

# Article Summary

## *Bereavement in the Context of Homelessness: A Rapid Review (2023)*

It is common for the bereaved who are experiencing homelessness to be unrecognized grievers in their communities and not be adequately supported in their bereavement. To be able to better support individuals who are experiencing homelessness and bereavement, we need to understand how bereavement is experienced in the context of homelessness.

This rapid review gathered published information from 17 references on how bereavement is experienced within the context of homelessness (from 509 references imported for screening).

### Four themes identified for understanding the bereavement experience were:



***Bereavement:  
A Risk Factor for Homelessness***  
Common for people to connect their bereavement to the time they felt life “fell apart” (i.e., was the turning point for transitioning to homelessness).



***Increased Frequency of Death***  
There was a high frequency of deaths of people they cared about during their experiences of homelessness.



***Anticipatory Grief***  
Especially for those with pets who were experiencing homelessness.



***Ways of Processing Grief***  
It can be very difficult for bereaved individuals to process their grief while concurrently experiencing homelessness. Some coping mechanisms mentioned were: talking with shelter staff, being around their pets, memorials, and more avoidant or escapist means of coping (such as the use of drugs and alcohol to cope).

### Current practices used for support were themed into:



#### ***Memorials***

These memorials can be in shelters and other housing services, or larger public settings. Creating space for memorials can provide a safe avenue for people to grieve together and promote collective mourning, which can build a sense of community aimed at reducing social exclusion during bereavement.



#### ***Advocacy***

Provides an opportunity to make meaning from the deaths by challenging social injustices. As a form of advocacy, some memorial services were created to be more public, raising awareness of inequities existing for both death and bereavement in the context of homelessness.



#### ***Trauma-Informed Care***

The cornerstone of practice working in sectors supporting those who are experiencing homelessness.

## Themes for gaps and barriers to support were:

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### ***Systemically Overlooking Death and Bereavement: Preparing staff***

Service providers working with populations who are experiencing homelessness claim that staff orientations and training do not typically include knowledge of bereavement, death, and palliative concerns, and they do not tend to enter the workforce prepared to provide support for bereavement. Additionally, staff can have their own bereavement experiences in relation to the death of a client. Staff can have overwhelming grief after a client's death and need support in the workplace.



### ***Environmental Features Accompanying Experiences of Homelessness***

The exhaustion and anxieties of survival and adapting to homelessness may leave bereaved individuals with little energy to engage in processing their grief. Some difficulties mentioned were: lack of bereavement support in general, anger and hostility towards an unjust society because of the lack of services, not being able to afford to bury or cremate the deceased, not being able to store or keep the belongings of the deceased, and their living circumstances (e.g., unpleasant and unsafe shelter conditions, rigid shelter rules) when experiencing homelessness.

## Discussion

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There was a dearth of information specifically addressing the dual experience of bereavement and homelessness. The articles lacked attention to detailed or in-depth explorations of the varying dimensions of bereavement in the context of homelessness, as well as frameworks of care. Most articles reported were designed to investigate other topics outside these specific areas of interest. Overall, this review highlights the importance of providing better bereavement support for those housed, unhoused, and staff who serve those who are unhoused.

Research has begun by our team to explore how to best support bereaved individuals experiencing homelessness with their grief.

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