National Conference on Ending Homelessness 2023

Shifting Away from Police Interventions with Unsheltered Persons: evidence from Montreal

Hannah Brais, Research Coordinator, Old Brewery Mission

Dr. Ayobami Laniyonu, Assistant Professor, Centre for Criminology and Sociolegal Studies, University of Toronto

MISSION OLD BREWERY

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

Context

SPVM* encountering more interventions with people experiencing homelessness, distinct challenges in these interventions, and some friction in interactions with homeless serving organizations.

OBM-SPVM partnership since 2017

OBM-University of Toronto community-research partnership

*Service de Police de la Ville de Montréal (City of Montreal Police Service)

Methodology

- Recruitment conducted with SPVM
- Up to three participants each from nine different precincts; 24 participants total
- Participants had received the OBM training
- Semi-structured telephone interviews; between 15 and 59 minutes
- Project approved by the University of Toronto Office of Research and Innovation and internally by the SPVM

Questionnaire

Officers' role in the SPVM

Interactions with homeless individuals

Relationship with community organizations

Evaluation of training measures in place for officers

Themes

Key theme:
Structural and Systemic Determinants of Homelessness as Beyond Police Capacity

"What I find difficult sometimes is the recurrence, you know? The impression that it's a bit like Groundhog Day. You know? I have the impression that there are days when I'm going to put on band-aids but the next day the band-aid is already gone. That... in terms of homelessness what I find difficult is that, that a person that I'm going to interact with one day, that I feel like you know, I've done a good intervention, but the next day, it's to be done again. [...] It's really more the fact that at some point, it seems like we're not getting out of the, the poverty, the misery, the homelessness, the addiction... you know?"
(Participant 130)

Protocol (and the public?) vs Aid

"There's also a connection with the demands of the citizens. You know, indirectly, the citizens call us, or they have fears, or whatever, if we say no, this is not repression, I won't do it, well afterwards, in the long term, the citizens will just stop calling us and then, uh, it will... it will have a breach of trust, you know?"
(Participant 130)

Dependence on homeless-serving organizations

"I think that before, personally when I arrived at [police station number], detention was the easiest solution, or that we applied more often. Now, we have, you know, at one point when they created, for example, the resource of the detox centers, well that helped us because we could do something else than giving them a ticket and taking them to the cell. It allowed us to have another option." (Participant 021)

Gentrification and Change

"I've been in [precinct area] for a while now. At the beginning, the homeless in [precinct area], there was very little. Then they closed the park when they started to do construction, then they closed Viger Park, then on the orange line, the whole orange line of the metro, well, we started to have homeless people from downtown to Plateau-Mont-Royal--[...] and then we started to have some, there were calls to 9-1-1 that came out because people saw homelessness, saw more people panhandling, who sometimes brought back certain homeless people, that's it. So that's the change."
(Participant 535)

Recommendations

Targeted homelessness prevention efforts

"Because it's not just the police, I mean, before, we should be the last person to intervene in the background, [...] there should be community resources, government resources in the department that could intervene with them, where these people wouldn't have to deal with the police."
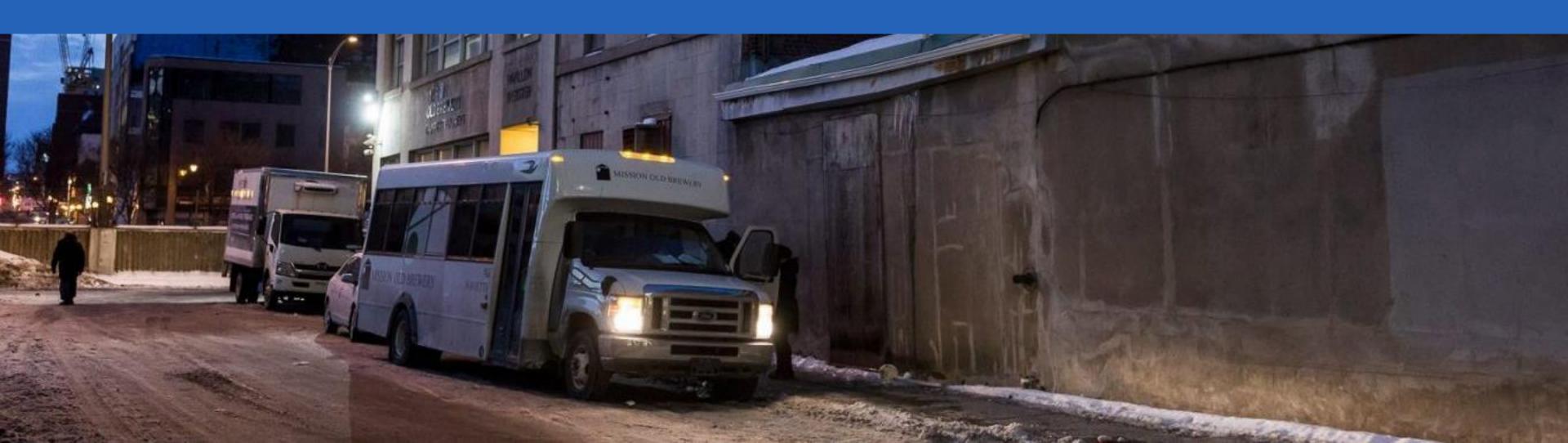(Participant 997)

Better supporting homeless-serving organizations

"There are organizations but obviously they are all overwhelmed. There aren't enough of them. There should be a way to have more space, because often that's where I find myself frustrated in my work is that I can't find a place for them to be taken care of." (Participant 497)

Coordinated Access (or Entry) System

"Of course, when we absolutely have to evict a person, it rarely ends well because they don't necessarily want to accept the resources that we offer them and, um, when we look for resources, it's really difficult for us. I don't know if one day it will exist, you know a type of 8-1-1, or 3-1-1 that we call and then they dispatch because it's happened to me often, let's say a gentleman who is outside, he wants a resource. It's 10 o'clock in the evening, I've called 10 resources and not one of them can take him. At a certain point, I'm not a telephone directory, so it's up to me to find the resource, be their taxi driver, to...it's very heavy, there."
(Participant 043)

More homeless-serving resources outside of the downtown core

"Yes, and the people we deal with are often people who come from [residential area] or who don't want to travel because they say 'well, this is where I have my friends, this is where I have my people... if you take me downtown, I'll have to come back by bus, or it'll take me all day to walk.' So uh if we had something closer that would be great. " (Participant 122)

Improved impact assessment of displacing encampments

"You know, they're human beings, and it's... when we went to dismantle the encampment, I found it very, very, very, very difficult. You know? It's sad to see that you know people were abandoning their tents, abandoning everything that... you know, your life ends up in a reusable bag, there, from the grocery store... it's... ah no, I, no I found that very difficult."
(Participant 248)

Arrest diversion programming

"Prevention, at the SPVM, they try to do it by sending police officers on the ground to talk with them, to try to prevent crimes but they send them to try to avoid incivilities then crimes all that, [...] in my opinion, it would take people who are not in the police force [...] the police officers who are sent by the SPVM are sent preventively to counteract incivilities but it takes people who have the time and it's their job to be totally attentive to their needs. You know? To be able to take the time to listen to someone who has a big problem ."
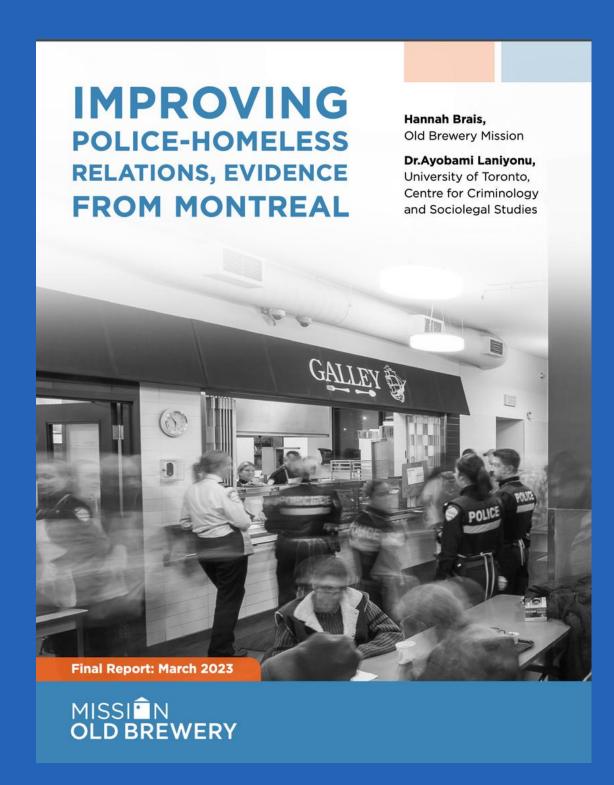(Participant 021)

Conclusion & Implications

Willingness of the police to reconsider their role with homeless individuals

Interest in improving relations with homeless-serving organizations

Mismatch between organization-level politics and officer opinions

IMPROVING POLICE-HOMELESS RELATIONS, EVIDENCE FROM MONTREAL

Hannah Brais,
Old Brewery Mission

Dr. Ayobami Laniyonu,
University of Toronto, Centre for Criminology and Sociolegal Studies

GALLEY

Final Report: March 2023

MISSION OLD BREWERY

Final report available at:
https://www.missionoldbrewery.ca/en/research-and-data

Policing of Homelessness and Opportunities for Reform in Montreal

Ayobami Laniyonu*
University of Toronto
Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Hannah Brais
McGill University
Montréal, Québec, Canada

Abstract: Police in North America face a public crisis of confidence and pressure to reduce interactions with socially vulnerable persons, such as people experiencing homelessness. Police contact with homeless persons, however, is driven in part by structural and policy factors beyond officers' control, as well as demand from some members of the public. In this qualitative study, we examine police officers' understanding of the causes of homelessness, their role in policing homeless persons, and their attitudes towards reform. Data were collected from 24 officers in Montreal via semi-structured interviews. Our results uncover evidence that officers understand the structural roots of homelessness, despite pathologizing some homeless persons they interact with. Though officers express support for expanding opportunities for housing and the role of non-profit organizations, they do not imagine a world without policing of persons experiencing homelessness. Finally, they express a strong sense that the public drive most police–homeless interactions and even constrain opportunities for non-punitive interactions.

Keywords: police, homelessness, Canada, police reform

Résumé : Les policiers d'Amérique du Nord sont aux prises avec une crise de confiance et des pressions de la part du public afin de réduire leurs interactions avec les personnes vulnérables sur le plan social, telles que les personnes en situation d'itinérance. Cependant, leurs contacts avec les personnes itinérantes découlent en partie de facteurs structurels et politiques indépendants de leur volonté et de la demande de certains membres du public. Dans la présente étude qualitative, les chercheurs examinent la compréhension qu'ont les policiers des causes de l'itinérance, leur rôle dans la judiciarisation des personnes itinérantes et leurs attitudes envers les réformes. Les données ont été recueillies auprès de 24 policiers de Montréal, dans le cadre d'entrevues semi-structurées. Les résultats démontrent que les policiers comprennent les racines structurelles de l'itinérance, même s'ils pathologisent certaines personnes itinérantes avec qui ils interagissent. Bien que les policiers soient favorables à l'offre de logements et au rôle des organismes à but non lucratif, ils n'imaginent pas un monde sans surveillance policière des personnes itinérantes. Enfin, ils ont le

*Please direct correspondence to Ayobami Laniyonu, Centre for Criminology and Sociolegal Studies, University of Toronto, 14 Queen's Park Crescent West, Toronto, ON M5S 3K9; a.laniyonu@utoronto.ca

Contact

Dr. Ayobami Laniyonu, Assistant Professor, [Centre for Criminology and Sociolegal Studies](), University of Toronto
a.laniyonu@utoronto.ca

Hannah Brais, Research Coordinator, Old Brewery Mission
hbrais@missionoldbrewery.ca