How are shelters used in different sized cities?

What you need to know

Those who are experiencing episodic and longer-term homelessness represent a small number of shelter users who use the majority of shelter beds. Programs and policies need to be developed to target these groups.

What is this research about?

There are several subgroups within the category of 'homelessness'. One way to look at homelessness is to determine how long or how frequently individuals use shelters. Increasingly, cities and municipalities collect information on those who use services related to homelessness including shelters.

This data can provide a picture of patterns of service use such as shelter stays.

Previous American research found a pattern in the length of shelter stays among people who are homeless. The pattern showed that the length of stay fell into one of the three categories: temporary, episodic and long-term. The groups differ in the length that they are homeless and also in the complexity of their needs. The study tests these findings from American research in a Canadian context, looking at patterns of shelter stays in Ontario cities of different sizes.

What did the researchers find?

Three subgroups of individuals were indentified based on their pattern of shelter stays over the four year period. A temporary cluster (88 – 94 per cent) experienced a small number of homeless episodes for relatively short periods of time. An episodic cluster (3– 11 per cent) experienced multiple homeless episodes also for short periods of time. A long-stay cluster (2– 4 per cent) had a relatively small number of homeless episodes but for long periods of time. Despite their small size, the episodic and long-stay groups used a larger number of total shelter beds.

What did the researchers do?

The researchers used data from the databases of shelters located in three Ontario cities between 2004 and 2007 to identify different groups of shelter users based on both their frequency of use and their length of stays in shelters.. The three cities selected were Toronto, Ottawa and Guelph.

- Toronto had 56,533 participants.
- Ottawa had 18,879 participants.
- Guelph had 1,016 participants.

In addition to the duration and frequency of shelter stays, the databases contained information on the demographic characteristics of shelter users including age and sex.

HOW CAN YOU USE THIS RESEARCH?

Program and policy development should focus on creating a variety of strategies for each of the different subgroups.

To increase efficiency, individuals in the episodic and long-stay sub-groups should be identified and offered more intensive housing and support programs. These groups are relatively small, yet they use a large proportion of the shelter beds.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Tim Aubry is a Professor in the School of Psychology at the University of Ottawa and current holder of the Faculty of Social Sciences Research chair in Community Mental Health and Homelessness.

Dr. Susan Farrell is the Clinical Director of the Community Mental Health Program of the Royal Ottawa Health Care Group.

Dr. Stephen Hwang is a Scientist with the Keenan Research Centre of the Li Ka Shing Knowledge Institute, St. Michael's Hospital, Toronto, Canada

Melissa Calhoun is a doctoral student in the School of Psychology and Research Assistant at the Centre for Research on Educational and Community Services, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, Canada