



## **Toronto's 2006 Street Needs Assessment: Moving to action**

A presentation to Toronto City Council's Community Services Committee, July 5, 2006

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### **Toronto can still achieve goals of the street count, despite flaws in the count**

Experts and advocates agree: Toronto's 2006 homeless street count was fatally flawed and does not provide reliable data to make important decisions about the allocation of funding for shelters, services or housing. The count does offer some interesting observations, such as:

- 25.8% of the street homeless were identified as Aboriginal;
- 86% of those surveyed want permanent housing;
- 84.4% said they need more money to pay for permanent housing;
- 37% of those surveyed were on waiting lists for affordable housing.

However, none of these observations are statistically reliable. For instance, a more accurate count of the homeless population (including the "hidden homeless", who were ignored in the official count) might reveal that there are more Aboriginal people among the homeless, or it might show the opposite. The same must be said of the other "findings".

A Wellesley backgrounder (attached) identified ten fundamental concerns with the street count:

1. Homeless counts generate **lots of heat but little light**.
  2. There is **no consistent or accepted methodology** for street counts.
  3. Toronto's street count uses the "point-in-time" method, which **misrepresents the magnitude and nature** of homelessness.
  4. Toronto's street count **surveyed only half the neighbourhoods** in the city.
  5. Toronto's street count **relied on volunteers to make assumptions** about the homeless status of those who wouldn't / didn't volunteer to participate.
  6. Concern #6 – **Only the "visible" homeless were counted**, even though invisibility is a survival strategy for Toronto's homeless people.
  7. The single biggest group of homeless people – the **"hidden homeless" – were deliberately left out** of Toronto's homeless count.
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8. Toronto's "needs assessment" **relied on assumptions and voluntary disclosure**, not informed clinical assessments of physical, mental health and other needs.
9. The 2006 homeless count **didn't consider the dozens of previous counts, needs assessments and detailed research studies** on Toronto's homeless population.
10. The flawed methodology, lack of consultation with experts and advocates, and the motion by City Council in October, 2005, all **raise fears that the street count will be used to cut funding** for homeless programs.

Toronto officials acknowledge "unavoidable limitations to conducting a Street Needs Assessment". They identify flaws including the use of "point-in-time" methodology and the practice of counting only "readily-observed" homeless people and not those hidden away (a deliberate survival strategy for many homeless). Staff concluded: "The Street Needs Assessment, therefore, did not survey every homeless individual in Toronto on April 19, 2006"<sup>1</sup>.

Toronto's count had several important goals. City officials had hoped that the count would create a "baseline" of the homeless population. But the numbers do not offer a reliable basis for determining the needs for shelters, services or housing. However, Toronto City Council can still meet the goal of reducing and ending homelessness through a co-ordinated strategy that includes:

1. a **thorough review of previous homeless counts and needs assessments**, including the many important recommendations that have been made in the past four decades;
2. a **continuing review of current social and economic data** on housing and homeless; and,
3. an **action-oriented strategy that engages experts and advocates, including the homeless**, in the implementation of solutions.

The Wellesley Institute launched a community-based initiative called the **Blueprint to End Homelessness in Toronto** this year. Our model is the *Blueprint to End Homelessness in New York City*<sup>2</sup>. To date, we have:

- reviewed **30 studies and reports on homelessness and housing in Toronto**<sup>3</sup>;
- started to **collect and analyze a wide range of current data** on housing, homelessness, urban health, income and other social and economic indicators;
- **consulted with more than three dozen Toronto-based experts** from the government, community and private sectors; and
- **studied housing and homelessness initiatives** in other municipalities;
- **met with UN Habitat officials and international organizations to review international experiences** including the United Nation's global urban observatory and its monitoring systems branch, which has developed software called the Global Urban Indicators Database.

### **Some preliminary observations from the Toronto Blueprint process**

The Wellesley Institute's Blueprint to End Homelessness in Toronto is in its early stages, but some important observations have emerged, including:

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<sup>1</sup> General Manager, Shelter, Support and Housing Administration, *2006 Street Needs Assessment: Results and Key Findings*, Report to Community Services Committee, June 20, 2006, p9.

<sup>2</sup> A copy of the summary, main report and appendices is posted in the "Key Resources" section of the Wellesley Institute web site at [http://wellesleyinstitute.com/kr\\_housing/](http://wellesleyinstitute.com/kr_housing/)

<sup>3</sup> See Appendix 1 at the end of this report for a listing of the reports and studies.

- ***no one in charge***: there have been dozens of reports from the municipal and community sectors on housing and homelessness in Toronto over the past four decades. Many offered practical recommendations. Some were implemented, but most were ignored. There is no mechanism to implement or monitor this work leading to an *ad hoc* and unco-ordinated process. The first recommendation of the 1999 Mayor’s Homelessness Action Task Force, headed by Dr. Anne Golden, was that Toronto appoint a homeless facilitator. It was never adopted. Dr. Golden said: “*We need to have someone in charge to bring focus and provide public accountability*, and therefore recommend the appointment of a facilitator for action on homelessness. The facilitator should be appointed for a five-year term, and will establish priorities, define action plans, track progress, produce an annual report card, and report to the Mayor and Council<sup>4</sup>.” (Italics added.)
- ***almost no new truly affordable housing***: Affordable housing is the key solution to Toronto’s homelessness disaster and affordable housing crisis, but very little is being built. A June, 2006, City of Toronto review reported that 478 new affordable homes were completed in Toronto in 2005. Only 175 of those had rent supplements to ensure the units were affordable to low and moderate-income households<sup>5</sup>. Compare that to the applications for 39,009 condominium and single-family homes in Toronto in 2005<sup>6</sup>.
- ***poor housing and ill-health is linked***: Numerous studies link poor housing and homelessness with poor health, including increased morbidity (illness) and increased mortality (death).
- ***rents continue to outpace household incomes***: The average rent in Toronto for a typical two-bedroom apartment is \$1,060<sup>7</sup>. Using the standard calculation<sup>8</sup>, a tenant household needs an annual income of slightly more than \$35,000 to afford Toronto’s average rent. Yet 45% of Toronto’s households have annual incomes of less than \$35,000<sup>9</sup> - which means that *almost half of the city’s tenant households cannot afford the average market rents*. This is one important explanation for the growing number of evictions in Toronto.
- ***growing evictions increase numbers of “hidden homeless”***: Toronto’s 2004 evictions study found that 29% of evicted tenant households went to homeless shelters. Another 29% became “hidden homeless” by “couch-surfing” with family or friends<sup>10</sup>. A total of 30,499 tenant households (more than 76,000 women, men and children) faced eviction in Toronto in 2005<sup>11</sup>. That added as many as 22,000 “hidden homeless” annually.

The **Wellesley Institute** is a community-based research and policy institute dedicated to advancing urban health. Find more information at [www.wellesleyinstitute.com](http://www.wellesleyinstitute.com). **Michael Shapcott** is Senior Fellow in Residence at the Wellesley Institute, working on housing, homelessness and related urban issues.

<sup>4</sup> Anne Golden’s prepared text on the release of the Mayor’s Homeless Action Task Force Report, January 14, 1999.

<sup>5</sup> *Status of Affordable Housing and Shelter Initiatives*, City of Toronto, June 2006, p3. These include only those projects completed and occupied.

<sup>6</sup> Toronto City Planning, *Development Portfolio of Major Projects 2005*, p1. These include applications for condominium approval, rezoning and other housing applications to the City of Toronto.

<sup>7</sup> Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2005 Rental Market Report, Toronto.

<sup>8</sup> The standard calculation is that a tenant household should pay no more than 30% of household income on rent.

<sup>9</sup> City of Toronto Urban Development Services, City Planning, Policy and Research, September 2003.

<sup>10</sup> Linda Lapointe for the City of Toronto Shelter, Housing and Support Division, *Analysis of Evictions Under the Tenant Protection Act in the City of Toronto, Overall Rental Housing Market*, March 31, 2004, p71.

<sup>11</sup> Ontario Rental Housing Tribunal statistics, 2005.

## Appendix 1: Selected listing of homeless counts and needs assessments in Toronto

1. *Report of Committee on Homeless and Transient Men*; June 1960; Social Planning Council of Metropolitan Toronto
2. *Report on Skid Row*; November 1977; City of Toronto Planning Board
3. *People Without Homes: A Permanent Emergency*; January 1983; Social Planning Council of Metro Toronto
4. *No Place to Go: Homelessness in Metropolitan Toronto*; January 1983; Metropolitan Toronto Community Services Department and Metropolitan Toronto Planning Department
5. *Housing and Health*; October 1984; City of Toronto Department of Public Health
6. *Off the Streets: A Case for Long-term Housing*; September 1985; City of Toronto Alternative Housing Subcommittee
7. *Report of the Inquiry Into the Effects of Homelessness on Health*; March 1987; Toronto Union of Unemployed Workers
8. *Homeless Not Helpless*; September 1990; City of Toronto Healthy City Office
9. *The Street Health Report*; May 1992; Street Health
10. *State of Homelessness Report*; 1996/97; City of Toronto Community Services
11. *Mental Illness and Pathways into Homelessness*; January 1998; Clarke Institute of Psychiatry, Wellesley Hospital and Queen Street Mental Health Centre
12. *Homeless Voices*; March 1998; City of Toronto Health City Office
13. *Taking Responsibility for Homelessness*; January 1999; Report of the Mayor's Homelessness Action Task Force
14. *Report Card on Homelessness*; 2000; City of Toronto
15. *Homelessness and Health: An epidemiological study* by Dr. Stephen Hwang; 2000; Canadian Medical Journal
16. *State of the Disaster*; Winter 2000; Toronto Disaster Relief Committee
17. *State of the Disaster: Update 2001*; Winter 2001; Toronto Disaster Relief Committee
18. *Homelessness, Drug Use and Health Risks in Toronto*; Spring 2002; Street Health
19. *Homeless 'squeegee kids': Food insecurity and daily survival*; 2002; Social Science and Medicine
20. *Toronto Report Card on Homelessness*; 2003; City of Toronto
21. *Risk of death among homeless women: a cohort study and review of the literature* by Angela M. Cheung, Stephen W. Hwang, April 2003, Canadian Medical Association Journal
22. *The Shelter Inspection Report*; May 2003; Toronto Disaster Relief Committee
23. *Bed Bugs in Toronto*; December 2003; Centre for Urban and Community Studies
24. *Homelessness in Toronto: A Review of the Literature from a Toronto Perspective*, May 2004, Community Social Planning Council of Toronto
25. *From Tent City to Housing*; June 2004; Emergency Homelessness Pilot Project
26. *Borderlands of Homelessness Women's Views on Alternative Housing*, Revised August 2004 (first published May 1996), The Women's Services Network
27. *Homeless Older Adults Research Project Final Report*, November 2004, University of Toronto Institute for Human Development, Life Course and Aging
28. *Palliative Care and the Homeless*; January 2005; St. Joseph's Health Centre
29. *Count us in: Inclusion and Homeless Women in Downtown East Toronto*; June 2006; Ontario Prevention Clearinghouse, Ontario Women's Health Network, Toronto Christian Resource Centre and Toronto Public Health
30. *Failing the Homeless: Barriers in the Ontario Disability Support Program for Homeless People with Disabilities*, June 2006, Street Health