

The Experience of Homelessness among Canadian and Allied Forces Veterans

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Study Objectives

- To understand the experience of homelessness among veterans of the Canadian Forces (CF) regular forces, and/or reservists who have served in Special Duty Areas (SDA's) and Allied Forces (AF)
- Discover contributing factors that lead to homelessness
- Identify the supports needed to prevent and reduce homelessness

Background and Significance

- There is limited research concerning homeless CF and AF veterans
- International research indicates that the number of homeless people in the veteran community is quite significant
- Veterans make up one in four homeless people in the United States

Background and Significance

- ❑ Many Veterans transitioning to civilian life have an Operational Stress Injury (OSIs)
- ❑ Many become part of the homeless population
- Research on homelessness among CF & Allied Forces veterans is needed in order to inform how best to provide the supports & services needed to prevent & reduce homelessness among this population

Research Methodology

- Interpretative phenomenological approach
- Focuses on understanding the perceptions & attitudes toward everyday lived experience, the importance of shared social meanings, and the value of embodied experience for the purpose of understanding the human experience

Sample

- A purposive sample of 54 homeless CF & Allied Forces veterans from 3 provinces & 5 cities (London, Toronto, Vancouver, Victoria and Calgary) who meet the inclusion criteria:
 1. Veterans of the CF regular forces, and/or reservists who have served in Special Duty Areas (SDA's) and AF
 2. Presently homeless* or homeless within the past year
 3. Able to give informed consent
 4. Able to speak and understand English to the degree necessary to participate in the interview

***NOTE:** Homeless defined as accessing the shelter system, living in the rough such as parks or under bridges, living in abandoned buildings, tent or car

Demographics of Sample

- All participants were male with an average age of 54.98 years
- On average they had served in the Forces for 6.39 years and had been released 27.02 years ago
- 87% had served in the Regular CF and 11.1% in the Reserves.

Demographics of Sample

- The largest group (44.4%) had a high school education
- On average they had experienced their first episode of homelessness 11.07 years ago and had spent a total of 7.95 years homeless
- 70.4% were in shelters, 25.9% were presently housed and 3.7% had no fixed address (NFA)

Demographics of Sample

Demographic		Percent (%)
Gender	Male	100
	Female	0
Ethnicity	Canadian	77.8
	American	9.3
	Aboriginal	9.3
	British	3.7
Education	High School	44.4
	University/College	31.5
	Graduate School	24.1
Type of Forces	Regular	87
	Reservist	11.1
	Other	1.9

Demographics of Sample

Demographic		Percent (%)
Deployed	No	55.6
	Yes	44.4
Current Housing	Shelter	70.4
	Housed	25.9
	Street/NFA	3.7
Current Residence	Toronto	35.2
	London	24.1
	Victoria	20.4
	Vancouver	9.3
	Calgary	11.1

Deployed

N=24

- 12 – Canadian bases overseas
- 2 -WWII
- 3 -Viet Nam
- 2 -Iraq
- 5- Not listed

Data Collection

- Semi-structured interviews
- Individual interviews lasted 20 to 60 minutes
- Demographic Questionnaire

Data Analysis

- Each individual interview was audio taped
- The audio tapes were transcribed verbatim by the research assistants
- An analysis of transcripts was conducted to identify common themes among the various descriptions

Findings

- ***A downward spiral that can become a vicious circle*** is the overarching analytical interpretation

Three underlying themes:

- (1) ***A long journey from the military home to homelessness***
- (2) ***The best and the worst of the system***
- (3) ***Two different Worlds...like being on Mars & Coming to Earth.***

Theme I: A long journey from the military home to homelessness

Participant 4:

“I would say the number one cause...alcoholism & drug addiction, that’s how I dealt with the problems when I came out of the military. There isn’t enough help for you to make the transition...you resort to drugs & alcoholism because it makes you forget.”

Theme I: A long journey from the military home to homelessness

Participant 17:

“A real hard adjustment from getting out of the service for me was the loss of all that structure...a lot of bouncing around from jobs, changing a lot of addresses...I was suffering from depression and I was drinking...a lot of heavy drinking went on in the military. That’s what ultimately helped to lead to my homelessness was undiagnosed depression...still continue to drink and the depression takes over...it’s a real downward spiral...”

Theme I: A long journey from the military home to homelessness

Many found the transition to civilian life very difficult and resorted to drinking or other drugs to cope with their problems. For many these problems lead to depression and further drinking and drugs to cope. Ultimately, this lead to a downward spiral of broken relationships, inability to find work or losing jobs, no income to retain a place to live and ultimately becoming homeless many years after their release from the military.

Theme II: The best and the worst of the system

The Best:

For the majority of Veterans in this study, the best services were provided by the shelter system. The shelter staff and services offered a variety of resources and referrals including those who needed detox and follow up treatment for drug and alcohol abuse.

Theme II: The best and the worst of the system

Participant 3:

“I went to the detox place to get some treatment finally for my drug & alcohol abuse. I have nothing bad to say it has been a good experience for what I needed it for. I am happy here for them telling me how to go about it & showing me how to do the referrals to all the places.”

Participant 2:

“Two & a half years after my injury, I’m receiving enough money to go to pay rent and have enough to eat... also received a pension settlement from VAC which is allowing me to pay for my tuition for college for two years”

Theme II: The best and the worst of the system

The Worst:

On the other hand, several Veterans stated that they had had no contact or follow up from VAC since their release from the military.

Participant 6:

“I have never been contacted by VAC...Forgotten & abandoned. I screwed up my knees in the forces...Both cartilages are gone. I have had two operations. It wasn't bad enough for them to give me a pension. I would have liked a little bit of follow- up.”

Theme II: The best and the worst of the system

Several Veterans stated that there needed to be affordable descent housing. Because of substandard housing, many Veterans were forced back into the shelter system thereby, setting up a vicious repeating cycle

Participant 18:

“What tends to happen is a vicious circle, people are going to filthy housing with the bed bugs...they come back to the system again, because they get fed up with it. There definitely should be a better housing situation.”

Theme III: Two different Worlds...like being on Mars & Coming to Earth

The majority of the veterans expressed how different it was from the military to the civilian world and therefore, found transitioning to civilian life to be one of the major problems that lead to homelessness

Participant 13:

“I was trying to set up a business at the time with no financial presence in the civilian world ... Which made it hard to get loans...I wound up at that time homeless...As a military person living in barracks I wasn't entirely prepared for what real finances in the real world was like...all of my expenses came out of my pay check...boiled down to never having been exposed to the reality of civilian finances... I was rather coddled in the military. Big, big difference...Like two completely different worlds...”

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Recommendations from the Veterans

- Veterans suggested a structured transitional program that included such topics as financing, budgeting, writing resumes, and vocational rehabilitation.
- **Note: Since the 1980s, the Second Career Assistance Network (SCAN) seminars about programs and services offered has been in place for CF members transitioning to civilian life. However, none of the veterans interviewed mentioned the SCAN program).**

Recommendations from the Veterans

- Several suggested the need for a stream lined VAC staffed call in centre for veterans during the transitional period that would help them with the paper work in regards to eligibility for benefits or a pension.
- Many of the veterans suggested family counseling not only to help with assisting the Veteran to adapt to civilian life but also to help families to adjust to the changes in the Veteran.
- Many of the veterans recommended that VAC outreach counselors should come to the shelters to identify veterans and to discuss eligibility for benefits or a pension.

Recommendations from the Veterans

- Majority stated they were different than the rest of the homeless population because of their service in the military and did not want to be in a general shelter program
- Want shelters or transitional housing designed for Veterans that provide structured programs
- Programs to deal with alcoholism, drug addiction & mental illnesses (Depression, PTSD, etc.)
- Build on the military ethos: “ Vets helping vets”
- ***Cockrell House**-Colwood, BC-1stTransitional house for Homeless Veterans

Future Studies

- There were 5 Aboriginal Veterans interviewed who spoke about the circular migration from urban settings in London, Toronto, Calgary, Vancouver & Victoria to their rural/remote home communities
- Studies are needed to understand the meaning of migration and the role that informal social supports in rural/remote home communities play to prevent and/or reduce homelessness among Aboriginal Veterans.



Thank you

Questions?