

**Involving Peer-Researchers in Qualitative Research on Homelessness and Mental  
Health: Improved Data Quality?**

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## **Abstract**

Engaging peer-research is becoming more and more integrated in qualitative academic research on homelessness and mental health problems. Peer-research methods are already well described in the literature, but evidence of the working elements in the data collection process remain relatively underexplored. This paper aims to fulfill a knowledge gap by examining how peer-researchers in the specific role as co-interviewers, contribute to a broader understanding of sensitive topics amongst homeless persons and/or persons with mental health problems. In particular, into hard to reveal issues such as: stigma, shame, painful experiences and other experiences participants may be exposed to. This paper does not suggest that individual academic researchers are not able to gather extensive qualitative data on these issues, but it argues that - when implemented properly - this method has the potential to gather rich information that comes even closer to the participant's experience. Especially in conducting research in to marginalized groups.

Based on 150 semi-structured interviews with users of homelessness or mental health care services that were conducted by university researchers in close collaboration with trained peer-researchers in the Netherlands, we identified how involvement of peer-researchers leads to improved data quality.

The first findings indicate that peer-interviewing appears to be especially useful, in situations where participants have experienced a long history of homelessness and/or mental health problems, and addition, to hear the voice of participants who strongly expressed negative feelings towards care-providers and authorities. In these cases, participants showed more willingness to open up to their fellow peer-researchers because of their 'understanding' of the issue. Peer researchers were also found to be in a better position to ask both detailed and confronting questions on sensitive topics such as the misuse of drugs and alcohol, the use of medication and debt-problems. Through there lived experiences peer-researchers were equipped with increased awareness of 'within-group' problems in relation to these topics. We also found positive side-effects of working with peer-researchers based on the notion of empowerment. Peer-researchers acted as an example and thereby we found that participants often compared themselves with peer-researchers by expressing hope and faith to improve their own situation. Although this paper describes many positive effects of peer engagement in research, it also shows that these effects do not occur automatically. The level of guidance peer-researchers received, and experienced they gained contributed to the increased reliability and validity of the data.

To conclude, involving peer-researchers in academic research on homelessness and mental health appears to be relevant and insightful. It contributes to active participation of participants who are presumable less likely to share detailed information concerning certain sensitive topics. In addition, it contributes to the empowerment of participants and has the

potential - with investments of time and training - to contribute to increased reliability and validity of qualitative data.