



Is technology of benefit to homeless individuals?

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Abstract

The following brief literature review explores the benefits of technology to homeless people. Technology (e.g. books, magazines, mobile phones, computers) have been found to benefit the homeless by providing information for health-related issues; services provision; allocating free food, venues and shelters; and communicating with friends and family. Further research is needed on the benefits of technology in Scotland. Tackling the root causes of homelessness is the ideal solution to the problem.

Keywords

homeless individuals, technology

Clarification of terms

Homelessness, according to “Section 24 of the Housing (Scotland) Act 1987, as amended, defines homelessness for the purposes of the Act as follows: A person is homeless if he/ she has no accommodation in the UK or elsewhere. A person is also homeless if he/ she has accommodation but cannot reasonably occupy it, for example because of a threat of violence. A person is potentially homeless (threatened with homelessness) if it is likely that he/ she will become homeless within two months. A person is intentionally homeless if he/ she deliberately did or failed to do anything which led to the loss of accommodation which it was reasonable for him/ her to continue to occupy.” (Scottish Government 2018a).

Technology, as defined here, is traditional based which includes books, magazines and newer based such as computers and mobile phones (McGrail et al. 2018).

Background

In Scotland, if individuals are defined as homeless the local councils are legally obliged to allocate permanent accommodation for each applicant. The overall trend in the number of housing applications by homeless individuals has decreased since 2010. For the year 2017/2018 a 1% increase has been noted since the previous eight years. The main reasons given for homelessness are household/relationship breakdown and being asked to leave. Other reasons include, but are not limited to, mental

and physical health issues (tuberculosis, infectious diseases), financial difficulties/ debt/unemployment, lack of supportive networks, drug/alcohol addictions, and anti-social behaviours (Scottish Government 2018a).

In general, health inequalities are prevalent in Scotland with poorer health of those living in deprived areas. Most homeless individuals come from deprived areas. It is important to note that homeless individuals are amongst the most vulnerable in the society with least access to help. According to the Scottish

Government, amongst the health issues amongst those that have experienced homelessness, over 51% did not report substance abuse and/or mental health issues. About 30% of the homeless have experienced mental health issues and 19% had drug and/or alcohol addictions. Six percent of all the homeless individuals experienced both mental health issues and substance addictions (Scottish Government 2018b).

In order to reduce the number of applications related to homelessness, the government has taken a preventive approach which involves providing services related to employability, mental health, money advice, and family mediation. Other charity approaches include relating art projects (drama, writing, art classes, music classes) (With One Voice 2018) to homelessness, providing meals and community (Soul Food Edinburgh 2019). Providing shelters and temporary housing have also been some of the solutions for preventing homelessness (Shelter Scotland 2019). Social Bite is another charity, amongst others, that fights to end homelessness in Scotland by providing food, jobs, housing (Social Bite 2019).

Access to technology

Research on the use of technology in alleviating homelessness is limited. One of the first questions that come to mind is whether homeless people have access to technology given the limited economic capital. A study by Rhoades et al. (2017) conducted in California indicated that majority of the homeless people had cell phones which suggests that technology-based programmes would be useful in alleviating the well being of homeless

people. The ownership of computers and/or tablets amongst the surveyed population was lower which limits the internet usage and writing up of job applications.

Other research by Borchard (2010) in Las Vegas noted that young homeless adults had various kinds of technology with them including DVD players, laptops, mp3 players, and smartphones. Eyrich-Garg (2010, 2011) reported that close to half of the surveyed homeless in Philadelphia had a mobile phone and a computer with internet access in public and/or university libraries. Similarly, Reitzes et al. (2017) found that just over half of the surveyed homeless population in Atlanta had a mobile phone and access to internet.

Uses of technology

Various technological innovations have been found beneficial to the homeless. In the UK, the use of debit and credit cards to purchase various commodities results in less cash at hand that might be shared with a homeless individual. In Oxford, an organization called Greater Change has taken advantage of technology to bypass this issue. Homeless individuals have access to a service that gives them a QR code which then could be scanned by the phones of passers-by that do not have any cash (Greater Change 2019).

Beam (Beam 2019), another charity organization, supports homeless individuals by providing the skills necessary to obtain a job. This is done by online campaigns on Beam to fundraise for skill trainings. Homeless Link (HomelessLink 2019) charity has created an application StreetLink that could be used when a person by the public notes

a rough sleeper and is guided to the appropriate services. Having a phone could also be used for applications such as NextMeal (NextMeal 2019), which helps to identify locations where meals are being served.

Some studies have explored the use of technology in improving health of homeless people. For example, the use of smartphones could have a major impact on the wellbeing of homeless people. Homeless people could also contact emergency services, case workers, various charities involved with homelessness related issues. Homeless people could also get in touch with those that they call friends, family, and loved ones for support (eTrust 2019). Rice et al. (2012) have found that social networking improves the mental health amongst homeless people.

In a review by Sala and Mignone (2014), it was noted that digital technology has been found beneficial in improving mental health, addictions issues and sexual health amongst homeless people.

Technology has also been used for providing education. For example, services in Seattle have used technology to provide homeless people with information on employment, housing, food using either traditional technology such as brochures, pamphlets and digital technology such as cell phones and internet (Woelfer and Hendry 2009).

McGrail et al. (2018) evaluated the use of technology for educational and literacy uses amongst the homeless population in the US. Books and magazines were highly used by homeless people and newer technologies were used but to a lower extent. Some literacy practices using newer technologies (internet,

computers) suggested to be of benefit include writing up resumes, job search skills and housing information.

In Glasgow, a roving digital officer has been assigned to help homeless people with making online benefit applications (reGlasgow 2018).

Limitations to the use of technology

Despite some of the benefits of technology-based interventions, further research should be conducted in Scotland as there is limited knowledge on the topic. As noted in the report by Rhoades et al. (2017), the homeless population ages much faster than the general population which means that homeless people would start exhibiting age related issues such as hearing, vision and cognitive impairments earlier than the general population. As such, some technology-related adaptations need to be made to facilitate the use of technology. Access to technology and how to use the various tools is also a limitation for some of the homeless individuals. Finally, although technology is beneficial to the homeless it does not tackle the root causes for homelessness.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Findings based on the literature indicate that technology, whether traditional or digital, can provide access to information related to health, services, and also provide a means of communication with loved ones. This is all vital for quality of life of homeless people. There are various services that have been established for the homeless that provide access to digital technology. Despite some of the

access to technology, there is still not sufficient access for all homeless people. Even though access to technology may be provided, skill training may be necessary amongst the homeless. Government initiatives have assigned officers that would be able to assist homeless individuals in using digital technology.

As research on the topic is limited in Scotland, further studies would be

necessary to establish the trends of technology use amongst the homeless. Surveys that would take the opinion of homeless people would be necessary to establish the needs and preferences. Further policies and programmes would be needed to establish the positive impacts of technology on the homeless. Training programmes on developing skills would be useful.

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