

ABSTRACT

Broke but not without hope: Exploring exits from Housing First and returns to homelessness

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“...he succeeded in giving the impression of being broke but not without hope.”

Nels Anderson, *The Hobo*, 1923

Introduction: This research offers a thick and rich, multidimensional and situational look, into a Housing First program in Charlotte, North Carolina. This dissertation focuses on individuals who have experienced chronic homelessness who exit Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) programs that employ a Housing First (HF) model and return to homelessness. The ultimate goal of my research was to address the gap in knowledge service providers have in housing retention for the chronically homeless and to break the cycle of misunderstanding around why people return to homelessness. In order to understand why individuals who have experienced chronic homelessness may assimilate to a street culture, exit housing, and return to homelessness I drew upon Bahr's (1970) social disaffiliation theory and Maslow's (1943) theory of the hierarchy of needs.

Research questions: 1. What individual factors influence exits from PSH/HF among individuals who have experienced chronic homelessness? 2. What program factors

influence exits from PSH/HF among individuals who have experienced chronic homelessness?

Methods: This study's methodology is a qualitative inquiry that uses certain ethnographic techniques. The combination of prolonged engagement, in-depth interviews, focus groups, and field observations enabled me to examine and analyze what individual and program factors contribute to people leaving housing and returning to homelessness. I conducted two pilot studies for my dissertation research that also contributed to the well being of the target population and provided an avenue for community engagement in Mecklenburg County.

Findings: The major themes for the first research question regarding individual factors are: physiological needs, psychosocial needs, identity, and relationships. The major themes for the second research question regarding program factors are: transitions to housing, formal operations, quality of staff and support services. Findings challenged both Social Disaffiliation Theory and the Hierarchy of Needs in regards to explaining the behavior of the chronically homeless population. Challenges and a critique of these theories are discussed.

