Why Are We Still Struggling with Homelessness in Canada?

Stephen Gaetz

As the homelessness crisis in Canada has worsened over the past 15 years, it has become increasingly apparent that we need to re-evaluate our approach to this critical issue. There is no doubt that we are in the midst of a crisis. The numbers of people who can be found panhandling on streets or sleeping in parks in major cities throughout the country is testament to this. At the same time, homelessness has become much more visible in suburban areas, small towns and rural communities.

We do have a good idea of how we got to this place. Structural changes in our economy and housing market are implicated, as are significant shifts in government policy. We abandoned our national housing program in the 1990s and since then have witnessed a steady erosion in the supply of affordable housing. At the same time, many jurisdictions have cut back on supports and entitlements to low-income Canadians. Compounding this problem, as evidenced by Statistics Canada, most earners saw their incomes stagnate or decline over the past 25 years[1]. The overall result has been an increase in poverty across the country, and a very noticeable rise in the number of homeless individuals and families. Even in economically prosperous areas such as Calgary, the homeless population grew a staggering 740 percent between 1994 and 2006.

The response to homelessness in Canada has been mixed. There are many examples of communities struggling to develop fresh and inventive approaches to the emerging local crisis. In 1999, the federal government established the National Homelessness Initiative (now the Homelessness Partnering Strategy) and has played an important leadership role, providing funding and support for 61 designated communities across the country. Yet as inventive as these responses are in meeting the immediate needs of homeless people, the situation has not improved significantly. This, of course, raises questions about the effectiveness of our solutions. And there *are* solutions. Research in Canada and around the world points to strategies that work in reducing and eliminating homelessness. Put simply, we need to set aside our quest for an emergency response and focus on developing a comprehensive strategy to end homelessness in Canada.

Responding to Homelessness

How we respond to homelessness is largely determined by how we define it. Homelessness is an extreme manifestation of poverty, characterized not only by inadequate housing but also by insufficient income and social supports and poor health. It is a complex issue involving a range of social exclusionary factors that exacerbate poverty, limit opportunities and create barriers to full participation in Canadian society. The homeless population itself is quite complex, and in fact the term "homeless" obliterates some important differences. For instance, men tend to outnumber women on the streets. African Canadians and Aboriginal people are over-represented amongst the homeless, as are lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered youth. In many cities we now see growing numbers of both homeless families and people who are employed but cannot afford a home. All of this suggests that homelessness is indeed a complex issue and different subpopulations may require specific and targeted resources and supports.

So where do we start to respond to the problem of homelessness? Broadly speaking, there are three main approaches. First, there are strategies for prevention. This means investing in supports and coordinating services to reduce the likelihood of people becoming homeless in the first place.

The second approach is to "manage" people while they are homeless. This means investing in emergency services and resources to ensure that homeless

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people receive temporary shelter and the supports they need to regain their health and, one hopes, eventually move on in their lives.

The third approach is to provide transitions out of homelessness. This ranges from outcomes-based counselling in drop-in centres and shelters, to supportive and transitional housing programs and supports (including the Housing First model—more on this later) that offer participants the independence that most of us enjoy.

A comprehensive, sustainable solution to homelessness would employ all three approaches.

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Canadian Response to Homelessness

To accurately reflect the Canadian response to homelessness, we must acknowledge that we have placed too much emphasis on managing the crisis (through emergency services and by criminalizing homelessness) while under-investing in preventive programs and strategies to help speed the transition out of homelessness. This is not to say that investments in emergency responses are unnecessary. The very large numbers of Canadians who are homeless testifies to the need for emergency services. However, when we choose to invest in emergency shelters (some with over 500 beds), drop-in centres, soup kitchens and other front line services, we need to ask ourselves: is this the best we can do?

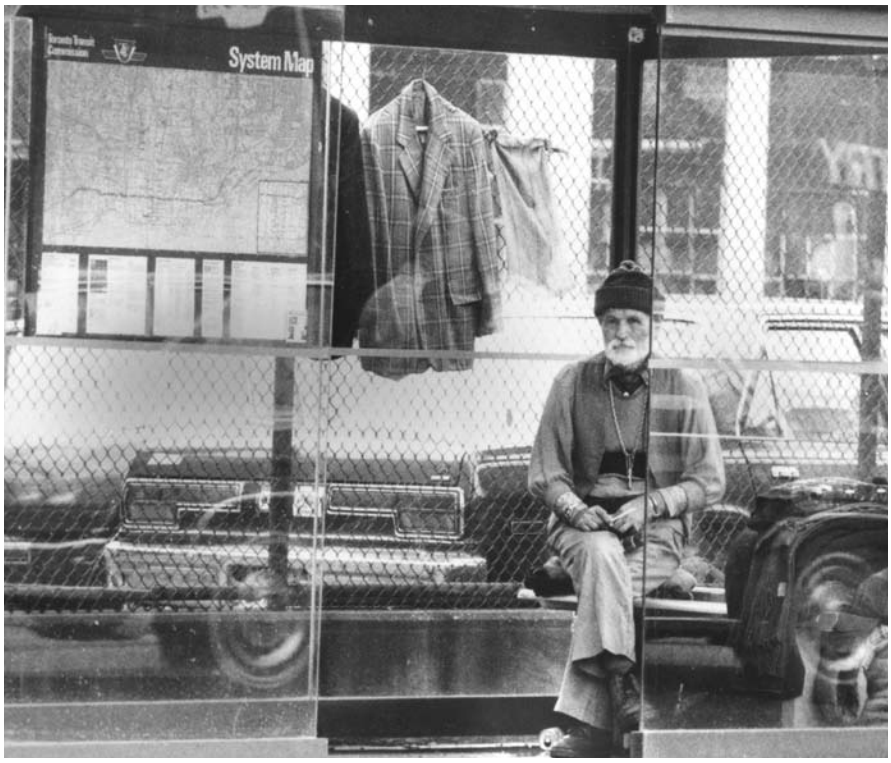
There is plenty of research that attests to the limitations of an emergency response approach. First and foremost, maintaining the state of homelessness clearly compounds a range of problems not only for the homeless people themselves but also for society at large. The damage to families and communities that results from homelessness is irrefutable, as is the deteriorating health of the people who experience prolonged homelessness.[2] Mental health problems emerge or are exacerbated,[3] and they are at a higher risk of early death.[4] People who are homeless typically suffer from malnutrition no matter where they get their food (including from drop-ins and shelters).[5] Addictions are both a cause and a consequence of homelessness and can become a stumbling block for people seeking to improve their lives.[6] Not only do homeless people have greater difficulty in maintaining employment,[7] but they are also more likely to be involved in the criminal justice system.[8] The longer they remain homeless, the worse these problems become and the greater the challenges they face in moving forward. By keeping people in a "state of emergency," how much are we really helping them? Is it enough to treat the symptoms while ignoring the causes?

Of course, there are significant social as well as financial costs associated with "managing the crisis" by taking an emergency response approach. A 2007 report by the Sheldon Chumir Foundation[9] estimated that the annual cost of managing homelessness is between $4.5 and $6 billion, for a 10-year cost of almost $50 billion. A 2001 study in British Columbia suggests it costs $30-$40,000 annually to support one homeless person,[10] and a 2006 study in Halifax points out that investments in social housing would generate per person savings of 41 percent.[11] Steve Pomeroy points out that the costs of homelessness do not just accrue to our system of emergency shelters, drop-in centres and front line services.[12] We must also consider residual costs when people who are homeless wind up in hospitals and emergency departments due to compromised health, are in need of mental health supports, and are incarcerated, for instance.

The sum of all these studies suggests that we have chosen to invest in a very expensive response to homelessness. As Michael Shapcott writes in the Wellesley Institute's Blueprint to End Homelessness,[13] the average monthly costs of housing people while they are homeless are $1,932 for a shelter bed, $4,333 for provincial jail, or $10,900 for a hospital bed. Compare this with the average monthly cost per individual to the City of Toronto for rent supplements ($701) or social housing ($199.92). In fact, by responding to homelessness "on the cheap", we are engaging in a very expensive strategy.

Alternative Approaches

There are some interesting alternative approaches to homelessness to be found in other countries. Many of us are familiar with the U.S. government's strategy of encouraging all levels of



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government to develop action plans to end homelessness. The "Housing First" model pioneered in several large American cities has gained traction and is often a centrepiece of these plans. It is also worth mentioning that the U.S., for all its faults, has a funded national housing strategy while we do not.

The British government, taking a more aggressive approach, has over the past 15 years carried out a comprehensive campaign that emphasizes prevention and transitions out of homelessness. They have even handled their emergency response differently, moving away from large-scale shelters where people are warehoused (few shelters in the City of London have more than 30 beds) to an approach that models transitional housing, where individuals get their own room with a door they can lock.

Our "made in Canada" approach to homelessness is unique in the world, characterized by innovation, commitment and community involvement. Yet, what does all this add up to? While demonstrating some creative initiatives, our response has developed in an ad hoc manner and lacks overall coherence. It is a case in which the whole is definitely not greater than the sum of the parts.

Seven Things We Can Do

To begin to solve our homelessness crisis, we need to move away from our short-term crisis management approach to a more strategic one that recognizes the role of communities, the non-profit sector, the private sector and all levels of government. Here are seven things we can do to steer our response to homelessness in a more effective direction.

1. Make *Prevention* and *Transitions* from Homelessness Central to our Strategy

The time has come to focus on prevention and transitions from homelessness in our strategic response to the crisis, while maintaining a necessary emergency response. There are many promising signs that Canadians are coming to this realization. In fact, during the past year, the Government of Canada's Homelessness Partnering Strategy has undergone a paradigm shift in this direction.

Homelessness has been described as a "fusion policy" issue, one that cuts across the business of most government departments in one way or another. A renewed emphasis on prevention requires us to consider how the policies and actions of different units of government might contribute to the problem and thus, to the solution. A range of factors that contribute to homelessness, including inadequate income and the high cost of food and fuel, require responses from different departments.

Prevention strategies may then include provision of income supports and rent supplements (for people with low incomes and/or experiencing an economic crisis), eviction prevention and a range of other policy and program options. In addition, there needs to be better coordination and seamless service delivery to allow people who experience addictions and mental health problems, for instance, to maintain their housing and receive the services they need.

A preventive approach also means we need to address program and policy weaknesses that may contribute to homelessness. If difficulties in obtaining benefits (disability, for instance) are leading to poverty, changes need to be made. If youth who have cut their ties with child welfare services are not being allowed to re-engage with the system when they become homeless, we need to change the system. If recent changes to our criminal justice system, such as holding more people on remand for longer periods and cutting back on discharge planning, are contributing to homelessness, we need to revisit these policies and practices. If we know that violence against women, children and youth leads to homelessness, we must not only ensure that there are adequate supports for people in such situations, we must also continue to confront the causes. Finally, if specific minority populations are overrepresented amongst the homeless (as are African Canadians, Aboriginals and sexual minorities), we must acknowledge that combating discrimination is a preventive strategy.

Transitional approaches such as the "Housing First" model need to be more broadly embraced. This is premised on the belief that housing is a basic human right and thus that people who are homeless—even the long-term, chronically homeless—should be moved quickly into housing, even if they are

suffering from addictions or mental health problems. We must abandon the notion that homeless people need to be ready for housing. Appropriate services, provided through a "case management" model, help to ensure that people remain housed and can move forward with their lives, in spite of personal challenges. As pointed out by Falvo in this issue, there are several successful and innovative applications of the Housing First approach in communities in Canada, including Calgary, Ottawa and notably Toronto, with its Streets to Homes initiative.

Shifting our focus to prevention and transitions does not mean abandoning emergency support. In fact, until such strategies are demonstrated to be effective, we must continue to invest in emergency services.

2. Strengthen and Expand our National Strategy

The Homelessness Partnering Strategy has shown great leadership, not only by providing funding and support for 61 designated communities across the country, but by providing moral and intellectual guidance. Unfortunately, it is continually hamstrung by inadequate funding, lack of a robust national housing strategy and short-term renewals that make almost every year of the program a "sunset year."

As of this writing, the Homelessness Partnering Strategy is set to expire in March of 2009. It *must* be renewed, significantly expanded, and given a long-term commitment that allows it to develop and implement a comprehensive approach to housing and homelessness. As part of this, there must be a commitment to reinvest in a national housing strategy. We can afford it. It is always cheaper to house people than to keep them homeless.

3. Involve All Levels of Government

Considering homelessness as a fusion policy issue also means involving all levels of government in solutions. The sad truth is that to some degree all levels are already involved (as evidenced by the $4.5-$6 billion annual tab). However, the approach taken thus far has been neither coordinated nor particularly effective.

Municipalities—both individually and collectively, through the efforts of the Federation of Canadian Municipalities—have emerged as real leaders in the fight against homelessness. They will inevitably continue to play a major role as sites of service delivery, but they should not be expected to carry the load to the degree that they have in the past. Where municipal governments can continue to innovate is through integrating and coordinating services, as well as through planning, to ensure that adequate supplies of affordable housing become part of all new housing developments.

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Provinces and territories, the major funders of social and health services, need to take a more pro-active role in addressing homelessness by supporting comprehensive strategies and action plans and helping local government more effectively deal with the crisis. Rather than passively funding a fragmented and ad hoc system of services, provincial governments need to develop their own provincial homelessness initiatives and take the lead on preventive strategies.

Homelessness is the responsibility of governments as a whole, not just one department. And while working horizontally is always a challenge, it is necessary if we are to develop effective and sustainable solutions to the housing crisis.

4. Support our Innovators

The most innovative Canadian responses have arguably happened at the local level, where different stakeholders, including municipal governments and the non-profit and private sectors, have developed programs and strategies to deal with homelessness in their communities. In many cases, these strategies have brought out the best, showcasing innovation coupled with compassion.

Whether we are speaking about the work of Victoria's Cool Aid Society, the Calgary Homeless Foundation, Toronto's Eva's Initiatives, Collectif de recherche sur l'itinérance, la pauvreté et l'exclusion sociale (CRI) in Québec or countless other examples, we do know that Canadians can and do devise innovative responses to homelessness. We need to continue to support such innovators, particularly those who take a comprehensive approach to homelessness by emphasizing prevention as well as both transitional and emergency support.

5. Encourage Evidence-Based Solutions

Research must contribute to homelessness policy and program planning in Canada. There is a solid body of research in Canada that deepens our understanding of the issues, challenges our assumptions and points to effective solutions to homelessness. Such research can be used both to educate the public and to inform policy and practice at all levels of government and throughout the social, health care and housing sectors.

It should go without saying that effective policies and programs are best built upon solid research evidence. However, in the homelessness sector, access to the best research, program models and evaluations has been limited. We need to insist on a stronger evidence-based approach to program

and policy development. We also need to ensure that the best ideas that result from our innovation are shared and transferred across the country. Resources like the Homeless Hub (www.homelesshub.ca) and Raising the Roof's Shared Learnings (www.sharedlearnings.org) provide a starting point.

6. Stop Criminalizing Homelessness

In many communities, Canadians have responded to homelessness with generosity and compassion. But we have also seen jurisdictions respond to the visible 'inconvenience' of homelessness with measures that seek to restrict the rights of homeless people to public space, even when they have nowhere else to go. Other laws have sought to criminalize the income-generating activities of this population. That in spite of strong research evidence[13] that shows the overwhelming majority of people who are homeless want regular jobs but must engage in street-level money-making activities such as panhandling to subsist. The rush to criminalize such activities reflects the worst of the Canadian response to homelessness, compounding the problems of marginalized people already struggling to survive.

7. Invest in Affordable Housing

Perhaps the single most important factor in eliminating homelessness is an adequate supply of affordable housing. As David Hulchanski puts it, "Homelessness is not just a housing problem, [but] it is always a housing problem."[14]

There can be no doubt that a lack of affordable housing is a direct contributor to our homelessness crisis. Since the withdrawal of the federal government from its housing program 15 years ago, we have witnessed an almost total halt in the building of social housing across the country, and that which exists is aging. The supply of affordable housing in the private market has continued to dwindle as well. This is due to gentrification, condo-conversion and planning approaches that underlie the growth of new urban and suburban centres across the country. Finally, while incomes have continued to stagnate or decline, the price of rental housing has increased.

We need to reverse this trend by ensuring that low-income earners, lone-parent families and singles, and people receiving social assistance have access to housing that is safe and affordable. A comprehensive affordable housing strategy involves several streams of activity:

- A national housing strategy funded and supported by all levels of government
- Reinvestment in subsidized and social housing stock, allowing the plans and implementation to be determined at the local level
- Supportive housing designed to meet the needs of individuals dealing with addictions, mental health, disabilities, etc.
- Establishment of eviction prevention programs in communities across the country
- Rent supplement programs that allow people greater choice and autonomy as to where they live
- Proactive zoning and planning (municipal and provincial responsibility) that make affordable housing mandatory in all new housing developments.

As Laird has argued, "The limitations of yesterday's solutions are now apparent."[15] The emergence of our homelessness crisis in Canada reflects poorly on us all, and investing heavily in the emergency response has not produced the results we need. Yet there is plenty of evidence from within Canada and abroad that demonstrates the degree to which governments, the non-profit sector, the private sector, researchers and people who experience homelessness can develop real solutions to homelessness.

We too have our innovations, strengths and a commitment to solving this problem. We need to shift our investment, adjust our paradigm and take advantage of the growing body of knowledge about what works.

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