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Irish Centre for Social Gerontology

Participant Researcher Briefing Series

No. 2

Identity and Home

A collaboration as a part of the
Older Traveller and Older Adult Homeless (OTOH) study



Institute for
Lifecourse and Society

What is this brief about?

This Brief focuses on the importance of identity and feelings of home and belonging for older people who have experienced homelessness, and it is a part of the Participant Researcher Briefing Paper Series from the Older Traveller and Older Adult Homeless (OTOH) study. The Series is based on collaborative work between Participant Researchers, who were either members of the older Traveller community or older people who have experienced homelessness, and researchers from the Irish Centre for Social Gerontology (ICSG), NUI Galway. With this being said, the data presented in this brief was developed with older homeless people only.

This Brief presents the perspectives of, and the insights gathered by, Participant Researchers who have experienced homelessness on key aspects of identity and feelings of home and belonging for older homeless people. It shows why this topic is important in supporting positive health, and for the development of flexible home care models for this group. The Brief describes the findings of two research projects, which explored the following questions:

Project 1: In what way can accommodation security deepen your sense of belonging and integration in the community, for older people?

Project 2: What difficulties do older men in homelessness experience in expressing their identity?

Project 1 was completed by Asad Abushark, and Project 2 by Leo Redmond.

The Older Traveller and Older Adult Homeless (OTOH) Study

The Older Traveller and Older Homeless (OTOH) study is funded by the Health Service Executive Ageing Research Awards. The aim of the study is to investigate life-course and structural determinants of positive subjective health amongst older Traveller and older homeless people, with a view to centralising the voice of these groups in effective, ethical and rights-based models of home care delivery.

With efforts to improve homecare services for older people in Ireland, there is a pressing need to ensure new reforms are accessible and relevant to the most marginalised older groups. The study focuses on older Travellers

and older homeless adults as two such groups, whose views on health and service access are not always considered. There is also little attention given to marginalised older adults who achieve more positive health outcomes, and healthy ageing biographies, and the ways their perspectives might provide valuable information for improving the design and development of policy and practice.

The study involves a series of research strands that prioritise voice and the 'insider perspective' within the research. This includes focus groups with older Traveller and older homeless adults, and service and advocacy stakeholders working with both groups, consultation forums with older Traveller and older homeless adults and stakeholder participants, in-depth life-course interviews with older Travellers and older homeless adults and, as these briefs describe, participant research training.

What we did

This section is described by ICSG researchers.

Those of us in the research team who were Participant Researchers took part in a programme of researcher training. The focus was on the research process, and on one data-collection method: photo elicitation.

The training involved three workshops held in NUI Galway, between January and February 2020. Participants were recruited through project collaborators and through networks of participants who had already taken part in some aspect of the Older Traveller and Older Adult Homeless study.

In the first workshop, five broad themes which had been developed from earlier phases of research were presented to guide the development of research questions. The five themes were: accommodation and home; health services; social connections; identity; and discrimination. All participants had the option to work in pairs or groups, and two of the individuals opted to work together. This meant that four research projects were to be developed – two of which are described in this Brief.

The second workshop focused on the steps associated with photo elicitation as a research method. The ethical issues of research generally, and those connected with photo elicitation specifically, were also discussed. Participants Researchers were provided with a disposable camera with 27 exposures; one participant opted to use their camera phone to take pictures. Participants were given four weeks to take photographs which they believed addressed their research question. Reminder cards and notebooks were provided to encourage Participant Researchers to remain focused on their research question, to reflect on ethical considerations when taking a particular photo, and to note their thoughts about each photograph.

The third workshop concentrated on how to analyse the photos that participants had taken. Participant Researchers were supported by ICSG researchers to engage in a reflective process where they identified and discussed with the group how each photograph addressed their own research question, as well as considering how it fed into the broader aim of the OTOH study. Contributions from other Participant Researchers also informed the analysis. Participant Researchers' comments were recorded and transcribed and it is these materials along with Participant Researchers' notes that are used for the findings of this Brief. Drafts of the Brief were sent to Participant Researchers for review, and follow-up telephone calls were organized to confirm whether or not they would like to change any of their contributions, and to discuss and agree recommendations based on their work in conjunction with ICSG researchers.

Why is participant research important and who took part

The research processes and outputs on which this Brief is based aimed to advance the voice of older Travellers and older adults who have experienced homelessness, empowering inclusion and voice to tackle health inequities. It reflected the voice-led approach taken in the broader OTOH study.

This training programme was developed in line with international best practice for the activation and empowerment of marginalised groups of researchers (Fitzgerald and Walsh 2016) and was sensitive to a wide range of abilities and backgrounds.

In addition to contributing to the

overall participatory methodology of the project, there were two important reasons why participant research had to be included. Firstly, this research process provided older people from potentially marginalised sections of society with a way to contribute to the research directly; and secondly, it helped ensure that the overall study was relevant to the lives of older Travellers and older people who are currently, or who have recently experienced homelessness.

The backgrounds and individual profile of the Participant Researchers were diverse. In total, four older homeless people took part, as well as one member of the older Traveller community. Four of the Participant Researchers were male, one was female. For the purposes of this study, an 'older person' is someone aged 50 years or over. Participant Researchers ranged in age from their early 50s to their early 70s.

What we found: In the Participant Researchers' Own Words

Project 1: In what way can accommodation security deepen your sense of belonging and integration in the community, for older people? – Asad Abushark

This section is described by Asad, with editorial support from ICSG researchers.

I moved to Ireland from Palestine in 2015 having lost everything in the wake of Israeli wars in the Gaza strip. In Ireland, my family and I stayed for some time with a friend, before we were given rooms in different lodges (temporary homeless accommodation). Life was difficult and miserable in these places because we had a lot of anxiety, insecurity and a lack of privacy or peace of mind. In January 2019, we finally got an apartment and have been there ever since.



Findings

Photo 1: Relaxing Roses

We've finally gotten a flat and we feel more comfortable. This allows us to feel like we belong to this place, which makes it easy to integrate. Because we have our own place, we can grow roses. This picture shows my wife watering the roses. Roses are actually an important part of our culture; people have them at weddings and other celebrations, and it's part of our cultural heritage to present friends with flowers you've grown. To have our own flowers at home, to water them and look after them gives me a sense of comfort and happiness. My wife waters them first thing every morning.

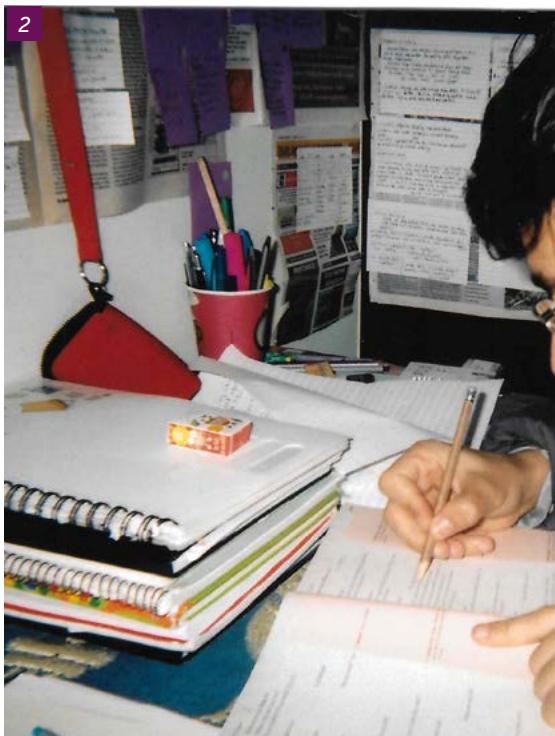


Photo 2: Studying in Comfort

This is my great son. When we were homeless, he did not have his own room to study and to do his own things; he suffered a sense of loss and hopelessness, and some degree of tension. He feels very happy now that we have our own place. He has his books and his own room. He can study whenever he likes, he can arrange his own books whatever way he likes, he sleeps whenever he likes. No one can disturb him. He has peace and quiet and feels happy and hopeful. He is determined and ambitious. He has been totally dedicated to his studies for the Leaving Certificate and this helped him score high grades. He was able to be dedicated and to concentrate well because we have our own flat.



Photo 3: Space to Focus

This is me and my books. I have a collection of books on Irish history and Palestinian history. I am very fond of Irish history, literature and books. So now because I have my flat, I can buy the books I like, and whenever I feel like it, I can take a book from my collection and focus and read. I

don't need to go to a library or different places because I can relax. This can save a lot of time to be dedicated to my research as I'm involved in a book about the Irish and Palestinian political history and struggle.

Discussion

This section is described by ICSG researchers, with contributions and guidance from Asad.

Three important issues arise from these pictures. Firstly, having secure housing has led to positive impacts for Asad and his family's well-being. They have been able to literally 'put down roots' with their flowers, but also in their community. They have been able to practice parts of their culture and Asad now feels relaxed enough to spend time on his hobbies and interests. Leaving homelessness has helped Asad maintain his dignity by allowing him to look beyond his basic need for a home towards other more enjoyable and creative activities.

Leading on from this, leaving homelessness has allowed Asad and his family to have daily routines which are important to them and impact on their well-being. As well as having regular routines, being able to do things as they please without planning is also much easier now that they have a home. For Asad, his apartment gives him security and freedom, both of which were more challenging during his homeless experience.

Having a happy family is at the centre of Asad's well-being. Now that his wife and son have space and are relaxed enough to spend time on hobbies, practicing their culture, and studying, this gives Asad great comfort. He knows that the people closest to him are secure so it makes him feel secure. Now they have a home, Asad and his family are all in a better position to integrate into their community.

Project 2: What difficulties do older men in homelessness experience in expressing their identity? – Leo Redmond

This section is described by Leo, with editorial support from ICSG researchers.

I am in my early sixties and have been homeless since I separated from my wife over seven years ago. I spent my working life as a chef and I have four adult children and three grandchildren. I would like to get my own place, with my own front door as soon as possible. The first thing I'll do when this happens is have my family over to visit. [ICSG researcher note]: Right now, Leo is living in emergency accommodation in Dublin; he was recently moved there from homeless residential accommodation where he was living at the time these pictures were taken.



Findings

Photo 1: The Man with Two Heads

This picture shows the door that is the way out, and the way in [to the homeless residential facility]. You get off the bus and you walk in that door. You need to put a different head on your shoulders when you walk through that black door. You go from being part of the world to

a different existence when you go through this door. This is an aspect of homelessness that people don't think about. Like there are certain things that we can't do now

because certain individuals were going over to the local shop and ransacking the place. We all got tarred with the same brush. Now I do go in and get my paper but that's it. I never go over with anyone else. As far as they know, I'm not homeless. That's because where we are is out in the sticks. It's a mile and a half down to the front gate. So as far the local shop knows, I'm just a blow in who's living somewhere in the area. I take my time coming back from the shop. I read as much of the paper as I can on the way back.

For me, I've always read the paper every day and that was something I wanted to continue when I became homeless. I didn't want to fall down a hole and turn my back on the world. I think reading the paper is important because you can get lots of information and I like to pass that information to my children. Information helps broaden the mind and helps you improve yourself.

Photo 2: Positive self-preservation



This could be a lovely place. The grounds are absolutely lovely. The fact that you can get out and walk around, on all the lovely land, is great.

This is the central square and there's lads that just spend all day walking around that square. You'd see them out there at two in the morning, and they'll be back out there

at six in the morning. Some lads here would have been in prison before so it's a bit like an open prison to them. And a small number of them think this is the best place ever because they get everything they need handed to them.

There's only one half of that table tennis table left and we shortened the net and now we play short table tennis. There's a golf course beside the grounds and you could go in and play the back nine! But they've put up railings now because there was fellas going in and just digging holes.

A lot of the lads in here are not showing their true selves; they're putting up a façade. But not for me. I think honesty is the best policy. On the positive side there are good guys in here. They do what they can to help others. There's a guitar player in there and we have sing-songs; it's good craic. You make the best of what you have. If I'm feeling chirpy, I wouldn't sit beside certain fellas because it would put years on you.

Photo 3: The Bright Side



This picture illustrates something positive; these are two new residents. It's two guinea pigs and one of the lads put this enclosure together for them. The positive is that people in the house can do things like this; he put this up overnight, he has the skills. And some of the hard fellas in here took the biggest shine to

the guinea pigs. Nobody mistreated them. But then another guy opened a book on how long the guinea pigs will last before someone does something. In saying all this, I'd say 75% of people in the house are good people; they're from every walk of life.

Discussion

This section is described by ICSG researchers, with contributions and guidance from Leo.

Despite having many of his needs catered for, Leo is faced with difficult living circumstances. The location in these pictures, where Leo was housed until very recently, was physically isolated and hard to access. This added to his social isolation because it made it difficult to see friends and family and to get support from them. This was a barrier to maintaining the most important part of his identity: that of father and grandfather. In addition, as someone who is 'homeless', he feels stigmatised and he is therefore often less open about this part of his identity when he meets new people or people he has known for longer.

Leo finds it difficult to relate to some people where he is staying but he draws on his resilient attitude to help deal with these people's behaviours, as well as the other challenging aspects of homelessness. Leo, and certain other residents, deal with their living situation by having a positive, adaptable and resourceful approach to his circumstances. He maintains important daily routines – such as reading the paper- he appreciates the beauty of his surroundings, and he keeps away from people he feels will have a negative impact on him. As an older man, Leo and his fellow older homeless men are able to draw on a reserve of personal skills that have been developed and practiced throughout their life. One such skill is switching 'heads' or identities: when he goes into the 'real world' he feels he is back to 'normal' life. When he returns to his residence he has to put on a different head to face his actual existence.

Conclusion

The two research projects illustrated in this Brief demonstrate the contrasting experiences of an older man who is currently experiencing homelessness, and one recently exited homelessness. The positive representations put forward by the first Participant Researcher can be held in contrast to those put forward by the second. Both Asad and Leo focus on those around them in their living environment and how the mind-sets of those they live with impact them positively and (sometimes) negatively. The housing situation described in the first project provides the foundation for the pursuit of higher-order human needs relating to self-actualisation (growing plants, learning) and forming personal connections; Asad has a home. Arguably, the living situation described in the second project - although Leo is housed - does not fully support this; the larger residential environment is more challenging to positive attitudes and behaviour. The commonality between both men is the importance of family and how this forms part of their identity, as older men; however time spent in homelessness seems to have a negative impact in this regard. The two stories illustrate the divergent experiences of older adults who have experienced homelessness, the varied contexts within which they may be the recipients of home care, and the sort of aspects of identity and belonging that home environments and home care should try to support.

Recommendations/messages

This section is described by Participant Researchers, with editorial support from ICSG researchers.

- Provide more social supports for older homeless people to prevent isolation and to promote self-help.
- Older people experiencing homelessness should have periodic visits from mental and physical health, and social care professionals, and they should be asked about and listened to with regard to their needs.
- It should be easier and faster for older homeless people to see specialist medical professionals.
- Health resources such as literature should be made available to older homeless people, as well as education on how best to manage health.
- Homelessness is so bad for your health, especially if you are older, it is like a prescription for a slow death. Therefore everyone, especially older people should have their own home if they are to have good health and well-being.
- Recognise that older adults who have experienced homelessness often don't have the same problems as younger homeless (e.g. addiction) and offer supports accordingly.
- When housing older homeless people, do so in the general community, rather than in communities of older people, so that links with family can be easier maintained.

This Brief has been co-produced by:

Asad Abushark
Leo Redmond
Brídín Carroll
Kieran Walsh

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For further information, please refer to <https://icsg.ie/our-projects/otoh/>, or contact:

Irish Centre for Social Gerontology
Institute for Lifecourse & Society
National University of Ireland Galway
Upper Newcastle Road
Galway
H91 C7DK

Phone: 00 353 91 495461
Email: icsg@nuigalway.ie
Twitter: [@icsg_nuig](https://twitter.com/icsg_nuig) and [@OTOH_study](https://twitter.com/OTOH_study)
Website: www.icsg.ie