Exclusive: Family homelessness on the rise [1]

Author: Monsebraaten, Laurie
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EXCERPTS

Child and family homelessness is a hidden but growing crisis in Canada that requires a multi-pronged response from government and community agencies, according to the first comprehensive study of the problem.

It means addressing poverty, affordable housing, child care, discrimination, intimate-partner violence, stigma, children's mental health and family well-being, says the report being released on Family Day by Raising the Roof, a national organization dedicated to finding long-term solutions to homelessness.

With Canada spending about $7 billion a year on emergency services and homelessness supports, the authors say it would be cheaper and more humane to shift the focus to prevention, early intervention and creating a co-ordinated response.

"If we build affordable housing but do not address intimate partner violence, we will not completely stem the flow of women and children into homelessness," they say. "If we only look at downstream solutions instead of prevention, we will always be in a reactive mode to the crisis."

The prevailing image of homelessness in Canada is of "the older, single man (usually white) sitting on a street corner," says the report. And most research on the issue focuses on adults or youth.

But family homelessness, which is often hidden because parents and children seek temporary shelter with family and friends, makes up a significant percentage of the overall homeless population. Between 2005 and 2009, shelter use by children in Canada increased by 50 per cent, from 6,205 to 9,459. Families stay in shelters an average of 50.2 days, three times longer than other groups, according to the report.

However, recent strategies focus on the chronically and episodically homeless and fail to recognize or respond to the increasing numbers of children, youth and families experiencing homelessness, it says.

The 137-page report, which includes interviews with families who have faced homelessness and agencies that work with them, sets out practical tools and resources to help community organizations and government tackle the problem, said Carolann Barr, Raising the Roof's executive director.

"We hope as different levels of government develop affordable housing strategies and poverty reduction plans that they will incorporate some of these recommendations," she said.

Toronto's Young Parents No Fixed Address (YPNFA) network of 30 agencies, which meets monthly to share problems and brainstorm solutions, is an example of how a co-ordinated response helps to prevent homelessness and intervene early.

"We offer quick help and support to front-line workers and connect clients to other agencies," said network co-ordinator Yvette Roberts of Oolagen, a downtown youth mental health centre. Last year, the network helped 120 families find housing and 74 get parenting support, she added.

"Collaboration is so important with this population," she said in an interview. "Especially when it comes to housing."

Children whose families struggle with homelessness face challenges in school, physical and mental health problems, behavioural issues and often live in poverty as adults, Roberts said.

"For children, the transiency creates anxiety: 'Whose bed am I going to be sleeping in, what about school and the friends I just made?' she said. "They feel the stress of their parents who aren't able to focus on their needs."

When affordable housing is scarce, young parents and those who are unemployed or disabled are particularly vulnerable.

New father Blair Levesque, 33, is struggling to find a home for his partner, Felisha Young, 29, and their 6-week-old baby, Nikolas.

The couple, who has been living in a basement apartment in Scarborough for the past year, are having a dispute with their landlord they

fear may end in their eviction.

But since the couple both suffer from disabilities and are on welfare, it has been hard to convince a new landlord to take a chance on them, said Levesque, a forklift operator who had to quit his job due to chronic back problems

"Up until now, we have always paid our rent on time. And now with a new baby, the last thing I would do is risk his safety by not paying my rent," he said. "We just want to find a place where we feel welcome. But it's really tough out there."

Recommendations to end child and family homelessness

Federal, provincial, territorial and indigenous governments:

- Support and fund a co-ordinated children's mental health action plan.
- Develop and fund a national housing and homelessness strategy.

Federal government:

- Develop and fund a national poverty reduction strategy focusing on family poverty.
- Implement a national housing benefit.

Provincial/territorial governments:

- Implement a "one child, one case" policy for all government services to ensure comprehensive support.
- Develop a ministerial homelessness and housing secretariat/roundtable to work on preventing and ending homelessness.
- Develop a province/territory-wide plan to end homelessness.

Municipal/regional governments:

- Review bylaws and municipal practices to encourage "inclusionary zoning" and development of affordable housing.
- Develop new emergency shelters, transitional and/or permanent housing for families with children.

Community Agencies:

- Develop holistic, wrap-around services for clients, including co-ordinated assessment and common intake.
- Develop trauma-informed services to better support clients and staff.

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