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Introduction to the Special Issue: Homelessness in Canada

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In February 2009, over 700 people gathered for more than three-days at 'Growing Home,' Canada's second national conference on housing and homelessness (www.nhc2009.ca) to explore causes and solutions to this urgent problem. Conference delegates included those who are experiencing or have experienced homelessness, their families, policy analysts, political activists, politicians, professionals, scholars, those in the affordable housing community, and concerned citizens generally. Over 140 academic papers and workshops were delivered by the country's leading researchers and homelessness-serving practitioners.

There is an enormous scale of homelessness in advanced industrialized countries such as Canada. In a country of over 34 million people, between 150,000 and 300,000 are homeless, and various levels of government commit from \$3 – \$6 billion to supporting those on the streets. There are structural issues that can increase the risk of homelessness, including threats to income such as a rise in unemployment, low assistance levels for those with disabilities and seniors, lack of social housing and rent supports, insufficient affordable housing, and too many precarious jobs (involving job insecurity, low wages or high risks of ill health). Then there are events in a person's life

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that, under the worst circumstances, may lead to homelessness. These personal triggers include such crises as leaving the parental home because of conflict and abuse, marital or relationship breakdown, family violence, death of a spouse, leaving prison, leaving some form of social- or health-sector care, sharp deterioration in mental health, increase in alcohol or drug abuse, mounting debts or eviction from a rented or owned home. In today's economic uncertainty, these issues have become urgent and threatening.

It is particularly timely, therefore, to present a special issue on homelessness, bringing together some of our country's leading experts on the topic. Employment is a particularly critical area to be understood by policy makers, practitioners, and scholars. It is an important segue out of homelessness and precarious employment, unemployment, or other issues associated with labor market integration which put people at risk of being homeless. And yet we know less than we should, from both theoretical and analytical grounds. The first article, by Micheal L. Shier, Marion E. Jones, and John R. Graham qualitatively analyzes the perceptions of employed individuals' experiences of homelessness in Calgary, Alberta—a population hitherto neglected in the literature. They are followed by an examination of some issues of specific impact to select homeless sub-populations. Unemployment of young people is particularly high in Canada, as in other Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) nations. Karabanow, Hughes, Ticknor, Kidd, and Patterson therefore delve into youth perceptions about formal and informal employment in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. Following them are John Coates and Sue McKenzie-Mohr, examining the trauma histories of homeless youth in the Maritimes using an adapted Trauma Symptom Inventory. A different and also under-researched area is immigration, and to the fore come anthropologists Alina Tanasescu and Alan Smart, who use interview and survey data collected from immigrants experiencing housing stress to better understand how this population might be assisted. Geographer Geoffrey Nelson takes a new look at a different secondary literature, providing the first major analysis of the transformative evolution from custodial forms of housing to supportive housing to the present supported housing, or

“housing first” model. A vitally important stakeholder, and again one about which we do not know enough, is the media. As a corrective, communications scholars Barbara Schneider, Kerry Chamberlain, and Darrin Hodgetts examine the ways that four Canadian newspapers frame stories about homelessness in Canada—and show that all is not what one might first think. Concluding the edition is economist George Fallis, one of the country’s eminent scholars on homelessness, who presents a history of Canada’s welfare state as it pertains to housing policy.

The interdisciplinary nature of the special issue is paramount. The following pages highlight the useful contributions that scholars, particularly those with an interest in theory, bring to the table. The special edition guest editors would like to thank Dr. Robert D. Leighninger, Melinda McCormick, and their team for helpful guidance at all stages in our process; to Micheal Shier and Heath McLeod, for leadership of the management of the copy editing of our special edition; to Sarah Meagher, who provided many months of leadership to the management of the special edition review and author submission processes; and to the authors, communities, and funders who were involved in the resulting dissemination. Not an unusual facet for a special edition: in several instances, and with the encouragement from the team at the journal, the co-editors were authors, and in each of these instances the double blind peer review process (as with all of the other articles) prevailed: authors were at all times precluded from any peer review decision making process.

The special edition provides ample evidence that scholars can provide enormously helpful research into such issues of public policy as homelessness. Likewise, the work of Canadians can be of interest to readers from other countries. May the present special edition fertilize these prospects further; and above all else, may they contribute to our understanding of, and therefore solutions to, one of the great social problems of our time.

