Recommendations from the Winnipeg Street Census

The Winnipeg Street Census marks the first ever attempt at a comprehensive view of homelessness in Winnipeg. We sought to ask not only how many people are homeless, but to learn why and to hear their stories. On the night of October 25, 2015, there were at least 1,400 people experiencing homelessness in Winnipeg. The analysis of the data from residential programs as well as the surveys completed by 796 participants experiencing homelessness has informed the following principles and recommended actions. These have been endorsed by sixteen community-based organizations and the Winnipeg Police Services.

Principles for Addressing Homelessness

Indigenous-led solutions. The over-representation of Indigenous Peoples among those experiencing homelessness is connected to the legacy of residential schools, systemic racism, endemic poverty and colonialism. 71.1% of people experiencing homelessness are Indigenous. 57.9% of Indigenous respondents had involvement in Child and Family Services. Indigenous organizations, community groups, and Peoples must be leaders in all aspects of the homeless serving sector and have the necessary support and resources to address homelessness.

A harm-reduction approach. Harm reduction is about supporting healthy and safe choices based on recognizing where people are at in their lives. A lack of appropriate choices can put people in more dangerous situations. For example, people self-identified substance use as either a reason they first became homeless or a barrier to housing. Those who work in the community know that confronting substance use is almost impossible without the stability of housing. There needs to be housing options for people who want no substance use at all, and at the same time, substance use should not prevent people from being housed.

A trauma-informed approach. Because of the methodology, the Street Census survey did not go into detailed questions about trauma. Yet trauma still came out; people spoke frequently of grief and loss. Trauma is an important factor in homelessness, especially among Indigenous people, and must be addressed when confronting homelessness.

A recovery-oriented approach. Almost ¼ of respondents said they need services related to mental health; mental health was rarely cited as a reason for homelessness or a barrier to housing, but qualitative information suggests that for some people mental health was closely connected to trauma and substance use. The Mental Health Commission of Canada’s Guidelines for Recovery-Oriented Approach provides guidance to services providers while the Province of Manitoba’s Recovery: Hope Changes Everything report has recommendations that should be implemented to change Manitoba’s mental health system.

Respect for people’s choices. Everyone surveyed for the Street Census had a unique story, experience, and path. For some people, the street is a place where they find support and connection. They said the biggest barrier to housing would be loneliness. Simply trying to get them ‘off the street’ and into a different community is not what they wanted. A one-size fits all approach to addressing homelessness will not succeed. With this in mind, congregate housing and other models of accommodation need to be part of the options available to people experiencing homelessness, in addition to scattered site housing.

An inclusive approach. Women, Indigenous Peoples, youth and newcomers were all more likely to rely on informal support for shelter like friends and family. Women and newcomers were less likely to stay in unsheltered locations. Definitions of homelessness, including the Homelessness Partnering Strategy definition, should take a comprehensive view of homelessness, recognizing differences in populations and their differing needs.
Immediate Actions Needed

Prevention of Homelessness. The most common reason people first became homeless was family breakdown or conflict. 49.2% of participants spent time in foster care or group homes. Families need support to prevent familial breakdown, which can include keeping children with family rather than entering the care of Child and Family Services (CFS). Early intervention and additional support for families who are struggling will reduce homelessness; these need to be prioritized.

Strategic Interventions. The Street Census clearly identified the most common age persons become homeless is 18 years old. The next most common ages are 15, 16, 17, and 19 years old. 49% of participants had spent time in foster care or group homes. It is clear from this data that the most strategic point of intervention to avoid long-term homelessness is when youth age out of the care of CFS. No young person should leave the care of CFS to homelessness.

There are other important transitions which people said led to homelessness: moving into Winnipeg, particularly from a First Nations community (4.1%); leaving the home of parents or guardians; losing a job (10.5%); being evicted (7.4%); leaving an institutional setting like addictions treatment, hospital, or correctional settings (8.1%). More research is needed to identify what types of strategic interventions could prevent homelessness during these transitions.

A Spectrum of Supports. Street Census participants spoke of so many different experiences which indicates the need for a broad range of services and supports. Some only need minor assistance – such as a rent-bank or financial education; others (especially the 1/3 of people who have been homeless for 5 or more years throughout their lives) require more intensive interventions such as Housing First. Almost 1/3 of people had been homeless for less than 3 months when surveyed. When people arrive at an emergency shelter or another service (EIA office, resource centre, etc.) and say they do not have a home, they should be connected with support to find appropriate housing quickly. Winnipeg needs rapid rehousing, and it needs to be done in a way that supports the long-term well-being of the individual or family, not simply to reduce the number of people experiencing homelessness in the short-term.

Housing with Supports. Most people cited a number of barriers to finding housing, and the fact that people tended to experience homelessness more than once shows that more than housing is required. Housing First and supportive housing models have demonstrated success. Street Census Partners who are involved in operating housing with support programs note that there must be a range of supports and these must be ongoing for many of the people placed through the various housing with support programs.

More Housing. Ending and preventing homelessness requires a diversity of housing options including affordable housing, social housing, and housing with supports. Preventing homelessness in Winnipeg requires safe and adequate housing in First Nations communities. It is time for a national housing strategy to develop housing in a sustainable way, taking into account various community and population needs. Locally, the Housing Supply Working Group of End Homelessness Winnipeg is endeavouring to create at least 300 homes for people experiencing homelessness in the next three years.

Increased Incomes. The most frequently cited barrier to housing was low income. After the Provincial EIA program (52.2%), the second most common income source category was informal means (family and friends or informal employment; 24.5%). Taken together, this demonstrates that incomes on EIA are too low, and income support programs are not accessible for those who need them. With Rent Assist increasing to 70% of median market rent as of December 2015, the next urgent step is making EIA accessible. In the
immediate term, the Manitoba Ombudsman has made a number of recommendations to make the EIA program more fair and accessible; these should to be implemented. In the long-term, some people have recommended a Guaranteed Annual Income or Basic Income as a means of improving adequacy and accessibility. For those who are able to work, programs with demonstrated success around long-term employment or livelihood need to be part of the spectrum of supports available to people.

**Limitations**

The principles and immediate actions are limited by the scope and methodological challenges of the research. Partners note that while the Street Census asked about the cause of people’s first experience of homelessness, there is no data on their subsequent experiences. There is some evidence that transitions from institutional/system settings (health and mental health programs, treatment programs, correctional institutions) have a role to play in homelessness. Like the transition from CFS, intervention at this point can be a strategic prevention initiative.

The Street Census also was unable to account for people experiencing homelessness outside of the inner city. It is possible that people in different neighbourhoods have different experiences and needs. It was not an effective methodology for determining specific service needs or evaluating existing services for people experiencing homelessness, partially because people may not know what services exist and partially because a trusting relationship is often required for these needs to be identified. The partners recommend that another Winnipeg Street Census be conducted in two years, with adjustments to the methodology to reach people outside of the core. In the year between, a more detailed survey similar to the Winnipeg Street Health Report of 2012 should be conducted to fill in these gaps in information.

**Endorsements**
The following organizations have endorsed these principles and recommended actions:

- Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives – Manitoba
- Canadian Mental Health Association Winnipeg
- EAGLE Urban Transition Centre
- Institute of Urban Studies
- The John Howard Society of Manitoba Inc.
- Lived Experience Circle
- Macdonald Youth Services
- Main Street Project Inc.
- Resource Assistance for Youth
- Rossbrook House
- The Salvation Army Booth Centre Winnipeg
- Siloam Mission
- The Social Planning Council of Winnipeg
- Spence Neighbourhood Association
- Sunshine House Winnipeg
- West Central Women’s Resource Centre
- Winnipeg Police Services