What is important to the quality of life of homeless or hard-to-house Canadian adults and street youth? A multi-site study.

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Objectives

The data presented here were collected as part of a project to develop a quality of life instrument for homeless persons and street youth. Traditional measures of quality of life have tended to emphasize objective evaluations of an individual's characteristics and situation. In addition, most generalized measures of quality of life do not address issues and life areas that are of particular importance to individuals who are homeless. These individuals live within an unique social context that differs considerably from that of society in general. For an instrument to accurately measure quality of life among those who are homeless or hard-to-house, it must reflect needs and priorities generated from within the target population, rather than imposing these from without.

This research sought to identify the factors that affect the quality of life of those who experience homelessness by soliciting the views of homeless and hard-to-house Canadians themselves.

Method

Participants met in focus groups of 3 to 8 people to discuss what is important to their quality of life. Eight groups were conducted in Toronto, 6 in Montreal, and 5 each in Ottawa and Vancouver. The specific lead question differed from site to site. For example, participants in Toronto were asked to discuss “What is going well in your life and what is going badly?”. Vancouver participants were asked to talk about “All the different things or areas of your life that impact it, making it good or bad”. Each focus group session was audio taped and lasted 45 to 90 minutes.

Analysis

Audio tapes of the focus group sessions were transcribed and coded using QSR’s NVivo 2 qualitative software. Analysis focused on identifying the life areas that had a positive or negative impact on participants’ quality of life.

Results

Participants

140 homeless and hard-to-house individuals living in 4 Canadian cities (Montreal, Ottawa, Toronto, Vancouver), including 97 men (69.3%) and 43 women (30.7%) aged 15 to 73 years, with a mean age of 31.5 years (SD=14.8
years). The women in the sample were generally younger than the men, with a mean age of 26.5 years (SD=10.5, range = 15-47) compared to a mean of 33.8 years (SD=15.9, range = 15-73).

Of those who reported ethnic or cultural background, most participants self-identified as Canadian (53.9%). Those self-identifying as being of European descent formed the second largest group at 26.4%. Just over 13% of participants indicated that they were First Nations. South Asian and African participants each comprised 1.1% of those reporting ethnic status. Almost half (42%) of participants who provided information about their housing situation were living in housing designated for the homeless or hard-to house, while another 37.5% were living in shelters. 12.0% were living on the street or without any shelter, and 5.6% were in commercial housing. Most (73.6%) were unemployed, while 13.2% were working casual or part-time and 11.0% were engaged in volunteer or unpaid work. The majority (61.7%) had completed high school, and 11.1% had completed some post-secondary education. Close to a quarter of those reporting education (23.5%) had ended their education after elementary school. Nine participants reported that they were currently pursuing some form of education (see Table 1 for proportion of participants who reported demographic information).

**Tangible Influences on Quality of Life**

Many participants identified **basic needs** as important to their quality of life, including:

- shelter/housing
- food
- clothes
- personal hygiene
- personal identification/documentation
- affordable transportation
- money

**Health** was clearly very important to many participants. Individuals who were healthy were grateful to be so, while participants with health problems noted that these had a strong negative impact on their lives. Both youth and older participants commented on the importance of physical fitness. **Mental health**, particularly stress, was also raised in connection with quality of life. Some of the things that cause stress are:

- homeless lifestyle
- the feeling of being trapped in the neighbourhood/lifestyle
- living in the shelter system
- lack of money
- health problems
Having access to alcohol, tobacco, and drugs was important to a number of both older and younger participants, while others wanted to reduce their use of these substances.

**Intangible Influences on Quality of Life**

The impact of each of these basic needs on quality of life was intertwined with less tangible and more complex concepts. For example:

**Shelter/housing:** While some participants simply talked about getting off the street, many specified that they wanted to be able to move into a space of their own. They also wanted these spaces to be clean, safe, and have cooking facilities and private bathrooms. Several participants noted that they need access to certain resources because of specific conditions. For example, people who are HIV positive need access to clean drinking water at all times, and those with mobility issues would benefit from housing with an elevator. Some of the key attractions of clean, individual housing appeared to be the stability, privacy, and sense of pride that this would provide.

**Food:** Both the aesthetical and nutritional quality of food were considered important. Nutrition was clearly a concern; participants mentioned the importance of eating enough, of having balanced and nutritious meals, a variety of foods, and accommodations for dietary needs. There was a sense that satisfying food cravings, simple enjoyment of food, food choices, and perhaps even proper nutrition are luxuries that are beyond the reach of many participants, yet many of them clearly wanted more than just enough food to survive.

**Money:** Some participants simply talked about having enough money to survive, but for others money was cited as a means to a specific goal such as obtaining stable housing, being able to buy personal items (such as personal hygiene products), being able to buy things for their children, being able to own things, being able to go shopping when they want to, and status (because of the perception that it is only people with money who are important). It appears that money is linked to having choices, freedom, and some sort of recognition from society.

**Work:** A number of participants, particularly among the adults, indicated that they enjoyed working and felt better about themselves when they were employed. Both youth and adult participants stressed that they wanted jobs that were stable, legal, well-paid, and involved something that they enjoyed doing. Clearly, it is not just job availability that matters, but also job choices.

Other less tangible influences on quality of life included:

**Relationships**, especially with family and friends. Both men and women talked about the importance of having contact with their children. For some participants this contact was a source of joy, while for others a lack of contact
was a source of distress. Several youth talked about their desire to have children some day. Discussions about other family members, particularly parents, brought out more mixed responses. Many participants felt close to one or more family members and valued their relationships with them, but others said that family was not important. A few of the younger participants mentioned that they wished they could end conflicts with family and parents.

‘Friends’ were described as people who are more than merely acquaintances, and for some participants friends appear to take the place of family. Both the youth and adult participants stressed the importance of having caring friends. One participant explained the significance of friendships by stating "a lot of us are lonely".

**Self-respect and self-care** were considered important, as was **respect from others**. Participants were resistant to negative stereotypes about the homeless. Many participants raised **emotional issues** such as dealing with abuse, loneliness, and the impact of past experiences. They noted the importance of **personal growth** and of **having goals** in life. A number of participants, both adult and youth, spoke about the importance of **creative and leisure activities**.

**Broader themes**

The basic and the less tangible influences on the quality of life of the participants in this study are linked together through several broader themes. Some of these themes are **having choices**, **having stability**, **having a sense of self-respect**, and **having some of the same rights as other members of society**.

Participants wanted choices for housing, work, and food. For most, it was not simply a question of any shelter or any job. Housing should meet particular needs and be clean and safe. It seems that many participants are eager to have a home, not just a place to live. A job should provide a sense of pride, and more than a subsistence wage. Food should not just ensure survival but should also be nutritious and appealing.

Stability was frequently mentioned in conjunction with housing. A number of participants commented on the lack of stability in their lives as a result of living in shelters. In contrast, several participants who had more stable housing noted that this provided a foundation from which to begin to address other issues in their lives. Many participants decried the lack stable work, which would not only ensure a steady income but also provide structure to their lives. Indeed, stability and consistency in day-to-day living was clearly important, but lacking, for many participants, particularly those living in shelters. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that stress was frequently mentioned as one of the negative influences on quality of life.
Having a home and having an enjoyable, legal job were seen as two potential sources of self-respect. Friends and positive interactions with family were also described as positive influences on participants’ sense of self - these interactions make people feel worthy, loved, and valued. Many participants, particularly in the youth groups, emphasized personal growth. In addition to self-respect, participants wanted respect and recognition from others. They told numerous stories about harassment and discrimination and were well aware of, and resistant to, the many negative stereotypes surrounding homeless individuals. The desire for choices, stability, and fulfilling home and work lives seemed to reflect a wish for some of the same rights and privileges enjoyed by other members of society – in essence, a desire to be seen as people, not just ‘homeless’.

Summary and Conclusion

As part of a larger study to develop a population-specific measure of quality of life, we conducted focus groups in 4 Canadian cities. A total of 140 homeless or hard-to-house individuals described what is important to their quality of life. Participants in most groups reported that food, shelter, health care, and other basic necessities were important. However, they also mentioned less tangible influences such as relationships with family and friends, self-respect and self-care, and the respect of others. Having choices, recognition as members of society, and the desire for stability were some of the broader themes that linked the various influences on quality of life together. The information gathered in this study provides a rich first-hand description of what is important to the quality of life of individuals who are homeless or hard-to-house.

Table 1: Proportion of participants reporting housing, employment, education, and ethnic background

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number (%) reporting</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ethnic or cultural background</td>
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<tr>
<td>Housing situation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Employment</td>
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<td>Education completed</td>
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