

FORUM PROCEEDINGS

Windsor Essex County Homelessness and Housing Research Forum

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Forum Sponsors

Homeless Coalition of Windsor-Essex County

Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation

National Homelessness Initiative

University of Windsor

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WINDSOR ESSEX HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS RESEARCH FORUM

Session #1: Exits and Returns Study: A Longitudinal Study of Homeless People in Windsor

Context:

- A multidimensional approach developed by Anucha (2005) that identifies homelessness as a combination of a number of factors that comes together from within four dimensions: private market, the state, civil society and household characteristics.

Objectives:

- Examine exits and returns to homelessness or what is generally described as a “homeless career” among homeless people in Windsor over a two year period.
- Examine the relationship between various structural and individual factors drawn from the conceptual framework developed by Anucha (2005) and exits and returns to homelessness.
- Using a qualitative biographical approach, this study will create detailed housing biographies for a subset of study participants.
- Map and document a feasible pre-tested longitudinal research strategy that can be used on a larger scale to understand the “homeless careers” of people who have experienced multiple episodes of homelessness.

Summary:

a) Participants

Adults at baseline (first interview):

- 96 participants (80%) were adults: 66 were males and 30 were females
- Majority of adults were born outside of Windsor, only 36.3% were from Windsor.
- 67.6% of the adults in the study had a high school education or less
- Main reason for current homelessness was 32.5% trouble with family, 31.3% job loss/lack of work and 31.3% lack of affordable housing
- 35% were told they have a mental health problem by a mental health professional and 79.3% have been given medication.

Youth at baseline (first interview):

- 23 participants were teens, 16 males and 7 females.
- 65% of youth in study were born in Windsor
- 70% of youth in study reported their cause for homelessness as problems with family followed by 25% that were in trouble with the law and 25% who did not have work and 22.5% addiction issues

- 35% of youth in study were told they have a mental health problem by a mental health professional and 78.6% are receiving medication.
- youth under 22 years of age were significantly associated with having left home at a younger age ($r = -.256, p \leq .01$) and being younger at first homelessness ($r = -.489, p \leq .001$).
- 32.5% of youth in study accessed food banks/cupboards and 12.5% accessed addiction programs
- Youth reported high levels of social support for example, 85% reported having family/friends that make them feel happy and safe, and having someone to count on in case of emergencies.
- A significantly larger proportion of youth at baseline reported experiencing childhood stressors including having been sent away because they did something wrong (52.5%) and having spent time in a foster home (42.5%).

b) Findings

Baseline interview:

- Of those who were literally homeless at baseline, 33.3% remained in literal homelessness, while 11.1% moved into shelters, 44.4% moved into doubled-up housing, and 11.1% moved into their own housing during their first move thereafter.
- Of those who were in shelters at baseline, 4.3% became literally homeless, 31.9% remained in shelters, 25.5% moved into doubled-up housing, and 38.3% were able to move into their own housing.
- Of those in doubled-up housing at baseline, 16.7% became literally homeless and a further 16.7% moved into shelters, while 33.3% remained in doubled-up housing and 25% were able to move into their own housing in their first move after the baseline interview.
- Finally, among those who were in their own housing at baseline, none either became literally homeless or moved into doubled-up housing, 66.7% moved into shelters, and 33.3% remained in their own housing during the first move since baseline.

Second interview (of the original 120 participants, 71 (59%) were tracked for a second interview)

- The findings related to their last move include that among those who were literally homeless after baseline, none remained literally homeless, 42.9% moved into shelters, none moved to doubled-up housing, and over half (57.1%) were able to move into their own housing.
- Among those who were in a shelter after baseline, none became literally homeless, 10% remained in shelters, 10% moved to doubled-up housing, and three-quarters (75%) were able to move into their own housing.
- Among those who were in doubled-up housing after baseline, none became literally homeless, 10% moved into shelters, 30% remained in doubled-up housing, and 55% moved into their own housing.

- Finally, of those who were in their own housing after baseline, none became literally homeless, 8.7% moved into shelters, 17.4% moved into doubled-up housing, and 73.9% remained in their own housing.

Implications:

- Planning for a multidimensional response that addresses measurable concrete outcomes, closes the front door (limits the ways in which people enter in to the system), opens the back door (creates more options for people once they have been in the system) and builds a sustainable infrastructure (www.endhomelessness.org).
- Develop a plan that specifically addresses youth homelessness given that many of the adults that were part of the study identified their first entry to the system when they were a youth.

Best Practice: Homeward Bound (WoodGreen Community Services)

Wood Green’s Homeward Bound is designed to help women and their children transition from shelter life to economic self sufficiency. The program exemplifies the power of a wholistic and integrated support system by offering: intensive career and life-skills training with a focus on computer literacy, housing, child care and community re-integration – all under one roof. The final phase of the program guarantees a job placement within one of Homeward Bounds’ Industry Council partners and also a chance to purchase their own home through WoodGreen’s home ownership program.

One of the major successes of the program is the number of women who have gone on to higher education and have completed their studies. At the time of the forum 30 women were enrolled in various college programs. Two women have secured employment.

Some of the challenges have included legislation issues related to the Social Housing Reform Act and the Residential Tenancy Act. Issues relate to “who is the tenant” and housing tenants who no longer need the service or refuse the support services. Funding issues related to securing stable funding as well as how to coordinate funding when time lines and deliverables overlap. Finally evaluation of the program is also a challenge specifically how to define measurable outcomes to justify the model and also how to plan and budget for evaluation.

The program is already demonstrating success in the short term. One of the women who have been helped by the program spoke of the huge impact the program had on her life and her children’s.

Session #2: Housing Conditions of Newcomers: Growing New Roots

Context

- Windsor-Essex County is home to the 4th largest proportion of foreign born people in Canada. Secondary migration is a factor as a result of perceived employment opportunities even though unemployment rates are higher than provincial and national averages
- To settle and grow new roots, new immigrants and refugees need adequate, suitable and affordable housing.
- Immigrants and refugees face barriers tied to their immigrant status that make them particularly vulnerable to homelessness.

Objectives

- Examine the *scope, causes and forms of homelessness* among immigrants and refugees in the Windsor/Essex region.
- Examine how *race/ethnicity, gender, age, religion and language* mediate homelessness among immigrants and refugees.
- Explore *the contextual issues and social processes* related to experiences of homelessness by immigrants and refugees by illuminating their experiences of discrimination and marginalization and how these constrain their housing options.

Summary

The research forum highlighted data from two components of the research study namely: 1) secondary analysis of Census 2001 data, and 2) in-depth interviews of 20 immigrants. The secondary analysis included special census tabulation (Canada, Ontario and Windsor) by gender, ethnicity, immigrant status, housing tenure and core housing need.

a) Participants

The socio-demographic characteristics of the in-depth interview participants were:

- Ethnic Background: 7 Middle Eastern/Arabs; 5 South Asians; 5 Africans and 3 of European descent.
- Gender: 13 females and 7 males
- Age range: ages 20 to 59
- Marital Status: 11 were married or in common law relationships, while 7 were single, divorced, separated or widowed.
- Length of Time in Canada: majority - less than 5 years; 1 participant had been in Canada for 7 years
- Employment Status: participants were mainly unemployed or underemployed, 13 were unemployed, 5 had part-time employment and 2 had full-time employment.
- Educational Background: 9 had some sort of post-secondary education and 11 had high school or less.
- Main Income source: 13 were on Social Assistance, 5 depended on employment income and 2 on alimony.

- Income: 14 participants had household income of less than \$30, 000 per year

b) Findings

Secondary Data Analysis

- More immigrants (15%) were in core housing needs in Windsor compared to non-immigrants (11.9%)
- More visible minorities (22%) experience core housing need compared to all immigrants and non-immigrants
- Slightly higher percentage of female immigrants (67.5%) own their housing compared to non-immigrants in Windsor
- Slightly lower percentage of male immigrants (76.1%) own their housing compared to non-immigrants (79.6%) in Windsor
- West Asian families experience the highest percentage of core housing need of immigrants living in Windsor
- Affordability is the main issues with respect to core housing need.

In-depth interviews

There were six main themes identified from the results of the interviews. These themes were:

- **Choosing Windsor as a Survival Strategy**

Windsor was a desirable community due to several reasons including: 1) well-established ethnic communities, 2) milder weather (southernmost tip of Ontario), 3) reasonable rental rates, and, 4) proximity to United States for education and employment opportunities

- **Challenges of Finding Housing and Staying Housed**

Participants identified various barriers to finding and maintaining housing. These barriers included: 1) low income, 2) lack of transportation, 3) lack of social capital, 4) quality of housing stock (older units), and, 5) inaccurate descriptions of available housing in advertisements. For example many participants were paying more than 50% of their monthly income on rent. Unemployment was a major barrier and most participants expressed frustration at not being able to secure employment in their field or being under-employed. Utility costs have been rising and this also places strains on monthly income.

- **Pre-Migration History as a 'Frame'**

For many participants, they had lived in superior housing in their home countries compared to current living conditions. This difference provides a frame of reference and often participants in these situations were dissatisfied with housing conditions. However for participants that had come from refugee camps, their level of dissatisfaction was not as high given their frame of reference was the experience of living in a refugee camp.

- **Perceived Relationship Inadequate Housing Conditions and Well-being**
Some of the inadequate housing conditions that were described included: poor or no heat, poor ventilation, living with other families in inadequate sized units, rodents and pests, structural issues in older units, noisy neighbours and limited personal space.
- **Experiences with Social Housing**
There is a long waiting list for social housing so in the meantime many families live in poor housing conditions. They also may move a lot to try to better their housing situation. The condition of some of the social housing units was mentioned; some of the stock is old and requires significant repairs/maintenance. Other participants were not sure of the areas in which social housing was located; safety of their families was a concern. Social housing is also high density housing and there is limited green space for the children.
- **Perceived Relationship between Children’s welfare and Poor Housing Conditions**
The main concern expressed by participants was in relation to the link between their children’s health and adequate housing conditions. For example some participants described the lack of green space in rental housing and the impact this has on their children’s ability to be outside and to play safely. Low income is also a factor in children’s health. For example participants would choose to pay rent and ensure their children had food to eat sometimes foregoing their own health. Finally, children were exposed to unhealthy conditions such as rodents and bugs.

Implications

- The high rate of ***Unemployment and underemployment*** among newcomers increases their vulnerability to homelessness and inadequate housing.
 - Advocacy needed to address the ‘credentialism’ that limits employment opportunities for newcomers which in turn limits their full participation in the community.
 - Current efforts to encourage immigrants to move to ‘second tier cities’ such as Windsor is paradoxical – lower costs of living but less employment opportunities.
 - Windsor and other second-tier cities need to advocate for resources to come with such policy initiatives.
- Re-imagining Social Housing:
 - There is a need to increase not only the ***quantity but also the quality of social housing stock***.
 - Social housing is the most ***affordable*** option for many low income people.
 - A better quality social housing stock will reduce the stigma many homeless and under-housed people experience.
- Building housing communities
 - Shuldiner (2000) recommends a broader change from building housing for low-income people (or other special-interest housing) to building, communities that can accommodate low-income people (like some co-op housing models, for example).

Best Practice: Casa el Norte

Casa el Norte is an emergency shelter that has existed in Fort Erie since 2001. Each year Fort Erie receives approximately 2500 people who claim refugee status. On average, Casa el Norte provides shelter and support to 600 people a year. There are 16 beds in the shelter. The shelter is also fully accessible.

Support services include multi-lingual support and settlement and re-unification. Most of the referrals to Casa el Norte are from a neighbouring shelter across the border in Buffalo, New York and from Citizenship and Immigration Canada. Since refugee hearings can take years to conclude, the types of support provided include: translation, medical, legal assistance, school support and referrals to other community programs.

Casa el Norte is a good example of grassroots community development where the reliance on a network of community partners and volunteers is high. One of the major successes of the program has been in unifying families.

There are increasing pressures to expand the service. Another challenge is the immediate and ongoing availability of counseling.

Session #3: Rural Homelessness Study: Patterns, Causes and Best Practices for Program Delivery**Context**

- A growing number of rural low-income people have housing that is so *inadequate in quality*, so *insecure in tenure*, and so *temporary in duration* that keeping a roof over their heads is a preoccupying and precarious accomplishment.

Objectives

- What are patterns of rural homelessness?
- What are the multidimensional causes of homelessness?
- What are best practices and innovative policies for effective program delivery?

Summary

A cross-sectional survey was conducted with 76 participants living in rural communities. Two focus groups were conducted with service providers. One group was provided for county service providers. The other group was for service providers who mainly are located in Windsor however may provide some supports in the county.

a) Participants (Cross sectional survey/n=76)

- The majority (47%) of participants were female.
- The majority (30%) were single.
- The majority (21%) had four or more children.
- In the past year, the majority (23%) were on social assistance.
- The majority (56%) were renting and of the percentage that was renting the majority were renting in the private market (44%)

b) Cross sectional survey

- The majority (55%) stated that their housing was unaffordable
- With respect to the types of problems participants have encountered, no affordable housing was the main problem (63%) followed by lack of contacts and lack of steady income (53%). Transportation was a problem for 46% of study participants.
- With respect to social stigma related to housing situation, the main experience was that of being ridiculed, insulted or harassed (28%) followed by being denied benefits others have received (25%).
- Participants were asked what type of help they had received or were receiving. The majority (64%) use food banks. Use of other community services was low indicating that many participants rely on their own abilities/resources.
- Of those participants that accessed services the majority (32%) were very satisfied.

c) Focus groups

Five themes arose from the focus groups were service providers. These themes included:

- **The homeless/at-risk of homelessness population in the county**
Service providers feel that many homeless in rural areas are hidden and go unnoticed by the general public. For example one provider described a client who lived on the beach for six months. Other clients live in substandard housing such as cottages (no heat in the winter or excessively high heating costs) and barns.
- **Barriers to Accessing Services**
The lack of public transportation among county municipalities and to the city of Windsor makes it difficult for clients to access services especially health service which are often found in Windsor. The cost of taxi service between municipalities is also excessive and therefore clients will go without services.
- **Importance of Having Supports in Your Home Community**
Service providers described that it is very important for clients to receive services in their home community because that is where their formal and informal support networks are established. Service providers described situations where clients moved to other municipalities to access services however they soon moved back because they were lonely and had limited social connections.

The other issue that was described was that clients also develop connections with service providers and when they move they often have to change their workers and this causes problems. The client now has to establish new relationships.

- **Barriers to the Delivery of Services**

There were five major barriers identified regarding the delivery of services in rural areas:

- 1) funding constraints to maintain county offices and also higher transportation costs,
- 2) the time it takes to travel in the county is higher and therefore less time is available
For direct client service (especially if going to client's homes),
- 3) County staff often work in more isolation since staffing in satellite offices is limited or staff are essentially working out of their cars,
- 4) staff consistency, and
- 5) Lack of resources for providers to access on behalf of clients such as affordable housing and employment opportunities.

- **Rural Approaches to Homelessness**

Some of the best practice approaches that were described included: 1) multi-service centres, 2) development of supports/partnerships with informal providers such as churches, 3) peer support models, and, 4) case management model that follows the client no matter where they live would provide the consistency needed by many people.

Implications

- Not as visible as urban homelessness
 - Women with children disproportionately affected
- Not as mobile as men because of children so migration to urban areas to seek services frequently not an option.
- More homogenous population
 - Majority are White, Canadian and Essex County born.
- Majority of sub-sample interviewed on experience of stigma and discrimination relating to their housing reported experiencing such.
 - Awareness and public education needed.

Best Practice: THRIVE

Prior to October 2002 there was no service dedicated to the homeless population. THRIVE is a program of the Youth and Family Resource Network. Services include 2 housing support workers and a 24 hour emergency service. The types of supports that are provided include: information on available housing, advocacy, 1:1 support, applications for social housing, food bank access, budgeting, resolution regarding landlord/tenant issues, access to utility assistance, forms completion, trusteeship and access to community information services.

Challenges for the program are:

- Lack of affordable housing in county municipalities
- Lack of suitable rooms for singles

- Lack of emergency shelter response
- Long waiting list for social housing
- Financial restraints for clients
- High utility costs
- Lack of public transportation
- Continued program funding is the main challenge

Session # 4: Roundtable Discussions

A series of roundtable discussions occurred with participants assigned by number to a group. Each research area was discussed by two tables and the results are summarized below according to the standard set of discussion questions that were provided.

Exits and Returns

- a) What are the 3 main issues you feel need to be addressed?
 - Look at the individual
 - Supportive safety net
 - Service pocket
 - Adequate ongoing supports: some workers dedicated to youth and in home community, also address addiction/mental health issues
 - Affordable housing: being able to find and keep housing- also look at use of rooming houses (safety)
 - Housing to meet needs of larger families
 - Transitional housing
 - Income security: unstable, all types of government funding need to be raised
 - Funding stability of organizations
 - Ensuring people can get an education

- b) What groups need to be at the table to address these issues?
 - All 3 levels of government
 - Community service organizations
 - Receive input from the people in need
 - Religious/spiritual groups
 - Day care services
 - Housing providers
 - Employment services
 - Education/training
 - Front-line workers (those that deliver the service)
 - Children's Aid Society
 - United Way
 - Citizens: labour, Chamber of Commerce, businesses

- c) What are the short term strategies?
 - Shelters/motel

- Transitional housing
- Food banks
- Supportive housing
- Partnerships/Networking among agencies: come together to develop services that we do not have, coordinate efforts to become more efficient
- Ontario Works emergency funds
- Religious/chaplaincy supports
- Skills training assessments
- Lobby for better social assistance and minimum wage
- Lobby to amend safe school act: major barrier for youth with issues to stay in school
- Appear at Standing Committees in unity
- Make sure government knows what's happening and how it affects services

d) What are the long term strategies?

- Educational programs
- Policy change/advocacy
- Ways to identify individual needs that leads to planning
- Long term supportive counseling and mentoring
- Creating a sense of connectiveness
- Community awareness
- Coordinated funding

e) What may be the barriers/challenges to address these issues?

- Getting 3 levels of government engaged at table
- Lack of knowledge of services – what already exists
- Case managers are needed to provide intensive support – funding
- Too many band-aid solutions/not addressing reasons people are homeless/be proactive not reactive
- Staff turnover/training – creating networking opportunities
- Mechanism to deliver the services
- Lack of cohesion in service delivery between organizations: different policies, rules, forms etc.
- Lack of compassion
- Buy-in and recognizing need: reluctant client and trust issues
- Need more client-centred approach
- Address cultural diversity issue
- Stigma/ society belief that if people are not doing well it is because of personal failure.
- Supports to obtain employment
- Legislation is very restrictive

Housing Conditions of Newcomers

- a) What are the 3 main issues you feel need to be addressed?
- Income
 - Housing
 - Continuum of integrated social supports
 - Employment credentials
 - Language: need for advocacy on landlord and tenant issues – need translators
- b) What groups need to be at the table to address these issues?
- Multicultural council/newcomer agencies
 - 3 levels of government
 - Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration/Skills and training/ Income Security programs
 - Shelter providers
 - CMHC
 - Private industry
 - Service Canada
 - Social activists
 - Peer support
 - Housing providers/Central Housing registry/Housing Tribunal
 - Employment agencies – public and private
 - Service clubs – Rotary
 - School Boards
 - Homeless Coalition
 - Religious/cultural groups
 - Community legal services
 - Regulating bodies for trades/professions
- c) What are the short term strategies?
- Comprehensive needs analysis specific to this group
 - Use of services
 - Coordinate a meeting of those identified in #2
 - Education of relevant issues
 - Employment:
 - funding to implement mentor programs and to help navigate through system from start to finish
 - Affordable child care
 - Access to health system
 - Follow up to ensure success
 - Language
 - Available translators
 - Materials/information printed in different languages
 - Provide services in multi-languages
 - Set up “Speak English” cafes
 - Housing
 - Provide bus passes for search

- d) What are the long term strategies?
- Core funding of organizations that address issues of population group
 - Supports for long term self-sufficiency
 - Link with ethnic associations
 - Employment
 - Stable employment: institute security contract
 - Partnership with regulatory bodies
 - Lobbying for clear requirements and making it easily available to newcomers
 - Language
 - Publishing housing information in ethnic newspapers
 - Public awareness and education
 - More accessible language service lines
 - Housing
 - Increase social assistance/minimum wage
 - More transitional units with extended stays and supports
 - Provide legal advice re: housing
 - Single point of access: i.e. an office at 400 City Hall Square for multicultural services
- e) What may be the barriers/challenges to address these issues?
- Unstable funding of existing programs
 - Turf protection – need for cooperation in system
 - Education
 - Staffing to address training and education needs
 - Discrimination
 - Lack of knowledge among public
 - Public/government complacency
 - Many cultural groups
 - Transportation
 - Legislation/laws
 - Manpower for translators
 - Access to information

Rural Homelessness

- a) What are the 3 main issues you feel need to be addressed?
- Lack of county-based services/affordable housing
 - Transportation
 - Funding: overall lack of government funding, client income and social housing
 - Communication among providers is difficult
 - Lack of good-paying permanent jobs

- Lack of knowledge of resources
 - Difficult access to health care
 - Lack of acknowledgement that it exists
- b) What groups need to be at the table to address these issues?
- Senior levels of government
 - Private/corporate sector
 - General public: consumers, religious groups, ethnic groups
 - Community service organizations
 - Landlords
 - Transit Windsor
 - Police
 - Key informants
- c) What are the short term strategies?
- Public awareness
 - Cutting the red tape
 - Increase advocacy for the homeless/at risk of homelessness
 - Bicycle program
 - Gas funds
 - Organized car pool
 - Keeping outdoor/public washrooms open year round
 - Coordinated programming in churches/drop-in centres
 - Home share program
 - Send out pocket guides to rural homes
 - Word of mouth about resources
 - Getting word to politicians, police, and churches regarding rural homelessness
- d) What are the long term strategies?
- Lobbying senior levels of governments: social benefits, agency funding, national housing strategy
 - Centralized access
 - Housing stock: adding new stock and maintaining existing stock
 - Transitional housing
 - Public awareness/education
 - Place in county for people to become eligible for priority 2 on housing waiting list
 - Steady case management to ensure person works with same worker/1 person – 1 agency responsible for taking people to appointment
 - Government insurance for cars so people can donate cars to drive one another
 - Shuttle services to and from city
 - Tax benefits to employers to maintain jobs in county
 - Training programs
 - Incentives for those working to move beyond poverty

- Raise minimum wage and social assistance rates – ensure on political agenda every election
- Bike lanes/paths and road repairs so people can bicycle
- Mobile agency

e) What may be the barriers/challenges to address these issues?

- Lack of awareness: nimby and ignorance
- Sustainable funding
- Confidentiality – stigma issues
- Political will
- Community collaboration
- Education for clients
- Distance between clients and services
- Lack of visibility and willingness to talk about it
- Pride
- Lack of engagement of private sector

Summary

This report provides an overview of the proceedings from the homelessness research forum. The Homeless Coalition and service providers are encouraged to use this information in ongoing planning at the system and services levels.

The report also suggests the need for ongoing education and awareness and also the importance of future research to broaden the understanding of homeless populations, gaps/changes in services and identification of needs.