

COVID-19

and Homelessness:

What are the implications for Canada?

Stephen Gaetz

President, Canadian Observatory on Homelessness

Professor, Faculty of Education, York University, Toronto Canada

@SteveGaetz



Introduction

About Canada



- Population: 37M
- Complex Federal model
- 230k experience homeless annually, 35-40k on a given night
- Covid-19: 143,000 cases
9217 Deaths

OVERVIEW

- **Federal Government Response**
 - **Municipalities and Communities respond**
 - **On the ground – Challenges in providing supports**
 - **What's next?**

Part 1

Federal Response

Government responses to homelessness and Housing Precarity during COVID-19

- Income supports (CERB)
- Increased Federal investment in supports for emergency services for the homelessness sector (\$157.5M)
- Moratorium on evictions

High level of Federal and Provincial/Territorial cooperation



Federal government directives support prevention

“Keeping people housed is a key way to limit the spread of COVID-19 as people need to have a secure place to self-isolate. To help people who are at imminent risk of homelessness maintain their housing, communities may wish to use Reaching Home funds to, for example:

- provide short-term financial assistance (for example, rent arrears and utility deposits)
- deliver in-kind support (for example, grocery cards, personal hygiene products, gift cards), and
- utilize non-financial tools such as landlord-tenant mediation, problem solving with neighbours, and helping individuals or families with budgeting

Individuals being discharged from public institutions (for example, corrections, hospitals), where conditions may be crowded, may present an elevated risk of spreading COVID-19. In these instances, Reaching Home funds could be used to, for example:

- help individuals exiting institutions transition directly to housing and support them in maintaining housing so that they do not need to access a shelter

Tuesday announcement:



Canada announces new Rapid Housing Initiative

Monday, September 21, 2020

- \$1 billion **Rapid Housing Initiative** will cover the construction of modular housing, as well as the acquisition of land, and the conversion of existing buildings to affordable housing.
- \$236.7 million through Reaching Home: **Canada's Homelessness Strategy** to help extend and expand the emergency response to the COVID-19 outbreak.

Part 2

Municipalities and Communities respond

Challenges

**Institutional
response to
homelessness
produces
vulnerability**



Underlying assumptions of pandemic responses can lead to actions that may not be helpful for homeless populations



KNOW WHAT TO DO TO FIGHT THE H1N1 FLU VIRUS (HUMAN SWINE FLU)

SAVEZ-VOUS QUOI FAIRE CONTRE LE VIRUS H1N1 (GRIPPE PORCINE CHEZ L'ÊTRE HUMAIN)



FLU SYMPTOMS ARE: cough and fever, runny nose, sore throat, body aches, fatigue and lack of appetite

SYMPTÔMES DE LA GRIPPE : toux et fièvre, nez qui coule, maux de gorge, douleurs musculaires, fatigue et un manque d'appétit

Protect yourself and others:

- Wash your hands often and thoroughly in warm, soapy water or use hand sanitizer
- Cough and sneeze in your arm, not your hand
- Keep common surfaces and items clean and disinfected
- Stay home if you're sick. Contact a health care provider if your symptoms worsen

Protégez-vous et les autres en suivant ces recommandations :

- Lavez-vous fréquemment et soigneusement les mains au savon et à l'eau chaude ou utilisez un gel antiseptique pour les mains
- Toussez ou éternuez dans votre bras plutôt que dans votre main
- Nettoyez et désinfectez les surfaces et les articles que vous partagez avec d'autres personnes
- Restez à la maison si vous êtes malade. Consultez un fournisseur de soins de santé si vos symptômes s'aggravent

KNOWLEDGE IS YOUR BEST DEFENCE

S'INFORMER, C'EST SE PROTÉGER

For more information:
www.fightflu.ca
1-800-454-8302
TTY 1-800-465-7735

Pour en savoir plus :
www.combattezlagrippe.ca
1-800-454-8302
ATS 1-800-465-7735

 Public Health Agency of Canada Agence de la santé publique du Canada

Significant increase in number of encampments in Canada



BUT

While the prevalence rate of Covid 19 infections
■ ■ ■ amongst populations experiencing homelessness
has been higher than the Canadian average, we
have not seen major outbreaks sweeping through
the shelter sector. Yet.

At the
community
level:

INNOVATION
!





With very little opportunity for planning and preparation, communities have implemented some innovative strategies

- Some organizations moved quickly to house all of the residents of their shelter
- Major cities have moved vulnerable people experiencing homelessness into hotels
- Many shelters have made efforts to arrange their space to enhance social distancing.
- This City of Toronto has committed to building 1000 units of Permanent Supportive Housing in one year!



The City of Toronto response

- **Current Context**

- Toronto has the largest homeless population in Canada
- It has the largest shelter system, with 75 shelter/respice sites sheltering approximately 7,000 people every night
- The City has implemented an inter-governmental and sectoral response to COVID-19 involving the City, provincial/federal government, provincial healthcare sector, and community non-profit sector



The City of Toronto response

Risk mitigation

- Enhanced Infection Prevention and Control (IPAC) guidance
- Screening and testing for COVID-1
- Isolation programs
- Recovery programs
- Physical distancing in the shelter system
- Opened 33 new temporary facilities



The City of Toronto response

Rehousing

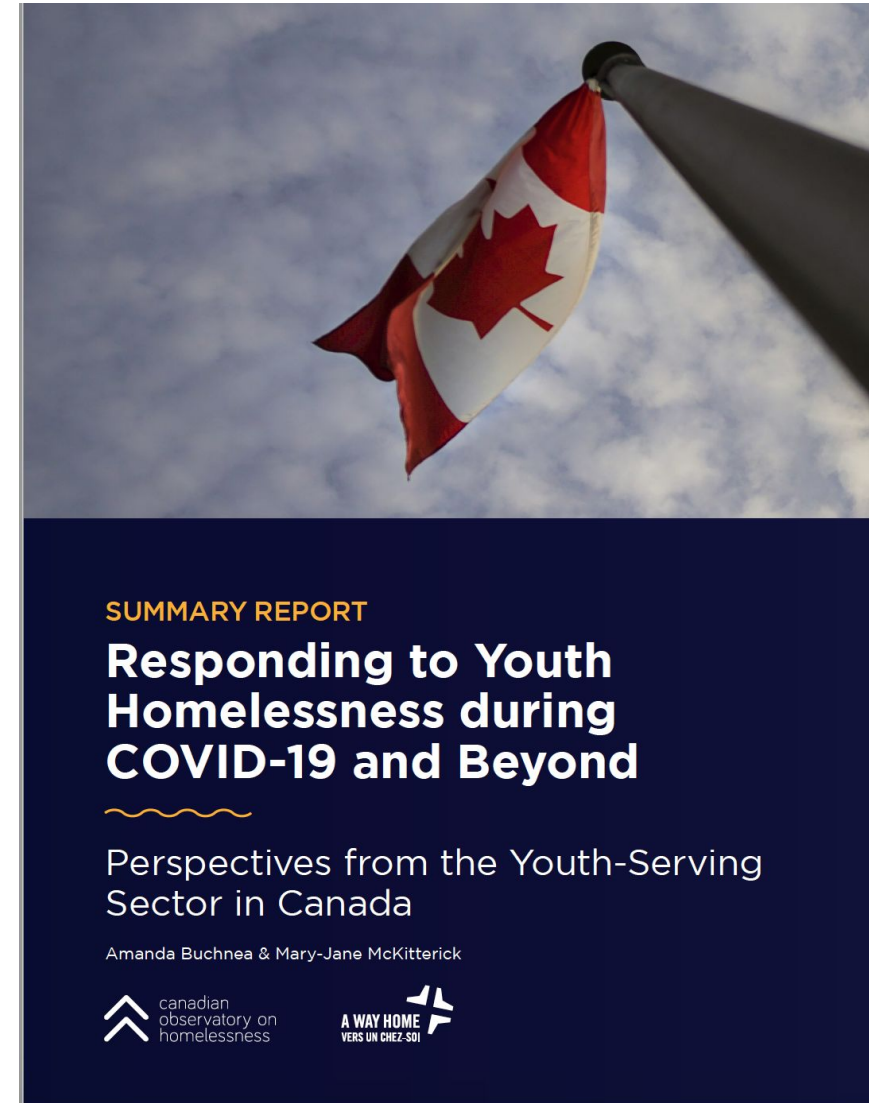
To date, the City has moved more than 3,500 people into temporary community centre programs, hotels, and interim and permanent housing to achieve physical distancing in our shelter system. This includes:

- More than 1,900 clients moved for physical distancing into 18 hotel sites
- More than 550 spaces created in 14 community centres and other sites that have opened as temporary shelter/respice sites for physical distancing
- More than 500 people have been moved from encampments into interim housing in apartments
- More than 1300 people moved into housing through the Rapid Access to Housing Initiative, housing allowances, and rent-geared-to income housing.

Part 3

**On the ground:
Challenges in
providing supports**

Consultations with the Homelessness Sector



PART 1: HOW COVID-19 IS AFFECTING YOUNG PEOPLE SERVED BY THE SECTOR

Side Effects of the COVID-19 Response



Staying home and self-isolating when sick is more feasible for those that have a stable and safe place to live, often with higher levels of education and jobs with higher earnings.³

Social/physical distancing is more challenging for those living in congregate housing/shelter spaces.

Washing your hands frequently requires reliable access to washrooms and sanitation supplies.

Side Effects of the COVID-19 Response



Many youth have experienced social isolation as a result of disconnection from family and natural supports, services and community.

Drop-Ins, Day Programs shut down, leading to more isolation and difficulties in accessing supports

Inadequate income – traditional approaches to making money not viable

Accessing government benefits challenging – For instance, to obtain CERB people must have worked in the formal economy in the past 12 months

Providing Harm Reduction supports particularly challenging

Congregating in public spaces – on the streets or in parks - is prohibited, but for many youth experiencing homelessness, there is no choice

Congregating in public spaces – on the streets or in parks - is prohibited, but for many youth experiencing homelessness, there is no choice. One consequence is the accumulation of tickets.

Case Management & Connection to Family & Culture

97% of respondents rated youth disengaging or going underground and being unable to reach them very or somewhat challenging (47% and 50%, respectively)

92% of respondents rated supporting youth to stay connected with family and natural supports very or somewhat challenging (30% and 62%, respectively)

81% of respondents rated connecting to cultural supports very or somewhat challenging (30% and 51%, respectively)

Implications & Concerns for the Well-Being of Young People



Socioemotional Well-Being, Mental Health & Substance Use

“...drug use has increased and mental health needs have been complex to assess. Need to create a sense of purpose for youth within their community, by engaging with the community to strengthen empathy and opportunities.”

Evictions Continue In Spite of Moratorium

A striking finding in our survey was that one third (33%) of respondents noted 'eviction prevention' as one of their top challenges for keeping youth stably housed during the pandemic.

PART 2: **SERVICE DELIVERY ADAPTATIONS**

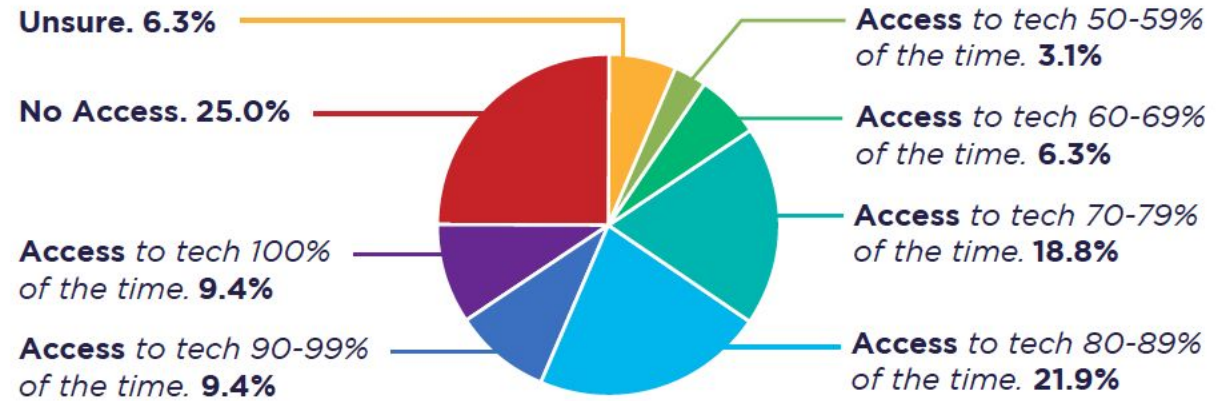
Facilitating contact and engagement through technology



BUT



Do youth have access to technology and if so, what percentage?

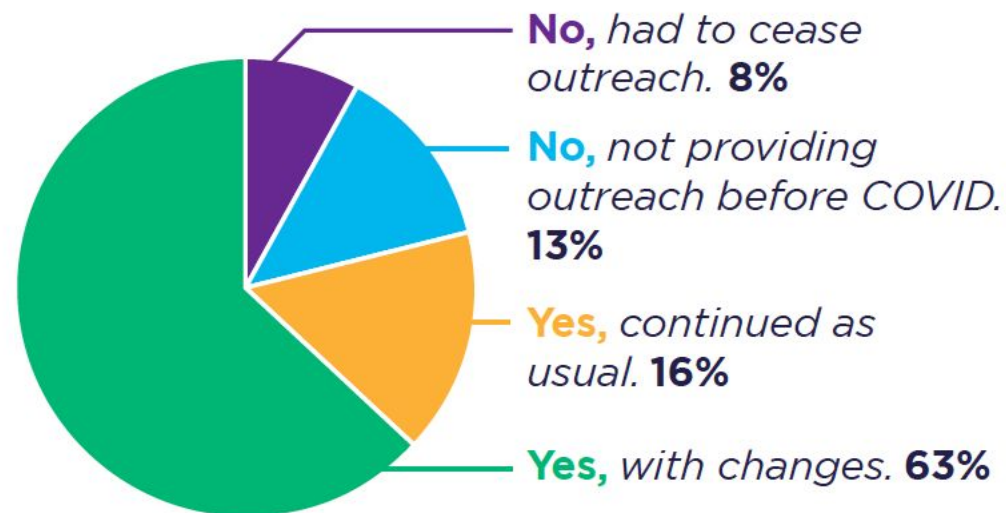


“They still have access to supports but the youth are not as interested in engaging in supports that aren’t face-to-face (we don’t yet have webcams in place in all residential programs). Some youth have tried to attend virtual AA meetings, but it has been a flop because of technical issues etc”

| Outreach & Other Services

In the previous survey, respondents were asked about whether they were providing outreach services. The second survey attempted to dig deeper into what outreach services were being provided, the challenges facing organizations, and adaptations they were making.

Providing Outreach Services During COVID-19 (n=38)



For those continuing to do outreach, services included:

- *Offering no-contact drop-offs of groceries, cheques etc.*
- *Meeting face-to-face for crisis support, rehabilitation and addiction services, or weekly house check-ins*
- *Connecting youth with housing supports, including access to isolation centres, physically-distanced or virtual apartment viewings*
- *Assisting youth to identify personal goals, access educational resources/opportunities, employment services and training, life skills training, safety planning, health/mental health, legal or other community services*
- *Supporting access to funding*
- *Providing access to food, clothing & showers for youth living on the streets*
- *Providing support for basic needs etc. to youth on housing waitlists*

Part 4

**What happens
next?**

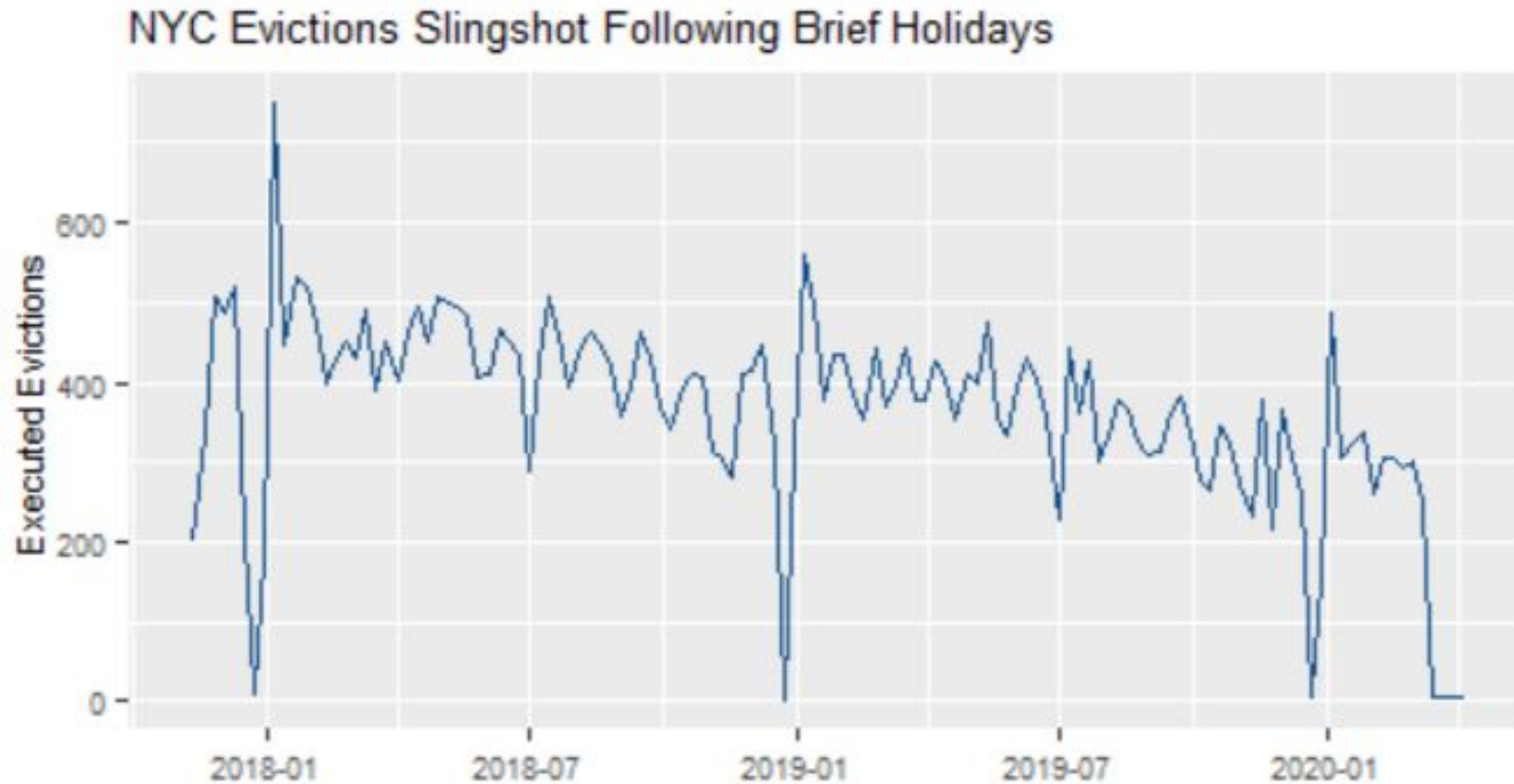
Recovery

It will be a slow road to recovery.

What will not be helpful

- Premature cut in income supports
- Rise in evictions
- Austerity and cutbacks, particularly in terms of housing
- Expansion of the financialization of the housing market
- Return to 'business as usual' in our response to homelessness
- We do not adequately prepare for subsequent waves
- Drastic rise in homelessness because of all of the above

Unintended Consequences: Evictions

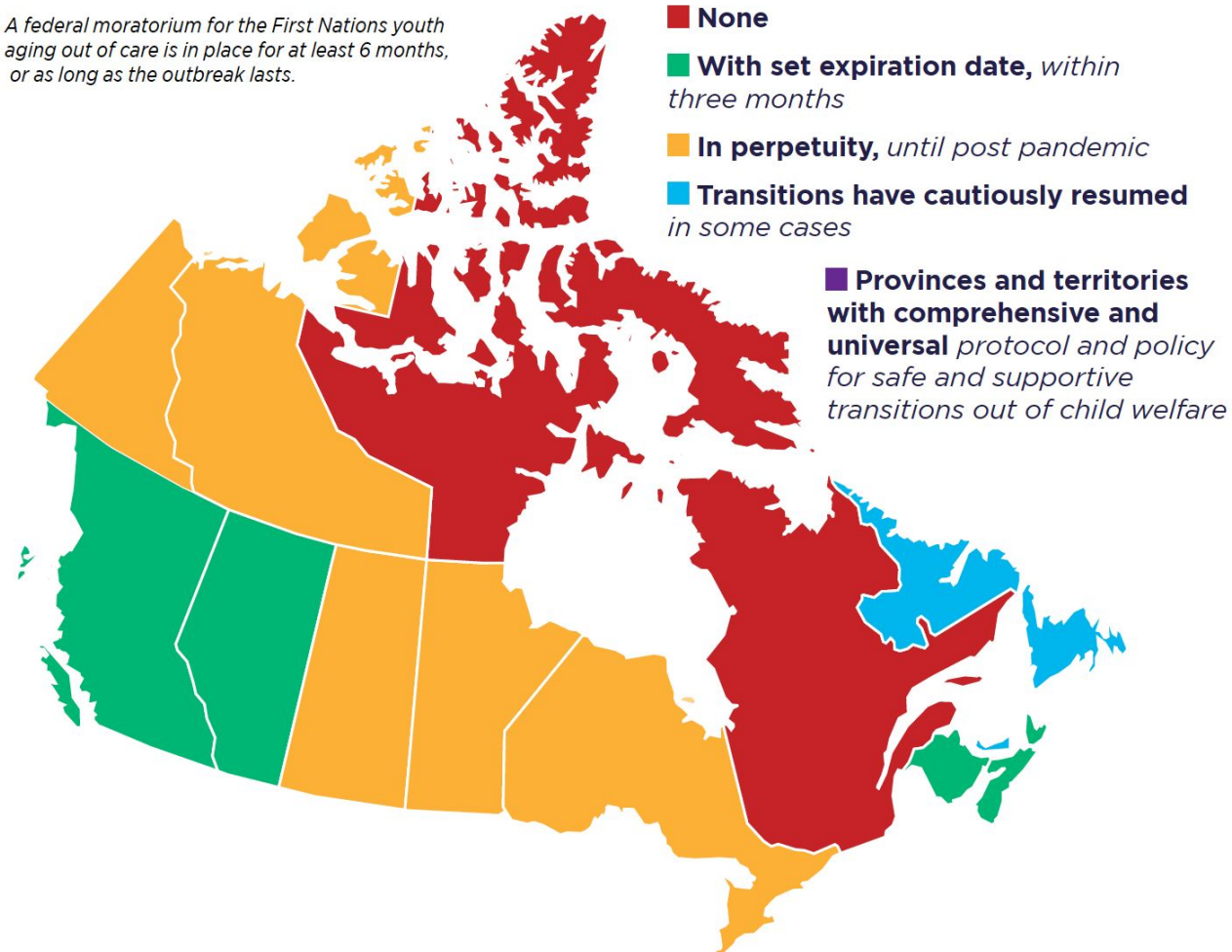


Patrick Fowler, Washington University, St. Louis

Unintended Consequences: Transitions from Care

Status of exits from care moratoria by province/territory

A federal moratorium for the First Nations youth aging out of care is in place for at least 6 months, or as long as the outbreak lasts.



Recovery

OPPORTUNITY

- COVID-19 has highlighted the folly of responding to homelessness by basically warehousing people.
- The government response perhaps opens the door to unconventional policy-making, and there may be public support for this.
- Planning for recovery is already happening.

Recovery

OPPORTUNITY

- As part of an infrastructure spending strategy, front load investments in the building and operation of ***affordable housing*** and permanent supportive housing.

Recovery

OPPORTUNITY

- Work with provinces and territories to implement a ***Guaranteed Basic Income***.

Recovery

OPPORTUNITY

- Implement measures to curtail the *Financialization of the Housing Market*

Recovery

OPPORTUNITY

- Aggressively address housing precarity and homelessness amongst *Indigenous peoples*.

Recovery

OPPORTUNITY

- Completely retool the response to homelessness in Canada to focus more on PREVENTION!.

Responding to homelessness in Canada





QUESTION!

What if we responded to the *pandemic* in a way similar to how we respond to homelessness?

A stylized illustration of a diverse crowd of people. The individuals are depicted from the chest up, wearing various colored shirts (blue, black, light blue, pink) and all wearing yellow face masks. The background is a solid light pink color. The crowd is dense, with people of different ethnicities and hairstyles visible.

We don't do we?

Instead, we focus on:

- Wearing masks
- Hygiene
- Social distancing
- Isolation
- Strategic closing of services



Homelessness

as a

PANDEMIC

Transforming our response to homelessness



**Questions
or
comments?**

