

Introduction and Recent History

Edmonton has seen a dramatic increase in the rate of homelessness since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. As of December 2023, there are 2,987 people experiencing homelessness in Edmonton according to Homeward Trust's Homelessness By-Names List. Among this group of people, 57% (1,714) are provisionally accommodated, 17% (518) are staying in overnight shelters, while 22% (656) are living unsheltered (Homeward Trust, 2024).

As a result of this situation, more and more encampments, defined as "temporary outdoor campsites on public property or privately owned land" (Office of the Federal Housing Advocate, 2023) have been set up throughout the city among the unhoused population who do not use overnight shelters.

Prominent examples of encampments in recent years include Camp Pekiwewin in the Rosedale neighbourhood, which was temporarily set up in summer 2020 as "an anti-police violence, emergency relief and prayer camp with a harm reduction approach for house-less people sleeping rough" (Indigenous Climate Action, n.d.). Around this same time, another temporary encampment called the Peace Camp was

set up in the Old Strathcona area to raise awareness for supportive housing and the need for a safe supply of drugs to prevent overdoses. It voluntarily closed in fall 2020 when new shelter spaces opened (Omstead, 2020).

As long as there have been encampments, there has been resistance against them. The matter has continued to come up as encampments – both large and small – continue to proliferate not only in and around Edmonton's downtown core but also in other quadrants of the city, such as the west end and the south side (Parsons, 2024). The situation reached a fever pitch when the Edmonton Police Service targeted eight encampments in and around the inner city considered to be "high-risk" for closure through a series of actions between December 2023 and January 2024.

This fACT Sheet takes a human-rights approach to understanding encampments, and aims to provide context to the houselessness situation, why encampments form even if shelter spaces are available, and suggests ways forward that prioritize the well-being and dignity of these marginalized groups.

Edmonton's Response to Encampments and the Resulting Fallout

When it comes to responding to the presence of encampments on public land, the City of Edmonton has two different teams to deal with encampments.

Encampments deemed to be low-risk or medium-risk are dealt with by encampment response teams (ERT) comprised of representatives from the City of Edmonton, Homeward Trust, Boyle Street Community Services, Bissell Centre, and the Edmonton Police Service. Social agencies work to connect people living in camps with alternative shelter and housing before city crews remove camps.

Encampments deemed to be high-risk are dealt with by joint operations committee (JOC) comprised of city park ranger peace officers and the police. Their goal is to dismantle camps in one to three days. Encampments that are considered high-risk are graded on a number of criteria, which includes fire risks, number of people and structures and how long it has been established (camps with six or more people, eight or more structures, and that remain for 26 days or longer can be deemed high-risk), ability of residents to protect themselves from the elements, crime and gang violence, as well as

sanitation issues (Boothby, 2023).

Under this context, eight encampments identified as “high-risk” were originally slated to be cleared in the following areas beginning December 18, 2023 (Edmonton Coalition on Housing and Homelessness, 2023):

- Herb Jamieson Centre
- Bissell Centre
- Hope Mission
- 95 Street & 101A Avenue
- 94 Street & 106 Avenue
- 95 Street & 105A Avenue (west of Bottle Depot)
- Dawson Ravine
- Kinnard Ravine

A court challenge to these actions from the Coalition for Justice and Human Rights resulted in a delay to the closure of these encampments and an interim court order was put in place (Boothby, 2023a). It stipulated that closure of encampments can happen under the condition of 48-hour notice being given to encampment residents and relevant social agencies, sufficient shelter space available, and if the encampment meets the criteria for high-risk based on the criteria described above. The interim court order was put into place until January 11, 2024 and has subsequently been extended until January 16th when the Coalition will challenge the City of Edmonton’s encampment closure

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policies and its constitutionality in court (Snowdon and Riebe, 2024). The Coalition's lawsuit ended up being dismissed in court on the rationale that the Coalition does not have a genuine stake in the outcome ((Boothby, 2024).

Removal of the eight encampments took place under the conditions of the interim court order between December 29, 2023 and January 10, 2024 (Snowdon, 2024). During this time, many activists and advocates were at these sites to act as non-intervening witnesses to document what took place and tell others about what they saw (Edmonton Coalition on Housing and Homelessness, 2023a). Shutdown of the eighth and final encampment located at 95 Street and 101A Avenue was perhaps the most contentious, which was met with strong resistance from the encampment residents as many of them refused to leave (Snowdon and Riebe, 2024a). Outcry from the way it was handled, which included the arrest of three people (one of them being award-winning Indigenous journalist Brandi Morin) (Carmichael, 2024) has prompted Edmonton mayor Amarjeet Sohi to seek to declare a state of housing and homelessness emergency at a special city council meeting on January 15, 2024 (Parsons and Snowdon, 2024). The mayor cited concern that some of the actions taken in the response to encampments may not be in line with the city's commitment to truth and reconciliation

with Indigenous communities (the majority of the encampment residents are Indigenous). The passing of this motion would result in the city requesting a meeting with the city's housing counterparts within federal, provincial, and Treaty 6 governments to meaningfully address the situation.

Since the closure of these encampments, the provincial government set up a new navigation and support centre for people displaced by their removal. Located in the Karis Centre run by the Hope Mission, residents of the closed encampments will be offered help with housing, health care, financial supports, addiction treatment, and mental health services (Bellefontaine, 2024).

A Human Rights Approach

Canada, in its National Housing Strategy, recognizes housing as a human right. Yet this right is not afforded to everyone. Encampments are the result of various levels of government within Canada failing to meet their obligations to realize this right. They are a violation of the right to housing, and at the same time, an attempt of people experiencing homelessness to claim that right for themselves (Flynn et al., 2022).

What we are seeing today is not unique; ticketing, arrest, forced eviction, and the

destruction of tents and personal property are widespread responses to encampments throughout Canada. The criminalization of homelessness in general, and direct enforcement against encampments, pushes people experiencing homelessness away from community and services that would help them and further entrenches their homelessness (Flynn et al., 2022).

Encampments are not a solution to homelessness. Access to adequate, affordable housing that meets people's needs is. In the meantime, it is critical that governments uphold the basic human rights and dignity of encampment residents while they wait (Farha & Schwan, 2020). The UN Special rapporteur on the right to housing outlines eight Principles to guide governments and other stakeholders in adopting a rights-based response to encampments. These Principles are as follows:

1. Recognize residents of homeless encampments as rights holders. All government action with respect to encampments should uphold said human rights and dignity.
2. Meaningful engagements and effective participation of homeless encampment residents. This means residents are entitled to meaningful participation in the design and implementation of policies,

programs, and practices that affect them.

3. Prohibit forced evictions of encampments. Under international human rights law, governments are not permitted to destroy people's homes, even if those homes are established without legal authority.
4. Explore all viable alternatives to eviction. Governments may not remove residents from encampments without meaningfully engaging with them and identifying alternative places to live that are acceptable to them.
5. Ensure that relocation is human rights compliant. Governments must ensure that, when residents are moved, they are provided with adequate alternative housing with all necessary amenities. Relocation cannot result in the continuation or exacerbation of homelessness, or fracture families or partnerships.
6. Ensure encampments meet basic needs to residents consistent with human rights. This includes access to: safe and clean drinking water, hygiene and sanitation facilities, resources and support to ensure fire safety, waste management systems, social supports and services, and guarantee of personal safety of residents, facilities and resources that support food safety, resources to support harm

reduction, and rodent and pest prevention.

7. Ensure human rights-based goals and outcomes, and the preservation of dignity for homeless encampment residents. This means that Canadian governments must prioritize moving towards the full enjoyment of the right to housing for encampment residents.

8. Respect, protect, and fulfill the distinct rights of Indigenous Peoples in all engagements with homeless encampments. Government must recognize the distinct relationship that Indigenous Peoples have to their lands and territories, and their right to construct shelter in ways that are culturally, historically, and spiritually significant. Governments must recognize their right to self-determination and self-governance, and meaningfully consult with Indigenous residents concerning any decision that affects them (Farha & Shwan, 2020).

Why do People Stay in Encampments?

While encampments are often depicted as a space of social disorder and a danger to the larger community (Canadian Press, 2024), residents find a lot of value within them. Encampments can be spaces of mutual aid, residents work together to

meet their basic needs and share resources with one another. For those who use drugs, other residents can monitor them and intervene in the case of a drug poisoning. There is strength in numbers and encampments can offer protection. There can be a strong sense of community within encampments, and residents develop supportive relationships with one another. Residents experience discrimination and stigmatization from members of the general public. Within encampments, they can find solidarity. Lastly, encampments give a sense of autonomy to a group of people who often have that stripped away (Boucher et.al, 2022).

Encampments may also support residents in improving their lives in a way that works for them. Shelters are only open over certain hours, forcing people to pack their stuff up and move every day. Encampments, alternatively, allow residents to stay in one space for extended periods of time. This creates a sense of stability that allows individuals to pursue their larger goals (Olson & Pauly, 2023; Tran, 2023).

Aside from the positive aspects of encampments, there are several shortcomings of shelters. Many people do not feel safe in shelters, particularly women and 2SLGBTQ+ people. Shelters are loud, overcrowded, and lack privacy,

making it hard for people to feel comfortable enough to sleep (Tran, 2023; MAPS, 2023). Shelters have been described as feeling like “jail,” which is triggering for individuals with past experiences of institutionalization and overall, an unpleasant environment to be in. Staff have been described as being invasive, inexperienced, and patronizing, and residents are subject to intense monitoring and surveillance. Shelters have a lot of rules, and often these rules feel arbitrary (Olson & Pauly, 2023). Overall, shelters take away people's autonomy and dignity.

Being removed from encampments has serious mental and material consequences on residents. When people are moved, they are often forced to leave behind items, which are then thrown out. Stories have been shared of residents losing important documents, identification, and medications. People are often forced to move further away from the services they rely on. In addition, it becomes harder for outreach workers to find people once they have been moved. This can result in the loss of opportunities. Residents may become separated from community and loved ones. Ultimately, being removed seriously harms residents' dignity (MAPS, 2023).

Solutions

Homelessness in general can be attributed to three broad and interconnected structural trends: divestments in affordable housing, precarious labour and inadequate incomes, and the erosion of the social safety net. These issues are compounded by multiple forms of discrimination, including sexism, racism, and classism, as well as the ongoing effects of colonialism (Flynn et al., 2023; Olson & Pauly, 2023). Homelessness is the result of policy choices, and the various levels of government in Canada need to do better.

Creating more shelter beds is not the solution, and simply sending residents to shelters is not human rights compliant. The 8 principles listed above assert the importance of meaningful participation of homelessness encampment residents and allowing them to have autonomy over what happens to them (Farha & Schwan, 2020; Flynn et al., 2022). As this fACT sheet has illustrated, many people experiencing homelessness do not want to access shelters and may receive many mental and material benefits from living in encampments.

Ultimately, we need more affordable housing. In Edmonton, there are over 360,000 homes, but fewer than 15,000 affordable and social housing units.



Furthermore, approximately 49,000 Edmonton households experience core housing need (City of Edmonton, 2022). The solution to encampments is to get residents into permanent, affordable housing that meets their needs (Farha & Schwan, 2020), but there simply is not enough of this. Governments need to invest in more affordable housing, repair the social safety net, and implement policies to end homelessness. This is a large ask, and until these things are achieved, it is critical that governments uphold the basic human rights and dignity of encampment residents and do what they can to improve their living conditions (Farha & Shwan, 2020).





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