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From Street to Home: Using Photovoice to Better Understand Homelessness in Portland

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Introduction

Homelessness remains a pressing concern in Portland. The homeless-to-housed transition requires more than access to shelter: some individuals have trouble adapting to the change in social contact that accompanies solitary living (indoors); others may face difficulty setting boundaries associated with property (e.g., endangering their lease by having too many guests) or other community-living norms.

Method

Photovoice is a qualitative community-based participatory research¹ (CBPR) method in which participants record their individual perspective using photographs of their community. It is especially effective to help marginalized groups communicate their unique perspective outside the confines of their community paradigm². In this case, the CBPR members were already involved with HEARTH (Housing, Employment, and Recovery Together for Health), a collaborative project joining researchers at OHSU and PSU with staff and consumers at Central City Concern. This project was suggested by one CBPR member as a means to further engage this group of volunteers—all survivors of homelessness, most of whom were unfamiliar or uneasy with the lengthy proposal-to-grant-to-implementation process³ necessitated by professional research cycles.

Thirteen participants received brief training concerning human subject research, informed consent and forms, and camera operation. Some suggestions were offered about the staging and composition of photographs, but PI intervention was minimized to support participants' natural "voice" to take photographs that could illustrate their personal (and impression of the shared) story(ies)^{4,5}.

MacDonalds doesn't discriminate!

While McDonald's is often portrayed negatively, it does provide an important service by providing a community gathering space for homeless individuals. Several group members had vivid memories of using one of the downtown McDonald's as a gathering space. Many of the McDonald's near downtown have closed and been replaced by restaurants and coffee shops that cater to a different clientele— a new Portland with locked bathrooms and \$5 coffee.

Still Life : *Tent & ATM on Sidewalk*

Portland's Entertainment District and Downtown is where most of Portland's homeless social services are located such as day centers, cafeterias and soup kitchens, and health and mental services. Just like people who work in the central city, disenfranchised people struggle to sleep close enough to where they need to be so they arrive on-time. The City of Portland recently acknowledged the housing crisis, making it legal to camp on sidewalks.

(Self)reflection

This represents a life motto for Samm and sums up how she feels, now that she is housed and stable. While homeless, this message would not have spoken to her in the same way. She found joy in life when she got off the streets and no longer had to think only of daily survival.

Unlocking more than a door

A fob and 2 keys (door and mailbox) change everything for the homeless person: privacy, 24/7 access to a toilet, running water, a refrigerator, a kitchen, and a place to sit or lay down. Learning to be “case-managed” takes time. Many experience isolation when they move indoors, away from the forced social contact of day-to-day survival.

Everything happens here

This is the kitchen in Mac Dee’s home. As Mac said, “There’s so much about the kitchen because that’s where you live. Everything happens here– Thanksgiving, Christmas. Outdoors are fruit trees, cucumbers [growing] in the yard. There are also cats in the neighborhood. It feels well protected, safe for my daughter. It feels like a real neighborhood– not like Chinatown.”

Overwhelming and a bit unreal

Gary appreciates being able to come home and enjoy his house and dogs each night. When asked what it’s like being a homeowner after being homeless, Gary said, “Kind of overwhelming and a bit unreal ... it inspires me to continue so hopefully others can experience the same thing. Everybody should have the same right that I have.

Results

Eleven participants presented five photographs each to the CBPR group, describing the ways the photo represented their perspective. Descriptions included

- elaborate story-telling;
- intrinsic or overt symbols(ism);
- emotions, roles, behaviors, environmental stimulus.

After hearing the photographers’ descriptions, group members were asked for their personal responses, which ranged from:

- visceral, triggering emotions;
- commonality;
- positive affirmations;
- shared resiliency, hope, reflection, respect, etc.

Finally, 50 photographs were selected and arranged into categories of **“Street”, “Getting There,” and “Home.”** Subcategories were also identified that provided depth to the narrative i.e., one subcategory was “Waystations” such as the public library or McDonalds. Other subcategories described instrumental activities, but also feelings such as hope and resilience derived from nature and urban scenery.

Conclusions

Becoming housed is not the end of the homelessness experience. Security and routine contribute to a stable environment, but can require significant time and treatment between stages/degrees of recovery and socialization. Individual needs vary, in housing types and service structure. Awareness of housing insecurity in this group is high, and they are all engaged in housing, health, and/or service advocacy as professionals and volunteers.

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