

# Chapter 7: Experiencing Homelessness During COVID-19

Crises tend to amplify social inequalities; during difficult times, inequalities tend to increase and become more obvious. This was certainly the case with homelessness in Canada during the COVID-19 pandemic. Approximately [35,000 people](#) are homeless in Canada on a given day, but many more are susceptible to becoming homeless. It is estimated that up to 1.3 million Canadians have been homeless or had insecure housing in the past five years. During the pandemic, people experiencing homelessness were particularly vulnerable. They were at a higher risk of contracting COVID-19 for a [number of reasons](#). Self-isolation and social distancing are nearly impossible in crowded shelters. Following public health hygiene guidelines around hand washing is difficult with minimal access to the necessary facilities (and when restaurants, coffee shops, and stores closed, so did their washrooms). And more people who experience homelessness have underlying medical conditions that increase the risk of COVID complications than the general population. Furthermore, the pandemic removed many supports people rely on to survive being homeless. Water fountains were turned off. Libraries and malls closed. Transit services reduced capacity, making it more difficult to escape the elements. And for those who panhandled, the acceleration of the trend towards a cashless society left pockets empty. Dedicated services also experienced challenges. Shelters had to reduce capacities to adhere to physical-distancing guidelines, leaving more people on the streets. Encampments sprung up or enlarged as a result. It was difficult to offer outreach and counselling when a phone or computer became necessary.

To mitigate these factors, governments took a number of [steps](#). For example, the federal government pledged \$157.5 million to help ensure physical distancing for homeless populations. The City of Toronto moved people into hotel rooms and apartments it leased or bought. BC's provincial government also moved people in homeless encampments into housing and provided 3,500 smartphones, while the City of Vancouver proposed [changing a bylaw](#) to allow people to camp in its parks. Winnipeg created a dedicated testing site for its homeless population and distributed face masks. These policies, along with incredible efforts of shelters and all the other organizations that support this population, [mitigated worst-case projections](#) during the first wave of the pandemic; there were outbreaks and people got sick, but it was not the disaster many had feared.



*Photo by Cameron Venti on Unsplash*

While advocates recognized the relative effectiveness of the efforts of government in controlling outbreaks among the homeless, they called for continued attention and support for the issue. “Ultimately, the best protection from COVID-19 is a home,” said [Tim Richter](#), president and CEO of the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness. With a second and possibly third wave looming and more people in danger of losing their incomes, what was already a \$7-billion problem pre-COVID-19 may

become far worse. And systemic changes—rather than emergency measures—may be necessary to address it.

### As you read the chapter, consider the following questions:

- In April 2020, a group of social support and justice organizations sued the City of Toronto because its shelters were not all complying with federal physical-distancing guidelines. Bunk beds were still being used, and some beds were only 0.75 metres apart, rather than the recommended two metres. Homeless advocates called it a human rights violation. The lawsuit was [settled](#) in May, with the City agreeing to follow physical-distancing guidelines in shelters. What pressures do you think city shelters were trying to balance by not following guidelines? Do these justify their actions? How does this example reflect social inequality in Canadian society?
- One of the ways the government dealt with the economic fallout experienced by many Canadians due to the pandemic was through direct financial support (CERB) and wage subsidies. Canadians who had to stop working due to the pandemic received \$2000 a month. The barriers to receiving the money were low and the government erred on the side of accepting almost all applications rather than discouraging people who really needed the money. Many Canadians applied ([30%](#) of the population of MB; [40%](#) in SK; [43%](#) in ON; 43% in BC; 42% in AB; 63% in Nunavut; and so on), so many that it became clear that not all were actually eligible and would likely need to return the money come tax time. Some people [suggested](#) people receiving the benefit were less likely to return to work. Compare CERB with a minimum guaranteed income. How are their approaches similar? How are they different (for example, think through who is eligible to receive the money)? Would a minimum guaranteed income have been a better solution? Explain your answer.
- In the lockdown, many businesses posted signs on their doors saying that their washrooms were unavailable to the public. Park washrooms were closed as well. This didn't just affect homeless people. Everyone in society had to think twice before taking that extra-long walk (one of the only activities on offer!). This situation highlighted the fact that governments have largely stopped providing public facilities. Is this a human rights issue? Is it a social inequality issue?



### Additional online resources

In this interview, the president of the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness gives his thoughts on how the pandemic was handled and what more we could be doing.

- Baxter, M. (2020, May 11). [What Ontario is getting right \(and wrong\) about homelessness during COVID-19](#). TVO.

In this personal narrative, a physician explains how COVID-19 temporarily improved services provided to homeless individuals and makes the case for more permanent changes.

- Dosani, N. (2020, May 13). [COVID-19 has proven Canada can cure homelessness](#). Policy Options.

This report offers more detailed insights into how homeless people were adversely affected by COVID-19.

- Perri, M., Dosani, N., & Hwang, S. W. (2020, June 29). [COVID-19 and people experiencing homelessness: challenges and mitigation strategies](#). CMAJ.