

Co-production In Homeless Services: Conditions For Meaningful Involvement

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Core Claims

- Homeless services can meaningfully involve people experiencing homelessness (PEH) to promote autonomy, empowerment, and increased organizational capacity.
- Co-production is often group-based: group dynamics drive outcomes.
- Success hinges on the alignment between participant group, program structure, frontline support, organizational support, and institutional context.

Context

Public service providers increasingly seek to involve users, but real-world examples that give PEH meaningful power and responsibility remain limited. This study investigates how such co-production can work.



Research question

Under what conditions can homeless service providers meaningfully involve service users in co-production?



Methods

- Comparative ethnography across two organizations; triangulation of ~80 interviews, 200+ hours of observations, focus groups, document analysis
- Analysis of program design vs practice; with attention to process and enabling conditions

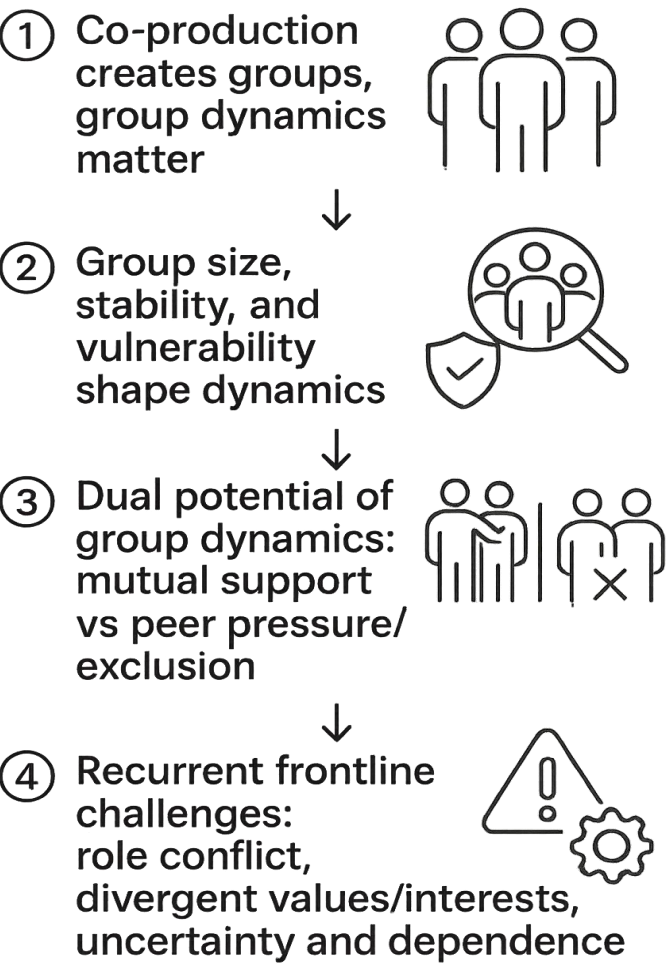


Four Initiatives Compared Across Two Organizations

This study compares one initiative at NuNN (a self-managed night shelter in Nijmegen) and three initiatives at De Regenboog Groep (DRG) (an NGO operating drop-in centers in Amsterdam).

Initiative	Participants	Activities	Power	Professional support	Main goal
NuNN (self-managed shelter)	14 co-producers, 14 users served	Daily shelter operations (intake, cooking, rules, cleaning), collective meeting	Full collective decision-making	Advisory (only during office hours)	Empowerment, re-socialization
DRG					
Visitor-volunteers	5–40 weekly co-producers per center; hundreds of users served	Chores like reception, cleaning, kitchen, laundry	Some discretion within tasks	Continuous, directive support	Inclusion, ownership, and personal growth
Client councils	40 co-producers	Advise on policy, represent peers	Advisory & consent rights	Advisory + logistical support	Strengthen user voice and legitimacy
Self-managed night shelters	12 co-producers, 28 users served	Night gatekeeping, enforcing rules, incident handling	Discretion: Can deny access for 1 night	Directive support (only during office hours)	Additional shelter for excluded groups

Process



What Enables Success?

Enabling Conditions

Participant group

- Balanced group (capacity, vulnerability, personalities)
- Group cohesion
- Commitment to practices and ideals of the initiative



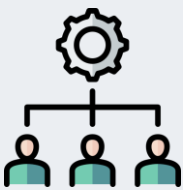
Frontline support

- Practical facilitation
- Building trust with participants
- Balance user involvement with other service values
- Build commitment among participants to practices and values of initiative



Program structure

- Tasks that are real and consequential, but doable and flexible
- Decision-making powers about issues salient to participants
- Incentives (e.g., shelter, housing trajectory, money, group belonging) tailored to context
- Selective participation to keep a group workable



Organizational conditions

- Practical & resource support
- Create frontline conditions conducive to initiative (autonomy, staff continuity)
- Organizational backing & commitment (through shared values and incentives)
- Alignment with mission and culture



Institutional conditions

- Relation management with immediate stakeholders
- Negotiated autonomy
- Sustained support



Conclusion

- PEH can actively shape services under the right conditions – fostering empowerment, resocialization, and/or additional capacity with limited professional support.
- Success depends on alignment of factors relating to participants, program structure, professionals, organizational and institutional conditions.



Further Reading

- Hoppen, Brandsen & Honingh (2025). *Public Management Review*
- Hoppen, Huber & Aaslund (2025). *Public Management Review*

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