

ONTARIO 360 – HOMELESSNESS – TRANSITION BRIEFING

A comprehensive strategy to eliminate homelessness in Ontario

Issue

Homelessness remains a persistent challenge for policymakers. Its causes are complex. The solutions are multijurisdictional and involve a continuum of services and supports. This past winter’s homelessness “crisis” in Toronto and elsewhere in the province demonstrated that Ontario still has considerable work to do to meet its 10-year goal of eliminating homelessness.¹

Nearly a quarter of a million people in Canada will experience homelessness at some point this year.² Those experiencing homelessness are the other 1-percent – the poorest and most excluded of the Canadian population. The incoming government will thus need a comprehensive strategy to support these individuals and families to have the security, dignity, and other broad-based benefits of adequate housing and shelter.

Overview: Homelessness in Ontario

It is difficult to systematically assess the state of provincial homelessness in Ontario due to a patchwork of data collection³ and different definitions and types – including chronic homelessness, transitory homelessness, and “hidden homelessness.”⁴ Fortunately data collection will improve in future

1 Laurie Monsebraaten, “Ontario sets 10-year deadline to end homelessness,” Toronto Star, October 29, 2015. Available at: <https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2015/10/29/ontario-sets-10-year-deadline-to-end-homelessness.html>.

2 Stephen Gaetz, Erin Dej, Tim Richter, Melanie Redman, The State of Homelessness in Canada 2016, The Canadian Observatory on Homeless Press, 2016. Available at: http://homelesshub.ca/sites/default/files/SOHC16_final_20Oct2016.pdf.

3 Danusha Jebanesan and Vivian Tam, Targeting Homelessness in Ontario through Housing, OMSA Position Paper, January 2016. Available at: https://omsa.ca/sites/default/files/position_paper/40/position_paper_targeting_homelessness_in_ontario_through_housing_2016_jan.pdf.

4 For a comprehensive study of homelessness in Ontario and its factors and causes in different parts of the province, see: Carol Kauppi, Bill O’Grady, Rebecca Schiff and Fay Martin, Homelessness and Hidden Homelessness in Rural and Northern Ontario, Rural Ontario

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years, in part as a result of the federal government's push towards coordinated "homeless counts" across the country. But in the meantime there is still some capacity to understand the state of homelessness in the province. There are some estimates for cities and regions across the province – more than 5,200 in Toronto as an example.⁵

As for government policy, there has been some progress in recent years. In late 2015, the provincial government released the report from the Expert Advisory Panel on Homelessness.⁶ The Panel's report, *A Place to Call Home*, set out various recommendations – including better defining and measuring homelessness and related policies, better supporting local capacity and initiatives, and working better with the federal government to align priorities and strategies. The government has since begun implementing many of them as part of its strategy to end homelessness by 2025.⁷

Still, the experience this past winter has shed light on the extent to which more resources and policy reforms are needed to address what is a very complex social problem.

The need for reform

The causes of homelessness (and in turn its solutions) are numerous; if you want to know what will end homelessness in Canada, the best thing you can do is ask someone who has been or is currently homeless. They know best the causes of their homelessness, having experienced the gaps in the safety net first hand.

Institute, 2017. Available at: <http://www.ruralontarioinstitute.ca/file.aspx?id=ae34c456-6c9f-4c95-9888-1d9e1a81ae9a>.

⁵ Michael Shapcott, "Toronto's homeless population continues to grow: latest city count," Wellesley Institute, July 31, 2013. Available at: <http://www.wellesleyinstitute.com/housing/torontos-homeless-population-continues-to-grow-latest-city-count/>.

⁶ Government of Ontario, *A Place to Call Home: Report of the Expert Advisory Plan on Homelessness*, 2015. Available at: <http://www.mah.gov.on.ca/AssetFactory.aspx?did=11038>.

⁷ Government of Ontario Press Release, "Ontario commits to ending chronic homelessness in 10 years," October 28, 2015. Available at: <https://news.ontario.ca/mma/en/2015/10/report-of-the-expert-advisory-panel-on-homelessness.html>.

That said, there are some identifiable and frequent causes of homelessness. Economic causes include poverty and a lack of safe, affordable housing. A history of trauma can frequently lead to homelessness, whether that is violence, sexual abuse, or personal tragedy experienced at any age. Untreated mental illness is another often cited cause of homelessness, though only a small minority of the 235,000 Canadians who experience homelessness this year suffer from a severe mental illness. There are a host of other institutional drivers of homelessness, including child protection services (notably for indigenous children) and a prison system that does not adequately prepare those who have served their time to re-enter and re-integrate into society.

So, what is the government of Ontario to do in the face of a problem, so complex, that it involves all orders of government and all sectors of civil society? Ontario is unique in the Canadian federation in that housing powers have been devolved to the municipal level (after they were first devolved from the federal to the provincial level).⁸ That means that the role of the province of Ontario in resolving homelessness is somewhat different from the role other Canadian provinces can and do play.

How to move forward

Below are three recommendations that are within provincial jurisdiction that the next Government of Ontario should consider as part of its overall policy agenda.

1. See the whole picture

While 235,000 Canadians experience homelessness over the course of a year, only about 35,000 people are homeless on any given night. These numbers tell a very important story; the vast majority of people who experience homelessness do so for a short period of time. These people use emergency services such as shelters for only a few days before finding housing of their own. A much smaller portion, an estimated 5-10 percent,

⁸ Gregory Suttor, *Still Renovating: A History of Canadian Social Housing Policy*, Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016.

experience chronic homelessness, meaning they are homeless for a long period of time (over one year, or several times over the course of one year).⁹

Plans to end homelessness across Canada tend to focus first on ending chronic homelessness. This is the case in Ontario, where the provincial government has committed to ending chronic homelessness by 2025. This focus is appropriate; while a small minority of the homeless population, those who are chronically homeless tend to use a lot of social services. The logic is, by first helping these people, the “homeless serving system” will be much better able to help those who are less chronically homeless, as their support needs tend to be less complex.

While remaining committed to its goal of ending chronic homelessness (and being forthright about its progress towards that goal), the Government of Ontario must not lose sight of the bigger picture. In other words, focusing on the chronically homeless without also preventing people from becoming homeless because they cannot afford or access safe housing is akin to shoveling during a snow storm.

Prevention must also be a key part of any strategy to addressing and ultimately eliminating homelessness. Preventing people from falling into homelessness will require more affordable housing options. There are many ways to create more affordable housing, ranging from building government-owned housing to leveraging private developments to provide a portion of affordable units. One way or another, creating more safe and affordable housing must be a priority of any the Ontario government. A recent Ontario 360 “transition briefing” by Janet Mason sets out some useful ideas in this regard.¹⁰

⁹ Tim Aubry, Susan Farrell, Stephen Hwang, and Melissa Calhoun, “Identifying the Patterns of Emergency Shelter Stays of Single Individuals in Canadian Cities of Different Sizes.,” *Housing Studies* 28(6), 2013: 910–927. Available at: https://ruor.uottawa.ca/bitstream/10393/24220/1/Aubry_Tim_2013_Identifying_the_patterns_of_emergency_shelter_stays.pdf.

¹⁰ Janet Mason, “Affordable housing – transition briefing,” Ontario 360 (University of Toronto School of Public Policy and Governance), April 4, 2018. Available at: <http://on360.ca/30-30/ontario-360-affordable-housing-transition-briefing/>.

2. ***Commit to implementation of the Truth and Reconciliation recommendations***

Indigenous people are over-represented among the homeless population in virtually all parts of the country, even cities where there are not a lot of indigenous people among the general population (such as Montreal).¹¹ Rather than seeing this over-representation as the result of poor choices, it is principally the result of a long history of government efforts to assimilate indigenous peoples and to erase their culture and traditions.

Recent research I conducted with my colleague Carey Doberstein (UBC Okanagan) found that public attitudes, including those of liberals and conservatives, are generous and sympathetic towards those who experience homelessness as a result of a mental illness. The same cannot be said of indigenous people experiencing homelessness, towards whom there is still prejudice and misunderstanding (research forthcoming).

These attitudes can lead to a number of challenges when it comes to ending homelessness among indigenous people, from prejudice on the part of landlords towards indigenous housing applicants, to difficulty gaining public support for homelessness programs and policies that are designed for indigenous peoples. The Government of Ontario should commit to the implementation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission recommendations, particularly those related to education about Canada's past as a part of a broader project of reconciliation and those regarding reforms to the child welfare system.

3. ***Get out of the way***

There is intense innovation on the issue of homelessness happening at the local level across Canada and particularly in Ontario, given its devolution of housing policies to the municipal level. The province should facilitate this

¹¹ Eric Latimer, James Macgregor, Christian Méthot, and Alison Smith, *Dénombrement des personnes en situation d'itinérance à Montréal* le 24 mars 2015. Montréal, Québec: Ville de Montréal, 2015. Available at: https://ville.montreal.qc.ca/pls/portal/docs/PAGE/D_SOCIAL_FR/MEDIA/DOCUMENTS/RAPPORT_DENOMBREMENT_ITINERANCE_102015.PDF.

innovation and not throw up barriers to the creation of new best practices and new affordable housing.

One immediate, tangible change the government could make would be to remove restrictions around inclusionary zoning powers. Inclusionary zoning allows municipalities to require that new housing developments include a portion of affordable units, thus enabling local governments across Ontario to leverage hot housing markets to their benefit.

The current inclusionary zoning framework places serious limitations on a local government's ability to do this. It is a bit counterintuitive: having given local governments the responsibility for housing and homelessness, the province is preventing them from accessing key tools that would allow them to fulfill that mandate. The new Ontario government should revisit this policy, and other transfers of funding and decision-making to the local level such as the Community Homelessness Prevention Initiative, to ensure that local expertise and resources are maxed out in any efforts to respond to homelessness.

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