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Community Stakeholders Perceptions of the Impact of the Coronavirus Pandemic on Homelessness in Canada



Speaker COI

Presenter: Dr. Cheryl Forchuk

Nothing to disclose



Session Specific Learning Objectives

At the end of this presentation, participants will be able to ...

1. Describe key system changes due to COVID-19 affecting the homeless sector and individuals.
2. Highlight both drawbacks and benefits of these pandemic-induced changes.
3. Demonstrate why there is a likely increase in first-time and recurrent homelessness in Canada



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Background

- According to PiT (Point in Time) counts 32,000 people in Canada experience homelessness each night
- Homeless population experiences “*highest degree of marginalization*” (United Nations, 2020)
- COVID-19 pandemic:
 - ↓ shelter capacity
 - ↓ personal hygiene areas
 - ↑ hotel spaces
 - ↑ visibility of encampments
- At-risk populations:
 - Youth
 - Family violence
 - 2SLGBTQ+

Methods

➤ Sample:

- Purposive sampling
 - Communities selected based on size, population, rural/remoteness, and sociodemographic profile of residents
- Stakeholders - variety of positions in the homeless sector
- 200 service providers from 28 distinct communities

➤ Recruitment:

- Contacted municipal representatives/Reaching Home community entities who forwarded invitations to service partners

Results

- System changes
- Personal changes in life circumstances
- Previous strategies no longer working
- Opportunities
- Some things getting better
- Overall increase in first time and recurrent homelessness in Canada

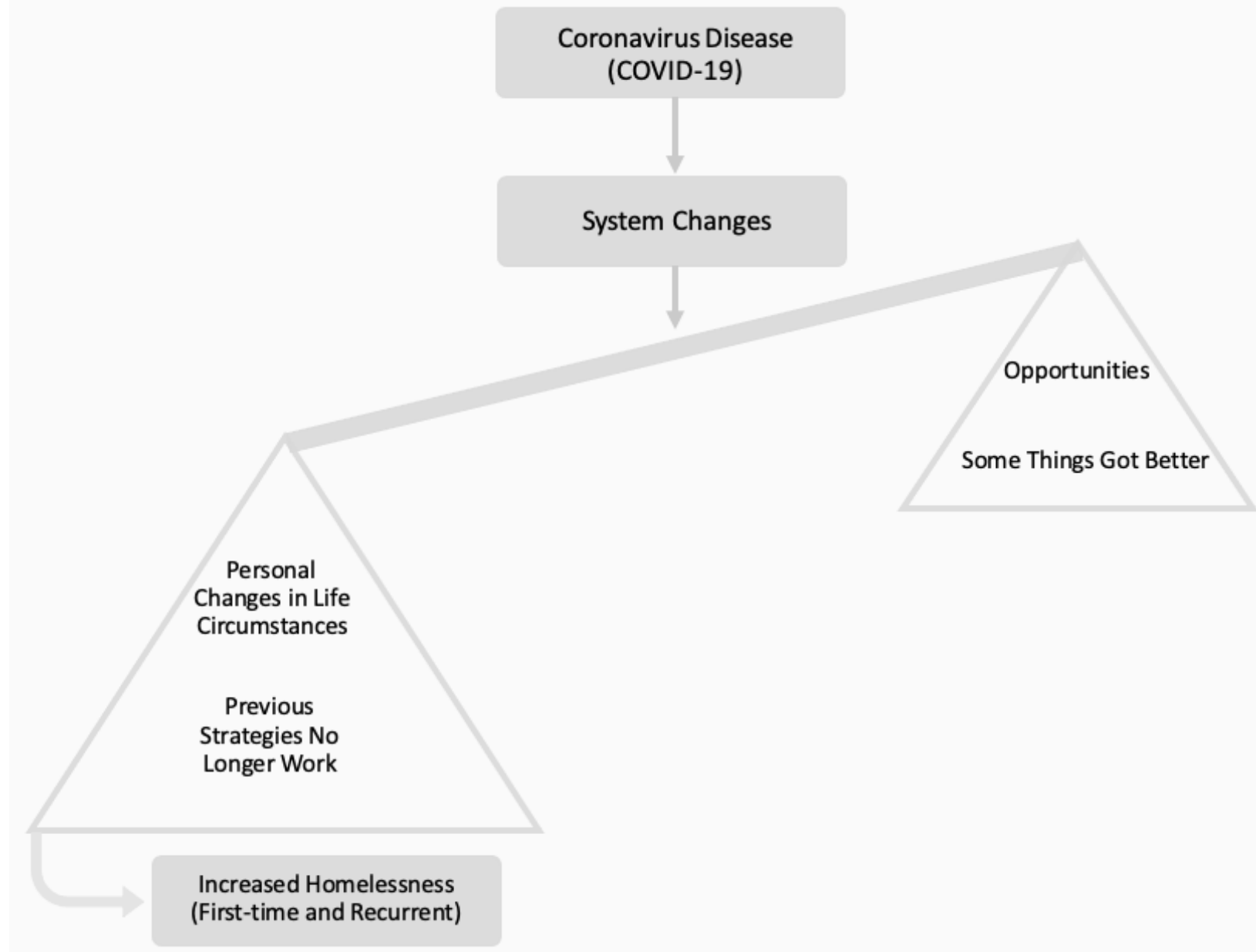


Figure 1. Model of Relationship Between COVID-19 Pandemic and Increased Homelessness in Canada

Figure 1. illustrates the nature of the relationships that exists between these themes.

Several Changes at the System Level



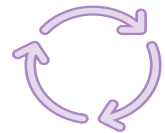
Higher costs & lower availability of housing



Adoption of virtual care



Data Collection and Sharing Implications



Capacity, Funding and Delay Challenges



Overworked and Understaffed Agencies



A. Higher costs & lower availability of housing

- Due to the increased cost of housing, people forced into unsafe living conditions:
 - unfinished basements with mold
 - vehicles
 - outdoors
 - homes with domestic violence
- Lack of housing availability
- Long waiting lists for subsidized and public housing



B. Adoption of virtual care

People experiencing homelessness have no or limited access to internet or a telephone

For subpopulations, such as youth and LGBTQ+ youth, face-to-face interactions are key to building trust



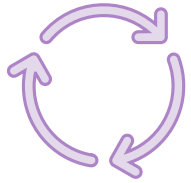
C. Data Collection and Sharing Implications

Positive changes:

- Increased resources/funding to hire staff to focus on data initiatives
- Illuminated research gaps such as not connecting with the hidden homeless

Negative changes:

- Stopped or delayed PiT counts
- Partners dropping out of research/data initiatives due to lack of capacity



D. Capacity, Funding and Delay Challenges



Delayed construction of new shelters



Additional funding is insufficient



Hotels and quarantine shelters served as overflow accommodation or isolation areas.



E. Overworked and Understaffed Agencies

Staff shortages and
overworked personnel

Exhaustion and pressure
resulting in:

- Vacant job positions
- Resignation from frontline workers
and management staff

Personal Change in Life Circumstances



Financial struggles



Job loss and unemployment



Increased evictions



Deteriorating mental health and
increased substance use

Previous Strategies No Longer Working

Pandemic caused previous strategies for mitigating homelessness to be ineffective:

- More people sleeping in the rough (woods, bushes, along trails, in tents, etc.)
- Large encampments appearing across Canada
- Migration from smaller and remote communities to larger communities

Disadvantaged subpopulations:

- Couch surfers
- People experiencing Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)

Opportunities

The pandemic has positively impacted the homeless sector in the following ways:

- New housing opportunities that protected elderly and immunocompromised
- Funding to enhance services and resources
- Providing communicative devices to people experiencing homelessness
- Citizens-led initiatives

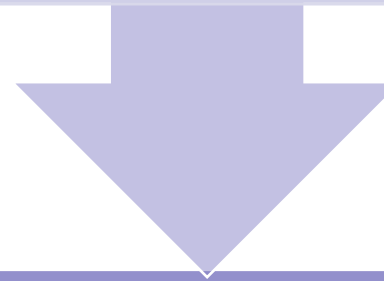
Some things
got better

People working in the homeless sector and individuals experiencing homelessness benefited from increases in funding:

Provide flexible services

Increased shelter hours or beds

Ability to shelter more individuals for longer periods of time



Enhanced communication and partnerships between providers

Collaboration between agencies, community groups, hospitals, police, universities and others enhanced the services provided to people experiencing homelessness.

= Increased
Homelessness:
First Time and
Recurrent

- The detrimental negative factors arising from systems-related changes during the pandemic led to an **INCREASE** in first-time and recurrent homelessness across Canada
- Factors include:
 - lack of affordable and adequate housing
 - Economic and social inequities
- Numbers on rising homelessness may be **UNDERREPORTED** because people may choose not to use formal homeless services due to stigma or a lack of availability.

Summary

Current state of homelessness in Canada is influenced by system changes caused by the pandemic, which have opposing forces, both positive and negative

The impact of the negative forces are **GREATER** than the positive ones

Result is likely more people experiencing first-time and recurrent homelessness across Canada

Questions?

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