
Homelessness in Canada

Homelessness is not an error of people, caused by their characteristics or mistakes, but instead, by society's and governments' actions or failures to act in the areas of poverty, deinstitutionalization, and the shrinking supply of affordable housing. At the root of homelessness is poverty, and the growing number of poor is leaving many without shelter, or a roof over their heads. Deinstitutionalization was originally seen as an appropriate way to maximize resources, but insufficient reinforcement has led to vagrancy. The rising cost of rent and housing has made it difficult to pay for other basic necessities such as food, leading to homelessness as the only option. However, if prevention and reduction strategies are effectively placed by the government, a decrease in homelessness is very possible. The occurrence and deepening poverty has grown because of alterations in the make up of the labour market and because of Government policy changes like restrictions on Employment Insurance eligibility and incises to welfare. The rich are continuing to get richer and the poor are continuing to get poorer. "From the ten-year period between 1986 and 1996 the population of Canada increased by 14 percent, and this would bring upon expectations of a corresponding increase in the number of Canadians living below the official poverty line set by the federal government. Instead we find that there were 30 percent more Canadians living in poverty at the end of this period, a rate which was more than double that warranted by population increase of 14 percent." (Pohl, par. 1; "cause #1" sec.7) Women are especially having a harder time dealing with poverty issues as they are more likely to experience times of low financial instability for a longer amount of time and to a greater degree of depth than men. In 2003, there were approximately 1.5 million adult women living in poverty. In the same year, the average pre-tax income for women over the age of 16 was just 62% that of men. (Women and Girls: Homelessness and Poverty in Canada 1) These underlying factors of women in poverty are what cause the bulk of homeless women. For example, in Vancouver the homeless people who were confined to streets consisted of being female and less than 19 years old 31.5% of the time. So not only men and women, but also the youth is affected by poverty and homelessness. The likelihood of youth who grow up in poverty is far more likely to grow up to live in extreme financial distress. This is the result of other negative outcomes of poverty such as poor academic achievement, abuse and neglect, developmental delays, physical health problems, and behavioral and sociological problems. Deinstitutionalization has led to structural changes in the health care system which has resulted in people coming out of institutions without any proper community support programs leaving them to become homeless. Without proper community-based support programs deinstitutionalized mentally ill patients have more difficulties obtaining a home. The Vancouver Richmond Health Board/Vancouver Community Mental Health Services maintains a waiting list of 2,600 individuals who are mentally ill who must wait an average of four years for supportive housing. (Homelessness Causes and Effects 3) For example, in the

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past four decades British Columbia has had the largest amount of deinstitutionalization it has ever had. This is directly attributable to the downsizing and eventual closure of Riverview Hospital on July 13, 2012. When Riverview Hospital was downsizing they were under funded, and felt as if modern medicine had relinquished the need for a psychiatric hospital. This resulted in a deinstitutionalizing of many patients deemed to be fit for society when they were actually more suited to remain in the mental institutions permanently or for an extended period of time. These patients after wandering the streets, and looking for jobs and homes from anywhere from a month to a year seemed to find a home in Vancouver Downtown Eastside. The neighborhoods in the area are seen as a norm for low-income individuals or those looking for a better life because they are invested with many community resources targeted to the homeless, which makes it appealing to mentally ill people as well. Furthermore, as deinstitutionalization has led to homelessness of patients, homelessness has opened the gateway towards incarceration. Surveys of jail and prison inmates find that mentally ill offenders are more likely than other inmates to have been homeless at the time of arrest and in the year before arrest. (Markowitz 51). Also with the insufficient amount of treatment programs within the neighbourhoods and the restricted number of staff, personal resources, and public supports, numerous troubled homeless individuals are at an increased risk of police confrontation and arrest. These displaced individuals are confined not only for summary offences such as, intoxication, disorderly conduct, vagrancy or causing a nuisance, but also indictable offences like assault, theft and robbery. Housing prices continue to dwindle today and the amount of low-income individuals continues to inflate. As immigrants continue to flood into Canada the provisions provided for them has led to inferior housing options. These houses are not only unreasonably priced, but are also not comfortable or acceptable. Inappropriate housing such as in impoverished areas like Vancouver has seen an alarming increase in bedbugs, particularly in Downtown Eastside, where 31 per cent of residents have reported infestations. (Bed bugs) For example, in Metro Vancouver it was found that 96% of refugees experience extreme, high or moderate housing stress in their first six months in Canada. (Francis 60) In their first year in Canada refugees are provided with the Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP), which is designed to be designated strictly towards shelter and food. The RAP rates are dependent on the amount of people that are in a family; for instance, single refugee is given \$635, a family of three is given \$1,163 and a family of five is given \$1,447 per month. The average monthly rent in Metro Vancouver as of October 2008, for a three bedroom apartment was \$1,356, which is suitable to accommodate for a family of five. Therefore, after paying for shelter a family of five has \$91 to pay for food and other expenses. This causes a lot of problems leading to homelessness because newly integrated refugees are generally uneducated of Canadian norms and traditions, and have a hard time seeking a job or any other way to provide for themselves, or their families. So the \$91 is all they have to eat and support others. In order to shrink homelessness preventative and reduction strategies have to be placed by the government. For example, some preventative strategies that could make a difference to completely stop homelessness from the root are emergency prevention and mainstream prevention strategies.

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Mainstream prevention programs can be used for assessing and responding to the housing needs of low-income people through health care, general treatments like addiction and welfare. Also individuals from public institutions like hospitals, jails, and medical care facilities, who have been discharged, could use specifically designed planning programs to map out their future with discharge planning. Discharge planning is a set of activities that an individual participates in with a treatment program and they are determined to allow people to make easy transitions to self-reliant living. Similarly reduction strategies like outreach programs, rapid rehousing, support services and permanent housing can help to regress homelessness. The outreach programs are ways to connect the general public with information about services and housing. Rapid rehousing is a way of incorporating emergency shelters and transitional houses to assist in the reduction of the period of time people are homeless. Support services such as, job training, income assistance, legal aid, mental health services and treatment for drugs and alcohol can help with reduction. Finally, having more of a quantity of permanent housing, which is affordable, can change the homelessness outlook. In conclusion, as the problem of homelessness continues to not be addressed, more and more people are finding homes on street corners, jails and prisons. Through preventative and reduction strategies the problem of the poverty struck households could begin to turn around for the better. However, as society continues to ignore this predicament and the Government continues to address other troubling situations instead, the amount of homeless flooding the streets will continue to increase. The problems stem from three specific government organizations: health care, social services and Criminal Justice System. These organizations must bond together to first address the problem specifically, and then work collectively to fix them.

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