Pathways to Homelessness of Older Adults Living in Extended Stay Hotels

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Introduction

Increasing numbers of adults 50 and over are experiencing homelessness, many for the first time. In the year 2030, it is expected that one in five U.S. residents will be over the age of 65[1]. Since the 1980's, the national stock of low-cost private rental and public housing has steadily declined[2]. Recent research suggest, in the search for affordable housing solutions, many older adults seek shelter in extended stay hotels[3]. This led us to question:

1. What factors contributed to older adults moving to extended stay hotels?

2. What barriers prevent exits from hotel homelessness?

Often suffering from chronic health problems and disabilities, it is unlikely many homeless older adults are able to return to work[4]. Experiencing a companion loss can lead some into isolation as they struggle to cope and maintain the household on a single income. Others become distanced from family and friends during transitional housing instability.

With the baby boomer generation continuing to age in the midst of difficult economic conditions, it is important to understand why increasing numbers of older adults are transitioning into hotel homelessness and what community based resources are needed for this growing population. The purpose of this study was to understand factors that contributed to older adults' initial transitions into hotel homelessness and the barriers preventing exiting.

Method

Nine older adults residing in extended stay hotels were recruited from a northeast suburban county in Metro Atlanta using flyers and snowball sampling. Data was collected from 2006 to 2012. Residents were provided cameras to document images of their extended stay "home". They were also engaged in one-hour in-depth interviews.

Sample Research Questions

1. How long have you lived at the extended stay hotel?

2. What circumstances led you to the extended stay hotel?

3. What is it like for you to live here?

4. What keeps you from moving out?

Analyses

A grounded theory[5] approach was used to identify themes of older adults pathways to extended stay hotel living. Themes emerged using open and axial coding techniques. Three categories of loss were identified to explain transitions into hotel homelessness: income loss, health loss and companion loss. Additionally, inadequate access to community resources, chronic health problems and inadequate income were identified as barriers preventing exits from hotel homelessness.

Findings

Figure 1. Respondents Images of Hotel Living



Figure 2. Transitions into Hotel Homelessness

Income Loss –Steven, a veteran who began struggling financially after losing his job four years ago, receives a retirement pension but says it is not enough to cover his expenses. He moved into the hotel 1.6 years ago and is still struggling to find employment.

Health Loss - Vanessa had a stable job and lived in an apartment before being diagnosed with Congenital Heart Failure. Unable to continue working, Vanessa moved in with family who could care for her. When she was unable to financially contribute to the household, her family asked her to leave. After living out of her car and in a shelter, she moved into an extended stay hotel.

Companion Loss – After the death of her husband, Barbara Ann fell into a state of depression that left her broke and homeless. Shortly after moving in with her daughter at the extended stay hotel, Barbara Ann experienced paralysis of the face. After examination at the hospital she was diagnosed with Bell's Palsy. Barbara Ann, who has been waiting two years for disability approval, struggles to pay rent.

Figure 3. Reason for Displacement

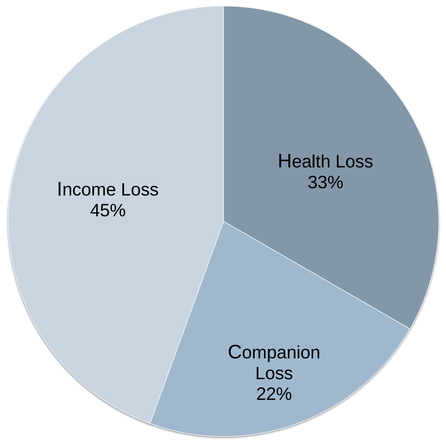
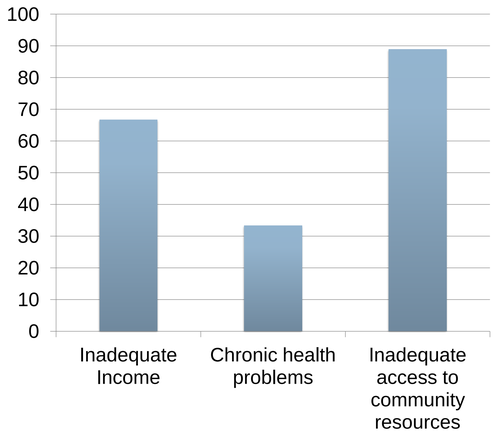


Figure 4. Barriers to Hotel Exits



*Data in percentages

Figure 5. Demographic Profile of Respondents (N=9)

Characteristic	N	%
Men	3	33.3
Women	6	66.7
Age		
49*	2	22.2
50 – 54	2	22.2
55 – 59	1	11.1
60 – 64	4	44.4
Ethnicity		
African American	7	77.8
Caucasian	2	22.2
Weeks in Hotel		
> 18	4	44.4
19 – 36	2	22.2
37 – 54	1	11.1
55 – 73	2	22.2
First time homeless	8	88.9

** Participants within 4 months of 50th birthday.*

Discussion

1. Income loss, health loss and companion loss were identified as the three contributors leading to housing displacement of older adults.

   - Four out of nine respondents were initially displaced due to income loss. The other five respondents came to the extended stay hotel after experiencing the death of a companion or health loss.

2. Inadequate access to community resources, chronic health problems and inadequate income were identified as barriers to hotel exits.

   - Of the respondents receiving adequate income to support rent at costly hotels, none of them were able to save enough money for an apartment or housing rental deposit.

   - Respondents suffering from health loss often incur costly medical expenses, medications and physician co-pays that prohibit their ability to provide for themselves or save for future housing expenses associated with rentals.

   - A significant number of the respondents lacked knowledge and access to community resources or stated a lack of resources in their area.

As identified in this study, a lack of community resources designed to meet the needs of homeless older adults can make the transition from homelessness to stable housing complicated and seemingly impossible. A significant number of respondents were experiencing first time homelessness which suggest a need for more research in this area. Such research might explore whether first time homeless older adults have different transition experiences than chronically homeless older adults. Future research focusing on safe and affordable housing solutions for adults 50 and over is essential in aiding populations of people after income, health and companion loss.

References

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