

# Stories of hidden homelessness in the suburbs



---

## What you need to know

Experiences of homelessness differ depending on the individual. The stories heard in this research do not support the stereotype that homelessness is an individual problem. There is a need for more services in accessible areas, as well as safe and affordable housing. Providing adequate services can restore dignity and a sense of citizenship.

---

## What is this research about?

A large proportion of homelessness in the suburbs is hidden. This means that individuals are forced to live on the outskirts of society. In the suburbs, people who are experiencing homelessness are most likely to be part of the hidden homeless population.

This includes individuals who are 'couch surfing' or staying with friends or family temporarily. It also includes those who are moving

between friends and family due to a lack of housing. Those who experience homelessness and live outside, largely live in ravines and forests for safety and to avoid police.

In 2010, in Peel Region, 11,920 people accessed shelters, 14,500 accessed food banks and 14,000 people were on the waiting list for affordable housing. Given the prevalence of hidden homelessness the majority of people in Peel Region

are unaware of its existence. They are also unaware of the narratives that accompany homelessness.



---

### KEYWORDS

*Homelessness, narrative, service provision, hope, hidden homelessness, Peel Region, housing.*

Summary Date: September 2013

### ARTICLE SOURCE

Daiski, I., Halifax, N. V. D., Mitchell, G. J., & Lyn, A. (2012). Homelessness in the Suburbs: Engulfment in the Grotto of Poverty. *Studies in Social Justice*, 6(1), 103-123.

## What did the researchers do?

Community staff led the researchers through areas used by those experiencing homelessness. Later, participants were recruited through fliers and posters at local agencies such as soup kitchens and shelters.

Participants were selected to reflect as diverse a group as possible and were aged between 20 and 70. The researchers were attempting to uncover stories of homelessness. The researchers interviewed a total of 7 women and 8 men. Interviews lasted between 40 to 90 minutes.

## What did the researchers find?

There were a variety of pathways that led into homelessness. Some of the stories recounted provided details of being unable to afford housing, having been the victim of a crime, including domestic abuse, chronic illness and disability, and having lost employment.

The experience of homelessness was described as a feeling of being trapped in poverty. This meant struggling against: violence, sexual exploitation and the loss of identity. People also expressed struggles against substandard private sector housing and minimum wage standards.

People hoped for escape from homelessness into full citizenship.

This was a challenge due to a lack of support and resources. Other challenges included: employment, housing, lack of addiction treatment facilities and insensitive case-workers.

Participants expressed hope in the future. This was driven by different motivations including community, friends and personal ambitions.

There are also problems with private sector affordable housing options. Long-term underfunding by governments has caused a lack of affordable housing. People have reported living in unsafe, inaccessible or unclean housing conditions.

## HOW CAN YOU USE THIS RESEARCH?

Policy makers must consider the hidden homeless population when counting homelessness. This may require additional tools. They must also listen to individual's stories to fully understand homelessness. Furthermore, alternatives to current social housing should be considered to address the large backlog in applications. New housing policies should be created. These policies should draw on radical solutions already tested in other areas.

Community case workers who work with the public should be trained in anti-oppressive and inclusive service provision. This includes staff in shelters and programs such as Ontario Works. The public should be made aware of homelessness in their midst, what leads to it and what needs to be done to avoid and eliminate its effects.

---

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Dr. Isolde Daiski** is Associate Professor for the School of Nursing at York University.

**Dr. Nancy Viva Davis Halifax** is Associate Professor for the School of Health Policy & Management at York University.

**Dr. Gail J. Mitchell** is Professor for York University's School of Nursing and Director of the York-UHN Nursing Academy.

**Andre Lyn** is Manager of Community Investment at United Way of Peel Region, and former Researcher with The Social Planning Council of Peel.