

The Invisibility Trap

The Paradoxical Effect of Making Homelessness Invisible



From NIMBY to Neighbour Research Team, 2025



Illustrations by Emma Richard

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Overview

THE PROJECT

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, with the ultimate goal of helping to reveal points of disagreement regarding perceptions of homelessness and identify where there are perceptions that are susceptible to change in order to bring people together and foster community resiliency and a sense of community belonging writ large.



THE OBJECTIVES



To uncover perceptions of homelessness in mid-size cities among different social groups



To support the cities of Brantford and Cambridge, and the County of Wellington to address the unique challenges their communities face



To engage with members of disparate groups to have a respectful exchange with the aim of fostering empathy and community resiliency

WHO WE ARE

The Cities of Brantford and Cambridge are located on the shared traditional territory of the Neutral, Anishnaabe and Haudenosaunee peoples. The County of Wellington is located within the Between the Lakes Purchase, the treaty and territory of Mississaugas of the Credit.

We are a team of researchers and lived experts who live, work, and play in these communities and who share a passion for meaningfully addressing homelessness in a way that supports dignity and care for all.

Erin Dej, Co-lead
Carrie Sanders, Co-lead
Ryan Broll
Jessica Braimoh
Steph Howells
Bill O'Grady
James Popham
Marcus Sibley

Deborah Hill, Peer research team member
Simon Lanza, Peer research team member
Barb McPhee, Peer research team member

With support from:
Jason Webb
Alex Abramovich

Overview

WHAT WE DID



From Roots to Home

Led by the Peer Research Team, From Roots to Home is an image and corresponding story of the journey from homelessness to housed. It has been featured in a podcast, academic journal, on postcards, and t-shirts.

Environmental Scan

We created a snapshot of existing planning documents related to housing and homelessness in municipalities across Ontario.



Media Analysis

We investigated news stories and social media posts in the three case study cities to understand how narratives around homelessness are represented.

Interviews

We interviewed 86 community members, including people experiencing homelessness, service providers, business owners, community organization members, law enforcement, and first responders. We asked participants what they thought of their community, interactions with other actors, daily challenges they experience, and their views on the issue of homelessness.



Bridging Divides Documentary

Using a Brokered Dialogue design, the documentary provides participants with different perspectives on homelessness to share with each other and learn from one another, with the aim of finding common ground among them.

KEY FINDINGS

The series of research tasks led us to a clear overarching conclusion:

Many of the policies, programs, and initiatives to respond to homelessness in mid-size cities have the underlying goal of ***invisibilizing homelessness***. However, by working to make homelessness invisible, most of these activities, paradoxically, make the situation ***more visible*** to the public, further entrenching people in homelessness, and increasing distress, poor health, and substance use challenges, which can ultimately lead to death.

The remainder of this document identifies ***5 paradoxes***, where efforts to invisibilize homelessness render it more visible. For each paradox, we provide solutions that address specific concerns members of the public may have that do not result in unhoused people being caught in this invisibility trap. Implementing the solutions should include proper evaluation and feedback loops to assess their impact on people who are homeless and the community at large.

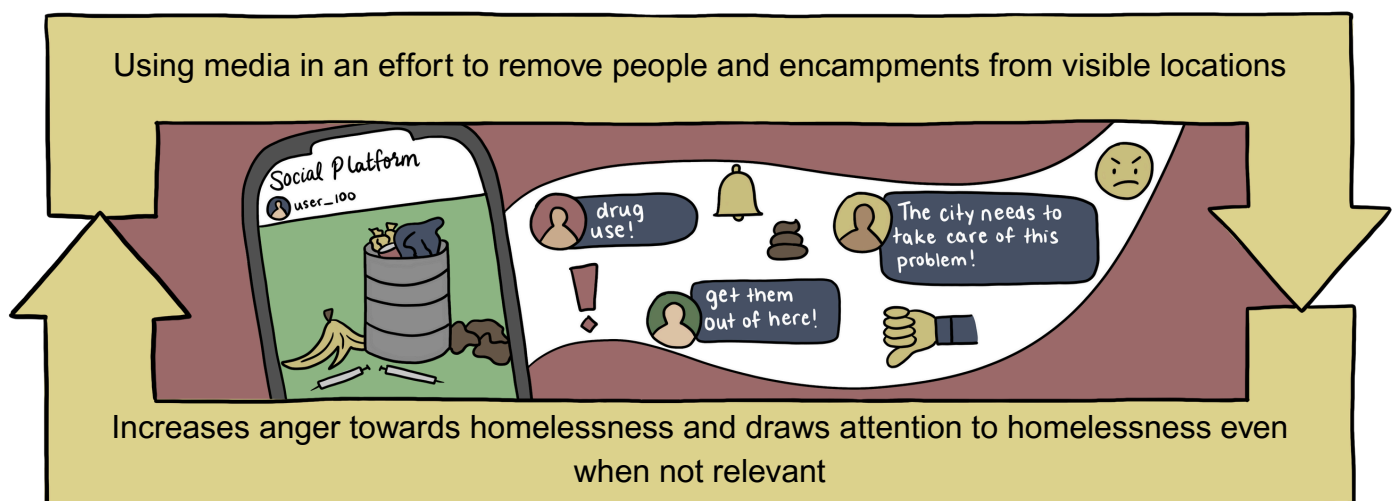
Toxic Media

INTRODUCTION

Social media posts that seek to remove homelessness from their community tend to hyperfocus on and sensationalize homelessness (or issues irrelevant to homelessness but that are framed as such), such as visible garbage, syringes, and encampments. This hyperfocus makes homelessness more visible by encouraging people to notice and file complaints about unhoused people, and brings homelessness into conversations where it is not relevant. It increases the community's negative narrative concerning homelessness.



THE PARADOX



EXAMPLE



Local news headlines and social media posts identify encampments and people who are homeless as ruining tourism in their mid-size city. This has the effect of turning the attention onto homelessness in a negative way, where people who are homeless are positioned as the problem, rather than the homelessness crisis itself. It keeps the focus on homelessness and thus dissuades residents and potential tourists from venturing downtown and fails to acknowledge other factors, such as the rise in costs of living, increase in online shopping, and the long-term economic impact of the pandemic.

SOLUTIONS

Educate Ourselves:

Learn more about the root causes of homelessness, the state of the crisis, and the opportunities to support long-term systemic change. See [a collection of informational resources here](#).

Shape the Narrative:

Municipalities should invest in awareness and education materials that support sharing verified facts about homelessness and the stories of people with lived experience of homelessness.

Nowhere To Go

INTRODUCTION

Active resistance to building supports for unhoused people (e.g., warming/cooling stations, drop-in centres, emergency shelters, supportive housing) because of concern that they will encourage people who are homeless to come to or stay in a community has resulted in insufficient buildings and spaces where people experiencing homelessness are allowed and welcome to be. With nowhere to go, people experiencing homelessness become more visible in spaces across the community, particularly the downtown core in mid-size cities.



THE PARADOX



EXAMPLE



In an effort to respond to the housing crisis, a not-for-profit seeks to buy land to create a supportive housing building. Neighbours successfully fight against the development, citing traffic concerns, a change to the neighbourhood aesthetic, and fears over safety. Unhoused people who were identified as potential residents remain in the shelter, which they must leave from 7am-7pm everyday. With nowhere to go, they spend the day walking through downtown and seek refuge from the weather in local coffee shops, restaurants, and stores.

SOLUTIONS

Government Investment in Short and Long Term Responses:

All orders of government must create immediate actionable plans to increase social and supportive housing stock. In the meantime, provide 24 hour drop-in spaces for people to rest, find community, and have a welcoming space to spend time in.

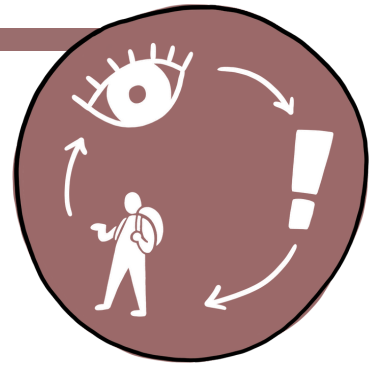
Implement a Feedback Loop:

Neighbours can share their specific concerns with organizations to create a community that grows together and learns from each other.

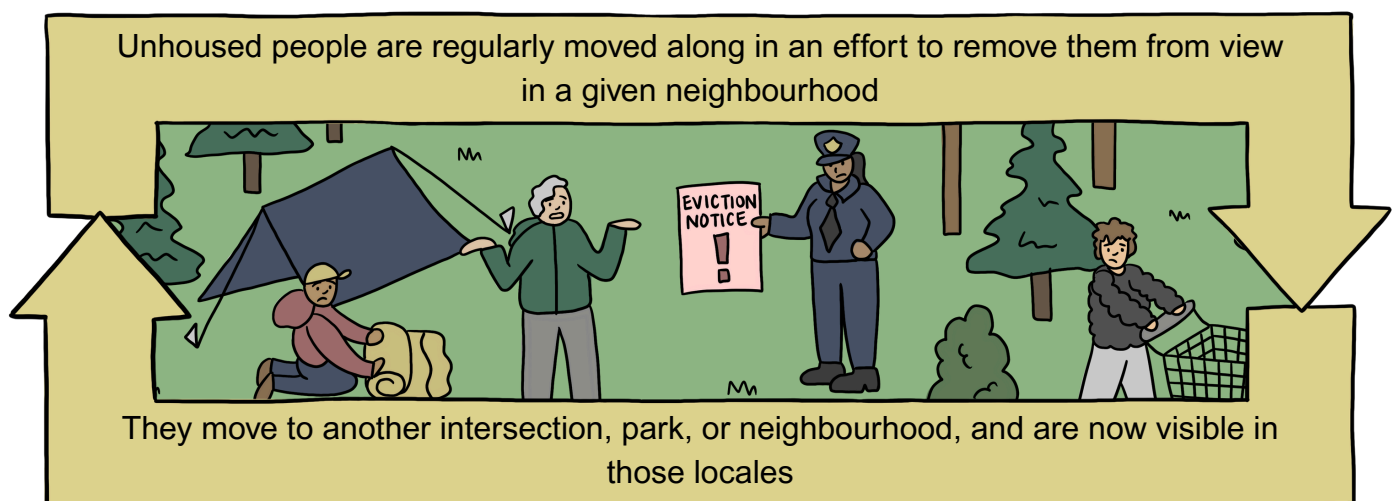
Moving Them Along

INTRODUCTION

The increased visible presence of people experiencing homelessness in public spaces has fostered a cycle of complaints among community members, who report sightings of unhoused people to local law enforcement with the expectation that they be displaced from that neighbourhood. With nowhere else to go, many unhoused people move to another part of the community, becoming visible to those neighbours, who also call in complaints. Law enforcement described this never-ending cycle as a game of whack-a-mole. At the same time, the constant movement and disruption makes it difficult for unhoused people to connect with services, keep important belongings (e.g., ID, medication), and can further prolong homelessness.



THE PARADOX



EXAMPLE



Someone experiencing unsheltered homelessness pitches a tent in a field off the highway, including a blue tarp to shield them from the hot summer sun. Neighbours of a nearby suburb can see the blue tarp from their upstairs windows and call bylaw to complain. Bylaw provides the unhoused person with 48 hours to pack up their belongings, and lets them know of a church offering dinner twice a week. The resident finds a corner of a large carpool lot to set up their tent, but commuters call bylaw and they are required to move again. With nowhere else to go, they head back to the original field they know.

SOLUTIONS

Municipalities Should Take a Human Rights Approach to Encampments:

Use the National Protocol to respond to encampments to foster long-term success for unhoused people and neighbourhoods. See [the Protocol for Homeless Encampments in Canada](#).

Programs and Services Must be Able to Meet People Where They're At:

Recognize the barriers people may face to accessing emergency shelter, ensure basic needs are met while making long-term housing plans.

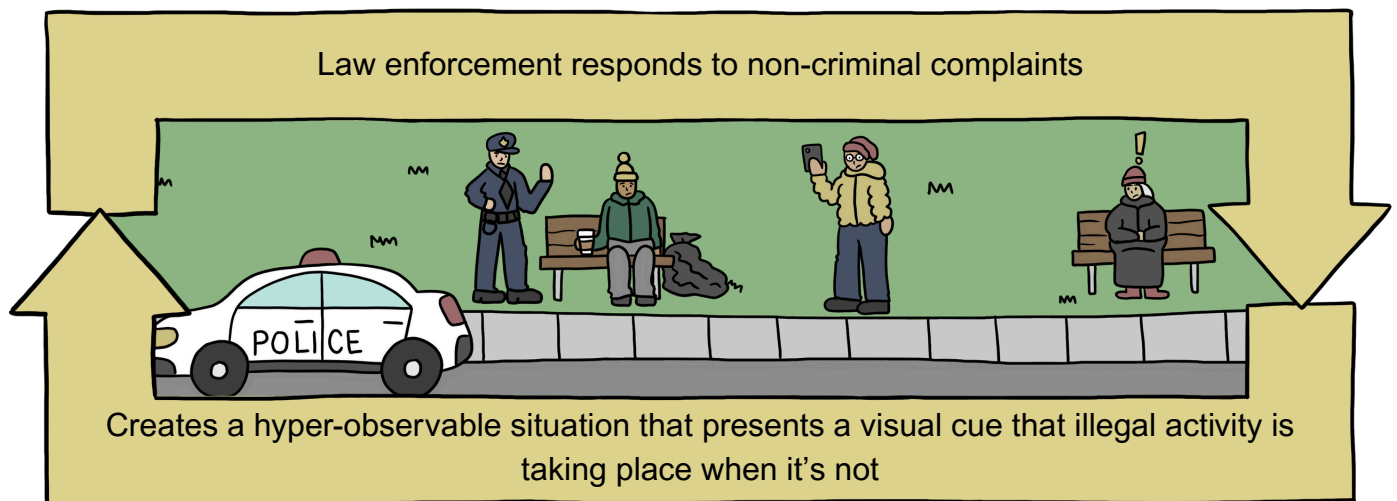
Over-Regulation and Control

INTRODUCTION

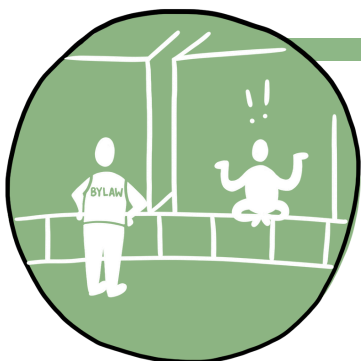
Community complaints about non-criminal issues (e.g., a tent visible from a hiking trail, unhoused people spending time in the park, walking through a neighbourhood) triggers a law enforcement response (including police, private security, bylaw, and emergency responders). The presence of people in uniform and in cruisers to respond to non-criminal activity creates the impression that people who are homeless are engaging in criminal activity, even when that is not the case.



THE PARADOX



EXAMPLE



Someone sees an unhoused person sitting on the sidewalk outside a business. They call the police to have the person moved, who directs the call to bylaw. A bylaw cruiser arrives at the scene and two uniformed bylaw officers approach. The unhoused person does not know the difference between a bylaw and police uniform and becomes anxious. The person is agitated, causing onlookers to notice the unhoused person and equate the area with homelessness and crime.

SOLUTIONS

Support Permanent Outreach Programs:

Outreach workers from not-for-profit organizations build trusting relationships with people who are homeless, can de-escalate and support people, and connect them with services.

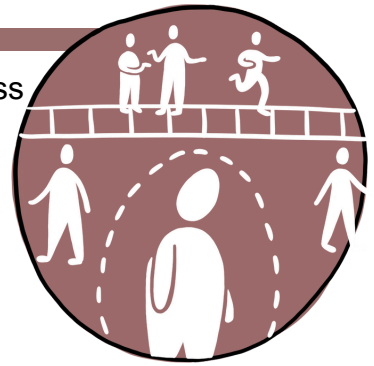
Government Investment in a Continuum of Care:

People require different supports to exit homelessness. Offering a range of services can significantly reduce the need for an enforcement response.

Exclusion and Social Isolation

INTRODUCTION

The outcome of the above paradoxes – the push to invisibilize homelessness by moving people along, combined with a lack of systematic responses, supports, and spaces of belonging – has left people experiencing homelessness to be and feel more visible, isolated, and stigmatized. The distress many people who are homeless feel, and the lack of dignity many experience when interacting with other community members, further entrenches homelessness, making it difficult to find hope that their circumstances can change. With resistance to building and resourcing programs to support the homeless population, people are more easily identified as homeless, for example, if they have limited access to sanitation facilities or if they have no place to leave their belongings and have to carry them wherever they go.



THE PARADOX



EXAMPLE



Someone has experienced homelessness for 12 months. Too ashamed to reach out to family or friends, they are sleeping in their car, moving to different parking lots each night. Despite their efforts, they cannot find an affordable place to rent and their mental health is suffering. Without access to shower facilities or laundry, they have become more visibly homeless and have been kicked out of several grocery stores when trying to buy basic necessities.

SOLUTIONS

Learn About What You Can Do to Help:

Think about what steps you can take to build a more inclusive community and the negative implications of stigmatizing people who are homeless. See [the Hello, Friend infographic for ideas on how you can help](#).

Governments Have a Responsibility to Provide Basic Needs:

Ensure unhoused people have access to sanitation facilities, a place to store their belongings, and spaces of community belonging.