Beyond encampments: an evidence-based path to solving Canada's homelessness crisis

Mohammad Karamouzian,[a,b,*] Stephen W. Hwang,[c,d] and Dan Werb[a,e]

[a]Centre on Drug Policy Evaluation, St. Michael's Hospital, Toronto, ON, Canada
[b]Dalla Lana School of Public Health, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON, Canada
[c]MAP Centre for Urban Health Solutions, St. Michael's Hospital, Unity Health Toronto, Toronto, ON, Canada
[d]Division of General Internal Medicine, Department of Medicine, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON, Canada
[e]Institute of Health Policy, Management & Evaluation, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON, Canada

Homeless encampments have become a permanent fixture of the Canadian landscape, from large urban centers to small towns and remote communities. This reality reflects a national crisis with an estimated 67,000 people experiencing homelessness on any given night, with regional rates as high as 27 per 10,000 people in Central Canada.[1] The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically expanded homeless encampments, as people experiencing unsheltered homelessness surged by 107%, contributing to a 79% increase in overall homelessness on a given night.[1] These visible manifestations of Canada's housing crisis have generated intense debates about whether to remove or preserve homeless encampments. Supporters of 'encampment sweeps' claim that these sites pose threats to public health and safety through disease spread, environmental damage, fire hazards, and crime, arguing that their forced removal is essential.[2]

However, available evidence demonstrates that encampment sweeps are ineffective. Forced removals generate traumatic experiences and risks by destroying essential possessions (e.g., tents, identity documents, medications), disrupting care continuums, separating residents from trusted outreach workers, and forcing them into isolated and less safe venues with higher risks of violence and fatal drug overdose.[2] Moreover, encampments do not contribute substantially to crime. A recent analysis of 84 encampments in Brantford, Ontario revealed that the majority (83%) showed no significant increase in surrounding areas' crime following their establishment. Over half (51%) were associated with significant decreases in at least one crime category, while nearly one-quarter were associated with decreases in multiple crime types.[3]

Reliance on enforcement is particularly damaging given that the Canadian justice system is a primary driver of homelessness. In 2023–2024, 7455 people (i.e., one in six releases) were discharged from Ontario provincial jails with no fixed address.[4] This prison-to-homelessness pipeline is self-reinforcing, with 40% of people experiencing homelessness citing justice involvement as causing their housing loss, while 68% found it "difficult" to find housing after release.[4,5] This systemic failure disproportionately harms Black and Indigenous populations, whose overrepresentation in custody, by 3 times and 9 times, respectively,[6,7] reflects the direct intersecting legacies of colonialism, intergenerational trauma, and systemic racism. This pipeline functions as a modern mechanism of racial segregation, channeling historically marginalized communities from correctional facilities directly into encampments, which are then targeted for removal by police.

Beyond immediate human costs, sweeps are cosmetic and cost-inefficient. The economic case for supportive housing, however, is overwhelming, even for individuals with the most complex needs. Intensive supportive housing for mental health and addictions costs $2000–$5000/month—a fraction of institutional alternatives, such as psychiatric hospitals ($31,500/month), mental health facilities ($17,000/month), or correctional institutions ($11,000/month).[4] For those with less acute health needs, costs for basic supportive housing are substantially lower ($613/month).[8] Yet instead of making these investments, governments pursue costly enforcement. Toronto, for example, spent nearly $1 million evicting residents from three encampments in 2021—$33,000 per person and enough to cover 16 months of the average rent in Toronto.[2] Growing legal support from Canadian courts and the Federal Housing Advocate confirms that these policies waste vast public funds on strategies that violate the fundamental Charter rights of the most marginalized citizens.[2]

Effective approaches in Canada and elsewhere provide evidence-based roadmaps for action. Finland nearly eliminated street homelessness through a comprehensive, state-funded "Housing First" strategy. This model offers immediate, unconditional access to permanent housing, accompanied by tailored, integrated socio-economic support services. Finland's success stems from treating housing as a constitutional right, maintaining firm political commitment across

*Corresponding author. Centre on Drug Policy Evaluation, St. Michael's Hospital, Toronto, ON, Canada.
E-mail address: mohammad.karamouzian@unityhealth.to (M. Karamouzian).

governments, and making substantial public investments in non-market housing. This approach achieved a ~70% reduction in the number of people experiencing long-term homelessness from 2008 to 2022, with estimated cost savings of at least €15,000 per person through reduced use of social, healthcare, and police services.[9] Similarly, Brazil's Visible Streets Plan (Plano Ruas Visíveis), launched in 2023 with an estimated budget of R$1 billion (~€150,000), applies Housing First principles with local adaptations, emphasizing rapid housing access alongside comprehensive social support and anti-poverty campaigns, with early findings showing improved quality of life, independence, and employment prospects among participants.[10] Canada has also proven Housing First works through the At Home/Chez Soi study, the world's largest randomized trial of this model, which found participants maintained stable housing 73% of the time over two years compared to 30% for those receiving standard care.[11] Despite the evidence generated in 2012, Canada failed to scale up Housing First, due to fragmented jurisdictional responsibilities across federal, provincial, and municipal governments, decades of underinvestment in social housing, and failure to recognize housing as a fundamental human right.

To solve this crisis, Canada must pivot from enforcement to evidence-based approaches. This requires deploying outreach teams to help encampment residents access essential services while providing necessities, such as water, sanitation, and public health supplies (e.g., hygiene supplies, naloxone, sterile drug use equipment). Any decampment must be voluntary and contingent on the availability of acceptable housing, co-designed with residents themselves. The system must build medium-term infrastructure to bridge the gap from street to home. This requires multiple, flexible transitional housing facilities that integrate clinical and social assistance programs. Such facilities serve as stable platforms for navigating permanent housing, addressing acute health and social needs exacerbated by years of life on the streets. This work, funded in part by the 2024 Federal Budget's $250 million allocation for addressing encampments, could bridge to permanent solutions. This creates an opportune moment to align Canada's existing National Housing Strategy with ending homelessness.

Ultimately, Canada must legislate housing as a fundamental, justiciable human right, consistent with its obligations under international covenants. This can begin at the municipal level, by localizing human rights principles into city charters and operations, before being cemented in federal and provincial law. Ending this crisis is no longer a matter of evidence, but a test of Canada's political will and commitment to human dignity.

References
1 Roberts M, Quayum S, Gravel E, Campbell R. *Everyone Counts 2024 - Highlights Report Part 1 – Enumeration of Homelessness.* Ottawa: Housing, Infrastructure and Communities Canada; 2025.
2 Schwan K, Lutoto P, Freeman S, et al. *Case study: Toronto—A human rights analysis of encampments in Canada.* Ottawa: The Office of the Federal Housing Advocate; 2022.
3 Hodgkinson T, Henderson S, Andresen MA, Sanders CB, Condon C, Anthony T. To tent and protect: homeless encampments as "protective facilities". *J Crim Justice.* 2024;95:102299.
4 Husein S, Taylor C. *From incarceration to encampments.* Toronto: John Howard Society of Ontario; 2025.
5 Tasca J, Ahmadi R, Husein S, McNeil J. *Locked up, lucked out: The Revolving Door of Homelessness and Ontario's Justice System.* Toronto: John Howard Society of Ontario; 2024.
6 Department of Justice Canada. *Overrepresentation of Black People in the Canadian Criminal Justice System.* Ottawa: Government of Canada; 2022.
7 Robinson P, Small T, Chen A, Irving M. *Over-Representation of Indigenous Persons in Adult Provincial Custody, 2019/2020 and 2020/2021.* Ottawa: Statistics Canada; 2023.
8 Canadian Mental Health Association-Ontario. *Housing First: The Path to Recovery.* 2022. Toronto.
9 Morales LMR. *Finland's "Housing First" Policy Successfully Tackles Long-Term Homelessness (2008–ongoing).* New York: Inequality Solutions; 2024.
10 Ministério dos Direitos. *Humanos e da Cidadania. Plano de Ação e Monitoramento para Efetivação da Política Nacional para a População em Situação de Rua.* Brasília: Governo Federal - União e Reconstrução; 2023.
11 Goering P, Veldhuizen S, Watson A, et al. *National At Home/Chez Soi Final Report.* Calgary: Mental Health Commission of Canada; 2014.