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Research Planning for Global Poverty and Homelessness Policies and Services: A Case Study of a Joint Canadian-South African Initiative

*Solina M. Richter[1], Kathy Kovacs Burns[2], Annalie DH Botha[3]

[1]Associate Professor, Faculty of Nursing, Edmonton Clinic Health Academy,11405 87 Avenue, University of Alberta, Edmonton Alberta, Canada. *E-mail: solina.richter@ualberta.ca; Tel: +1780 4927953.
[2]Associate Director, Health Sciences Council, Edmonton Clinic Health Academy, University of Alberta,3-398, 11405 - 87 Avenues, Edmonton, AB Canada. Email: kathy.kovacsburns@ualberta.ca; Tel: 780-492-7766; Fax: 780-492-2874.
[3]Associate Professor, Department of Health Studies, University of South Africa, P.O. Box 392, UNISA, South Africa. Email: bothaadh@unisa.ac.za; Tel: +27(0)12-4298814; Fax: +27(0)12-4296688.

Global poverty, homelessness and health-related issues require both international and country-specific research to explore best collaborative approaches, determine relevant global health services and policy research questions, and explore how collaborative partnerships and research can be applied in practice with people who are homeless. A workshop was organized in South Africa with Canadian and South African researchers, non-researchers and community leaders, and community charitable organizations. Open discussions focused on the approaches for joint research, capacity building and knowledge transfer initiatives regarding low income and homelessness issues. One of the results is a guiding framework for these initiatives.

Keywords: Global homelessness, research collaborative partnerships, community participation, South Africa, Canada.

INTRODUCTION

Homelessness has been defined as a global issue or problem requiring both international and country-specific partnerships to collaborate on research which explores best approaches to address the needs of low income and homeless people, determine relevant 'real world' global health services and policy research questions, and explore how these collaborative partnerships and research can be applied in developing policies and service practices with people who are living in poverty or who are homeless. The local and global implications of homelessness are enormous and costly in terms of health, social, and other outcomes for individuals and families who are homeless, for stakeholders attempting to help or initiate improvements and changes in health and social outcomes, for policy decision makers who must weigh what evidence exists in support of funding decisions, and for local and global societies. A large need exists to transform the outcomes for homeless people and other stakeholders. However, there exists a huge gap in the understanding of what is exactly needed and

how to proceed with this transformation. We therefore need to work collaboratively at local and global level to gather evidence and translate and share knowledge. An even greater consideration and potential challenge in global studies is the formation of partnerships to collaborate on research related to homelessness.

Purpose

This paper will reflect on a case study of a joint Canadian-South African research partnership that supports the exploration and development of global and country-specific homelessness policies and service practices. It will further emphasize the importance of local and global civic and citizen engagement in advocacy, community partnerships in the global context and cross-cultural experiences, and collaboration on influencing global and local policies and service practices to address homelessness and more importantly provide for the homeless. The paper will also substantiate the need for

more global studies and collaborative research on homelessness. We will reflect on a workshop that was held in South Africa, and a framework outlining the outcomes and potential opportunities for ongoing research related to homelessness policy and services at the global and local levels.

Background

"Why do global collaborative and comparative research on homelessness?" Global research has been defined as "the area of study, research and practice that places a priority on improving health and achieving equity in health for all people worldwide" [2]. Global health and thus global research is about worldwide improvement of health, reduction of disparities, and protection against global threats that disregard national borders [3]. Although the roots of global homelessness have similarities in different countries, the way in which they contribute to the consequences are usually different in each country. In addition, each country develops independent solutions in response to the perceived urgency of the problem within its own context. Countries around the world need to address their homeless issues collaboratively by understanding the impact of homelessness on their own countries and globally, and by sharing knowledge to improve the management of health and social issues within and across countries. At an international conference called Constructing Understanding of Homeless Populations (CUHP 2005) it was emphasized that countries around the world need to address their homeless issues collaboratively [4]. It is necessary to be aware of the impact of homelessness on the globe and share knowledge to improve the management of social issues in various countries. There is a need for collaboration across countries, cultures, and diversities to share and enhance the knowledge and best practices in health and social services delivery and policies for homelessness. Decision makers, health and social service providers and researchers have to guide relevant health services and policy research and knowledge transfer that will benefit the low income and homeless populations local and globally. "Greater 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" [5].

Kemeny and Lowe [5] argue that there are underlying similarities between all countries due to historical eventuality and variations. National boundaries reflect distinct societies created by their own particular social, political, cultural and economic factors. These factors produce distinctly national housing systems through the enactment of national legislation, and the implementation of national programmes. Cross-national research is therefore useful because national boundaries reflects

distinct societies cleared by own particular social, political, cultural and economic factors. Greater 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 [6].

"What does collaborative global research on homelessness do that other research on homelessness is not doing?" Global research on homelessness expands the possibility to implement capacity building and mentorship regarding conducting research with homeless people across countries. Researchers and students have the opportunity to collaborate with a diverse and highly trained health researcher team across countries. It allows for the possibility to develop research methodologies that take into account social locations and experiences of homeless people not otherwise possible. A collaborative research program on homelessness increase the knowledge and awareness about global homelessness and related health inequities and disparities with targeted audiences (policy decision makers) within countries and globally through shared research findings as well the option to development and share promotional materials and educational programs.

Cross country research led by cross country interdisciplinary research teams will strengthen the credibility of the research designs, ethical processes, data gathering and analyses [7]. Through research capacity building the teams have joint learning opportunities through shared experiences, problem identification and problem solving skills, research techniques and concerns, and joint agreement on best research approaches for exploring priority global homelessness strategies and policies [8]. However, quality, useful, and relevant global research is difficult to coordinate between or among countries, including engaging interdisciplinary or cross-sectoral research teams [8], and particularly on topics concerning vulnerable populations such as low income and homeless people and their challenges with equitable access to health and social services [9]. It is this latter which presents challenges for joint country researchers who want to go beyond the usual research which compares policies and services between countries. The research which is often sought for global studies are those in which common poverty or homelessness priority decisions have been identified for policies or services across two or more countries, and which can then be explored or assessed for effectiveness, efficiency, strengths and weaknesses, gaps or other measures. In addition, researchers aspire to measure such outcomes as the impact of or on policy and practices, improved income levels or decreased homelessness, improved health outcomes of the poor or homeless, reduction of health and social inequalities, achievement of health or social system goals and strengthening of their capacity to make a difference.

These would be deemed examples of successful priority setting for researchers working across low, middle and high income countries and looking specifically at poverty and homelessness issues. This is similar in context to the framework developed by Kapiriri and Martin which provides a practical basis for planning and evaluating priority setting in low and middle income countries. These authors stress the importance of understanding the prerequisites and contextual factors that may influence successful priority setting – "understanding potential precursors and inhibitors (the institutional capacity, and incentives) and the priority setting context (political, economic, social-cultural) would facilitate the development of feasible and context sensitive improvement strategies" [10]. Therefore, more research is needed and required as 'evidence', not necessarily to compare countries as to their strengths or weaknesses of health outcomes, health services, and other factors related to poverty and homelessness, but to provide some validated evidence on best practices, programs, and other factors that will be useful in guiding or reframing policy recommendations or program decisions.

Rolfe et al. [11] outline a number of stages involved in building sustainable collaborative partnerships. It involves the sharing of information, the sharing of resources and skills, and multidisciplinary involvement. "Any cross national collaboration requires flexibility and sophistication. International work also requires an understanding of cultural differences, including language, lifestyle, and assumptions about health, economic resources and political systems. It also requires additional resources of time and, often, of money" [12].

Participating Countries

South Africa and Canada are the two participating countries for this project as researchers from both countries are affiliated through previous health research initiatives. On close examination, Canada and South Africa are countries that have more similarities than might first be expected. Both are rich countries within the context of their continents. South Africa as a low-middle income country and Canada as a high-income country, have obvious housing and homelessness situations and degrees of poverty, although, South Africa has income disparities that are among the most extreme in the world [13]. South Africa and Canada have multi-cultural populations where immigrant and migrant workers account for an increasing proportion of the labour force. The unstable economic and political circumstances in South Africa's neighboring countries contribute to the large percentage of illegal immigrants and refugees found in South Africa. Both countries encounter different challenges related to supply and demand for affordable and/or subsidized housing. Rapid economic growth in Canada pushes a large percentage of the low-income group into the 'working poor category' that cannot

financially compete for affordable housing, forcing them to use alternatives, such as living on the street or camping in river valleys. The recession which has impacted all countries in some way has certainly contributed to further the challenges faced by low income and homeless people in both Canada and South Africa. Not only have homeless rates increased, but there are also more inequities and inequalities in health-related, social and other determinants.

In South Africa, the homeless population is comprised of a large percentage of the low and no income people who are increasingly migrating to the larger cities to search for work, which, in turn, increases the housing problem in these densely populated areas. It is projected that the population living in towns and cities in South Africa will grow to 63% by the year 2015 [13]. About 16% (2004) of the population live in inadequate housing such as informal settlements and dwellings. Homeless people illegally invade open spaces and 'squat' on private and open land as a solution to their housing problems - the LULU (locally unwanted land use) phenomenon is growing and promotes negative and positive public discourse [14]. Likewise, in Alberta, Canada, where the economy was booming between 2004 to early 2008, the influx of skilled, non-skilled and temporary foreign workers has increased demand for housing, subsequently increasing housing prices and further reducing affordability. Homelessness is defined different in Canada and South Africa. It is mainly influenced by different factors such as "climatic patterns, traditions, culture, social infrastructure and welfare systems, financial and gender issues" [15]. In Canada it is common to use the terms 'absolute homelessness', 'concealed or hidden homelessness', 'at risk of houselessness' and 'the inadequately housed' [16]. The faces of homelessness in South Africa are described as "economic homelessness, chronic homelessness, and situational homelessness" and "near homelessness" [17]. How we define homelessness is politically sensitive and the manner in which we are defining homelessness determines who receive financial and other support [15]. South Africa has various urgent problems (HIV/AIDS and violence) that are higher on the priority list for South Africa politicians; however, South Africa has made remarkable progress in developing policies that address housing issues since 1994 (e.g. Housing Act, 1997; Prevention of illegal eviction from and unlawful occupation of land Act, 1998; Rental Housing Act, 1999; White Paper: A New Housing Policy and Strategy for South Africa, 1994; Department of Housing HIV/AIDS: Framework Document, 2003; and A Social Housing Policy for South Africa 2003).

Canada has similar and different issues but policies are few and certainly not national or federal. Homelessness issues have not been visible on the political agenda in Canada, until very recently with homelessness strategies. In a recent report issued by the Wellesley Institute on advancing urban life, the United Nations called housing

and homelessness in Canada a "national emergency" [18]. There are no reliable or consistent approaches to counting the number of homeless people in Canada. Housing advocates estimate that one quarter of a million Canadians experience homelessness annually [19]. Canada has no federal housing strategy and is "the only major nation in the world without a comprehensive and properly-funded national housing strategy" [18]. The two countries have much to learn from each other. We asked ourselves the question: "Can homelessness across both countries have similar evidence gaps related to research, practices, policies and transformation capacity?" It is vital that collaborative research on homelessness be conducted in order to develop strategic interventions and make recommendations to policy decision makers to effect change locally and globally. The ideas generated for joint research projects will stimulate further engagement and action by research teams to engage other stakeholders in Canada, SA, and other interested countries and continue exploring common or broader global homelessness issues and policy gaps.

REFLECTION ON THE WORKSHOP - METHODOLOGY

A Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR) approach was used between Canada and South Africa to coordinate and develop an approach that would best facilitate discussions and framework planning for needed evidence to support homelessness policy and service practices locally and globally. CBPR provided the right approach to have participants in South Africa and Canada contribute to the strategies that would best accommodate global research and work related to homelessness issues. As a result of this preliminary work, a workshop was organised in South Africa in 2009 with the purpose of facilitating the development of a joint Canadian - South African health services and policy research collaboration framework and accompanying strategies related to the health and social issues of low income and homeless people. It was the first step in establishing long-term global homelessness research collaboration and opportunities. This was necessary to provide the medium and interaction among the Canadian and South African researchers, non-researchers including health and social services provider, community services and policy decision makers, and other global experts [20]. Canadian and South African teams included a range of academic and professional disciplines (Health Service Research, Nursing, Social Work, Sociology), service providers (NGO-Faith based organization, volunteers and a director of HIV/AIDS organisation, coordinator of a street youth project in Canada), decision makers (Department of Social Development, and municipality representatives) and homeless people. The engagement of the low-income and homeless communities was critical to the development of success-

ful knowledge translation at the practitioner to person/family/ community level. All participants had an expressed research interest in examining various homelessness issues, 'good' practices and possible solutions. We believed that having the right discipline and sector mix for the partnership and team were critical for the implementation of the community based participatory research (CBPR) approach and to the development of a practical health research framework concerning homelessness.

The workshop consisted of:

• Expert presentations (e.g. 'A situational analysis of child-headed households in South Africa'; 'The housing circumstances of recently-arrived refugees in 3 Canadian cities'; 'Media Interest in Homelessness –the Canadian perspective'; 'Policies related to poverty and homelessness: the challenges locally and globally'; 'Homelessness in South Africa - Street homeless', 'The Homeless in Pretoria, South Africa', 'Knowledge utilization and the use of evidence to influence community practice and policy development'),
• Coordinate, guided and open discussions on the potential development of a framework for sustainable joint Canadian-South African and other countries involvement in the development of research teams, joint research projects, research capacity building, funding proposals, and ongoing knowledge dissemination and transfer initiatives within and across countries, related to best practices and approaches to addressing the health and social issues of low income and homeless people.

RESULTS OF WORKSHOP

Research Gaps

Based on the presentations and discussions which followed during the workshop, a number of areas were identified for further exploration or research. Joint Canadian-South African, as well as country-specific initiatives, was identified. Some of the specific research needs identified included: strategies to address shelters/housing needs, identifying social and health determinants affecting the homeless population, more appropriately defining 'homelessness', describing more appropriate research methodologies and participant roles and involvement in homelessness studies, policy studies needed, country exchange programs and studies, knowledge dissemination, translation & utilization, research capacity-building needed, and exploring specific topics, e.g. Refugees and Xenophobia issue in South Africa.

The Way Forward: Priority Setting for Collaboration

Moving the collaborative work and research agenda

ahead, the team concluded that first and foremost, we must be clear about the purpose of the collaborative and partnership between Canadian and South-African researchers and stakeholders. What are we trying to achieve through this partnership? The second priority was for the team to clearly and accurately understand the meaning of relevant terms for the collaborative and for the research planning – that is, defining what it means to be a researcher or collaborator within a global collaborative or partnership in which we are building research capacity and cross-cultural experiences; defining who are the homeless or what is homelessness; how does civic and citizen engagement fit in this context; what policies and programs exist at the country or global levels; and how generalizable will our efforts and findings be for global engagement. We asked many questions:

- What do we mean by collaboration, particularly concerning global homelessness?
- How feasible is collaboration across two different countries, continents and hemispheres? What must be done to enhance motivation and commitment towards the collaborative work and research? How do we establish meaningful collaboration?
- How do we overcome challenges around collaboration, research, skill levels of team members, translation of information (i.e. different languages and levels of understanding), priority setting and other relevant aspects? Can these challenges be addressed through capacity building?
- What additional relationships are needed with governments or services within countries and globally to assist with priority setting for poverty and homelessness issues?

DISCUSSION

Where should the discussion start with inter-country research planning for priorities related to poverty and homelessness? Researchers from different countries often join forces to explore the opportunities and possibilities for comparative or common research questions related to policy and service priorities for vulnerable populations. This task started with the joint Canadian-South African workshop which brought a diverse group together to discuss differences and similarities concerning policies or programs/services to address the needs of impoverished and homeless individuals and families. What was missing as a prelude to the meeting was a clear comprehensive understanding of the priorities established by each country and also globally around poverty and homelessness. This information was identified as a need or gap and became the first priority identified for the research plan and partnership. As pointed out by Kapiriri and Martin, priority setting is a challenge for decision makers and planners in

low and middle income countries [10]. With issues such as poverty and homelessness, the challenge becomes much more complex and needs to involve more than one sector to set priorities. The social, environmental, political and economic factors must be considered. The task for identifying relevant research related to country-specific or global poverty and homelessness priorities for policies and programs cannot take place without interdisciplinary and cross sector partnerships from interested countries that include interdisciplinary research teams inclusive of decision maker and community collaborators and those living and experiencing poverty and homelessness.

International Collaborative Partnership Building

Based on the stages involved in building sustainable collaborative partnerships as outlined by Rolfe et al., the South African/Canadian team is well established in this process to continue building the team and its capacity to do collaborative work and research [11]. Some of the team members have extensive experience working in South Africa/Africa and Canada. They have sufficient knowledge of the geopolitical, religious and social differences between the two countries to be able to manage some of the unexpected challenges that could arise. Barriers and challenges that are common to international partnerships also include the acquisition and management of the finances, establishing an effective communication system between the participants, and contextual differences. The universities, both in Canada and South Africa, have well established systems in place to support this type of formal collaborative partnership and assist in addressing some of the challenges. We do anticipate that we will experience some barriers. Building a collaborative global partnership is time consuming. Long term commitment is needed. We also anticipate North-South research tension which is the tension between the North and South Hemispheres based on the many geographical, economic and political differences. Binka suggests that partners should be aware of this and to make sure that an unequal partnership does not develop [21]. Potential conflicts should be identified early on in the development of partnerships so that they can be resolved or consideration be given to not forming the partnership at that point in time.

Understand the meaning of civic and citizen engagement in the global context

We believe that engagement of all role players is necessary to ensure that the partnership is successful and able to achieve measureable outcomes. This includes academics as well as community and government people. We defined civic engagement as a form of advocacy or "people participating together for deliberation and collective action within an array of interest, institutions and networks, developing civic

identity and involving people in governance processes" [22], and in this case to address issues related to homelessness. Today's academics are expected to become civically engaged and can include "those activities which individual academics undertake which in some way involve interaction or engagement with the non-academic community and are related to academic expertise" [23]. As well, "vibrant multi racial/multicultural exchange can bring the issues of society to our doorsteps" [24] and will be necessary to move the global partnership agenda ahead. We will focus on "actions with responsibility of civic engagement with diverse stakeholders whose voices need to matter more in our shared future" [24]. Universities have a critical role to play in civic engagement; not just to educate future leaders but also to address important societal issues, such as homelessness.

Civic engagement is also important for nongovernmental organizations (NGO's) to ensure that they too link to global coalitions. It will give them 'new power arrangements that span traditional distinctions among local, national and international politics' [25]. Citizen engagement is important to ensure that people are co-creators of policy rather than seeing themselves as victims of it. People as citizens are capable of engaging in complex public works and deliberation. Not only does citizen engagement allow people to participate in an advisory function, but it also develops their skills in listening, and analysis of the issues in question. When citizens tackle a specific issue or social problem their ideas and energy can contribute to improved outcomes related to that problem. In addition the government and academic participants also learn valuable lessons; to value the perspectives within public deliberation [26].

We believe that a community based participatory research (CBPR) approach will contribute to civic engagement. CBPR is "an orientation to research that focuses on relationships between academic and community partners, with principles of co-learning, mutual benefit, and long-term commitment and incorporates community theories, participation, and practices into the research efforts" [27]. CBPR seeks action and change as its primary goals, simultaneously functioning as both research and service [28]. The principles underpinning CBPR that will help us to ensure civic engagement include a collaborative approach, equitable involvement of all partners, recognition of the unique strengths that each brings and building on strengths and resources within the community. We also begin with a research topic of importance to the community. We do acknowledge that this will involve a cyclical and iterative process and that the research efforts need to include capacity building [29]. The team decided to focus their capacity building activities to move the agenda ahead on building a community – university partnership at a global level, developing homeless people networks, developing best practice guidelines when working with homeless youths and advocating with a focus on joint material development

and a specific theme per year. Research capacity building will include different levels: university faculties and researchers, decision makers, and community-based service providers. Networks will be established to develop social (shared) responsibility and capacity through virtual and other networks. The different projects will start at local city levels and work towards national and global levels. One of the positive outcomes of our initial visits/meetings was the agreement to continue work on identified priorities and to continue to develop a guiding framework for sustainable research and knowledge transfer.

CONCLUSION

Although the South African-Canadian participants could not predict the outcomes of the workshop related to ongoing initiatives including the development of a homelessness research plan or framework, it was clear that there was commitment from all involved to continue with the work and research framework development. There was great optimism that this global collaboration would be able to continue and be sustained through various research and other initiatives. Everyone will need to participate equally and contribute to the various initiatives if this partnership is to continue to be successful.

A number of priority areas for exploration and research were identified as the place to start at local and international levels. Some of these priority areas will not require any resources to complete but will need some dedicated time – for example, examining the literature for various definitions of the homeless and homelessness, or for identifying existing poverty and homelessness policies and strategies or programs. There are other priorities which will require funding to proceed and complete. More researchers and other stakeholders will need to be recruited to participate in the initiatives planned. There are also opportunities for graduate students and junior researchers to explore for dedicated papers, thesis studies, and research program development.

Partnerships are only as successful as the people involved in leading or managing them. At the global level there is the challenge of distance between partners and the use of virtual venues to conduct the work. The joint Canada-South Africa partnership including the research team are committed to take the necessary steps to explore research opportunities to establish an evidence base to help inform policies and practices which support those living in poverty or who are homeless and/or eventually eliminate poverty and homelessness.

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