

Kingston's Housing Crisis and COVID-19: A Matter of Life and Death

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Background photo credit: Aaron Bailey, photo essay, "Empty for the wrong reasons: A visual archive of Kingston's COVID-19 encampment evictions". 11 December 2020, *The Kingstonist*.

In March of 2020, COVID-19 changed the way that municipal officials, police officers, and public health authorities responded to issues of housing and homelessness in Kingston. This change prompted us, Sophie and Angela, to write a paper about what we saw happening.

*That paper was recently published in the *The Annual Review of Interdisciplinary Justice Research*. But while our paper is largely theoretical, this summary highlights the practical aspects of our argument.*

SO, WHAT ARE WE SAYING?

- 1.** Efforts to promote health and safety of unhoused people in Kingston during the COVID-19 pandemic have been ineffective.
- 2.** Many of these efforts—including surveillance, displacement, and the removal of necessary services (e.g. washrooms, clean water, waste management)—have exacerbated unhoused people's risk of suffering, illness, and death.
- 3.** Given that these efforts are not having their intended effect, the City of Kingston must change its strategies to:
 - a) Protect unhoused people in Kingston from further harm; and
 - b) Advance unhoused people's health and sense of community.
- 4.** In order to ensure that changes actually benefit unhoused people in Kingston, *un- and under-housed Kingston residents must be centred in our conversations and actions.*

WHY ARE WE SAYING THAT?

Because we are **observing** . . .

. . . potentially fatal patterns of willful neglect in the City of Kingston's response to the ongoing homelessness crisis (see "Key Observations").

Because we are **thinking** . . .

. . . about what *potential fatality* means, particularly when that potential is rooted in neglect of the people to whom government is responsible (see "Key Concepts and Thoughts").

Because we are **listening** . . .

. . . to our neighbours—especially those who are unhoused.

SO, WHAT ARE WE ACTUALLY ASKING FOR?

SHORT-TERM

- Stop surveilling unhoused people because they are unhoused.
- Stop displacing unhoused people from public spaces.
- Prioritize the construction of safe, affordable (i.e. welfare-rate), permanent, and habitable housing in ongoing and upcoming development opportunities.
- Given the dynamic nature of this unfolding COVID-19 situation, when in doubt about what to do, consult unhoused people themselves, housing organizers, and other allies.

LONG-TERM

- Actually build the safe, affordable, and habitable housing in Kingston that the City of Kingston has presumably been aiming to build for over 30 years.

KEY OBSERVATIONS

1990s

Kingston residents begin to struggle to access to safe, affordable, and habitable housing (hereafter “housing”) [1]

2000s

Kingston residents continue to struggle to access housing [2]

2010s

Kingston residents *still* struggle to access housing [3, 4]

March 26, 2020

City of Kingston (hereafter “the City”) declares a state of emergency in response to COVID-19, advising residents to “stay home” [5]

Late March 2020

In From the Cold (i.e. Kingston’s only shelter for adults) closes

April 2020 - now

City staff, police officers, and public health workers have pursued different strategies to support the health and safety of unhoused people in Kingston, including:

- Surveilling unhoused people
- Displacing unhoused people from tent encampments and other gatherings in public space
- Removing public washrooms, water, and other necessary services from unhoused people's tent encampments and other gatherings in public space

Taking a closer look at events from April 2020 to now...

April 2

City announces upcoming opening of physical distancing shelter [6]

Early April

Unhoused Kingston residents form a small tent encampment of 3-6 people in City Market Square

April 10	City officials evict campers from Springer Market Square, offering alternatives, including both the physical distancing shelter and Belle Park
May 22	City announces eviction date of June 5, 2020 for campers in Belle Park [7]
May 25	Derek Ochej, Clerk for the City's Homelessness and Housing Advisory Committee (HHAC), explains that the next HHAC meeting (which had been scheduled for June 11) had been cancelled due to "a lack of time-sensitive business" [8]
June 2	City extends Belle Park campers' eviction date to July 7, 2020 [9]
July 7	City "clarifies" that July 7, 2020 is not an eviction date for Belle Park campers [10]
July 8	City sets eviction date of July 31, 2020 for Belle Park campers [11]
mid-July	Integrated Care Hub opens at Artillery Park [12]
July 31	City begins removing essential services (e.g. washrooms, running water, garbage collection, and electricity) from Belle Park [13]
August	City staff and other officials begin removing campers from Belle Park, instructing them to move to alternatives such as the physical distancing shelter (a 1.5+ hour long walk away from Belle Park) and/or the Integrated Care Hub at Artillery Park (which was <i>not</i> housing) [14]
September 1	City officials and police forcibly remove campers from Belle Park [15, 16, 17]
November 1	City removes unhoused people from the Integrated Care Hub at Artillery Park, instructing them to move to the Care Hub's new location at 661 Montreal Street—approximately 400 metres from Belle Park (and despite the fact that it was not ready for inhabitation)

KEY CONCEPTS AND THOUGHTS

Death politics

- In Kingston, the combined crises of homelessness and COVID-19 have led to a kind of **death politics**, whereby government action is taken to prioritize life for some people (i.e. housed people, who, in general, are also white and middle- or upper-class), but at the expense of other people (i.e. unhoused people).

Potential fatality

- The death politics that unhoused people in Kingston face are shaped by the threat of death (i.e., **potential fatality**): “people’s lives are not fostered (but are sustained), [and] their deaths are not assured (but are advanced)” (Lachapelle and May, p. 322).

Care can be carceral.

- The administration of care is not always so different from the administration of prisons.
- Governments in Canada and beyond often use public health rhetoric to control unhoused people—which is always harmful; but in Kingston, a city well known as “the prison capital of Canada,” these efforts to control unhoused people, many of whom have incarceration experience, are particularly harmful.

Tent encampments are not the problem.

- “The encampment at Belle Park reflects unhoused people’s innovative and practical response to the impossible situation with which they are faced in this era of housing insecurity and COVID-19” (Lachapelle and May, p. 337).

BUT WAIT, WHERE IS THE EVIDENCE?

- We wrote this summary based off of an academic paper in which our evidence is largely theoretical—because we actually don’t need more empirical evidence. We already know the problem.

- Our goal in writing that paper (and in writing this summary now) is not to gather more empirical evidence.
- Instead, our goal was then and is now to ground in the present-day Kingston context what we already know to be empirically true, including the following interconnected facts:
 - Private property structures society;
 - Homelessness kills;
 - Poverty kills
- **Un- and under-housed people in Kingston have already identified the problems. We—and you, City officials—must listen.**

“The [City] hasn’t gone about this in a straightforward way.”

– Nathan Rosevear, former Belle Park resident



Photo credit: Meghan Balogh, *The Whig-Standard*, “The people here are good people” 2 June 2020, <https://www.thewhig.com/news/local-news/the-people-here-are-good-people>



Photo credit: screenshot from video featured in Global News, “City of Kingston seeks to relocate Belle Park homeless camp as June 5th move-out date issued,” article written by Kraig Krause, published 27 May 2020, <https://globalnews.ca/news/6994312/belle-park-homeless-encampment-move-out-kingston/>

“[The encampment at Belle Park] is the most stable place we’ve had in the last six months or year, these three months here, because I’ve had the experience of being bounced around the system [...] Why can’t the program be transitional? You find me a place, make sure it’s wheelchair accessible and we’ll work together to make it my home? I don’t want to leave in a year.”

– Peter Hern, former Belle Park resident

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