

The Politics of Social Planning in the Small City

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Canadian Political Science Association
June 12-15, 2012

Draft Version

Not to be cited until a final version is uploaded

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Introduction¹

Over the last ten years local governments in small cities across Canada have been engaged in social planning and developing action plans to address particular social issues in their respective communities.² At one level this planning process involves broad consultation with numerous agencies, non-profit organizations, business groups and the local community on multiple themes: seniors, youth, children and families, drug-abuse, homelessness. At another level this planning process includes the contracting of consultants for research, the creation of an official “social planning / community development” position, new program budgeting, and substantial monetary commitments in city property, tax and development cost exemptions, and grants to fulfill these various social planning goals. What initially may appear from the local level as an earnest act of community engagement, expanding the role of the local government into new areas of “community development,” is in fact motivated largely by the potential to access federal (and provincial) funds to address the local “homelessness crisis,” and not from a local desire to support new initiatives in a complex policy jurisdiction. Thus, the prospects for local governments to realize these social planning goals are highly contingent on the conditionality and discretion of upper-levels of government, now integrated into a complex three-level inter-governmental relationship that to date has been fraught with uncertainty and unclear lines of jurisdictional authority and financial resolve. Utilizing planning documents, media reports, government websites, and interviews with social planners from four small cities in British Columbia (Kelowna, Kamloops, Nanaimo and Prince George), this analysis examines the political tensions and dynamics that have emerged from within these local governments as they assume an awkward “leadership” role that has been thrust upon them from higher levels of government. This analysis suggests that the prospects for addressing important social issues through the existing “partnership” structure may be quite limited unless the terms of the relationship are altered to better reflect the particular constraints of small cities.

After decades of federal government dominance over social and housing policies, this critical “leadership role” has been rapidly devolved down to the small city level in initiating solutions to complex social problems – notably the “homelessness crisis.” Since 1999 the Government of Canada has established a firm position on addressing these social issues through what it believes is *The Power of Partnerships*:

The basic theory behind partnerships is that working together and leveraging assets and resources is more effective than working in isolation. A partnership draws its strength from coordinating resources so that two or more individuals or groups can work toward a common goal. Partnerships are especially important in addressing issues such as homelessness and poverty. Because they are multi-dimensional, these issues require multi-dimensional responses (such as affordable housing,

¹ I would like to thank Dr. Christopher Walmsley (TRU) for his research contribution to this paper. I would also like to thank the support of Dr. Will Garrett-Petts (TRU) and the CURA: Mapping Quality of Life & the Culture of Small Cities.

² The “small city” is defined as having a potential population of 10,000 to 360,000. Using this categorization, small cities comprise 55.6% of the Canadian population (Viaud)

employment, justice, training, child care, mental health, addictions, etc.).
(Government of Canada)

What is notable in this statement is the extent to which areas of jurisdiction understood as responsibilities of only the federal or provincial levels of government are passed to the local level – with the justification that “[N]o one level of government, sector or organization can claim to be able to address these issues in isolation” and “[C]ommunity-based approaches to addressing social issues like homelessness seek to empower local organizations and individuals through an atmosphere of dignity and participation, with the goal of achieving durable results” (Government of Canada). This analysis draws on critical and cautionary insights regarding the potential of the local or “community” level to be the empowered and effective instrument suggested by the federal government through this “responsibilitization of community” (Haddow, 101-104; Kelly & Caputo, 37-42). As noted by many observers, most local governments in Canada lack any meaningful constitutional or legal status, are subservient to provincial government dictates, financially dependent on upper-levels of government to even meet basic infrastructure needs, and aptly regarded as but an administrative extension of provincial-level policy decisions. Operating with severe constraints on raising revenues (through just property taxes and user fees) with the limited capacity to take on major initiatives, “local authority” has long been restricted to the provision of basic services and the implementation of local land-use policies. In critiquing proponents of the decentralization of social policy, R. Haddow has observed that “[T]he preoccupations with property and economic growth that are usually at the centre of municipal politics ... do not bode well for effective ‘social planning’ under municipal direction.” (Haddow, 103) This analysis confirms this observation as it applies to local government in the small city. Due to financial concerns and sizable commitments in other areas of local governance, and the prevailing terms established by the federal government for multi-level “partnerships” in this area of social policy, there are limited incentives for small city governments (versus Canada’s largest urban centres) to implement effective solutions to these social challenges.

This study is unique as it examines two understudied areas of urban politics in Canada – the increased responsibility of local governments in addressing social issues and the distinct politics of the *small city* in adjusting to this devolution of responsibility to address these social challenges. This analysis represents the intersection of studies of local government, community, and social policy in an age of neo-liberal governance practices. Where analyses of national politics and the federal system often make reference to the processes of “downloading” and / or “off-loading” on various policy fronts, this study reveals the problems and politics that emerge at the local level from these practices, and how the small city faces distinct challenges in this policy area versus Canada’s largest urban centres. The analysis is comprised of three sections that emphasize both the complexity of the social issues and the solutions proposed through multi-level governance, and the distinct status and political response of local governments in the small city. The first section examines the role and decisions of the federal and provincial governments in generating the social issues that became so evident in Canada’s urban centres by the late 1990s and into the 21st century, and the problems and limitations for small cities inherent in the measures proposed to date to respond to these social issues. The second section examines the divide between Canada’s largest

urban centres and small cities on the issue of “local capacities,” highlighting the numerous and significant differences at play as these urban centres have become integrated into a multi-level governance “solution” to the most critical social challenges of our time. The final section focuses on the political context of the small city and the particular political issues that have emerged on the issue of social planning and the implementation of the goals enshrined in these planning documents.

From Federal to Local “Leadership”

By the mid-to-late 1990s neither the federal nor provincial governments were addressing the housing needs of low-income citizens in any meaningful way, and at the federal level “the prevailing opinion in the senior ranks of the government of Canada was that they had no particular role in responding to the needs of Canada’s homeless people” (Smith, 1). The fact that by the late 1990s Canada’s largest urban centres were confronted with a major homeless crisis despite advanced local services and infrastructure revealed the failures of federal and provincial authorities to anticipate the implications of cutbacks on income support and inaction on the provision of housing. For the small city these issues would be compounded by the dearth of infrastructure and local government services in place to mitigate these challenges, and the conditions established by federal and provincial authorities to acquire funding. The eventual “downloading” of this responsibility to local governments and communities in response to this crisis was not a well-defined and coordinated plan, but a political reaction to concerns from Canada’s largest cities without regard to the extent of the problem and the limitations of Canada’s small cities.

The more visible presence of homeless individuals on the streets of large and small cities and towns across Canada is a deliberate result of policy changes that have been gradually instituted over the last 25 years by the federal and provincial governments. In the late 1990s, Barbara Murphy identified the main determinants of homelessness, and why it was destined to further increase without decisive action by federal and provincial levels of government.

At the root of homelessness is poverty and the shocking reality that we are now tolerating a level of poverty that leaves so many without a roof over their head. Beyond the root cause of poverty we also tolerate a housing situation in our cities that provides little or no accommodation the poor can afford. The formula is simple – combine a growing number of poor and a growing number of expensive housing units and we have people on the streets. Add to this a failure to recognize that the mentally ill cannot manage on their own, economically or with even the simplest of life’s demands, and we have even more people on the streets. (Murphy, 19)

This outcome stands in marked contrast to the gains that had been achieved prior. From the 1940s to the early 1980s the federal government took a leadership role on housing and income support that led to the creation of a considerable amount of public housing and co-operative / mixed income residential units, with more than a million new housing starts funded in the 1970s alone with a concern for creating low-income housing (Coutts, 234, Murphy, 98-99; Carroll, 2002, 73). The multiple programs and highly subsidized

character of “housing” in order to achieve results for low-income earners, made this area particularly vulnerable to “death by a thousand cuts,” which were gradually introduced by the federal government over a ten year period.³ The federal government retreat from public and subsidized housing was then replicated by the same actions by provincial governments through the 1990s. By the end of the 1990s there were only a very small number of public housing units being built at the provincial level, and the majority of subsidies needed to promote the construction of low-income rental or housing units had been whittled away in a drive to rein in federal and provincial spending.⁴

These federal and provincial actions did not go unnoticed at the local level as homeless issues (often linked to cold winter deaths) garnered media attention in Canada’s largest urban centres. By late 1999 the federal government had decided to reenter the “housing” arena, but with a considerably narrower field of attention e.g. emergency shelters and transitional housing, through the creation of the National Homelessness Initiative (NHI). The NHI initially invested \$753 million over three years with the aim to “help alleviate and prevent homelessness across Canada” (HRSDC). More than a renewed collaboration with provincial governments, the focus of the NHI was on a direct federal government partnership with communities with a demonstrated homeless problem. The NHI had the goal to “facilitate community capacity by coordinating Government of Canada efforts and enhancing the diversity of tools and resources,” “foster effective partnerships and investment that contribute to addressing the immediate and multifaceted needs of the homeless and reducing homelessness in Canada,” and “increase awareness and understanding of homelessness in Canada” (HRSDC). The NHI was composed of three components: Supporting Communities Partnerships Initiative (SCPI) – “a demonstration program, aimed at encouraging communities to work with provincial, territorial and municipal governments and the private sector and voluntary organizations to address the immediate needs of homeless people”; Youth Homelessness Strategy; and an Urban Aboriginal Strategy (National Homelessness Initiative, 2-5).

Of the three the SCPI was the most important component, but access to funds required a “Community Plan” that directly addressed the issue of homelessness, establishment of “Community Planning Groups” that had demonstrated broad consultation and inclusion, and a “City Homelessness Facilitator.” The Community Plan was expected to:

- provide community service organizations with a framework in which to work together to achieve common goals.
- assist the community to make the best possible use of scarce resources by reducing overlap and duplication.

³ 1984 - federal funding cuts to housing programs begin, and over next 10 years total cuts would amount to \$1.8 billion (Layton, 233). 1985 – federal assistance only available for low-income housing assistance, ending subsidies to middle-income residents of mixed-income projects (Murphy, 99-100). Late 1980s – cutbacks to new cost-share social housing “even for newly targeted low income residents” (Murphy, 100). 1993 – funding canceled for new non-profit or co-operative units, and capped existing social housing portfolio at \$2 billion annually (Layton, 233). 1996 – federal government announces plans to download existing federal housing programs to the provinces with the phasing out of all federal funding by the third decade of the 21st century (Layton, 233)

⁴ Only British Columbia and Quebec continued, but with substantially reduced funding (Kelowna Committee to End Homelessness).

- enable the community to evaluate its progress in reaching its objectives; and
- identify other sources of funding that the community will use to meet its 50% matching requirement. (12)

Further “the plan must reflect the needs of the key groups at risk – Aboriginal peoples, women and their children, youth, immigrants, refugees, substance abusers and the mentally ill – and involve them in the planning process.” (12). SCPI established nine criteria for an acceptable plan – a designated *Geographic Area*, *Objectives* “to be achieved by March 31, 2003,” a *Community Plan Development Process* with particular attention to “involving Aboriginal, youth and homeless persons throughout,” *Assets and Gaps* identified, *Priorities*, *Sustainability*, an *Evaluation* mechanism “that should be an annual process,” a *Communication Plan*, and a list of *Community Financial Contributions*. Of these, the clear identification of *Assets and Gaps* was the most important as “Research has shown that homelessness is most effectively reduced by implementing a seamless underpinning of support services that helps people – over time – move from a situation where they are without permanent shelter or in danger of becoming homeless, to one of self-sufficiency.” (14) It was expected that the community “list the supports and services that currently exist in your community – programs, services, human resources, equipment, buildings, land, etc.” and use “this list to quantify the supports and services that are required to meet the needs of the homeless – the gaps” (14). As an exercise in effective planning these conditions established clear criteria to maximize the benefits of funding, but there was minimal consideration for the disparities in preparedness of the various communities eligible for SCPI funding to meet these criteria.

The original funding proposal for the NHI was intended for Canada’s ten largest urban centres, with only the intervention by the provinces broadening eligibility to other communities (Smith, 4 & 9-11). SCPI started with 80% of the funding targeted towards the 10 largest, with the remaining 20% in the case of cost overruns in the largest centres and for those communities that could demonstrate that they had a “homeless problem.” Those eligible for funds later expanded to include another 51 municipalities (of which our four small cities are represented). From its inception, then, the NHI had a “large city” bias, with small cities and towns as an afterthought. The short time frame for funding (with no guarantees of renewal), the requested inventory of assets and gaps, and the assumption that there was standing research at the local level profiling the extent of the local homeless crisis assumed a scale of infrastructure and organization at the local government and community level that pertained to the largest urban centres. For example, Vancouver’s Social Development Department “owns, operates, or has leased land for over 10,000 units of social housing,” an Affordable Housing Fund to provide grants for social housing projects, conducts research and oversees numerous programs and by-laws to support social housing in addition to the provincial role (City of Vancouver). With considerable staff in place, decades of experience in social programming and housing, and established links to front-line community groups, these large centres were prepared to meet the conditions and put funds into action to address recognized gaps. The funding potential for small cities was much more limited, with no social plans or staff in place, but able to secure “urgent needs” funding provided that there was a local commitment to fulfill the larger agenda on social planning. Recognizing these limits the small city of

Kelowna, which had created a social plan in 1995 and a position to oversee implementation, moved instead to petition the province over a reliance on the NHI.

“[o]ur senior management staff sat down with the Premier and with BC Housing people that were there (at a UBCM meeting) and said look, we have a huge problem with homelessness and very little resources to deal with it, we need it to be a priority.” (Interview)

Shortly after this meeting the Premier announced the formation of the Task Force on Homelessness, Mental Illness and Addictions at the UBCM in 2004, and initiated ongoing consultation with select cities in B.C.⁵ Through 2005 the Provincial Housing Strategy that was emerging emphasized “the importance of partnerships to leverage provincial resources to maximize the number of households who can be provided with assistance,” thus adopting the federal model with communities (Patterson et al., 26). At the end of 2006 the Provincial Government announced the creation of *BC Housing Matters*, with a priority on the establishment of affordable housing and income support for those homeless with the most pressing care needs. This provincial-local partnership appeared to have the advantage of consultation with smaller centres regarding the needs and the limits of local governments in addressing homelessness.

At the federal level a second phase of the NHI would be introduced, extending initiatives and funding commitments until 2007, then replaced by the Homeless Partnering Strategy with annual funding of \$134.8 million for two years. While feedback from community partners on the usefulness of the NHI was generally positive, it was not lost on participants that the NHI was only addressing the homeless crisis at a surface level.

Despite the progress that has been made as a result of the NHI, most communities identified gaps in their continuum of supports and services, particularly in the area of affordable housing. Although not within the mandate of the NHI, the continued gap in availability of independent, affordable housing at the final stage of the continuum was identified by evaluation respondents as having a detrimental impact on establishing the overall continuum of supports and services. (Human Resources, 5)

In other words, without an “affordable housing component” it is not hard to imagine that many individuals supported by this funding ended up returning to the streets. In addition, the problem still remained that there was no long-term commitment by the federal government to these communities, a situation not lost on community partners engaged in developing social plans, as the “duration of funding for these programs has been limited to only two to three years at a time. This lack of predictability and sustainability has led to uncertainty and inefficiency in delivering an adequate response to the homelessness crisis” (Kelowna Committee to End Homelessness, 9).

⁵ The “Task Force convenes local and provincial governments to develop new resources to address issues related to homelessness” (Patterson et al., 26) and the cities involved were Vancouver, Victoria, Kelowna, Nanaimo, Prince George, Fort St. John, Terrace, New Westminster, and Surrey.

In response to these shortcomings the Homeless Partnering Strategy (HPS) was enhanced in late 2008. First, the HPS provided a much longer funding horizon, with financial commitments until 2014, ending the 2-3 year renewal process that generated so much uncertainty within communities. Second, the HPS included an important “housing-first” component that recognized that little can be achieved until stable housing is assured, completing the “seamless underpinning of support services” earlier affirmed in the NHI as necessary to achieve self-sufficiency for many homeless individuals. And third, there was a financial commitment of over \$1.9 billion to affordable housing and homelessness over five years. Despite these improvements, the HPS reemphasizes that it is a “community-based program that relies on communities to determine their own needs and develop appropriate projects” (HRSDC), reaffirming that the municipal level must continue to take the lead and will only receive HPS funding if this is matched at the local level.

Designated communities must have an approved, up-to-date and comprehensive community plan before they can receive funding. The plan must identify long-term solutions to address homelessness and how the community intends to continue these activities. Designated communities have to demonstrate in their plan that other partners will provide a contribution of at least \$1 for every dollar of the Homelessness Partnering Strategy allocation to the designated community (HRSDC).

Even though the HPS funding was comprised of a far more comprehensive approach to the homeless crisis, the continuation of past conditionality on funding represented a significant increase in the social responsibilities and financial commitments at the local level. Where the NHI had focused on front-line support e.g. emergency shelters and improving transitional housing, the HPS now placed the local level in the lead role in the provision of affordable housing. Not only did this require a considerably higher level of specialized planning (moving from community social plans to “homeless action” plans), it is also a sizable increase in the upfront local resource commitment to initiate projects, and considerable uncertainty as to the long-term financial implications at the local level with respect to maintenance and in-house social support (particularly in housing for addictions and mental illness). In the case of British Columbia the broader HPS mandate served to further integrate the local government level into a far more complex “leadership” and planning role in the provision of affordable housing, as the local-provincial “partnership” with BC Housing became linked to the federal initiative on affordable housing. In the 2008 Throne Speech the province indicated that “municipalities with populations over 25,000 identify and zone appropriate sites for supportive housing and treatment facilities for persons with mental illness and addictions” as part of local planning process (UBCM). This deeper linkage is not surprising, as it was clearly in the interest of the provincial government to seek as much funding as possible from the federal government for the affordable housing commitments that it had advanced in late 2006. It also became evident that the size of the federal financial commitment on housing fostered a dispute within the federal-provincial “partnership,” exposing the considerable funding uncertainty that still prevails in this area.

Even though there was a federal five-year funding commitment, in early 2011 it was revealed that some \$1.4 billion of the \$1.9 billion for affordable housing was “in limbo,” as the two-year federal-provincial agreement on spending was about to expire. This quagmire was confirmed when in mid-2011 it was reported that a provincial-federal agreement was finally brought to the “affordable housing” component, but only after two years of talks as to a “framework for how to spend \$1.4 billion on affordable housing over the next three years” (Scofield). Rather ominous for the local government level was that the “parties now agree that Ottawa would pay half the funding, but provinces wouldn’t have to pay all the other half as long as they could find someone else to do it.” As the Minister of Human Resources reaffirmed “This framework recognizes the need for local solutions to housing challenges,” but again there is no commitment to funding after 2014. Despite these limitations, the sentiment at the federal level is that the NHI and the HPS have been a success. The federal government was able to leverage approximately \$2.61 for every \$1.00 it invested, respect provincial authority and decision-making, and receive positive feedback from “community partners” in Canada’s largest urban centres in addressing service gaps (Graham, 173-175; Senate, 16).

In marked contrast, for small cities (and towns) this “partnership” has generated only confusion and increased frustration at the local level. In 2008 a position paper by the Union of British Columbia Municipalities (UBCM) captured the ambiguity and lack of certainty that pervades decisions at the federal and provincial levels on addressing homelessness.

There appears in British Columbia the expectation at the provincial level that local governments should take on greater responsibility for affordable housing and homelessness, although there have been no discussions with local government on the nature of these new responsibilities or the tacit meaning of this shift in duties in the future. (UBCM, 2008, 3)

From its survey of larger communities (over 25,000) the UBCM identified problems related to provincial decisions, namely “lack of local capacity – to develop and manage suitable policies and measures to effectively address the issue,” “limited availability of land for development in the community and lack of interest in the development community to build supportive housing” and the sentiment that they are “not responsible for healthcare / affordable housing” as provision of municipal lands “limits future community options” (UBCM, 6). Four years later the very same concerns would be expressed at the first annual Mayor’s Caucus in 2012, as the issue of local governments and “social services” were front and centre.

As the “front lines” of Canadian government, local governments are facing a time of incredible challenge. We have a broad service mandate of core responsibilities And each year more and more of the core social services are now falling to local governments to provide as other levels of government reduce service provision – leaving no choice for municipal governments – we must provide these services so needed in our communities – we do not have the ability to download to another level of government.” (B.C. Mayors Caucus)

The post-caucus media coverage garnered considerable provincial attention as mayors from various communities provided frank assessments of federal-provincial homelessness and housing initiatives. As one mayor observed, “cities have also been pressed by the province to help provide social housing, usually by contributing land. Municipalities are saying ‘When did it become our responsibility to provide social housing?’” (“B.C Mayors want new deal”). Another mayor called the decision-making process on grants “ad hoc,” noting that “we spend time and resources applying for these grants, and they might grant them because they like Whistler today or they might not because they want to give them to somebody else. And to a large extent it’s up to the minister’s discretion who gets the grant and who doesn’t. So we’re competing with our neighbours and, it’s just, there’s no accountability and no certainty” (Poon). In criticizing duplication by both cities and senior governments, and the continuing service gaps, another mayor firmly stated that “cities have stepped up to cover off services that have been downloaded by Ottawa or Victoria without receiving any contributions. Social service delivery is a particular mess” (“B.C Mayors want new deal”). For small cities, uncertainties on funding and responsibilities persist as they continue to try and navigate federal and provincial granting conditions. The significant gaps in service, minimal resources and capacity for research, and concerns over what are unclear financial commitments at the local level reveals the limited sense of “empowerment” and benefits accruing from the partnership.

The Small City, Social Issues and the “Capacity to Respond”

Social issues, such as homelessness, drug addiction, prostitution, street crime and panhandling are most often visualized and recognized as challenges of our largest urban centres e.g. Vancouver’s “Eastside.” This is not surprising as national media coverage is based in these centres, Canada’s “big city” mayors have openly raised the profile on these issues since the late 1990s in order to pressure a federal and provincial financial commitment, and research and reports on homelessness draw on evidence and experts from these centres. Smaller urban centres are seen as spared these challenges, offering a more idyllic and safe “family-friendly” setting, and marketed on this local ambience to encourage population growth and investment. The visibility of these urban social challenges is often less pronounced serving to confirm this assessment. However, less obvious are the numerous local bylaws and practices underlying the creation of this impression, that may be categorized as an official policy of “dispersal and discomfort” in an active effort to make homelessness, panhandling, prostitution, and drug-related activities less concentrated and visible. This policy is comprised of a variety of coordinated tactics ranging from enhanced bylaws, the enforcement of “red-zones,” aggressive and targeted policing, and citizen patrols. The outcome of this policy approach is captured in this assessment of small city homelessness, “[W]e see it in our parks, on our streets, and in our alleys. But these are just the public faces of the issue. Homelessness also hides in tents and beneath bridges; it sleeps in shelters and eats in soup kitchens. Sometimes it moves from couch to couch, bouncing between friends and family members” (HAP – Kamloops, 3). In fact the close proximity of the small city to the natural environment that is a “selling feature” for healthy activities and picturesque

vistas, is also the refuge of countless homeless whose multiple camps in and around parks and along the shorelines serve to diminish the weight of their presence.

The social context of the four cities in our study share similar qualities, social qualities which suggest there is a greater need for federal and provincial support over large urban centres if homelessness and related issues are to be addressed in a meaningful manner. Not only do these centres have average unemployment rates that run higher than Vancouver, but local unemployment is prone to significant spikes at times e.g. in 2011 Nanaimo had a local unemployment rate of 16%+, suggesting that these local economies are subject to considerable volatility in employment opportunities and incomes. All four cities have a higher percentage than the provincial average (and higher than Vancouver) of citizens dependent on social assistance and Employment Insurance benefits (BC Stats). Recent information from our four small cities has also provided rough estimates of the numbers of homeless (visible on the streets and in shelters) and profiles of these individuals: Kamloops – 103; Kelowna – 279 (400+); Prince George – 361; and Nanaimo – 115-302 (SPARC-BC).⁶ All of these counts recognize that they have only captured a fraction of the local homeless population. Initial data suggest that men comprise the majority of visible homeless, about 61-79% depending on the city (p. 20). Over 20% are “working homeless” (employed but unable to acquire secure shelter) and a highly disproportionate are First Nations (Kelowna - 21%; Nanaimo – 36%; Kamloops – 29%; Prince George – 66%). While the numbers are large, either equivalent to or higher than Vancouver given the size of the local population, they do appear manageable in terms of housing and support and have been important in determining local shelter (cold weather) and transitional needs. However, data from a 2011 report on the “hidden homeless,” those with only a temporary housing situation in which “the street” is often an option, further reveals the extent of the problem. Projected hidden homeless over the past year (2010-11) were 1,489 for Kelowna, 796 for Nanaimo, 718 for Prince George, and 1,167 for Kamloops (SPARC-BC). By factoring in the “hidden homeless” we are better able to see why addressing the visibly homeless only captures a small segment of those in need.

Interviews with the hidden homeless reveal both the broader dynamics of homelessness and the complex housing needs of many of those who are “sometimes” visible on our streets (SPARC-BC). Some 80% were staying with friends or acquaintances for various lengths of time, and then forced to find “other” arrangements. The most common “other” arrangement was couch surfing, camping, a rental suite and/or sleeping in the streets. Some 64% included the use of emergency shelters or transition housing in the last year, and 82% had used community or government services to try and help get their own place. The majority of hidden homeless were 25 – 45 years of age, with a higher percentage female than the visible homeless - 53% female and 47% male. Some 65%+ reported having mental health challenges, while over 52% had substance use challenges, and 48% had physical challenges - with 22% reporting having all three challenges. Of note, 74% already rely on income assistance – either social assistance or provincial disability benefits – and thus are not “outside the system,” but these levels of

⁶ The years for the latest homeless counts from the four cities are Kamloops – 2010; Nanaimo – 2008; Kelowna – 2007; Prince George – 2010. There was no consistent methodology for the four cities. For Nanaimo, the “302” is considered the more accurate number (SPARC-BC, 14), and for Kelowna, the City of Kelowna website and the Homeless plan use the estimate of “400+.”

assistance are in no way commensurate with the costs of the local housing or rental markets (SPARC-BC). “Dispersion and discomfort” is a highly inappropriate response to these needs – but from a local government perspective the costs of this strategy are largely absorbed at the federal and provincial levels e.g. emergency healthcare and the criminal justice system.

As the local government level became integrated into a lead position in resolving the homeless crisis and related issues it revealed the significant disparities in capacities between large urban centres and small cities. These disparities are rooted in economic development histories which have fostered distinct housing profiles and a differing relationship to past federal and provincial initiatives on housing and social programming.

Large cities have higher housing costs and a relatively larger rental stock. At the same time, they act as a magnet for single individuals who require short-term low-cost housing. Smaller centres, on the other hand, have a relatively greater proportion of senior citizens and families who require affordable housing in markets where rental accommodation is less common and home ownership the norm. (Carroll, 1990, 100)

These observations are borne out by recent statistics on our four small cities in British Columbia - a distinctive housing profile versus large urban centers establishing a difficult context for addressing existing and future homelessness. Dwellings for rent in small cities comprise a considerably smaller (and declining) percentage of overall housing than in large urban centres.⁷ Perhaps the greatest limitation is that the small cities of today were only “small towns” in the post-war years when the federal government financed public or mixed-income housing to the benefit of low income earners. As a consequence, in attempting to respond to the present, and unprecedented homeless crisis, these centres lack the stock of lands and housing that are still available to Canada’s largest urban centres. In addition, these towns never attracted the private investment of the post-war years that went into office buildings, “rooming houses” or downtown hotels that today provide an existing stock that may be purchased and renovated to address homeless needs in large urban centres. In Vancouver since 2007 the provincial government has purchased 24 Single Room Occupancy hotels (SROs) to protect and enhance the affordable housing stock and prevent conversion into high end housing that would have further increased the homeless population (BC Housing). In small cities, these opportunities are rare.

In small cities new housing for middle and upper income families continues to be built in the traditional suburb model, with an older stock of housing located in and around the downtown core for low income owners and renters subject to increased redevelopment into commercial establishments, high-end condominiums or upscale housing. This is often encouraged through local government incentives in an effort to intensify occupancy and revive the economic prospects of downtown cores, suffering from the development of big-box retailers on the fringes of the municipality (MacKinnon and Nelson, 40-42; Sailor, 123-128). This has intensified the local initiatives to disperse and displace the homeless.

⁷ Dwellings for rent as a % of overall local housing: Prince George – 29.7%; Nanaimo – 29.5%; Kelowna – 28%; Kamloops – 26.6%; Vancouver – 52% (B.C. Stats)

We tend to get more concern from people who perceive their safety to be compromised by the homeless people downtown And it's also an issue for downtown businesses. They feel that it's jeopardizing our ability to market the downtown core to potential businesses. (Interview)

Since this dynamic has occurred in a period where there has been no federal or provincial incentives to build large rental units, particularly for low-income earners, rental costs have increased with the scarce supply while vacancy rates have dropped dramatically. In the period between 2001 and 2006 the number of rental spaces declined in Prince George by 1.6%, by 3% in Kelowna and by 2% in Kamloops, with only Nanaimo recording a 0.7% increase - but against a population increase in the same period of nearly 8% (BC Stats). In Kamloops the vacancy rate for rental units went from 7.8% in 2000 to 0.4% in 2008, climbing slightly to 1.5% in 2009 and 2.6% in 2010 (Deutsch). Such a tight rental market is most detrimental to low-income earners and those on social assistance, as landlords can be far more discerning in favoring higher income individuals. Most significant though, the maximum social assistance allowance for shelter remains fixed well below local rental market rates (SPARC-BC). Not surprisingly, the vast majority of hidden homeless identified “low income” and the “lack of affordable housing” as the two most significant barriers preventing them from getting their own place (SPARC-BC).

Small cities, then, do not confront the homeless crisis on the same footing as large urban centres. The lack of public housing, mix-income housing, old hotels and rooming houses, and declining rental space makes it far more difficult and costly to establish affordable housing for low-income earners into the future. These features, combined with the distinctive social qualities and local development pressures, suggest the likelihood of even greater levels of homelessness without a sizable commitment by federal and provincial partners. Despite the extent of current homelessness – visible and hidden – in these four small cities, there is little doubt that the local measures taken to date have served to limit what could have been a far more conflict-ridden and unhealthy local context – however removed these are from a meaningful solution.

The Politics of Social Planning in the Small City

“Homelessness” has been the dominant social planning issue in the four small cities we examined in B.C., if not the main reason for local councils to fund the creation of a permanent social planning position. Local planning documents, media reports and interviews with local social planners attest to the high priority homelessness has become at the local level. While original social plans placed a priority on homelessness as a local issue that needed to be addressed, the subsequent plans to directly address homelessness establish firm timelines to “end homelessness” (City Spaces; HAP Steering Committee; Kelowna Committee to End Homelessness; Prince George). With this more comprehensive approach, the aim is to move beyond shelters and transitional housing to the implementation of affordable housing as a local commitment. Local goals all include planning for mixed-income developments and the provision of affordable rental housing for low-income residents. More immediate and tangible initiatives at the local government level include adopting incentives for the building of affordable housing, the centralization of housing information and referral services, incentives for secondary

suites, meeting with landlords to reduce rents for low-income tenants, and coordinating community organizations and local government in advocacy at the provincial and federal levels to provide the necessary funding to fulfill plans. This momentum at the local level on the homelessness front is expressed by small city social planners. Local government websites not only provide plans to address homelessness, but are linked to local service providers and document results in these areas. In interviews in the four small cities with social planners it is apparent that there had been achievements. Whether through the increases in shelter spaces, transitional housing or local services, or dispersal strategies, there was a sense that the most visible and problematic aspects of overt homelessness had been reduced (Interview).

Despite notable achievements, social planners confront numerous challenges with respect to moving forward on the multiple dimensions of “homelessness.” The most significant issue was that for local councils, addressing homelessness represents another example of downloading – outside of accepted local responsibilities – which included the “social planner” position as simply “a receptacle for downloading other levels of government [responsibility]” (Interview). Even though the results of the consultation process with the community may favor advancing on the homeless front, the “downloading” issue is a continuing concern at the council level and may be used to justify local inaction. Several planners noted that a main component of the position was to convince local councils that plans and recommendations did not entail large financial commitments at the local level, and that they were not moving into unacceptable areas of responsibility (Interview) – a commitment, as we have seen, that is growing increasingly untenable. Thus, while the “success” of other cities in acquiring funding by “what they have brought to the table” may be emphasized, there is a local government sense of few options in this “partnership” if the local homeless issue is to be addressed. Further, council concerns over provincial downloading are recognized as having merit, such that “unexpected” financial costs on the “social front” would not be a surprise. This reveals how the continuing uncertainty over funding at the provincial and federal levels is played out at the local level.

Even with detailed plans defining local, provincial and federal responsibilities, and an agreement by council to move forward as a partner to address homelessness, there remained important local hurdles to the implementation of any plan. Most notable was the “Not In My Backyard,” or NIMBY reaction, as proposals for particular services, and transitional and affordable housing became more concrete in placement. Local councils, in the face of special interests or area specific opposition, may be inclined to retreat from implementation, requiring the repeated revisiting of agreed upon plans while stalling progress for considerable periods of time (Interview). In addition, changes in councils due to election outcomes can easily bring about further delays and changes in priorities due to new personalities on council. Thus, the composition of local councils and the disposition of individual mayors play a crucial role in determining the contacts and the lobbying efforts towards upper-levels government for momentum on homelessness plans (Interview). These dynamics suggest significant inequities from one municipality to another in the implementation of strategies to end homelessness – inequities that are played out directly on the fortunes of the local homeless population – and confirmed by recent examples.

Of the two communities that had established Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) as early as 2008 on the construction of affordable housing, there are significant differences in outcomes (and Kamloops and Prince George have yet to establish these agreements). In Kelowna, where it is recognized in the MOU that there were 279 visible homeless, the agreement allows for 128 units of which 79 were completed as of 2012 (B.C. Housing). The MOU for Nanaimo recognized an estimated 302 visible homeless individuals, and allowed for the creation of 160 units, of which only 18 units had been completed by early 2012. Once the recent data on “hidden homeless” for these communities is factored in – roughly 1,489 for Kelowna and 796 for Nanaimo – it becomes apparent both how slow and unequal the response has been, and how limited the provincial and federal response appears relative to the local needs. Further, in Nanaimo controversy erupted over the construction of “low-barrier housing” (which the majority of homeless require and comprise the bulk of MOU units) making it the news story of the year for 2011. “[H]ousing advocates and opponents were locked in a battle against each other and the City of Nanaimo,” leading to four, four-hour public hearings on one project alone, temporarily stopping all proposed developments, and bringing the housing issue into the municipal election (Stern). As one citizen engaged in these debates observed about the controversy over planning and communication, “It is not always the fault of the city council. The provincial government is supposed to be a partner and they have been absent in all of this” (Cunningham). This observation captures a growing sentiment - that the local level is doing all the “heavy lifting” politically to respond to a crisis that their own social planning documents often identify as created and continuing because of decisions by their “partners.” It is not hard to imagine the irritation of local elected officials in small centres as federal MPs and provincial MLAs are only visible to announce successful funding applications or to celebrate the opening of a facility. As local councils repeatedly have to defend “controversial solutions” to local social challenges while unable to ascertain what the ultimate costs and obligations may be for residents, the prospects for small city success appear remote in this planning environment.

Conclusion

This overview confirms the limited incentives and possibilities in small cities for arriving at effective solutions to homelessness and related social challenges through local social planning initiatives. The terms of the existing multi-level “partnership” structure, the unique social qualities and local constraints in capacity, and the politics at the local government level which have emerged in response to this “leadership role” do not suggest there will be concrete measures to better address these social challenges in the near future. In fact, with federal and provincial funding commitments that are set to end in 2014, the call for a “new deal” by B.C. mayors, and the slow and unpredictable pace of implementation at the local level, there is the possibility of the politics of social planning on homelessness becoming much more heated despite over a decade of federal and provincial funding opportunities. Only firm and long-term funding commitments by federal and provincial governments, with greater regard for local limitations in resources and capacities, can assure some degree of success in implementing local homeless action plans in the small city.

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