

## Homelessness in the City of Toronto

Houda Abbas & Sarah Afiane (2021)

With winter approaching in Canada, this raises the urgency of the homelessness crisis in Toronto. Yet many homeless Torontonians are choosing cold streets over warm shelters as areas to reside. One individual that agrees with this choice, David Pirtle who struggles with homelessness states; “All I can say is that my fear of the unknown, of what might be waiting for me at that shelter, was worse than my fear of the known risk, you know, of staying out on the street. It wasn't until the very end of my homelessness that I ended up in a shelter. And I found out that a lot of what I was afraid of was true.” (Shapiro, 2019). Despite the sense of community, many homeless people experience theft, as well as traumatic experiences from people who are all struggling to survive and acquire their basic needs of survival, being food, water and shelter. Grouped together, it is more dangerous than helpful. When people do choose shelters, they prefer smaller, scattered sized shelters, where getting help is the focus and is done more effectively.

On any given day, Toronto has 8,700 people living in homelessness (About Toronto Homelessness, 2019). Of those numbers, women and seniors take up the majority of that percentage due to their higher susceptibility. Women in Toronto are more likely to experience homelessness as they face more financial insecurity. This is because they are more likely to be financially dependent on a spouse or financial partner, additionally they have more pressure associated with raising children, and being isolated and excluded from society resulting from their status as single mothers (Woolley, 2014). Further, older women are more likely to become homeless due to family related crises, whereas older men tend to become homeless due to lack of work. For older women, this means they suffer a loss of social support, and live alone (Woolley, 2014).

Issues with senior homelessness include mental illness which is a particularly stigmatized problem in Toronto-especially surrounding the issue of poverty- as well as physical health problems and elder abuse (Woolley, 2014). Among the most common mental illnesses in the homeless population is depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, anxiety disorders and substance abuse (Tarr, 2019). David Pirtle, the senior mentioned earlier, suffers from schizophrenia, and struggled to find help within shelters, stating there was a lack of

understanding and a discrimination towards the topic (Shapiro, 2019). With the struggles of these illnesses, it may be very difficult to carry out a highly functioning lifestyle, as many of these mental illnesses lead to cognitive and behavioural problems which in turn make it difficult to earn stable incomes or carry out typical or average daily activities, which leads to poverty and homelessness. These realities of mental health and income insecurity reinforce the connection between health and homelessness as these challenges contribute to increased levels of alcohol and drug use, as well as violent victimization (Tarr, 2019).

While homeless people in Toronto face these vulnerabilities, which differ depending on their intersectionality, they are also subject to active efforts to push them outside of the city's public spaces. One of the ways this has taken place has been through the use of hostile architecture. Hostile architecture, "also called 'defensive architecture' or 'unpleasant design' involves designing urban spaces in such a way that the space discourages certain unwanted behaviors" (Carey, 2018 p. 1). However recently these latent planning processes have extended beyond dictating behaviours to include the removal of certain groups of people from spaces, with one in particular being homeless people. One common form of hostile architecture used to deter homeless presence is with the implementation of what are called 'anti-homeless spikes,' which serve to prevent homeless people from sleeping on the ground (de Fine Licht, 2017 p. 29). Another type of hostile architecture frequently used are benches with a middle 'armrest' (de Fine Licht, 2017 p. 29). Though proponents of this type of architecture have argued that these benches provide more comfort for people, by providing them with an armrest, these types of benches are primarily used to deter homeless people from lying down and sleeping on them (de Fine Licht, 2017 p. 29). Moreover, hostile architecture can also come in the form of eliminating infrastructure from public spaces, in what is referred to as ghost amenities (Chellew, 2018). This is seen in areas including Dundas Square, as it contains little infrastructure that encourages public presence, albeit being a central space for many Torontonians.

While these forms of architecture do hurt homeless people—by impacting how they interact with public amenities—they also serve a distinct purpose, being to force homeless people out of public spaces (Knight, 2020). This is because these infrastructures, and their lack-thereof, help construct cities with underlying conceptualizations of who the space is, and is not, meant for. These understanding of *who* gets to freely enjoy public space and *how* the space

is intended to be used are important as they impact how homeless people are perceived—and consequently treated—within the city of Toronto.

## References

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