

A Call for Affordable Housing, Social Services, and Destigmatization to Relieve Vancouver's Homelessness Crisis

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Abstract

This paper was originally written for Dr. Ayls Avalos-Rivera ENGL 114W course *Language and Purpose*. The assignment asked students to write a persuasive essay that will present a problem, propose a solution, and assess its feasibility. The paper uses APA 7th ed. citation style.

Homelessness is one of the most prominent problems Vancouver faces. Along with the addiction and mental health crises, the city has been struggling to support its under-housed citizens with the chronically homeless population, referring to the people who have lived on the streets for more than a year, increasing three times in size since 2005. Encampments found in Strathcona Park and along the busy city streets display the struggle a large population of Vancouverites face in their day-to-day lives to survive. Population growth is due to a lack of social services, gentrification, and stigmatization. Illegal evictions, gentrification of deprived areas, and the views of Vancouverites on the chronically homeless all contribute to the problem. The City of Vancouver's solution of the crisis includes developing temporary modular housing to efficiently shelter the underhoused. Additionally, addiction, mental health, and social services will be made available to residents of these developments. Destigmatization of the chronically homeless is crucial for the success of the city's plan and the well-being of all Vancouverites.

Despite Vancouver having services found nowhere else in North America, the city still faces an addiction, mental health, and homelessness crisis. The city is in distress; public property such as sidewalks and green spaces like Strathcona Park

are filled with encampments of homeless people (CBC News, 2020). Since 2005, the population of homeless people who have been living on the streets for more than a year, known as the chronically homeless, has grown three times in size (St. Andrew's-Wesley, 2008). The increase of chronically homeless people living in public spaces has caused housed Vancouverites to create a stigma against them. The chronically homeless struggle the most when it comes to getting off the street, as a majority suffer from untreated mental health issues and struggle with substance use. With population growth, the amount of affordable housing and social services available are not enough to support them. The improvement of Vancouver's homelessness crisis relies on the development of affordable housing, providing social services to and changing Vancouverites' views of the under-housed.

The improvement of the crisis starts with determining the multitude of factors as to why Vancouverites live on the street. The demographic of the homeless population is diverse; some are marginalized due to their identity like Indigenous peoples (The Ministry of Attorney General et al., 2021) or lack a full education, but a majority of the chronically homeless suffer from untreated mental illnesses, struggle with substance use, and overall, a lack of access to affordable housing (Patterson et al., 2012, Fleming et al., 2019, St. Andrew's-Wesley, 2008). Substance use in British Columbia is prominent and an overdose crisis was declared by the provincial government in 2016, calling for the need for overdose prevention and supervised consumption services (Panagiotoglou, 2022). The city's irresponsible gentrification in neighbourhoods like the Downtown Eastside, which is known to have a prevalent population of under-housed people, has worsened the homelessness crisis (Fleming et al., 2019, Burnett, 2014).

Gentrification is the modernizing of deprived areas by developing improved housing and commercial spaces, inviting new residents and businesses, and results in existing inhabitants of these areas either becoming homeless or having to move to affordable neighbourhoods. The extreme rates of gentrification we can see around metro Vancouver, in the form of modern high-rise apartments and new or renovated shopping centres, has created a lack of affordable housing and an increased homeless population (Fleming et al., 2019). Gentrification has led to illegal evictions, the rise in the cost of housing, and invites new people to move into a city that struggles to house its existing citizens (Burnett, 2014, Fleming et al., 2019). Housed Vancouverites of gentrified neighbourhoods stigmatize and further displace the homeless, who were pushed into living in public on sidewalks and in parks. The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the

city's crisis, displaying how many Vancouverites lack basic human rights like access to clean water, food, proper health care, and stable housing (Olson & Pauly, 2021). Before the city excitedly expands gentrification, its priority should be providing more affordable housing and services to aid in the substance use, mental health, and homelessness crises.

Increasing the amount of housing and existing services to be able to accommodate the homeless population may help decrease the number of individuals living on the streets. At the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, the City of Vancouver opened vacant hotels to the homeless as a more socially distanced and sanitary alternative to encampments (Olson & Pauly, 2021). As rates of infection went down, the homeless people let into these temporary shelters were once again displaced onto the streets. As a long-term solution, the Ministry of Attorney General and Minister Responsible for Housing, the City of Vancouver, and the Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation (2021) together created the *Memorandum of Understanding on Support for Unsheltered Vancouver Residents*, which recognized the homelessness crisis in Vancouver and surrounding cities across British Columbia, and their plans on how to solve it. The party is committed to moving homeless people indoors, into shelters, and short and long-term housing, as well as ensuring they are provided with social services to independently live off the street. They also included that they would not disturb and would allow public encampments to be in place if there is not available shelter. Providing affordable shelter to under-housed people is what will decrease the chronically homeless population.

Having a home gives them a safe warm space to sleep at night, and allows them to get help with addiction, mental and other health issues as they do not need to worry about their safety. Both St. Andrew's-Wesley (2008) housing-first model and the City of Vancouver's (2018) temporary modular housing solution present the idea of housing being available for all residents. The housing-first model recognizes that housing is a human right and that all residents should have access to permanent long-term housing. As long-term housing is more time-consuming to develop, the City of Vancouver's plan is optimal for the quick resolution to the housing crisis. The temporary modular housing solution is the development of multiple-unit buildings that can be built in three months, faster than typical buildings, and construction can accommodate the homeless population with proper city planning. In addition to sheltering, temporary modular housing provides meals, access to rehabilitation and detox services, mental health services, and connections to the surrounding community and

potential future career paths. The results residents had after six months of inhabiting temporary modular houses show a positive change in their welfare and interactions with others, and most remained sheltered.

Additional help can be implemented by developing more supervised substance use and overdose prevention sites. As explained by Panagiotoglou (2022), supervised substance use and overdose prevention sites can help decrease the number of emergency services being used to aid in cases of substance use and overdose. Services like Insite, the first supervised consumption site in North America, prevent overdoses and provide clean medical equipment and other healthcare-related services through their medically trained staff and facility (Vancouver Coastal Health, n.d.). They also provide access to social services and rehabilitation, like Vancouver's temporary modular housing solution. Prioritizing housing and providing access to social services for the homeless will hopefully get them to excel independently in the future.

Although residents of temporary modular housing have shown a positive change in their interactions with others, some Vancouverites are concerned about the problems that could arise from the placement of under-housed individuals in their neighbourhoods by homing them into these new housing developments. As shown in a video by CBC News (2020), Vancouverites who live in neighbourhoods filled with encampments feel worried about the potential harm the homeless can do to residents and shared public spaces. Potential harm, like the recording of a man stumbling around a residential neighbourhood wielding a chainsaw, is an example of behaviours expressed by a minuscule amount of homeless individuals who struggle with addiction and untreated mental health issues. A certain amount of Vancouverites tend to assume that all homeless people act in a similar way, creating a negative stereotype and stigma against all homeless people, based on the erratic actions of a selected few. Once the city can provide the proper mental health and substance use services to individuals who express erratic behaviours, similar events will eventually occur less or none of the time. Despite some Vancouverites being weary about the city's homeless population, getting them proper housing and services will improve city functions.

There are arguments against the city's plans to use plots of land for developing affordable housing, as it could be used in other ways like gentrification. Gentrification would benefit the city by bringing new businesses, residents, and tourists, thus more money, and Burnett (2014) expresses that the homelessness crisis draws in customers to new developments, with some businesses using the crisis as an advertisement. And for the gentrified areas not

using the crisis as advertisement, gentrification displaces homeless people away from the city, making the crisis no longer the city's responsibility to solve. Gentrification with that idea in mind would not solve the crisis, it would just displace under-housed people into other surrounding cities. As for the part of the population concerned with affordable housing bringing down surrounding property value as they have low costs and interest rates as explained by Nguyen (2005), this always is not the case as it depends on the number of units, density, design, and other factors of the development. If affordable housing were to bring property value down, that would benefit the city as it would lower housing costs for most Vancouverites, especially during the current housing crisis and the rise in the cost of living.

There is an urgent need for affordable housing in Vancouver. The Covid-19 pandemic has put a spotlight on the growing homeless population in the mists of mental health, substance use, and housing crises. The provincial and municipal government's plans and actions towards the crisis will not be enough to solve it. Vancouverites and residents of surrounding cities must work to destigmatize their views of the homeless population for the city to succeed. Vancouverites' active support and positive outlook on the crisis are what will enable the city to provide affordable housing and social services to the population of under-housed people.

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