelessness is an identity, shaped not solely by an individual's self-perception but also the singular and collective perceptions of others'.[42] However, during the study design phase a shift in focus was influenced by the utilisation of a critical theoretical perspective that enables consideration of the connections between social problems and social structures. As such, the semi-structured interviews with adults who have

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[38]   Marks (2009), above n 5.
[39]   City of Sydney (2014), *City of Sydney Street Count*, viewed 10 November 2014,
         <http://www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/community/community-support/homelessness/street-count>.
[40]   Phelan (1997), above n 3; Kidd (2007); Parsell (2011), above n 21.
[41]   Milbourne, P and Cloke, P (2006), *International perspectives on rural homelessness*, Routledge, London.
[42]   Marks (2009), above n 5, 21.

previously been homeless explored personal experiences of homelessness as well as their understandings of public perceptions of homelessness.

This research was influenced by a subjectivist epistemology, which accepts that meaning is ascribed by individual experience, perception and interpretations. In other words, it is the experiences of participants that are foregrounded in the study.

Methodology

Given the subjective nature of exploring personal experiences of homelessness, a qualitative methodological approach was vital. In line with the theoretical approach to the study, semi-structured interviews were employed to collect data. This method combines the elements of structured and unstructured interviews to allow the participant to talk freely and express their views, whilst incorporating set open-ended interview questions.[43] The interview method gave participants the freedom to discuss their experiences and opinions, and reduced the influence of the interviewer on the data.[44]

Purposive sampling was used to recruit adults who had previously experienced homelessness. Purposive sampling is a selective method of recruiting participants based on what is known about the target population and the purpose of the study.[45] Individuals who were known to meet the requirements of the study were specifically targeted. All participants had previously experienced homelessness within the previous five years. Figure 1.1 shows an overview of the participants (n=6). The last column shows the coding for each participant. Age (years old – yo) is followed by the type and length in years of previous homelessness.

Figure 1.1 overview of participants

Participant Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Length of Homelessness	Type of Homelessness	Code
Naomi	35	Female	1 year	Primary, Secondary and Tertiary	(35yo, PST1)
Samantha	32	Female	More than 4 months	Secondary and Tertiary	(32yo, ST<1)
Daniel	47	Male	24 years on and off	Primary	(47yo, P24)
Robert	60	Male	More than 1 year	Primary and Secondary	(60yo, PS1)
Allan	55	Male	More than 3 years	Primary and Secondary	(55yo, PS3)
Emily	25	Female	More than 1 year	Secondary	(25yo, S1)

Half the participants were male and half were female. The oldest participant was sixty years of age, and the youngest was twenty-five; this participant, Emily,[46] first experienced homelessness at age seventeen. Participants had experienced a range of different types of homelessness.

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[43]   McNeil, P, and Chapman, S (2005), *Research methods*, 3rd edn, Routledge, Oxon.
[44]   Walter, M (2010), *Social research methods*, Oxford University Press, Victoria, 174.
[45]   Ibid.
[46]   Names have been replaced with pseudonyms in order to protect the identity of participants.

Secondary homelessness was the most common amongst participants (n=5). Samantha experienced the shortest term of homelessness at four months, while Daniel had experienced the longest term of homelessness for twenty-four years. **Appendix A** contains brief biographies of participants.

Interviews with participants were audio recorded and later transcribed. Audio recording allowed greater engagement for the interviewer and note taking was not required. This also allowed for more in-depth analysis of data through immersion and incubation. Prior to the interview, participants were asked to read an Information Sheet and sign the Consent Form. Participants were offered an opportunity to ask further questions about the interview and research process before signing.

The length of the semi-structured interviews varied from twenty minutes to sixty minutes. All participants shared personal stories and information in the interview, demonstrating the effectiveness of open-ended interview questions to allow participants to speak freely, and guide the direction of the interview.

Data analysis

The author employed a thematic analysis to analyse the primary data. Interview transcripts were read multiple times. Transcripts were first read individually. The data was then reorganised with all answers listed under each of the interview questions. The data was also reorganised according to gender, type and length of homelessness. The initial stage of analysing interview transcripts was coding. Coding is a method in which data is categorised, in order to identify themes.[47] Coding is a particularly useful method of identifying similarities in participant experiences. Relevant quotes were categorised into themes in order to identify similarities.

Limitations

It is acknowledged that this small-scale study is not able to reflect the experiences of the whole target group. This was not the intention. Experiences of homelessness are not homogenous. All participants were no longer homeless and it is acknowledged that their experiences are not necessarily representative of all people who have experienced homelessness. Nevertheless, and despite the size of the study, the in-depth research has highlighted the key issues in relation to the lived experiences of people who have been homeless. Further avenues of research have been identified and will be discussed below.

Findings

Although the journeys of the interview participants were personal and vastly different, common themes recurred throughout all interviews. Participants were of different ages, gender, and locations, yet they expressed similarities in their understanding of the impact of stigma and preconceived ideas about homelessness. Common themes were identified with the application of thematic analysis. These themes provide insight into experiences of homelessness, and the impact of perceptions of homelessness.

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[47]   Hall, R (2008), *Applied social research: Planning, designing, and conducting social real-world research*, Palgrave Macmillan, South Yarra.

As mentioned, a biography of participants can be found in **Appendix A** and a code has been used to identify and describe participants where data is presented here. For example Naomi (35yo, PST1): Naomi is thirty-five years old. She has experienced primary, secondary and tertiary homelessness, for a total of one year.

Understandings of homelessness

In order to gain insights into the experiences of homelessness, it is important to understand how participants define the term 'homelessness'. When participants described what they believed homelessness to be, the significance of safety and security were strong recurring themes:

> To me, it's not having an address, not having secure accommodation, and not having somewhere you can be safe and secure. (Naomi 35yo, PST1)

> Homelessness is, to me, something that people experience when they don't have anywhere to call a home, as simple as that. (Emily, 24yo, S1)

> Having nowhere safe to live. No fixed address. Not a permanent roof over your head. (Samantha, 33yo, ST<1)

Participants highlighted similar key themes by describing life outside of homelessness:

> Having that stable accommodation, with a lease and a bond where you aren't going to be thrown out tomorrow… and feel safe. (Daniel, 47yo, P24)

> It's having stability and security that makes the biggest difference. (Naomi, 35yo, PST1)

> We had a roof over our heads, a place to call home, a kitchen of my own, a bathroom of my own. My own belongings and my own bed, instead of a room in a refuge. (Samantha, 33yo, ST<1)

Emily, however, explained life outside of homelessness from a different angle, emphasising the importance of becoming independent of services:

> Not having to rely on services, not having to rely on government housing and being on the private rental market, and cutting all ties with anything to do with struggling. Like housing and youth services. (Emily, 24yo, ST1)

Daniel described homelessness as an internal experience rather than external, and talked about feeling lost, and giving up:

> It's being lost within yourself and giving up on yourself. (Daniel, 47yo, P24)

Lack of knowledge about homelessness

Participants discussed the lack of knowledge within the community about homelessness. Some participants reported knowing so little about homelessness that they did not even realise that they were homeless until years later.

Samantha and Naomi talked about their experiences of being homeless without knowing it at the time. However, since becoming involved in advocacy on behalf of homeless people, both women have developed their knowledge about homelessness, and since identified previous periods of homelessness.

> I had been couch surfing when I was younger. I didn't know that was homelessness back then…I learnt that couch surfing or being in a refuge was homelessness… Now, I realise, looking back, I was homeless on several occasions. (Samantha, 33yo, ST<1)

> It wasn't until I received training in homelessness that I realised there were periods of time in my life when I was homeless when I was young, but didn't realise at the time. (Naomi, 35yo, PST1)

Education about homelessness was clearly crucial for Naomi and Samantha. Here, Samantha highlights the importance of educating the wider community:

> Society's view of homelessness is a person on the street… They don't see it as a woman living in a refuge (or) the person who's been sleeping on someone's couch for three months…because people aren't educated about that stuff. (Samantha, 33yo, ST<1)

Preconceived Ideas

There is considerable research available surrounding public perceptions and assumptions about homelessness. Much of this research describes the negative attitudes, and false assumptions about homelessness, usually relating to drug and alcohol issues and other preventable causes.[48] After exploring participants' own understandings of homelessness, it is important to gain insight into what participants believe to be the public perception of homelessness. Participants' descriptions were similar to what was explored in the literature. Participants described a number of negative attributes that they believed to be the public perception of homelessness.

Naomi did not have issues with drugs or alcohol. She explains:

> People assume that homelessness means sleeping rough, on the streets, having mental health issues generally associated issued with drugs and alcohol (Naomi, 35yo, PST1).

Unproductive or unwanted members of society

Participants believed that a common assumption about people who are homeless is that they are unproductive or unwanted members of society:

> They [people experiencing homelessness] are dole bludgers, they are lazy and they are the scum of the earth. (Emily, 24yo, ST1)

> In terms of people living on the street, I think there's an obvious stereotype, a negative stereotype. (Emily, 24yo, ST1)

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[48] Homelessness Australia (2014), above n 5; Marks (2009), above n 5; Phillips (2015), above n 4.

Naomi explained how she believes the public perceives homelessness. She described a poorly presented and uneducated person:

A rough looking individual, someone who doesn't present well, possibly doesn't have a lot of education, that just carries shopping bags of stuff around. (Naomi, 35yo, PST1)

Robert explained what he felt when he saw the 'looks' in people's eyes as they walked past him and other homeless people on the streets:

[Their eyes were saying] You're a worthless human being, you're a wasted life. (Robert, 60yo, PS1)

At fault

As indicated above, common perceptions of people who are homeless include assumptions that the people who are homeless are lazy, and at fault for their own situation. This was substantiated by Naomi who felt fearful that people believed she deserved to be homeless and assumed she was homeless because of her own wrong doing:

In general people judge homelessness as poor lifestyle choices, or poor life choices. That it's your own fault for whatever reason, and that you probably deserve to be there. (Naomi, 35yo, PST1)

Allan described what he had thought to be the public opinion of the cause of homelessness. He talked about the assumption that homelessness is caused by doing something wrong:

People have preconceived ideas that homelessness comes out of doing something wrong, or that something is not right with you. (Allan, 55yo, PS3)

The shame and fear of judgement

Discussion of stigma is prevalent within literature on homelessness. This was reflected in the interview data. All participants stated that they believed there is a stigma associated with experiencing homelessness. All participants said they avoided telling people that they were experiencing homelessness and some said they made serious efforts to ensure that no one found out:

I didn't tell anyone [that I was homeless]. (Robert, 60yo, PS1)

I didn't tell people I was homeless. (Samantha, 33yo, ST<1)

I tried not to tell people I was homeless. (Naomi, 35yo, PST1)

Naomi indicated that she chose not to tell people that she was homeless, as she found it embarrassing and feared judgement.

I found it embarrassing and humiliating. I was worried about people judging me, and thinking I was an unfit parent for having my daughter in that situation [homelessness]. (Naomi, 35yo, PST1)

Samantha spoke about the lies she told to hide that she was homeless. She said that she feared being treated differently, because she knew that people had preconceived negative ideas about people who are homeless.

> 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. I just thought I couldn't handle it. So I lied. (Samantha, 33yo, ST<1)

Experiences and feelings of judgement

Participants shared experiences of judgement and ill treatment they experienced due to their homelessness. For two participants, their struggles affected access to, or ability to maintain, employment. Robert referred to an often-used quote from a video of a formally homeless person[49] to describe the judgement he experienced when seeking employment:

> Society 'spits at you with their eyes'. (Robert, 60yo, PS1)

As Robert explained, 'spitting with their eyes' was the way the public looks at people who sleep rough, their 'looks' and 'stares' are so degrading in a way that is comparable to being spat on. Robert acknowledged this description was borrowed from a friend; it was a description that certainly resonated with him.

Daniel, who had been a 'rough sleeper' in public places, including under a bridge, spoke about instances where members of the public would yell at him and tell him and others sleeping rough to get a job. It is significant to note that when Daniel became homeless, he was employed:

> [Members of the public] walk past, and yell at you, and tell you to get a job. (Daniel, 47yo, P24)

Samantha thought that she would be considered a poor tenant, and denied rental properties if they knew that she was homeless:

> I thought that they [real estate agents] would judge. And I thought that I would be denied properties… They would think that I am not a good tenant. They would think that I have become homeless because I can't maintain my tenancy and pay my bills and all those things. So I felt it would be better just to keep it from them. (Samantha, 33yo, ST<1)

Naomi felt that she was excluded from job opportunities because she could not provide an address. At this point in her life, she had only a Post Office box.

> I often found it hard applying for jobs. They often required a street address on your resume…I knew they 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. (Naomi, 35yo, PST1)

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[49] This is a phrase used by AJ, a member of the PIAC Homeless Consumer Advisory Committee, StreetCare, who is currently sleeping rough. It was used in one of the videos produced by the Public Interest Advocacy Centre as part of the "In Their Words" StreetCare video project. The video is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sCcDeQ3W3N0>

Allan was able to find employment while homelessness; however, like Naomi, he believes that preconceived ideas about homelessness affected his opportunity to sustain that employment:

> After the boss found out I was sleeping in my car, I knew I wasn't getting that job as a full time job because I was a homeless person. So I couldn't be relied on [at work] if I couldn't be relied on to keep my accommodation…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 the fact that he found out that I was homeless, and that wasn't acceptable in his mind. (Allan, 55yo, PS3)

Referring to the treatment experienced when approaching charities and other homeless services for help, Allan said he was treated differently and felt belittled when people were 'proud' of his ability to sustain housing (post homelessness); they could not see past his homelessness, to his many years of successes. Allan's comments support the view that homelessness is an identity, as he explains:

> I was treated very condescendingly by most of the services… Whenever I speak to anybody they are proud of my five years staying there [in a public housing property], this is a little bit condescending. Well, sorry, but I managed to stay 40 years in one place beforehand and I didn't need any help or praise when I did that. (Allan, 55yo, PS3)

Not fitting the criteria

As discussed above, participants had hidden their homelessness, so when people found out, they were often shocked, indicating that many people had preconceived ideas about homelessness. Participants received varied reactions when people discovered they were experiencing homelessness. However the common theme was that people were shocked that participants did not fit their existing idea of what a homeless person looked like.

Naomi spoke about her experiences when she first told her employer/s that she was homeless. She said that they were surprised because of her appearance and being reasonably well spoken:

> They were very surprised, because I present well, and I'm articulate… they have an idea in their mind about what a homeless person is, and I don't look like a homeless person. I don't act like a homeless person. I don't, there's nothing about me personally that would indicate that I was homeless at any point in my life. (Naomi, 35yo, PST1)

Robert also talked about people who did not think he looked or seemed homeless. He shared a story about an incident he experienced at a meeting for homeless persons. Upon arrival, he was told by a receptionist at the charity centre:

> 'You don't look homeless'. (Robert, 60yo, PS1)

Robert responded to this comment rather ironically. His reaction expressed what he felt was the public expectation or preconceived idea of what it was to be homelessness:

> Shit, I knew there was something I forgot to do this morning. Roll in the gutter and pour cheap wine over myself. (Robert, 60yo, PS1)

Only one participant, Emily, reported that:

> No, [I didn't feel I was treated differently]. (Emily, 24yo, ST1)

Social isolation

Social isolation was a challenge faced by the majority of participants (n=5). Some lost friends when they disclosed that they were experiencing homelessness, and others made an effort to stay away from people, fearing judgement.

> I felt quite isolated a lot of the time, socially particularly…when I had a stable address again, I did hear from friends that had stayed away. (Naomi, 35yo, PST1)

> There's no friends in homelessness apart from the homeless people. (Allan, 55yo, PS3)

> I stayed away from people. (Robert, 60yo, PS1)

Social isolation was not an issue for Emily when she was homeless. She engaged in the 'homeless subculture' by developing friendships with people who were staying at the same accommodation service:

> A lot of my friends were from the same refuge. (Emily, 24yo, ST1)

Experiences with service providers

Participants cited drug and alcohol issues to be the main targets of services for people who are homeless, and if these criteria were not met, there were often limited services available to help them address their issue of homelessness.

> Drugs or alcohol, they tend to get the much needed help. (Daniel, 47yo, P24)

> If I had drug, alcohol or legal issues, they could help me. (Naomi, 35yo, PST1)

Drugs and alcohol were not issues for Allan. However, when seeking help from a service, it was often assumed that he had drug and alcohol issues. Eventually, when he experienced challenges with his mental health, suddenly the service he was provided drastically changed.

> 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]. The issue was homelessness… it wasn't till I had a mental breakdown, and went to hospital that people started going 'hang on a second, this is really starting to get to you' and then people started listening to me. (Allan, 55yo, PS3)

Daniel shared personal experiences of the judgement he has faced, primarily from homelessness services such as public housing providers:

> They just judge you. You are either an alcoholic or a drug user. There seems to be no in-between. (Daniel, 47yo, P24)

Allan adds to this:

> They'd always speak to you like you've got a drug or alcohol problem. There was no issue [with drugs or alcohol]. The issue was homelessness. (Allan, 55yo, PS3)

Naomi went on to explain that her 'image' acted as a barrier to receiving support and services when she was homeless. As previously explained, Naomi presented well and was articulate. In the minds of staff at the services, that meant she did not fit their client profile:

> One of the biggest barriers was that I was well presented. My case didn't fit their idea of the profile of homelessness. (Naomi, 35yo, PST1)

Emergency accommodation services were unable to provide long-term accommodation. This caused additional challenges for Emily:

> Because I was in crisis refuges, and knowing that I wasn't going to stay was unsettling… Knowing that I was going to have to move at some point was the biggest struggle. (Emily, 24yo, ST1)

Emily was offered a lot of support when she was homeless. However, she felt as though the services were tailored to suit the funding goals of the service, rather than the needs of the service user.

> I was offered a lot of support, in terms of access to services… some of them were pointless. There's a lot of red tape around it. It was just as though they were just trying to tick the boxes because, because otherwise they wouldn't get any money. (Emily, 24yo, ST1)

Naomi found the logistical experience of seeking services traumatic, particularly when she was required to complete large amounts of paper-forms, and repeat her emotional story for different services in order to explain her need.

> Having to tell my story over and over again was traumatising…It was lots of paperwork, so lots of mental exhaustion, because of actually the logistics, and to have the mental capacity to do and be the things that I had to, was exhausting and traumatising, basically. (Naomi, 35yo, PST1)

Lasting emotional impact

A significant theme that emerged from the interview process and thematic analysis was the lasting emotional impact experienced by participants during and following homelessness. These emotional issues and trauma stemmed not only from the experience of living in below-standard or temporary accommodation, but more so from the stigmatisation and ill treatment they received for having the label of homelessness.

Daniel referred to the ill-treatment and bullying he received as a homeless person sleeping rough in inner-city areas, and said his self-esteem continued to become lower:

> Your self-esteem just gets lower and lower. (Daniel, 47yo, P24)

Daniel went on to talk about society's attitudes toward homelessness as another challenge on top of the many other challenges he was already facing. It was only after receiving professional mental health support that he was able to overcome the judgement and bullying he had experienced:

> It is just a nail in the coffin. You just don't need that. It is just another way to drive you further down… I started to get some mental health support. You know what I mean, and talking to someone, and understanding. And now I tend to brush it off. (Daniel, 47yo, P24)

Robert talked about the emotional impact that homelessness had on his life:

> You're homelessness is just in your head but that despair slowly dictates standards of achievement for life. (Robert, 60yo, PS1)

He spoke earlier about people 'spitting with their eyes' and here Robert explains how that felt:

> It's bloody hard. It tears away that little bit of pride, self-doubt you know acceptance into society. (Robert, 60yo, PS1)

Naomi talked about how her experiences of homelessness have impacted her mental health and emotional wellbeing as she continues to live in fear of losing her home, or her income, and becoming homeless again.

> It does impact my mental health and my emotional wellbeing from time to time. It's given me a general sense of fear. So, fear around losing a home, losing an income, not managing my life in that way, and the reality that the potential of homelessness could happen if things go wrong again…The ignorance from the broader community is what impacts me the most. The emotional impact… (Naomi, 35yo, PST1)

Naomi goes on to say that, even years later, she is still challenged by some of the issues she experienced when she was homeless:

> There's still things I am working through emotionally… the sense of guilt that my daughter had to go through that experience with me. (Naomi, 35yo, PST1)

Samantha shared similar experiences:

> It's still emotionally hard. It takes its toll on me. (Samantha, 33yo, ST<1)

Analysis

Understanding the lived experiences of homelessness is important for homeless service delivery. The initial focus of this research was to explore the impact of stigmatisation on an individual's identity. However, it became apparent in the design phase of the small-scale study that this focus had the potential to overlook broader structural factors that may contribute to the exclusion and marginalisation of people experiencing homelessness. Applying a critical theoretical lens to the research resulted in a shift in focus to the lived experiences of people who have experienced homelessness. This provided insight into the challenges that come with being homeless. Key themes emerging from the data are revisited here, along with implications, conclusions and areas for further research.

The lived experiences of stigma

Participants confirmed that there is a social stigma associated with being homeless in New South Wales. This was in line with the literature which suggests that public perceptions of homelessness are, typically, those of a rough sleeper, a poorly presented person, with little or no education, no occupation, usually having drug or alcohol issues, worthless, and at fault for their own homelessness.[50] The research revealed that people who are homeless are aware of negative public perceptions and that they are faced with emotional challenges as a result of being subjected to these ideas. This resulted in participants making active efforts to hide their homelessness. Crucially, feelings of shame, fear and judgement continued to resonate with participants even though they were no longer homeless.

Access to housing

The implications and consequences of negative public perceptions were highlighted by one participant who hid her homelessness from real estate agents out of fear she would be rejected for rental applications. She feared that the perceptions of homelessness would result in her remaining homeless, as she felt that she would be seen as unreliable and unable to maintain tenancy. Another participant feared that she would be seen as an unfit parent, as her child was with her throughout her homelessness. By maintaining secrecy about their homelessness, people put themselves at risk of further disadvantage by not accessing services and supports. These participants were socially isolated and rejected by friends and family. Most of the participants tried to stay away from people; they did not want to be seen and judged. This makes people susceptible to further disadvantage. Loss of social connections results in breakdown of the support networks that are important elements for overcoming disadvantage.

Access to employment

Three participants talked specifically about obtaining and maintaining employment while being homelessness. One participant struggled to get a job offer when she was unable to provide her actual address on her resume (she provided a post office address), and another was unable to maintain employment once his employer discovered that he was sleeping in his car. Despite the quality of his workmanship, and commitment to the job, the participant was no longer seen as 'reliable' in the eyes of the employer. According to Homelessness Australia, there is a common belief that homelessness can be resolved by 'getting a job'.[51] This is a misconception as ABS

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[50]   Homelessness Australia (2014), above n 5.
[51]   Homelessness Australia (2014), above n 5.

data show that unemployment is not the leading cause of homelessness.[52] As this research illustrates, people become homelessness even when they have a job, homelessness makes it harder to maintain employment, and obtaining employment continues to be a barrier when people are unable to provide their home address.

Defining and understanding homelessness

Similar to the definition of homelessness used in Australian literature and research as being 'lack of adequate access to safe and secure accommodation',[53] participants defined their homelessness in terms of a lack of accommodation safety, stability and privacy. Rather than mentioning an actual 'house', participants were concerned about not having a 'place to call home'. One participant who had stayed in refuges and with friends stated that a home was more than a roof over her head, but rather a place where she had a sense of ownership. Having the privacy of a bathroom, and a bed of her own was particularly important.

Demonstrating the power of public perceptions, three participants did not realise they had been homeless because they had not been rough sleepers. Participants noted that they only became aware of their past 'homelessness' after receiving training at a subsequent point in their lives. One participant said that even though she had experienced homelessness on a number of occasions, it was 'society's view of homelessness', and the image of a person living on the street that had warped her view of homelessness.

The 'homeless' identity

It was a common theme that participants did not 'realise' they were homeless. In addition to the participant referred to above, at the time of their homelessness, Naomi and Samantha also believed that homelessness meant sleeping rough, something they had not done. The serious implication of not identifying as homeless means that people's exit from homelessness may be delayed as a result of a lack of access to services and supports. An interesting juxtaposition is that people who do indeed consider themselves homeless also find it difficult to exit homelessness. Chamberlain and Johnson refer to the 'homeless subculture', where people engage with others who are experiencing homelessness and see their identity as 'homeless'.[54]

Again, the power of public perceptions is a powerful force, particularly as these perceptions have a negative impact on identity. It is important to note, beyond being a 'formerly homeless person', participants expressed a number of positive defining attributes when introducing themselves in the semi-structured interviews. They had agency and freely shared their age, and what part of NSW they were living in. Some participants said they were parents, and talked about their children, as well as their study and current employment.

Accessing services

Earlier critiques of service provision raised the issue of services being too focused on specific groups of people experiencing homelessness, and not being open to a wider range of experiences. Participants talked about 'not fitting the profile' of homelessness services, or not receiving assistance because, although they were homeless at the time, they were not eligible for support because they were not struggling with drug and alcohol issues. This limited their access

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[52]   ABS (2011), above n 1.
[53]   Chamberlain and Mackenzie (2008), above n 7.
[54]   Chamberlain and Johnson (2011), above n 28.

to much-needed help and support, and was a barrier to overcoming homelessness as they went from one service to another, trying to find help, but always being declined.

In contrast to societal views, according to the ABS homelessness is, most often, not the result of drug and alcohol issue, resulting in further disadvantage and marginalisation for people experiencing homelessness.[55] Allan spoke of his experience of approaching a homeless service for support while he was homeless. He was spoken to, 'like [he had] a drug or alcohol problem'. For Allan this was not the case. He felt belittled by the staff at this service. What Allan experienced was not uncommon among participants. Robert was told by a charity organisation that he 'doesn't look homeless'. By denying services to people like Allan and Robert because they do not meet societal expectations of what it is to be homeless, people who are homeless feel belittled and put-down by the assumptions that they do not fit this negative stereotype.

Emotional impact

Participants discussed the emotional effects of homelessness. One participant directly identified the 'ignorance from the broader community' as providing the biggest emotional impact. Others talked about their self-esteem becoming lower, and another participant talked about the despair he experienced, 'dictating his standards of achievement in life'. While Allan was homeless, he was hospitalised for what he refers to as a 'mental breakdown' arising from the emotional stress of experiencing homelessness. Two participants said that they were continuing to face these emotional challenges, even though it had been years since they were homeless. One participant talked about the positive outcomes he experienced after seeking mental health support.

Mental health services

Although participants had not necessarily become homeless as a result of mental illness, four did discuss the challenges with mental health and self-esteem that they experienced while they were homeless. From feeling down after being victimised as a rough sleeper, to feeling like a failure as a parent, experiences of homelessness resulted in various mental health issues. One participant sought professional assistance, which helped him to better cope and 'brush off' the poor treatment he received as a rough sleeper. Possible implications to address the issues of mental health identified in this study include better integration of homelessness services with mental health services, not only to address people who have known mental illnesses, but also to support the emotional challenges associated with homelessness.

Normality

The review of literature looked at research undertaken by the University of Western Sydney, which reported that participants, who were initially homeless, experienced feelings of 'normality' after being housed. This research however, investigated the feelings and experiences people had when they were homeless. The findings of this research show that experiences of homelessness removed normality from people's lives. From the experiences of participants, becoming homeless (i.e. the 'inadequate access to safe and secure housing') actually resulted in more than merely a lack of accommodation. It removed normality from their lives by imposing severe social, and emotional challenges, and further disadvantage. In addition, relationship breakdown with family and friends was often because of extreme fears of judgement.

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[55]   ABS (2011), above n 1.

Areas for further research

This small-scale study has identified issues warranting further research. In particular, further exploration of younger people's experiences of homelessness is warranted to ensure that services remain accessible to this group. The study also found that perceptions of homelessness had a lasting impact on the participants. The specific impact of stigma on self-perceived identity is another area warranting further research.

Conclusion

This research has illustrated examples of people who have experienced homelessness continuing to be marginalised and stigmatised in society. The perception of homelessness is a significant contributor to the marginalisation and disadvantage experienced by people who are homeless. Furthermore, homeless service delivery is not immune from ideas circulating in society that stigmatise people who are homeless.

Participants in this research reported feelings of shame when seeking employment and housing. Maintaining secrecy about homelessness results in further marginalisation from social networks and services that may be available. 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.

Emotional support and mental health service provision is important for health and well-being when the impact of stigma results in lower self-esteem for people already denied the right of safety and security.

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Appendix A

Participant Biographies

Naomi

Naomi (35yo, PST1) is a single mother with a 16 year-old daughter. Naomi has recently completed a certificate IV in Community Services at TAFE and is currently seeking employment. Naomi's experience of homelessness was nine months. This included a short-term community-housing placement, followed by an additional three months of couch surfing. However, she explained that there have also been times in her youth when she experienced homelessness, but did not know it at the time. Naomi left home at age 15. She worked to support herself at this time while she stayed with friends, and couch surfed. On occasion, she did not have anywhere to go, and slept on trains, railway stations and clothing collection bins.

Naomi is a passionate advocate for people who are homeless and has said that she is now more aware of homelessness issues, and makes her feel like she can use her experiences of tough times to help other people.

Samantha:

Samantha (33yo, ST<1) is a single mother of a four year old son and is currently studying full-time. Samantha became homeless as a result of domestic violence. She left her previous partner on a number of occasions due to domestic violence. Samantha has stated that she was homeless for four months; however there have been other times in her life that she was homeless without realising it. Her participation advocating for people who are homeless gives her the drive to push forward, and makes her feel like what she went through was 'not for nothing'. Samantha is still suffering from the trauma she experienced from domestic violence, and still gets emotional about her experiences. Samantha is no longer homeless, and says that having a roof over her (and her son's) head, a rental lease, a place to call home, and belongings of their own was the 'best thing ever'.

Allan

Before becoming homeless, Allan (55yo, PS3) owned his home and his own business, but lost them after his divorce. Throughout his years of homelessness, Allan was constantly re-establishing his accommodation, and camping out between harvest jobs. Allan came out of homelessness when he received a long awaited call from NSW Housing, informing him that he had been allocated a one-bedroom unit in Sydney, exactly what he asked for. Allan says that his experience of homelessness has made him think carefully before he makes any move, and plan for the future. He does this to protect himself from making a decision that might compromise his situation, and to prevent him becoming homeless again.

Emily

Emily (24yo, ST1) first became homeless at age 17. She stayed in refuges and couch surfed throughout this time. Emily was offered a lot of support during this time, especially in terms of skills/ employment training, and employment. She soon became interested and passionate about advocating for people experiencing homelessness. Emily now has a full-time job, and is living in a private rental property.

Daniel

Daniel (47yo, P24) is a single father to a three (3) year old son. He is currently seeking custody rights for his child. For the majority of Daniel's time experiencing homeless, he slept rough, underneath a bridge. Daniel retained employment throughout periods of his homelessness. Daniel's most recent period of homelessness was five (5) years ago. Daniel found that many agencies and services for people experiencing homeless were aimed at those with drug and alcohol issues. Daniel did not fit this criterion and was often denied help. Daniel wants to make sure that the experiences of people who are homeless are heard and understood, and that their rights are respected. Daniel is currently unemployed, and living in community housing.

Robert:

Robert (60yo, PS1) became homeless when he left his partner. All that he had was a car, a dog, some clothes and 50 dollars. For the majority of the time that Robert was homeless, he slept in refuges and in his car. Throughout his period of homelessness, Robert experienced and witnessed ill treatment from people he knew, as well as staff at services and charities for the homeless. Robert currently lives in 'housing commission' accommodation and is currently unemployed. In the past he has been employed to do physical labour. He is now suffering deterioration in his hands, knees and back, and is unable to pass medical tests for employment requiring physical labour.