

research snapshot

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How to Prevent Homelessness When a Bed Is a Home?

What is this research about?

Canada continues to experience a homelessness crisis. Providing affordable housing is one of the most important ways to reduce homelessness. However, many homeless people need more than just simply housing in order to make it off the streets. These individuals are usually more vulnerable because of mental illness, addiction and other problems. This group of people is considered “hard to house”. Shared-housing programs are one approach to helping this group receive community supports, counseling, and help for transitioning from poverty to independence. However, shared housing means that individuals have little personal space and become vulnerable to various risks in the space they share with other tenants.

What did the researcher do?

The York researcher conducted a focus group with community housing workers at Strachan House and interviews with Strachan House’s manager and four part-time community housing workers. The data from these interviews are supplemented by the researcher’s own experiences as a former employee.

What did the researcher find?

When analyzing the case study data, three main themes emerged:

What you need to know:

While shared-housing programs are a useful strategy for keeping many people from becoming homeless, others need more independent housing in order to climb out of poverty. There is an urgent need for more self-contained social housing in Canada.

1. An Empowerment Approach to Shared Housing

- Participants described their approach to working with tenants as “a facilitative management approach” that gives tenants “a voice” and “a sense of belonging” thereby helping them develop the confidence and independence to deal with other issues in their lives.

2. Practices and Policies for Housing Stability

- All participants agreed that having staff on site 24 hours, seven days a week was necessary because of the shared-housing model of their program.
- Innovative and creative programs within Strachan House that help tenants maintain housing include an in-house Tenant Bank where tenants can pay rent, cash cheques, and get help with budgeting.
- Frequent staff meetings to ensure early identification of problems and outreach was identified as a key component of preventing unstable housing and evictions.

3. Challenges to Empowerment Practices Within a Shared-housing model

Participants said they had to balance different interests such as:

- The dual role of housing workers as support workers who support tenants in maintaining housing and as a landlord who also evicts
- The paradox of professionalism versus “personalism”. They said that it is an ongoing struggle for staff to meet expectations of being “professional” by setting boundaries and enforcing rules while still being “personal” by remaining someone tenants can feel comfortable to approach and build a trusting relationship with.
- The “very fragile situation” of encouraging tenants to see the positive impact of community while also giving them “space”. They noted that some tenants feel that even such expectations as attending apartment meetings infringe on their individual rights. One participant emphasized that this is a “huge struggle, because what would be good for one person may not be good for the house or the building.

How can you use this research?

Policymakers and community groups will benefit from this research in their efforts to protect the “hard to house” from ending up back on the streets. This research could be useful to developing eviction prevention policies since eviction often leads to homelessness. Such programs would make sure evictions only happen if the person has another place to move to. Components of Strachan House like the rent bank could be used in other social housing locations to provide further incentive for people to pay their rent on time. This research is useful to demonstrating that proper housing gives people a chance to fully participate in their community. The research is helpful in showing that more than one

strategy needs to be used in transitional housing for the homeless.

About the Researcher

Uzo Anucha is an Assistant Professor at York University’s School of Social Work.

anucha@yorku.ca

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Knowledge Mobilization at York

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kmbunit@yorku.ca

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