Rewriting the Narrative on Homelessness in Mid-Sized Canadian Cities

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HOMELESSNESS IN MID-SIZE CANADIAN CITIES

Approximately 35,000 people experience homelessness every night in Canada, with evidence that the problem is getting worse.[i] The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on people who are homeless as well as people who are currently struggling to make ends meet cannot be overstated. The pandemic has ravaged Canada's economic and social sectors and homelessness experts have expressed grave concerns about people's loss of housing, growing encampments, and a steep rise in homelessness across the country.

As homelessness becomes more visible in communities across the country, we are witnessing a growing divisiveness in the narratives about people experiencing homelessness. Perceptions of homelessness, discussions about who belongs in the community, and official and unofficial responses to homelessness are deeply contentious. Embedded within narratives about homelessness are misperceptions about its causes, people who experience homelessness, and risks posed to public safety. These narratives have significant negative impacts, including on the sense of belonging among people who are homeless, community resiliency,[ii] and social inclusion.[iii] For example, though people experiencing homelessness are more likely to be victims of violence than perpetrators, and are more likely to be arrested for minor nuisances than serious crimes,[iv] their mere presence in public settings—particularly around commercial businesses—often leads residents to demand intervention by police or by-law in situations where no crime is being committed.[v] This can result in adverse interactions with police who are tasked with managing these precarious relationships between housed citizens and people experiencing homelessness. This scenario, played out repeatedly in communities across Canada, further marginalizes people experiencing homelessness, consumes large amounts of police resources, and often resolves the situation only temporarily.

Given the changing context of homelessness, smaller suburban cities are facing an identity crisis. The desire many long-term residents have in these communities to maintain 'deep roots' comes up against the economic, demographic, and social diversification that they are faced with. These changes are not going away – a 2021 Statistics Canada report[vi] shows that smaller mid-sized cities across Canada are growing at rates higher than larger metropolitan areas brought on by urban sprawl and growing urbanization. To date, most research on homelessness has focused on large urban centres. As a result, mid-sized cities (pop. 50,000-500,000) struggle to develop evidence-informed policies and practices that are appropriate for their resources and contexts.[vii]

While homelessness has always been present across different types of communities, its visibility and the subsequent pressure for mid-sized cities to act quickly has come up against their ability to adapt to the changing needs of the community and to respond in a way that leads to long-term stability and equity for everyone. Such contentions can negatively impact ***community resilience*** - that is community harmony, sense of belonging, and ability to get along.

COMMUNITY RESILIENCE

Community resilience is a multi-dimensional, dynamic and iterative process that involves collective awareness, action, reflection, adaptation and social inclusion. Community resilience is influenced by social, cultural and structural resources, constraints and opportunities. Central to developing community resilience is the ability to address sustainable, affordable housing, poverty reduction, and access to a continuum of healthcare and mental health resources.[viii]

Community resilience requires the community to:

1. **Develop *conscious collective awareness* of the root causes of problems,**
2. **Develop *an intention* to set and maintain goals that aim at addressing problems in a long-term, sustainable way,**
3. **Develop *thoughtful actions* that locate and utilize appropriate and accessible resources.**
4. **Continually *acquire collective feedback and reflection* on the initiative to allow for adjustments and refinement.**

Not all initiatives, when put into practice, will prove successful, however failure can provide insights that will assist in finding new direction or community needs. Thus, it is essential to build feedback loops into all initiatives and to use these feedback loops to solicit reflection from all community members.[ix]

OVERVIEW OF THE RESEARCH:

The research consisted of a qualitative case study analysis that sought to address the contentious issues surrounding homelessness and public safety in a mid-size urban community in British Columbia, Canada. The goal of the project was twofold: to create a fact-based counter-narrative on the experiences of homelessness and community safety and security, and to think about strategies to address these demographic and social changes while fostering community resilience. To do so we engaged with 3 stakeholder groups: people experiencing homelessness; law enforcement; and other community representatives (i.e., business owners, social service providers, and other residents).

The project was guided by two overarching research questions:

1. **How, and in what ways, do the experiences and narratives surrounding homelessness, crime, and public safety converge and diverge among the stakeholder groups?**

2. **What opportunities for growth exist in mid-sized cities to promote community resilience?**

DATA COLLECTION

It was crucial to the research that we involve people who live in the community and who experience the issues described in this summary on a daily basis. Drawing on principles from community-based research, two people with lived experience of homelessness were employed as research coordinators on the project to help support its development.[x] As research coordinators, they assisted in: 1) developing interview questions, 2) recruiting people with lived experience to participate in the project, 3) data analysis, and (4) knowledge mobilization.

Data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Three different sets of interview questions were created for each stakeholder group. We also conducted two focus groups. One focus group involved people with lived experience of homelessness and another involved community stakeholders and service providers. The goal of the interviews and focus groups were to identify similarities and divergent experiences and perceptions within and across stakeholder groups.

All of the interviews took place between September 2019-December 2019. People with lived experience of homelessness were prioritized as participants. In total 54 people participated in the study, specifically: 18 people experiencing homelessness, 16 law enforcement, 14 community members, and 6 service providers were involved in the project.

THE COMMUNITY

The suburban city we conducted this research in has a population just under 100,000 people and, like other mid-sized cities across Canada, has experienced continued population growth in the last five years; growth that is expected to continue for the next decade. This community level change has brought increasing attention to social issues, including homelessness. The research team chose this particular mid-sized city as the case study location due to its size and the substantial media attention the community drew around the heightened politicalized nature of the issue of homelessness. For example, at the time of data collection, the most recent encampment had been legally sanctioned to be cleared; tent residents had been removed from the space legally and forcibly; and a supportive housing program had also just opened in a nearby neighbourhood. Despite these changes, people with lived experience of homelessness were still visible in a climate of deep community tension.

This research brief presents a summary of the contentious narratives among the three stakeholders groups in an attempt to make sense of similarities and differences across narratives.[xi] Each summary is immediately followed by a suggested opportunity for change aimed at both broader structural systems and community-based initiatives that can assist mid-sized cities across Canada in building community resilience. Broadly, communities need to take into account the social, political, and cultural context in which they operate. Communities must also adopt a collective responsibility[xii] that involves all levels of government, social services, non-governmental associations, people experiencing homelessness, Indigenous leaders, and the community at large to withstand and address present stressors and enable them to successfully adapt in the face of risk and adversity. Initiatives that are created in collaboration with all members of the community are likely to be accepted and adopted by that community.[xiii] If community resilience is built (not imposed) and maintained, communities are better positioned to respond effectively to inequity and unforeseen social change.

Encampments

Any space that people experiencing homelessness occupy becomes politicized because the very nature of being homeless and the conditions that have created homelessness in Canada are inherently political. Encampments are political because they are a response to structural failures and systems gaps and fill important needs not met otherwise. Understanding encampments outside of this political context has the effect of erasing an understanding of the space as located on Indigenous land. This narrative also precludes seeing encampments as important spaces for survival and collective well-being. For example, despite municipalities often failing to provide encampments with heat, hygiene, and sanitation infrastructure, they are important spaces for belonging and community building among people who experience homelessness and who in many ways face rejection from the broader community.

Law enforcement (e.g., police and by-law) is often brought in to respond to encampments. When this happens, there is a tendency for the political nature of encampments and the conditions that produce homelessness to be overlooked. Such interventions and attempts at managing encampments can create a critical divide and, at times divisive relationship, between the city and law enforcement that negatively impacts community resilience.

OPPORTUNITY FOR CHANGE

It is imperative that encampments are responded to through a human rights lens.

A. Acknowledge that encampments are located on traditional Indigenous lands, and as such Indigenous Peoples' must be meaningfully included in all responses to maintain their enshrined rights to land and self determination.

B. Encampments are always political in nature; encampments must be recognized as a response to local and national housing and homelessness crises.

C. Responses to encampments require municipalities, with provincial/territorial and federal investment and support, to provide adequate and accessible resources and services to those in need. Resources include but are not limited to: access to safe, affordable, and permanent housing; sustainable access to nutritious food; physical and mental health care services; medication; and spaces for community building.

D. Encampments must be recognized for their ability to promote a sense of belonging and family. In order to respond to encampments, people who experience homelessness must have meaningful opportunities to develop strong social networks both among others experiencing homelessness and with the broader community.

E. Any engagement that state actors have with encampments should follow the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Housing's *National Protocol for Homeless Encampments in Canada*[xiv]

Crime

Like other communities across Canada, law enforcement is used in mid-sized communities to respond to the visibility and presence of people experiencing homelessness. Community members and police are often quick to describe people experiencing homelessness as perpetrators of theft and in some cases violence within encampments. When discussing safety, police in this research noted that rates of serious and violent crimes had decreased in the specific community. These accounts were supported by local police data. However, these facts had not penetrated the public narrative that people who are homeless were dangerous. Nevertheless, what was often missing from these conversations were the instances of violence committed ***against*** people who are homeless by housed community members.

In this research, the visibility of potentially stolen bicycles and propane tanks in encampments was a source of immense frustration for some other community members which, in turn, negatively impacted police-public relations as police were perceived by some residents as ineffective at responding to these crimes. Several people who experienced homelessness sympathized with this frustration and noted how theft among people experiencing homelessness often occurred as a means of survival, and not necessarily to support substance use. Absent from these narratives, however, were the ways that law enforcement, particularly by-law, tearing down encampments and removing personal belongings are also experienced as acts of theft against people who are homeless.

OPPORTUNITY FOR CHANGE

Deploying law-enforcement for non-emergency situations involving people experiencing homelessness and other under-served populations can escalate situations, create confusion over the presence of law enforcement, and can be potentially life-threatening. To mitigate the overuse of law-enforcement in these situations, mid-sized cities should consider the development of Street Outreach Programs (SOPs).

Street outreach is defined as "moving outside the walls of the agency to engage with people experiencing homelessness who may be disconnected and alienated not only from mainstream services and supports, but from the services targeting homeless persons as well."[xv]

In addition to providing people with supports to may help them transition out of homelessness, research finds that SOPs create opportunities for people to engage with dependency/addiction services; reduce contact with the criminal legal system; and improve perceptions of community safety and fear of crime.[xvi] SOPs in mid-sized communities should consider a variety of delivery methods as the community itself may be geographically expansive or may lack extensive public transit options that would make accessing such services difficult.[xvii] SOPs should also consider working collaboratively with other service providers; doing so may help increase awareness and use of community supports among underserviced populations.[xviii]

The Visibility of Homelessness & 'They're not From Here'

Access to, and use of, public space is a contentious issue across many communities. In this research, for some community stakeholders any presence of people who presented as homeless in the urban core was a problem, with little openness to shared space. Meanwhile, people who experienced homelessness described not particular locations, but places where they might encounter aggressive and potentially violent community members as unsafe and unwelcoming. In this way, the entire community was described as a potential threat for these types of encounters as community members could be anywhere. Here it is important to note that the use and access to community space is rarely equitable or inclusive; people experiencing homelessness are not able to exercise their same right to public spaces that other community members do. In this research, much of the discussion regarding use of public space centered on the assumption that people who are homeless are a threat to the others who spend time downtown, with little understanding of what that threat is.

Narratives of belongingness were used to respond to the increasing visibility of homelessness in this community. Who counts as a resident of this community and who is an 'outsider' was a common discourse across all three stakeholder groups in this research. Despite data that reveals most people experiencing homelessness in this community are longtime residents, there was a perception that many people who are homeless were brought there by surrounding municipalities. This narrative disincentivized some community stakeholders from wanting to provide good quality services to people who are homeless, fearing that it would encourage people from all over to come and stay in this community. This lack of response has the effect of increasing feelings of exclusion while failing to provide much needed services for anyone who experiences homelessness in this community.

OPPORTUNITY FOR CHANGE

Cities must create working groups of key players from across their community, including Indigenous leaders and representatives from education, healthcare, community services, employment, income assistance, and with meaningful inclusion of people with lived experience of homelessness to develop three-tiered awareness initiatives that draw from national, provincial, and local evidence to inform all stakeholders about the causes and conditions of homelessness in the community, and to support people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness in accessing services.

Nowhere to Go

In this research, most stakeholders agreed that there is a lack of space and services for people experiencing homelessness in this community. When people who are experiencing homelessness or who are housing insecure are not provided with the resources they need to meet their daily needs, be safe, and have a sense of belonging, it has negative repercussions for the whole community.

While it is clear that having dedicated safe spaces for people who are homeless is essential, these spaces have to be integrated in the community at large so as to build broader community resilience. Such spaces can assist people experiencing homelessness in developing positive social networks and building interpersonal trust among community members and cannot be positioned as tools to separate people who are homeless from the rest of the community.

OPPORTUNITY FOR CHANGE

Mid-sized cities must create spaces for people experiencing homelessness, housing insecurity, and poverty to create community and access resources.

A. People who are homeless require designated spaces where they can be comfortable and where people who are experiencing homelessness, peer outreach workers, staff, and potentially service providers and health care workers can build supportive, trusting relationships.

B. Spaces should be designed and implemented through the expertise and leadership of people with lived experience of homelessness in their own community, who know best what kinds of spaces will be useful and safe for people who are homeless.

C. Spaces should be located in neighbourhoods frequented by people who are homeless and that are easily accessible through public transit. Service providers should work with surrounding neighbours and business to create a strong sense of community investment in the space.

D. Designing spaces must take into consideration the unique context of different people who are experiencing homelessness, potentially including separate spaces and/or programming for Indigenous Peoples, women identifying people, youth, members of the 2SLGBTQ+ community, and other groups.

E. These spaces should be funded by various orders of government for capital as well as long-term operational costs to ensure the sustainability of the space and staff.

Substance Use

Our research found that there was deep disagreement across stakeholders as to the connection between drug use and homelessness. Drug use, especially concern about drug paraphernalia in public spaces and around businesses is assumed to be the result of people who are homeless, with no discussion of housed people using drugs or people who are homeless who do not use drugs. On the other hand, some service providers described the optics of fear regarding drug paraphernalia, with the instances of dirty needles in public parks, or near seniors or children, being uncommon.

There was also confusion among law enforcement and social service providers regarding the availability of, and access to, addiction services within the community; some reported there being very few services available, whereas others noted that the options of addiction services was abundant given the size of the community. The varied, and at times contradictory, understandings regarding community resources negatively impacts the ability to provide immediate support and wrap-around services to those in need. People experiencing homelessness were clear that there must be a variety of services to support people who use drugs, and the strictly abstinence-based available in the city do not meet the needs of the community.

OPPORTUNITY FOR CHANGE

Through a systems coordination strategy, mid-sized cities, in partnership with service providers across the community, should develop a continuum of care model that allows people who are experiencing homelessness to access housing and services that meet their needs.

A. Design a continuum of care model to provide a range of services from abstinence-based housing to harm reduction spaces and services.

B. Offering a continuum of care includes providing supervised consumption sites for the safe use of substances. Services along a continuum of care are integrated so as to allow people to move towards recovery at a pace and in a way that works for them.

C. The Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction (CCSA) offers a *Best Practices across the Continuum of Care for the Treatment of Opioid Use Disorder*[xix] to support this endeavour.

Community Services & Supports

Across stakeholder groups, there was a poor understanding of the principles of Housing First as both a philosophy and program model in this specific mid-sized city. This misunderstanding has resulted in an aversion to the evidence of success for Housing First models from some community members.

Our research also showed that there was deep contention between people who experienced homelessness and other stakeholder groups regarding the need for a diverse range of services for substance use. Law enforcement and other community member stakeholders often described the solution to homelessness as exclusively in the domain of mental health and addiction, whereas people experiencing homelessness identified poverty, un- or under-employment, lack of affordable housing, and other systematic issues as leading to their homelessness.

All stakeholders agreed that there are not enough mental health supports in this mid-sized community and in part because of this police are regularly being called to respond to mental health crises, not criminal issues. This visible use of policing as a response to mental health concerns has the effect of making it appear as though there is more crime in certain locations and among particular groups than is truly the case. Further, interviews showed confusion and a lack of awareness regarding what organizations and services are available to provide support for substance use and mental health challenges, and further, what the eligibility requirements are for these available services.

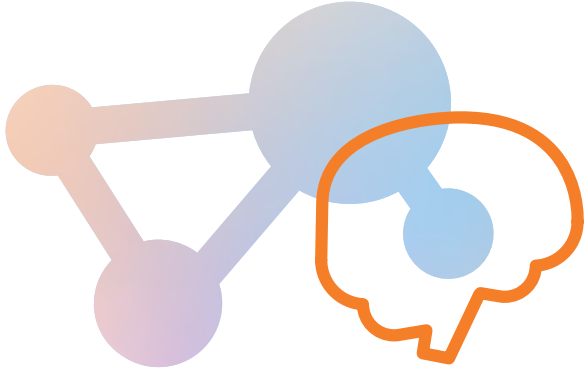
OPPORTUNITY FOR CHANGE

A. Develop competency and resourcing regarding Housing First among all members in the community, following the 5 key principles of Housing First and recognizing that emergency responses (such as shelters) do not constitute Housing First.

B. Build service provider capacity on delivering Housing First programs through the *Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness Training & Technical Assistance*[xx] program.

C. Mid-sized cities should conduct a systems mapping exercise of mental health and substance use treatment services in the community to gain a clear understanding of existing organizations, programs, and services in order to identify any systems gaps that need to be filled to offer a continuum of care for people who are homeless who require mental health and/or substance use care.

i. *Create an accessible resource guide that frontline emergency responders and social service workers can access in order to direct people to immediate supports and care to those in need.*



D. In partnership with municipal, provincial/territorial, and federal leaders, mid-sized cities should develop a framework for systems coordination that strengthens inter-agency collaboration and local systems coordination. Multi-sector cooperation is essential for building and maintaining community resiliency. All orders of government, along with a range of governmental departments, Indigenous leaders, and social service sectors should be invited to the table to co-create a plan for strong collaboration across organizations and groups who may not have pre-existing working relationships. Without coordination they may be duplicating efforts or neglecting the needs of some groups.

I. Develop strong local systems coordination to maximize service capacity and develop shared goals and resources to ensure there are service models to meet people's unique needs. St. John's Homeless-Serving System Coordination Framework[xxi] *provides the tools to develop robust systems coordination.*

ii. *Prioritize and nurture strong relationships with national and provincial/territorial partners. This may include developing memorandums of understanding, shared learnings across stakeholders, and policy and practice coordination. Building these relationships can ensure all voices are heard and that there is alignment between policies and practices in the community and stakeholder directives, and vice versa.*

Role of Community

Only certain people's perspectives are used to make up the public narrative about homelessness in this community. Some participants in each of the three stakeholder groups shared narratives of compassion, mutual aid, support, and understanding about homelessness in the city but these stories are overshadowed by others, most notably people and groups who identify with the local Not In My Backyard (NIMBY) group. This loose collective of people dominates public discourse about homelessness in this community, which has two negative effects.

First, it presents the NIMBY group narrative as the accepted perspective of homelessness in this community, leaving little room to hear from others with differing perspectives in the public realm. It disregards the organizations and people who are making a positive difference in the lives of people experiencing homelessness, including the solidarity among people who are homeless themselves.

Second, the rhetoric that everyone in this community hates people who are homeless and are not interested in long-term, sustainable solutions undermines the legitimate concerns business owners, law enforcement or other community members have and that could be resolved through positive community building strategies. The single-focused rhetoric of demonizing people who are homeless limits opportunities to discuss the ways in which all orders of government, public agencies, homeless-serving organizations, and the public at large have a role to play in ending homelessness in this community and helping to foster community resilience.

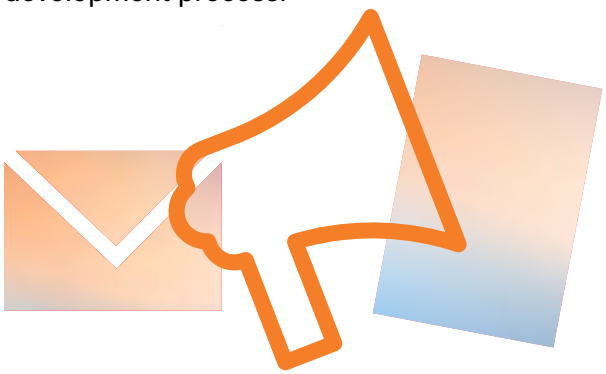
OPPORTUNITY FOR CHANGE

Break the narrative on homelessness

A. Mid-sized cities should seek to collaborate with community groups and organizations working with people experiencing homelessness in order to break the present narrative on homelessness by working with their local media and utilize various social media platforms to build an alternative narrative that makes it possible for their respective community to understand homelessness and security in ways that are more reflective of the everyday experiences of its community members and highlights the positive interactions and activities that are happening in the community

B. Mid-sized cities and their specific community partners can use pre-existing social media campaigns to develop a template for breaking the narrative around key points of tension found in the research

C. Social media campaigns should focus on misunderstandings about homelessness, as well as local knowledge on the most important issues to be addressed. People with lived experience of homelessness should be meaningfully involved at each step of the campaign development process.



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