

BUILDING KNOWLEDGE

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Student Research Series

Homeless Encampments in British Columbia

This series of bulletins features student research on a range of socio-economic topics. This report was written by students in the Masters of Public Policy program at Simon Fraser University, and was sponsored by BC Housing.

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Methodology

The researchers used a multi-method research approach, including a literature review, media survey, expert interviews, and case study analysis. The study selected three case studies from B.C. for analysis.

Introduction

Homeless encampments, commonly referred to as tent cities, are temporary, informal forms of shelter used by individuals experiencing homelessness. Recently, these encampments have become more common and visible in British Columbia. This report outlines three policy options and analyzes their capacity to address the challenges of responding to, and supporting individuals residing in, homeless encampments.

The three policy options are:

- ▶ Sanctioned Encampments
- ▶ Supportive Housing (+)
- ▶ Navigation Centres

The Supportive Housing option includes an enhancement (+) to create a toolkit for housing providers to assist encampment residents in transitioning to housing.

The policy options are analyzed using criteria in the following categories:

- ▶ Security and Protection
- ▶ Equity
- ▶ Freedom and Autonomy
- ▶ Cost
- ▶ Political Feasibility
- ▶ Administrative Complexity.



Background

Structural pathways to homelessness in Canada can include a number of factors including the effects of colonization, entrenched poverty, discrimination and a lack of affordable housing, among others.

While lacking a standardized definition, homeless encampments generally involve individuals living in temporary shelters or enclosed places not designed for long-term, on-going occupancy. In B.C., encampments are located on both private and public land, and range in scale from scattered camping found throughout the Fraser Valley, to densely populated encampments like that at Oppenheimer Park in Downtown Vancouver. Most often, people are living in tents.

Reasons individuals may choose encampments over other options

Key reasons individuals experiencing homelessness may choose to live in encampments include:

- ▶ Shortcomings in the shelter system that mean these spaces are not meeting the needs of all individuals
- ▶ A sense of safety and community fostered by encampments
- ▶ A desire for autonomy and privacy.



Encampments can provide residents with psychosocial benefits not found to the same degree in shelters. The sense of safety may arise from living with a group of individuals rather than alone and may relate to the sense of community fostered by encampments. As a result, they can become sites of social cohesion and community-building.

However, experiences of perceived safety are not uniform for all residents – particularly women and youth. In addition, as camps mature and grow in population, the rate of criminal activity may increase and residents become less safe.

BC Housing Perspective

Homeless to sheltered

BC Housing welcomes this important research as it underscores the urgent need to support people experiencing or at risk of homelessness across the province.

Over the past year and a half, BC Housing and our partners have relocated more than 1,100 people to safe, indoor accommodation from Oppenheimer and Strathcona Parks in Vancouver and Pandora, Topaz, and other parks throughout Victoria. This work would not be possible without the collaboration and support from municipalities, First Nations, health authorities, non-profits, and others.

We continue to see the impacts of colonialism, systemic racism, and other forms of oppression in the disproportionate number of Indigenous, Black and trans youth who are experiencing homelessness. We have responded by evolving our housing efforts with recent encampments to include trauma-informed homeless outreach, partnerships with Indigenous organizations, and culturally informed services. As well, we continue our ongoing organizational work to incorporate the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the Truth and Reconciliation Calls to Action, and the B.C. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act.

As an example, moving efforts in Vancouver were grounded each day by welcome ceremonies hosted by local First Nations. Representatives from the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səllilwətaʔ (Tsleil-Waututh) peoples spoke about the legacy of colonialism on Indigenous peoples and the need for all people to unite in the spirit of community care, compassion, and justice.

The findings from the student research are important to helping inform and advance our service delivery. We have mobilized several critical responses to homelessness, including:

- ▶ Purchasing 15 hotels in nine communities with over 1,100 rooms for temporary accommodation and long-term homes;
- ▶ Utilizing modular home technologies to speed up the timeline from design to occupancy;
- ▶ Adding a mandatory racial identity question on the 2020 Point-in-Time Homeless Count, the findings of which are being used to improve service delivery; and
- ▶ Working on creating two navigation centres (Vancouver and Nanaimo) to provide enhanced services for individuals experiencing chronic homelessness with complex needs.

We are also working upstream through our Homeless Prevention Program (HPP) to assist people at risk of becoming homeless. The HPP provides individuals in identified at-risk groups facing homelessness with rent supplements and support services to help them access rental housing. This program will help approximately 3,200 households this year.

Providing safe, secure housing gives people a platform from which they can thrive. We have a lot of work ahead of us, but this research report encourages our teams to continue our commitment to listening to the needs of community, evolving our best practices, and ensuring that we deliver housing as quickly as possible to people who need it most.

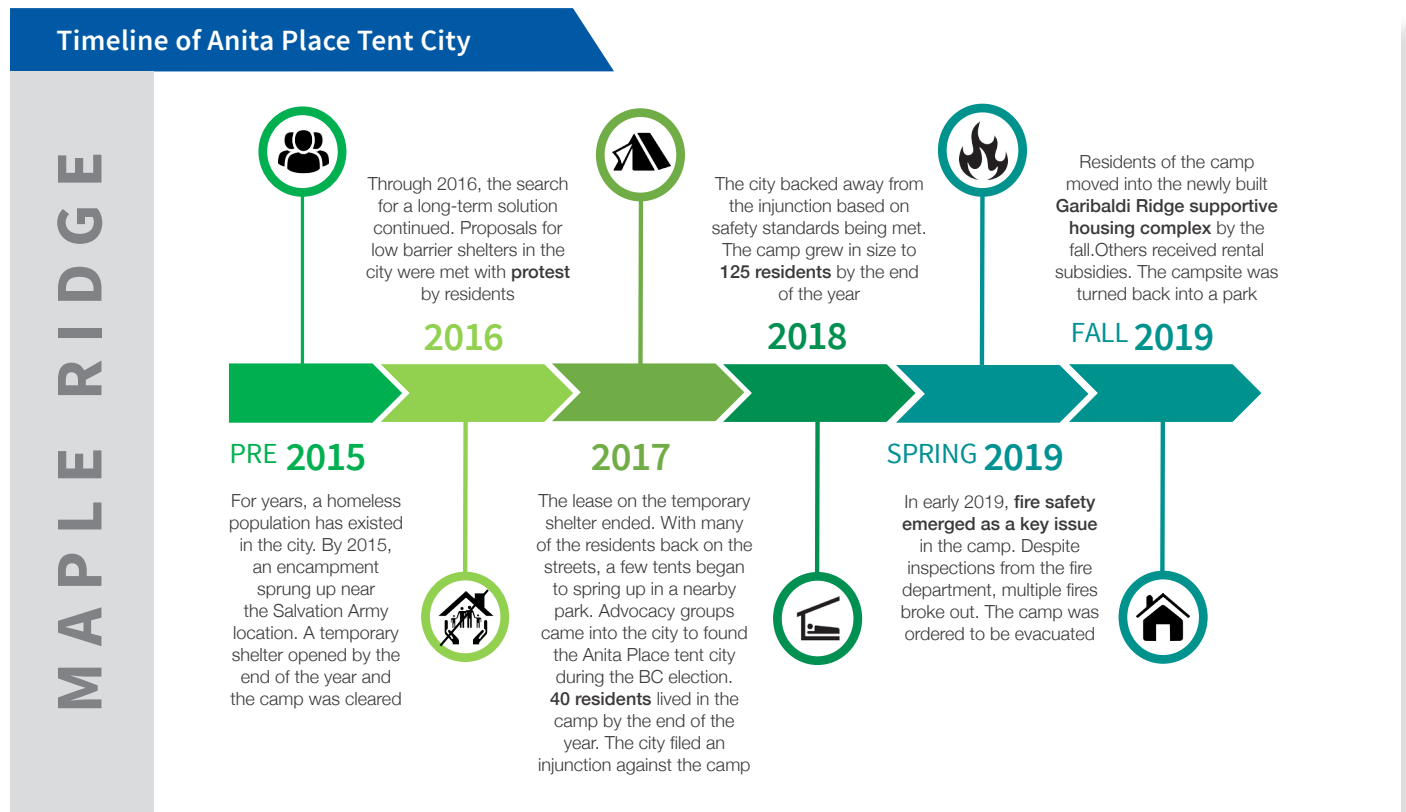


Case Studies

This section provides a brief description of homeless encampments in the municipalities of Maple Ridge, Surrey, and Nanaimo.

Maple Ridge: Anita Place Tent City

Homelessness in the City of Maple Ridge has been an ongoing issue for decades. It became more visible through the establishment of homeless encampments. Anita Place Tent City was an active encampment in the community between 2017 – due to the closure of a temporary shelter and 2019 – when new supportive housing opened.



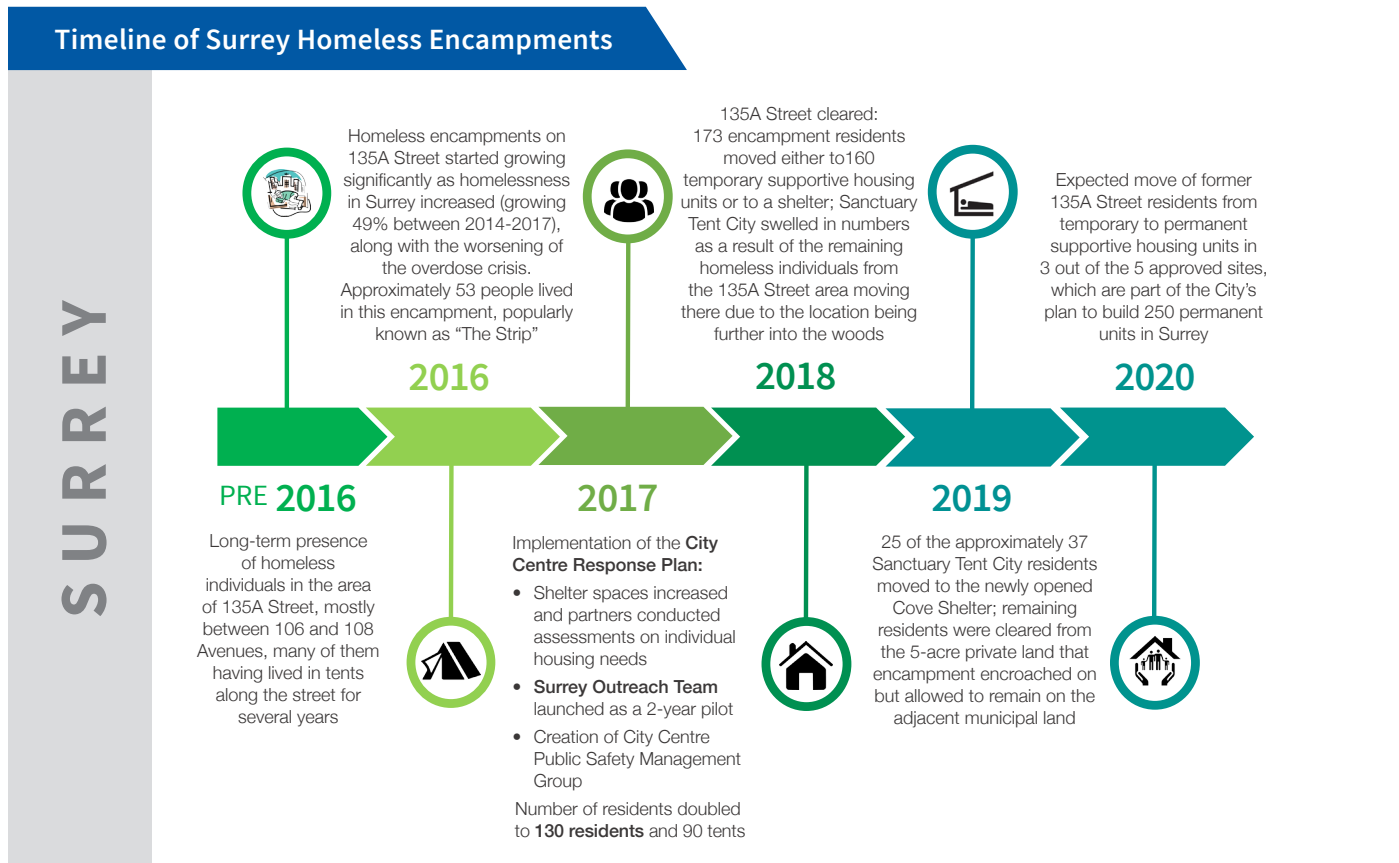
Note: Royal Crescent opened in October 2018 for campers from Anita Place.

LESSONS LEARNED

- An active homeless encampment may be dangerous to both its own residents and those nearby. A string of fires in early 2019 at Anita Place Tent City highlighted safety concerns.
- Supportive housing was proposed by BC Housing in order to provide safety and support for former encampment residents. The Maple Ridge case showed that inevitably all proposals may be unpopular, especially with stakeholders situated closest to proposed supportive housing sites. Nearby residents and businesses will likely ask ‘why here?’. The Mayor and Council of Maple Ridge opposed the Garibaldi Ridge supportive housing project, however, the municipality was required to accept the provincial government’s decision that the project go ahead.
- The political struggle was worth the final outcome. The supportive housing increased safety for both the community and camp residents who moved to a safer situation.

Surrey: 135A Street and Sanctuary Tent City

The encampment along 135A Street, also known as “The Strip”, was located between 106 and 108 Avenues in the Whalley area of Surrey. This semi-industrial area had a longstanding homeless presence, with some claiming to have lived in the encampment for six years. Sanctuary Tent City, on King George Boulevard in Surrey, existed for approximately five years, but its population started to swell in summer 2018 after the removal of the 135A Street encampment.

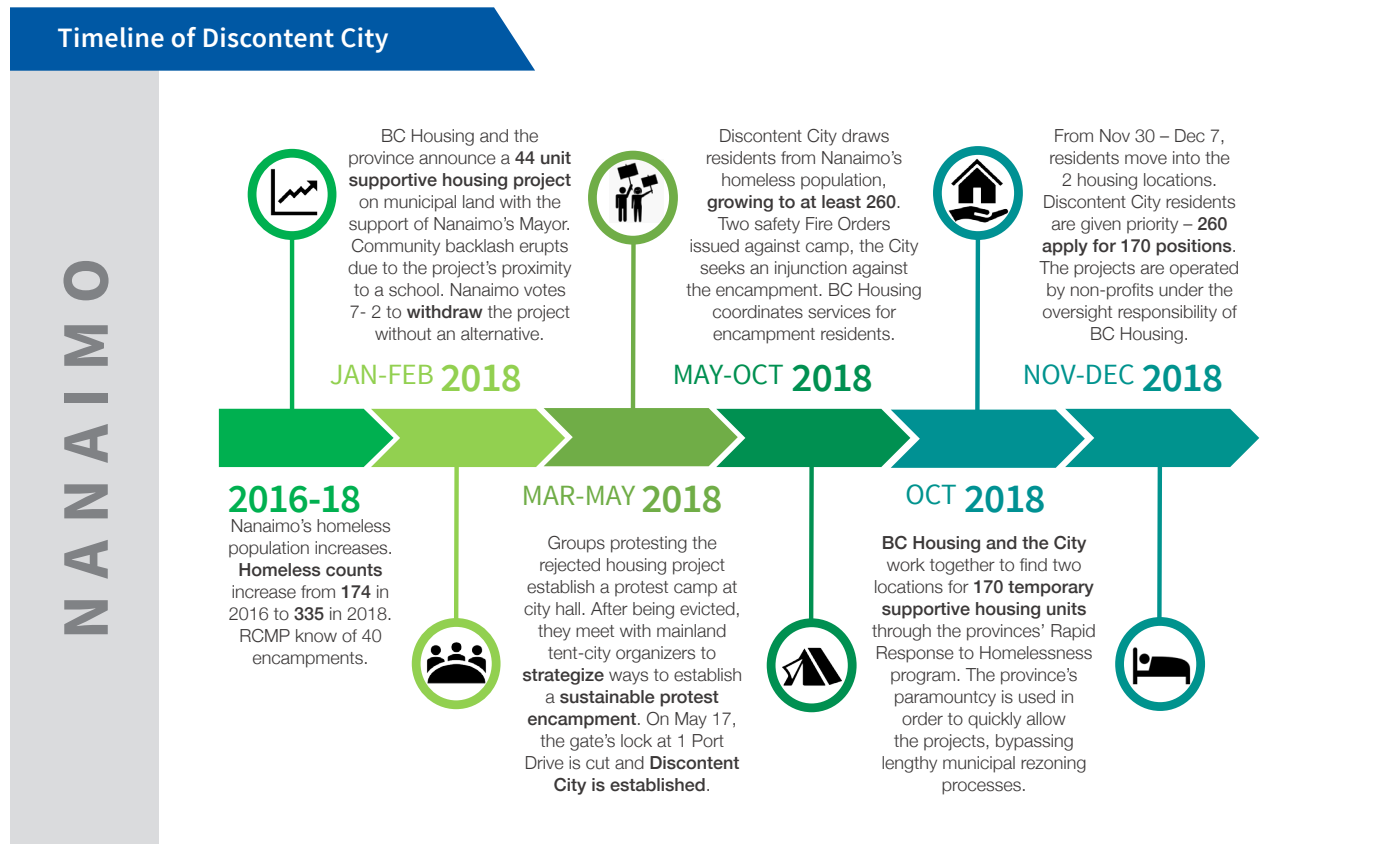


LESSONS LEARNED

- The City of Surrey was responsive to addressing the encampments through partnerships with multiple stakeholders. Focusing on relationship-building, the strategy has been widely recognized as an effective way to support encampment residents. Other cities both in Canada and internationally are now considering this approach as a model for responding to encampments.
- Some former encampment residents and advocates state that the restrictions and inability for recourse to the Residential Tenancy Act serve as barriers to entering and maintaining housing in transitional supportive housing. Transitional housing is excluded from the Residential Tenancy Act.
- Others who didn’t acquire a space in the supportive housing units were upset about not being chosen despite being in need, with some claiming to be on housing lists for a long time.

Nanaimo – Discontent City

In May 2018, “Discontent City,” was established in Downtown Nanaimo by a coalition of advocates protesting the lack of safety, alienation, and insufficient government support for people experiencing homelessness in Nanaimo and across British Columbia. The founders were a coalition of activists, with strong representation from organized groups from other jurisdictions, whose experience in homeless activism helped establish a long-lasting and visible encampment.



LESSONS LEARNED

- Discontent City was a prominent issue in Nanaimo, as it happened in the middle of two key political cycles. First, a change in government at the provincial level led to a \$291 million dollar investment in the newly created Rapid Response to Homelessness program in 2017. Next the 2018 municipal election put significant pressure on the Mayor and Council to step away from controversy surrounding homelessness and encampments.
- Nanaimo is an island community with a unique culture that takes pride in being distinct from mainland B.C. Locals were resistant to examples and comparisons from situations that occurred on the mainland.
- Further, a misinformed discourse grew in Nanaimo's community that Discontent City residents were outsiders. Maintaining strong local data sets and information can help overcome these challenges.
- Some clients found the transition to supportive housing challenging. Challenges included the rapid sign-up process, the loss of autonomy that clients experienced in moving to supportive housing, and the fact that housing staff did not have prior relationships with clients. At the same time, concerns were also expressed that encampment residents were able to access supportive housing before others in the region who were also experiencing homelessness.

Policy Options

Sanctioned Encampments

This policy option entails the legal sanctioning of encampments on specific city-owned plots of land. Sanctioning encampments requires municipalities to provide camp residents with various services including sanitation, electricity, and storage with the goal of maintaining health and safety standards.

Certain guidelines must be followed in the operation of a sanctioned encampment, such as providing a portable toilet per 20 people; hand and dish washing stations; cleaning and hygiene supplies; first aid and naloxone kits; fire extinguishers; professional pest control; collection and disposal of needles; and daily fire inspection which would ensure flammable material is disposed of safely.

Mobile health teams may also visit the encampment regularly. This option is meant to be a short-term solution to the growing number and size of encampments.

Supportive Housing (+)

Supportive housing provides a private room or apartment in a building with support services. Buildings and units vary in style, size and supports provided. Supportive housing offers a range of on-site, non-clinical supports, such as life-skills training, and connections to primary health care, mental health or substance use services. People living in supportive housing are often some of the community's most vulnerable. Many require a range of health care, mental health and addictions services. This report proposes supportive housing (+), which includes additional measures to assist encampment residents during their transition to supportive housing. The research recommends that BC Housing, working in collaboration with stakeholders, develop a toolkit designed to aid supportive housing operators in helping former encampment members during their initial transition into the housing continuum. Leveraging research on what residents consider to be positive aspects of encampments and why they are drawn to encampments could form a beneficial foundation to the toolkit.

Navigation Centres

Navigation Centres have been implemented in American cities like Seattle and Philadelphia, to connect the hardest-to-reach homeless individuals with social services. Navigation Centres provide these individuals with room and board, and intensive case management that aims to connect people to medical, housing and employment services.

Navigation Centres are different from traditional shelters because they have few barriers to entry, and allow individuals who have partners, pets, and possessions that require secure storage to stay. Sobriety is not a requirement for entry, nor are there rigid entry and exit times. No drop-ins are allowed; instead, individuals must seek referral from outreach workers.

Some shelters in B.C. have adopted policies similar to those used in Navigation Centres. Moving towards an official Navigation Centre model however has the potential to mitigate the negative stigma associated with shelters in both the homeless community and the broader community. This option would require the installation of Navigation Centres in municipalities where homeless encampments have been identified.



Criteria and Objectives

Security and Protection

Encampments are touted as sites of increased safety and security by advocates. As encampments increase in size however, incidents of crime and risk to personal safety can also increase, especially for women and youth. This report measures Security and Protection of the Policy Options in three ways:

- ▶ The mitigation of environmental risks
- ▶ The amount of positive movement along the housing continuum
- ▶ The degree of direct (in-situ) provision of social and health services

Equity

A key consideration is ensuring policy outcomes do not worsen the quality of life of the most vulnerable individuals living in encampments. Highly vulnerable individuals may possess multiple medical risks and minimal survival skills, be unable to meet their basic needs, and have issues related to their mental health and/or substance use. Thus, this objective looks to increase the well-being of the most vulnerable individuals living in encampments through the provision of more housing solutions and more effective engagement with this demographic.

This report measures Equity in two ways:

- ▶ The ability to address the long-term housing needs of the most vulnerable;
- ▶ The ability to engage with the most vulnerable residents (relationship-building).

Freedom/Autonomy

Freedom and autonomy are important factors influencing unsheltered individuals' decision to locate and stay in encampments. Barriers to accessing social services and shelters include freedom and/or autonomy. This report measures to what degree a policy option reduces freedom and autonomy relative to what is experienced in encampments.



Cost

This is the total cost to provincial and municipal governments for providing the policy option in the short-and long-term.

Political Feasibility

Political Feasibility is identified as a factor in the success or failure in policy development around homeless encampments. Nearby residents and business owners may form an advocacy coalition against homeless encampments and some potential policy solutions. Therefore, proposed policy options must take into consideration the political risks they pose. To assess political feasibility, this report measured the level of community support including city council, residents, and business owners.

Administrative Complexity

Implementation challenges must be considered when assessing policy options for supporting the residents of homeless encampments. Addressing encampments requires the cooperation of various levels of government, as well as collaboration and partnerships among different government departments and between service providers and non-governmental organizations. This report measures administrative complexity by the level of administrative burden associated with the implementation of each option. Consideration is given to the number of external partners required and the number of additional internal programs and services needed for the successful execution of each proposed solution.

Ranking of Policy Options for Each Measure

The following table shows the policy options that will be most effective at meeting the defined criteria and objectives (outlined on page 7), based on the measures and priority ranking listed below.



		Measures	Sanctioned Encampments	Supportive Housing (+)	Navigation Centres
CRITERIA AND OBJECTIVES	SECURITY AND PROTECTION	Mitigation of Environmental Risks	Medium <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Risk of harm from uncontrolled fire; risk of acts of violence; and risk of wildlife encounters can be mitigated due to the provision of services like electricity, safe cooking areas and security. Encampment residents are exposed to variable weather conditions. 	High <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supportive Housing provides protection against all environmental hazards, including inclement weather. 	High <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Navigation Centres provide protection against all environmental hazards, including inclement weather.
		Positive Movement Along the Housing Continuum	Low <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Residents have relatively low potential to enter the housing continuum. 	High <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Residents who access a unit in Supportive Housing are given entry to housing further along the Housing Continuum. Individuals within Supportive Housing are provided with resources to maintain or improve their housing situation. 	Medium <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Individuals enter the Navigation Centre through outreach workers. This places people previously experiencing homelessness on the Housing Continuum; housing support workers are available to assist clients to secure housing.
		Direct Provision of Social and Health Services	Medium <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Official endorsement of the encampments allows for established relationships between service providers and encampment residents. 	High <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supportive Housing provides in-situ social and health services, as well as connections to services in the community. 	High <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Navigation Centres provide in-situ social and health services, as well as connections to services in the community.
CRITERIA AND OBJECTIVES	EQUITY	Ability to Address Long-term Housing Needs of Vulnerable Individuals	Medium <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sanctioned Encampments are a short-term solution and do not address long-term housing needs. However, they do provide a stable location where outreach workers can connect with residents and help them address their housing needs. 	High <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supportive Housing is designed to address long-term housing needs. 	High <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Navigation Centres place residents in contact with support workers who perform a needs assessment and connect individuals with housing.
		Ability to Engage with Vulnerable Individuals	High <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sanctioned Encampments might avoid displacing individuals from places considered “home.” Individuals can also remain where they have developed bonds of kinship and community with fellow residents. May permit greater relationship-building between social service providers, outreach teams, and encampment residents, who can relax knowing they are not going to be evicted from the tent city immediately and without support. 	Medium <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supportive Housing is designed to engage and support vulnerable populations, but has more barriers compared to the other options. 	High <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Navigation centres are ranked high as entry is regulated by outreach workers. It is assumed everyone using these spaces has a relationship or is in the process of building a relationship with outreach workers.



		Measures	Sanctioned Encampments	Supportive Housing (+)	Navigation Centres
CRITERIA AND OBJECTIVES	FREEDOM/ AUTONOMY	Level of Autonomy for Encampment Residents	<p>High</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Sanctioned Encampments offer similar levels of freedom and autonomy to unsanctioned encampments. ▶ Sanctioning encampments entails some regulatory restrictions, but their sanctioned status should provide official means for residents to influence their regulations. 	<p>Medium</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Negative impacts to freedom and autonomy have been identified as a challenge to people transitioning into Supportive Housing, due to some of the policies that residents must adhere to. ▶ A toolkit to aid in this transition has the potential to mitigate these impacts of the transition to Supportive Housing. 	<p>High</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Navigation Centers are a low barrier shelter option and do not place many restrictions on resident's autonomy.
	COST	Cost to Government	<p>Medium</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ The operational funding for Sanctioned Encampments is estimated to be \$1- \$2 million per year. ▶ This option would need funding negotiations between the municipal and provincial governments. 	<p>Low</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ The cost of Supportive Housing units varies as it depends on the price of the land, the location, the number of units, etc., and is often shared between the City and the Province. ▶ Costs include capital and construction costs as well as annual operating costs. ▶ If a toolkit were developed to aid the transition of residents from encampments to Supportive Housing, additional staff, training and support services may be required. 	<p>Low</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Initial one-time capital costs depend on the location, condition of the sites, size of the facility, and need for renovations of the Navigation Centre. ▶ Costs include capital and constructions costs as well as annual operating costs.
	POLITICAL FEASIBILITY	Level of Community Support	<p>Low</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Encampments are very unpopular with nearby residents and businesses. ▶ Sanctioning camps runs the risks of greater political pushback from impacted stakeholders. 	<p>Medium</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Supportive Housing may be unpopular with nearby residents but may be perceived as safer compared to an encampment. ▶ The restrictions on entry and guests in the Supportive Housing model is a compromise that some impacted stakeholders will be able to accept. 	<p>Low</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Navigation Centres do not have the same rules and restrictions as Supportive Housing, which could result in less community support.
	ADMINISTRATIVE COMPLEXITY	Level of Administrative Burden	<p>Medium</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Complexity arises through the coordination between levels of government. ▶ Should the current location not be feasible, the movement of an existing encampment to a sanctioned location presents its own administrative challenges. ▶ The provision of services to Sanctioned Encampments may require the expansion or creation of new outreach programs. 	<p>High</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Supportive Housing works within the framework of existing services and programs meant to address homelessness in general. ▶ The creation of a toolkit for the purposes of assisting supportive housing operators requires minimal internal effort in the formulation and communication of the resource. 	<p>Low</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Navigation Centres in British Columbia necessitate the creation or expansion of programs and services. ▶ Determining the location of the Centres requires collaboration between levels of government, which could result in a high level of administrative complexity.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The analysis suggests that Supportive Housing (+) augments encampment residents' security and protection effectively and is likely to have a lower level of administrative burden than the other options outlined in this report. BC Housing and others have successfully used Supportive Housing (+) in response to encampments as seen in the case studies in this report. The recommendation of this research reinforces this option as the optimal course of action, although Navigation Centres and Sanctioned Encampments may also play a role in a comprehensive strategy to address homeless encampments. The report also suggests that developing a toolkit for supportive housing operators to help create environmental conditions aiding encampment residents during the transition into housing would be beneficial.

Policy makers should pay close attention to current and local conditions to determine the most appropriate responses and review the outcomes of these options in other jurisdictions.

Finally, the research suggests that the implementation and development of responses to homeless encampments should be inclusive and collaborative. Homeless encampments are dynamic and complex phenomenon that require current and locally relevant information that is best gathered from the network of actors directly impacted by, and responding to, encampments.

Limitations

In creating this report, a decision was made to focus on homeless encampments emerging in areas not previously studied, such as suburban communities outside Vancouver.

This report looked at some of the most visible camps, and therefore, the research has limitations in addressing the numerous smaller and less visible encampments across the province. These smaller encampments are temporary in nature and are often designed to stay hidden, making reliable data on their nature challenging to collect.

During development of this report, the researchers considered an extensive array of policy options beyond the three that were analyzed. The policy option of prioritizing camp closures was not analyzed. Under the key criteria of security and protection, dispersing camps puts encampment residents at greater risk.



More Information:

Visit BC Housing's Research Centre at www.bchousing.org to find the latest workshops, research and publications on the key challenges and successes in building and operating affordable, sustainable housing.

BC Housing works with students from various BC universities to further a deeper understanding of socio-economic housing topics and provide an opportunity to gain practical experience working on real-life issues. Supporting student research is a way to strengthen our relationship with the education community and adds to the rich collection of research available to housing providers and all levels of government.

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