BEYOND
HOUSING FIRST:

A Holistic Response to Family Homelessness in Canada

RAISING THE ROOF | CHEZ TOIT
Long-term Solutions for Canada's Homeless

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Editors: Caitlin Boros & Tyler Pettes

Acknowledgements

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The need for prevention and system coordination

Some families **on social assistance** have only

$1,000 = 🏠 🍲 🚌 **etc.**

per month to cover: rent, food, transportation & other expenses

1 in 5 of all rental households in Canada spend **>50%** of their income **ON RENT**

235,000 Canadians experience **homelessness EACH YEAR**

Gaetz, S., Gulliver, T., & Richter, T. (2014): The State of Homelessness in Canada: 2014. Toronto, ON: The Homeless Hub Press.

BETWEEN April 1, 2009 & March 31, 2010 **64,500 women** sought refuge at a **VAW* shelter**

*Violence Against Women

Sinha, M. (2013b). Measuring violence against women: Statistical trends. Ottawa, ON: Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics & Statistics Canada, Juristat Article.

IN March 2014 **841,191** Food Bank an increase of **25%** from 2008

people in Canada visited food banks

Food Banks Canada. (2014). Hunger Count 2014. Downloaded at: www.foodbankscanada.ca/HungerCount

1. Executive Summary

This report, part of Raising the Roof's national *Child and Family Homelessness Initiative,* speaks to Housing First as a means of early intervention for families experiencing homelessness. However, while Housing First has been identified as a successful and effective approach in assisting those currently experiencing homelessness, this report aims to hold a parallel discussion of what it would mean to genuinely *prevent* homelessness from occurring, and how we can ensure that the systems and structures are put in place so that workers are better able to assist Housing First participants.

Homelessness is not a social concern that occurs in a vacuum, but one that intersects with multiple social concerns. This includes poverty and Canada's declining social safety net. It is the contention of this report that by addressing the *root causes* of homelessness – such as affordable housing, income, food security, discrimination, and violence – we can prevent the cycle of poverty and homelessness experienced by families and eventually eliminate the need for Housing First.

In addition, the complex systems and services provided to families experiencing poverty or homelessness must be better coordinated. This includes income assistance programs, education, child welfare, and social housing, among others. It must also be noted that a lack of overall services has resulted in decreased success among Housing First 'graduates' and other program participants. To assist those at-risk and provide them with opportunities to escape the cycle, these services must be supported and implemented in a way that matches the unique needs of families experiencing homelessness.

To demonstrate, this report features qualitative research from interviews with both Housing First participants and workers from across the country. This in-depth analysis identifies the most common barriers and challenges faced by these two groups, and provides insight for long-term solutions.

Child & Family HOMELESSNESS
Long-term solutions across Canada

"…by addressing the root causes of homelessness… we can prevent the cycle of poverty and homelessness experienced by families…"

2. Introduction

Housing First has emerged as an important evidence-based best practice for responding to chronic homelessness, particularly for individuals with mental health challenges and addictions. It has shifted the homelessness sector toward a more humane, rights-based approach where housing is not contingent on whether an individual agrees to receive services or treatment; rather it is designed to 'meet clients where they are at' and does not require pre-determined standards that deem them to be 'housing-ready'. The success of this model has been phenomenal, with housing retention rates consistently measuring in the 75-90% range after one year of programming (Goering et al., 2014; Padgett, Gulcur, & Tsemberis, 2006; Stefancic & Tsemberis, 2007). Thousands of individuals and families have been housed under Housing First programs in Canada. For example, Homeward Trust, an Edmonton-based homelessness organization (and a Raising the Roof partner) has provided housing for 2,883 households since 2009, with 79% having been able to maintain their homes (Homeward Trust Edmonton, 2013). The success (and cost-effectiveness) of this model has led to policy shifts provincially and federally. At the federal level, communities funded under the Homelessness Partnership Strategy (HPS) are now required to devote 65% of funding to Housing First related programming and initiatives.

Yet as the model continues to be implemented at a broader scale across Canada, the glaring structural and systemic barriers to escaping homelessness have become increasingly apparent. These include high-levels of poverty and the lack of affordable housing. It is the contention of this report that if we are to truly address homelessness in Canada and genuinely realize the rights-based principles of Housing First, efforts must be made in conjunction to address the *root causes* of homelessness.

This paper is written as part of Raising the Roof's *Child and Family Homelessness Initiative,* a multi-year research project designed to create a comprehensive framework to address child and family homelessness at multiple levels: primary prevention, systems-level, and early intervention.

Prevention and Early Intervention Framework

Family Homelessness

Primary Prevention

Systems-Based Response

Early Intervention

Core Principles
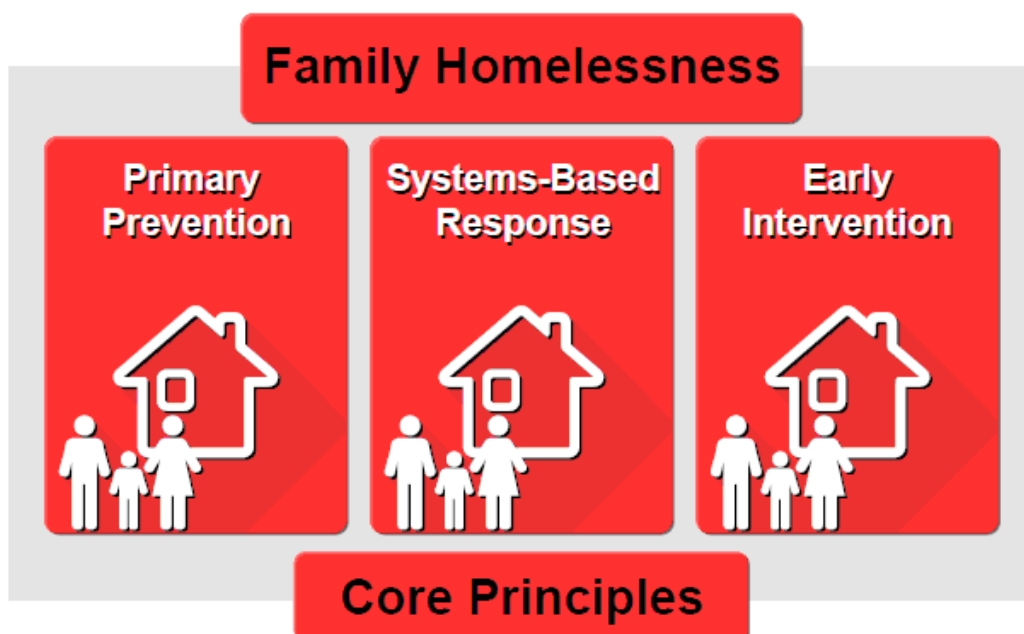
As written in our publication *Child and family homelessness: Building a comprehensive framework to address child and family homelessness in Canada: Phase I, an environmental scan* (Noble, 2014), the first publication as part of the larger Child and Family Homelessness Inititaive, primary prevention involves addressing concerns before homelessness occurs or addressing the root causes of homelessness well in advance of families becoming at risk. We have identified four areas that require intervention at a primary level: poverty, discrimination, intimate partner violence and family well-being. A systems-based response involves addressing the gaps or lack of coordination in the multiple 'systems' that families encounter when receiving services. This can include local homelessness organizations or broader establishments run through municipal, provincial, or federal governments. The majority of these larger systems that impact homelessness are provincial and include income assistance programs, education, child welfare, and social housing (although this can also be municipal). Finally, as Gaetz (2014, p. 44) writes, early intervention involves:

Identifying and addressing the physical, emotional, material, interpersonal, social and educational needs of [families and children] who are at imminent risk of, or who have just become homeless.

Housing First falls under this category as its point of intervention is once a family is at imminent risk of or is experiencing homelessness, and its aim to is to prevent future occurrences.

In order to genuinely 'end' homelessness in Canada, all three areas must be addressed in a holistic manner. While Housing First is an important component of this response, we mustn't forget the important work that needs to be done to *prevent* homelessness from occurring in the first place and *coordinate systems* of care. If we do, the thousands of individuals and organizations working across Canada to combat homelessness will be faced with a continuous cycle: for every individual/family housed, a new one will replace them. Similarly, without guaranteeing that those who are housed are done so in a manner that ensures they are secure, individuals will remain at risk of future homeless episodes.

It is not our intention to lessen the importance of front-line Housing First initiatives (or continuing to fund them), nor to negate the hard, often thankless work that agency staff do every day. Rather, it is our aim to hold a parallel discussion of what it would mean to genuinely *prevent* homelessness from occurring, and how we can ensure that the systems and structures are put in place so that workers are better able to assist Housing First participants.

In general, even the most enthusiastic supporters of Housing First generally do not claim that it is a panacea to ending homelessness (Bodor et al., 2011). The problem is that funding shifts that prioritize Housing First in the absence of preventative measures have the effect of putting an even greater burden on the few resources that are available and reducing conversations about solutions to homelessness to emergency-based ones, leaving fundamental causes unaddressed. Most cities across Canada lack sufficient capacity and are struggling with limited resources to run their Housing First programs, and very few are able to meet the demand for such programming in their communities.

We are already experiencing a crisis where over 235,000 Canadians experience homelessness each year (Gaetz, Gulliver, & Richter, 2014). More resources are needed to ensure that citizens that are currently homeless are able to obtain and maintain housing. Moreover, it should be pointed out that there are places in Canada that lack the infrastructure to support emergency services such as shelters, let alone have the capacity to support Housing First initiatives. For instance, Kate speaks about the situation in the Yellowknife:

Everybody is talking about Housing First... and I look at Housing First and think ok, what is Housing First going to look like here? And I shudder to think that those of us that provide housing for families are not going to be getting any help. Because in Yellowknife, where are the resources? You know, who is going to be providing the money to provide the resources to have wraparound services for the families? How are we going to find housing for them? And is it just going to be in Yellowknife, or in the whole North where there is a shortage of housing to begin with? When three generations are living in the same house?

Questions remain, therefore, of who should be addressing the broader structural concerns (i.e. not Housing First agencies), how to ensure funding is not diverted from the front lines, and what measures can be taken to guarantee implementation is parallel. Homelessness is the most demonstrable element of a much deeper crisis that is brewing in Canada: poverty and a lack of affordable housing in the presence of population growth. If measures are not taken to address these elements, the homelessness crisis will continue to get worse. Resources are needed to prevent homelessness as well as respond to it.

3. What is Housing First?

Housing First is both a program model and a philosophy. As a philosophy, Housing First is premised on the notion that housing is a basic human right, and is fundamental to addressing any other barriers one might face in life, including mental health and addiction concerns. Gaetz, Scott & Gulliver (2013, p.2) define Housing First as a:

Recovery-oriented approach to homelessness that involves moving people who experience homelessness into independent and permanent housing as quickly as possible, with no preconditions, and then providing them with additional services and supports as needed. The underlying principle of Housing First is that people are more successful in moving forward with their lives if they are first housed.

Housing First stands in direct contrast to previous 'treatment-first' models in that participants are not required to receive treatment or services before they receive housing or take steps to become 'housing ready'. According to Gaetz, Scott & Gulliver (2013), some of the key principles of Housing First include:

- Immediate access to permanent housing without any housing readiness requirements
- Consumer choice and self-determination
- Individualized and client-driven supports
- Community and social integration

Services that might be provided under Housing First models include rent supplements, support obtaining an income, basic life skills, and community integration.

Several agency staff spoke of their love for the Housing First model, particularly its client-driven and choice based mandate, and the lack of preconditions necessary to receive housing. As Renee, an agency representative, states:

Nobody wants somebody coming into their living room and telling them what to do. The moment you do that you create a barrier, even if you are well intended…you present them with choices because it is their life, and it is not yours.

"…it is necessary that **parallel work be done to prevent homelessness** from occurring so that Housing First programs can truly achieve their goals."

Staff felt great about being able to provide concrete services and basic needs to some of Canada's most vulnerable citizens. For example, Lorna, a front-line follow-up support worker states:

Seeing the successes is the big thing. I have a participant that went to jail, went to court, fought to get her daughter back out of care and won…she got her daughter back and started school and is on her way to becoming an electrician within like 6 months…seeing those success stories is what makes the job worth it.

Similarly, Jocelyn, another follow-up support worker comments:

I think just the idea of them being housed after being homeless for so long – that in itself is such a success and to see their face – like wow I have a bed now, I don't have to sleep on the ground, that stuff is why we do what we do.

Family participants were also extremely grateful for the help they received. It was not uncommon to hear statements such as "I don't know where I'd be without this program" or "I am so grateful for everything they have done". Even in the face of continued hardship, some participants described how this was much better than the life they were living previously.

It must be emphasized therefore, that Housing First programs do phenomenal work, and provide much needed services to Canada's homeless; in no way does this paper support the cessation of these programs. Instead, it is necessary that parallel work be done to prevent homelessness from occurring so that Housing First programs can truly achieve their goals.

4. Prevention

In discussions of prevention it is not uncommon to hear comments such as "it's difficult to know whether these particular interventions would have actually prevented an episode of homelessness or not", and the conclusion drawn is that prevention work is difficult and inefficient. Yet these interventions (e.g. rental supplements) are geared toward ensuring that households are functioning in a healthy way, thereby making our communities and economy stronger. Moreover, these discussions on prevention very rarely address *primary* prevention, or the actions that are needed to address the root causes of homelessness and instead focus on households that are already at imminent risk of homelessness.

While the goal of preventing homelessness is obviously an important one, it feeds into a much larger issue: homelessness is not a social concern that occurs in a vacuum, but one that intersects with multiple social concerns, including affordable housing, income, food security, discrimination, and gender and intimate partner violence (IPV). When it is viewed this way, solutions can be envisioned in a holistic manner, where interventions are geared at strengthening the foundations of our society, not just ensuring people have housing. In this sense, interventions at the primary level will prevent homelessness from occurring, but not necessarily in a linear or detectable manner. For far too long homelessness has been perceived as an isolated social concern, asking the homelessness sector to respond to too many issues, of which many are out of their realm of influence and expertise. It is time to look at the big picture, and upload responsibility back to the multiple sectors of society that have contributed to this crisis.
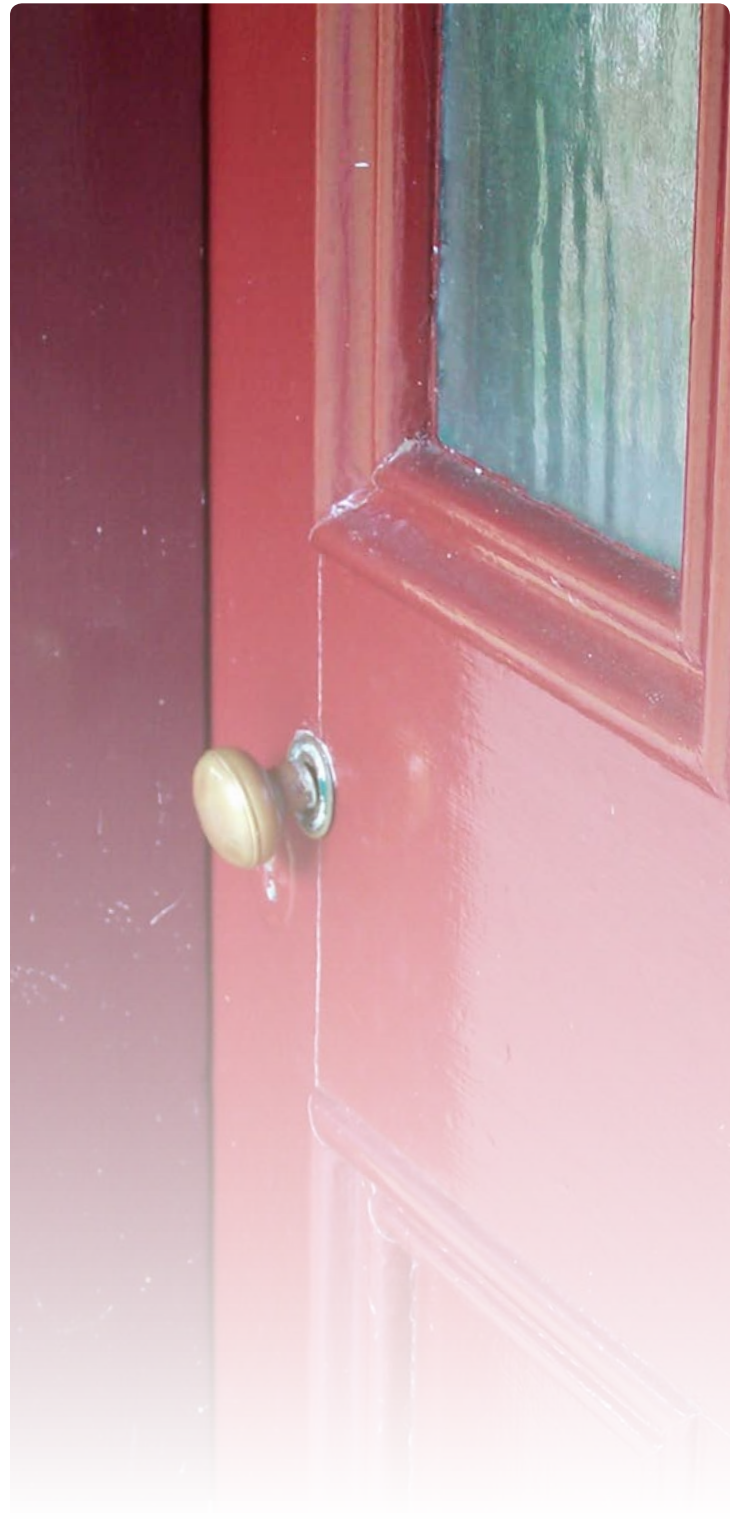
A. Affordable Housing

Not surprisingly, the barrier cited most frequently by front-line workers was finding affordable housing for their participants. Multiple family participants also expressed their frustrations in finding suitable housing. Government investments in affordable housing have decreased substantially in the past few decades, with cities across Canada contending with very low vacancy rates (often under 1%). In the *State of Homelessness in Canada,* a report recently released by Gaetz, Gulliver & Richter (2014), the authors state that in the past 25 years, despite an increase in the population of nearly 30%, national housing investments have decreased by 46%. The authors continue that there has been an even more dramatic rise in the Aboriginal population, with a 20% population increase in just five years (2006-2011). This has led to long wait lists for social housing, typically several years. By 2033, federal funding for social housing will be non-existent.

In addition, market rates have skyrocketed, making rental units unaffordable for those living on low incomes. In fact, of all rental households in Canada, nearly 1 in 5 are paying more than 50% of their income on rent, rendering them at great risk of homelessness (Gaetz et al., 2014). Some provinces, such as Alberta, do not have rent control legislation, meaning landlords can increase rent at their own discretion, even while tenants remain in their units. In Yellowknife, one company holds a large monopoly over the private housing market, meaning if they deny a tenant a unit (due to rental arrears, for example), the majority of private units (approximately 80% according to research participants) become unavailable, as they are owned by the same company.

While finding housing can be difficult in general, Housing First participants may be at a greater disadvantage due to the stigma of being in a 'homelessness' program or on income assistance, discrimination based on race, gender or other, or the high number of barriers they face in general. All of these challenges can result in Housing First participants waiting several months for appropriate housing, either when they join the program or in the event they need to be rehoused, which unfortunately occurs regularly. This leaves participants and families in a difficult predicament, as they continue to couch-surf, stay in shelters, hotels, or even the streets while they wait for housing. One staff member expressed concern over how this waiting period can cause participants to become disengaged with the program – particularly if waiting to be rehoused – as they feel like their hard work has done nothing to prevent them from slipping back into homelessness. This occurrence had led some staff to advocate for increased emergency shelters as they "make Housing First possible" under the current conditions. Chris, a follow-up support worker, discusses how the lack of affordable housing in his city makes it difficult to house families:

It's trying to find units; something that can accommodate small or large families. And not only the size, but the location. Is this a building that a family is going to work well in? It's trying to find a big enough unit, but one that's a good fit, because kids in a quiet building might not be a good thing. So finding the right unit is kind of a big change [when working with families]. Before, even though we had low vacancies – looking for units for families reduces that even more.

The implications of the lack of affordable housing in Canada for families in Housing First programs are therefore numerous:

a. Large families can face greater difficulties finding units with ample space. This is compounded further when children are of different genders, as laws often prohibit sharing a room in these circumstances.

b. Areas that tend to have affordable units can be concentrated in low-income, high-crime neighbourhoods that many parents feel are unsafe for raising children in. Moving to a safer neighbourhood may involve moving to the outskirts of the city, resulting in transportation concerns (particularly for large families with young children) during the winter, or when a family cannot afford the costs of transportation.

c. Finding a suitable location that is close to schools, childcare and vital services can be challenging. Again, if these are not located in close proximity to a family's housing, transportation can become a concern.

d. The types of units available at low costs might be run-down, unsafe (particularly for families fleeing violence), or may contain pests such as bed bugs, roaches, mice, or mold.

B. Income

Income insecurity can result from both precarious employment with low wages or Canada's deteriorating social safety net for those families who, for one reason or another, are not able to work. It is increasingly difficult to become eligible for many income assistance programs, and for those who do qualify, the amounts provided are in no way commensurate with the cost of living. For instance, families on social assistance are often provided with approximately $1000 per month in total, which is expected to cover rent, food, transportation, and all other costs. In addition, social assistance programs are punitive in nature, often based on the ideological position that some people are trying to 'take advantage' or do not want to work. The logic that follows is that recipients cannot be 'rewarded' for being on social assistance, and therefore most additional income, including from child support or part-time work (that families are allowed to keep), is capped at a certain rate and clawed-back if the amount exceeds this cap. Families are not allowed to keep any assets or savings, making it nearly impossible to gain any traction to move forward with their lives.

Moreover, despite the meager amounts provided, there are some benefits for families (particularly those led by single parents) to remain on income assistance rather than obtain employment, including receiving childcare subsidies and health/dental benefits. The implications for families who experience housing precariousness or are in Housing First programs are hence twofold:

a. The gap between the cost of rental units and income ensures families are stuck in a perpetual state of poverty and hence remain at risk of homelessness

b. Many participants in Housing First programs remain reliant on housing subsidies well after they 'graduate' from their programs. It is reasonable to ask how long this is sustainable if homelessness is not prevented from occurring, and increasing numbers of participants are enrolled into Housing First programs.

C. Food Security

For families living at-risk of homelessness, there is often no other option than to rely on food assistance programs such as food banks. For instance, in March 2014, 841,191 persons visited food banks across Canada; over 1/3 of them children (Food Banks of Canada, 2014). This represents a 25% increase from 2008. While food banks provide valuable sustenance to ensure that families do not starve, they are often unable to provide enough food, and the food that they can provide is reliant on donations and funding. Many families are not able to access nutritious food, including fresh produce, and are left instead with food with high starch content and little nutrition. This can lead to the paradox of poor families struggling with weight problems, which of course can further impact their health.

Even worse, there are thousands of families in remote areas that do not have access to services such as food banks or meal programs, and the cost of food in these places can be astronomical. Food insecurity is an issue that has plagued Canada's North for years, and unfortunately continues to get worse. For instance, in the Northwest Territories, it is estimated that 15.8% of persons age *12 or older* experienced moderate or severe food insecurity in 2013 (NWT Bureau of Statistics, 2013). It has also been reported that 1 in 3 children go to bed hungry every night (Macdonald, 2014). In fact, the cost of food rises dramatically the further a family lives from Yellowknife.

Families living in remote communities must pay amounts for food that most of Canada cannot comprehend. For instance, a head of cabbage can cost as much as $28 and a 24-pack of bottled water (often in communities that do not have access to clean drinking water) can cost $65 (Macdonald, 2014).

For families struggling to afford housing and childcare, food becomes a third obstacle that often they are unable to overcome independently. In addition to placing families at-risk of losing housing, food insecurity presents challenges to health, employment and other factors that can present a barrier in escaping the cycle of poverty and homelessness. With such high-rates of emergency service use for food (like Food Banks), it is clear little is being done to prevent families from becoming at-risk of or eventually homeless.

D. Discrimination

Often, certain groups that experience discrimination go unrecognized – including young parents and single dads. While the latter might not need specialized programming per se, it was identified in this research that most of the services geared toward families assume that it is the mother seeking services or caring for the children. Anthony, a single father of five, describes his troubles getting access to services:

[There are] not a lot of services for men, single dads…women get housing priority, while there is more stigma on men…what they should have already…It's more I have something to prove to them before they will even consider helping.

Anthony continued that the advocacy and support he got from his Housing First program has really helped him in this regard. Similarly, Bonnie, a family participant asked, "if we are not able to give a man the same supports as the women, what happens to the children?". Knowing that the healthy involvement of fathers is in the best interests of the children, system designers and service providers must do their best to encourage the involvement of dads, and to not assume that all single parents are mothers.

When working with young people who are homeless, the fact that many of them are parents themselves is often missed in program design. Young people in general face additional barriers in Housing First programs, including increased landlord stigma, little means to secure a living wage (due to low levels of education and work experience resulting from their age), low levels of family support, and a lack of experience living independently. Adding parenting responsibilities to this can be extremely daunting and presents a barrier in helping young people move forward.

Being labeled as 'homeless' or 'in poverty' can be stigmatizing itself. In addition to the effects this labeling can have on individuals and children, stigma can also lead to discrimination on behalf of landlords who are needed for Housing First programs, as well as a lack of public empathy and desire to address the problem (which would create political pressure for action). For instance, many Housing First programs are part of 10-year plans to end homelessness across Canada and have faced ridicule from members of the public as a result. For example, Jaime, a front-line worker comments:

If you go out there and talk to people and tell them that you work with Housing First and this 10-year plan to end homelessness, people laugh: "Yeah, yeah, sure. We're throwing our money away". I mean there's an attitude about it.

Meaghan, a front-line worker, argues for the need to better inform the public so they can support this work:

Advertising the success rates of the programs for what the government funding is going toward will make people feel less apprehensive about where their money is going and to give support to the government and feedback about what it would be like to have a very successful and proud neighbour and community and country. There's a lot of people that don't understand homelessness.

Several advocates argue that this lack of understanding extends to poverty in general. In this line of work it is not uncommon to hear comments such as "people should just get a job", not necessarily understanding that many people living in poverty do have jobs, and that for others, there are multiple barriers to obtaining, and in particular, maintaining employment. Poverty and homelessness continue to be framed in mainstream discussions as problems that occur with individuals who have deficits rather than systemic problems that can be remedied. Laurel, an anti-poverty advocate states, "remember, one of our biggest barriers is still convincing people that we can eradicate poverty". In addition to misconceptions such as these, some advocates argue that while there are many citizens who express concern with these social problems, a lot of 'poor bashing' still occurs, resulting in not only public apathy, but in some cases outright hostility. In addition, it has been argued that a growing sense of individualism has replaced notions of collective responsibility in our society, resulting in some people questioning why these concerns affect them at all (if they are not the ones experiencing them), or at the very least, why their public dollars should be spent addressing them.

E. Gender and Intimate Partner Violence

One of the leading causes of family homelessness is Intimate Partner Violence (IPV). Between April 1, 2009 and March 31, 2010, 64,500 women sought refuge at a violence against women (VAW) shelter (Burczycka & Cotter, 2011). Unfortunately, those who encounter the shelter system represent a very small percentage of the number of women who experience IPV. For instance, it is estimated that 1 in 4 of all *reported* violent crimes are incidents of IPV, which does not include other types of violence against women, including sexual assault (Sinha, 2013a). Although the occurrence of IPV is high across the country, there is some regional variation. For instance, the percentage of women in the territories that experience IPV are exponentially higher due to the rough social circumstances (largely a consequence of the history of colonization) faced by many families; this includes poverty, inadequate and overcrowded housing, and a lack of infrastructure in remote communities, especially emergency shelters and access to RCMP. While IPV can be considered an individual or relational cause of homelessness, it is included as a form of primary prevention in this report because its roots are often found in gender-based structural inequities.

Intimate partner violence and homelessness are related in many ways. There are of course the women and children who flee their homes in search of safety and do not have a place to go. Similarly, because most perpetrators of abuse isolate their victims financially and socially, when some women leave they do not have the means to sustain their own households. This can result in the difficult 'choice' between living with poverty or violence. Having inadequate housing can also make it difficult to keep women who leave safe because of poor infrastructure that can be broken into, or women who must live in remote or isolated communities. These situations are particularly frightening for women who have recently attempted to separate from their partners and are statistically the most at risk of serious injury or death. Finally, it is also important to consider how homelessness can affect perpetrators if they are the ones to become homeless upon separation. They may feel increased anger, frustration and a hit to their pride, which can add 'fuel to the fire' in the dynamic between the perpetrator and victim.

In light of the high incidences of violence in women and children's pathways into homelessness, there are several concerns that must be discussed in terms of the applicability of current Housing First models and their ability to meet the needs of these families:

a. As safety is a huge issue for women and children, they are less likely to live on the street, or even reside in shelters. It is more common for women and children to stay with friends or family members, or to become involved in relationships (not necessarily safe ones) in order to secure housing. In addition, some parents may be hesitant to seek assistance, fearing this could lead to child welfare involvement or apprehension. This means that this form of homelessness is largely hidden from view. As Housing First programs mostly target street-entrenched populations that are classified as 'chronically' homeless or 'high acuity', it is reasonable to question how these families can gain access to such programs. This may also be the case with violence against women (VAW) and transitional residences for families who are also not targeted for Housing First programs (though there is some movement with this). Although these families are generally prioritized for social housing units, the current affordable housing crisis leaves many residing in shelters for several months, causing them to become de-facto transitional units. If Housing First programs postulate that housing is a right, then it should follow that it is a right for *all* individuals and families experiencing homelessness, not just heavily street-entrenched populations. It also should not mean that families must experience years of hardship before they obtain this 'right' to housing. Moreover, families with children should be prioritized to exit homelessness as quickly as possible in order to mitigate the consequences of homelessness on children.

b. Many advocates for women's and family homelessness are concerned that recent policy shifts that prioritize funding toward Housing First models may in fact *increase* family homelessness. This is because many programs geared toward families fleeing violence are transitional in nature, and they may lose their funding under this current policy shift. Some advocates argue that safety is better secured in congregate living facilities that are for women and children only. In addition to having specific security measures in place, these congregate living models can provide intensive one-site support for trauma, and can foster the development of relationships with women in similar situations, creating a sense of community (Mosher & Homes for Women, 2013). As Housing First is a model rooted in choice, it can be argued that congregate living options must remain part of the solution for those who prefer or feel safer with this model. For those who prefer their own housing unit, there remains some question of how to factor safety plans into current Housing First models, including the training of landlords.

c. Any program that responds to women and children fleeing domestic violence must be trauma-informed, recognizing the trauma participants have experienced and ensuring that families are not subjected to further oppression or traumatization. In their report *Housing First, Women Second?* Mosher & Homes for Women (2013, p. 6) argue:

Since trauma impacts one's sense of safety, control and efficacy,

service approaches must be attentive to building a sense of physical and emotional safety with an awareness of possible triggering events and situations, and creating opportunities to rebuild control and interpersonal relationships. For women and girls trauma is often rooted in boundary violations, and hence clarity of roles and respect for boundaries in service provision is necessary…building trust with staff can take considerable time.

The authors continue this discussion, arguing that the principle of choice in Housing First must be prioritized. In addition, Housing First models must consider how 'mental health' is defined as many women and children fleeing violence may not have a formal mental health diagnosis, but may be experiencing considerable difficulties as a result of their trauma and difficult life circumstances. In this case, mental health concerns may be operationalized as opposed to experienced (Mosher & Homes for Women, 2013).

5. Systems-Level Response

Families who experience poverty and homelessness must interact with many mainstream systems including, but not limited to, education, childcare, housing, child welfare, emergency and violence against women shelters, immigration, legal services, income assistance and support, and employment. Poverty and homelessness can be confounded by gaps or inconsistencies in the system or through a lack of coordination. In several cases, families are left to navigate through these complex systems, where many become frustrated or 'fall through the cracks'. While Housing First is premised on the notion that wraparound supports and services will be provided to ensure clients are able to maintain their housing, this is not always possible within Canada's current infrastructure and reduced funding for necessary services. Several agency staff spoke about their struggles working with various mainstream systems. For instance, Shane states:

Sometimes I feel like we refer our clients to the same system that keeps them oppressed

because it doesn't empower them…The entire system is actually a barrier. So how do you pull yourself out of poverty when you're on income support? It's like nothing, so how do they pay their bills? How do they get out of debt? When they're making $700 a month or less…like yeah we want to take them out of poverty but we put them on income support, which keeps them in poverty.

A. Lacking and Inefficient Services

The most frequent systemic barriers front-line workers reported facing was a lack of necessary services (particularly for mental health needs), long wait-lists for services, eligibility criteria and rules left to be enforced at the discretion of individuals workers. For instance, several staff spoke about inconsistencies in obtaining income support for their participants, depending on which staff they spoke to at intake. Angela, a front-line worker states:

We get some workers who are absolutely fabulous, more than willing to help, here's information, here's resources…and then there's some that will go there and be like nope, they aren't employable, denied.

Another staff spoke about how at times, after a participant has been denied, she will wait several weeks before attempting to return to income assistance in the hope that she will get a different worker. Being deemed ineligible for income support has resulted in families being evicted or becoming ineligible for a Housing First program as they are required to have an income in order to participate.

Several front-line staff expressed concern that some aspects of the system they have to work within set their clients up for failure. This was particularly true for sending clients to services in areas where drugs are easily accessible and participants had a history of using. Meagan, a follow-up support worker, states:

Some of the options that are available to our clients put them more at risk. So for example I have a client who has been homeless for some time and she's having a hard time accessing two readily available shelters [while waiting for housing] because one has long waiting lists and her addiction has impacted her ability to stay at the other one…other than that it's going to be a program downtown when she's been 15 days sober and unfortunately its going to put her back in a cycle of addiction which is where she's been for years and years.

B. Limited and Conflicting Systems

Another theme that emerged from discussions with staff was that utilizing a Housing First philosophy can be difficult when working within systems that have conflicting mandates, goals and philosophies. Several agency staff felt that many mainstream services are punitive in nature, and are designed ideologically to prevent people from defrauding the system rather than helping them. Donna, a follow-up support worker comments:

Most of the systems are punitive. Like as a worker going in I feel like a criminal trying to access some of these services…I've been sternly talked to or told to do something that's not part of our job… I feel like everybody, us and the workers in different agencies, are frustrated and they're trying to access the different resources, and everybody is just grasping for the few resources there are.

The philosophy of harm reduction that is pivotal to Housing First programs was described as conflicting with several mainstream agencies, including child welfare. While many participants pointed out that clear-cut child protection concerns could arise with some families in Housing First programs and hence should be addressed immediately, it can also be difficult to mitigate the conflicting philosophies in other situations. This is an issue that must be resolved because parents who use substances (not necessarily abuse) will be hesitant to reach out for support for fear of having their children apprehended. For instance, Shane states:

When I work with families who have kids, they never ask me for services for their children because anything I would give them would put a spotlight on their on their family and potentially they could lose their children because they are apprehended. So they stop asking for help out of fear, because the system is punitive.

When agency staff were asked to describe how they balance their programs' harm reduction policy (or non-requirement of sobriety) when there are children in the household, several responses were given. One staff spoke about how it is ultimately a judgment call. If substance use is not problematic, or if it does not interfere with a parent's ability to take care of his/her children, there is no need to contact child protection services. Another staff stated if substance use has been flagged as a concern for families, most come into Housing First programs already having a relationship with child welfare.

In this case, it is simply a matter of staff working with the child protection workers. This staff continued to say that mitigating these concerns is not an issue that arises frequently, and that most of the time the parents are extremely loving and work very hard to take care of their children while working to address their addictions. This is an area within the Housing First philosophy that remains relatively unexplored and could use more theoretical development.

It should also be noted that in many cases, it is the very support of Housing First programs that allow parents to be reunited with their children, or not to have them apprehended. Having a stable housing situation allows regular visitations to occur with children who have been removed, and the support and services provided can demonstrate to child protection workers that parents are attempting to better their lives for the sake of themselves and their children. Similarly, obtaining housing and services can prevent child protection workers from apprehending children, providing that a plan of care is put into place and implemented. Deborah, a family participant echoes this sentiment:

If it wasn't for these guys [the staff at Housing First program] **I probably would have lost my kids.**

C. Housing First has its Limitations

Finally, several staff commented that despite having the mandate to enact the Housing First philosophy they found this difficult, as even these programs must operate as a 'system'. For instance, Shane states:

The majority of our clients have their issues with addictions because of abuse and trauma. So we can say we empower, but it's difficult – we want to be in the spirit of Housing First and meeting people where they are at, and letting them take control. But again, we work within systems and it's a frustration.

One example that stood out was workers' mandate to graduate clients, often theoretically within a year. While this wasn't seen as a problem for participants who had fewer barriers and were 'ready' to graduate (and one worker even commented that families are in general easier to 'move on' than those who have been entrenched in 'street life' for years), some staff felt they were working with an unrealistic timeframe in which to establish a rapport, work with clients on meeting their instrumental needs, and begin to address some of the deeper barriers such as trauma and addiction. Some staff felt that they had to spend most of their time simply securing the basic needs of their clients and that it was not always possible to begin to address some of the deeper-seated concerns within the time parameters given. Tom, a follow-up support worker states:

Although we're not crisis workers, we are really. I mean that's what we're doing is putting out those fires – so when we're saying that it [time in the program] would be a year to 18 months, that's BS. It's unrealistic.

As the majority of Housing First programs are designed to intake those with high acuity or who have been chronically homeless, some workers felt this was simply not enough time to work with participants, particularly those who have been living with barriers such as trauma and addiction for multiple years, even decades. When philosophies of meeting people where they are at and not requiring service provision in order to receive housing are factored in, the process of engagement and change can indeed become a lengthy one. It is therefore reasonable to question how long some Housing First participants will require supports in order to maintain their housing (of course allowing for individual differences). Anthony, a single dad of five, spoke about his anxiety over no longer having access to intensive supports:

I see a lot of helping in these programs, but then what about when they end? You're done, goodbye? And then it's like you get kicked out of the nest when your wings aren't quite developed. Where are you going to go? Straight down…I'm going to stay in the program as long as possible. I'm basically 16 going on 37 and am scared shitless. I've come too far to go back now.

Moreover, some of the barriers that Housing First participants present can be episodic or require ongoing maintenance which, in light of difficulties accessing the regular mainstream services outlined above, can make maintaining housing and wellbeing difficult for clients once they have graduated. One staff member shared an example where her Housing First team graduated a participant after she had successfully maintained housing for a year and a half, only to have her experience an episode of mental illness soon after. The participant was sent back to the agency and staff were told by funders they never should have permitted her to graduate. Yet how long can staff keep a relatively healthy, symptom-free participant enrolled in programs, particularly when this participant will always be at risk for future mental health episodes? Even in the absence of mental health concerns, many participants require years to learn the life skills necessary to maintain housing or to cope with new stress or crises that may arise. Cathy, an agency staff member comments:

Our clients are successful because of our supports – I know that makes sense – but I mean ongoing. They might not need intensive case management, but ongoing support. Like they have this setback, this problem…they just need that little bit of help every so often. They'll be evicted or there will be issues that lead to eviction once they graduate…So it would be good if there was some form of graduate support or follow-up.

As choice is a central principle in most Housing First programs, participants have to agree to graduate. Several staff spoke about how this can cause great anxiety in families and may act as a trigger for their previous trauma, mental health and addictions concerns. Other participants may simply begin to avoid staff members in an attempt to remain in the program. Several of the family participants also expressed great anxiety about graduating from their Housing First program. For one mother, her anxiety centered around financial supports:

I'm scared [for when I graduate the program] because I don't know how financially stable I'll be without the program. Because income support does not give enough for a family to live on. I have two kids and don't even get $1000.

For some programs, particularly ones that do not have a rental subsidy program to refer clients to upon graduation, there is good reason for this financial anxiety. Some programs are able to refer clients to other forms of financial support while they are in the program, but upon graduating they are no longer eligible. For instance, staff in one program spoke about how a partner organization provided a $150 per month incentive to participants in order to maintain their housing, and $100 the following year. Upon graduating they are no longer eligible.

Some staff commented that the process by which clients become eligible for graduation can be oppressive in itself. For instance, some programs ensure that Housing First participants pass a home inspection before graduating and answer many personal and invasive questions, sometimes from a staff member who has not been their primary worker.

D. Opportunities to Address Existing Systems

On a more positive note, Housing First programs have largely created the space for workers and policy makers to identify glaring gaps and inconsistencies within various systems and begin to discuss how to address this. For instance, Susan states:

There's interesting work that has been happening across the province [Alberta] as well, the cross-ministerial initiative – there's kind of been this initiative where we expose things that don't make any sense. Discharging for instance, people into homelessness…it creates the table where the conversations are had at a high enough level that they start to eventually change.

For some cities this has meant developing a 'system-of-care', defined by the Calgary Homeless Foundation (2014, p. 3) as:

A local or regional system for helping people who are homeless or at imminent risk of homelessness. As a method of organizing and delivering services, housing, and programs, it aims to coordinate resources to ensure community level results align with 10 Year Plan goals and meet client needs effectively. An integrated System of Care improves the capacity of homeless serving agencies through strengthening accessibility, continuity and coordination of care.

While bringing together front-line agencies that are mandated to serve the homeless has been an important component, there remains a lot of work to be done around gaps and inconsistencies in larger – typically provincial – systems such as income assistance, child welfare and housing. Families are often placed in 'catch-22s' as they interact with various systems, as they are not well coordinated. For instance, a family may experience a child welfare apprehension and as a condition of the children's return, parents are required to secure a large, suitable housing unit. Of course this requires more income, and income assistance may reject this request without the children being in their care or until the larger unit is rented.

6. Conclusion

Housing First is an early intervention response with proven successful outcomes. In meeting families 'where they are at', this program is able to intervene and get families into housing without a long list of prerequisites. Providing families with housing is the first step in helping them escape homelessness and gain stability in their lives. The Housing First model has demonstrated that once individuals have been housed, wraparound client-driven services support participants from the perspective of employment, addictions, mental health, education, and establishing community connections.

To date, most strategies have focused on homelessness as an isolated insular issue and have yet to address the primary causes of homelessness. While some headway has been made in provinces such as Ontario, with the newly released Poverty Reduction Strategy that includes ending homelessness, and Alberta, where youth homelessness has been made a priority, much greater buy-in from government is needed. Until complex societal issues such as affordable housing, income, and food security are addressed, families will continue to fall into homelessness and graduates of Housing First programs may once again become vulnerable.

Coordinating a systems-response is also imperative. The fragmented coordination between provincial and federal systems-level responses has often prevented individuals from receiving the support they require. Systems and services need to act as a support and not a barrier in order to ensure the long-term success of prevention initiatives and Housing First programs.

Currently, a strong focus on Housing First programming (an early intervention response) has overshadowed the importance of essential programming and supports. We need to break the cycle of homelessness. The only way to do this is through a holistic approach that includes prevention, systems-response, and early intervention as a direct response to ending homelessness in Canada.

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