

**Information dissemination amongst the
homeless population in Adelaide, Australia: the
use of mobile phones and the internet**

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Executive Summary

The purpose of this research project is to examine how homeless people in Adelaide disseminate and connect with information. Nine women and men who have experienced homelessness took part in interviews and fourteen people who currently work or have worked with homeless people also took part. A major theme illustrated here is the effective use of information technology by homeless people. The results of the research lead to a service delivery recommendation regarding the provision of information technology access.

Introduction

The aim of this research is to find out how homeless people acquire information about the services they use, using a qualitative approach.

One of the priorities for this research is to focus on the strengths of the participants and a strengths perspective is used accordingly (Saleeby, 2009). The research highlights the capacity and resourcefulness of the participants in getting their needs met, and explores ways to draw further on that resourcefulness.

The reason for exploring this particular aspect of homelessness is to provide guidance for service organisations which offer support for homeless people. The findings may be used to help organisations in augmenting the capacity of homeless people in terms of connecting to resources, information and the community.

Literature review

This research aims to pull together threads on the digital divide, the role of social service workers in information provision and homelessness as a social issue. The research is premised on an acceptance of the maxim that knowledge is power, and on a concern for the issue of people who fit the definition of being homeless being at risk of entrenched disadvantage and disempowerment where their ability to access information is not maximised. One of the roles of people who work with any client group in a social service context is to provide information as a means of empowering people, and this research builds on that role and imperative.

The most commonly accepted definition of homelessness in Australia is Chamberlain and Mackenzie's (2003) definition which includes the three categories of primary, secondary and tertiary homelessness, in recognition of the diversity of the experience of homelessness. Chamberlain and Mackenzie's (2003) definition is used by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) in their collection of data on homelessness. This research draws on participation from people who are in the primary and secondary homeless category, along with participation from staff who work with those homeless people.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics' census, 'Counting the Homeless', authored by Chamberlain and McKenzie (2006), found that there were 104 676 people who fit a definition of homelessness. For planning purposes, they state that it is reasonable to assume a figure of 105 000 people who are homeless at any given time nationwide. In total, males make up 56% of this figure and the remaining 44% are females. The bureau also found that Indigenous people are overrepresented, particularly in the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP).

According to the 2001 Census, 897 people were in the primary homeless category in South Australia, 5251 people were in the secondary homeless category and 1438 people were in the tertiary homeless category at that time. This was a total of 7586 homeless people at the time of the census. Chamberlain and McKenzie (2006) estimate that, in South Australia, the number of homeless people was 7962 in 2006. They argue that the number of homeless people goes up and down, but in South Australia a typical point-in-time figure is probably about 7950, which is up from the 2001 figure.

Mitchell (2010) states that many homeless people have multiple issues which may include drug and alcohol abuse, mental health, criminal offending and domestic violence. Booth (2009) has studied the food sources and acquisition practices used by homeless youth in Adelaide. She found that the range and prevalence of unconventional food acquisition methods among homeless youth suggest high levels of food insecurity, despite the existence of welfare services and a network of emergency food provision agencies in Adelaide. Whilst the issue of food insecurity demonstrates a facet of a complex and multilayered social issue, the unconventional food acquisition methods examined by Booth demonstrate a resourceful strength amongst the homeless population.

Owens (2003) highlights the strength and resilience of the homeless women in her study of 20 women who accessed the services of Catherine House (which provides emergency and long term supported accommodation for women without children over 21) in Adelaide, South Australia. One of the consistent themes she found was the idea of women moving out of homelessness to a new sense of self, which included with idea of being (minimally) powerful and able to make a difference (Owens, 2003). Similarly, the research here intends to frame the ability to seek, share and use information as a strength of many homeless people.

This research focuses on the themes of strength and resourcefulness with respect to information dissemination, and explores the use of the internet and mobile phones by homeless people. With the general population increasingly using the internet, it is reasonable to expect that the homeless population will do the same, though not necessarily at the same rate. This is an important consideration, especially for service providers who might be in a position to facilitate the uptake of technology amongst homeless population by way of ameliorating the kind of compound disadvantage experienced by homeless populations on the wrong side of the digital divide.

Brown, Campbell and Ling (2011) write about mobile phone use in teenagers as a means to bridge the digital divide. They argue that their findings on the increased usage of internet capable mobile phones by low income and minority teenagers can narrow the digital divide. However, they do highlight the paradox that those who least can afford it are accessing the internet, in a less functional form, in a comparatively expensive way. Hersberger (2002, 2003, 2005) has written several articles about information poverty, homelessness and access to information in an American context. In her 2003 article on whether the economically poor are also information poor, she concludes that while it was not a pressing issue at the time, as more computer literate children grow up and become homeless, there will be a higher demand for access to digital information technologies amongst the homeless. Hersberger (2003) also found that while homeless people may be described as economically and information poor, there are those who have been involved with the welfare system for some time and who consider themselves 'information insiders'. Her research in this area found that homeless parents living in emergency family shelters did not perceive themselves as being information poor or affected directly by the lack of access to digital information. However, it should be considered that this research is now 8 years old

and expectations around technology have increased exponentially since then. The related consideration is one of how access to digital information could facilitate the kind of insider status described by Hersberger.

Hersberger (2003) found that a clear picture is emerging of the sparse information networks of the homeless, and their perception of the value of information. Her research indicates that the fragmented relationships which many homeless people have can impact on their ability to access information. She argues that that information poverty plays a role in the efforts of this population to activate resources that will aid them in improving everyday living conditions. Hersberger (2005) advocates making public libraries a welcoming space for homeless people, not only as a means to find information, but also to provide a socially acceptable space for them to spend their days. Hersberger's thoughts intersect with the idea of providing a space where information dissemination can flourish, whether in a physical, social space, or through related digital possibilities.

Proof that homeless people do currently access the internet exists in the form of blogs, personal accounts of homelessness and forums, with contributions from around the world. Locally, in South Australia, the now archived website attributed to Norm Barber (Barber, 2009) reflects on the homeless culture in Adelaide. His critique of services for homeless people may help workers understand how clients feel about using services. From a global perspective, the homeless forums (<http://www.homeless.org>) give a voice to homeless people and those who support them around the world. Although it is American, The Survival Guide to Homelessness (<http://guide2homelessness.blogspot.com>) provides a wealth of peer to peer information about surviving homelessness and much of the information could be adapted to Australian circumstances.

Given this internet presence, those who work with homeless people would benefit from accessing these and other sites created by homeless people. The knowledge gleaned from such sources would likely be beneficial for service delivery. The potential of peer to peer resources to facilitate information empowerment and information insider status is also significant, and augments the broader information searching and social networking possibilities which the internet offers. This research examines the significance, and the potential importance, of the place of technology in the empowerment and information

enrichment of a marginalised population group. Information gained through this process will assist service providers when new programs for homeless people are created.

Methodology

A qualitative approach to the research question is used to facilitate an understanding of the issues faced by homeless people and those who work with them. The research investigates knowledge and service information dissemination amongst the homeless population in Adelaide through one to one interviews with homeless people and one to one interviews and surveys with workers in homelessness service provision.

Two woman and seven men took part in the interviews. One woman considered herself Aboriginal and one man considered himself Aboriginal. One man was born in Croatia but came here at the age of three. One person was 17, three were between the age of 18-25, one person was between the ages of 25-34 and four were 35-50. These figures are a reasonable representation of the homeless population in Australia.

Staff from various agencies that serve homeless people were asked to take part in a brief questionnaire and interview. Some of the agencies cater specifically for homeless people, while some agencies cater to a specific demographic which often includes homeless people.

Three of the people interviewed had been homeless for less than 6 weeks, one had been homeless for between 6 weeks and 6 months, 4 people had been homeless for between 6 months and a year and one person had been homeless for over a year.

Interview questions were broad and open ended to prompt conversation. The purpose of the interviews was to identify themes which constitute meaningful data, but also to listen for any ideas and inspirations which might come from single respondents only, and which are best elicited by open conversations. The following questions were used as prompts:

Staff Questions

- In your experience, if homeless people wanted to find out about a specific service, how do they go about it?
- If an organisation is starting a new service or program, what do you think is the best way to get information out there to the target demographic?

- What do you think is the biggest barrier that stops homeless people from accessing information?
- What kind of information or assistance do you think could make a long term change in the life of homeless people?
- Have you noticed that homeless people have an increased access to the internet nowadays?
- Have you noticed that homeless people have an increased access to mobile phones nowadays?

Participant Questions

- If you wanted to find out about a specific service, how would you go about it?
- Have you ever been in a situation where you found out about a service after it would have been useful?
- If an organisation is starting a new service or program, what do you think is the best way to get information out there?
- What do you think is the biggest barrier that stops you from accessing information?
- What kind of information or assistance do you think could make a long term change in your life?
- Do you use the internet? If so, for what purpose?
- Do you have a mobile phone?

Findings

Overwhelmingly, as reported by staff and participants, the most common way that people found out about services was through word of mouth. This speaks to the importance of networks and relationships on the street. One staff member suggested that word of mouth along the drug trade route was a very effective way to disseminate information. However, this is not likely to be a method of information dissemination that could be harnessed by agencies. In regards to word of mouth transmission of information, one worker suggested that,

The Internet has a very limited application for our client group. Often we'll ask people how they found about us and it is almost always by word of mouth or through another service (Social Worker).

An interesting question arises from this: while word of mouth has consistently been cited as one of the most common forms of communication, one worker questioned whether this was simply the default option because service providers have not provided a better alternative.

A staff member described brochures as important, and said that they had to be in simple language.

90% of people take our brochures off our counter, brochures are a good way of advertising and letting people know what help is out there, cause a lot of people just don't realise (Administration Assistant).

One staff member who was interviewed stated that it is all very well to have the information; however it is another thing entirely for clients to do something with it. She reflected the frustration of providing information and support for clients only to find that they had not followed up.

It's a major issue, giving people information and options, but them not taking it (Boarding house case worker).

Hersberger (2002) found that some homeless people experienced information overload due to the willingness of service providers to share information with them. Le Dantec and Edwards (2008) argue that while information is reaching the homeless population, social factors discourage or prohibit them acting on that information. Transport was another issue raised by both staff and participants. While a person might be given information about a service, if it is difficult to access it or not directly relevant to immediate needs, the information is worthless. Hersberger (2002) cites an example of a compulsory information session on how to improve credit history, where participants were largely disengaged because one of the main features of the session was money management strategies but it did not address their immediate problem of first finding an income source. The issue of the irrelevance of information which is not generated and disseminated along peer to peer lines can be witnessed in a variety of ways, and these include ignoring, not complying with and disengaging from advice.

Safety in numbers was a recurring sentiment that illustrates the need homeless people have for finding peers they can trust on the street (Ledantec and Edwards, 2008). One staff member at a sobering up unit which sometimes provides emergency accommodation spoke about this. He stated that it was only once you trust someone that you are willing to share information with them about resources available. He gave the example of the location of squats as information which would not be shared with a wide audience.

One worker reflected that there had been some changes in the homeless population in the past 5 years or so. Previously there had been a sense of pride in being a 'streetie', the culture was almost tribal and it was a positive thing to be accepted as part of that group. However policy changes and an increase in police attention to homeless people in the city of Adelaide mean that this culture had disintegrated and the informal peer support was no longer as available. The worker gave the example of the Telstra Message Box Program as an innovative service which provided a way for homeless people to communicate with each other, and service providers. This system gives people a voicemail box which can be accessed free of charge from Telstra phones. However, the increased popularity of mobile phones may mean that this service is underutilised.

One older man stated that he did not have a mobile phone because he could not afford it. During the interview it transpired that he was on the Disability Support Pension and part of the reason that he did not currently have a mobile phone was a previous experience with large bills and a poor understanding of mobile phone plans.

A staff member who works in a boarding house program stated that most of the clients of his program used prepaid mobile phones and don't have the skills to use the internet. His clients are mostly older, around 40 years of age. Homeless people often have lower levels of literacy (LeDantec and Edwards, 2008), particularly older homeless people. Hecht and Coyle (2001) found that younger homeless people had a mean of 10.8 years of education, while older people had a mean of 9.6 years of education. Numeracy can also be an issue, preventing people from understanding directions, bills, and personal money management. Thomas et al (2006) write about the difficulties faced by homeless mothers with low literacy levels in administering medication to their children. Literacy was often self identified as a barrier to accessing information in this research. Many of the participants had not finished Year 12, most had gone to school until the end of Year 10. One man (the oldest person

interviewed) had not attended high school at all. When asked if he'd used the internet he stated:

Nah, don't know how. Never learnt to use a computer. The kids are good at that stuff though.

LeDantec and Edwards (2008) cite further problems with mobile phones as well as the ongoing cost and the need to understand and negotiate that cost, including the need for access to power to charge the phones and the inevitability of theft. Several staff interviewed related experiences of clients pawning their phones for varying lengths of time, making it difficult to remind them of upcoming appointments.

Some staff members who were interviewed spoke about homeless people having two mobile phones, in case of theft, pawning or being asked to hand one over on entry to a shelter. Le Dantec and Edwards (2008) also found that a mobile phone can function as a status symbol and be a way of hiding one's homelessness by giving a point of contact. Often mobile phones were often the only stable connection people had to their pre-homeless lives and Le Dantec and Edwards cite one woman who had a friend who continued to pay her mobile phone bill because, "that's the only way [my son] had to get in touch with me." (Ledantec and Edwards, 2008)".

Responses from workers interviewed for this study underscore the importance of mobile phones in the communication and information realms of homeless people's lives, and consequently of the importance of technology in facilitating communication and information access. As one social worker commented,

Mobile phones, that's really exploded in recent years, so many people have mobile phones... it's almost essential for us to be able to communicate with people by mobile phones. If people didn't have mobile phones, it's (contacting them) really difficult. People are more mobile phone savvy, so they know how to use them, they know how to set up accounts and they know how to switch around their memory (sim) cards... ...and use them as a safety device .

Seven or eight years ago, when ENU (the Exceptional Needs Unit) started offering some of their packages for the most vulnerable, one of the first things they provided was a mobile phone (Social Worker).

Ledantec and Edwards (2008) illustrate that for some people in their study, access to a mobile phone and the internet meant the difference between finding employment or continuing their dependence on social services. A long term homeless man in their study noted that in order to find work, a mobile phone was becoming as important as a physical address: “See that’s the thing, it’s not just an address. You need that too, but I know guys out on the street who got jobs because they got a [mobile] phone.” (Ledantec and Edwards 2008).

One of the workers interviewed for this study echoed the spirit of this point, saying that mobile phones are a valuable asset to a homeless person which have made it easier to maintain engagement with clients. Another worker noted that many of the clients of his service have a mobile phone. He also observed that phone numbers are very temporary and clients often pawn their phone and re-buy it when they have been paid. This makes it difficult for services to contact them, whether for appointments or welfare checks. Despite this, the worker stated that,

I don’t know if it is just a lot of my clients, but a lot of people tend to have mobile phones. A couple of the ones sleeping rough have iPads and access the internet through that.

Nearly everyone has a mobile phone, it’s pretty rare for them not to, which makes our work a lot easier. If we can’t connect with them, we can’t follow up. We haven’t been working in the area long, but I never would have thought that the general homeless population would be connected with Facebook. I was really surprised, maybe that was really naive (Social Worker).

The social workers at the organisation with which this worker is affiliated spoke about their organisation’s website, “where clients are allowed to ask questions”. Their website is also a means for people to self-refer and for clients to seek further assistance, as the duty worker monitors it. The worker stated that it was a less confrontational way of making contact with

a worker for some clients. This links with comments made by another social worker in this study about homeless people being afraid to seek information due to fear of rejection.

One of the staff members who was interviewed stated that five years ago, “the idea of having a computer for client use was only just taking off.” Further, he stated that he saw internet use “certainly with younger homeless people, but certainly not with the older population”. He believes that with generational change, more homeless people will want to use computers and the internet.

Another worker commented on interstate services which have set up Twitter and Facebook accounts which are quite active. The worker said that,

A number of services are using Facebook, often around marketing and fundraising, but there is also some direct client contact/interaction - people sharing opinions, experiences and stories. We haven't gone there - I don't think we know how to deal with that stuff. I think it's a whole new... ..another avenue, fraught with complexities, but it is probably something that is going to be in the future ... our clients will be looking for us on the internet or Twitter (Social Worker).

Staff interviewed for this study who had computers on-site for client use were quite positive about homeless people using the internet as a means to keep in touch with people. Social workers stated that many clients use email, Facebook and the internet in general to re-start relationships and then maintain them, and that technology is an important ingredient to connectedness and the kind of social attachment which can lead to pathways from homelessness. Some staff who did not have computers available at their site found it difficult to imagine that homeless people would want to, or even be able to use the internet. One staff member thought that for homeless people, accessing the internet would be last on their list of priorities. She stated that if someone came to her asking to use the internet, she would refer them to the local library.

The youngest homeless participant in this study stated that she does not use the internet, but that she may later. She self-identified lack of access and poor numeracy skills as part of the reason that she does not use the internet. The males between the age of 18 and 24 were more likely to have used the internet, specifically for Facebook and email. Keeping in

touch with people was the main reason cited for using the internet by homeless people interviewed for this study. Using the internet for this purpose can be viewed as a strength and existing capacity which could be promoted and built upon, and as a resourceful ability to maintain relationships despite being in a very difficult situation.

One social worker in this study gave the example of a client who was using Skype to communicate with her teenage daughter who was in foster care:

It was such an important thing for her to be able to see her daughter's face. She didn't have internet access at home, so she would go and use it at the local community centre. I can really see a place for that, particularly people who are separated from their children (Social Worker).

The worker did note that it might be hazardous for clients to feel that connection with their family but have it terminated once their computer time was over. It is true that the use of communications technology by the homeless population produces risks and costs, and that it has potential limitations in terms of literacy, costs to agencies thinking of setting up computer facilities, and financial risks to homeless people using mobile technology. However, there is a significant benefit to promoting the use of communications technology in the lives of homeless people: it is a promotion which builds on and celebrates existing strengths and the resourcefulness of homeless people, and this is inherently empowering. It also works in terms of its selection as a resource: the use of information technology by homeless people is a self selected means of information dissemination and connectedness – it doesn't require an effort to promote compliance and it isn't imposed by well meaning agencies which miss the practical nuances of homeless peoples live.

As a choice, the use of communications technology is by homeless people, for homeless people. As such, it enables peer to peer support. It is a choice which builds on strengths, which is selected through the prism of the realities of homeless people's lives, which is enabling and empowering, and which facilitates the further development of capacity which is underpinned by access to information and social connectedness, and which may link to pathways from homelessness: as a point of contact, a source of knowledge, and a means of access to services, information technology is an important node in the web of circumstances required to connect homeless people to family, employment and housing. Where risks exist,

they are manageable, and the path towards managing those risks flags an important direction for capacity building services for homeless people: literacy and numeracy skills, and financial literacy skills are important tools for overcoming social exclusion, and the importance of those tools is magnified when consideration is given to how they help overcome barriers to information and connectedness through the use of information and communication technology. Financial risks associated with mobile phones are concerning, but these risks could be much less pronounced if homeless people had better access to computers and the internet. The use of mobile phones by the homeless populations serves an important primary purpose and need around connectedness and contactability – these things are achievable via internet based applications without the associated cost risks.

That the homeless population in South Australia use mobile phones demonstrates that they need and want technology as part of their armoury in the fight against marginalisation. With provision of targeted infrastructure and capacity building training by service providers, this need can be met in ways which reduce current risks associated with meeting that need, which increase uptake of digital communication, and which flag pathways from homelessness.

Conclusion

This study has explored the use of the internet and mobile phones as a means via which information can be disseminated to, by and amongst homeless people.

Hersberger (2002) states that as the next generation of homeless people come through the ranks, being people who have grown up with widespread availability of the internet, we are likely to see an increased demand for internet access by homeless people. Ledantec and Edwards (2008) believe that thoughtful technological interventions can be deployed as part of the effort to reduce homelessness and help the most at risk members of our society. The evidence presented in this study supports that idea.

While few clients or workers see access to the internet as an absolute necessity now, many agree that it will become more important in the future. Drawing on that emerging importance and the evidence in this study, this research suggests that social service organisations consider promoting internet access for homeless clients, and that they also consider the importance of having a useful and accessible shop front on the internet. The

importance of information and communications technology in the lives of homeless people, and especially its emerging importance, should not be underestimated.

Speaking to social service staff and homeless participants who had experience using the internet revealed a clear purpose for that use, which was to stay in touch with information, family and friends. This is unsurprising, given that many people who live in secure accommodation use the internet for the same purpose. The important point here is to note the benefits that a homeless person may realise from keeping in touch and connected, or even restarting a relationship with family and friends: Zlotnick et al (2003) write about social affiliation being strongly associated with exiting homelessness. It is possible for information and communications technology to assist with facilitating social affiliation and connectedness for homeless people.

Recommendation

The study here recommends that organisations which provide services for homeless people consider providing computers for client use. That recommendation is made on the basis of asking homeless people what they want and use rather than making assumptions about what constitutes a useful or essential service.

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