

Is there community in encampments?

Background

Homelessness is rising in Canada and across the globe as economic and social inequity deepens (Bainbridge & Carrizales, [2017](#); Infrastructure Canada, [2024](#)). There are over 150 million people who are homeless worldwide (Farha, [2019](#)) and at least 235,000 individuals experience homelessness in Canada each year (Gaetz et al., [2013](#); Strobel et al., [2021](#)). Encampments are one of the most visible manifestations of homelessness. Encampments, sometimes also referred to as tent cities, are temporary structures occupied by unhoused individuals, often in urban spaces (Boucher et al., [2022](#); Farha & Schwan, [2020](#); Speer, [2017](#)). The size and nature of encampments varies widely, from large, organized spaces to a small group of people who mostly exist independently of one another. Encampments have become a focal point of discourse by the general public and decision makers, often centered on concerns around the use of public space (Robillard & Howells, [2023](#)). Health and safety risks for both encampment residents and the surrounding public drive public narratives about homelessness (Olson & Pauly, [2021](#)). Where access to housing and supports are woefully absent, responses to encampments commonly consist of sweeps that displace and criminalize residents (Boucher et al., [2022](#); Braimoh et al., [2023](#); Gordon & Byron, [2021](#); Herring et al., [2019](#)).

While encampments have existed for decades (Chan McNally, [2022](#); Speer, [2017](#)) the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated homelessness and unsheltered homelessness specifically. Unsheltered homelessness, comprising of people living and sleeping on streets, parks, in vehicles, abandoned buildings, encampments, and other outdoor locations, increased by 88% from 2018 to 2022 (Infrastructure Canada, [2024](#)). During the pandemic, encampments were a response to reduced shelter capacity and safe distancing practices (Allegrante & Sleet, [2021](#); Olson & Pauly, [2021](#)) and have come to be a viable living option for people who do not have access to safe, accessible, and permanent housing. Advocates recognize that encampments are not the solution to homelessness, but until such time as there are housing solutions to meet unhoused people's needs, encampments act as a means for people who are otherwise excluded from the housing continuum to assert their human right to housing (Farha & Schwan, [2020](#)). Despite the constant struggle to meet basic needs and the regular threat of sweeps and displacement, encampments allow unhoused people to meet a vital social need that is regularly denied to them in other settings. Public discourse often overlooks the fact that encampments not only meet a material need by way of a tent or structure but can also have immense social and psychological benefits. People who are homeless commonly face isolation and loneliness as a result of ongoing discrimination, exclusion, and negative stereotyping in public spaces (Boucher et al., [2022](#); Dej, [2020](#); Rokach, [2005](#), [2014](#); Sanders & Brown, [2015](#)). Encampments can offer a sense of stability and community, elements that are hard to come by when experiencing homelessness.

Purpose

The purpose of this brief is to examine the role of encampments in providing interpersonal connection and a sense of community for people who are unhoused. The findings from the research covered in this brief defy narratives from some concerned citizens and decision makers who situate encampments as an always and already dangerous and chaotic environment. In contrast to this narrative, research that prioritizes the lived expert voices of people who reside in encampments demonstrate that understandings of 'home' do not always correlate with a physical domestic structure, and instead are intimately tied with social relations and community that are key to a sense of belonging. We recognize that while encampments offer an opportunity for flourishing community, in some cases they can also be spaces of violence and harm. The same is true for people who reside in traditional homes, especially considering the rates of violence against women and gender diverse people (Sardinha et al., [2022](#)) and the exceptionally high rate of overdose in homes (Ministry of Mental Health and Addictions, [2019](#)). In this brief we do not shy away from this reality, but consider how encampments can offer a way to address harm and insecurity that prioritizes a personal sense of safety and community care. This brief identifies the ways in which encampments can offer a space of community and provide social connection and belonging for people who are unhoused.

Evidence from Existing Studies

Encampments are the result of human rights violations that deny people access to truly affordable housing that meets their needs. They are also an example of people asserting their human right to housing given the extremely limited options available to them (Farha & Schwan, [2020](#)). People's pathways into, and experiences of, homelessness vary and reflect an interplay of structural, systemic, and individual factors (Gaetz et al., [2017](#)). Many unhoused people struggle with physical, mental health, and substance use issues (Fitzpatrick, Bramley & Johnsen, [2013](#); Gaetz, [2010](#); Shariff et al., [2022](#); Zufferey, [2017](#)). These conditions can be causal to homelessness but are almost always made worse by the experience of homelessness (Gaetz et al., [2013](#)). Given the challenges that create vulnerability to homelessness, many people who are unhoused have small and fragmented social networks (Bower et al., [2018](#)). A breakdown of family relations, trauma, or interactions with the child welfare and justice system are systematic factors that create homelessness and simultaneously fracture social connection (Dej et al., [2020](#); Gaetz et al., [2016](#)). Adverse experiences such as victimization before or while homeless can also negatively impact an individual's ability to trust others and build connections (Kryda & Compton, [2009](#)). In addition, exclusionary laws (i.e. ticketing panhandling) and negative stereotypes isolate the homeless population from the rest of society (Eisenberg, [2017](#); O'Grady et al., [2013](#); Wolch et al., [2014](#)).

The range of factors that negatively impact people's housing stability and leave them at risk of homelessness simultaneously create the conditions for social disconnection and isolation. Strong connections to family and natural supports are well documented as a key to preventing homelessness and maintaining housing stability, especially for young people, but for many people experiencing homelessness it is the lack of a supportive family and network that precipitates homelessness (Borato et al., [2020](#); Schwan et al., [2018](#)). Even for people who have strong connections before becoming homeless, feelings of shame over their status as homeless can lead them to withdraw from support systems (Dej, [2020](#); DeOllos, [1997](#)). The exclusion and social isolation people experience while homeless often continues once they are housed,



with lived experts reporting ongoing loneliness, disconnection, and exclusion that increases their housing instability and risk of returning to homelessness (Dej et al., [2023](#); Kidd et al., [2016](#); Marshall et al., [2020](#); Perron, [2014](#); Thulien et al., [2018](#)).

Social relationships play an important role in determining someone's social, mental, and physical well-being (Holt-Lunstad, [2021](#); Wang et al., [2023](#)). For populations who are especially likely to experience isolation and loneliness, developing and maintaining social connections is of utmost importance. From an outside perspective, residing in an encampment may not seem like the best option compared to the shelter system or other forms of temporary housing. However, the effectiveness of encampments at building connection, support, and fostering a sense of belonging make it the more desirable option for some people who are homeless, especially given the lack of alternative options for permanent, accessible, and truly affordable housing (Cohen et al., [2019](#)). More recently, there has been a growing recognition of the social aspects that encampments can provide to this population.

Social connections

The sense of connection in encampments is in part a response to the disconnection embodied in the shelter system and broader community. Due to severe capacity limitations and the increasing complexity of need, emergency shelters are overwhelmed, which can create a challenging environment for people in distress or who have experienced trauma (Quirouette, [2016](#)). For equity deserving groups, such as women and gender diverse people, Indigenous people, people who identify as 2SLGBTQ+, and youth, shelter spaces that meet their needs may not exist in their community and/or may not be safe spaces (Abramovich, [2017](#); Anderson & Collins, [2014](#); Ecker, [2020](#); Schwan et al., [2021](#)). Shelters are not accessible to everyone; for example, given that most shelters are abstinence-based, people who use substances are not able to stay or risk being restricted from services (Kerman et al., [2022](#)). Likewise, the unpredictability of shelters, including limitations on the length of stay or daily concern that a bed may not be available that night, make shelters a risky or unreliable option (Cusack et al., [2021](#); Herring, [2014](#); Sereda, quoted in *Waterloo v. Persons Unnamed*, [2023](#); Olson & Pauly, [2023](#)). Most shelters have policies and rules that are designed to manage such a large group of people, but in doing so, can limit people's ability to maintain existing social connections and build new ones (Cohen et al., [2019](#); Loftus-Farren, [2011](#)). For example, few emergency shelters allow couples to stay together or pets to accompany people. The love and companionship offered by a partner or a beloved pet leave some people to choose staying in an encampment where they can remain together, rather than be separated in the shelter system (Howe & Easterbrook, [2018](#); Irvine, [2013](#); Kerman et al., [2019](#)). Research demonstrates that pets are non-judgmental and offer unconditional love to people experiencing homelessness, that in turn directly addresses loneliness and acts as a motivating force for individuals to maintain their health and well-being (Irvine, [2013](#); Rew, [2000](#)). Many people prioritize the sense of connection that comes from a partner or pet over shelter, which speaks to the power of belonging in people's lives.

Not only do encampments offer the opportunity to keep people together, they provide a practical source of mutual aid and resource sharing that is essential to surviving homelessness. Unlike most emergency shelters where there is a high rate of fluctuation in who resides there on any given night, the relative stability in people staying at an encampment creates the conditions where people get to know one another and often work together to meet their basic needs. It is common for people in encampments to share food, blankets, and tents with one another



(Boucher et al., [2022](#); Speer, [2017](#); Young et al., [2017](#)), as well as social supports, stories, and other critical features of community and culture (Mitchell & Selfridge, [2017](#)). Indeed, the Federal Housing Advocate's ([2024](#)) investigation of encampments found that, “established encampments have informal systems through which residents look out for each other. In other words, they are a community with a kind of safety net of their own” (p. 13). Some encampments with more formalized governance systems have rules around resource sharing, including obligations around cooking meals for the residents, as well as cleaning and security duties (Loftus-Farren, [2011](#); Speer, [2017](#), [2019](#); Young et al., [2017](#)). Sparks ([2016](#)) describes the high level of structure at an encampment in Seattle, where a system of voting, governance, and assigned tasks for encampment management provided residents with a sense of social cohesion, responsibility, and pride. More informally, Boucher et al. ([2022](#)) provide a detailed picture of how community organizing and mutual aid took shape as encampments grew during the COVID-19 pandemic, ensuring people had access to survival items, such as sleeping bags, food, and clothing, and provided support to maintain their physical and mental health. As one of the participants in their study noted: “We all know what everybody needs and get it done and that’s that. And we all go out for the day, hustle, come back and put it all in a pot, and pool it all together. ... It’s like a little village, you know? We all take care of each other” (Boucher et al., [2022](#), p.4). Not only does resource sharing support people to meet their immediate needs, research shows that it creates a sense of obligation and responsibility among encampment residents that builds social bonds and a sense of community (Loftus-Farren, [2011](#); Young et al., [2017](#)).

The most dominant theme across the research is that encampments offer a sense of community and belonging that is lacking in other living arrangements. Beyond meeting material needs, the psychological sense of community found in encampments is powerful and often overlooked among politicians and decision-makers (Young et al., [2017](#)). Research describes this sense of community as ‘community connectedness,’ ‘solidarity’ (Boucher et al., [2022](#)), ‘a larger collective’ (Sparks, [2016](#); Speer, [2017](#)), and as ‘a family’ (Loftus-Farren, [2011](#)). As expressed by an encampment resident, “You can remove tent city but you can’t remove this society” (quoted in Braimoh et al., [2023](#), p. 23). The creation of a street family is not new (Mosher, [2015](#); Smith, [2008](#)); connection and kinship are enhanced in encampments where people share space and are regularly in communication with one another (Blue Sky et al., [2022](#); Loftus-Farren, [2011](#)) – including through unhoused youth’s use of social media and other technologies that support connections (Selfridge, [2016](#); Selfridge & Mitchell, [2019](#)). The solidarity and connectedness found in encampments exists in direct opposition to the exclusion and stigmatization that unhoused people experience in public (Boucher et al., [2022](#); Dej, [2020](#)). Encampments offer a sense of home for people who have lost their familial home or who have not had a positive home life in the past. By describing encampments as home, residents position the space and people who make up the encampment as people with whom they rely on, care for, and offer a sense of comradery and safety (Speer, [2017](#)).

Safety

People who are unhoused lack benefits such as safety and privacy that people who are housed enjoy (Junejo et al., [2016](#); Skolnik, [2023](#)). Living life in public spaces increases the likelihood of criminal justice involvement for engaging in activities that are not illegal for people who have access to private space, such as urinating, consuming alcohol, or relaxing (Chesnay et al., [2013](#); Dej, [2020](#); Gaetz, [2010](#); O’Grady et al., [2013](#)). The criminalization of homelessness



(Aykanian & Fogel, [2019](#)) means that simply existing as someone who is homeless in public can mean a risk of being displaced, ticketed, or arrested (Gordon & Byron, [2021](#); Herring, [2014](#); Speer, [2019](#)) – reinforcing inequalities among impacted populations (Card et al., [2021](#)).

In focus: Connecting to land

For Indigenous Peoples, connection and belonging is at the heart of what it means to exist. Relationality is part of the human experience and an obligation to care for the world around us. For Indigenous Peoples, connection extends beyond people to also include land, plants, animals, water, and spirituality (Wilson, [2008](#)). Because of this deep connection to the world, the western definition of homelessness that focuses on a lack of a physical structure does not accurately capture Indigenous Peoples' experiences. Instead, Indigenous homelessness is defined as a loss of All My Relations – that is a loss of community, kinship, land, language, and culture (Thistle, [2017](#)). As Christensen ([2013](#)) describes, “Indigenous homelessness can be connected to a much more pervasive exclusion embodied in a kind of material and social ‘dis-belonging’ (p. 815). In this way, Indigenous people often feel a sense of home when they are on their land and connected to one another, even if they do not have a roof over their head. Encampments can offer a space for Indigenous people to be together and hold stewardship over their land. Evicting encampments where Indigenous people reside, then, acts as a continuation of colonial land dispossession, displacement, and disconnection (Braithwaite et al., [2023](#); Flynn et al., [2022](#)). The National Protocol for Homeless Encampments in Canada (Farha & Schwan, [2020](#)) identifies national and international human rights obligations that require governments to recognize the distinct rights and self-determination of Indigenous Peoples that includes not forcibly removing them from their lands and requiring meaningful consultation with Indigenous leaders in creating homelessness, encampment, and housing policies.

Not only does living in public and semi-public spaces increase unhoused people's risk of criminalization, so too does it make them more vulnerable to victimization. In fact, people who are homeless are more likely to be a victim of crime than they are to engage in criminal activity (Novac et al., [2007](#)). Being a victim of crime, and especially assault and abuse, is both a cause of homelessness and exacerbated by the conditions of homelessness (Asberg & Renk, [2015](#); Broll & Huey, [2020](#); Gaetz, [2009](#)). One study found that between 27 and 52% of unhoused individuals had been assaulted (physically or sexually) within the past year (Fazel, Geddes & Kushel, [2014](#)). Specific populations, including women, youth, and 2SLGBTQ+ people face a disproportionate risk of victimization than their housed counterparts and other people who are experiencing homelessness (Coolhart & Brown, [2017](#); Kerman et al., [2023](#); Kushel et al., [2003](#); Schwan et al. [2021](#)). Although encampments can be a site of violence and victimization, encampment residents consistently describe them as safer than alternative living arrangements (The Office of the Federal Housing Advocate, [2024](#)).

Encampments can act as sites of increased safety compared with other living spaces, such as emergency shelters or living outside alone. Whether due to organized security efforts by encampment residents (Sparks, [2016](#)) or informally through mutual aid, regular check-ins (Boucher et al. [2022](#)), and consistent access to outreach support (Herring, [2019](#)), encampments provide the number of people and consistency for relationship building necessary to create a sense of safety for residents (Junejo et al., [2016](#); Loftus-Farren, [2011](#)).



The mutual protection offered in encampments is described as safety in numbers, but more than that, the sense of safety goes hand in hand with being part of a community (Cohen et al., [2019](#)). In the Office of the Federal Housing Advocate's public engagement sessions on encampments, a service provider explained how encampment residents create safety for one another:

People look out for each other in encampments. This doesn't mean that conflict or challenges don't happen. Of course they do like in any communal living situation [...] People may watch over each other's belongings, pets, etc. Or also support each other if facing a physical threat. I have seen people break up disagreements and fights among other people in a respectful way. I have also seen people protecting a woman fleeing an abusive partner, by taking turns staying with her or near her tent." (as quoted in the Office of the Federal Housing Advocate, [2023](#), p. 20)

Many encampments build safety protocols and, "establish a care network outside of traditional systems" to provide as much safety as possible within the conditions of encampments, with a participant in the engagement session in Vancouver astutely noting, "Residents know each other better than people who live in a high-rise" (The Office of the Federal Housing Advocate, [2023](#), p. 20)

While the network of connection created in encampments can provide safety to many, it is important to recognize that they also leave some people vulnerable to violence. Women and gender-diverse people, as well as youth and people with disabilities, are at risk of harassment, violence, and sexual exploitation within encampments. This risk of violence and harm is not unique to encampments; unfortunately, it is a common occurrence for women and gender-diverse youth who experience homelessness in all its forms (Gordon et al., [2022](#); Schwan et al., [2021](#); Reid et al., [2021](#); Watson, [2016](#)), not only from intimate partners, but from others, suggesting that women and gender-diverse people are subject to multiple, co-existing threats (Riley et al., [2014](#)). While encampments can be a site for this violence, many women and gender-diverse encampment residents have been vocal that encampments ultimately make them safer than accessing shelter, most of which are co-ed, or returning to a violent relationship and home (The Office of the Federal Housing Advocate, [2023](#)). Because of the potential intermediary effect of encampments between women and perpetrators of violence, research shows that encampment sweeps and evictions remove systems of safety they have established and put them in increasingly unsafe situations and at greater risk of violence and harm (Flynn et al., [2022](#); The Office of the Federal Housing Advocate [2023](#), [2024](#)).

Safety for encampment residents also comes in the form of privacy. While community is built from being together, strong relationships come from having space to be alone and build relationships on their own terms rather than constantly having to share space with strangers. As described by Dej et al. ([2023](#)), most of the young people they spoke with who were transitioning from homelessness to housing were around people all the time, whether in transitional housing or with roommates. They described loneliness as not an absence of people, but a lack of strong, meaningful connections. As one participant noted in that study,

Most of us have a lot of people around us, which makes us feel... You can tell someone I am feeling lonely and they say oh go talk to this person or that person. But talking to those people is a distraction and only keeps you busy at that moment. If you feel like,



that connection, bond, it's not there... I think that is being lonely (Nadia, as quoted in Dej et al., 2023, p. 19)

The privacy afforded by encampments – that is, having their own tent that they can close at any time, provides a sense of safety that differs significantly from shelters, many of which are congregate spaces where many people sleep in the same space. Privacy allows encampment residents to address their physical and mental health concerns, to minimize the sleep deprivation that often results from staying in shelters or sleeping outside, and allows people to create a network of relationships organically and in a way that meets their needs, ultimately creating more satisfying and longer lasting connections (Cohen et al., 2019; Speer, 2017; Waterloo v. Persons Unnamed, 2023).

Stability

The ways in which encampments facilitate community and connection as described above are contingent upon the stability offered by encampments, in comparison to other living arrangements (Finnigan, 2021; Sparks, 2016). Stability looks like providing people with autonomy, access to resources, and the practical components that make surviving homelessness more bearable.

Encampments allow residents to exercise self-determination, especially compared with emergency shelters. Given the overwhelming number of people in need, shelters often must institute strict rules to manage people staying in these spaces (Flynn, 2024; Herring, 2014). This may include limitations on access to a bed, scheduled meal and leisure times, and specific appointments for showers, laundry facilities, and other daily activities (Dej, 2020; DeOllos, 1997). Encampments allow people to structure their day and meet their needs in a way that works for them. They can escape the crowd at any point, access their belongings throughout the day, and eat or sleep at a time that works for them (Junejo et al., 2016; Speer, 2019). Boucher et al. (2022) explains that in an encampment this flexibility is based on *relational autonomy*, which “highlights how people’s agency cannot be understood without considering their interdependence with other people and environments” (p. 2). Encampment residents’ autonomy is intimately tied with their collective efforts in that, “engaging in mutual support may be considered an act of exercising autonomy in a relational way, as well as a way in which marginalized people actively resist their isolating social environments” (Boucher et al., 2022, p. 2). In what may appear as a paradox, it is the connections and relationships developed in the encampment that creates the conditions for people to assert their independence and feel more control over their lives than in other settings.

Not only do encampment residents gain a sense of belonging from people they live with, outreach workers and service providers are also key to providing connection and a sense of acceptance (Dej et al., 2023). Living in an encampment means that providers know where to locate a resident so that they can check in and follow up on service provision, including medical appointments and medication, substance use support, housing and income access, managing paperwork and documentation, and support navigating institutions such as the child welfare or criminal justice systems (Cusack et al., 2021; Chan McNally, 2022). Encampments offer what Olson and Pauly (2023) describe as *precarious stability*, that is, physical and geographic stability of staying in one place that improves their “physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional health” (p. 131) but one that is under constant threat of being undermined by sweeps and eviction through trespass notices. As an encampment resident in Victoria, BC, described:



At tent city I realized that I need a solid foundation to organize other things from and not be stressed out—from there I can start working on my life and figuring it out. I have found this at tent city. I am noticing that am able to function better and keep better track of day-to-day appointments and to better organize my life in general. (ST24, as quoted in Olson & Pauly, [2022](#), p. 131).

The ability to connect with service providers over weeks or months means that encampment residents can meet needs beyond basic survival and address their overall well-being (Boucher et al., [2022](#); Olson & Pauly, [2023](#)). Conversely, access to services, belongings, and a place to stay is severely threatened when encampments are evicted. Evictions lead to isolation, a loss of connection to services and residents, threaten people’s physical and mental health, and often result in people losing their belongings that are essential to survival (Blomley et al., [2022](#); Boucher et al., [2022](#); Sereda, quoted in Waterloo v. Persons Unnamed, [2023](#)).

Case Study: In Search for a Home Amidst Denver’s Ban on Camping

Langegger & Koester ([2017](#)) investigate Denver, Colorado’s quality of life law that bans camping, “residing or dwelling temporarily in a place, with shelter, on any public or private property in the city.” In essence, the law requires unhoused people to ‘move along’ or find shelter. As a result, individuals residing within encampments are placed in a state of perpetual motion where they are unable to stay in a singular space long enough for the social production of ‘home’. A ‘home’ is intrinsically produced through one’s relations to people and place. Maintaining a permanent camp allows time for residents to attach meaning to their space. This includes a designated area to leave one’s belongings, decorate, and engage in routinized behaviours. One participant, in describing his night routine with his partner at their tent explains, “we go home and there’s a bed already set up and a place to rest and we have an iPad so we’ll watch movies at night” (p. 458). Laws that continually uproot individuals dislocate them from places attached with meaning. Therefore, participants emphasize that maintaining a permanent camp allows for the production of ‘home’.

Encampment residents identified autonomy, self-reliance, and interpersonal bonds as the characteristics of a home. These qualities are available in encampments but are often absent in shelters, where residents described being treated like children who must adhere to strict rules and regulations. In encampments, on the other hand, people exercised autonomy and self-reliance by arranging practical and decorative items, hosting friends, and cleaning and maintaining their site. From these actions, participants expressed they felt “attached to their personal histories and fully present in the here and now” (p.461). Encampment residents were able to develop interpersonal bonds through “proffered networks of aid, labor, sharing, and commiseration” (p.462). These insights demonstrate the importance of stability in the pursuit of a ‘home’ amidst anti-homeless management techniques.

Analyses from The Canadian Alliance for Social Connection and Health

Using data from the 2021 Canadian Social Connection Survey, we examined the social health needs of individuals who were now or previously unhoused. In the survey, 130 participants reported being currently unhoused or having had a history of being unhoused. In comparing these individuals to individuals without a history or current experience of being unhoused, the



unhoused individuals reported higher scores on the Everyday Discrimination Scale ($\beta = 0.675$, $SE = 0.184$, $p < 0.001$), greater loneliness ($\beta = 4.541$, $SE = 1.102$, $p < 0.001$), and lesser support from family ($\beta = -0.764$, $SE = 0.132$, $p < 0.001$), friends ($\beta = -0.679$, $SE = 0.120$, $p < 0.001$), and significant others ($\beta = -0.772$, $SE = 0.136$, $p < 0.001$). All models controlled for age, gender, ethnicity, and household income. These findings suggest that individuals with experiences of homelessness have elevated social health needs, and highlight the need for enhanced social and community supports within encampments and other housing systems.

Discussion

The existing evidence emphasizes the importance of social inclusion and community connection as pivotal in the lives of encampment residents. For people who are excluded from society, social connections, security, and stability, encampments can be a space of non-judgement, mutual care, and stability. The feeling of belonging and the creation of community has material, social, and psychological benefits, providing a sense of safety and security for many residents. Maslow's hierarchy of needs indicates that people will prioritize physiological needs (breathing, food, water, shelter, sleep, etc.) and when those needs are met they can address safety needs such as health, and then a sense of love and belonging (McLeod, 2024). Research on encampments indicates that the sense of belonging, friendship, and connection is so powerful and essential to human life that many encampment residents prioritize it over the limited shelter options available. A sense of belonging and meeting physiological needs are mutually reinforcing. The community created in many encampments provide trusting relationships and the care offered to one another ensures their survival in harsh and hostile conditions.

While encampments are not a substitute for permanent, truly affordable, and appropriate housing, until that housing is available to everyone encampments provide a much-needed community of care. Policy makers and service providers can learn valuable insights from how encampments are organized and operated, providing opportunities for organic community development, relationship building, radical acceptance, and a sense of responsibility over space and caring for others. Housing options that embody these attributes will not only meet Canada's human rights obligations; they will enhance stability by providing connection and belonging that everyone needs to not just survive, but thrive.

Conclusion

Based on the evidence summarized above, we recommend policies and practices that support the inclusion of unhoused populations, foster belonging within their communities, and respect their basic human rights.

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