

The Prevention of Homelessness

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Across Canada, homelessness has long been treated primarily as a crisis to be managed, not a problem to be prevented. Most investments go into emergency shelters, day programs, and policing responses that attempt to manage people's suffering after homelessness has already occurred.¹ These responses save lives but do little to stop homelessness from occurring in the first place.

Why Prevention Matters

Homelessness Causes Serious, but Preventable Harm

While crisis responses to homelessness are well-intentioned, they rarely help people exit homelessness quickly or permanently. Prolonged periods without housing compound risks: traumatic brain injuries are common,² physical and mental health decline,^{3,4} exposure to violence increases,^{5,6} social supports erode, and life expectancy drops sharply.⁷ These harms reflect a system that manages crises rather than preventing them.

Many People Believe in Prevention—Just Not When it Comes to Homelessness

Given the substantial evidence of harm, preventing homelessness should be a national priority. Until recently, Canada's response has been largely reactive, providing a shelter bed or a meal instead of addressing the issue early. As a result, homelessness rates remain high across the country. This raises a crucial question: can we end homelessness without prioritizing prevention?

The pandemic showed that people embrace preventive measures when they understand what is at stake.¹ The same principle applies to homelessness. Prevention is humane, **cost-effective**, and socially responsible.^{8,9} However, prioritizing it requires a shift in how we understand and respond to homelessness—a shift backed by a growing foundation of research and practice knowledge.

*To end homelessness,
**prevention must be
the first step**—not an
afterthought.*

Defining the Prevention of Homelessness

To effectively address this complex issue, we must define it clearly in a way that clarifies whose responsibility it is to prevent homelessness. Homelessness prevention refers to housing-led policies, practices and interventions designed to stabilize housing in order to reduce a person's risk of, or experience of, homelessness.

The term 'homelessness prevention' must be used with precision.

The prevention of homelessness includes:

- **Primary Prevention:** Reduce inflows into homelessness through early intervention. In other words, working upstream to stop people from becoming homeless in the first place.
- **Secondary Prevention:** Reduce the likelihood that those who are at imminent risk of, or who have recently become homeless, transition to long-term or chronic homelessness.
- **Tertiary Prevention:** Provide housing-led supports to help people exit homelessness and reduce the likelihood of returning to it.

What Homelessness Prevention is NOT

Emergency services often offer a range of supports described as preventive because they aim to minimize the most negative impacts of homelessness, such as providing shelter, food, security, mental health and addictions supports, housing research, assistance with obtaining identification, life skills education and employment support. While these efforts are indeed well-meaning, important, and sometimes lifesaving, they do not constitute true homelessness prevention **because they do not directly (or even indirectly) prevent the occurrence of homelessness**, as people may continue to be homeless while receiving these supports.

Equity: Who is Most Impacted?

Homelessness is unevenly distributed. It reflects and reinforces broader structural inequities. Many individuals at risk also face discrimination, racism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, or any combination of these. **Populations most affected include Indigenous peoples, 2SLGBTQ+ individuals, Black and racialized people, and people with disabilities.**^{10,11}

Prevention efforts must recognize that the pathways into homelessness vary widely across groups. Racism, colonialism, gender-based violence, homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia, and ableism shape risk in distinct ways. As a result, prevention strategies must be tailored to the needs, strengths, and lived realities of each group.

Prevention approaches are most effective when they are designed and led by people with lived experience.¹² This ensures that interventions are culturally grounded, relevant, and responsive. For Indigenous Peoples, for example, mainstream organizations can best contribute to prevention efforts by following the leadership of Indigenous communities, organizations, and leaders, and by supporting approaches and programs that are Indigenous-led and developed under Indigenous direction.^{13,14}

The Typology of Homelessness Prevention

The Canadian Observatory on Homelessness's definition of homelessness prevention includes a typology that outlines five categories of prevention activities. These categories aim to organize the range of activities involved in homelessness prevention and designate the public institutions responsible for these efforts. As such, the typology emphasizes that addressing homelessness is not solely the duty of the homelessness sector. Other public institutions also play vital roles.

1. STRUCTURAL PREVENTION (Primary Prevention)

Structural prevention addresses the broad economic, social, and political conditions that create pathways into homelessness—poverty, racism, colonialism, discrimination, unaffordable housing, and social exclusion. It recognizes that these forces intersect and compound disadvantage, leading to disproportionate risk among certain groups.

These five categories form a complete prevention system^{15,16}

Preventing homelessness cannot be the responsibility of the homelessness sector alone.

Typology of Homelessness Prevention

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- 1. STRUCTURAL** Prevention
 - 2. SYSTEMS** Prevention
 - 3. EARLY** Intervention
 - 4. CRISIS** Intervention
 - 5. HOUSING** Stability

Effective structural prevention requires coordinated government action, rights-based housing legislation, the active engagement of a range of public systems, and sustained investment in deeply affordable housing to disrupt these underlying conditions. Responsibility for structural prevention generally lies with all orders of government, as most structural prevention policies, investments, and interventions fall outside the homelessness sector.

Examples of Structural Prevention

- Enacting policies that promote poverty reduction and income equality through legislation, internal policies, and increased investment in education and early childhood programs
- Addressing inequity, racism and discrimination
- Increasing the availability of deeply affordable housing that is safe, in good repair and appropriate
- Addressing colonialism and Indigenous housing sovereignty
- Preventing displacement
- Promoting social inclusion for all
- Reducing adverse childhood experiences
- Rights-based legislation

2. SYSTEMS PREVENTION (Primary Prevention)

Systems prevention aims to ensure public institutions such as healthcare, corrections, child welfare, social services, education, and income support, for instance, do not inadvertently cause or contribute to homelessness. It addresses gaps like poor discharge planning, rigid eligibility criteria, and culturally unsafe practices that can lead to housing instability. In the face of ongoing racism, sexism, homophobia and transphobia, many people's experiences of public institutions designed to 'help' are anything but helpful.^{17,18}

A key driver of homelessness in Canada is the lack of transitional planning and supports (including permanent housing) for those leaving public systems like child protection,¹⁰ health care^{19,20} and criminal justice.²¹ These systems often discharge people directly into homelessness without adequate planning or housing supports. While policies can increase the risk of homelessness, the same systems can also play a critical role in preventing it.

Systems prevention requires partnership between government-funded services and community organizations working to address homelessness. Homeless-serving providers must work collaboratively with other community agencies, supported by funding from municipal, provincial and federal governments. Effective systems prevention requires trauma-informed, culturally grounded approaches co-designed with people with lived experience to ensure accessibility and impact.

Examples of Systems Prevention

- Housing-focused hospital discharge supports
- Correctional release supports
- Extending care and transitional supports for youth leaving child welfare
- Removing service access barriers
- Supporting Indigenous-led systems
- Ensuring culturally safe, self-determined service access

3. EARLY INTERVENTION (Primary Prevention)

Early intervention targets people who are at immediate or emerging risk of homelessness, aiming to resolve issues before housing loss occurs. These supports often include mediation and coaching, legal advocacy, financial assistance (including rent supplements), mental health supports, and coordinated case management that can stabilize a household quickly. Particularly for youth, early intervention is essential, as timely supports can prevent long-term or chronic homelessness.^{10,22} Supports often include strengthening connections to family and natural supports, legal assistance, help with rent arrears, and mental health services.^{23,24}

Examples of Early Interventions

- Eviction prevention
- Mental health crisis supports
- Family and Natural Supports
- Reconnect
- School-community partnerships
- Upstream Canada
- Duty to Assist

4. CRISIS PREVENTION (Secondary Prevention)

Crisis prevention supports individuals and families who have recently lost their housing or are at risk of entering emergency shelters. It prioritizes rapid, housing-led responses to stabilize people quickly and prevent chronic homelessness. Rather than expanding emergency services, it addresses the crisis at its source with immediate, practical solutions that reconnect people to safe housing.

Many people new to homelessness can resolve their situation on their own. However, some become trapped and face additional crises and trauma without intervention, risking chronic homelessness. Crisis prevention aims to reduce this risk by first assessing and identifying those who are most vulnerable to chronicity, then supporting them to rapidly exit homelessness, and finally working with those who accept help to resolve their homelessness within one or two months.

Crisis prevention is delivered through coordinated efforts among emergency service providers, housing organizations, and outreach teams, with funding from provincial and federal governments and municipal resources.

Examples of Crisis Prevention

- Diversion
- Rapid Rehousing
- Host Homes
- Direct Cash Transfers
- Duty to Assist

5. HOUSING STABILIZATION (Tertiary Prevention)

Housing stabilization provides long-term supports for those exiting homelessness to stay housed and rebuild their lives. It recognizes that people emerging from homelessness often face significant trauma, poverty, health challenges, and disconnection that place them at risk of returning to homelessness without sustained support.^{25,26,27}

Exiting homelessness often requires assistance and recovery time. Housing-led programs that do not provide housing stabilization supports and case management are not likely to be sufficient.^{27,28} Without proper supports, individuals may have difficulty recovering from the trauma and physical and mental toll that exposure to homelessness brings.²⁸ They may live in extreme poverty and in unsafe environments. They may have challenges finding a sense of social inclusion. And as a result of all this, they may become homeless again.

Effective housing-led interventions must provide people with appropriate and client-led (intensive) case management that includes culturally grounded approaches, and flexible supports tailored to different groups—especially youth, whose developmental needs differ from adults.^{29,30} Ensuring fidelity to evidence-based program models is essential to the effectiveness of these supports.

Housing stabilization is the responsibility of housing support agencies, health and social service providers, and peer support organizations, working in partnership with sustained funding from municipal, provincial and federal governments.

Examples of Housing Stabilization

- [Housing First](#)
- [Housing First for Youth](#)
- [Permanent Supportive Housing](#)
- Long-term case management
- Mental health and harm reduction supports
- Indigenous-led stabilization models

Conclusion

Various orders of government, led by the Government of Canada, are beginning to acknowledge the limitations of the crisis response and the benefits of prevention. At the same time, there is growing interest within the homelessness sector in shifting focus towards prevention, provided there is sufficient funding and training to support this shift.³¹

*Preventing homelessness is not only the right thing to do – **it can also save money.***

As our homelessness response shifts toward prevention, the next step is to identify effective interventions, determine how to invest in these initiatives, and scale innovative solutions efficiently.

We can learn what works by examining how some Canadian communities are applying preventive interventions, as well as international examples from countries that have prioritized prevention, such as Australia, Finland, the Netherlands, Denmark, Ireland, Wales, Scotland, and England.

A growing body of international research evidence confirms the positive outcomes of preventing homelessness. **Studies demonstrate the cost-effectiveness of investing in prevention, emphasizing that preventing homelessness is not only the right thing to do, but it also can save money.**^{8,9}

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To learn more about homelessness prevention visit the Homeless Hub: homelesshub.ca/collection/prevention



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