

'Invisible' homeless women are not accessing the services they need

December 12 2013



Homeless women are not accessing the support of social services that they need to progress due to a lack of service coordination and the complex needs of the service users, a recent project has found.

Researchers at the University of Bristol found that homeless women 'are used to making themselves invisible in order to survive' and are therefore a hard-to-reach group for [social services](#) to work with.

As part of the TARA project, a longitudinal study of the service use and need of homeless women, funded by the School for Social Care Research (part of the National Institute for Health Research), the research team interviewed a group of homeless women aged 19 to 59 over 18 months and 15 practitioners from a range of services.

Homeless women may well experience being 'homeless' differently from men, partly because women may not sleep rough but end up in precarious, and often dangerous places, and also because the notion of 'home' has different gendered connotations for men and women.

None of the participants referred to having a social worker for themselves as adults, but instead mentioned others such as mental health teams, housing support workers and third sector support workers are fulfilling functions that social workers would have provided in the past.

This in turn means that women have to re-tell their life story to a large number of practitioners, over and over again, in order to access services, which can be humiliating and disempowering. It can also contribute to the impact of complex trauma, pertinent because participants were struggling to survive the impact of a large number of [traumatic life events](#).

The study also found that a lack of repeated contact with one practitioner means that participants may not disclose all important information at an initial assessment, such as whether the participant has children, a factor that many participants find most difficult to deal with.

Dr Emma Williamson, Senior Research Fellow in the School for Policy Studies, led the study and said: "Homeless women are used to making themselves invisible in order to survive. Services need to work hard to build meaningful and [trusting relationships](#) to enable women to access appropriate services and to remove the barriers which currently prevent

women from accessing the services they need."

The study found that service users and practitioners recognised the need for a pivotal key worker role to facilitate across services, sharing information with workers about clients' progress through the system as a whole, but also involving the women in these information sharing decisions.

Participants preferred practitioners who took the time to build meaningful and trusting relationships with them. It was also suggested that low-level support for those who had made progress was important to help them in vulnerable times and reduce the risk of them re-entering the system.

However, it was recognised that low resources meant that building meaningful relationships with the service users wasn't always possible and funding cuts and subsequent low staff morale would further repress women's likelihood of seeking help.

More information: Read the complete study:
www.bristol.ac.uk/sps/news/2013/tararesearch.pdf

Provided by University of Bristol

Citation: 'Invisible' homeless women are not accessing the services they need (2013, December 12) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2013-12-invisible-homeless-women-accessing.html>

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