PUBLISHED JULY 2023

EVIDENCE BRIEF

The **Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council** in collaboration with **Employment and Social Development Canada**

SSHRC's Imagining Canada's Future initiative mobilizes social sciences and humanities research to address emerging economic, societal and knowledge needs for Canada, and help guide decision making across all sectors, toward a better future. This evidence brief addresses the Future Challenge Area of: **The Emerging Asocial Society.**

Approaches to social inclusion, community resilience and homelessness in the context of emerging asocial societies

About the project

The NIMBY (not in my backyard) narrative poses a significant barrier for all orders of government, especially municipalities, as well as homeless service organizations in adopting and implementing services and housing programs geared toward people who are homeless, precariously housed or living in poverty. NIMBYism is defined as an opposition to proposed infrastructure, services and the people who occupy those spaces. The backlash to encampments that emerged as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic is an example of this exclusionary discourse and strategies to displace unhoused or precariously housed people. Conversely, the YIMBY (yes in my backyard) movement centres on welcoming investment in equitable housing projects and promotes the inclusion of underserved groups in spatial organization and design.

This knowledge synthesis fills two gaps. First, it offers a prospectus of existing literatures on homelessness-related NIMBYism that shed light on the challenges communities face when attempting to support people who are homeless or precariously housed, as well as assess pragmatic ways communities resist this social exclusion. These literatures are drawn from peer-reviewed texts in sociology, criminology and public health, as well as grey literatures from governmental reports and community organizations in Canada and other English-speaking countries. Second, this knowledge synthesis project identifies key literature gaps and offers a comprehensive summary of strategies that address social exclusion and promote community resilience.

Key findings

- NIMBYism's core beliefs are generally attributed to 1) the perceived preservation of property values among property owners; 2) an unwillingness or disinterest in fostering diversity or change within communities (e.g., preservation of existing community character); and 3) a perception that spaces geared toward people who have experienced homelessness or who are living in poverty contribute to increased crime.

- People who espouse NIMBY rhetoric often frame "unwanted" buildings or social services as violating their quality of life or as an infringement to their "right to property" and tend to promote the use of law enforcement to remove people they deem undesirable from public view.

- Governments and politicians engage in NIMBYism by prioritizing NIMBY constituents' perspectives, engaging in divisive politics that reaffirm harmful practices such as the criminalization of poverty and homelessness, using exclusionary zoning laws to prevent the building and operation of much-needed social services (i.e., shelters, transitional housing and harm reduction services) and condoning encampment evictions.

- Developing programs that encourage shared experiences between housed and unhoused residents can create a sense of community through emotional connection (e.g., shared community gardens, collaborative music programs, etc.) and empathy-building, and can strengthen feelings of belonging and resilience among housed and unhoused people.

- Existing literature overlooks the ways NIMBYism serves to reinforce the preservation of predominantly white, middle-class communities. A gap exists in exploring how exclusionary attitudes systematically entrench unequal power dynamics along the intersections of race, class, gender and (dis)ability and how they reaffirm the logics of land dispossession that are central to colonialism.

- There is a dearth of research on the role municipalities can play in fostering YIMBY narratives and challenging NIMBYism. Future studies should investigate 1) how municipal governments collect and evaluate community input; 2) whose voices are omitted; and 3) how key decision makers assess competing stakeholder groups' perspectives through the lens of equity and in light of the legislated obligation to uphold the right to housing for all.

- The literature on NIMBYism focuses predominantly on contestations to buildings or services geared toward people who are homeless. Future research should consider the myriad forms of NIMBYism, including the ways people—and not only buildings or programs—are subject to exclusionary rhetoric and practices.

- The current literature on community resilience focuses largely on emergency preparedness and first responses in the aftermath of natural disasters. Few studies map the ways communities cope with adversity in the face of chronic crises such as homelessness.

Policy implications

1. Municipalities, with the financial and programmatic support of the other orders of government, should promote inclusive communities, including by funding programs that have a YIMBY mandate; refrain from engaging in or condoning NIMBYism; and uphold the right to housing that is enshrined in the National Housing Strategy.

2. Politicians within all orders of government and service organizations that face opposition should respond to NIMBYism with a clear policy framework for addressing homelessness or affordable housing shortages. Acknowledging and addressing specific concerns will allow organizations and agencies to outline detailed ways they will respond to those concerns while ensuring housing and supports to people who are homeless move forward.

3. All decision-making bodies, both governmental and organizational, must ensure that lived-experience experts have a meaningful role in the decision-making processes regarding services and supports meant for them. This can promote community resilience and ensure policies are equitable and intersectional in nature. Decision-making bodies need to capture the full breadth of who their community members are—including people who are homeless, who have low income and who are seldom heard during the planning and development stages of community projects.

CONTACT THE RESEARCHERS

Marcus A. Sibley, Lead Investigator, postdoctoral fellow, Wilfrid Laurier University; msibley@wlu.ca

Danielle Thompson, research assistant, University of Waterloo; d37thompson@uwaterloo.ca

Natasha Martino, research assistant, McMaster University; martinon@mcmaster.ca

Erin Dej, assistant professor, Wilfrid Laurier University; edej@wlu.ca

Samantha Henderson, project coordinator, Wilfrid Laurier University; sahenderson@wlu.ca

Jason Webb, postdoctoral fellow, Wilfrid Laurier University; jawebb@wlu.ca

Carrie Sanders, professor, Wilfrid Laurier University; csanders@wlu.ca

FURTHER INFORMATION

▷ **Read the full report**