

Editorial

The Struggle to End Homelessness in Canada: How we Created the Crisis, and How We Can End it

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Abstract: The current Canadian response to homelessness focuses on prevention, rapid transition out of homelessness, and the provision of emergency services. However, until the structural conditions that create and perpetuate homelessness are addressed, efforts to end homelessness will be limited at best. In this editorial, the director of the Canadian Homelessness Research Network and the Homeless Hub proposes key steps toward developing a more comprehensive approach to ending homelessness in Canada.

Keywords: Homelessness, Canada, emergency response, research, service model, Canadian response to homelessness

INTRODUCTION

Canada is a country of contradictions. On the one hand, Canada is a prosperous nation of over 30 million people, with over 80% of the population living in urban areas. The Organization for Economic Development and Co-Operation (OECD) sites Canada for its strong economic performance, including having recorded national budget surpluses for the past 11 years [1], an unusual feat amongst OECD nations. We are a nation with a strong health care system and social programs. And yet we experience a homelessness crisis.

Though there have long been impoverished communities in cities and rural areas across the country as well as a persistent and growing gap between rich and poor, it is only in recent years that large numbers of people living in extreme poverty have been vulnerable to losing their homes. The evolution of homelessness from a problem afflicting a small number of single males to a 'crisis' affecting a diverse population of individuals and families is a relatively recent occurrence beginning in the 1980s and accelerating in the 1990s [2]. We do know how we got here – a number of significant structural changes in the economy, and more significantly, shifts in government policy have led to a cut in support for low-income individuals and families, and a reduction in the affordable housing stock.

The increasing number of visibly homeless people living on the streets and in parks across the country began to draw the attention of the general public, the news media and politicians by the mid-1990s. The emergence of a homelessness problem - what was described at the time as a 'national disaster' - resulted in a scramble by community groups and governments to put in place a range of emergency programs and services to assist people who found themselves without a home. It can be argued, however, that in spite of the creativity and innovation that characterized

many of these programs, the 'emergency response' did not have a significant impact on the homelessness problem as demonstrated through a definitive reduction in numbers.

In recent years, there has been a shift in the Canadian response to homelessness, one that now privileges solutions that are more strategic and which focus on prevention and rapid transitions out of homelessness, in addition to emergency services. While these changes are welcome, until the structural conditions that produce and sustain homelessness in Canada are addressed, our ability to truly confront this crisis will be limited at best.

THE EMERGENCE OF HOMELESSNESS AS A PROBLEM IN CANADA

In the book *Finding Home*, Hulchanski *et al.* argued that while there have long been people who were homeless or under-housed in Canada, homelessness has emerged as a 'social problem' only relatively recently [2]. In fact, for most of the latter part of the 20th century, governments in Canada demonstrated, both through policy and practice, a commitment to providing adequate housing and supports for low income Canadians and individuals in crisis. In the period following World War II, the Canadian government increased the housing supply through key programs that included government insured mortgages, investment in social housing, and subsidies for development of rental housing [2]. These changes ensured there was a sufficient, affordable supply in most communities across the country.

There is no doubt that many of the social and economic factors that more generally contribute to homelessness today also existed at that time. Throughout the country, many people were living in poverty in urban and rural areas, and also on aboriginal reserves. Mental health and health problems, as well as addictions, created challenges for people who lacked the necessary income and access to appropriate services. Family violence affected women and children. Nevertheless, while there is no denying that many people were living in poverty in Canada, low incomes coupled with individual stressors (loss of jobs, evictions,

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health problems etc.) did not inevitably mean that individuals and families had to face the prospect of long term homelessness. For the most part, an adequate supply of affordable housing existed. This is because throughout most of the post-war period, there was a strong commitment by Canadians and their elected representatives to ensure there was adequate housing. While not enshrined in law or the constitution, there was certainly popular support for the idea that a prosperous country such as Canada could and should ensure that all citizens had access to safe, clean affordable shelter.

However, beginning in the 1980s and accelerating through the 1990s, a transformation began to take place. Global and domestic changes in the economy (trade liberalization, deindustrialization), coupled with profound changes in government social and housing policies had a direct impact on the growth of poverty [3, 4] and began to lead to growing numbers of people winding up on the streets or in emergency shelters because they lacked access to safe, affordable housing. Hulchanski has described this as a shift from a policy of rehousing to one of dehousing [2]. Underlying these changes was the embracing of neo-liberal economic policies by governments at the federal and provincial levels [3, 4]. This took the form of a demand for 'smaller government', lower taxes on income and corporations, privatization of government services [5], and free trade agreements such as NAFTA. Coupled with these economic policies was a steady roll back of social spending – though not necessarily government spending as a whole.

The dismantling of Canada's national housing strategy had the most profound impact on homelessness. This was part of a broader strategy by the Federal government not only to shift its housing policy in favor of home ownership (including a range of government funded subsidy programs) [6], but also as a means to drastically cut spending in order to balance the budget. In practice, this meant cuts in federal funding transfers to the provinces, who were then forced to drastically cut their own program spending in housing and social spending. While such government cutbacks over the past fifteen years have undoubtedly contributed to the string of eleven consecutive budget surpluses (ending in 2009), the notion of 'surplus' is illusory. It came at the expense of a growing infrastructure deficit, most particularly in the area of housing.

The elimination of our national housing program began with the gradual reduction in spending on affordable and social housing (including support for co-op housing) in the 1980s, culminating in the termination of spending on new affordable housing stock by the Federal government in 1993 (though subsidies on the mortgages of existing social housing continued) [7]. In 1996, the federal government transferred responsibility for social housing to provincial governments, leaving Canada as virtually the only major developed nation without a fully funded national commitment to housing.

The erosion of our affordable housing and social housing stock, which began in the 1980s, was now in full swing. Shapcott writes that in 1982, all levels of government funded (annually) 20,450 new social housing units. By 1995, the number dropped to around 1000, with numbers slowly climbing to 4393 by 2006 [8]. While the private sector has

increased the overall supply of housing by building a large supply of ownership housing since that time, it has not responded to the need for more affordable housing by increasing the supply of rental housing, for instance. In fact, the opposite has occurred – in cities across the country, there has been an aggregate loss of rental housing with apartments and rooming houses being demolished or rapidly converted to condominiums. Furthermore, as neighborhoods have become gentrified and home ownership encouraged (through low interest rates) the profitability of the condo market has soared.

Accompanying the reduction in affordable housing stock were significant shifts in income patterns. Evidence from Statistics Canada census data [9] shows that while there was an overall increase in wealth over the previous quarter century, this growth has been for the most part concentrated in the upper quintile. Census data indicates that earnings for full-time middle-income earners stagnated and declined for those at the bottom, in large part because of wage suppression, benefits reduction, the growth of part time work and the deindustrialization of the Canadian economy.

These inequities in income distribution were further exacerbated by reductions in Government support for low income Canadians during this time [3, 9]. The introduction of Canada Health and Social Transfer in 1995 resulted in a substantial reduction in federal funding of health, post-secondary education and social welfare services – again, a move justified by the need to balance the budget [10]. Direct transfers to individuals and families through Federal benefits (including Family Allowance, Old Age Security and Employment Insurance Benefits, etc), reached 6.3% of the GDP in 1993, were reduced to 3.8% of the GDP by 2008 [5]. In the context of perceived concerns regarding welfare fraud reported in the conservative media at the time, governments in many jurisdictions sought to 'restructure' welfare programs, often in the form of deep cuts in benefits. The province of Ontario, for instance, slashed welfare rates by 22.5% in 1997 [4], with only minor cost of living increases since.

Overall, these cuts had a profound and disproportionate impact on low-income earning sub-populations, including single parent women, visible minorities and new Canadians. One manifestation of the increase in poverty has been the growth in the use of food banks, with over 700,000 users in 2006, an increase of 91% since 1989 [11]. In addition, the reduction of rental housing market availability combined with stagnating or dropping incomes, has meant that during this period, more and more Canadians were paying a larger percentage of their income on housing. The list of people on the City of Toronto's social housing waiting list grew to over 67,000 by 2006 [12].

Yet, the neo-liberal policies and economic shifts described above were embraced with the promise that economic growth would benefit all members of society. Market solutions were touted as the route to ensuring adequate housing, based on the premise that with proper incentives, the private sector would step in and build affordable housing. At the same time, it was believed that tax cuts and restructuring the Canadian economy would lead to a growth in wealth, and that this wealth would trickle down to not only the middle class, but the very poor as well. These

market solutions to social problems such as poverty, never materialized.

In fact, one could argue that these transformations led to a growth in extreme poverty. With less safe, affordable rental housing on the market, a declining and underfunded social housing stock and no government commitment to ensure housing for all, people with low incomes experiencing personal crises have become more and more vulnerable to homelessness. During this time, the number of people who wound up living on the streets and in parks in communities across Canada (including families, women and youth) began to grow quite dramatically, putting pressure on the homelessness infrastructure that was largely set up to serve single adult men. The homelessness service infrastructure was not sufficient to respond to this rapid growth in numbers, nor designed to effectively respond to the needs of specific sub-populations such as youth, women, and ethno-racial minorities (particularly Aboriginal persons).

In cities across Canada, homelessness became a more visible problem on city streets, in parks and other public spaces. As a result, more and more people became aware of the growing crisis, leading to more news coverage of the issue and demands for politicians to do something, anything. "Moral panics" about squeegeers and panhandlers began to be played out in the media in cities like Toronto and Montreal, where this highly visible form of poverty became framed as a noticeable manifestation of urban decay [13, 14]. Homeless squeegeers and panhandlers were often depicted as dangerous and bad individuals avoiding real work (reminiscent of 19th century concerns about 'street urchins') and as a threat to downtown businesses, tourism and urban life in general decay [13-15].

As the crisis grew, groups across Canada emerged to advocate for a response to homelessness, perhaps most notably the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee, which campaigned vigorously to have the homelessness problem declared a National Disaster. Governments at the municipal, local and national level began to debate the homelessness problem, and countless communities attempted to respond to the growing visibility of poverty. The City of Toronto undertook a major review of the issue, producing a report that highlighted key causes and potential solutions [16]. Canada now had a full-blown homelessness 'crisis'.

RESPONDING TO HOMELESSNESS

There are a range of approaches and strategies to confront homelessness, each of which has merits. First, there is the focus on prevention, which means to invest in supports and the coordination of services so as to reduce the likelihood that people will become homeless in the first place. This may include rent supplements (for people with low incomes and/or who experience an economic crisis), and seamless service delivery to allow people who experience health, addictions and mental health problems, for instance, to obtain and maintain their housing and receive the services they need. It also means ensuring that there is an adequate supply of affordable housing to reduce the prospect that people living in poverty may be 'one cheque away' from becoming homeless.

Another approach focuses on "managing" people while they are homeless, through an investment in emergency

services and supports such as shelters, drop-in centers and soup kitchens. The goal of emergency responses is to address basic and pressing needs to lessen the immediate impact of homelessness on individuals and communities.

Finally, there are approaches that focus on supporting peoples' transition out of homelessness. This includes a variety of strategies, including outcomes-based case management, motivational counselling, as well as supportive, supported and transitional housing programs. "Housing First" has emerged as a key strategy in North America, the premise being that the best response to homelessness is to house people immediately (everyone is deemed to be 'housing ready'), and then surround them with the kinds of supports they need.

Ideally, prevention, emergency responses and programs that support transitions out of homelessness must all be part of the solution. Such responses must be coordinated and strategic, and not left up to chance or ad hoc program development. Finally, strategic responses to homelessness should aspire to be evidence-based and sensitive to the diverse needs and choices of the population. There is no "one size fits all" solution to homelessness. We must aspire to understand what works and for whom, and research and program evaluation must play a role in identifying issues and determining the most effective responses.

THE CANADIAN RESPONSE TO HOMELESSNESS

In the face of a crisis, things rarely roll out in such a coordinated fashion. This is certainly true of the Canadian response to homelessness. As the homelessness problem grew rapidly throughout the 1980s and 1990s, there was a growing chorus of calls for government, communities and the non-profit sector to do something. In communities across Canada, individuals, service providers, faith groups, the non-profit sector and local governments worked to develop a range of services that responded to the immediate needs of people who are homeless, including emergency shelters, drop-in centers, counselling, social supports, and in some cases health supports.

These efforts were supported by the National Homelessness Initiative (NHI), which was launched in 1999 by the Government of Canada as a three year initiative with a budget allocation of \$753 million. This program emphasized the importance of community responses to homelessness through providing funds to 61 designated community entities, which would make decisions and disperse funds locally. The stated goal of NHI has been to make "strategic investments in community priorities and a planning process that encourages cooperation between governments, agencies and community-based organizations to find local solutions for homeless people and those at-risk." [17]. While this initiative emphasized the importance of community-based solutions, it did not proscribe strategic approaches such as the US Interagency Council's 10 year plans to end homelessness.

The NHI, now rechristened the Homelessness Partnering Strategy, has shown great leadership through providing funding and support for communities across the country. It is worth pointing out that one of the ongoing strengths of the Federal Government's strategy is its commitment to evidence-based practice, one that encourages government

and service providers to draw on the best research and program models to support policy and programming. Unfortunately, this initiative is continually hamstrung by inadequate funding and short term renewals that make almost every year of the program a “sunset year”.

At the provincial level, the record has been rather uneven. While the ten provinces are largely responsible for housing, social services and health care, very few have well formulated and funded strategies to combat or end homelessness. Ontario, Canada’s largest province, has never had a homelessness secretariat, nor a coordinated strategy to end homelessness.

It is at the municipal and community levels that much of the innovation and action takes place. As the homelessness crisis has worsened, many Canadians in communities across the country have risen to the task of addressing this serious issue through the development of programs and strategies to deal with homelessness in their communities. In many cases these strategies have brought out the best, highlighting innovation coupled with compassion. At the same time, the lack of a strong national strategy and the reliance on community-based initiatives has often resulted in a fragmented, uncoordinated response to homelessness and the over-reliance on an investment in an expansion of emergency services (shelters and drop-ins).

Finally, it is worth pointing out (because this often goes unstated) that along with the provision of supports, the emergency response to homelessness also includes law enforcement. We have witnessed many jurisdictions in Canada (and the US as well) respond to the visible ‘inconvenience’ of homelessness with measures that have sought to restrict the rights of homeless people to inhabit public spaces such as streets and parks. For instance, several provinces and municipalities have enacted laws that have essentially criminalized the income generating activities of this population. The rather ironically titled “Safe Streets Act” of Ontario [18] was enacted purportedly to protect the public, ignoring the fact that people who are homeless are much more likely to be victims of crime [15]. Research has demonstrated that people who engage in such income generating activities do so because they provide ‘cash in hand’ on a daily basis needed to meet subsistence needs [19]. Rather than having the dubious effect of pushing homeless people into the formal economy, such policing practices invariably burden homeless people with fines that they cannot pay, often with the result that they wind up in jail. In the end, the rush to criminalize such activities reflects the worst of the Canadian response to homelessness, compounding the problems of marginalized people already struggling to survive.

If one were to characterize the first ten years of the Canadian response to homelessness (1995-2005), it would be that we have placed too much emphasis on “managing” the crisis, through the development of a broad range of community-based emergency services. This is not to say that an investment in emergency responses isn’t necessary, nor that preventive and transitional programs and strategies have been absent from the equation. Rather there has been a lack of balance in the Canadian response, in that there has not been a sufficient investment in preventive programs or strategies to support people to move quickly out of

homelessness. What does all this add up to? While demonstrating some really creative initiatives, our response has developed in an ad hoc manner, reflecting a fragmented approach that has overall lacked coherence. It is a case where the whole is definitely not greater than the sum of its parts.

THE MOVEMENT TOWARDS A STRATEGIC RESPONSE TO HOMELESSNESS

Our “made in Canada” approach to homelessness is unique in the world, characterised by creativity, commitment and community involvement, yet we haven’t ended homelessness, and in many cities the problem has continued to grow. Calgary, for instance, has seen its homeless population grow by 650% between 1997 and 2007 [20]. As the homelessness crisis has continued over the past decade, people have begun to seriously question the effectiveness of our responses. It has become clear that our emphasis on the emergency response has not been enough. Building more and bigger shelters (there are several with over 600 beds) has not helped reduce homelessness. As Laird has argued, “The limitations of yesterday’s solutions are now apparent” [21].

The good news is that the innovative spirit in Canada has led to a rapid evolution in thinking about appropriate and effective responses. Over the past five years, there have been some very promising shifts and changes. These signal both a move away from the narrow focus of Canada’s past efforts, and a more strategic approach to responding to homelessness. Across the country, all levels of government have begun to see the necessity of an integrated approach to responding to homelessness, one that focuses on prevention, an emergency response and transitions.

The Government of Canada’s Homelessness Partnering Strategy has undergone a paradigm shift in this direction. The homelessness problem is now seen as a “fusion policy” issue; one that cuts across the business of most departments of government in one way or another. A renewed emphasis on prevention suggests the need to consider how the range of factors that contribute to homelessness – lack of affordable housing, inadequate income, employment insurance, the high cost of food and fuel, weak discharge planning in health and corrections services, inadequate settlement supports for new Canadians – require responses from different departments and services, working collaboratively with others to prevent homelessness and assist those who have wound up on the streets.

Communities across Canada have also taken up the challenge by developing effective approaches to supporting people in poverty, and helping people who are homeless obtain and maintain housing. There have been innovative developments from the east coast (eg. Stella Burry Community Services in Newfoundland [22]) to the west coast (Cool Aid Society in Victoria [23]), which demonstrate comprehensive and respectful approaches to providing permanent housing for people who have experienced homelessness. Innovative programs focusing on mental health and addictions, including those that embrace harm reduction, demonstrate effective solutions to old problems.

Canadians have also begun to look abroad for good ideas, most notably to Great Britain and the United States. We are learning from the comprehensive approach to confronting homelessness developed in the UK and have drawn on the

many innovative responses developed in the United States, including Housing First and 10 year plans to end homelessness. Housing First is now recognized by the Government of Canada as a priority response to homelessness and there are several successful and innovative applications of this approach in communities in Canada, including Calgary, Ottawa and notably Toronto, with its “Streets to Homes” initiative [24].

There are also efforts to think more strategically about responding to homelessness. The leaders in this area are the Calgary Homeless Foundation [25] and the province of Alberta, which have both developed comprehensive 10 year plans with targets, benchmarks and a rigorous evaluation protocol. This is a welcomed move away from the fragmented, ad hoc approaches that have characterized the responses to homelessness in many communities across the country.

Finally, there is a growing recognition of the importance of research and evidence-based practices. In the 1990s, impatient with the lack of a response to homelessness, it was not uncommon to hear people suggest: “We don’t need research; we know what the problems are and we know what the solutions are.” After years of living with this crisis, the winds have begun to change, as people have seen the contribution that research can and should make to policy and practice. Two national conferences on homelessness research, as well as the development of the Canadian Homelessness Research Network and the Homeless Hub (a virtual research library - www.homelesshub.com) are positive outcomes of this shift in thinking.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

There is a strong sense amongst stakeholders across Canada that we are making progress at last. Yet, there are still some pieces missing. The key reason we continue to endure the homelessness crisis is that the underlying problems that created the crisis in the first place have not yet been sufficiently addressed. Neo-liberal policies that promised to reform government, create wealth and reduce poverty have clearly not worked, nor have they yet been repealed. Instead, our affordable housing supply has been reduced and our system of income and social supports has been undermined.

These shifts in policy over the past 15 years have not saved governments money either. There is ample evidence from across Canada that the emergency response to homelessness has been expensive; that it is cheaper to provide people with supportive housing than to let them slide into homelessness [26- 28]. As Pomeroy has argued, this cost does not just accrue to our emergency shelters and drop-ins, for when people become homeless they are more likely to wind up using expensive health services due to compromised health, addictions and mental health challenges, and/or become incarcerated [29].

The most glaring weakness in our response to homelessness is that Canada continues to stand alone amongst developed countries in lacking a well-funded national housing strategy. There can be little doubt that a lack of affordable housing is directly related to our homelessness crisis, and presents challenges to even our best

thought out solutions (how effective can Housing First be if there is no affordable housing to move people into?).

Though the Federal Government and the provinces have begun a slow reinvestment in housing in recent years, the amount of affordable housing being built comes nowhere near the levels of the early 1980s. The current economic downturn has resulted in more funds for housing, but the Conservative government has made it clear that this is only part of a stimulus package and therefore is not part of a long term housing strategy.

As we continue to move towards developing a more comprehensive approach to ending homelessness in Canada, we need to continue to emphasize strategic thinking and the coordination of service delivery, so that our responses to homelessness carefully blend appropriate support for prevention, emergency responses, and transitions out of homelessness. We must also resist the temptation to respond to the crisis through punitive law enforcement strategies that criminalize homelessness.

Underlying any strategic efforts to end homelessness must be the development of an effective affordable housing strategy involving all levels of government and communities across Canada. This must include a commitment to an ongoing reinvestment in our subsidized and social housing stock, allowing the plans and implementation to be determined at the local level. Such a housing strategy must include an expansion of supportive housing for those who struggle with addictions, mental health problems and disabilities – an area where we have developed effective and innovative service solutions. We must also consider taking a strategic approach to encouraging the development of affordable housing by the private sector, including proactive zoning and planning policies that make it mandatory to ensure that affordable housing is available in all new housing developments. Finally, low income Canadians, and those who live through crises must be provided with the necessary income and supports to maintain their housing, and to live healthy, safe lives.

Homelessness became a problem in Canada late last century due to structural changes and policy shifts that we well understand. The consequences of these shifts have been devastating to individuals and communities across the country. We know how we created our homelessness crisis, and we also know how to end it. Until Canada commits to a long term, well funded strategy to increase the supply of affordable housing, it is unlikely that we will be able to move away from our reliance on a homelessness strategy that emphasizes emergency services.

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