
The Importance of First-hand Experience in Homelessness Research, Policy and Implementation

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Introduction

Incorporating real, first-hand experiences in a way that is meaningful is a challenge facing many individuals working in, or alongside, the homelessness sector (Centre for Homelessness Impact, 2019). Despite much progress in recent years, and approaches like coproduction appearing higher on the agenda than ever before (Beebeejaun et al., 2015), they are still concepts that many working in research and policy struggle to implement in a way which adds value to their work.¹ People with experience of various social issues are in a unique position to provide insights that would not be possible had they not lived through the things they have (Bimpson et al., 2021), and that others working in the sector may not be able to provide.

Homelessness is a vast and complex issue, with many different components (Teixeira, 2020), which is why it is vital that people who have experienced it first-hand are central to research, policy development, and implementation. Experiences of homelessness are a vital piece of the evidence, so should be treated as such.

Lived experience, or first-hand experience in this article, includes the direct experience of someone who has faced any form of social injustice, e.g., homelessness. It continues to gain little traction as a key part of social change work, even though throughout history it has had a proven and lasting impact, from Alcoholics Anonymous to the civil rights movement (Sandhu, 2017).

One of the key problems with involving people who have experienced homelessness and/or early trauma, is ensuring that their input is meaningful², both for them and anyone they are working alongside, whether it be researchers, policy makers, or

¹ <https://www.homelessnessimpact.org/post/jean-templeton>

front-line workers. Often individuals are seen as informants rather than people who can actually create change themselves. For example in prison settings, research involvement from inmates has been identified as tokenistic (Buck et al., 2020).

This article will outline some of the main challenges that the sector faces when working with people who have experiences of homelessness and related issues, followed by some potential solutions.

We Can't Make Assumptions

Many services, organisations and charities believe they are serving their communities to the best of their ability, but my own personal experiences of services showed me that often these conclusions are reached without gaining extensive feedback from said communities. Surveys or feedback forms which only measure satisfaction at a basic level can lead to missed opportunities to implement changes which could have a massive difference for the people involved. This is why it is important that people who have experienced homelessness are involved in service design and planning from the beginning, so we can ensure the correct things are being measured.

We Can't Be Afraid to Try, Or Fail

You can only spend so much time thinking about doing something. At some point organisations must take a leap and try something new. Failing is inevitable, but it is how we respond to that failure which is important. If everything went right all the time, we would never have the chance to reflect on why, and we would never learn anything. Risk and failure can profoundly challenge us as human beings (Goran et al., 2017). However, this should go hand in hand with proper testing and listening, so we avoid unintentional harm.

From my personal experience, services can get caught up in worrying about doing something different, in particular what that might look like if something goes wrong. Obviously, services should be worried about failing and that what they are doing is effective. At some point you just have to try, even if that means you might fail, otherwise there is never the potential for change. To do this well you need to rigorously test innovations to ensure they are having the desired impact. You also must be open to honest feedback from the communities that you are working with. The feedback which is often the hardest to hear is what you can learn the most from. Services cannot assume that what they are doing is right because staff are working really hard.

I frequently speak about my experiences of homelessness (Green, 2021), as I am comfortable doing so in most settings; however, someone telling their whole story should never be a prerequisite for their involvement. Just because I am comfortable talking about the trauma I experienced leading to homelessness and then ultimately, addiction, it does not mean that everyone who has had similar experiences would be, and that should never be expected. The hostels, temporary flats, and sofas I slept on over the course of more than a year mean that there is a wide variety of situations that I both have knowledge on and am comfortable talking about, however some people may only feel comfortable talking about hostels, or street homelessness for example. Similarly, some people may be comfortable describing themselves as having experienced homelessness, but may not want to go into more detail, and they should not have to in order to participate.

Three Principles for Meaningful Involvement

From the work I have been involved in, both in using my own experience of homelessness to create change and working with other people who have experienced homelessness, as well as the existing evidence base, three principles stand out which can ensure that involvement is meaningful for everyone.

Choice

Choice, and therefore control, are incredibly important factors for many individuals who have experienced homelessness. When you have first-hand experience of any form(s) of social injustice, often these situations are ones where your choices have been taken away from you. Whether that be homelessness, trauma, or the criminal justice system, a common theme throughout is a lack of control.

This is why ensuring anyone who you are working with has choices and control over what they are involved in. This might mean having a conversation about which elements of their experiences they are comfortable talking about, and not presuming that because someone is comfortable talking about homelessness, for example, that they are also comfortable talking about their experiences of trauma or addiction.

If individuals have previously experienced trauma, then feeling that things are not in their control can be triggering, and potentially retraumatising (Levine, 2010). This can be avoided by having open conversations about the scope of the work and the specifics of their involvement. We need to create environments where people are not just saying what they think we want to hear, because that does not help anyone.

Comfort should also be considered. This could mean a few things depending on the situation, but links back to choices and control. People have to feel able to share their honest thoughts, but they also need to feel as if they can say 'no' if they are not comfortable taking part in something. One way of ensuring this is to make the physical environment a comfortable one.

An example of this could be not putting someone who is speaking about their own experiences for the first time in a room full of academics and policy makers.

To give a personal example, I would not be comfortable in a room full of frontline hostel workers after my own experiences of living in a hostel, and in that environment, I would not feel like I was able to share my thoughts honestly.

We also must be mindful of what we are asking people to do and share. For example, we should not be asking individuals to come to panel events and tell their whole story. It should be focused on what we can learn from their experiences in the context of the research that is currently being done and the implications for policy. This also avoids them having to talk about anything that could be distressing.

Having said that, often people will want to share their stories, so then it is about making sure they have the resources and support around them to enable them to do that in a stress free and safe environment that is not triggering.

Strategic Level Involvement

People who have experienced homelessness, or related issues, should be involved from the beginning. It is also vital that people who have never come into contact with homelessness services and found their own way out are included, because their experiences are just as valid as those who have used services. Far too often we are asked for input at the end of a process, when important decisions have already been made. It is almost a tick box exercise, and that is always obvious to those of us being asked to take part. We know when our input is really being valued and when it is tokenistic. In the mental health field for example, peer workers and other lived experience roles are often not accepted meaningfully by the wider workforce which can lead to discrimination and defensiveness, as well as professional isolation for peer workers (Davidson, 2015). The most important strategic question should always be 'are the services that exist what people both want and need?'

This needs to be organisation-wide, not just implemented into one project or a single strand of work. This partly comes down to mindset and organisational culture, and real experiences really being seen as a key part of that and the wider strategy. It has to be seen as a core part of the work.

Accessibility

Incorporating real experiences into front line services means that we have the ability to make them more accessible for anyone who might need help. A key part of accessibility is the language that is used by both frontline services such as housing options, and academics working in homelessness and related fields.

When services use plain language, in both written and spoken communication it enables anyone accessing those services to fully understand what their options are and any processes they might have to go through, no matter what their background is.

Jargon is a huge issue when talking about accessibility. Often professionals have a tendency to use language that most people would not use on a daily basis. Academic language is also known for using sophisticated words and complex grammar which can disrupt normal reading and ultimately block how much we can learn from it (Snow, 2010).

Research should be accessible to as many people as possible, so it can have the biggest impact. If people do not understand the research, they will not be able to understand (Babavemi and Uduak, 2017) and implement it. It is as simple as that.

Data and evidence about what works are interesting to a wide range of people, from those working in frontline services, schools, and universities, as well as government ministers, because they are the people it truly affects and who would benefit from reading it.

There is a lot to be said for simply saying what you mean. When working with expert groups, you should present information that is easy to read. The harder something is to read and understand, the less people will read it. More accessible language means a bigger audience.

In terms of physical accessibility, making sure that spaces, whether that be online or in person, are accessible to everyone who wants to take part is important. When working with people who are experiencing or who have experienced homelessness, we can provide things like phone credit or Wi-Fi access. It is also important to set aside a budget for alternative formats, such as braille, large print, or sign language interpreters.

When thinking about physical environments, the type of room, the layout, and the space can really play into power dynamics. The space has to allow people to feel comfortable, so sitting in a circle rather than at a long table with one person at the end creates a more inclusive environment.

As Sandhu (2017) pointed out, the social justice sector is relatively good at talking about inequalities within society but can often be reluctant to recognise its own contribution to these inequalities. By failing to provide individuals and communities with ownership of activities, we are failing to share power, and therefore disempowering people.

How Else Can We Ensure People with Experiences of Homelessness are Involved Meaningfully?

Payment

Many within the sector find conversations around paying people with experiences of homelessness uncomfortable. Often vouchers or 'experience' are offered instead of payment, which for some may work, but other colleagues with learned experience would never be expected to work for vouchers, or 'experience'. You would never ask an electrician to rewire your house in exchange for a voucher.

Having said that, you should ask the people you are working with how they would like to be paid, in case they do not want cash for whatever reason. A direct cash payment could affect someone's benefit payment – leaving them without enough money the following month. If someone would prefer a voucher to a cash payment, ensuring they have a choice in the type of voucher is also important.

Those of us who have experienced homelessness are often thinking, or talking, about extremely painful experiences, and we should not have to give those insights or knowledge away for free.

When organisations work with consultants or freelancers, they are paid based upon their knowledge, experience, and what you think both of those are worth. There needs to be a way of measuring someone's contribution to your work in line with the other people you work with.

Another thing to keep in mind is that payment should not be used to encourage people to participate in work where they would otherwise refuse. If someone expresses being uncomfortable with a certain project for example, payment should not be used to bribe them into participation.

Fair payment also helps to address power imbalances. If you have some people in the room being paid for their time when others are not, the outcome will be poor (MacKinnon et al., 2021).

Language Matters

The language we use when talking about homelessness, or any social issue, really matters. It can unite and connect people, or 'other' people and put them into boxes.

The following sentence for example, notice your gut reaction as you read it.

'High risk homeless youth with complex needs. They are also a vulnerable substance abuser who is known to be chaotic and troubled.'

What does that description make you think? That description was how I was described in homelessness services less than two years ago. The words used are negative, deficit-based, and immediately make you think negatively about the individual they are describing, in this case, me.

The homelessness field has a habit of labelling, diagnosing, and putting people into boxes. By doing this it means they are putting limits on people, and I know from my own experience that eventually, when these labels are repeated over and over again, you start to believe and internalise them, whether it is 'addict', 'complex needs', or another. By the time I left services, I believed every single label that had been put on me.

Take 'complex needs' as an example. Often, life is complex and messy and usually services are only designed to help someone with one thing at a time, for example homelessness or addiction. When an individual does not fit neatly under just one service, they are told they have complex needs. From birth, some groups of people have more resources at their disposal to cope with challenging life experiences than others. So how does labelling an individual as complex rather than their life experiences as complex, benefit them?

As someone who had the label 'complex needs', and probably still would if I was still accessing services, the reality is that it is not that complex that trauma can lead to homelessness and/or substance use (Mate, 2018). Evidence shows us that often addiction is an adaptation to trauma, so they are very closely linked (Van Der Kolk, 2015).

Similarly, with the phrases 'hard to reach' and 'difficult to engage' – people are not hard to reach, but services are often very hard to access and require you to jump through multiple hoops to be eligible for help.² It is also completely understandable that once someone has had a bad experience with a service, they will not want to engage (Bimpson et al., 2021). Maybe the trust is not there or they do not feel safe,

² <https://www.homelessnessimpact.org/post/improving-services-starts-with-people>

but labelling them as difficult to engage is not helpful. The service should be thinking about what else they could do to try and engage with that person rather than putting the responsibility onto the person.³

The language that we use has the ability to either make the people we are working with feel welcome or feel like they are a problem and do not belong in a certain space.

Examples in Practice

In our work at the Centre for Homelessness Impact, we are actively involving many people who have experienced homelessness from the beginning of all of our projects.

Our most recent policy paper includes the stories of 14 women, including myself, alongside the research.³ Real experiences are a vitally important piece of the evidence and are even more powerful when presented alongside quantitative research.

We have several ongoing projects which look at both the language we use when we talk about homelessness, and the images that are used to represent homelessness in the sector, the media, and beyond. These projects have been designed with groups of people who have experienced homelessness who continue to be involved at every stage.

Our systematic reviews and trials involve expert panels, which include people with first-hand experience, policy makers, frontline workers and academics. The panels meet several times over the course of the project, from the inception of the initial idea and discussing the scope of the project, right through to the policy recommendations.

We work with a range of people who have different experiences, because no two people have the same experience of homelessness. It is also very important to not just include one person with first-hand experience, so as to take the pressure off one individual.

One common problem is the formation of 'advisory groups' which in theory are great. However, in research they would need to be very specific to each individual project. For example, for a project on women's homelessness, you would not include men.

³ <https://www.homelessnessimpact.org/post/an-evidence-based-approach-to-tackling-homelessness-health-inequalities>

Recommendations

In conclusion, people with experience of homelessness should have strategic level involvement from the beginning of any project, which must always involve open and honest dialogues about the scope of their involvement.

Payment should also be fair and reflect the level of involvement. For example, are they being asked to speak directly about their experiences which may be more emotionally taxing, or are they being asked to help design a new accommodation project? Having said that, it is vital that anyone involved is provided with choices and control over any involvement. Providing them with a full overview of what the work will entail means they can come to an informed decision about what they are comfortable with and be made to feel like they can say 'no' should they not want to take part.

Finally, anyone working with homelessness in any capacity should aim to use language that does not include jargon, is strengths-based, positive, and empowers everyone they come into contact with to ensure anyone who has experienced homelessness does not feel stigmatised or 'othered'.

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