

POLICY

24 Ending Homelessness: Building not only homes but relationships of respect

Janet Mosher

Hitting the streets at 15 was the least of my worries. I had lost all hope, all connection to and all faith in the society around me. I remember sleeping in a parkade on a piece of cardboard when I was 16, waking up periodically when a businessperson would uncomfortably walk around me. I was shocked and angry every time: I had no clue how a person could walk by such a tragedy without so much as a word (Book, 2015, p. 18).

How is it that people with resources, homes and cash in their pockets could walk by and say nothing—not even acknowledge Derek’s existence? This is where stereotypes, stigma and discrimination come in. It is widely known that pervasive stereotyping of homeless people—and indeed, of most low-income people—exists. The United Nations Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, Magdalena Sepúlveda Carmona (2014), recently said that “common prejudices often stereotype persons living in poverty as lazy,

irresponsible, indifferent to their children's health and education, dishonest, undeserving and can even paint them as criminals" (p.5). As mentioned in the foreword of this book, poverty and homelessness are often assumed to be the result of bad choices—or fundamental character flaws—rather than things like unemployment, relationship breakdown or childhood and adult experiences of trauma. Jesse captures this process of stereotyping and dehumanization in a powerful way:

Being a homeless person you're matter out of place. You're the grotesque, unwanted wildlife living in the urban-hinterland forests. Everyone stares at you, judges you and tells you to get a fucking job. The social distance that separates you from civilization also separates you from your own humanity. I know. I've lived it. Like some by-gone nomadic hunter-gatherer, you're exposed to nature's elements, starvation and disease. You're on an endless sojourn to nowhere and when your already precarious wanderings are complicated by serious injury, often times you fade away and die, forgotten and alone (Thistle, 2015, p. 36).

When people are identified as belonging to a particular social group—homeless or poor, for example—a flood of assumed traits, values and characteristics are automatically assigned to them. Judgments are formed about a person based on these assumptions without ever examining whether they are true of this particular person. One of Cheryl's poems exposes the many assumptions commonly made about women surviving on the streets:

*SHE MUST HAVE BEEN CRAZY
THE SAME VOICE ON REPEAT
WHY ELSE WOULD SHE CHOOSE
TO LIVE LIFE ON CONCRETE?*

*She must have been illiterate
not known enough to tweet*

*She must have been very hungry
limited on where to eat*

*She must have been addicted
to more than a chocolate treat*

*She must have been unemployed
A bum ... a welfare cheat*

*She must have been a criminal
cops hounding her every beat*

*She must have been alone
surrendering to defeat*

*She must have been a whore
a woman of the street
(Duggan, 2015, p. 24)*

While these beliefs or assumptions are sometimes explicitly stated, often they operate subconsciously. In the past decade there has been a lot of research about how these “implicit assumptions” or “implicit biases” operate. Perhaps the most influential has been a project based at Harvard University that allows people to take an “implicit assumptions” test on-line (<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>). These tests consistently show a gap between the views people consciously express about members of particular social groups, and their subconscious beliefs (the latter often reflecting negative, stereotypical assumptions).

As the stories in this book show, and as documented by research, implicit and explicit assumptions and biases are acted upon, and often lead to unfair and discriminatory treatment. So people with resources may walk by Derek because they feel threatened (assuming he’s potentially dangerous, for example), and this ‘tragedy’ is ignored because his circumstances are not widely recognized as tragic. Rather, it is assumed that it is Derek’s fault that he is on the street; he is irresponsible, and has made poor life choices. These unexamined assumptions lead some people to the conclusion that Derek is undeserving of their attention. A split between ‘us’ and ‘them’—the deserving and undeserving—is created.

The belief that Derek is homeless and on the street due to his own fault makes those who are housed feel better about what they have—that is, they are more likely to feel that they deserve what they have. It also makes people feel more in control of their own lives if they believe a person is homeless because he or she was irresponsible and made bad choices, rather than because of an injury at work, a terminal illness or the absence of non-poverty waged employment opportunities. As Rose explains, these social divisions exist along many aspects of identities.

Being homeless or living close to poverty has always been hard and costly for me. I have seen first-hand, the ugly division of race, age, ability and the cruelty of others all over Turtle Island. Injustice instead of justice, that's what I found (Henry, 2015, p. 29).

The connection Rose draws between stereotypes, social divisions (us/them or insider/outsider) and injustice is critical. The labelling of someone as 'different' (almost always equated with 'lesser than'), as flawed, as not worthy of respect, as irresponsible and as potentially criminal has profound consequences at the individual, institutional and policy levels. Jean Swanson (2001), an anti-poverty activist in British Columbia, calls this poor bashing, a "war of exclusion, prejudice and hate against the poor in Canada" (p. 3). As she explains, poor bashing includes leaving poor people out of discussions, ignoring their proposals for what they need and failing to address questions about the unequal distribution of wealth and income.

Stigma

In recent years, the subject of stigma has received substantial attention in the context of mental health. For example, the Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) has recently undertaken a major project called Opening Minds that focuses on stigma and its harmful impacts. It describes stigma as "a complex social process involving many parts, all of which work together to marginalize and disenfranchise people with a mental illness and their family members" (MHCC, 2013, p.2). MHCC (2013) identifies three main parts or types of stigma:

- self-stigma (the internalization of negative views and stereotypes)
- public stigma (prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory behaviours)
- structural stigma (the reflection in law and public policy of these attitudes) (p. 2)

MHCC documents how stigma associated with mental illness can lead to unfair treatment from employers, fellow employees, family members, health care workers and many others. Stigma is often the reason people do not disclose and do not seek help. The insights about stigma, how it operates and the harm it

causes, can be usefully applied to poverty and homelessness.

For those without a home, being constantly treated in disrespectful ways—assumed to be irresponsible, lazy and dangerous and, at best, patronized and belittled—has a negative impact on self-esteem. As Sean explains:

Homelessness basically strips your self-worth, and that is a really hard thing to get back...It is very tiring and time-consuming when one has nowhere to go and nothing to do with their day, and worst of all, self-defeating. You wake up with very little self-worth and then a day that offers no opportunities adds to that feeling of worthlessness (LeBlanc, 2015, p. 100).

Like Sean, Rose makes clear the pain caused by stigma.

The pain that homelessness brings upon your body is, however, not only physical; the wounds it creates on your spirit and soul are far more painful. I have found that helping those around me is an effective way to soothe and remedy the misery and discomfort of not having a place to call home (Henry, 2015, p. 29).

Stigma's effects include marginalization (treating some people as having nothing to contribute to society), social exclusion and even violence. Not surprisingly, social stigma often leads to depression and, sometimes, suicide (Kidd, 2009; Belcher & DeForge, 2012).

Addressing stigma is very important. In fact, the World Health Organization has declared stigma as the “single most important barrier to overcome” (CMHC, 2013, p.1). MHCC explains that many people “describe stigma as more life-limiting and disabling than the illness itself” (MHCC, 2013, p.1). In comparison with mental health, there has been little attention paid to addressing the stigma experienced by persons who are homeless and poor, yet in the context of homelessness and poverty, the recognition of the destructive impact of stigma is equally important. As the UN Special Rapporteur (Carmona, 2014) has concluded:

...prejudices and stigma against people living in poverty are major barriers to effectively tackling poverty and achieving the full potential of social protection. When such prejudices inform social protection policies, these policies tend to deny the dignity and autonomy of low income families, fail to recognise that they

should enjoy their rights and freedoms in an equal manner with the rest of the population, and overlook all the obstacles that people living in poverty face to achieve more fulfilling lives...In this role it has become increasingly and shockingly clear to me that one of the main obstacles in the fight against poverty is the deep-seated stigma and prejudice against low income families that unfortunately, seems to be universally widespread among those who are better off in society, and finds its way into government policy and programming, intentionally or not (p.5).

Stereotypes

There are ready examples of how stereotypes—unfounded assumptions—make their way into Canadian law and public policy. For example, anti-panhandling laws build upon and perpetuate a stereotype of ‘the homeless’—assumed to be one large group who are all the same—as dangerous, threatening and undeserving. They reinforce the division of ‘us’ (deservedly housed) and ‘them’ (undeserving homeless). Stasha discusses much of this binary thinking her story, where she says:

Homelessness is a symptom of holes in our social safety and social support nets. I think it is interesting how the phrase ‘the homeless’ distracts from the fact that homelessness is a symptom of policy failure. I don’t accept the position of ‘us’ and ‘them.’ I don’t accept blaming individuals for giant holes in our safety nets and communities (Huntingford, 2015, p. 91).

Yet stereotypes and binaries dominate in our society. ‘Workfare’ laws and policies that assume poor people have no motivation to work and must be forced—by threat of removal of benefits—to become ‘work ready’ are another example. As Swanson (2001) reminds us, these stereotypes are also reflected in the exclusion (or token consultation) of people who experience poverty and homelessness in the development of policies, programs and services.

We often see these stereotypes reflected in mainstream media. In a recent review of Canadian news media, researchers found that while reporting varied between news outlets, two common representations of those who experience homelessness emerged: they are either victims of circumstances beyond their control who need and deserve help, or they are people who have made bad choices, who are undeserving of assistance and who represent “a social evil needing to

be controlled and even punished” (Schneider, et al., 2010, p. 165). As these researchers conclude, both of these “representations work to keep people who are homeless on the margins of society, controlling them, disenfranchising them, and denying them full participation as citizens” (Schneider, et al., 201, p. 166). These researchers also found that the voices of people who are homeless were largely excluded; rather, so-called experts spoke about them as objects for academic commentary and as a ‘problem’ to be ‘solved’ by ‘experts.’ These representations in the media are important because they shape our understandings, our beliefs, and our actions, both individually and institutionally.

Finding ways to end stigma is critical to working to end homelessness. Stigma situates those who experience poverty and homelessness as undeserving, and this acts as a major obstacle in the building of broad social and political support for tackling homelessness. Stigma also erodes the dignity and humanity of those who experience poverty and homelessness, and this is a form of harm that must be addressed. It also impedes the development of policy and services that meaningfully recognize and respond to the needs, priorities and solutions proposed by those who actually experience homelessness.

Fighting homelessness and poverty is not only about building houses and providing adequate income supports, but also importantly about the manner in which housing and income are provided. It is not only about building shelter, but also about building relationships, community and a sense of belonging. A human rights framework must inform our approach. As the UN Special Rapporteur concludes, everyone is entitled to social protection (social security) as a basic human right:

...at the core of a human rights perspective are the values of universality, equality and non-discrimination, participation, access to information and accountability. From a rights perspective there are no “undeserving poor.”...Social protection is not a handout or a luxury, but rather a right that belongs to everyone (Carmona, 2014, p. 8).

Moving towards respect and inclusion

Voice and participation are central to a human rights framework because they are essential to human dignity and respect. Derek’s story also helps us to understand that ‘voice’ also requires that there be an engaged listener, which he found at a

local Native Friendship Centre. He describes the impact of being heard:

There was no agenda to his role other than to sit and talk. We didn't set goals or try to develop 'outcomes,' we just shared stories and talked about life. This kind of discussion is a luxury to street people. Most support people are now assigned to tangible roles, and are so busy filling reports and checking email that actual conversations with clients are a rarity. But this guy had the time for me and time is most certainly a huge factor in healing—time away from the damage means time to move forward. (Book, 2015, p. 19).

Derek's story also reminds us that we need to pay attention to voice and participation, dignity and respect, not only in designing and shaping public policy or service delivery, but in every human encounter. In his words:

It should be known that each of these growth periods in my life was accompanied by someone who actually believed in my potential. These were people who were not simply spouting terms like 'client-centred' and 'non-violent communication,' but people who lived those concepts, who trusted that I may actually know what I need in my life (Book, 2015, pg. 21).

We can also learn a lot from the MHCC's evaluations of programs designed to reduce the stigma of mental illness to create programs to reduce the stigma of poverty and homelessness. Early results of these evaluations suggest that different programs may be needed for varied audiences—MHCC is looking at youth, health professionals, workplaces and journalists/media—and that stories told by those who have experienced mental illness can be very powerful in addressing stigma. This point is supported by the authors in this collection who offer much insight and wisdom about how to move forward in respectful, non-stigmatizing ways. Rose wrote extensively about how participating in her community helped her and others to build strength and understanding:

For many of us, these issues [health, discrimination, etc.] are hard to deal with on a daily basis, so when we all started to move to one community, we learned that these obstacles were our common ground, and that we all had a strong desire to make changes. We decided that we were up to the challenge of learning to work together, and we started living together as one street family. Soon, we started hosting and organizing community meetings in our home forums that were designed to educate people about

social issues that affected us all. We never really charged anyone for attending our public workshops because it was never about money—it was, and still is, about educating people about what it is like to be judged for being who we are (Henry, 2015, p. 30).

The importance of creating community is crucial, but so is undoing the stereotypes that people experiencing (or who have experienced) poverty and homelessness have attached to them. This means a commitment to challenging ‘us’ versus ‘them’ mentalities. Stasha wrote about the negative reaction she got for ordering a veggie burger with bacon—an order that seemed contrary to waitstaff but sounded perfect to her—and how it became the ideal metaphor for “challenging thinking that only provides two options rather than taking a spectrum view that allows for diversity” (Huntingford, 2015, p. 88). As Stasha asserts, opening up to this way of thinking can be liberating and can help us better relate to each other, regardless of social location. In her words: “Being a veggie burger with bacon enables you to bridge communities that are framed as the opposite of each other” (Ibid).

Rose offers a similar way of viewing the world that could help move us in this direction:

Now we have all heard the saying that people are the same everywhere you go. That homeless people are all the same: lazy, uneducated criminals who are drug addicted with no desire to work, and would rather collect a government cheque. I beg to differ, because I have lived the experience of being homeless twice in my life...People across this nation are as diverse as the weather, and some of those funny stereotypes we hear have rings of truth about them. Of course all people are not the same. But who said people have to be the same? Life is different. That is the beauty of it. We are all different but get by, helping each other out (Henry, 2015, p. 32).

References

Belcher, J.R. and DeForge, B.R. (2012). Social Stigma and Homelessness: The Limits of Social Change. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment* (22:8), 929-946.

Carmona, M.S. (2014, Feb). *From Undeserving Poor to Rights Holder: A Human Rights Perspective on Social Protection Systems*. Retrieved from http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2442841

Kidd, S.A. (2009). Social Stigma and Homeless Youth. In D. Hulchanski et al. (Eds) *Finding Home: Policy Options for Addressing Homelessness in Canada*. Toronto: Cities Centre, University of Toronto. Retrieved from <http://homelesshub.ca/sites/default/files/3.5%20Kidd%20-%20Social%20Stigma%20and%20Homeless%20Youth.pdf>

Mental Health Commission of Canada. (2013, Nov). *Opening Minds, Interim Report*. Retrieved from http://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/English/system/files/private/document/opening_minds_interim_report.pdf

Schneider, B., Chamberlain, K., and Hodgetts, D. (2010). Representations of Homelessness in Four Canadian Newspapers: Regulation, Control, and Social Order. *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare* (37:4), 147-172.

Swanson, J. (2001). *Poor-Bashing: The Politics of Exclusion*. Toronto: Between the Lines Press.