



## **Systematic Literature Search: Homelessness among Older People**

conducted as part of the SSHRC project:

"Homelessness in late life: growing old on the streets, in shelters and long-term care" (project no 435-2012-1197)

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## **Methodology for a Systematic Search on Homelessness Among Older People**

Note from the authors: This document was created with two readers in mind: those who are interested in the intersections of homelessness and aging, as well as those interested in the details of a systematic review on the topic of homelessness among older people. The main section of this document outlines the methods used to compile a comprehensive list of resources pertaining to homelessness among older people. The appendices that follow provide a more detailed outline of the process of the systematic review in order to provide guidance to researchers wishing to replicate the search. The challenges of conducting a systematic review in this area of research are also discussed. We hope that researchers and students will build on this list in order to develop new insights on the topic. Please feel free to contact us with additional references or your research—we'd be happy to provide a link to relevant projects from our website.

The purpose of this review was to identify and assess the state of literature pertaining to homelessness among older people, and to test whether it was possible to compile a comprehensive list by means of a systematic review (i.e., the 'gold standard' of many journals). It was difficult to identify a broad literature in this new domain of research at the outset of the project. Formal searches identified a selected group of authors publishing most of the work in the area, including J. Bottomley, C. Cohen, M. Crane, A. M. Warnes, and O. Washington. Apart from this, the literature on homelessness in general, and in social gerontology was relatively sparse. In 2010, we began an initial literature review for the project proposal through available databases such as Web of Science, Google, and the Social Sciences Index; we supplemented our findings using a snowball technique. A few years into the project in 2013, we had over 100 articles addressing homelessness among older people. Reviewer comments on a submitted journal article however, prompted us to return to the database in order to conduct a more systematic review. This document details the findings of that review, in light of our previous research report (Grenier, et al., 2013; see <http://aginghomelessness.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Literature-Review-Aging-and-Homelessness.pdf>).

The systematic literature search was conducted using the Web of Science databases in June 2014. Web of Science was accessed through the McMaster University library website, using

McMaster University's institution subscription to the databases. Web of Science collection aggregates scholarly works from five separate indices: 1] Arts & Humanities Citation Index, 2] Science Citation Index Expanded, 3] Social Sciences Citation Index, 4] Conference Proceedings Citation Index – Science, and 5] Conference Proceedings Citation Index – Social Sciences & Humanities. Over 8,000 academic journals are catalogued in these databases.

Our search quickly identified that a straightforward search identifying articles on homelessness among older people could not simply be produced using a combination of search terms queried in the existing databases. Research librarians at McMaster University suggested using complex search strategies and formulas involving all relevant terms of interest. However, we found that once these terms were searched together, very few results would appear, some of which were not relevant to this project. After encountering this problem, a separate librarian advised us that the search was too complex (e.g., the numbers of terms required to capture 'age' and the phenomenon of homelessness), and that we would benefit from a more manual approach. Despite the sophistication of the databases searched, and the complex nature of our search, we needed to return to manual search methods in order to identify relevant articles.

The search began using several key terms used to refer to older adults or later life. These terms included: "*older adult*", "*senior*", "*elder*", "*elderly*", "*old age*", and "*late life*". These terms were paired with a group of terms referring to homelessness. These terms included: "*homeless*", "*homelessness*", "*unhoused*", "*displaced*", "*precariously housed*", "*houseless*", "*marginally housed*" and "*on the street*". This search yielded many results, although upon review many were deemed to be unrelated to the topic of homelessness among older people. A detailed description of this search, as well as a list of relevant results found using this search strategy is included in Appendix A.

We concluded that this initial search, while yielding many relevant results, was too broad. The team made a decision to clarify the search terms to those most directly focused on the question at hand: homelessness among older people. Initial searches involving all of the terms and phrases referring to homelessness (listed above) were examined, and it became clear that in some cases, the search terms produced works that did not directly pertain to older homeless populations.

Many of the identified articles focused on broader issues of homelessness, or housing issues, with little direct link to this review. Our concern was to know more about the specific group of older people who became homeless—this included people who age in conditions of homelessness (e.g., those who ‘age on the streets’) as well as those who became homeless for the first time in late life. What we found, was that many citations included digital ‘tags’ on homelessness or older adulthood, that caused them to appear in search results. While many of these works could be considered generally helpful, they were excluded for being outside our area of interest. That is, they did not help us to identify what was known about homelessness among older people, or the specificities that occurred in relation to age and late life. Also, our funded project focuses on those who are already homeless, rather than those at ‘risk’. To refine the search in order to identify only the most relevant articles, we decided that the most effective search terms to systematically identify relevant content on homelessness among older people would include only the terms “*homeless*”, “*homelessness*”, and “*unhoused*” alongside the list of terms referring to older adults (listed above). This search led to a more focused set of results. More information on this step, as well as a full list of relevant works that were found using this search, is also included in Appendix A.

After a detailed assessment of the results from the initial search, we compared results to the resources that we had previously acquired. It appeared that the systematic review did not yet cover those we had already identified through the snowball technique. We returned to our search terms, in the aim of not missing valuable results by means of conducting a systematic review. In addition to the terms from the initial search, three new terms referring to older adults were used, including “*aging*”, “*ageing*” and “*aged*”. Therefore, the list of terms used to refer to older adults in this updated search was as follows: “*older adult*”, “*senior*”, “*elder*”, “*elderly*”, “*old age*”, “*late life*”, “*aging*”, “*ageing*” and “*aged*” were used in the search. As mentioned above, this broad search allows for all articles mentioning one or more of these key words to appear in the results. In this updated search, we also attempted the search using a different combination of search terms referring to homelessness. The terms “*homeless*”, “*homelessness*”, “*unhoused*”, “*shelter users*”, and “*emergency shelters*” were also included. These terms were searched alongside the age-related terms (listed above).

This search yielded many relevant results, many of which had not been found through previous searches. Specific details on this search, as well as the full list of relevant results that were found using this search, are included in Appendix B. Again, in our review, we made the decision to focus exclusively on older persons who are currently homeless (i.e., those who aged while homeless, and those new to homelessness in late life), rather than individuals who are marginally or precariously housed. The Canadian Homelessness Research Network's four-part definition of *homelessness* states that those who are at risk of becoming homeless are often not considered in the definition of *homeless*. That is, they speak to a slightly different population with different needs. It is for this reason that for the purposes of the current funded project, the search terms "*precariously housed*" and "*marginally housed*" were omitted from the final literature search. This is however, certainly an important area for future research.

In an attempt to compile as comprehensive list of works pertaining to older homeless adults as possible, we combined the relevant results from both the initial search and the updated search (found in Appendices A and B, respectively). Together, the results from these previous searches formed a list of 274 results: 132 relevant results from the initial search (including 4 from the "on the streets" search), and 138 relevant results from the updated search. All duplicates were removed. This left a list of 149 sources that were identified by the systematic review, all directly pertaining to older homeless adults. This comprehensive list produced by means of a systematic review is included at the end of this section. Additionally, we have included a list of English sources that we have found relevant throughout the project, but that did not appear in any of the searches outlined in this review. In fact, some of these sources do not directly relate to older homelessness, and would have been excluded from our systematic review. Nonetheless, we offer them as potential sources of knowledge. These sources, along with a more detailed description, are included in Appendix C. We are also in the process of replicating this search in French.

## Comprehensive List of Relevant Articles

- Produced by Systematic Review (149 Sources)

Abdul-Hamid, W. (1997). The elderly homeless men in Bloomsbury hostels: Their needs for services. *International Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry*, 12(7), 724-727.

Aguilar, R. (2013). Old, female and homeless life on San Francisco's streets for women over 50 is filled with hardships, small: And large. *Nation*, 296(6), 24-26.

Barak, Y., & Cohen, A. (2003). Characterizing the elderly homeless: A 10-year study in Israel. *Archives of Gerontology and Geriatrics*, 37(2), 147-155. doi:10.1016/S0167-4943(03)00043-8

Bicknell, J. (2012). Delivering care for the aged homeless. *Australasian Journal on Ageing*, 31, 5-15. doi:10.1111/j.1741-6612.2012.00602.x

Bissonnette, A. (2001). Elder homelessness - where is the outrage? *Topics in Geriatric Rehabilitation*, 16(4), VIII-IX.

Bissonnette, A., & Hijjazi, K. (1994). Elder homelessness - a community perspective. *Nursing Clinics of North America*, 29(3), 409-416.

Bottomley, J. (2001). Elder homelessness: Part I - introduction. *Topics in Geriatric Rehabilitation*, 16(4), VI-VIII.

Bottomley, J. (2001). Energy assistance programs: Keeping older adults housed and warm. *Topics in Geriatric Rehabilitation*, 17(1), 71-81.

Bottomley, J. (2001). Health care and homeless older adults. *Topics in Geriatric Rehabilitation*, 17(1), 1-21.

- Bottomley, J., Bissonnette, A., & Snekvik, V. (2001). The lives of homeless older adults: Please, tell them who I am. *Topics in Geriatric Rehabilitation, 16*(4), 50-64.
- Brown, R. T., & Steinman, M. (2012). Characteristics of US emergency department visits by older homeless adults: Results from a nationally representative survey. *Gerontologist, 52*, 385-385.
- Brown, R. T., & Steinman, M. A. (2013). Characteristics of emergency department visits by older versus younger homeless adults in the United States. *American Journal of Public Health, 103*(6), 1046-1051. doi:10.2105/AJPH.2012.301006
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- Brown, R. T., Kiely, D. K., Bharel, M., & Mitchell, S. L. (2012). Factors associated with geriatric syndromes in older homeless adults. *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society, 60*, S47-S47.
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- Brown, R. T., Kiely, D. K., Bharel, M., & Mitchell, S. L. (2013). Factors associated with geriatric syndromes in older homeless adults. *Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved, 24*(2), 456-468.
- Brown, R. T., Kiely, D. K., Bharel, M., & Mitchell, S. L. (2013). Use of acute care services among older homeless adults. *Gerontologist, 53*, 37-37.
- Brown, R. T., Kiely, D. K., Bharel, M., Grande, L. J., & Mitchell, S. L. (2013). Use of acute care services among older homeless adults. *Jama Internal Medicine, 173*(19), 1831-1834. doi:10.1001/jamainternmed.2013.6627



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- Brown, R. T., Kimes, R. V., Guzman, D., & Kushel, M. (2010). Health care access and utilization in older versus younger homeless adults. *Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved, 21*(3), 1060-1070.
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## Appendix A – Initial Search

Identifying comprehensive search terms to identify articles on the population group of older people is challenging in any topic related to aging. Medical literature tends to use the term ‘the elderly’, with the terms ‘older’ being used in sociology or social gerontology, and ‘older adult’ in practice contexts. A variety of terms that refer to older people were identified for our search. The terms “*older adult*”, “*senior*”, “*elder*”, “*elderly*”, “*old age*”, and “*late life*” were employed in the systematic search. This initial search was constructed to identify all articles that contained one or more of these terms. This search yielded 1,106,339 results.

In order to identify articles specifically pertaining to homelessness in later life, terms and phrases referring to homelessness were added to the search. Our first attempt was to be as broad and inclusive as possible in order to identify as many articles on the subject as possible. Terms and phrases identified as relevant included “*homeless*”, “*homelessness*”, “*unhoused*”, “*displaced*”, “*precariously housed*”, “*houseless*”, “*marginally housed*” and “*on the street*”. This search yielded 3,696 results, many of which were not directly relevant.

After manually assessing the results, researchers determined that many of the articles found were not directly relevant to topic at hand. In particular, the phrase “*on the street*” was found to yield more irrelevant results than relevant. For example, several articles that appeared in the search results were related to the idea of older adults acting as “eyes on the street” in troubled neighbourhoods. To overcome this, with the goal of a systematic search in mind, a separate search containing only the terms referring to older adults (i.e., those mentioned above) and the phrase “*on the street*” was conducted. This search yielded 76 results. These results were examined manually to determine whether the works were relevant to older homeless populations. Four of the results were identified as relevant to our purposes of identifying the state of the literature on homelessness among older people. The four relevant references are listed below.



### Results from “On the street” Search (4 sources)

Kane, M. N., Green, D., & Jacobs, R. (2013). Perceptions about homeless elders and community responsibility. *Educational Gerontology, 39*(11), 840-855.

doi:10.1080/03601277.2013.767582

Kramer, B., & Barker, J. (1996). Homelessness among older American Indians, Los Angeles, 1987-1989. *Human Organization, 55*(4), 396-408.

Passarella Bretas, A. C., Marcolan, J. F., Rosa, A. d. S., Leao Fernandes, F. S., & Raizer, M. V. (2010). Who told you to grow old and live on the streets? *Revista Da Escola De Enfermagem Da Usp, 44*(2), 476-481.

Pottieger, A., & Inciardi, J. (1981). Aging on the street - drug-use and crime among older men. *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs, 13*(2), 199-211.

After determining that many of the results produced in this search were not relevant to the topic, the search terms were changed. The terms “*older adult*”, “*senior*”, “*elder*”, “*elderly*”, “*old age*”, and “*late life*” were searched alongside the terms “*homeless*”, “*homelessness*”, and “*unhoused*”. This search yielded 771 results. As with the previous search, these results were examined manually to determine their relevance to the topic. A total of 163 results were determined to be directly pertaining to older homeless populations.

This list was then scanned for duplicates. Two references were removed, leaving a total of 161 references. All book reviews were removed as well, but the books that were reviewed were added. This left a total of 132 references. These references are listed below.

**Results from Initial Search (132 Sources)**

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## Appendix B – Updated Search

After a detailed review of the initial search, we identified that a few critical terms were missing from the initial search. Additional age-related terms were added to the search. The terms “*older adult*”, “*senior*”, “*elder*”, “*elderly*”, “*old age*”, “*late life*”, “*aging*”, “*ageing*” and “*aged*” were searched. The search with these additional words yielded 2,619,818 results.

The terms “*homeless*”, “*homelessness*”, “*unhoused*”, “*shelter users*”, and “*emergency shelters*” were also added to the search. The exact search was as follows:

(“*older adult*” or *senior* or *elder* or *elderly* or “*old age*” or “*late life*” or *aging* or *ageing* or *aged*)

AND

(*homeless* or *homelessness* or *unhoused* or “*shelter users*” or “*emergency shelters*”)

The search yielded 1,896 results.

These 1,896 results were examined manually to determine their relevance. A total of 167 references were determined to be directly pertaining to older homeless populations. Once again, duplicates and book reviews were removed. This left a total of 138 citations. These relevant findings are included below.

### Results from Updated Search (138 sources)

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### Appendix C – Other Relevant Sources (84 sources)

The comprehensive list of relevant works was then compared to a list of critical sources identified throughout the project. We identified 84 sources from the project that did not appear in the systematic review. The majority of these sources broadly concern homelessness, although several pertain directly to homelessness in older adults. This list is included below.

Abbott, P., & Sapsford, R. (2005). Living on the margins. *Policy Studies*, 26(1), 29-46.

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