

CURRENTS/QUESTIONS D'ACTUALITÉ

“It’s Not Our Responsibility, But We Need to Do Something”: Explaining Local Government Responses to the Homelessness and Housing Crises

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Abstract

In the past five years, there has been a striking increase in the number of people experiencing homelessness, including unsheltered homelessness, across Canada (Infrastructure Canada, 2024). Facing this growing crisis, local governments are changing and expanding their responses. An important innovation is tiny homes, a form of deeply affordable and supportive housing for people leaving homelessness. In this brief article, I ask what explains local government’s increased leadership and innovation with respect to homelessness and housing crises. Drawing on interviews and document analysis regarding the development of a tiny homes community in a mid-sized BC municipality, I identify three factors that have contributed to local government’s policy innovation: 1) local officials are keenly aware of the inadequacies of federal and provincial responses and of the need for alternative approaches; 2) they hold important resources, notably local knowledge and land; and 3) they are facing pressure to respond from citizens and service providers.

Résumé

Au cours des cinq dernières années, le nombre de personnes en situation d’itinérance, y compris sans domicile fixe, a augmenté de façon frappante dans l’ensemble du Canada (Infrastructures Canada, 2024). Face à cette crise croissante, les gouvernements locaux modifient et élargissent leurs réponses. Une innovation importante est la construction de maisons de petites dimensions, une forme de logement très abordable et solidaire pour les personnes qui sortent de l’itinérance. Dans ce bref article, je pose la question de savoir ce qui explique le leadership et l’innovation accrues des collectivités locales en matière de crise du logement et de l’absence d’un chez-soi. En m’appuyant sur des entretiens et l’analyse de documents concernant le développement d’une communauté de petites maisons dans une municipalité de taille moyenne en Colombie-Britannique, j’identifie trois facteurs qui ont contribué à l’innovation politique du gouvernement local : 1) les fonctionnaires locaux sont parfaitement conscients des insuffisances des réponses

fédérales et provinciales et de la nécessité d'adopter d'autres approches; 2) ils détiennent des ressources importantes, notamment un savoir-faire et la propriété foncière; et 3) ils sont soumis à des pressions de la part des citoyens et des prestataires de services pour qu'ils réagissent.

Keywords: homelessness; municipalities; multilevel governance; housing; Canadian politics

Mots-clés: itinérance; municipalités; gouvernance multiniveau; logement; politique canadienne

In the past five years, there has been a striking increase in the number of people experiencing homelessness across Canada (Infrastructure Canada, 2024). Facing this growing crisis, local governments are innovating in their responses. This defies expectations that the development of social policy should be left to senior orders of government (Banting, 1987; Banting & Myles, 2013; Rice and Prince, 2013). Some big cities have been leading for years (Smith, 2022), but it is curious to see smaller and mid-sized municipalities, which tend to be constrained in policy-development, also taking on a bigger role. Not all cities are acting this way, of course. But several municipalities of various sizes across Canada—including Quebec City, London, Edmonton and Duncan—have positioned themselves as leaders and innovators in local housing.

One municipal approach has been managing homelessness through bylaw and police enforcement. Decampments, ticketing unhoused people and enforcing bylaws is an expensive and ineffective long-term solution (Flynn et al., 2022; Chesnay et al., 2013), but it is something local governments can do with the limited powers that they have. Another more recent approach taken by municipalities has been to increase the housing supply and options available to people experiencing homelessness. An important innovation in this respect is tiny homes, a form of deeply affordable supportive housing for people leaving homelessness.

What explains local government's increased leadership and innovation with respect to homelessness and housing crises? Using tiny homes in a mid-sized BC municipality as a representative case, I identify three factors that have contributed to local government's policy innovation: 1) local officials are keenly aware of the inadequacies of federal and provincial responses and of the need for alternative approaches; 2) they hold important resources, notably local knowledge and land; and 3) they are facing pressure to respond from citizens and service providers.

Tiny Homes: A Locally Led Policy Solution

In order to understand the role of local governments in their emergence as a policy response to the housing crises, I conducted five interviews with key local leaders in the homelessness-serving sector, including non-profit leaders, a city councillor and a city bureaucrat in a mid-sized city in BC. I also reviewed local reporting as well as policy documents and reports. The community¹ was chosen because it is representative of the emerging trend in small and mid-sized communities throughout BC that sees local governments taking a more active role in the development of long-term solutions to homelessness, and can serve as a pilot study for future research on local government involvement.

Tiny homes communities have been proven to be effective in Canada (Munro, 2023a), but are not yet identified as a priority by the provincial government in its response to housing and homelessness in BC (e.g., Government of BC, 2023). Pointing to the success of the tiny homes community in Duncan, BC (Michaels, 2023; Van Emmerik, 2023), which followed a concerted effort on the part of the Mayor and local service providers in the face of provincial resistance (personal interviews 2024), municipal officials in the community under study led efforts to develop tiny homes communities of their own. The city and the province signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in October, 2023, which outlined their agreement to work together on new forms of supportive and transitional housing for people experiencing homelessness. The local government was a leader in the design of these responses, including 120 tiny homes units (with 60 additional traditional supportive housing units). The province funded the units and operating costs. It is important to note that provincial willingness to collaborate marks a departure from its apparent previous reluctance to do so in other communities, including in Duncan (personal interviews, 2024).

Six months after signing the MOU, 60 tiny homes units were up and running; one month later, another 60 units came online at a different location. Local and provincial officials note that this is an incredibly fast pace (personal interview, 2024; Whitehouse, 2024) facilitated by municipal actions to identify and zone land and even to purchase the tiny homes upfront (the cost would be reimbursed by the province, which owns the units [personal interview, 2024]). Local officials insist that the tiny homes idea was driven locally; the local government agreed to contribute land to provincial partnerships only if the developments would be tiny homes as opposed to supportive housing buildings, the province's preference. The province agreed to two of the three collaborative projects being tiny homes (personal interview, 2024).

Explaining Local Government Action

Officials in the community under study successfully pursued a tiny homes approach through a partnership with the province but also with a leadership role, effectively creating a new housing option that previously was not available. What explains local government action?

First, there was concern locally with existing approaches to supportive and transitional housing. Twenty years ago, this community was part of a small number of BC municipalities to partner with the province in the development of supportive housing for people experiencing chronic and long-term homelessness. This approach required local governments to contribute properly zoned, shovel-ready land, and the province contributed capital costs to build new supportive housing buildings as well as operating costs so that housing would be supported. Three supportive housing developments resulted from this partnership, and they continue to operate to this day.

While this is an important part of the housing system, there are limits to its success and ability to contribute to reducing the homelessness crisis of today. First, there is increasingly a shortage of affordable rental housing supply. This means that, even when a person is ready to leave supportive housing, there is nowhere affordable to go. This also means that existing supportive housing units are

generally full; people transitioning out of homelessness are no longer able to access those spaces. As a city councillor explained, “one thing I think we were a little naïve on [in the early 2000s] was the idea that someone would come into supportive housing, live there for a year, and then find another long-term housing place to live... so what we have found is that [supportive housing units] fill up. It doesn’t take long to fill them up, but the output is slow” (personal interview, 2024).

Building more supportive housing is an expensive and time-consuming activity, and it might take years before more units are available. This results, as a service provider noted, in people “languishing in shelters” (personal interview, 2024). Tiny homes was an attempt to provide supportive housing quickly, while achieving different results: “we really see the idea of small homes as being a place where we could try some new innovations and programming around not putting somebody into housing and keeping them there, but putting somebody into housing and being really intentional about what kind of housing, having a housing-focused goal and plan” (personal interview, 2024).

Finally, while supportive housing is an important part of the housing system, local officials stressed the need for a greater diversity of responses: “It was about engaging the sector and asking ‘what is missing?’ For a number of years in BC, the main model that has been pushed is very expensive supportive housing. New builds or repurpose builds... we hear loud and clearly from our organizations and from lived experience that there need to be options. Different options to move folks through at various levels. Housing First approaches require us to meet folks where they are at, and a supportive housing building may not be where they are at” (personal interview, 2024). A tiny homes community would, in the minds of councillors and officials, keep the strengths of supported housing—on-site support, time to stabilize following a traumatic and disruptive period of homelessness—while eliminating some of the downsides, including the high cost and long timelines associated with building new supportive housing.

Second, drawing on horizontal relations with city officials in Duncan, BC, officials and councillors were aware not only of the successes with tiny homes in that community but also of specifics regarding its development and operation (personal interview, 2024). In addition to this key local knowledge, officials were also able to leverage another crucially important resource: land. Land is an important contribution to housing partnerships for two reasons: first, land has become so expensive that it can make affordable or supportive projects unviable. The ability of municipalities to contribute land to housing developments makes them important partners. Second, it is important, from the provincial partner’s perspective, for local governments to have something at stake in the project: “the reason [the province] wanted the land is they wanted to know that the municipalities were committed to it. Because in other municipalities, as soon as issues come up the population fights it like mad. And then it gets shut down and council bends to the pressure of the people” (personal interview, 2024). Contributing land meant that municipalities were fully committed to a project’s long-term success.

With the power of local knowledge and land and armed with what they believed would be a better response to homelessness, local officials negotiated with the province. Rather than just contributing the land and going with the province’s preferred approach (which remains supportive housing [personal interviews, 2024]), the local

government took a new approach—according to key local actors familiar with the process, they put conditions on the land contribution: “the only reason we got [tiny homes] here locally is because of some strong advocacy work at the council level. It was like this is a condition for the city to provide that land” (personal interview, 2024). Incredibly, this allowed the local level to shape provincial responses, leading to the development of a new type of housing.

Finally, local officials and councillors have stressed the extent to which homelessness has become a crisis in the past five years and changing expectations from residents and local partners. While there has long been homelessness in this community, and a large encampment developed in 2019 before the pandemic, the visibility and scale of homelessness have grown rapidly in the past five years. Local officials have felt increasing pressures from citizens and service providers to take on a larger role in responding to the homelessness crisis: “the taxpayers demand that we do something. So, we’re in this spot where we think, ‘ok, technically, it’s not our responsibility, but we need to do something because the citizens expect us to do something’” (personal interview, 2024). They later continued, “unfortunately, we’re the ones that get the phone calls, not the province” (personal interview, 2024).

In addition, there was a call for greater municipal leadership from service providers (personal interview, 2024). The city’s previous approach to homelessness included supporting a non-profit society for five years; the society was tasked with developing and implementing a response to homelessness. This is not uncommon in municipalities across Canada, but senior officials at this municipality realized that they were already involved in homelessness: “in the last few years, Council has really seen that no matter how much we’ve wanted to say that we’re not in it or it’s not our mandate, we’re reactive to it anyways. So, we are dealing with the outcomes of other agencies and other levels of government not being fully in” (personal interview, 2024). In addition, there was pressure from service providers for the municipality to move to a more proactive and solutions-oriented approach, which meant no longer funding the society and rather doing more work out of the city itself. The city’s social service manager told the press in late 2023 that the city would no longer be supporting the society, but rather would be taking on more of a direct role: “the change is happening because we’ve heard from community that there is a desire for a greater involvement from the city to take a leadership role” (Munro, 2023b).

Conclusion

This case study of tiny homes shows that local governments are asserting their role as key actors in the Canadian welfare state. This has happened for three reasons: local officials were keenly aware of inadequacies and problems with existing responses to homelessness; they had valuable resources, including land and local knowledge; and they were motivated by increasing pressures from their citizens and service providers. This shift suggests that the structures and limitations imposed on municipalities within Canadian federalism do not respond to demographic realities, but also fail to respond to the policy challenges of today.

It also sheds light on how and why municipalities are taking on bigger roles in the development of responses to complex, place-based problems. This case can thus

be considered a pilot case study; additional research on local government responses in different communities is needed to better understand these dynamics, including local government actions in different institutional contexts, notably in Ontario, where local governments have more of an official role in housing and homelessness. Additional research in BC and in other provinces will also shed light on important municipal-provincial dynamics. Research on attitudes toward housing and homelessness is also needed, including a better understanding of what citizens understand to be the causes of homelessness and which level of government they see as responsible for leading in the development of solutions.

Competing interests. The author declares none.

Note

I Due to the small number of interviews conducted, I am not referring to this city by name so as to further respect the anonymity of research participants.

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