Digital exclusion of homeless people

Sam Dyce

August 2019

Abstract

The world is getting progressively digitalised but this is causing a greater exclusion for those living on the streets. Digital exclusion is a pressing issue for the homeless community as it denies them the key tools that most take for granted. This briefing looks at research on the effectiveness of the technologies that those whom are traditionally socially excluded have access to and spaces that are meant to increase inclusion. It also highlights investigations that tell us what those within the homeless community feel they need. Through these findings, the briefing identifies the flaws of many of the tools available, showing how they are restrictive and exist in hostile environments. This leads to the conclusion that digital inclusion needs to be designed with the needs of those living on the street in mind and to provide training specific to them as individuals. The work emphasizes the key need for face-to-face interaction and to dispel the negative association that exists between homeless people and the usage of technology.

Keywords

Digital exclusion, digital inclusion, social inclusion, social exclusion, homeless

Key points

- The majority of people living on the streets have access to phones but they are unreliable due to it being dependent on battery, and it risk of being broken or stolen.

- Public spaces are designed in ways that digital exclude the homeless community, requiring money spent to gain access, lacking a welcoming space, and limiting access to the web.

- Attempts at digital inclusion are also limited due to training not being specific to the needs of the people, their goals, and to the disabilities some of them face.

- Funding for effective digital inclusion should create spaces that have the homeless community in mind and that develop them with their personal goals in mind, face-to-face training which will help to avoid a digital underclass.

Background

Digital exclusion is becoming an increasing issue as we moved towards a more digitalised world. A study by the House of Commons indicates that almost 90% of jobs require some form of digital skill (House of Commons Science and Technology Committee, 2016). Those particularly vulnerable are homeless people who along with others are making up what Finley describes as being part of 'the advent of a "digital underclass' (Finley 2018). Homeless people are being left behind. Their social exclusion exacerbated by their digital exclusion. However, as these two are linked, there is hope that digital inclusion can be used to increase social inclusion. Martin (2016) collects data that suggest the two are linked and 'that digital participation has a positive impact on some of the dimensions of social exclusion' (Martin, Hope and Zubairi, 2016). It is therefore important to analyse the effectiveness and limitations of the methods in which homeless people are being digital included.

Findings

1. Mobile access

What much of the selected literature reviewed indicates is that digital inclusion and exclusion within the homeless community is not based on a lack of access to hardware but a more complicated relationship based on the limits of the hardware, e.g. mobile phones. As Williams states in their research, 90% of homeless people own mobile phones (Williams, 2017). This number is also supported by

Wenzel whose study finds that 94% of homeless people use phones, finding their usage being 'remarkably similar between our respondents and same-age Pew Research Center respondents.' The key difference being that 'homeless respondents had slightly higher rates of accessing the Internet on cell phones (49 and 45%)' (Rhodes and Wenzel, 2017). The homeless community is digitally included but use mobile phones rather then laptops or home computers, which means that their access is conditionally on less reliable technology.

The literature indicates that digital exclusion stems less from a deprivation and more from a limitation on the digital access they do have. As argued in the Lemos and Crane report, there is a notion that a homeless person with a phone is somewhat presenting a false image. But the report goes on to argue: 'the public needs to be more comfortable with the notion that digital technology is increasingly a part of homeless people's lives' (Lemos and Crane, 2013). Phones are how homeless people find jobs and connect, and this has been identified as a stigma needed to be overcome into order to help their social inclusion. The report also identifies theft and battery life of the phone as the practical issues homeless people face. The report highlights how the 90% number is misleading as without access to the ability to charge these devises they are useless. It then goes on to point to instances in the US where homeless people have trespassed in order to charge their phones. This as they write 'puts them at risk of altercations, violence, or even arrest' (Lemos and Crane, 2013) This report also shows us how statistics like the 90% can be misleading as while technically correct, it hides the different

relationship the community has to the phones and the risks that exist for them.

Even with phones however, homeless people still face digital exclusion. For example, Lemos and Frankenburg point out phone contracts include data restrictions. Their study's results were that 'respondents were mostly aware that they were often restricted to expensive and limiting payment systems of their phone' (Lemos and Frankenburg, 2015). Therefore, the digital inclusion experienced by homeless people is limited and expensive.

However, this is not to say that providing physical devices is purely ineffectual. A report by Amanda Finely on a project centred on providing laptops to the homeless highlights that 'the organisation Social Box has identified computer access as an effective component to pull individuals out of homelessness' (Finley, 2018). It important that society invests in digital inclusion through hardware as it provides an agency and avenues for people to get themselves back on their feet. However, it is also important to address the issue that hardware is not just limited by the risk of theft or damage, but also by the need for public spaces to access the internet and charge the device.

2. Public access

Much of the digital inclusion in the homeless community is reliant on public spaces. As a report by Heather Williams shows, of those who used the internet, '41% used public buildings ...31% used private wi-fi ... Public wi-fi hotspots were also popular at 29% usage, and only 6% had a 3G contract.' (Williams, 2017). The public sphere is very important to this

community to gain digital inclusion but as much of the literature shows there are a number of issues within it that are causing exclusion.

In the 2013 report by Lemos and Crane, it is established that there are several issues with public Wi-Fi spots in private business. Exclusion can occur due to their limited nature, as these spots are not advertised well and are often not actually free. This means that digital exclusion still occurs, as these spaces are conditional on spending money to stay (Lemos and Crane, 2013).

While the public libraries are the most used as indicated by Williams, they too come with similar limitations to private businesses. As mentioned in the report by Lemos and Frakenburg, participants flagged a number of issues that led to their exclusion. This included: unreliable Internet, too few computers, in addition to the need for a fixed address to be able to join the library, thus blocking many from the resources it provides. A particularly noteworthy issued faced, for its specificity to the homeless community, was that many respondents felt 'excluded from libraries for having too much luggage' (Lemos and Frankenburg, 2015).

In light of this, findings in the Lemon and Crane report indicated that centres designed with homeless people in mind were more effective. As the report states 'one volunteer worker says that homeless people can just "crash" and use the printer and scanner' in such spaces (Lemos and Crane, 2013). The report continues by arguing that, by removing such restrictions, digital inclusion can be achieved as homeless people feel welcomed not stigmatised by the limits. This finding of the report seems

to indicate that by designing a space for them, people have access to digital freedom rather than limits which keep them excluded.

3. Skill access

The literature reviewed also flagged up a lack of skill and of proper training in this skill as being a key component of digital exclusion. The report by Williams discussed how a lack of skill or confidence in skill causes members of the homeless community to disengage from the Internet. (Williams, 2017). This issue was also highlighted in a House of Commons Report, which further placed emphasis on the need of the Government to enact policy to encourage better training and education. It also argued the need for face-to-face support to reach the hardest to reach (House of Commons, 2016).

This was echoed in the report by Lemos and Frankenburg where respondents worried that, as the word became 'digital by default', there would be reduction of trust created by face to face interactions and that this move would make important information harder to access. (Lemos and Frankenburg, 2015)

This report also highlighted how merely training people in digital skills would not help tackle exclusion as the respondents found that the 'training wasn't basic enough or they thought the skills and programmes being taught (for example, Microsoft Office) were not relevant to their experiences and aspirations.' (Lemos and Frankenburg, 2015). This, once more, highlights the finding that digital inclusion is not a universal process. It is also important to note that this shows how the skill issue is not a lack of

engagement with the digital field but an indication that the education process needs to be improved.

4. Health barriers

It is however important to remember that these findings do not reach every part of the homeless community, with those most vulnerable being most susceptible to being at a disadvantage with technology. Wenzel finds that, while we try to see digital solutions with homeless people, it 'may be helpful to be mindful of the myriad intersecting vulnerabilities (e.g. physical/mental health conditions, cognitive deficiencies, trauma) that may complicate an individual's ability to engage effectively with technology (Rhodes and Wenzel, 2017). Programmes need to be put into place to reach these people indication again, that there is no universal solution to digital exclusion.

In terms of health, reports also seem to indicate positive results from digital inclusion. As Martin wrote, 'mental health is positively correlated with Internet access: 49% of those with above average mental health have access to the Internet compared with 38% of those without Internet access' (Martin, Hope and Zubairi, 2016). This paper does however not that this could be correlation not causation. That being said, the findings of other literature does indicate that digital inclusion is linked to social inclusion so there is some evidence to suggest that internet access can improve the wellbeing of homeless people, just as it can for the wider population.

Limitations

There are a number of imitations of this literature review due to the topic and research selected. The topic is complicated, with no universal problem or solution due to necessity of specific case-by-case care in terms of inclusion. Research also becomes dated quickly due to technological advancements. There is also the limitation of the research by country of origin, as social exclusion policy, and economic situation can affect the data surrounding digital exclusion/ inclusion.

The research is also at a point of identifying problems, not analysing success yet.

Conclusion

The data suggest that lack of devices is not the root of the digital exclusion within the homeless community. Rather the literature indicates a lack of effective education that builds confidence and skills, as well as barriers for entry within public spaces that provide Internet access. The findings of the literature indicate a recurring issue of a lack of specialised support. Areas exist but many are not designed with homeless people in mind and therefore contain caveats that perpetuate exclusion. The connection that the literature makes between social and digital exclusion indicates that countering these with digital inclusion could help homeless to be social included also.

The studies of the literature find that homeless people desire places where they feel welcomed, pointing to face-to-face interactions as preferable, and the need for skill sharing that encourages those who feel uncomfortable with technology and develops people's skills in a meaningful way.

Recommendations

Based on the literature reviewed the recommendations are to create welcoming spaces for digital inclusion for the homeless community, both in regards to places and skills to access the Internet. Public spaces need to adapt to become less restrictive and more inclusive.

Additionally, the data suggests that digital inclusion through face-to-face and active skill programmes would be a great source for social inclusion. This is being done through the Re:Connect project at People Know How. Indeed, this project addresses a number of the issues raised in the literature. For example, in the Lemos and Frakenburg's report, there is mention of complaints to the reduction of face-to-face and of skills teaching that was too general are addressed. Re:Connect provides 'strength focused' support looking to build upon peoples strengths and improve those skills for their aspirations and needs.

The project also addresses the unwelcoming spaces for homeless communities as it seeks to build peer-to-peer support, encouraging people who they teach to teach others. The project also provides a number of free workshops where people can provide tips. All this provides a support network that those excluded can rely on, as well as be comfortable and therefore encouraged to use.

Based on the literature, there appears to be a lack of support with regards to open-access public spaces. Therefore, it would be beneficial to have funding for projects where digital inclusion is at the forefront of consideration.

Another recommendation based on this information would be to focus on de-stigmatising of the image of homeless people with access to technology. Providing the homeless community with greater access or support for their devices would help both digital and social inclusion. Providing chargers, laptops, and open and unrestricted access to the Internet can only help them survive and thrive in a growing digital world. If the world must be "digital by default" then it is the responsibility of society to make sure that this is inclusive.

1. Dorney Smith, S. (2017). *Digital Health Inclusion for People Who Have Experienced Homelessness*. [online] London: Pathway. Available at: https://www.pathway.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Digital-Inclusion-Report-Final-for-web.pdf [Accessed 4 Apr. 2019].

2. Finlay, A. (2018). *Preventing Digital Exclusion from Online Justice*. [online] London: Justice. Available at: https://2bquk8cdew6192tsu41lay8t-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Preventing-Digital-Exclusion-from-Online-Justice.pdf [Accessed 4 Apr. 2019].

3. House of Commons Science and Technology Committee (2016). *Digital Skill Crisis*. London: House of Commons. Available at: https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmsctech/270/270.pdf [Accessed 4 Apr. 2019].

4. Lemos and Crane (2013). The potential for empowering homeless people through digital technology. [online] London: Lemos and Crane. Available at: https://www.lemosandcrane.co.uk/resources/LemosandCraneDigitalEmpowerment.pdf [Accessed 4 Apr. 2019].

5. Lemos, G. and Frakenburg, S. (2015). Trends and Friends: Access, use, and benefits of digital technology for homeless people and ex-homeless people. [online] London: Lemos and Crane. Available at: https://lankellychase.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Trends-and-Friends-2015.pdf [Accessed 4 Apr. 2019].

6. Means B, Wang H, Young V, Peters VL, Lynch SJ. STEM-focused high schools as a strategy for enhancing readiness for postsecondary STEM programs. J Res Sci Teach. 2016;53(5):709–36.

7. Martin, C., Hope, S. and Zubairi, S. (2016). The Role of Digital Exclusion in Social Exclusion. [online] Edinburgh: Carnegie UK Trust. Available at: https://d1ssu070pg2v9i.cloudfront.net/pex/carnegie_uk_trust/2016/09/LOW-2697-CUKT-Digital-Participation-Report-REVISE.pdf [Accessed 4 Apr. 2019].

8. Rhodes, H. and Wenzel, S. (2017) No Digital Divde? Technology use among homeless adults. Journal of Social Distress and the Homeless, [online] 26(1), pp.73-77. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/10530789.2017.1305140 [Accessed 4 Apr. 2019].

9. Williams, H. (2017). An investigation into access to digital inclusion for healthcare for the homeless population. [online] NHS Digital. Available at: https://amhp.org.uk/app/uploads/2018/11/Digital-Inclusion-and-Homeless-People.pdf [Accessed 4 Apr. 2019].

Contact People Know How

Edinburgh Palette
525 Ferry Road
Edinburgh
EH5 2FF

www.peopleknowhow.org

0131 569 0525

contactus@peopleknowhow.org

/peopleknowhow

@PKHinnovation

@peopleknowhow

/PeopleKnowHow1