

An Overview of the State of Homelessness in Canada

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This written report of the presentation I gave to the Mouvement pour mettre fin à l'itinérance de Montréal on Tuesday, June 3 2014, contains three parts. The first is an overview of recent changes to the welfare state, many of which have disproportionately hit the most vulnerable citizens. The second section provides a brief overview of local plans to end homelessness in Canada. The newer plans (notably Saskatoon and Winnipeg) are reviewed briefly, whereas plans that have been in effect longer (Calgary and Vancouver) will be reviewed more completely. Finally, the strengths and weaknesses of each plan are considered.

1. Recent changes to the welfare state in Canada

David Hulchanski, Associate Director of the Cities Centre and Professor in the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Toronto, is one of Canada's leading experts on housing and homelessness. In his speech and subsequent paper entitled "Homelessness: Past, Present, and Future", he argues that the word "homelessness" has not always been used in Canada. He studies reports completed in the 70s and 80s and notes that these reports speak of homeless people or individuals who are unhoused, but there is no reference to the broader problem of homelessness. Hulchanski notes that this word first appears in reports and articles in the late 1980s; adding the "ness" to the word homeless renders the word more complex and abstract.

He considers what explains this change in language and the need to literally invent a new word to describe a social phenomenon. After the war, Hulchanski notes, Canada invested heavily in the construction of housing. In the 1970s and 1980s, the federal government was building upwards of 20,000 units of social housing per year. The first cuts to the federal investment in social housing came in the 1980s when the co-op program¹ was cut by Brian Mulroney's government.

In the 1990s, Jean Chrétien's government made significant changes to the funding of the welfare state and in terms of social transfers to the provinces. The 1995 federal budget made significant cuts to transfers to provinces, and rates of social spending across Canada fell. The direct effects of these cuts on middle class families are contested, but there is general consensus among leading political scientists that these cuts hit low-income families and individuals very hard.

In 1996, the federal government transferred the administration of social housing to the provinces. In no other area of social policy has the federal government withdrawn in this way, making social housing a unique area of social policy in Canada. BC and Quebec were the only Canadian provinces that continued to fund the construction of new social housing, though in 2001 the newly elected Liberal government in BC cut social housing. In Ontario, the province transferred the responsibility for social housing to municipalities in 1998.

The 1970s and 1980s also saw other significant institutional changes as well. Provincial mental institutions across Canada closed. There are two reasons cited for this decision: first, there was a belief that people with mental illnesses should not be locked up in facilities, but should live their lives in communities with the support they need. The other reason is that provinces, in shutting down mental institutions, saved tax dollars. Indeed, the supports required by many of the previous inhabitants of mental institutions did not follow those people into their communities, and today many of them find themselves in the shelter system.

Residential schools also closed, and the country saw an urbanization of aboriginal people. Many of the aboriginal people who moved to big cities suffered unimaginable trauma and violent past, and had been separated from their culture and language. Coupled with racism, aboriginal people continue to face systemic barriers to housing and supports, and make up a wildly disproportional part of the homeless population in many Canadian cities, especially in the West.

¹ Co-op housing was seen as a very effective form of housing, but was also seen as too costly.

In addition to these policy changes, political scientists say that the recent evolution of the welfare state can be characterized by “drift”. Drift happens when social risks change and evolve, but the welfare state does not adapt to keep up with those changing risks. The working poor, single-parent families, and women entering the work force are social and demographic changes in Canadian society; if the welfare state does not adapt to the new social risks that these changes bring, there is less social protection. Gaps are created in the welfare state, gaps that shelters and other service providers are doing their best to fill.

The homeless population is generally broken down into a number of different categories. Most common is the differentiation between chronic, episodic, and temporary homelessness. This breakdown is used by many plans, including Calgary and Edmonson. Recent plans, such as Winnipeg’s plan, add a fourth category to this breakdown: hidden homelessness. Saskatoon differentiates between 4 types: absolute, sheltered, hidden, and at risk.

The definition of homelessness used in the Quebec provincial plan is as follows: L’itinérance désigne un processus de désaffiliation sociale et une situation de rupture sociale qui se manifestent par la difficulté pour une personne d’avoir un domicile stable, sécuritaire, adéquat et salubre en raison de la faible disponibilité des logements ou de son incapacité à s’y maintenir et, la fois, par la difficulté de maintenir des rapports fonctionnels, stables et sécuritaires dans la communauté. L’itinérance s’explique par la combinaison de facteurs sociaux et individuels qui s’inscrivent dans le parcours de vie des hommes et des femmes.

2. What is happening around Canada?

In the absence of a federal, and in many cases provincial, response to homelessness, cities and community groups at the local level in Canada are starting to step up with respect to homelessness.

The Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness held a conference in Ottawa in October 2013, and distributed a lot of information about how to create and implement a 10-year plan to end homelessness at the local level. The Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation has recently come out with a document that aims to help local governments (cities and municipalities) create and protect affordable housing. The Mental Health Commission of Canada has also recently developed a tool kit for Housing First. This resource contains information such as how to plan, implement, evaluate, and ensure the sustainability of Housing First at the local level.

Many local community groups and cities across Canada have developed and are implementing plans to end homelessness. The main ones discussed in the presentation to MMFIM were Saskatoon (adopted in 2013), Winnipeg (2014), Vancouver (2011 and StreetoHome in 2010), Lethbridge (2008), Calgary (2008), Toronto (most recent plan adopted in 2014) and to a lesser extent Ottawa and Halifax. The main similarities in the plans are the resolve to move from managing homelessness to ending it, and an emphasis on Housing First.

Differences include the model of development and implementation of the plan. There are three main models present in Canada. First, in some cities, it is an established non-profit or NGO leads the plan. In Halifax and Saskatoon, for example, the United Way is the go to organization for homelessness. Secondly, in Vancouver and Ontario cities, the municipal government is the lead actor. In Ontario, the responsibility for social housing has been officially transferred to the local level, which explains why Ontarian cities are so involved. In Vancouver, current mayor Gregor Robertson made it a campaign promise to end street homelessness by 2015. Cities in BC do not have the responsibility for housing or homelessness, but there was a feeling at the local level that not enough was being done at higher levels of government. The city has decided to take leadership of this issue.

Thirdly, in Calgary and Winnipeg there is a non-governmental organization that is responsible for developing and implementing the plan. This organization pools provincial and federal money (and often times private donations as well) and is a single point of access for service providers. The organization will issue an RPF and service providers in town will apply for the funding and contract. If successful, the service provider is funded by the homelessness organization.

Most of the plans have stated the goal of ending homelessness. Big cities such as Vancouver, Calgary, and Edmonton have 10 year plans to end homelessness. Saskatoon, Winnipeg, and Ottawa are on 5-year plans. Some of the plans also have specific targets about shelters; Vancouver's city plan, for example, simply aims to have sufficient shelter space to meet the needs of the homeless population. Calgary and Ottawa, on the other hand, have specific goals about how many shelter beds they want to see closed by a certain date, as well as a specific reduction in spending on shelter beds by a certain time.

In 2001, the Community Advisory Boards of seven of the biggest cities in Alberta decided to start working together on the question of how to best end homelessness. They founded "7 cities" as a means of sharing experiences, ideas, and supporting and learning from one another. Three of these cities (Calgary, Edmonton, and Wood Buffalo) have 10 year plans to end homelessness while the other four (Lethbridge, Red Deer, Medicine Hat, and Grand Prairie) have 5 year plans. Most do homeless counts on a regular basis, and they all report on their progress regularly.

As the 7 cities began developing their plans to end homelessness, they benefitted greatly from Toronto's early experiences with Housing First, notably through the Street to Homes program. In the early 2000s, the Calgary Homeless Foundation invited Jack Layton, then Toronto city-councilor and homelessness advocate, to come to Calgary to share some of Toronto's experiences. The American National Alliance to End Homelessness (NAEH) was also a source of inspiration, as American cities had already been introducing 10-year plans to end homelessness.

The 7 cities introduced their plans in early 2009. Later that same year, the province of Alberta came out with its own 10-year plan to end homelessness. This plan built significantly off the work that had been done by the local community organizations, and the local and provincial plans align well in terms of their goals, timeline, and implementation strategies.

Lethbridge and Red Deer have come very close to their goal of ending street homelessness. There was broad and early buy-in to Lethbridge's plan to end homelessness, and important players – such as city council, the police, prominent members of the community, real estate, and the business community – were on board quickly with the plan of ending homelessness. These plans were largely funded by the province and federal governments.

In 2008 the Calgary Homeless Foundation introduced its ten-year plan to end² homelessness. In addition to ending homelessness by 2018, the CHF also aimed to close down the majority of Calgary's shelter beds by the same year. The goal with respect to shelters is to close down 1700 shelter beds by 2018 and 600 by 2014. As of 2013, only 131 shelter beds had been closed. The annual reports note that a lack of affordable housing and rapid population growth have negatively affected the ability of the CHF to meet these targets. The length of shelter stays has also not gone down as quickly as the CHF had originally planned; the same reasons relating to affordable housing and population growth.

The majority of the funding for the CHF comes from the provincial government; the CHF pools funding from the federal and provincial governments, and also fundraises from private donors. To implement its plan, the CHF funds various non-profits and NGOs in Calgary.

The city of Vancouver introduced a 10-year housing and homelessness plan in 2011. The plan is implemented in three segments, the first being from 2011-2014. The city is providing important political leadership on the issue by lobbying senior levels of government for support and engagement in the building and maintenance of affordable and supportive housing units. The city also has certain tools that it can leverage; for example, the city often waives developer fees in exchange for low-income housing. The city also has density bonusing powers; they can exchange density for affordable housing.

Vancouver does homeless counts on a yearly basis; it is the city that leads the count. The most recent count in 2014 shows that there are more people sleeping on the streets than there were in 2008 when the current mayor, Gregor Robertson, was first elected and promised to end street homelessness by 2015. The mayor and his party, Vision Vancouver, have said that the most recent number is largely due to delays from BC Housing in the opening of new units; the city, province, and StreetoHome Foundation have partnered to build new buildings for affordable and supportive housing.

The StreetoHome Foundation was created in 2008. They have fundraised over \$26 million to use to leverage government priorities and investments. This money has been fundraised privately, though in 2008, the city, the province, and the Vancouver Foundation each put in \$500,000 as seed money. The majority of this money has gone to partnerships with the city and the province in the construction of new affordable and supportive housing units. The Foundation also has a rent bank, which serves as an important preventative measure for people who are at risk of falling into homelessness.

² No individual or family will spend more than 14 days in an emergency shelter.

Ontario was the only province in Canada to formally devolve the responsibility for social housing to municipalities. The City of Toronto thus plays a very important role in the fight against homelessness. Toronto was a leader in terms of housing first in Canada, with the Streets to Homes operating since about 2005. Since then, they have housed nearly 4,000 people. This program is run through the city out of the Shelter Support and Housing Administration.

Toronto has recently introduced a 5-year plan to re-structure the city's responses to homelessness. The city had introduced Housing Options Toronto, a comprehensive housing plan that spanned the entire housing spectrum, in 2010; it is a 10-year plan. The new plan, the Housing Stability Service Planning Framework, hopes to gradually transform how the city organizes the services it provides to the homeless population to improve the housing stability of Toronto's most vulnerable people.

3. Lessons learned

Of the cities in Canada that have introduced plans to end homelessness, Lethbridge and Red Deer are doing the best in terms of achieving their goals. These small cities were able to get the key players on board relatively quickly; there was some opposition to the Housing First approach among some councilors and members of the community, but the coalitions that developed in both of these cities were able to get members of the business community, police, bureaucrats, councilors and public figures on the same page and committed to the goal of ending homelessness.

Bigger cities, such as the high profile cases of Calgary and Vancouver, are not on track to meet their targets of ending homelessness. People on the ground say that this is due to a number of factors.

In bigger cities, an obstacle to success is often the inability to get all the important actors to agree on the goals, but also the method of achieving those goals.

There are also significant challenges with respect to affordable housing in Toronto, Calgary, and Vancouver. To make the affordability challenge even more of a problem, vacancy rates in these three big cities are among the lowest in Canada. Recent reports say that Toronto's vacancy rate is currently 1.5%, for example. With over 90,000 people on the waiting list for low-income housing and 40% of rental households in core housing need, Toronto, like other big cities, faces significant barriers to finding housing for its vulnerable population.

Some people involved in implementing and evaluating the plans have suggested that there has been an over-reliance on Housing First in some cases. Housing First is a very effective form of housing certain portions of the chronically homeless population, but some advocates argue that not all homeless people are best suited to the Housing First model. People with traumatic brain injuries, for example, or people with fetal alcohol syndrome might prefer to live in a more communal environment.

Vancouver has begun building a lot of new units for low-income and supportive housing, which has helped (and will continue to help) many people in Vancouver. There is some concern that some of the new buildings have a high number of people with complex needs, and that the supports available are not adequate to meet the needs of the residents. In these buildings, people were selected based on where they come from, as the city has adopted a 50-30-20 policy for the new buildings. 50% of the tenants must come from the street, 30% from shelters, and 20% from other places (SROs or at-risk environments for example).

Advocates in Vancouver have argued that a good way to get around this problem is to find housing for people in a client-focused way; they note that learning about someone's housing history and support needs and matching that with suitable and adequate supportive housing is the best way to ensure people remain housed and receive the supports they need. This can be done in congregate or scatter-site housing.

It was also often mentioned that while housing and supports are absolutely necessary in terms of ending homelessness, other factors, such as food, clothing, and furniture, are often overlooked. Many service providers in Vancouver used extra or left-over funds to implement meal programs, and anecdotal evidence suggests that providing food is an important way of stabilizing people and helping them to stay healthy.

Many people involved in implementing the plan in Calgary stress the importance of building and maintaining good relationships with landlords throughout the city. Given their reliance on private market apartments and the low vacancy rate in Calgary, it is important for the CHF to have a relationship based on trust with landlords. The CHF often guarantees the rent, and covers the cost of any damages that may occur while the person is in the apartment. Service providers who work directly with formerly homeless people through a Housing First approach emphasize the importance of this practice.

The StreetoHome Foundation in Vancouver has had significant success in its lobbying efforts because it was able to bring resources to the table when it brought its ideas to the provincial government. The Foundation was able to use its private funding to leverage public money in the construction of new affordable and supportive housing units, but the same might also go for offering supports in existing housing. As Tim Powers, a prominent Conservative strategist and media commentator, told the FCM annual conference, governments want to work with people who do more than just talk.