COVID-19 ravages homeless shelters in Toronto

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The rapid spread of Omicron across Canada is taking an especially terrible toll on the homeless population, with major outbreaks reported in shelters in Toronto and British Columbia in recent weeks.

Two years into the pandemic, the refusal of governments at all levels to adopt any measures to overcome the long-standing social and economic problems plaguing Canada's urban centers continues to have devastating consequences for those forced to live on the streets, in shelters, or other forms of temporary accommodation.

As temperatures dropped to deadly levels during a severe winter cold snap earlier this month, the Omicron variant ran rampant through Toronto's homeless shelter system. Fifty shelters reported outbreaks and over four hundred people tested positive by Friday, January 14.

The drop of outside temperatures to injurious and deadly depths pushed up shelter occupancy rates and accelerated COVID-19 transmission. With only 65 beds for people to isolate available system-wide, shelter staff were directed to keep infected residents on site. While the isolation site's aim during previous waves was to prevent infection spread, outbreaks across the system are now seen as "entirely unavoidable."

Andrew Bond, medical director of Inner City Health Associates, told the *Toronto Star*, "There's no amount of dedicated isolation space away from the shelter system that can be created to move every single person who gets COVID or is in contact with COVID."

As the extreme cold weather increased demand for already inadequate services, COVID-19 infections continued to thin out available staff. This convergence of challenges led to dropped calls on shelter intake phone lines and an overall decrease in cleanliness and social distancing practices.

"A lot of people have experienced what are called 'courtesy hang-ups.' And consistently, people spend inordinate amounts of time on hold. Between the two, folks cannot get through to even find out if there is shelter space," said housing advocate and York University adjunct faculty A.J. Withers. "Getting people out of the cold so they don't die or lose fingers and toes is paramount at this moment. Ultimately though, Toronto's unhoused population needs more non-congregate settings, single-room housing where isolation is possible, to avoid outbreaks."

Throughout the pandemic more people have been infected by COVID-19 in Toronto's homeless shelter system than all cases in Manitoba and New Brunswick, which have a combined population of about 2 million people.

The consequences of these outbreaks for homeless people, many of whom suffer from multiple health problems, have been and will be catastrophic.

A study by researchers at Lawson Health Research Institute published on the Canadian Medical Association Journal Open website examined COVID-19 testing in Ontario. With data on close to thirty thousand people who had recently experienced homelessness, the study found the homeless are far more likely to become infected, be hospitalized, experience complications, and die from the novel coronavirus.

"Individuals recently homeless were over 20 times more likely to be hospitalized for COVID-19, over 10 times more likely to receive intensive care, and they were over five times more likely to die within 21 days of a positive test," said principal author Lucie Richard in an interview with CBC Toronto.

Decades of public policy decisions aimed at slashing budgets and making billions available to big business and the super-rich have created a situation where every year over 235,000 Canadians are homeless at some point. Another 1.7 million working people live in precarious housing, which in simple terms means they are one pay

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cheque, one accident, or one illness away from sleeping on the street. All of the established political parties, from the New Democrats on the "left" to the right-wing Tories, are responsible for this state of affairs. They abolished social housing programs in the late 1980s and 1990s, enforced massive attacks on wages and working conditions, and gutted social programs that helped keep low-income earners off the street.

In a recent Nanos Research poll commissioned by the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness, seven out of 10 Canadians indicated that they want urgent action on homelessness. A staggering number reported having experienced homelessness themselves (5 percent) or knowing a family member (10 percent), or a friend/acquaintance (21 percent) who had been homeless. These results suggest as many as 1.6 million Canadians have experienced homelessness at some point in their lives.

COVID-19 has compounded the everyday struggles and indignities that people experiencing homelessness endure, as park washrooms have been closed, water fountains drained, and services and community spaces crucial to the homeless community disappeared.

The conditions and services available at homeless shelters experiencing outbreaks are significantly worse than the bare minimum provided in "normal" times. As one housing advocate reported, "I'm in touch with a man staying at a shelter with an outbreak of about 30 cases who has COVID-19 for the second time. He tells me some [external] services that would normally go in, like healthcare, won't go in when there's an outbreak."

The absence of health care is of particular concern given that shelter staff are ill-equipped to deal with health issues. "Shelter workers have zero training in terms of providing nursing or infirmary care support," the advocate continued. "It's just horrific. Every shelter should have a (registered practical nurse) or health worker in it. If you even just had flu-like symptoms, and you're in a shelter, it would be hell."

Toronto shelter resident Jacqueline Hillier had to be isolated for four days after testing positive with COVID-19. "After my boyfriend and I were put in isolation, nobody came to check on us for 18 hours," she said. "I had to use a plastic bag to urinate in. Nobody came. I didn't get a drink of water until the next day."

The horrendous conditions facing homeless people as the pandemic enters its third year were entirely predictable. In March 2020, street nurse Cathy Crowe, who has been advocating on homeless issues for decades, described Toronto's homeless shelters as "a petri dish waiting for COVID-19 to arrive." Neither Justin Trudeau's federal Liberal government nor Doug Ford's hard-right Progressive Conservative provincial government did anything to avoid the foreseeable and foreseen disaster that then followed (See: Coronavirus threatens to ravage Toronto's swelling homeless population).

Even after the pandemic's first three waves, no precautionary measures were implemented during the summer of 2021 to bolster protection for the homeless population in the coming fall and winter. "We knew that COVID-19 was going to be coming. We knew that winter was coming. It's not like any of this should have been a surprise," said Lorraine Lam, an outreach worker with Sanctuary Toronto.

In 2019, a total of 7,300 people were counted as homeless in the Greater Toronto Area. Currently, there are over 7,400 people sleeping at shelters alone, indicating that the entire homeless population has risen considerably during the pandemic.

Toronto's shelter system is at a "boiling point," advocates say, and is nearing collapse. The scrapping of eviction moratoriums under Bill 184, which came into force in July 2020 and was dubbed the "eviction bill," has made it much easier for landlords to force tenants out.

A collection of pro-landlord amendments to the Residential Tenancy Act of 2006, Bill 184 has increased housing insecurity in Ontario, driven up rents and hastened the loss of affordable housing units. "The purpose of Bill 184 is to allow corporate landlords to more easily remove the greatest obstacle to increasing their already massive profits: working class tenants," stated Cole Webber of Parkdale Community Legal Services. The Toronto-based Federation of Metro Tenants' Associations (FMTA) noted that Bill 184 deprives tenants of a "key safety net that protects them from eviction" and called it "a cruel attack on vulnerable tenants in a time of historic need."

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