Making the case for the
Canadian Definition of Homelessness

CANADIAN OBSERVATORY ON HOMELESSNESS

In order to effectively address the problem of homelessness, there is a need for an agreed upon definition of homelessness. A common definition provides all levels of government and community groups with a framework for understanding and describing homelessness, and a means for identifying goals, strategies and interventions, as well as measuring outcomes and progress.

To this end, the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (COH) (formerly the Canadian Homelessness Research Network) - working in collaboration with national, regional and local stakeholders - has developed a *Canadian definition of Homelessness*. In doing so, we have drawn from our shared history of attempting to define homelessness in Canada, but also from effective examples from other jurisdictions (most particularly, the ETHOS definition from Europe). The end result is a useable, understandable definition that is uniquely Canadian yet allows for national and international comparison.

Making the Case

We begin by asking a key question: Is homelessness really something that needs to be defined? After all, there are few Canadians who are unaware of the 'problem' of homelessness. Yet despite broad usage of the term by politicians, advocates, the news media, and the general public, it is a concept that has proven to be quite difficult to articulate. While there is most certainly general agreement that people living outdoors or in emergency shelters are in fact, 'homeless', when we move beyond that group, definitions become contested. Is someone homeless if they temporarily leave their home (or are asked to), only to return after several days or weeks? What about 'couch surfers' who rely on personal networks (like friends or families) to find temporary lodging during crises? Does homelessness refer only to those who are chronically homeless, who have made the streets their home for years and years? These are all important questions.

There is no doubt that homelessness is a complex individual and societal problem, and this complicates efforts to define it. It is not simply a bound and measurable category of persons, as the line between being homeless and not being homeless is quite fluid with people moving between living situations. In addition, people we describe as homeless are in fact quite diverse; the pathways into and out of homelessness are not linear, and people who experience such extreme circumstances may not share much in common with each other, aside from the fact that they are extremely vulnerable. Homelessness is the outcome of an intricate interplay between a) structural factors, including lack of or inadequate income, access to affordable housing and health supports, and/or the experience of discrimination, b) systems failures, including difficult transitions from child welfare, inadequate discharge planning and transitional supports from hospitals, mental health and addictions centers, and corrections, and / or c) individual circumstances such as interpersonal conflict, addictions, mental health problems, and personal crises (divorce or separation, death in a family, sudden job loss, destruction of one's home). Individual factors often determine who will become homeless in relation to structural and systemic failures.

The breadth and complexity of the issues underlying homelessness creates a sense that the issue is unbounded, and difficult to get a handle on, particularly because many people suffer from similar individual and structural problems, but never become homeless. This can also create the 'illusion' that it is therefore difficult to solve. However, researchers such as David Hulchanski have countered that this seeming complexity obscures what is in fact a much more simple and straightforward problem; that homelessness is inevitably connected to a lack of safe, affordable and appropriate housing, as well as adequate income and appropriate services. When making this point, Hulchanski often references Cushing Dolbeare:

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"Whatever other problems they face, adequate, stable, affordable housing is a prerequisite to solving them. Homelessness may not be *only* a housing problem, but it is *always* a housing problem; housing is necessary, although sometimes not sufficient, to solve the problem of homelessness" (1996: 34).

So why is it important to have a definition of homelessness in Canada? A case can be made that addressing any complex problem cannot be done without first having a thorough understanding of the nature and extent of the problem. After all, you cannot measure the scope of the problem without first knowing who is and is not affected. This notion is precisely the challenge that faces all strategic initiatives aimed at addressing homelessness, and our lack of clarity about what counts and what does not gets in the way of creating comprehensive strategies to address homelessness, evaluate outcomes and progress, and share effective practices. We identify the following as key reasons for adopting this definition:

- **Sharing a common language about homelessness:**
  For those interested in addressing homelessness – whether the general public, researchers, service providers, government officials or those working in the private sector – an agreed upon definition gives us a common language to talk about, think about, and respond to homelessness. Without a shared understanding of who is and is not homeless, and who is at risk, we cannot easily agree on how to address the problem.

- **Enumerating the problem:**
  It is increasingly understood that good data is crucial to addressing the problem of homelessness. A standardized definition allows communities to articulate with greater precision who they count as homeless, and what strategies are employed to address the problem. As the boundaries between the homeless and non-homeless populations are fluid, a clear definition would ensure consistent measurement and data collection. Having a common definition also enables meaningful comparisons across jurisdictions.

- **Evaluating outcomes and progress:**
  A clear definition not only allows you to count, but more importantly, makes possible informed and accurate monitoring of those identified as homeless and their response to strategies or interventions aimed at addressing their homelessness. This is particularly important for communities engaged in strategic and coordinated plans to end homelessness. A comprehensive definition allows you to identify measures or indicators related to how well outcomes and progress are achieved through strategies, interventions or programs implemented to address particular aspects of homelessness, whether it be chronic homelessness or prevention, for instance.

- **Coordinating responses to homelessness:**
  While individual communities across the country develop innovative responses to homelessness, the absence of a shared definition means that often there is little commonality between the various community, provincial, and federal responses. A review of the international approaches to homelessness reveals that those countries with consistent, national definitions of homelessness are the most successful in addressing the issue within their borders. Such plans and strategies address homelessness from common starting points and use common language for discussion, as well as identical measurement methodologies.

- **Developing stronger policy responses:**
  The Canadian response to homelessness is rapidly evolving. As we move away from a focus on the provision of emergency services, to more comprehensive strategies that embrace prevention and efforts to rapidly re-house people, we need a comprehensive definition that clearly articulates the breadth and range of housing vulnerability (from those who are living outside - at one end of the continuum, to those whose current housing is insecure, making them vulnerable to homelessness at the other). Can we really adopt a preventive approach to homelessness unless we know who is at risk and why? Strategies that reduce the cyclical nature of homelessness require an understanding of risk factors as well. Although who qualifies as being homeless or at risk of being homeless is a hotly contested issue, the consideration of those 'at risk' of homelessness is a necessary feature of a Canadian definition of homelessness. In the end, a definition will serve to both guide future policy directions, as well as offer an official stance on important elements of the preventive response to homelessness.

Developing a Canadian Definition of Homelessness

Recognizing the value of establishing a comprehensive and standardized definition of homelessness, the COH has crafted a definition. This process began with a thorough literature review of efforts to define homelessness across Canada, as well as in the United States, Europe and Australia. A review of the literature can be found in our companion document **Background to the Development of a Canadian Definition of Homelessness**.

From there, the COH established a working group with leaders from the areas of research, policy and practice[1], to develop, refine and test a new definition. The goal has been to forge a common definition that strikes a balance between the needs and wants of different stakeholder communities, was easy to communicate and explain and was inherently useful for those addressing the problem of homelessness. The COH working group operated with the assumption that a good definition must be:

- *Inclusive and Comprehensive* - The definition is broad enough to cover any and all true-life experiences of homelessness and those who experience housing exclusion. The accompanying typology is both comprehensive and specific enough to allow users to clearly define what aspects of homelessness they are referring to.

- *Meaningful* – The definition and accompanying typology have been established to help improve our strategies to enumerate the problem of homelessness, and develop effective and targeted interventions and solutions to end homelessness.

- *Clear* – The definition and typology are unambiguous, allowing users to determine if a person in a given situation is homeless or not, and with the clarity and precision identify who is homeless or in a vulnerable situation.

- *Practical and Useable* – The framework, language and scope of the Canadian definition allows for easy application.

- *Canadian* - While drawing from what we see as the best elements of international definitions, we have developed a definition that represents the realities and experiences of homelessness in Canada. Key language for the definition reflects the history and practices of those who have applied definitions of homelessness across Canada. At the same time, this Canadian definition is easily compared to/aligned with definitions elsewhere.

Additionally, the COH's Inclusion Working Group was consulted during development of the definition. This group includes people from across Canada who have experienced homelessness and they were in agreement that the range of housing and shelter situations (and lack thereof) contained within the definition accurately describes the breadth of circumstances encountered by people who have been homelessness – or are precariously housed.

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1. The COH Working Group included: Dr. Stephen Gaetz, Director, Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, York University; Carolann Barr, Executive Director, Raising the Roof; Anita Friesen, Senior Policy Advisor, Program Policy and Planning, Family Violence Prevention and Homeless Supports, Alberta Human Services; Bradley Harris, Social Services Consultant, The Salvation Army; Charlie Hill, Executive Director, National Aboriginal Housing Association; Dr. Kathy Kovacs-Burns, Associate Director, Health Sciences Council, University of Alberta; Dr. Bernie Pauly, Assistant Professor, School of Nursing, University of Victoria; Bruce Pearce, President, Canadian Housing Renewal Association; Alina Turner, VP Strategy, Calgary Homeless Foundation; Allyson Marsolais, Project Manager, Canadian Observatory on Homelessness.

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Using the Canadian Definition of Homelessness

The definition and typology we have developed is intended to assist policy makers, service providers and researchers in doing their work by providing a degree of clarity as to the scope and extent of the problem we refer to as homelessness. We recognize that policy makers, service providers and academics are situated within different contexts, with different mandates and will not all use the definition in the same way. One of the strengths of the typology is that users are able to define with great specificity the parameters around who is included and who is excluded in the problem definition, or who should be the target of interventions. In fact, this definition gives people the power to more specifically refine what they mean when they talk about homelessness. For instance:

When doing homeless counts this definition allows communities to select and clearly articulate which parts of the definition they wish to include, as well as who is excluded from the count. This allows for greater clarity in communicating results, engaging the general public and in comparing results with other communities.

From a policy and planning perspective, communities and government can clearly identify the scope and extent of the problem they are trying to address. For instance, in developing strategies to address homelessness, in shifting the focus to prevention, or in targeting a specific intervention, the definition allows users to specify exactly who is included in the intervention, and who is not. The Canadian Definition of Homelessness will also prove beneficial to all levels of government, in that it can help shape the approach and actions undertaken at the federal, provincial and local levels and allow for clear articulation of responsibilities for housing and homelessness. Furthermore, use of this definition will help maintain a universal form of response across all levels of government and departments.

Finally, for researchers, the definition can help provide methodological clarity, and enhance the comparability of research findings. The definition can assist in defining inclusion and eligibility criteria.

Addressing the needs of sub-populations:

The population of people who are impacted by homelessness is quite diverse. It has been thoroughly documented that homelessness affects various populations differently. Young people leave home with no prior experience of running a household, women are often fleeing abuse, Aboriginal persons experience discrimination and in some cases inadequate housing on reserves, or immigrants and refugees often live in overcrowded situations, for instance. In constructing a Canadian definition, then, we were mindful of the unique experiences of sub-populations, which necessitated the inclusion of specific language within the Canadian definition of homelessness. Different sub-populations tend to experience homelessness in distinctive ways that require different responses.

Given the over-representation of Aboriginal peoples amongst homeless populations (including First Nations, Metis, and Inuit peoples), special attention must be paid to considering how and whether a definition of homelessness accounts for important experiential and cultural differences. Aboriginal homelessness refers to indigenous people whose living circumstances match those outlined within the Canadian Definition of Homelessness. However, while this definition may adequately describe the housing situations of Aboriginal people who are homeless, the remedies and solutions must take account of the history of colonization in Canada, the fraught relations between different levels of government and Aboriginal nations and communities, cultural differences and the ongoing experience of racism. Such a conceptualization must also recognize that the population of people who are Aboriginal and homeless is also quite diverse, including youth, seniors, women and families, for example.

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