

The Impact of the Length of Time Spent on the Street on Adjustment to Homelessness

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Abstract : Background: The length of time spent on the street influences the degree of adjustment to homelessness. Over the years spent sleeping rough, homeless people gradually lose the ability to control their lives and their return to mainstream society becomes less and less likely. Goals: The aim of the study was to discover whether and how men who have been sleeping rough for more than ten years differ from those who have been homeless for four years or less. Methods: The research was based on a narrative analysis of in-depth interviews focused on the respondent's entire life story, i.e. their childhood, adolescence, and the period of adulthood preceding homelessness. It also asked the respondents about how they envisaged the future. The group under examination comprised 51 homeless men aged 37 - 54. The first subgroup contained 29 men who have been sleeping rough for 10 - 21 years, the second group contained 22 men who have been homeless for four years or less. Results: Men who have been sleeping rough for more than ten years had problems adapting as children. They grew up in a problematic family or in an institution and acquired only a rudimentary education. From the start they had problems at work, found it difficult to apply themselves, and found it difficult to hold down a job. They tend to have high-risk personality traits and often a personality disorder. Early in life they had problems with alcohol or drugs and their relationships were unsuccessful. If they have children, they do not look after them. They are reckless even in respect of the law and often commit crime. They usually ended up on the street in their thirties. Most of this subgroup of homeless people lack motivation and the will to make any fundamental change to their lives. They identify with the homeless community and have no other contacts. Men who have been sleeping rough for four years or less form two subgroups. There are those who had a normal childhood, attended school and found work. They started a family but began to drink, and as a consequence lost their family and their job. Such men end up on the street between the ages of 35 and 40. And then there are men who become homeless after the age of 40 because of an inability to cope with a difficult situation, e.g. divorce or indebtedness. They are not substance abusers and do not have a criminal record. Such people can be offered effective assistance to return to mainstream society by the social services because they have not yet fully self-identified with the homeless community and most of them have retained the necessary abilities and skills. Conclusion: The length of time a person has been homeless is an important factor in respect of social prevention. It is clear that the longer a person is homeless, the worse are their chances of being reintegrated into mainstream society.

Keywords : risk factors, homelessness, chronicity, narrative analysis

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