Making the Prevention of Homelessness a Priority: The Role of Social Innovation

By Stephen Gaetz

Abstract. Mass homelessness emerged in Canada in the wake of neoliberal policies that reduced government production of housing and other supportive measures. Efforts to reduce homelessness have occurred in three stages: 1) an emergency response in the 1990s that consisted mostly of investment in shelters, soup kitchens, and day programs, 2) the implementation of community plans to end homelessness, combined with the adoption of Housing First as a strategy that seeks to provide reliable shelter as a first step to anyone without it, followed by other remedial services, and 3) the recent development in Canada of early intervention strategies to prevent homelessness from its inception. The second stage was highly successful in dealing with the situation of chronically homeless adults, and many communities have begun to see reductions in homelessness. However effective, this approach does not break the cycle by intercepting potentially homeless individuals in their youth, which is when it begins for many people. Canada is at the beginning stages of the move towards a stronger focus on prevention, aided by a social innovation agenda to identify, design, test, and evaluate preventive interventions to determine which ones will be most strategically effective, setting the stage for implementation and going to scale.

Introduction

The persistence of modern mass homelessness continues to present a challenge in many countries. There are three basic things one can do to address the issue. First, we can seek to prevent homelessness by working upstream to target those most vulnerable to homelessness by providing necessary supports through early intervention. Second,

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we can implement emergency services and supports to provide "temporary" aid while people are experiencing homelessness. Third, we can help people exit homelessness in a sustainable way through providing not only housing but, ideally, supports to stabilize their living situation.

In Canada, the first phase of our response to modern mass homelessness focused mostly on the second option: providing temporary shelter, day programs, and food. This approach continues to persist as the dominant response in terms of funding, policy, and practice. More recently—in the last 15 years—there has been a shift towards a focus on supporting sustainable exits from homelessness through the implementation of evidence-based interventions such as Housing First, often accompanied by coordinated community planning strategies. Progress has been made, but implementation of these strategies has been uneven across the country, and the number of people experiencing homelessness has not declined sufficiently to suggest that this emphasis—which mostly targets people who are chronically homeless (and for the most part adults)—has been sufficient to drive us towards actually ending homelessness.

What is missing in Canada and other countries is a more dedicated effort to address the inflow into homelessness through prevention. This article documents the journey towards prioritizing the prevention of homelessness in Canada, including steps taken to provide definitional clarity and to develop the knowledge and evidence base to enable the implementation of effective prevention-focused policy and practice. Through "Making the Shift—A Youth Homelessness Social Innovation Lab," the principles of social innovation are being applied to develop and mobilize this knowledge to contribute to a systems transformation in how homelessness is responded to in Canada, with the ultimate goal not just to reduce the number of people who experience homelessness, but to produce better outcomes for people who are precariously housed or are at risk of losing their housing.

Understanding the Roots of Modern Mass Homelessness in Canada

Canada has not always had a major homelessness problem. Hulchanski et al. (2009) have argued that while there have long been people who

are homeless or under-housed in Canada, homelessness emerged as a "social problem" relatively recently, beginning in the late 1980s. By the mid 1990s, the problem became more visible in cities across the country, with growing numbers of homeless people in public spaces, such as on the streets and in parks.

There is no mystery about the origins of this crisis. We have a pretty good understanding of which factors contributed to the rise of modern mass homelessness in Canada. While most certainly there is a long history of poverty and housing precarity in Canada, a number of factors exacerbated the problem in the final decades of the past century.

Trade liberalization over the past three decades has had a significant impact on Canada's manufacturing sector. Coupled with profound changes in policy and investment by all orders of government—particularly in the areas of social and housing policy—new trade rules resulted in the growth of poverty and the rise in housing precarity (Gaetz, Dej, Richter, and Redman 2016; Chunn and Gavigan 2004; Moscovitch 1997). The popular rise of neoconservative thinking led to policy and investment shifts that had a profound impact on low-income Canadians. Demands for smaller government, restricting the social safety net, tax cuts for individuals and corporations, and privatization led to a reconfiguration of the role of government. The federal government made significant changes to its funding relationship with provincial and territorial governments. In 1995, the Canada Health and Social Transfer was introduced, which led to significant reduction in federal spending on health, postsecondary education, and social welfare, in exchange for a block transfer of funds, with the justification being the need to balance the budget (Government of Canada 1996, 1997). Federal benefits for individuals and families (including Family Allowance, Old Age Security, and Employment Insurance Benefits), were reduced by almost 50 percent by 2008 (Pomeroy 2007). Provincial governments also got into the act by restructuring welfare programs, which, in many cases, meant deep cuts to welfare benefits.

In 1995, the Province of Ontario (Canada's largest province) slashed welfare payments for individuals by 21.6 percent from $663 per month to $520. The Minister responsible disingenuously stated that this was "only one small part of this government's commitment to helping

people." The policy shift was never fully reversed. By 2018, minor cost of living increases had raised the rate to $722 per month, considerably lower than the $1,036 per month it would have been after adjusting for inflation (Stapleton and Yuan 2018).

Perhaps the biggest contributor to modern mass homelessness was a major shift in housing policy in the early 1990s. At that time, the federal government made a neoliberal gamble that the private sector was better equipped to build affordable housing (and, by inference, was more efficient than government)—a notion that was influenced by what had happened in the United States under President Reagan, where significant cuts were made to the Department of Housing and Urban Development. The Canadian gamble included large-scale cuts in direct spending on building social housing, to be replaced by a massive investment (through tax expenditures) in incentives to individuals and the private sector in order to spur the housing industry to build more housing. This meant that direct federal investment in affordable housing by the government of Canada declined dramatically, leading to a cascading decline in investment by provincial and territorial governments. Throughout the 1980s, federal investment resulted in around 20,000 new homes being built annually. After the cutbacks, the annual production of new houses dropped to less than 1,000 by the early 1990s.

After 30 years, we are now in a position to assess the success of this neoliberal shift in policy and investment, as the results of this grand experiment are now in. It was a massive policy failure. The incentives to the private sector and potential homeowners led to a boom in the building of private freehold homes and condominiums, but the overall investment in rental housing, particularly low-cost housing, began to drop precipitously. In fact, while in 1990 approximately a third of new builds were rental, this decreased to less than 10 percent by 2010. Fortunately, this trend began to shift by 2012, and by 2018, for the first time in several decades, more rental units were built than condominiums (Saretsky 2019).

The loss of rental housing through the rise of short-term rentals, such as Airbnb, has compounded the long-term loss in that market (Grisdale 2019). The financialization of the housing market, through

investment funds buying up housing stock as an asset to hold, has also put pressure on the housing market (Kalman-Lamb 2017). Housing affordability in Canada has grown over the past several decades into a huge problem, and this is especially so when we consider the shrinking supply of low-cost rental housing available for low-income earners. As a result, over 18 percent of low-income families now pay more than 50 percent of their income on housing (BCNPHA 2018). There is a long waiting list for social housing. In the City of Toronto alone—with a population of 2.7 million—the waiting list in 2019 was over 100,000 (City of Toronto 2019).

This policy and investment failure has thus had catastrophic effects on housing affordability for low-income Canadians. This points to a fallacy of neoliberal thinking that there can be a private-sector-led solution to the housing affordability crisis. The good news is that the government of Canada announced a new National Housing Strategy in 2017 (including a $40 billion, 10-year investment), which includes a return to direct investment in the building of affordable housing and a new national housing benefit. All of this hinges on support from provincial and territorial governments. Additionally, in 2019, the Trudeau government legislated housing as a human right. These are all important and much needed developments. Unfortunately, the lost opportunities of 30 years of disinvestment (a period during which the population of Canada grew by 30 percent) means that reversing the impact will be slow and incredibly costly. A lot of damage has been done by past policy failures.

Responding to the Homelessness Crisis

One of the most problematic outcomes of the neoliberal policy shift has been the emergence of modern mass homelessness in Canada. In the face of such a crisis, there are basically three things you can do. First, you can prevent it—that is, put in place mechanisms and supports to help people who are at risk of, or new to, homelessness. Second, you can provide emergency services because no matter how good your prevention strategies are, some people will experience difficulties that result in the loss of their housing and home. Finally, you

can move people into housing with necessary supports to enhance housing stability, thus reducing the risk of a return to homelessness.

Throughout the 1990s, in the first phase of modern mass homelessness, the numbers and visibility of the homeless in cities across Canada continued to grow. There were varied responses to this emerging crisis, but the main one was to greatly expand the provision of emergency services and supports. Public and charitable investment flowed into the development of emergency shelters, soup kitchens, and day programs across the country. Accompanying this more "charitable" response, however, was a negative public backlash in many jurisdictions. The backlash arose as a "moral panic," driven by the fears of visibly homeless people and their income-generating practices such as panhandling and cleaning car windshields at intersections. In many jurisdictions, politicians seized on the problem to adopt and implement punitive approaches that essentially criminalized the status and experience of being homeless (O'Grady et al. 2011, 2013). In the Province of Ontario, this took the form of the regressive Safe Streets Act, legislation modeled on what had been done in many jurisdictions in the United States, which attempted to address the perceived "disorder" of homelessness through banning aggressive panhandling and cleaning windshields at intersections.

In focusing on a crisis response, something problematic happened. People somehow mistook the emergency response for THE response. An emergency response to a national disaster such as flooding or fires generally focuses on providing people with temporary support while a return to housing is arranged. The homelessness crisis response developed in a way that did not effectively either prevent homelessness nor help people exit the situation, so that a result was the growth of chronic and long-term homelessness. We know well from research that prolonged experiences of homelessness has particularly negative outcomes for individuals, leading to diminished health and well-being, trauma, and early mortality (Guirguis-Younger et al. 2014; Kulik et al. 2011; Frankish et al. 2005).

The focus on managing homelessness through emergency services, then, defined the first phase of our response to homelessness, and while there have been some important policy shifts since then, this

continues to be where the bulk of energy and investments remain in Canada. Key lesson: do not go down the road of expanding emergency services unless you are equally committed to ensuring that everyone who enters the system has a (rapid) way out, with access to housing and support.

The second phase of our response to homelessness began late in the first decade of this century, originating in cities in the Province of Alberta and drawing inspiration from the United States. At the center of this new approach was the broad implementation of Housing First, an innovative model developed by Pathways in New York (Tsemberis and Eisenberg 2000; Tsemberis et al. 2004; Tsemberis 2015). As an intervention, Housing First offers to rapidly move people experiencing homelessness into housing with no preconditions and provide them (with their consent) with client-driven support, tailored to the needs and circumstances of individuals experiencing homelessness. Targeting chronically homeless adults who have complex and acute mental health and addiction issues, Housing First represented a revolutionary shift from emergency services and support to one that emphasized sustainable exits from homelessness. The evidence base for the efficacy of Housing First is substantial, making this one of the few homelessness interventions that we can definitely declare a "Best Practice." In Canada, the federal government funded the "At Home/Chez Soi" project, which was the largest research project (involving a randomized control trial) of Housing First ever taken (Goering et al. 2014; Hwang et al. 2012; Aubry et al. 2015; Nelson et al. 2014). The results were very compelling and led to a federal policy shift in 2013 prioritizing investment in Housing First and a shift away from managing the crisis through emergency services. It is not only a humane response to this crisis but a cost effective one as well, as keeping people in a state of homelessness turns out to be very expensive indeed (Latimer et al. 2017).

The shift to Housing First was an incredibly important development in Canada. Combined with the implementation of community plans and coordinated strategies to reduce homelessness, it led to substantial drops in numbers in cities like Edmonton, Medicine Hat, and Lethbridge, Alberta, within a decade. This transformation of the response to homelessness was aided by support and investment by

the Province of Alberta, and, later, through support offered by organizations such as the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness. In 2013, Housing First became the central priority of the federal government's five-year investment in the renewal of the Homelessness Partnering Strategy.

The success of driving down the numbers of people experiencing homelessness in some communities in Canada has since led to claims that we could actually end homelessness through the broad adoption and implementation of Housing First (HF). While HF is absolutely essential to any solution to homelessness, and we have learned a lot through trying to manage the transition from the crisis response, there are important factors to consider that may temper our enthusiasm.

- First, the shift has been a considerable change-management task, and there has been resistance to its broad adoption as a policy and practice priority. Over six years after the prioritization of Housing First at the national level, the bulk of Canadian investment is still in emergency responses, and this investment has in fact increased in some cities.
- Second, it has become clear that communities need a lot of support to effectively implement HF in a way that demonstrates fidelity to the model (Nelson et al. 2014).
- Third, HF works best when it is not simply considered an intervention, but rather as a philosophy that guides the whole community response to homelessness. Ideally, this means not only coordinating the homelessness sector to optimize the housing system, but also involves an integrated systems response involving other public systems (health, justice, child protection) to achieve the needed changes to see through HF.
- Fourth, the investment in HF must also be accompanied by an increase in the supply of affordable housing, and a renewed focus on poverty reduction, meaning that structural change is crucial.
- Fifth, more work needs to be done on adapting the model for key subpopulations, including Indigenous people. As one example of how this can be achieved, the work on Housing First for

Youth adapts the model to meet the needs of developing adolescents and young adults (Gaetz 2014, 2017). This has gained traction internationally.

- Finally, it may be the case that a focus on Housing First alone—while an important and necessary strategy—may not be sufficient to end homelessness.

So, while the prioritization of Housing First is a laudable and necessary shift from two decades of relying on emergency services to manage the problem of homelessness, some key questions still remain: Do we only address homelessness as a problem *after* it has occurred? Must we only be concerned about addressing the needs of individuals once their problems become chronic and acute? All of this points to a key question: Where does the prevention of homelessness fit into our response?

Phase Three: A Shift to Prevention

> If we want to stop people dying on roads, we invest money in seatbelts, not in the emergency department. In the same way in regards to homelessness, why would we wait to intervene with a young person when they're in crisis, when we can intervene early and keep them at home, and in school and engaged?
>
> Peter Jacobson, Manager, Youth Services, BCYF, Australia (quoted in Gaetz et al. 2017)

What characterizes the first two phases of our response to homelessness is that our efforts for the most part continue to focus on helping people *after* they have already lost their housing. Culhane et al. (2011: 295) argue that this has led to

> a situation that Lindblom … warned about nearly 20 years ago, one in which an absence of a prevention-oriented policy framework would lead to the institutionalization of homelessness.

The shift to prevention has been a long time coming. In 2019, the government of Canada launched Reaching Home, its new homelessness strategy, which included a substantial and expanded, 10-year

investment in responding to homelessness at $2.2B CAD annually. Key features of the strategy include: 1) a goal of reducing chronic homelessness by 50 percent over 10 years, 2) prioritizing the homelessness of Indigenous people, who make up less than 5 percent of Canada's population but represent 30 percent of the homeless population, and 3) supporting communities across Canada to implement effective coordinated access systems and linked data management systems to support their efforts. These priorities are important, but they do not signal an important shift in strategy.

When examining the four priority areas of Reaching Home, we begin to see an interesting additional area of focus: the first foray into the prevention of homelessness by a senior level of government in Canada. The Reaching Home program outlines four areas of outcomes it expects communities to achieve, the third and fourth focusing on prevention (Baker 2019):

- Chronic homelessness in the community is reduced;
- Homelessness in the community is reduced overall and for specific populations (mandatory targets to reduce Indigenous homelessness);
- New inflows into homelessness are reduced; and
- Returns to homelessness are reduced.

This focus on prevention is a significant shift in thinking. One cannot overestimate how important it is. As Gaetz and Dej (2017), point out:

> While the language of homelessness prevention is sometimes used in policy circles in Canada, it is rarely well conceptualized and in practice has not been a priority in most jurisdictions.

While some countries have a record of incorporating prevention into their homelessness strategies, this has for the most part not been the case in Canada and the United States. Australia has been a leader in youth homelessness prevention since the 1990s, where its efforts focused not so much on building a robust crisis response but, rather, a substantial and scalable nationally funded and school-based Reconnect Program (Australian Government 2013; Chamberlain and Mackenzie

1998; Crane et al. 2006; National Youth Commission 2008). This was followed by another innovative school-based early intervention program, the Geelong Project (Mackenzie and Thielking 2013; Kelly et al. 2016; Mackenzie 2018). Finland, which is renowned for the success of its "made in Finland" approach to Housing First, has also extensively focused on prevention (Y-Foundation 2017). Finland's 2016 Action Plan for Preventing Homelessness is based on an integrated systems response with a call for collaboration between the housing, social services, health, and employment sectors. One of the most interesting policy directions supporting the prevention of homelessness comes from Wales. The Housing Act of 2014 clearly articulates what kinds of interventions are supported, the structural changes that are needed to achieve this end, and which parts of government must be involved (Mackie 2015; Mackie et al. 2017; Ahmed et al. 2020). Central to this legislation is the notion of a "duty to assist," whereby local authorities, if they become aware that a person is at risk of, or is experiencing homelessness, have a duty to offer assistance, and if accepted, to make efforts to remedy the situation within 56 days. Similar legislation has since been passed by the British government, and there is potential for policy transfer elsewhere, including Canada (Wilding et al. 2020).

In Canada—and I would argue in the United States as well—focusing on the prevention of homelessness has not been a priority and has been curiously controversial to the point of almost being a dirty word. In practice, homelessness prevention has not been clearly articulated as a strategy (Gaetz and Dej 2017). At the community level, "prevention efforts remain inconsistently implemented in most countries" (Fowler et al. 2019: 465).

The reasons for this resistance to homelessness prevention are complex to unravel. It is one of the negative outcomes of the politics of scarcity, where the urgency of using limited resources to meet the immediate needs of people in crisis means that homelessness prevention, while not outright rejected, has not been broadly embraced (Gaetz 2018: 142). In this context, homelessness prevention is sometimes framed as a distraction, suggesting that while important, we need to first focus on housing all those who are chronically homeless. As suggested earlier, in spite of the success of Housing First, rates of homelessness

in Canada and the United States remain stubbornly high (Henry et al. 2017). Waiting for better results before we broadly implement prevention may not be good policy. As Fowler et al. (2019: 466) comment:

> The United States shows decreases in (per capita) rates of homelessness based on annual point-in-time counts of sheltered and unsheltered persons …; however, changes have leveled off despite substantial reorganization of homeless assistance.

Some critics of a shift to prevention cite the lack of a solid evidence base. Notwithstanding the fact that very little we do regarding homelessness has a strong evidence base (the exceptions being Housing First and Permanent Supportive Housing), it is an askable question as to whether there is sufficient evidence to move in this direction. In particular, there are concerns regarding prediction and targeting when we are targeting scarce resources (Culhane et al. 2011; Evans et al. 2016).

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in homelessness prevention and a body of research is emerging. This work is beginning to demonstrate that an investment in the prevention of homelessness pays dividends (Ahmed and Madoc-Jones 2020; Busch-Geertsema and Fitzpatrick 2008; CMHC 2005; Culhane et al. 2011; Distasio and McCullough 2014; Forchuk et al. 2011; Mackie 2015, 2017; Pawson et al. 2006, 2007; Pleace and Culhane 2016). In terms of predicting outcomes, research does suggest that the most effective early intervention strategies, including eviction prevention, should, in fact, be targeted (Burt et al. 2007; Culhane et al. 2011; Parsell and Marston 2012; Evans 2016). Recent research by Shinn et al. (2013, 2015, 2017), where they developed and tested an effective screening tool to identify and support households facing eviction, demonstrates that this can be done.

Fowler's recent work demonstrates that prevention initiatives work best not as one-time programs or initiatives, but rather as approaches embedded in a coordinated systems- level responses. Fowler et al. (2019: 465) test assumptions about policy interventions for ending homelessness by using a system dynamics model:

> Simulations suggest that prevention provides a leverage point within the system; small efficiencies in keeping people housed yield disproportionately large reductions in homelessness.

This work, along with Mackie's (2015, 2017) research from Wales, demonstrates clearly the need for sustainable policies and investments to ensure reliable delivery of integrated systems responses to support coordinated prevention efforts.

Defining Homelessness Prevention

A key challenge that has impeded progress on homelessness prevention is the lack of definitional clarity and shared language regarding what it entails. While people may "get" that prevention matters, they may not be clear on what homelessness prevention involves in terms of legislation, policy, program interventions, and who is actually responsible for addressing the problem. As Shinn et al. (2001: 97) explain:

> [T]he logic of prevention requires that we define clearly what is to be prevented, specify the intervention(s), and establish a causal (or at least correlational) connection between intervention and avoidance of the undesirable phenomenon.

In response to this lack of definitional clarity, the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness released *A New Direction: A Framework for Homelessness Prevention* (Gaetz and Dej 2017). The aim was to provide a starting place for a national conversation about how to think about the role of prevention in how we respond to homelessness, not in opposition to or as a replacement for the focus on Housing First, but rather to complement it. The framework was designed to provide greater clarity on what constitutes homelessness prevention through a definition and typology.

Additionally, the framework was designed to identify who and what sectors are actually responsible for homelessness prevention beyond the homelessness sector. The task of homelessness prevention cannot and should not be the responsibility of the homelessness sector alone. Other public institutions that are implicated in the production

of homelessness, including health care, the justice system, child protection services, and the education system must not only be at the table, but must be key players in a prevention strategy. The definition of homelessness prevention provided in the framework is as follows:

> Homelessness prevention refers to policies, practices, and interventions that reduce the likelihood that someone will experience homelessness. It also means providing those who have been homeless with the necessary resources and supports to stabilize their housing, enhance integration and social inclusion, and ultimately reduce the risk of the recurrence of homelessness. The causes of homelessness include individual and relational factors, broader population-based structural factors, and the failure of many public institutions to protect people from homelessness. This suggests that homelessness prevention must not only include interventions targeted at individuals, but broader structural reforms directed at addressing the drivers of homelessness. That not only communities but all orders of government, and most departments within have a responsibility to contribute to the prevention of homelessness is in keeping with a human rights perspective. (Gaetz and Dej 2017)

Five Elements of the Typology on Homelessness Prevention

Accompanying the definition is a typology of homelessness prevention that is built on a public health model of primary prevention (working upstream to intervene early), secondary prevention (addressing the needs of those at imminent risk or who have become homeless), and tertiary prevention (supporting those who have exited homelessness to ensure they do not return to it). The typology was also populated with concrete examples of policy-and-practice interventions to support prevention and with methods to identify who is responsible for taking action.

1. **Structural prevention:** This involves addressing structural factors that contribute to homelessness through legislation, public policy, and investment designed to address risks of homelessness and increase social equality. Examples include: establishing housing as a human right, implementing decolonization and poverty reduction strategies, and providing income support.

2. **Systems prevention:** Many people experience homelessness because of barriers to accessing support and/or system failures, such as unsupported transitions from child protection. Systems prevention then involves breaking down barriers and enhancing access to services and support. One example would be reintegration support for those leaving public institutions, such as correctional facilities, hospitals, and child protection systems.
3. **Early intervention:** Responding to those at imminent risk of homelessness and providing crisis intervention to those who have recently experienced homelessness is a crucial domain of homelessness prevention. It means responding as early as possible through effective outreach, coordinated intake and assessment, client-centered case management, and shelter diversion in order to ensure people do not fall into homelessness. If they do, they are supported to exit homelessness as quickly as possible through remedying the situation that led to their current situation.
4. **Eviction prevention:** This is one type of early intervention that is designed to keep people stably housed and avoid eviction. This can involve landlord/tenant mediation, rental assistance, emergency financial assistance, and legal advice and representation.
5. **Housing stabilization:** This involves supporting people who have experienced homelessness to find and maintain housing, which in many cases involves support tailored to individual needs. Interventions, such as Housing First, can thus be considered preventive, as are other housing programs that offer supports to enhance health and well-being, education and employment, and social inclusion. (Gaetz et al. 2018a: 25)

The five elements of the typology were designed not to be discrete with clear boundaries but rather to work together as a framework, spanning upstream approaches that focus on structural and institutional prevention, systems approaches to stop the flow of individuals from mainstream institutions into homelessness, and interventions designed to support people to reduce the risk of homelessness.

Developing a Base of Knowledge and Evidence for the Prevention of Homelessness

> Every innovation has two parts: the first is the invention of the thing itself; the second is the preparation of expectations so that when the invention arrives it seems both surprising and familiar—something long-awaited.
>
> Edwin Land (in Westley et al. 2015: 5)

Having defined homelessness prevention, an important next step has been to build a knowledge base that can provide evidence for the efficacy of prevention, clear examples of how it works, and inspiration for change in Canada. This is important because in light of the federal government's prioritization of prevention, many organizations and governments struggle with the challenge of what to do and how to do it. There is not deep experience in doing this kind of work.

To that end, in 2017, two nonprofits launched Making the Shift—A Youth Homelessness Social Innovation Lab—with a mandate to conduct and mobilize quality research to support governments, communities, and service providers to transition from managing the crisis of youth homelessness to focusing on prevention, including enabling sustainable exits from homelessness. The partnership that initiated this venture was between the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (COH), an institute that collaborates in producing and mobilizing research to find solutions to homelessness, and A Way Home Canada (AWHC), a national coalition to end youth homelessness through a focus on policy, planning, and practice.[1]

Social innovation labs—also referred to as "design labs" or "change labs"—have emerged as one way to address complex problems through collaboration, in order to conduct research, engage in experimentation, and build strategies that can lead to social transformation (Miley et al. 2018; Hassan 2014; Gryszkiewicz et al. 2016; Westley et al. 2015). Key to social innovation and the creation of research impact is the notion of deep collaboration, involving a shared agenda, co-creation and co-ownership of the work and the outcomes, and the maximization of the knowledge, skills, and reach of collaborators (Phipps et al. 2016).

In setting up Making the Shift (MtS) as a social innovation lab, the focus on youth homelessness was strategic. In Canada, approximately 13 percent of people who experience homelessness and who access services are youth (ages 16–24), yet 50 percent of the broader homeless population reports first experiencing homelessness before they were 24 (Government of Canada 2019). Moreover, amongst currently homeless youth, over 40 percent report experiencing homelessness for the first time before they were 16 years old, an age at which there is little or no targeted support (Gaetz, O'Grady, Kidd, and Schwan 2016).

Youth homelessness is a complex and urgent policy challenge in need of a comprehensive solution. If it can be addressed through effective prevention, there is a strong possibility that there will be a positive impact on the lives and well-being of young people in this situation. In the long run, early intervention will also potentially contribute to the prevention of adult chronic homelessness.

In addressing the challenge of youth homelessness prevention, there is a need for shared agreement on the nature of the problem and intense collaboration between researchers, policymakers, service providers, and people with lived experience of youth homelessness to identify what works and for whom. This is why there is a need for collaboration and co-leadership between COH and AWHC. Making the Shift (MtS) was created with the express purpose of becoming a key driver of systems transformation in homelessness through research, program design, prototyping, demonstration projects, and other means to identify potentially transformative policies, practices, and processes. Here, the goal is for social research and development to enhance understanding of youth homelessness prevention and expand the knowledge base through the intersection of research *and* practice in order to improve social outcomes.

The development of the MtS program of research has been based on the belief that there are realistic and practical solutions to youth homelessness. Communities can implement effective strategies and interventions that produce better outcomes when informed by credible evidence and supported by appropriate policy and funding frameworks. Our research themes will build evidence for these strategies and interventions.

The Making the Shift research program is guided by *five intersecting research themes* designed to most effectively achieve the program's mandate, including two core themes that are the foundation of the project, and three cross-cutting theme areas.

1. Shifting to prevention and early intervention
2. Sustaining successful exits from homelessness
3. Enabling health, well-being, and inclusion
4. Enhancing outcomes for Indigenous youth
5. Leveraging data and technology to drive policy and practice

Conceptually, the research agenda is framed by critical perspectives that couple study of individual youth experiences with analyses of systemic and structural drivers of homelessness and their impact on young lives. Within each of the five theme areas, there are a series of more specific sub-themes that allow for subject-specific insights from academic and community experts, including people with lived experience of youth homelessness. Through this research framework, MtS identifies which prevention programs, policies, and interventions should be pursued, who they should engage, and in which contexts they are likely to be effective, thereby providing solutions to reduce the life-long health, social, and economic burdens of youth homelessness.

Making the Shift is currently funding a series of large-scale projects designed to enhance our understanding of key challenges such as: 1) how to produce better outcomes for young people aging out of care; 2) providing Housing First for Youth for young people with mental health and addictions issues, 3) preventing Indigenous youth homelessness through cultural reconnection, and 4) a longitudinal study tracking young people as they exit homelessness, to understand the factors that promote housing stabilization.

Making the Shift also has a comprehensive knowledge mobilization (KMb) strategy in order to cultivate and mobilize the knowledge generated regarding innovative and effective solutions to youth homelessness. There is a strong emphasis on supporting implementation of effective policy and program models that focus on prevention by

governments, funders, and communities alike. The MtS knowledge mobilization Research to Impact Cycle consists of four mutually reinforcing components and is designed to mobilize the knowledge generated through the five research themes (COH and AWHC 2019a). MtS is designed to provide decision makers and practitioners at the national, regional, and local levels with critical and timely information, practical, evidence-based, and innovative policy-and-program models, resources, and technical training and support that will inform the implementation of effective strategies to prevent youth homelessness. Promising initiatives emerging from these systematic incubation efforts will be advanced through the innovation pipeline to be further developed, assessed, and brought to scale.

Key to the experimentation work of MtS as a social innovation lab are a series of demonstration projects (COH and AWHC 2019b). Design thinking guides the work of MtS (Gaetz 2014a; Brown and Wyatt 2010). The goal of demonstration projects is to expand our knowledge and understanding of innovative approaches to preventing and ending youth homelessness by identifying, developing, testing, evaluating, and mobilizing innovations in policy and practice, through the implementation of comprehensive demonstration projects. Our current demonstration projects include:

- Housing First for Youth (HF4Y) is a rights-based intervention for youth who are experiencing, or are at risk of, homelessness (Gaetz 2014b, 2017). An adaptation of the well-established Housing First model, HF4Y is designed to meet the needs of developing adolescents and young adults. There are HF4Y demonstration projects taking place in Hamilton, Toronto, and Ottawa.
- Youth Reconnect (YR) is a preventive intervention designed to provide support to vulnerable young people in the communities where they have developed social connections and supports, while encouraging youth to engage or reengage with education. Hamilton is currently running a YR demonstration project.
- Enhancing Family and Natural Supports (FNS) is focused on preventing and ending youth homelessness through strengthening relationships between vulnerable young people and their

support networks, including family. There are eight demonstration projects taking place in seven Alberta cities as well as in Toronto.

- School-based early interventions. These include Youth Reconnect in Hamilton and the Upstream Project Canada (TUPC), which is a school-community collaborative early-intervention initiative based on the Geelong Project in Australia. Three demonstration projects are at various stages of implementation.
- Duty to Assist is the Canadian term for the adaptation of the Welsh prevention initiative enshrined within The Housing (Wales) Act 2014 to meet the needs of developing adolescents and young adults (Gaetz et al. 2018b). In this case, adults working in public institutions that engage youth—schools, child protection, health, justice—have a duty to offer assistance to young people they determine to be at-risk of, or who experience, homelessness. If the young person accepts, he or she will be helped to navigate systems and be connected to YR teams that can provide support to young people and their families. MtS is currently designing a pilot for Hamilton, Ontario.

All demonstration projects involve robust program model and service design, as well as robust research and evaluation (process and outcomes). This research agenda is designed not only with the goal of developing a robust knowledge base but also with the intent of raising questions about the nature of the problem we are trying to solve and how we should approach it. At a policy level, in responding to homelessness in Canada and the United States, the key performance indicator that guides the work is whether people are housed or not, with housing stability measuring how long a person or family has remained housed. There are inherent limitations to this narrow approach to housing stabilization. The research that does exist from Canada, Ireland, and the United States on what happens when youth exit homelessness does not paint a compelling picture of the recovery for young people (Frederick et al. 2014; Kidd et al. 2016; Karabanow et al. 2018; Mayock and Corr 2013, 2014; Slesnick et al. 2017).

> For particular populations such as Indigenous-identifying young people, "housing" in a structural sense by itself is inadequate to explain the wholistic balance and healing that culturally safe and appropriate services aim to provide. (Gaetz et al. 2019: 74)

A key conclusion to be drawn from this research is that we need to consider exactly what outcomes—beyond being housed—we should be looking for (Gaetz et al. 2019). The longitudinal research being conducted as part of Making the Shift will give us a better understanding of the pathways of young people as they move in and out of homelessness. The demonstration projects we are undertaking are designed to broaden the definition of housing stability to include health and well-being, safety, engagement with employment and education, and social exclusion, and to identify what kind of support is needed in order to achieve these better outcomes for young people and in the long run reduce the longer term risk of a return to homelessness.

Conclusion

Grappling with how to respond to homelessness has been an ongoing challenge in Canada. Since the emergence of modern mass homelessness in the 1980s and 1990s, the thinking about how to approach the problem of homelessness has continued to evolve. From the first phase, where the emphasis was on the provision of emergency services and support such as shelters and soup kitchens (not to mention the use of law enforcement), we have learned that this approach, while largely—but not entirely—well-meaning, was not producing positive results for people experiencing homelessness, and in fact contributed to the growth of chronic homelessness. The second major phase of our response to homelessness focused on community strategies and Housing First, and in particular prioritizing the needs of the chronically homeless (adults for the most part) to access housing and supports to exit homelessness. The adoption of Housing First was a major development in learning how to respond to the issue and has helped us overcome some stigmatizing prejudices such as that people must be "ready" to move into housing. Taking a rights-based approach and ensuring people were housed without preconditions was an important and humane shift in our thinking and our practices.

Phase 2 has represented a major step forward. However, over time it has become clearer to many that investing in Housing First is a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for truly ending homelessness. In the last decade, there has been a growing recognition that we need to turn our sights to prevention if we ever hope to truly end homelessness. However, there were few examples of effective prevention initiatives, and most were in jurisdictions outside North America. That meant the evidence base was not sufficiently developed to engender a major policy shift. In recent years, however, the knowledge and evidence base regarding homelessness prevention has been growing, providing insights into the implications of a prevention agenda for policy and practice.

In Canada, we are seeing a shift towards prevention. Providing conceptual clarity about what prevention is and who is responsible is an important starting place. Developing the knowlege and evidence base regarding youth homelessness through the work of Making the Shift—A Youth Homelessness Social Innovation Lab is a good example of how research-community partnerships can generate, and mobilize, this knowledge to transform how we approach homelessness.

In the context of the Government of Canada's move towards requiring prevention outcomes from communities, the need to generate knowledge and evidence that will allow all orders of government and local communities to deliver effective program and policy responses has never been greater.

Note

1. The websites of these three organizations are 1) Making the Shift <http://makingtheshiftinc.ca/>, 2) The Canadian Observatory on Homelessness <https://homelesshub.ca/users/homelesshub>, and 3) A Way Home Canada <https://awayhome.ca/>

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