

# research snapshot

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## Shared Housing Programs Can Lead People Back into Homelessness

### What is this research about?

There is a lot of research on the factors that make people vulnerable to homelessness. But there is relatively little on what causes people to return to homelessness again and again – a phenomenon that is known as a ‘homeless career.’ One recent Canadian study found that 82% of ‘hard to house’ tenants – people in a shared housing program – had been homeless before. Another study found that homeless people who get a residence of their own (as opposed to doubling up or moving into a hotel or a single room) are much less likely to become homeless again. Living in a private residence seems to reduce the likelihood that a person will return to the streets. This is noteworthy because most people in Canada, when they leave homelessness, usually don’t enter a private residence. In fact, they tend to enter some form of shared housing. Shared housing is often all that is available. What impact, then, does a shared housing program have on people who were once homeless and who once again find themselves at risk of homelessness?

### What did the researcher do?

Uzo Anucha, an Associate Professor in the School of Social Work at York University, looked at the underlying dynamics that force people to fall into a homeless career. She interviewed 12 people in two shared housing programs in Toronto. Her goal was to learn about the experiences and struggles of people

### What you need to know:

Shared housing does not meet the needs of people who have already been homeless. Many of these people wind up returning to homelessness. Subsidized individual apartments would better meet the needs of those trying to get out of a difficult situation.

in shared housing programs. All of the interviewees had been homeless before. All had impending evictions and were likely to be homeless again.

### What did the researcher find?

Although the majority of interviewees were unemployed, they all expressed a desire to work and a reluctance to stay on welfare. Ironically, those who obtained work often found themselves in low-paying jobs that lacked job security, leaving them vulnerable to homelessness. Many of the participants revealed that they had lacked family support very early in their lives.

Homelessness tends to be episodic. During periods of homelessness, people often experience a range of unstable living situations. The researcher found that doubled-up housing often precedes a homeless episode, which confirms earlier findings. Many who enter the shelter system have just come from the

house of a family member or a friend.

Shared housing doesn't give people the private space and time that is usually associated with the idea that home is a refuge from the outside world. It forces people to conduct private, everyday business in public view. It also sabotages their efforts to find jobs and work on personal issues like addiction. Shared housing can leave people feeling homeless even though they are technically housed.

People who are on the verge of homelessness, however, can be very resourceful. Even when they have unstable housing, they can find ways to hang on for long periods of time. But all interviewees felt that subsidized individual apartments would help them break the cycle of homelessness. Being able to communicate and socialize with family and friends also helps. So, too, do school and volunteer work. These activities offer people a relief from their shared housing situations.

### How can you use this research?

Policymakers and practitioners need to take a multifaceted approach to the problem of homelessness. Eviction prevention programs that work with both landlords and tenants are needed to help people stay housed. Coordinated discharge planning is needed for people who are leaving jails or drug treatment facilities. This will help prevent returns to homelessness.

### About the Researcher

Uzo Anucha is Associate Professor in the School of Social Work at York University. This Research Snapshot is from her article, "Housed but Homeless?: Negotiating Everyday Life in a Shared Housing Program."

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### Keywords

Homelessness, Shared housing, Hard to house, Coordinated discharge planning

### Knowledge Mobilization at York

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