

# Challenges and Implications of Social Stigmas Around Aging and Homelessness

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## Introduction

Although there is no agreed-upon definition of *homelessness* across disciplines or countries, the Canadian Homelessness Research Network (2012) defines homelessness as “individuals without stable, permanent, appropriate housing, or the immediate prospect, means, and ability to acquire it” (para. 9). The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) defines homelessness in various ways; for example, a *chronically homeless individual* “refers to an individual with a disability who has been continuously homeless for one year or more or has experienced at least four episodes of homelessness in the last three years where the combined length of time homeless in those occasions is at least 12 months” (2024, p. 9). Homelessness is recognized as a global phenomenon that can deprive individuals of the necessities of daily life: food, water, shelter, clothing, health care, and social inclusion (Busch-Geertsema et al., 2016). This literature review explores existing research around experiences of homelessness in older adult populations, especially those with other marginalized identities. The research is relevant, as homelessness among older adults will significantly increase in the coming decades due to accelerated population aging and continued economic vulnerability into old age without appropriate prevention and policy response (Grenier et al., 2016).

## Research on Older Adults Experiencing Homelessness

Older adults are now the fastest-growing age group of those experiencing homelessness (Henderson et al., 2023). The numbers of people aged 50 and over experiencing homelessness are estimated to triple by 2030 (Culhane et al., 2019; Henderson et al., 2023; LeadingAge, 2025).

Point-in-Time (PiT) Counts are unduplicated single-night estimates of sheltered and unsheltered homeless individuals conducted nationwide (HUD, 2017). In 2024 nearly 60,000 people across Canada were identified as experiencing homelessness (Housing, Infrastructure and Communities Canada, 2025); in the U.S., a total of 771,480 people experienced homelessness on a single night, which is the highest ever

recorded (HUD, 2024). About 20% of people in this latter population was age 55 or older, and nearly half of which were living unsheltered in places not meant for human habitation (HUD, 2024, p. 5).

Collectively, population aging, a trend of first-time homelessness at mid-life, and continued economic vulnerability into old age, indicate that without appropriate prevention and policy response, homelessness among older adults will significantly increase in the coming decades (Murphy & Eghaneyan, 2018). According to Weldrick and Canham (2023), a growing number of older people are expected to experience homelessness for the first time later in life and are expected to remain homeless as they age. Along with the marginalization experienced due to the mere fact of being homeless, the diversity that exists within the older population means that members of some groups may experience additional adverse effects and a disparity in the availability of services. This should become a pressing concern for decision-makers, gerontologists, and housing advocates alike (Weldrick & Canham, 2023).

Grenier et al. (2016) indicated that one of the most prevalent problems in aging research is the lack of consensus as to the exact definition of “older adults.” Some researchers define older adults as individuals over the age of sixty-five (NIH, 2025). Other researchers take a different approach; by accounting for the health and mortality disparities between the general population and homeless adults, they define older homeless adults as individuals over the age of forty (Crane & Warnes, 2001; McDonald et al., 2007). Including this wide range of ages may make it difficult to reach conclusions about the experiences of any of the subgroups of the older population. Because there are many different pathways into homelessness, another limiting factor researchers encounter is discovering a significantly identifiable common pathway to their homeless circumstances (Burns, 2016). In addition, homeless older adults often experience victimization and physical, mental, and behavioral challenges. These challenges have a profound cost both to individuals who are homeless as well as to society as a whole (Crane & Warnes, 2001; Dietz & Wright, 2005; Grenier et al., 2016; McDonald et al., 2007).

Nott et al. (2025) acknowledged that limited work has addressed the layered dehumanization faced by unhoused aging individuals; homeless individuals are often dehumanized, and ageism adds an additional layer of this dehumanization (Nott et al., 2025). Dehumanization and stigma can have devastating effects and can also play a significant role in putting older adults at risk of falling into homelessness; for example, roughly only a third of eligible older adults participate in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) research suggests that low participation is largely due to perceived stigma around receiving welfare (Henderson et al., 2023).

A constructivist grounded theory study (Burns, 2016) explored meaning of place for fifteen older adults living in emergency homeless shelters in Montreal, Quebec. The study revealed that homelessness evoked

intense feelings of despair, anger, and frustration in the subjects. Shelter life both helped and hindered the subjects' ability to deal with the stigma associated with homelessness and to process the grief associated with the loss of a home, in order to move forward. By reframing homelessness as a normalized experience of grief, the study helped shift negative perceptions of aging and homelessness towards understanding homelessness as an intense period of loss, which requires validation, empathy, compassion, care, and support (Burns, 2016).

Findings from Willison et al. (2023) indicated that there are existing biases within homeless shelters and healthcare settings that disadvantage older adults. Staff unwillingness to provide care to older adults as well as the fact that the services available are often geared to the younger homeless population can adversely affect older homeless adults in care settings and medical facilities. Biases also affect the prioritization of institutional policies focused on homeless populations. Cultural competency within staff training methods had not been explored, and focus groups with service providers that might reveal existing biases and suggest solutions had not yet been conducted.

## The Intersection of Age, Unhoused Status, and LGBTQ+ Identity

Individuals who occupy multiple marginalized statuses are believed to be at an increased risk of experiencing homelessness at some period during their lifetime (Fraser et al., 2019). Limited research has explored older people experiencing homelessness who are part of the LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, and Queer) community. "Homelessness Among LGBT Adults in the U.S." by Wilson et al. (2020) was the first study to provide estimates of sexual and gender minority adults experiencing homelessness using representative national data. From this study, researchers found that 17% of sexual minority adults reported experiencing lifetime homelessness, more than twice what was found in the general population. The study provides further evidence that homelessness is experienced at disproportional rates among LGBTQ+ adults (Wilson et al., 2020).

Fraser et al. (2019) identified links between homelessness, LGBTQ+ discrimination and stigma, poverty, ethnicity and racism, substance abuse, mental health, sexual abuse, foster care, family, survival sex and sex work, physical ill-health and HIV, and shelter inaccessibility. While older age was not explored, this article emphasized that LGBTQ+ homeless people experience greater levels of discrimination and stigma than non-LGBTQ+ homeless people, both on the basis of homeless status and LGBTQ+ identity. This work reaffirms that an intersectional-systems approach to homelessness research is required in order to develop well-informed, culturally sensitive homeless support programs for older LGBTQ+ adults (Fraser et al., 2019).

## The Intersection of Age, Unhoused Status, and Race

With regard to race and ethnicity, roughly 42% of people who are homeless identify as African American and 20% identify as Hispanic, despite each group comprising roughly 12% of the total population (Fraser et al., 2019; Page, 2017). Henderson et al. (2023) acknowledged that few studies have examined the intersection of older age and racial/ethnic composition among those experiencing homelessness, and those that have are limited in generalizability due to small samples drawn from limited geographic regions. It is evident, however, that the percentage of African Americans experiencing homelessness is disproportionately large in comparison to the national percentage of African American older adults (HUD, 2024; Moses, 2019).

In a study using nationally representative survey data from the National Epidemiologic Survey on Alcohol and Related Conditions Wave III, Rhee and Rosenheck (2020) sought to identify factors that contribute to the higher rates of homelessness among non-Hispanic black adults compared to non-Hispanic white adults. The researchers found that homeless risk was associated with socio-structural factors such as income and incarceration and individual adverse events (e.g., trauma) and was not associated with psychiatric or substance use disorders. This was notable, as no national survey data had previously been analyzed with the goal of identifying differences in lifetime risk of homelessness between black and white adults (Rhee & Rosenheck, 2020).

Moreover, Olivet et al. (2021) further examined racial inequities and their associations with homelessness in the United States. The study was conducted using mixed-methods and was conducted in eight communities. The study examined whether race and ethnicity had association with housing outcomes by surveying individuals in poverty and comparing the race and ethnicity of those experiencing homelessness to the general population. The findings of the study indicated that Black and Native-identified peoples were the most overrepresented among those experiencing homelessness in each community. The data suggested that among various communities studied, for people of color, factors associated with homelessness included economic immobility, racism and discrimination within homeless services and involvement in multiple systems, including the criminal justice system (Olivet et al., 2021).

## Discussion and Future Directions

As the population of older adults experiencing homelessness continues to grow, it is critical that research, prevention efforts, and support systems are expanded, and that they are designed with cultural awareness and responsiveness to the intersectionalities within the population. It is apparent that older adults experiencing homelessness are not in control of their narrative and are given very few opportunities to voice their lived experiences. Rather than categorizing homeless older adults with their younger counterparts,

researchers need to understand their lived experiences if policies are to adequately address the pathways into and barriers to exiting homelessness (Grenier, 2016). Advocates should explore ways to incorporate the narratives of the people facing homelessness into their advocacy efforts to challenge biased perceptions within the field and improve the care afforded to older adults seeking refuge.

While it is notable that much of the prior research has examined the various forms of stigma and discrimination faced by homeless people (see Canham et al., 2024), the discrimination faced by people experiencing homelessness and intersecting identities (e.g., being a person of older age, LGBTQ+ status, and/or color) has received much less attention. Weldrick and Canham (2023) and Olivet et al. (2021) both acknowledged in their papers the vulnerability of LGBTQ+ and older adults of color within the homeless population. Importantly, their studies added to existing literature highlighting the fact that individuals occupying multiple marginalized statuses are at an increased risk of experiencing homelessness at some period during their lifetime. There seems to be little research suggesting that advocacy efforts are designed to address ways to overcome the intersectional disadvantages these identified groups face.

Negative perceptions, stereotypes, and beliefs communicated throughout society often dictate actions and public policy. Governmental policymakers and advocates for the homeless play vital roles in communicating messages about ways to address the homelessness crisis. In turn, these messages affect the supports made available to address this ongoing crisis. Robust studies of the diversity among homeless populations could give policy teams and advocates for people experiencing homelessness the necessary data to make compelling arguments to lawmakers about the need to support them.

## Conclusion

Based upon the findings of this literature review, future research should be directed to better understanding the intersecting identities and stigma faced by older adults experiencing homelessness. It is crucial to identify which sociodemographic groups are over-represented in the overall homeless population and to determine which systemic barriers those groups face. Understanding how their needs correspond to, or differ from, what is known about older unhoused people is also necessary. Research should extend to the overall aging homeless populations but also explore particular factors affecting historically marginalized groups. This research can help support advocacy and policies addressing the unique needs of older homeless individuals and reducing homelessness among these vulnerable populations.

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