

A Case Study: Understanding and Responding to Homelessness Crisis in Chilliwack

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an in-depth discussion on the breakdown of government programs over the last few decades that have eroded the low-to-middle income housing stock and ballooned housing unaffordability in BC with a focus on Chilliwack. The goals of this paper are twofold, and they include: (1) unpack the causes of homelessness and its implications; (2) examine the current responses to the homelessness crisis. Most of the data collection done to support this analysis is drawn from current news stories and government websites so that the most up-to-date and impactful happenings are incorporated. This article examines the root causes of homelessness followed by the highlights of existing solution efforts and gaps in programs and policies using a case example of Chilliwack, British Columbia, Canada. This paper briefly discusses the recommendations and next step to address the homelessness crisis in BC with a focus on Chilliwack.

KEYWORDS

Affordable housing, Canada, Community Development, Homelessness

INTRODUCTION

Canada's National Housing Strategy Act (2019) declares that "*adequate housing is a fundamental human right...essential to the inherent dignity and well-being of the person*" [emphasis added]. Yet there are hundreds of thousands of people in British Columbia that are struggling to keep a roof over their head, live in overcrowded or rundown conditions, or have already been forced into homelessness- and these numbers continue to rise (Azpiri, 2023; Duncombe, 2022; Harding & Jeyapal, 2018; Skrypnek, 2022; St. Denis, 2023). There are simply not enough affordable and accessible housing units available across BC. This province stands out as being the hardest hit by the housing and rental crisis (Griffiths, 2023).

There are several staggering statistics that paint a bleak picture of what BC's homelessness epidemic looks like today. There has been a sharp increase in folks experiencing homelessness in most municipalities across the province since the Covid-19 pandemic (St. Denis, 2023). For example, the

proportion of people experiencing any form of homelessness in Vancouver has risen by 15 percent over the last 10 years (St. Denis, 2023). Of the nearly 9,000 British Columbians that are currently unhoused, more than 200 of them are children (Skrypnek, 2022).

According to the State of Homelessness in Canada (2016), an estimated 235,000 Canadians experience homelessness annually. This number likely underestimates the true prevalence, as many individuals experiencing homelessness reside with friends or family and forgo shelter services. On any given night, at least 35,000 Canadians are estimated to be homeless.

In British Columbia, 26,240 individuals were estimated to have experienced homelessness in the 2021, according to the 2021 Estimate of the Homeless Population in British Columbia report. A 2020 report by the Fraser Valley Regional District (FVRD) estimated that there were 895 homeless people in the region. The survey found that homelessness was unevenly distributed across the FVRD, with Abbotsford having the highest number of homeless individuals (333), followed by Chilliwack (306), Mission (178), Hope-Boston Bar (69), and Agassiz-Harrison (9)

This paper presents an in-depth discussion on the breakdown of government programs over the last few decades have eroded the low-to-middle income housing stock and ballooned housing unaffordability in BC with a focus on Chilliwack. The goals of these papers are twofold and they include: (1) unpack the causes of homelessness and its implications; (2) examine the current responses to the homelessness crisis. In addition, identify the gaps in housing policies and programs.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Peer reviewed and grey literature, including news articles and official websites, was examined for the study's goal in order to analyze the data. The articles were gathered from Social Work Abstracts and Google Scholar, among other search engines. One of the study's authors also contributes her firsthand account of working in Chilliwack's homelessness sector. This is a critical literature study; we do not claim it to be a systematic review.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded by community development and systems theories. The self- help approach, a key concept in community development, is a multifaceted approach that emphasizes empowering residents to identify and address challenges within their local environment. This theory recognizes the inherent strengths and resources that exist within communities and focuses on harnessing them to create positive change. In the words of Robinson and Green (2011) through this process, communities strengthen their capacity to solve problems, not simply those encountered at this time, but also those they might face in the future.

This study also draws from Systems Theory. Building on Healy's (2005) work, the theory posits that individuals are not isolated entities but part of interconnected systems. According to Healy (2005), these systems encompass elements such as housing policies, economic disparities, mental health services, social support networks, and broader societal structures.

RESULTS

This study identified the four themes, and they include: a) understanding social justice issues; b) existing solution efforts; c) gaps identified/implications of the Study; (4) moving forward: next steps.

Understanding Social justice issues

History & Trajectory

Up until the mid-1980's, the federal government took a lead role in ensuring housing was funded and built for those who might otherwise be without (Clempson et al., 2023; Harding & Jeyapal, 2018). Unfortunately, Canada went from being an international leader in fulfilling the housing needs of its citizens to what has deteriorated into today's housing crisis beginning with the New Housing Directions (NHD) initiative in 1986 (Clempson et al., 2023; Harding & Jeyapal, 2018). This piece of legislation created two huge impacts that are still felt today. The NHD prompted only those in desperate "core need" to be granted access to limited social housing, instead of supporting a broader population as policies previously had (Begin, 1999; Clempson et al., 2023). It also deprioritized housing provision by downloading this responsibility onto lower levels of government that have less impact and regulatory ability (Begin, 1999; Clempson et al., 2023). More blows that are brutal followed with the major defunding of government co-op and social housing programs in the 1990's (Begin, 1999; Clempson et al., 2023). Since then, the Canadian government has done little regarding housing action and policy change.

Azpiri (2023) highlights the voice of Jill Atkey, CEO of BC Non-Profit Housing Association, who says that the current grim circumstances are a summation of "years of failure to invest in rental housing...and a shocking lack of direction from governments." This is further frustrated by BC Housing's mismanagement of resources and general unwillingness to fund any projects that are not massive or supportive buildings (Ballard, 2022; St. Denis, 2023).

The recent introduction of the National Housing Strategy Act emphasizes the need to address housing affordability and accessibility over the next decade (Clempson et al., 2023; Place to Call Home, 2023). This is pushing decision makers to tackle the underlying causes of homelessness. Vance (2023) posits that BC will start to see good results regarding homelessness and housing affordability in about five years. However, what about those struggling with or at imminent risk of homelessness *right now*?

Driving Root Causes

The study identified a number of root causes that escalated the rise of homelessness and they include: (1) lack of housing; (2) rental market crisis; (3) strain on shelters.

Lack of Housing. "Housing affordability within British Columbia has been deteriorating since the 90's when the construction of reasonably priced builds and social housing all but stopped and, as the end of 2023 approaches, the crisis persists" (Clempson et al., 2023). I know from personal experience that it is nearly impossible for the average Canadian to break into the housing market with post-pandemic inflation affecting everyone harshly. Even if folks are able to obtain the exorbitant amount of money needed to purchase a home, many units remain out of reach. The Government of British Columbia (2023) recognizes that traditionally zoning rules in BC have led to the development of mostly condos and single-family homes, which a lot of people cannot afford. There is a huge shortage of much-needed affordable units being built and sold. This is also greatly slowed down by outdated zoning barriers and a swamp of bureaucratic regulations (Government of British Columbia [GBC], 2023).

The costs to build new projects have also become astronomical, inducing another barrier to affordability. Vance (2023) pinpoints that this is caused by the high purchase price of land, combined with soaring interest rates, construction labor, and materials. This has led to some building ventures being completely halted, or the high prices being passed onto the buyer (Vance, 2023).

Rental Market Crisis. There have been intense rent increases across the board in Canada, leading to negative consequences for many. British Columbia alone has experienced a 30 percent increase in rents in just the last five years (Azpiri, 2023). BC tops the charts with over a third of the province's renters paying an "unaffordable" rate, and 16 percent spending a "crisis-level" amount of more than half of their income on housing related costs (Azpiri, 2023; Griffiths, 2023). This puts a high number of folk's one paycheck away from losing their home. Those hit hardest by this are often households led by female-led or minority families (Azpiri, 2023). As Atkey bluntly puts it, "the rental crisis is worse here (in B.C.) than pretty much anywhere else in the country" (Griffiths, 2023, para. 3).

Not only are rental unit prices unattainable for most, but the quality of what some people are paying for does not match the price. Azpiri (2023) reports that 7 percent of BC renters live in units that are rundown and in need of repairs or renovations. A large portion of people in BC (11-24 percent) are forced to live in overcrowded housing arrangements to counteract the high prices of rental units (Azpiri, 2023).

With less buying power to purchase a home, the demand for affordable rentals has increased. However, an unregulated rental market persists that is monopolized by short-term rentals and "renovictions" (Feinberg, 2017; St. Denis, 2023). Places are being bought up by the few that can afford them, sometimes flipped, and then offered back to disadvantaged populations at enormous costs (St. Denis, 2023). It is quite evident that there needs to be more policy and funding put in place by the government for "purpose-built rental housing" (Azpiri, 2023).

Strain on Shelters. With owning or renting a home out of reach for so many; there has been a massive increase in the number of people accessing BC shelters (Duncombe, 2022). Sadly, it has become common practice for overcrowded shelters to have to turn away the vulnerable folks that need somewhere safe to stay (Duncombe, 2022). The numbers in 2021 show that shelters have to deny beds to an average of six people a night- a 45 percent increase from the year before (Duncombe, 2022). BC Housing admits that despite investments in more than 4,000 shelter spaces, they do not come close to meeting demand (Duncombe, 2022).

EXISTING SOLUTION EFFORTS

Modular Builds

There are several different approaches/responses to combat homelessness in BC. For instance, a Vancouver's modular housing program that began in 2017 was one of the responses to address the crisis (St. Denis, 2023). This project used city land or empty developer sites to erect high-quality yet cheap modular units very quickly (St Denis, 2023). These accessible units provided the dignity of independent bathrooms and kitchens, which are not usually an option in shelters or SRO rooms (St. Denis, 2023). Another bonus to this movement was that these temporary buildings did not have to endure the long public hearing process where they would come up against zoning laws and neighbor disapproval (St. Denis, 2023). They can also be moved relatively easily to new places and reused (St. Denis, 2023).

Tiny Homes

There have been villages of tiny homes popping up across the province, including several spots on the Island and soon Kelowna and Vancouver (Skrypnek, 2022; Strachan, 2023). These temporary communities are a great step in transitioning people from living rough on the streets or in tents into more permanent housing situations (Skrypnek, 2022). They are also a great alternative to scarce shelter spaces! The tiny home communities on the Island are single-person units made out of shipping containers, with shared washrooms and communal areas built around them (Skrypnek, 2022). They are put up on city or BC

Housing owned lots and supported by service providers 24 hours a day with meals, mental health and addiction resources, and employment opportunities (Skrypnek, 2022; Strachan, 2023).

Updated Legislation

The provincial government has recently updated zoning laws and building processes to allow for higher density builds to be put up faster (GBC, 2023; Vance, 2023). As well as cracking down on short-term rental regulations, that will hopefully open up more permanent rental units (Vance, 2023). The new zoning legislation will allow for a rental suite or laneway home to be built on any lot in BC, as well as maximizing the amount of units per lot size (GBC, 2023). To put this into action the provincial government will provide resources to municipalities to speed up approvals and waive some of the building fees (GBC, 2023). As part of BC's "Homes for People" action plan there will be more support for housing developments, transit-linked projects, and the necessary infrastructure and amenities to bolster this progress (GBC, 2023).

CASE STUDY: ISSUES OF HOMELESSNESS IN CHILLIWACK

Brunoro (2023) estimates that there are roughly 500 people experiencing homelessness in this city. This number is a 60 percent increase from 2020, and 204% increase from 2016 (Brunoro, 2023; Feinberg 2017). Of that 500, half were designated "chronically homeless" because they have been living in such conditions for over a year (Canadian Observatory on Homelessness [COH], 2021). 54% percent were "sheltered homeless" people; finding refuge from the elements in shelters, safe or transition houses, hospitals, vehicles or couch-surfing (COH, 2021). There was a distinct overrepresentation of youth (11%), Indigenous (38%) and 2SLGBTQ+ (15%) folks in these statistics (Brunoro, 2023; COH, 2021).

The COH shows that there is a vacancy rate of around 1.3 percent in Chilliwack, meaning units are few and far between (COH, 2021). Not only are they sparse, but rental units are overpriced in Chilliwack as well, with rents well exceeding the \$1,000 mark (COH, 2021). The seriousness of this discrepancy is exacerbated when comparing rental rates to monthly income assistance benefits of only \$935 (COH, 2021). Anyone living on welfare assistance or living alone have dangerously low incomes that do not allow for monthly mortgage or rental payments to be made (City of Chilliwack [COC], 2020; Clempson et al., 2023).

One of the community's shelters, Ruth and Naomi's Mission, runs consistently at capacity (Brunoro, 2023). I personally see and work with many individuals in Chilliwack who have no choice but to sleep out in the cold because zero shelter spaces are available. Ruth and Naomi's reports that more and more seniors and the working poor are accessing their services because they cannot find an affordable place to live (Brunoro, 2023). And that there has been an overspill of people from bigger or northern cities using Chilliwack shelters, that the local resources just don't have the ability to support (Brunoro, 2023).

EXAMINING RESPONSES TO THE CHALLENGES

Chilliwack Initiatives

Looking at the case study of Chilliwack, there have been many strides forward in the homelessness crisis. Chilliwack Healthier Communities holds monthly meetings of community partners that work on targeted issues such as the need for attainable housing (Feinberg, 2017). This committee has led to several fruitful endeavours including (COC, 2021; Clempson et al., 2023; Feinberg, 2017):

1. Chilliwack's "Housing First Task" team established in 2014 that pushed for no- or low-barrier housing and shelter options, which was unheard of in Chilliwack before this time.

2. The 2016 “Homelessness Action Plan” which has produced two modular buildings, the PCRS Housing Hub program, Ruth and Naomi’s Family Centre, MQHS affordable apartments, and supportive housing spots at places like Annis Residence or Interchange.
3. The “Housing Action Plan” allows Chilliwack to work alongside the province to create more affordable housing units and support existing renters.

A part of these initiatives was Chilliwack successfully applying for BC Housing’s Reaching Home funding in 2020 (COC, 2021; Clempson et al., 2023). The city received \$1.7 million that will be put towards shelter diversion, housing supports and small renovations over the next several years (COC, 2021; Clempson et al., 2023).

Gaps Identified/Implications of the Study

Lack of Housing

While it is great that housing strategies are finally being prioritized at all levels of government, it will be a slow process to see these actions come to fruition. As Vance (2023) states “introducing legislation is the easy part, the hard part will be the implementation.” It will still take years for units to be developed (Clempson et al., 2023), and even then will the builds match the pace of those in need of housing? There are also valid concerns from municipalities that their planning committees, infrastructure, and services will not be able to keep up with the increase in demand, and what that will look like regarding funding (Vance, 2023). However, there have been promises made by higher levels of government that these worries will be supported as needed (Vance, 2023).

Rental Market Crisis

Clempson and colleagues (2023) make note of an important point of contention that none of the federal or provincial moves around housing will help renters who are struggling currently. The initiatives mainly benefit housing development stakeholders, or people that have the advantage of already owning property (Clempson et al., 2023). Atkey is again the voice of advocacy, remarking “a quarter million renter households in British Columbia who are struggling to afford rent don’t need a new unit of housing. They need help affording their current rent” (Clempson et al., 2023; Griffiths, 2023). The under-regulated rental market (regarding both price and quality standards) should be just as much of a governmental concern as providing new builds (BC Housing, 2023; Clempson et al., 2023).

Strain on Shelters

Undoubtedly, more shelter spaces are not the answer to the homelessness epidemic. Dr. Naomi Nichols echoes this sentiment by highlighting that shelters are often dangerous in many ways, offer poor conditions, are chronically understaffed, and often do not have the space for people (Understanding Homelessness in Canada, 2022). Not only that, but also so many folks are “banned” from shelter services due to their escalated behavior, ingrained street survival skills, or unsupported mental health and addiction concerns (Understanding Homelessness in Canada, 2022). Here lies the many failings of our systems to address the social determinants of health.

Moving Forward: Next Steps

There is so much emphasis on the bureaucratic machine that really does not do much too actually help those that are street entrenched (Understanding Homelessness in Canada, 2022). Monies spent on these processes could instead be infused into more units and providing rent subsidies. These funds could also be used to put up tiny home communities in every city, including Chilliwack! As everyone deserves the dignity of having a home, no matter the size.

It would be nice to see designated tent cities in major metropolitan areas. That way the funding and manpower needed to continually dismantle camps and other methods of enforcement could be redirected to more positive and permanent housing solutions. This idea was explored by city council in Fredericton, New Brunswick, who pointed out that designated sites would allow cities to keep track of homeless individuals easier, thus helping them access services on a more consistent basis (Urquhart, 2021). It is also important to examine whether some street entrenched folks are ready for the structure of semi- or fully-independent housing. Providing a step in between homelessness and supportive housing might help these people better, adapt to the skills needed to live within the expectations of more permanent housing options.

There is room for growth and change regarding the issue of homelessness through all three categories of Rothman's Community Development Framework (CDF), locality development, social planning, and social action (Brown, 2022). The most obvious missing piece in this equation are the voices of those who are experiencing homelessness. Including these folks in the conversation follows along the lines of locality development, the most influential of Rothman's theory. Arbitrary shifts are being made that directly affect this vulnerable population's day-to-day survival. What do they want to see happen? Their perspectives would be critical in making meaningful change in this province's housing strategies. As described by Brown (2022) "people are capable of perceiving and judging the conditions of their lives". (P.41) The path forward should not be solely dictated by those who stand to make the most profit. Those experiencing or at risk of homelessness need to be elevated by community developers to have the biggest say on how this situation is dealt with.

Conversely, to this notion, Rothman's second stage of CDF, social planning, is another impactful tool to be harnessed when it comes to BC's housing crisis. The "technical process of problem-solving by experts on substantive social problems, such as housing" (Brown, 2022, p. 43) need to be implored here. Municipalities should be using skillful researchers and planners to decipher which housing projects would create the most benefit in a specific community depending on resource availability. Along with when and how these initiatives would be carried out.

The final stage of Rothman's model, social action, of course has a powerful place in resolving the challenges of the province's homelessness problems. As Brown (2022, p. 45) argued that it is essential to push back against the status quo for things to change in a positive way for those without a home. It has only been through the work of social 'agitators' that current changes have finally begun shifting things on the housing policy front (Brown, 2022).

In this phase, to continue pushing for those that are deeply street entrenched to be involved in housing programs, despite the barriers and protests, is critical. The most vulnerable cannot continue to be put on the back burner in this issue. There is so much more social action and work to be done to ensure the human right of safe shelter is given to every single person in this province.

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSION

This study has examined the challenge of homelessness in Canada, with a particular focus on Chilliwack, British Columbia. The findings reveal a trifecta of pressing issues shortage of affordable housing, a strained rental market, and overwhelmed shelters as driving forces of the crisis. Current responses, while well intentioned, require modifications to maximize their effectiveness.

The modular home projects in Vancouver continue to be shut down as they are not a "financially sensible option"- moving them to other sites costs more than anticipated (St. Denis, 2023). BC Housing is

still interested in using this model as a temporary solution to shelter those trapped in homelessness while more permanent solutions are worked out (St. Denis, 2023). St. Denis (2023) makes an important point that not all modular projects need to follow the supportive model; just building these units as rental suites would help boost the available housing stock.

It is astounding how well the tiny home communities are doing. Skrypnek (2022) notes that even locals that were originally opposed to the idea now see the benefits. In Duncan, the residents of the tiny home village report 100 percent improvement in their health and wellbeing, and almost 80 percent have obtained some kind of employment or training (Skrypnek, 2022). Although governments might view the initial investment in the homes and supports cost heavy, advocates of this model emphasize, “getting people off the street permanently is the money saver” (Skrypnek, 2022).

The provincial government is quite optimistic about the impacts their new zoning and building process regulations will have on the housing crisis. The GBC (2023) compared their work to similar measures that were employed in New Zealand several years ago that had impressive results. It is predicted that there will be more than 130, 000 obtainable housing units built across the province over the next decade (GBC, 2023).

While innovative approaches like modular housing and tiny homes offer immediate relief, emphasizing the construction of more affordable units and implementing rent subsidies to address the underlying issues would offer a more sustainable long-term approach.

Of paramount importance, are the genuine voices of those experiencing homelessness. Individuals directly affected by homelessness possess valuable insights that should be central to crafting solutions. Amplifying their voices and partnering with them will ensure programs are not just well-intentioned but truly cater to their needs.

Overall, in the case of Chilliwack, it is critical to leverage social planning expertise to conduct needs assessments and customize housing initiatives to their specific circumstance. This data-driven approach, combined with the insights from those experiencing homelessness, can lead to a more effective and empathetic response to this pressing social issue. By giving precedence to these recommendations and the implications as discussed earlier, Chilliwack and other cities in Canada can move towards a future where everyone has access to safe and secure housing.

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