



2025-2026 Research Package

Senior Regionals & Provincials:

This house supports a “Housing First” approach to homelessness in major urban cities

Background

What is a “Housing First” approach to homelessness?

“Housing First” is a policy approach to homelessness that involves moving people who are experiencing homelessness, especially individuals experiencing chronic homelessness, from street or emergency shelters into stable and long-term housing. After individuals are moved into independent and permanent housing, additional support services are provided as needed. Housing First is an approach to homelessness first popularized by Sam Tsemberis and the nonprofit Pathways to Housing in New York in the 1990s. The underlying principle of Housing First is that people are better able to move forward with their lives if they are first housed,

preparing them to seek addiction treatment, employment opportunities, and reconnection with loved ones.

The key difference between Housing First and alternative housing solutions is that it does not require people experiencing homelessness to address behavioural or health challenges or to participate in service programming to access housing. Likewise, Housing First does not mandate participation in treatment or training services to retain housing. Advocates for Housing First view this approach as a means to enable access to permanent housing without prerequisites or conditions beyond those typically required of a renter. Conversely, alternatives such as the Treatment First approach prioritize resolving issues that lead to homelessness, such as alcoholism, drug dependency, mental health struggles or family crises, before helping people find permanent housing. Although all housing policy models advocate for housing the homeless, the Housing First model argues that providing permanent, unconditional housing is the top priority for individuals experiencing homelessness.

Why is homelessness in major urban cities a significant issue today?

Homelessness in major urban cities is a pressing issue across Canada and the world today. In Canada, homelessness is rising and increasingly visible, with 2.5% of households, or nearly 980,000 people, experiencing absolute homelessness and lacking shelter at all. Edmonton's homeless population continues to face freezing cold temperatures, unhoused because of a lack of daytime shelters, and encampments proliferate in warmer weather. In Calgary, about 2 in every 1,000 people experience homelessness each night, amounting to more than three thousand residents. Toronto's unhoused population has more than doubled in three years, with homelessness disproportionately affecting those identifying as Indigenous, 2LGBTQ+, and black. The number of homeless people in Metro Vancouver has increased by 9 percent in 2 years.

Internationally, cities such as Los Angeles, New York, Manila, Athens, Paris, and Santiago have all witnessed growing homeless populations. Los Angeles, for example, holds one of the largest stable populations of homeless people in the United States in Central City East, an area commonly referred to as Skid Row. The area is characterized by homeless encampments, rampant crime, and public drug use. Similarly, two-thirds of the Philippines' homeless population reside in Metro Manila, with many living in small encampments made from sheets balanced on tuk-tuks; the unhoused in Manila remain increasingly vulnerable to typhoons and monsoon rain.

Given the strain on municipal, regional, and federal resources in addressing the homelessness crisis in major urban cities globally, the effectiveness of Housing First solutions is up for debate. Governments and nonprofit partners must attend to the needs of increasingly vulnerable homeless populations while considering the interests of citizens and communities.

What is the history of homelessness policy and Housing First?

Housing First was developed in New York City in the 1990s by Dr. Sam Tsemberis and his nonprofit Pathways to Housing. This model emerged from surveys of individuals experiencing homelessness, which identified what they needed and wanted to improve their situation. Pathways to Housing's programming served clients with addiction or mental health issues by providing rental subsidies to secure housing. While programming initially required individuals to agree to two staff visits per month, supportive services were offered on a voluntary basis. Beginning in 1996, the New York Housing Study included Pathways to Housing as the experimental portion of a randomized trial comparing it with Treatment First programs. Results showed higher rates of housing stability with Housing First and presented no significant group differences between the models for most health and treatment outcomes.

Housing First's initial trial success in New York led to its adoption in other major urban centres. In 2008, the Government of Canada allocated \$110 million to the Mental Health Commission of Canada to undertake a research demonstration project on mental health and homelessness. The government's funding enabled the At Home/Chez Soi project in order to evaluate the effectiveness of the Housing First approach in Vancouver, Winnipeg, Toronto, Montreal, and Moncton. European cities such as Brno, Glasgow, Lisbon, Lyon Métropole, and Vantaa have also implemented Housing First approaches to addressing homelessness. Brno, for example, was the first city in the Czech Republic to introduce Housing First, launching its pilot programme in 2016 and prioritizes support for vulnerable groups such as rough sleepers and families with health issues. Vantaa implemented a whole-system approach to homelessness where the principles of Housing First guide all services, and housing is publicly owned by the government. In Japan, the Tokyo Metropolitan Government initiated the Community Life Transition Project in 2004 to support homeless individuals by transitioning them from the streets to rented apartments and into community life.

Despite widespread adoption of Housing First models in major urban cities, questions remain about their implementation and effectiveness. Between 2018 and 2022, homelessness across Canada increased by around 20 percent. In the United States, the number of people experiencing homelessness jumped 12 percent between 2022 and 2023. Critics of Housing First argue that its prominence has led many places to de-emphasize short-term shelter, citing San Francisco's focus on permanent homes as an explanation for the 33 percent drop in shelter beds between 2004 and 2014. Others, however, cast the blame on Housing First's reliance on the private rental market in some countries, creating challenges because the rental subsidies typically provided do not cover high rent costs, and affordable housing is limited and often in poor condition. Even in cities committed to Housing First, implementation challenges persist, as evidenced by uncertain funding, long wait times, rental unit shortages, and social isolation of residents in Brno, Glasgow, Lyon Metropole, and Vantaa.

Questions to Consider

- What are the practical limitations of the Housing First strategy?
- Why do individuals experience homelessness?
- What are possible alternatives to Housing First approaches beyond Treatment First?
- What are the roles of different levels of government in addressing homelessness?
- Who is responsible for financing housing policy solutions?
- How does the public view the homelessness crisis, and how does their perception influence a willingness to adopt a Housing First approach?
- What are the necessary features for a successful solution to homelessness?
- Who are the proponents of the Housing First approach? Who are the opponents of the Housing First approach?
- To what extent can a “Housing First” approach be successfully implemented in major urban cities?

Links:

[Housing First](#)

[Housing First Core Principles](#)

[Housing First Works](#)

[Homelessness and Housing in Canada: A Human Rights Crisis](#)

[Fewer drop in-spaces mean Edmonton’s homeless have nowhere to go in the morning](#)

[Learn about Homelessness](#)

[Toronto’s unhoused population reaches ‘crisis’ level, more than doubling in 3 years: survey](#)

[Number of people who are homeless in Metro Vancouver up 9 per cent in 2 years: report](#)

[In a Nation Growing Hostile Towards Drugs and Homelessness, Los Angeles Tries Leniency](#)

[Homelessness in the Philippines: Reflections from Manila](#)

[At Home/Chez Soi](#)

[Housing First in Cities: A Transformative Approach to Homelessness](#)

[Addressing Homelessness: U.S. Sweeps Versus Japan's Public Assistance](#)
[Towards support for homeless people and the introduction of Housing First in housing policies](#)

[Why the 'housing first' approach has struggled to fulfill its promise of ending homelessness](#)

[Housing First is a Failure](#)

[Quebec to scrap "housing first" program in Montreal](#)

[Housing First and Homelessness: The Rhetoric and the Reality](#)