



Make-work methodology: Canadian homelessness research and its role in austerity

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Abstract

Observations from the frontlines of the Canadian homelessness research community demonstrate that it largely constitutes ‘make-work’: activities carried out to keep busy and thus, perpetuate the non-profit sector and maintain the status quo. It achieves this through its conceptualization of socio-economic issues and selection of acceptable questions—essentially, through its methodological decisions—which do little to challenge the forces that dispossess and displace people. The resulting policy and programmatic responses promote widely-accepted cost-saving ‘solutions’ to homelessness, and thus, state austerity, which ultimately deepens poverty. The cycle of make-work continues. Instead of upholding a private, competitive ‘population management industry,’ how can we produce knowledge that directly supports resistance to the common struggle of housing deprivation? Inverting the dominant methodology means accounting for who created, perpetuates and benefits from the housing crisis, not accounting for austerity’s sake.

Keywords

Homelessness, research, austerity, non-profit sector

1. Introduction

In 2014, a group of unhoused people and their supporters stormed the Sheraton Wall Centre Hotel in downtown Vancouver, where the annual Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness (CAEH) conference was taking place. They had come to ‘disrupt the tranquility of the opening dinner’ being enjoyed by a ‘powerful class of managers’ who are promoting market-based ‘solutions’ to homelessness (The Social Housing Alliance, 2014, n.p.). Their demand: *end the ‘ending homelessness’ industry now*. In ‘an important moment of solidarity and refusal,’ as recounted in this journal (Nelson, 2020, p. 89), some attendees left

the CAEH conference to join the action confronting municipal police at the hotel lobby doors, in the rain. Noticing a stack of familiar research reports discarded on the wet ground prompted one researcher to question if much change had resulted from the immense amount of time and money spent producing them (Paradis, 2014).

Over the past decade or so, research on homelessness has expanded dramatically in Canada. Yet, little attention is given to an unfortunate contradiction: the ever-growing knowledge base of enumeration, evaluation and consultation has not correlated with any significant decrease in homelessness itself. Intended to influence policy and social work practice, many projects result in reports that go ‘straight to the shelf (or puddle)’. Even some researchers in the field and intended practitioner audiences admit to not reading them, begging the question of who or what they are for.

This paper contends that mainstream Canadian homelessness research is largely ‘make-work’: activities carried out to keep busy, and thus, self-perpetuate. Despite good intentions, this research community maintains the audit culture and logics of state austerity, which ultimately deepens poverty, and therefore reproduces itself as a key player in the private, professionalized ‘population management’ industry (Willse, 2015). This is more commonly known as the non-profit social services sector, which itself is a form of privatization that has been expanding globally in direct relation to welfare state retrenchment and neoliberal restructuring (Abramowitz, 1986; Arena, 2012; Choudry & Kapoor, 2013; INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, 2007; Lake & Newman, 2002; Wolch, 1990). In place of a consistent theoretical framework, this paper builds on conceptualizations and arguments of bureaucracy (Graeber, 2015; 2018) and agnotology scholars (Slater, 2008; 2012; 2013) to elucidate how avoidance of structural and material analysis perpetuates an industry which sustains capitalist social relations.

The dominant homelessness research community achieves self-perpetuation within, and for the maintenance of, the status quo through its conceptualization of socio-economic issues and selection of acceptable questions—essentially, through its methodological choices. A key argument of this paper is that individualization constitutes the analytic and methodological foundation of homelessness research, frustrating attempts to address it as a social and structural problem. Canada’s homelessness research field generally acknowledges poverty, housing, and the political-economic contexts that produce homelessness acknowledges, yet simultaneously demonstrate a systematic ignorance of the deeper structural causes of homelessness. Consequently, research leads to cost-cutting policy and program ‘solutions’ that are oriented towards therapeutic treatment of individuals rather than social-redistributive approaches.

In a later section of the paper, personal observations from the frontlines of make-work research serve as a case study on how certain methodological decisions can carve out economically-productive spaces within the audit culture of state austerity policy. This includes a reflection on ‘people with lived experience’ (PWLE) of housing precarity—advisory committees typically framed as the ultimate ethnographic ‘blessing’ to legitimize the dominant methodologies and the resulting policy/programmatic solutions posed. Some of

the observations echo those of academics reflecting on similar experiences in Canada (Malenfant, Nichols, & Schwan, 2019; Voronka, 2019; Voronka, 2016), and in other settler-colonial states such as the United States (Willse, 2015) and Australia (Farrugia & Gerrard, 2016), which are cited throughout this paper. Willse's (2015) *The Value of Homelessness: Managing Surplus Life in the United States* is particularly useful in this discussion. His Foucauldian analysis helps us understand how state knowledge production, which constructs 'populations' to be managed, is turned against people. More broadly, the book looks at the ways 'discipline brings into play its power, which is one of analysis' (Foucault, 1975, p. 197).

This paper is a call for researchers and would-be researchers in the field to shift away from the make-work projects of 'studying homelessness' and instead, to commit to challenging the forces that produce it. Is it possible to stop the narrative that *more* 'evidence' is needed for social change to occur? How can we produce knowledge that directly supports resistance against common struggles such as housing deprivation? This paper takes seriously the demand of unhoused people of Vancouver, prefaced above, 'for a major mobilization to confront, expose, and oppose the government policies and NGO industries that manage homeless, low-income, and Indigenous people without challenging or disrupting the systems and social conditions that cause homelessness and poverty' (The Social Housing Alliance, 2014, n.p.). The final section concludes with a proposal for 'unruly research' which challenges the prevailing orthodoxy of social policy research. It includes examples of alternative approaches and possible questions that can mobilize research to advance the right to shelter and improve conditions collectively, rather than individually.

2. Individualization and systemic ignorance of structural explanations

How homelessness is defined, conceptualized, and operationalized has become a key concern in the academic social science field in Canada. This is evidenced by the immense proliferation of population counts and demographic studies, as well as an 'intensified concern with reorganizing funding through more scientific management' (Willse, 2015, p. 105). Much of this serves the pragmatic 'What Works?' approach to public policy, which now dominates all government research activities (Slater, 2012; Stanhope & Dunn, 2011). Homelessness is conceptualized as a 'discrete, calculable and governable social problem' (Farrugia & Gerrard, 2016, p. 269) requiring special expertise and intervention to solve. This understanding, coupled with ongoing retrenchment of welfare states across the world, has resulted in the proliferation of the research field and non-profit social service provisioning. Ongoing research is legitimized by the idea that society will only be able to address homelessness after learning more about it. After all, who could argue against researching solutions addressing the urgent concern of homelessness?

The audit culture resulting from increasing austerity requires 'objective means' of qualifying which competing organizations representing different segments of populations and goals get a piece of the shrinking pie. The widespread proliferation of calculative rationalities, principles and techniques of modern financial accounting (Shore & Wright, 2015) offers quantification and standardization assessments of clients and services, as well as

programmatic responses and economic restructuring. The quantitative methods and regression techniques lend credibility to claims of objective and ‘value-free’ knowledge (Slater, 2013). Homelessness research also includes rich narratives of individuals overcoming personal hardship in a hostile world. Often presented as apolitical or ‘non-partisan,’ it suggests that its methodologies and findings are a kind of ‘common sense’—an extremely powerful claim to make about projects whose funding is tied to municipal, provincial and federal strategies, or related private foundation initiatives. The collected data offers these funding bodies an ‘evidence base’ that, more often than not, aligns with prevailing neoliberal logics and management strategies.

It is common practice to situate inequality and economic contexts as a backdrop to homelessness, but not to explore these active processes and systems in any depth. The research focuses on ‘groups affected’ by race, gender, sexual orientation, and age. However, less attention is given to the tough economic climate, cuts in government budgets, the global reorganization of labour markets, the devastating effects of privatization on public housing, or the astoundingly unaffordable and increasingly financialized private rental markets. When political-economic structures are left unquestioned, the outcome, whether intended or not, is an assumption that homelessness is caused by individual choices made under certain resource constraints (Slater, 2013). The resulting analytical process takes the mainstream as self-evident, identifying individuals and groups for their ‘inclusion’ into capitalist society of rentiership, debt, wage-labour, and White, heteronormative civility (Cameron, 2006).

The latest iterations of ‘risk-factor analysis,’ which assesses individual problematic events (‘pathways into homelessness’) to inform prevention strategies, somewhat ironically now include structural variables such as ‘poverty.’ Demographic information, coupled with experiences of exploitation, criminalization and institutionalization are ‘reduced to constellations of factors that may act as disincentives to the rational negotiation of a pathway back to housed society’ (Farrugia & Gerrard, 2016, p. 276). This production of bureaucratic knowledge and schematization ignores subtleties and reduces social existence to preconceived mechanical or statistical formulae (Graeber, 2015). These flat variables cannot account for interactive processes (Willse, 2015) such as the historical state-produced attempt at genocide of Indigenous peoples, violent enclosure of the commons, punitive relocation via reserves and prisons, kidnapping and murder committed by church-run residential schools, and their reformation into the contemporary child welfare system. It is a methodological choice to reject engagement with discussions about the coercion of wage labour through debt, exposure to environmental harm, the constant threat of criminalization and police brutality, and dispossession by global corporate rule that working-class and racialized people face. As Slater (2013) suggests, this ignorance is an active construct that is manufactured, managed, strategically employed, and institutionally amplified.

3. Austerity solutions

Structural explanations for homelessness are often mentioned but then overshadowed by the individualistic lens and not discussed in serious depth by the dominant methodologies

used in policy research. This allows poverty to be understood as a technical problem, where social variables become the levers for intervention (Farrugia & Gerrard, 2016). This involves a prescription of therapeutic, individualistic responses to homelessness, largely led by the non-profit sector. The therapeutic response is undertaken alongside, or in support of, state-facilitated gentrification strategies and public-private partnership arrangements found in the typical 10-year plans of neighbourhoods and municipalities hoping to ‘clean up’ visible poverty in streets and public spaces, making way for capital accumulation. Non-profit programs and research operate as security and surveillance to stabilize cities’ perceptions of safety and cleanliness and to build a public consensus for the given municipal plans.¹ Notably, promoted market-oriented policies and interventions – most prominently, ‘Housing First’ – promise cost-savings.

Canada’s homelessness research boom originated out of a concern for the growing economic cost of homelessness born by society and public institutions. Key studies released in the early-mid 2000s, such as one commissioned by the federal government in 2005 (see Pomeroy, 2005), began to frame ending homelessness as cost-effective and subsequently inspired questions such as: ‘Can we save money by doing the right thing?’ (Gaetz, 2012). The now widely-accepted ‘Housing First’ intervention model has been the answer to this call. As the name suggests, it promotes the immediate provision of housing to chronically homeless populations (but since has expanded to groups outside of this category as a general ‘best practice’). Importantly, the model critiques traditional approaches to housing and service provision, which put too much emphasis on emergency services such as shelters and placed barriers between individuals and services (e.g. mandatory abstinence or mental health treatment). The reason for the enthusiastic shift to Housing First, however, is not because both liberal and conservative governments adopting it found traditional services paternalistic or offensive, but because they saw them ‘as a deterrent [they] could no longer afford’ (Willse, 2015, p. 164).² Such barriers to services can visibilize poverty, which, in turn, threaten processes of (re)valuation of urban districts for future profitability in the real estate market. Therefore, evidence for Housing First has been widely touted by major studies (most notably the world’s largest Housing First trial, *At Home / Chez Soi*, by the non-profit organization, Mental Health Commission of Canada), which emphasize the financial cost of leaving populations deprived of housing—inevitably borne by public institutions such as health facilities, hospitals, criminal justice systems, police, and emergency shelters (Gaetz, Scott, & Gulliver, 2013; Polvere, et al., 2014).

¹ A study by Roe (2009) reveals how non-profits providing harm reduction services to poor people of Vancouver’s downtown east-side intertwined with gentrification processes by entering into partnerships with businesses, developers and police, and by fixing a ‘therapeutic community’ status to the area. He contends that the organizations’ implementation of ‘a model for the enlightened and efficient management of the socially marginal’ in which residents became ‘clients’ caters to gentrifiers’ anxieties over the perceivably uncontrolled space, and reinforces broader interventions such as redevelopment and eventual displacement (p. 75). For more on the often-overlooked role of non-profit organizations in gentrification, see: Arena, 2012; Fraser & Kick, 2014; Ilyniak, 2017.

² The enthusiastic acceptance of Housing First is very similar to that of ‘Universal Basic Income’ (UBI), which also is claimed to be free of ideology and is advocated for by the ruling classes. UBI seeks to sustain the capitalist system while allowing for the rollback of public services and dismantlement of workers’ protections. For further in-depth analysis, see *Basic Income: a critical reader* (Spring Magazine, 2020).

Largely a technical ‘design fix,’ the discourse surrounding Housing First has a strange tendency to ignore true costs of living (e.g. astronomically high rental rates in cities such as Toronto and Vancouver) and remains vague about who will pay for subsidies—a key element of the model—and for how long. The model makes marginal adjustments to current styles of individualized social work practice. Concepts such as ‘reintegration’ and building ‘independence’—as opposed to dependence on social services and assistance—still translate to volunteering arrangements, personal budgeting education, work preparation programmes, and encouraging more cordial relationships with bosses and landlords. Like other mainstream ‘affordable housing’ models promoted by professional researchers, another key component of Housing First is reliance on the private real estate market to solve its own crisis—a logic oppositional to that of social(izing) housing.

While challenging the contradictory high public costs of homelessness is not wrong, intended or not, this critique inevitably plays into state austerity agendas (Baker & Evans, 2016; Chapman & Withers, 2019; Willse, 2015). In New York City, for example, an unprecedented commitment of \$1 billion to Housing First as a part of a ten-year plan in 2004 led to a decrease in street (visible) homelessness by 2013. However, the overall homeless population grew by 71% in this time as massive cuts were made to shelter, public housing and subsidy programs (Baker & Evans, 2016). This aligns with a metanalysis of Housing First studies which found that while shelter and ER costs decreased, effects on the justice system (criminalization used to clear streets for capital accumulation) were more ambiguous (Ly & Latimer, 2015). As major players in unhousing (displacing and containing) poor and racialized people (Waquant, 2008), police and prison systems have seen their budgets increase across North America in the past few decades (John Howard Society of Canada, 2018; Urban Institute, 2022).

There are critiques across the political spectrum arguing that Housing First’s ability to improve lives and end homelessness is overstated (see, for example, Chapman & Withers, 2019 and Eide, 2020). Nonetheless, prioritizing cost efficiency along with program efficacy have become the norm in homelessness policy and research. The competition for dwindling social services funds results in an increased demand for an audit culture of evaluation, performance review, and consulting. Commissioned or in-house researchers analyze workflows for non-profit organizations to improve their labour productivity and showcase favourable outcomes to better contend for the same small pot of money in a sort of ‘competitive management of populations’ (Willse, 2015, p. 47). Funding programs incentivize these so-called evidence-based models, such as Housing First, and reward collaborations where multiple organizations are expected to pool otherwise insufficient resources. This is where goal-oriented data—unhoused lives quantified and placed into categories and ‘outcomes’—become compatible with cost/benefit analyses. Making individuals calculable in relation to financial resources, ‘allows for tighter regulation of the financial cost of service approaches and a reorganization of services along the lines of supposed economic efficiency’ (Willse, 2015, p. 128). This bureaucratic knowledge escapes the question of what or who this efficiency is for.

Curiously, those concerned with cost-savings in the pursuit of ending homelessness are silent about current calls for defunding police or the abolition of the prison system. The position also did not seem to recognize the ‘cost-saving’ potential for rent-striking tenants across the continent resisting mass eviction (and imminent homelessness) in the economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic. There was no pressure from this research field on landlords—who saw very little losses in profit (Ali et al., 2020)—to provide rent relief in these unprecedented and deadly times. The Canadian homelessness research community was silent about the *lack* of ‘cost-savings’ when riot-police, private security and demolition vehicles were deployed by Canadian municipalities to displace public park encampment residents, who had grown in numbers and become significantly more visible during the pandemic. Instead, organizations have cumulatively received millions of public dollars to study COVID-19 cases among encampments in Toronto (Draaisma, 2020), for example, and to evaluate the hotel shelter programs that residents are forced into. While it is common knowledge that encampments had little to no COVID-19 cases and that the hotel shelters had seen major outbreaks and reported deaths (Encampment Support Network Toronto, 2020), the research community failed to question the significant public funds funneled to major hotel companies such as Accor (Novotel) for at-rate accommodations as well as renovations after the contracts—not to mention the roughly \$15 million they overbilled the City (Auditor General Toronto, 2022).

Homelessness research reports and policy briefs also fail to demand a true public reinvestment into a public social safety net. Rather, they promise to magically do ‘more with less’—a demand which diverts investment into the non-profit sector, private organizations whose key purpose is pulling in private capital from philanthropic foundations and corporate charities to top up insufficient public resources. More recent calls for the prevention of homelessness which denounce the ‘politics of scarcity’ (Gaetz & Dej, 2017), still make ambiguous pleas for ‘social inclusion’ and less funding controls, and do not challenge, but generally reinforce the logics of the non-profit industrial complex. One example is the attempt to steer public funding towards elusive youth homelessness ‘prevention’ program models to be conducted by non-profit organizations along with the development of risk assessment tools for greater prediction. These models are considered even cheaper than Housing First (presumably, because they do not require subsidies since target clients are not yet homeless); but like Housing First, they repackage typical individual therapeutic practice under new names such as ‘Youth Reconnect.’ Far from redistributive or universal, these are private responses also largely carried out within the market, which means that access to them will always be highly uneven and differential (Lake & Newman, 2002).

There is an uncomfortable relationship between crises such as homelessness and a privatized social service industry, which inevitably seeks economically-productive ventures. A view that is sympathetic to the non-profit sector accepts that its role is to ‘pick up the pieces’ left behind by the retrenchment of the welfare state. A perhaps less sympathetic perspective understands that it has become a productive industry which cannot sustain itself without homelessness. Further, this view points to the non-profit sector’s key role in neoliberal reforms and more broadly, the maintenance of capitalist relations. Cuts and

reforms to social welfare that have proliferated since the 1980s, including significant tax exemptions for the wealthy, have contributed to the erosion of the public sector and produced more poverty and inequality. Thus, the major contradiction is that promotion of ‘cost-saving’ in homelessness policy research cannot be divorced from this history of austerity restructuring, that *(re)produces* poverty and homelessness.

4. Make-work: a never-ending ‘End’?

Malenfant, Nichols & Schwan (2019) describe the ‘necessary nimbleness’ and fluidity that is required of the often highly-gendered and under-valued labour in the Canadian homelessness research field. This is especially true of fund-seeking, where considerable evidence found that ‘shifting and strategic use of language and frames ... to apply to different funding opportunities’ is common (Malenfant et al., 2019, p. 46). One shared sentiment Malenfant et al. identified among workers across two organizations was that they were ‘not doing enough’ to address homelessness: ‘it was difficult for many workers to see where their own individual tasks could contribute to these vast global structures of social inequality’ (p. 51), especially in an environment where funding ‘structures the ways that work is organized’ (p. 41). The work was described as ‘perpetually chasing funding to eat their own tails’ (p. 42). This depiction is reminiscent of the phenomenon of ‘bullshit jobs.’ As defined by Graeber (2018), the term describes the subjective feeling that ‘a form of paid employment that is so completely pointless, unnecessary, or pernicious that even the employee cannot justify its existence even though, as part of the conditions of employment, the employee feels obliged to pretend that this is not the case’ (p. 9-10). This sentiment was shared by a number of my co-workers throughout various jobs in homelessness research and policy-making (see next section). Here, this concept is expanded to the organizations and research field as a whole to make the central argument that homelessness research in Canada is largely ‘make-work’: activities assigned or carried out largely to keep busy and thus, self-perpetuate.

One need not look far to notice redundancy in homelessness research. The website HomelessHub.ca, operated by the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, hosts the central Canadian digital inventory of research on homelessness and toolkits for how to conduct more. The following sample of titles, constituting 0.001% of the approximately 10,000 reports, blog pieces, and other media catalogued, demonstrates the prevalence of repetitive reporting in the field: *Plans to End Homelessness*; *Plans to End Youth Homelessness*; *Strategies to End Homelessness*; *What Needs to be Done to End Homelessness?*; *Defining the End to Homelessness*; *Working Together to Define What it Means to End Homelessness*; *Coming Together to End Homelessness*; *The Struggle to End Homelessness in Canada*; *Putting an End to Child and Family Homelessness in Canada*; *A Plan, Not a Dream: How to End Homelessness in 10 Years* (Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, 2021).

Even if ‘you’ve ended homelessness,’ a blog post on HomelessHub.ca asks, ‘can you prove it?’ Other blog posts suggest the evidence for solutions exists, but is not implemented by government and programs. Therefore ‘knowledge mobilization’ is needed, which translates to more work—more blog posts, executive summaries, quick sound bites, and

infographics. The seemingly endless production of studies and reports is evocative of the commentary on gentrification by Engels in *The Housing Question* (1872). He outlines how the managerial class's solution to poverty is to shift it elsewhere: 'the bourgeoisie has only one method of solving the housing question after its fashion – that is to say, of *solving it in such a way that the solution continually reproduces the question anew*' (emphasis added, n.p.). This quote can be applied here quite literally. By avoiding deeper structural analysis and, in turn, upholding austerity, homelessness research allows for the *reproduction of the question* of 'Strategies to End Homelessness.'

Is more research on homelessness truly needed? Research by the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness, MAP Centre for Urban Health Solutions, Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, Mental Health Commission of Canada, The Salvation Army, Raising the Roof, A Way Home Canada, John Howard Society and numerous other organizations and affiliated academics endlessly build evidence for programs based on meagre subsidies and individualized counselling. They all show the obvious: a little bit more money and some social interaction while navigating poverty may make some lives better. These results are not 'beautifully surprising,' as proclaimed by a patronizing study on one-time cash transfers to homeless people by the Foundation of Social Change in British Columbia (Watson, 2020).

By asking limited questions about how to *manage* homelessness, the research field accepts poverty and inequality as inevitable. Certainly, this reality is not preferred by the research and non-profit communities; it is highly doubtful that any individual in the field outwardly or consciously desires this status quo. Rather, the manufactured ignorance of methodology ultimately allows for this make-work to carry on.

5. From the frontlines of make-work

This section shares some reflections on the mainstream homelessness research community in Canada, which are based on personal employment experiences over a period of eight years. These experiences have included advising on, or developing, methodological processes as well as conducting and managing data collection with a national project on youth homelessness, and with various committees of people with lived experience (PWLE) of housing precarity.

5.1 Research as opportunity

I can still hear a comment from a non-profit director during a PowerPoint presentation: 'We're on the cutting edge of homelessness research. We're not bored by it' (personal communication, 18 February 2021). However, as alluded to in the previous section, my co-workers' doubts about the work may stem from the issue that the field's collective curiosity in the research process seems to end where professional or financial gain begins. Fund-seeking to support this never-ending work is serious business. I have witnessed large amounts of finances spent on a public relations firm to lobby different sections of

government for more funding in the midst of a diversion to COVID-19 pandemic-related relief. I have seen non-profit leadership form an entirely new organization, with a new staff, to be eligible for millions of public dollars. This money was not used to research youth homelessness but rather to act as a middleman, managing funding for projects across the country—administrative (bullshit) work.

Funding impetus for homelessness intervention research has perhaps evolved beyond the simple ‘What Works?’ approach and moved into that of ‘Social Innovation.’ Under this framework, more methodologically sophisticated systems of surveillance that can, for example, coordinate people’s personal data across sectors, mimicking targeted advertising approaches. Other developing trends include standardization, compliance measures, and trademarking ‘solutions’ to claim authority and collect training and user fees. I have been in meetings where the development of evaluation frameworks was proposed ‘so consultants can be hired’ (personal communication, 6 February 2021). This promise of opportunity also motivated the demise of the disastrous Vulnerability Index – Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool (VI-SPDAT). The survey, developed by OrgCode Consulting Inc., is used by social service organizations in Canada, the United States, and Australia to determine an individual’s or family’s level of homelessness risk and to prioritize which clients should receive assistance first. VI-SPDAT was found to have reliability and validity problems due to racial and gender biases, with potentially devastating effects (Cronley, 2020). Besides publicly critiquing the tool, one organization that I worked for saw this situation as a chance to step in with its own assessment tool: ‘the space is open and we look to occupy it’ (personal communication, 18 March 2021). Another project I worked on promoted the Youth Assessment Prioritization Tool, which requires training for a fee and is rumoured to be its developer’s ‘retirement plan’ (personal communication, 2 April 2021). In such ways, the make-work carves out and perpetuates economically productive spaces within the audit culture of austerity.

5.2 Goal-oriented data collection

The analytic foundation of individualization in homelessness research informs which questions are asked and how. For example, multiple-choice questions only allow certain responses, while regression calculations can only feature the variables considered. Reconfiguring qualitative human experience into neat quantitative boxes incorrectly depicts reality. Research assistants know this well; being cognizant of what is lost, ignored, or (re)interpreted by surveys, forms and questionnaires is emotionally strenuous, especially in larger studies with human participants. Frontline data collectors witness the immeasurable everyday violence of people’s impoverishment.

Working in the homelessness research field, I quickly learned how easy it is to manipulate ‘truths’ using frames, technologies, and practices of interpretation and representation that suit the mandate of a given project – essentially, ‘how to lie with statistics’ (Huff, 1954). However, these are far from outright lies. The ‘decision-based evidence-making’ (Slater, 2008), or goal-oriented data collection, constitutes real, raw data collected

carefully and double-checked by research assistants and managers. Yet, the questions in surveys and interviews can be misleading. For example, a survey I administered for a large study asked young people transitioning out of the child welfare system (94% of whom relied on some form of social assistance) about the main reasons for their unemployment. The multiple-choice options demonstrated how seemingly neutral questions individualize poverty: ‘mental illness,’ ‘physical illness,’ ‘transportation problems,’ ‘fear of loss of benefits,’ ‘both mental and physical illness,’ and ‘other.’ Most respondents chose ‘other’ and elaborated: ‘I can’t get a job,’ ‘I’m staying in a shelter,’ ‘I need to focus on school’, or my personal favourite, ‘I don’t want to work.’ These methodological issues are mundane, but common and therefore, cumulatively and inevitably distort results. For example, the respondents were not allowed to choose both ‘student’ and ‘unemployed’ for ‘primary employment status,’ which meant the survey results did not properly represent the population.

I have manipulated data. This was not because of direct pressure from a supervisor but rather the omnipresent collective anxiety that the intervention being tested ought to lead to some positive results since it used considerable public money. It was also wrought by a methodological dilemma on how to categorize individuals’ longitudinal housing histories into codes like ‘stable-permanent’ and ‘unstable-temporary.’ With each ambiguous case (e.g., a participant housed long-term but with an abusive ex-partner or in a very poorly-maintained basement rental apartment), my team was thrown into another debate loop. In the end, I had to decide within this false duality imposed on what otherwise should be understood as precarity, the general state under the social construct and relations of private property.

Depending on the project goal, definitions and categories broaden or narrow. Baseline surveys typically demonstrate a need for intervention. The evaluation of the interventions presents an increase in employment, education, and housing stability. The cumulative impact of such methodological decisions is that outcomes of studies and evaluations generally have positive conclusions skewed towards the given goal. They provide ‘evidence’ that an intervention is effective in some favourable way.

It is also important to note that these numbers and narratives are often generated within a coercive context. Participants complete the ratings and testimonials within the power imbalance of the intervention, with evaluations sometimes even conducted by their caseworker. The typical questions such as, ‘What did you like about the program?’ and ‘What did you dislike about it?’ demand polite answers to the person holding your cash reimbursement. Sometimes, participating in the study is a condition of receiving help from the non-profit organization. This is especially true of randomized-controlled trials, a method borrowed from medical research and now applied to social interventions, in which the lucky half of the study sample receives financial assistance and counselling while the other half receives nothing to ‘control’ the results. Commenting on this practice in Canada, Voronka (2019) notes that it raises serious questions about limited choice and consent under duress when few people subjected to poverty are in a position to turn down such an opportunity. Again, frontline research workers are privy to this. In and out of working hours, fellow research assistants and I received phone calls and texts from participants asking if their next

interview appointment could be rescheduled to an earlier date in order to receive the study participation compensation sooner. Meanwhile, studies often keep compensation amounts low to avoid ‘economic exploitation.’

5.3 People with lived experience (PWLE)

A discussion on homelessness research is incomplete without considering a key piece of its methodological process: the people who have been or are currently homeless but are uniquely positioned between this community and professional spheres. People with lived/ing experience or ‘expertise’ (PWLE) are an integral to the perpetuation of make-work research and non-profit industry. Indeed, including people with direct experience of homelessness in research methodology design, organizational governance or related promotional activities is now considered an ethical ‘best practice’ for organizations and academics. The intended role of PWLE is to transcend power structures, use knowledge to empower others, and inform what ‘evidence’ is needed to make programmatic changes. PWLE committees often engage in make-work research tasks, as well as advisory, and facilitation activities including consulting on methodologies and monitoring project progress. In return, members are provided with some small compensation and possibly professional development in the field.

A typical, somewhat infantilizing experience that I had as a participant on a PWLE committee involved advisory meetings – focus groups designed with the lure of free pizza, experimental ‘Claymation’ videos, and multi-day ‘visioning’ workshops led by external facilitators with vague job titles. This work, spanning two years, amounted to a lengthy ‘youth homelessness strategy’ that, unlike other similar reports, did not even make it to the virtual shelf.

While these can be spaces where research is critically discussed from the perspective of ‘the researched’ and ‘the consulted,’ those who are available, qualified and chosen for lived/ing experience advisory work are by and large ‘recognized as able to perform White civility, comprehensibility, and self-manage unruliness’ (Voronka, 2016, p. 197). Members are nonetheless paid low wages or honorariums and are highly monitored and audited. Their voices are considered only at organized, coordinated, authorized moments.

The danger is that lived/ing experience narratives limit analysis of the historical, political-economic moment or workings of the industry and therefore tend to reproduce, rather than undercut, the dominant ideological stances of homelessness research (Voronka, 2016, p. 194). Counter to ground-up, grassroots initiatives, the PWLE committees exist only within these non-profit and research spaces. Like any other job, this work occurs within the given organization’s set parameters, goals, and mandates linked to funding. The difference is that the PWLE’s genuine motivation for social change is exploited. This kind of consultation, like the research itself, does not ask ‘Should this happen?’ It asks: ‘*How* should it happen?’ Even when positioned as advisors, steering committee members, or co-authors, PWLE’s ability to fundamentally influence or change an accepted epistemic approach is extremely limited, especially under the coercion of informal wage (honorarium) labour.

A PWLE group I am currently a part of regularly discusses the limits of consultation and evaluation, as well as whether or not homelessness research projects and conferences allow for much critical dialogue. They bring rise to the demand, ‘nothing about us without us’ (Nelson, 2020). Tokenization is another common theme in conversations among our membership. It is a concern that is raised repeatedly, even to managers, directors and principal investigators, but can never truly be resolved within this environment. This is because PWLE position and committee *are* tokenization. Not unlike research study participants, PWLE are objects of information, as opposed to subjects of communication (Foucault, 1975). Hiring PWLE reproduces the pervasive individualistic framing in homelessness research and replaces any possibility of engagement with more critical, confrontational and collective demands. To listen to, and to be led by, existing working-class movements directly challenging state and private forces of the housing crisis, for example, would contradict the ideological underpinnings of the research and goals of funding sources. At the end of the day, the researchers and policymakers offering technical solutions to socio-political problems value the expertise of financiers, economists and the real estate sector over that of PWLE. No matter what PWLE ‘inform,’ the dominant discourse will still individualize risk and responsibility, while positioning the private market as the remedy rather than the cause of the housing crisis.

PWLE are seen as the ultimate ethnographic ‘blessing,’ visually corroborating the organization’s narrative description (Voronka, 2016, p. 72), legitimizing the organization or researcher and their policy and programmatic proposals. This makes critiquing the retrenchment of the social welfare state and, especially the privatization of social services (the non-profit sector), that much more difficult. Essentially, PWLE committees make for a highly effective, but cheap, public relations strategy in a field in which maintaining the image of ‘doing good’ eventually translates to more funding. The make-work research continues.

6. Proposal for unruly research

The proliferation of the data, projects, evaluations, toolkits, models, conferences, workshops, definitions, stories, and blogs has not correlated with any significant reduction in poverty or homelessness. Inequality, in fact, has increased (Breau, 2015). The homelessness research community self-perpetuates by upholding austerity and producing more poverty and homelessness to legitimize reliance on non-profit social services. Eliminating housing insecurity would end this knowledge production and population management industry.

Based on personal employment experiences in the homelessness research community in Canada, in this paper I have identified a handful of reasons to remain skeptical of the perpetual need for ‘evidence’ to make policy changes or eradicate poverty. Mainstream homelessness research engages in bureaucratic, goal-oriented data collection, interpretation and dissemination that has potential negative effects on the population it purports to help. Methodological sophistication becomes a goal unto itself while simultaneously telling us less about what we ought to know. In the rush to ‘solutions,’ more conflict-based and

redistributive approaches, like demands to increase wages or support tenant struggles against financialized landlords, are neglected. Instead, the apparently indisputable logic of cost-saving, which enjoys acceptance by governments across the political spectrum, is continuously asserted.

One of the key methodological errors in homelessness research is its choice of subject: it studies and attempts to manage the symptom (homelessness), not the problem (capitalism). Homelessness research is dominated by a downward orientation, one that looks towards regular people, workers, and those experiencing poverty in order to quantify, manage and discipline them. Researchers must stop imposing what Voronka (2019) calls ‘slow death through evidenced-based research’—careers dependent on the prolonged suffering of others. Researchers must shift away from these make-work projects of ‘studying homelessness’ and commit to looking upward. If they are concerned about better understanding ‘social exclusion’ they should want to know how such abandonment and exploitation came about. If we invert the dominant methodology of individualization, as Slater explains, ‘then the problem becomes one of understanding life chances via a theory of capital accumulation and class struggle ... the injustices inherent in letting the market (buttressed by the state) be the force that determines the cost of land and housing’ (2013, p. 369).

How can we produce knowledge that directly supports resistance to an inherently common struggle? A more ‘unruly’ research methodology is necessary to reclaim the political space currently dominated by non-profit and neoliberal logics. This requires a different kind of engagement: deploying powerful techniques of analysis that critique and dismantle power structures instead of surveilling people who have been dispossessed and displaced. Note, for example, that there seems to be a lot fewer research institutions focused on studying and eradicating the problem of concentrated wealth and power. Imagine if we became ‘hoarding experts’—a job in the non-profit industry typically responsible for clearing out people’s belongings in congregate subsidized housing or in encampments—but instead, intervened in the lives of people who hoard land and wealth. We simply cannot understand poverty without research on the ruling classes and their hegemonic and material reproduction.

To achieve any change, we must practice asking questions that lead away from the same old answers. The merit of structural analysis, in this regard, is that it can simplify and schematize complex material to find *something unexpected* (Graeber, 2015). Together with a ‘militant research’ principle which upholds the working-class people and their collective power as primary agents in political and social struggle, these methods present a critical alternative to the aforementioned ‘goal-oriented data collection’ approach.

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic and associated uptick in social resistance to exacerbated inequality and displacement, there are some useful examples in the Canadian context that help reframe and reimagine what alternative methodologies could look like. Parodying a government department website, EvictionsOntario.com was created by Ontario tenant organizers, which revealed the provincial quasi-judicial Landlord and Tenant Board’s cruel efficiency in processing tens of thousands of evictions online. The website profiled adjudicators such as ex-police, landlords, and paralegals for landlord-side firms and listed the

worst corporate offenders of mass eviction during the pandemic. EvictionsOntario.com also provides resources on how to connect with neighbours to fight evictions collectively, not alone in highly imbalanced legal battles (Evictions Ontario, 2021). Similarly, RenovictionsTO.com, created by a couple Toronto researchers, asks tenants to anonymously report landlords who practice ‘renoviction,’ evicting a tenant by claiming the need to complete major renovations (RenovictionsTO, 2021). The data, initially collected out of interest, propelled the researchers to meet with tenants who contributed to the website, not to share findings, but to talk about organizing. A number of these tenant groups have since successfully resisted their evictions.

Inverting the dominant methodology means accounting for who created, perpetuates and benefits from the housing crisis, not accounting for austerity’s sake. Who benefits from homelessness and housing deprivation, and how? How can simultaneously high rates of homelessness and rental housing vacancy in major Canadian cities be explained? How did the corporate foundations funding the make-work, such as Home Depot or KPMG, for example, accumulate such surplus funds for donation, and what are their interests in this philanthropic industry? What is lost through tax exemption via donations—how much money gets diverted to specific non-profit projects while the rich donors continue to exploit the earth and its people?

The necessary focus on who the research is accountable to will shift the questions being asked. How can housing, healthcare and other infrastructure be socialized, and is this enough? How can encampment residents self-organize to resist the forces currently displacing them? How specifically can this mobilization take place within the context of everyday survival and the disempowering effect of charity?

Finally, this reorientation calls on PWLE to also become ‘unruly’ and organize collectively. Lived experience is not a replacement for critical analysis. It is too easily coopted to reproduce the dominant ideological position in the mainstream homelessness research of individualized therapeutic response, cutting costs and non-profit career-advancement for a certain few. Lived experience, however, tells us *why* we ought to do something. The critical, structural analysis and theory can help us consider alternative ways we may go about doing that work: mobilize our insights to challenge the collusions of state and capital and express moral outrage at who exactly stands to privately gain from collective human suffering. This work demands an imagination beyond the socially and economically ‘acceptable’ frameworks of the non-profit sector. It rejects the false notion of ‘inclusion,’ which coerces people deeper into mainstream capitalist society. We must reject knowledge systems that quantify lives against increasingly tighter budgets. Critically, as the ‘faces’ of homelessness research, PWLE currently have the platform ‘to confront, expose, and oppose’ the make-work, as urged by disrupters of the 2014 CAEH conference (The Social Housing Alliance, 2014, n.p.). To collectively improve conditions, we will find ways to radically reverse the epistemology of individualization and wield knowledge for the power of—not over—people.

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