RESEARCH ARTICLE

Critical junctures as complex processes: examining mechanisms of policy change and path dependence in the Canadian pandemic response to homelessness

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Abstract

Policy change is not an instantaneous or linear process. In fact, change includes several mechanisms working in tandem and even against one another. This article examines the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on homelessness policy in Canada. In a sector that is already plagued with emergency responses – rather than long-term solutions – the pandemic has initiated a critical juncture where policy change is possible, but not guaranteed. Although the existing failures to alleviate homelessness in Canada make policy failings even more obvious, aspects of the pre-existing Canadian response to homelessness negate change. The pandemic, however, has led to temporary solutions and created a setting where long-term change is possible. Using over 150 primary sources, this article analyses mechanisms of change and path dependence in the pandemic response to homelessness. The presence of such mechanisms is tested in three major Canadian cities.

The COVID-19 pandemic is an exogenous shock, with critical and lasting effects on policies, economies, and industries worldwide. It is a "major event or confluence of factors [which disrupts] the existing balance of political and economic power in a nation," marking a critical juncture that can lead to new and different paths of policy development (Acemoglu and Robinson 2012, p.106; Capoccia 2016b). In the homelessness policy area, it has created a moment where structural conditions are changing, creating an opportunity for policy change. These changes, however, are still embedded within the pre-existing policy context (Falleti and Lynch 2009).

Governments in Canada have responded with initiatives to prevent the spread of the virus among populations experiencing homelessness, recognising increased vulnerabilities. A study has found that those with a recent history of homelessness are more

likely to be tested for the virus and to test positive, as well as more likely to be admitted to the hospital, receive intensive care, and die from COVID-19 (Richard et al. 2021).

This article identifies the pandemic as the initial condition of a critical juncture and analyses the ongoing mechanisms of change and path dependence evident in the responses to homelessness. In so doing, this article asks: what empirical evidence is associated with mechanisms of policy change in the Canadian approach to homelessness during the pandemic and what mechanisms work against such change?

Analysing an exogenous shock that marks the incidence of a critical juncture as it is occurring offers a unique perspective into the mechanisms and underlying processes that contribute to a broader understanding of policy change. It identifies choices and policies that can lead to long-term changes and those that offer more temporary solutions. Homelessness policy in Canada is facing a critical moment, where both mechanisms of sustained change and path dependence are evident. The complexity of these mechanisms speaks to not only the intricacy of critical junctures but also the efforts needed to allow for lasting policy change in the Canadian approach to homelessness.

The article continues as follows. First, the path dependence and critical juncture literature situates the pandemic as the initial condition of a critical juncture in the homelessness space. Then, a brief summary of the existing responses to homelessness sets the context of pre-existing path dependence and policy failure. Next, I describe how I compiled the sources of pandemic responses in three Canadian cities. I then differentiate the responses, characterising them as evidence of mechanisms of change or path dependence, utilising the Mahoney's (2000) typology of mechanisms of change. I conclude with considerations regarding the significance of the COVID-19 pandemic on homelessness policy in Canada.

Theory: Critical junctures and mechanisms of change

The pandemic serves as the initial condition of a critical juncture in homelessness policy. It is a time where policymakers are presented with alternative approaches to homelessness. A public health frame is forcing governments to re-examine shelter and crisis-focused responses and consider more long-term solutions. In addition to temporary solutions, such as increased shelter spaces and isolation centres, more long-term housing options are also being utilised. There is an increase in collaboration between governments, sectors, and actors, advocacy, and innovation. The contingency created by the pandemic, which underscores the importance of a safe home, has created a moment where more options are present.

In public policy literature, "critical junctures" are the moments or events that provide opportunities for change (Capoccia and Kelemen 2007; Mahoney 2000). According to Mahoney (2000, p. 513), "critical junctures are characterised by the adoption of a particular institutional arrangement from among two or more alternatives." Mahoney continues: "these junctures are 'critical' because once a particular option is selected it becomes progressively more difficult to return to the initial point when multiple alternatives were still available" (p. 513). According to this definition, critical junctures occur when an option is chosen from multiple alternatives. The pandemic, therefore, is the initial condition, and it is the moment of
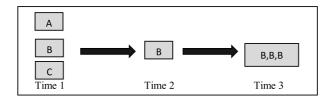
Figure 1. Contingency and the critical juncture.
Source: Adapted from Mahoney (2000)

contingency that offers distinct opportunities for change (Mahoney 2000). We are currently in Time 1 in Figure 1. During this initial condition, there are multiple options that are available, and it cannot be fully predicted which option will be chosen. Time 2 is when one option – Option B in the diagram – is chosen over others. Time 3 is the self-reinforcing process that occurs once an option is chosen and then reproduced repeatedly. Reinforcing mechanisms sustain policies and their path dependence. Such mechanisms constrain the ability of actors to bring about policy change and include the centrality of collective action, density of institutions, prevalence of political authority that enhances asymmetries and complexity, lack of efficiency-enhancing mechanisms, shorter time horizons, and strong status quo biases (Pierson 2000). When a decision is made at Time 2, such mechanisms keep it in place at Time 3 and beyond.

Contingency is therefore a key element of critical junctures. Change is more possible as structural constraints are relaxed (Capoccia and Kelemen 2007). The strategies and choices utilised by key actors within a given historical context frame these moments of uncertainty that are neither predetermined nor completely random (Capoccia 2016a). Institutions and policies assert a given structure through their distributive properties (Pierson 1995). They distribute power, money, information, access, and other assets creating specific structural conditions, which they continue to assert through mechanisms of path dependence. Significant changes can alter or create new choices regarding boundaries, distribution, and identities (Katznelson 2003).

Critical junctures provide an avenue for significant change, facilitating new path-dependent legacies (Hacker 1998). The pandemic, therefore, provides changes in structural conditions that can set policy development along a different path (Collier and Collier 2002; Pierson 2000). Although initial conditions may increase the alternatives present, however, it is possible that the choice is made to revert to the policies that existed prior to this uncertainty, marking a return to the status quo (Capoccia 2016a; Capoccia and Kelemen 2007; Hacker 1998).

During these moments of contingency, there are many factors that need to be considered. Given the different approaches to studying critical junctures, different mechanisms of change can be utilised to analyse how and when a critical juncture can occur (Capoccia 2016b). Significant moments alter the environment actors are in, influencing their roles and identities as well as their preferences and capabilities (Katznelson 2003). Mahoney (2000) offers a helpful typology of the explanations of path dependence and institutional change. Different explanations offer different mechanisms of change. Such mechanisms include changes in values or subjective beliefs of actors, increased competitive pressures and learning processes, transformation of system needs, and the strengthening of subordinate groups. Although they are

discussed as separate mechanisms, they are not mutually exclusive and – as the subsequent analysis will show – can occur concurrently. The presence of these mechanisms asserts the pandemic as a moment of contingency with multiple alternatives available. These mechanisms point to the opportunities for change if certain available options are chosen during the critical juncture (marking Time 2 in Figure 1).

Changing values and beliefs of actors

During critical junctures, there may be a change in ideas promoted by individual and collective actors. The key to this ideational change is sufficient consensus among actors about these policy ideas. How a crisis is defined affects the solutions posed in response. The framing of the crisis by national leaders can inspire legitimacy for certain policy changes, with the legitimacy of existing institutions challenged by a juxtaposing alternative (Blyth 2002; Krebs 2010; Capoccia 2016a). Events can trigger changes in perceptions that lead to a change in actors' preferences and beliefs (Mahoney 2000). Ideational changes occur when existing understandings are shattered allowing for new discursive formations during a major exogenous shock. New discourses can become institutionalised when an option is chosen (Hajer 1993; Schmidt 2008). When ideas are tied to a policy area that provides solutions to particular problems, they may provide a cohesive response and motivation for action (Boothe 2012).

Increased competitive pressures

Competing pressures from other actors and bodies can also lead to institutional transformation (Mahoney 2000). Learning processes occur with the presence of "change agents" who clarify incentive structures for individuals and help overcome collective action problems. These change agents show a possible alternative path and stimulate cooperation (Meyer-Stamer 1998). Increased public awareness and support for policy can also electorally motivate politicians to act (Boothe 2012). Change occurs when there is little self-interest for actors to reproduce a given institution as there are pressures from other actors that render it less beneficial (North 1990).

Transformation of system needs

Exogenous shocks can change the function of policies. Shocks can put pressure on a system and render its functions obsolete, creating a need for change to preserve the institution's goals in a new environment (Mahoney 2000; Wallerstein 1974). Antecedent structural conditions are impacted with changes in socio-economic conditions and social alliances (Capoccia 2016). Major events that disrupt the balance of power together with prior institutional structures create an opportunity for change (Acemoglu and Robinson 2012).

Strengthening of subordinate groups

Explanations of change that consider power argue change occurs when timing creates a tipping point that alters the balance of power. There are specific moments

in time and events that can tip the balance of power in favour of one side over another (Mahoney 2000; Roy 1997). There is an ongoing conflict between groups until a time where there is such disadvantage to subordinate groups, and they successfully challenge existing arrangements (Mahoney 2000).

Although these mechanisms mark change, they may not indicate drastic policy change. According to Hall's (1993) seminal piece on paradigmatic change, there are three types of change. Third-order change marks a paradigm shift with a change in the instrument setting, instruments, and goals (Hall 1993).[1] A third-order change would suggest a departure from existing policies at Time 2 in Figure 1 with new path-dependent legacies at Time 3 and beyond. In some of the mechanisms occurring during the pandemic, there are changes in policy instruments with the changing environment, marking a first and second-order change (Hall 1993). New innovative approaches are used, although some are still indicative of the pre-existing temporary crisis response. Others, however, mark a departure with more long-term goals and sustained collaboration. If choices are made to adopt policies with new instruments and goals, change will occur.

The analysis below considers each of Mahoney's mechanisms in turn to show that there are mechanisms influencing structures of power, system functions, and actors in the homelessness response during the pandemic. Although they are in many ways utilising different explanatory variables, together these explanations offer a consideration of the mechanisms that serve as an initial condition of a critical juncture. The mechanisms, however, are occurring simultaneously with those of path dependence, marking the contingency of the initiation of a critical juncture. The historic policy failures and complex governance of the pre-existing crisis response to homelessness in Canada are also evident. Therefore, although there is contingency with multiple mechanisms of change present through the policy alternatives available, there is still uncertainty about the choices that will be made.

Homelessness in Canada: Policy failure and path dependence

Where it has been documented, homelessness has grown significantly in Canada (Doberstein and Smith 2019a). Even as homelessness changes, particularly as it relates to *who* experiences homelessness in Canada, there have been no equivalent policy changes in response (Aubry et al. 2013; Hwang 2001). Although there has been some re-engagement by governments to reinvest in homelessness, efforts have remained low and slow (Doberstein 2016; Doberstein and Smith 2019b). Homelessness policies and approaches in Canada have therefore been plagued with failures[2].

Housing in Canada has been inundated by changes in federal/provincial relations since the postwar period (Banting 1990). With growing neoliberal attitudes and

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[1]In first-order change, there is a change in the environment of the policy instruments used with some social learning but not enough to facilitate a paradigm shift. In second-order change, there is a change in the instruments used but not in the goals, all of which is still occurring within the existing framework (Hall 1993).

[2]Policy failure can be conceptualized as when "policies fail to achieve their central goals" (Busenberg 2004, 145). McConnel (2015) creates a typology of degrees of failure. Tolerable failures do not fundamentally impede the goals proponents want to achieve and lack strong or any opposition. Conflicted failures have periodic controversy with failures to achieve goals even with attainment. Outright failures do not fundamentally achieve goals, opposition is great, and/or support is almost absent.

devolution following the 1990–93 recession, there were significant cuts to many social programmes by all levels of government, with some provincial differences (Suttor 2016). Governments began to divest from affordable housing and social supports (Gaetz et al. 2016). This led to a steady decline in social housing, decreased federal funding, and the creation of federal-provincial tensions (Suttor 2016). As a result, there was a significant increase in homelessness in the 1990s across Canada that continues today. Homelessness has increasingly become a consolidated provincial and municipal responsibility with lasting changes in Canadian federal relationships (Gaetz et al. 2016). With the decentralisation of homelessness, provinces, cities, and the third sector (shelters, drop-in centres, etc.) are left with the main task of managing homelessness and delivering the necessary social services (Rice and Prince 2013).

Municipalities are left with a significant burden due to the downloading of responsibilities coupled with divestment from federal to provincial, and in many provinces then to municipal governments. Federalism also increases the opportunities for governments to "pass the buck" and avoid responsibility (Weaver 1986). It can decrease the centralisation of authority and act as a barrier to radical policy change (Boothe 2012). Homelessness is therefore an important example of policy complexity, requiring different levels of government, policy areas, and industries to collaborate. Differences across cities lead to different models of governance (Smith 2022). When there is a lack of integration, different elements of policy are contradictory and conflict (Vince 2015). The Canadian response to homelessness has often included a "patchwork of services" (Nichols and Doberstein 2016), when comprehensive solutions are necessary (Rabinovitch et al. 2016). Crisis situations, furthermore, increase the likelihood of policy failures due to the need for more local actor partnerships and coordination between levels of government and organisations (Jung and Song 2015). Crisis in homelessness occurs often, even beyond a pandemic, whether through harsh winters, extremely hot summers, or other disease outbreaks.

Many provinces and cities have adopted their own local housing, homelessness, and poverty reduction plans in response to receiving more responsibility for homelessness (see for example Toronto's HousingTO 2020–2030 Action Plan (City of Toronto 2019), or British Columbia's 2019 TogetherBC Poverty Reduction Strategy (Province of British Columbia 2019)). These plans often demonstrate the complexity of homelessness, calling for more coordination and collaboration among all levels of government. They also highlight that even as policies are held in place, they can adapt with some forces of path dependence occurring with patterns of resistance (Katznelson 2003; Thelen 1999, 2000). Even the most recent federal strategy – the 2018 National Housing Strategy – requires provincial collaboration and funding to meet federal dollars and initiatives (Government of Canada 2018). As the first of its kind, it marked some federal reinvestment although its long-term promises are contingent on future governments. The committed investments have also not met the demand, particularly following decades of divestment. Although initiatives can be found in some communities and areas of policy, the response to homelessness continues to be fragmented and underfunded across Canada. Existing responses rely on the maintenance of homelessness through new shelters and services that manage, rather than prevent and end, homelessness (Draaisma 2019; Dej 2020; Johnstone et al. 2017).

Evidence of path dependence in the pandemic response would therefore continue this trend of emergency responses rather than longer-term solutions to homelessness through housing and more integrated policy. Rather than siloed responses, more integration would require the collaboration of multiple levels of government, systems, and policy areas including but not limited to health, social assistance, child welfare, criminal justice, housing, and trauma-informed service provision. A departure from the fragmented, uncoordinated, and underfunded approach would mark change in Canadian homelessness policy. Not all change during the pandemic is paradigmatic or a signal of lasting and significant policy change (Hall 1993). The policy choices during the pandemic have traces of mechanisms of change; however, the path-dependent legacies continue to offer status-quo policy choices that limit full-scale third-order change.

Methods

To test the hypothesised causal mechanisms and their observable implications, I analysed primary sources in different provinces to analyse their empirical manifestations (Beach and Pedersen 2019; Bennet and Checkel 2014). This investigation is based on a compilation of various documents and media sources including news articles, reports by organisations, media releases, government websites, webinar notes, and sector surveys on homelessness and the pandemic. These were collected using key word searches, Google alerts, and network emails, bulletins, and notices (the researcher signed up for alerts from various homeless networks and organisations). The main criteria for the sources used were the discussion of homelessness and the pandemic, as well as any government and other organisation documents or sources highlighting responses to the pandemic. Keywords included: "homelessness and COVID-19 in [city name]"; "homelessness and COVID-19 Canada." Since the initial reporting of COVID-19 cases in January 2020 (Government of Canada 2020), and May 2021, I compiled over 150 sources regarding homelessness and the pandemic, a majority of which were newspaper articles. All the media and primary sources gathered and cited in the analysis below can be found in the Appendix.

Given the pandemic's increased focus on congregate and overcrowded shelter settings, and the prevalence of such environments in larger Canadian cities[3], my analysis focuses on major cities in different provinces: Toronto, Vancouver, and Calgary. Table 1 includes the newspapers utilised and the corresponding number of articles from each newspaper. Table 2 shows the news outlets the articles came from, with a broad range of newspaper outlets, both local and national, included in the sample.

Once the search terms were developed and the list of articles was read, they were then coded according to Mahoney's mechanisms of change. To limit equifinality, several mechanisms were investigated to consider several causal paths. The potential biases of the sources used were not considered because the descriptive content was of particular focus. The bias of reporting is therefore a limitation to this study. Relying

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[3]It is significant to note that homelessness in Canada is not only found in large urban settings. Rural homelessness in Canada includes largely hidden homelessness with many informal networks and experienced disproportionately by Indigenous Peoples and women and children (Schiff et al, 2015; Taylor, 2018).

Table 1. Newspaper sources used based on cities and region

City	Number of News Sources
Toronto	51
Vancouver	26
Calgary	20
Provincial news stories	11
Federal news stories	21
Total	**129**

Table 2. Newspaper sources utilised in media analysis

Newspaper	
The Calgary Herald	CTV News
The Toronto Sun	The Toronto Star
Calgary Journal	Global News
Tricity News	CBC News
Times Colonist	The Guardian
The Vancouver Sun	The National Post
CP24	The Huffington Post
The TVO	Globe and Mail
The Tyee	City News
Policy Options	The Province
The Conversation	

on newspaper articles disregards other changes that may be occurring, particularly at the community level. Organisations and networks were therefore helpful sources of information. Toronto is also overrepresented in the newspaper article sources utilised. Although each city was analysed separately, the mechanisms were tested in Toronto more so than in the other cities due to the availability and use of sources.

Media analyses allow for the identification of frames and messages regarding a particular issue (Gould 2004). The mechanisms of change examined and coded rely heavily on the ideas around homelessness, the framing of the issue, the interests involved, conflicts between various interests and groups, and the decisions made that are often announced to appease such conflicting interests. The media also served as the main venue of information transfer between governments and the people during the pandemic. Supplementing the analyses with policymaker and service provider interviews, although an ideal methodological decision, was not possible. Policymakers would be difficult to access during the time, and the decision was made not to reach out to the community, which was struggling immensely during the pandemic. Networks and bulletins were primarily used to consider the community perspectives and announcements made by governments in the media for the perspectives of policymakers. All media sources cited in the remainder of the article can be found in the Appendix found in the supplementary material.

This is a preliminary examination of mechanisms of change *during the initiation* of a critical juncture. Direct evidence of decision-making following the pandemic cannot be considered (Schimmelfennig 2014). The evidence utilised therefore does not include enough time to consider what will happen once the pandemic is over. It is, however, *indicative* of the complexity of change. Preliminary mechanisms and

possible paths forward can be explored and allow for a consideration of change as it is occurring, and the necessary factors and mechanisms to facilitate lasting policy change.

Evidence of mechanisms of policy change[4]

Amid the pandemic, homelessness prevention and alleviation through permanent measures is being framed as the cure for, and prevention of, COVID-19 (City of Toronto 2020b; Ferreira 2020; Scoffield 2020; Smith 2020a; UN-HABITAT 2020; Woods 2020). There are examples of collaboration and innovation that may signal change with mechanisms of changing values and beliefs, increased competitive pressures, transforming system needs, and strengthening of subordinate groups found in early interventions and policy responses.

Change, however, does not occur immediately or linearly. In fact, change includes several mechanisms working in tandem and even against one another marking the contingency of the pandemic as Time 1 in Figure 1. The pandemic has created an environment that has forced responses representative of previous path dependence and others that are evidence of mechanisms of change. Building on Mahoney's mechanisms of change, Table 3 offers its implications in the Canadian approach to homelessness during the pandemic.

It has long been known that housing is a social determinant of health, with homelessness including several factors that influence individual health (Frankish et al. 2005; Jackson and McSwane 1992). What has come into focus with the pandemic, however, is how the previous responses to homelessness have created conditions that put individuals at risk.

Changing values and beliefs of actors

The framing of homelessness in relation to the crisis is indicative of initial changes in support of more permanent solutions and a possible move away from the previous crisis management approach. Actors are taking the opportunity of the framing of homelessness during the pandemic to bring forward strategies for prevention. The pandemic has exposed existing shelter conditions as a public health risk at a time when evaluations of government decisions are tied to their commitment to decrease the spread of the virus. The commitments and decisions may mark a change in beliefs and values, particularly when the framing of the issue is particularly salient (Capoccia 2016b). Only the end of the pandemic will exhibit if changes in these values and belief are long-lasting, although early responses and framings may point to some positive change in values.

Not only is homelessness framed as a public health emergency but also the existing solutions to homelessness are also framed as failures. The legitimacy of previous decisions is questioned and challenged with more permanent solutions put forth through collaborative efforts. The pandemic is a spotlight on homelessness (Parsons 2020; Steacy 2020), with the legitimacy of the current system called into question.

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[4]All media sources cited in the remainder of the paper can be found in Appendix B.

Table 3. Mechanisms of change and path dependence operationalisation in the approach to homelessness

Cause (Trigger)	Mechanism	Outcome (operationalisation)
The pandemic is leading to new ideas about homelessness and framing it as a public health issue	Changing ideas and beliefs with consensus among actors in problem definition	New discourses in homelessness used by key actors and evident in policy discussions
The pandemic is leading to increased competitive pressures with change agents showing alternative policies and solutions	Learning processes and increased public awareness leading to increased competitive pressures	Actors define homelessness in relation to the pandemic, there is increasing advocacy in response and collaboration between actors
The pandemic is leading to the transformation of needs with systems having to adapt to new needs	The functions of systems are transforming in the new environment with new needs, regulations, and collaborations/interventions	Shelter system needs to adapt to new physical distancing regulations, testing, protocols for positive clients, etc., and the system is responding with more long-term housing opportunities
The pandemic is leading to an environment where the power of groups is changing	Strengthening of subordinate groups related to increasing advocacy, problem definition, and changes in discourse	Increased advocacy and collaboration of actors, challenges to existing structures, etc.
The pandemic is not leading to a consideration of alternative paths, the status quo is maintained	Path dependence with initiatives depicting the status quo	Focus on a crisis response and temporary solutions to homelessness

Source: Author's compilation.

News coverage on homelessness and the pandemic include interviews with advocates calling for change and more assistance. There have also been interviews with individuals experiencing homelessness themselves to increase public awareness on the pandemic experiences of those without a home. In Calgary, Gordon Kelter shared that he is afraid to use city shelters because of the high risk of contracting COVID-19 which has forced him to sleep on the street: "I won't go near the Drop-In Centre. The COVID really freaked me out" (Graveland 2020a).

Policymakers have voiced their commitments and concerns and called for more collaborative efforts. Vancouver Mayor Kennedy Stewart identified the Downtown Eastside community as vulnerable to outbreaks and directly called out upper levels of government for assistance: "We are talking to senior levels of government and other funding partners from charitable and philanthropic communities about how we can keep these programmes going and add more services and programmes that will slow transmission as we head toward the peak of the outbreak" (CBC News 2020b). In Toronto, City Councillor Joe Cressy directly identified the pandemic as "… an opportunity to end homelessness" (Bozikovic 2020). Governments have also named individuals experiencing homelessness as a priority population for vaccination efforts (Casey 2021a; Casey 2021b; Draaisma 2021a; CBC News 2021b).

Municipal governments calling for help on homelessness is not necessarily new in Canada but the pandemic has offered an urgent framing to their efforts. Prime Minister Trudeau directly mentioned homelessness in the Speech from the Throne where he not only addressed the previous commitment to reduce chronic

homelessness by half (which was not met) but also committed to eliminating chronic homelessness in Canada (Government of Canada 2020c). The Prime Minister began by specifically mentioning the pandemic:

"Strong communities are places where everyone has a safe, affordable home.

No one should be without a place to stay during a pandemic, or for that matter, a Canadian winter. This week, the Government invested more than $1 billion for people experiencing homelessness, including for this fall." (House of Commons Canada 2020)

Through the Rapid Housing Initiative (RHI), the federal government invested $1 billion to create 3,000 new permanent affordable housing units across Canada (Prime Minister of Canada 2020). This includes funding to purchase properties and hotels (Fumano 2021; Smart 2021a; Smart 2021b). All the cities under examination in this article were provided funding through the "Major Cities Stream" with immediate support (Prime Minister of Canada 2020). Through the RHI, the federal government has been involved in local initiatives, such as the purchasing of a former hotel in Vancouver in collaboration with the city and the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CBC News 2021).

Framing homelessness as a public health risk during a global pandemic has led to a growing consensus among policymakers in Canada for a new and more long-term response to homelessness. Crowded shelters are framed as unsafe, and stay-at-home orders underscore the need for more permanent solutions. In addition to the preexisting National Housing Strategy, leaders have committed to more urgent support, although this mechanism alone does not signal a paradigmatic shift. Changing values and beliefs need to be grounding in long-lasting policy decisions.

Increased competitive pressures

Advocates have always been central in the response to homelessness. The sector has utilised the pandemic to advocate for immediate and long-term government responses. Together with other sectors and actors, the homelessness sector is providing alternative paths and stimulating cooperation, in addition to increasing public awareness. Awareness coupled with the other mechanisms has increased competitive pressures during the pandemic.

In the Recovery for All Campaign, the CAEH argues that "we are at a unique moment in time when big change is possible – we have an aligned federal Parliament and a public sharing in some of the fear and anxiety that our homeless neighbours feel everyday" (CAEH, 2020b). The call to action goes on to advocate for homelessness to be included in the recovery funds and focus (CAEH, 2020b). Tim Richter, the CEO and president of CAEH, along with other advocates presented the importance of the federal government's inclusion of housing and homelessness to the pandemic recovery at the Standing Committee on Human Resource, Skills and Social Development and Status of Persons with Disabilities (ParlVu, 2020). Although these advocates have long argued for more action around homelessness, they are now bolstered by the context of the pandemic and increased government involvement.

In an open letter to Ontario Premier Ford and Mayor Tory, for example, advocates including physicians, nurse practitioners, and sector organisations demanded changes to the shelter system. This includes requirements for sites to institute physical distancing and ensure the availability of sufficient staffing and supports (Ahsan 2020). Organisations and advocates filed a lawsuit alleging that the City and province have failed to ensure safe shelter conditions. The pandemic has provided advocates the opportunity to challenge existing processes with a public health crisis that supports their efforts. Not having safe conditions, the coalition argued, violates the Canadian Charter and the Ontario Human Rights Code (Delitala 2020). An interim agreement was reached, showing the power of this form of advocacy. The City specified that it will no longer utilise bunk beds and ensure all individuals receive support. The City also committed to essential and enforceable physical distancing standards in shelters (CCLA 2020; Goldblatt Partners 2020). A constitutional challenge against the City for its operations marks an important moment for advocates and shelters in the city (van Wagner and Potamianos 2020). These standards may create safer shelter conditions beyond the pandemic.

In Vancouver, activists were able to ensure the City and BC housing delivered a warming tent, shower trailer and toilet in an encampment, and raised money for other resident needs. Although there have been neighbourhood concerns around encampments, they are mainly directed at governments for not solving homelessness, with protests demanding action and money raised for sleeping bags, tarps, and laundry services (Colbert 2021). Such solutions, however, have been deemed temporary fixes with activists demanding more lasting solutions (CBC News 2021). In Calgary, the Drop-In Centre made a first-ever public plea to landlords with vacant affordable housing units. The executive director of the Centre argued that they cannot return to the crowded environment and that: "The solution here is housing. It's not hotels, it's not other shelters, it's housing," calling on more actors and assistance (Klingbeil 2020).

The pandemic has led to innovation and collaboration as well as created incentive structures that will be difficult for governments to walk back on (Pierson 2000; Campbell 2004). Many advocates have started to call for support beyond the pandemic and assurances that existing support will not disappear (Woods 2020). Opportunities for long-term housing may increase the desire for more – and reinforce – further practices. The use of temporary solutions is not however evidence of third-order change, pointing to changing instruments with the changing environment as is evident in the transformation of system needs.

Transformation of system needs
Given the congregate environments of Canadian shelters and the high risk of the population, governments as well as the sector have been forced to re-examine the shelter system. Although the sector has had to respond to outbreaks in the past (Buccieri and Gaetz 2015; Leung et al. 2008), this pandemic has altered the needs of the system. Rather than simply offer beds in crowded shelters, the pandemic has created an urgent need for safer environments to protect against the spread of the virus. There have been long-term initiatives with more permanent housing and supports for individuals experiencing homelessness, and easier paths towards

such options, transforming the use of shelters and short-term housing as stepping stones to more permanent housing options.

During the pandemic, the City of Toronto acquired hotels and residential buildings along with permanent housing units (News Staff and Canadian Press 2020). During the first year of the pandemic, 25 hotel programmes were opened (Levy 2021). The hotels and private rental buildings are being considered for permanent affordable and supportive housing units (Vincent 2020d). To purchase, renovate, and convert the properties, the City is hoping for stimulus money from upper levels of government in the form of "recovery-oriented partnerships" (Ibid), with the City utilising the pandemic to frame the need for more collaborative efforts now and in the long term. Mayor Tory also announced a plan for a modular supportive housing initiative. This initiative, initially set to take several years, was expedited to increase the availability of stable, affordable, and supportive housing sooner (City of Toronto 2020d; Elliott 2020; Pagliaro 2020c).

The Mayor of Vancouver proposed cutting the red tape associated with the building approval process in the City, asking Council to ease the year-long process to build more housing for more long-term solutions (Fumano 2020). This includes an emergency response plan to scale up the community and housing sector to increase housing and working with landlords for new affordable housing (City of Vancouver 2020; Eagland 2020a). The BC government purchased hotels and created supportive housing (Smart 2021). The province is also working on long-term plans to secure permanent housing with supports for those removed from encampments, committing to build 23, 000 homes across the province to ensure those in temporary accommodation have permanent homes (Canadian Press 2020; Eagland 2020b). The City negotiated with individual landlords to also open up more units (Canadian Press 2020d). The province has also purchased hotels in attempts to increase affordable housing through more permanent solutions (CBC News, 2020g).

The Calgary Drop-In Centre initiated efforts to work with landlords, putting out a call to landlords with affordable units, an example of a longer-term solution as well as a collaborative effort (Klingbeil 2020; Le 2020). The Centre is also utilising a transitional housing building as part of a housing project where shelter clients will stay for up to six months until more permanent housing can be secured (Hudes 2020). The City also released a plan to end homelessness associated with opportunities presented during the pandemic with buildings and hotels now for sale (Dippel 2020).

The pandemic has transformed the needs of the homelessness system. As temporary housing is provided, these decisions have several effects. Policies create constituencies and entitlements, which are later fought to be maintained (Campbell 2004). Responses to the pandemic have strengthened advocacy and shown that solutions to homelessness are available and possible, which will make it difficult for policy-makers to return individuals to crowded shelters in the future. Although it will be difficult, however, given the predominance and path-dependent legacies of crowded environments, such decisions cannot be ruled out. Operations of some of the temporary shelter sites have been extended to 2023. The Shelter, Support, and Housing Administration in Toronto reported that temporary shelters will remain open until April 2023 followed by a "gradual, phased approach to transition over the next 24 months" (City of Toronto 2022). BC housing also still had open

shelter sites as of May 2022 (BC Housing 2022). The province moved to purchase hotels to create more long-term spaces signifying some longer-term attempts to increase housing through direct property acquisition (Uguen-Csenge 2022).

Strengthening of subordinate groups

The pandemic has also created new power dynamics. With access to emergency funds along with stronger collaborations in conjunction with the other mechanisms of change, the pandemic has revealed itself as significant to the future of homelessness policy.

In limiting the spread of COVID-19, governments have worked with one another and with organisations. Even in moving individuals from shelters to convention centres or hotels, collaboration between several organisations and levels of government is necessary (Reiger 2020; Stagg 2020). The sector has also been home to several vital resources for frontline workers. The Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness has held several webinars regarding the pandemic, with speakers and communities sharing their experiences. Resources, such as guidelines, documents, fact sheets to share with individuals experiencing homelessness, best practice for opening isolation sites, and many others, have been shared by the Canadian Network for the Health and Housing of People Experiencing homelessness. A survey conducted with frontline staff and organisations across the country serving youth experiencing homelessness revealed the needs of the sector during the pandemic to inform advocacy and the proposal of new initiatives and policies (Buchnea, McKitterick and French 2020).

Beyond advocacy and increasing the competitive pressures for change, the homelessness sector has even utilised this moment to conduct new research that will place homelessness on the policy agenda beyond the pandemic. CAEH released findings from a survey conducted with Nanos Research. The survey itself was not directly related to COVID-19, but rather aimed at reaffirming the position of homelessness as a priority and area for policy attention. The survey found that one in three Canadians is touched by homelessness and that a majority do support building new affordable housing and see ending homelessness as urgent (Nanos 2020). This research, as a survey that is solely asking about homelessness, is the first of its kind and asserts the importance of alleviating homelessness. It can become a tool for advocates to utilise – even postpandemic – to pressure governments for policy change.

There has been an increase in targeted funding to support the changing needs of the system, strengthening the system responding to homelessness. Frontline workers have also continued to share practices and collaborate and learn from one another in this changing environment. They have advocated for more long-term approaches from governments. Individuals experiencing homelessness have also advocated for themselves, evident in the tensions in encampments and specific initiatives that led to safer encampment conditions and better long-term housing options. The growing advocacy and collaboration evident in the discourse around homelessness, and increased challenges by multiple sectors, exhibit the failures of existing arrangements and their path-dependent legacies.

Path dependence and band-aid solutions in the homelessness response

Examples of path dependence in the pandemic response are evident in the initiatives that mimic Canada's historic focus on an emergency response and temporary solutions. Increases in funding and shelter spaces may allow for physical distancing but do little to alleviate homelessness during a crisis. Many of the temporary responses, even when significant, are not enough to stop the spread of COVID-19 or to end homelessness on their own (Fox 2020).

There has been an increase in targeted funding to support the changing needs of the system, strengthening the system responding to homelessness. Increased funding can add flexibility, allowing actors to make certain decisions they could not make before (Capoccia and Kelemen 2007). Increases in funding, although helpful, are occurring in several sectors and industries during the pandemic. It is possible that innovative practices will result; however given the gross underfunding of the past, much of it is to keep existing shelters and services – that are now even more overburdened – running.

The federal government's response has been to increase funding through the Reaching Home Strategy. As part of the National Housing Strategy, Reaching Home provides funding and support to certain designated communities, Indigenous communities, territorial communities as well as those that are more rural or remote (Employment and Social Development Canada 2020b). Provinces also responded with their own increases in funding for social services as well as specific initiatives.

Even with increases in funding to manage overwhelmed services, there are pre-existing challenges that hinder responses to homelessness. Canada's federal system continues to create challenges for cities, provinces, and the federal government in choosing available alternatives. Cities are not allowed to run deficits and do not possess revenue tools to compensate (Star Editorial Board 2020). Homelessness remains a contentious area of policy with constant finger-pointing by all levels of government, even during the pandemic. Vancouver Mayor, along with a Member of Legislative Assembly and Member of Parliament, called on the federal government to keep its 50–50 cost-sharing agreement as per the National Housing Strategy, arguing that the pandemic has simply underscored the need for urgent action on homelessness (Fumano 2020b). In Toronto, Premier Ford argued that the province cannot help without Ottawa helping first. Prime Minister Trudeau responded by saying that "the federal government will be there to work with the provinces, including supporting them in their areas of jurisdiction" (Star Editorial Board 2020). Calgary Mayor Naheed Nenshi was also openly critical of provincial decisions, including the lack of hotel use for isolation, which were later approved (Smith 2020a; Klingbiel 2020). Similar to the devolution of the 1990s, this "passing of the buck" shows the legacy of previous responses to homelessness. This has led to several sector-level initiatives as organisations and workers on the ground attempt to increase their capacity in response to the pandemic.

The sector's capacity to respond to the pandemic, however, has been negatively affected because of the previous lack of attention and funding. A survey conducted by the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness (CAEH) identified the main sector concerns: lack of PPE, staffing shortages, lack of essential supplies, and lack of

prioritisation from public health and/or local emergency planning groups. Only a quarter of respondents identified their ability to develop a plan to manage and spread the virus, although all respondents are working on plans to respond (CAEH News 2020). The sector faces a significant burden with on the ground efforts, even in its emergency response.

Temporary band-aid solutions have been utilised to avoid mass outbreaks among the vulnerable population. With physical distancing guidelines, shelters have had to adapt and create new protocols, while other services such as drop-in centres have been forced to close (Sweere 2021). In addition, the homelessness system has not been able to access informal networks of institutions for support. This includes coffee shops, restaurants, libraries, detox programmes, in addition to daily drop-in centres. With little access to supports, including washrooms, more individuals are left looking for help on the street (Casey 2020c; Dabaghi-Pacheco 2020a; Morrison 2020; Smith 2020b). Staffing has also become an issue; cities have had to redeploy staff into the shelter system (Pagliaro 2020a). Shelters that have been open for 24 hours in the past have had to close, which also led to some issues around curfews related to pandemic restrictions. Even with these closures and guidelines, there have still been several outbreaks in shelters in all the cities included in this study, leading to fear among individuals experiencing homelessness and encampments in each city (City of Toronto 2020f; Curtis 2020a; Graveland 2020a; Lim 2020; Bains 2021; Butts 2021; Draaisma 2021; Culbert 2021; Graveland 2020b; Martin 2021; Van Wagner and Potamianos 2020).

Encampments are a physical manifestation of a crisis not novel to Canada. Vancouver's longstanding tent cities can attest to the pre-existing inadequacies of the system (Vikander 2016). A pandemic with strict physical distancing measures, however, harshly illustrates existing response failures (CBC News 2020e; City of Toronto 2020e; Graveland 2020b; Lorinc 2020; Yuen 2020). Forced evictions from encampments in each city also speak to the previous responses of criminalisation and lack of permanent solutions to homelessness. Even with the stress associated with shelters due to outbreaks in 20 shelters, trespass notices were posted in encampments in Toronto (Draaisma 2021). Some activists have argued such initiatives focus on the visibility of homelessness and not the underlying issues, with a lack of long-term supports for those forced to leave encampments (Di Stefano and Silverthorn 2021). In Vancouver, an encampment in Strathcona Park marks the third time the City is trying to shut down an encampment over the less than a year (Winter 2021). The province promised housing to all encampment residents, but campers have demanded adequate housing including a minimum of 600 square feet, and no restrictions around substance use and pets (Bains 2021). Tensions were evident in Calgary with tent cities leading to complaints from surrounding communities (Kaufman 2020).

Although policymakers have argued that there are temporary housing options for encampment residents, the initiatives around temporary housing and supports are slow and have not met demand. In Vancouver for example, individuals were moved to temporary camps to limit overcrowding where many individuals were forced to continue to wait for housing (Parsons 2020). Even with the City's plan to lease housing units and new housing options, more is needed (Steacy 2020). In

Toronto, individuals were waiting weeks in encampments for temporary hotel housing (DiManno 2020). Those that had been placed in temporary housing in apartments awaiting demolition will be moved out without clear plans or next steps (Kivanç 2020; The Canadian Press 2020b).

Governments have created opportunities for temporary housing during the pandemic to decrease shelter capacity and allow for physical distancing. BC Housing opened isolation centres in the province, with seven sites in Vancouver (BC Housing, nd). With a rise in tent cities, the City of Vancouver negotiated with individual landlords to open up units (The Canadian Press 2020). The BC provincial government announced more than 600 spaces in hotel rooms and community centres (McElroy 2020). BC housing together with the City of Vancouver identified eight locations including six hotels and two community centres with wrap around services. Individuals residing in the well-known Downtown Eastside tent city (Oppenheimer Park) were prioritised and moved out by the provincial government into these various forms of temporary housing (Zussman and Armstrong 2020). A former Army and Navy department store has also been utilised for temporary housing (Larsen 2021; Kearney 2021)). In Calgary, the TELUS Convention Centre was used as an emergency shelter (King 2020). Hotel rooms were also retrofitted shortly after a public disagreement between the Mayor and the provincial government, where the province argued there was a significant burden associated with using hotels (Anderson 2020; Smith 2020a). In Toronto new shelters, recreation centres, and vacant Toronto Community Housing Corporation units have been utilised (City of Toronto 2020a; City of Toronto 2020b; Tsekouras 2020; Vincent 2020a; Vincent 2020b). Shelter and Supportive Housing Administration of Toronto also developed an approach for the City to use two vacant buildings meant to be demolished before the pandemic, leasing them from developers (Casey 2020a; Vincent 2020c). Many individuals have recently come out against the inhuman living conditions in the temporary hotels (Singh 2022).

It will be interesting to watch if and how governments "return" individuals to shelters. For there to be a paradigmatic change in the Canadian approach to homelessness there is a need for a change in the goal of homelessness policy. The goal can no longer be a crisis response, but sustained and long-term housing options through affordable supportive housing and a consideration of the health, social, and economic poverty associated with homelessness. Although there is evidence of changing instruments – or second-order change – with hotels and convention centres utilised along with increased services, there is a need for the initiatives to continue to promote more permanent solutions to homelessness.

Conclusion

Responses to the pandemic have shown the inadequacies of the Canadian approach to end homelessness. Other responses, however, highlight the ability of governments and actors to collaborate, the power behind a public health frame to end homelessness, and the initiatives that can be taken during an emergency to alleviate a major societal ailment (Dosani 2020).

Future research needs to return to this pandemic and consider how and if homelessness policy and services changed and if the scales tipped towards sustained policy change or a return to the status quo. With evidence of mechanisms of change present during the pandemic, the resulting policy changes – or a lack thereof – will contribute to theories of change. Change does not necessarily always equate to paradigmatic policy changes. Recent research has found other policy areas as resistant to third-order change even with evidence of first and second-order changes (Jansen and Robbins 2022). The homelessness space includes several policy areas that may also be resistant to change.

The pre-existing policy complexity, crisis and temporary focus, and lack of attention in homelessness are rendered more visible and emphasised during the pandemic. Understanding how governments respond during such a crisis speaks to the necessary factors for sustained change, as well as those insufficient to force change. Policy change is fraught with conflicting mechanisms and factors. Its complexity requires careful attention. Critical junctures create alternative paths, and investigations of the paths chosen need to consider the options available during the initial moment of contingency and the mechanisms that worked for or against certain paths leading up to those eventually taken.

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