A SEARCH FOR UNDERSTANDING: HOMELESSNESS IN NORTHERN MANITOBA

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INTRODUCTION

Poverty has been a prevalent issue throughout world history. Despite the United Nation’s opinion that we have the best quality of life, Canada cannot say that it is the exception to this rule. Many people live in abject poverty here. Without an official poverty line to help determine the level of poverty, estimating the actual number of poor is a contentious issue. Most official reports base their findings on Statistics Canada’s Low Income Cut Offs (LICO’s). For example, the National Council of Welfare estimate that in 1997 just over five million Canadians, or 17.2% of the population, were living in poverty (Silver, 2000). Such findings generally underestimate the number of poor Canadians as they usually do not include data on Aboriginal people living on reserves, residents of the Yukon, Nunavut, and North West Territories, and people who live in institutions. The costs surrounding poverty are enormous. For example, population health studies show a strong correlation between poverty and people’s health. They argue that poverty contributes to many of our social ills, affecting individuals, families, communities and society as a whole (for example, see Layton, 2000). Though there are discrepancies in the actual rates and effects of poverty, poverty rate and population health studies have one major commonality, they indicate that poverty is increasing (Ross, Scott, & Smith, 2000). At the margins of this growing trend, one often finds the homeless.

Studies on homelessness in Canada are uncovering the shocking reality that, as Canadians, we now seem to tolerate a situation where people live daily without a roof over their heads. This points to a trend where levels of homelessness are becoming
accepted as normal. These studies also attest to a growing shortage of affordable housing in many of our cities and towns. As a result, we increasingly witness homelessness in our daily lives - physically seeing its effects on our streets, in the media and in the lost faces of those actually living it (Murphy, 2000). Walking down the main streets of any of Canada’s major cities one often sees the homeless huddled against storefronts or asking for spare change. They have no physical resemblance to the rest of us, are shabby and ill equipped for Canada’s weather, and most look twice their actual age. One sad truth is that, if homeless people were not there in plain view every day, we would not think about the issue at all. Another is that these visible reminders of homelessness are only the tip of the iceberg. Many more of the homeless are out of sight, unwilling to be objects of pity or contempt or curiosity, and still more are simply trying to find a place to stay warm (Murphy, 2000).

To date, the vast majority of homeless studies have been conducted in the metropolitan areas of our country. Little reference is found regarding homelessness in rural or northern communities. This primary focus on homelessness in the densely populated areas of our nation does not reflect the true magnitude of people living on the streets. Anecdotal information tells us that homelessness in not confined to our cities. Homelessness is showing no boundaries, it is seen in the smallest of our communities. In this regard, the meaning and impact of homelessness upon people in Northern Canada has rarely been heard.

The focus of this proposed study is to complete a formative evaluation of a homeless shelter situated in a Northern Manitoba community. This project provides the opportunity for people involved in the issue of homelessness there to actually tell their own stories in order that, together, we can better understand and work toward viable solutions.

THE CONTEXT - THE CITY OF THOMPSON MANITOBA

Thompson is the largest center serving Northern Manitoba and is situated 750 kilometers north of Winnipeg. It owes its roots to the International Nickel Corporation Organization Limited mine
(INCO), and much of the city’s economic activity revolves around the mine and various supporting businesses. This city of 15,000 inhabitants has a growing retail, education, training and service sector, providing residents and surrounding communities with many of the amenities one would expect in larger southern centers. The local trading area encompasses some 40,000 people, the majority residing in 18 First Nation’s communities. Their patronage offers increasing opportunities to local businesses and reflects Thompson growing status as a regional center with a diversified economic base.

The shift towards regional center status has resulted in a migration of northern people seeking services, educational and work opportunities, and new living arrangements. Although Thompson’s overall population has stabilized in recent years, the percentage of Aboriginal residents continues to increase and now represents approximately 50 to 60 % of the total population. Many have come directly from the outlining First Nation’s communities to secure employment or take part in educational opportunities. Others visit Thompson for the shopping, recreational and social venues, as well as to utilize health and social services. A third group find it impossible to stay in their home community and gravitate to Thompson in the hope of seeking out a better life. In most cases, those that come to Thompson are successful in their tasks. For a small number this is not the case. They find themselves unable to secure adequate resources to meet their basic needs or to get back home. The result of this trend is an increasing number of visible homeless people on the streets of Thompson, roaming the streets and back alleys of the downtown core, panhandling, drinking and doing whatever becomes necessary to stay alive from one day to the next.

THE ISSUE - HOMELESS SHELTER

As a response to this growing trend, Thompson opened an emergency homeless shelter in the downtown core on February 5, 2002. Under the leadership of the Thompson Homelessness Advisory Committee (THAC), the mission of Nanatowiho Wikamik Shelter (means Treatment House) is to get people off the streets, onto treatment and back to their homes and families. The shelter is an 18 bed facility, consisting of two large rooms, one
washroom and one shower facility. Open 24/7, it has a staff of 11 individuals. The shelter has developed an number of guidelines or rules. A number are described here in order for the reader to get a sense of the shelter structure and program:

* the shelter’s doors are open all day with the exception of two hours, one in the morning and one in the early evening for cleaning. During the two hours no one is allowed in. The rest of the time people come in and warm up, have soup, and to do crafts or play games to pass the time. Every Thursday, the shelter holds sharing circles, one for men and another for women. Breakfast and a light supper is provided. A van is used to take people to the airport, bus or train station in order to assist them returning home.

* washroom facilities are made available throughout the day and there is one shower stall for everyone’s use. No laundry facilities are available.

* mats (same as the mats used in the school gym) are made available in the evening. The recipient takes one and finds a place on the floor in which to spend the night. Women and men are housed in separate rooms separated by a door. Sign in for a mat is 9:00pm and it is first come first serve. They are not given blankets or pillows because of health and sanitation reasons. There is no sleeping during the day for the homeless at the shelter.

As of October 15th, 2002 the shelter has housed 4046 individuals, fed 10,819 people and referred 414 to various treatment centers in Northern Manitoba. As that statistic show, this program has become vital for the safety and well being of the homeless populations in Thompson and efforts are underway to not only give a permanent home but also secure long term funding. At present it only has temporary status. Temporary measure for a complex situation.

ESTABLISHING A DEFINITION OF HOMELESSNESS

Establishing an agreed upon definition of homelessness has proven to be a challenged for many researchers, governmental agencies, advocacy groups, and social agencies. There are many levels and interpretations of what makes a person homeless. For
example, the United Nations in 1987 choose a very broad definition of homelessness to include two groups of people, those living in absolute homelessness and those in a situation of relative homelessness. Absolute homelessness included street people and victims of disaster who have no home at all. Relative homelessness included people whose homes are grossly inadequate and therefore do not meet the UN’s basic standard (McLauqlin, 1987). Most Canadian definitions generally focus on homelessness in absolute terms. They define the homeless as people who sleep in shelters or in other places most of us do not consider dwellings (Murphy 2002). The resulting inconsistency in defining homelessness causes problems in estimating the number of homeless nationwide and often limits the amount and types of services being made available to those in need. Due to the nature of the context of this study, our preliminary definition of homeless includes transient people who temporarily use the shelter while in Thompson, those who utilize the shelter on a long term basis, and those who are not using the shelter but are, for all intensive purposes “on the street.”

**OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY**

The research team has identified five key objectives at this point. These objectives have come forward as a result of preliminary investigation and discussions with a number of key informants. We would be open to any further suggestions from the Thompson Homelessness Advisory Committee and shelter staff. The five key objectives are:

1) To gather demographic data on who the homeless are and identify reasons why they currently find themselves in this situation

2) To work with the homeless shelter to determine its strengths and limitations as a response to the issue of homelessness in Thompson.

3) To clarify the perceptions and attitudes of the community towards homelessness.

4) To examine the relationship between homeless people and their
community of origin.

5) To identify issues around affordable housing in Thompson.

METHODOLOGY

In order to ground this study, the research team is proposing to do a formative evaluation (Marlow, 2001; Reamer, 1998). This type of evaluation is generally completed during the early stages of a project and focuses on the program approach to service, its design features and procedures. It will not be an evaluation of the program’s outcomes - whether the program has accomplished all that is set out in its mandate (considered an summative evaluation). Qualitative methods of data gathering will be primarily used, though some quantitative data will be gathered for descriptive purposes. Validation of data will be ensured through the process of triangulation.

The primary focus of this study is to gather information regarding the actual experiences of people involved in and around the shelter. As such, it will limit itself to exploring the immediate context around which the program is currently operating. This includes topics such as client characteristics, the referral process, services provided, and common assumptions held by the people involved. Interviews, using a purposive sampling method, will take place with select individuals who use the shelter, are staff from the shelter, are key informants from other agencies involved, and are local residents and business owners located within the immediate vicinity of the shelter. We will solicit information regarding their perceptions of the shelter’s limitations and strengths. A interview schedule of open ended questions will be utilized to guide with this process. Focus groups and direct observations will also be used to increase the validity of the interview data. Quantitative data will primarily be gathered through secondary sources, such as shelter and government statistics, and other public data gathered by agencies involved (e.g., RCMP, AFM, MKO).

The gathering of data will primarily be done by the principal investigators. From time to time we may utilize volunteer data gatherers. These will be senior social work students with the
Faculty of Social Work and be under direct supervision of one of the investigators.

Signed formal consent will be acquired before any interview begins and the individual will be fully informed of the nature of the research and the voluntary nature of their participation. A copy of this consent form is attached as appendix A. All sensitive documentation will be kept in a secure manner and under the strictest of confidence. Upon completion of the final report all sensitive material will be destroyed.

Upon acceptance of this proposal, the research team will submit an application for Human Subject Research Ethics Protocol approval to the University of Manitoba Ethics Review Committee. The research team will not proceed with any data gathering until this protocol has been reviewed and approved by them.

**TIME LINES AND COST**

The research team is proposing that the study be completed without any direct cost to the Advisory Committee or the Nanatowiho Wikamik Shelter. As part of the Faculty of Social Work at Thompson’s commitment to community service, we believe that we can complete the study utilizing existing resources within the faculty. In return we request the right to utilizing our findings for academic purposes such as presentations at conferences and for publication in a scholarly journal.

The following is a tentative time line for the study. It may vary throughout the actual process.

1) To present the proposal to THAC and shelter staff by December 7, 2002

2) Literature review to be completed by January 1, 2003.

3) Questionnaire to be developed by January 4, 2003.

4) Have completed proposal sent to University of Manitoba for ethics review for January 10, 2003.
5) Feb, 2003 begin data collection, have completed for March 31, 2003.

6) April 1, 2003 to May 31, 2003 analysis and report writing

7) Present findings to THAC, Salvation Army and the shelter staff in June, 2003

REPORTING METHODS

The research team proposes the following reporting process:

1) The research team are willing to meet with members of THAC to discuss the study at any time during the process that is convenient to both parties.

2) Upon completion of the study, the research team will provide two copies of and present its final report to the Thompson Homelessness Advisory Committee.

3) The Committee will be given the opportunity to response to any aspect of the final report. Such responses will be taken into consideration if a rewrite of the report is seen necessary by the principle investigators.

3) The final document can be used by the Committee for its own purposes, such as utilizing it for funding proposals, as long as the principle investigators are given appropriate acknowledgment.

4) The Committee allows the principal investigators title to present any part of their findings, for academic purposes, at other venues such as workshops or conferences or for publication.
REFERENCES


