Stephen Gaetz, Professor and President of the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (Homeless Hub)

Transcript

Hi, I’m Stephen Gaetz and I’m a professor in the Faculty of Education at York University in Toronto, Canada. I’m also President of the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness. Today I’m going to talk with you about COVID-19 and its impact on Canada and, going forward, what things we might want to think about in terms of housing and homelessness in the recovery phase. But I’m going to begin with what I’m going to try to offer, which is a 40-second overview of homelessness and housing policy in Canada.

So Canada, like many countries, with population of 35 million, went through a neoliberal turn around 30 years ago and after being actively involved in investing in affordable housing kind of withdrew, believing that the policy should shift towards using tax expenditures and incentives for homeowners and the private sector to build housing, and so we saw a growth in building freehold homes and condos, not so much rental housing, and very very little affordable housing in the ensuing 30 years. So the results of that experiment are in, that, you know, that it was a colossal failure.

On a more positive note, in 2017 Community Canada launched a new national housing strategy with a 40 billion dollar investment over 10 years, in 2018 a new homelessness strategy called Reaching Home which doubled the investment, and in 2019 declared the right to housing. So what does all of this mean in the context of homelessness? I’m going to throw some slides here to discuss this.

So here we go.

SLIDE 1: Canadian government response to COVID-19

- Income supports
- Large investments to support businesses
- Increased investment in supports for emergency services for the homelessness sector
- In some contexts, moratorium on evictions

So in the current context we've seen with the rise of COVID 19, we've seen governments impose lockdowns across country. We've seen actually a lot of harmony amongst the different levels of governments and for the most part amongst political parties, so that’s enabled there to be somewhat of a consistent response. They've invested in income supports which should last until the summer, end of summer; large investments to support businesses; increased investment in supports for emergency services for the whole homelessness sector and in some contexts moratorium on evictions.

SLIDE 2: Homelessness and COVID-19

- Our response to homelessness puts people at risk in a pandemic
- Long term exposure to homelessness has an impact on the health and wellbeing of those who experience it
- Social isolation is challenging in a homelessness servies environment.
- Use of policing to address people using public spaces complicates things for people experiencing homelessness
- Anticipated higher rate so hospitalisations, use of ICU beds and morbidity.
Our public responses to pandemics make assumptions that may not apply to homeless population.

Now, thinking about homelessness and COVID-19, one of the things one has to think about is that our pandemic responses typically operate with some assumptions that put homeless people at a disadvantage. The first one is that people have a home so when you impose lockdown orders or mandatory quarantine you're assuming someone could go there and close the door and lock it. Even things such as hand-washing, you know, some of the things we do to like reduce the risk of spread of disease are really difficult if you're homeless and don't have access to clean water and so these kinds of things. This is a poster from H1N1 and it highlights all of this. Every single thing may, say short of coughing into your elbow, is something that a person who's homeless will find difficult to do.

So what do we know and think about our response to homelessness during a pandemic? I believe that by focusing most of our investment, even to this day, on emergency services like shelters, day programs, soup kitchens, we put people at risk. We also, in doing so, undermine the health and wellbeing of people who are homeless so while we may mean well in doing it, it’s a highly problematic response and, in the context of a pandemic, it makes things even worse because social isolation is almost impossible whether you're sleeping outdoors or indoors. The use of policing which in Canada has been common for decades you know, as a response to homelessness is problematic during a pandemic. For instance, if they're giving tickets to people for being in public parks - if you’re homeless and you don't have access to private space you're forced into public spaces all the time. And also the research that's emerging, research from people like Dennis Culhane suggests that because of the compromised health and the risk of overcrowding, that kind of thing, people who are homeless we can anticipate higher rates of hospitalisations, of incidents of COVID-19 and of morbidity.

SLIDE 3: With very little opportunity for planning and preparation, communities have implemented some innovative strategies.

- Some organisations moved quickly to house all the residents of their shelter.
- Major cities have moved vulnerable people experiencing homelessness into hotels.
- Many shelters have made efforts to arrange their space to enhance social distancing.
- The City of Toronto has committed to building 1000 units of Permanent Supportive Housing in one year!

So on the bright side, with very little opportunity for planning we’ve seen some interesting things emerge. So some organisations in Canada, shelters have managed to house everybody in their shelter who's homeless, which is an amazing thing, right? Though it does beg the question like why don't we do that in non-pandemic times? Some major cities have moved all vulnerable people experiencing homelessness into their hotels. Toronto has done that with 1200 people. It begs the question what happens after the pandemic, are all these people made homeless again? We’ll have to wait and to see. Many shelters have made efforts to arrange their space to enhance social distancing which is fine given the overcrowded nature of shelters but it’s pretty hard, you know, during the daytime especially, to keep that in force because people are going to have to move around. And the final one here is you know, something the City of Toronto announced last week which is that they’re going, they’re committed to building, in one year, 1,000 units of permanent supportive housing. So if they can do that, that bodes well for the future because obviously they're figuring things out about how to fast-track housing. So we’ll see.

SLIDE 4: It will be a slow road to recovery. What will not be helpful

- Premature cut in income supports
• Rise in evictions
• Austerity and cutbacks, particularly in terms of housing
• Expansion of the financialisation of the housing market
• Return to ‘business as usual’ in our response to homelessness
• Drastic rise in homelessness due to all of the above
• We will not adequately prepare for subsequent waves

Okay. The recovery. It'll be, everybody understands that it'll be slow road to recovery. The devastation to the economy will be huge. This kind of things. So things that won't be helpful include a premature cut in income supports before people have a chance to get employment. There's a potential for rise in evictions. Patrick Fowler, a researcher from Washington University in St. Louis, has done this interesting work that shows that during non-pandemic times there are dips in evictions that happen around holiday periods throughout the years, particularly the, you know, winter holidays, right? But even like Fourth of July. What happens after is a massive spike right, and so while there may be moratoriums, either enforced or just landlords are not evicting people, I think we can anticipate a large number of evictions to happen once the recovery begins unless we do something.

Austerity and cutbacks are possible; we have to remember that coming out of the last recession in the United States, the Right was much more effective in crafting a narrative of what went wrong. And that gave rise to the Tea Party and they were saying things like, the problem with the banking system was too much regulation, that kind of thing. The expansion of the financialisation of the housing market could happen. That happened after the last recession. There's a lot of capital out there now, it hasn't gone away with the recession and looking for places to invest so I think we can expect to see that happen as well. Hopefully we don't see a return to business as usual in our response to homelessness. If anything, you know, this pandemic has highlighted the folly of keeping people where host in a state of homelessness. We have to stop that. We may see a drastic rise in homelessness due to all of the above things and we may, if we return to normal, we will be inadequately prepared for potential second and third waves.

SLIDE 5: Recovery opportunity

- COVID-19 has highlighted the folly of responding to homelessness by basically warehousing people.
- The government response perhaps opens the door to unconventional policy-making, and there at be public support for this.
- Planning for recovery is already happening.

So what are some opportunities? As I said, you know, I think the public and governments, many people are realizing that it doesn’t work to keep people in a state of homelessness like this. It doesn’t work to have overcrowded shelters. So hopefully people will be open to doing something different. The current government response where they’re trying to be very nimble and be able to pivot quickly maybe opens things up for new ways of thinking around policy and investment so they might just keep that momentum going. One could hope. And then the other thing is that they're already planning for recovery so that getting the ideas out there and the public space is really important right now. We can’t wait until October or November. So here are some of the opportunities.

SLIDE 6: Recovery opportunity
• As part of an infrastructure spending strategy, frontload investments in to the building and operation of affordable housing and permanent supportive housing.

Given the high levels of unemployment the government might consider foregrounding front-loading its investments in the building and operation of affordable housing and permanent supportive housing. So currently they have it spread over ten years, why not go for three years? The Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness is advocating that they build 300,000 new units, like 50,000 new units of housing a year, affordable housing and then also 10,000 units of permanent supportive housing. These are things that are doable.

SLIDE 7: Recovery opportunity

• Work with provinces and territories to implement a Guaranteed Basic Income

There's a lot of talk in Canada now about guaranteed basic income. Now people have been talking about it on the margins for a number of years but you're seeing much more talk in public spaces and public venues, that kind of thing, and so I think given the experience of the income support there might be an opening so we need to work on that one.

SLIDE 8: Recovery opportunity

• Implement measures to curtail the financialization of the housing market

They need to invest in evictions prevention and get ready right now because it's coming. There's the crisis on that.

We need to implement measures to curtail the financialization of the housing market, right, so that could be through taxes - as disincentive to this kind of ownership model - to also giving housing societies and municipalities first right of refusal when when properties are for sale. There's a whole basket of things that could be done but we have, this is something we have to move on because it undermines all of our efforts. If we could keep building more affordable housing and still lose lots of housing to this means.

SLIDE 9: Recovery opportunity

• Give more teeth to the right to housing

We need to get more teeth to the right to housing in Canada. It’s not just visible right now, it doesn’t apply to provinces and territories so that’s important.

SLIDE 10: Recovery opportunity

• Aggressively address housing precarity and homelessness amongst indigenous people

Finally, we have to aggressively address housing precarity and homelessness amongst indigenous people. Indigenous people make up 4.5 percent of the Canadian population but 30 percent of the homeless population and the need there is great. It's accumulated through years of colonialism and racism in this country; it's time to do something about this.

SLIDE 11: Responding to homelessness in Canada

Prevention > Emergency response > Housing and supports, where ‘Emergency response’ is the largest part.
We need to completely retool our response to homelessness. I often use this diagram to kind of explain how we invest in homelessness. You know, there are three things you can do. You can prevent homelessness, you're going to have to have an emergency response because bad things will happen no matter how good your prevention is, and then you need housing and supports. And so Housing First is an example of that. So the bulk of our investment is in that emergency response. We've been investing more on Housing First over the last seven years or so. Very little on prevention and so I think where we need to get to is something like this.

**SLIDE 12:** Where we want to get to...

Prevention > Emergency response > Housing and supports, where ‘Prevention’ and Housing and supports’ are the largest parts.

There's been some good modeling - Patrick Fowler, who I mentioned before, has shown that, like, the investment in prevention of homelessness is less than the investment in Housing First, both of which are massively less than the investment in keeping someone in a state of homelessness. We're learning more about how to do prevention in Wales, then England, now Scotland there's the duty to assist or, in Scotland they're calling a duty to prevent. These early intervention strategies that, when operationalized, really reduce the inflow into homelessness and then preclude that damage that happens to people when they're exposed for homelessness, exposed to homelessness for a long time.

So these are troubling times but there's also potential opportunities here and so, you know, I hope through our discussions we have, like, some good conversations, some good ideas come forward about what to do, some good strategies and making their relationships and the networks happen so that we can move forward to help turn something which is a horrible thing - COVID-19 - into something that can potentially change things for the better. So thank you.