


LIVING AS A HOMELESS PERSON

Introduction

Focus

In this *News in Review* story you will follow the journey of CBC reporter Mark Kelley as he lives as a homeless person for seven days. He talks to those who are homeless and those who work with the homeless as he tries to determine what steps can be taken to improve the homeless situation.

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

There is an old saying that states that you should not judge another person until you have walked a mile in their shoes—in other words, until you have lived another person's experience. Mark Kelley, a reporter for the CBC, attempted to put that proverb into action by living as a homeless person for seven days.

Kelley wanted to experience what it is like to be homeless, by living in the Old Brewery Mission shelter (www.oldbrewerymission.ca) in Montreal, one of the oldest shelters in the country. It has been housing people since 1889.

Before his assignment, Kelley already knew that homelessness was on the rise in Canada. He knew that homelessness had been declared a national emergency in 1998 but that there were still thousands of people living on the street. He wanted to feel what it was like to be homeless. He wanted to feel what it was like to be invisible to others who go

about their lives during the day with barely a glance at those panhandling for change on the streets of our major cities. He wanted to understand why more and more working families are homeless. And perhaps most importantly, he wanted to understand how anyone, in a wealthy nation like Canada, could end up with nothing.

He also wanted to find out if there was anything he could do to help. During his seven-day assignment, Kelley handed out drinks and food to the homeless and tried to get one homeless man a job.

In this *News in Review* story you'll follow Kelley on his journey. You'll hear from Canadians who live in shelters and on the streets in Montreal. And you'll take a step closer to walking a mile in their shoes. You will also get a better idea of the extent of the problem across the country. And we'll invite you to share your reactions and ideas in solving this national problem.

To Consider

1. In a small group, or as a class, brainstorm a list of reasons why people become homeless.
2. Share your own knowledge of the topic. Do you know anyone who is homeless? Are there homeless people living on the streets of your town or city? Have you had to deal with panhandlers?
3. What services for the poor exist in your community? For example, are there food banks, thrift shops, and/or shelters? Do you think your community provides enough services? Explain.

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Video Review

Before Viewing the Video

Part I: Brainstorming

1. Write the words *homeless person* in your notes.
2. With a partner, or in a small group, write down all the thoughts and images that come to your mind when you picture a homeless person.
3. Create a physical description of the person (age, ethnicity, gender, clothing, hair, etc.).

Part II: Analysis of your Notes

1. Where do you think you acquired this mental picture? For example, did these ideas come from your parents, the media, your personal experience, or something else?
2. How many of your points are based on fact? How many are based on stereotypes?
3. How might a negative stereotype of the homeless affect what we choose to do, or not do, about this issue?

While Viewing the Video

Part III: Video Questions

1. Describe the conditions of the shelter known as the Old Brewery Mission.

2. How does reporter Mark Kelley feel at the beginning of his seven-day assignment?

3. What happens when Kelley dresses like a homeless person for a day?

4. Describe the Mission's women's shelter.

5. Do homeless women seem different from homeless men? Explain.

6. Describe the homeless man known as Superman.

7. What does Kelley try to do for Superman?

8. How does Kelley's plan work out?

9. How does Kelley feel at the end of his assignment?

10. What new information or insight do you have about homelessness from viewing this video?

Part IV: Follow-Up

1. Review the words and phrases you used to describe a homeless person in the opening activity. What do you need to add to that description now that you've seen this *News in Review* story?

2. Mark Kelley's seven-day assignment demonstrates that you can't really understand someone unless you've "walked a mile in their shoes." What lessons can we take away from his experience?

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A National Problem

Further Research

To investigate current conditions facing the homeless in Canada and elsewhere, visit the Homeless News at www.homeless.org.au/news/canada.htm and Intraspecta at www.intraspecta.ca/homelessCanada.php. The official Government of Canada homeless initiative may be viewed at <http://homelessness.gc.ca/>.

Although Mark Kelley spent his seven days living among the homeless in Montreal, homelessness is not a problem that exists only in that city. Poverty and homelessness are national problems. But the reasons why people are homeless vary from area to area across the country. As you read the material below, ask yourself what local solutions are required to tackle the homelessness problem.

Alberta

The province of Alberta has experienced unprecedented economic growth in the last few years. The oil boom has resulted in huge revenues for the province and many wealthy citizens. You might think that in a wealthy province like Alberta there would not be a homeless problem. But in fact, the number of homeless people in the province has grown during the economic boom.

In Calgary, the homeless population has increased more than 30 per cent over two years. In 2006, this city had about 3 400 people living in shelters and on the street. Edmonton, the provincial capital, has also experienced a 30 per cent increase in its homeless population.

In Alberta, homelessness seems to be the result of the economic boom. People from across Canada, and from outside the country, have flocked to the province to try to land well-paying jobs in the oil industry. Because so many people have moved to the province, cities have not been able to construct homes fast enough to house them all. As a result many single working individuals, and working families, become homeless.

Some of the homeless in the province are single men who moved to the province in search of jobs but who have not been able to find work. This has resulted in a large group of unemployed men who congregate in the downtown cores of Alberta's major cities. On some days, a construction foreman will show up downtown and hire a truckload of men for the day. But on other days, there is no work at all. And because there are so many men looking for work, they compete against each other and are willing to work for very low wages, rather than not work at all.

In December 2006, overcrowding in Alberta's homeless shelters contributed to a potentially deadly outbreak of bacteria linked to pneumonia and meningitis. According to an article by the Canadian Press on December 19, 2006, a particular strain of the bacterial infection, known as sero-type 5 first appeared in Calgary in 2005 with about 15 cases. In 2006, that number had risen to 50 cases, and included one death. Judy MacDonald, deputy medical officer of health for the Calgary region, said that "overcrowding or close conditions among people" results in the spread of dangerous bacteria.

British Columbia

The Social Planning and Research Council of British Columbia (<http://sparc.bc.ca/>) estimates that in 2006, over 2 000 people in the Greater Vancouver area were homeless. The highest concentration of homeless people in the province is in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside neighbourhood. This also happens to be the poorest neighbourhood in Canada.

Further Research

The City of Toronto has a Housing and Homelessness Report Card for the city at www.toronto.ca/homelessness/index.htm.

Many of the residents are addicted to drugs and have to sell their bodies to pay for their habits.

But two recent events have encouraged the government to take aggressive steps to improve the situation for the homeless. One event is the publicity surrounding Robert (Willie) Pickton. Pickton is charged with murdering 26 women who were at one time residents of the Downtown Eastside area. The trial has highlighted the poverty of the area and the hopelessness faced by its often drug-addicted and troubled residents. The other event that has spurred the government into action is the 2010 Olympics, which are being hosted by Vancouver. All levels of government—municipal, provincial, and federal—do not want thousands of visitors to Vancouver to see run-down neighbourhoods and homeless people sleeping on the streets.

As a result, in April 2007, the provincial government announced it would begin funding 996 more units of supportive housing to reduce homelessness. Supportive housing integrates support services with housing so people can

gain greater self-reliance and improve their chances of finding employment. It cost the government \$80-million to purchase 15 buildings in Vancouver, Victoria, and Burnaby to provide affordable housing.

Ontario

As the largest city in the country, Toronto also has the largest number of homeless people. In 2006, Toronto officials estimated that about 5 000 people were living on the streets and in shelters across the city. This number does not include the so-called “hidden homeless” who live in temporary accommodations. Of these 5 000, approximately 3 500 sleep in shelters, close to 1 000 sleep on the streets, and the rest sleep in treatment facilities, correctional facilities, or shelters for abused women.

Homelessness costs the city of Toronto over \$160-million a year. That adds up to more than \$31 000 per homeless person. The city spends more on homelessness than on parks and recreation, transportation services, or public health services.

Follow-up

In small groups, create an organizer that summarizes the homelessness situation in each of these provinces. Then record suggestions for specific ways that the homeless can be helped in each province.

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Heavenly Solution

Gary Mason, a columnist for *The Globe and Mail*, wrote an article that argues that it is not difficult to solve the problem of homelessness. All we need to do is provide housing.

A heavenly solution to a hellish dilemma

By Gary Mason

April 7, 2007

Reprinted with permission from *The Globe and Mail*

Judy Graves is rarely shocked by anything.

She is known as the angel of the poor and dispossessed in this city because of the hours she spends tending to their needs. She has strolled streets and alleyways for years trying to help the homeless. Her work is often done while the rest of us sleep. And in those wee hours of the morning she has seen it all.

But she didn't see this coming.

The B.C. government's announcement this week that it had purchased 10 low-rent hotels in the city to convert to social housing took her breath away.

The government also said it will put up three more buildings on sites provided by the city. Combined with an earlier announcement in February, the provincial government has committed to providing nearly 1 200 units of housing in the city for the poor and homeless with promises of more to come. The \$80-million program, which also includes housing initiatives for suburban Burnaby and the capital of Victoria, may be the single biggest initiative to deal with

the homeless crisis ever in Canada.

Ms. Graves said most of the housing will come with on-site support staff.

"It means many of our poorest citizens can go to sleep knowing they won't become homeless," Ms. Graves told me. "They can rest in the certainty that their housing will be well managed, repairs will be done, they will be safe. Security will be a priority. These people won't need to feel they are taking their life in their hands when they go down the hall to use the bathrooms."

That's right. Ten of the buildings purchased by the government are single-room-occupancy hotels that were among the most run-down and poorly maintained buildings in the city. Many were rat- and cockroach-infested. Many had shared bathroom facilities and no cooking appliances in the rooms. They were unsafe and often the last stop for people before they ended up on the street.

Under the government's plan, the buildings will get a \$10-million facelift, inside and out.

"We know this is the solution to homelessness," said Ms. Graves, homeless-advocate for the city of Vancouver. "Housing does cure homelessness—it really is that simple. And the little bit of support breaks the cycle of homelessness and helps people get their feet under them again. Supportive housing blots up problems like a sponge. People thrive on it. And our whole community thrives because of it. Once we have enough supportive housing for everyone who needs it—we'll see the end of homelessness."

The City of Vancouver had planned to buy one single-room occupancy hotel a year for 10 years in an attempt to deal with its growing homeless emergency. In one day, Vancouver Mayor Sam Sullivan said, the provincial government did a decade's worth of work. The city, meantime, plans to build more social housing on several pieces of land it owns throughout Vancouver.

Many believe the homeless problem in Vancouver really took off when the Liberal government tightened its welfare policies in 2001. So, some argue, Premier Gordon Campbell is only fixing a problem he mostly created. Maybe so. But that's not his motivation.

This is all about the Olympics. Sad, but true. If the Olympic Games weren't coming, along with tens of thousands of visitors from around the world, there would not be the impetus to deal with the homeless problem of this city. The last thing Mr. Campbell wants is for his guests

to be tripping over some guy in a sleeping bag when they walk out of their hotel in the morning. If it took the Olympics to get politicians focused on the issue, so be it. At least something is being done, and it will be the Olympics' greatest legacy in B.C.

There is more action to come. Many of those on the street—up to 400 by some estimates—have severe mental problems. Some were released from mental-health institutions with no support systems in place to oversee their transition to the outside world. Many do not have the mental capacity to live on their own. This will be a harder issue for the government to deal with, but deal with it, it must.

Meantime, the B.C. government should be applauded for the action it took this week.

Ms. Graves is still pinching herself. "The ground moved," she said. "It's a whole new reality."

Analysis

If Mason is correct, and the problem of homelessness is easy to solve, then why haven't we solved it? Decide which of the following factors are the most responsible. Be prepared to explain your rankings.

- a) The homeless people themselves
- b) A lack of funds
- c) A lack of concern for the homeless among the public
- d) A lack of political will
- e) Other (Explain.)

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Who Are the Homeless?

It can be difficult for those of us who have always had a bed to sleep in and a roof over our head to understand how someone can become homeless. When we think about the homeless, we tend to picture someone scruffy panhandling on the street. It is important to remember that each homeless person is someone's son or daughter, brother or sister, husband or wife, or father or mother.

Many homeless Canadians have lived very troubled lives. Many are plagued by mental illness or drug addiction. Some ended up on the street after they fled abuse in their family homes or horrendous living conditions on Native reserves. Others ended up homeless because they were employed in poorly paid jobs and were unable to pay the rent. Perhaps even more surprisingly, some people became homeless because they moved to an area with good paying jobs but with a housing shortage.

As you review the material below, consider which of these factors are in the control of those who are homeless. That is, are any of these factors something that a homeless person can change alone?

1. Poverty

One of the factors that has contributed most to the growth in the numbers of homeless is poverty. A September 27, 2006, article in the *Toronto Star* estimated that one in three Toronto households cannot afford the rents the market is charging. Over 175 000 households in Toronto earn incomes of less than \$20 000. This means they can only afford rent of up to \$500 a month. That is less than half the average rental price in the city.

Not surprisingly, eviction rates in the city have jumped. In 2005, about 30 500 tenants were evicted because they couldn't afford to pay for rent, hydro and food. That was an increase of over 10 per cent from 2004. The *Star* article cites a 2004 study that found that one-third of evicted tenants go directly to homeless shelters. Another third become the "hidden homeless," staying in temporary arrangements with family or friends.

2. Mental illness

Many people who live on the streets or in shelters suffer from mental illness. Some estimates indicate that as many as 50 per cent of the homeless population suffer from some type of psychological disorder.

Many mental illnesses require patients to take medicine every day, preferably at the same time of day. If the patient does not take the medication then he or she can become delusional, or paranoid, and can actually become afraid of the medication itself. A delusional person may be suspicious of doctors and nurses, and almost anyone who tries to help them. The person may also be extremely reluctant to enter a medical institution.

According to Canadian law, a patient cannot be forced into an institution or forced to take medication unless that person poses an imminent danger to himself or herself or to another. In other words, no one can be forced into medical care unless they are suicidal or homicidal.

As a result, many mentally ill patients end up homeless and on the street because they are ill and cannot manage

to work or pay bills, skills that are necessary for someone to live alone.

3. Abuse

A large portion of the homeless are living on the street because they fled abusive families or left an abusive relationship. Children who run away from a sexually or physically abusive parent may end up on the street because they do not have the skills to hold down a job that would pay enough for rent, food, and other living expenses.

4. Drug or alcohol addiction

Another reason some people end up homeless is because they have an addiction. A serious drug addiction requires the addict to constantly seek money to secure the next fix. This leads some addicts to turn to crimes such as robbery or break-and-enter as they search for cash. Others turn to prostitution to support their habits. Most ad-

dicts use most of the money they get on their addiction, so they end up unable to pay rent and are evicted.

5. Aboriginals

A large percentage of the homeless in Canada are Aboriginal citizens. Although there are no official records of the percentage, in some cities, like Winnipeg, it is large. The Social Planning Council of Winnipeg took a random sample of 350 homeless people in 2003 and found that over 75 per cent of the people in shelters and on the street were Aboriginal.

Housing experts and those in the Aboriginal community believe the reason is that the housing situation on reserves is often deplorable. These conditions force many residents to leave the reserve in search of a better life and better living conditions. Unfortunately, many end up on the street.

Reflection

In a small group, discuss the following statements. Refer to the information you learned in this *News in Review* story to support your arguments.

“The homeless are lazy people who simply don’t want to work.”

“The mentally ill should be forced to take medication to reduce the symptoms of their illness.”

“More money should be spent on policing and law enforcement to protect the rest of society from the homeless.”

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Personal Stories

Did you know . . .

Some homeless people in Toronto buy and resell a newspaper called *Toronto Street News* in order to earn some money.

Activity

It is important to remember that those who are poor and homeless are not so different from the rest of us. They have parents, siblings, possibly a spouse, and children. The personal stories below focus on four individuals who are homeless.

As you read these stories, identify the reason why each person became homeless. In your opinion, what does each of these individuals need to get off the streets?

Michael is 27 years old. His father was poor, and a drug addict, and often lived on the street. Michael became addicted to drugs and began stealing and breaking into homes to pay for his habit. He has been in and out of jail. He moved to Vancouver from Hinton, Alberta, to make a new start. He has been diagnosed with a mental illness and prescribed anti-psychotic medication. He went off the medication, however, because the pills made him drool and made him groggy. He was cut off welfare and couldn't afford to pay for his room in an apartment. He now lives on the street in downtown Vancouver.

Source: Jim Bronskill and Sue Bailey, "A soft place off the mean streets: Homelessness or jail are often the only choices for those with mental illness," *The Chronicle Herald*, November 17, 2006

Robert Willis is homeless but he used to have a middle-class life. He was married, with two children, and he had a full-time job. But tragedy struck when both of his children died of separate illnesses. His wife died shortly after. Willis became an alcoholic and eventually lost his job and his home. He is 53, a landscaper by trade, and recently began a program designed to give homeless people a second chance. The pilot program is small—only six people have been selected to participate—but each will receive a job, drug and alcohol counselling, advice on hygiene and grooming, and a small amount of money.

Source: Lindor Reynolds, "A chance to put his tattered life back together," *Winnipeg Free Press*, September 6, 2006

Mohamed Gedi came to Canada from Somalia with his older sister in 1990. He was kicked out of the house when his sister got married. Because he was only 14, he became a ward of the Children's Aid Society. He spent the next few years in and out of foster homes and group homes. He says the group homes were the worst, because they were full of drugs and trouble. By 2007, he was living on the street, with no job and no family ties.

Source: Carol Goar, "Poverty from those who know," *Toronto Star*, April 16, 2007

Kathy Kunsman lived on the street for 13 years. She was an alcoholic, but believes that it was her low self-esteem and lack of knowledge about available services that kept her on the street. Kunsman explains that she became trapped in the cycle of homelessness because she had a drinking problem, and no shelter would accept a woman who was drinking. She explains that men would wait outside for women like her. "There are a lot of predators. It's worse for women on the street."

Because she was drinking, she couldn't get a bed in a shelter, so she had to sleep in the street. This meant she was a victim of male violence, which made her drink even more. Strict shelter rules relating to alcohol and drug use prevented her from breaking out of this cycle.

Source: "Street-savvy women report on problems of being homeless," *Toronto Star*, June 22, 2006

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Activity: Helping the Homeless

Further Research

To learn about one social agency's services to the homeless visit the Canadian Red Cross Web site for a look at what it provides in Toronto
www.redcross.ca/article.asp?id=007180&tid=071.

Quote

"I believe that if people know about homelessness—that there are people living without a home—they will want to help." — Hannah Taylor, Ladybug Foundation Mission Statement

It is not easy to solve the problem of homelessness because there are a lot of reasons people become homeless. Nonetheless, there are a number of steps that can be taken to improve the situation.

Your Task

You will be placed in a small group. Your job is to develop an Action Plan to address the homeless situation in your town or city, or in the nearest large city. You should prepare a brief report that you will share with the rest of your class. To get you started, some background information has been provided for you. This information contains specific steps that individuals, governments, and corporations have taken to address homelessness. Try to be as creative and as practical as possible.

Background Information

- Hannah Taylor is Canada's youngest anti-poverty crusader. She is 10 years old and has been an advocate for the homeless for five years—ever since she saw a homeless person eating out of a garbage can. She has raised over \$1-million through her Ladybug Foundation charity (www.ladybugfoundation.ca). She has travelled across the country talking to some of the country's top business leaders, she organizes "Big Boss" breakfast events where business leaders learn more about the homeless, and her foundation is planning to launch a new national education program on homelessness for students from Kindergarten to grade 12.
- Nancy Schwoyer, 69 years old, and Rosemary Luling Gaughton, 79, opened a 17th-century farmhouse to offer temporary shelter to those in need.
- In 2006, Montreal passed a law making it illegal for the homeless to sleep in public places.
- In Victoria, people are prohibited by law from sleeping overnight in parks, on street grates, on the steps of churches, or curled up in bus shelters. The city has an estimated 700 homeless and only 175 permanent shelter spaces.
- A recent law passed in Las Vegas, Nevada, made it illegal to feed a homeless person.
- In December 2006, a Calgary bylaw was introduced outlawing "bad" public behaviour. This includes urinating in public and putting your feet up on a park bench. Critics of the law believe that the new bylaw will unfairly target the homeless. A December 7, 2006, news story on www.ctv.ca reported that a homeless person had recently been fined for spitting in a garbage can and another man was fined twice when he couldn't find a place to sleep. His tickets added up to \$287.
- The government of British Columbia announced in spring 2007 that it would buy up old buildings in Vancouver and Victoria to provide more supportive housing units. These are single-unit rooms, but those who live in them are also provided with some support services.
- Philip Mangano, a homeless expert in the United States, suggests closing all shelters and giving each homeless person a key to a cheap apartment.
- Michael Shapcott, a housing and homelessness policy expert in Toronto, estimates that it costs a great deal less to provide housing for the homeless

