

BOOK REVIEW / COMPTE RENDU

Homelessness, Housing, and Mental Health: Finding Truths – Creating Change

Edited by Cheryl Forchuk, Rick Csiernik, and Elisabeth Jensen
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This edited volume by Cheryl Forchuk, Rick Csiernik, and Elisabeth Jensen provides a powerful example of the possibilities of a program of research dealing with the complexities of real-world research with persons with severe mental illness. The population of interest was individuals currently living in the community but diagnosed with a mental illness at some point in their lives. The overall program goal was to understand the complex issues related to housing and mental health at individual, community, and societal levels. The editors, also leaders in the program of research, note that the research was conducted in Ontario and so is of primary relevance to that context.

The book contains 20 chapters organized into five sections. Section 1 presents an overview of the project and its origins. Sections 2, 3, and 4 are a compilation of 16 articles that were previously published in peer-reviewed journals. The articles are organized under the section headings Understanding the Issue, Homelessness and Its Prevention, and Additional Challenges. The final section is about moving this agenda forward.

The first section, Overview, includes two chapters. The first chapter, by the editors, describes the process of beginning the program of research: the Community-University Research Alliance (CURA). The whole process began with one "old, homeless, mentally ill woman whom many knew of but few knew" (p. 3), named Margaret (pseudonym). Margaret's situation was the catalyst for community agencies and activists to develop a unique demonstration housing project, to be called "Margaret's Haven." They wanted to evaluate the initiative and approached Cheryl Forchuk, a professor and associate director of research in the School of Nursing, Faculty of Health Science, at the University of Western Ontario. Dr. Forchuk also has extensive experience in mental health nursing and is well versed in the mental health field. She and Jensen became involved early in the process, understanding the issue of housing as a key determinant of health. Then in 1999, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada introduced a new funding opportunity, Community-University Research Alliances (CURA), to promote the collaboration of university-based researchers with community partners. Thus this program of research was born, and the rest of the chapter details the process of implementing the CURA. The inaugural research group was composed of academics (from five universities and seven disciplines), a range of community partners, and consumer-survivors. The label *consumer-survivor*, which was chosen after some discussion, refers to surviving both the illness and the systems in place to help.

Chapter 2 reflects the complexities of the research topic, as well as the complexities of the methods required to study it. So, for example, some populations could be accessed through fairly traditional means, and some were much harder to access—people who are homeless or who are living independently in the community created considerable challenges for generating a sampling frame. The chapter details how each issue was addressed. The program was designed to have a large quantitative and qualitative data set that would provide a breadth of information for “multiple secondary analysis” of the various data.

Section 2, *Understanding the Issue*, includes six chapters of published research that demonstrate the disconnection between policies leading to the current situation and their impact on people’s lives. These chapters address the following issues: the lack of integration and cohesion of policies in the mental health, housing, and income support fields; consumer-survivors’ housing-related experiences; the experiences of family caring for members with a mental illness, focusing on housing, quality of supports, and formal services; four popular myths about people with mental health problems; consumer-survivor issues related to housing preferences and needs; and preferred housing options for consumer-survivors.

Section 3, *Homelessness and Its Prevention*, includes four chapters of published research that address the following issues: the impact of homelessness on health and accessing services, the experience of homeless adolescents, the issue of individuals being released from hospital to shelters or no fixed address, and an intervention study with a focus on preventing homelessness from discharge to no fixed address. Building on these issues, the fifth chapter in this section, also previously published, recommends changes related to the use of electronic patient records, addressing advantages as well as barriers and ethical issues.

Section 4, *Additional Challenges*, addresses the issue that consumer-survivors who are homeless are not a homogenous group. The five chapters of published research explore additional complexities arising from intersecting oppressions: issues of diversity (newcomer populations, youth, and the elderly), rural mental health, gender, uprootedness and displacement among three specific groups of girls (homeless, Aboriginal, newcomers to Canada), and substance abuse.

Section 5 presents the culmination of the program of research. Chapter 19 returns to the beginning, with Margaret, and the housing that was developed in London for women like her, Margaret’s Haven. It was this that led to CURA, and Chapter 19 chronicles the development and demise of Margaret’s Haven. However, the final chapter, Chapter 20, is disappointing. Here we might expect the tapestry that was promised in the introduction to the book, but it fails to appear. The threads are there but not the tapestry. Given the depth of exploration about the issues through the CURA research, the outcome is disappointing, and it would have been useful to broaden the relevance of the book. Overall, this book provides a very useful example of a program of research including the multiple research methods that can contribute to it, the complexities of doing this community/academic program of research, and the varied pictures resulting from the research components. However, it seems to fall short of the synthesis of concepts that was promised—the tapestry.