

SUPER INTENT CITY: MEDIA PORTRAYALS OF HOMELESSNESS

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Background

150,000-300,000 people experience homelessness in a given year in Canada(1). On a single night, 1400 people experience homelessness in Victoria (2). Homelessness is a result of structural factors such as poverty and high housing costs, systemic factors such as aging out of care and individual situations (1). In Victoria, housing is unaffordable and unavailable (3). People experiencing homelessness have poor health and die prematurely due to lack of the basic determinants for health such as housing, income and social supports (4,5). Homelessness is associated with multiple sources of stigmas (6)

Media reflects and contributes to public opinions and influences policy responses to homelessness (7) often reproducing stereotypes.

Need for Healthy Living Spaces

- In fall, 2015, Tent city was portrayed as in need of basic amenities such that the "provincial government provided a portable outhouse" and a garbage bin to help with the sanitation issues (8).
- Tent city residents, themselves, raised health issues related to living in shelters and the negative impacts of shelters on their health such as the "risk of catching bugs such as lice" (9).
- It was not until May, 2016, that tent city residents "finally recognized ... as humans" receiving flush toilets, clean drinking water and showers (10) with residents feeling healthier, and "better able to connect with health services by living in tent city" (11).
- Public health is mentioned related to concerns of overcrowding and disease surveillance.

Public Safety Issues: Tent City is Safer than the Streets

- In fall, 2015, nearby homeowners/renters express concerns about crime and personal safety. No mention of safety for the residents who are living in inadequate and substandard housing.
- In February, 2016, provincial politicians shift from a focus on basic amenities for health to tent cities as an ongoing, unacceptable risk to "public safety" and issue an initial eviction notice.
- Tent city is portrayed as unsafe due to increasing concerns re fire and public safety prior to the second court injunction.
- Tent city residents highlight that tent city is safer than the streets, questioning "is some back alley supposed to be safer than right here?" (12).

Judge Hinkson's Rulings

First Hearing: April 2016

• "I need to be satisfied there is accommodation that enables people to address their health issues." "If someone is drug-addicted and they are being forced to go somewhere that can't accommodate their health issue, it's not really much of an option." "The tent city on the lawn of the Victoria courthouse will remain in place for now." Tent city community was deemed to be safer than the alternatives and that residents were managing themselves.

Second Hearing: July 2016

• "I have come to the conclusion that the encampment is unsafe for those living there and for the neighbouring residents and businesses and cannot be permitted to continue." However, adequate housing must be provided.

Research Questions

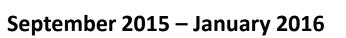
- 1. What are the media representations of people experiencing homelessness and living in SIC (stigmatizing and non-stigmatizing?
- 2. Who holds these representations and how do they change over time?
- What are the implications for public health and the role of public health in challenging stigma and influencing more accurate understandings of homelessness?

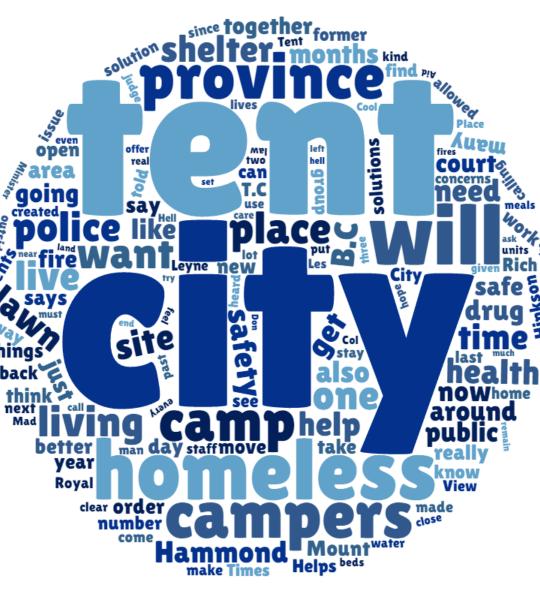
Methodology

Data were collected from September 1^{st,} 2015 to September 30^{th,} 2016 from print media using Canadian Newsstand Major Dailies and Access World News databases. 434 articles were retrieved from 18 regional and national newspapers. The initial search was conducted using the terms "Victoria" and "tent city" within the above timeline.

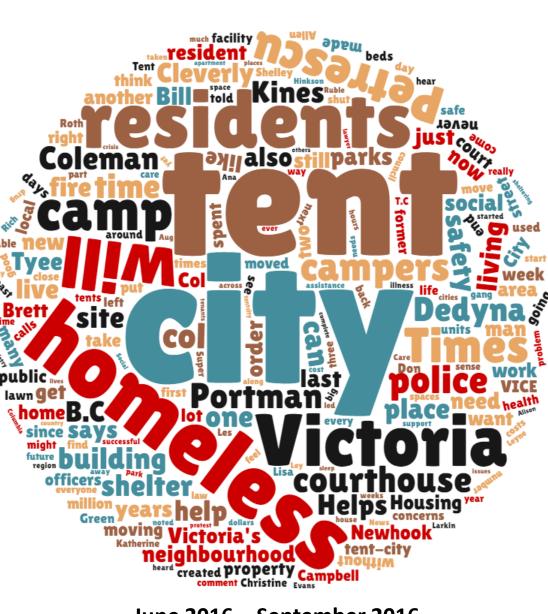
Articles retrieved were put into an excel spreadsheet according to document type. The articles were then categorized into as primary (1) and secondary (2) sources. Primary sources include articles that directly described tent city and/or the residents of tent city while secondary sources include articles that mention tent city but did not directly describe it or the people. The 289 primary sources were then then summarized and analyzed using discourse analysis.







February 2016 - May 2016



June 2016 – September 2016

Conclusions

- While the need for healthy living spaces was identified early on, this discourse diminished with escalating media portrays related to criminalization and public safety.
- Criminalization of poverty and focus on public safety that ignore the lack of safety for those living alone on the streets obscures key issues related to the social determinants of health such as housing, income, community support and inclusion.
- Tent city residents repeatedly highlighted that being in a community is safer than on the streets and shelters. They emphasized the importance of building community both as a source of healing and support and as a resource for social action to mobilize resources to address homelessness.
- Media portrayals that criminalize poverty, reinforce that those who are homeless are undeserving of living in 'prime real estate' areas highlighting ongoing colonialism and neo-liberalism that contribute to displacement of people including Aboriginal peoples.
- Service providers as well as public health were portrayed as needed to manage or provide surveillance of tent city even when residents were deemed to be able to manage themselves.
- Media portrayals shape the publics' opinion of who is deserving and undeserving in our community and portrayals directly informed by people experiencing homelessness are critical to counter stereotypes and find solutions to homelessness.



Articles **Number of Primary Articles Per Month** Table 1. The frequency of document types used in the discourse analysis. Document Type Frequency

Gangs and Rats: Criminalization and Surveillance of Poverty

- Beginning in Dec., 2015, tent city residents are repeatedly portrayed as criminals and in need of surveillance rather than as victims of crime and poverty and in need of the resources for health.
- Tent city was described as tarnishing Victoria's image and portrayals of moral decay increasing over the next 8 months with use of language such as "drug ghetto", "filthy tent city" and "freeloaders" to describe the encampment and its residents.
- The Mad as Hell group emerged in April, calling tent city residents "thugs", "criminals" and "bullies."
- The province's lawyer in June states "risk of fires, increasing violence, the arrival of gang members, the presence of a "chop shop" for stolen bikes and an infestation of rats".
- Service providers and police are portrayed as needed to manage the situation in spite of BC Supreme Court decision highlighting that the camp was managing themselves.

Community/Belonging: Mobilizing Solutions to Homelessness

- Repeatedly tent city residents, when asked, emphasized the importance of community and belonging as a fundamental benefit for residents and better than life on the streets or in shelters.
- They described "meetings to lay down some rules" creating order and a sense of community through self governance. They portrayed tent city as a place where "everybody looks after everybody".
- Another writer noted "In tent city: learned to share, developed trust, forged relations, grew community and became a family here" (13).
- The Christ Church community was initially supportive of the tent city community saying "Churches can speak to build better communities" (14) and hosted a Christmas dinner. However, this support was withdrawn with escalating criminalization of tent city residents.
- In August, 2016, an editorial by TAPS highlights the sense of community and belonging that led Super InTent City to a victory creating more shelter space, and more supportive housing initiatives then ever before.
- "Reflecting on years of inaction, we might reasonably presume that the government would not have responded without the action taken by the tent city people" (15).

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