Happenings

New Research Initiatives: Addressing Global Homelessness

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Homelessness is a global social issue that affects both industrializing and industrialized countries. Increasingly, researchers are indicating that problems related to social injustice and poverty are linked cross-nationally, requiring us to look for answers beyond our borders (Cross, Seager, Erasmus, Ward, & O'Donovan, 2010). We must become aware of the global impact of homelessness and share knowledge about best practices that can address this critical social issue in various countries. Kemeny and Lowe (1998) argue that there are underlying similarities in homelessness issues among all countries and that "awareness of varied experiences of other societies, cultures and jurisdictions in dealing with the housing issue facilitates a more informed assessment of our own national experience and priorities and can help confront assumptions" (p. 162).

In 2007 an interdisciplinary global homelessness research group was formed, with participants from South Africa and Canada. Researchers from Germany joined in 2011. On close examination, Canada and South Africa have more similarities related to homelessness than might be expected. The two countries are rich within the context of their continent. Both are classified as middle- to high-income countries yet present various housing and homelessness situations and degrees of poverty. Although South Africa is classified as a middle- to high-income country, its income disparities are among the most extreme in the world (Homeless International, 2012). South Africa and Canada have multicultural populations in which immigrant and migrant workers account for an increasing proportion of the labour force. Both countries encounter challenges meeting the demand for affordable and/or subsidized housing. Homelessness issues are more visible on the political agenda in Canada. South Africa, as a new democratic state, has other urgent problems (HIV/AIDS, poverty, crime and violence) that are higher on the priority list of politicians. Strategies and policies to address homelessness are related to political, economic, religious, societal, or public forces that influence the priorities of and pressures faced by governments and deci-

sion-makers. This is true for South Africa and Canada but the extent of homelessness and strategies to address it are different in each country. As researchers and humanitarians, we have much to learn from one another. A collaborative and comparative research agenda is warranted.

While meaningful, high-quality, multi-country global research is difficult to coordinate, especially when engaging interdisciplinary or cross-sectoral research teams (Freshwater, Sherwood, & Drury, 2006), such research is needed. It is critical that we explore issues in vulnerable populations such as low income, homelessness, and challenges related to equitable access to health and social services (Global Forum for Health Research, 2007). Evidence is needed not only to compare countries as to the strengths or weaknesses of health outcomes, health services, and other factors related to health, but also to provide validated knowledge on best practices, programs, and other factors that could be used to guide policy recommendations or decisions.

Our global homelessness research agenda includes exploration of partnership development. A partnership assessment tool (Afsana, Habte, Hatfield, Murphy, & Neufeld, 2009) is implemented yearly to assess and ensure equitable development of the partnership. Based on the stages involved in building sustainable collaborative partnerships, the South African, Canadian, and German team has established a process to strengthen itself and its capacity for collaborative work (Richter, Kovacs Burns, & Botha, 2012). The research group decided that an essential first step in addressing homelessness was not only to develop a common understanding of homelessness in the different countries, but also to show the inequities and injustice of the present situation and make "explicit the values on which proposed action is based" (Whitehead, 2001, para 4). We have strived to understand health inequities and disparities in each country, including the country-specific interplay between poverty and homelessness and the intersections with age, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, diseases, geography, various policies and programs, historical events, and other determinants. To this end, we have undertaken a range of national and international initiatives. The studies have focused on street youth in South Africa (Prinsloo & Richter, 2003), ethical issues related to conducting research with street youth (Richter, Groft, & Prinsloo, 2007), how homelessness intersects with gender and more specifically homeless women (Richter & Chaw-Kant, 2008, 2010), media discourses and the framing of homelessness (Calder, Richter, Kovacs Burns, & Mao, 2011; Richter, Kovacs Burns, & Chaw-Kant, 2010; Richter et al., 2011), and social reality and media ownership and how they influence news coverage of homelessness (Mao, Richter, Kovacs Burns, & Chaw-Kant, 2012). A direct result of the media studies was the development of a project to address homelessness within a university population. Other

research projects will focus on developing a common definition of homelessness, an analysis of policies related to housing and homelessness, the specific needs and experiences of homeless people related to their geographic location, and health-care providers' perceptions and experiences delivering care to homeless people.

Ruger (2006) argues that an important step in global actions to redress inequalities related to homelessness is to develop guiding principles. Our team has developed the following set of guiding values for our collaborative research:

- Inclusion of multidisciplinary and multisectoral decision-makers, health and social care providers, and other stakeholders (e.g., faith-based organizations) within and across countries. We have developed terms of reference for the establishment of a global homelessness advisory group.
- Inclusion of homeless people. It is the people who are homeless who will benefit from the improved policies and practices based on knowledge gained from the projects and the program of research.
- Development and implementation of capacity-building and mentorship programs in research on homelessness. The team currently includes a PhD student and a postdoctoral fellow.
- Development of a shared integrated theoretical framework that incorporates a wide range of theories for changing individual behaviour, developing policy, driving collective global action, and enhancing knowledge translation (http://www.miptoolkit.com/). A philosophical discussion group has been established to advance our thinking.
- Acknowledgement of the need for multi-method research on homelessness. Exploratory and Community-Based Participatory Research with mixed-method designs is perceived as the most appropriate approach for within- and across-country studies on homelessness (Padgett, 2009).

Community engagement and ownership is a key principle in our research on homelessness, as it emphasizes community participation and methods that promote community ownership. Rich and Clark (2005) state that a "one size fits all" approach is inappropriate in this kind of research and subsequent program development.

Our focus is the generation of new ideas that support capacity-building internationally and across academic disciplines. Our hope is that this will promote active brokering of community partners and collaborators to address homelessness at a global level. In 2003 the World Social Forum adopted the slogan "Another world is possible" (Burchardt, 2008). It is essential that this slogan become increasingly visible in our research on global homelessness.

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