

Gaining Ground, Losing Ground: The Paradoxes of Rural Homelessness

What you need to know

Nineteen percent of Canadians live in rural areas. Compared to people living in urban areas, rural Canadians are profiled as having lower incomes, less education, fewer resources and having poorer health. Rural Canadians suffering from mental illness represent the lowest income levels in rural areas. Although rural mental health sufferers share similar needs to those in urban areas, they do not have equal access to mental health and social services. Lower income levels, and a lack of services, place mental health sufferers (living in rural areas), at risk of becoming homeless.

What is this research about?

The research is about housing and homelessness in rural Canadian areas. The study discusses the reality of rural homelessness and indicates that there are limited services in place to meet the needs of those who are at risk of becoming homeless. Com-

parisons are made between urban and rural homelessness. The research points to the need for increased access to health and housing services to help residents remain in their community and curb the trend of relocation to urban areas to access services.

What did the researchers do?

The researchers used data from a 2001-2006 study of mental health and housing. The original study included 550 focus group participants from rural and urban areas in southwestern Ontario. They represented four categories: consumers of social services, peer support workers, family members of consumers, and service

providers. Discussions with participants from the four categories focused on topics of current housing situation, recent changes in housing, housing preferences, and experiences of finding and securing affordable housing. These interviews were analyzed to highlight references to rural housing experiences.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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What did the researchers find?

The researchers found that there was a sense of both gaining and losing ground experienced by participants. The participants felt they were gaining ground when they had social, physical, and service supports available to help them live in the familiar rural community of their choosing. However, there are little services to support mental health service consumers in rural areas of Canada which often lead to a sense of losing ground. Four barriers

have been identified as standing in the way of securing and maintaining housing for rural Canadians at risk of becoming homeless. They are: **social ties, social services, transportation, and relocation.** The social ties of consumers can be negatively affected in a small community because the consumers' situations are often known by many of the other residents. Social services limitations lead to shortages of workers and programs, and long

waiting lists. These limitations have placed an emphasis on emergency and crisis intervention services rather than prevention and rehabilitation services. Limited transportation options, and long travel times acted as barriers to meeting service needs. Rural residents often had to relocate to urban areas to address their needs and rely on shelters for accommodations. However, many felt unsafe sleeping in shelters and chose to live on the streets.

HOW CAN YOU USE THIS RESEARCH?

This research can be used to raise awareness about rural homelessness. It provides evidence that there are unique issues associated with rural homelessness that are not effectively addressed by approaches currently used to fight urban homelessness. Rural-focused solutions must be sought to address the needs of those that do not live in urban areas. Mobile services and hospital vans are identified as solutions to help mental health service consumers access the help that they need. The research can also be used to advocate for the need for affordable housing funding to be re-allocated to the province so that the responsibility is not on the shoulders of the smaller municipalities.

