

Understanding Homelessness



Perspectives from 3 Mid-Sized Cities in Ontario

COMMUNITY MEMBERS WE TALKED TO:

People experiencing homelessness,
Service providers,
Business and Community Organizations,
Fire Department,
Police officers and
Bylaw officers.

COMMUNITY MEMBERS WE TALKED TO:	Total number (n = 86)
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People with lived experience of homelessness	29
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Service providers	10
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Business and Community Organizations	24
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Fire Department	3
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Police officers	11
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Bylaw officers	9
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Background

Visible homelessness in mid-sized cities (pop. 50,000 - 500,000) is a relatively new problem. Misconceptions about homelessness have led to divided opinions about how to address homelessness and the general public's feelings of unsafety. This research explores how different community members make sense of the issues underlying homelessness in their mid-sized cities.

What We Did

We interviewed **86 people** across three cities in southern Ontario. We asked about what they thought of their community, interactions with other actors, daily challenges they experience, and their views on the issue of homelessness.



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Here's what we have learned so far...

People experiencing homelessness feel marginalized in communities that otherwise pride themselves on taking care of one another.

Communities have invested in "disciplinary" processes, such as complaint-driven responses to encampments and private security companies. These processes create a cycle of displacement for people instead of long-term solutions:

Many community members perpetuate stigma even if they mean well: For example, online groups that were intended to foster safety have become spaces that breed hostility toward people experiencing homelessness.

"There are different security companies around here now. You can't do anything. You're stopped and they're like 'move along,' right? It's freezing cold and in the middle of the night sometimes. No, I'm not bothering anybody. But [private security] tells me I have to leave because they will call [police]"

- Person Experiencing Homelessness

"It's a little concerning with the amount of people that are actively hunting just looking for these people to try to report them and get them out."

- Law Enforcement Officer



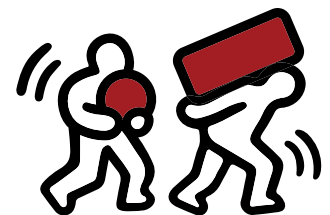
Communities need different first responders.

Many communities rely on law enforcement as first responders because there aren't always appropriate resources available in mid-sized cities for specific situations:

Some communities are finding success in public health supports to address the opioid overdose crisis, as opposed to law enforcement. This demonstrates that non-traditional response options can fill an important void in the current response system.

"They're getting paid to help the people, not put them in worse situations. But other than that, they're not social workers, they're not psychologists, they're police officers."

- Person Experiencing Homelessness



Here's what we have learned so far...

We Need Responses that Build Community Resilience.

Contrary to popular belief, people experiencing homelessness are much more likely to be residents who have lived in an area for a long time, rather than people relocating from other cities.

Over 3 in 4
are locals.

Across the three cities, an average of 76% of people who are homeless had lived in the city for 5 years or more.

COMMUNITY RESILIENCE - harmony, a sense of belonging and ability to get along - is built through the inclusion of all community members, including people who are vulnerable, marginalized, and underserved.

It is in the best interest of all community members to invest in structural solutions rather than only individual responses:



"I think the biggest problem with everything that's going on right now is everybody is so focused on being an individual and meeting their needs and living their life and doing things on their terms... we've lost a sense of compassion. We only look out for ourselves, and nobody else... Homeless people are not disposable. They all have stories, they all have circumstances that caused them to be there. And if you just stop looking at them like a disease and cared enough to help, maybe we could [help]."

- Business Owner

Misunderstandings about person-first approaches, (e.g., consumption and treatment sites and Housing First) can lead to people opposing supports with long-term benefits. However, communities finding the most success are those that have focused on building strong connections between community members.

So What's Next?

This research highlights pressure points among community stakeholders about the issue of homelessness in their communities. To learn what practical steps we can take to address this issue, check out the [**NIMBY to Neighbour**](#) series on the Homeless Hub.