

Canada: Coronavirus threatens to ravage Toronto's swelling homeless population

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The rapid spread of the coronavirus throughout Canada poses a grave threat to the thousands of homeless people living in the country's largest city, Toronto. The city's homeless population, which is conservatively estimated at around 9,000, lacks access to testing and treatment, and has no option to self-isolate to prevent the spread of the disease.

Although Ontario Premier Doug Ford announced a state of emergency in Ontario yesterday, no specific measures were unveiled to help the homeless community combat COVID-19. A \$300 million support package, made up of \$200 million from the federal government and \$100 million from Ontario, is dedicated to purchasing desperately-needed medical supplies and equipment for the province's overburdened hospitals—equipment which should have been secured long ago.

Earlier this month, street nurse Cathy Crowe, who has spent decades advocating for the homeless in the city, described Toronto's homeless camps as "a petri dish waiting for COVID-19 to arrive." Noting the overcrowded state of shelters and centres, she added, "If (coronavirus) hits [Saint Michael Hospital's] emergency department or if it hits any of the centres, it will spread very quickly. Deaths are almost certain."

The dire conditions facing homeless people in Toronto were underscored by a fire at a major encampment last month. The fire erupted in early morning on February 23 under the Don Valley Parkway, a major highway feeding the city centre. One man was hospitalized, and three others suffered injuries, not including those affected by smoke inhalation. These makeshift accommodations face a high risk of fire, with a total of three breaking out during the winter season alone. Fuel from propane tanks is thought to be the immediate culprit in the latest case.

Many homeless people seek out underpasses, as well as ravines and parks, that are close to downtown charities, but away from homes and businesses where they risk

encountering police.

For more than a year, homeless advocates have been pressing the city administration to declare homelessness in the city to be an official emergency, which would allow different departments to work more closely on tackling housing issues. Crowe renewed this demand following her warnings about the coronavirus.

The city's homeless population is estimated to be in excess of 9,000. The problem is even more pronounced when one takes into account those who have temporary shelter thanks only to the kindness of friends and families, or who live in their vehicles. Toronto experienced sharp increases in daily occupancy of city shelters in 2019 in comparison to the previous year. Homeless shelters, previously seen as a temporary housing solution for distressed residents, have become a permanent solution for many.

The city is no longer able to close some shelters during the summer months as demand continues to surpass available accommodation no matter the season. A survey by the municipal government in April of 2018 found more than 500 people sleeping outdoors.

Conditions on the streets and in tent cities put the homeless at a much greater risk of catching coronavirus and other diseases. Recent outbreaks have included cases of streptococcus. Many homeless people also have compromised immune systems due to lengthy periods living in cold, damp, and unsanitary conditions, poor diets, and addiction.

Last year saw the largest number of deaths (63) of homeless people in the city since 2005, according to the Toronto Homeless Memorial. The Memorial's figures show a spiraling death rate since the project was launched in 1985, when there was just one recorded death. This January, the total figure since its inauguration passed 1,000 deaths, although organizers stress that this is not an authoritative accounting and the actual number is

undoubtedly higher.

The roots of the present housing crisis go back to the federal Liberal governments of Jean Chretien and his finance minister (and future Prime Minister) Paul Martin. Brought to power thanks to disaffection with years of Progressive Conservative Party rule, the Liberals proceeded to implement a harsh austerity agenda that included cancelling the federal housing program, and its rental supply and assisted rental programs. Housing policy was offloaded to the provinces. In Ontario, the New Democratic Party government of Bob Rae also slashed spending on public housing and social welfare. The right-wing government of Mike Harris then cut social assistance by nearly one third and repealed rent control laws. By 1997, for the first time in more than 40 years, no social housing was built in Ontario. Consequently, the wait list for subsidized housing in Toronto has grown to more than 100,000 names long.

At the same time, the increasing cost of housing and stagnating wages of workers have helped transform the city into one of the least affordable places to live in the world. To spend no more than the recommended 30 percent of income on rent, one needs to earn approximately \$65,000 per year. For minimum wage workers, this figure is wildly out of reach, requiring a 97-hour work week. The average price of a single bedroom apartment in Toronto has increased from \$950 in 2003 to upwards of \$2200 today. The working class faces the choice of leaving the city altogether (and abandoning its job opportunities) or unsustainable debt and eventual financial ruin.

In addition to working longer and accumulating debts, some middle-class Torontonians, encouraged by record low borrowing rates, have joined the rampant speculation on the housing market being carried out by real estate companies and major financial institutions. These factors have all combined to create a precarious housing bubble which commentators and such staid institutions as the Bank for International Settlements anxiously fear may soon burst.

Exacerbating the shortage of rental units is the rise of home-sharing apps. To meet the rising costs of housing in the city, more residents are offering their homes (or parts of their homes) as short term rentals on platforms such as Airbnb where, depending on the location, they are poised to make more than they would from a traditional rental. This adds to the apartments that Airbnb entrepreneurs, who buy up units for the express purpose of renting them out short-term, have removed from the long-term housing

supply.

Meanwhile, landlords eager to capitalize on the high rents and low vacancies, work to push out existing tenants who are protected by law from large increases in rent so that they can charge market rates to new tenants. A November 2019 report from the Advocacy Centre for Tenants Ontario revealed a sharp increase in so-called no fault evictions. By undertaking renovations or by claiming to require a dwelling for their own use, landlords can evict tenants locked in at lower rates. The desperate housing situation has pushed more sections of the population into homelessness, whereas it had once primarily afflicted the historically oppressed indigenous community, women escaping abuse, and those struggling with mental health or substance abuse issues.

In contrast to the growing numbers of workers struggling to make ends meet, Toronto is a magnet for wealth from across the country and around the world. It is home to an estimated 27 billionaires including David Thomson of the Thomson Reuters media empire, whose family, with a net worth of \$37 billion, is Canada's richest. Thomson's mansion sits in one of the country's richest neighbourhoods, situated just a few kilometres from a recently demolished homeless encampment in the Rosedale ravine.

There are plenty of resources to address the housing needs of Torontonians but this requires an attack on the wealth of the capitalist elite, who hide much of their ill-gotten wealth in tax havens. Unwilling to undertake even modest wealth redistribution, all levels of government turn to pointing the finger at each other for the homeless and housing crises, with rightwing politicians like Doug Ford scapegoating those suffering from addiction, and recent immigrants and refugees.

The deployment of vast financial resources to deal with Toronto's housing crisis becomes all the more urgent under conditions of the public health emergency produced by the coronavirus pandemic. Without urgent action to test homeless people, provide them with adequate medical care, and ensure they have housing and income to make it through the crisis, they risk being ravaged by the deadly COVID-19 disease.



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