

Homelessness

Indicator Type: Social

Domain: Living

The relative dearth of affordable housing and resultant homelessness rates is a problem common to all urban centres across the globe. It is a difficult problem to solve due to the complexity of the factors and issues that help to create homelessness. In general terms, people who are considered homeless include those that live on the street, and/or stay in emergency shelters; however, they also include who spend most of their income on rent or those whose economic status forces them to live in overcrowded conditions making them at serious risk of becoming homeless (City of Toronto, 2000). Irrespective of the fact that the number of employment vacancies have risen over the past 5 years, many of these new jobs that have been created simply do not pay enough to make ends meet (City of Toronto, 2000). And thus, the issue of underemployment continues to grow.

Trends:

Homelessness in Toronto is getting worse, not better. The number and size of families using shelters has risen in Toronto in the last decade. The City of Toronto (2000) figures indicate that while one-parent families are still the majority of family admissions to emergency shelters, alarmingly, couples with children are now the fastest growing group of shelter users. Not only is family shelter use on the rise, so too is the number of children using shelters. In one decade there has been a marked rise in the number of children staying in shelters, up from 2,700 in 1988 to 6,000 in 1998 (City of Toronto, 2000). Another significant trend is that families are staying in the shelters for longer periods. In 1998, families with children stayed on the average of 1.5 months, compared with just two weeks in 1989 (City of Toronto, 2000). Studies undertaken by The City of Toronto (2000) have shown that in a two-year period between 1996 and 1998, there had been a 7 percent increase in the number of youths staying in shelters. The overall trends in the data suggest that between 1988 and 1998 the total number of admissions to Toronto shelters had increased by 75 percent (City of Toronto, 2000). The use of emergency shelters is not the only indicator of homelessness indicating a rising rate. Toronto has seen an increased demand for the Out of the Cold shelter program. In 1988 Toronto had a single Out of the Cold shelter. Today there are 41 Out of the Cold shelter locations across Toronto (City of Toronto, 2000). The City's two street patrol services report that more people seem to be living on the streets (City of Toronto, 2000).

Between 1988 and 1998, roughly 17 percent of people (or 27,000 single individuals or families) using the shelter system were people who stayed in the shelter for more than one year (City of Toronto, 2000). The 17 percent consisted of mostly men who were using the shelters as a supportive housing (City of Toronto, 2000). Of the 17% of people staying in the shelter system for periods of one year or more, the chronically homeless use 44 percent of the bed capacity (City of Toronto, 2000). These trends suggest that the minority, represented by the chronically homeless, is using proportionally more of the available shelter space provided. Viewing these trends together, there is a definite worsening of Toronto's homelessness problem.

Linkages:

There are a number of issues that are related to homelessness. The rise in homelessness can be linked to a number of government policy decisions, such as the withdrawal of funding for new social housing by senior levels of government as well as reductions in social assistance benefits, which were reduced by 21.6 percent in 1995 (City of Toronto, 2000). A lack of social housing has resulted in a significant reduction in the availability of affordable housing for those with marginal incomes. The reduction in social assistance benefits means that that homeless and people of marginal incomes have less money available to them to attain some form of housing. For some people this drop of 21.6 percent could mean the difference between renting an apartment or living on the streets. The rise in homelessness can also be linked to the advent of the Tenant Protection Act. Accounts from tenant and community legal agencies indicate a rise in evictions since the Tenant Protection Act was introduced in 1998. Other links to homelessness include family breakdowns, refugee claimant, spousal abuse, and new comers to the city.

Action:

Much of the earlier action taken to combat homelessness involved funding for homelessness services. One major action undertaken by the City of Toronto was the formation of a Homelessness Task Force. The purpose of the Task Force was to develop long-term strategies addressing the problem of homelessness (Community Services and Housing Development, 2000). Recently, the Mayor's Homelessness Action Task Force proposed an action plan with six key strategies that together address the main barriers to solving the problem of homelessness (City of Toronto, 2000). The strategies included in the action plan were: reduce poverty; preserve and create new affordable and supportive housing; shift the focus from emergency to prevention responses; plan services and develop strategies for high risk groups; implement a

comprehensive health strategy; and a strategy for all levels of governments to come together (City of Toronto, 2000; Community Services and Housing Development, 2000).

Difficulties:

- Municipalities cannot tackle the larger issues of poverty and lack of affordable and supportive housing, these are the responsibility of the Provincial and Federal governments should be shared across governmental sectors.
- Provincial and Federal governments response has been directed more toward funds to homeless services.

Future Prospects:

- Increased co-operation between all levels of government so as to fully address all the issues and strategies involved with the problem of homelessness, such as those laid out in the Mayor's Homelessness Action Task Force action plan.

Sources of Information:

City of Toronto (2000) *The Toronto Report Card On Homelessness, 2000*. City of Toronto.

Community Services and Housing Department (2000) Report of the York Region Homelessness Task Force, September 2000. York Region, Toronto.