MEDIA TOOLKIT: REPORTING ON HOMELESSNESS

HOPE
END HOMELESSNESS
WINNIPEG

WHY THIS TOOLKIT WAS CREATED

Homelessness is an increasing public concern for communities across Canada. This is reflected in increasing news and media coverage in recent years.

People experiencing homelessness face stigma and discrimination on the basis of their housing status. Sometimes, this is reflected in coverage on homelessness.

By empowering media with facts and guidelines for reporting on homelessness, human rights can be better protected, and the public interest can be better served.

THE RIGHT TO HOUSING

Article 25 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* recognizes housing as a human right:

"Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, **housing** and medical care and necessary social services"

In Canada, the right to housing became law with the passage of the *National Housing Strategy Act* in June 2019.

According to the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate Housing, a State is violating international human rights law if any significant part of its population is deprived of access to basic shelter or housing.

People experiencing homelessness should be recognized and supported as rights claimants, rather than portrayed as criminals or stereotypes.

CAUSES OF HOMELESSNESS

Each person has a unique story to tell. In that sense, there are as many causes of homelessness as there are people experiencing it.

In general, the most common causes for a person's first experience of homelessness are:

- Family or relationship breakdown
- Disabilities, including mental health and substance use disorders
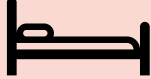- Evictions and poverty

Most individuals who experience homelessness find themselves without a home for the first time as youth, between the ages of 18-20 years old.

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TYPES OF HOMELESSNESS

Unsheltered: Sleeping outside, in tents, bus shelters, cars, doorways or empty buildings. 5-15% of homelessness

Emergency Sheltered: Staying in emergency shelters for adults, youth or family violence. 10-30% of homelessness

Provisionally Accommodated: Staying in transitional housing, hotels, motels, hostels, jails, hospitals, or "couch surfing" with family or friends, without any long-term agreement or plan. 60-80% of homelessness

At Risk: Living in housing that is too expensive, crowded or unsafe. 3-20X the total number of those experiencing homelessness

Many people experience **multiple types** of homelessness

"Homelessness in this city is a sickness. I don't care what anybody says, the system has failed. They keep tearing my camp down, making me move, but they don't give me a place to go."

– Kyle Landry to CTV, December 12, 2019

"It felt like I was invisible. I felt like I wasn't even a person… People didn't acknowledge me… I never acknowledged homeless people until I was homeless myself, but now I will never forget."

-Delaphine Bittern to the Free Press, March 23, 2020

INDIGENOUS HOMELESSNESS

Colonizing systems have been imposed on Indigenous peoples' relationships to land and housing. In Canada, reserve and scrip systems, forced migrations, residential schools, Sixties Scoop and CFS policies have led to Indigenous peoples' experiences of homelessness.

Jesse Thistle's *Definition of Indigenous Homelessness in Canada* identifies it as the outcome of historical and ongoing settler colonization and racism, that has displaced and dispossessed First Nations, Métis and Inuit Peoples from their traditional governance systems and laws, territories, histories, worldviews, ancestors and stories.

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DO:

- **Use Person-First language:** e.g., "people experiencing homelessness" or "person living without a home"

- **Separate the Issues:** homelessness, substance use, panhandling and other issues are distinct and often unrelated situations people experience

- **Identify Strengths:** people experiencing homelessness are resourceful and collaborative, and are the experts on homelessness

- **Include the Voices of those with Lived and Living Experience:** include the first-hand experience of those without a home, rather than relying only on government or academic voices

- **Look at the System:** contextualize individuals' experiences and stories within the colonizing and social systems that impact their lives

- **Identify Solutions:** highlight measures that can prevent and end homelessness, such as affordable housing, supports for families, accessibility, or mental health and harm reduction services

DON'T:

- **Do not define people by their circumstances:** e.g., "homeless person" or "the homeless"

- **Do not Stigmatize People:** Do not label people who are coping with a violation of their basic right to housing as "addicts" or "criminals"

- **Do Not Focus on Vulnerabilities:** describing people as "vulnerable" or "at risk" can be paternalistic and condescending. When needed, identify specific risks or harms people face

- **Do not Tokenize or Sensationalize those with Lived and Living Experience:** do not interview individuals who are in a state of crisis or intoxication, or share sensitive personal details

- **Do Not Blame the Individual:** focusing on a person's choices or mistakes does not offer insight into the limited range of options society may have presented them with

- **Do Not Portray Homelessness as Inevitable:** homelessness has very specific social and economic causes and is a relatively recent historical phenomenon. Do not suggest that homelessness "has always existed" or is too complex to solve.

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SOURCES AND RESOURCES

- The Universal Declaration of Human Rights:
  - https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/

- United Nations OHCHR: Annual Reports – Adequate Housing:
  - https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Housing/Pages/AnnualReports.aspx

- National Housing Strategy Act:
  - https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/N-11.2/FullText.html

- Canadian Definition of Homelessness:
  - https://www.homelesshub.ca/sites/default/files/COHhomelessdefinition.pdf

- Definition of Indigenous Homelessness in Canada:
  - https://www.homelesshub.ca/IndigenousHomelessness

- Framing homelessness for the Canadian public: the news media and homelessness:
  - https://www.homelesshub.ca/resource/framing-homelessness-canadian-public-news-media-and-homelessness

- Homelessness Coverage in Major Canadian Newspapers, 1987 – 2007:
  - https://www.cjc-online.ca/index.php/journal/article/view/2417/2845

- Winnipeg Street Census 2018 Final Report:
  - http://streetcensuswpg.ca/2018-census/

- 2018 Winnipeg Street Health Survey Final Report:
  - https://endhomelessnesswinnipeg.ca/2018-winnipeg-street-health-survey-report/

- Connecting the Circle: A Gender-Based Strategy to End Homelessness in Winnipeg:
  - https://wcwrc.ca/connecting-the-circle/

- Here and Now: the Winnipeg Plan to End Youth Homelessness:
  - http://www.hereandnowwinnipeg.ca/

- The 10-Year Plan to End Homelessness in Winnipeg:
  - https://endhomelessnesswinnipeg.ca/our-mandate/