

HOMELESSNESS: CANADA'S MEAN STREETS

Introduction

The newspaper headlines in the fall of 1998 were disturbing: "Homeless suffer higher suicide risk, study finds." "Homelessness called growing shame." "Births up among homeless women." "Civilized society feared at risk." "Homelessness a national disaster." Homeless people living on the streets or panhandling for money are found in the downtown core of any major city in Canada, but has a national disaster occurred? Is civilized society in Canada at risk? In the leaner, meaner Canada of 1998, homelessness—an all too vague term for most people, but a cruel reality for too many others—has indeed become a major national issue.

The statistics are as disturbing as the headlines. As of October 1998, there were at least 200 000 homeless people in Canada—people literally without homes, people with no private spaces in which to live, people existing from day to day, 24 hours a day, in public places. And the situation is getting worse. In Toronto, front-line workers report two to four deaths each week of homeless people. The Mayor's Task Force on Homelessness estimates that another 80 000 people in Toronto are at risk of becoming homeless in the near future as a result of overcrowding of existing shelters, substandard housing that they will eventually have to leave, and—for others—simply not having enough money to pay the rent. In Vancouver, social workers report that the spread of HIV infection is a direct result not only of prostitution and drug abuse but of homelessness itself, an interconnected and self-perpetuating relationship. In Montreal, the suicide rate among young street people is 12 times higher than that of young people who have homes. And in Calgary, about half the city's homeless population of 3800 are actually employed but cannot find affordable housing. Making matters worse, not only do homeless people suffer from a

poverty cycle, but they also face discrimination that hinders efforts to improve their situation. They are often stereotyped as being lazy and an unnecessary burden on society, as actually preferring life on the street to any other option, or—perhaps the cruelest misconception—as somehow being people who "deserve" to be homeless.

There is, however, a growing, troubled awareness that in our own country, rated by the United Nations as one of the best countries in the world in which to live, there is a conspicuous discrepancy: poor people without homes. For many of us, having more than one television, more than one telephone, more than one car is not unusual. We probably don't consider ourselves "wealthy" and yet, in terms of the most basic need—a home—200 000 Canadians have no wealth at all.

As media coverage of homelessness has increased, private organizations have also increased their efforts to help those sleeping on the streets, sometimes in very simple ways, like providing blankets. Volunteers continue to serve in soup kitchens and participate in many other outreach programs for the homeless. However, in a political climate of rationalization and downsizing of social services, governments disagree as to who is responsible for the homeless, raising the fundamental question of the role of the state as opposed to the role of private and corporate citizens in fulfilling our social responsibility to the poor. Municipalities argue they are short of funds for social welfare programs because provincial governments have slashed spending. Provinces argue they have no money because of cuts in transfer payments from the federal government. Meanwhile, according to a report by the Centre for Social Justice at York University in Toronto, the gap between rich and poor in this country is widening despite increased economic growth in Canada. And for the homeless, winter has descended on our mean streets.

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"Child Poverty: A Growing Disgrace," February 1994

"Ontario Turns Right: Harris Hits Hard," September 1995

"Canada's Mood: The New Pessimism," February 1996

"Health-Care Cuts: Operating With Less," February 1996

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HOMELESSNESS: CANADA'S MEAN STREETS

A Human Face

Assumptions

Before you watch this **News In Review** report, make notes as indicated below:

- Describe the mental image you see when you hear the term homeless person.
- Record the reasons why you believe people end up homeless.
- Estimate the number of homeless people in Canada.

Eye Contact

Now, as you watch the video, make notes on the following groups of people shown in the video. Suggest the specific risks they face.

- former mental patients
- aboriginal people
- the "invisible" homeless
- "squeegee kids"

Worth Considering

After viewing, discuss your findings with your classmates. How did your original assumptions correlate with the information you recorded from the video? What new information about the homeless did you learn from the video?

A New Mindset, A New Direction

In the video, you learned that homelessness is increasing. At the same time, you have heard that the gap between the rich and the poor in Canada is also growing. The fact that some people have so much and others have so little is seen as unacceptable by many Canadians. People who are concerned about homelessness argue that a country as wealthy as Canada should be able to solve this problem. Many social critics suggest that finding a solution requires,

first and foremost, the will and the determination to do so. Why is a collective will important? As you watch the video a second time, record the opinions and suggestions of the people listed below. How does each represent the will to overcome this important social problem?

- Dr. Tom Waters, Strathcona Mental Health Team
- Barbara Nahwegahbow, Anishnawbe Health Centre
- Anne Golden, Chair of the Mayor's Homelessness Task Force (Toronto)
- Mel Lastman, Mayor of Toronto
- Clayton Ruby, Lawyer

The Social Contract

Review your notes and decide what you think are the crucial issues involved in the problem of homelessness. Do you feel Canada as a nation can "afford" to solve this problem? To what extent do you think that individual Canadians or Canadian society as a whole has a legal obligation to help the homeless? What are our moral obligations?

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Defining a National Disaster

In early October 1998 the headlines declared "Homelessness a national disaster." Anti-poverty groups and Toronto Mayor Mel Lastman agreed that the problem of homelessness in Toronto had to be declared a national emergency so that all three levels of government—federal, provincial, and municipal—could work together to solve the problem. But on what grounds could homelessness be declared a national emergency? Cathy Crowe, a "street nurse" and head of the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee, argued in an opinion piece in *The Toronto Star* that the homelessness issue is an even bigger problem than the 1998 ice storm in Eastern Ontario and Quebec, an event that was declared a national disaster when 4 000 000 people were left without power. As you read paraphrased points of comparison below made by Cathy Crowe, decide for yourself if homelessness should be declared a national emergency. Is it simply a question of the number of people affected?

1. During the ice storm the government had hydro workers working around- the-clock to ensure that electricity was restored as quickly as possible. For the homeless, the luxury of electricity does not exist, and many homeless people die every winter.

2. During the ice storm, people were housed temporarily in emergency shelters. Most wanted to return to their own homes quickly, as they found the conditions of shelters intolerable: overcrowded, smelly, loud, and tense. For the homeless, the emergency shelter stay is not temporary. Many homeless people have been in shelters for five to 20 years.

3. During the ice storm, relief efforts included sending public health nurses into emergency shelters to help people

deal with the emotional trauma of congregate (group) living, and the elderly or very ill who were unable to tolerate shelter conditions were moved to hospitals. No such services are provided for the homeless.

4. After the ice storm, some government compensation was provided for suffering and loss. For the homeless, no such compensation exists. In fact, the funding that had been directed toward the homeless in the past has been reduced. In Ontario, welfare rates have been reduced by 21.6 per cent since the Conservatives were elected in June 1995.

On October 8, 1998, the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee, consisting of housing experts, academics, church people, front-line health and community workers, AIDS activists, and formerly homeless people, released a report calling for immediate short-term "rescue" measures and the "one per cent solution." This would direct an additional one per cent of all three government budgets to housing. As Cathy Crowe said, "After all, in a real disaster, people are returned to their homes."

Follow-up Discussion

What is your opinion on the proposed "one per cent solution"? Discuss with your classmates where this one per cent increase could come from at each government level. For example, should the federal government cut defence spending by one per cent?

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A National Problem

A great deal of media coverage focuses on homelessness in large urban centres, especially Toronto. Toronto is perhaps the key case study because it has the greatest number of homeless people, and Toronto-based groups such as the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee have received much media attention for challenging governments to declare homelessness a national disaster.

Homelessness, they point out, is not just a problem in Toronto; it affects all the major cities across Canada. As you read the following information, consider why the reality of homelessness is a complex national issue.

Street Kids in Montreal

Some people believe that "squeegee kids" lead an easy life, making quick money by cleaning car windshields and then choosing to spend the proceeds however they like. Street kids, however, are often trapped in their situation. They live without a fixed address or running water. Many of them are struggling with drug abuse, depression, and poverty so great that nearly one-quarter of them resort to selling sex for food or shelter. The reality of life on the streets for these young people was chronicled in a study released September 1998 by Montreal public-health officials.

The study found that street youth are 12 times more likely to die than their peers. It also stated that 40 per cent of them are already injecting drugs on the street and another 10 per cent begin injecting each year. Street kids report being very aware of the health risks of injecting cocaine or heroine, and most try to reduce the chances of becoming addicted by only carrying a few needles at a time. However, despite these precautions they often end up re-using the needles they have. The study also found that 38 per cent of the young people interviewed said they had entertained suicidal thoughts in the past year, and around 34 per cent had already tried to kill themselves.

The Working Homeless in Calgary

Calgary has a booming economy and jobs are plentiful. Ironically, there is almost no housing available for the newly employed. In June, Shawn McLennan flew from British Columbia to Calgary to start a new life. He was able to find work as soon as he arrived but for his first six weeks he had to sleep on a river bank in a park, averaging four hours of sleep a night. After that, he was able to obtain a bed in a transition shelter for the homeless, where he is currently living. He is trying to save enough money for a first and last month's rent, a damage deposit, and utility hookups, all of which are required of renters in Alberta.

In 1997, when Calgary's economic boom was just beginning, it was estimated that half the city's 3800 homeless people were actually employed people. In response, the city converted one of the houses it owned downtown into a temporary residence for the working homeless. Restricted to men who have full-time, permanent jobs, they pay only a few dollars a week to live there, allowing them to scrape together the \$1500 to \$3000 required to get a rental unit in the city. By August of 1998, 75 men had moved through the house, and there are lineups for those who want to get into the house.

The Alberta provincial government no longer requires subsidized housing units to be built in the province. As a result, whereas construction is booming, only single-family homes are being built. In the first half of 1998, over 4900 single-family homes were constructed, but only 20 rental apartment units were constructed. This, in turn, has forced rents up an average of 11 per cent and out of reach for the lowest earners.

Halifax

Adsum House is a temporary emergency shelter for homeless and transient women (16 years and over) and their children. Ad sum is a Latin phrase that can be translated as "I am here." The only shelter of its kind in Maritime Canada, Adsum House provides shelter, food, and clothing, and gives the women an opportunity to stabilize their lives under the guidance of dedicated and skilled staff and volunteers. It can accommodate up to 18 women and children at any one time. Everyone, including staff, residents, and volunteers contribute to the daily upkeep of the house. Approximately 60 volunteers give generously of their talents to help in the daily operation of the facility and to participate on administrative committees. Current statistics indicate that every day another woman becomes homeless within the Metro Halifax area. Adsum House is typical of the many shelters providing assistance

to the needy across Canada, shelters that are run almost entirely by volunteers.

Follow-up Discussion

1. To what extent is the problem of homelessness one that should be solved by governments or non-government organizations and individuals? If we deem homelessness a national disaster how does this affect the division of responsibility between private, public, and governmental organizations in terms of solving the problem?

2. Why do you think some people are willing to give of their own time to help in shelters? What types of personal qualities would these people have?

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Why So Many?

Although there have always been a certain number of homeless people in Canada, there has been a significant increase in the number of people that now find themselves without any place to live. As well, it is no longer rare to find among the homeless entire families, teenagers, and single-parent (primarily female) families. This is a significant change. Most anti-poverty advocates and a number of economists argue that the increase in homelessness is a direct result of cuts to government spending within Canada. Although any major social problem is complex, social commentators do point to specific factors that affect the extent and seriousness of the problem. As you read the following information, consider how each of these factors affects homelessness.

Cuts to Social (Subsidized) Housing

Colin Vaughan, a reporter on politics and urban affairs for Toronto's CITY-TV, states that the homeless became much more visible in Toronto after governments abandoned the social housing field. Jean Chrétien's federal government stopped funding to social housing in 1993, and the Ontario government, under Mike Harris's Progressive Conservative Party, followed suit in 1995. Up until then, an average of 2100 affordable housing units had been built in Toronto every year. As tenants moved into those units, the low-cost accommodation they previously occupied became available for those still on the waiting list. In effect, two units were being provided for the price of one. But since the government cutbacks, no social housing has been built in the city of Toronto. As a result, the low-income tenants are staying put, units are no longer recycled, and the neediest end up on the street.

Removal of Rent Controls

It has been suggested that another factor that has contributed to the increase in homelessness is an increase

in rental prices. Shortly after they were elected, the Progressive Conservative Party removed rent controls in Ontario. Rent controls place a limit on how much landlords can increase the rent from year to year. As a result of the rent controls being removed, some low-income families found that their rents increased faster than their incomes, and they were evicted from their homes. Anne Golden, the Chair of the Mayor's Homelessness Task Force, also estimated in October 1998 that 80 000 people in Toronto alone are in danger of becoming homeless this year because of large increases in rents.

Cuts to Welfare

In addition to the elimination of social housing, the Ontario government has also made substantial cuts to the welfare system in the province. Since 1995 welfare rates (the amount received by a recipient) have been cut 21.6 per cent . The government points out that even with these cuts, welfare recipients in Ontario still receive the highest welfare payments in the country. Social Services Minister Janet Ecker has stated these cuts are actually "good" for the homeless because it forces more people off welfare and into paying jobs. Anti-poverty activists agree that fewer people are on welfare, but they disagree that those people have moved into paying jobs. They say those people are now living on the streets. Furthermore, they criticize the cuts and the government's arguments, pointing out that Ontario is the most expensive province in Canada in which to live, and that is why welfare rates are higher.

Intergovernmental Conflict

One of the reasons it is difficult for the homeless problem to be solved quickly is because the issue involves the jurisdiction of three levels of government. For example, money for shelter allowances and rent supplements, housing conversion and new construction, and funding for support services all come from separate areas of government. Critics suggest that in order for permanent progress to occur, the governments must agree that homelessness is a priority, and therefore agree collectively to divert appropriate funds as per their individual mandates. These same critics say this is not yet happening.

Ontario Premier Mike Harris continues to argue that the provincial government does not have a role to play in solving the homelessness problem. Indeed, in a speech in Hamilton on October 9, 1998, Harris questioned whether the situation was a crisis at all. "I don't know whether it's a national state of emergency at this point of time. I don't know whether it's any worse than last year. I can tell you that there are far more jobs and far more people working,

and the food bank, I think in August, announced that food bank usage was down 10 per cent this year over last as a result of a booming economy in Toronto." The province declined to participate in the Homelessness Task Force, headed by Anne Golden, and instead produced its own report in October 1998 that assigns responsibility for homelessness to municipalities. The Ontario government's report also called on Ottawa to offer tax incentives for building low-cost rental housing in the province, and accuses the federal government of costing Ontario \$80-million a year in welfare money because of delays in dealing with refugee claimants, many of whom are forced to live in hostels.

In an attempt to get the attention of the federal government, in October 1998 Toronto Mayor Mel Lastman challenged Prime Minister Chrétien to visit the city's streets. Chrétien responded by saying he would wait for Anne Golden's report to be released before he would accept Lastman's invitation. A spokesperson for the Prime Minister stated, however, that the Prime Minister recognizes the problem of homelessness in urban centres. Ottawa has already provided \$300 000 for the Golden study and is considering establishment of a cabinet committee to look at alternatives. As well, in November 1998 the federal government turned over two federal buildings to the City of Toronto to be used as homeless shelters.

It has been Mel Lastman, Mayor of Toronto, who has become the loudest advocate for the homeless in his city. Some find this ironic because during the mayoral election campaign he caused an uproar when he stated that there were no homeless people in Toronto. Since he has been mayor, however, Lastman seems to have accepted and admitted there is a problem. He created a Homelessness Task Force in January of 1998, and he joined the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee in declaring homelessness a national disaster in October 1998.

Discussion

Although cuts in government spending may have created an increase in homelessness, some social commentators and financial experts claim that society will benefit from these spending cuts because it will lead to a stronger economy with a larger tax base from which social programs can be funded. With reference to this point of view, discuss the short-term versus long-term implications of the homelessness problem.

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Perception and Misconception

Some observers say that one of the reasons the problem of homelessness in Canada's major cities is not improving is because misconceptions interfere with a true understanding of the problem, thus making it more difficult to organize effective strategies that combine the efforts of private organizations, governments, and the public at large. Anne Golden, Chair of the Toronto Homelessness Task Force, has been gathering information about the reality of the homelessness situation in Canada's largest city and has identified the misconceptions listed below. Before you read the following information, consider how people often talk about homeless people.

Misconception: Most homeless people are males suffering from mental illness and/or substance abuse

According to Golden's research, while two-thirds of homeless people are male and one-third female, the fastest growing segment of the homeless population is women and children. In fact, single mothers head 37 per cent of homeless families. The demand for family hostels has gone up by 123 per cent since 1992. For most of these people, the reason they are living on the streets or in shelters is not because of mental illness or drugs, but because of poverty and lack of safety at home.

Misconception: With strong economic growth, the homelessness problem will resolve itself.

According to the data Golden gathered, the direct opposite is true. For the first time in the 20th century we are seeing rising poverty and rising homelessness at the same time that economic prosperity is increasing. In 1996 the poverty rate for all Canadians rose to 17.6 per cent and to more than 20 per cent for children. In Toronto, the child poverty rate is 36 per cent. Not only are there more poor today, but those who are poor are getting poorer. Between 1990 and

1995 average incomes in Toronto fell by 12.5 per cent, and one in four Toronto families now lives below the poverty line. There is also a greater number of people in Toronto who are being evicted. In fact, there has been a 78 per cent increase in evictions from 1992 to 1997. With the waiting list for social housing averaging around eight to 10 years, it is likely that more renters will end up on the street when they cannot make their payments.

Furthermore, in mid-October, a report released by the Centre for Social Justice in Toronto identified a large and growing gap between rich and poor in Canada that economic growth is not helping to narrow. For example, in 1971 the wealthiest 10 per cent of families made 21 times more than the poorest 10 per cent of families. By 1996, the top 10 per cent were making 314 times more than the poorest 10 per cent. In addition, the average salary for a corporate executive rose 13 per cent from 1995 to 1997. Over the same three years, workers' wages rose no more than two per cent, less than the rate of inflation. And finally, the average family with children under 18 suffered a \$4000 decline in real income between 1989 and 1996, and the percentage of families with middle class incomes shrank from 60 per cent to 44 per cent.

Misconception: There are plenty of services available to meet the needs of the homeless.

Right now there are approximately 5000 homeless people in Toronto. Each night about 4500 of them find space to sleep in one of the cities shelters, but over 500 will not be able to find a bed. It is those people who end up sleeping on the streets, in parks, and in abandoned buildings. The shelters that do exist are seriously overcrowded and they are often very unpleasant.

Misconception: Homelessness is primarily Toronto's problem.

Although Toronto has the greatest number of homeless people in Canada, many of the city's homeless are not actually from Toronto, or even from Ontario. In fact, a recent report showed that 47 per cent of all the homeless in Toronto in the past nine years come from outside Toronto and 14 per cent from outside the country. Many of them have come looking for jobs and to take advantage of special services. And Toronto itself has been hindered in its ability to deal with the homelessness crisis because of decisions made at the federal and provincial government levels. For example, both the federal and provincial governments have withdrawn from social housing

construction.

Follow-up Discussion

How do the perceptions and misconceptions of Canadians toward the issue of homelessness affect how the issue is dealt with? Suggest specific ways, both on an individual level and in a larger social context, in which misconceptions hinder effective problem-solving of the issue of homelessness.

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No One I Know

It is easy to become desensitized to an issue like homelessness. It may seem like a hopeless or very distasteful situation to us personally, something we have difficulty dealing with emotionally. We may also feel distanced from it because it seems so far removed from our own experience. Of course, if any of us has been personally touched by homelessness, or know of someone who has become homeless, then it is much easier to understand the issues. For one of the individuals below, homelessness was just a temporary experience. For the other, however, it has become a continual way of life. While reading these profiles, think about why putting a name, a personality, and a human face to the issue of homelessness may be the first important step in solving the problem.

Rich Arsenault

Arsenault started living on the streets of Halifax as a teenager after leaving his Micmac reserve. A year later he and some high school friends moved to Toronto to look for work. "We wanted to find work here and we really thought that we would. Living on the street never really came to mind. But all of a sudden, that's where we were." At that time, police were not very tolerant of "vagrants" living on the streets so Arsenault spent a lot of time being chased by police. Eventually, a pair of Toronto police officers took an interest in Arsenault and helped him to apply to the police academy. Arsenault's application was successful, and he became a police officer. After working his way through the ranks of the force he spent 13 years with the Emergency Task Force, and is now part of the force's aboriginal unit. Although he could have retired five years ago, he continues working because he finds it so rewarding. And he still credits the two officers who took the time to take an interest in him. "They would just talk to me and treat me like a person. When you're on the street, you lose your self-esteem. I needed someone who could tell me I was going

to make it." And he did.

Daniel Hepworth

Hepworth, known to his friends as Stone, was a bartender and successful dancer who worked throughout Ontario and Florida. He was also married and the proud father of a little boy. However, the scars of an abusive childhood and a series of deaths in the family eventually drove him to "the bottle" and he soon ended up in jail. He became addicted to crack cocaine, and his problems escalated, resulting in his being in and out of jail more than 25 times. He is now divorced and has been living off and on at a shelter for the homeless in Toronto this past year. Hepworth believes things are starting to look up for him. For the past four months he says he has stayed clear of both alcohol and drugs. Although he has not worked regularly for two years, Hepworth has found odd jobs. He hopes to use his savings from odd jobs to move from the shelter into an apartment of his own. He also hopes to work for a theatre company, perhaps as a set builder, and also wants to go back to school to study sociology. He says, "I just want to contribute to society [from which] I've taken so much."

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Short-term, Long-term

Solving any major social problem involves balancing short-term and long-term strategies. During the summer of 1998, city officials in Toronto warned that existing shelter space in the city would not be adequate to handle the demand from those seeking shelter in the coming winter. There were simply not enough beds for all those who would need them. The long-term goal of the Toronto Mayor's Homelessness Task Force is to reduce homelessness; but this fundamental part of its mandate will not be an easy task. Unfortunately, the task force will not be issuing its complete report until late December or early January, and that will be too late for the homeless people currently living on the streets.

Immediate Relief Needed

Another group, the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee has called on the federal government to declare homelessness a national emergency. Such a declaration would empower all levels of government to mobilize their resources and tackle the problem immediately. In addition to declaring homelessness a national emergency, the group also wants the following to occur:

- All governments should begin work immediately on a new national homelessness relief and prevention strategy that includes reopening and maintaining services for the homeless. At least one homeless drop-in centre in downtown Toronto was closed last summer as a result of neighbourhood opposition.
- Adequate social assistance benefits should be reinstated. (The group argues that Ontario's 21.6 per cent welfare cut in 1995 has severely limited recipients' ability to afford Toronto rents.)
- Suitable public buildings should be made available as emergency shelters, or hostels and

parks should be allowed to serve as temporary refuges with tents, mobile homes, and bathhouses.

- Emergency medical relief should be provided, including clinics, outreach workers, infirmaries, screening, and immunization, nutrition, and hygiene programs.
- Emergency funding should be granted immediately to community organizations helping the homeless.
- The amount of money spent on housing at all levels of government should be doubled from one per cent to two per cent of their total budgets. (This would pour an additional \$3.8-billion into housing programs nationally.)
- Stable, long-term funding should be provided to social benefits and services as well as to crisis shelters and aid agencies

Converting Existing Buildings

Other groups and individuals have proposed a variety of short-term solutions to deal with the current crisis. One proposal is to convert the currently closed Doctor's Hospital in downtown Toronto. This building is well-equipped to function as a shelter as there is a toilet in each two-bedroom room, as well as showers and a kitchenette on each floor. Although the government wants to sell the hospital and have the land redeveloped, it has agreed to open the hospital to the homeless on December 1, 1998, and allow it to function as a shelter until April 1999.

Returning the Homeless to their Rural Roots

Seaton House Annex in downtown Toronto is the only city shelter that does not confiscate alcohol at the door. This policy was created so the shelter could lure in out of the cold the hard-core homeless men who shun the strict rules in shelters. As a result, Seaton House has homeless people under its roof who are some of the most difficult to serve. In an effort to break the cycle of substance abuse and homelessness that plague their clients, the shelter has drafted a proposal to move about 20 of these homeless men back to the rural setting from which many of them came. Shelter workers believe that the men would function much better in an atmosphere where they are far away from the temptations of downtown street life and where they would work in agriculture, growing vegetables and fruit and caring for unwanted animals.

Although such a special-use farm would be expensive—about three times the cost of the Annex for each homeless

man—the hostel workers believe it would save hundreds of thousands of dollars in police, court, ambulance, and hospital time that the most troublesome men cost society each year. For example, one 33-year-old man who is an occasional Seaton House resident has lived as a chronic alcoholic on the street since the age of 15. In the past year, he was picked up every week for public drunkenness, emergency services have been alerted 54 times, and he has spent considerable time in detoxification centres. The Annex report estimates he costs society about \$150 000 a year.

Discussion

Despite the fact that there are not enough beds available to house every Canadian who is homeless, one neighbourhood was able to successfully lobby the government to close a shelter they did not want in their community. Psychologists call this type of behaviour the "not in my backyard (NIMBY) syndrome." People may feel badly about a situation but not want to do anything about it if it means they themselves are inconvenienced. Some urban planners have argued that if home owners want to live in an area that is free of "questionable" properties like shelters and group homes, then the neighbourhood should automatically be designated an "A" area, and those homeowners should have to pay much higher property taxes than home owners in other neighbourhoods. Discuss the validity and implications of this proposal.

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Discussion, Research, and Essay Questions

1. Conduct research into the homelessness situation that may exist in your own community. What are the numbers? What services are available for these people? Who provides these services? Where does the funding come from? What level of government is responsible for these agencies? What do the workers providing these services think needs to be done to solve the homelessness problem in your community?

2. Prepare brief position statements in reaction to each of the following proposed solutions to the homelessness problem in Canada:

- (a) increased welfare payments
- (b) building more public housing
- (c) diverting Employment Insurance surplus funds to employment and training for the homeless
- (d) increasing the percentage of government spending on housing by one per cent at all levels
- (e) providing more day-care spaces so that single mothers have the opportunity to find steady employment
- (f) providing more shelters for battered women so they have the opportunity to leave abusive relationships without ending up homeless.

 3. Calculating the number of people in Canada who are poor is currently determined by a family's income level. If a family's income falls below the Low Income Cutoff, an amount established by Statistics Canada and which varies according to the jurisdiction, then the family is considered

to be in poverty. How would you determine whether a person or family is living in poverty? What factors would you need to consider? To answer this question, conduct research at the Statistics Canada Web site, at www.statcan.ca/start.html.

➤ 4. The United Nations Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights has recently issued a report criticizing Canada's treatment of the poor, saying we have not ensured that Canadians enjoy economic and social rights guaranteed by a UN covenant to which Ottawa is a signatory. The report suggests that Canada is not taking care of citizens living at the low end of the economic spectrum and points to "crisis" levels of homelessness, skyrocketing usage of food banks, deep cuts to welfare rates, and inadequate funding for battered women's shelters. The report, released in Geneva on Friday, December 4, said, "The committee is gravely concerned that such a wealthy country as Canada has allowed the problem of homelessness and inadequate housing to grow to such proportions that the mayors of Canada's 10 largest cities have now declared homelessness a national disaster." Research this report in more depth and the reaction to it on the part of Canadian officials. As an individual Canadian, how do you think you could or should respond to this UN report? What could you possibly do?

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➤ Indicates material appropriate or adaptable for younger viewers.