Mapping and Understanding Homelessness Crisis in British Columbia: Community Development Approach

Shannon Walker[1], Rita Dhungel[2*],

[1]School of Social Work and Human Services, Abbotsford, British Columbia, Canada.
[2]School of Social Work and Human Services, University of the Fraser Valley, Abbotsford, British Columbia, Canada.

Abstract

In British Columbia, housing has grown to be a significant social justice issue. In British Columbia, the housing first method is a contemporary perspective that helps disadvantaged individuals obtain and keep a place to live. By analyzing rental and vacancy statistics in British Columbia, this study will investigate and assess the housing first strategy. This article's objectives are to analyze the political factors and driving forces behind the housing crisis response, comprehend the practical obstacles that local residents must overcome, and provide a thorough understanding of homelessness in British Columbia's Lower Mainland. To accomplish the goals, a comprehensive literature review was carried out, and it was critically examined and assessed. A structural social work theory lens was used to examine the collected data on a theme basis. This paper begins with a brief overview of housing related issues and strategies and concludes with a critical analysis of the implications fora policies, programs and research.

INTRODUCTION

The non-existence of affordable housing units in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia in Canada is at a crisis level. Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) reports that Vancouver's rental vacancy rates dropped below one per cent at the end of 2022 (Carey, 2023). Moreover, in excess of 105,000 renting households in British Columbia pay more than 50% of their gross income on shelter, a rate that Statistics Canada labels unaffordable (Griffiths, 2023). There are many factors that influence the homelessness rates in B.C., including low housing availability, inflated real estate markets, and increasing mortgage rates. Homeless visibility in British Columbia has increased, with a wider demographic of people feeling pressure associated with unstable housing (Kading, 2018).

The housing first approach is an evidence-based model with the main goal of providing housing by 'moving people experiencing homelessness into independent and permanent housing' (Homeless Hub, n.d.). The housing first model roots form the belief that community members cannot be helped until they have secure housing (Aubry, 2020). Examples of intersecting problems faced by those facing homelessness include substance use dependency and mental

health concerns. The primary underlying factors contributing to the increase in homelessness are the scarcity of housing, the crisis in the rental market, and the pressure on shelters (Stevens & Dhungel, 2024). The housing first approach recognizes and incorporates that housing is an inherent right that must be respected and prioritized (Kading, 2018).

This study will examine and evaluate the housing first approach through analysis of rental rates and vacancy rates in British Columbia. The goals of this article are: (a) critically understand political determinates and motivations behind the housing crisis actions and understanding the barriers that community members face at the ground level; and (b) unpack in-depth understanding of homelessness in the Lower Mainland and British Columbia.

Methodology

For the purpose of the goals listed above, a comprehensive literature review was conducted. Sources of knowledge used in this paper will include scholarly peer reviewed articles and grey literature such as supreme court rulings, policies made by the Government of Canada and discussion panels. Google Scholar, Social Work Abstracts and Government Websites were reviewed for literature and knowledge synthesis.

Theoretical Frameworks

The structural theory of social work served as the foundation for this compressive review. Structural social work emphasizes conflict views and focuses on oppressive societal structures, whereas mainstream social work generally focuses on the person and maintaining status quo (Payne, 2007). As stated in the Canadian Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics, Values (2024), social justice—the idea that everyone should have equal access to opportunities in the political, social, and economic spheres—is the cornerstone of social workers' roles and responsibilities. Therefore, Middleman and Goldberg (1974) highlighted that Social workers need to step in by "bringing to bear, changing, or creating social structures," (p.32) to enhance the quality of the relationship between individuals and their social environment. Dominant groups, or capitalists, utilize their power and position to pursue their own agendas and oppress the powerless people by coercion and force (Mullay, 2007). A structural approach aims to alter social structures rather than the person who was unjustly affected by flawed social arrangements (Mullay, 2007, p. 245). These repressive groups not only incite violence but also exacerbate social justice issues like poverty and homelessness.

Findings of the Study

Upon thoroughly reviewing literature, the findings are thematically analyzed in the three themes, and they include: (a) Critical analysis on social justice issues; (b) Examinations on solutions to address the issues (c) Gaps in policies, programs and services

Critical analysis on social justice issues

The housing first approach is a modern lens used across B.C. to assist vulnerable people with attaining and maintain housing (Aubry, 2020). The housing first approach uses a pathways model, being that it is a well-defined program for implementation and maintenance (Aubry, 2020). The consensus was that communities of British Columbia are only as healthy as their most vulnerable people. People who struggle with housing affordability are in a lower socioeconomic class (City of Vancouver, 2022).

People within the low-income bracket have a spectrum of income sources ranging from working full time and possibly having a second job, to being on disability or social assistance (City of Vancouver, 2022). Homeless people were previously viewed as a menace and outcasted from society (Tausen, Charleson, & Fingerhut, 2021), but people from all walks of life are affected by housing affordability in British Columbia. It was common for police and community members to be upset with homeless people, further oppressing them by keeping homeless people on the move or harassing them with "routine police checks" (Venn, 2019). This leads the community members to possibly treat vulnerable people differently because people in authority do.

Municipalities are responsible for working through their own homeless and housing crisis with little support from government systems (Bueckert, 2023). When the 2010 Olympics came to Vancouver,

the City of Vancouver bussed their homeless people to Maple Ridge and dropped them off to hide them from the world (Hyslop, 2010). At that point in time, homelessness was shamed which further fueled community members to marginalize and oppress their homeless population (Hyslop, 2010; Venn, 2019). With rental prices skyrocketing across British Columbia and more so in urban areas, homelessness and housing affordability or security is overtly visible in communities (City of Vancouver, 2022). Some people resultantly have moved to alternatives such as living in a passenger vehicle, motorhome, or trailer (City of Vancouver, 2022). The view among this population is that there is safety in numbers which can lead to larger homeless camps that receive negative reactions from the community and authorities.

Emergency services continue to be stressed as tent cities have an increased number of police incidents, which requires more police presence around these communities (Venn, 2019). The actions and collaboration between the municipality and the police could be viewed as marginalization, oppression, and a threat to the homeless population (Venn, 2019). Community members may feel a decrease in their level of safety from having homeless in their community, which is often addressed by politicians petitioning to increase security, furthering the cyclical nature of the marginalization and oppression homeless people endure (Venn, 2019).

People who are affected by housing instability and homelessness are more likely to receive medical treatments for substance addiction, mental illness, medical attention for exposure to harsh elements, and severe illness related to living outside (Pfaff, Krohn, Crawley, Varacalli, Ravi, & Sattler, 2021).

Examinations on solutions to address the issues

This review uncovered a number of federal and provincial initiatives aimed to address the homelessness issues. Government policies play a significant role in shaping the availability and affordability of housing. British Columbia analyzed the assistance needed to support unstable housing and homelessness and the initiatives in place and their effectiveness in managing the affordability crisis in B.C (Government of British Columbia, 2019). The relationship between the programs and resources for affordable housing in British Columbia is multifaceted due to the intersectionality of municipal, provincial, and federal governments (Buchnea *et al.*, 2021). Notable programs implemented across British Columbia are the (a) National Housing Strategy; and (b) Affordable housing (Stronger BC).

National Housing Strategy

The National Housing Strategy is a federal housing program designed to help Canadian's access affordable housing that meets their needs in a sustainable way and is the largest and most ambitious federal housing program in Canada to date (Buchnea *et al.*, 2021). Safe and affordable housing has been the launch pad for the National Housing Strategy's socio-economic outcome and is intended to invest $82 billion over a ten-year period in building stronger communities and strengthening the middle class (National Housing Strategy, 2017). Its goal is to provide more safe and affordable housing and lift more Canadians out of poverty (National Housing Strategy, 2017). The policies are also designed to ensure that public, private, and non-profit sectors work together in collaborative efforts to provide access to living conditions in which individuals will thrive (National Housing Strategy, 2017). In 2019, The National Housing Strategy Act was passed as a means of recognizing that every Canadian deserves the right to adequate housing (National Housing Strategy, 2017). It ensures that the government is held accountable by incorporating principles that do not discriminate, are inclusive, and align with fundamental human rights law (National Housing Strategy, 2017).

According to the National Housing Strategies progress report completed in June 2023, housing programs and initiatives under (NHS) have committed $27.71 billion into the $82 billion plan through federal (NHS) initiatives (National Housing Strategy, 2017). It has supported the creation and repair of 238,390 units, 41,924 community housing units, and 9,077 low- income community housing units

to address the needs across the housing continuum for Canada's most vulnerable populations (National Housing Strategy, 2017). This report indicates that the housing strategy is a step in the right direction towards solving the lack of safe and affordable housing in B.C.

Affordable Housing (Stronger B.C)

A second initiative designed to reduce homelessness and create more safe and affordable housing is a program called Stronger BC (Stronger BC for Everyone, n.d.). This program was created with homes for people action plan in mind. By working with new investors that prioritize affordable housing, action has been taken to speed up the delivery of new homes, increase the supply of attainable middle- income housing, fight speculation, tackle permit and zoning challenges, and help those most in need (Stronger BC for Everyone, n.d.).

The homes for people action plan were created under four main pillars (Stronger BC for Everyone, n.d.). The pillars are meant to unlock homes faster, deliver better and more affordable homes, support those in greatest need, and create a housing market for people; rather than speculators (Stronger BC for Everyone, n.d.). Since implementing the action plan in 2018, the province of British Columbia has committed to increasing the number of rental properties. To deliver 114,000 new homes over a ten-year period, the province has tackled speculation by working alongside private sectors, federal and local governments, nonprofits, and faith-based organizations (Stronger BC for Everyone, n.d.). The homes for people action plan aligns with the National Housing Policy in that it builds a solid foundation to provide more affordable housing.

In the five years that the action plan has been implemented, there has been significant progress made towards the goal of creating new homes, with more underway. In 2023, the housing action plan budgeted $4 billion towards affordable housing over the next three years and committed to investing an additional $12 billion over the next 10 years to build even more homes for people (Stronger BC for Everyone, n.d.). Furthermore, the speculation and vacancy tax has helped

turn over 20,000 condos into rental homes throughout Metro Vancouver alone, and plans for many more provincially funded and financed homes are underway in the near future (Stronger BC for Everyone, n.d.). It is projected that by 2027/2028, 108,600 homes will be open or under construction which aligns with the vision of creating a housing market that puts people ahead of profit and cracks down on speculators and profiteers within our real estate market (Stronger BC for Everyone, n.d.).

These housing programs and initiatives are helpful to those who fit the criteria and are able to apply to the programs, wait on the list, then move into housing. Providing more affordable housing for Metro Vancouver is essential. The Canadian Government recognizing that housing is a right and not a privilege creates a new platform for growth surrounding the view of homelessness from a top-down perspective. The changes in communication between all levels of government with the new lens on homelessness is a great start in reducing the stigma against homelessness on the individual and community levels.

Gaps in Policies and Programs

Homelessness is created by gaps in government systems. Gaps range from access to quality medical care, mental health support, livable wages, food insecurity and more. The Housing First Policy that the Canadian Government is utilizing to position itself to assist with homelessness assumes that people cannot be helped if they do not have housing. The reality is that people are going without because the government moves unbelievably slow. There are people needing support so that when they do get into housing, they will have the skills and abilities to maintain it. This could be reinforced by teaching healthy daily skills for self-care, getting trauma support outside of pharmaceuticals, getting education and employment counselling, offering support and low barriers to accessing detox or addiction treatment. These are services that are currently needed that have extremely long waitlists. When people are living in survival mode, they are less likely to have the capacity to fulfill application needs and

follow up with their waitlist status.

Programs such as BC Housing requires applicants to follow up with their application every six months or their application will be terminated (BC Housing, 2024). This information is not on their website, and it is not freely shared with applicants. This also takes the responsibility off the program and places it on the most vulnerable. This lack of accountability is visible across most programs that service vulnerable populations. The lack of accountability can greatly affect a client's ability to trust systems and lose faith which can perpetuate the cycle of homelessness. From the community perspective, why should the community care if the government and the programs that offer services appear to have little care.

This affects people who experience housing instability and homelessness by creating feelings of shame and guilt. There are no government funded counselling programs which leads people to self-medicate. This can be done with high-risk behavior including the use of drugs and alcohol, promiscuous sex, self-defecating behaviors, and self-harm. The gaps in the systems are interrelated and the government is attempting to isolate them by focusing on offering housing

first and not being able to deliver housing to communities for years while community members wait in survival mode.

Implications for Policies, Programs and Research

Rothman's Community Development model has an excellent way of contextualizing the housing crisis in the Lower Mainland, British Columbia and, across Canada as suggested by Stevens and Dhungel (2024). One of the stages of the model is social planning, and Stevens and Dhungel (2024) argued that "social planning is an impactful tool to be harnessed when it comes to BC's housing crisis" (p. 76)). This model would fit best against the housing crisis due to the goals, who is involved, and the strategies used (University of Calgary, 2023). The social planning practice model have been used to date to fight homelessness have been ineffective, thus taking time to analyze the problem, the gaps in service, what is creating or perpetuating the problem could be enlightening for those involved

and those who read the results of the analysis (University of Calgary, 2023).

The staff who are working in the area of homelessness crisis role would been to be analyzed and outline the staff's rights and responsibilities to create transparency and accountability for workers involved (Reddy, 2021). The organization that employs the workers would need to outline their rights and responsibilities also to prevent the worker being blamed as when things do not go as planned it is common for organizations to not take blame and put the blame on a worker then terminate them. The staff role could also include specific skills including expert data analysis, and a problem solver who could analyze at the Canadian, provincial and municipal levels (Reddy, 2021). The analysis would need to identify gaps between each level of government and identify ways to bridge the gaps to promote housing stability. More possible staff could be educators and lawyers and social workers in the community who could assist with advocating for the affected vulnerable population. This may come in the way of assisting with applications, informing constituents of their rights, or even speaking up for the rights of homeless people in the community to end the stigma.

The constituents in Rothman's model would be those affected by housing insecurity and homelessness (Reddy, 202; Stevens & Dhungel, 2024). The constituents could be people who are utilizing services to attain housing stability and people who do not utilize services. An analysis of why people who are affected by housing insecurity and homelessness do not utilize services would be needed to bridge that gap. There may be a lack of trust, lack of knowledge of the programs, and inability to navigate applications, or other physical, mental or structural barriers. Understanding who the constituents are, and their barriers will promote the ability to truly assist the population in need and the community as a whole (Reddy, 2021). As the quality of life of the vulnerable population goes up, so does the quality of life of the rest of the community.

Rothman's model could be effective when working through housing and homelessness

through a community development lens because the model analyses community systems (Reddy, 2021; Stevens & Dhungel, 2024). This model identifies every system that is offered in the community to its members. This includes medical services, emergency services, education, and work accessibility, income assistance accessibility, transportation systems, who uses these systems, who does not use them, how the community interacts with the system and why (Reddy, 2021). If people are not accessing a service that could be beneficial, maybe the system and service related needs to be adapted to fit the needs of the community. Effective community systems are not just present for community members, they need to be applicable to the needs of the community. The location that the system or service providers enter the community may need analysis.

The final stage of Rothman's Social planning practice is identifying the change strategy. This includes the collection of data, analysis, and choosing the best plan of action. There may be more than one plan of action which could be greatly beneficial for the community. In this stage the different level of government funding that the community receives could be reviewed and the community could possibly look at adding avenues of grants or funding projects through initiatives at the provincial or federal level. Utilizing the social planning practice model gives opportunity for the community to possibly redistribute funding within their community to create options for affected community members while they wait for higher levels of government to follow through with their plans.

Conclusion

Homelessness and housing affordability remains problematic at a crisis level within the Lower Mainland of British Columbia (Kading, 2018). With housing availability and affordability continuing to be left as a municipal problem, the housing crisis is perpetuated (Buchnea *et al.*, 2021). Increasing communication such as informing BC Housing applicants how to keep their file open could greatly reduce the number of housing application that are closed due to loss of contact (BC Housing, 2024). The goal of providing safe housing was successful

in providing over 270,000 safe homes (National Housing Strategy, 2017). The Lower Mainland did experience an increase of rental availability which gave some ease to the renting population (Stronger BC for Everyone, n.d.). Rothman's Community Development Model encapsulates the Lower Mainland's housing crisis through targeting social planning in the community with strategic goals in place for community development and local systems (Reddy, 2021; Stevens & Dhungel, 2024). Attention needs to remain on the ever evolving housing need in the lower mainland as the crisis continues to cycles through.

Taken together, it is imperative to do community-focused participatory action research. This makes it possible for anyone without a place to reside to be invited to a community forum where they can critically discuss their challenges and experiences and develop the best course of actions for themselves. Since they are the experts in their own lives, it is critical to use a participatory action research technique and include them in all important talks when developing housing policies, programs, and services for them. This will facilitate collective collaborations on housing-related actions such as neighborhood development and social planning.

References

Aubry, T. (2020). Analysis of housing first as a practical and policy relevant intervention: The current state of knowledge and future directions for research. *European Journal of Homelessness, 14(*1), 13-26.

BC Housing. (2024). *Housing application.* https://housingapplication.bchousing.org/olf/faces/haveYouApplied

Buchnea, A., Legate, J., McKitterick, M., & Morton, E. (2021). *The systems planning collective: The state of systems approaches to preventing and ending homelessness in Canada. Hub Solutions.*

Bueckert, K. (September 17, 2023) *Municipalities can't solve homelessness without more federal and provincial aid, experts say.* CBC News. https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/kitchener-waterloo/homelessness- reports-waterloo-regio n-guelph-municipalities-fix-1.6968280

Carey, C. (2023, January 26). Vancouver's rental vacancy rates under 1%. *CityNews Vancouver.* https://vancouver.citynews.ca/2023/01/26/vancouvers-vacancy-rate- drops/

City of Vancouver. (2022). *City of Vancouver housing needs report.* https://vancouver.ca/files/cov/pds-housing-policy-housing-needs- report.pdf

Griffiths, N. (2023, June 19). Exclusive: More than 100,000 BC households at risk of homelessness due to rental crisis. *Vancouver Sun*. https://vancouversun.com/news/local-news/exclusive-bc-rental-crisis- puts-100000-households-at-risk-homeless

Homeless Hub. (n.d.). About homelessness: Supporting communities to prevent and end homelessness. https://www.homelesshub.ca/about- homelessness/homelessness-101/housing-first

Hyslop, L. (February 3, 2010). Winter olympics on slippery slope after Vancouver crackdown on homeless. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/feb/03/vancouver-winter- olympics-homeless-row

Kading, T. (2018). Homelessness and housing insecurity: Government inaction in the creation of a major crisis. In R. L. Harding & D. Jeyapal (Eds.), *Canadian Social Policy for Social Workers* (pp. 239-257). Oxford University Press.

Pfaff, K., Krohn, H., Crawley, J., Varacalli, F., & Ravi, P., Sattlet, D. (2021). The little things arI live, work, and build community e big: Evaluation of a compassionate community approach for promoting the health of vulnerable persons. *BMC Public Health, 21*(1), 1-10. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-021-12256-9

Mullay, B. (2007). *The new structural social work* (3rd Edition). Toronto, ON; Oxford University Press.

National Housing Strategy. (2017). *Canada's national housing strategy: A place to call home*. https://eppdscrmssa01.blob.core.windows.net/cmh-cprodcontainer/sf/project/ placetocallhome/pdfs/canada-national-housing-strategy.pdf

Payne, M. (2005). *Modern social work theory*. Chicago, IL: Lyceum Books.

Reddy, S. (2021). *Rothman's three models of community organization. https://www.slideshare.net/slideshow/rothmans-models-of-c/*250858293

Stevens, H., & Dhungel, R. (2024). A Case study: Understanding and responding to homelessness crisis in Chilliwack. *Journal of Advanced Academic Research, 11*(1), 70–79. https://doi.org/10.3126/jaar.v11i1.65523

Stronger BC for Everyone. (n.d.). *Homes for people and action plan to meet*

the challenges of today and deliver more homes for people. Faster. https://news.gov.bc.ca/files/Homes_For_People.pdf

Tausen, B., Charleson, M., & Fingerhut, L. (2021). Proximity with limited humanity: How hosting a tent city impacted college students' perceptions of individuals experiencing homelessness. *Journal of Community Psychology, 49*(7), 2853–2873. https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.22630

University of Calgary. (2023). *Rothman's three models of community organizing. https://www.calgary.ca/social-services/community-assessment/rothman-models.html*

Venn, D. (August 14, 2019). Okanagan homeless claim they are assaulted 'regularly' by police, public. *Vernon Morning Star* https://www.vernonmorningstar.com/news/okanagan-homeless-claim- they-are-assaulted-regularly-by-police-public-3301591