

Returning Homeless

Exploring the influence of informal social network contacts on homeless persons' capabilities to remain housed after transitioning from sheltered- to independent housing

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ABSTRACT

Falling back into homelessness after a prior homeless episode is a persistent problem among many homeless people in European cities. The risk of returning back to a shelter after transitioning to independent housing is high, and frequently attributable to, amongst other things, the lack of a supportive social network. However, specifically how social dynamics lead to housing instability remains understudied.

This study examined the influence of the informal social network(s) on housing-stability of people who have experienced multiple homeless episodes through the lens of the capabilities approach. This interdisciplinary framework provides insight into the personal, socio-ecological and structural factors that facilitate or hinder the creation of effective possibilities for an individual to achieve wellbeing. By looking at resettled homeless people at the cross-road of structure, agency and personal preference this research hopes to uncover important elements in the composition of their social network that inhibit or enable a stable housing situation and prevent them from falling back into homelessness.

Together with expert by experience peer-interviewers 24 semi-structured interviews were held with recurrent homeless persons to explore their pathways in and out of homelessness and the bonding, bridging and linking social capital they had to achieve stable housing. Data was analyzed focusing on different aspects of the capabilities approach, which helped to identify the personal, socio-ecological and structural factors that influence the abilities people have to attain social capital and how this influences housing tenancy.

Through the lens of the capabilities approach, this study described the complexity of interactions between resettling homeless persons and their informal social contacts, by highlighting the personal stories of individuals that are caught in the middle between two very different realities after transitioning from the shelter to a house. Results show that after rehousing their situation is precarious and their networks are often small and easily unbalanced by negative social experiences. Nevertheless, most participants had a small number of potential helping sources of contact. However psycho-social barriers (stress, shame, (self)stigma) derived from past experiences and stigmatized social status constituted a major barrier to ask for help or (re)connect to these contacts. In the virtue to stably rehouse homeless persons, more attention should be payed to understanding and involving the social environment of resettling homeless persons and to address these psychosocial barriers. Increasing involvement of experts by experience during resettlement and facilitating opportunities to rebuild confidence and a sense of self-worth are important factors to prevent recurrent homeless episodes.

This study identifies several factors that policy makers, service providers and care-professionals engaged with recurrent homeless persons could consider. First, the social context of the transitioning homeless persons should become a more crucial part of the considerations made during the transition to a house and the period thereafter. Although social engagement and assertiveness can be a complex, long-term undertaking, in which trust and self-confidence need to be built over time, it is a crucial factor to later housing stability. Service providers can be more insistent when they try to get an understanding existent social network contacts: openness about feelings of shame and pain are important starting points to explore hidden support-needs and aspirations to (re)connect.

