The Politics of Inequality and Power Disparities

The Thralls of Capitalism in Vancouver: How Neoliberalism and Settler Colonialism Criminalize the Unhoused

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This paper considers the houselessness crisis in Vancouver as a case study highlighting how a history of settler colonialism and a federal shift towards neoliberalism in Canada feed the social issue closer to home. By analyzing current municipal funding in Vancouver, this paper highlights the government's approach to reducing social support programs and implementing external funding models in their place, while continuously boosting funding for police task forces.

It explores how governmental and political actors socially construct criminal activity and public safety concerns to justify the displacement of unhoused people. The paper also explores how the expansion of police task forces focused on patrolling streets, as well as the city's development of hostile architecture, work to achieve this goal of displacing unhoused populations under the guise of protecting public safety.

Additionally, by reflecting on the history of property and how access is governed, the paper connects settler colonial systems with the issue of houselessness. Settler colonialism has fueled the development of private property which allows access to shelter to be denied and creates houselessness as a social phenomenon. Public property then becomes the only space for unhoused people, who are restricted and policed within it. Ultimately, the paper argues that neoliberal and settler-colonial frameworks criminalize unhoused people within the Canadian context, justifying under-funding for social supports and over-funding for a police-based approach that fails to adequately address the issue.

To those who have been made to feel invisible, your worth is not a negotiation.

Introduction

The unhoused population has increased an average of 7.7% annually for the last 10 years in Vancouver, creating a houselessness crisis (Crompton et al. 2024). As this issue gets worse, encampments continue to grow and migrate throughout the Metro Vancouver region. Despite the visibility and proximity of this crisis, Canadian governments fail to adequately address it. Rather, neoliberal ideology shifts blame onto individuals and responsibility onto community partners, who receive limited funding in the form of grants. Additionally, there continues to be a surge of forced removal and encampment displacement at the hands of the Vancouver Police, as well as the emergence of public architecture which creates a hostile environment for unhoused people. The way in which the unhoused are excluded from access to shelter and governed within public space also reflects the settler colonial notion that land can be privatized and restricted. Ultimately, Canada continues to fall back on neoliberal and settler colonial frameworks which criminalize the unhoused and justify an inadequate response centred around policing.

The Neoliberal Ideology within Canada

Over the last three decades, neoliberalism has become increasingly entrenched in Canadian society, leading to the abolition of many social support programs. In fact, this ideology has a unique way of eliminating social support by minimizing government spending and market regulation, replacing them with individualized solutions and notions of proportionate opportunity. Ultimately, neoliberalism advocates for free markets in which public services and social goods, such as health care and housing, become commodities (Knuttila, 2022). It posits that everyone may participate in these markets if they acquire the capital necessary to do so, which, apparently, simply involves working hard enough (Ramos and Stanbridge, 2012). In

practice, however, neoliberalism polarizes income levels, often to the point that disadvantaged groups can no longer afford to meet their basic human needs (Donnan, 2014), and with minimized social support, the gravity of these issues is magnified.

The myth of meritocracy is deeply intertwined with neoliberal ideology, as it justifies rolling back social supports and rolling out individualized solutions for social issues. Meritocracy describes a system in which one gains access to opportunities and resources through their individual skills and abilities (Ramos and Stanbridge, 2012). Within this framework, it is assumed that opportunities for and success within education, work, income, and social connection are granted based on effort and skill. Thus, if someone has high social or class status it is seen as the result of their individual competence, regardless of their pre-existing access to resources and capital. Similarly, if one struggles with unemployment, or is unable to find housing, it is presumed to be the consequence of an individual failure, which must be rectified by individual means (Ramos and Stanbridge, 2012. For this reason, houselessness is often viewed as the result of a deficiency in competence. The pitfall of meritocracy is that it fails to consider one essential truth which is guaranteed by existing systems: we do not all start out on an even playing field. Thus, when social goods are replaced with free markets, the existing resources of more privileged groups increase twofold, while the less advantaged are expected to create their own solutions.

The Canadian Social Housing Program

The Canadian social housing program is an important example of a social support program that has been slashed under a neoliberal government (Begin, 1999). Over the time period when it was in effect, the Federal Co-operative Housing Program built nearly 60,000

homes for low-income Canadians, ensuring access to housing for those at risk of losing it. Mulroney's federal government terminated the housing program in 1992 and froze social housing expenditures completely in 1993 (Begin, 1999). The Federal Co-operative Housing Program is only one of many social support programs terminated due to the shift towards neoliberalism in Canada.

In lieu of a social housing program, the Canadian government currently implements external funding models, often on the provincial and municipal levels. In Vancouver, this consists of minimal funding in the form of *Homelessness Services* (HS) Grants, which are given to community partners who are expected to offer necessary services. HS grants are intended to provide funding to Vancouver-based non-profit organizations which host events and run projects to support those experiencing houselessness in Vancouver (City of Vancouver, 2025). The 2024 HS Grant Report shows that 34 applicants applied for grants, with a total funding request of $99,920. The Grant Report reflects that the council of Vancouver was recommended to approve funding of $43,000 to be allocated to 17 of the 34 non-profit organizations, each receiving a maximum of $3000. (City of Vancouver, 2024). Thus, the amount of funding recommended for approval was less than half of the already shockingly low amount requested by non-profit organizations striving to support the unhoused.

A common argument in defence of this approach to cutting social programs and funding external organizations is that it is more efficient. The argument often goes as follows: governments have thousands of issues to address, and a limited capacity to do so. Instead of addressing each issue directly, governments can save time and money by funding external

organizations who work to solve certain issues. This ensures that governments can focus their time directly on the issues deemed most important, while others still receive attention from the organizations that are funded to address them. This argument would suggest that, instead of funding a federal social housing program, it is more efficient and fiscally responsible for provincial and municipal governments to provide funding to non-profit organizations designed to support low income and unhoused people. However, as we can see by analyzing the amount of funding provided through HS grants, these organizations are underfunded and lack sufficient resources. In contrast, government agencies including municipal police continue to receive disproportionately generous funding to police unhoused populations instead.

The City of Vancouver's Response

In April of 2023, the Vancouver Police Department (VPD) spent $409,536 and allocated dozens of police officers to assist city crews in an eight-day long decampment project, during which unhoused peoples, their tents, and their belongings were forcefully removed (Howell, 2024). This single project aimed at displacing unhoused people in the Downtown Eastside received over 9 times the amount of funding that was allocated for HS Grants for the entire year in 2024. With a funding disparity this significant, it becomes clear that the government's focus lies in policing the unhoused, rather than supporting them. Friedman explains this attitude perfectly; we do not want the unhoused around, and yet, housing and feeding them is expensive and we do not want to pay for it. Thus, we call the police to make them go away (2022).

When explaining the decampment project, the Mayor of Vancouver, Ken Sim, stated that, "our commitment to the safety and well-being of our community guided our decisions to address

encampments in the Downtown Eastside in April 2023...” (Howell, 2024). Citing concern for community well-being as the cause of the decampment project, Sim frames unhoused encampments as public safety hazards (Howell, 2024). Unhoused people and their encampments are commonly constructed as dangerous and unsanitary, which contributes to the idea that they pose a threat to the public. The perceived threat that unhoused populations pose is often over-emphasized, meanwhile the real dangers of being unhoused are disregarded. Consequently, the response to houselessness often consists of increased policing, which further stigmatizes unhoused populations. Constructing encampments as harmful and unsafe to the broader community, while ignoring the lack of access to safe and affordable housing, works to justify this criminalized response (Braimoh et al. 2023) and maintain the ideologies which fuel the underfunding of social supports and overfunding of policing.

In February of 2025, Vancouver Mayor Ken Sim and Police Chief Adam Palmer announced a $5 million funding boost for the VPD, with the goal of increasing police presence in the Downtown Eastside; the area where the unhoused population has become most concentrated. Sim and Palmer described the funding boost as a “long-term initiative to dismantle organized crime” (Fumano, 2025). Once again, citing crime prevention as the main objective for increasing police presence in an area with a large population of unhoused people directly links their presence with criminal activity, further criminalizing the unhoused and justifying their displacement. This approach rarely does anything other than momentarily patch the issue, because houselessness is a chronic condition and chasing the unhoused away is only a temporary solution (Friendman, 2022). The unhoused will continue to occupy public space when they lack access to private space; thus, a meaningful solution would require adequate shelter. Unfortunately, neoliberal spending seems to only afford band aid solutions. When explaining the

VPD's funding boost, Sim stated that "from a fiscally responsible perspective, it's probably the best investment we can make." (Fumano, 2025), revealing his approach of funding what is seen as the most cost efficient, rather than effective.

It is not only under-funding and over-policing that drives the criminalization of the unhoused. In 2019, a surge of urban designs began appearing in Vancouver, which reflect a hostile attitude towards unhoused people (Mussett, 2019). These designs include spiky or wavy metal installments placed on ledges, colourfully painted boulders placed under shop awnings, and arm rests placed in the middle of benches. While the City of Vancouver states that these designs are for artistic or practical purposes, they conveniently prevent people from lying down, sleeping, or seeking shelter on benches and under covered areas. Vancouver's assistant director of development planning Jason Olinek states that he is not aware of any policy implicitly or explicitly designed to be hostile towards unhoused people. Olinek does, however, mention that the city analyzes projects through the *Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design* (CPTED) framework. This framework's aim is to eliminate design features that may elicit illegal activity, such as loitering (Mussett, 2019). Public architecture, then, is designed to discourage the presence of people who are perceived as criminal threats. Since unhoused populations are criminalized, the development of architecture aimed at discouraging criminal activity is also aimed at discouraging the presence of unhoused people. Citing crime prevention as the objective of developing hostile architecture thus functions as a loophole for implementing anti-houseless designs.

The Criminal Justice System and the Unhoused

Some may argue that assumed drug use and engagement with other criminal activity justifies public safety concerns and police-based approaches to houselessness. To address this argument, we must analyze the nature of intersection between unhoused populations and the criminal justice system. According to Public Safety Canada (2008), unhoused people are most likely to be charged with property-related offences which meet survival needs. The most common forms of property crimes involve commercial theft and trespassing. Commercial theft in this context involves shoplifting items like food, clothing, and hygiene products, as well as items to be re-sold for cash. Trespassing often takes place on abandoned properties, where unhoused people seek to fulfil their need for shelter, especially in the colder winter months when the streets become increasingly inhospitable (Public Safety Canada, 2008). Much of the property crimes committed by unhoused people are committed as a means of survival. With access to safe housing, the need to commit such crimes would decrease by no small measure.

Unhoused people are also most frequently charged with violations of municipal bylaws, such as loitering and panhandling (Public Safety Canada, 2008). Terence Lester (2023) outlines two groups of municipal bylaw ordinances which target unhoused populations: Anti-Homeless Ordinances and Quality of Life Ordinances. Anti-Homeless Ordinances prohibit activities such as standing, sitting, and resting in public spaces, as well as camping, panhandling, and food-sharing. It is important to note that these ordinances often prohibit activities that people engage in daily within their own homes. No one bats an eye when you spend your Sunday laying on your living room couch. It is not an issue when you pitch a tent in your backyard or pay to do so in a provincial park. People often ask their friends and acquaintances for money to fundraise to meet a personal goal, or to help a loved one in need. It is considered an act of kindness when

you share your extra cookies with your neighbour. When these activities are enacted in public space by someone unhoused, though, they become bylaw violations. Thus, we see that unhoused people are criminalized simply for having no access to private property. Quality of Life Ordinances include activities that are linked to behaviours deemed uncivil, such having a dog off leash, smoking in parks, or drinking in public (Lester, 2023). Although many people partake in these activities daily, unhoused people are disproportionately targeted because of increased visibility.

Unhoused people that are involved in drug-related offences are often charged with possession for personal use (Public Safety Canada, 2008). I must note that drug detoxification and treatment programs are difficult to access. In many cities including Vancouver, treatment centres lack resources and are backed up with long waitlists. Additionally, the results of treatment are generally short lived when clients are released to the streets without stable housing (Public Safety Canada, 2008). The issue of substance use is an important and nuanced one which has become increasingly relevant in Vancouver; however, this paper lacks the resources to properly analyze this issue. Instead, I suggest that it is important to consider that struggling with substance use issues does not make one disposable. Substance abuse is an illness which, like any other, requires adequate treatment and compassion. Unhoused people who struggle with substance use deserve to be housed, a condition which is necessary for lasting recovery (Lester, 2023).

Being unhoused is often a condition which fuels engagement in the aforementioned offences and makes rehabilitation much harder. Therefore, attempting to reduce involvement by increasing policing is inadequate, because policing does not effectively address the issue of being unhoused. Additionally, the view that unhoused people are inherently dangerous and undeserving

of help overlooks the human worth, value, and belonging of unhoused people, and encourages the notion that they deserve to be unhoused and/or discarded (Lester, 2023).

While neoliberal ideology has a significant hand in criminalization and displacement, so too does settler colonialism. We must acknowledge that houselessness only exists within the framework of land ownership where there is a distinction between private and public property, allowing people to be excluded from property which is private and restricted within that which is public. This division emerged in Canada through the process of settler colonialism, when land was divided and relationships with land were restricted to the relationship between an owner and their property (Braimoh et al. 2023). Assertion of private property has thus functioned to allow colonizers to displace Indigenous peoples and claim their land, making existence on or passage through unceded territory a legally punishable offence (Gardner and Ansloos, 2022).

The privatization of housing depends on the privatization of land as property; thus, houselessness as a social phenomenon was born out of the settler colonial process. Just as the development of private property has been (and continues to be) used to restrict and outlaw Indigenous presence, it excludes unhoused people from shelter, banishing them to public spaces, where they are targeted and policed. Unhoused presence is restricted within public spaces when cities pass laws and policies that prohibit unhoused people from occupying them. Governments do not implement laws and policies that explicitly state their aim to restrict unhoused people from using public space. They do, however, fund police task forces aimed at dismantling unhoused encampments under the guise of protecting public safety, and implement policies such as the CPTED framework, which focus on eliminating architecture that provides room for sleeping, which, apparently, elicits illegal activity.

Conclusion

In this paper I have explored how neoliberal and settler colonial frameworks in Canada criminalize the unhoused and justify a police-centred response, rather than one focused on rehabilitation. While some may argue that assumed involvement with criminal activity justifies police-based approaches, I argue that the majority of the crimes that unhoused people commit stem from being unhoused, and thus addressing these crimes requires adequate rehabilitation efforts. Police-based approaches punish unhoused people for committing crimes of survival, which does not address the issue of being unhoused and is therefore ineffective. Moving forward, there are plentiful things which offer promising steps towards re-housing our neighbours: further literature critically analyzing neoliberal and settler-colonial ideologies and policies, as well as how political actors criminalize and socially construct unhoused populations, social movements aimed at destigmatizing unhoused people, and transformative policies striving to house and rehabilitate them.

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