

RESEARCH UPDATE

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A REVIEW OF OCTOBER 2016 POINT-IN-TIME HOMELESS COUNTS IN ALBERTA (7 CITIES ON HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS, NOVEMBER 2016)

REVIEWED BY JANINE ISAAC

Alberta's 7 Cities on Housing and Homelessness is a provincial initiative made up of organisations geared towards the implementation of homelessness elimination strategies in Edmonton, Calgary, Wood Buffalo, Grande Prairie, Lethbridge, Medicine Hat, and Red Deer.

On October 19 & 20, 2016, the second provincial Point-in-Time (PiT) Count was conducted by a specific organization in each city. This review will outline the methodologies and key findings found in the 2016 Alberta PiT Count of Homeless provincial report, with an emphasis on Edmonton's results. Consequently, this review is best suited for policy makers, researchers in human geography, planning, or other related fields. However, it can also be of interest to the general public as it raises awareness of the current state of homelessness in Edmonton.

METHODOLOGY

In contrast to 2014 where counts were conducted primarily on the night of October 16, 2014, the 2016 count was conducted on the night of October 19 from 7 PM to midnight with surveys conducted in areas that were deemed unsafe during the night on the day of October 20, 2016. This aligned methodology provided comparable counts throughout the 7 Cities and eliminated some of the challenges encountered by the 2014 approach, mainly the different times the 7 cities conducted their counts (Three Hive Consulting, p. 7).

Surveys were created using SurveyMonkey, an online survey creation tool, and most of the data submitted using this software and later compiled on Microsoft Excel. In all cities, enumerators were asked to conduct surveys on all encounters on the street, emergency shelters or transitional housing. Moreover, if individuals had accompanying minors under the age of 18, the survey was only administered to the parent(s) or accompanying individual aged 18 and up.

KEY FINDINGS

The 2016 Alberta PiT Homeless Count report emphasises on general findings and therefore, the results display only the core survey questions and disregard locally specific questions.

Calgary and Edmonton had the most individuals experiencing homelessness as compared to the 5 other cities. However, with relation to the rest of the cities, the urban centres saw a slight decrease in the homeless population from 2014 to 2016. In terms of individuals experiencing chronic homelessness, Edmonton was found to have 59% experiencing 4 or more episodes of homelessness in the last 3 years.

In terms of age-gender demographics, the counts show that the homeless population is predominantly males of working age (25-44 years old). Throughout all the counts, Edmonton had the highest proportion of homeless males at 80%. Three Hives Consulting indicates that women are likely "part of the hidden homeless population" due to the increased risks of sexual and physical violence on the streets (p. 19). Accordingly, the proportion of women counted across all cities either decreased, stayed relatively the same as 2014's result, or increased slightly by 4-5% from 2014.

Individuals who identify as indigenous continue to be over-represented as those experiencing homelessness. However, a general trend found across most of the cities saw proportional decreases except in Red Deer and Wood Buffalo.

Finally, the report indicated that the most common reasons for experiencing homelessness were due to job loss or substance use. Moreover, individuals indicated that during their current episode of homelessness, their main source of income was through welfare or income assistance.

LIMITATIONS

Although PiT counts can provide a snapshot of the homeless population in a city, limitations can include the quality of survey responses and differing volunteer abilities. To explain, some volunteers may have little to no experience with vulnerable populations and therefore missed engagements are possible. Additionally, the extent of the questions asked to participants is not enough to provide a definitive grasp on the homeless experience, therefore, strategies using this report as a data source may overlook the differing levels of homelessness and neglect potential populations who require resources.

Overall, the report's findings add to the discourse on homelessness elimination strategies and some of the challenges found within the report can be used to improve future PiT counts in terms of better volunteer-organiser coordination and a more cohesive methodology approach for intrametropolitan comparisons.

Publication Source: http://media.wix.com/ugd/ff2744_50d2b36993f34223982e60a63d271e34.pdf

ABOUT THE RESEARCH REVIEWER:



Janine Isaac graduated from the University of Alberta in 2015 with a Bachelor of Science in Atmospheric Sciences. She is currently interested in research on social policy issues such as poverty, homelessness, and city housing.

ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE ON ALBERTA'S 7 CITIES HOMELESS COUNT

REVIEWED BY NAVROOP TEHARA

On October 19, 2016, 5,373 individuals were counted as experiencing homelessness in Alberta's 7 largest municipalities. A homelessness count can be very difficult due to the population being transient, and often "hidden". The 2016 homelessness count employed a technique called Point in Time method. The use of a Point in Time method is recognized as one of the best practices in trying to better understand homelessness. The point in time method focuses on measuring the number of homeless people on a specific day. This allows researchers to show a snapshot of the situation. Researchers conducted the count from 7 pm to midnight in Calgary, Edmonton, Red Deer, Grande Prairie, Wood Buffalo, Lethbridge, and Medicine Hat. The researchers supplemented visual counts with data from municipalities and the government of Alberta.

The survey used a nuanced definition of homelessness that capture the complex nature of the subject matter. The survey used three key definitions to quantify and qualify homelessness. The category of unsheltered refers to people who lack accommodate and live in places that are not fit for human habitation such as streets and public spaces. Emergency sheltered homelessness refers to people who access emergency shelters but do not have stable accommodation. Last, provisionally accommodated refers to those who are receiving temporary housing provided by government or the non-profit sector. These three definitions allowed the homeless count to illustrate a detailed picture of homelessness in urban centres in Alberta.

Homelessness in Alberta occurs in larger urban centres like Calgary, Edmonton, and Grande Prairie. The homeless count also revealed that the majority of those experiencing homelessness are men aged 24-55 who accessed emergency shelters. Despite being underrepresented, women are more likely to be facing hidden homelessness. Examples of hidden homelessness for women who are couch surfing, staying with friends and relatives, or staying in abusive relationships for fear of homelessness. In the future, it would be imperative that the homeless count focuses on the hidden elements of poverty and homelessness that women.

Poverty and homelessness are problems that disproportionately impacts the indigenous community in Alberta. Individuals who self-identify as Indigenous made up 28% of the homeless individuals despite only representing 4% of the general population. Indigenous youth (younger than 18) also made up a significant portion of the count.

Poverty and homelessness can result from households being unable to afford their rent or mortgage. Housing affordability becomes an issue when a household spends more than 30% of their income on housing. Despite increasing vacancies in Alberta, rents have not decreased in proportion. Increasing the supply of affordable housing by developing housing specially targeted at those experiencing affordability issue may help a portion of the homeless population. An integrated support system is also needed to help those who have complex needs.

The count revealed that homelessness can result from addiction/substance abuse, job loss, family conflict, eviction, and mental or physical illness. Providing integrated supports through a dedicated case worker can potentially help those individuals dealing with substance abuse and mental health issues. Last, in order to improve the homelessness count for upcoming years there needs to be accurate and up to date information shared between the provincial government, institutions, non-profits and municipalities. A concerted effort needs to be made on data management and processes that uniformly shared among all actors. As homelessness across Canada continues to grow it is important that the federal, provincial and municipal governments work together to develop affordable housing and programs targeted at reducing homelessness. This can come from stable funding, and targeted resources to help those with complex needs.

Publication Source: http://media.wix.com/ugd/ff2744_50d2b36993f34223982e60a63d271e34.pdf

ABOUT THE RESEARCH REVIEWER:

Navroop Tehara is passionate about community development and evidence-based decision-making. He is working as a policy analyst with the province. Navroop is new to Edmonton and hopes to get a better understanding of urban issues in Edmonton.

REVIEWED BY MAXWELL HARRISON

Early in 2017, the Government of Ontario wrapped up public consultations on its proposed plan to pilot a basic income study. The Mowat Centre for Social Innovation published a report titled “Pilot lessons: How to design a basic income pilot project for Ontario” aimed at informing Ontario’s efforts. The Centre’s report serves as a decent primer on the basic income. It frames the current debate by outlining the historical context, what’s currently known about basic income programs, and what needs to be considered.

It has been over 40 years (1972) since the Government of Canada launched its own basic income trial. Recently, the concept seems to have slipped back into vogue. The upside for Ontario’s policy makers is that the basic income is supported by robust academic literature stemming from earlier North American experiments.

Researchers at the Mowat Centre have combed through this literature enabling them to identify pitfalls. The key to success for any trial is to have an experimental design that’s able to generate reliable data from different combinations “of tax back rates and payment levels.” Earlier North American work was often of such complex designs it hindered the investigator’s ability to perform statistical analysis. Ultimately, this undermined the generalizability of their pilots’ conclusions.

The Mowat report proposes a blueprint for Ontario’s policy makers to consider when designing their own study. It recommends an independent task force be set up with a secure source of funding to design and execute the study, analyze the results, and report back to Cabinet. The pilot will only be successful if it is insulated from the day-to-day vagaries of partisan politics. In the case of the 1972 Canadian pilot, researchers failed to conduct some analysis work set out in the original scope. The shortfall was due in part to a change in government, and the new government’s decision to cut the pilot’s funding.

On the other hand, the intriguing findings gleaned from these studies demonstrate a slew of indirect socio-economic benefits for low-income families. Just some of the positive social outcomes include a decline in hospitalization rates and an increase in high school graduation rates and elementary test scores. This research also demonstrates that a basic income has a marked effect on recipients’ labour force participation rates. According to these studies, married women experience the most significant decline in their share of total hours worked (as high as 28 percent) while married men experienced a modest decline of 8 percent.

The Mowat Centre, however, takes care to highlight that the “Manitoba experiment revealed reductions as small as 3 percent and 1 percent respectively ... For proponents, sceptics, and agnostic program designers alike, it is essential to remember that the socioeconomic milieu in which these past results emerged (1960s and 1970s North America) was significantly different than that of today.” Societal and technological changes only add to the fodder justifying a retooled, basic income experiment set in the modern labour market.

One of the most prominent issues facing workers today is the proliferation of precarious employment and widespread automation. The rise of the automation is an especially serious challenge for workers trapped in low-income jobs. A Brookfield Institute study determined that 42 percent Canadian jobs are at “*high risk of automation in the next two decades.*”

Authors of the Mowat report explain that typically historical periods of intense technological disruption saw physical work commandeered by machines. This freed up workers to concentrate on more cognitively demanding jobs. The authors contrast this against today’s job market, where, in addition to globalization, the existential threat facing many workers is the prospect of replacement by artificial intelligence. The best illustration of this is the impending dislocation of truck, taxi, and bus drivers by autonomous vehicles. According to the conference board of Canada, “it is expected that 560,000 individuals working within the [Canadian] transport, truck, and courier service industries will be displaced, along with 50,000 taxi drivers and chauffeurs.”

An aspect of the Mowat Centre's assertion is problematic. There is scant evidence to suggest that the rise of smart technology will leave masses of workers unable to find new forms of work. The historical record clearly demonstrates that rather than destroying jobs, new technology often simply shifts employment to new and different sectors. However, if this dislocation were to come to fruition, it will pose a serious challenge for policy makers. The current coverage of our social safety net is highly fragmented, only providing benefits to a fraction of our most vulnerable citizens.

The report also goes on at length about how a guaranteed income could underwrite some of the risk associated with starting new business ventures. Basic income experiments in low and middle-income countries have clearly demonstrated how a basic income can stimulate significant levels of economic activity. The entitlement acts as a material support for those investing in themselves (through education) and their businesses. It can also act as seed money for new ventures. This is especially true for ventures in the early stages when entrepreneurs work to attract outside investment and generate cash flow.

The report's authors stress the need for Ontario's experiment to measure the potential for a basic income to foster greater entrepreneurship. This move may backfire. Employing tax revenue as seed money, for an area traditionally reserved for venture capital, would likely spawn a negative public perception. Moreover, the sums required to act as start-up capital in a developed economy would likely render the program's expense prohibitive.

These minor issues aside, the Mowat Centre's report offers a well thought out and widely applicable blueprint for any jurisdiction contemplating a basic income trial. Too often, it seems, policy makers' aversion to experimentation hobbles new policy research and development. Therefore, I must also commend the Government of Ontario's endeavour to experiment and promote evidence-based policy making.

Publication Source: https://mowatcentre.ca/wp-content/uploads/publications/126_pilot_lessons.pdf

ABOUT THE RESEARCH REVIEWER:



Maxwell Harrison is a lifelong resident of the Edmonton area. He attended the University of Alberta where he received his Bachelors of Science. Mr. Harrison has worked as a private consultant, with the Public Service, and as an environmental researcher. Maxwell is currently employed as an energy policy analyst. He is actively interested in social issues, politics and the overall civic life of his community.

REVIEWED BY JOHN KOLKMAN

This research paper with a provocative title is part of a series of articles compiled by the Institute for Research on Public Policy entitled *Income Inequality: The Canadian Story*. In this paper, the authors question what they term the most agreed upon policy response across the political spectrum, namely that investing in human capital (education) is an effective way to increase incomes and thereby reduce inequality.

Using data gleaned from the federal census and labour force surveys, the authors examine links between income and educational attainment during the time period from 1980 to 2013. During the first portion of this time period, the link between higher educational attainment and higher income held with university graduates having consistent and even growing wage differential compared to those less educated (high school graduates and below). Starting around the year 2000 until about 2004, the wage differential stabilized and then began to reverse around 2004.

This reversal of fortune for the highly educated was more pronounced among men than among women and more pronounced in the western provinces than in Ontario and Quebec. The authors point out that the narrowing of the wage differential in favour of those without university degrees coincided with a decade-long resource boom in which males especially could command good wages with lower levels of education. With the resource boom ending in 2014, it is possible that the wage differential in favour of the highly educated may begin to reassert itself.

The authors nevertheless maintain that the education premium may never reassert itself to the same extent it did in the last few decades of the twentieth century. One reason is the consistently higher educational attainment of Canadians. When relatively few Canadians had university degrees, those with them could command higher wages. When more Canadians have them, those with a university degree are not as highly valued relative to those without. The authors also point to a slowdown in the pace of innovation in the information technology revolution that drove wage growth in the last several decades of the 1900s as another possible cause for wage compression between the highly educated and less educated.

The authors use their hypothesis questioning the returns from higher levels of education to draw a number of implications for public policy going forward. They suggest a shift in public spending away from university and graduate level education and toward additional investment in apprenticeships and trades certificates.

While the research paper is certainly thought provoking, it cannot be assumed that the 2000 to 2013 trend will continue in the future. As the authors acknowledge, relatively high incomes for less educated workers may have been linked to a rather unprecedented resource and construction boom tied to high oil prices and relatively high prices for other natural resources during this time period. Like the demise of well-paying blue collar manufacturing jobs in the last several decades of the 1900s due to automation and off-shoring, it is no means certain that there will be a significant resurgence in blue collar jobs in resource sectors like oil and gas. The link between higher levels of education and higher incomes may still win the day in the long run.

Publication Source: <http://irpp.org/research-studies/aots5-foley-green/>

ABOUT THE RESEARCH REVIEWER:



After a decade as ESPC Research Coordinator, John Kolkman recently stepped back to a three-day per week position as a Research Associate. Coordinating ESPC volunteers and editing Research Updates are now among his responsibilities.

“Through our research, analysis, and engagement, we hope to create a community in which all people are full and valued participants.”

—The Edmonton Social Planning Council

ABOUT ESPC

The ESPC is an independent, non-profit, charitable organization. Our Focus is social research, particularly in the areas of low income and poverty.

We are dedicated to encouraging the adoption of equitable social policy, supporting the work of other organizations who are striving to improve the lives of Edmontonians, and educating the public regarding the social issues that impact them on a daily basis.

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THE RESEARCH UPDATE:

The Edmonton Social Planning Council, in collaboration with our volunteers, strive to provide stakeholders and community members with up-to-date reviews on recently published social research reports.

Interested in volunteering? Email johnk@edmontonsocialplanning.ca