

The eReview provides analysis on public policy relating to Canadian families and marriage. Below please find a commentary on recent research by the IMFC on homelessness and family contact.

Homelessness and family contact

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At times, the homeless are cited as a nuisance; alternatively, they become the temporary object of our seasonal charity. What might not be so readily apparent as we slosh through the slushy sidewalks downtown to grab a coffee or mail a letter is that people like the man huddled against the mailbox are members of a family. They are sons and daughters and sometimes—moms or dads.

The loss of hearth and home is a complex problem that the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada recently devoted time to researching. We wanted to know more about the relationship between those in need and their families. A recent survey by the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada of clients of the Ottawa Mission, a men's shelter, found that nearly 32 percent of respondents have regular weekly contact with immediate family. Despite the instability wrought by homelessness, these men were able to maintain family relationships.

The survey is a snapshot of family contact among those who use shelter services, and there is much more research to do. In fact, this is one of the most interesting points about our study: There is little Canadian data on homelessness and family contact, though on the surface, that may seem like a very simple connection to examine.



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Our survey shows some interesting results: of the 32 percent of respondents who have regular weekly contact with their immediate family, 75 percent were enrolled in an addiction recovery program at the Ottawa Mission. While the association between clients in addiction programs and contact with family is not clear, it could be that such programs offer stability, making it easier for clients to connect with family. Conversely, it could be that existing family relationship influence a client's decision to seek treatment.



One thing known for certain is that family is an important social safety net for those at risk for becoming homeless. Sociologists suggest relationships that provide emotional and financial support may reduce the length of time someone experiences homelessness. Other studies have concluded that family is an effective social institution in protecting its members from experiencing homelessness.

Though it might not be our first thought when someone asks for spare change, the reality of homelessness reverberates through families. About half of the Ottawa Mission clients who were surveyed report they are fathers and of those, 37 percent remain in contact with their children.

Of course it is true that 65 percent of survey respondents said they have little or no contact with family. A number of studies show that a family history of dysfunction including substance abuse, poverty, institutionalization and abandonment is prevalent among those who experience homelessness. It's important to note family dysfunction does not cause homelessness, but the association is too prevalent to ignore.

There are many reasons people experience homelessness and family is only one variable. But for many of those in need, the absence of family does not go unnoticed. Workers at the Ottawa Mission will tell you that clients in addiction counselling often think about and talk about their relationships with family. Exploring the role of family in the lives of those dependent on shelter services should help us to understand those who are homeless a bit better, and inform how we relate to those who all too often simply blend into the cityscape. It's not a simple problem, and there are no simple answers. But overcoming the fact that there is so little Canadian literature on the topic of homelessness and family contact is one step in the right direction.

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