

# research snapshot

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## Homelessness Is a Symptom of Poverty and Government Failure

### What is this research about?

Since the 1980s, homelessness in Canada has been on the rise. Cutbacks to social programs and the lifting of rent controls have left housing out of reach for many individuals. In some cases, the private and voluntary sectors have responded with crisis interventions. Food banks give out groceries to help those unable to afford the necessities of life. Churches offer their basements for people to sleep in the wintertime. Volunteers prepare meals and help out with supervision and cleaning.

However, the root causes of homelessness are rarely addressed. Homelessness is often thought to be the result of mental illness or an eccentric 'chosen' lifestyle, a view that ignores key social factors. How do people become homeless? And what supports are needed for people who are homeless to get off the street?

### What did the researcher do?

Researchers at York University set out to understand the housing needs of homeless people. They interviewed twenty-four participants who were homeless in Toronto. Most of the participants were living in shelters. Others were living on the street, in parks or abandoned buildings, and under bridges. A few of the women were staying with a 'friend,' which is often referred to as 'couch surfing.' Although the majority of the interviewees were white males, the

### What you need to know:

Homelessness, most of the time, is not a choice or the result of mental illness – rather homelessness is caused by a lack of income and housing. Homelessness therefore should be seen as a social, not an individual, problem.

participants came from a range of ages and cultures, reflecting the diversity of the city.

### What did the researcher find?

Researchers found that the main causes of homelessness are inadequate incomes and substandard housing. Some of the people interviewed lost their housing because of a welfare system which they called 'inflexible' and 'punitive.' Many people who are homeless do not even apply for social assistance payments; the payments are inadequate and the application process complicated and dehumanizing.

The loss of stable employment emerged as the most frequent cause of homelessness. Temporary jobs tend to be dangerous, insecure, and without benefits. Other barriers to housing include the stigma of being homeless itself, ethnicity and sexual orientation, and previous convictions in the justice system. Violence is common on the street and in shelters, which are dangerous places.

When people who are homeless find affordable housing, the housing tends to be substandard and unsafe. This often leads people back to the street. Indeed, getting housing does not necessarily mean the end of homelessness. To keep their housing some people need transitional support, such as help with depression or even basic activities like shopping and budgeting. Ultimately, though, all participants hoped that they would one day be able to once again have 'a key to lock the door.'

### How can you use this research?

This research has practical applications for anyone working to improve the lives of those who are homeless. Homelessness is a symptom of poverty and an inadequate social support system. As a result, crisis intervention alone is not enough. Health and service providers need to emphasize prevention by focusing on the Social Determinants of Health – those social factors that have an impact on health and wellness. Incomes need to be adequate to support the necessities of life. The social safety net, which has been dismantled over the past few decades, needs to be rebuilt. To prevent homelessness, we need social programs and immediate help for those who are in danger of losing their homes.

Overall, the people who were interviewed recognized that affordable housing, a steady liveable income, and adequate social security would put an end to homelessness in most cases. If asked, they can provide answers to their problems. In other words, health and service providers need to work with the homeless themselves to create solutions. An advocacy model that supports collaboration between providers and clients would offer an effective way to engage those who are homeless in finding solutions.

### About the Researcher

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### Keywords

Homelessness, Housing, Social determinants of health, Income disparity, Advocacy model, Welfare

### Knowledge Mobilization at York

York's Knowledge Mobilization Unit provides services for faculty, graduate students, community and government seeking to maximize the impact of academic research and expertise on public policy, social programming, and professional practice. This summary has been supported by the Office of the Vice-President Research and Innovation at York and project funding from SSHRC and CIHR.

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