

Research Summary

The use of memorials for those bereaved and experiencing homelessness in Kelowna, British Columbia, Canada

Very little research has explored how people experiencing homelessness grieve after losing someone, or how memorials can support them. Memorials can help people process loss by offering a place to remember and honour those who have died. Community memorials can also bring people together, as they are shared with others and can help people feel less alone in their grief.

01

To develop a better understanding of grief in the context of homelessness, **the BC Centre for Palliative Care and the Kelowna Homelessness Research Centre conducted in-person interviews in Kelowna, British Columbia, Canada, in 2023.**

02

After the study, a closing event was organized by members of the research team and the Lived Experience Circle on Homelessness (LECoH) to honour the bereaved in this community.

03

We developed a memorial art piece together, which was suggested by LECoH members - a white shopping cart with the initials NFA on the front, which stands for No Fixed Address. At the event, people took time to adorn the cart with the names of those they had lost.

The cart was located at Outdoor Sheltering Site 4 (OS4), an overnight sheltering location on the rail trail, beside a memorial grave dedicated to a beloved community member who died. The white cart remains in place today and continues to be cared for and respected by the community. There are now discussions about making it a permanent community memorial.



The story of this memorial is also shared in the documentary film *No Fixed Address: The White Cart Memorial*. More information about the film can be found at whitecart.ca.

Findings

For individuals living in precarious housing or homelessness, bereavement may be shaped by instability, stigma, displacement, and limited access to formal supports. The memorial grave and white cart at OS4 represent community-based responses to loss. This research examines how these memorials are understood, experienced, and envisioned by those most directly affected. Semi-structured interviews were completed in March 2025 with 22 participants. The findings are organized into four interrelated themes:

Grieving While Experiencing Homelessness


Participants described grief as compounded by the instability of their circumstances. The deaths of community members were not isolated events; they were layered onto ongoing experiences of marginalization, displacement, and insecurity.

Barriers to bereavement included:


Limited access to information about deaths and memorial plans


Lack of transportation to attend services outside the site



Structural policies or bylaw restrictions that shape what is permitted on-site



Emotional fatigue from repeated or cumulative losses


Essential Qualities for Envisioning Future Memorials

Participants shared diverse preferences and perspectives when asked about essential qualities for future memorial activities.

Three sub-themes were generated:


Importance of Location
Physical placement influenced whether memorials felt stable, respected, and enduring. Some expressed concern about the longevity of existing memorials and how relocation or site changes might affect them.


Increasing Awareness and Communication About Memorial Practices
Participants described gaps in information, including a perceived lack of formal communication regarding when someone dies and how memorialization plans are developed.


Expressions of Care Within the Community
Participants emphasized care and responsibility from within the community, expressing willingness to help maintain and improve memorial spaces. They envisioned memorials as community-maintained spaces reflecting agency, collective stewardship, and mutual care.

Agency and Meaning-Making

Participants described varied perceptions of their ability to influence the memorials. Some felt their agency was constrained, shaping what could be built or displayed, but others described how artistic and creative expression fostered empowerment.

Positive Impacts of Memorial Engagement

Regardless of who initiated the memorials, participants described meaningful positive impacts associated with the memorial grave and the white cart. They described how these spaces can foster connection and solidarity, validate grief that may otherwise go unrecognized, create opportunities for ritual and reflection, and provide a sense of continuity amidst instability.

“It gives people a place to go in and speak to you know, the people we have lost or just have somewhere to grieve over you know the loss we have, you know down here because it's not just about the ones we we've lost, but as well as losing our stuff...We grieve with that, with having to start over continuously.”
-Participant

Conclusion and Implications

This research underscores that grieving while experiencing homelessness is shaped by compounding losses, structural barriers, and social marginalization. Memorials are sites of remembrance, community connection, and meaning-making.

Participants' insights suggest several key considerations for future action.

01

Center lived experience in memorial design

Memorials should reflect the realities and preferences of those directly affected.

02

Prioritize location and longevity

Thoughtful placement can communicate respect and stability.

03

Improve communication and transparency

Clear processes around death notifications and memorial planning can enhance inclusion.

04

Support community-led stewardship

Enabling individuals to design, maintain, and shape memorials affirms agency and dignity.

05

Recognize creative expression as healing

Artistic engagement can empower individuals and reshape narratives of marginalization.

Ultimately, memorial practices at OS4 offer insight into how communities experiencing homelessness care for one another in the face of loss. By listening to participants' perspectives, service providers, policymakers, and community partners can develop more responsive approaches that honour grief, strengthen connection, and uphold the humanity of those navigating bereavement under conditions of profound precarity.

These findings are preliminary results from an ongoing study. A full manuscript detailing the methodology, complete analyses, and final conclusions is currently in preparation and will be submitted for peer-reviewed publication.

For more information, please contact Joshua Black at jblack@bc-cpc.ca

This research was collected on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territory of the Syilx Okanagan Nation, in what is colonially known as Kelowna, BC, Canada.

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