
Brief Report

Homeless Men and Women: Commonalities and a Service Gender Gap¹

Robert J. Calsyn²

University of Missouri—St. Louis

Gary Morse

Malcolm Bliss Mental Health Center, St. Louis

Gender differences among homeless persons on a host of variables were examined. A stratified random sample of 248 homeless persons staying in shelters in St. Louis provided data for the study. More similarities than differences between men and women were found. However, men tended to be homeless for longer periods and were more likely than women to sleep on the streets. Men were also more likely than women to have a drinking problem and to have been convicted of a crime. Men were less likely than women to ever have been married and to be caring for dependent children. The most striking gender differences occurred on service utilization variables; women were much more likely than men to have received social services. Comparison of our data with previous studies and potential explanations for the gender gap in service utilization are offered.

Despite the political and scientific controversies over the exact size of today's homeless population (Freeman & Hall, 1987), there is a consensus that homelessness has increased over the past two decades. Moreover, Rossi (1989) and Wright (1989) have provided compelling statistical evidence that the in-

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²All correspondence should be sent to Robert J. Calsyn, University of Missouri—St. Louis, Gerontology Program, 406 Tower, 8001 Natural Bridge Road, St. Louis, Missouri 63121-4499.

come, shelter, and quality of life of today's homeless population is even more dismal than for their counterparts of two decades ago. Contemporary homelessness is clearly an unacceptable living condition of major social importance that community psychology has yet to study in a systematic manner.

Knowledge about homeless people has increased in the past decade with research identifying population characteristics and documenting the existence of the diverse and multiple needs that beset homeless people. (See Tessler & Dennis, 1989, for a review.) A major limitation of the existing literature (Tessler & Dennis, 1989) is that homeless samples have comprised male subjects almost exclusively. Although women have been part of the homeless population for centuries and their numbers have grown rapidly in recent years (Rossi, 1989), there has been little thought or research on whether the characteristics, problems, needs, and causes of homelessness among women are similar or different from men. (See Bassuk, 1986, for an exception.) Such information is essential to developing basic knowledge about homelessness and a rational public policy about the interventions that are needed to address the common and unique needs of homeless women and men.

Background Variables. Prior research has found that a higher percentage of homeless women than men have been previously married (Bahr & Garrett, 1976; Crystal, 1984), and they are more likely to have responsibility for dependent children (Crystal, 1984; Maurin, Russell, & Memmott, 1989). Also, homeless men are more likely to have had criminal records than homeless women (Burt & Cohen, 1989; Crystal, 1984; Roth, Toomey, & First, in press). Three studies (Burt & Cohen, 1989; Maurin et al., 1989; Roth et al., in press) reported that men have been homeless longer than women. Similarly, men spend more nights sleeping on the streets (Burt & Cohen, 1989; Crystal, Ladner, & Tomber, 1986; Roth et al., in press).

Objective Needs. Past research has generally found that homeless women are more likely than homeless men to have been institutionalized for mental illness (Robertson, 1986), although a more recent study (Roth et al., in press) found no gender difference. Gender differences have not been found when current psychiatric symptoms were assessed (Robertson, 1986). Although Maurin et al. (1989) found no gender differences in substance abuse, two other studies (Bahr & Garrett, 1976; Roth et al., in press) found greater substance-abuse problems in homeless men than women. Earlier research (Bahr & Garrett, 1976) suggested that homeless women received less social support than homeless men, but more recent studies (Maurin et al., 1989; Roth et al., in press) reached the opposite conclusion. Homeless women are thought to be more vulnerable than men to physical and sexual assault (Baxter & Hopper, 1981); however, empirical data are lacking.

Service Utilization, Service Willingness, and Quality of Life. Prior research suggests that homeless women receive more social services than do

homeless men (Crystal et al., 1986). No one has yet compared the willingness of homeless men and women to receive various human services. Gender differences in the quality of life have not been found in the general population or in samples of former mental patients (Baker & Intagliata, 1982), but differences in the quality of life of homeless men and women have yet to be examined. In summary, insufficient data have been collected on gender differences among homeless people, particularly from a needs assessment perspective. Although modest data exist on gender differences regarding substance abuse and mental health needs, only minimal data exist on gender differences regarding other human service needs. Almost no data exist on gender differences in three other categories of variables: service utilization, service willingness, and quality of life. Moreover, only two studies (Burt & Cohen, 1989; Roth et al., in press) have used representative sampling; all the other literature cited above employed convenience sampling. The present study improves upon prior research by collecting data on more variable categories than any study to date and by employing a stratified (by gender) random sampling procedure.

This study was most concerned with an exploration of gender differences as they relate to service implications, rather than formal hypothesis testing. Nevertheless, based on prior research, some gender differences were expected: (a) Homeless women were considered more likely than men to have been married; (b) men were more likely to have drinking problems and alcohol treatment histories; (c) men were more likely to have criminal histories; and (d) women were more likely to be more physically vulnerable, experiencing a higher rate of physical and sexual abuse and reporting a greater need for services to improve their physical safety.

METHOD

Participants and Sampling Strategy

A total of 248 people (122 female and 126 male) who were receiving temporary housing in St. Louis area homeless shelters were interviewed. The mean age of the participants was 30.60 ($SD = 9.60$); nearly two thirds (64.9%) of the sample were racial minorities (all but two minorities were black); the mean education level was 11.20 years ($SD = 2.14$). Only 4.4% of the sample was currently married and living with their spouse. Participation was voluntary and participants were paid \$5 for their interview.

Of the 16 emergency shelters in the St. Louis area, 13 agreed to participate in the study. Based on estimates from a previous study of St. Louis shelters (Hutchinson, Stretch, Anderman, Searight, & Triegaardt, 1981), the

participating shelters served 96% of the homeless men and 79% of the homeless women in the St. Louis area. Sampling for each gender group was stratified by each shelter depending on the average monthly census of a given shelter. Participants in each shelter were randomly selected from the current shelter census using a random numbers table. As the interviewer explained the purpose of the study to the potential participant, the interviewer performed an informal assessment of the person's competency. If the interviewer doubted the person's competency, four brief mental status questions concerning orientation to time, place, the interviewer, and self were asked. Inaccurate responses to any of these questions resulted in a judgment of participant incompetence. Five persons were judged incompetent and eliminated from the study. Ten additional persons declined to be interviewed. Participants were interviewed by a same-sex interviewer in that part of the shelter that afforded maximum privacy.

Variables and Measures

The comparison of homeless women and men conducted was across five sets of variables: (a) background characteristics including homeless history; (b) indicators of current need; (c) participants' ratings of their willingness to receive services in 11 areas; (d) current use of services; and (e) quality of life. Specific variables and their measurement are described below.

Background Variables. In addition to the demographic characteristics of age, sex, race, education, marital status, number of dependent children, occupation, and imprisonment prior to becoming homeless, data were also collected on the history of homelessness, including the number of times homeless, the length of time since first homeless, the number of months currently homeless, and number of cities lived in in the past year (transience). The number of stressful events in the year prior to becoming homeless was also assessed using the Health and Daily Living Form (Moos, Cronkite, Billings, & Finney, 1983).

Objective Needs. Psychopathology was assessed using the Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI; Derogatis & Spencer, 1984). The BSI is the short form of the SCL-90 which was considered to be the best self-report symptom checklist by a NIMH task force (Waskow & Parloff, 1974). Problem drinking was measured by the Short Michigan Alcoholism Screening Test (Selzer, Vinokur, & van Rooijen, 1975). Informal social support was assessed by a modified version of the Arizona Social Support Interview Schedule (Barrera, Sandler, & Ramsey, 1981). Three scores from that instrument were used in the present study: total support available, total support utilized, and felt need for additional support. Interpersonal adjustment was measured by asking four questions on interpersonal relations from Clark's (1968) scale of Personality and Social Network Adjustment. An alienation scale adapted from Bahr and

Caplow's (1973) study of homeless people was administered. Self-esteem was assessed using the Rosenberg (1979) scale. Participants were also asked to list the best job they had ever had; Hollingshead's (1957) categories of occupational status were then used as a rating of occupational skill level. The seriousness of health problems was determined by using the system developed by Wyler, Masuda, and Holmes (1968) to rate the seriousness of the 14 health problems listed in the Moos et al. (1983) instrument. Participants were also asked the following four yes/no questions: arrests while homeless, physical abuse while homeless, sexual assault while homeless, and employment while homeless.

Willingness to Receive Services. Participants were also asked to rate their willingness (on a 7-point Likert scale) to receive 11 human services: employment, job training, permanent housing, temporary housing, financial assistance, food, medical care, treatment for drinking problems, treatment for emotional problems, clothing, and help with personal safety.

Service Utilization. Participants were asked to indicate the percentage of time they spent in emergency shelters as opposed to sleeping rough (in parks, abandoned buildings, etc.). In addition, they were asked if they had utilized any of the following services: mental health treatment, alcoholism treatment, public housing, housing assistance agencies, medical treatment, unemployment office, vocational rehabilitation, social security, and welfare.

Quality of Life. Baker and Intagliata's (1982) measure of the quality of life in 14 domains was also administered. This measure has been used with both psychiatric as well as the general population.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table I presents means and standard deviations (or percentages for categorical variables) for those variables with a significant gender difference. MANOVAs were run for all of the ordinal variables within a given general variable category (i.e., background variables, objective need indicators, service willingness, service utilization, and quality of life). In all cases the various statistics (Pillais, Hotellings, Wilks) produced the same approximate F value reported below. Chi-square analyses were done for the categorical variables. Table I presents means and standard deviations (or percentages for categorical variables) for those variables with a significant gender difference, as well as the appropriate univariate statistical test (t or χ^2).

Background Variables

The multivariate comparison found that the gender groups differed significantly across the continuous background variables, $F(9, 237) = 3.45$,

Table I. Significant Gender Differences

Continuous background					
Variables	Means ^a		Significance test		
	Female	Male	<i>t</i> (245)	<i>p</i>	
Longest period of employment (months)	34.74 (37.78)	48.0 (52.79)	2.70	.007	
No. of cities	0.68 (1.15)	2.32 (6.47)	2.72	.007	
Length of time since first homeless (months)	21.06 (34.58)	44.21 (64.79)	3.48	.001	
Duration of current homelessness (months)	9.85 (23.95)	19.29 (30.27)	2.69	.008	
Categorical Background					
Variables	Percentages		Significance test		
	Female	Male	χ^2	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Previous imprisonment					
No	92.5	66.7			
Yes	7.5	33.3	23.08	1	<.001
Marital status					
Never married	41.8	62.7			
Married	5.7	3.2			
Separated	31.1	9.5			
Separated (circumstantial)	2.5	5.6			
Divorced	12.3	15.9			
Widowed	6.6	3.2	23.96	5	<.001
Dependent children					
No	31.1	96.8	34.97	1	<.001
Yes	68.9	3.2			
Continuous objective need					
Variables	Means ^a		Significance test		
	Female	Male	<i>t</i> (245)	<i>p</i>	
Problem drinking	1.35 (2.11)	4.00 (3.94)	43.69	<.001	
Total utilized network size	4.34 (2.52)	3.37 (2.13)	3.29	.001	
Support need	2.44 (0.45)	2.15 (0.50)	4.74	<.001	
Occupational skills	5.33 (1.31)	5.82 (1.31)	2.85	.005	
Categorical objective need					
Variables	Percentages		Significance test		
	Female	Male	χ^2	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Criminal problems					
No	93.4	60.3			
Yes	6.6	39.7	35.17	1	<.001
Sexual abuse					
No	85.1	99.2			
Yes	14.9	0.8	15.17	1	<.001

Table I. Continued

Continuous service willingness					
Variables	Means ^a		Significance test		
	Female	Male	<i>t</i> (245)	<i>p</i>	
Treatment for drinking problems	0.71 (1.56)	2.53 (2.20)	56.30	< .001	
Improved personal safety	4.00 (1.58)	3.22 (1.86)	12.00	< .001	
Continuous service utilization					
Variables	Means ^a		Significance test		
	Female	Male	<i>t</i> (245)	<i>p</i>	
Percentage of time in shelter	94.86 (16.90)	74.83 (28.71)	6.66	< .001	
Categorical service utilization					
Variables	Percentages		Significance test		
	Female	Male	χ^2	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Drinking/alcohol treatment					
Never	90.1	68.3			
Past	8.3	22.2			
Present	1.7	9.5	18.23	2	< .001
Current medical					
No	66.4	81.1			
Yes	33.6	18.9	6.12	1	.01
Public housing agency					
Never	82.0	96.0			
Past	5.7	4.0			
Present	12.3	0.0	17.27	2	< .001
Housing assistance agency					
Never	77.9	96.0			
Past	4.9	.8			
Present	17.2	3.2	18.20	2	< .001
General relief/welfare					
Never	35.2	81.7			
Past	24.6	11.9			
Present	40.2	6.3	59.10	2	< .001
Food stamps					
Never	34.4	61.1			
Past	32.0	24.6			
Present	33.6	14.3	20.12	2	< .001
Quality of life					
Variables	Means ^a		Significance test		
	Female	Male	<i>t</i> (245)	<i>p</i>	
Shelter	5.28 (1.59)	4.26 (2.02)	4.37	.001	
Neighborhood	4.45 (2.05)	3.73 (2.05)	2.74	.007	
Food	5.21 (1.80)	4.42 (1.84)	3.46	.001	

Table I. Continued

Variables	Quality of life		Significance test	
	Means ^a		<i>t</i> (245)	<i>p</i>
	Female	Male		
Other residents	5.35 (1.53)	3.98 (1.92)	6.17	.001
Activities	4.88 (1.95)	4.01 (2.10)	3.32	.001
Spare time	4.92 (1.80)	4.13 (2.19)	3.09	.002
Services	5.37 (1.61)	4.38 (1.86)	4.43	.001

^aStandard deviations appear below their respective means in parentheses.

$p < .001$. Significant differences were found on four of the subsequent nine univariate comparisons. Consistent with prior research, men had been homeless for longer periods than women, both since first homeless and also during the current episode of homelessness. The men had also lived in more cities in the past year than the women. Similar to previous research, men had worked for longer periods at one job than women.

Analysis of the categorical background variables found significant results on three of the four measures. Homeless men were more likely than women to have been convicted and/or imprisoned for a crime prior to homelessness, as found in prior studies. Consistent with previous research, more men than women had never been married, and women were more likely than men to be currently taking care of children.

Objective Need Indicators

The multivariate analysis of the set of continuous objective need indicators found a significant effect for gender, $F(11, 234) = 8.75, p < .001$. The subsequent *t* tests revealed significant gender differences for 4 of the 12 objective indicators. As found in previous research, homeless men had more drinking problems than women. The men had also worked more frequently than homeless women but had lower occupational skills than homeless women. Homeless women expressed a greater need for social support, although they also utilized a larger social network. These results are consistent with most prior research on gender differences in social support among homeless people (Maurin et al., 1989; Roth et al., in press) as well as the general population (Flaharty & Richman, 1989).

As predicted, homeless men and women also differed on two of the five categorical objective need indicators. Women were more likely than men to have been sexually abused while homeless. Women were also less likely than homeless men to have been convicted of a crime, also consistent with prior research.

Service Willingness

The multivariate analysis found a significant effect for gender on the service willingness variables, $F(11, 234) = 9.35, p < .001$. The subsequent *t* tests revealed that women expressed a greater willingness to receive services for personal safety, as predicted. Men exhibited a greater willingness than women for treatment for problem drinking.

Service Utilization

Homeless men spent less time sleeping in shelters (i.e., more time on the streets) than did homeless women. Homeless men had higher rates of past and present treatment for problem drinking. Unlike most previous research (Robertson, 1986), the gender groups did not differ with regard to past or present mental health treatment; however, our no-difference finding is consistent with Roth et al.'s (in press) more recent study. With regard to other social services, homeless men were less likely to be service recipients of five services: medical treatment, public housing, the local housing assistance agency, welfare, and food stamps. There were no significant gender differences on the other four social services.

Quality of Life

Homeless women experienced a higher quality of life in general than homeless men, $F(14, 234) = 3.94, p < .001$. As Table I indicates, women were more satisfied than men in 7 of 14 areas: (a) their current place of residence (i.e., shelter settings), (b) their shelter neighborhood, (c) their food, (d) the people they lived with (i.e., other shelter residents), (e) their daily activities, (f) use of their spare time, and (g) available services and facilities.

CONCLUSION

Nearly all of the prior research had relied on convenience samples. The fact that we replicated many of these earlier findings using a representative sample of shelter users provides a stronger basis for policy makers and service providers to plan programs for homeless men and women. Although one could argue that our results would not generalize to those homeless people who do not use the shelters, prior research indicates that the number of homeless people who never use shelters is small and that the characteristics and needs of shelter users and street people are quite similar (Hannappel, Cal-syn, & Morse, 1989).

From a needs assessment perspective, our study found that homeless women and men are more similar than different in most areas. However, some important differences do occur. As predicted, homeless women are more vulnerable to sexual abuse and indicate a higher willingness to receive personal safety services. The fact that two thirds of the homeless women and almost none of the men are caring for dependent children has important service implications. Many homeless women need supportive day care, assistance with schools, and special services for preserving a healthy sense of family and for facilitating normal child development.

Service planning should also take into account two special problem areas for men: men need more services in order to help with drinking problems; men have greater needs for assistance with the criminal justice system.

Beyond these differing needs, several additional findings appeared: men, as compared to women, tend to be homeless for far longer periods of time, suffer a poorer quality of life, and receive less assistance in the key service areas of housing and welfare—yet these are the very services that are most critical for ending homelessness.

What accounts for this “gender gap” in fewer services for homeless men and the resulting poorer quality of life? Part of the gap is the direct result of the fact that women are more likely than men to be caring for children. Burt and Cohen (1989) are the only researchers who have drawn their sample in such a way that specific comparisons can be made between homeless men, homeless women without children, and homeless women with children. They found that women with children did receive more public income assistance than other women or men. However, in examining other variables, including use of shelters and length of time homeless, the two groups of women were more similar to each other and different from men. Burt and Cohen noted that communities tend to provide more resources for homeless families which may have created hierarchies of “deservingness” among the homeless (p. 519). We suspect that homeless men are at the bottom of the hierarchy, in part, because of their greater abuse of alcohol and their criminal difficulties (Rossi, 1989; Wright, 1989). Further, cultural stereotypes promoted the belief that men are better able to “take care of themselves.” Such stereotypes appear to be operating in human service practices that provide homeless men with fewer essential resources such as housing and general welfare assistance. Consequences of these attitudes and policies are that the disenfranchisement of homeless men is heightened and homelessness is perpetuated.

The argument presented here is not one for fewer services for homeless women. Clearly, some differential service provision is needed. What is equally important, however, is that a humane living environment should be provided for all who are homeless, and that everyone, regardless of gender, should be provided with the resources that would enable them to achieve a non-homelessness status.

Finally, additional research is needed to determine whether the fewer services received by homeless men than women is a true gender gap or rather a societal preference to provide more support for families with children than single individuals.

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