

Toronto report on homelessness: a sweeping indictment of government cutbacks and social conditions

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6 February 1999

A recently published report on the housing crisis in Toronto, "Taking Responsibility for Homelessness," details the devastating consequences of the past decade of government cutbacks and capitalist restructuring.

The report is significant in two respects. First and foremost, because it documents the extent of the homeless crisis in Canada's wealthiest metropolitan center. But the report is also noteworthy because of the conservatism of its recommendations and its refusal to lay blame, although any discussion of causes inevitably raises the question of who and what are responsible for the rise in homelessness.

The release of the report, which was commissioned a year ago by Toronto's newly elected mayor, Mel Lastman, has coincided with growing public awareness and alarm over the plight of the homeless, especially as the Canadian winter is now at its height. According to the estimates of homeless advocates and municipal authorities, even when the city declares a severe weather emergency, as it has already done more than a dozen times this winter, so as to press extra shelter space into service, the number of available hostel beds falls up to 500 short. Under such conditions, it is hardly surprising that several deaths among Toronto's homeless have been attributed to exposure to the elements. The most recent such death occurred Wednesday evening, across the street from the Ontario legislature.

Subtitled "An Action Plan for Toronto," the 290-page report was authored by four members of the Mayor's Homelessness Action Task Force and has been dubbed the "Golden report" after task force leader and former United Way (charities) President Anne Golden.

It examines both the causes and changing composition of the homeless:

* On an average Toronto night between 3,100 and 3,200 homeless persons seek refuge in shelters, but the total varies widely depending on the season, and in winter greatly exceeds 3,200.

* While in a previous period those who relied on hostels were primarily single men, the report reveals that youth under 18 and families with children are the fastest growing users of hostels. Between 1992 and 1998 shelter use increased by 80 percent for youth, 78 percent for single women, 55 percent for single men and 123 percent for families

* In 1996, 26,000 different people used hostels, 5,300 of them children. Uncounted are an untold number who refused to use such shelters because of cramped conditions, lack of security and various indignities or who escaped sleeping on the streets by doubling up with friends or relatives.

Of the 170,000 people who sought refuge in Toronto shelters between 1988 and 1996 an estimated one third were suffering from mental illness. The high proportion of mentally ill among the homeless is principally attributable to "de-institutionalization." Over the past two decades, the downsizing and closing of mental health facilities has caused thousands of patients to be emptied onto the streets. The report does not detail these cuts but merely notes that "expenditures on mental health services have declined as a percentage of Ministry of Health expenditures."

The Golden report attributes much of the growth of homelessness to a lack of affordable housing, resulting from the spread of poverty and a decline in the stock of cheap rental accommodation. It is estimated that over 106,000 people in Greater Toronto pay over half their income on rent and are thus at risk of becoming homeless. "There are fewer and fewer low-cost rental units and rooming houses in Toronto," notes the report. "The federal and provincial governments have withdrawn support for new social housing programs." A conservative estimate is that at least 5,000 new socially-assisted housing units are needed in Toronto alone. The task force suggested that a fund be set up to offset the higher rents in the city and to provide an emergency fund to reduce the growing eviction rate.

The origins of the current housing crisis, while not referred to in the report, can be traced back at least two decades. During the speculative real estate boom of the 1980s, neighborhoods that previously provided low-rent housing underwent widespread gentrification, displacing thousands of low-income families. One telling figure is that, since 1986, the number of rooming houses in Toronto has decreased to 393 from 603.

The rent controls in place during that period, which offered some protection for the poor, came under increasing attack by big landlords and were weakened under the Ontario NDP government (1990-95). The Harris Tory government, citing the lack of incentive for new housing development, has responded to the proclaimed failure of rent controls by more or less abolishing them, thus throwing the poor once again to the mercy of the

market.

A notable theme of the report was that homelessness could not be addressed by solutions for Toronto alone but required a provincewide and nationwide approach. The report acknowledges that behind the growth of homelessness is the general increase in poverty in urban centers across the country. Factors contributing to this include the 22 percent cut in welfare benefits carried out by the Ontario Conservatives in 1995 and the cuts and restrictions on unemployment benefits imposed by the federal Liberal government.

Many of the report's 105 recommendations amount to an appeal to the provincial Tory government to reverse the downloading of services onto municipalities carried out over the past three years. The federal government, meanwhile, is urged to provide grants to help with the construction and rehabilitation of low-income housing. "Experts in all cities stated that the federal government's withdrawal from social housing has affected cities throughout Canada and is a primary reason for the rise in homelessness in the last five years."

Hailing the report as "the definitive Canadian report on the plight of the homeless," Mayor Mel Lastman has vowed to speed its recommendations through various city departments within 60 days. Some of the mayor's closest collaborators, however, are far from enthusiastic about the recommendations' cost, while others have pointed out that the most important would require action by senior levels of government.

Deputy mayor, Councilor Case Oates noted that the task force proposals will cost an extra \$12 million in annual spending, plus \$11 million in capital spending. "While the task force has made the case for homelessness, the city faces competing demands for its money," he said. "Finding \$12 million for homelessness when the city is under pressure to cut \$200 million from spending is going to be a challenge." David Collenette, the federal minister for the Toronto area, wouldn't say whether the Chretien Liberal government will make available the millions of dollars for social housing the report recommends. "I think we should stay away from dollars and look at the policy areas that need to be highlighted," he said. Meanwhile, as of last November, the city has 10 applications to demolish some 1,179 low-cost housing units.

Reception to the report has varied. Housing activists have called it "too little, too late" and are organizing to go to Ottawa in mid-February to demand a meeting with Prime Minister Chretien. Administrators in the public housing sector have also not been enthusiastic. "Building another 1,000 low-income housing units a year won't make a dent in the current hostel population," said Michael Shapcott of the Co-operative Housing Federation of Canada. "The report does nothing to change reality for people out on the streets," said Bob Rose of Parkdale Activities Recreational Center. "The dollar estimates were conservative--too conservative for my tastes."

Among others who have expressed skepticism over the proposals in the report are housing developers. While the report urges them to undertake new construction, they have complained that the incentives of cheaper land and lower taxes called for in the report will be insufficient to cause any surge in investment in low-rent housing. Luxury condominium developments will still be far more

profitable.

The former NDP provincial premier, Bob Rae, was among the most enthusiastic in his praise of the report, calling it "at once damning, compelling and practical." Rae, whose government spearheaded the assault on the social gains of workers thus opening the way for the Tories, has moved still further right since leaving office. Declared Rae, "As one of the architects of the old programs"--i.e., rent controls and social housing--"I say, forget the past and move on to what can be done now."

It is no secret that millionaire Mayor Lastman has embraced the Golden report, even calling for a national summit on the homeless March 25, as part of a public relations exercise to offset his own record of denial and indifference to the plight of the poor. Only last summer Lastman launched a witch-hunt against squeegee kids (people who earn money by cleaning windshields) in an attempt to deflect rising social tensions against a section of the homeless themselves. But homelessness and poverty have now become so visible in Toronto that they have begun to attract international comment, raising fears Toronto will lose something of its lustre as a world class city, affecting the tourist trade.

Mindful that no current government will implement strategies which are not deemed "cost effective," the Golden report points out that the additional expenditures it advocates on housing and healthcare will be offset in the long run by savings in costly emergency measures and policing. In a bid to win business community support, the report observes that "the growth of homelessness puts at risk our ability to compete."

The Golden report's recommendations have been carefully drafted and budgeted to appeal to a "fiscally conservative" political elite, and yet for the most part they have already been dismissed as too costly. The initial cost of implementing the task force's recommendations would be \$300 million. Thus far the provincial government has pledged \$1 million.

The Golden Report suggests that a lack of public awareness has stymied political action in support of the homelessness. But that is belied by the fact that the Golden Report is itself based on at least 158 existing Ontario studies on homelessness and related issues. Alarm bells have repeatedly been rung, but there has been no letup in the big business assault on public services, social programs or jobs. No one should expect the ultimate results of this report to be any different, despite the current flurry of activity by Lastman and other opinion makers.



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