

# Streets of Exclusion

A zine on the criminalization of  
homelessness in Toronto



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The cover picture is of the statue known as Panhandler Jesus located at The Church of Saint Stephen in the Fields, Toronto.

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# Introduction

In May of 2023, Toronto city council declared homelessness an emergency. This was after years of activist groups such as the Shelter & Housing Justice Network demanding the city to do so. Years that witnessed a surge in unhoused populations across the city, alongside an increase in deaths on the street and the violent evictions of homeless encampments. In 2021, the year that had 3 of the most violent encampment evictions in Toronto's history, 221 people died while unhoused. An unprecedented number that reflects the city's punitive response to homelessness. A response that aims to punish and exclude those without a fixed address, rather than helping them alleviate the conditions that lead to them having no home to go to at night.

This zine is about Toronto, one of the richest and most populous cities in North America, and its tarnished legacy of criminalizing homelessness through the force of the police. Toronto's pursuit of punishing unhoused communities through punitive measures reinforces the pathologization of homelessness that intends to diminish social, economic and political causes of housing insecurity. One that frames the issue not as a failure of government policy to provide adequate housing for all, but one where homeless

individuals are blamed for a decline in moral order. Which consequently connects their very presence in public spaces as a sign of criminality.

This is the case across both the United States and Canada, where laws have been implemented with the intended objective of socially excluding unhoused populations from public spaces by targeting them with fees, fines and the possibility of incarceration. Laws that criminalize necessary survival actions such as sitting in public, receiving food, asking for help and panhandling that disproportionately restrict the movement of homeless individuals. Anti-homeless legislation that Don Mitchell says "work in a pernicious way: by redefining what is acceptable behavior in public space, by in effect annihilating the spaces in which the homeless must live." While these policies are written with a neutral tone, the outcomes of their execution ensure unhoused populations encounter police significantly more when compared to the average person. Which in turn, results in homeless individuals being ticketed by police at a disproportionate rate. Inevitably ensuing that people without a fixed address are overrepresented in incarcerated populations. The police are not objective arbiters of the law when it comes to carrying out these policies, but strict enforcers of socially constructed perceptions of criminality with the

intention of punishing people on the street for participating in life sustaining activities. People with no fixed address have no private place to call home, they usually have no choice but to be present in a public space, so they are virtually guaranteed to face the omnipresent threat of these anti-homelessness laws.

This zine hopefully brings further into light the harms committed by the city of Toronto towards its unhoused population. In addition to pointing out the consequences of having an overfunded police force at the expense of social services that, if properly subsidized, would make the police obsolete when it comes to addressing the prevalent issue of homelessness. Or in other words, the safest communities are not the ones with the most police, they are the ones with the most resources.

# Roots of Contemporary Mass Homelessness

"First and foremost, homelessness must be seen as a component, an extreme reflection, of general social, economic and political patterns, not as an isolated problem, separate and apart."

- Peter Marcuse, 1988

## AFTER THE WAR

Between 1945 and 1970, Canada dedicated a significant amount of spending towards social security. A safety net that included unemployment insurance, family allowances, old age pensions, Medicare and social housing for provinces nationwide. 12 percent of all housing built in the country was for social homes by the 70's, due to Canada's strong national housing program. In Toronto, approximately 3,900 units of social housing were built each year from 1965 to 1995, which made 1 in 8 eight houses subsidized. Ontario in general witnessed one of the largest growths during this time, spending 3 and a half times more on social assistance in 1970 than in 1945. By 1980, over \$10 billion dollars, or nearly 2/3 of provincial spending was expended on education, health and other various social services.

## HOMELESSNESS AS CONSEQUENCE OF NEOLIBERALISM

Because of Canada's robust social safety net, cities like Toronto were not yet experiencing an alarming amount of homelessness going into the last quarter of the 20th century. The amount of people using homeless shelters in Toronto in 1980 was at 2,000. This changed drastically with both provincial and federal governments embracement of the neoliberal approach to structuring the economy. Neoliberalism can be defined as a set of political and economic policies that prioritize privatization, austerity, individualism and the capitalist free market.

Researchers have identified four common indicators of neoliberal mentality that contributed to the unprecedented rise in homeless populations in cities across North America. Economic and Occupational Change, such as the increase in unemployment due to the reduction of manufacturing jobs, Gentrification, which displaced lower socio-economic populations from their neighbourhoods in favour of higher class living, Neoliberal State Reform, that gutted social spending at the expense of people most susceptible to homelessness, and Urban Entrepreneurialism, which adopted the private sector as the main facilitator of services. Unhoused populations began to increase in the late 70's and then surged exponentially from the early 80's onward.



These factors, in conjunction with one another, produced an unprecedented rise in the wealth gap between classes in Canada. Resulting in more working class people no longer being able to afford a higher standard of living, as more wealth accumulated towards a smaller number of rich people. Many families were directly impacted by this restriction of the country's social security, creating a growing need for shelter services in cities. In Toronto, the people using homeless shelters increased 10 times or to 20,000 by 1990.

Perhaps no other component contributed more to the exponential rise in homelessness than the complete altering of social housing that occurred in the 1990s. Influenced by the neoliberal practices of Ronald Reagan, the United States president at the time, Canada followed suit by decimating funding for affordable homes in exchange for large investment into the private sector. In 1993, Canada became one of the only G8 countries to not have a national housing strategy by putting an end to the financing of affordable housing. As a result, seven provinces cut housing spending between 1993 and 2000. The largest reduction came from the two richest provinces, Ontario and Alberta, which slashed around \$500 million combined during that time period. One of the first actions of Mike Harris when he became premier in 1995 was to cancel 17,000 units

of affordable housing. A decision that in the words of Cathy Crowe, a prominent street nurse and activist, made Harris the "architect of the homeless disaster." Housing was not the only social service that fell victim to 90's austerity measures. Federal spending on health, education and welfare decreased dramatically as well. Welfare specifically was cut by over 20% in the province of Ontario, a policy choice that has yet to be completely reversed to this day.

These elements together shaped the exponential rise in homelessness that developed going into the 21st century. Cities witnessed their unhoused communities peak, such as in Toronto around 2001, who had nearly 34,000 residents occupying shelters in the city. This increase in people without a fixed address coincided alongside an increase in evictions, families on the waitlist for affordable housing, and unhoused deaths on the street. Hundreds of new people walked into drop-in centers and shelters, never thinking they would ever have to step foot in such a place.

Little changed in Toronto during the years of David Miller who was elected mayor in 2003. Despite running on a progressive platform, he ultimately catered to the business class of the city with lower property taxes and the selling of land to private owners. Virtually no affordable

housing was built in Toronto in the first 15 years of the century, where there was around 647,000 Ontarians who paid more than 30% of their income towards rent. Resulting in a concerning amount of people waiting up to 20 years for social housing, a wait time that has only increased to this day. A positive aspect that occurred under Harris's tenure was the creation of Streets to Homes project in 2005, which had housed around 1,500 previously unhoused people by 2008. The total amount of homelessness in the city however did not reduce during this time. Indicating that Harris's government did not take sufficient measures to address the underlying conditions that led to people becoming unhoused. Both recent mayors Doug Ford and John Tory continued to maintain the status quo when it came to housing, emphasizing privatization, low taxes, and public-private ownerships. These decisions are what has entrenched the neo-liberal urbanism that defines Toronto today.

Unhoused communities represent the surplus population that are displaced due to austerity measures implemented by the neoliberal state. Essential to this way of framing the issue is its rejection of the pathologization of homelessness, which is frequently used to justify the existence of unhoused populations. A pathologization that in the words of Erin DeJ, "dilutes complex historical, cultural, and social

conditions in favor of individual deficits to be addressed by targeting personal failings." Under a neoliberal capitalist lens, the cause of homelessness is downsized onto the dispossessed, leaving the overall system exempt from all criticism. Absent from this status quo narrative is the condemnation of societal decisions made by powerful people that have exacerbated the conditions that lead to housing insecurity. Homelessness is not a natural phenomenon of humankind, but a construct. One that just as anything else built in our society, can be torn down and replaced with something new.

## UNHOUSED POPULATION IN TORONTO

According to a Toronto Needs Assessment Report, men make up 63% of the unhoused population in Toronto, while women make up 34%, and genderqueer, trans and Two-Spirit people are around 3-4%.

Over 60% of all unhoused individuals identify as members of racialized groups. Black people, despite making up 9% of people in Toronto, represent 31% of the unhoused population. This disparity is also present with Indigenous people, who represent only 2.5% of Toronto's population, but make up 15% of those who are experiencing homelessness. This is a consequence of neoliberal austerity measures intertwined with the legacy of Indigenous dispossession and displacement of land, family and identity. Experience in child welfare is a common indicator of future poverty, and Indigenous children are disproportionately more likely to be placed in the Canadian child welfare system. Seniors, veterans, as well as LGBTQ2S+ are also dominantly represented in homeless communities. 86% of unhoused people reported to have been living in Toronto for one year or more, with 44% saying they have always lived in the city.

# CRIMINALIZING HOMELESSNESS

"The law, in its majestic equality, forbids rich and poor alike to sleep under bridges, to beg in the streets, and to steal loaves of bread."

- Anatole France, 1898

## POLICING AS A NEOLIBERAL RESPONSE TO HOMELESSNESS

As social programs such as affordable housing have been cut due to neoliberal austerity measures, state expenditures towards the police remains well funded. The supposed objective of reducing the role of the government does not apply to law enforcement and prisons. This is because neoliberal policy is rooted in the assumption that police serve as a legitimate solution in maintaining social security, and that it is their job to facilitate the movement of those participating in "disorderly conduct." Unhoused people fit the description to many as a sign of declining urban livability, which justifies in their eyes the use of punitive measures to exclude them from society. The police, throughout their entire

existence, have been responsible for mobilizing the oppression of people who have been displaced due to capitalist policies. Which in turn, has essentially normalised their size and presence in everyday life. Homeless individuals are significantly faced with disciplinary mechanisms utilised by law enforcement compared to those who have stable housing. This is especially true in Toronto, where unhoused people are 47% more likely to experience daily interactions with police.

City populations are manufactured to deem the police as the only solution to addressing the harm caused by systemic inequality. The state produces insecurity that leads to homelessness through austerity policies, then promotes visions of safety that can only be achieved by police and carceral measures. All the while, these very institutions placed under the guise of "public safety," not only reinforce systemic inequality, but themselves produce greater unsafety for communities. By framing police, prisons and courts as integral to social welfare, obscured is the fact that they are often sites of violence for all those involved rather than places of resolution for harm done. The police are then further legitimized under the pretense that they are arbiters of the objective law that treats everyone equally. Missing from this narrative is the fact that police are far from neutral when choosing which

"criminals" to go after and the ones they choose to ignore. Their actions as to who to police are driven significantly more by political influences and public perception of crime than what causes the most harm in society. Resulting in law enforcement essentializing certain vulnerable communities who happen to have more interactions with police as inherently prone to criminality. Those supposedly on the anarchic side of the thin blue line. The unhoused are on the far side of the spectrum of the undeserving, condemned alongside the likes of welfare recipients, prisoners, low income dads and drug users as threats to the moral order of a society that claims to reward hard working, law abiding consumers. Their presence in public spaces is deemed criminal in of itself, even though they are more likely to be victims of violence than perpetrators of it.

Just as racial profiling by policing specifically targets people based on their race, social profiling signals out unhoused people based on their impoverished state. This intersection of racial and social profiling that law enforcement participates in structurally reinforces the processes through which homeless individuals, alongside other marginalised communities, are excluded from society. It is through this usage of profiling, that the police facilitate the pathologization of homelessness by



enforcing socially constructed perceptions of criminality specifically targeted to punish unhoused individuals for their very existence. Laws that prohibit actions such as panhandling, sleeping, camping, and the sharing of food in public, alongside prohibiting asking for help and protecting oneself from the weather, have been implemented by cities and strictly enforced by police to specifically target unhoused populations with a disproportionate amount of fees, fines, arrests and evictions that perpetuate the paradoxical cycle of poverty. Research has discovered that between 2006 and 2016, 187 cities across the U.S increased bans on sitting and lying in public by 52%, camping in public places by 69%, and sleeping in a car by 143%. Because of this constant obstruction of the criminal legal system in the lives of unhoused populations, it has been determined that the chances of a homeless person being arrested in their lifetime range between 63 to 90%. While lifetime conviction rates are between 28 to 80%, and likelihood of incarceration ranging from 48 to 67%. In Toronto, this form of legalised discrimination against unhoused people is best articulated by the tarnish legacy of the 1999 Ontario Safe Streets Act.

## ONTARIO SAFE STREETS ACT

Following the unprecedented rise in unhoused populations in the late 20th century, which in turn produced a moral panic arising from the sight of "squeegee kids" and aggressive panhandlers, Ontario implemented the Ontario Safe Streets Act. The OSSA prohibited such actions as panhandling in an "aggressive manner" as well as solicitation of a "captive audience," namely panhandling near a frequently busy spot in the city. Noted by academic research is the vagueness of what it means to exactly "solicit" within the context of the statute. Many homeless people have no choice but to be near crowds in a public space, their presence is almost always going to be surrounded by other people, and it is entirely up to the police to interpret what counts as aggressive panhandling. Furthermore, terms within the Ontario Safe Streets Act are just as deceiving as the name itself. Using "captive audience" to describe the public implies that they are vulnerable victims to the onslaught of dangerous panhandlers. Language of how the unhoused issue is framed contributes immensely to the continued pathologization of homelessness.

When it comes to a panhandler committing a first offence, the average OSSA ticket is \$60 but can be upwards of \$500, and then up to \$1,000 or incarceration for every following offence. Imagine you do not know

where your next meal is coming from, let alone having to find a safe place to sleep for the night, being forced to panhandle whatever cash you can, only to be handed an exorbitant fine by an officer, having to owe money to the very government that failed to provide you with affordable housing in the first place. One man who spoke at the Toronto Homeless Memorial claimed that he was over \$40,000 in debt from 20 years of receiving Safe Street Act tickets. Even though he is now currently housed, he stills finds himself paying money to the state, precisely because he was living on the streets in his past. The burdens of being unhoused does not go away when people finally find shelter.

According to data compiled by the Toronto Police, the issuing of these tickets in the city increased by 2000% between 2000 and 2010. Even though crime in Toronto did not increase, and evidence suggesting that the number of panhandlers had decreased during this time. When the issuing of these tickets hit their peak in 2010, nearly 75% of them were for non-aggressive panhandling.

# VIOLENT DISPLACEMENT

"When society places hundreds of proletarians in such a position that they inevitably meet a too early and an unnatural death, one which is quite as much a death by violence as that by the sword or bullet; when it deprives thousands of the necessaries of life, places them under conditions in which they cannot live - forces them, through the strong arm of the law, to remain in such conditions until that death ensues which is the inevitable consequence - knows that these thousands of victims must perish, and yet permits these conditions to remain, its deed is murder just as surely as the deed of the single individual; disguised, malicious murder, murder against which none can defend himself, which does not seem what it is, because no man sees the murderer, because the death of the victim seems a natural one, since the offence is more one of omission than of commission. But murder it remains."

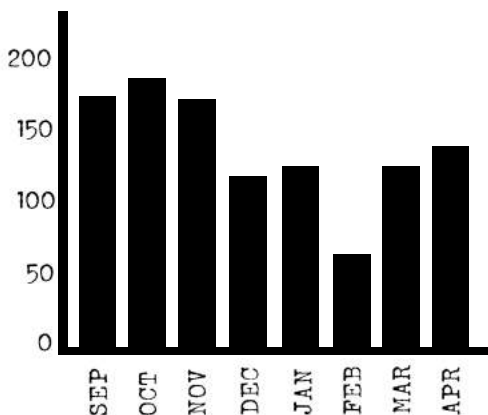
- Friedrich Engels, 1845

## CONDITION OF TORONTO'S SHELTER SYSTEM

To understand the presence of unhoused communities in Toronto, it is first essential to analyze the current condition of the city's shelter system. On any given

night, there are an estimated 10,000 people without housing. For most nights of the year, drop in shelters operate around a 99% capacity rate. This is especially true in the colder times, where an average 145 people were rejected daily last year due to overcrowding. An number that doesn't even count the people who don't even bother trying to get a spot. Those attempting to call central intake need a phone, a resource many of which do not have direct access to.

AVERAGE DAILY NUMBER OF UNMATCHED INDIVIDUAL CALLERS IN TORONTO'S SHELTER SYSTEM IN LATE 2022/EARLY 2023



The city of Toronto has also failed to properly expand access to warming centers in the winter time. While cities like Hamilton approved extra funds to keep warming shelters open until March of 2023, Toronto decided their top priority was to violently close down the Novotel hotel, a temporary shelter that was created during the pandemic. Multiple individuals were left with nowhere to go after being

violently evicted by the police at the end of last year. This was during a time when hundreds of people were not only being turned away from shelters, but when the limited warming centers sparsely located around the city only opened when it was -15 C or colder. Many experts and activists have contested the -15 C threshold required for warming centers to be accesible, asserting that it is dangerous and not based on evidence. 72% of all hypothermia have happen in conditions that aren't considered cold enough to be a an extreme cold weather report. Yet the city continues to refuse to expend resources towards these much needed community spaces. Shelter benefits in general have remained stagnant for years while rent in Toronto only goes up. Between 2011 and 2021, Ontario Works shelter benefits only increased by 7 percent, while the cost of a one-bedroom apartment surged by 51 percent.

Although it is vital that cities expand their shelter space to provide safety for all who require them, it is important to remember that homeless shelters are not an end all solution. They still operate within a neo-liberal individualistic framework rather than recognizing homelessness as a social problem. While drop in shelters do undoubtedly provide a much needed social service to help those in need, and have sufficiently aided in ways where they state has failed, they ultimately exist to manage and maintain homelessness rather

than mitigate the underlying issue. The homeless industrial complex exists throughout neo-liberal governance, and facilitates a similar surveillance of control over unhoused people's lives as the criminal justice system. Some have referred to homeless shelters as a "Total Institution." A term to describe a closed system where people are cut off from the wider community and forced to conform to strict norms and rules.

Many people find themselves reluctant to stay in shelters, due to various reasons such as possible threats of violence, substance withdrawal or concern over having their possessions stolen. Despite the city's claim that people have access to safe, high quality shelters, the facts of the matter suggest otherwise. Between March 2016 and February of 2021, there were 10,038 reported incidents of violence in Toronto shelters. Furthermore, as organizations such as OCAP (Ontario Coalition Against Poverty) and SHJN (Shelter & Housing Justice Network) have pointed out, shelters in Toronto are prone to the spreading of disease. This was especially the case during the height of the COVID-19 Pandemic, where sleeping in an overcrowded shelter made unhoused individuals more susceptible to having the illness.

For over 30 years housing advocates have been fighting for better conditions and

more shelter space in Toronto. In 1999 the Safe Park tent city was created in Allan Gardens to provide shelter for those who could not get into any other place. In 2016, to put pressure on the lack of action by John Tory, the Shelter Campaign was created by OCAP to demand 1,500 shelter beds be added in the city. They eventually gained enough elected councilors attention to pass a motion that opened 1,000 more shelter beds in 2018. An instance of one of the many successes of grassroots organizing against the neoliberal status quo.

## EVICTIONS

Evictions remain a consistent cause of homelessness in Toronto. One of the more common methods used by landlords is known as the no-fault eviction, when the tenants are removed with the intention of the owner using the property for their personal use. These types of evictions have risen by 41% since 2019, leaving many renters attempting to sue their landlord in response. When tenants end up going to the Landlord and Tenant Board to report such violations however, they end up waiting much longer than landlords who apply for an eviction, leaving renters further burdened with getting their grievances regarded. An Ombudsman report determined that land hearings are typically scheduled within 6-9 months, while tenant applications could take up to 2 years to be heard. Low-income tenants



often cannot afford a lawyer, and therefore have to represent themselves to challenge an eviction, or else be represented by an overworked legal aid worker. Those in social housing are also not safe from threats of eviction. Elderly renters who happen to secure an affordable place are especially susceptible to being removed from their homes. As they are faced with a complex interplay of economic and social conditions that exacerbate their housing instability.

### ENCAMPMENT SWEEPS

Toronto's response to the presence of informal settlements, which can be defined as any form of shelter that falls outside of state regulation, has been one of violent displacement and removal. This choice is upheld by legislation and regulation whose objective it is to further exclude the presence of homelessness from public space. Municipal Code Chapter 743 for instance, prohibits camping, dwelling and lodging on city streets, sidewalks and parks. Chapter 608 bans sexual behaviour and nudity, alcohol without a permit, and limits access to parks after midnight. Then there is Chapter 636, which prohibits camping, tents or any "temporary abode" in public squares.

Sweeps, the term used to describe the violent eviction of homeless encampments, has become a frequent response by the police to deal with the problem of visual

poverty. Just as anti-homeless legislation fails to address the structural conditions that lead to homelessness, sweeps also fall into this category of reactive discipline towards unhoused populations that neglect material causes. According to Constance Gordon, these sweeps "function alongside, and through, vast mechanisms of surveillance and policing in public space. In many ways, it is through the politics of infrastructural maintenance that cities are made in the service of some, while systematically expelling others." Rapidly gentrifying cities like Toronto prioritise capital accumulation through constant urban growth, which in turn result in the further dispossession of unhoused communities from public spaces. A prominent example being the homeless encampment sweep that occurred in 2019 under the Gardiner Expressway in downtown Toronto, which made room for "Dinner With A View," an expensive restaurant attraction. These sweeps further propel the criminalization of homelessness and work alongside anti-panhandling tickets, increased surveillance, arrests and municipal codes implemented in cities that ban encampments, to enforce the social exclusion of unhoused populations from public space.

The creation of these encampments, alongside panhandling and being present in public spaces, fall into the category of

necessary survival strategies utilised by unhoused individuals. Their existence provides opportunities for community and mutual aid that promotes equal distribution of basic survival needs amongst homeless populations. Mutual aid that was integral during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic where the challenges that come with being homeless were exacerbated to a heightened extent.

In the summer of 2021, Toronto spent \$2 million carrying out three of the most violent encampment evictions in its history. Communities in Trinity Bellwoods, Alexandra Park and Lamport Stadium were displaced by the likes of city officials, militarized police, and Star Security. There are multiple accounts of people describing the violence law enforcement inflicted onto them during the evictions, from being pushed, brutally beaten, pepper sprayed and being sexually harrassed. Activists were being threatened with fines of upwards of \$10,000 for defending their neighbours in tents. People's possessions were thrown away and disregarded, bulldozers destroyed tiny shelters that people called their home. All of this violence occurred under the justification that the city was going to find housing for those living in the encampments. It has been determined in the aftermath of events however that 92% of residents evicted were not placed in any form of housing. Rather, they were forced back onto

the street. An Ombudsman report published in 2023 further emphasized the multiple issues that came with the city's execution of the encampment evictions. It concluded that Toronto ultimately failed to honour its promise to a human rights approach and to serve the unhoused communities with dignity and respect. There was little effort to communicate information relating to the encampment sweeps for both the general public and the people living in encampments. The information that was available was found to be "unclear, confusing and lacking in transparency."

In addition to the carrying out of the violent evictions, the city also took it upon themselves to discipline activists attempting to alleviate the struggles of encampment conditions. Khaleel Seivwright, a carpenter and activist, decided to build tiny shelters for encampment residents during the winter time. Seivwright had built over 100 of these shelters with the help of 40 volunteers before April of 2021, and actively distributed them in parks across Toronto. Rather than acknowledging the warmth and safety that these shelters provided to people in need however, the city of Toronto demanded that Seivwright cease the production, distribution and supply of these structures instead. After a heinous legal battle, Seivwright was forced to comply with the city's command.

# HOMELESSNESS AND INCARCERATION

"What do we make of the flowering vine that uses as its trellis the walls of a prison?"

- Jackie Wang, 2018

## HOMELESSNESS AS A CONSEQUENCE OF INCARCERATION

One outcome of the current criminal legal system is the reinforcement of the very harms it claims to want to alleviate in society by perpetuating the existence of such injustices as homelessness. Those released from correctional facilities in Canada are significantly more likely to find themselves without a fixed address. An estimated 30% of people have nowhere to go after they have periods of incarceration. Mainly due to the loss of housing as a result of being incarcerated, as well as the reluctance of landlords to accept formerly incarcerated people as tenants. The effects of being incarcerated extends far beyond being excluded from society, it is a collateral impact that imposes itself on every aspect of a person's livelihood. Unhoused people going into the criminal justice system are significantly more likely to be detained because they get denied bail. Sequentially resulting in them more likely to plead guilty to an offence in order to satisfy a plea bargain,

regardless of if they committed the crime or not. Periods of homelessness have been shown to significantly increase the risk of recidivism amongst past offenders as well. One study determined that being unhoused after incarceration created "greater than two times the risk for new convictions and prison readmissions and three times the risk for revocations."

## UNHOUSED INCARCERATION IN TORONTO

The intersection of homelessness and incarceration is a vicious cycle. As discussed earlier in this zine, unhoused individuals are significantly more likely than people with homes to encounter police in their daily lives. Which only leads to both an increased chance of being arrested and convicted of a sentence. Ontario is no different in this regard, and has witnessed a rise of people with no fixed address being incarcerated in the past 15 years. This has been during a time when crime in general has declined, leading to a larger disproportionate disparity of incarcerated people who are considered unhoused. In 2007, 1 in every 16 admissions to correctional institutions had no fixed address. In 2021, this number had escalated to 1 in every 6 admissions. In Toronto, the numbers are even more worrisome. 1 in every 4 admissions to detention centers in 2020 were homeless at the time of incarceration.

# A PATH FORWARD

"In this new space one can imagine safety without walls, can iterate difference that is prized but unprivileged, and can conceive of a third, if you will pardon the expression, world "already made for me, both snug and wide open, with a doorway never needing to be closed""

- Toni Morrison, 1997

## THE LIMITS OF HOUSING FIRST

Housing First is an approach to addressing homelessness that aims to move unhoused people into permanent housing regardless of present conditions, while simultaneously providing additional support and services based on their needs. It is a solution that mainly targets chronically homeless adults who have severe mental health and addiction issues, as they are the most affected by the conditions that come with living without a fixed address. The fundamental belief that drives Housing First is that people will be more successful in pursuing a fulfilling life if they are housed. Its implementation is guided by 4 main principles. Immediate provision of housing and consumer driven services, that is consumers are encouraged to select the type of housing as well as treatment they will receive, Separation of Housing and Clinical Services, where housing and services are separated not



only geographically but conceptually, Providing supports and treatment with a recovery orientation, which is an approach to recovery that builds on people's strengths and does not punish them. Then there is the principle of Facilitation of Community integration, where consumers are encouraged to be a part of the community and use the amenities available to them. Housing First has mostly shown to be an effective alternative to reducing homelessness, and a constructive shift away from the emergency services approach, such as funding towards homeless shelters and soup kitchens, that defined the late 20th century response to homelessness. The main finding behind research has been that the implementation of Housing First has had a positive impact on housing stability.

The implementation of Housing First is not without its critics however. While in theory it seems to be a promising solution to a social problem, in practice it has shown symptoms of neglecting the well-being of the unhoused people it claims to help. As A.J Withers asserts in his assessment of the success of Toronto's HF programs, they are "neatly aligned with a broader neoliberal project. HF creates individual solutions for social problems while minimizing public investment and public infrastructure and promoting an uninhibited free market." While it is true that being given a home should be the



the first priority when it comes to alleviating homelessness, that home should not rely on the privatized housing with profit incentives and be on the outskirts of the city, hidden away from public life. As is the case for many homeless individuals who have had experience with HF programs, who often find themselves isolated from social services required for their survival such as food banks. This is what Cathy Crowe has concluded about Housing First as well when she says, "people become a successful housing statistic as "housed," but more often than not struggle and suffer. Who benefits? Private landlords." Housing First should ultimately be seen as what it truly is, a smoke and mirror policy that has in a sense crushed advocacy for a national housing program. While certainly better than other punitive alternatives, it is important to recognize that this neoliberal initiative is not the end all solution to homelessness.

### DEFUND THE POLICE, REFUND THE COMMUNITY

Policing, and all of the punitive measures that coincide with it, is not a solution to homelessness. Increasing their budgets will always be at the expense of social programs that truly exist to provide safety for society's most vulnerable. Yet the city of Toronto continues to disregard this reality in the face of a seemingly ever present homelessness emergency. A

groundbreaking report worked on by multiple non-profits called Rethinking Community Safety: A Step Forward for Toronto has outlined multiple recommendations that the city should implement in diverting resources away from the police. Their first proposal is that Toronto should reallocate around the \$100 million in funds currently being used to police unhoused individuals towards homeless outreach, drop ins, safe consumption sites, and supportive housing. Furthermore, the \$150 million currently prioritized to police people experiencing mental health crises instead be redirected towards the expansion of civilian crisis response programs, safe beds, ACT teams and intensive case management. These initiatives will effectively mitigate the criminalization of both encampments and homelessness, thereby limiting consequential interactions between police and unhoused people who are just trying to survive. Which in turn, would reduce the disproportionate rate of people with no fixed address spending time in the legal system.

Refunding the community with the objective of alleviating the conditions of homelessness comes in many forms. Universal prevention can include investment in poverty reduction, healthcare, income supports, social housing such as that Canada has had before, early childhood interventions, violence

prevention, anti-discrimination policy and tenant rights and legislation.

Reintegration support for young people leaving child protection and people leaving corrections or mental health settings must also be prioritized.

## ENCAMPMENT EVICTIONS ARE A VIOLATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

In 2023, an Ontario court set an important precedent when it came to the clearing of homeless encampments in cities, declaring them a violation of the human rights of each encampment individual who ends up getting evicted. Section 7 of the Canadian Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms guarantees the life, liberty and personal security of all Canadians, and every single encampment eviction violates these rights. Considering just how essential these encampments are to the well being of unhoused communities, it is vital that the criminalization of their existence ceases immediately. Not only should all evictions end, but there must be an increase in publicly funded survival gear such as fire extinguishers, sleeping bags, access to food and water, winter clothing like mitts, toques, long underwear, jackets and wool socks for all encampment residents. So long as the shelters in Toronto remain underfunded and crowded, so long as the wealth gap in Canada continues to grow, so long as social services continue to be neglected, there will be a prevalent need to provide adequate mutual aid required

for encampment communities to survive. After all, the presence of these encampments are a consequence of the Canadian government choosing not to invest in proven methods that mitigate homelessness.

## HOUSING FOR ALL

The Canadian government has failed to address the urgency of the homelessness emergency. No politician elected in the past 40 years, corresponding with the rise in neoliberal capitalism, has taken sufficient steps to dismantle certain obvious foundational causes of the rise in unhoused populations.

The most relevant policy that has been implemented in this regard is the National Housing Strategy Act which came into force in 2019. A piece of legislation that recognizes housing as a human right guaranteed in international law. The National Housing Strategy Act aims to provide housing outcomes for those most in need, as well as hold the federal government accountable for upholding the right to housing. As critics point out however, this federal housing strategy is still not nearly enough to adequately dismantle homelessness. As it still relies heavily on the private sector as the main housing supplier for renters. Leilani Farha says, the Strategy "reinforces people living in homelessness as

beneficiaries of charity or unproven social programs rather than rights holders requiring human rights responses to their living conditions."

In order to fulfill their obligation of making housing a human right, Canada must eliminate the idea of housing as a commodity that extracts wealth for landlords and capitalists. As the commodification of housing is in direct contradiction to the right of having a home. An idea that in a world where capitalism is so deeply entrenched in every facet of our lives, seems next to impossible to achieve. It is vital to remember however that all means of progress and development towards increasing human freedom and liberty from oppression seemed impossible in their time. It is easy in hindsight to recognize their accomplishments, but hardly in the moment in which they were conceived are they appreciated. In the words of Ursula K. Le Guin, "We live in Capitalism. Its power seems inescapable. So did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings."

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"We can only be interested in men by knowing them — knowing them directly, thoroughly, intimately; and this knowing leads ever to the greatest of human discoveries,—the recognition [sic] of one's self in the image of one's neighbor; the sudden, startling revelation, "This is another Me, that thinks as I think, feels as I feel, suffers even as I suffer." This is the beginning, and the only true beginning, of the social conscience."

- W.E.B Du Bois