

ASSOCIATION BETWEEN SOCIAL SUPPORT AND THE NEED FOR PSYCHIATRIC
SERVICES AMONG NYC HOMELESS SENIORS WITH SMI

Association Between Social Support and The Need for Psychiatric Services Among NYC

Homeless Seniors with Serious Mental Illness

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INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

Statement of the Problem

The population of homeless seniors that struggle with mental health issues can be as large as 26.2% of the population specifically dealing with severe mental illness and 34.7% with chronic substance abuse issues (SAMHSA 2011). There is a need for providing psychiatric care to homeless seniors who are mentally ill, but there are challenges due to limited resources and access to healthcare. The research gathered partly focuses on the types of mental illnesses that homeless seniors normally face. Although mental health is many times the cause of individuals becoming homeless (Habanik, 2018), there are factors of homelessness that could be exacerbating these mental health problems as well. The problem of mental health for homeless seniors is significant in many areas but they still struggle to receive care. Therefore, the research also focuses on the stigmas and setbacks that keep this population from easily receiving the care they need.

There are supportive approaches that have been used, involving housing programs, community outreach, and community organization collaboration, all working with and through mental health and primary care providers as well as homeless housing, to help the homeless that suffer from mental illness (American Psychological Association, 2015). Ultimately, more research is needed to be done in order to fully understand and come up with the best course of action to fight against this social problem. However, considering the social support and receipt of care for homeless seniors who are mentally ill, we can assist if we take what we have learned and look to raise awareness, reduce the stigma and walk towards the goal of achieving proper care for this neglected population in society.

Significance of the Study

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Identification of Gaps in Existing Knowledge

One gap in the existing literature is the lack of research focused specifically on the relationship between social support and the need for psychiatric services among homeless seniors with serious mental illness. While previous studies have explored various factors associated with the need for psychiatric services among homeless populations (Schanzer et al., 2007; Padgett et al., 2011), few have specifically examined the role of social support in this context. The limited research that does exist has primarily focused on younger homeless populations (Nyamathi et al., 2011; Wenzel et al., 2013) and has not sufficiently addressed the unique challenges faced by homeless seniors with serious mental illness.

Anticipated Application of Findings

The study's findings are expected to be useful in the development of interventions to enhance social support for homeless seniors with serious mental illness, leading to improved well-being and reduced need for psychiatric services. Furthermore, the study may inform policy and program decisions aimed at addressing the needs of this vulnerable population, potentially resulting in the allocation of resources to programs promoting social connectedness. Ultimately, the anticipated application of the study's findings is to improve the quality of life of homeless seniors with serious mental illness.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Increase of Elder Population in the U.S.

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The elderly population is typically defined as individuals aged 65 years or older (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). According to the Administration on Aging, there were over 56 million Americans aged 65 and older in 2020, representing 16.9% of the total population (Administration on Aging, 2020). The aging population is projected to continue growing, with estimates suggesting that by 2060, the elderly population will reach nearly 95 million (Ortman et al., 2014).

Mental Health Problems Among Elderly

Types of mental illness among elderly people, the cost that US society spends to prevent,

In the United States, mental health disorders are a major public health concern among the elderly. Depression is the most common mental health disorder among older adults, affecting an estimated 6.5 million people aged 65 and up (NIMH, 2018). Anxiety disorders, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, and dementia-related disorders like Alzheimer's disease are also prevalent in the elderly. These disorders can impair daily functioning, reduce the quality of life, and increase the risk of suicide (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021). In the United States, the cost of mental health treatment for older adults is substantial, with an estimated \$71 billion spent in 2015 (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2019).

Psychotherapy, medication management, and social support programs are effective interventions for preventing and treating mental health disorders in the elderly. These evidence-based interventions have the potential to significantly reduce illness burden and associated costs (American Psychological Association, 2015). Addressing mental health disorders in the elderly is critical for promoting healthy aging and improving the overall well-being of older Americans.

Mental Health Problems Among Homeless Population

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Research indicates that mental health problems are prevalent among the homeless population, with rates of mental illness significantly higher among homeless individuals than in the general population (Fazel et al., 2008). Several studies have reported that over 50% of homeless individuals have a mental health disorder, with depression, anxiety, and substance abuse being the most commonly reported conditions (Teague & Mares, 2008).

Homeless individuals with mental health problems often face significant barriers to accessing care, including a lack of financial resources, transportation difficulties, and stigma associated with mental illness (Fazel et al., 2008). These barriers can make it difficult for homeless individuals to receive the necessary treatment and support to manage their mental health conditions.

Psychiatric Service Needs for Homeless Seniors

Access to psychiatric services is a crucial aspect of geriatric mental health, particularly among homeless elderly populations who may face additional barriers to accessing care. Research suggests that homeless elderly individuals have high rates of mental illness, including depression, anxiety, and substance abuse disorders, and may be at increased risk of suicide (Desai et al., 2017; Voss et al., 2016). However, they face multiple barriers to accessing care, including lack of health insurance, transportation difficulties, stigma, and limited availability of specialized geriatric mental health services (O'Connell et al., 2018).

One study found that homeless older adults in New York City had significantly higher rates of mental illness compared to their housed counterparts, but was less likely to have a regular source of healthcare (Lee et al., N. D.). Additionally, the study found that among those who did access psychiatric services, homeless elderly individuals were more likely to receive care in emergency

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departments or hospitals, which may not be the most appropriate setting for ongoing mental health management (Brown et al., 2018).

The lack of accessibility to psychiatric services among homeless elderly individuals can have significant consequences, including increased healthcare costs, decreased quality of life, and higher morbidity and mortality rates. Therefore, improving access to mental health services for this vulnerable population is essential. Some potential interventions proposed to improve access to care for the homeless elderly include developing specialized geriatric mental health services, using telemedicine and mobile health technologies, and increasing collaboration between mental health providers and homeless services organizations (O'Connell et al., 2018).

Although psychiatric services, including medication management and therapy, have been shown to improve mental health outcomes among this population, the current system has weaknesses such as relying on emergency departments and hospitals as primary sources of care and difficulties in adherence to medication regimens due to unstable living situations (Brown et al., 2018).

Social support and mental health outcomes

Social support is known to play a significant role in mental health outcomes. It has been linked to reduced symptoms of depression and anxiety, improved quality of life, and decreased use of psychiatric services. A systematic review by Santini et al. (2021) found that social support was associated with a reduced risk of depression and anxiety in older adults. Similarly, a study by Zhang et al. (2020) found that social support was associated with lower rates of psychiatric hospitalization among people with SMI.

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Association between social support and psychiatric service use among homeless populations

Research has shown that social support may act as a protective factor against the need for psychiatric services among homeless populations. A study by Schanzer et al. (2007) found that individuals who had social support were less likely to need mental health services, even after controlling for other variables such as substance abuse and mental health diagnoses. Similarly, a study by O'Connell et al. (2015) found that homeless individuals who had more social support were less likely to use emergency department services for mental health problems.

PURPOSE OF STUDY

The purpose of this study is to investigate the association between social support and the need for psychiatric services among homeless seniors in New York City who have been diagnosed with serious mental illness. The study aims to determine if social support can act as a protective factor against the need for psychiatric service, even after controlling for sociodemographic confounding variables. By understanding this association, the study may help identify potential interventions that can improve the mental health outcomes of homeless seniors with serious mental illness.

The social support theory and the stress and coping model will serve as the theoretical foundation for this study. The social support theory suggests that social support can promote better mental health outcomes by reducing stress, while the stress and coping model proposes that social support can act as a coping mechanism for individuals experiencing stress or adversity.

METHODS

Research Design

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The research obtained in this paper will focus on a quantitative methodology that primarily involves a survey design to retrieve data. The purpose of our research is to have a deeper understanding of the effect of social support on needs for psychiatric service among homeless seniors suffering from mental illness while considering sociodemographic factors such as race, gender and age. Therefore, a survey data collection method that involves questionnaires and interviews will bring to light opinions, behaviors, experiences and demographic characteristics of our target population directly. By administering surveys to homeless seniors with serious mental illness who are living in shelters, on the streets or in transitional housing, consistent data can be coded and analyzed statistically.

The surveys will be administered as a random sampling in order to be sure our survey results are coming from the target population. Therefore, surveys and interviews will be distributed at locations including shelters, drop-in centers, and clinics that homeless individuals with mental illness will be occupying. The results from the survey will allow comparison of factors that contribute towards the psychiatric support of homeless with SMI. Housing status and severity of mental health can be considered as factors that contribute towards the effect of social support and psychiatric services. Survey results will hopefully give the ability to analyze the rate of receipt of psychiatric services and the association with demographic characteristics.

Random sampling will have a risk of bias with surveying individuals that come from a very specific group. The amount of individuals surveyed, if too small of a cross section of the community, has the potential to affect the impact of the results in our research. Lastly, depending on the severity of the participants mental illness, the answers may not be reliable across the board and there may be an ethical issue with consent of participation. Overall however, surveys will provide an efficient method to collect quantitative data to help our research.

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Measurements and Variables

The Independent variable in this case are psychiatric services which are being used to treat homeless seniors with serious mental illnesses. The dependent variable in this case is The method of measurement for the IV used is the “Independent Measures Design”. This design is known as an experimental design in which different participants are used in each condition of the independent variable. This is performed by random assignment to maximize the chances of each participant being assigned to one group. For instance, in the case of the homeless seniors receiving psychiatric services to treat their mental illnesses, one group of homeless seniors (consisting of 10) would receive approximately 10 hours of psychiatric care on a weekly basis, whereas another group of homeless seniors (also grouped into 10) would only receive about 5 hours of psychiatric services weekly. This is performed to gather an idea of how many hours of the services provided will make an impact on the mental state of the homeless seniors.

There are pros and cons with utilizing this design method. The pros are that it helps avoid order effects (like fatigue and other bodily ailments) as they participate in small sessions at a time. If the same homeless seniors are involved multiple times, they may grow weary of the experiment and may result in the psychiatric services backfiring. The cons are that this design is very time consuming as different participants are required for different sessions every time.

Sampling

The study population for this study’s research are homeless seniors with severe mental illness in New York City. These are individuals inside of the New York City area who are 50 years or older with no stable housing (Humphries et al., 2020). Homeless seniors with severe mental

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illness can be characterized by, but is not limited to, the following. Substance abuse problems, social isolation and/or cognitive impairments. A simple random sampling will be conducted to ensure an easy implementation of research. This sampling will allow for statistical analysis that can lead to generalizable conclusions about the population that can be impactful evidence.

A minimum of 300 surveys will be administered across many shelters, community organizations, and drop-in centers using a structured questionnaire and will be available in multiple languages to accommodate non-English speaking participants. The disadvantage of this sampling is the chance of a high non-response rate, especially considering the population we are targeting. It may be difficult to reach our specific population and have many willing participants. A lack of proper representation could be detrimental to the research and be a waste of time and resources. However, these surveys will be brief and easy to understand in order to accommodate the participants and confirm quality results. Additionally we will provide assistance to participants to ensure their understanding of the survey and ability to complete it.

Data Collection

The data collection method in which will be used to support the independent measures design, will be the “self-report” data collection method. This method relies on the participants giving answers about themselves. Usually, the questions are pre-set. The reason for choosing this data collection method is to reduce the cost of research and keep the queue for participants on track as multiple people will be required for the independent measures design method, as many surveys can be distributed to multiple participants quickly. Although this method is cost-feasible, it may not always result in accurate results and misinformation regarding the participants.

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Statistical Analysis

In this study, the proposed statistical analysis will involve multiple logistic regression analysis to determine the effect of social support on psychiatric service utilization among homeless seniors with serious mental illness in NYC, while controlling for sociodemographic factors.

Regression analysis is a statistical technique that examines the relationship between a dependent variable (in this case, psychiatric service utilization) and one or more independent variables (in this case, social support and sociodemographic factors).

The regression analysis will involve constructing a model that includes the dependent variable and independent variables and estimating the coefficients of the independent variables that predict the dependent variable. The analysis will test the significance of the coefficients and their effect size, which will indicate the strength and direction of the relationship between social support and psychiatric service utilization while controlling for other relevant factors.

LIMITATIONS

Because of the nature of this study, it is subject to limitations. Results are dependent on the distribution of survey data, as well as the responses of the participants. Additionally, researchers must be aware that the sampling may or may not be entirely representative of the study population, which can create a bias. Physical or psychological factors and hazards are considered as well in the study. The environment may impact participants' responses to the questionnaire. The proposed design is suitable for the research question, but it has limitations in that it cannot capture the complexity of the social and contextual factors that may influence social support and psychiatric service utilization. Qualitative research may provide more in-depth insights into the experiences of homeless seniors with serious mental illness and the role of social support in their lives.

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Alternatively, a longitudinal design may allow for the examination of changes in social support and psychiatric service utilization over time, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between the two variables.

CONTRIBUTION TO BEST PRACTICES

It is expected that social support will have a significant effect on the need for psychiatric services among homeless seniors with serious mental illnesses. This study's findings could potentially inform social work practice in several ways. First, the results could help social workers identify the importance of social support for homeless seniors with mental illness and develop more effective interventions to increase social support. Additionally, the findings could inform the development of policies that increase funding for programs that provide social support for homeless seniors.

The study's results could also be presented at professional conferences and published in academic journals to disseminate the findings to a wider audience of researchers, practitioners, and policymakers. The study's potential implications and meaningfulness for social work/sociology include a better understanding of the importance of social support for homeless seniors with mental illness and the potential for social support programs to reduce the need for psychiatric services.

Furthermore, the study's findings could potentially contribute to the identification of best practices for providing services to homeless seniors with mental illness. By identifying the factors that influence the need for psychiatric services, social workers can develop evidence-based interventions that address the specific needs of this vulnerable population. Overall, this study has the potential to inform social work practice, research, and policy and contribute to the development of effective interventions for homeless seniors with serious mental illness.

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