

COVID AND HOMELESSNESS

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Overview

- Homelessness developments during COVID.
- What might still happen?
- What could still be done?

What's happened so far?

- Increased physical distancing.
- Large numbers of hotel rooms have been secured, especially in the larger cities.
- Some persons experiencing homelessness are still being housed (as they were before the pandemic).

What's happened so far (cont'd)?

- New physical distancing norms may be here indefinitely.
- This varies by city.
- Most emergency shelters in Calgary and Edmonton have not been complying with a two-metre requirement.

Lingering challenges

- Congregate living continues.
- Outdoor sleeping (though we don't count it well).
- Shared bathrooms and other common areas
- Costs of cleaning associated w these shared spaces.

Lingering challenges (cont'd)

- Still very little cooperation from corrections sector.
- New homelessness created by the economic downturn.

Costs

- The Government of Canada (GoC) announced \$157.5M in one-time funding for Reaching Home in March 2020 (Reaching Home is the federal government's main funding vehicle for homelessness).
- In September 2020, the GoC announced an additional \$236.7M for Reaching Home, along with \$1B for modular housing, the acquisition of land, and the conversion of existing buildings into affordable housing.

Innovations

- A technological innovation worthy of attention is the City of Ottawa's new GIS mapping system, used to both identify encampments and keep case notes pertaining to encampment residents (in order to provide better services).

Improved partnerships

- The pandemic has allowed partnerships btw the health & homelessness sectors to flourish.
- For ex., a larger share of Toronto's emergency facilities are seeing primary health care—i.e., service provision by family physicians and nurses—provided on site.
- Some Toronto shelters are also seeing pharmacists keep regular hours on site.

Improved partnerships (cont'd)

- Some Calgary shelters have seen a substantial increase in the use of licensed practical nurses and paramedics on site.
- Total nursing positions at the Calgary Drop-In have increased from 2.0 FTEs to 17.0 FTEs during the pandemic.

Improved partnerships (cont'd)

- There have been very positive examples of Indigenous-led partnerships.
- An Indigenous-led vaccine clinic in Calgary, which includes the onsite presence of Elders, is worthy of attention.
- And Indigenous-led testing and vaccine clinics in Winnipeg has been well-received.

Harm reduction innovations

- “Harm reduction” in this context refers to a deliberate approach to reduce harms associated with drug and alcohol use, without necessarily requiring total abstinence.

Harm reduction innovations (cont'd)

- In Ottawa, supervised consumption services and a safe supply of cannabis are both offered at an isolation site designated for persons experiencing homelessness.
- Territorial officials in Yellowknife have distributed alcohol at the city's isolation centre for persons experiencing homelessness.

Eviction prevention

- Several cities have expanded eviction prevention programs during the pandemic.
- This has involved short-term \$ to pay a variety of costs allowing households at risk of homelessness to either remain housed or to get rehoused quickly.

Eviction prevention (cont'd)

- Such costs can typically include rental arrears, utility arrears, first month's rent, the securing of damage deposits and moving costs.
- While the initiatives themselves are not new, the pandemic has given officials reason to use increase funding in order to expand their use.

Rapid Housing Initiative

- The Rapid Housing Initiative (RHI) has generally benefitted homelessness system planning.
- This federal initiative provides funding for modular housing, the acquisition of land, the conversion of existing buildings into affordable housing, and the reclamation of closed or derelict properties.

Rapid Housing Initiative (cont'd)

- Supported projects are housing both persons currently experiencing homelessness and persons at risk of experiencing homelessness.
- Many projects are still awaiting word on whether their respective provincial government will provide operating dollars, which will in turn determine what kinds of social work (i.e., 'wraparound') support can be provided, and which specific households can be accommodated.

Rapid Housing Initiative (cont'd)

- The RHI is viewed as being the best federal housing initiative right now to target chronic homelessness.
- Also, during the recent election campaign, the Liberals promised to double funding for the initiative.

Will there be new homelessness?

- With statistical analysis looking at determinants of homelessness, the relationship btw unemployment & homelessness is rarely found to have statical significance.
- Most of that research has been done in the US.
- Also, much of this research has been cross sectional.

Will there be new homelessness?

- I think there's a lag effect of 3-5 years from the time of a recession to a rise in homelessness (and this may help explain the lag of a relationship found in previous research).
- Let's discuss the lag effect.

Will there be new homelessness (cont'd)?

- A household may try to arrange a rental arrears plan with their landlord.
- They may also borrow money from family and friends.
- They may try to move into cheaper housing as well, or move in with family or friends.

Will there be new homelessness (cont'd)?

- The lag effect also stems from Canada's elaborate social welfare system.
- For example, EI (& more recently CERB) can cushion the blow from job loss and help households hang on to their housing.
- Social assistance, while not as generous, can also delay homelessness onset.

Will there be new homelessness (cont'd)?

- This lag effect means there's time for senior orders of government to plan homelessness prevention initiatives.
- Since it could be a few years before we see rising homelessness in some communities, there's time for preventive measures to be designed and implemented.
- Those measures could target households either at risk of becoming homeless or that have just become homeless.

Will there be new homelessness (cont'd)?

- We do know that, for example, that the following types of workers in Canada have been most directly affected by the COVID-19 Recession: young people, women, nonmarried persons, and persons without high school accreditation.

How to prevent new homelessness

- I've previously recommended that Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) track various indicators.
- For ex.: the % of Canadians falling below the MBM (and especially those falling below 75% of the Market Basket Measure); median rent levels; the rental vacancy rate; the % of households with extreme shelter cost burdens; evictions; & average nightly occupancy in emergency shelters.

How to prevent new homelessness (cont'd)

- As much as possible, such tracking should emphasize both how these indicators have changed since the start of the pandemic, and how this change varies across both geographical areas and specific populations (e.g., women, youth, Indigenous peoples, etc.).
- I've also recommended that the federal government enhance the Canada Housing Benefit (CHB).

How to prevent new homelessness (cont'd)

- I've also recommended that the federal government take a soft approach to recovering CERB overpayments from social assistance recipients.
- There was confusion as CERB was being rolled out.
- Maybe don't try to fully recover the value of the CERB from these individuals (via the tax system).
- Complete amnesty could be considered in some cases.

How to prevent new homelessness (cont'd)

- I've further recommended that ESDC introduce a new funding stream for Reaching Home (i.e., the federal government's main funding vehicle for homelessness).
- The US did something similar after the 2008-09 Recession.
- A new prevention stream could focus on time-limited \$ directed at households at risk of becoming homeless, are in the process of losing their housing, or who have just begun to experience homelessness.

How to prevent new homelessness (cont'd)

- Provincial and territorial governments could also do things to prevent new homelessness.
- They could increase social assistance benefit levels.
- They reinstate social assistance eligibility for recipients who became ineligible due to the CERB.

Summary

- Many homelessness officials have done good work during the pandemic.
- A visible rise in outdoor sleeping is cause for concern.
- We may see more homelessness stemming from the economic crisis.
- There's lots that can be done to prevent that.

Thank you

- I've written three reports about COVID and homelessness.
- If you'd like me share them with you, please reach out to me at falvo.nicholas@gmail.com.