



Introduction

Homelessness: What's in a Word?

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As we write this introduction in 2009, to accompany the launch of an electronic book that brings together current Canadian research on homelessness, we are struck by the way in which the term “homelessness” has come to be used – by researchers, by the media, by politicians, by service providers. *Homelessness* has been called “an odd-job word, pressed into service to impose order on a hodgepodge of social dislocation, extreme poverty, seasonal or itinerant work, and unconventional ways of life” (Hopper and Baumohl, 1996, p. 3). Why do we have such a term? Where did it come from? What does it mean? What does it conceal? These are all essential questions, not only for society and public policy, but also for researchers. What are we researching?

The invention of homelessness

A search of the *New York Times* historical database covering 1851 to 2005 reveals that the word *homelessness* was used in 4,755 articles, but 87% of this usage (4,148 articles) was in the 20 years between 1985 and 2005. Before the 1980s, it is rare to find *homelessness* used to designate a social problem. What happened in that decade that made the difference?

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In 1981, the United Nations announced that 1987 would be the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless (IYSH). What the United Nations intended was a focus on the fact that so many people in *less developed* countries were unhoused. There was no mention of developed countries like Canada in that 1981 UN resolution.¹ The 1981 UN General Assembly resolution also did not use the word *homelessness*. The term as the name of a social problem was not in common use at the time. The 1981 UN resolution was intended to draw attention to the fact that many millions of households in developing countries had no housing. They were unhoused, homeless. They needed adequate housing.

But by 1987, the focus of the International Year had shifted to include homeless people in the developed nations of the world, including Canada. In that year, many of the people whose work is represented in this electronic book attended conferences on homelessness in Canada that focused on the growing number of unhoused people *in Canada*, not those in developing countries.

Before the 1980s, people in developed countries did not know what it was like to be unhoused or homeless. They had housing, even if that housing was in poor condition. Some transient single men in cities were referred to at times as “homeless.” But the term had a different meaning then.

In 1960, for example, in a report titled *Homeless and Transient Men*, a committee of the Social Planning Council of Metro Toronto defined a “homeless man” as one with few or no ties to a family group, who was thus without the economic or social support a family home normally provides. The committee made a clear distinction between house and home. The men were *homeless*, not unhoused. *Home* refers to a social, psychological space, not just a house as a physical structure. These homeless men had housing, albeit poor quality housing – rooming hous-

¹ “That an international year devoted to the problems of homeless people in urban and rural areas of the developing countries ... to focus the attention of the international community on those problems, Recognizing the grave and generally worsening situation of the homeless in the developing countries...” U.N. General Assembly, Resolution 36/71. International Year of Shelter for the Homeless, 4 December 1981.

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es or accommodation provided by charities. Canada at that time thus had homeless individuals, but no problem called “homelessness.” Most of the homeless individuals at that time were housed, though their housing was of poor quality.

Similarly, in 1977, the City of Toronto Planning Board released a *Report on Skid Row*. This report never uses the word “homelessness” and uses the word “homeless” only a few times. These men – and they were mainly men² – were characterized by their “residence in a deteriorated mixed commercial-residential area in older sections of the city,” by frequent changes in residence, and by the low rent they paid. They had housing, but they were homeless.

The word “homelessness” came into common use in developed countries in the early and mid-1980s to refer to the problem of *dehousing* – the fact that an increasing number of people who were once housed in these wealthy countries were no longer housed. Canada had started to experience dehousing processes.

Until the 1980s Canadian urban planners, public health officials, social workers and related professionals had been focused on *rehousing* people into better housing and neighbourhoods. This was because, during the Depression and the Second World War, very little new housing was built and many people were living in poor-quality, aging, and overcrowded housing. After the war, Canadians revived the housing market, created a functioning mortgage system with government mortgage insurance, built social housing, and subsidized private-sector rental housing. About 20,000 social housing units were created every year following the 1973 amendments to the *National Housing Act*.

In addition, starting in that postwar period, people who needed to be protected during difficult economic times and supported in ill health

2 It was only a few years later, in her 1982 book *The Lost and the Lonely*, that McGill sociology professor Aileen Ross examined “a new social problem...that of homeless women.” By this time, destitute women, too, were finding themselves in Skid Row housing and even on the street. Ross used the term “homelessness” to underscore that whether housed or unhoused, these women fell outside the gendered norms associated with *home*: “Home-making has always been thought of as a much more important part of a woman’s identity than a man’s...Most of the women had lost this part of their identity.”

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and old age received the assistance they needed. Universal health insurance, Unemployment Insurance, Old Age Pensions, and the Canada Assistance Plan were all introduced or improved as national cost-shared programs during those years.

In introducing the 1973 housing legislation, the Minister of Urban Affairs – a federal ministry we no longer have today but which existed during most of the 1970s – clearly asserted that our society has an obligation to see that all people are adequately housed.

When we talk ... about the subject of housing, we are talking about an elemental human need – the need for shelter, for physical and emotional comfort in that shelter. When we talk about people's basic needs – the requirements for survival – society and the government obviously have an obligation to assure that these basic needs of shelter are met.

I have already acknowledged this obligation in stating that good housing at reasonable cost is a social right of every citizen of this country. ... [This] must be our objective, our obligation, and our goal. The legislation which I am proposing to the House today is an expression of the government's policy, part of a broad plan, to try to make this right and this objective a reality (Basford, 1973, p. 2257).

Undoubtedly we would not have the social problem of homelessness today if this 1970s philosophy had continued through the 1980s and 1990s, to the present day.

By the 1980s, however, Canada had a social problem that was and has ever since been called *homelessness*. The proceedings of Canada's 1987 national IYSH conference, for example, included a document endorsed by the conference, called the "Canadian Agenda for Action on Housing and Homelessness through the Year 2000." This agenda included the following explicit summary of the federal government's failure to take action on the growing national affordable housing crisis.

A significant component of the homelessness problem is that housing has not been a high priority for governments at any level.... [O]nly a small proportion of government resources are directed to improving housing conditions.... In all regions of the country, the demand for housing that is adequate and affordable to low-income persons and the willingness of local organizations ready to build greatly exceed the availability of gov-

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ernment funds to carry out effective social housing programs (Canadian Association of Housing and Renewal Officials, 1988, p. 122.).

The cutbacks in social housing and related programs began in 1984. The government ignored the 1987 Agenda for Action. In 1993 all federal spending on the construction of new social housing was terminated and in 1996 the federal government further removed itself from low-income housing supply by transferring responsibility for most existing federal social housing to the provinces. Reliance on the private market for housing provision puts at a disadvantage not only those with low incomes, but also those facing discrimination in the housing and job markets on the basis of race, gender, family status, disability, immigration, age, or other factors.

Over the past two decades we relied on an increasingly deregulated society in which the “genius of market forces” would meet our needs, in which the tax cuts, made possible by program spending cuts that usually benefited poor and average income people, were supposed to “trickle down” to benefit those in need. The competitive economy required, we were told, wage suppression and part-time jobs with no benefits. We may now be entering a new, very different period caused by the global financial crisis – although this remains to be seen.

The dehousing of so many Canadians starting in the 1980s was not the result of a natural disaster (an earthquake, a flood, an ice storm). Canadians are quick to rehouse people whenever a natural disaster leaves people homeless. But over the past two decades, instead of continuing public policies, including appropriate regulation of the private sector where necessary for the general public good, we did the opposite.

By the early 1980s countries like Canada needed a new term for a widespread mass phenomenon, a new social problem found in many wealthy, developed nations. The “odd-job word,” *homeless-ness*, filled the gap. Adding the suffix “-ness” turns the adjective *homeless* into an abstract noun. As such, it allows readers and listeners to imagine whatever they want. It tosses all sorts of problems into one handy term. We thus have the ongoing problem of defining what *homeless-ness* is and isn't. There is no single correct definition, given the different mix of problems that goes into the hodgepodge of issues, and depending on who is using the term.

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In short, we have not used the word *homelessness* for very long. It was rarely used before the 1980s. It is a catch-all term for a host of serious social and economic policy failures – more serious than in the past. Its widespread usage reflects what has happened to Canadian society – the way we organize who gets what, and our failure to have in place systems for meeting basic human needs in a universal, inclusive fashion. It also reflects the institutionalization of a problem. We now have a huge social service, health, mental health, and research sector focused on homeless or dehousing people. This requires special skills and knowledge.

What homelessness means

We need to be careful when we use the words *homeless* and *homelessness*. While it is true that all societies through history tend to have some people who are homeless – without a home – we have not always had the set of social problems we associate with the word *homelessness*.

Starting in the 1980s *homelessness* came to mean a poverty that includes being unhoused. It is a poverty so deep that even poor-quality housing is not affordable. Canada has always had many people living in poverty. But it was only in the 1980s that more and more people found themselves not only poor, but unhoused.

We can at least separate out the one common feature shared by all homeless people from all the other complex social situations associated with the word *homelessness*. The best summary of the core of the problem came from long-time U.S. housing researcher and activist Cushing Dolbeare about 10 years ago. It is a statement I quote often. She wrote:

The one thing all homeless people have in common is a lack of housing. 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 (Dolbeare, 1996, p. 34).

Some people disagree, saying that homelessness is an individual problem, *not* a housing problem. Housing is an expensive problem to address. It is simpler and cheaper to blame people for their personal fail-

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ures. We all have our personal failures. But only for some does it mean finding themselves and their families unhoused.

Homelessness means that we have two kinds of health and mental health care: one for the housed population and another for the unhoused population.

It means that those already facing systemic inequities, discrimination, and violence on the basis of gender, race, age, poverty, disability, sexual orientation, immigration or Aboriginal status, now face the possibility of becoming dehousing as a result.

It means that we work to create more and better emergency shelters rather than assisting unhoused people to settle into adequate, stable and affordable housing.

It means that Canada does not have a tenure-neutral housing system; that owners and renters are treated very differently in terms of subsidies and helpful regulations.

This huge imbalance in the allocation of resources continues. We have limited resources for the prevention of dehousing and for quick rehousing. Most resources and professional attention are focused on supporting people in their homelessness. This is the situation in which we are stuck today. We have all the evidence we need about the health impacts, including premature death, of being unhoused for any extended period of time. Yet we still give priority to the homeownership sector and ignore the rental and social housing sectors.

It used to be possible to say that no one in Canada was born homeless. Unfortunately, with so many homeless families in temporary shelters, children are today being born into unhoused families across the country. Here is a quote from an experienced Canadian veteran of homelessness:

I don't ever want to go back to being homeless. I'd rather try to do something to prevent that happening, because everybody deserves their own place to call home.

This Canadian veteran of homelessness is a 12-year-old Calgary girl.

As we write in 2009, postwar progress in building a middle-income inclusive society in which everyone is adequately housed has halted.

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Instead of rehousing processes and mechanisms, we have had, for at least two decades now, dehousing processes and mechanisms.

Hiding behind the word homelessness

Who is in favour of homelessness? Who lobbies for homelessness? Which economists tell us homelessness is good for the economy? If no one is doing these things, why does homelessness persist?

Homelessness does not occur in a social or political vacuum. The events that make people homeless are initiated and controlled by other people. The primary purpose of these activities of others is not to make people homeless

but, rather, to achieve socially condoned aims such as making a living, becoming rich, obtaining a more desirable home, increasing the efficiency at the workplace, promoting the growth of cultural institutions, giving cities a competitive advantage, or helping local or federal governments to balance their budgets or limit their debts. Homelessness occurs as a side effect (Jahiel, 1992, p. 269).

Homelessness is the “natural” outcome of the way we have organized our housing system, and the way we allocate or fail to allocate income and support services when they are desperately needed. Though no one favours homelessness, many contribute to it by doing what societal norms and government laws and regulations allow.

For a long time sociologists and social policy experts have recognized the especially difficult nature of some social problems – which is why some persist. Here is one explanation:

a social problem is an enterprise in finding ways of getting something done or prevented, while not interfering with the rights, interests, and activities of all those who are involved in the failure to do, or the persistence in doing, what is the subject of the problem (Frank, 1925).

This observation, from a 1925 article on the nature of social problems, refers to what we might call the tyranny of the status quo. A significant majority, or at least an influential minority, are doing fine and have so far benefitted from the changes that were made in the 1980s to the present.

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So keeping things the same and tinkering at the edges, acting *only* at the local community level and individual level of the problem, without addressing the larger dynamics that are producing the problem in the first place, means, obviously, that the problem will persist.

By hiding a broad set of socially undesirable outcomes under the rubric of homelessness, society can recognize and condemn the undesirable social outcome we call homelessness. No one I know of is in *favour* of homelessness. But simply condemning the problem while at the same time not doing anything to change the social dynamics that produce the undesirable outcomes, means that things will stay the same – or get worse. In addition, the social dynamics creating the problem remain unnamed, subsumed under the rubric of the abstract term *homelessness*. The homeless-makers carry on their work and the homeless-making processes continue.

Responding to homelessness

If we are to ensure that things do not simply stay the same, or get worse, we need to act on two main fronts.

First, bearing in mind Cushing Dolbear's insight that homelessness is *always* a problem of housing, we need to focus on rehousing those who have become unhoused. Unfortunately, at present we have limited resources for the prevention of dehousing and for quick rehousing. Most resources and professional attention are focused on supporting people in their homelessness. It is urgent that we refocus our efforts on getting people rehoused.

The second thing we need to do is to recognize that homelessness is not a complex problem. Yes, it is *not* a complex problem.

After all these years of research and policy analysis and documenting the lived experience of those affected and those who provide support services, we know what the causes of the problem are. That means we know what the solutions are.

When individuals or families run into serious difficulty in one or more of the three key areas that support a decent standard of living, they may find themselves unhoused and potentially on a downward spiral. The three areas are: housing, income, and support services. Groups already facing inequities, discrimination, and violence are often the first to

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face difficulties in these areas when the economic tide changes. Starting in the 1980s, more and more individuals and families could not afford housing, or could not find jobs or income support at a living wage, or could not obtain appropriate addiction or mental health support.

An adequate standard of living means that a good society not only ensures that good-quality health care is available to everyone, but also access to adequate housing, employment at a living wage, and essential support services must also be available for everyone, not just those who can afford them – and that systemic inequities are addressed in social policy.

Homelessness in the plural

We have tried in this electronic book to avoid lumping together problems that are distinct, and lumping together people who may have little in common beyond the fact that they have experienced the dehousing processes at first hand. There is no one face of “homelessness.”

We have organized the chapters into themes. One set of themes represents disadvantaged groups (women, children & youth, immigrants, Aboriginal people), another represents policy areas implicated in homelessness (housing, health, or the justice system). We also have included a section on research issues. The contents of each chapter often cross various themes. As this electronic book evolves over time, we may need to add further themes, if new research emerges that does not fit the existing themes.

Why women? Research shows that women’s reasons for homelessness are often different from men’s, and abuse in the home is a primary factor. Women who are homeless are often accompanied by children, and the housing and supports they require differ as a result. Policy and service responses to homelessness must take gender into account.

Why children and youth? The experience of homelessness varies according to one’s age and defies easy categorization. The growing phenomenon of “family homelessness” means that increasing numbers of children experience homelessness, with serious and lasting consequences for their well-being, development, and education. Youth, meanwhile, outnumber any other homeless group in Canada. Alongside housing, income, and support services, the child welfare system is also implicated

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in homelessness among children and youth – both when children cannot be reunified with their parents due to inadequate housing, and when youth become too old for the services of child welfare agencies but still have insufficient supports for obtaining and maintaining housing. How service providers respond to homeless people depends on how we understand who is homeless and why, and how we recognize family relationships in that response.

Why Aboriginal people? People of Aboriginal descent are overrepresented among homeless populations across Canada. The effects of economic marginalization, social exclusion, and Aboriginal policy intersect with devastating results for Aboriginal individuals and families. Deplorable housing conditions on reserves, high rates of family violence, inadequate housing and supports for Aboriginal people living in urban centres, and historical legacies of residential schools and community displacement all play a role in Aboriginal homelessness.

Why immigrants and refugees? Homelessness among these groups is increasing, because of inequities in employment, discrimination in the housing market, lack of family and social supports, and differential access to services based on immigration status. Homelessness in immigrant and refugee communities poses a particular challenge to homelessness services in Canada's largest urban centres, and regions such as Southern Ontario where the majority of new immigrants settle.

Why health? Research clearly shows that the consequences of homelessness include effects on health and mental health – and some of these effects persist even after homeless people secure housing. The response to homelessness must take into account these problems and their long-term repercussions.

Why the justice system? Another finding from the research is that homeless people may be criminalized within the justice system, and also that they are disproportionately the victims of crime. Responses to homelessness must take into account the way in which those who have been incarcerated may become dehousing, and how those who are dehousing may become involved with the justice system.

Why include research issues? In conducting research, it is important not to make quick assumptions about the lives and pathways into homelessness of the many different individuals who find themselves de-

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housed. This section is intended to challenge researchers to ensure that they are rigorously testing their assumptions and keeping an open mind towards new research and new evidence in this field. We have also tried to include information from across the country, since homelessness takes different forms in different places – big cities, smaller centres, suburban and rural areas, or the North. We hope eventually that the book will provide good coverage of the whole country.

Policy options: Housing, income, and support services

Some might wonder about the subtitle of this book: *Policy Options for Addressing Homelessness in Canada*. The individual chapters are mainly about specific issues for specific population groups. Where are the policy options?

The policy options emerge from a better understanding of specific aspects of the many problems tossed into the word *homelessness*. People become homeless because of serious problems arising in one or more of the three key necessities of an adequate standard of living: housing, income, and support services. When systemic inequities, misfortune, ill health, or abuse interfere with people's ability to hold on to or obtain one or more of these, a serious personal crisis can result, especially for those with a limited knowledge of available options or a weak support network.

A host of problems became lumped together under the word homelessness starting in the 1980s because the public sector's provision of housing, income and support services to those most disadvantaged by the market system, which were far from adequate to begin with, were systematically and continually cut back or eliminated. What do we call a new form of deeper and widespread destitution that now included being unhoused for periods? The word homelessness provides a good cover for the impacts and outcomes of public policies, programs, and tax cuts that benefited mainly higher-income groups. If people became unhoused, it was their fault.

Neo-conservative policies (known in the research literature as "neoliberal") were first implemented in Margaret Thatcher's United Kingdom (elected 1979), Ronald Reagan's United States (elected 1980), and Brian

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Mulroney's Canada (elected 1984).³ Deregulation, public spending cuts, and tax cuts for the well-off were supposed to "trickle down" to the less fortunate. The other popular cliché was that "all boats would rise with the rising tide" of wealth. In 2004, TD Senior Economist Don Drummond and his colleagues at TD Financial concluded: "In sum, the evidence that a rising tide lifts all boats is spotty at best – though, certainly, it is superior to a situation where all the boats are sinking" (Drummond et al., 2004, p. 25). Five years later, in fall 2008, we learned that most boats are indeed sinking.

The huge economic surplus generated during the prosperity of the past two decades, we now know, never could and never did trickle down. The global financial crisis and the economic depression it produced are the result of the same policies that stripped lower-income households of essential housing, income, and support services. Even during the period of economic growth, the bottom 10 to 20 percent suffered a loss in their real (inflation-adjusted) standard of living, while the top 10 to 20 percent, even after the financial collapse of late 2009, reaped most of the benefits. With the onset of the financial crisis we are all now paying for the implementation of an ideology that benefited those seeking elected office in Western liberal democracies and those able to change, bend, or break the rules in the financial sector in their favour.

We know the policy options. We need social protections that prevent Canadians from becoming unhoused. We need programs that ensure that all Canadians have what they need for an adequate standard of living, so that no one will be unhoused for more than a very brief period should a crisis of some sort arise. We need policies that correct historic and systemic inequities, and that provide adequate, affordable and secure housing, an adequate income or income support when needed, and adequate support services if these are required (for addictions, mental health, and so on). Only then will we begin to solve the problem we now call homelessness.

3 For a history, see Harvey, 2000.

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Health impacts: Homelessness kills

If this book were about homelessness in the United States, lack of health insurance would join the list of causes and solutions: housing, income, support services, and health care. Without some form of universal access to adequate health care, independent from one's income or wealth, people can become unhoused and homeless after trying to pay for the health care services required by a loved one.

Canadians are fortunate in that our universal health care insurance system, though far from perfect, eliminates almost all financial barriers to physician and hospital services. No one loses his or her housing due to the cost of health care – through many cannot pay for the prescribed medications, dental care, or assistive devices they require. However, people often are dehousing due to disability, chronic illness, or a sudden health crisis, because income, housing, and support services are insufficient to protect people in these situations. Health conditions that greatly increase the risk of loss of housing include severe mental illness, substance abuse, and medical illness.

As well, being unhoused for any period of time can cause or exacerbate health problems. Longer periods can cause long-term and permanent harm to health. People who have been unhoused for long periods of time die younger than is the norm for the rest of society. The research literature on this issue is unequivocal.

Among men aged 25 to 44 years who use emergency shelters in Toronto, mortality rates are four times higher than among men in the general population (Hwang 2000). Lack of housing takes a particularly high toll on women under the age of 45: those who use shelters are fully 10 times more likely to die than their housed counterparts (Cheung 2004). This increased mortality risk has an enormous cumulative effect over one's lifetime – in Canada, a typical 25-year-old man has a 64% chance of surviving to age 75, but a 25-year-old man at a homeless shelter has only a 27% chance of living to see his 75th birthday (Hwang, in press). These extreme health inequities can only be addressed through a combination of housing, health care, and social interventions.

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Finding Home – and losing homelessness

In this electronic book, we hope that by taking apart the word “homelessness” and revealing the many social issues it conceals, we can begin to develop appropriate responses. As the e-book evolves, we hope that more and more of the chapters will contain information about the progress we are making in eradicating homelessness. Most of all, we hope that in another 20 years’ time, the term *homelessness* will be obsolete.

This e-book project is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). It represents an educational and dissemination partnership with Canada’s national homelessness charity, Raising the Roof, and with the newly created SSHRC-funded Canadian Homelessness Research Network (CHRN). The e-book will be permanently available on the CHRN’s website, The Homeless Hub, where it will be periodically updated. www.homelesshub.ca/FindingHome.

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