



Child & Family Homelessness: Recommendations

Summary of Recommendations

These recommendations are drawn from the international research, country-wide interviews and discussions at the Child and Family Homelessness Summit held in September 2015. We have also drawn extensively from the work of the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, Campaign 2000, and the Mental Health Commission of Canada respectively.

We recognize that there is a great deal of overlap between the recommendations, and this is intentional. Solving homelessness requires extensive investment and ongoing cooperation between the various levels of government. We also recognize that some of these recommendations will take a great deal of time to fully implement but feel that there are some areas where small steps can be taken towards a greater goal. For example, the realization of an end to child poverty is likely years away, but concrete steps such as increases to the Child Tax Benefit or to social assistance rates could be undertaken almost immediately.

We also understand that community agencies are often under-resourced, under-staffed and have huge client caseloads. At the same time, they are the first faces that families and children see and do amazing work at supporting their clientele. We have included a small list of recommendations for community agencies, but see these as suggestions that they should work towards **as feasible** until they are supported to do so financially by the various levels of government and other funders. While we have not included a specific recommendation to increase funding to community organizations, this concept is embedded throughout several of the individual recommendations.

Recommendations

Children’s mental health is a significant component of the Child and Family Homelessness Initiative for several reasons. Addressing children’s mental health from a prevention or early intervention standpoint improves long-term outcomes for children living in poverty or homelessness by reducing the length of time — and therefore, potentially the emotional impact — spent in one of these states. Additionally, effective response requires a systems-based response, the third area listed in our framework.

Recommendations for ALL Levels of Government

We recommend that the federal government, in conjunction with the provincial, territorial and Indigenous governments:



Recommendation 1.0 – Support and fund National Coordinated Response and Action on Children’s Mental Health.

Recommendation 2.0 – Develop and fund a National Housing and Homelessness Strategy.

Recommendations for the Federal Government Only

We recommend that the federal government:



Recommendation 3.0 – Develop and fund a National Poverty Reduction Strategy focusing on family poverty.

Recommendation 3.1 – We further recommend the implementation of a National Housing Benefit.

Recommendations for the Provincial/Territorial Governments Only

We recommend that provincial and territorial governments:



Recommendation 4.0 – Implement a “One Child, One Case” policy for all government services.

Recommendation 5.0 – Develop a Ministerial Homelessness and Housing Secretariat/Roundtable to Work on Preventing and Ending Homelessness.

Recommendation 6.0 – Develop a province/territory-wide Plan to End Homelessness.

Recommendations for Municipal Governments Only

We recommend that municipal (or regional where relevant) governments:



Recommendation 7.0 – Review bylaws and municipal practices to ensure a focus on “inclusionary zoning” and development of affordable housing.

Recommendation 8.0 – Develop, in partnership with other levels of governments and/or non-profit or private developers, new emergency shelters, transitional and/or permanent housing aimed at families with children.

Recommendations for Community Agencies



Recommendation 9.0 – Work to develop a system of care within your local community to provide holistic, wraparound services for clients, including coordinated assessment and common intake.

Recommendation 10.0 – Develop trauma-informed services to better support clients and staff.



Recommendation 1.0 – National Coordinated Action and Response on Children’s Mental Health

According to the [Mental Health Commission of Canada](#) (MHCC), approximately 1.2 million Canadian children and youth (1 in 5) are affected by mental health, yet less than 20% will receive appropriate treatment. For children who have experienced homelessness the numbers of those impacted is significantly higher, while those who receive treatment is concurrently lower.

Committed individuals and organizations across Canada have already done significant work in this area, and there are a number of documents which provide a framework for action in this area such as:

- [Evergreen](#): A Child and Youth Mental Health Framework for Canada
- [School-Based Mental Health in Canada](#): A Final Report
- [CHANGING LIVES, CHANGING DIRECTIONS](#): The Mental Health Strategy for Canada
- The Mental Health Strategy for Canada: [A Youth Perspective](#)

However, we also feel that existing materials have not sufficiently addressed the issues of concern in this report: children and their families experiencing homelessness. This report – and particularly the additional supplement – are our attempts to help bridge that gap. Given the large number of children living in poverty or currently homeless, a mental health response must have significant focus on this population. Similarly, children who have been witness to IPV or who have experienced abuse directly must be included as a priority in any coordinated response to children’s mental health. Finally, a national response to children’s mental health must recognize the unique experiences of Canada’s diverse cultural groups including immigrants, refugees and Indigenous Peoples.

We recognize input is needed from a variety of providers, end users and all levels of government in order to address all possible barriers and to implement solutions in this area. As such, we recommend that the federal government, in conjunction with provincial, territorial and Indigenous governments, support and fund the development and implementation of coordinated action and response to children’s mental health and involve key players in this action, including the MHCC (given their previous history and knowledge in this area). The goal would be to build on existing frameworks (such as Evergreen Framework), and develop a coordinated response to key priority areas (including child, youth and family homelessness).

The implementation of projects and initiatives related to this recommendation will require increased funding to community organizations for staff and volunteer training, as well as program development, implementation and evaluation.



Recommendation 2.0 – National Housing and Homelessness Strategy

Ending homelessness requires building of new housing and the development of supports. In order to achieve these efficiently, we need an orchestrated system of commitment to developing new affordable and social housing and supporting programs that will end homelessness. This strategy needs to be spearheaded by the federal government, but must be developed and funded in partnership with the provincial, territorial and Indigenous governments and in meaningful collaboration with people facing homelessness, including parents and families who have experienced homelessness.

As with the area of Children’s Mental Health in Recommendation 1, we feel that programs and policies are failing to reflect the populations discussed in this document. Recent homelessness strategies have focused on chronically and episodically homeless populations and have failed to recognize or respond to the increasing numbers of children, youth and families experiencing homelessness. Housing needs to be developed to provide a healthy, safe and affordable living environment for homeless families. Finally, a national housing strategy must recognize the unique experiences of Canada’s diverse cultural groups including immigrants and refugees and Indigenous Peoples.

In developing this recommendation, we have drawn heavily from the [*State of Homelessness in Canada: 2014*](#) (Gaetz, S., Gulliver-Garcia, T., Richter, T., 2014) which has outlined a comprehensive program of resolving the homelessness and housing crises in Canada.

A national Housing and Homelessness Strategy should include the following:

- A common definition of homelessness that will be used nationally. Two existing definitions – The Canadian Definition of Homelessness (2012) and the Canadian Definition of Youth Homelessness (2015) are already widely accepted across the country and would provide the easiest starting point for a consistent definition.
- A commitment that ending homelessness is the desired outcome of any housing program. This should include measurable criteria for determining success. The authors of SOHC: 2014 suggest “One approach to measuring this national outcome could be that an end to homelessness in Canada will be achieved when no Canadian individual or family stays in an emergency homeless shelter or sleeps outside longer than one week before moving into a safe, decent, affordable home with the support(s) needed to sustain it.¹ This new housing could include independent permanent housing, transitional housing or supportive living.
- Agreed upon measures including “milestones, outcomes and performance expectations along with an agreement on regular evaluation and reporting” (SOHC: 2014).

1 There may need to be exceptions made to support women and children fleeing violence who need the protection and security of an anonymous shelter or transitional living environment to protect them from further harm.

- The development of targeted strategies and plans to address family homelessness, youth homelessness and violence against women. The unique needs of this population, particularly homeless women and children, needs to be recognized in the implementation of this strategy.
- A focus on the elimination of homelessness amongst Indigenous peoples. Homelessness reductions for Indigenous Peoples should be both embedded within mainstream plans at all levels of government, but also be focused on as a separate and distinct area sensitive to the specific multi-generational and systemic injustices of our country's Indigenous communities. These strategies must be developed in conjunction with Indigenous organizations and communities.
- Implementation of a family-based Housing First strategy.
- Plans for an annual Point-in-Time count of homelessness using a consistent national methodology **as well as** regular prevalence studies in communities to identify the hidden homeless population(s).
- Investment in a range of rent supplement programs as a means of preventing family homelessness (or the National Housing Benefit in Recommendation 3.1).
- Development of an intensive and extensive new social housing capital building program and investment in repairs and maintenance for existing social housing stock.
- Increased funding to community organizations for human and physical resources to enable them to provide necessary supports, in assisting homeless families to find and maintain housing.



Recommendation 3.0 – National Poverty Reduction Strategy

The majority of provinces and territories have developed provincial poverty reduction strategies. Federally, a national-level poverty reduction strategy appears imminent. If we are serious about ending child and family homelessness, it is critical that this strategy proceeds immediately.

We are calling for the federal government to develop, fund and implement a national poverty reduction strategy and to mandate that all provinces and territories do the same. We feel that these should be broad strategies to cover a wide-range of individuals and families living in poverty, but we would also like to see specific strategies that target issues concerning family and children’s poverty, based on the recommendations from Campaign 2000: End Child and Family Poverty in Canada and its partner organizations.

These include:

- A legislative commitment to the reduction and eradication of poverty that includes both targets and timelines to ensure government accountability for stated commitments.
- One of the easiest ways to eliminate, or at least reduce, poverty is to increase incomes and access to both good jobs and affordable housing. Improving the spectrum of income supports including social assistance, minimum wage, disability payments, and other federal benefits as well as increasing the amount of subsidized child care and affordable housing available will go a long way towards decreasing child and family poverty.
- Ensuring that the new Canada Child Benefit (CCB) design reduces the child poverty rate by 50% in five years. The federal government should enter into agreements with the provinces and territories that will ensure no claw backs are permitted on any portion of the CCB from social assistance benefits (Campaign 2000, 2015).
- A focus on the elimination of poverty in Indigenous communities. All plans (national, provincial and territorial) should embed poverty reduction strategies for Indigenous Peoples within their mainstream plans but also focus on Indigenous poverty as a separate and distinct area. These plans must be developed in conjunction with Indigenous organizations and communities and be resourced with adequate funding.
- The development of a national Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) program “which includes a well-developed policy framework based on the principles of universality, high quality and comprehensiveness, and is guided by targets and timelines” (Campaign 2000, 2015, p. 2). This would include:
 - > New, regulated child care spaces across the country.
 - > Increased funding for child care, especially for low-income parents.
 - > Increased availability of alternate care hours to meet the needs of working families (particularly those working shift work or non-traditional 9-5 hours).

- Address issues with the federal Employment insurance program to “expand access, duration and levels of benefits” (Campaign 2000, 2014)
 - > This would include enhanced maternity/parental leave benefits that pertain to all new parents (adoptive, student, trainee, self-employed parents, part-time and casual workers) that are more flexible and include a secondary caregiver benefit (Campaign 2000, 2015).
- Develop and fund employment equity programs to reduce the wage gap experienced by Indigenous and racialized people, immigrants, people with disabilities and women.
- Develop and fund targeted employment programs to support the needs of women fleeing violence, families experiencing homelessness, new immigrants and refugees, and Indigenous and racialized communities.



Recommendation 3.1 – National Housing Benefit

In the *State of Homelessness in Canada: 2014* the authors proposed the development of a housing benefit to support low-income individuals and families who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.² This benefit would be a new program to support those who have issues of severe affordability in their current housing and would be administered through the Canada Revenue Agency, in a manner similar to the Child Tax Benefit, GST payments, etc.

This benefit would be available to both homeowners and renters and would differ in amounts based on the cost of housing, size of the family unit and household income. The housing benefit could be deposited directly into the recipient's bank account on a monthly basis. According to Londerville and Steele (2014) "the maximum income for a family of two adults and two children would be under \$36,000 while a single would need to make less than \$22,000. Recipients would be expected to make a reasonable contribution towards the cost of their housing – for example 30% of their income – and the housing benefit would cover 75% of the difference between the actual housing costs and the contribution" (as cited in SOHC: 2014).

Londerville and Steele have calculated the cost of this housing benefit at \$871.08 million annually for renters and \$247.92 million annually for low-income homeowners. A further breakdown follows:

Renters:

\$428.28 million for renter families (215, 000 recipients)

\$388.8 million for renter singles (360,000 recipients).

\$54 million into reserve funds for the homeless (50,000 recipients).

TOTAL: \$871.08 million (625,000 recipients)

Homeowners:

\$146.16 million for families (105,000 recipients)

\$101.76 for singles and childless couples (106,000 recipients)

TOTAL: \$247.92 million (211,000 recipients)

While these numbers would need to be updated to reflect point of implementation, they provide a clear indication of the extent and severity of the problem.

2 For more information on the concept of the Housing Benefit, the impact, costs etc. see both Gaetz, Gulliver & Richter (2014) & Londerville & Steele (2014).



Recommendation 4.0 – One Child, One Case (or One Family, One Case)

Currently, the disjointed provision of children’s services means that children and their families are served in a disconnected manner and risk getting lost in the system, thereby failing to receive necessary supports. Several provincial/territorial ministries provide services that impact families including social services, education, children’s services and health care. By developing a system to share information between agencies and ministries, children and their families will be cared for more holistically.

The “One Child, One Case” concept was widely supported by attendees at the Child & Family Homelessness Summit in September 2015. This has been expanded to also account for multiple children in one family by using the concept “One Family, One Case” where applicable. By creating a system of care in which children’s needs are addressed comprehensively, homelessness can be prevented and resolved more easily.

This recommendation consists of several different components:

- Development (or implementation) of a common database system that can be accessed by a variety of providers. Implementation will require development of the various components of the system and ensuring it is useful for all participants³.
- Develop a common and shared intake form that is available in the central database and accessible to all entities.
- Develop guidelines to sharing information and release of confidentiality forms that would allow for joint information gathering/sharing.
- Provide funding to enable training for all participants.
- Rollout a pilot project in both a small community and a larger city to test implementation.
- Create and fund multi-agency Service Hubs which (like Port Cares) bring a number of services under one roof. This enhances service collaboration and coordination and also makes it easier for families to access needed supports.

³ In Ontario, some services providers use Child and Youth Information System (CYSIS) which allows for integrated data collection and management within Ontario’s Ministry of Children and Youth Services Transfer Payment agencies. “CYSIS provides a secure web-based approach to using data to maximize care, reduce duplication, optimize programming and meet the detailed requirements of funding partners ([Mothercraft, 2015](#)).



Recommendation 5.0 – Homelessness and Housing Secretariat

The Province of Alberta currently has an [Interagency Council on Homelessness](#) (previously known as the Alberta Secretariat for Action on Homelessness). This council provides oversight to the province's Ten Year Plan to End Homelessness and provides for coordinated decision-making, information-sharing and cross-sectoral partnerships.

The size and scope of the Council/Secretariat would vary depending upon the size of the province/territory and the extent of homelessness in that area. The framework of Alberta's Council provides a promising practice for implementation in other communities.

The composition of the Council/Secretariat should include:

- Representatives of municipal, provincial/territorial and federal governments
- People facing homelessness, particularly representatives from grassroots anti-poverty groups and self-advocacy organizations
- Representatives of community-based organizations, housing providers and emergency shelters
- Representatives from distinct sub-populations (as applicable in that community) i.e. youth organizations, women's shelters/domestic violence programs, health/mental health, substance use, agencies working with racialized communities and newcomers)
- Representatives from Indigenous (First Nations, Métis, Inuit) organizations
- Representatives from the business community involved in housing (i.e. apartment associations, property management companies, developers, construction)
- Representatives from government services (in Alberta, an Assistant Deputy Minister is assigned from several core Government of Alberta ministries including Human Services, Municipal Affairs, Health and Justice and Solicitor General)



Recommendation 6.0 – Plans to End Homelessness

Some provinces and territories have developed housing and homelessness strategies or other forms of “10 Year Plans to End Homelessness”. The depth, comprehensiveness and execution of these plans vary across the country.

We are recommending that each Province/Territory, depending upon the extent of the homelessness crisis in their area, develop 3, 5 or 10 Year Plans to End Homelessness. While allowing for local variation, there should be some consistency in what these plans are required to include. Significantly, it is important that Provincial/Territorial Plans align with any federal strategies that are developed. At minimum, we feel that these plans should include:

- A stated commitment to ending homelessness in a set period of time.
- A definition of homelessness that aligns with a federal definition and/or the Canadian Definition of Homelessness.
- Agreed upon measures including “milestones, outcomes and performance expectations along with an agreement on regular evaluation and reporting” (SOHC: 2014).
- An analysis of the most at-risk populations and the development of targeted strategies to address them (for example, family homelessness, youth homelessness, violence against women and homelessness amongst Indigenous people).
- Implementation of a family-based Housing First strategy.
- Investment in programs to support prevention including housing support and eviction prevention programs, rent supplements, energy programs, increased social assistance rates, increased minimum wage, services for women facing violence and subsidized child care programs.
- Support for the development of new affordable and social housing and repairs to existing social housing stock.
- Where relevant, changes to planning or zoning legislation to allow municipalities to implement inclusionary zoning (see Recommendation 7 for more information).
- Development of provincial/territorial rent control guidelines and rental tribunals that support clients’ rights.
- Evaluation methods including Point-in-Time counts, shared databases, ongoing analysis.
- Monitoring and governing mechanisms that include meaningful leadership and input by persons facing homelessness and representatives of grassroots anti-poverty organizations.

In addition, municipalities⁴ should be required to develop their own plans to end homelessness that are approved by the Province/Territory, and evaluated annually or bi-annually.

⁴ This could be all municipalities or apply only to “designated communities” – the 61 communities that receive funding from the federal government through the Homelessness Partnering Strategy.



Recommendation 7.0 – Inclusionary Zoning & Development of Affordable Housing

Historically, many communities in Canada (and throughout the world) have practiced “exclusionary zoning” when it comes to affordable housing or emergency shelters. They limit the locations of developments, make it difficult for social housing to be developed by imposing fees and support opposition from neighbours.

By contrast, inclusionary housing programs or inclusionary zoning allows municipalities to change their development regulations and processes to require private developers to include affordable housing units or to pay into a fund to provide for the development of such housing elsewhere⁵. This enables municipalities to move forward on affordable housing initiatives even in the absence of funding from higher levels of government. By ensuring that their zoning bylaws and practices are enabling, rather than restricting, housing development, municipalities can support reducing homelessness.

Some of the inclusionary housing practices will require approval from the province or territory the municipality resides in while others can be directly implemented by the municipality. We encourage municipalities to implement as many changes as they can in developing their inclusionary housing programs and to collaboratively lobby their higher level government for changes to the respective legislation.

Below are some examples of possible changes that could allow a municipality to develop more inclusionary zoning. For more information please see [Inclusionary Housing Canada](#) and The Wellesley Institute’s [Inclusionary Housing](#) reports.

Affordable Housing Requirements

Inclusionary housing programs often require developers to build affordable housing units as a percentage of the total number of units being developed or to provide alternative community benefits. In Ontario, this is covered under Section 37 of the Planning Act. By mandating affordable housing – and providing clear guidance – as to what this entails, municipalities could increase the number of units available in their communities. **Currently, implementation of these requirements often sees the provision of community benefits (i.e. a playground) rather than housing, or the housing is geared towards home ownership, rather than rental.**

Cost Offsets

To assist developers in including affordable units in their developments municipalities can provide a number of cost offsets. The most effective of these is likely “density bonuses”, wherein an increased number of units can be built, outside of the density restrictions. Other cost offsets could include reducing the number of parking spaces required, fast tracking approvals or reducing/waiving certain development fees.

5 Inclusionary zoning must exist in concert with funding and mechanisms to enable non-profit organizations to operate the resulting housing as Rent-Geared-to-Income (RGI) units. Most existing inclusionary zoning programs create “affordable” housing i.e. 80% of market price which is not affordable to families facing homelessness.

Elimination of Bylaw Restrictions

Restrictions have been developed in many communities that prohibit the number of shelters in one area or provide a set distance between certain residential care facilities. Toronto's Dream Team was **successful in convincing four communities** – Toronto, Kitchener, Sarnia and Smiths Falls – to amend their exclusionary by-laws after filing cases against them at the Human Rights Tribunal of Ontario.

The “tiny home” movement is also restricted from reaching its full potential because of bylaw restrictions governing size of units, access to services etc. By allowing for implementation of tiny home communities or by permitting individuals to allow a tiny home on their property, thousands of individuals and families can be housed quite easily and cheaply.

Limits on Strata Conversions

Strata (or condo) conversions refer to the development of condominiums in previously rented buildings. This is popular in urban centres where land may be expensive or unavailable, but it then reduces the number of rental units available in that community. Several communities in British Columbia (including North Vancouver, Victoria and Coquitlam) restrict condo conversions if the vacancy rate is below 4%. This therefore allows these municipal governments to ensure that needed rental housing is not diminished at a time of high demand/low availability.

Second Suite Housing

Many communities have restrictions against second suite housing or prevent people from renting out units in their home by limiting the number of unrelated people who may reside in one residence. For families with children experiencing homelessness, sharing a home with a couple other families may be a necessary and useful first step towards independence. In other cases, accessing a basement apartment often provides the cheapest kind of affordable housing and yet, often these places are illegal. By allowing homeowners to legally rent out spaces in their homes, or by permitting sharing of facilities, families can be quickly and easily put on a track to recovery.



Recommendation 8.0 – Development of Housing Spaces

While Recommendation 7.0 discussed the various ways that municipalities can support the development of housing through regulatory policy, this recommendation is more specific to the development of a variety of types of housing spaces.

In an ideal world, we would have no need for emergency shelter spaces. However, even if we were to see the development of a fully funded national housing strategy with thousands of units in the pipeline, implementation to the point of addressing the numbers of people currently homeless, those living in hidden homelessness and those at extreme risk of becoming homeless is several years away.

In the meantime, municipalities should be working with a variety of community partners to develop the types of shelters that their community needs. Many communities have an insufficient supply of adequate family shelters and shelters for women fleeing violence.

Municipalities can donate surplus lands to developers and/or non-profit groups to use for the development of shelters, transitional housing or permanent residences.

Developers and property management companies can also be encouraged to donate (aside from any tax rebates or incentive programs listed in Recommendation 7.0) units in each of their buildings to families exiting homelessness.



Recommendation 9.0 – Coordinated System of Care for Community Agencies

Community agencies often bear the second biggest burden of homelessness, next to their clients. They deal with complex issues, often while being under-resourced, and lack sufficient supports to deal with the demands and needs of their clients. Many agencies would like to cooperate amongst each other and yet struggle with the competition for the donor/funder dollar. We would like to encourage the development of local systems of care to help to focus on providing coordinated supports for clients. Some possible methods include:

- Develop a common intake form with a shared database. Clients do not need to repeat their stories over and over, while agencies providing different services can work together to holistically meet the clients' needs.
- Support the development of a coordinated access centre/access point. Taking a common intake form one step further, coordinated access allows for centralized intake of clients and then referrals to the most suitable and relevant agencies. Intake teams could be staffed by workers seconded from various services.
- Provide cross-sectoral training to other agencies. Every organization has its strengths. Share the promising practices and skills from one organization with others. Homeless agencies can provide training for mainstream support organizations on tips for working with vulnerable populations.
- Conduct joint advocacy on campaigns to improve the lives of clients that all the agencies serve.
- Joint fundraising activities to support specific projects that cross agencies and client groups.



Recommendation 10.0 – Trauma-Informed Services

Homeless individuals have been severely impacted by trauma and homelessness in and of itself can lead to PTSD. The provision of trauma-informed services means recognizing the complexity of issues that may arise in client's lives and working to address these in addition to whatever other services are being provided.

- Meet clients where they are at – both literally and metaphorically. Outreach programs allow clients to meet with workers in spaces where they feel safe. Enable staff to be able to meet with clients in their homes, workplaces, schools, coffee shops, faith communities etc. This also means recognizing that a client may face challenges in meeting obligations and understanding this as part of their trauma. Children may act out and parents may miss appointments or be late for a scheduled meeting. Rather than penalizing a client for an absence, develop flexible drop-in hours for program delivery.
- Provide ongoing training and support for staff on promising practices of providing trauma-informed care.
- Staff burnout is extremely high in organizations working with vulnerable populations. Developing extensive staff self-care supports including staff recognition, personal time off, flex time, employee counselling, and debriefing counsellors after traumatic incidents can help mitigate this.

While this recommendation is primarily aimed at community-based agencies, government service providers also need to be trauma-informed. For example, child welfare or family services staff should also have training in trauma-informed care. This is particularly important as family homelessness can be a flag for child welfare involvement and may result in family separation.



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