

Running Head: HOMELESSNESS IN CANADA

Urban Homelessness in Canada

Institutional Affiliation

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Definition of Homelessness

Homelessness can simply be defined as the lack of house or shelter. Hulchanski (n.d.) believes that homelessness is “a great unresolved political and social problem of our time.” He defines homelessness as:

The absence of a place to live (a house or apartment or room - the physical structure) - which includes the absence of belonging to a place and the people living there (a home, in the social/psychological sense). [It refers to] situations in which people lack regular and customary access to adequate and appropriate conventional housing (the physical structures that are designed and intended to be permanent residential accommodation). A person who has no regular place to live stays in an overnight emergency shelter, an abandoned building, an all-night coffee shop or theatre, a car, outdoors, or other such places not meant to be living spaces” (Hulchanski, n.d.).

On the other hand, Springer (2000) views homelessness as term encompassing many possible meanings. Springer suggests using the "houselessness" instead of homelessness. She also identifies

Categories of Houselessness/Homelessness

According to Springer (2000), there are three categories of houselessness:

Absolute houselessness refers to people who use public or private housing. “People sleeping rough, which means in the street, in public places or in any other place not meant for human habitation are those forming the core population of the "homeless"[as well as] those sleeping in shelters provided by welfare or other institutions” (Springer, 2000).

Concealed houselessness refers to people who are houseless but temporarily housed with friends or family. "...all people living with family members or friends because they cannot afford any shelter for themselves. Without this privately offered housing opportunity, they would be living in the street or be sheltered by an institution of the welfare system." (Springer, 2000).

At risk of houselessness refers to people who are at grave risk of losing their housing. This group includes "...those facing the risk of losing their shelter either by eviction or the expiry of the lease, with no other possibility of shelter in view. Prisoners or people living in other institutions facing their release and having no place to go to, are considered as part of this population" (Springer, 2000).

What Causes Homelessness

Springer notes that before people becomes homeless or houseless, they first experienced inadequate housing. "Before becoming houseless, many people have been living in "substandard housing" situations. ...Households with a feeble and perhaps insecure income are likely to live in substandard housing units and might also experience houselessness because of economic difficulties" (Springer, 2000).

For Jahiel (1992), homelessness happens not only because of people's economic difficulties. Jahiel (1992) believes that "homelessness does not occur in a social vacuum. He argues that

the events that make people homeless are initiated and controlled by other people whom our society allows to engage in the various enterprises that contribute to the homelessness of others. The primary purpose of these enterprises is not to make people homeless but, rather, to achieve socially condoned aims such as making a living, becoming rich, obtaining a more desirable home, increasing the efficiency at the workplace, promoting

the growth of cultural institutions, giving cities a competitive advantage, or helping local or federal governments to balance their budgets or limit their debts. Homelessness occurs as a side effect (Jahiel, 1992).

Hulchanski (n.d.) supports Jahiel's (1992) argument that homelessness is the "outcome of a very complex social process." Some of these social processes are:

global economic restructuring (including deindustrialization and labor market changes); restructuring of the welfare state (national, provincial and local welfare and income maintenance policy and programs); demographic change (more single person and single parent households); change in social attitudes and lifestyles; a housing system in crisis (gentrification, conversions, low vacancy rates, cuts in social housing supply and general housing assistance, etc.); and an inadequate system of supports for vulnerable groups, including people who require assistance with mental illness and substance abuse problems (Hulchanski, n.d.).

Hulchanski (n.d.) stresses that these social processes are crucial to understanding the problems of homelessness, specifically in Canada.

Statistics on Homelessness

As early as the 1980s, social action agencies have reported that the number of homeless Canadians was between 100,000 to 250,000 (Hargrave, 1999). By the 1990s, the statistics on homelessness have shot up. Reports from provided by hostels, emergency shelters, advocacy and government agencies showed that the number of homeless people began to spiral upward in the late 1980s and into the 1990s (Hargrave, 1999). Likewise, there has been an increase in the subgroups of homeless that require decent housing as well as a variety of social support, medical and counseling services (Hargrave, 1999). Another trend noted is that the composition of the

homelessness population is no longer limited to only “derelict” older men but also young men, teenagers, women and children (1999). Over represented in the homeless populations are native Indians, refugees and ethnic minorities (Hargrave, 1999). It was noted that the lack of affordable housing in major cities is a consistent factor for the rise in number of homeless (Hargrave, 1999).

Not much have changed with the 1990s trends in the homeless population. Presently, "in almost every urban center across Canada the number of homeless people continues to rise. The fastest growing sector among homeless is young people age 18 and families with children" (Pollack, 2001). Even in Toronto with a strong economy, the population of the homeless remains.

The Toronto Report Card on Housing and Homeless 2003 reports that a quarter of Toronto's population or 552, 300 still live in poverty. Most of the people living in poverty cannot afford to pay the exorbitant rental fee in private apartments. Only 20% of private rental apartments rent for less than \$800 a month (Toronto Report Card on Housing and Homeless 2003) and between 1997 and 2002, Toronto rents rose by 31% (Toronto Report Card on Housing and Homeless 2003). Thus, with more than 25% of tenants in Toronto earning below \$20,000 annually, more than 250, 000 tenant households pay more than 30% of their income on rent, 20% pay more than 50% for rental (Toronto Report Card on Housing and Homeless 2003). Because of the high rental rates, more people are applying for social housing. Recent data indicates that the social housing waiting list now stands at 71,000 households (Toronto Report Card on Housing and Homeless 2003). Furthermore, from 2000 to 2002, only 3% of new housing construction was for rental units (873 units) compared to 97% for the home-ownership market (28,492) (Toronto Report Card on Housing and Homeless 2003). In 2002, about 31,985 different people of which

4, 779 were children stayed in Toronto's emergency shelters (Toronto Report Card on Housing and Homeless 2003).

While homeless population is high in Toronto, there is no specific area in the city which is known or prominent for its number of homeless people. Unlike in other cities such as Vancouver where there is an invisible line separating East Hastings from West Hastings to keep the homeless people in the East away from the West end. In Toronto, the homeless are not concentrated in one area. The government has effectively spread the homeless people throughout the city to try to avoid having one area with all the homeless people. In fact, each area in Toronto has its share of homeless people, including the very wealthy areas. Some of those in the more affluent areas have been complaining about the presence of homeless people in their area. One affluent community has even petitioned the closing of a church program that offers shelter to homeless during the winter.

Government and Private Organization's Solution to Homelessness

Various groups both government and non-government have organized different ways to help address the problem of homelessness in Canada. A coalition of NGO's wrote to the United Nations in 1998 to deplore Canada's record in dealing with homelessness and poverty (Parkdale Community Legal Services, n.d.). Local churches also mounted programs and projects aimed at providing temporary shelter to homeless during winter. While the local government has launched the Mayor's Homelessness Action Task Force to deal with the crisis of homelessness.

A case study by the Ministry of Community and Social Services on The City of Toronto Homeless Initiatives Fund (CT-HIF) which combined the City of Toronto's Homeless Initiatives Fund, created in 1992, and the Ontario Homelessness Initiatives Fund showed that "a streamlined approach to getting clients into the system. And, greater integration makes it easier

to coordinate the allocation of resources” (Raising the Roof, n.d.). The case study notes the Mayor’s Homelessness Action Task Force responded to homelessness in Toronto by “funding a broad range of new initiatives that have a measurable impact on preventing homelessness; helping people across emergency shelters or moving from hostels into more permanent forms of accommodation; and freeing up space within the shelter system” (Raising the Roof, n.d.). Furthermore, the same case study lauds the local administration’s effort to ensure that services were coordinated and that target recipients of the program are well-informed on how to acquire such services (Ministry of Community and Social Services, 2000). More importantly, communication within and across concerned government agencies were integrated to ensure coordination

An intra-departmental committee established by the Shelter, Housing and Support Division to ensure that strategies developed to address homelessness issues takes into account the needs and variety of clients and that they were consistent with work underway in other parts of the Department ((Raising the Roof, n.d.).

Another inter-department working group on homelessness included representatives from various divisions within the department as well as staff from Urban Planning and Development Services Department and Office of the Chief Administrative Officer (Raising the Roof, n.d.).

Another program on homeless is the Literacy and Homelessness Project in Toronto. The said program aimed at making literacy skills accessible and relevant in Toronto to people who were transient, socially isolated, homeless, and under-housed. Members of the team shared information, provided training and expertise, improved practice, and advocated for educational access for people who were homeless. The project ended in 1999, but the Toronto Street

Education Coalition continued its work. Because of this endeavor, “many service agencies working with homeless people were encouraged to help homeless adults with their learning needs to access employability, housing or other social services” (Raising the Roof, n.d.).

Recommendations

As homelessness is viewed as a social economic problem, solutions to its must also involve reforms in social processes. Jahiel (1992) points out, “the discourse on homelessness must be broadened to reach into those areas of housing, income production, health care, and family life where the events and people contributing to homelessness are situated.” Moreover, as “social, economic and governmental program changes over the past two decades have created a large group of Canadians at risk of becoming homeless’ (Hulchanski, n.d.), the government must be able to establish ways to solve the socio-economic conditions which contributes to the increasing homelessness population.

The Toronto Report Card on Housing and Homelessness (2003) recommends the following actions:

For the Canadian Government: a) Improve income security for low-income people; b) Fast-track rental housing program funding; c) Fund rental housing at a level to produce units that are affordable to low-income renters; and d) Fund the revitalization of Toronto’s ageing social housing stock.

For the Province of Ontario: a) Improve social assistance benefits, especially the shelter component; b) Increase minimum wage to reflect rising cost of living; c) Fast-track rental housing program funding; d) Provide capital funding for the new rental housing program; e) Provide rent supplements for new rental housing; f) Provide funding to support services for new transitional housing; g) Provide more supportive housing units

with ongoing funding; h) Amend the Tenant Protection Act to provide some form of rent protection to vacant units; i) Increase funding for community mental health and addiction services; and j.) Fund the revitalization of Toronto's ageing social housing.

For the City of Toronto: a) Continue to use municipal levers and resources to help build new affordable rental housing (including City lands); b) Promote inclusive communities; and c) Ensure sufficient shelter beds are available.

Indeed, the solution to homelessness is not about providing temporary shelters to the homeless, the root cause of it which is poverty, unemployment and illiteracy must be addressed through an integrated program. Canada's problem with homelessness is a very serious one and it requires not short-term solutions but long-term programs that will ensure the sustainability of the program.

There must be a concerted effort among different government agencies from the national level down to the local level to ensure that programs are well-coordinated, integrated, and well-funded. Likewise, government agencies must ensure that services intended for the homeless reached their target recipients.

In the end, the solution to Canada's homelessness is empowering the homeless through literacy and livelihood training so they can be employed. Also, government agencies for housing mortgage and housing rentals must ensure that there are low-cost housing projects or shelters available for the homeless.

Homelessness is a social problem that needs social reform solution. Government and private organizations such as churches, literacy groups, and human development firms must work together to help the homeless empower themselves, get employed and provided access to affordable housing.

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