

Beyond Ending Homelessness

An Alternative Perspective

A DI Discussion Paper by Linda McLean
November 2008



CALGARY DROP-IN & REHAB CENTRE

I have always wanted to write a book called “The Right to be a Rotter”. A fairer title is perhaps “The Right to Be Oneself”.

One of the great difficulties of community life is that we sometimes force people to be what they are not: We stick an ideal image on them to which they are obliged to conform. We then expect too much of them and are quick to judge or to label.

If they don't manage to live up to this image or ideal, then they will disappoint others. So they feel obliged to hide behind a mask. Sometimes they succeed in living up to the image; they are able to follow all the rules of the community. Superficially this may give them a feeling of being perfect, but this is an illusion.

In any case, community is not about perfect people. It is about people who are bonded to each other; each of whom is a mixture of good and bad, darkness and light, love and hate.

And community is the only earth in which each can grow without fear toward the liberation of the forces of love which are hidden in them. But there can be growth only if we recognize potential, and this will never unfold if we prevent people from discovering and accepting themselves as they are, with their gifts and wounds. They have the right to be rotters, to have their own dark places and corners of envy and even hatred in their hearts. These jealousies and insecurities are part of our wounded nature. That is our reality.

Jean Vanier, Community and Growth 1989

Introduction

The topic of homelessness has become a central point of discussion both locally and nationally. Much of the discourse that plays out in various forms of media and in research surrounding the topic positions homelessness as a new crisis. To read the offerings of popular press one might mistakenly assume that this ‘crisis’ emerged without warning, or prior indication of the growing numbers and complexity among those affected. Annually we enter into discussions about how to respond, temporarily, to seasonal emergencies related to the ever-growing numbers of individuals for whom safe shelter is not a guarantee – numbers who often cannot be accommodated within the limits of existing programs that serve this population. Despite the fact that year over year the homeless population has grown, in Calgary and across the country, the reaction is one of concerned surprise to find that again we are ill-equipped to adequately address the needs of the men, women, and children for whom homelessness is a reality.

The emergent portrayal of homelessness in Calgary is centered around the quest for solution. By consequence, we have, therefore, defined homelessness as a problem. For whom this is a problem is variously described and owes much to the perspective and motivation of the author or speaker. But, for the sake of discussion, let us initially accept the simplistic definition of homelessness as some form of singular problem.

The search for solution requires a number of components: descriptions of what is wrong; definition of causes; manufacturing of a sense of urgency to respond; assignment of responsibility, accountability (and even blame where it serves to bolster the position) and; appointment of those who will lead the charge towards the next big thing.

In this process the complex, multi-faceted issues that fall under the banner of homelessness become diluted until they bear little resemblance to reality. Plurality becomes singularity and the complex becomes simplified to the point where we can presumably define a major social issue in terms of a basic equation. In this instance the equation becomes: homelessness = lack of housing.

Following this equation there is an obvious solution. If homelessness equals lack of housing then the solution lies in housing. From this basic line of reasoning has developed the concepts that now underpin the prevailing discourse that surround homelessness in Calgary. The counter discourse that this paper seeks to present rests on a belief that while there is merit in some aspects of the proposed solution, there are flaws in the underlying premise that call into question the potential for its true operationalization. At best it will fall short of promised outcomes, at worst it stands to undermine and negate some of the most significant and central supports that currently meet the needs of the homeless without provision of viable alternatives.

Understanding Discourse

A significant amount of attention is paid in this paper to language and the discourse that surrounds poverty and homelessness. I believe that this discourse shapes, or perhaps distorts, our collective perceptions of these issues. It may extend influence also into the arenas of planning, funding and practice. It undoubtedly impacts how people affected by homelessness view our systems of support and the corresponding programs at their disposal, as well as how many of these people come to view themselves.

I noted in the introduction the important role that perspectives and motivations play in defining or portraying the topic of homelessness. Context, discourse and definitions shape our understanding and interpretations of the issue of homelessness. Differing opinions and beliefs related to the contexts in which homelessness occurs, what constitutes homelessness, and who should be factored in or out of a count of homeless individuals, are noted as challenges in the majority of current literature on the topic.

Discourse theory investigates the way in which social practices articulate and contest the discourses that constitute social reality. These practices are possible because systems of meaning are contingent and can never fully exhaust a field of meaning. In order to unpack and elaborate on this complex set of statements we need working definitions of the terms discursivity and discourse. The discursive can be defined as a theoretical horizon within which the being of objects is constituted (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). In other words, all objects are objects of discourse, as their meaning depends upon a socially constructed system of rules and significant differences. This idea of the discursive views as logically self-contradictory all attempts to escape and conceptualize this world from an extra-discursive perspective. As Laclau and Mouffe state in a frequently quoted passage:

The fact that every object is constituted as an object of discourse has nothing to do with whether there is a world external to thought. An earthquake or the falling of a brick is an event that certainly exists in the sense that it occurs here and now, independently of my will. But whether their specificity as objects is constructed in terms of ‘natural phenomena’ or ‘expressions of the wrath of God’; depends upon the structuring of a discursive field. What is denied is not that such objects exist externally to thought, but the rather different assertion that they could constitute themselves as objects outside any discursive conditions of emergence. (ibid.: 108)

In other words, human beings are ‘thrown into’ and inhabit a world of meaningful discourses and practices, and cannot conceive of, or think about, objects outside it.

“Those who control discourse, control society.”

Discourse and discourses refer to systems of meaningful practices that create the identities of subjects and objects (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). Discourses are concrete systems of social relations and practices that are intrinsically political, as their formation involves the construction of frontiers between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ (Fairclough, 1992). In addition, therefore, they always involve the exercise of power, as their constitution involves the exclusion of certain possibilities and a consequent restructuring of the relations between different social agents. Not to be disregarded is also the fact that discourses are contingent and historical constructions, which are always vulnerable to the dislocatory effects of events beyond their control, shifts in political forces, strengthening of groups or entities excluded in their production, economic, or technological developments (Laclau, 1985).

Throughout the literature on discourse from sociology (Mannheim, 1960) and anthropology (Malinowski, 1944) at least one thread is common: those who control discourse, control society (Shapiro, 1982). As a resource to be controlled, manipulated and monopolized, this points to the inherently competitive and antagonistic nature of discourse. As a form of power, it is likely to be aligned ideologically with prevailing values, beliefs, and pursuits of the dominant cultural group in a given historical context, while simultaneously excluding more marginal positions and interests (Gramsci, 1971).

Putting the complexities of our premises aside, two primary aspects of the theory underlying the academic study of discourse are of importance within the context of this discussion: 1) that discourses are contextual – historically, socially and politically and; 2) that discourse constitutes a form of power, in that it tends to reflect the values, beliefs and objectives of a dominant group. Also important is the corresponding notion that if discourse is created and controlled by the ‘in’ group, then it, by definition, excludes the perspectives and voices of those outside the mainstream. Homeless people fall well outside the mainstream within our society. When those homeless people are physically disabled, mentally ill, poor, or addicted they are situated, politically, economically, legally and socially, even further from the locus of power.

The Premise

Current discourse in Calgary has been fuelled by recent work that draws upon concepts popularized in the United States. Central to this is the creation of Ten Year Plans that focus on ending homelessness. The foundation of most plans is a Housing First approach loosely defined as ‘programs that place homeless people directly into permanent housing without requirement for a transition period’. The majority of Plans share marked similarities, with occasional adaptations that reflect unique local realities. What they all agree upon are several assumptions:

1. Homelessness is a problem that must end
2. Homelessness is economically costly
3. Housing people is the primary solution to the problem

The Calgary 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness (2008) is described as a community-based initiative that incorporates the knowledge, perspectives and beliefs of broad representatives from among the public, private, and non-profit sectors, along with homeless individuals. It would follow that the discourse, definitions and assumptions presented therein are also representative of diverse stakeholders. But is this really the case?

While I would not dispute in theory the majority of definitions used for terms that abound within the Plan, in practice and in application their utility diminishes.

Standard definitions relating to the terms absolutely, relatively, and chronically homeless become clumsy when applied to the real individuals that we encounter each day in the course of our work addressing homelessness. So too do the Guiding Principles (ibid.: 9) that underpin the Plan. Taken together with the strategies to end homelessness presented they collectively support what I believe is a flawed premise: homelessness = lack of housing.

Beyond the Premise

Homelessness is not about a lack of housing. Lack of housing is a symptom of what homelessness actually consists of. Beyond the practical necessities that housing serves, a home is a symbol. A home is a symbol of a variety of accomplishments: economic capacity; social access and integration; emotional connections and supports that attend the functions that take place within housing; acceptance and tolerance of one’s presence and place within a community of housing; intellectual ability to run and maintain a household. A home becomes a physical symbol that validates one’s existence. A person of no fixed address ceases to exist within many formal systems. It is a measure of personhood in symbolic terms within our society.

But a house does not confer these capacities upon an individual. A person without the economic, social, emotional and intellectual capacities to obtain and sustain housing will not be made whole through placement in housing. Homelessness is not merely a physical state; it is an emotional and social reflection of one’s disenfranchisement. Homelessness is not about lack of housing; homelessness is about lack of belonging.

Even for those individuals who might best fit the description of economic refugees – those whom financial crisis has forced to the street, those who bore no other burden of illness, disability, emotional scarring, addictions, abuse, – the fundamental premise remains the same. Poverty is a form of disenfranchisement that forces people to the margins of society and strips them of belonging.

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Other observable traits, behaviours, and factors contribute to disenfranchisement in our society. Physical and developmental disability, mental illness, behavioural disorders stemming from abuse and neglect, and active addictions are all stigmatized. Those affected are excluded from mainstream participation in education, employment, housing, health care and social activities. For many this exclusion begins in childhood. In the absence of effective intervention this cycle is perpetuated into adulthood. Our very systems compound the effects of exclusion by maintaining income support programs at the most meager levels, thereby condemning to poverty those already stigmatized by physical, emotional, psychological and social challenges.

Of course there is the debate about cause and consequence. Does one become homeless because of addictions, mental illness, physical disability, abuse, and neglect or are these consequent to homelessness? It is a circular argument and cannot be definitively resolved. What is clear, based on the personal evidence gleaned from thousands of clients who seek support through homeless shelters, is that the vast majority come to homelessness by way of a lengthy and complex path of progressive exclusion. On arrival at this point, many find their first place of belonging. Homeless shelters become de facto communities; communities where standards of normalcy are more expansive, where a shared sense of exclusion forges acceptance, connection and, yes, belonging. Many remain here because the barriers to integration with the mainstream world are too extensive; others stay because they are reluctant to surrender this sense of belonging for alternatives which have too often disappointed.

Seeking Solutions

Are homeless shelters the solution? Perhaps not. Largely due to the persistent discourse that frames them as temporary measures that are unsupported by any substantive systemic change that would render them otherwise. Limited and inadequate resourcing maintains shelters in a minimally functioning state where everything is consumed in the provision of the most basic human needs. The most significant benefits and solutions that lie within shelters cannot be fully developed in this climate.

So, too, the prevailing discourse that problematizes homelessness, and, by association, the people affected, continues to prevent the development of responses and solutions from within the community of the homeless. Much energy is consumed in defense of the existence of shelters and their inhabitants. Defenses that speak to the issues of exclusion, marginalization, and disenfranchisement. Too much of the Plans to End Homelessness center on outcomes for the mainstream and not for those who live homelessness.



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Housing First holds out the promise of re-integration, of inclusion through re-housing. But little discussion about the systemic discrimination and societal norms that perpetuate exclusion factors into this dialogue. The promise of four walls, a key, and paid caregivers whose role it is to constrain the behaviours of the formerly homeless so that they do not offend the new communities they have been ‘integrated’ within will presumably lead the newly housed individual to the place of belonging they need. I disagree. The premise and the model are designed to address the needs of those offended by homelessness, not those affected. They aim to assuage our discomfort, our unease with the visible evidence of our acceptance of societal and systemic norms that value the primacy of individual success in favour of collective good. That willfully and consistently under-resource those systems of support that would serve the needs of those among us who suffer. That accepts disenfranchisement in all its forms and manifestations.

Addressing the roots of homelessness will require a more comprehensive strategy that broadens the premise from simply housing to the social and systemic barriers that create and perpetuate exclusion. In the series of papers to follow an in depth examination of specific sub-populations and corollary issues will be presented with a view to developing thoughtful and informed strategies for change. As a starting point the following offers a preliminary overview of the central aspects of a plan to address homelessness.

Components of a Plan for Change

Just as homelessness is multi-faceted so must be any response to addressing this as a social issue. A lack of comprehensive social policy that deals with the intersections between economics, social welfare, health care, justice, education, employment and housing increase the challenges associated with addressing homelessness. Housing is but one component of an informed solution. A true understanding of homelessness must work from a premise that places priority on integrated responses that address the issues related to disenfranchisement, not on bricks and mortar. Components of a multi-faceted approach would include the following broad strategies:



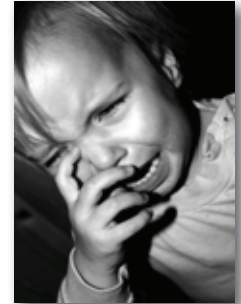
Harm Reduction Initiatives

Addressing homelessness requires an investment in initiatives that seek to work directly with those affected in their current state. Harm reduction approaches seek to minimize the negative affects of high-risk and dangerous practices. By definition this requires acceptance of patterns of behaviour that may be deemed harmful and beyond social norms. Often this is focused on issues related to addictions. While treatment is the most often cited solution, there is also a critical need to enhance harm reduction initiatives that accept individuals where they are and provide supports to minimize harm related to behaviours. Central to this would be a move away from criminalization of addictions in favour of programming and services that protect both the individual involved and the larger community. Examples of harm reduction approaches would include managed alcohol programs, needle exchange, sex trade outreach services, and safe injection sites.

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Prevention Initiatives that Invest in Children and Youth

A significant body of literature demonstrates the connection between risk factors present in childhood and subsequent adult homelessness. Children and youth affected by poverty, addictions, mental health issues, physical and developmental disabilities, abuse, low education levels, discrimination, unstable housing and parental dysfunction are at high risk for homelessness and the attendant social and economic disenfranchisement. Homelessness prevention begins in childhood and requires broad investment in effective systems of support for children and youth that promote resilience, minimize risk and adequately resource programming ranging from enriched early childhood services to accessible and comprehensive health care



Enhanced Shelter Resourcing and Standards

Homeless shelters offer an ideal venue for the engagement and support of homeless individuals. Adequate resourcing of shelters to promote provision of expanded programming that emphasizes stabilization and capacity building within a context that is socially inclusive capitalizes on the natural congregation patterns of street-entrenched individuals, particularly those deemed chronically homeless. Current formal funding levels limit programming to essential and basic needs services, without associated standards for service delivery. Enhancing the resourcing and development of shelter standards is an essential component of developing a comprehensive system of homeless assistance services. Shelters have been, and remain, the primary point of contact for individuals affected by homelessness. We are in an ideal position to capitalize on the potential for development of Centers of Excellence in programming, planning, research and evaluation related to homelessness.

Community Development

The mitigation of disenfranchisement requires not blame or accountability, but empowerment. In order to support the active participation of individuals affected by homelessness in development of solutions we must attend to the need for community development using their emic definitions of community. Token inclusion of homeless individuals in mainstream venues for planning and dialogue does not promote empowerment. If we are to understand the needs and choices of this diverse population it is necessary to employ community development strategies that promote empowerment, engagement and meaningful inclusion. To date this has been absent from any planning process related to addressing homelessness.



Systemic Reinforcement

Provision of housing without concurrent development of systemic supports related to underlying causes will result in no change to the exclusion that homeless individuals experience. Housing an individual reliant on current income supports does not alleviate the attendant poverty and associated disenfranchisement. In order to address the underlying causes we must invest in massive reinforcement of systemic supports in health care, education, and income supports that have been progressively eroded. Reinforcement and enhancement of these systems is a precondition to successful provision of housing without exclusion.

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Inclusive Housing Options

The range of housing options available in Calgary remains reflective of mainstream, middle class value systems that privilege individuality. There is some recognition of the need for supports attached to housing, but minimal attention is paid to defining what these supports would consist of. A truly inclusive model of affordable and supportive housing requires an accurate understanding of the experiences, needs and values of the populations to be served. Expanded focus on housing models that allow for communal living/ownership, cooperative housing, and recognition of the natural formation of community among sub-groups within the homeless population is essential. In addition, the premise must emphasize the degree to which housing options will maximize potential for belonging and inclusion.

Conclusion

If we are to begin effective dialogue about homelessness then it is essential that we step beyond prevailing discourse. It calls upon us to deconstruct the assumptions that underpin the premise and the solution. Only then can we seek solution that serves all of us inclusively. Simplistic definitions and equations do not capture the complexities of reality and, in turn, lead to simplistic solutions that sell short our potential.

Homelessness is not simple. It strikes at a place in all of us that brings out the unease, the discomfort, the fears that surround our own sense of place. We are innately social, innately dependent on others for our survival and, that which is more philosophical, but equally critical: our sense of belonging. When we are confronted with the visible reality of homelessness perhaps it is a reminder on a subconscious level of what is really at risk. Homelessness is about lack of belonging.



“ Homelessness is about
lack of belonging. ”



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