**The Impact of Housing and Homelessness on Persons with Developmental
Disabilities: Connecting the Literature
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Introduction

Within the past few years, all levels of government have identified affordable housing as an important priority. Within the City of Toronto, *Housing Opportunities Toronto* (HOT) was created as a roadmap for the City, aimed at providing housing opportunities for everyone, having the overarching goal to improve housing stability for vulnerable Toronto residents. HOT has established targets of creating 10,000 affordable rental and 2,000 ownership homes between 2010 – 2020 (City of Toronto, 2009). The Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing (MAH) have created *Ontario's Long Term Affordable Housing Strategy*, reflecting Ontario's transformation towards a better housing system. According to the document, "Ontario is making several investments to achieve the vision of a province where every person has an affordable, suitable and adequate home to provide the foundation to secure employment, raise a family and build strong communities." (MAH, 2016). With regards to addressing housing affordability on a national scale, the Government of Canada is in the midst of compiling *a National Housing Strategy* to meet the housing needs of all Canadians, as they believe that all Canadians deserve access to housing that meets their needs and that they can afford.

Evidently, the need for affordable housing has become an important priority. This may be due to the fact that more research has become available regarding the impact of homelessness on individuals. However, the population that often gets left out of this conversation is persons with developmental disabilities (DD). This document aims to explore available literature on the topic of persons with DD and how they may be impacted by Canada's current housing situation, including homelessness. As there is currently no research that directly addresses the impact of housing and homelessness on persons with DD, related topics will be covered in order to gain insight into the subject.

Housing and Homelessness in Canada

Despite the availability of research regarding housing, mental health and disability; much of the research available on the impact of homelessness on individuals remains largely from international sources. Local research has only become evident within the past few years, signifying how Canada has only recently placed a priority on addressing the issue of affordable housing and homelessness within the country. Additionally, the actions being taken remain largely isolated from one another, with no formal federal housing strategy currently in place. Nonetheless, the available literature is still valid and can be applied to the Canadian population. Before reviewing the literature, it is important is to provide context for the issue of affordable housing shortages and homelessness within Canada, keeping in mind that there is a lack of available research and it is impossible to gather exact data due to the vulnerable and transient nature of persons who are homeless.

Firstly, homelessness continues to be a major problem in Canada with no evidence of seeing a significant reduction to the amount of homelessness experienced within our country (Gaetz, Gulliver & Richter, 2014). Approximately 235,000 Canadians will experience

homelessness in a year, with over 35,000 Canadians homeless on any given night (Gaetz, Gulliver & Richter, 2014). The inability of people to afford and maintain housing continues to underlie much of Canada's problem regarding homelessness. Toronto, Canada's largest city, has a staggering waitlist for people and families waiting for affordable housing. For example, more than 93,500 households, or over 171,000 people, were on the housing waiting list in July of 2015 (City of Toronto, 2015). This number has continued to increase since 2010, and many will wait years until they obtain safe and affordable housing. Therefore, in order for homelessness to be appropriately addressed, increasing access to affordable housing needs to be taken seriously.

Secondly, people who are homeless and struggle with severe mental health concerns or substance abuse issues often overshadow the needs of those with physical and/or developmental disability (Mahamoud et al., 2012). These circumstances work to further marginalize persons with a disability and maintain their level of invisibility. Just over 75% of adult Canadians with intellectual disabilities who do not live with their families, are living in poverty and are at a very high risk of homelessness (Canadian House of Commons, 2010). In 2006, 14.3% of the Canadian population identified as living with a disability, totaling approximately 4.4 million people (Canadian House of Commons, 2010). Though this number does not represent only those who have a developmental disability, it represents a high percentage of the population that continues to be ignored.

Lastly, the following news story represents the reality of the housing crisis in Canada, and is important in providing context for Canada's current housing situation. In May 2010, four homeless and/or formerly homeless persons living in Toronto launched a legal battle to challenge the Ontario Superior Court to order federal and provincial governments to implement effective housing strategies to reduce homelessness and substandard living conditions (Monsebraaten, 2010). Their claim was that homelessness and inadequate housing violate human rights under sections of the Charter that guarantee "security of the person" and the right to equality (Monsebraaten, 2010). The Ontario Superior Court dismissed the case, followed by the Superior Court of Canada dismissing the appeal, implying the view that legislatures, not the courts, are the place to fight homelessness.

Following the results of this court case, a group of affordable housing advocates took their concerns to the United Nations (UN), and in February of 2016, the UN Committee reviewed Canada on its compliance as a signatory to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CBC News, 2016). The outcome of the review concluded that the Canadian government is failing to protect vulnerable populations by denying them their fundamental right to housing (CBC News, 2016). Recommendations in the UN report include: implement a rights-based national housing strategy; increase federal and provincial resources for housing; increase availability of social housing and adequate emergency shelters across the country; intensify efforts to address indigenous peoples' housing crisis; and integrate a disability perspective in all housing plans and policies (UN, 2016). Evidently, the Canadian government needs to become serious about creating real change in addressing the obvious housing crisis, while considering the many vulnerable populations that are directly affected by this crisis.

<u>Persons with Developmental Disabilities</u>

Context regarding the housing situation in Canada needs to be connected to how it relates to persons with disabilities, particularly those with a developmental disability. The quality of life for persons with DD is significantly less when compared to someone without a disability. For

example, research states that persons with DD have significantly poorer health statuses compared to those without a developmental disability (Krahn, Hammond & Turner, 2006; Ouellette-Kuntz, 2005; Sutherland, Couch & Iacono, 2002). This is attributable to the fact that persons with disabilities often face increased levels of poverty and social exclusion, which are key social determinants of health (Ouellette-Kuntz, 2005). These potentially avoidable factors then become barriers in accessing housing, as persons with DD find themselves unable to afford market rates due to high levels of poverty. It is further exasperated when trying to find housing that accommodates any specific needs such as location to public transit and support services.

Lower quality of life is also reflected in the amount of abuse persons with DD are faced with. The research on the negative impact of abuse has been well documented, however, what often gets forgotten is that persons with disabilities experience abuse more frequently than the general population (Reither, Bryen & Shachar, 2007; Bryen, Carey & Frantz, 2003; Sobsey, 1994). The victimization of children and adults with DD often goes unreported, or is frequently disregarded when it is reported (Reither, Bryen & Shachar, 2007). Therefore, abuse continues to remain largely invisible in our society. This is further perpetuated by the fact that persons with DD often reside in isolated settings where they are dependent on others for support. If individuals face abusive situations from the people who support them, there are limited options for where they can go to receive help, or access alternative housing options that are also both accessible and affordable.

The acknowledgement of mental health issues within our society has become quite visible, as one in four people (25% of the population) are faced with a mental illness in their lifetime. However, the prevalence of mental health issues in adults with DD is estimated at a rate of 30% to 50%, significantly higher than the general population (Smiley, 2005). There are many services available, such as the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) or hospitals specializing in mental health, which people can access for support with their mental health issues, shall they be diagnosed. A significant percentage of mental health issues in adults with DD often go undiagnosed and untreated as physician's over-attribute symptoms of mental illness to the individual's developmental disability (Moss et al., 2000). It is also difficult to diagnose because adults with DD may have linguistic limitations which make it difficult for them to describe their symptoms. Undiagnosed mental health issues can create problems for adults with DD such as not being able to maintain stable housing, or not being able to access supports that can help them with their mental health issues and connect them to appropriate housing. Instead, adults with DD may be over-utilizing hospital services that are not properly equipped to meet their needs and who do not provide them with long-term housing solutions.

It is important to note that though research exists regarding the topic of developmental disabilities, it is still considered an under researched subject compared to other populations. Furthermore, researchers have a difficult time accessing specific populations of people who are not already connected to services. This means that it is unknown how many people have a developmental disability and who also struggle with managing a mental illness along with stable housing. What we do know from the research, however, is that this population is more likely to face poorer health statuses, increased levels of poverty, and higher rates of abuse and mental health issues.

Housing and Homelessness

The relationship between mental health issues, homelessness and access to housing is complex. Therefore, to add developmental disability to this issue only further complicates the matter. To develop an understanding of just how complicated the relationship between persons with DD and housing may be, it is important to consider the relationship between housing, homelessness and mental health.

Individuals experiencing mental health issues are predisposed to experiencing homelessness, and will likely experience more severe and longer periods of homelessness, with less connections to friends and family compared to individuals who are homeless and who do not have mental health issues (Munn-Rivard, 2014; CMHA, 2008; Greenberg, & Rosenheck, 2008). Mental health is also directly influenced by the type of housing one has access to. Therefore, people who experience housing insecurity or are homeless are more likely to experience mental health issues; exhibited by higher stress levels, poor coping skills, substance issues, low self-esteem and feelings of hopelessness (Munn-Rivard, 2014). Even though adults with DD may have housing, if it does not adequately meet their needs they are more likely to develop mental health issues and have an increased chance of becoming homeless. When examining the current housing situation in Toronto, experiencing forms of mental health issues seems a likely option considering the limited supply of adequate and affordable housing for persons with DD.

Greater awareness has been given to the relationship between housing and mental health, particularly the role that housing can play in the well-being of an individual. However, an important issue to consider is that the total amount of time someone spends homeless is directly related to lower perceived recovery from mental illness (Castellow, Kloos & Townley, 2015; Burt et al., 2007). The longer someone is homeless, the less likely they are to recover from their mental illness and will likely experience higher levels of psychiatric distress (Castellow, Kloos & Townley, 2015). Homelessness in and of itself is a traumatic experience that places people in vulnerable situations that are difficult to recover from. Having a developmental disability will only increase the level of trauma one experiences, further complicating their ability to recover from being homeless or lacking adequate housing.

Furthermore, persons with DD are more vulnerable to becoming homeless compared to people without a disability (Backer & Howard, 2007). Firstly, because once the individual ages out of the children's system, they are no longer able to access the same supports and receive the same programming. An added stressor may be the reality that the adult supports may not be immediately accessible to them, leaving many individuals not receiving the care and support they require. Secondly, due to individuals having a high level of dependency on others for support, particularly family members, if their family members pass away without a plan in place, the risk of homelessness increases. The stress that these situations cause on persons with DD as well as their loved ones negatively contribute to their mental well-being.

Evidently, a cycle has been created where people who have mental health issues are more likely to become homeless, however not having adequate or stable housing increases the chances of developing mental health issues. A bi-directional relationship exists between housing and health, where poor housing results in poor health, especially mental health, and vice versa (Baker et al., 2014; Suglia et al., 2011; Hulse & Saugeres, 2008). This results in unaffordable housing being unevenly experienced, with particular groups like adults with DD being especially vulnerable. This bi-directional relationship between housing and health reinforces the notion that

the business of housing and the business of health are interconnected, therefore both need to be invested in one another in order for either problem to improve.

Conclusion

Though there is a lack of research regarding the impact of housing and homelessness with persons with DD, conclusions may be drawn from the research. People who are homeless will likely have a developmental disability along with a mental health issue, and adults with DD who are not homeless will likely be at high risk for homelessness and experiencing mental health issues. Regardless of the scenario, the quality of life for persons with DD remains low. Most importantly, the issues facing this population continue to remain largely invisible. Though housing and homelessness continue to remain complex issues, the Canadian government has identified a commitment to address these issues in the hopes of eliminating homelessness altogether. This a big task, one that the developmental service sector needs to be included in, in order to give a voice to those who may not have the ability. Furthermore, services working with the developmental service population continue to lack housing resources, while homeless shelters and hospitals become overwhelmed as they find themselves unequipped to deal with the unique needs of persons with DD. These services need to stop operating in isolation in order to effectively meet the needs of persons with DD.

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