


# HOMELESS IN CANADA

## Introduction

### Focus

Home, a place that shelters, a place to seek solace from societal pressures, and a place to call one's own, is a necessity that most Canadians take for granted. Yet for thousands of our citizens this haven does not exist. They must subsist on the barest of resources they can create for themselves or get from the diminishing services provided by local governments and charitable organizations. This report investigates these citizens who are ignored for the most part by mainstream Canadians or negatively labeled and often stereotyped. These people are variously called bag ladies, street people, vagrants, hobos, winos, drifters, panhandlers, squeegee kids, and worse. However, they truly only share two terms: *homeless* and *marginalized*.

 Sections marked with this symbol indicate content suitable for younger viewers.

“Mid pleasures and palaces though we may roam  
Be it ever so humble, there's no place like home”

— J.H. Payne, composer, from the opera *Clari, Maid of Milan*, 1823

Homelessness infrequently enters the headlines, typically around Thanksgiving and Christmas, or when relatively affluent citizens feel encroached upon by requests for money. Homelessness made different types of headlines recently, when marginalized people and their supporters protested forced evictions in Toronto and Vancouver. In both cities, homeless people had “squatted” (occupied) vacant pieces of private property as places to create shelter. In Toronto, homeless people had constructed rough huts on the property owned—ironically—by Home Depot. Over a period of three years, roughly 100 residents lived in this area, dubbed “Tent City.” In Vancouver, the homeless and their advocates occupied a former department store owned by the provincial government and empty for nine years. The occupation was made in an attempt to force the government to develop the site into a shelter for the homeless. In both cases, the residents were forcefully removed.

These incidents revealed to the general public what homeless advocates had long recognized: that homelessness is on the increase in Canada. The highest estimates range up to 100 000, while the lowest hover around 40 000. The

reasons for the increase have been attributed to fiscal cutbacks, public lethargy, a decrease in affordable housing, or government inaction. Government officials and their supporters dispute the severity of the problem, blaming the issue to a degree on incorrect statistics and the resistance of the homeless themselves.

Indeed, simply counting a population with no fixed address is difficult. Many of the homeless are suspicious of the intentions of a census, and others simply cannot be found. Some of the homeless in big cities resist official programs because they fear for their safety in government-run shelters, or are excluded because they have substance abuse problems. For all of the homeless, retaining their dignity is a primary concern. The actions in Toronto and Vancouver represented marginalized people attempting to solve the problem of homelessness on their own.

Regardless of what or who is responsible for homelessness, the issue is approaching the crisis stage across Canada. When the stories of occupations and evictions have faded from the headlines, the homeless will still be there looking for shelter.

### Responding

1. What is a “home”?
2. What must be included in a definition of *home*?
3. What are the minimal requirements for a home?
4. Describe encounters you have had with the homeless.

# HOMELESS IN CANADA

## *Video Review*

Watch the video and respond to the questions on this and the following page.

1. Describe the area called "Tent City" in Toronto.

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2. Approximately how many people lived there? \_\_\_\_\_

3. Describe how it was shut down.

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4. List some of the reasons provided in the video for closing down Tent City.

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5. How did the residents and their supporters protest their eviction?

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6. In Vancouver, from what building were the homeless evicted?

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7. Why did the homeless and their supporters occupy the building?

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8. How has the federal government been blamed for making the problem of homelessness worse?

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9. Where will the bulk of federal assistance money go?

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10. Fifty years ago, who was the average homeless Canadian?

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11. How has that changed today?

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12. What are some of the problems with municipal and provincial shelters for the homeless?

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## Discussion

Form small groups to discuss and summarize some of the issues raised by this *News in Review* program.

1. In what ways did Tent City in Toronto and the Woodworth building in Vancouver serve as "home" for the people involved? List some details that you saw.
2. Who is blaming whom for the state of homelessness in Canada? Who do you believe is most at fault? Why?
3. Barring money, what considerable problems face those who wish to combat homelessness? What do you believe should be the first step?

# HOMELESS IN CANADA

## *Identifying the Problem*

### Further Research

For more information see Connie Hargrave, "Homelessness in Canada," Share International, [www.shareintl.org/archives/homelessness/hi-ch\\_Canada.htm](http://www.shareintl.org/archives/homelessness/hi-ch_Canada.htm); or go to the Ottawa Inncercity Ministries Web site, "Homelessness in Canada: Part 1," [www.ottawainncercityministries.ca/homepage/homelessnessInCanada\\_Part1.htm](http://www.ottawainncercityministries.ca/homepage/homelessnessInCanada_Part1.htm)

### Did you know . . .

In 2001, a single person was defined as low-income if they made \$18 849 and lived in a city with a population greater than 500 000? A single person needed \$13 026 if they lived in a rural area. A family of four bringing in \$35 471 is considered low-income in a big city, while a rural family requires \$24 513. Go to the National Council of Welfare Web site at [www.ncwcnbes.net](http://www.ncwcnbes.net) to view the complete table.

Most government officials, social activists and researchers agree that homelessness is a serious national issue. However, there appears to be considerable debate over how it should be remedied, who has responsibility for the issue, or even how to determine the extent of the problem. Although it may seem obvious, there is disagreement among the interested parties as to what is meant by "homelessness." The issue is often divided into two broad categories: absolute and relative homelessness. Absolute homelessness refers to people who live on the street with no physical shelter. Relative homelessness refers to those people who live in substandard spaces that do not meet basic health and safety standards.

The numbers of homeless can vary depending on how the data are analyzed. Those who wish to minimize the problem, and hence the costs, prefer to use figures for the absolute homeless, that is, those people who are actually on the street. Activists who want to attack the problems at a broader level include those people who are in danger of ending up on the street.

According to Barbara Murphy, author of *On The Street: How We Created Homelessness*, even when the narrower definition is employed, there were 35 000 to 40 000 homeless people in Canada in the year 2000. This breaks down roughly this way: 10 000 people in the cities of Toronto and Montreal, approximately 5000 in Vancouver, and roughly 1000-2000 in cities like Edmonton, Calgary, Ottawa, Winnipeg, Hamilton, Halifax, Saskatoon, and Regina. Many small towns, some in

affluent suburban areas, also have homeless populations. Homelessness essentially affects all communities across Canada.

### Who Is at Risk?

The average homeless person today is a male in his early to mid-thirties, down from the age of nearly 50 in the 1950s. While males still form the majority of homeless people, the number of homeless women and children is increasing. Several factors can increase the likelihood of homelessness.

- **Poverty:** People who are unemployed or underemployed may not have the financial means to maintain adequate housing. Statistics Canada hesitates to define poverty by income, instead using the term "Low Income Cut-Offs." The average Canadian family spends roughly 36 per cent of its gross income on food, shelter, and clothing. Low-income is defined as those families who spend 56.2 per cent or more of their gross income on these necessities. The amount of money that a family needs to survive will vary from location to location in Canada due to the differences in the cost of living. It costs more, on average, to live in a city than it does in a rural community.
- **Social Assistance:** Those relying on Employment Insurance, welfare, workers' compensation or disability pensions often fall into the low-income bracket. The amount of money available to those on social assistance varies with the program and the province. For example, as of March 2001, 1.9 million Canadians were

officially listed as welfare recipients. In a recent *Toronto Star* article on welfare (Rachel Giese, "Welfare week payoff a painful reality check," October 14, 2002), a 40-year-old single mother with two dependents was described as being entitled to \$926 a month plus \$396 baby bonus for her two children. A part-time job earns her an additional \$160 to \$300 each month. Once her rent (\$900), food, clothing, transit and utilities are covered she has \$186 – \$326 left to cover all other expenses each month.

- **Aboriginal Ethnicity:** A study conducted by the Greater Vancouver Regional District ("Research Project on Homelessness in Greater Vancouver," July 2002) found that 15 per cent of Aboriginals residing within its boundaries were at risk of becoming homeless.
- **Disability:** In the same study, 13 per cent of those who were in danger of becoming homeless were disabled individuals who lived on their own.
- **Fixed Income:** This means that the

money received does not increase year to year or increases only at the inflation rate. Senior citizens who receive pensions would be an example.

- **Single Parents:** Many single parents fall below the low-income cutoff. The responsibility of raising children and maintaining a household reduces the chances of full employment or higher education or training. The majority of single parents are female.
- **Domestic Abuse:** Physical and mental abuse, sexual abuse, and lack of care are cited as risk factors for homelessness. Female spouses and children are most at risk in this category.
- **Substance Abuse:** Alcoholism and drug addiction are major risk factors. Those individuals with addictions divert necessary income toward their habits. They also have greater difficulty acquiring and holding jobs.
- **Mental Conditions/Syndromes:** Those individuals who have mild mental syndromes, but lack family support, may end up on the streets.

## Activities

In the Toronto region, 20 politicians, journalists, business people, and community welfare workers responded to a challenge by the Daily Food Bank called "Walking in the Shoes of Welfare" to experience life in the low-income bracket. The motivation for the simulation was for people to empathize with the plight of those living on limited means. The number of people using food banks in Toronto has risen to 155 000 per month from 115 000 in 1995. The amount provided for social assistance often does not cover the necessities, increasing the likelihood of people having to use food banks or losing their accommodations.

"Walking in the Shoes" was a one-week simulation that required participants to live at the welfare limit for the week. A single person was left with \$30 after food and housing costs were covered. A family of four was left with \$80. After mandatory deductions for items such as phone service (\$6.60) or laundry (\$2.00), one participant, a single man, was left with \$2.75 per day for the week. The reality of trying to meet rent and food costs, and coping with transportation to work and forgoing the luxuries such as a newspaper created stress and then desperation.

1. Go to the Daily Bread Food Bank's Web site at [www.dailybread.ca](http://www.dailybread.ca) and click on "events" to read the comments of participants. What information about their experience did you expect to see? What part of their experience surprised you?
2. Attempt the simulation yourself. Ensure that your whole family will attempt the exercise with you or at least does not let you "sponge" off them. On the Daily Food Bank's homepage, find the link at the bottom for the educational exercise. Download the booklet and read the instructions. Ask your teacher or family for assistance in calculating the amount of social assistance for which you are eligible.
3. Write a short report highlighting the financial difficulties you faced. In particular, what items or practices did you have to sacrifice? What was on your mind most often during this week? Would you or your family be able to survive? For how long? In what ways could living at this low income reduce the likelihood that you could achieve "success" in the future?

### **For Further Research and Consideration**

Why are groups such as Aboriginals or the disabled at greater risk than other Canadians? Choose one of the at-risk groups listed and research the issues facing it. What factors can you uncover that increase the threat of homelessness for individuals in that group?

# HOMELESS IN CANADA

## Point/Counterpoint

### Further Research

Unfortunately, homelessness may well be with us for some time yet to come. For more current information about the situation, consider visiting the Web sites of three of Canada's national television networks:

CBC – [www.cbc.ca](http://www.cbc.ca)

CTV – [www.ctv.ca](http://www.ctv.ca)

Global –

[www.canada.com](http://www.canada.com)

Homelessness is a contentious social and political issue that inspires considerable passion among Canadians. Some views are critical of government and business actions and inaction, while others are disparaging of the homeless themselves. Consider your reaction to the following viewpoints. Where do you stand on this issue?

“There’s nothing wrong with them that they can’t get out and get jobs. There’s too much given to them already.” — Leo Barkhouse, 72, citizen, commenting in a *Toronto Star* article on Tent City residents, Toronto, October 3, 2002

“I don’t think anybody wants to see anybody in the province of Ontario or anywhere in Canada, for that matter, living in a tent city. It’s a huge issue that we have to deal with not only as a provincial government, but I think it requires the co-operation of all three levels of government.” — Ontario Premier Ernie Eves, in *The Toronto Star*, May 8, 2002

“I think they (Home Depot) did it right, I think they did it properly, and I hope that no one will be hurt. That’s important, that nobody gets hurt. Home Depot has the right, as you or I, to have trespassers removed off their property.” — Toronto Mayor Mel Lastman, in *The Toronto Star*, September 25, 2002

“I’m shocked. There were real efforts being made to accommodate the needs of the people there in a way that wasn’t destructive to the community, and I

think simply evicting them, in the long run, isn’t very productive.” — Toronto councillor David Miller, in *The Toronto Star*, September 25, 2002

“Here is your sorry record when it comes to the homeless in Ontario. You gutted rent controls; you walked away from social housing; you broke your promise to bring in rent subsidies; you cut funding for addiction and mental health services; and you did all of this quite proudly while slashing welfare rates in Ontario.” — Ontario Liberal Leader Dalton McGuinty, in *The Toronto Star*, September 25, 2002

“We always get 101 different excuses why they wouldn’t rent to us: We don’t accept welfare. Or the places are just too much. I don’t want to live on the streets. I don’t want to live below anyone else. I want to be treated the same way anyone else would be treated.” — William Hooper, 30, homeless shelter resident in Toronto, in *The Toronto Star*, October 5, 2002

“We need affordable housing, that’s what we need. People shouldn’t need to rely on the state. They should be able to find housing that’s affordable to them somewhere in their community.” — Brad Duguid, Toronto city councillor and board member of Toronto Community Housing Corp., in *The Toronto Star*, October 5, 2002

“It’s a place for the homeless to feel they have a home; for those without families to be part of one; for all of us to hope and dream and prove we’re

alive.” — Angel, homeless person, commenting on the Woodward squat in Vancouver, in *The Toronto Star*, October 5, 2002

“It will be illegal to live in public places, on the streets and in the parks. Living on the streets is not an option. Call it tough love. I think we can, at the end of the day, virtually eliminate homelessness in the province of Ontario.” — Former Ontario finance minister Jim Flaherty outlining his policy during the Conservative leadership race, in *The Globe and Mail*, February 15, 2002

“It’s about time we outlawed homelessness. Once you become such a burden on society with your illnesses,

whether it be an addiction or a medical handicap, then you’ve given up some of your freedoms. They should be rounded up, cleaned up and put back to work in one way or another, just like the rest of us.

“It’s a better solution than giving them a welfare cheque and sending them back out on the street to continue with their addictions and illegal behaviours.” — Jordan Brookes, in *The Vancouver Province*, February 22, 2002

“I am not homeless, and the people who purport to speak for me in City Hall are liars. I have an alternative living choice. These advocates don’t represent me.” — Bonnie, resident of Tent City, Toronto, in *The Toronto Sun*, April 11, 2002

## To Do

1. Complete the chart entitled “Opinions on Homelessness” on the next page using the quotes above.
2. Which of the opinions expressed ideas that you had not considered before? Did they cause you to reconsider your opinion about homelessness? Why?
3. Write a draft of a letter to the editor that illustrates your feelings about the issue of homelessness. When peer-edited and corrected, consider sending your letter to a local newspaper. Ensure that your letter reflects information such as:
  - local issues
  - some statistics
  - some solutions

## Opinions About Homelessness

Commentator	Points raised about homelessness	My opinion/reaction
Leo Barkhouse		
Premier Ernie Eves		
Toronto Mayor Mel Lastman		
Councillor David Miller		
Liberal Leader Dalton McGuinty		
William Hooper		
Councillor Brad Duguid		
Angel		
Jim Flaherty		
Jordan Brookes		
Bonnie		

# HOMELESS IN CANADA

## **Tent City: A Case Study in Homelessness**

All Canadian cities have homeless citizens who attempt to survive by finding or creating shelters to protect themselves from the elements. Some cities have areas such as highway underpasses or vacant buildings that contain concentrations of homeless people who share in the difficulties of living rough. Toronto grabbed the national headlines in September when security guards and police moved in to close down one of Canada's largest homeless colonies, nicknamed "Tent City" by the press.

### **What Was Tent City?**

Tent City was a small parcel of land located in Toronto's port lands. The area consists of largely empty or dilapidated industrial sites, and is considered an eyesore by many Toronto residents. Ambitious plans have been outlined for the area, but it will first require billions of dollars of investment from all three levels of government to clean it up and remove soil contaminated with toxins and heavy metals. Tent City itself sat on the site of a former iron foundry now owned by the hardware giant Home Depot.

In 1998 squatters began to construct lean-tos. In November 2000, the Ontario Ministry of the Environment ordered the squatters evicted due to the heavy metal contamination. Advocates for the homeless defied the order by bringing in prefabricated shelters and aiding residents in the construction of huts. Home Depot posted notices asking residents to leave in December 2000, worrying about the liability they faced. It relented that month when the city announced it was searching for an alternative site.

In November 2001, Toronto city councillors approved a plan to establish a community of prefabricated houses on a site near the Tent City site. The houses would be 175-square-foot homes with chemical toilets. The residents would pay a mortgage of \$325 a month and eventually own their homes. This plan was scrapped when the federal port authority objected, stating that the land might one day be needed to unload heavy cargo.

On August 29, 2002, Home Depot was reported by *The Toronto Star* as

claiming that it would set up manufactured shelters on its site before winter. The company had joined forces with "Homes First," a non-profit agency to find shelter for the Tent City residents. This move was blocked by City Hall, which maintained that the land would have to go through a lengthy rezoning process in order for it to be used as an emergency shelter.

On September 24 security officers hired by Home Depot forced the squatters out of the site. Residents were given a strict time limit to remove their belongings, and a fence was constructed to prevent squatters from returning.

### **Life In Tent City**

By all accounts, Tent City was a dangerous place to call home. On top of the dangerous levels of arsenic and lead and other substances in the soil, there were no sanitation facilities available. The homeless population suffers from higher infection rates for common diseases. Diseases such as tuberculosis are also on the rise. The population of Tent City included those with substance abuse problems, ex-convicts, and individuals who suffered from psychological disorders. The police rarely went into the area, so justice tended to be of the street variety.

Despite these very real problems, residents and advocates referred to the area as a community. The modest huts and shacks were more secure and comfortable than alleys, doorways or highway underpasses around the city. Residents maintained that people watched out for one another's safety and belongings within Tent City. The fear of publicly run shelters is felt by

**Did you know . . .**

There is a Federal Co-ordinator on the Homeless? As of November 2002, the Honourable Claudette Bradshaw was in charge of federal efforts to reduce homelessness. The National Secretariat on Homelessness can be reached at [www21.hrdc-drhc.gc.ca/home/index\\_e.asp](http://www21.hrdc-drhc.gc.ca/home/index_e.asp)

One Toronto homeless person, Sally, stated in a 1997 study called "Homeless Voices": "No one knows the whole story and quite frankly, no one cares. All they see is a poorly dressed waste of life." (Toronto Healthy City Office, "Homeless Voices," 1997)

many of the homeless. They say that the shelters are overcrowded and carry the dangers of theft or violence.

There was also a sense of dignity at the site that was missing from the shelters and subsidized apartments offered by the government and non-profit organizations. Many shelters practice zero tolerance with respect to drugs and alcohol. Tent City represented an area where conditions for a roof over one's head would not be imposed. Some residents stated that they did not want government subsidies, but would rather live within their means outdoors.

**In Their Own Voices**

Negative stereotypes about street people abound. A bylaw restricting panhandling was passed in Toronto to prevent squeegee kids from approaching cars. The words *lazy*, *wino*, and *crazy* fly from people's mouths. News stories about the homeless barbecuing squirrels make the Toronto headlines, but never quite get substantiated. Even those who normally feel compassionate

about social issues often forget the human qualities of the homeless. It is difficult to see and hear the homeless when exploitive companies mass market videos entitled "Bum Fights," where street people are paid to punch and kick each other. (Sales of the tapes, as of August 2000, stood at 200 000.)

In Toronto, the Homeless Persons Outreach Project was established to provide a means for Toronto's homeless and impoverished to talk about their feelings and concerns. This is a group that normally is not asked its opinions, even when the policies or projects directly concern them. The traditional media typically quote politicians and advocates who, despite their intentions, end up speaking for the homeless. The messages of the homeless can be quite profound and moving when they finally are heard. For the majority of Canadians who do not work with organizations that deal with the homeless, it can be astounding to learn who they are and how difficult it is to try and extract themselves from the street.

**Activity**

Using the Internet, research the lives of the homeless using primarily the voices of the homeless. This can be challenging. One useful site is the Toronto Healthy City Office. Go to their Web site at [www.city.toronto.on.ca/healthycity/homeless\\_voices.htm](http://www.city.toronto.on.ca/healthycity/homeless_voices.htm). Download the "Homeless Voices" document. It contains information on the status of the homeless in Canada, but also pages of accounts written by the homeless themselves.

If time permits, you might consider creating a docudrama on the plight of the homeless, using their own words.

# HOMELESS IN CANADA

## Solutions?

Upon investigation, the problems of homelessness seem to be insurmountable. Part of the problem is that the municipal, provincial and federal governments often do not co-operate to act together. Partisan politics and a desire to balance budgets are most often the reasons for the failure to provide

adequate money or to share programs. However, part of the problem is that there is disagreement over how to resolve the problem and who should shoulder the burden. Look at the following general categories of solutions. For each suggestion, indicate whether you agree or disagree and why.

### The "Tough Love" Approach

Many provinces imposed cuts to welfare in order to balance their budgets in the 1990s. There was also a philosophical rationale to this approach beyond mere dollars. Emulating programs in the U.S., some provincial governments believe that it is necessary to break the cycle of dependency. Cutting back or removing welfare payments will provide incentive for recipients to seek employment and take care of themselves. The belief is that this frees up government money for other programs and that the new wage earners will provide a boost to the economy. Jim Flaherty, an Ontario cabinet minister, proposed making homelessness illegal as a means of encouraging people to seek legitimate homes.

Agree \_\_\_\_\_ Disagree \_\_\_\_\_

Why? \_\_\_\_\_

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### Federally/Provincially Funded Affordable Housing

During the 1980s and 1990s, the federal and provincial governments withdrew subsidies that provided for low-rent or low-cost housing. When the real estate market boomed in many markets, rents rose above what many low-income individuals could afford. Those in need can wait years for a unit to become available, and often must be put up in emergency shelters. Homeless advocates want the governments to become directly involved once again in creating affordable housing.

Agree \_\_\_\_\_ Disagree \_\_\_\_\_

Why? \_\_\_\_\_

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### **Enforce Non-judgmental Guidelines for the Homeless**

At the International Conference on Inner City Health held in Toronto in October, Beric German, a research co-ordinator with the Street Health organization, noted that 37.6 per cent of respondents to a survey on homeless drug users were evicted from their homes because they used drugs or alcohol. Many of those said that their eviction made their problem worse. German proposed “harm reduction housing,” which would be housing that permitted limited drug and alcohol use as long as there was no inappropriate behaviour. This would reduce a certain element of homelessness and perhaps encourage those with substance abuse problems to enter programs.

**Agree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_

**Why?** \_\_\_\_\_

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### **Crisis Response Approach**

Recognizing that there are at least 40 000 homeless in Canada and maybe as many more at risk of becoming homeless, many advocates for the homeless suggest a more direct approach to alleviating the problem in the short term. Allow the homeless to occupy vacant areas, but supply them with the essential facilities for proper sanitation and hygiene. Programs initiated by the various levels of government are time-consuming and mired in red tape. Providing the homeless and agencies for the homeless with the means to solve their own problems can at least prevent homelessness from increasing.

**Agree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_

**Why?** \_\_\_\_\_

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