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Ignoring Canada's Homelessness Won't Make It Go Away

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It may be surprising for residents of any of Canada's major cities to learn that we don't really have a homelessness problem. In fact, most people who access emergency shelter services access them once, get back on their feet and never access them again.

"For the vast majority of people who become homeless, the experience is rather short. In Canada, though the median length of stay in emergency shelter is approximately 50 days, most people are homeless for less than a month (29% stay only one night), and manage to leave homelessness on their own, usually with little support. For these people homelessness is a one-time only event." The State of Homelessness in Canada, 2013.

What we do have in Canada is a *chronic* homelessness problem. And we're not really doing anything about it.

I've worked with the chronic homeless for three years in Ottawa's Byward Market. They can be defined as those 'who have been on the streets for a long time, potentially years, and are locked into a state of homelessness due to multiple needs across health, addiction and contact with the criminal justice system,'

Although small in number, at less than 15 per cent of the homeless population, this group consumes more than half of the resources in the homelessness system, says the report.

Each and every client that enters my office is a complex and troubled individual whose needs must be addressed individually. However, there are more often than not major similarities between the life stories of the chronically homeless.

They are typically from impoverished families, where addiction, neglect, emotional, physical and sexual abuse were prominent. They usually do not have a high school diploma. Most of them started abusing drugs and alcohol between the ages of 11 and 15, as an escape from the neglect and abuse that they were suffering at home.

They often become involved in crime once their addiction gets out of hand. This typically happens before they are even able to legally drink.

The chronic homeless that I work with spend their adult lives in a constant vicious cycle through the corrections system, the health care system and the addiction recovery system and travel through these systems on a loop for years, sometimes for decades.

Some manage to get their addiction under control after treatment. If they're lucky, they also get their mental health conditions monitored by a psychiatrist. They find affordable housing and get a job or go back to school. They get their foot back into the societal door and then something terrible happens in their life that leads them back to their drug of choice. After a few weeks, their resources are spent and they resort to crime to feed their habit. They neglect to pay their rent and eventually, the police catch them shoplifting, dealing drugs or fighting and they get sent back to jail to sober up for a few months. Only to start the vicious cycle all over again from the beginning.

Oh, and most of them have lost all of their belongings, all of their identification and most of their family support by the time that they end up back in jail.

Homelessness really isn't the problem here. If you aren't suffering from a major mental illness or a major addiction, the chances are that you are only going to be homeless for a brief period of time. There are supports and programs out there that do phenomenal work and are getting people off the street every single day. But if we really want to tackle the issue of homelessness, we have to tackle the issues that plague the chronically homeless.

The majority of the chronically homeless have addiction and mental health issues as well as contact with the criminal justice system. Therefore, it seems logical to have a wealth of programs set up geared toward these individuals.

But we don't. I work in the Nation's Capital for one of the only agencies in the entire region that will accept clients from jail or prison into an addiction and mental health treatment centre upon their release. Considering we can only accommodate about 30 clients at a time, it is barely even a scratch on the surface.

That means that every other chronically homeless person who is released from jail or prison is literally sent right back out to the street, without any support or any hope of avoiding the life that lead them behind bars in the first place. With no support and no

hope for anything better, it's no wonder that the cycle of addiction often begins again immediately upon release. And once the money runs out, it's back to crime to feed the beast.

It's an obvious problem with an obvious solution. We need to stop victimizing, and re-victimizing these people and denying them the help that they so direly need and deserve. They aren't criminals. They're people doing the best they can with the hands they've been dealt.

I have been fortunate enough to see what works for these individuals. Long-term, residential treatment immediately following incarceration that addresses both the addiction and the mental health concerns. During the treatment phase of four to six months, social and community supports need to be explored.

The client needs to be encouraged to see that life can be better. That they can get their high school diploma. That they can live a life free of addiction. That their mental health conditions can actually be managed quite well if they keep regular contact and manage to stay off the street drugs.

And then from treatment, a move into a transitional housing development that is staffed twenty four hours a day with trained professionals who specialize in addiction, mental health and treating the chronically homeless. After a year or so living well in supervised housing, a move to more independent living, but with weekly contact with a therapist to keep a close eye on their addiction and mental health problems.

It's extremely rare to see a client fall back into homelessness without a prior lapse of their addiction or mental health problem. It just doesn't happen that way. It's pretty easy to tell that you are on the verge of becoming homeless again and if you have your faculties about you, most people can find a way to keep their heads above water. But if you are plagued by addiction or commanded by voices, you are destined to fall right back into the cracks.

I see on a daily basis that there is a great deal of hope for the chronically homeless.

But when there are so few agencies actually willing to help those with violent criminal records, severe addictions and severe mental health issues, homelessness in Canada is the problem that will never go away.

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