

An Historical Analysis of Canada's National Homelessness Programs: Are we making progress on realizing the right to housing?

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Abstract

Canada committed to the right to housing through the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in 1976 and subsequently through the National Housing Strategy Act in 2019. However, an 88% increase in unsheltered homelessness between 2018-2022 suggests that Canada is failing to realize the progressive right to housing via federal policy and programming alone. In this article, we review Canada's successive national homelessness initiatives—especially the Homelessness Partnership Strategy and Reaching Home and their central interventions, Housing First and Coordinated Access. Our aim is to understand why current federal policy and programmatic infrastructure have not advanced the right to housing. To the existing body of scholarship, our work offers an analysis of Canada's national homelessness policy history, providing a critical assessment of the shift to data-driven governance as this move intersects with the adoption of legislative commitments to the progressive realization of the right to housing.

Keywords: homelessness, right to housing, housing policy, affordable housing, federal homelessness policy

Résumé

Le Canada s'est engagé à garantir le droit au logement par le Pacte international relatif aux droits économiques, sociaux et culturels en 1976 et ensuite par la Loi sur la stratégie nationale sur le logement en 2019. Néanmoins, l'augmentation de 88 % du nombre de personnes en situation d'itinérance à l'extérieur des refuges, entre 2018 et 2022, indique que le Canada ne parvient pas à concrétiser pleinement ce droit au logement par le seul biais des politiques et des programmes fédéraux. Dans cet article, nous analysons les initiatives nationales successives du Canada quant à l'itinérance, notamment la stratégie canadienne de lutte contre l'itinérance et le programme Vers un chez-soi, ainsi que leurs interventions principales : Logement d'abord et Accès coordonné. Nous visons à comprendre les raisons pour lesquelles les politiques et les programmes fédéraux existants n'ont pas permis de faire progresser le droit au logement. Notre travail s'ajoute à de nombreuses études sur ce sujet et offre une analyse historique des politiques de lutte contre l'itinérance au Canada, en proposant une évaluation critique du glissement vers une gouvernance fondée sur des données, notamment en lien avec l'adoption d'engagements législatifs visant à la concrétisation progressive du droit au logement.

Mots clés : itinérance, droit au logement, politique de logement, logements sociaux, politique fédérale de lutte contre l'itinérance

Introduction: 25 Years of National Homelessness Programming

Canada first committed to the right to housing in 1976 through the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (Canadian Human Rights Commission, 2023). However, the mid-1990s termination of affordable housing investments by the federal government—and downloading of this responsibility to the provinces, many of whom have since transferred the housing and homelessness portfolio to municipalities—was a key contributor in spurring a crisis of homelessness in Canada (Canadian Centre for Housing Rights, 2022; Doberstein & Smith, 2015; National Housing Council, 2023; Whitzman, 2023). More recently, the federal government has renewed its commitment to the right to housing through the National Housing Strategy (NHS) in 2017 and the National Housing Strategy Act in 2019. Despite these commitments and 25 years of national homelessness programs, homelessness shows no signs of slowing down in this country. This article seeks to understand why.

Although no single unified process exists for measuring homelessness across Canada (Whitzman, 2023), it has clearly been on the rise for decades (Gaetz, DeJ, Richter, & Redman, 2016; Infrastructure Canada, 2023b; Whitzman, 2023). In one enumeration process, called the Point-in-Time (PiT) Count, 67 communities and regions gathered data regarding people experiencing homelessness in both 2018 and 2020-22 (Infrastructure Canada, 2023d). Over this timespan, the PiT revealed a 20% increase in people living in homelessness, an 88% increase in people living unsheltered, and a 9% increase in people experiencing chronic homelessness (Infrastructure Canada, 2023d). These figures, in addition to the proliferation of encampments, visibility of people living unsheltered, and overcrowding in shelters, all point to a rise in homelessness in recent years (Chan McNally, 2023; Lee, 2022; Infrastructure Canada, 2023b; Infrastructure Canada, 2023d; Office of the Federal Housing Advocate, 2024; Mitchell & LeBel, 2023)—and Canada's consequent failure to meet its right-to-housing commitments.

In 1999, the federal government implemented the National Homelessness Initiative (NHI), the first of three national programs to address homelessness in communities across the country. NHI focused on understanding the scope of homelessness nationally and supporting emergency shelters. NHI was later renewed as the Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS) which operated from 2006 to 2018. Starting in 2014, HPS required communities to set targets for utilizing Housing First (HF). This model prioritizes helping people move directly from homelessness into long-term and stable housing while offering, but not requiring people to engage with, supports and services (Homeless Hub, 2021). In 2019, HPS was redesigned and launched in its current iteration, Reaching Home. Today Reaching Home supports the National Housing Strategy announced in 2017 and encourages, but does not mandate, an HF approach. Rather, to access funds through Reaching Home, communities must develop and implement Coordinated Access (CA), a service prioritization model focused on providing unhoused people with housing through four stages: access points, community-wide common assessment, prioritization, and referral/matching people with housing resources (Infrastructure Canada, 2023c).

Our research team's 2021-23 unprecedented municipal-level exploratory investigation of the implementation of one community's CA system found CA to be ineffective as an approach to housing people who are homeless (Nichols & Martin, 2024; Martin & Nichols, 2023). From that study, we turned to academic and policy literature to understand how CA had come to be federally adopted as the approach of choice, effectively overshadowing HF. The scant evidence to support CA's effectiveness in our own community and in the homelessness literature (Ecker et al., 2022) prompted us to conduct this historical review of Canada's three successive national homelessness programs. Within the constraints of this paper, we were unable to review all three programs, so we chose to focus on the two most recent ones. We were particularly curious about the shifting orientation from the Homelessness Partnering Strategy (2006-2016) to Reaching Home (2017-present) that moved from prioritizing an evidence-based intervention to a data-driven service prioritization model. While the former orients communities to use specific interventions to effectively *resolve* homelessness for specific populations, the latter orients communities to use structured decision-making tools to allocate resources to efficiently *manage* the scale of local homelessness. We explore how these logics intersect with other dominant policy narratives such as the progressive realization of the right to housing. We set out to understand how evidence has been operationalized in the pursuit of these policy reforms, and why the current federal policy and programmatic infrastructure has failed to advance the right to housing by reducing or ending homelessness.

In this article, we describe an historical analysis of homelessness policy-making in Canada to make sense of the current federal response to homelessness. We document and assess the progression of federal responses to homelessness from HPS to Reaching Home, and specifically from the state prioritization of Housing First to Coordinated Access. We begin with a brief overview of our methodology, then describe government accounts of the two more recent national homelessness programs, HPS and Reaching Home, considering each in terms of its demonstrated orientation to evidence, effectiveness in reducing homelessness, and adherence to the principles of the right to housing. To the existing body of scholarship, our work offers an analysis of Canada's national homelessness policy history, providing a critical assessment of the shift from evidence-based policy-making to data-driven governance in light of the adoption of national legislative commitments to the progressive realization of the right to housing.

Methodology

This article emerged from our team's research regarding what was working and not working in one community's homelessness response system. That initial study involved interviews with 48 local service users and 42 local service providers as well as a scan of the local service response. Finding Coordinated Access in this community to be largely ineffective in housing unhoused people, we sought out empirical support for the usage of CA's components as well as CA as a whole. When we found little evidence in the literature, we became curious about the history of national homelessness programs that have led up to the federal institution of CA.

We subsequently embarked on an historical analysis of Canada’s three successive national homelessness programs, centring on the most recent two, HPS and Reaching Home, for this article. For this analysis, we drew primarily on the programs’ evaluations. For HPS, these include: the HPS summative evaluation (ESDC, 2014) of the program’s “relevance and performance” (p. 1) from 2007 to 2011; the Employment and Social Development Canada¹ (ESDC, 2018c) evaluation of the implementation of HPS; and the Advisory Committee on Homelessness final report (ESDC, 2018a). This third report made recommendations based on the National Housing Strategy engagement process and consultations with individuals, experts, and communities across Canada regarding HPS. For Reaching Home, we considered the ESDC (2023) evaluation of Reaching Home focused on “the program design, implementation, and progress towards the expected outcomes” from 2019 to 2021 (ESDC, 2023, p. 2). Finally, we drew on the Office of the Auditor General of Canada (2022) evaluation of the impact that ESDC, Infrastructure Canada, and CMHC (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation) initiatives have had on addressing chronic homelessness from November 2017 to March 2022.

We proceeded to consider both HPS and Reaching Home in terms of each one’s orientation to evidence, demonstrated effectiveness, and adherence to the principles of the right to housing. We define evidence as publicly attainable information collected from transparent and legitimate sources. While we recognize that both quality and appropriateness of housing is key to people’s well-being, for the purposes of this article, we consider program effectiveness to simply mean the reduction of the number of people experiencing homelessness. And we assessed alignment with the right to housing as demonstrated through the integration of the principles of non-discrimination, inclusion, participation and accountability, as set out in the NHS Act (Housing, Infrastructure, and Communities Canada, 2025a).

The Right to Housing

Throughout this work, we have applied a right-to-housing lens which the United Nations broadly defines as “the right to live somewhere in security, peace and dignity” (United Nations, 2023, para. 11). A place to live for each person must also be safe, accessible, and appropriate to the person (The National Right to Housing Network, 2023). This right includes the entitlement to “equal and non-discriminatory access to adequate housing” (United Nations, 2023, para. 13). It also includes recognizing and mobilizing the agency of people who best understand their own circumstances of homelessness and housing insecurity as “*active subjects*” instead of programme recipients (United Nations General Assembly, 2018, p. 4). Further, a commitment to people’s agency as rights-holders can be seen in the rights to choose where one lives (United Nations, 2014, p. 3) and to engage in decisions affecting housing at local and national levels (United

¹ Employment and Social Development Canada (previously Human Resources and Skills Development Canada) was the federal ministry that oversaw HPS and then Reaching Home until April, 2023. Reaching Home was then transferred to Infrastructure Canada, now Housing, Infrastructure and Communities Canada.

Nations, 2014, p. 3). The application of the right to housing as a discursive, legal, policy, and programmatic framework is central to eliminating homelessness. In fact, Buccieri et al. (2023) found general agreement among homelessness researchers in Canada that ending homelessness requires a broad-based legislative and policy shift from framing housing as a commodity to viewing it as a human right that includes “deeply affordable housing” (p. 242). The Government of Canada introduced the right to housing into legislation through the National Housing Strategy Act (S.C. 2019, c. 29, s. 313). Its approach is grounded in “non-discrimination, inclusion, participation and accountability” (Government of Canada, 2023a, para. 4). Beyond recognizing the significance of adequate housing as a human right and necessary key for human and community well-being, the Act also states that Canada’s housing policy will improve Canadians’ housing outcomes (Government of Canada, 2023a, section 4).

However, the government commits only to “further the progressive realization of the right to adequate housing as recognized in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights” (Government of Canada, 2023a, section 4).² DesBaillets and Hamill (2022) point out that the continued *progressive* realization of the right to adequate housing through public policy and programs differs from the *legal* enforcement of a right which individuals may claim through the court system. As such, the NHS sets out no legal remedy for individuals living with homelessness—although the government will convene review panels to hear cases from communities or groups experiencing systemic infringements on their right to housing (The National Right to Housing Network, 2023). In our analysis of Canada’s national homelessness programs, we apply a right-to-housing lens bearing in mind the following: 1) the National Housing Strategy’s commitment to the realization of the right to housing; 2) the potency of a right-to-housing approach for reducing homelessness; and 3) our team’s conviction in housing as a fundamental human right.

For any strategy to be effective, government must consistently define affordable housing and ensure sufficient affordable housing (DesBaillets & Hamill, 2022; Ecker et al., 2022; Gaetz, 2010; Porter, 2021; see Brown et al.’s research on Coordinated Entry, 2021; see Whitzman et al., 2023 for what this entails). However, since the launch of the NHS, the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation has used at least six different definitions of affordable housing, some based on household income and others on market rent levels or the provision of government subsidies (Whitzman et al., 2023). These definitions influence the extent to which a household can actually find housing to be affordable. For instance, market thresholds can change with rising prices even if incomes do not.

² Canada has also committed to the right to housing for some or all of its population(s) by ratifying the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, and the Convention of the Rights of the Child (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2024).

Policy History

Our team traced the policy history of Canada’s National Homelessness Initiative, Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS), and Reaching Home (see Table 1 for their timeline). This paper focuses on the latter two, providing descriptions of both, along with analyses of their orientation to evidence, effectiveness, and alignment with the Right to Housing. Table 1 provides a general overview of the timeline of the three national programs.

Table 1. Timeline of National Homelessness Programs and Commitments

	1976	1999	2006	2014	2017	2018	2019-present (2025)
Right to Housing Commitment	Canada ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights						
						National Housing Strategy	
							National Housing Strategy Act
National Homelessness Programs		National Homelessness Initiative (NHI)	Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS)		Reaching Home (RH)		
Mandated National Homelessness Program Approaches			Housing First (HF) targets			Coordinated Access (CA). Housing First encouraged within CA	

Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS)

In 2006, the new Conservative federal government launched the Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS) to replace the National Homelessness Initiative. HPS included new objectives, new funding streams, and the introduction of Community Advisory Boards (ESDC, 2018c).³ ESDC (2018b) described HPS as “a unique community-based program aimed at preventing and reducing homelessness by providing direct support and funding to 61 designated communities” (para. 1).⁴ Although HPS ultimately lasted 5 years longer than its predecessor, NHI, it initially experienced shorter-term funding cycles. HPS was funded from 2007 to 2009, and from 2009 to 2011, and was then extended to 2014 for its first three-year cycle (ESDC, 2014). Finally, it was renewed for 2014-2019 (ESDC, 2014).

³ These boards were local advisory committees responsible for determining how to respond to their unique community needs through coordination and community partnerships.

⁴ Designated Communities are those communities that are eligible for the Designated Communities stream of Reaching Home funding. These communities are expected to use a Homeless Information Management System, a Coordinated Access system, and an outcomes-based approach to prevent and reduce homelessness (Housing, Infrastructure, and Communities Canada, 2025).

Beginning in 2014, HPS adopted a Housing First (HF) approach which is based on the presumption that homelessness can be ended by ensuring that people first have independent, permanent housing and are then offered relevant supports and services (ESDC, 2014). HF clients were to be provided with a choice in what housing to accept, supportive services were to be offered but not mandatory, and the focus was to be strengths-based and community-integrated (ESDC, 2018c). The HF model provides Assertive Community Treatment to clients with higher needs and Intensive Case Management for clients with moderate needs (Goering et al., 2014).⁵ HPS required that, by 2015, programs in larger communities direct 65% of their HPS funding to HF targets (Aubry et al., 2015; ESDC, 2018c). In addition, smaller communities receiving over \$200,000 were required to direct 40% of their HPS funding to HF activities by 2016-17 (ESDC, 2018c).

Homelessness Partnering Strategy Orientation to Evidence

In setting the HF targets, the federal government drew on the 2009 to 2013 research findings from the federally funded At Home/Chez Soi (AH/CS) demonstration project (Aubry, et al., 2015). AH/CS used a randomized controlled trial design in five Canadian cities to determine the effectiveness of the HF model in addressing homelessness among people who had serious mental health issues and were homeless or precariously housed (Goering et al., 2014). The research team found that HF contributed significantly to housing stability for this population and was much more effective than a treatment-as-usual approach (Aubry et al., 2015; Goering et al., 2014). In fact, twice as many HF participants as treatment-as-usual participants in the last six months of the study were housed all of the time (62% vs 31%) and well under half as many HF participants as treatment-as-usual participants (16% vs 46%) were housed none of the time during the same period (Goering et al., 2014). Nonetheless, about 13% of HF participants, primarily those with “longer histories of homelessness, lower educational levels, more connection to street-based social networks, more serious mental health conditions, and some indication of greater cognitive impairment” were not stably housed in the first year (Goering et al., 2014, p. 7). In addition, substance abuse problems and mental health issues among HF participants showed no real improvement over those of treatment-as-usual participants (Goering et al., 2014).

By introducing HPS, the federal government also demonstrated a continued focus on data as the Homelessness Individuals and Family Information System (HIFIS), launched in 2001 under NHI, remained an important part of the national funding program for homelessness. HIFIS supported data collection for screening in the HF program and was “designed to support service providers' operational capacity and collect information on clients using their services” (ESDC, 2018c, p. 3). Service providers in a variety of housing programs used HIFIS for activities such as

⁵ Assertive Community Treatment uses multidisciplinary teams to provide a variety of supports to people with severe mental health issues. Intensive Case Management uses case managers, working with a team, to support people with less severe acuity to stay in their homes (Homeless Hub, 2021).

outreach and case management (ESDC, 2018c). During the HPS period, HIFIS use expanded to 400 service providers (ESDC, 2018c).

Effectiveness of the Homelessness Partnering Strategy

The first three-year funding cycle for HPS provided enough evidence to support mandating HF targets for the subsequent 2014-2019 funding cycle. Significant positive outcomes continued after the HF targets were initiated. Notably, by 2015-16 over 6000 individuals, more than twice the national target, had stable housing placements and almost three quarters of clients had been placed in permanent housing (ESDC, 2018c). In the same year, 84% of HF clients were either still in stable housing (41%) after 12 months or had successfully exited the program (43%) after 12 months. The ESDC (2018c) final evaluation of HPS was clear in recommending that HF be extended to homeless populations beyond those who are chronically or episodically homeless. The 2018 ESDC evaluation of HPS asserted that, through “increased housing stability, financial stability and self-sufficiency for homeless individuals,” (p. 32) homelessness is reduced “through both Housing First and non-Housing First interventions with the placement of individuals in stable housing” (ESDC, 2018c, p. 32). However, because the ESDC assessment does not provide quantitative evidence of overall reductions in homelessness as a result of the HF intervention, it is not clear whether this intervention was sufficient (or sufficiently scaled out) to realize reductions in homelessness at community or national levels. Although the ESDC (2018c) final evaluation of HPS states that there was strong adherence to the HF model overall, the evaluation also identified issues such as rapid timeframes, communication, and access to resources that may have hampered organizations’ ability to deliver programs with fidelity to the HF model.

In 2018, ten years into the HPS, the Advisory Committee on Homelessness reported on a 2016 nationwide consultation with partners and stakeholders about the program (ESDC, 2018a). The Committee determined that HPS was limited in part by supporting individual programs rather than by supporting communities in an integrated manner. One of the many recommendations provided by the committee included the “development of a coordinated access system that uses common assessment tools to prioritize clients and match them with available housing and support” (ESDC, 2018a, p. 11). These coordinated systems, intended to prevent, reduce, and ultimately end homelessness, were to be community-determined, data-driven, regularly assessed, and adapted for particular populations (ESDC, 2018a). As with the HPS evaluation (ESDC, 2018), the Committee also recommended expanding the HF philosophy to include all populations of people who experience homelessness, not just focusing on chronic and episodic homelessness as HPS had been doing up to that point. Notably, the Committee emphasized retaining the existing HF targets as a key step in ending homelessness (ESDC, 2018a).

At the same time, ESDC acknowledged that a lack of affordable housing (a concern raised in the evaluations of all three homelessness programs) restricted communities’ ability to succeed in adhering to HF principles (ESDC, 2018c). DesBaillets and Hamill (2022) assert that,

by not only respecting individual choice but also recognizing extra-personal causes of homelessness, HF promotes individuals' dignity and autonomy. However, these authors also point out that the reliance of HF on the private rental sector cannot guarantee housing tenure or affordability, significantly impeding community capacity to scale out the program and federal efforts to realize the right to housing.

Homelessness Partnering Strategy's Alignment with the Right to Housing

The Advisory Committee on Homelessness report on the HPS strongly recommended that in order to meet international and domestic commitments to the right to housing, the Government of Canada must immediately “develop a strategy for the elimination of homelessness, to prioritize resources available to addressing homelessness and to take action as urgently as reasonably possible to eliminate homelessness” (ESDC, 2018a, p. 31). We found no mention of the right to housing in the HPS summative evaluation (ESDC, 2014) or final evaluation (ESDC, 2018c) although this may be related to the linguistics of the time, with the language of “right to housing” emerging more recently in federal law.

Nonetheless, HPS support for the right to housing can be seen in its shift of focus from emergency shelters towards transitional housing and more stable housing, especially with the implementation of HF in 2014 (ESDC, 2018c) and the principles introduced with it. These included providing people with choice in the housing and services that they were connected to and an emphasis on rapidly connecting people to permanent housing and supports (ESDC, 2018c). Together, these principles help to ensure that people have housing and can participate in their own housing outcomes, both key dimensions of the right to housing. At the same time, one of the biggest issues with Housing First according to the consultations was that it was not implemented broadly enough to extend beyond people defined as chronically homeless.

National Housing Strategy (NHS) and National Housing Strategy Act

In 2017, responding to an escalating housing affordability crisis, and decades of calls from housing advocates for a national housing strategy, the Government of Canada announced the National Housing Strategy: A Place to Call Home (NHS). The NHS included a 10-year plan to provide funding for 160,000 new housing units to be built; reduce the number of families in housing need by 530,000; and reduce chronic homelessness⁶ by 50% (Government of Canada, 2017; Housing, Infrastructure, and Communities Canada, 2025b). This last target was later increased to 100% in the 2020 Speech to the Throne (Government of Canada, 2020).

The NHS also brought with it the promise of the National Housing Strategy Act and the guarantee of a new revamped national *homelessness* strategy (ultimately Reaching Home) to

⁶ Chronically homeless/chronic homelessness is defined as “individuals, often with disabling conditions (e.g. chronic physical or mental illness, substance abuse problems), who are currently homeless and have been homeless for six months or more in the past year (i.e. have spent more than 180 cumulative nights in a shelter or place not fit for human habitation)” (CMHC, 2024).

replace HPS (Government of Canada, 2017). The 2019 enactment of the National Housing Strategy Act introduced the federal housing advocate’s office, the national housing council, and review panels—and committed the NHS to “establish[ing] national goals relating to housing and homelessness and identify[ing] related priorities, initiatives, timelines and desired outcomes” (Government of Canada, 2019, section 5(2)(b)). The Act also reaffirmed Canada’s international commitment to the progressive realization of the right to housing (Government of Canada, 2023a).

Unfortunately, the NHS allocated insufficient funds and inadequate attention to the structures underpinning the disproportionately high rates of homelessness among racialized, Indigenous, and LGBTQ2S+ populations (Porter, 2021). Later, in 2023, the National Housing Council (2023) determined that the NHS does not yet align with the progressive right to housing committed to in the National Housing Strategy Act. Instead, the Council (2023) asserted that it is imperative that the Strategy

prioritize and deliver housing to those in greatest need; contain targets, plans and timelines for the elimination of all homelessness and reduction in core housing need; [and] deploy the maximum of available resources to the achievement of these targets (p. 2).

The federal government has reported that, as of March 31, 2024, the NHS has contributed to a reduction or elimination of housing need for over 541,000 households—exceeding its target of 540,000—and has created or committed to creating over 146,000 new housing units overall, approaching its target of 160,000 new housing units (Government of Canada, 2024; Housing, Infrastructure and Communities Canada, 2025b). However, this building target seems woefully inadequate considering the Office of the Federal Housing Advocate’s calculation of the need for 4.3 million more homes for very-low and low-income households (Whitzman, 2023).

Reaching Home: Canada’s Homelessness Program

Launched in April 2019 for a 10-year period, Reaching Home is the first national homelessness program to be tied to housing within a national housing strategy (Doberstein & Smith, 2015).⁷ The goals of Reaching Home align with those of the NHS, especially in supporting vulnerable people to be adequately housed and to reduce chronic homelessness by 50% by 2027 to 2028 (Infrastructure Canada, 2023a).⁸ This connection signals a recognition that housing is key for addressing homelessness and for realizing the national commitment to the

⁷ While the federal government had introduced the federal-provincial Affordable Housing Initiative (AHI), later titled the Investment in Affordable Housing or IAH, in 2001 during NHI’s first phase, the launch of Reaching Home in 2019 represents the first time that a national homelessness strategy has been tied to housing within a national housing strategy (Doberstein & Smith, 2015).

⁸ The fact that some federal government materials continue to use this earlier 50% target instead of the subsequent 100% target announced in the 2020 throne speech may suggest a softening of the government’s bold ambitions.

right to housing. In addition, the longer funding period for Reaching Home may demonstrate a stronger government commitment to Reaching Home than to previous national homelessness programs. Reaching Home frames its centrepiece service prioritization model, Coordinated Access, as a data-driven approach based on person-specific or “By Name” lists of people experiencing homelessness in a community and a common assessment tool to match them to appropriate resources (EDSC, 2019). Overall, it is intended “to help communities ensure equity of access to appropriate resources, prioritize people most in need of assistance and connect people to appropriate services in a more streamlined way (ESDC, 2019, pp. 7-8).” Designated communities, as part of their eligibility for Reaching Home funds—and therefore their commitment to CA—must pursue the following outcomes as a condition of their funding: the overall reduction of chronic homelessness and homelessness in general, especially for priority groups; a reduction in new shifts into homelessness; a reduction in returns to homelessness; and a reduction in Indigenous homelessness (ESDC, 2019). CA was implemented without a clear theory of change or logic model to guide the development and implementation of an outcomes evaluation framework.

Although CA is not coupled with housing resources nor supported by evidence of its effectiveness for reducing homelessness, it is the primary approach the government requires of communities and is deemed a sufficient tool for communities to reduce homelessness across these indicators. This proposition now seems naive. In some instances, communities are looking to CA alternatives to better meet the needs of their communities. For example, Atlohsa Family Healing Services (2025) in London, Ontario, has developed a roadmap for addressing the high level of Indigenous homelessness in that community through Indigenous-led approaches in CA.

Reaching Home’s Orientation to Evidence

The shift from HPS to Reaching Home is distinguished by the requirements for communities to implement CA systems, to use pre-existing homelessness management information systems such as the Homelessness Individuals and Family Information System (HIFIS), and to eliminate the requirement for HF implementation, despite evidence to suggest that HF is an effective approach for some groups. These changes mark a significant shift from HPS’ evidence-informed policy direction (e.g., proceeding from robust program and intervention evaluations) to Reaching Home’s data-driven service prioritization direction (e.g., assessing individual vulnerabilities as part of a service-matching effort). Notably, Reaching Home is also the first and only national homeless funding program to be securely funded for a decade (Infrastructure Canada, 2023a) despite much less prior evidence to support its central approach, CA, in comparison to HF, and no evidence to date about its effectiveness thus far. Indeed, without a transparent logic model or theory of change underpinning CA, it is not entirely clear how it is envisioned to reduce chronic homelessness, homelessness for other priority groups, and homelessness in general.

The implementation of a CA process in communities requires service providers to use a standardized, community-determined approach to gather a range of client data to allow individuals' needs to be assessed, prioritized (or ranked), and matched with housing resources. Despite the federal government mandating a standardized assessment tool, it has not provided such a tool for communities (Infrastructure Canada, 2023c). The Vulnerability Index-Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool (VI-SPDAT) is broadly used as the CA assessment tool among communities. It has been found to be easily available and cost-effective, requires little training, and has made the assessment process quicker when used on its own (Brown et al., 2018; Ecker et al., 2022). However, despite the VI-SPDAT's broad usage, numerous concerns have been identified. These include poor reliability and validity, problematic reliance on self-reported data, gender and racial bias, and limited understanding of vulnerability (Brown et al., 2018; Fowler et al., 2019; Slota et al., 2021; Kithulgoda et al., 2022b; Cronely, 2020; and Porter, 2021).

Information gathered during standardized client assessments⁹ is not used to directly find housing for clients. Instead, this data is added to HIFIS or another homelessness management information system so that the client may be included on a community-wide list of homeless individuals (such as a By Name List) and perhaps eventually be prioritized and matched with housing (Infrastructure Canada, 2023c). However, it is not clear that the data entered by service providers into HIFIS aids in the housing of people who are homeless or contributes to greater national understandings of homelessness. With CA, housing matches are unassured, relying heavily on the accuracy of the assessment, the acuity of vulnerability it indicates, the client's alignment with community-defined priority groups, the number and needs of other local people without housing, and the availability of housing resources in the community. Despite the sheer volume of client data being collected by homelessness service providers, the Office of the Auditor General (OAG, 2022) found that ESDC and Infrastructure Canada had not drawn on necessary data, such as national shelter-use data, to determine how the national homeless population had changed and to adjust policies accordingly.

The use of HIFIS under CA diverges from its previous use under HF in a few ways. No longer are HIFIS and the mandated approach in separate streams of funding as they were under NHI and HPS. Additionally, the collection and use of data for structured decision-making goes beyond the original focus of HIFIS. When it was first developed, HIFIS was targeted at shelters and kept track of goods and services (Peressini and Engeland, 2004). Today, however, HIFIS can be populated with information from other non-shelter agencies that are part of a community's housing response (ESDC, 2019). However, its utility at the individual organization level remains limited, with shelters continuing to utilize their own internal case management software because the client data in HIFIS is not entirely useable (Cullingham et al., 2024).

⁹ Much has been written by scholars about standardized tools, especially the VI-SPDAT, a tool widely used for triage and assessment in Coordinated Access (see, for example, Slota et al., 2021; Balagot, 2019; Brown et al., 2018; Salim, 2021).

According to the 2023 Reaching Home evaluation, the introduction of CA as well as other changes introduced with Reaching Home emerged from the “extensive feedback from stakeholders, community service providers, provinces, and territories. In addition, the Advisory Committee on Homelessness provided recommendations” (ESDC, 2023, p. 5). However, our team has not been able to locate information identifying the parties who provided this extensive stakeholder feedback. Despite the Committee’s recommendation to maintain HF targets and expand the program to a broader population, Reaching Home only *encourages* communities to use an HF approach while the targets for using HF have been removed (ESDC, 2019). Although McBride and Bartlett (2018) acknowledge the benefits of Reaching Home’s Indigenous and territorial funding, HIFIS implementation, and community targets for reducing chronic homelessness, they strongly disagree with its cessation of HF targets. They suggest that this shift is not evidence-based but rather a means to provide communities with more flexibility to emphasize shelters and treatment-first options. Furthermore, Ecker et al. (2022) view the switch to CA and Coordinated Entry (in the US) as rooted in the logic of austerity and driven by political endorsement of cost-cutting (Ecker et al., 2022, p.16). However, this contradicts Latimer et al.’s (2020) finding that for people with severe mental illness, HF was already proving to be cost effective under HPS.

Effectiveness of Reaching Home

Reaching Home is halfway through its ten-year duration. However, several factors impede an assessment of this program’s impact. First, its target for reducing chronic homelessness is unclear. That is, there has been a certain quietness on the federal government’s part around its expansion from a 50% target to a 100% target. Indeed, some federal materials continue to cite the earlier target (e.g., Infrastructure Canada’s About Reaching Home, 2023a; Statistics Canada’s A review of Canadian homelessness data, 2023; and Office of the Auditor General’s Chronic Homelessness, 2022). However, the size of the reduction target admittedly matters little when homelessness continues to rise steeply.

Second, a lack of available community-level outcome reports makes it challenging to assess the progress of Reaching Home. Specifically, as of March 31, 2021, only nine (or 15%) of the 57 designated communities in Canada (outside of Québec) required to have CA had a completed CA system, although 97% had started to implement some of the requirements of CA (ESDC, 2023). Among the barriers that communities identified in trying to create a CA system was a lack of adequate resources, including a lack of capacity (ESDC, 2023). Most notably, communities faced significant issues trying to implement all the data-related aspects of the CA system (ESDC, 2023). As one territorial stakeholder expressed, “There’s been a real underestimation on the part of the federal government on how much resource and time it takes communities to get to the data piece” (ESDC, 2023, p. 25). Communities also expressed a lack of buy-in for CA, citing concerns about privacy, governance, respect for the needs of homeless Indigenous individuals, and administrative labor (ESDC, 2023, pp. 24-25). Program implementation delays can impede data availability to assess the program’s effectiveness.

Communities that cannot meet the base requirements for reporting may in turn be hampered in their ability to access funding and provide services.

Third, it is not clear how Reaching Home has affected levels of homelessness nationally, or whether it has affected the numbers at all. The program's initiatives placed 59,309 people in more stable housing from the years 2019 to 2023. In the 2020-21 fiscal year, 35,241 individuals experienced core prevention and shelter diversion services. Of the 66% who were contacted after three months, 91% were still housed, but it is unclear what the housing outcomes were for the remaining 34% who were not contacted. We wonder if a large proportion of this substantial last group are difficult to contact because they experience housing instability. In addition, in the 2019-20 fiscal year, 13,057 individuals were placed in more stable housing. After 12 months, 70% of the 58% who could be contacted remained housed or had successfully exited the program (ESDC, 2023).

While these numbers may seem encouraging, Employment and Social Development Canada's (ESDC) evaluation of Reaching Home acknowledged that it has not clearly demonstrated what impact this may have had on preventing or reducing homelessness overall (ESDC, 2023). Indeed, a 6% increase from 2016 to 2020 "in chronic homelessness among shelter users" may suggest a lack of advancement toward the government's targets for reducing or eliminating chronic homelessness (Government of Canada, 2023b). It is also clear, based on the growing number and size of homeless encampments in Canada, that many people who are homeless are not using the shelter system and thus may not be captured in shelter-use data (Office of the Federal Housing Advocate, 2024). The Office of the Auditor General (2022) determined that Infrastructure Canada, ESDC, and the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation—the three entities responsible for Reaching Home and the National Housing Strategy—were unable to satisfactorily demonstrate that their programs had contributed to reducing homelessness. The OAG (2022) also found that ESDC and Infrastructure Canada had not drawn on necessary data, such as national shelter-use data, to determine how the national homeless population had changed and to adjust policy-making accordingly. The OAG found a lack of coordination between Reaching Home, the sole NHS program responsible for addressing chronic homelessness targets, and other NHS initiatives. Specifically, it found that the supports offered by Reaching Home communities were not being complemented by targeted affordable housing construction initiatives through CMHC. Considering this lack of integration, the Office expressed doubt that even the more conservative 50% reduction target in chronic homelessness would be met (Office of the Auditor General, 2022).

The Office of the Federal Housing Advocate (2024) identified short-term,¹⁰ unassured, and insufficient funding for community services as a significant impediment to Reaching Home's ability to address people's housing-related needs:

¹⁰ The Reaching Home Directives are clear that funding is allocated on a year-to-year basis. (Housing, Infrastructure, and Communities Canada, 2025c).

Frontline services are underfunded, operating over capacity, and facing high rates of staff turnover and burnout. Reliance on project-based and short-term funding – the model used by the federal Reaching Home program – is a barrier to long-term planning and ties up staffing in managing administration and reporting requirements. (p. 17).

It is notable that the current homelessness crisis has developed during a 40-year absence of federal involvement in affordable housing production and net loss of affordable housing (National Housing Council, 2023). While CA was not intended to address insufficient levels of affordable housing, the broader strategy of which it is part, the National Housing Strategy, has clearly been ineffective in producing housing of sufficient quantity or affordability (Whitzman, 2023; National Housing Council, 2023). Research through the Office of the Federal Housing Advocate (2023) has determined that the housing crisis must be addressed through the addition of 4.3 million homes, especially non-market homes, that are affordable to low- and very low-income households. As mentioned earlier, the NHS committed to provide funding only for the construction of 160,000 new housing units –representing a significant shortfall compared to the Housing Advocate’s projections.

Reaching Home’s alignment with the Right to Housing

Although the National Housing Strategy (NHS) and National Housing Strategy Act reaffirmed Canada’s commitment to the right to housing, both the documents, Reaching Home: Canada’s Homelessness Strategy Directives (Infrastructure Canada, 2023c) and the Reaching Home Coordinated Access Guide (ESDC, 2019) fail to explicitly mention this right, effectively ignoring the de facto human rights violation that homelessness constitutes. The absence of sufficient affordable housing not only impedes the rights of people to adequate shelter, but also their ability to exercise personal choice in housing options (DesBaillets & Hamill, 2022). In stark contrast to the HF philosophy that all people should be able to rapidly access housing, CA matches people to housing on the basis of a vulnerability assessment score rather than personal choice. It operates from the premise of resource scarcity and the ensuing need to prioritize some people over others, in this case those experiencing the most vulnerability, including people who are chronically homeless. These conditions are by nature exclusionary.

Furthermore, CA components may compromise the human rights principles of non-discrimination and inclusion. While the Community Advisory Boards in designated communities allow for community actors to participate in defining their own homelessness responses, CA lacks a mechanism to ensure that local homelessness responses are guided by the expertise of people who have experienced homelessness. The federal government still encourages the use of HF principles, which allows people to exercise their autonomy in refusing units that they are offered. However, CA does not ensure that housing-insecure people have a say in what kinds of units are created in their communities or what types of units they themselves are prioritized for. Without sufficient housing stock and subsidies in communities, a growing number of people are left without housing. Without affecting this deficit, Coordinated Access cannot resolve

homelessness; it can only manage who gets access to housing resources. In this respect, CA cannot help but discriminate, leaving some people to languish on long waiting lists.

Discussion and Conclusion

Through this article, we have sought to shed light on the evolution of national homelessness funding programs in Canada, particularly the Homelessness Partnering Strategy and Reaching Home. We undertook this review because we struggled to find empirical support for the adoption of Coordinated Access as a key component of the Government of Canada's Reaching Home program. Like Ecker et al. (2022), we had been unable to confirm that Canada's CA model has been supported by evidence from prior scholarship or ongoing learnings from previous homelessness programs. And so, we set out to answer the following questions: "How has evidence been operationalized in the pursuit of these policy reforms?"; and "Why has the current federal policy and programmatic infrastructure failed to advance the right to housing by reducing or ending homelessness?" We considered national homelessness programs in terms of their orientation to evidence, effectiveness, and alignment with a right-to-housing framework. We found that there are not currently (nor have there ever been) sufficient legal or administrative mechanisms at the national level for progressively realizing the right to housing. Furthermore, it is unclear how data collected from people experiencing homelessness is currently being used to evaluate program effectiveness, inform policy-making, and enable equitable resource distribution. We summarize the incongruencies we found here.

First, the Advisory Committee on Homelessness that reviewed HPS had recommended moving forward with a CA approach to encourage a shift towards integrated community responses rather than individual programs. It had also recommended expanding HF to encompass more homeless populations beyond chronic and episodic homelessness¹¹—and had recommended keeping the HF targets. However, while the move to Reaching Home has adopted CA and encouraged the use of HF, it has dropped the targets for HF, making it optional for communities.

Second, while the government frames CA as data-driven, the adoption of CA itself is not evidence-based. Yet CA is supported through Reaching Home with a commitment of ten years of funding, much longer than any previous program funding cycle, including the evidence-based HF through HPS. Furthermore, the mandated use of HIFIS or other HMIS for shelters and other homeless-serving agencies indicates an orientation to data collection. Although Reaching Home requires communities to provide more data to support an "outcomes-based approach," it is not clear that the data is being used to effectively track nor advance reductions in homelessness (or

¹¹ Namian (2020) notes that specifically targeting chronically homeless people, as Reaching Home, CA, and the NHS all have done, allows the state to "tackle the widespread homeless problem at its fringes" (p. 315). Instead, it is important for communities using CA to incorporate a structural approach, including addressing the workings and effects of structures like racism and colonialism in sustaining patterns of housing precarity (Porter, 2021; Shinn & Richard, 2022).

any other outcome). The government's unawareness of Reaching Home's impacts in reducing chronic homelessness puts its stated commitment to data-driven decision-making into question.

Third, there is a lack of a clear and uniform strategy to measure homelessness and track progress on reducing it. This forces a reliance on outdated numbers and leaves the federal government not at all sure of the impacts of its efforts to reduce homelessness. Even the government's more conservative target of a 50% reduction in chronic homelessness by 2027-28 has been determined by the Office of the Auditor General (2022) to be unlikely.

Fourth, the federal government's inability to consistently define affordable housing and its inadequate investment in it continues to weaken the capacity of any national homelessness program to reduce homelessness and to realize Canada's commitment to the right to housing (Whitzman, 2023). Evaluations of all three homelessness funding programs have raised the lack of affordable housing as a significant barrier to their success in reducing homelessness. Today, although homelessness is linked to housing through the National Housing Strategy, the federal government targets for increasing affordable housing continue to be deemed insufficient by both the National Housing Council (2023) and the Office of the Housing Advocate (Whitzman, 2023). The two key homelessness program approaches, Coordinated Access and Housing First, both require sufficient affordable housing to be effective. It is well-known that the homelessness crisis burgeoned as the responsibility for affordable housing was downloaded from the federal government to the provinces and then, in large part, to municipalities (Canadian Centre for Housing Rights, 2022; Doberstein & Smith, 2015; National Housing Council, 2023; Whitzman, 2023). And yet, the primary onus for addressing homelessness continues to be placed on the shoulders of municipal governments, the least flexibly resourced level of government, and community organizations that are only eligible for Reaching Home funding on a yearly basis.

Finally, given Canada's commitment to the right to housing in 1976 and its recommitment to it in both 2017 and 2019—and given that homelessness is a clear violation of this commitment—it is incongruous that federal homelessness funding program materials do not explicitly reference (nor demonstrably advance) the right to housing. Regarding the right-to-housing principle of inclusion, the HPS and Reaching Home's focus on people who are chronically or episodically homeless and willing to participate actively in the federally mandated process may exclude many people, especially those who do not use shelter systems or engage with municipal social services. The NHS introduction of the Federal Housing Advocate, National Housing Council, and review panels have opened avenues for greater civic engagement pertaining to homelessness. But at this early stage, the extent to which the new Housing Advocate is empowered to advance the right to housing remains unclear, as are the effects of these new consultative practices on policy-making. All of the contradictions discussed above, as well as the fact that homelessness has become so visible and pervasive in communities across Canada, constitute a strong signal that the federal government is not only failing to meet right-to-housing commitments, but is also withdrawing from its obligations as a duty-bearer.

An Historical Analysis of Canada's National Homelessness Programs

In attempting to bring clarity to the complexity of the recent history of homelessness policy-making in Canada, we have kept our scope to the most broad-reaching policies and programs. In doing so, we have not delved into the specifics of programs in any particular region, province, or territory in Canada. Furthermore, knowing that we could not do justice to the trajectory of Indigenous homelessness programs and their effects, we have not explored them in this paper. Finally, we recognize the importance of tracing the role of funding, private sector involvement, compensation, and incentives in the evolution of homelessness policy, but determined that this was outside of our scope.

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