

Improving Services to Families Experiencing Homelessness

Understanding how Children's Services and the Non-Profit Sector can Improve Collaboration

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1 Introduction

For the 2021/2022 school year, I, a fourth-year psychology student at Mount Royal University, was given the opportunity to join the Institute for Community Prosperity at Mount Royal University's Catamount Fellowship. The Catamount Fellowship is a research and community-based program that gives a select group of students the ability to explore a community issue with the collaboration of a local organization. The goal of this fellowship is to help students foster and develop a greater understanding towards systems-level thinking and to better comprehend how various structures influence these issues. In addition, this program gives students an opportunity to put changemaking into action and embody what it means to be a changemaker within their community.

For my community issue, I was partnered with Trellis, a non-profit organization in Calgary that focuses on providing social services for children, youth and families. Trellis was created in 2020 and is an amalgamation of the Aspen Family and Community Network Society and the Boys and Girls Club of Calgary. Some of the services that Trellis provides are housing services that support families experiencing homelessness. One event that may occur for families experiencing homelessness is Children's Services involvement. Children's Services is a system that focuses on providing social services, intervention, and support for children and youth. During the 2020/2021-year, Trellis identified that 60% of the families they helped had Children's Services involvement (Trellis Society, n.d.). Of those families with Children's Services involvement, Trellis saw 60% of those children being apprehended from care (Trellis Society, n.d.). As a result, my community issue aimed to explore the intersection between families experiencing homelessness and their involvement with Children's Services. The purpose of my community issue is to better understand the barriers that these families face, especially when they are involved within both systems and to help identify strategies that aim to keep families together.

With collaboration from Trellis, under the guidance of Jocelyn Adamo, as well as my faculty mentor from Mount Royal University, Harpreet Aulakh, I was able to create and develop this report that explores the systems and relationships between families experiencing homelessness and their involvement with Children's Services. This report's objective is to explore the question of **"how might Children Services and the non-profit sector improve collaboration in order to better serve families experiencing homelessness?"**

THE PRECARIOUS HOUSING “ICEBERG”

Visible homeless: 150,000 - 300,000

Overcrowded: 705,165 h/hs

Substandard housing:
1.3 million h/hs

Core housing need:
1.5 million h/hs

Inadequate housing: 2 million h/hs
(minor repairs)

Annual housing supply deficit:
220,000 h/hs

Unaffordable housing: 3.1 million h/hs
(paying - 30%)

(Raising the Roof, 2016)

2 Family Homelessness

The issue of family homelessness is a unique, wicked, and traumatic event for many individuals. Oftentimes, there is a spectrum of homelessness, with each individual or /family experiencing it at varying degrees, depending on their circumstances. Families experiencing homelessness are often a part of the hidden homelessness phenomenon, where families struggle to secure and maintain stable housing and are forced to stay with family, friends or in shelters (Raising the Roof, 2016).

Families are one of the fastest growing demographics to experience homelessness in Canada (Paradis, 2016). A State of Homelessness in Canada (2013) report described how homeless families “accounted for 4% of all shelter stays but used 14% of total bed nights.” In addition, the Child and Family Homelessness report (2016) stated that families experiencing homelessness remained in shelters three times longer

than other individuals experiencing homelessness.

With the shelter stay of families increasing, many non-profit organizations are faced with the stress of trying to serve the needs of families. Based on the State of Homelessness in Canada (2013) report families who are experiencing homelessness can be categorized in the following categories: unsheltered, staying in emergency shelters, staying in violence against women shelters and provisionally accommodated. This demonstrates the variety of circumstances in which homelessness can be exemplified.

The precarious housing iceberg (see image above) highlights the spectrum of homelessness and the depths in which the issue of homelessness can go.

2.1 Interaction with Children's Services



Oftentimes, when a family experiences homelessness, it is common for there to be Children's Services involvement. However, the implications for this involvement can have lifelong consequences on the children and families they serve. One issue is the role that Children's Services plays in promoting a cycle of homelessness. Research has reported that **"73.3% of youth who become homeless before the age of 16 reported [some] involvement with child protection services"** (Nichols et al., 2017, p. 2).

Interactions with Children's Services can ultimately lead to the apprehension of children and youth from the care of their parents or guardians. A traumatic event such as this can have negative consequences on the child/ youth's social, emotional and physical well-being, as a result of dealing with more than one adverse childhood experience (ACE). **Nichols et al. (2017) identified that "63.1% of youth [in Canada] who are homeless report childhood trauma, abuse and/or neglect – a key cause of involvement with child welfare [services]"** (p. 2). These findings on youth homelessness suggest that Children's Services involvement can be positively correlated to a cycle of youth and adult homelessness.

As a result, Children's Services involvement can leave lasting impacts on the family and individuals involved. While this is only one aspect of the interaction of Children's Services on families experiencing homelessness, there are many more implications within the interaction of these two systems.

It is important to note that both Children's Services and the cycle of homelessness, specifically in this report's case, family homelessness are both systems that have a reciprocal relationship with one another. However, both of these systems work in silos. As a result, both of these structures feed individuals into each other's system. The objectives of this report is to spark interest and inquiry between the relationships of these two systems and to identify areas in which improved collaboration and changemaking can occur.

3 Causes of Homelessness

Macro-level Causes (systemic)

- Structural forces that influence government policies and institutions within our society.

Micro-level Causes (personal)

- Based on individual circumstances and can include unemployment, addiction, mental illness, domestic violence and etc.
- The UNNS (2001) describes how micro-level causes of homelessness are a result of the effects and influences of macro-level forces (as cited in Baskin, 2007).
- In Alberta, the top three causes of homelessness can be attributed to addiction and substance abuse, job loss and poverty (Turner Strategies, 2018).
- Moreover, within Calgary, Turner et al. (2018) identified that the primary driving force behind family homelessness can be primarily attributed to poverty and lack of income.

The next two subsections will explore the influences of macro-level influences, such as government policies and the history of colonialism as causes of homelessness.

3.1 Economic and Government Policies

Economic and government policies are a part of the macro-level cause of homelessness. Paradis (2016) identified how neoliberalism ideology, deregulation of government and privatization of corporations, and decreased funding for social programs are some of the structural forces that lead to inequality and poverty, ultimately resulting in homelessness. Moreover, the deregulation of government has led to decreased funding in subsidized housing, therefore increasing the barriers for low-income families to obtain secure housing (Paradis, 2016). Additionally, the increase of privatization and foreign real estate investors have resulted in increased housing prices, leading to a lack of affordable housing for many Canadians (Paradis, 2016).

As of 2022, Canadians are currently undergoing a major housing crisis and the dream of affording housing becomes less attainable.

3.2 Influence of Colonization

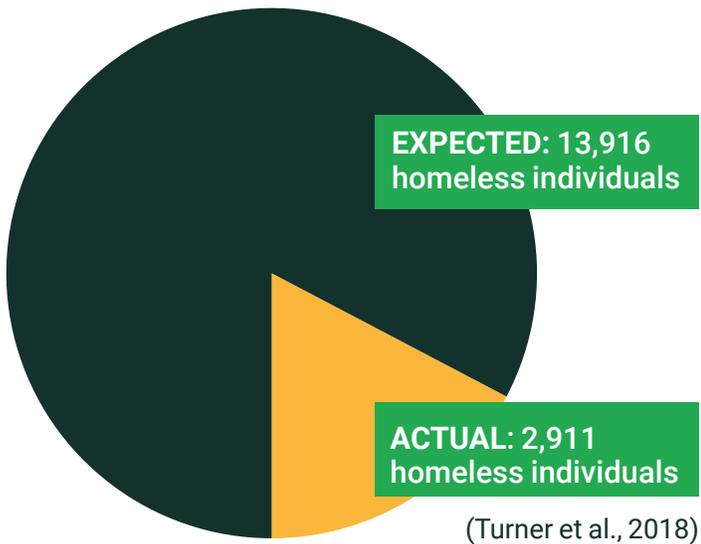
The effects of colonization within Canada's history has a significant role in the overrepresentation of Indigenous Peoples and families experiencing homelessness. Bingham et al. (2019) describe how Indigenous Peoples in Canada are eight times more likely to be homeless than other demographics. This can be attributed to Indigenous Peoples experiencing inequality and poverty due to the systemic influences of colonialism and past government policies (Bingham et al., 2019).

Bingham et al. (2019) describes how policies such as the Indian Act of 1876 were proposed to deprive Indigenous Peoples from practicing their cultures and traditions and displacing Indigenous Peoples and children from their communities. Additionally, government policies, such as residential schools and the Sixties Scoop, were forms of cultural genocide that have consequently led to a cycle of intergenerational trauma that Indigenous peoples continue to experience (Bingham et al., 2019).

Ultimately, these legacies of colonization have significantly influenced the issues of inequality, racism and poverty that Indigenous Peoples prevalently face; thus, leading to their disproportionate representation within the homeless population and in child welfare apprehensions.

4 Family Homelessness Within Calgary

In 2008, after witnessing an increase in the number of individuals experiencing homelessness, the City of Calgary presented a **10-year initiative to end homelessness** by the year 2018. In particular, one aspect of this initiative focused on ending family homelessness within the first two years of its plan (Homeless Hub, 2008). While ambitious in nature, this initiative required the intense collaboration of the government, non-profit sector, private sector and other institutions that play a role in serving individuals and families experiencing homelessness. This initiative applied systems level-thinking in order to help identify innovative and effective strategies needed to combat the issue of homelessness. By 2018, while the City of Calgary was not able to completely eliminate the issue of homelessness, the initiative did help to significantly reduce the number of individuals experiencing homelessness.



Based on a homeless point-in-time count, Calgary was predicted to have 13,916 individuals experiencing homelessness by 2018, but the actual number was around 2,911 individuals (Turner et al., 2018). This demonstrated that the initiative and strategies implemented successfully helped alleviate the crisis of homelessness within the city. This success has translated into the decrease of family homelessness within Calgary as well. However, Turner et al. (2018) noted that while the number of families experiencing homelessness have decreased, family shelters still remain at full capacity. While this report was produced in 2018, non-profit organizations are still trying to deal with the issue of family homelessness while dealing with lack of funds and resources. In Calgary, certain demographic groups are also overrepresented among families experiencing homelessness. These groups include single female heads of households, Indigenous families, and new immigrants and refugee families, and families with the parent and guardian having a disability (Turner et al., 2018).

4.1 Calgary’s Response to Family Homelessness During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has only magnified the issue of family homelessness, as many families face these challenging and trying times on top of being at risk for homelessness. One of the effects of the pandemic has left many parents/guardians unemployed and families struggling financially, leaving them at-risk for eviction and eventually homelessness. Moreover, COVID-19 safety measures also resulted in a restriction in the number of social services available for families to access, as many organizations tried to follow public health guidelines all while trying to serve families. Furthermore, families living within shelters had an increased risk of being exposed to COVID-19 because they were in close-contact with other families or individuals living or working within the shelter. Over the course of the pandemic, Calgary has seen an increase in the number of families at risk for experiencing homelessness, which is a setback towards Calgary’s plan to eliminate homelessness. As a result, the **COVID-19 Community Affordable Housing Advocacy Plan (The Community Plan)** was proposed and is an initiative involving the City of Calgary and 40 other organizations within the public, private and non-profit sectors, that aim to build more affordable housing to meet increasing demands within the city (City of Calgary, 2020) This initiative would require both funding from the provincial and federal government and the creation of housing would result in the creation of home for 12,000 Calgarians (City of Calgary, 2020). The hope is that the increase in affordable housing would help ensure families have access to secure and safe shelter, as well as having their health and well-being protected by reducing exposure to COVID-19 as the pandemic continues.

Both Calgary’s **10-year Plan to End Homelessness** and **The Community Plan** highlight the importance of collaboration across all sectors in order to properly address the issue of homelessness within the city. Calgary’s 10-year plan is a testament to the success that this cooperation brings and demonstrates that even the most ambitious and incredible goals are achievable with adequate resources needed to fund those plans. These sentiments of collaboration between industries demonstrate the importance of having strong relationships between organizations. This relates to this report’s issue that focuses on improving collaboration between the nonprofit sector and Children’s Services. These two sectors often work together, but in silos, and the issue of family homelessness won’t be properly addressed until both Children’s Services and the nonprofit sector are able to similarly align their goals in order to help these families.

5 Issues with Child Apprehension and the Family Reunification Process

Within Canada, Children's Services is regulated under each provincial or territorial government. In Alberta, the Ministry of Children's Services is a branch of the Alberta provincial government and is responsible for providing "early intervention, child development, and delivering support and services to children, youth and families" (Government of Alberta, 2022). As mentioned previously, when a family experiences or is at-risk for homelessness, Children's Services becomes involved.

The culmination of homelessness with personal factors, where the well-being of the child is at harm and at risk, can result in the apprehension of the child by Children's Services. The main priority of Children's Services is to ensure child safety; however, in terms of apprehension, reuniting the child with their family is a top priority for Children's Services as well (Esposito et al., 2014). It is important to note that age of the child and the time period in which the child was placed in care influences the probability of family reunification (Esposito et al., 2014).

A study conducted by Esposito et al. (2014) discovered that around 44% of children apprehended were youth aged 14 to 17-years-old. These researchers discovered that the older the age of the child, the less likely they were to reunify with their families. Baskin (2007) attributes this phenomenon as a result of the structure of Children's Services, which focuses primarily on the well-being of children aged 15 and younger. As a result, older youth end up aging out of the system without the proper support available and are more likely to end up living on the streets (Baskin, 2007). Furthermore, Baskin (2007) identified that around 25 to 50 per cent of youth experiencing homelessness were previously apprehended and were placed in foster or government care.

Another issue with child apprehension is that it leaves children and youth without the appropriate natural supports needed to help them navigate through this traumatic and life-changing period.

Since Children's Services involvement and child apprehension are risk factors for experiencing homelessness later on in life, the issue of youth and adult homelessness becomes more prevalent. Borato et al. (2020) identified that, despite experiencing stressful and harmful events within their family dynamic, youth experiencing homelessness desire to have the connectedness and improved relationship with their families, especially their parents or guardians. Gaetz et al. (2016) identified that youth experiencing homelessness who were in constant contact with family members and had stable family relations reported improved relationships and more positive reports in their well-being (as cited in Borato et al., 2020). These statements further affirm and emphasize the importance of family reunification and connection as a positive and necessary occurrence in the lives of children and youth who are apprehended.

Furthermore, while the impact of child apprehension can have detrimental effects on the children, it can also negatively affect the wellbeing of the parents. A study conducted by Ritland et al. (2021) explores the correlation between Indigenous mothers experiencing child apprehension and their risk of suicide. The study concluded that Indigenous mothers were four times more likely, compared to other mothers who experience child apprehension, to attempt suicide after their child was apprehended (Ritland et al., 2021). This can be due to the effects of colonialism and the impact of intergenerational trauma on Indigenous mothers. Additionally, the authors noted that a lack of support programs available for these mothers are some of the challenges that prevented the reunification of their family. As previously mentioned, many personal issues that Indigenous families face can be directly attributed to the effects of colonization and intergenerational trauma.

If child apprehension does occur, the top priority is family reunification. However, parents and guardians face challenges and barriers that make it difficult for them to achieve reunification. If reunification does occur, families face the issue of dealing with the traumatic experience of apprehension and rebuilding relationships with their children. One criticism in the way Children's Services deals with child apprehension is the lack of support they give parents and guardians during these reunification periods.

Likewise, there is also a criticism on whether or not child apprehension was an appropriate decision in the first place. In 2017, the Alberta Ministry of Children's Services was under criticism for how they handled three separate child apprehension cases, which resulted in the deaths of three children shortly after reunification. The parents of these children described that they had noticed changes in each child's personality and well-being once they returned into their care.

The Office of the Child and Youth Advocate (OCYA) released a report reviewing these cases and made recommendations that Children's Services needed to make in order to improve the apprehension and reunification process, as well as to ensure the safety and well-being of the children and families are protected and prioritized. (Government of Alberta, 2017).

Recommendations

(Government of Alberta, 2017)

1. Implement intensive, sustained plans to specifically support young children who are returned to family after being in care
2. Implement a research-based framework
3. Ensure that children are returned to their families with a continuity of health, education and social supports comparable to what they received when they were in care

In response, the Ministry of Children's Services (2017) accepted these recommendations made by the OCYA. Children's Services is directed under the standards and policies set forth by the government. This event highlights the gaps within the Children's Service system and exemplifies one of the most damaging effects of child apprehension. Furthermore, this incident demonstrates the need for structural change within this system, in order to better reflect and serve the needs of the children and families they are supposed to protect. While the acceptance of the recommendations is reactive to this incident, it is important to note that the ministry is recognizing the areas they are lacking in and are taking the appropriate steps to revise and create change.

6 Solutions Landscape

6.1 Diversion Programs

A criticism of the interventions used by Children's Services and the non-profit sector is that they have a reactive rather than preventative approach with dealing with homelessness (Raising the Roof, 2016). Recently, new initiatives have focused on preventing absolute homelessness for families before their circumstances worsen. Diversion programs are new initiatives that focus on averting families from going to shelters. These programs help families seek other alternatives for housing, aside from shelters, and to support them in their process of securing housing; these supports include financial assistance, connecting families to appropriate resources and organizations, and assisting with the housing pursuit (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2011). It has been identified that the use of these diversion programs can help reduce the number of families staying at shelters (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2011). Effective and appropriate diversion programs can be successfully achieved with the collaboration of non-profit and government organizations within the social services industry.

6.2 Housing First Programs

Housing first model is a framework that is focused on providing individuals with access to housing and housing supports without any necessary requirements (Calgary Homeless Foundation, n.d.). This initiative takes in individuals and families as they are, without any eligibility conditions surrounding their personal situation and helps ensure that their basic needs are met before approaching them with recovery strategies and services. An example of a non-profit that uses the housing first model is Trellis' Sustainable Families program. This program focuses on keeping families together as they navigate the issue of homelessness, as well as providing them with housing stability and support for the head-of-household (Trellis Society, n.d.). This program has seen success at reducing child apprehension rates, youth homelessness, family violence and intergenerational trauma (Trellis Society, n.d.).

The housing first model addresses the issue of homelessness from a holistic standpoint and any strategies used are viewed from a person-oriented perspective. Within the last decade, many non-profit organizations within Calgary have adopted the housing first model to address and prevent the issue of homelessness. The housing first model has demonstrated successful results and has been noted to be more cost-effective compared to other housing models in the past (Gaetz et al., 2013).

6.3 Indigenous Support Programs

Another emerging initiative prevalent within the social services sector is the creation of Indigenous support programs that cater to the needs of Indigenous families experiencing homelessness. These Indigenous-centered programs focus on providing culturally relevant teachings and practices that help promote Indigenous identity and connect Indigenous Peoples to their community (Baskin, 2007). These programs help strengthen the identity of Indigenous families and assist them with addressing their situation in a culturally appropriate manner. With a high representation of Indigenous Peoples within the homeless population, using Indigenous support programs are necessary in addressing the unique and complex circumstances that Indigenous Peoples experience. Baskin (2007) identified how using Indigenous practices can help empower Indigenous Peoples and provide them with the healing and necessary skills needed to help them deal with their adverse situations.



7 Solutions Landscape

One of the methods that was employed during this research process was a community conversation, where frontline service workers were given an opportunity online to share their experiences and insights surrounding this issue of families experiencing homelessness and their use of Children’s Services. Their perspectives and stories shared within the conversation helped direct my research and narrow down the areas within this issue to help produce this final report.

I am grateful for everyone’s willingness to participate and openness towards hearing the stories of other workers. Many of these workers exuded a strong passion towards this subject and a desire to create positive change within their organization. However, the issue surrounding lack of adequate funding and resources makes it difficult for frontline service workers to provide the necessary services for all families. Staff shortage and burnout is also a significant issue within the social services sector that needs to be addressed. Adequate support within an organization is essential in helping staff deal with these difficult cases and events. Frontline service workers are the backbone of the non-profit and Children’s Service system and, without their work, any success of addressing the issue of homelessness would not be achieved.

8 Recommendations for Improvement

Revision of current policies

Based on the information that has been gathered in this report surrounding the Children's Services and non-profit sector, what are the recommendations needed to improve collaboration between these two systems? While the issue of family homelessness is a comprehensive issue that can be difficult to narrow down to one single solution, recognizing the gaps within both systems is the first step towards creating positive change. One recommendation is for Children's Services and the provincial government to revise and update their policies and standards to better reflect the current state of family homelessness. Power creates change and a lot of power is concentrated within government systems. Furthermore, macro-level systems are the biggest drivers for creating change within any system.

Increased funding

Once the changes occur at the macro-level, the effects are seen on a micro and individualized level. Improved funding towards the non-profit sector from the government can also help aid the prevention of child apprehension by Children's Services. The nonprofit sector is a major stakeholder in addressing the issue of family homelessness. Without proper funding to these organizations, families would not be able to receive the necessary services to address their circumstances. In particular, providing increased funding towards non-profit organizations that provide housing services for families can result in reduced child apprehension cases and Children's Services involvement. If the goals of Children's Services and the non-profit sector align, then more families would see success from the services they provide. But the disconnect between both systems has created a gap, which leads to the system failing the individuals they are intending to serve. It is beneficial for all parties within this system to work together, rather in silos.

9 Conclusion

Truthfully, before I started researching this issue, I was not knowledgeable surrounding the issues and barriers that families experiencing homelessness face, especially when there is Children's Services involvement. This issue was incredibly complex in nature and it was difficult to comprehend the dynamic relationships between these systems because they were dependent on each family's unique case. This report helped identify the various systems that have a role within the issue of families experiencing homelessness. The research helped identify that government policies have a significant role in creating long lasting change and have the power to create change when things aren't necessarily working.

While broad recommendations were made in relation to potential change between these two systems, the hope of the report was to create discussions and inquiry about what is needed to address the gaps between these systems. By addressing these gaps, the hope is that this report can lead to a structural and revisionary change between the relationships of these two systems, which will result in successfully addressing the issues and barriers of family homelessness.

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