MAKING KNOWLEDGE MATTER: MOBILIZING HOMELESSNESS RESEARCH THROUGH THE HOMELESS HUB

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ABSTRACT

As the homelessness crisis in Canada worsens, it becomes imperative that research be mobilized to play a vital role in debates and decisions regarding strategies and solutions. However, in the past research on homelessness has not had the impact that it should. The Homeless Hub (www.homelesshub.ca) is a web-based research library and information center that represents an innovative step forward in the use of technology to enhance knowledge mobilization and networking. This resource represents an important step forward in effectively mobilizing homelessness research to engage policy makers, service providers and the general public and inform debates about the causes of homelessness and the efficacy of proposed solutions.

There are few Canadians who would deny that the problem of homelessness has increased quite dramatically since the 1990s, and that it continues to be a profoundly challenging issue across the country (Gaetz 2008, 2010; Golden et al. 1999; Hulchanski, 2009; Laird 2007; Shapcott, 2007). The response to this emerging crisis has been remarkably uneven. On the one hand, communities across the country have struggled to develop local solutions to a national problem, by building more emergency services such as shelters, drop-ins and other kinds of supports. And while different levels of government have attempted to support such efforts (for instance, the national Homelessness Partnering Strategy), such efforts have not been developed evenly across the country, nor have they been accompanied by a robust national housing strategy. These attempts to deal with homelessness, however progressive they may be, have been accompanied by counterproductive efforts to "criminalize" homelessness – perhaps the most notorious example being Ontario's Safe Streets Act. Overall, it is fair to say that the infrastructure that has emerged as a response to homelessness has developed in an ad hoc way, rather than as a result of careful planning utilizing the best information available.

This raises the question of the role of research in tackling homelessness. It should go without saying that good policy and excellent programs are best built upon solid research evidence. Research *should* have an impact on decision-making in government through providing solid evidence that informs policy and practice. Strategic planning and program development within the non-profit sector *should* be rooted in an evidence-based approach. Good research deepens our understanding of the issues, challenges our assumptions, and points to effective solutions. Research can and should play a vital role in debates about solutions to homelessness.

Yet, it would be naive to assume that policy and program planning are always evidence-based processes. If one were to characterize the Canadian response to homelessness – whether at the national, regional or local levels – research has not played the role that it might. In fact, it is suggested here that one of the defining features of our response to the homelessness crisis has been our inability, or reluctance, to effectively mobilize research to address the problem, and to inform solutions. For research to have an impact, it must be valued, it must address the questions of policy makers, service providers and the general public, and people must have access to it. In other words, there must be effective mechanisms in place to mobilize research knowledge.

Over the past several years, things have begun to shift, and in a very positive way. More and more, people are demanding responses to homelessness that focus not just on the provision of emergency services, but on the development of comprehensive strategies that also emphasize prevention and transitions out of homelessness. Such strategic thinking requires a solid evidence base, and effective strategies for mobilizing research knowledge. In response to growing demands for an enhanced role for research, the Homeless Hub has emerged as an important mechanism for knowledge dissemination and exchange, and as a means of strategically linking those interested in evidence based solutions to a problem that we have been living with for far too long.

HOMELESSNESS RESEARCH IN CANADA

There is an acknowledged gap between the knowledge that researchers produce, and the decision-making that shapes policy and the provision of services. At the same time, it can be argued that research on homelessness has not effectively been mobilized to engage the general public and inform debates about the causes of homelessness and the efficacy of proposed solutions.

However, for research to have an impact, we must first know whether it even exists. Where is the research on homelessness? Can we mobilize research that isn't there? The truth is that for more than two decades, homelessness has been a prime focus for a number of researchers in academia, government and the non-profit sector. These dedicated individuals and groups have produced essential knowledge on the conditions of homelessness, its causes and solutions. The problem has not necessarily been the production of research knowledge (though it is worth pointing out that many research questions remain unanswered), but rather it's mobilization – ensuring that decision-makers have access to the best research, and are able to apply it to their needs. There are several underlying challenges that have muted the effective mobilization of homelessness research.

First, the research that dœs exist has been difficult to access. It has not been easy to find out who in Canada is doing research on homelessness, and there has been no coordinated system for broadly sharing the results. Academic research has typically been contained within disciplinary silos, and community-based research produced by the non-profit sector rarely gets shared regionally, let alone across the country. Different levels of government in Canada – federal, provincial and municipal - often conduct or contract research to inform policy. This research is often of high quality, but unfortunately, it is rarely shared broadly, and access to it is typically limited to those who know how to locate it. So, even though a significant amount of research and knowledge on homelessness in Canada has been produced over the past several decades, in general this body of research is very fragmented and difficult to access, even for those with the greatest resources.

A second challenge is that homelessness research is not a well-established subject area in academia, such as "gender studies" or "refugee studies", for instance. Homelessness is a topic that dœs not easily sit within one academic discipline. Because of the complexity of the topic, homelessness research is conducted from different disciplinary and methodological perspectives, within subject areas as diverse as sociology, geography, medicine, law, social work, anthropology, business and criminology. No single discipline dominates research on homelessness, there are no prominent academic journals devoted to the topic, and research is shared only infrequently at large, discipline-specific conferences. Interdisciplinarity is something that is valued by many, but is profoundly challenging to actually engage in.

Third, the lack of infrastructure to mobilize research simply entrenches existing barriers between the producers and users of research. Most research on homelessness conducted by academics is driven by the research questions that interest academics, and is shared amongst scholars using media and language with which the group is comfortable and familiar. Those who make decisions in government and the service sector experience challenges in finding and obtaining research, and in making it applicable to their own work and questions. In the social service sector, there is an underdeveloped capacity to either conduct new research, or synthesize existing research in order to bring it to bear on program planning. Finally, there is the general public. While the news media often reports on homelessness (one could nevertheless argue that it is an under-reported issue), rarely is this reporting informed by research. If this is where the public gets most of its information regarding homelessness, then researchers are surely missing an opportunity to educate. An informed public can lead to demands for evidence-based policy.

Finally, it must be said that within the homelessness sector, research has not always been valued. Over the past fifteen years, it has not been unusual to hear people suggest "we don't need research – we know what the problem is and what the solutions are". These claims are well-meaning, borne of the frustrations of people who want action on this very important issue. Yet, the question has to be asked: if we are still confronting the issue today after all these years, and if in many cases the problem seems to be getting worse, do we really know as much as we think we do? If politicians are not taking the actions that we feel can impact on homelessness, can research help make the case?

It is safe to say that homelessness is an issue for which the absence of effective infrastructure to mobilize research knowledge has led to a disconnect between the research (and researchers) on homelessness, and policy and practice. Quantz and Frankish (2002), in their study of homelessness research in British Columbia, outline the challenges that different stakeholder groups face not only in conducting research, but also in accessing existing research in order to apply findings in program planning and decision making.

The lack of an infrastructure and effective strategies for disseminating and mobilizing such knowledge means that decision makers in government and the community are unable to develop strategies, programs and practices using the best knowledge available. All levels of govern-

ment in Canada often make policy without access to the best existing research. Community-based agencies are in an even worse position to effectively plan, develop and deliver programs using evidence-based research, because they typically lack the capacity to obtain, analyze and engage in research. As a result, research has not had the impact on policy and practice that it could and should.

KNOWLEDGE MOBILIZATION AND THE HOMELESS HUB

The concept of Knowledge Mobilization (KM) has emerged over the past 10 years as a way of understanding how to increase the impact of research outside of academia. At its most basic level, *Knowledge mobilization* describes a process whereby research knowledge is made readily *accessible* and *understandable* to interested individuals, groups and institutions in society, who are then able to use it to effectively generate solutions to problems they have identified. Ideally, knowledge mobilization enables new forms of collaboration between and across sectors, to produce and share knowledge. Getting good information into the hands of decision makers hopefully leads to better decisions.

While there is certainly a longer history of applying the knowledge generated by researchers in the natural and medical sciences, knowledge mobilization has now emerged as an important objective in the social sciences as well. The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada has argued that researchers must now not only focus on the development of knowledge, but must also: "become far more proficient at moving the knowledge from research to action, and in the process, at linking up with a broad range of researchers and stakeholder-partners across the country" (SSHRC 2004). Several universities have since established knowledge mobilization units, including University of Victoria, and York University in Toronto, and define KM as: "the active, two-way exchange of information and expertise between knowledge creators and knowledge users" (ResearchImpact 2008)

If the goal of KM, then, is to make research relevant to policy makers, service providers and the general public, it is arguably most successful when:

- Research is valued
- Research is accessible
- Different kinds of knowledge are respected
- Mobilizaiton strategies reflect the needs of different kinds of learners
- Barriers between stakeholders are reduced, and partnerships are facilitated.
- Research is *Applied*, leading to tangible outcomes.

In recent years, we have seen the development of new strategies, tools and methods to enhance and support knowledge mobilization in the area of homelessness. The Government of Canada's Homelessness Partnering Strategy has asserted its leadership, strongly advocating the role of research – quantitative, qualitative and from a variety of disciplinary perspectives – as a tool of policy and planning. One of the key outcomes of this work has been the development of the Homeless Hub.

Launched in 2007 at York University, the **Homeless Hub** (www.homelesshub.ca) is a web-based research library and information center that represents an innovative step forward in the use of technology to enhance knowledge mobilization and networking. Building directly on the success of the first Canadian Research Conference on Homelessness (2005) and the consultation that followed, the Homeless Hub has emerged as a place where community services providers, researchers, government representatives, and the general public can access and share research, stories, and best practices.

This project was begun with an understanding that different stakeholders (in government, academia and the social services sector) are likely to think about and utilize research in unique and distinct ways. As such, the website is built with different stakeholders in mind. Five key features of the Hub exemplify this approach to knowledge mobilization.

First, the Homeless Hub contains the most extensive library on homelessness research in the world. There is a searchable research library containing resources and downloadable academic articles, and research projects and reports produced by all levels of government and service providers on a broad range of topics.

A second key feature of the site is the active effort to engage non-academics through, for instance, organizing content topically. Each topic is introduced with a detailed plain language summary, enabling visitors to the site to learn about key research findings without having to actually read through long and sometimes wordy reports. We have also included a range of arts-based resources.

Third, in an effort to ensure that the voices of people who experience homelessness were heard, the Homeless Hub contains a section titled *Stories*, where people can share their personal experiences.

Fourth, we have added a number of resources for educators. Schools represent an ideal place for people to learn about, think about and understand homelessness. New curriculum materials and modules, as well as fact sheets for teachers and students, have been developed in a variety of subject areas for primary, intermediate and senior grade levels. Teachers and educators drawing on these curriculum materials will be able to introduce students to the breadth of research available on the topic of homelessness.

Fifth, to further take advantage of new technological developments in publishing, we look to become a distributor of open access electronic books, and down the road, to develop an international journal of research on homelessness. This past summer, we distributed the book Finding Home (Hulchanski, et al., 2009), the most comprehensive reader on homelessness ever produced in Canada. This eBook has been edited by David Hulchanski and his team, published by Cities Centre Press at the UofT, funded by a SSHRC homelessness research dissemination grant. The book is an 'open access' publication, meaning people can download the contents for free in either PDF form, or as an E-Pub. We look to support more of this kind of publication in the future.

Finally, the Homeless Hub contains a robust networking area where people from across the country and across sectors can contact each other, share information and coalesce around regional, sectoral or topical issues. Building on the most comprehensive Canadian database of stakeholders interested in homelessness research, a project goal is to develop a Canadian Homelessness Research Network This area of the Homeless Hub is currently being revamped to take advantage of contemporary social networking technologies and practices, and is now linked with a broader homelessness research network in the United States.

Future plans call for a number of new innovations, including the creation of resources to support professional and workforce development in the homelessness sector. We also will provide resources to assist people in doing homelessness research, including program evaluation.

It has long been acknowledged in business circles, government and the non-profit sector that the most effective decisions and solutions are built upon a foundation of sound information and knowledge. This kind of thinking needs to be applied to the homelessness crisis in Canada, and the Homeless Hub provides an important vehicle for knowledge mobilization. As the homelessness crisis in Canada continues, the need for effective solutions based on a solid understanding of the conditions that create homelessness, as well as 'what works' to address homelessness, becomes imperative. We can no longer rely on limited information and 'ad hoc' solutions.

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