UNDERSTANDING PUBLIC ATTITUDES AND PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS HOMELESSNESS: A REQUISITE FRONTIER TO REDUCE HOMELESSNESS

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Abstract

Canadian urban communities are continually being challenged to respond to the growing homelessness problem. While considerable Canadian research has been conducted regarding causes and solutions, an empirical void exists when it comes to Canadian attitudes and perceptions towards homelessness. Based on the premise that public opinions can influence how we think about social problems and influence and predict our behavior towards them, this study examined the attitudes and perceptions of 111 University of the Fraser Valley undergraduate students’ towards homelessness. Participants were recruited from four undergraduate classes across three faculties of study, and they completed 24 survey questions.

Survey results highlighted misinformation and stigmas about homelessness amongst participants. Respondents had a high level of awareness of the causes of homelessness and expressed sympathy for this population. Less support was found for having housing initiatives in their neighborhood, and much less support when it came to paying more in taxes. Most respondents were not aware of what Housing First was, or the fiscal benefit of investing in reducing homelessness. Moving forward, there is a need to foster a sense of community ownership for reducing homelessness. Community-based research may be needed to identify what people’s attitudes and perceptions are towards homelessness, followed by more broad examination of why people have the attitudes they do, and the subsequent development of strategies to educate and garner support for strategies and policies to reduce homelessness.
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Introduction

This past summer, many British Columbians lost their homes at the hands of the devastating wild fires that ravaged the landscape of BC’s interior. In a truly amazing spectacle, citizens and communities across the province embraced those that had been displaced, with many opening up their pocket book and even their homes to help those affected. Yet, as much as the public rallied around these victims who lost their homes, it is interesting to ponder whether this same sentiment to help would exist when it comes to local homeless people? Recently I had this very conversation with a social service provider, and we discussed if a donation tin was at a local grocery store, would the public leap to the aid of the local homeless with the same yearning to help? We concluded that the public would likely view the situations differently and would likely respond differently accordingly. Yet, are the situations really that different? Accordingly, this research project seeks to better understand people’s attitudes and perceptions towards homelessness, and the important role they have in reducing homelessness.

Homelessness has been a growing concern in Canada since the 1980s, following a vast disinvestment in affordable housing, structural shifts in the economy, and decreased spending on social supports (Gaetz, Dej, Richter, and Redman, 2016). Neo-liberalism began to become more dominant in Canadian politics, resulting in less state involvement and more reliance on the free-market to distribute resources (Lightman, 2003). Homeless numbers have now risen to unprecedented figures in many communities. The 2017 homeless count in the Fraser Valley, which was a 24-hour point-in-time survey conducted March 7 and 8, 2017, found 606 people identifying as experiencing homelessness (Fraser Valley Regional District, 2017). This figure represents a 70% increase over the 346 people that were identified as being homeless in 2014. Similarly, 3,605 people were counted as being homeless in the Metro Vancouver region, which
was 828 more than 2014, representing a 30% increase and the highest number counted in the history of the homeless count (BC Non-Profit Housing Association and M. Thomson Consulting, 2017).

Having worked in a front-line role in community mental health for the past 10 years, often in an outreach capacity in the community, I have had the opportunity to bare witness to some of the challenges homeless people experience first-hand. To be clear, their struggle is not just about securing housing, it is also about how they are treated and viewed by many members of the public. It is about the stigma and shame that many carry with them because of how they are looked down upon. Yet, even with their greatest efforts to climb out of the clutches of poverty, they are thwarted by the hands of oppression. Yet, this does not need to be the case.

Stephen Gaetz, professor at York University and director of the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness and the Homeless Hub, was recently quoted as saying:

The good news is we know what to do to solve homelessness: targeted affordable housing investment, community systems planning, Housing First, prevention and federal leadership will get us there…And importantly we also know solving homelessness will be far cheaper than ignoring it (York Media Relations, 2016).

In fact, Gaetz, Dej, Richter, and Redman (2016) argue that homelessness could be prevented or ended in Canada for as little as an additional $50 per Canadian annually, or less than a $1 per week. Unfortunately, as Cooper (2017) points out, “there is more to be done if we want the money in the bank to result in shovels in the ground.” Reducing homelessness is not as simple as securing money to build homes, as recent news stories have shown.

Even when funds are in place for projects, local newspapers are regularly filled with stories of citizens resisting and even protesting against various affordable housing developments,
emergency shelters, and other resources that could reduce homelessness. For example, Brown (2017) wrote a story in November 2017 about a planned protest by Marpole residents, 1,200 of whom had signed a petition protesting plans to construct a temporary homeless shelter in their neighborhood. In one of the more public displays in recent memory, hundreds of Maple Ridge residents literally lined the streets in March of 2016, to rally against a plan by BC Housing to convert a hotel into housing for the homeless (Eagland, 2016). The project would have cost 5.5 million dollars and created 61 long-term, supportive housing units in the community. A year later the project remains at a standstill, the project still without a home, despite Rajvir Rao of BC Housing stating that BC Housing has allocated 15 million dollars to build a supportive housing complex in Maple Ridge (Melnychuk, 2017). Not In My Back Yard, or NIMBY, has been cited by municipalities across Canada as being the top regulatory barrier to creating affordable housing (Greater Victoria Coalition for Ending Homelessness (n.d.). At the heart of NIMBYISM would appear to be fear mongering based misperceptions and discrimination (Wynne-Edwards, 2003).

On February 1, 2018, the British Columbia Minister of Poverty Reduction and Social Innovation, Shane Simpson (2018, February), told attendees at the Metro Vancouver and the Fraser Valley Council of Community Homelessness Tables that there is a need for community acceptance at the local level to reduce homelessness, and expressed concern that some municipalities may have municipal candidates running in 2018 elections whose platform is “If you don’t want the local drug addicts living next door, vote for me.” It is therefore premise of this paper that in order to engage in policy change, secure funding for projects and initiatives to reduce homelessness, and literally build affordable housing, efforts first need to be made to engage in a community development process in many communities to foster greater community acceptance and ownership at both the public and political levels.
This research project will therefore focus on an extensive review of the literature regarding public attitudes and perceptions towards homelessness in Canada, with an emphasis on urban homelessness in the Fraser Valley. The role of misperceptions, stigma, individualism, neoliberalism, and social exclusion will be of particular focus in the theory section. As part of the project, a small descriptive study was completed which sought to answer the question: What are UFV undergraduate students’ attitudes and perceptions towards homelessness? This study would appear to be the first of its kind in the Fraser Valley. Results and themes will be identified, as well as implications for future research in urban communities will be discussed, including the need to examine why beliefs are held, where people are getting their information from that shape their beliefs, and in addition to increasing sympathy, develop strategies to educate and garner support for policies and projects to reduce homelessness.

**Literature Review**

**Importance of Understanding Attitudes and Perceptions**

The idea that public attitudes and perceptions can influence social policy is not a new concept, with research demonstrating this connection dating back as far as the early 1980s (Monroe, 1983; Jason and Rose; 1984). Attitudes are thought to be a predictor of behaviour, so understanding how people think about social problems, will help predict support for policies (Link et al., 1995). In fact, it has been said that without having an understanding of public opinions, policy makers may rely on the media for this information which is not always accurate, and create an illusion of popular consensus that can lead individuals to reassess their personal views. (Tompsett et al., 2006).

Research on attitudes and beliefs towards homelessness has also shown that public opinion survey results can influence how the public think about social problems, and can predict their
support and behavior towards helping homeless individuals (Lee, Lewis, and Jones, 1992; Batterham, 2007; Tsai, Lee, Byrne, Pietrzak, and Southwick, 2017). Unfortunately, the public may not always have access to accurate information, which can lead to misperceptions and the development of opinions based on limited objective information about homelessness (Lee, Link, and Toro, 1991; as cited in Phelan et al., 1997). As will be demonstrated throughout the literature review and the study associated with this project, homelessness is often associated with stigmatizing conditions, such as mental illness and substance use (Link et al., 1995). Research suggests that politicians may be swayed by public opinion, which in turn may be influenced by misinformation tactics by dominant media, politicians and other stakeholders with self-serving interests.

Research indicates that if the public can start to develop more sympathetic opinions towards the homeless, they may start to attribute homelessness to more structural causes, and accordingly be more inclined to support programs aimed at reducing homelessness (Agans and Liu, 2015). Similarly, Toro et al. (2007) conclude that if public opinions could be influenced in a positive direction towards being more sympathetic, perhaps policy and ultimately the prevalence of homelessness could be changed as well.

**What is Homelessness?**

When examining attitudes and perceptions towards homelessness, it is important to actually define what homelessness means. As Hobden, Tompsett, Fales, and Toro (2007) point out, there can be literal definitions of homelessness, or there can be definitions that also include the precariously housed, such as those staying with friends or family. Not having a universal definition can be problematic for numerous reasons, including being able to compare quantifiable
data from homeless counts, and most importantly for this study, how the public perceives “homeless” individuals.

In 2012, the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (2012) introduced a national definition of homeless in Canada, which was considered an important step because the definition of a problem shapes how it is to be solved (Gaetz, 2011; as cited in Fraser Valley Regional District, 2017). The Canadian Observatory on Homelessness defines homelessness as “the situation of an individual or family without stable, permanent, appropriate housing, or the immediate prospect, means and ability of acquiring it” (p. 1). Despite this definition, the Fraser Valley Regional District reports that local municipalities such as Chilliwack, Abbotsford, and even the Greater Vancouver Regional Steering Committee, have adopted their own definitions of homelessness, as has the Fraser Valley Regional District, which defines homeless persons “as persons with no fixed address, with no regular and/or adequate nighttime residence where they can expect to stay for more than 30 days” (p.2). This is the definition that will be used when discussing homelessness in this paper, as it captures the “hidden homeless” and is utilized in the community where this study takes place.

Who are the Homeless -- Fraser Valley

Given misperceptions about who is homeless, it is important to examine local homeless populations’ demographics, to distinguish fact from public perception. The Fraser Valley Regional District (2017) identified 606 homeless individuals during their homeless count last Spring. Of those counted, 64.1% were male and 35.2% were female. The majority, 61%, of respondents were between the ages of 30 and 59. Even though Indigenous people represent approximately 4% of the general population, they are disproportionately represented in the homeless population in the Fraser Valley, with 35% of homeless persons identifying with some
form of Indigenous ancestry. Most of the homeless persons surveyed, 62.3%, reported living within the Fraser Valley Regional District for 6 years or longer. As far as income, 23.7% indicated receiving income assistance, 15.3% report disability benefits, and 12.6% indicated binning (removing recyclable items from garbage bins and redeeming them for small amounts of money), while 5.1% had part-time employment. Nearly half of the respondents, or 41.1%, reported that they had been impacted by a change or withdrawal of services in the community – for example, wait times for services, denied income assistance, reduced service hours – which was an increase of 26% compared to the 2014 count. Nearly half, 49%, also indicated they had been in the care of Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) at some point in their lives. In addition, 68% of respondents reported having an addiction, 49% noted a medical condition, 47% stated that they had a mental illness, while 29% identified as disabled. The Fraser Valley Regional District also points out that there is a disproportionality of those identifying health concerns with those that are accessing services. For example, only 5.1% were accessing non-emergency medical services, 5.7 were accessing addiction services, and 4.2% were accessing mental health services.

One of the challenges of accurately reporting homeless counts and demographics is that there is not an accurate means of capturing this data. Hidden homeless can be considered those people that are residing temporarily with others, but they do not have the guarantee of ongoing residency or immediate prospects for accessing permanent housing (Homeless Hub, n.d.). A study conducted in Vancouver in 2009 estimated that the hidden homeless at a point in time count was 3.46 times the absolute homeless count (Eberle, Kraus, and Serge, 2009). The Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (2017) applied this figure to Canada using a conservative 3:1 ratio, and estimated that as many as 50,000 people could be considered hidden homeless on any given night in Canada. This is significant, as policy makers and the public may be holding opinions
based on a small, more visible, potentially more stigmatized segment of the overall homeless population.

**Canadian Attitudes and Perceptions**

A review of EBSCOHost, JSTOR, and Sage Journals Online, as well as a general Google search using search variations of “public attitudes and perceptions towards homelessness and Canada and BC,” suggests that there is a dearth of academic research regarding Canadians’ attitudes and perceptions towards homelessness and highlights the need for more research as will be argued throughout this paper.

**Public Opinion on Homelessness in British Columbia.**

At the Lower Mainland 2H Forum 2017 took place October 5, 2017, Lorraine Copas (2017, October), Executive Director of SPARC BC (Social Planning and Research Council of BC), presented some unpublished results from the *Angus Reid Poll on Public Opinion on Homelessness in the Lower Mainland*. Copas reported that the new poll surveyed 1,051 residents from across the Lower Mainland. Copas advised that most respondents identified the following causes of homelessness in order of most frequently cited: drug and alcohol (64.8%), mental health concerns (54.3%), lack of affordable housing (44.2 percent), population density (29.4%), bad choices (21.5%), and lack of economic opportunities (19.0%). Respondents identified the following actions to address homelessness: supportive housing (52.9%), affordable housing with supports (33.8 percent), more services (30.6%), more private partnership (25.7%), more rent supplements (11.9%), and none of the above (9.8%). Copas also reported that when the results were compared with predecessor poll from 2012, 20.3 percent reported increased sympathy, and 13.9% indicated decreased sympathy, and the remaining 4% reported being unsure. Copas also
advised that 61.1 percent of respondents strongly supported homeless people being able to access services that they need.

The predecessor survey, *Community Values: A Public Opinion Survey About Homelessness in Metro Vancouver* (Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness, 2012), was an online survey of 1,006 randomly selected adults in British Columbia from September 10 to 12, 2012. Affordable housing with support services was regarded as the primary solution to homelessness. Respondents were found to be compassionate towards the homeless, with 90% believing that homeless people should have access to services and information, and should be treated with dignity and respect. A significant majority of respondents wanted all three levels of government and community groups to take a greater role in addressing homelessness.

Taken together, these studies would seem to suggest that Lower Mainland residents have sympathetic attitudes towards the homeless, believe in having access to services, that housing would seem to be a basic right if everyone who wants a home is thought to be deserving of one, and that certain population groups generate more sympathy or concern than others in the case of the report from Copas (2017, October). Given that homeless numbers have been on the rise during the time in between the two studies, with presumably increased visibility and media exposure regarding homelessness, the continued levels of sympathy is considered noteworthy.

The only other BC study identified as part of the literature review was a 2013 survey of Greater Victoria residents’ attitudes towards homelessness. The Greater Victoria Coalition to End Homelessness (2013) reported 85.4% of participants agreed that affordable housing would help reduce homelessness, while 84.5% of respondents agreed that ensuring access to affordable housing is the responsibility of the government. In addition, nearly two-thirds of the respondents found the statement, “it costs more in government services...for a person to be homeless than it
does to provide them with housing” to be credible. Most respondents cited mental health issues, 96.5%, drug and/or alcohol abuse, 94.4%, and poverty, 89.2%, as the main reasons for homelessness.

In comparing opinions between the Lower Mainland and Victoria studies, it is interesting to note that in the Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness (2012) and the Greater Victoria Coalition to End Homelessness (2013) surveys, different levels of government and community groups were thought to need to take more responsibility, but there was no mention of what role individuals not affected by homelessness and communities could play in reducing homelessness. In addition, all three studies cited mental health and drug and alcohol use as the main reasons for homelessness, particularly in the Victoria study.

Public Opinions on Homelessness in Canada.

The most recent national study that was identified as part of the literature review was the Salvation Army (2011) report based on an Angus Reid Public Opinion survey of 1,000 Canadians on perceptions about homelessness in Canada. Findings of note include 40% of respondents believed that most homeless people want to live on the street and in shelters, 30% believe that a good work ethic is all one needs to escape homeless, and nearly 20% of Canadians believed homeless individuals themselves were to blame for their situation. In addition, 43% of respondents reported that they would never give money to a homeless person, 40% believed that most homeless people are mentally ill, and more than 33% of participants reported being afraid of homeless people. Somewhat surprisingly, 93% agreed that no one in Canada should be homeless, and 86% believed that housing is a basic right. Furthermore, 75% of participants acknowledged that once one becomes homeless it is exceptionally difficult to secure housing.
While more dated than the previous three surveys, Hobden, Tompsett, Fales, and Toro (2007) completed the only study of Canadian attitudes and perceptions towards homelessness that was identified in a scholarly journal as part of the literature review. In this study, the authors completed a telephone opinion survey in both Canada and the US, and found that Canadian participants were more likely to state that the government is responsible for helping homeless individuals. Canadians were also found to favor public rights for homeless individuals and were more likely to see them as being socially isolated, were more sympathetic, more supportive of public rights for the homeless, and more supportive of increases in federal spending to help reduce homelessness.

Hobden et al. (2007) found group differences among Canadian participants, with younger respondents being found to be more supportive of rights for homeless individuals and less likely to see them as being socially isolated. Older respondents also scored higher on limiting public rights. Female Canadian respondents were also found to be more likely to view them as being mentally ill, “mentally retarded,” depressed, alcoholic, and drug addicted.

POLLARA (2005, November), a Canadian public opinion and marketing firm that was formerly the pollster for the federal liberal party, conducted an on-line survey from November 11th to the 15th, 2005, surveying 1,435 Canadians. Nearly two-thirds, 63%, of respondents felt that homelessness had increased over the past three years, with Canadians living in British Columbia being the most likely to agree with the state at 77%. Canadians 65 years and older were found to most likely to agree that it is possible to reduce homelessness, 89%, while those between 25 and 44 years old were most likely to disagree -- 17%. Similarly, Canadians who earned a household income between $50,000 and $75,000 were the most likely to agree that it is possible to reduce the number of homeless people, 90%, while those who earn a household income of less
than $25,000 were the most likely to disagree -- 33%. What was interesting about this study is regional differences were found among the provinces regarding perceptions and attitudes, as well as demographic differences related to income and age.

In March 2017, Vox Pop Labs (2017), a social enterprise specializing in data science and decision support technologies, conducted a study to understand public opinion regarding homelessness and housing in the Golden Horseshoe area of Ontario. They found that there was very strong support for creating a legal obligation to prevent homelessness, particularly among female, youth and participants with lower incomes. Vox Pop Labs also found that most of the participants agreed that the Ontario government should make preventing homelessness a higher priority.

Key Points For Further Thought

There are some key points to keep in mind from the research on Canadian and Metro Vancouver residents’ opinions. Almost all of the studies indicated that Canadians had sympathy or compassion towards the homeless, with two not appearing to measure sympathy. Hobden, Tompsett, Fales, and Toro (2007), the Salvation Army (2011) report and Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness (2012), also indicated that almost all respondents felt that housing was a basic right in Canada, or that everyone should have housing. In addition, the Salvation Army report also indicated that three quarters of participants felt that it would be very challenging for a person to secure housing once they are homeless, reflecting an understanding of structural barriers. Yet, in the same study, nearly half of the respondents said that they would not give money to a homeless person, suggesting that sympathy does not always equal supporting policy/giving.
There would appear to be many inaccurate perceptions held by the respondents in many of the Canadian studies. Copas’ (2017), The Greater Victoria Coalition to End Homelessness (2013), and Hobden, Tompsett, Fales, and Toro’s (2007) studies found that drug and alcohol and mental health concerns were identified as being the top causes of homelessness among respondents. These perceptions would appear to be an overestimate among the identified homeless population within the Fraser Valley, especially when considering the lack of demographic data on the hidden homeless. It is also noteworthy that one-fifth of respondents blamed homeless people for their situation in the Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness (2012) and the Salvation Army (2012) surveys. The Salvation Army also indicated that a near majority of respondents believed homeless people wanted to live on the street or in a shelter. These findings would again be considered inaccurate perceptions, particularly of the underlying causes of homelessness.

Demographic differences were found in three of the studies, Vox Pop Labs (2017), Hobden, Tompsett, Fales, and Toro (2007), and POLLARA (2005, November) studies, which suggests that there may be different levels of sympathy and understanding between groups and/or geographical locations. The international literature further suggests that some group differences have been identified across research in the US and Europe, particularly around gender (Phillips, 2015), age (Tompsett et al., 2006), and political affiliation (Tompsett and Toro, 2007), but less so for ethnicity, income, socio-economic status and religion (Agans and Liu, 2015).

Given the heterogeneity of Canadian communities, this research suggests that some communities may have different degrees of sympathy and willingness to support homeless reduction policies given their different demographic compositions. For example, Medicine Hat has been touted as the city that has declared that they have ended homelessness. The Mayor of Medicine Hat was quoted in the Kamloops Daily news as saying that “We haven’t had the
NIMBYism. I have mayors in other cities tell me, ‘We can’t do anything because the neighbours lose their minds’ (Klassen, 2017, September 18). If demographic differences are confirmed, policy makers, community developers, and other advocates for reducing homelessness may be able to anticipate communities that may pose greater challenges, and this could guide tailored efforts for community engagement and development.

**Stigma and Nimbyism**

Research shows that stigma is often associated with the homeless population, and that this stigma is often based on misinformation. Phelan et al. (Goffman, 1963; as cited in Phelan et al., 1997) define stigma as being an attribute that is both socially defined as being discrediting, spoiling one’s identify and disqualifying one from full social acceptance. The authors write that stigma involves both extreme negative perceptions and social rejection of the marked individual. In their study, Phelan et al. found that identifying a person as being homeless, rather than eliciting compassion and reducing blame, actually engenders a degree of stigma over and above that attached to poverty. The authors conclude that stigma is not only likely to have negative consequence for their self-esteem and psychological well-being; it also suggests the possibility that they will face discrimination in social relations, employment, and housing, which will contribute to the perpetuation of their homeless condition.

This discrimination can take the form of the NIMBY attitudes (Wynne-Edwards, 2003), and can be one of the biggest barriers to reducing homelessness. NIMBY can be defined as a protectionist attitude that drives exclusionary and oppositional tactics that is often used by community members and/or groups facing an unwelcome development in their neighbourhood (CMHC, 2006). NIMBYISM may lead to fear mongering based on misperceptions resulting from inaccurate information. Accordingly, there is a need to gain a better understanding of what public
opinions are, and ensure that the public has access to accurate information so that people develop their positions based on facts, and not hearsay. People may still decide to support exclusionary policies even with the information, though research suggests that many may not.

The six common themes of NIMBY are focused on diminished property values, increased crime and safety concerns, increased density and congestions, negative effect on neighborhood character, different values and social norms, and feel that neighborhood already has “enough” affordable housing (Greater Victoria Coalition to End Homelessness, n.d.). Research suggests that these beliefs are not based on fact in most cases. For example, most studies have found affordable housing does not decrease neighbourhood property values, and may even increase them in some cases (Centre for Housing Policy Research, n.d.). Research has also shown that low income developments actually decrease violent crime, with no observed effects on smaller crimes including property (Freedman & Owens, 2011). Furthermore, misperception can also be created as many people experiencing homelessness spend much of their lives in public spaces, and day-to-day behaviours that would normally occur in private are often treated as criminal when they must take place in public such as sleeping, substance use, and urination (Dear and Wilton, 1996; as cited in Greater Victoria Coalition to End Homelessness, n.d.).

The increasing population, particularly in the Lower Mainland, means increased demand for living spaces and greater population density. Yet, unlike more affluent or even middle class residents, 75% of households below the poverty line own one or fewer cars compared to 54% for all households so traffic congestion would be less of a concern, and in fact increased density can be beneficial to the community including retail development and increasing transit service (Greater Victoria Coalition to End Homelessness, n.d.). In addition, newly constructed housing would need to meet building codes and other regulations, so the character of neighborhoods would
not necessarily suffer from the appearance of inferior built buildings, and the concern over different values would again appear to be a stigma-based reaction that is unwarranted given the misperceptions that people have regarding the homeless population (Greater Victoria Coalition to End Homelessness, n.d.). Finally, if there was “enough” affordable housing, there would not be conversations about needing more.

The common theme that seems to be associated with NIMBYISM is misinformation that can lead to misperceptions. As Phelan et al. (1997) argue, because people have limited objective information about homelessness (Lee, Link, and Toro, 1991; as cited in Phelan et al., 1997), their perceptions of homeless people are likely to be influenced more strongly by a small number of highly visible homeless individuals – visible either in the media or in their local community – who become salient because of their unusually dangerous, disruptive, or unaesthetic behavior or appearance. Under these conditions, the cognitive bias known as the “availability heuristic” (Tversky and Kahneman, 1973; as cited in Phelan et al., 1997), is said to potentially cause people to overestimate the prevalence of these characteristics in the homeless population and can lead to the NIMBYISM described by Wynne-Edwards (2003). Wynne-Edwards argues that the issues and fears driving NIMBY opposition are derived from a person’s lack of participation and knowledge, fear of change and perceived threat of the proposed intervention. In the case of homelessness, Wynne-Edwards states that the prevalence of NIMBY opposition is increased due to bias, bigotry and prejudice against homeless people due to stereotyped notions of who homeless people are.

A recent study by Clifford and Piston (2017) sheds further light on the effect of stigma and NIMBYISM. They found that while the public may want to help homeless people, disgust which they defined as an emotion that evolved to protect our health by keeping us away from potential contaminants, motivates many people to support policies that facilitate physical distance from
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homeless people. The authors found that sensitivity to disgust drives many of these same people to support policies that facilitate physical distance from homeless people, and is a powerful predictor of support for exclusionary policies but has no meaningful effect on aid policies. Clifford and Piston argue that while disgust does not undermine the public’s willingness to support aid to homeless people, it could create substantial barriers to enacting these policies. This point is particularly disconcerting, as it suggests that even if sympathy is elicited, people may still not support enacting policies.

Costs of Homelessness

"Homelessness has both human and economic costs to homeless individuals themselves as well as to the broader community. The longer people are homeless, the more expensive it becomes to support them (e.g. emergency hospitalization, correctional facilities, etc.) and the greater the cost to their self-esteem and ability to help themselves" (Wynne-Edwards, 2003, p.7).

Patterson et al. (2008, as cited in Gaetz, 2012) found that in BC, one homeless person costs the public in excess of $55,000 per year, whereas if this same person was provided with adequate housing and supports, the estimated cost would be $37,000 per year – an estimated annual savings of $211 million. An earlier study also in British Columbia by Eberle, Pomeroy, and Hulchanski (2001) had a slightly lower cost estimate, noting that it costs $30,000 to $40,000 per year to support a single homeless person in 1998-1999, compared to $22,000 to $28,000 per person for combined costs of service for housed individuals. Pomeroy (2005) undertook a national study, and found institutional responses to homelessness, including accessing prison/detention and psychiatric hospital services cost $66,000 to $120,000; Emergency shelters cost $13,000 to
$42,000; supportive and transitional housing cost $13,000 to $18,000, while affordable housing without supports only cost $5,000 to $8,000.

The social determinants of health and costs also need to be factored in when analyzing the costs of homelessness. Frankish, Hwang, and Quantz (2005) found that homeless people are at increased risk of death, risk of HIV infection among youth, higher prevalence of mental health and substance use, increased risk of exposure to TB, and a wide range of other medical conditions. Similarly, Ivanova (2011) reports that lower income Canadians experience higher rates of disease and disability, and accordingly utilizes more services and resources. Ivanova actually quantified the cost of this use, estimating that 30.9% of total public health expenditures were used by the poorest 20% of BC residents. Ivanova argued that if the lowest quintile families’ usage of health care resources were raised to the same levels observed for the second-lowest income quintile, this would save the health care system approximately 6.7% of its total annual spending. Ivanova speculates that this reduction could save the BC tax payer about $1.2 billion in health care spending. Ivanova estimated annual cost of reducing poverty in BC was 3 to 4 billion dollars, while the cost of doing nothing was 8.1 to 9.2 billion.

Finland is the only European country where homelessness has decreased in recent years; according to Kaakinen (2016) the key to this is the recognition that it is always more cost effective to end homelessness as opposed to managing it. In fact, this point is literally embedded into Finland’s current 2016-2019 Action Plan for Preventing Homelessness in the “Cost Savings” section where the following is written: “Allocating the savings achieved by the management of homelessness into preventive investments reduces the need for corrective work, which also becomes evident as cost savings in the long term” (Ministry of the Environment, 2016; p.4).
Solutions to Homelessness

Empirically-based solutions do exist to reduce homelessness, with Gaetz arguing that targeting affordable housing investment, community systems planning, Housing First, and prevention and federal leadership are the keys (York Media Relations, 2016). According to Evans Collings, and Anderson, (2016) a Housing First approach involves the prioritizing and rapid rehousing of the chronically homeless, with subsequent support and provision of treatment services for those that need it, and not just the provision of affordable housing. The Home/Chez Soi study is often cited as an example of the effectiveness of Housing First. Evans et al. reported that the study was a $110 million Housing First project that occurred from 2009-2014 in five Canadian cities, and was effective in rapidly ending homelessness for people experiencing mental illness, and found to be successfully implemented in cities of different sizes and cultural contexts. Gaetz, Scott, & Gulliver (2013) contend that Housing First is perhaps the only homelessness intervention that can truly be considered a best practice. Gaetz, Gulliver, and Richter (2014) argue that there is a need to shift from a focus on managing the problem through an over-reliance on emergency services and supports, to a strategy that emphasizes prevention and, for those who do become homeless, move them quickly into housing with necessary supports, with the critical piece being the availability of affordable housing.

Theoretical Framework

When analyzing the causes of homelessness, and the implications of homelessness for society, it is important to employ a structural and anti-oppressive lens to the situation. Using an anti-oppressive lens, consider who is being affected and who is benefiting from the current social hierarchy and distribution of power? What does this mean for the distribution of resources in society, and how does one’s place in the social hierarchy influence one’s motivation to realign the
power, wealth and resources of society? From a structural stand point of view, asking why the homeless simply cannot take control of their lives and gain employment and secure housing. From a neoliberalist perspective, everyone should have equal opportunity, but using a structural lens tells a different narrative.

**Anti-Oppressive Practice**

**Social Exclusion and Marginalization.**

A natural extension of stigma and discrimination that the homeless population faces would be the concept of social exclusion, which one can argue is a more accurate representation of the experience of being homeless. Pleace (1998) writes that homelessness can be understood as a set of consequences from social exclusion, when there is little to no assistance given to those who experience it. Pleace argues that homelessness is the price that is paid by those who are unable to function in the formal economy. Pleace goes on to argue that reconceptualising homelessness as a manifestation of social exclusion may help one consider the consequences of today’s unfettered neo-liberal capitalism and the lack of a safety net.

Adopting Pleace’s (1998) anti-oppressive approach allows one to critically analyze the underlying systemic and structural causes of oppression as it relates to homelessness. To say that homelessness is solely caused by a lack of affordable housing and society blaming the individual would be very short sighted. Consider the populations that are predominantly homeless in the Fraser Valley Regional District (2017) report. Research suggests that certain sub-groups of people could be more at risk of homelessness, with Gaetz, Donaldson, Richter, and Gulliver (2013) identifying that single adult males between the ages of 25 and 55 account for almost half of the homeless population in Canada (47.5%), and have greater incidences of mental illness, addictions and disability. Gaetz et al. also found that some Canadians, including youth, Indigenous people, and women and families, face unique risks and/or circumstances.
By being largely excluded from participating in society, people that are homeless become further oppressed and dominated by the ruling class or elite under the guise of not having power to change their plight. Young (1990) links the idea of powerlessness to Marx’s theory of socialism, arguing that some people have power while others are “have-not”. Those without power are dominated by the ruling class. Young writes that some of the fundamental injustices associated with powerlessness are the inhibition to develop one’s capacities, a lack of decision making power, and exposure to disrespectful treatment because of the lowered status.

Brazilian educational philosopher Paulo Freire (1921, as cited in “Five Faces of Oppression,” n.d.) argues that powerlessness is the strongest form of oppression because it allows people to oppress themselves. Freire calls this a “Culture of Silence.” According to Freire, oppressed people become so powerless that they do not even talk about their oppression. The oppressed have no voice and no will. A deeper level of silencing is said to occur through indoctrination, which Freire describes as being dehumanized and taught to believe negative perceptions are fact, including believing that they are naturally inferior to the ruling class. The oppressed do not know that they have a voice. At this point, the oppressed are not just silent because they are forced to be, they are silent because they choose to be.

This exclusion and powerlessness becomes people’s new perceived reality, affecting not only one’s identity and value, but also impacting them psychologically. Boydel, Goering and Morell-Bellai (2000) interviewed participants that were homeless, and found that homelessness was described as being like a process that involves gradual sense of loss, particularly with accoutrements such as work, relationships, a place to call one’s own, and an overall feeling of being devalued. They concluded that homelessness poses a threat to one’s identity. Similarly, Daiski (2007) interviewed participants that identified as being homeless and found that they
reported experiencing emotional distress over being socially excluded and depersonalized. In particular, several participants reported feeling lonely and attributed this to social exclusion. One participant’s response was particularly enlightening, when he stated “Everyday I see the same people, they see me. They never offer to buy you a coffee or something or even ask if you are okay. They never say, ‘Hi.’” (p.277)

In order to reduce homelessness, Housing First requires a redistribution of resources. It is therefore important to consider who benefits from maintaining homeless people’s powerlessness and exclusion. It would seem that those who are prospering from the current distribution of resources would not want to change the current system given that they are prospering. However, as found in the Conference Board of Canada (n.d.) research, only a shrinking minority of the population appears to be prospering. This argument would seem to tie into Phelan et al.’s (1997) position that public opinions towards people at the bottom of society are influenced by an effort to justify existing social order, and Ng and Allen (2005)’s finding that people with a strong belief that the social world is basically fair have negative attitudes toward social groups who receive the smallest allocation. Internationally, Furnham (1996) and Tompsett et al. (2006) found that higher-income respondents believed more in individualistic explanations for homelessness.

**Structural Social Work**

**Causes of Homelessness.**

Understanding the causes of homelessness is complicated. According to Gaetz, Donaldson, Richter, and Gulliver (2013), homelessness is typically caused by a combination of structural factors, system failures, and individual circumstances. The researchers note that structural factors include a lack of adequate income, access to affordable housing, health supports, and discrimination, and note a link between homelessness and poverty. Gaetz et al. also state that a critical shortage of housing that is affordable, safe and stable directly contributes to homelessness.
They report that millions of Canadians live at risk of homelessness when they are paying in excess of 50% of their income on housing, described as being a core housing need, or spend more than 30% of their income on it. Gaetz et al. also report that system failures such as transitions from child welfare, hospitals, mental health, addiction, and correction facilities, contribute to risk of homelessness. In addition, they note that individual factors such as trauma, personal crisis, mental health and addiction concerns, physical disability, and relational problems such as family violence, are contributing factors as well. This suggests that many causes of homelessness are out of an individual’s control. This is important given the stigma associated with homeless people.

According to the data compiled by the Fraser Valley Regional District, many of these structural causes of homelessness are present in the Fraser Valley. The average cost of rentals has continued to increase, with bachelor suites, one bedroom, and three or more bedroom suites having increased by 9%, 8%, and 7%, respectively since approximately 2012 (CMHC, n.d.; as cited in the Fraser Valley Regional District). As of October 2016, the cost of a bachelor suite had risen to $597 per month, which would leave a single individual receiving basic income assistance with only $113 for any other expenses such as food and utilities (CMHC, n.d.; as cited in the Fraser Valley Regional District), as individuals receiving basic income assistance only receive a maximum of $710 per month (Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction, 2017). Further fueling the rising rents are historically low vacancy rates in the Fraser Valley, with Abbotsford’s vacancy rate falling from 6.1% in 2010 to 0.6% as of October 2016, as demand outweighs supply (Fraser Valley Regional District, 2017).

In addition to cost and availability, Fraser Valley residents face barriers to accessing market rentals. Many landlords appear to discriminate against renting to people who are not employed or students. A random review of craigslist Fraser Valley rental advertisements
conducted on January 1, 2018, as part of this project, found that many advertisements stipulated “employed” or “working professional” people or “students” were wanted. In addition, many people that are street homeless or precariously housed lack references or may have lost their personal identification, both of which could be significant barriers to secure market rental housing and even subsidized BC Housing homes.

Healthcare system failures created additional challenges for homeless individuals. According to Browne (2016), in 2012 in BC the average wait time for a person to access government funded residential treatment for drug and alcohol was 18 days. In addition, before one can even be put on the wait list for many treatment centres, a person would also have to have funding to pay for treatment, which for many means applying for income assistance. The application process can be quite arduous and requires follow through, including often acquiring various documents to determine eligibility, all while trying to manage one’s addiction. Furthermore, a person may also have to access detox prior to residential treatment, which in my experience often involves a multiple week waiting period.

Trying to access psychiatric services can also prove to be just as daunting. Goldner, Jones, and Lan Fang (2011) contacted 297 psychiatrists in Vancouver, and only 6 (3% of the 230 psychiatrists successfully contacted) offered immediate appointment times, and their wait times ranged from 4 to 55 days. When asked whether they could provide Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, most (56%) psychiatrists in clinical practice answered “maybe.” This is noteworthy given the effectiveness of CBT in treating psychiatric disorders (Butler, Chapman, Forman, and Beck, 2006). Luptick (2015) quoted Jonny Morris, public-policy director for the Canadian Mental Health Association’s B.C. division at the time, who described mental-health care as a “patchwork” of services “not well connected”. Luptick reported that during the first half of
2014, the average time it took for an individual to have their first meeting with a Vancouver Coastal Health Community Mental Health clinician fluctuated between 10 and 20 days, with the wait time for outpatient psychiatry team being even longer, 20 to 40 days. In addition, it has been my work experience that trying to access free counselling is often very challenging due to availability and affordability even with sliding scales. Consider for example a person on basic income assistance who may only have $113 to pay for all of their non-rent expenses, which is likely an overly generous estimate. What are the odds they are going to give up some food, electricity, or some other basic necessity to access counselling?

Other system failures include reintegration of former inmates and transitioning youth from care to adulthood. The John Howard Society of Toronto (2010) found that 44.6% of incarcerated participants were going to be homeless or at risk of homelessness upon release. Homeless prisoners were described as being vulnerable group, given that they tend to be older, have severe health impairments, and most rely on income support programs whose benefits they lose while in jail and in many cases must re-apply for these benefits after they are released. Finally, 231 of 469 participants in the Fraser Valley Regional District’s (2017) Homeless Survey – nearly half – indicated that they had been in care of MCFD currently or historically. This is even more significant when one considers ACEs research (Adverse Childhood Experiences), which found that exposure to stress and trauma in childhood, could lead to a number of negative outcomes including homelessness (Sekharan, 2016).

Ideology

Government Ideology

Bryant (2003) reports that many analysts argue that the increasing number of homeless and insecurely housed people is the result of reduced state involvement. This would appear to be the
influence of neoliberalism, the idea that society should be shaped by the free market, and that the economy should be deregulated and privatized (Kerr, 2015). Kerr argues that neoliberalism is rooted in classical liberalism and the belief that people should be free to live their lives without a great deal of interference from the government. The idea is that free-market policies were supposed to allow people “equal” chance into the market place, but rising homelessness numbers are suggesting a different picture.

According to Suttor (2016), Canada first entered the housing policy field in 1946 with the creation of the Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC). Suttor writes that from 1965-1973, there was a ten-fold increase in social housing production in Canada, and that governments believed they could largely solve poverty, and adopted universalist programs. Suttor notes that during the 1970s, social housing production averaged 16,000 annually, and that almost fifty years later, social housing produced during this period represent half or more of all-low income target units in Canada.

In 1995, on the heels of a recession, there was a shift in ideology and policies, and Canada devolved responsibilities for housing to the provincial governments. Lightman (2003) describes this shift as being based on greed and self-interest at the expense of a broader social perspective, that smelled of neo-liberalism with reduced state involvement. Suttor (2016) notes that the Canadian government began making an annual transfer to each province known as the Social Housing Agreement between CMHC and the province, to maintain and operate existing social housing. According to Suttor, this allowed the federal government to avoid responsibility for managing the needs of low-income Canadians off reserve, and meant that CMHC did not have to problem solve how to manage an aging social housing stock.
From 1999 to 2006 the Federal Government’s policy for managing homelessness was the National Homeless Initiative (NHI), which was described as a decentralized approach emphasizing providing individual communities with support to respond to homelessness (Homeless Hub, 2016). Initial investment was for $753 million over three years, and was renewed again in 2004 for another three years with funding for $405 million. According to the Homeless Hub, in 2006 with the change in federal government from the Liberals to the Conservatives, the program was revised and renamed the Homeless Partnering Strategy (HPS). HPS continues to rely on communities to determine their own needs and develop projects. The Homeless Partnering Strategy has been renewed from 2014-2019, with a reduction from $134.5 million annually to 119 million available to be accessed.

Even with the HPS, it should be noted that according to Hulchanski (2007), unlike most Western nations, Canada’s housing system relies almost exclusively on the market for the provision, allocation, and maintenance of housing. Hulchanksi advises that only 5% of renters in Canada reside in non-market social housing, noting that this is the smallest social housing sector of any Western nation other than the United States. Falvo (2016) puts this statistic in further perspective when he notes that in comparison to Canada, the following OECD countries social housing per capita is: 18% for England, 19% for France, 32% for Sweden, and 34% for the Netherlands. Yet, late in 2017 there was some hope that perhaps Canada was moving in a better direction.

In November 2017, Prime Minister Trudeau stated "Housing rights are human rights, everyone deserves a safe and affordable place to call home," when unveiling Canada’s First national housing strategy (Zimonjic, 2017) which proposes investing $40 billion dollars over a 10 year period. The new strategy aims to build 100,000 housing units, while repairing 300,000 units,
with a goal of cutting homelessness by 50%. As part of the strategy, Canada will introduce a Canada Housing Benefit, which will cost 4 billion, half of which will be paid by provinces and territories, and provide an average rent subsidy of $2,500 annually to low income families beginning in April 2020 and concluding in 2028. The Housing Benefit is projected over 10 years to help 300,000 households, yet according to the Canadian Press (2016), in 2016 there were an estimated 235,000 Canadians that were considered homeless annually, and another 50,000 who are considered hidden homeless. Given that that homelessness is growing in the Fraser Valley, the strategy would seem to be underwhelming, albeit a positive step nonetheless.

While the housing strategy appears to be a step in the right direction, others have expressed some concern about whether Canada will be able to meet its ambitious goal, and whether it is doing enough. Penny Gursteen, the director of the School of Community and Regional Planning at the University of British Columbia, described the goal of reducing homelessness by 50% as being ambitious, but is optimistic after the unveiling of the strategy (CBC Newsa, 2017). Ackerman (2017) points out that federal funding will not be received until after the 2019 federal election, with Ottawa relying on the provinces and private sector to pick up some of the tab. This begs the question: if housing is such a priority, why is the funding for the housing being put off for two years?

In BC, the provincial government funds the Provincial Homelessness Initiative, which is described as being a partnership between the province, communities, federal government, and non-profits to create new housing options and support services to individuals who are homeless or at risk of homeless (BC Housing, 2016). The current provincial housing strategy, Housing Matters BC, is quite multifaceted in terms of services provided. A common historical theme of federal and BC housing policy is that while both governments may fund some programs, they leave the
responsibility of developing partnerships for housing initiatives to local governments and non-profits.

However, with initiatives created over the past couple of years, a change in provincial government from the Liberals to the NDP, and with the new national housing strategy, there may be some optimism for further positive changes on the horizon. In 2016, then-BC Premier Christy Clark agreed to allocate $500 million from tax profits from the real estate sector to build 2,900 more rental units in the province by March 2017, which follows the provincial government’s recent decision to implement a 15 percent tax on foreign buyers in metro Vancouver (Shaw, 2016). The BC government announced a provincial housing strategy in February 2018, and has already committed $500 million towards the creation of new modular housing, funding for 1,700 units of purpose built rentals, as well as new money for the Residential Tenancy Branch (Little, 2017). Despite ideological differences, both the BC Liberals and NDP seem reluctant to become actively involved when it comes to housing, beyond what in many ways seems like an almost superficial level given the scale of the problem. Perhaps cost, politics and concerns regarding taking responsibility for housing plays a role, but another explanation for reduced involvement would seem to be the ongoing influence of neo-liberalism.

Despite the promises of the Federal and BC NDP, Culbert (2017) reports both levels of government have indicated that it will take 10 years to complete plans, so the relief may not be immediate. This could be problematic, as Shaw (2016) quotes Kishone Roy, CEO of the BC Non-Profit Housing Association, who estimates that BC needs 3,000 new subsidized units annually. Even if funding is secured, the issue of land availability and location for these new homes is unresolved. What if some municipalities do not have the land or community acceptance? How
will the BC government mobilize citizens of communities to potentially agree to not only increase density, but have affordable or even low-barrier housing in one’s neighborhood?

On the local level, metro Vancouver municipalities are looking at taking a regional approach to homelessness, with what is known as “Home Front,” according to Burpee (2017), long-time chair of the Tri-Cities Homeless and Housing Task group since 2006. Burpee told attendees at the Lower Mainland 2H (Housing and Homeless) Forum 2017 that this would be adopting a collective approach to reducing homelessness, rather than municipalities working in isolation, and would be a regional homeless plan. Burpee added that the hope would be to add the Fraser Valley municipalities as well once Home Front is up and running. More recently, Burpee (2018) told the attendees at the January 12, 2018 Tri Cities Homeless Task Group that a $60,000 grant has been secured, and the hope would be to start developing the plan in February 2018.

After decades of the provincial and federal governments shirking responsibility for affordable housing, both governments are now seemingly taking on a more active role, with even municipalities expressing a desire to work together. Unfortunately, this shift does not mean there are shovels in the ground building new homes. Beyond shifting government ideology, another underlying barrier for reducing homelessness would appear to be individualism, which in itself could be a by-product of neoliberal ideals.

**Individualism vs Collectivism.**

Raphael, Curry-Stevens, and Bryant (2008) define individualism as the belief that one’s place in the social hierarchy is the result of one’s own efforts. Accordingly, they argue that individualism places the locus of responsibility with the person, and not as a result of how society organizes and distributes resources. Raphael et al. argue that individualism affects the social determinants of health in multiple ways, including that people can have a strong bias towards
viewing health problems as being the individual’s fault, possibly related to a person’s motivation and risk behaviors, as opposed to society. In addition, they note that people may believe that improving one’s health will result from changing one’s motivation, risk factors, and biomedical markers, with little focus on reorganizing society and its structure as it relates to health. When examining how society is organized, from access to healthcare and housing, to access to good paying jobs, this sense of individualism seems to permeate Canadian society.

Toro et al. (2007) undertook a comparative study regarding the knowledge, attitudes, and opinions regarding homelessness in Belgium, Germany, Italy, the UK, and the United States, which provides some insight regarding how individualism may be affecting Canada’s response to homelessness. They found that less compassionate attitudes towards the homeless were found in the UK and the United States, relative to the other countries. The researchers speculated that a contributing factor for the difference in prevalence rates of homelessness was individualism versus collectivism. Toro et al. note that Germans have a more collectivist attitude, and supported stronger social welfare programs (Coughlin, 1980; as cited in Toro et al., 2007).

Toro et al. (2007) add that if left unregulated, capitalism can lead to a wider income discrepancy between the richest and poorest citizens, and reference the Gini coefficient to illustrate this point. They state that the higher the Gini, the greater the income disparity. They report that the US had the highest Gini coefficient in 2003 at 41.0, with Germany 30.0, Belgium was 28.7, and Italy was 27.3. According to the Conference Board of Canada (n.d.), Canada’s Gini Coefficient was 0.32 in the 2000s, with 0 representing total equality and 1 representing total inequality. In addition, they note that in 2010 the richest income group (top quintile) had by far the largest share of Canada’s economic pie—with 39.1 per cent of total national income. This
group was also the only quintile to have increased its share of national income over the past 20 years—from 36.5 per cent in 1990 to 39.1 per cent in 2010.

Toro et al. speculate that having a large discrepancy between rich and poor could produce homelessness in a number of ways, including high earning individuals driving up the housing market making housing less affordable. In addition, they argue that the rich may become less concerned with eliminating homelessness and related social problems like poverty, and may be more likely to blame the individual for their own plight. Toro et al. note a consistent inverse relationship between wealth and charitable giving, and that the wealthy are more likely to support conservative candidates and policies (Gardyn, 2003; as cited in Tore et al., 2007).

Phelan et al. (1997) argue that public opinions towards people at the bottom of society are influenced by an effort to justify the existing social order and to shift responsibility from a structural to an individual level. More recently, Ng and Allen (2005) found in their study of economic distributive justice that people with a strong belief that the social world is basically fair not only think the economy distributes resources fairly, but they also have negative attitudes toward social groups who receive the smallest allocation, such as the poor, unemployed and homeless. They reference this as being the self-interest theory, and report that those whom benefit the least perceive the distribution to be unfair.

I will now move on to the research study that is part of this project. The central premise behind this study is that there is a need to develop an understanding about people’s attitudes and perceptions about homelessness, and that doing so should be the first step in a community development process aimed at reducing homelessness. While this study is small in scale, the research does provide insight regarding information that could gathered in communities, such as accuracy of perceptions of homeless people and the causes of homelessness, presences of stigma,
awareness of solutions, and the benefits of reducing homelessness to the tax payer. This data could provide a foundation for engaging in qualitative research seeking to identify why people hold the beliefs that they do, and hopefully identify education to not only elicit more sympathy, but also gain support for strategies and initiatives to reduce homelessness.

**Design and Methodology**

This study uses a descriptive research design and utilizes a survey that was designed for the purpose of obtaining quantitative data about a sample of UFV undergraduate students’ attitudes and perceptions towards homelessness. Survey questions were tailored to collect specific data related to participants’ perceptions of homeless people, understanding of the causes of homelessness, responsibility to reduce homelessness, as well as assessing for possible NIMBY attitudes, with the goal of demonstrating the value of this type of research by identifying target areas for education.

**Sample Procedure**

A systemic random sampling procedure was used to obtain participants from UFV Arts, Science, and Professional Studies programs. Data collection was obtained from three classes with whom the researcher had access to through school-based relationships with the professors, with the final class being randomly selected and contacted through a recruitment e-mail as found in Appendix A. Given the small scale of the study, and accessibility of UFV students, this population was chosen instead of trying to access the larger Abbotsford population which logistically could have proven challenging to access given the time considerations and resources available.

**Recruitment**

Participants were recruited from four classes, a UFV Arts and UFV Professional studies class in the 2017 winter semester, and a UFV Science and UFV Arts classes in the 2017 fall
semester. Classes were selected with the goal of obtaining a more diverse and representative pool of participants from the undergraduate student body across fields of study, with the assumption that there may be differences in perceptions and awareness across the disciplines, and accordingly may give a better representation of the student body as opposed to focusing on one faculty. The purpose, objectives, and procedures involved in the study were provided to participants in an information letter, as found in Appendix B, and a brief in person presentation.

**Data Collection**

This study used a 24 question survey to measure UFV undergraduate students’ attitudes and perceptions towards homelessness, as found in Appendix C.

**Likert Scales.**

This study utilized Likert scales for 18 of 24 questions. Likert scales were selected as they are designed to measure opinions (Bowling, 1997; Burns, & Grove, 1997; as cited in McLeod, 2008), and are considered to be easily understood and provide quantifiable data (LeMarca, 2011). The study was composed of five Likert items for all 18 questions, as per recommended practice (Dudley, 2011).

**Forced-Response Questions**

Forced-response questions were used for the remaining six questions, collecting data on participants’ perceptions regarding the causes of homelessness, responsibility for homelessness, and demographic data about the participants. For example, participants were asked to list their top three causes of homelessness by selecting for a list of provided answers. This approach was utilized for these questions as it was felt that a Likert scale may not have obtained the information being sought, and would have added to the length of time to complete the survey.
Coding

The researcher coded the Likert scale responses as follows: strongly agree (5); somewhat agree (4); uncertain (3); somewhat disagree (2); strongly disagree (1). The researcher coded the forced-response questions with multiple responses with a (1) for yes/selected, and (0) for answers not selected.

Data Analysis

Data was coded using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 24 software, and analyzed using frequency distribution bar graphs to summarize the responses, including actual frequencies and percentages.

Ethical Considerations

This study has been designed with great care to ensure that it complies with the Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans Course on Research Ethics (TCPS 2: CORE) training, for which approval was obtained as found in Appendix D. Two potential ethical concerns were identified that required further consideration when designing the study. First, it is recognized that the issue of homelessness could potentially be an upsetting topic for some people, particularly if they have had lived experience. The risk, was viewed as minimal as participants were made aware of the nature of the survey both verbally and through the information letter, and participations was voluntary.

Second, in the survey, questions 21-24 sought demographic information which could potentially allow a participant’s responses to be identified if someone other than the researcher were in possession of the survey results. Accordingly, only the researcher had access to the surveys, and surveys were shredded after data entry. All data was entered and presented in a
manner that contained no identifying information, nor were the specific classes from which the participants came from identified.

**Findings**

Please note that more detailed findings can be found in the Tables section, organized based on order of appearance in this paper.

**Right to Housing**

A majority of participants, 77.5%, *strongly agreed* with the statement that all Canadians have a right to housing, which increased to 98.1% when one includes the *somewhat agree* respondents.

**Perception of Homeless People**

Only 9.9% of respondents *strongly agreed* that homeless people wanted to work, with 51.4% selecting *somewhat agreed*, and 12.6% selecting *somewhat disagree*. A quarter of participants selected *uncertain*, which is significant as this suggests that many of the participants did not have a clear opinion and may benefit from education. A majority of participants, 65.7%, either *somewhat disagreed* or *strongly disagreed* with the statement that homeless people remain homeless by choice. Nearly one-fifth *somewhat agreed* and another 14.4% were *uncertain*, which is noteworthy when one considers the stigma that is associated with this population. Less than half of the respondents indicated that they would trust someone that is homeless, with 46.8% selecting either *strongly agree* or *somewhat agree* with the statement, with another third, 32.4%, selecting *uncertain*. It would be interesting to know what information respondents were using to make their decisions in this section given that perceptions of homeless people are likely to be influenced more strongly by a small number of highly visible homeless individuals (Phelan et al. (1997)).
Causes of Homelessness

Participants were provided with 15 causes of homelessness to choose from, and they were asked to select as many options as they felt applied to the statement homelessness is caused by. The most popular selections were addiction (95.5%), mental health (91.9%), lack of affordable housing (89.2%), lack of jobs with a living wage (80.2), and family breakdown (79.3%). It is noteworthy that 72.1% of respondents also selected poor choices as being a cause. For the purpose of the survey, poor choices was intended to mean decisions that an average person of sound mind would not make given the expected negative outcome; however, no definition of what constitutes a poor choice was provided with the survey, so this may reduce some of the validity of these responses. It is significant that addiction and mental health were the two most frequently selected causes, and poor choices was also very popular, given the stigma associated with this population. In addition, the least selected option by far was consequence of the free market at 16.2%, which is important to note given the research on wealth distribution, ideology, and poverty.

When participants were asked to rank the top three causes of homelessness, the results were similar to those answers from the previous paragraph, but with some subtle differences in ranking. The top ranked cause as indicated by the most first selections was lack of affordable housing (21.6%). The next three most popular causes were poor choices (18%), mental health (16.2%), and addiction (11.7%). The popularity of the latter three causes once again may reflect stereotypes and stigma.

While overall, respondents demonstrated an awareness of various causes of homelessness, the most popular selections other than affordable housing continued to focus on mental health, addiction, and free choice. The Fraser Valley Regional District (2017) count demonstrated that among the Fraser Valley residents who identified as being homeless, only 68% reported having an
addiction, and only 47% reported having a mental illness. Yet, 95.5% and 91.9% of respondents selected these as causes in the present study, which represents a large disparity.

**Responsibility for Reducing Homelessness**

A majority of participants indicated that the federal government and homeless individuals and their families were most responsible for reducing homelessness, with 25.2% of respondents selecting these options. The third and fourth most common responses were the provincial government and the municipal government, with 17.1%, or 11.7% selections.

While respondent’s assigned responsibility to the three levels of government and the homeless persons themselves, there was little ownership for the community taking responsibility with only 5.4% of participants selecting community as being responsible for reducing homelessness. Research has demonstrated that often the individual is blamed or held responsible for their social situation (Raphael, Curry-Stevens, and Bryant, 2008), and while the responses seemed to suggest more of a balanced approach between government and individual responsibility, the fact that one-fourth of respondents selected the individual as being responsible is important to consider in the context of the structural causes of homeless.

**NIMBY**

The survey responses suggest that while there may be some mild evidence of NIMBY attitudes, particularly concerning the level of support for having low barrier housing in participants’ neighborhoods and cities, considerable support was found for affordable housing and most surprisingly emergency shelters in participants’ neighborhoods. Unclear results were found for support for housing in cities. All the results indicated less support compared with the percentage of participants that selected that Canadians have a basic right to housing.
A little over half of participants, 54.1%, strongly agreed with the statement that I would support an emergency shelter in my neighborhood, with another 27% selecting somewhat agreed, for a total of 81.1% agreeing with the statement. This result was surprising given the apparent presence of stigma noted in the earlier results. Less support was found for having an emergency shelter in one’s city, with 26.1% selecting strongly agreed with the statement I would support an emergency shelter in my city, but not my neighborhood. A further 26.1% somewhat agreed, for a combined total of 52.2% either strongly agreed or somewhat agreed to having an emergency shelter in their city. There is a 28.9% difference between the combined strongly agreed and somewhat agreed total percentage between the two statements. It was expected that there would be more opposition for the shelter being in participants’ neighborhood, given the closer proximity to one’s home versus somewhere else in one’s city, which raises the question whether the wording of the questions may have been confusing, possibly limiting the validity of the results.

Considerable opposition was found regarding having low barrier housing in one’s neighborhood, with only 28.8% selecting strongly agreed with the statement I would support low barrier housing in my neighborhood. An additional 26.1% of respondents somewhat agreed to the same statement, for a combined total of 54.9%, with an additional 34.2% indicating they were uncertain – the latter being the largest demographic. Similar to the emergency shelter question, less support was found regarding the statement I would support low barrier housing in my city, but not my neighborhood. Nearly half of the respondents, 47.7%, selected either strongly agree or somewhat agree, with another 27.9% participants selecting uncertain. Compared to the emergency shelter response, there was 13.5% difference between the strongly agree and somewhat agree responses regarding the having low barrier housing in their city versus neighborhood.
Respondents near unanimously agreed to support affordable housing in their neighborhood, yet less than half supported affordable housing in their city, which is quite the contrast. A majority, 68.5%, strongly agreed with the statement I would support affordable housing in my neighborhood, with another 23.4% selecting somewhat agreed, for a total of 91.9% agreeing with the statement. In fact, only 6 respondents, or 2.7 disagreed. In contrast to these results, only 29.7% of participants somewhat agreed to support affordable housing in their city, but not their neighborhood. Another 18% somewhat agreed, while 24.3% of respondents strongly disagreed, and 16.2% somewhat disagreed. As was the case with the emergency shelter statements, there was a noticeable difference in responses when city versus neighborhood comparisons were made, with respondents found to be more supportive of having affordable housing in their neighborhood, as opposed to their city. In fact, in the latter case, nearly half of the respondents did not support affordable housing in their city. It was assumed that the opposite would be found, given the proximity to one’s home. As noted earlier caution needs to be exercised when interpreting these differences given potential for misinterpretation of the question.

The results suggest that while there may be some evidence of NIMBY attitudes, particularly with the lack of support for low barrier housing, overall a majority of respondents were found to be supportive of having both affordable housing and an emergency shelter in their neighborhood. While the least amount of support was found for low barrier housing, that variable also had the most uncertain responses with nearly one-third of respondents indicating so, suggesting that there is room to increase support through education about the benefits and drawbacks of low barrier housing. Results also suggest that if the public is more supportive of higher barrier affordable housing, perhaps different strategies could be employed to reduce homelessness. There could be a focus for immediate higher barrier housing initiatives to reduce
homelessness, while education and additional strategies could be implemented to garner public support for those who require lower barrier housing, with the emphasis on the benefits of housing first.

Taxes

Thus far data presented has suggested that a majority of participants have been very supportive of housing as a basic right, and largely supportive of government responsibility for reducing homelessness, and even having emergency shelter and affordable housing in their communities. The same degree of support, however, was not found for paying taxes. Only 70.2%, 76.5%, and 72.9% strongly or somewhat agreed that they would support federal, provincial, and municipal tax dollars being used for homeless initiatives. When respondents were asked whether they would support paying more in taxes to help the homeless, even less support was found, with only 16.2% of participants selecting strongly agreed that they would support paying more in taxes to help reduce homelessness, with another 31.5% selecting somewhat agreed, for a total of 47.7%. A further 24.3% indicated that they were uncertain.

Similarly, even less support was found for the belief that providing housing to a homeless person will save the tax payer money, which is not surprising given the lack of support for paying more in taxes. Only 63.9% strongly agreed or somewhat agreed with the statement that providing housing to a homeless person will save the tax payer money in the long term. Another 30.6% were uncertain. The percentage of respondents selecting uncertain is once again noteworthy, suggesting that one-third of participants may benefit from more information to make an informed decision.

Housing First

As noted earlier, Housing First approaches have been found to have favorable outcomes for homeless people, as well as being more cost effective (Evans, Collings, and Anderson, 2016),
yet only 28.8% answered yes to knowing what Housing First is. Of those respondents that indicated yes, 62.5% indicated that they would *strongly support* Housing First initiatives, while another 25% *somewhat agreed*, for a total of 87.5% in support of Housing First initiatives.

It is important to consider the findings of Housing First awareness in conjunction with the findings that 30.6% of respondents were uncertain whether providing housing to a homeless person would save the tax payer money. Would knowledge of housing first research shift some of the uncertain responses, or even some of the 32.4% of *somewhat agree* responses, to be more supportive of Housing First initiatives with increased awareness? Similarly would this increased knowledge change respondents support for the different levels of government using tax dollars to fund initiatives to reduce homelessness, or even be more willing to pay more in taxes themselves in the form of an investment?

**Limitations**

There are a number of limitations with this study. It covers a small sample size relative to the total undergraduate student body at UFV, which in the Fall 2015 semester had 9,154 students enrolled in studies at UFV (University of the Fraser Valley, n.d.). Accordingly, it is acknowledged that this sample is not representative of the whole student body. For example, a majority of participants in the study were female (74.8%) and mainly under the age of 28 (83.7%). According to the University of the Fraser Valley (n.d.), as of November 1, 2016, 56% of undergraduates enrolled at the school were female.

In addition, while 82.9% of the respondents indicated that they reside in the Fraser Valley, the small sample size would not be considered representative of Fraser Valley residents. Research indicates that females have been found to be more sympathetic in international studies (Toro and McDonnell, 1992; Furnham, 1996; Tompsett et al., 2003; Phillips, 2015; and Smidova and Vavra,
2016), yet less so in some Canadian studies (Hobden et al., 2007). Research has also shown that younger adults have been found to harbor more sympathetic attitudes as well (Toro and McDonell, 1992; Tompsett et al., 2003; and Tompsett et al., 2006; Hobden et al., 2007). The effect of education also has to be considered relative to the general population, though the international research is unclear about whether education does (Phelan, Link, Stueve, and Moore, 1995) or does not (Lee, Jones, and Lewis, 1990) predict support for reducing homelessness. In addition, presently Abbotsford is represented by two MLAs affiliated with the Liberal party, and one independent, and the MP is affiliated with the Conservative party, suggesting that the general population of Abbotsford may have a political orientation on the right side of the spectrum. This suggests that the results the sympathetic attitudes found in this study may be reflective of the demographics as opposed to the UFV undergraduate student body and overall general population of Abbotsford.

There are also some limitations with the use of Likert scales, and length of time the data was collected over. Holbrook (n.d.) notes that agree-disagree questions can prove to be more cognitively difficult, can allow for acquiescence response bias including systemic and cultural, as well as interpretation challenges and double negatives. If Likert scales are to used in future research, consideration should be given to using “Mamdadi fuzzy inference,” which Vongloa (2017) found makes the data was more suitable to be analyzed with the arithmetic mean and standard deviation, resulting in lower standard error and making it more appropriate for data analysis for statistical inference. As noted when discussing the results, particularly with the city versus neighborhood questions, it is unclear if the wording may have prevented accurate responses from being obtained. Finally, it should be pointed out that data was collected over two time periods as noted earlier, the Winter 2017 semester and the Fall 2017 semester. It is unclear if
any external variables, such as negative or positive news stories in the media, could have had a greater influence on participants in either time period.

**Implications**

A word of caution also needs to be exercised regarding Canada’s new National Housing Strategy. As noted earlier, the plan will take effect over a 10 year period, and the Federal government will not start paying funds until after the 2019 election (Ackerman, 2017). The Federal government has already come under fire for their reported lack of restraint when it comes to spending and increasing Canada’s debt prior to implementing the National Housing Strategy. In an article posted by the Fraser Institute, Lammam, Eisen, and Palacios (2017) estimate that as of March 2017, several months prior to the announcement of the Housing Strategy and the associated expenses, that Canada was projected to increase its’ debt by $122 billion dollars from 2018/2019 to 2021/22, causing Canada’s debt-to-GDP ratio to rise to 33.0%. This begs the question: What are the implications for National Housing Strategy if a new government is elected, or even if the Liberals are re-elected, if they are pressured to cut spending before even really implementing the spending for the Housing Strategy?

While spending on the National Housing Strategy may leave the Federal government open to criticism, it is important to consider the messenger and self-interest. Climenhega (2012) argues that the Fraser Institute is a “‘corporate propaganda system’ that purports to churn out unbiased research but in fact works tirelessly to hijack our democracy for the benefit of Big Business and the ultra-wealthy families that control it.” What is noteworthy here is not either argument itself, but the politics and ideology behind the arguments, and the need to make sure that the public has access to unbiased information from which they can develop their own opinions.
Finally, given the importance of demonstrating the fiscal benefits of reducing homelessness, it is important that some sort of measuring system be in place to try to capture data of fiscal savings. Efforts should be made to identify a system to capture the costs savings across the system. Perhaps through hospital contacts, RCMP and municipal police forces PRIME database, community health care providers, housing providers, this may be possible. This would, however, require the sharing and releasing of information to third parties which may require amendments of privacy and sharing legislation.

**Discussion**

A dearth of research concerning Canadian public attitudes and perceptions towards homelessness was found during the extensive literature review completed as part of this project. This would seem to be an empirical void, which is quite surprising given the amount of publicity homelessness receives in public forums such as media and public consultation. One would have thought that this topic would be at the forefront of research given the public exposure of protest and resistance in communities to homeless initiatives, and the costs associated with not reducing homeless. This makes one question the motivation and incentive to reduce homelessness, particularly with the underpinnings of neo-liberalism and the apparent erosion of the middle class given the rising costs of living. This leaves me wondering just how motivated the public is to truly reduce homelessness. While it is acknowledged that caution needs to be exercised regarding generalizing the results of this study, particularly to large metropolises or rural areas, the data collected does suggest the value of this type of research in the Fraser Valley and similar sized communities. The type of data obtained does demonstrate information that could be found in these other communities, and though the results may potentially be different, it is felt that the value of the research may remain.
This study was also designed to try to capture data in a couple of areas that in particular did not appear to have been examined previously: housing first and benefits to the tax payer. No previous study examining an awareness of Housing First was found during the literature review. While reducing homelessness is more than just Housing First, increasing housing stock for example, this would appear to be a very significant gap in the literature on attitudes and perceptions towards homelessness. If people’s willingness to support reducing homeless strategies, projects, etc., are being examined, it is important to identify what their understanding is of the solutions that are available. If it is found that people are not supporting strategies, it may not necessarily mean that they do not want to, it could also be that they may not be aware of the pros and cons of a solution. In the present study, it was found that a little under one-third of participants were aware of Housing First strategies. That is quite significant if Housing First is considered best-practice to reduce homelessness. If the results were replicated in a larger scale study, these findings would seem to suggest that this should be a target area for education. It is telling that among those in this study that did indicate they knew what Housing First was, almost all respondents strongly or somewhat agreed that they would support Housing First initiatives.

A second question that would also seem to be unique to this study was the question concerning whether reducing homelessness would save the tax payer money. Other studies have focused on whether respondents would agree to pay more in taxes to reduce homelessness, while this question took it one step further and obtained data on respondents’ knowledge about the fiscal benefits of reducing homelessness as it pertained to tax savings. It is interesting that only about a third of respondents strongly believed that reducing homelessness would save tax payers money. Yet, the literature reviewed in this project clearly indicates the fiscal benefits of investing in
homelessness. If respondents were aware of the cost-benefits of reducing homelessness, would their responses change?

Playing on Canadian society’s sense of individualism, and possibly even specifically targeting some of the groups found to be less sympathetic research, such as those with conservative ideology, older adults, and men, with focused education on the benefits or reducing homelessness may be prudent. In an ideal world, people would support strategies aimed at reducing homelessness for humanitarian and ethical reasons, however, for those that are unmoved by these concerns, perhaps a more practical approach touting the benefits of reducing homelessness for the tax payer and their family would be more effective. In other words, focus on reducing homelessness as being like an investment.

A challenge to be overcome with this line of thinking is that not everyone will be as greatly impacted by the growing costs associated with reactionary actions to reduce homelessness, such as perhaps the very wealthy, nor collectivist attitudes. As noted in Phelan et al.’s (1997) study, the wealthy and people that are prospering may be motivated to maintain the status quo that is benefiting them. A recent article in the Vancouver Province provides an example of this thinking:

What is it about that party that its members can’t get it through their heads that most people actually want fiscal responsibility from their governments and that the days of tax-and-spend should be history? As usual, the NDP thinks its sole purpose is to transfer wealth from anyone who is working hard and doing well. As has happened every time they’ve formed government, that attitude is their undoing. The sheep inevitably decide they’ve been sheared enough (Clark, 2018).
While the quote was referencing recent NDP tax increases and not specifically homelessness, and it was also published in a paper that is majority owned by two US Hedge Funds and not necessarily representative of public opinion, it does raise the question about how much resistance may be incurred if the provincial government is increasing spending around housing and homelessness, and potentially other areas, all of which will effect the tax payer. Will tax increases be viewed as excessive even if long term benefits are shown?

While the results of this study did not necessarily demonstrate the same degree of misperceptions and stigma found in studies cited in this project, they were present. Both this study and the literature suggest that the public may not have all the facts about homeless people, and may be developing perceptions based on misinformation. If stigma, misperceptions, and NIMBYISM are to be addressed beyond just identifying them, it would seem to be imperative to gain a better understanding of why people hold the attitudes that they do if more sympathetic attitudes are to be elicited. As Batterham (2007) argues, there needs to be more qualitative work done around what reasons and causes people use to support their beliefs, and what narratives they use to express their beliefs about homelessness. In particular, how can the narratives that people use be influenced so that they are better educated about the reality of the experiences of a homeless person, the underlying causes, the exclusion, and the systemic barriers they have to overcome? While there is a need to gain a deeper understanding of interventions that can elicit more sympathetic attitudes, and arguably more importantly, we also need to learn why those who are sympathetic may not support policies and initiatives.

People reporting sympathetic attitudes did not necessarily take ownership for helping reduce homelessness. In this study, there was a low level of attribution of responsibilities to communities, with 63% of respondents ranking community as being 5-7th most responsible for
reducing homelessness. Similarly, it was found that there was a stark difference in support for believing that everyone has a right to housing, compared to the support for paying more in taxes and also having low barrier housing in their neighborhood. This response seems reminiscent of Phelan et al.’s (1995) earlier cited research who noted a historical pattern of people expressing greater support for the principle of helping disadvantaged groups than for actual polices aimed at enacting those principles (Greely and Sheatsley, 1974; Jackman, 1978; as cited in Phelan et al., 1995). If conducting qualitative work, it would be interesting to explore why people who view housing as a basic right may be reluctant to support interventions to reduce homelessness. This would seem to be a critical concern that needs to be better understood if replicated in future research. In particular, this may suggest that even if greater sympathy is elicited, it may not mean that the public would necessarily support strategies to reduce homelessness, particularly if they are going to be directly affected. As Batterham (2007) asks, how can people be influenced to think about homelessness as a human rights issue, and as something that everyone has a responsibility to do something about? Employing focus groups that represent a cross-section of attitudes and beliefs would seem to be prudent, perhaps building off a future quantitative study with identifiers built in to follow up with respondents.

Further research examining the role of the media in influencing public opinion may also be prudent, as there would appear to be unclear results regarding the influence of media reports on the public. As noted in the literature review, Tompsett et al. (2006) argued that politicians often rely on media reports to gauge public opinion when opinion data is not available; however, surprisingly, it has been found that even influenced media reports have not necessarily been found to influence public opinion. Mutz and Soss (1997) analyzed a newspaper’s purposeful attempt to sway community opinion to bring about policy changes regarding public housing over the course
of one year. They found that while readers’ individual attitudes did not change regarding the issue, readers were of the belief that a majority of the citizens in the community had changed their views. Similarly, Wright, Donley, and Jasinski (2009) found even when homeless people were portrayed in a negative light, only a third of respondents changed their opinion over the course of a year, with 95% reporting more sympathetic attitudes. Yet, Page and Shapiro (1989; as cited in Tompsett et al., 2003) found that news commentaries and stories about research groups or those that included expert testimony had the highest effect on public opinion. It would seem logical that media coverage, especially given the sensationalistic coverage that often accompanies depictions of homeless people, would have some impact on public opinions. Once again, further research identifying where people obtain their information that shape their attitudes and perceptions would be very useful.

While the focus of this project has been on homelessness, it is important to note that the Lower Mainland and Canada are experiencing a housing crisis that effects demographics other than the poor and homeless (Culbert, 2017). Culbert quotes Patrick Condon, professor of Urban design in UBC’s architectural school, who states that average worker’s salaries are inadequate to buy or even rent homes, which is the first time this has been seen in Canada in a long time. Condon goes on to say that there are not policies in Canada to deal with this.

Now that housing is considered a basic right in Canada, there would seem to be some uncertainty of how policy will be applied across population groups with different scale of housing needs across the country. Will Canada differentiate between one’s right to rent a home versus owning a home? Will the working poor and those that cannot afford to purchase a home, or are paying high market rents causing them financial hardship, become resentful or less supportive of homeless reductions strategies if they feel that their needs are being neglected? Canada would
seem to be heading into uncharted waters, where the housing crisis may get worse before it gets better, and politicians and citizens mind sets, including expectations for services and supports, all may have to undergo a significant shift. In particular, can the larger housing crisis truly be addressed with unfettered capitalism? If not, what does this mean for a country that has been based on free-market capitalism for years?

**Conclusion**

As homeless count numbers surge, the Canadian and BC governments, and even metro Vancouver municipalities, appear to have experienced an ideological shift, whereby they are taking a more active role in affordable housing and reducing homelessness. As the Finland and Medicine Hat examples suggest, government involvement seems to be an important cog in the wheel to reduce homelessness. While there may be some renewed hope with this shift, it is important to heed the winds of caution, as shown the extensive literature review and the results from this study, there remains much work to be done before homes are built.

The literature review and current study have demonstrated the value in not only doing this research, but the importance of engaging communities in community development early in the process, if not the first step, when introducing housing projects, and other services to reduce homelessness. Fostering community acceptance, as noted by Minister Simpson (2018, February), needs to be established. Efforts need to be made to create a sense of community ownership and sense of responsibility for reducing homelessness, which means conducting research to identify what people’s attitudes and perceptions are towards homelessness. It is recognized that there may be differences among communities that may benefit from being examined locally and independent of larger studies. It is important to examine why people have the attitudes they do, and based on this analysis, develop strategies and interventions that will hopefully not only improve public
education about the causes of homelessness, but also garner support for polices and strategies to reduce homelessness.

The results from this study echo the results from previous summarized research in the literature review, with many participants demonstrating opinions that attach stigma to homelessness, as well as misinformation. While overall it was found that respondents had a high level of awareness of the causes of homelessness and expressed sympathy for this population, a shift in support was found when it came to supporting initiatives and increased taxes. Many more respondents were less supportive of proposed housing initiatives in their neighborhood, and many more much less so when it came to paying more in taxes, compared the total sample agreeing that housing is a basic right. These latter points are of particular research interest, as even if awareness is increased, stigma reduced, and sympathy generated, if the public is not willing to reach into their pocket, or have homes built in their neighborhood, would the quest to reduce homelessness really be further ahead?

It would seem prudent to view the individualism that seems to underlie Canadian society as being a double-edged sword. On the one hand, people may be reluctant to be imposed upon financially or geographically if there is no apparent benefit to them. On the other hand, investing in reducing homelessness will save tax payers money and improve access to services and resources for all. Quantifying these benefits may be an important strategy like Finland has done with their action plan to prevent homelessness.

Finally, and arguably most importantly, reducing homelessness is not just about dollars or cents, or even about building homes, as one may think. Reducing homelessness is about correcting the injustice of social exclusion. Due to not having a home, a person may lack agency and be looked down upon and othered. At a time when many people are living pay cheque to pay cheque, most
of us are not far from finding ourselves precariously housed should a series of unfortunate events befall us. Unfortunately, for many, the underlying causes of homelessness run much deeper, with years of systemic failures that often go unacknowledged, and are now often faced with resentment and discrimination by many for the burden they seem to pose for society. When conducting future research in the field of attitudes and perceptions towards homelessness, it is important to consider this field of study is not just helping build new homes, it is about welcoming an excluded population into society.
Bibliography


### Tables

**Table 1 – All Canadians have a right to housing**

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**Table 2 – People who are homeless want to work**

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### Table 5 – Homelessness is caused by

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### Table 6 – Top 4 Causes

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### Table 7 – Reducing Homelessness – Who is responsible?

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## Table 10 -- Low barrier housing in my city, but not my neighborhood

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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Somewhat Agree</td>
<td>26.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Uncertain</td>
<td>34.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Somewhat Disagree</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Table 11 -- Affordable housing in my neighborhood

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Valid</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>68.5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td></td>
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<td>23.4</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Uncertain</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Somewhat Disagree</td>
<td>2.7</td>
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</table>
Table 12 -- Low barrier housing in my city, but not my neighborhood

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Valid</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>18.9</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Somewhat Agree</td>
<td>28.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Uncertain</td>
<td>27.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Somewhat Disagree</td>
<td>12.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>11.7</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Table 13 -- Affordable housing in my city, but not my neighborhood

<table>
<thead>
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<th>29.7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>18.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Uncertain</td>
<td>11.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Somewhat Disagree</td>
<td>16.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>24.3</td>
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</table>

Table 14 – Taxes

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Valid</th>
<th>Federal Taxes</th>
<th>70.2</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Provincial Taxes</td>
<td>76.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Municipal Taxes</td>
<td>72.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pay more Taxes</td>
<td>47.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 15 – Housing First

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Valid</th>
<th>Know what it is</th>
<th>28.8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Would support it</td>
<td>87.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix A - Recruitment Letter

Dear Professor,

My name is Wade Usborne, and I am a student in the UFV Master of Social Work program. As part of my course work, I have the opportunity to complete a research study for my major paper. I am conducting a study titled: “Understanding Public Attitudes and Perceptions Towards Homelessness.”

I am contacting you today for the purpose of seeking permission to attend your class and recruit subjects to complete a short survey in class.

**Purpose/Objectives of the Study**

This study will assess undergraduate UFV students’ attitudes and perceptions towards homeless people, causes of homelessness including structural and personal, collectivism and individualism, responsibility for reducing homelessness, and solutions to homelessness including funding and “Not In My Back Yard” (NIMBY) attitudes. The premise behind the design of the study is that perceptions and attitudes influence how we think about social problems, which in turn influences our support for policy solutions. If we have a better understanding of people’s attitudes and perceptions, then this can provide an area of focus for future education initiatives.

The overall goal of the study is that results obtained could be used to further additional research and/or education, with the hope of furthering policy development and implementation that can reduce homelessness.

**Procedures Involved in Research**

The only investigator in this study will be myself, Wade Usborne. With your permission, I would ask to attend your class at an agreed upon date and time, introducing myself and the study to your class. I would ask for voluntary completion of the survey in class that I anticipate taking approximately ten minutes to complete, though some students may require more time. All responses will be kept confidential, and survey responses will be shredded upon data entry.

If you are interested in having your class participate in this study, please reply to this e-mail indicating your desire to do so, and I will look forward to coordinating a time to meet with yourself and your class.

Thank you for your time and consideration regarding my request. If you have any questions please contact me, and I will do my best to answer your questions.

Sincerely,

Wade Usborne

MSW Student
University of the Fraser Valley
Appendix B - Information Letter

Wade Usborne
MSW Student
University of the Fraser Valley
Wade.Usborne@student.ufv.ca

Dr. Robert Harding
Associate Professor/ Co-Investigator
University of the Fraser Valley
Robert.Harding@ufv.ca
604-504-7441 ext. 4470

UNDERSTANDING PUBLIC ATTITUDES AND PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS HOMELESSNESS

Information Letter

My name is Wade Usborne, and I am a Master of Social Work Student. You are invited to take part in a research survey about attitudes and perceptions towards homelessness. This project is part of the research for my Major Paper for my MSW degree. Your participation will require approximately ten minutes, though some participants may need more time. There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this survey. This study appears to be the first of its kind in the Fraser Valley, and accordingly your participation will contribute to this new knowledge base.

Obtaining a better understanding of people’s attitudes and perceptions could contribute to policy development and implementation that could reduce homelessness. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary. Participation will be anonymous. If you choose not to participate you may hand in a blank survey. If you choose to withdraw part way through the survey, you may hand in an incomplete survey. All incomplete surveys will not be used in the study. Once you submit a completed survey, you cannot withdraw your survey. Only Wade Usborne and MSW faculty supervisor Robert Harding will have access to your survey responses. Responses will be shredded after being coded and stored on a password protected computer. Any report of this research will not include any identifiable information. The MSW major paper will be available at the UFV library. Results from this study could be presented in other mediums such as conferences.

If you have questions or want a copy or summary of this study’s results, you can contact Wade Usborne or Robert Harding.

The ethics of this research project have been reviewed and approved by the UFV Human Research Ethics Board. If you have any concerns regarding your rights or welfare as a participant in this research, you may contact the UFV ethics officer at 604-557-0411 or by e-mail at Research.Ethics@ufv.ca.

If you return/submit this survey, it will be understood that you have consented to participate in this study, titled “Understanding Public Attitudes and Perceptions Towards Homelessness”.
Appendix C – Survey

Understanding Public Attitudes and Perceptions Towards Homelessness

By Wade Usborne, MSW Student | Dr. Robert Harding, Co-Investigator

Human Rights

Please Circle the Best Answer

1. All Canadians have a right to housing:

| strongly agree | somewhat agree | uncertain | somewhat disagree | strongly disagree |

Demographics

Please Circle the Best Answer

2. People who are homeless want to work:

| strongly agree | somewhat agree | uncertain | somewhat disagree | strongly disagree |

3. Most people that are homeless have been homeless for over one year:

| strongly agree | somewhat agree | uncertain | somewhat disagree | strongly disagree |

4. I feel compassionate when I think about people that are homeless:

| strongly agree | somewhat agree | uncertain | somewhat disagree | strongly disagree |

5. Many homeless people remain homeless by choice:

| strongly agree | somewhat agree | uncertain | somewhat disagree | strongly disagree |

6. I would trust someone that is homeless:

| strongly agree | somewhat agree | uncertain | somewhat disagree | strongly disagree |

Causes of Homelessness

7. Homelessness is caused by (please check all that apply):

- Shrinking rental housing stock
- A lack of affordable housing
- Poor choices
- Lack of jobs that pay a living wage
- Government failure to provide for its citizens
- Mental health concerns
- Addiction concerns
- Low income assistance/disability/pension rates
- Consequence of the free market
- Family breakdown
- Disability other than mental health or addictions
Unequal wealth distribution in society
Poor work ethic
Lack of employment skills
Low intelligence
Other _________________________ (please write response)

8. Please rank the top three causes of homelessness by writing a 1, 2, or 3 next to the option:
   — Shrinking rental housing stock
   — A lack of affordable housing
   — Poor choices
   — Lack of jobs that pay a living wage
   — Government failure to provide for its citizens
   — Mental health concerns
   — Addiction concerns
   — Low income assistance/disability/pension rates
   — Consequence of the free market
   — Family breakdown
   — Disability other than mental health or addictions
   — Unequal wealth distribution in society
   — Poor work ethic
   — Lack of employment skills
   — Low intelligence
   — Other _________________________ (please write your response)

Responsible For Reducing Homelessness

— Please rank, on a scale of 1 to 8, who you feel is most responsible for reducing homelessness:
   — Federal Government
   — Provincial Government
   — Municipal Government
   — Health Authorities and government agencies
   — Homeless individuals and/or their families
   — Charities and non-profits
   — Communities
   — Other _________________________ (please write your response)

Reducing Homelessness

Please Circle the Best Answer:

9. I would support an emergency shelter in my neighborhood:
   strongly agree  somewhat agree  uncertain  somewhat disagree  strongly disagree

10. I would support an emergency shelter in my city, but not my neighborhood:
    strongly agree  somewhat agree  uncertain  somewhat disagree  strongly disagree

11. I would support low barrier housing in my neighborhood:
    strongly agree  somewhat agree  uncertain  somewhat disagree  strongly disagree
12. I would support low barrier housing in my city, but not my neighborhood:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>strongly agree</th>
<th>somewhat agree</th>
<th>uncertain</th>
<th>somewhat disagree</th>
<th>strongly disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

13. I would support affordable housing in my neighborhood:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>strongly agree</th>
<th>somewhat agree</th>
<th>uncertain</th>
<th>somewhat disagree</th>
<th>strongly disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

14. I would support affordable housing in my city, but not my neighborhood:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>strongly agree</th>
<th>somewhat agree</th>
<th>uncertain</th>
<th>somewhat disagree</th>
<th>strongly disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

15. I would support municipal tax dollars being used for homeless initiatives:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>strongly agree</th>
<th>somewhat agree</th>
<th>uncertain</th>
<th>somewhat disagree</th>
<th>strongly disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

16. I would support provincial tax dollars being used for homeless initiatives:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>strongly agree</th>
<th>somewhat agree</th>
<th>uncertain</th>
<th>somewhat disagree</th>
<th>strongly disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

17. I would support federal tax dollars being used for homeless initiatives:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>strongly agree</th>
<th>somewhat agree</th>
<th>uncertain</th>
<th>somewhat disagree</th>
<th>strongly disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

18. I would support paying more in taxes to help homeless people:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>strongly agree</th>
<th>somewhat agree</th>
<th>uncertain</th>
<th>somewhat disagree</th>
<th>strongly disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

19. Providing housing to a homeless person will save the tax payer money in the long term:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>strongly agree</th>
<th>somewhat agree</th>
<th>uncertain</th>
<th>somewhat disagree</th>
<th>strongly disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

20. I know what Housing First is: □ Yes or □ No

If yes, would you support Housing First initiatives:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>strongly agree</th>
<th>somewhat agree</th>
<th>uncertain</th>
<th>somewhat disagree</th>
<th>strongly disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**About You**

21. Where do you live?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fraser Valley</th>
<th>Metro Vancouver</th>
<th>Other</th>
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22. What is your gender?

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Other</th>
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</thead>
</table>

23. What is your age group?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>18 or under</th>
<th>19-23</th>
<th>24-28</th>
<th>29-33</th>
<th>34 or older</th>
</tr>
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</table>

24. What is your program area of study?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Arts</th>
<th>Professional Studies</th>
<th>Sciences</th>
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</table>

Thank you for taking the time to complete the survey. Your participation is very much appreciated.

**Thank You!**
Certificate of Human Research Ethics Board Approval

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contact Person</th>
<th>Department</th>
<th>Protocol #</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Wade Usborne</td>
<td>Social Work</td>
<td>959S-17</td>
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<table>
<thead>
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<th>Co-investigator(s)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Robert Harding</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title of Project</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Understanding Public Attitudes and Perceptions Towards Homelessness</td>
</tr>
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<table>
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<th>Institution(s) where research will be carried out</th>
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<tbody>
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<th>Approval Term:</th>
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<tr>
<td>17-Feb-17</td>
<td>08-Mar-17</td>
<td>08-Mar-17 - 07-Mar-18</td>
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Certification:

The protocol describing the above-named project has been reviewed by the UFV Human Research Ethics Board, and the procedures were found to be in compliance with accepted guidelines for ethical research.

Michelle Riedlinger, Chair, Human Research Ethics Board

NOTE: This Certificate of Approval is valid for the above noted term provided there is no change in the procedures or criteria given.

If the project will go beyond the approval term noted above, an extension of approval must be requested.