



Homelessness Canada's defining social issue

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Jingle the change in your hand after buying a large cup of coffee and know that's all the federal government spent on your behalf last year to battle a national disgrace.

Poverty is Canada's dirty little secret, yet the Conservative government only spent about 17 cents per Canadian per day in 2006 to battle homelessness — it was 20 cents in 1991 — according to a report released this week by the Sheldon Chumir Foundation for Ethics in Leadership.

While it is startling enough to know up to 300,000 Canadians have no place to call home, what's also disturbing is the estimate another 1.7 million struggle with "housing affordability issues".

Our "new homeless" — families, women, students, immigrants, aboriginals — are simply low-income Canadians in need of affordable housing.

The issue hits home, as our newspaper's recent series on poverty highlighted. Food bank use is climbing, despite our growing prosperity, because too many families must spend most of their pay to keep a roof over their heads.

Those families told us they are literally a paycheck away from homelessness.

According to the report, Shelter: Homelessness in a Growth Economy, they are not alone:

- "Housing insecurity" is a national concern, with more than 2.7 million households paying too much of their income for shelter.
- About half of all Canadians live in fear of poverty, with a lack of affordable housing threatening both low and middle-income Canadians.
- Nearly one quarter of all new Canadians are paying more than half of their family income on rent.

Report author Gordon Laird argues homelessness is a chronic national woe caused by poverty — not mental illness or substance abuse. We can't alleviate poverty without tackling homelessness.

It costs us more to ignore the problem or deal with it ineffectively with stop-gap measures. Studies show the cost of shelters is much greater than the cost of creating affordable housing and implementing rent supplements.

The report states a decade of inaction on homelessness has cost taxpayers

nearly \$50 billion, with the annual cost hitting \$4.5 billion to \$6 billion for health care, criminal justice, social services and emergency shelter. That's comparable to the cost of the \$4.35 billion 2006 GST cut and 2007 environment plan on climate change, fresh water and wildlife conservation.

While investments were made in housing in 2005, without a national strategy (it was disbanded in 1993), there is no guarantee the money will be well spent.

As the income gap climbs relentlessly upward, Mr. Laird urges governments to stop dithering: "It has been studied to death. It is now time to take action and formulate an effective strategy to eradicate homelessness."

His call for action includes:

- Indexing welfare, shelter and social assistance to inflation.
- Developing alternatives to traditional home ownership, including market and non-market units, rent-to-own, with incentives for households, builders and municipalities.
- Using rent supplements.
- Investing in affordable housing alternatives such as independent housing trusts, mixed income co-operatives and even non-traditional interim shelters.
- Rezoning for new basement suites.

Homelessness and poverty have become our country's defining social issues. The need for action — in all levels of governments, in business, in our communities — seems clear and urgent.

Yet it will take courage, ethical purpose and strong leadership to make the change. In York Region, typically neighbourhoods vociferously oppose proposals for affordable housing. Only Newmarket has shown leadership in allowing basement apartments, with other municipalities turning a blind eye and only sanctioning apartments existing prior to 1995.

Meanwhile, more than one million children — one in six — continue to live in poverty in affluent Canada. Think about that the next time you pocket the change from your coffee.