



October 26th 2021 Webinar: COVID-19 Subproject Update

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Homelessness is a chronic and longstanding issue in northern Manitoba, and COVID-19 created additional challenges for the sustainability of housing supports. This research sought to understand the impact of COVID-19 on housing services in Thompson, Manitoba, and capture the voices and ideas of service providers and individuals with lived experience. Quantitative and qualitative methods were used, including Photovoice with participants staying in the YWCA SHIPP program.

Results showed that during the pandemic, there were some creative strategies for addressing homelessness, including the SHIPP program run by the YWCA, the use of hotel rooms for 14-day isolation services, and the development of a forthcoming managed alcohol program. There is a desire for services not to return to how they were before the pandemic. However, COVID-19 also caused new stresses and anxieties for both staff and clients, and pandemic protocols often overrode other needs and priorities. Personnel had to take on new roles without adequate training, resulting in a high turnover of frontline staff in some agencies. There were fewer in-person services being provided, and life on the streets became more precarious because of reduced resources, a lack of public washrooms, and the closure of malls and other buildings.

Themes that emerged from the Photovoice series included barriers to meeting basic needs, increased surveillance and violence in the community, limited services and resources, difficulties with recovery and looking to the future, and difficulty accessing social and family networks. There were feelings of isolation due to public health measures that limited people's ability to spend time with others.

Future needs include mapping community services, policies and interventions for preventing homelessness, and a greater focus on the experiences of people living in housing need or experiencing homelessness. There is also a need for more funding to run programs, including adequate training and pay for frontline staff.

Discussion Points

Limited access to technologies, especially cellphones, creates barriers. Many programs give out a phone number to call to access a service, especially during the pandemic when there were restrictions on entering buildings. Individuals may not be able to benefit from a service at all if they don't have a cellphone. The inability to meet in buildings also contributed to feelings of isolation, individuals could not connect with each other because there was no ability to gather.

It would be beneficial to expand this project, particularly the Photovoice component, to other places in Canada. How can we use COVID-19 strategically to talk about these issues that existed before the pandemic but are now being highlighted? Photovoice offers an opportunity to



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follow COVID-19 research restrictions, because individuals are given the ability to document their own experiences with limited need for in-person interactions between researchers and participants.

In Thompson and across Canada, programs and services are now losing their COVID-19 funding. Many communities received additional funds during the pandemic for the development of new and/or expanded services for people experiencing homelessness. The YWCA SHIPP program received funding for 16 beds through short-term pandemic funding. Pandemic funding is now ending, despite outbreaks still occurring in many northern communities and despite there still being great need for these services. As a country, there must be greater conversation about (a) what has been learned from the pandemic about what kinds of services are working for people, and (b) permanent social housing as a part of Canadian society.