

Cambridge Centre for Social Innovation

Research Report Summary

HOW DO HOMELESS PEOPLE MAKE SENSE OF INTERVENTIONS DESIGNED TO HELP THEM?

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"I used to wake up every morning and there were sandwiches and coffee by my head... it was really nice... but it made me a bit sad... I just wanted to talk to someone... I wished they'd stayed so we could just have a chat for a few minutes." (James – homeless person)

Key findings

How do homeless people make sense of interventions designed to help them? This study examines the experiences of homeless people in Bedford. It showed that those able to build relationships outside the homeless community were better able to succeed in moving out of homelessness. Additionally, it showed that information about interventions is restricted to newly homeless people. This is often mediated, for better or worse, by those who have previously experienced interventions.

Background

There has been a rise of 165 per cent in the number of people sleeping rough in England since 2010 (Rough Sleeping Statistics Autumn 2018, England, 2019). Many more are in temporary, supported or unstable accommodation (Fitzpatrick et al., 2018). Recently, following a sharp investment in the national strategy committing to ending homelessness by 2027 (Brokenshire, 2018), the number of rough sleepers fell by 2 per cent in 2018 (Rough Sleeping Statistics Autumn 2018, England, 2019).

'Hard' interventions to get people off the streets include police operations and prison, while 'soft' interventions include services, such as homeless hostels, street outreach teams, night shelters, day centres, other supported accommodation, mentoring, and skills courses. This study is mainly concerned with the latter, although participants shared experiences of both.

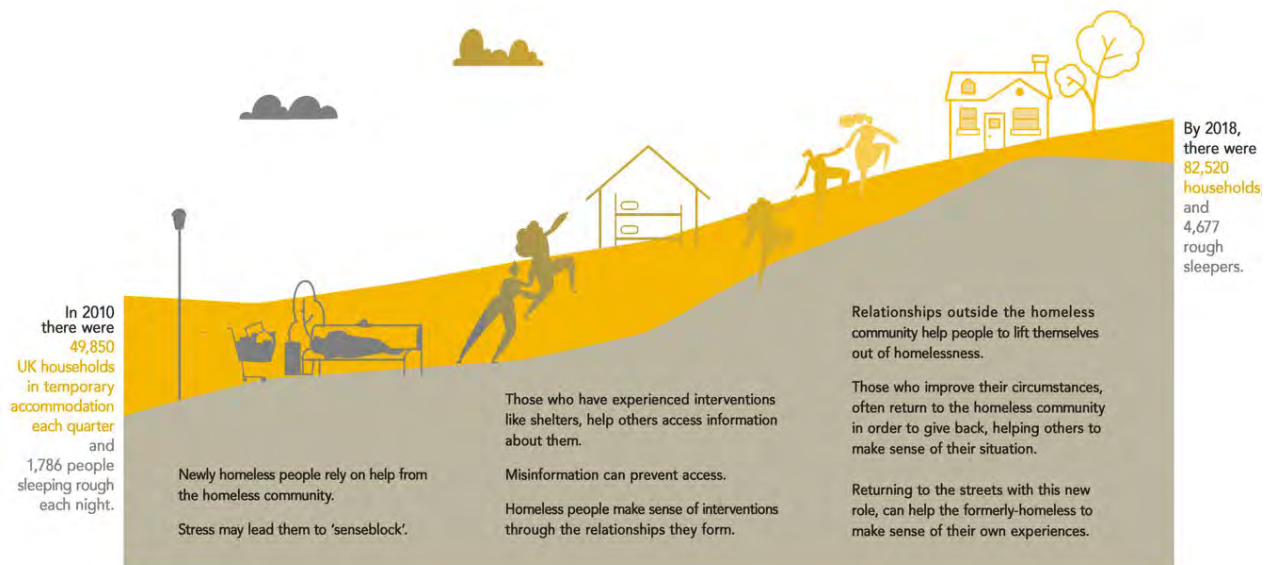
Bedford is one of the few areas outside London that benefits from targeted funding to reduce homelessness. The locality saw heavy political pressure to reduce the number of rough sleepers at the time of the study. In 2017, Bedford Borough had 76 people sleeping rough. Investing in new initiatives, they reduced this to 52 in 2018 (Rough Sleeping Statistics Autumn 2018, England, 2019). Notably, they opened 20 winter beds (Extra beds for rough sleepers in Bedford, 2018). Many substitute a street for a hall, but this is not a sustainable solution to homelessness (Fewer People Sleeping Rough in Bedford Borough, 2019).

Emerging themes

Finding a way out of homelessness is not just a struggle for housing, it is a struggle for belonging. We identified three key elements in people's journeys through homelessness: how they made sense of their situation; how they accessed information about help; and, crucially, the relationships they built.

When people become homeless, building relationships within the homeless community helps them to get by. Other homeless people can help them to find safety and shelter. They can also inform them about accessing homelessness interventions and services, such as shelters. However, other homeless people can also be sources of misinformation about those interventions.

The most common factor participants reported for becoming homeless, was relationship breakdown. The relationships they then built would be crucial in their pathways out of homelessness. While relationships within the homeless community can help the homeless to access interventions, it is the relationships they build outside the homeless community which enable them to successfully lift themselves out of homelessness, and prevent them returning. The homeless participants of this study were aware of this. They valued the relationships offered by interventions, over and above the practical provision offered.



Dwight, S. & Fava, M. (2020) Cambridge Centre for Social Innovation.
Data source: Homelessness statistics, Gov.uk.

Fig 1. The path out of homelessness relies on community.

Pre-intervention

"Only homeless people talk to you on the streets. No one else. It's lonely." (Homeless person)

"I made a lot of friends on the street. It's like a community. People check on each other and make sure you have somewhere to sleep. I refuse to let them go. I walk the streets three or four times a week to go and check on people and have a chat. I never give them money. Just have a chat. Sometimes there is new people and I make sure they know where everything is. Yeah. I refuse to cut them off." (Homeless person)

The newly homeless person relies on information from more experienced members of the homeless community. In this way, homeless people live in a subculture (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995). This is reinforced by poor access to information and mainstream society. Their information about interventions comes mainly from others who have already accessed them. Those who have benefitted from interventions, often actively seek homeless people with whom to share information about accessing help. They enable more people to access services. Those who had negative experiences, such as being evicted from supported accommodation, may give a skewed impression of available services, or even create negative myths. For example, one participant had been falsely warned that someone was recently stabbed at the shelter. Those new to the streets form a picture of the interventions available, based on these competing sources. Both positive and negative sources are perceived as legitimate and can significantly influence the choice of whether to access a service.

When a person becomes homeless, the extreme conditions they face, combined with the trauma that has led to their situation, means they are in a compromised position. They must meet their immediate needs. It is difficult for them to fully make sense of their position at this stage. Participants explained the difficulty of making rational plans to re-establish their lives when faced with the urgency of their situation. In many instances, they even adopted attitudes, or engaged in activities that were detrimental to their situation or their understanding of it. I described this as 'senseblocking'. Sometimes this involved drugs or alcohol, which were readily available, but it could also involve other means of escapism or avoidance.

In some instances, homelessness workers also seemed to engage in senseblocking, to cope with the stress of not being able to meet the needs of some people. The reality of having to turn people back onto the streets is a harsh one. In these cases, senseblocking involved strict rules and procedures that would enable decision making that contradicted the homelessness workers' emotional or moral judgement, when resources were lacking.

"It's heart breaking on the street in the line for the night shelter seeing people be turned away. I tried to offer my bed [in the hostel] to this woman 'cause I thought she needed it more than me but they wouldn't let me. They said 'that's not how it works'. It was heart breaking." (Homelessness worker)

Intervention phase

"I ended up in Barton House [homeless hostel]. I chose it over the Foyer [another hostel] because of the support, and when I went it felt like family. I had to share a room and couldn't drink... but I thought that's better than being on my own with no support. I knew I needed help. I'd rather be around people." (Homeless person)

The journey into homelessness involves the breakdown of relationships (Hill and Gaines, 2007). While there is friendship in the homeless community, there's also betrayal, which leads to isolation. Street relationships involve tension. There is, however, a duty and community established among those who have experienced homelessness. The community and hierarchy forms around their shared experience (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995).

Homeless people desire relationships. When encountering a night shelter, homeless hostel, or outreach worker, a homeless person is usually socially isolated. Such interventions often involve abruptly encountering many people. I found that relationships were a primary part of how homeless people made sense of an intervention. Those who spoke highly of an intervention usually connected it to the staff and other homeless people they met through it.

"In the hostels. You are given a room and left to get on with it. I liked the (Bedford) night shelter... there was a 24-hour safety net. There was always someone to talk to in a natural way. It's better than another one I stayed in. There you are given your own room but then just left alone to get on with it. Same in the hostel I went to you are given a room and that's it. You're left to get on with it." (Homeless person)

Building relationships is not easy, especially for the homeless. Many protectively isolate themselves from friends and family. Those who return to the streets can become increasingly self-reliant. This makes building relationships outside the homeless community increasingly difficult.

1.1 Post-intervention

"You see... bed spaces won't solve homelessness. Give them a bed and nothing to do they'll be back on the streets in three months. If the aftercare is there, then anything can work. Any of the new stuff (services) can work if the after care is there. Nothing will work if it's not. It's all about relationships." (Homelessness worker)

Many of those accessing interventions slide back into homelessness again. Some, many times. One participant reported being in and out of various homeless services over a period of 30 years. Those who successfully lift themselves out of homelessness, have usually been able to do so as a result of the positive relationships they have built with individuals or groups beyond the homeless community. This was usually through employment, training or a faith group.

Those who manage to improve their circumstances, often return to the homeless community in order to give back. A large part of this involves sharing information about accessing available services. Importantly, 'giving back' also involves building relationships with those in need. They recognise the

value of relationships between homeless and non-homeless. Returning to the streets with this new role can also help the formerly-homeless to make sense of their experiences, and give meaning to them.

"Some people aren't bothered at all about sleeping rough... it's normal to them and you can just live life there... do what you want. You can build a peer group that pulls you back or a group that pulls you forward. Making friends seems scary to me. It's overwhelming to think about the future... but I'm trying to make baby steps". (Homeless person)

Implications and future research

Interventions play a vital role in helping people out of homelessness. This study finds that, in addition to the practical services, they must consider how to improve access to information for the newly homeless, and how to encourage relationships that enable clients to integrate into wider society. By doing this, interventions will be more effective in helping people overcome homelessness. Ending homelessness is about more than finding buildings for people to live in. It is about helping those that have fallen out of mainstream society back into it and finding a place to belong.

Although this study focuses on homelessness in Bedford, the findings are relevant to homeless groups in other areas. The information flow, the importance of relationships and the role of senseblocking, are significant findings that can better inform practice across the country. I believe there is an opportunity to further develop this area of research by expanding the pool of participants, looking at other locations and other poor groups.

These findings may be generalisable to other poor communities within England, such as refugees, asylum seekers or the housed poor. I believe that the information flow may be similar with more experienced poor controlling the narrative of any interventions. In addition, like those who overcome homelessness, those overcoming other forms of poverty may be best placed to build strong instrumental relationships with the poor.

Further research could usefully look into identifying what prevents positive relationships and community building between homeless and mainstream communities.

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About the project

This research is based on interviews and observations with homeless people living in Bedford, England. It was carried out with the support of The Cambridge Centre for Social Innovation, King's Arms Project homeless charity and the homeless people of Bedford who have inspired and challenged me.

This research was designed and conducted by graduates of the MSt Social Innovation, with the support of faculty and fellows of the programme. The Centre is committed to ensuring wide access to our research findings. We welcome your feedback and ongoing support. The views of the authors do not represent those of their employers or CJBS. If you wish to discuss this research or access the full report, please contact the Centre at socialinnovation@jbs.cam.ac.uk.

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