

A Day in the Life: Stories and Photographs of Health and Homelessness in Toronto

A Day in the Life

A day in the life: Representing the social determinants of health through Photovoice began in March 2006 as an 8-week community-based research pilot project funded by a Wellesley Institute Enabling Grant. The aim of the project was to create a forum for members of the homeless community to present their lived experiences of homelessness, poverty and social inequity through stories and photographs.

Photovoice

Photovoice is a method of working with people in communities that are typically under-represented or excluded from decisions that affect their lives. It is a way of documenting community strengths and initiating dialogue about what is significant to the community. Quite simply, it is a way of giving voice to those who are excluded through the use of photography.

A Day in the Life's Activities

A Day in the Life project members (a group of 12 women and men with past and/or current experience of homelessness) met in March and April 2006 to tell stories and take photos about their daily life experiences and the issues that are important to them. The first eight weeks were so successful that the group continued to meet weekly at Street Health for seven months to discuss their experiences and photographs.

Findings from A Day in the Life

Each project meeting brought new insight into the lives and experiences of people living on the streets of the city of Toronto.

“When you are little you never dream, you will grow up to be homeless. I never dreamed I would stay a night at a shelter but all of a sudden there I was. And bed bugs. I thought they were only in nursery rhymes, but all of a sudden actual bed bugs are biting me.”

Disability is one of the ongoing issues for many people who are on the streets or living in insecure housing with low incomes.

“I [eventually] had a psychiatric diagnosis. Found out medication wasn't going to get me un-depressed – I was depressed by the situation I found myself in - unemployed and homeless. ... Some of the people I don't know how they survive, and some of the people, well, they just haven't survived.”

Homeless and marginalized people's needs have not been addressed effectively by government policy.

"Politicians have really dropped the ball on what their role really is. The role of the rulers is the connection to the earth and the well being of the people and it seems our politicians have really forgotten that. And when we don't have good rulers, we don't have good leadership and then everything and everyone suffers."

Having a home is important, and has a big effect on people's health.

"... Home is where the heart is. If I have a room, is that a home? If I am not allowed cooking, hot and cold running water – is that a room or a home? I believe that is still a room. When I am in jail I am in a room, when I am in a hospital I am in a room, but it's not a home. A room is still not a home."

Health is not only a biological condition but also a social one.

"Not everyone on the streets is there 'cause they want to be. I was married, had a good job, had a house and this is where I am right now though. I needed stitches in my head last year 'cause somebody cracked me with a bottle, I sat in the emergency ward for three and a half hours and I saw people go in there with nothing wrong and I just walked out and had buddy just tape up my head, I was alright. You get a lot of hassles, don't have a health card, and then they find out that you're on the street and right away the whole mood changes. And these are people that are supposed to be helping you. I've seen both sides of it now."

Working Towards Social and Policy Change

Using photographs and stories, *A Day in the Life* has been building a comprehensive picture of what the daily experience of homelessness is like and its effects on health and well-being. The project has provided an opportunity for reflection, relationship building, and an opportunity to work together towards social change using the arts.

Meaningful social change and policy change to address the issues that we have been exploring do not happen quickly. Much education is needed. Outreach and education focusing on politicians and the general public have been central activities of the project. The group has created visual and written materials that represent project members' experiences, which have been presented at community events, in written publications, at exhibitions, and in meetings with politicians. We are hopeful that increasing awareness and understanding of the daily lived experiences of homeless people will lead to greater public and political support for policies that truly address homeless and marginalized people's needs.

Our Next Exhibit

Our upcoming exhibit *urgent* will be at the University of Toronto, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, the Centre for Women in Education, January 29, 2007- February 23, 2007.

A Day in the Life Partnership and Contact Information

A day in the life was created through a partnership between Street Health and Professor Nancy Viva Davis Halifax at the Centre for Arts-informed Research at the University of Toronto, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.

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