

# BEST PRACTICES FOR ECONOMIC EMPOWERING OF THE HOMELESS

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## OVERVIEW

Aiming at economic empowering of the homeless through providing a tailored job, this conceptual paper examines existing work-related interventions for the homeless in terms of main concepts derived from five theoretical frameworks. These concepts include supportive work process/environment, critical financial education, engagement, and integrating of mental services.

## OBJECTIVES

- To increase the knowledge regarding application of theoretical frameworks in developing innovative and appropriate interventions for the homeless
- To improve interventions for teaching young social workers about how to apply theoretical frameworks in practice aimed at ending homelessness

## BACKGROUND

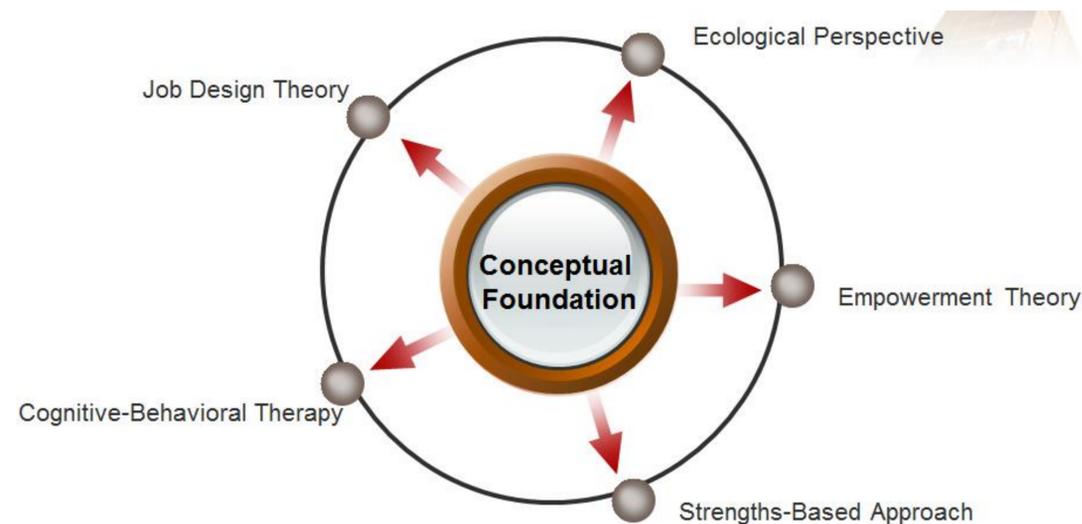
The focus of this conceptual paper is economic empowerment of the homeless by providing an appropriate job. Economic problems affect the homeless physical and mental health, social position, and family functioning (Ward, 1993; National Center on Family Homelessness, 2007). The most important need indicated by the homeless living in a shelter was a job (Burt et al., 1999). Relatively few studies examine employment for them. Some characteristics of homeless people including substance abuse, mental issues, insufficient job skills and education, self-blame, and criminal records (Burt et al., 1999; Radey & Wilkins, 2011) indicate that full-time and long-term jobs might not be proper for them (Shaheen & Rio, 2007). Thus, the research question is: What is the tailored job for homeless people in terms of format, content, and approach? In this case, for developing a tailored job, important components of four theoretical frameworks of job design, ecological, empowerment, and cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) are discussed, and job-related interventions are examined in terms of these components.

## CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATION

According to job design theory, to have a satisfying job, content (i.e. significance and autonomy), environment (i.e. work process, common perceptions and structure of organization), and work relationships have to be considered (Hackman & Oldham, 1980). This theory highlights the importance of work format, and supportive work environment to understand specific characteristics of the homeless. This is consistent with the ecological theory. Looking at the person in the larger context, ecological perspective underlines dynamic interactions among multiple levels including intrapersonal, interpersonal, community and structural levels (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Empowerment theory is also useful for developing an appropriate employment for the homeless. This theory emphasizes on improving economic, personal, social, and educational capabilities (Turner, 2011), which leads to increasing engagement and responsibility in changing the community (Sadan, 1997). Then, engaging in change process is fundamental in this framework. Another important concept in this theory is knowledge and critical consciousness (Freire, 1970; Zimmerman, 2000). In this case, Freire (1970) highlights the role of popular, understandable and relevant education. To sustain a job, the homeless need to gain financial literacy.

Finally, because of substance abuse and mental issues, taking into an account theoretical model of CBT is beneficial. Some interventions for the homeless, despite of being expensive, are not effective. For example, Housing First interventions have not been effective enough, because homeless people need job and social skills to maintain their house (Stergiopoulos et al., 2014). Therefore, it is important to improve social and cognitive-behavioral skills simultaneously with implementation of the other programs. Highlighting interrelated relationships among beliefs, thoughts, emotions and behaviors, CBT model is important for improving mental health and quality of life, and for addressing substance abuse (Beck, 1995; Butler, Chapman, Forman, & Beck, 2006; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2014). Briefly, to develop a tailored job for the homeless, the main components of abovementioned theories including supportive work environment/format, engagement, financial literacy, and social and cognitive-behavioral skills should be considered.

FIGURE 1-CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATION



## DISCUSSION

In this section, existing work-related interventions for the homeless are examined in terms of the main concepts of abovementioned theories.

- **Supportive work environment/format.** Ferguson (2012) establishes an intervention for homeless youth called social enterprise intervention, and indicates that integration of mental services with vocational trainings is useful. He also highlights the importance of supportive community for successful transition to employment. Improvement in employability, motivation and life satisfaction were benefits of this intervention (Ferguson, 2012).
- **Engagement.** Several studies show the importance of being involved in the services. For example, Shaheen and Rio (2007) mention that conflict in goals and expectations between homeless trying to get job and service providers leads to unsuccessful employment interventions.
- **Education.** The only intervention highlighted the importance of critical education is socio-economic empowerment (SEE) designed by Hawkins and Kim (2011). Although Hawkins and Kim (2011) believe literacy and education are not enough to address complicated issue of poverty, one advantage of SEE is to enhance financial literacy including economic experiences, barriers, and planning.
- **Social and cognitive-behavioral skills.** Himle et al. (2014) designed a work-related CBT for homeless and unemployed people with anxiety disorders, and compared that with regular vocational services. The result demonstrates that work-related CBT has significant positive effects on job search, self-efficacy, and decreasing functional impairments (Himle et al., 2014).

## CONCLUSION

Applying different theoretical frameworks to develop an appropriate employment for the homeless is important. Each theory highlights specific components that should be taken into an account. For example, job design theory highlights the importance of supportive and flexible work environment and format. Having control over the process of job through engagement is derived from empowerment theory. Further, financial literacy is significant to improve critical consciousness that is consistent with empowerment theory. Finally, mental services have to be integrated in any interventions tailored to the homeless. It is recommended to examine and incorporate the homeless perspectives on employment expectations, and desired work environment to develop better interventions.

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### How to cite this poster:

Makki Alamdari, S. (2017, April). *Best practices for economic empowering of the homeless*. Poster presented at 21<sup>st</sup> Annual PhD Spring Symposium, Indianapolis, IN, 2017. Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University School of Social Work.