



## **INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT: A STUDY OF HOMELESSNESS IN THE CITY OF TORONTO**

**Danielle Koyama & Peter A Dunn**

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### **Abstract**

*In 1998, homelessness in Canada was declared a national disaster by the Big City Mayors Caucus, the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, the City of Toronto, and over 400 community organizations. Since then, the situation has become worse. This study found that the conditions of homeless people in Toronto fit the definition of internally displaced persons delineated by the United Nations. As a result, they fall under United Nations human rights legislation and may qualify for international support. The research utilized data triangulation by analyzing information from thirty-five recent research studies based in Toronto, collecting information from representatives of fifteen key organizations providing services to people who are homeless in Toronto and undertaking in-depth qualitative interviews of fourteen homeless people from a diversity of backgrounds. The paper concludes with policy recommendations for social change anchored in a human rights framework.*

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**Keywords:** homelessness, internal displacement, internally displaced persons, human rights

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## **Introduction**

The purpose of this research study was to determine whether homeless people in Toronto, Ontario, may be considered “internally displaced persons” (IDPs) according to the United Nation’s definition. The research examined the experiences of displaced persons in other parts of the world and compared these to the experiences of homeless people in the City of Toronto. Hulchanski and Shapcott (2004) argue that many people in Canada are being “dehoused” by dramatic cutbacks to the housing and social welfare systems. The recent economic recession has exacerbated this situation. In this paper, internal displacement will be considered as a way of viewing homelessness, its causes and solutions.

The Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement are consistent with international human rights law and international humanitarian law. They provide a normative framework to address the specific needs of internally displaced persons worldwide by identifying rights and guarantees relevant to their protection. In addition, this framework sets out the responsibilities of all parties nationally and internationally in meeting these needs. In this study the concept of internal displacement and the Guiding Principles are examined in the context of internal displacement in Toronto.

People often think of internally displaced persons as living primarily in Third World countries. However, a growing number of individuals and organizations (Baraka & Williams, 2006; Editors of the Harvard Educational Review, 2004; Kirgis, 2005; Institute for Southern Studies, 2008) have argued that there have been “internally displaced persons” in North America resulting from natural disasters such as hurricane Katrina. In addition, Haledon. & Rauch (2004) found from their research that there are thousands of what they consider as “internally displaced persons” resulting from inner city violence in the United States and other “human-made disasters.” In addition, Fynn (2011) argues that Aboriginal peoples have been forcibly displaced in Canada through colonizing policies of “relocation.”

The United Nations investigated the situation of people who are homeless in Canada in 2007 (United Nations, 2009) and the United States in 2009 (Center on Housing Rights and Evictions, 2010). These investigations found significant violations of human rights related to ensuring adequate housing for all. The United Nations (2009) raised concerns about Canada’s lack of a national housing strategy and its inadequate response to individuals who are homeless. In this light, the following study will examine how people who are homeless in Toronto may be considered as internally displaced persons.

The definition of “homelessness” used in this study includes individuals who spend most of their income on rent, live in overcrowded substandard conditions, stay in emergency shelters, or live on the street (City of Toronto, 2009; Hulchanski, Campsie, Chau, Hwang & Paradis, 2009; Layton & Shapcott, 2008). The definition of “internally displaced persons” is based on the research of United Nations Secretary-General on Internally Displaced Persons (Deng 1993,

1998, 1999). According to the United Nations, internally displaced persons are defined as “persons or groups of persons who have been forced to flee or to leave their homes or places of residence to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized state border as have refugees” (Deng, 1999, p. 484).

According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (2010), there are nearly 27.1 million people world-wide who have been uprooted within their own country. Public attention has often focused on refugees who cross international borders after fleeing their homes. Internally displaced persons have received far less attention although their number is nearly twice as high as those of refugees. It will be argued that people who are homeless in Toronto have been displaced from their housing as a result of dramatic reductions in social housing programs and social assistance; increased evictions; cuts to tenant protection and rent controls; as well as gentrification and conversion of rental housing.

Internal displacement occurs in three categories, governed by different international laws:

a) situations of tensions, disturbances, or natural or human-made disasters where human rights laws are applicable; b) situations of non-international armed conflicts governed by humanitarian and human rights guarantees; and c) situations of inter-state conflict where the provisions of humanitarian law are primary (Deng, 1998). Homelessness in Toronto can be considered a serious human-made disaster and would therefore be recognized in situation “a”---human-made disasters where human rights laws are applicable.

There are many causes of Internally Displaced Persons in Third World countries including natural disasters such as hurricanes, earthquakes and tsunamis as well as armed conflicts, violence, forced relocations, violations of human rights, discrimination and other human-made disasters (International Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2011). Many people who became homeless in Toronto also experienced violations of their human rights as officially documented by the United Nations (2009). Plus, many have become homeless because of discrimination and other human-made causes. However, the specific causes of homelessness in Toronto may be different than the situation of IDPs in many Third World countries. Some of these causes include a private housing market that is geared to profits, rather than human needs; dramatic cuts to social housing and social assistance; curtailing laws to protect tenants; pushing poor people out of neighbourhoods through gentrification and conversion to condominiums; and human factors such as partner assault and abuse of youth which drive many individuals on to the streets (Hulchanski and Shapcott, 2004). What is important according to the United Nation’s Guiding Principles of Internal Displacement (Deng, 1999) and the work of the International Displacement Monitoring Centre (2011) is that a large number of people are displaced involuntarily from their homes and communities. They are deprived of essential protection mechanisms, such as community networks, access to many services, and livelihoods. They suffer severe distress, are unsafe and face conditions which make them particularly vulnerable. Plus, the movement of displaced persons occurs within national boundaries. In addition, the State has a major role to play in significantly reducing or eliminating internal displacement. Sometimes people only focus upon IDPs that have resulted from armed conflicts; however, this paper uses a more inclusive definition which is consistent with the Guiding Principles of Internal Displacement (International Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2011).

In 1992, the United Nations appointed Francis Deng to research the causes and conditions of displaced persons who are uprooted within their country. He was the Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General on Internally Displaced Persons until 2004. Since that time, the U.N. Secretary-General has appointed representatives to continue to investigate and deal with the issues of internally displaced persons (Office of the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights, 2011).

Deng's (1993) extensive research found that displacement regularly breaks up families, cuts social and cultural ties, terminates stable employment, disrupts educational opportunities, limits access to vital necessities and increases vulnerability to violence. He found that 27 conditions or common situations were evident in situations of internal displacement (see Table 1).

**TABLE 1**  
**Characteristics and Experiences of Internally Displaced Persons<sup>a</sup>**

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- 1) Discriminatory treatment
- 2) Cruel, degrading and inhumane treatment
- 3) Acts of violence
- 4) Gender-specific violence
- 5) Contemporary forms of slavery, such as sexual exploitation
- 6) Unfair detention and arrest
- 7) Restrictions on freedom of movement
- 8) Return or relocation to dangerous conditions
- 9) Deprivation of subsistence needs (food, water and clothing)
- 10) Lack of adequate safe housing or shelter
- 11) Lack of facilities and supports for individuals with disabilities
- 12) Inadequate health care and sanitation
- 13) Inability to retain personal property
- 14) Inability to retain personal identification
- 15) Barriers to maintaining the integrity of the family
- 16) Lack of opportunity for employment and economic activities
- 17) Lack of opportunity for education and skills training
- 18) Lack of opportunity for participation in community affairs
- 19) Lack of opportunity for participation in government and public affairs
- 20) Enforced disappearances
- 21) Lack of searches for missing and dead persons
- 22) Use of land mines and like devices
- 23) Hostage taking and use as human shields in conflicts
- 24) Forcible recruitment into the armed forces
- 25) Cannot leave country and seek asylum
- 26) Obstacles to practicing one's religion
- 27) Barriers to maintaining linguistic identity

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a United Nations - Mr. Francis M. Deng (1995)

### **A Human-Made Disaster and Internal Displacement in Toronto**

The growing problem of homelessness in Canada has reached such crisis proportions that it is now recognized as a national disaster (Toronto Disaster Relief Committee, 2003a, 2008).

About one in five Canadians (1.5 million households) are in need of core housing that is adequate, suitable, and affordable as defined by the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation. Put another way, about 250,000 to three million people experienced homelessness in Canada yearly, the number depends upon how homelessness is defined. However, unlike in many countries, the vast majority of Canadians are well housed (Hulchanski & Shapcott, 2004, Shapcott, 2005, Wellesley Institute, 2010). Despite having the ability to respond to the suffering of those who are homeless, the governments continue to pursue policies and make decisions that continue to cause not alleviate this suffering.

In Toronto, one of Canada's richest cities, the disaster is alarming. Approximately, 552,000 people, or a quarter of Toronto's population, live in poverty as defined by Statistics Canada. Nearly 168,000 people are homeless or marginally housed (individuals living in precarious, substandard conditions, living with relatives or friends, living in cheap hotels and motels, or rooming houses) and at risk of being homeless. Approximately 71,000 households are on social housing waiting lists (Shapcott, 2005, 2007). The shelters are not only full but dangerously overcrowded, and many people are left to live outside year round. About 32,000 different people use shelters in Toronto, including 6,000 children. Homelessness is increasingly visible on the streets, and the City has seen a dramatic increase in the need for emergency shelters, especially among families with children (Shapcott, 2007; Street Health, 2007). At least 1,000 people are forced to live outside on any given night (Shapcott, 2005).

The Toronto Disaster Relief Committee (2003a, 2008) explains that if a community of 32,000 lost its housing and was at physical risk because of a natural catastrophe, governments would declare the situation a disaster and promote relief. While natural disasters can have a devastating impact upon far more people and occur very suddenly, the homelessness problem in Toronto remains very significant. Throughout Canada there are over a quarter of a million individuals who are without a home. They face similar issues to other internally displaced individuals---namely, hunger, injury, disease, generalized violence, rape, death and trauma on an ongoing basis (Porter, 2004).

In 1998, the City of Toronto passed a motion declaring homelessness a national disaster. The Centre for Research on Epidemiology of Disasters (2003) states that "a disaster is a situation or event which overwhelms local capacity, necessitating a request to a national or international level for external assistance." Local politicians in Toronto called for assistance from the provincial and federal governments for the thousands of people who have been made homeless in the City by social and political causes and are experiencing great suffering which they themselves cannot alleviate (Hulchanski & Shapcott, 2004). For example, the dramatic deterioration of health is evident as Toronto faces outbreaks of tuberculosis in its shelters. An alarming number of people have died as a result of homelessness. Two to four homeless people are dying every week in the City of Toronto alone (Hwang, 2000, 2006).

Hulchanski, Campsie, Chau, Hwang & Paradis (2009) suggest that broad social and economic forces as well as social policy decisions made by all levels of government have created the context of mass homelessness in Canada. People have been internally displaced from their homes because of structural factors (Hulchanski & Shapcott, 2004; Hulchanski, 2009). Shifts in the economy as a result of globalization have changed the labour market, depriving more and more people of economic subsistence and the ability to find adequate housing (City of Toronto, 2003; Hulchanski, Campsie, Chau, Hwang & Paradis, 2009). Despite this situation

the State has commonly intervened in not only housing but in other areas such as health care and pensions and in the Canadian context the State has the resources to do so – what is missing is the political will.

The current trends toward homelessness started to build in the mid-1980s and 1990s. Hulchanski and Shapcott (2004) explain that the federal government had made a significant commitment to social housing during the previous two decades. Social housing increased in Canada from 12,000 units in 1963 to about 500,000 units by 1983. In his research Hulchanski (2009) found that there was not a severe incidence of homelessness in Canada in the 1980s, when the federal government was funding significant amounts of social housing as well as ensuring more adequate social assistance and supports.

The free trade agreements (i.e. Free Trade Agreement and the North American Free Trade Agreement) in the 1990s, and related shifts in philosophy and policy, changed the housing situation considerably. During those years, the federal neo-liberal political agenda turned to harmonizing labour laws and social programs with those in the United States; cutting debt; reducing government expenditures to make Canadian industries more competitive; eliminating national standards; and downloading services to the provinces and municipalities (Teeples, 2000; Teeples & McBride 2011). Layton and Shapcott (2008) explain that in the 1980s and 1990s, it was thought that the State should move out of the affordable-housing field and leave housing to the private sector. Thus in 1993, the Mulroney government withdrew federal funding for all affordable housing and hiked insurance premiums for the construction of rental housing. In 1996, the Chretien government began downloading housing responsibilities to the provinces. At the same time, Ontario Premier Mike Harris cancelled some 17,000 units of affordable housing in Ontario. The existing affordable rental housing began to disappear as rent control was removed by the provincial government in 1998 (Shapcott, 2005). Decent affordable housing is now out of reach for many (Shapcott, 2009). The Wellesley Institute (2010) estimates that there is a deficit of over 300,000 affordable housing units in Canada.

Adding to the problem in Ontario and Toronto is the erosion of tenants' rights. In the mid 1990s, the Ontario government weakened landlord tenant legislation making it much easier to evict tenants. Since then, about 15,000 people have been evicted from their homes per year in Toronto (Porter, 2004). At the same time, rents have been increasing much more quickly than employment earnings, as has the cost of food. Plus, the overall supply of rental housing has decreased significantly as rental housing is converted to expensive condominiums. Roughly, 97% of all new housing construction in Toronto is for home ownership and the population is growing rapidly. In the early 1990s roughly 2,100 affordable housing units were built in Toronto each year. In the last decade only 650 affordable (30% of income for rent) units were created in Toronto. Unfortunately, Toronto failed to reach its own subsidized housing targets (over 209,000 units in ten years)—targets which they continued to cut (Shapcott, 2007).

Other cuts compounded the problems caused by a growing shortage of affordable housing. In 1995, the Ontario Conservative government cut social assistance by 22% and froze the minimum wage. These changes had a serious negative impact on the ability of people to find affordable housing in Toronto. It has been found that roughly 67,000 families were pushed out of their rental housing because of the cuts to social assistance in Ontario (Street Health,

2007). Since this time the Liberal Government has only increased social assistance by a modest amount. Now on average, the cost of rental housing in Toronto for a single parent receiving social assistance is 73% more than she or he receives for the shelter component of his or her benefits (City of Toronto, 2009). Many end up on the streets because they cannot afford to pay rent in Toronto (Toronto Disaster Relief Committee, 2008).

Anucha (2005) emphasizes that homelessness is the result of multiple factors including the actions of the State, the private market, civil society. Nevertheless, the United Nations emphasizes that it is ultimately the responsibility of the State to ensure that this type of human-made disaster is rectified, whether it is in a developing or wealthy nation (Porter, 2004).

As a result of advocacy efforts, there have been in recent years some positive announcements to deal with homelessness and the lack of affordable housing. In 2005, the federal government introduced the National Homelessness Initiative, the Federal-Provincial Housing Framework and a budgetary commitment to fund more affordable units (National Housing and Homelessness Network, 2005). The Ontario Liberal Government provided some limited new funds for social housing. At the same time, the City of Toronto introduced some new homelessness initiatives. However, Shapcott (2005, 2009) warns that these government initiatives have not yet resulted in any significant number of social housing units actually being created, nor has the federal government made a long-term commitment to restore funding for affordable housing. The cost of housing has continued to increase dramatically. Furthermore, the current major recession has had a devastating impact upon people who are homeless or one step away from being homeless and upon the funding for support services for them (Wellesley Institute, 2010).

Since the qualitative interviews of this study were undertaken, the City of Toronto (2009) has emphasized a new program aimed at reducing the number of people who are “homeless on the street” through their Housing First model, including their Streets to Homes program. However, German (2008) explains that the Streets to Home program is just a neoliberal way of getting people off the street and not providing any new funding for social housing. In fact, the very limited number of shelter beds have been cut by over 300 in Toronto. Many of the housing units obtained through Streets to Homes are in high crime areas away from services. Plus, the City of Toronto’s shift to “redevelopment” of social housing has led to a major loss of subsidized housing units. Also, the gentrification of neighbourhoods with more condo developments have dehousing many families. Charges laid by police increased by 288% from 2004 to 2007 under the Safe Street Act. People who are homeless are being criminalized, and the few who obtain housing do so in small, substandard housing units often in high crime areas. And finally, the new mayor of Toronto, elected in 2010, is dramatically cutting back the budgets for social housing and homelessness initiatives.

Recent research studies found that people who are homeless on the streets in Toronto continue to confront most of the same issues as in the past decade (Gaetz, S., O’Grady, B., & Buccieri, K., 2010; Sakamoto, I., Khandor, E., Chapra, A., Hendrickson, T., Maher, J., Roche, B., & Chin, M., 2008; Shapcott, M., 2009a; Shout Clinic, 2010; Toronto Disaster Relief Committee (TDRC), 2008; Toronto Public Health, 2009; Wellesley Institute, 2010). In 2009 (TDRC), Bruce McLeod, the former Moderator of the United Church of Canada, added the 600<sup>th</sup>

reported name to the memorial which was established to remember homeless people who had died in Toronto since 2003.

Many people assume that individuals who are homeless in Canada are primarily single male adults and/or people with mental health issues who were de-institutionalized without adequate supports (Hulchanski & Shapcot, 2004). However, research has found that there is a wide diversity of individuals who are homeless in Toronto in terms of gender, age, family status, race, First Nations peoples, sexual orientation and ability (Chi, Redelmeirer, Tolomiezenko, Kliss & Kwang, 2009; Miles, 2006; Ryerson Caribbean Research Centre, 2005; Sakamoto, Khandor, Chapra, Hendrick, Maher, Roche & Chin, 2008). The fastest growing homeless group in Canada is women and children because of domestic assaults, increasing numbers of lone mothers and massive cuts to social assistance (Caragata, 2006). About 13% of all admissions to family shelters in Toronto are the result of women's shelters being full (City of Toronto, 2009). Many youth are homeless because of physical and sexual abuse in their families, including Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer (LGBTQ) youth who face multiple forms of oppressions (Shout Clinic, 2006). Caragata (2006) points out that homelessness is not colour blind. According to the United Way of Greater Toronto (2004), racialized community members are at least two to three times more likely to be poor than the rest of the Toronto population. The Colour of Poverty Campaign (2007) explains that ethno-racial minority families make up 59% of poor families in Toronto. Individual and systemic racism has resulted in many being homeless. Street Health (2007) found in their survey that 37% of homeless people in Toronto were non-Caucasian. For example, roughly, 15% of all people who are homeless in Toronto are Aboriginal peoples, and they constitute about 29% of people sleeping outdoors. This situation has resulted from colonization, racism, lack of adequate culturally responsive supports as well as inadequate affordable housing and low rates of social assistance (City of Toronto, 2009). In addition, many new immigrants are homeless in Toronto, including refugee claimants who often have few resources and no place to stay in Canada (City of Toronto, 2009).

### **Theoretical context**

The current research utilizes a human rights theoretical framework. This perspective emphasizes that governments have the responsibility to ensure basic human rights and social justice for all citizens. A human rights approach was chosen since it fits closely with the United Nations' concepts and legislation related to internally displaced persons. This framework challenges oppressive conditions and guarantees that human rights, including adequate and affordable housing, are met by the State. King (2003) argues that housing is a fundamental right which allows humans to flourish. This framework views internal displacement as deriving from the existing economic structure, globalization and social policies (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2010).

According to Hulchanski and Leckie (2000), the United Nations Charter in 1945 envisioned a world, which promoted human rights, fundamental freedoms and a higher living standard for all. A rights approach ensures that people do not have to depend upon charity. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 included Article 25 as an international agreement that all people have a right to adequate housing, food, clothing, medical care, social services, etc. The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which came into effect in 1976, included an article on the right to adequate housing. After the Year of Shelter for the Homeless in 1987, the United Nations developed a Global Strategy to ensure the right to



affordable housing. As part of this strategy, the United Nations stressed that the private sector cannot guarantee housing for all and that all nations, rich and poor, must promote legislative rights and implement housing programs to eradicate homelessness. The Government of Canada signed all of these international conventions.

The United Nations has emphasized human rights to adequate and affordable housing in its analysis, recommendations and legislation related to internal displacement. Deng (1999) stressed that individuals who are internally displaced should have a right to housing and other human necessities under international agreements.

### **Literature review**

This study represents the first research to systematically investigate whether the situation of homeless people in Toronto is a large human-made disaster within a national boundary and comparable to the 27 conditions of vulnerability confronting internally displaced people in other countries around the world, and thus could fall under the United Nations definition of internally displaced persons (Deng, 1998). Writers such as Hulchanski and Leckie (2000) have explained that homelessness can be considered a human rights' violation and that people are being internally displaced. This study builds upon these ideas, provides a concrete way of applying these concepts, and offers a pragmatic tool for social change.

Thirty-five quantitative and/or qualitative research studies which dealt with the conditions of homeless people in Toronto during the last ten years were analyzed in terms of content and themes. These studies were identified from searches of three literature databases, a review of the literature in this field by the Community Social Planning Council of Toronto (Glober, 2004) and through discussions with key community agencies dealing with these issues in Toronto.

These studies describe discriminatory, cruel and degrading treatment experienced by homeless people in Toronto. Homeless people are harassed by police, and often arrested and imprisoned (Committee to Stop Targeted Policing (CTSTP), 2000; Gaetz, Ogrady & Buccieri 2010; Hulchanski, et. al. 2009; Miles, 2006; TDRC, 2003a; Toronto Youth Cabinet, 2005). According to the literature, the prevalence of violence is very high for all people experiencing homelessness (Daiski 2007; Hwang, 2000; TDRC, 2001). Approximately 76% of youth in Toronto who are homeless have been the victim of violent crime on the street (Gaetz, O'Grady, Buccieri, 2010). The rate of violence against homeless women in Toronto is particularly dramatic. Roughly 86% of female street youth have been victims of crime (Gaetz, O'Grady, Buccieri, 2010). Most women who are homeless are afraid of sleeping at night on the street or in shelters because of sexual and physical violence (Cheung & Hwang, 2004; City of Toronto, 2009; Miles, 2006).

The health conditions of people who are homeless in Toronto are deplorable. According to one report (Cheung & Hwang, 2004), homeless women are dying at 10 times the rate of other women in Toronto between the ages of 18 to 44. According to the report by Street Health (2007, p. 4), "...more than half of the homeless people interviewed reported that they had experienced serious depression; 1 in 10 had attempted suicide; 1 in 5 women had been raped or sexually assaulted; three quarters of the respondents had at least one chronic or ongoing health problem. In addition, homeless people were 20 times as likely to have epilepsy, 29 times as likely to have Hepatitis C, twice as likely to have diabetes".

Individuals who are homeless in Toronto confront the following problems: contemporary forms of slavery (Gaetz, O'Grady, & Buccieri, 2010; Miles, 2006; ); unfair detention and arrest (TDRC, 2000; Toronto Youth Cabinet, 2005; Zakrisson, Hamel, Hwang, 2004; Shout Clinic, 2010); restrictions on movement and being returned to dangerous conditions (CTSTP, 2000; Shout Clinic 2010; Gaetz, Tarasuk, Dachner & Kirpatrick 2006; TDRC, 2000); lack of access to adequate food, water and clothing (City of Toronto, 2004; Daily Bread Food Bank, 2004; Daiski 2007; Hwang, 2000; Street Health, 2007; Tarasuk, Dachner, & Jinguang 2005; TDRC, 2000); lack of adequate safe housing and shelters, including for individuals with disabilities (City of Toronto, 2003; Daily Bread Food Bank, 2004; Daiski 2007; NHHN, 2001; TDRC, 2005, 2008; Toronto Drop-in Network, 2008); poor sanitation (Daiski 2007; Gallant et al., 2004; Hwang 2001, 2006; Shout Clinic 2010; Street Health, 2007; Toronto Public Health, 2009; TDRC, 2003a); a lack of security for personal property (Shout, 2010; Street Health, 2007; TDRC, 2000); inability to retain personal identification (City of Toronto, 2006, 2009; Shout, 2010; Street Health, 2007); difficulty in maintaining the family unit (Children's Aid Society of Toronto, 2001; City of Toronto, 2003, 2009; Ryerson Caribbean Research Centre, 2005); lack of opportunities for employment, education and skills training (CTSTP, 2000; Ryerson Caribbean Research Centre, 2005; Toronto Youth Cabinet, 2005); and barriers to participation in community affairs and government (City of Toronto, 2009; Gallant al., 2004; Shout Clinic, 2006; Street Health 2007).

## **Method**

This study was grounded in the principles of social action research, which emphasize collaboration and social change (Stinger, 2007). The purpose of social action research is to work with oppressed groups to promote social justice. The research was endorsed by the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee (TRDC), an advocacy group working to end homelessness. Members of the TDRC collaborated with the researcher and have used the research findings to lobby for positive social change in the community. Homeless people were paid for their participation in this research. They assisted throughout the research process. This research was reviewed and given ethical clearance from Wilfrid Laurier University Ethics Committee.

The research was guided by the following research questions: Can homeless people in Toronto be considered internally displaced by the United Nations definition? If so, what kinds of issues do they face, and how do these experiences compare to those of other internally displaced persons as documented by the United Nations?

Multiple research methods were employed to provide cross-data validity checks. An extensive academic literature search was conducted using over thirty-five studies about homelessness in Toronto. A content analysis was carried out on this research.

In-depth, qualitative interviews were used to study the specific experiences of homelessness in Toronto. This method was used in order to understand how individuals experienced their situation. Maximum variation sampling was used in the qualitative research (Gibich, 2007). Participants were contacted through gathering places in the homeless community such as encampments, drop-ins and shelters and other service agencies. A total of fourteen individuals were interviewed with primarily standardized open-ended questions. Participants were provided with an information letter: request to participate and then an interview consent form with the option of maintaining anonymity. The demographic breakdown of the participants included seven men, six women and one individual who was

transgendered; eleven adults and three youths; eleven Caucasian individuals, one Afro-Canadian and two Aboriginal people; five living primarily on the street, five in shelters and four in both locations; nine were single, three were in a relationship as a couple and two lived with their children.

A survey of frontline workers was conducted to supplement the data collected in the qualitative interviews as a relatively quick way to determine how frontline workers perceived the issues. The survey included both closed and open-ended questions. The key organizations which provide services to people experiencing homelessness in Toronto were identified through directories of agencies in Toronto and by experts in the field. Surveys were distributed to one frontline worker in each of these twenty organizations. A total of fifteen surveys were completed and returned (a 75% response rate). Participants included shelter and drop-in workers, AIDS outreach staff, mobile van services workers, street nurses, community outreach workers, volunteers in family shelters, community mental health staff, and harm reduction workers.

The content analysis of existing research was organized by themes. The results of the qualitative interviews were transcribed and coded with the use of sensitizing concepts (Cresswell, 2007). The analysis of the interviews of key respondents identified key patterns in the data. The quantitative data collected in the surveys from the closed questions were analyzed using SPSS Windows. All of these results were organized and analyzed in relation to the concepts of internal displacement as identified by Deng (1995, 1998).

## **Results**

The issues facing people who are homeless in Toronto were found to be consistent with the issues facing other internally displaced persons. Of the twenty-seven issues identified by the UN as common in displacement (Deng, 1995, 1998), nineteen were found exactly the same as internally displaced persons in Toronto (see numbers 1-19 in Table 1). Most of the other issues were not relevant because homeless people in Toronto do not experience the dangers of armed conflict; rather, they confront a human-made disaster. The following are the results of the in-depth qualitative interviews of people who were homeless and the survey of service providers.

According to the United Nations, internally displaced persons are “particularly exposed and vulnerable to discriminatory treatment” (Deng, 1995, 1998). In the current study, all of the individuals experiencing homelessness reported experiencing some type of discriminatory treatment. As one homeless person put it,

*They immediately associate homelessness with stupidity. Your opinion isn't worth anything and there are a lot of intelligent people down here. We have some pretty interesting conversations here. We talk about current events and we're as well informed, I think, as anyone.*

Fourteen of the fifteen frontline workers surveyed stated that the homeless people they work with face discriminatory treatment. The most common forms include verbal abuse from the general public, discriminatory policing practices, exclusion or restriction from public spaces, and lack of access to basic subsistence needs. All research participants reported that homeless people are frequently subjected to cruel, degrading and inhumane treatment. For example, individuals who are transgendered are often excluded or restricted from accessing

emergency services such as shelters. People of colour face racism from both staff and the general public. One Aboriginal man reported the following:

*They call me "Native piece of shit," saying "why don't you go back to your own country." Who are they to tell me to go back to my own country? I am in my country. I'm born and raised here and my ancestors were here for generations.*

According to the United Nations, internally displaced persons are frequently at risk from acts of violence (Deng, 1995, 1998). The lives and personal safety of homeless people in Toronto are also at serious risk. Every homeless person interviewed in the study reported either witnessing or experiencing some type of violence. Here is one account:

*I was under a bridge. There was a bunch of us. We built houses...and we were all sleeping there and people throw rocks, bottles and cans at us. We had our houses burnt...underneath the bridge. At one point I was living at City Hall, Nathan Phillips Square, and a guy was beaten to death. They found him dead.*

Ten out of fourteen participants had been victims of violence themselves. All frontline workers reported that homeless people are at serious risk of violence. One worker stated,

*Homeless people are vulnerable to violence by virtue of living outdoors and in shelters – mainly due to overcrowding, chronic stress and desperation.... It is really scary out there...*

The United Nations recognizes that displaced women are at heightened risk for violence. The prevalence of gender-specific violence against homeless women in Toronto is horrifying. One hundred percent of frontline workers surveyed reported that the homeless women they work with experience gender-specific violence. One worker describes the situation succinctly:

*The streets are extremely violent – especially for women. Almost all the women we work with who live on the streets or in hostels have been assaulted.*

All seven women in the study reported having been victims of violence while homeless. One reports,

*Three weeks after we came into the (shelter)...I was raped by my next door neighbours in one of the (family shelters) that we were staying in, by him and a friend of his...*

Eighty percent of frontline workers surveyed reported that the individuals they work with face contemporary forms of slavery: homeless women and youth often had to trade sex for shelter, food, protection and other survival needs.

The United Nations has found that "internally displaced persons face arrest and detention, often without judicial warrant or other legal safeguards, and sometimes as a means of collective punishment" (Deng, 1995, 1998). Homeless people, whether sleeping in shelters or outside, are frequent targets of the police. One describes a typical encounter as follows:

*You can't sleep here. You've got to move on.... I had to rest. I was told (by police) if I was there when he came back, I'd be sleeping in "other quarters."*

With a shortage of shelter space and intolerable conditions inside the shelters, people forced onto the streets often face arrest by police. Half of the interview participants reported facing detention or arrest for sleeping outside.

Internally displaced persons experience restrictions on their freedom of movement and often face forced eviction, further displacement and “relocation to places with conditions dangerous to their safety and/or health” (Deng, 1995, 1998). Frontline workers in the study indicated that people who are homeless in Toronto have very little freedom of movement. All of the homeless participants have been forced to move at some point while homeless. Many have even been encouraged to leave the city. Emergency *Out of the Cold* programs, operating at different locations every night during the winter, cause forced migrations all over the city. People wait in long lines for a space to sleep. Homeless people, especially those with compromised immune systems, are also constantly forced into dangerous conditions. People in overcrowded shelters live with the threat of contracting tuberculosis and other infectious diseases

Many of Toronto’s emergency shelters do not meet even the United Nations standards for refugee camps. At some locations, three people are forced to sleep in areas UN guidelines describe as suitable for one. Substandard conditions in Toronto shelters have been exposed by the release of a secret video documenting severe overcrowding, lack of privacy and violations of health and safety standards. The video shows more than 100 bodies lined up, side by side, with less than a foot of space between them (Toronto Disaster Relief Committee, 2005). Some shelters have one toilet for every 50 people, a shower for every 60, or no showers at all. Ventilation is generally poor. With an inadequate supply of shelters and dangerous conditions within them, many people are “forced to sleep outside on grates, in alleyways, parks and ravines, in polluted sites, dangerous squats, or in places without heat, hydro, running water or toilets.” The issue of forced relocation is particularly evident in the case of the former Tent City, a homeless encampment on Toronto’s waterfront. Without warning and with no plan for proper relocation, this community of homeless people was forcibly evicted. Fortunately, political advocacy resulted in a limited rent subsidy program to help many obtain private-sector housing. However, police continue to remove people from places parks, railroad areas, and other places where they are staying.

The United Nations reported that “internally displaced persons in many cases are deprived of, and/or denied safe access to, one or more of the following essentials for a minimum standard of living: sufficient food, water, clothing, housing, health care and sanitation. Such essentials are necessary for an adequate standard of living” (Deng, 1995, 1998). Homeless people in the city of Toronto are denied an adequate standard of living. A homeless interviewee describes his feelings this way:

*You can't go to your fridge for a glass of milk, you can't sit in front of your TV... it's difficult at times to be – I don't know how to put it. The only word I can think of is to be a soldier out there because sometimes you just feel like giving up. You just feel like what in hell is the sense of going on. You feel like you are beating your head against the wall. You're not getting your basic needs met.*

According to the study, homeless people are deprived access to adequate and nutritious food. They reported the quality of food they receive is generally very poor. Individuals also face difficulties in accessing safe water and sanitation as well as basic clothing, especially season-specific clothing:

*Winter's getting close and we haven't got winter jackets yet...Right now I'm wearing shoes and it's cold out there and I've got to get some boots. Once your feet get cold, you're in trouble.*

Homeless people are deprived of the basic right to housing. Here is one person's account of the available housing in Toronto:

*The room is small or it's a dive or a pig st...If you were to stick four pigs in that room even for a couple of hours and come back, they'd be dead...that's how bad it is. Housing is virtually unavailable. If there's affordable housing around...it's not livable.*

The participants in the study experienced major difficulty accessing housing. Many had been looking for safe affordable housing for several years. High rents and a severe shortage of affordable rental and social housing were identified as major barriers. Without access to safe housing, their ability to meet other basic needs is severely impaired. Individuals with disabilities had the additional problem of finding accessible housing. Most shelters in Toronto are not equipped to accommodate people with physical disabilities or mental health concerns.

The United Nations states that, "one very serious consequence of internal displacement is exhaustion and illness" (Deng, 1995, 1998). Homeless people in Toronto experience serious health concerns resulting from homelessness, as in this account:

*It's going to take six months of recuperation at least before I can even basically walk on my leg again. I haven't got that six months right now that I can sit at home and more or less put my feet up. I have nowhere to put my feet up. I had frost bite on my feet last winter. I lost a toe this year. More shelter spaces are needed because people are dying out there. Right now, a friend of mine is in Riverdale Hospital dying of tuberculosis because of the life out here.*

Thirteen of the fourteen homeless people in the study reported poor health. Lack of sleep, forced migration, lack of adequate food, and risky conditions on the streets and in shelters were reported to contribute to feelings of fatigue and exhaustion. Half of the homeless people interviewed reported that the chronic stress of homelessness had a significant negative impact on their mental health, a situation often compounded for families. This person describes the stress of being unable to provide for the family:

*You know there is time when I just feel like committing suicide, I'd jump in front of a subway you know or streetcar or do something. It's very, very stressful. I wanted to get my family out of this situation so the stress just built up and built up because I'm trying to find a place and they always turn me down ...*

Approximately 93% of frontline workers surveyed said that people who are homeless experience problems addressing health needs, including

*poor access to materials to carry out health care interventions (meds, supplies, crutches, assistive devices), and poor ability to follow special diets. Shelters often refuse people with disabilities because they are ill-equipped to deal with them.*

According to the United Nations, internally displaced persons regularly lose much of their property, including personal papers and documentation (Deng, 1995, 1998). According to

participants, homeless people are unable to protect their personal property and have no safe storage for their belongings.

*Everything you own, you can ask any of the homeless people around here... everything they own they carry in their bag. There is my stuff right there. That's everything I own right there.*

All of the people interviewed, with one exception, had lost their identification or had it stolen. The lack of proper ID was reported as a barrier to accessing health care, social assistance and, in some cases, emergency shelters.

Internal displacement often means the separation of families and communities (Deng, 1998). The study indicates that the lack of adequate housing and stressful conditions in shelters lead to the separation of homeless families in Toronto. A homeless parent says,

*My children I used to have when I had a home... now I'm unable to take visitation with my kids because I have nowhere to take them.*

The opportunity for education, skills training, employment or other economic activities contribute to a sense of dignity and independence (Deng, 1995, 1998). These opportunities are severely limited by homelessness.

*They figure that if you don't have an address and you're homeless, then you probably aren't trustworthy and you're going to last until the first pay-cheque and then they're not going to see you again the next day.*

Barriers to employment identified in the research include the absence of a stable home, discrimination, not having an address, telephone or transportation, health issues, shelter restrictions, and conditions associated with living outside. The ability to rebuild self-reliance is compromised by the daily struggle for survival. The attempt to access food, sanitation facilities and limited shelter space is very time consuming, especially without transportation. As a result of this daily struggle, homeless people are prevented from taking advantage of education and job skills training. Conditions on the street and in shelters make it hard for youth to complete their education.

Participation in community and government affairs has been identified as particularly important for internally displaced persons (Deng, 1995, 1998). Homeless people in Toronto are often marginalized from society, and one describes the social stigma this way:

*...They think they are better than us, right? We're just out there surviving like anybody else does. Just because we don't have a roof over our heads doesn't mean that we are not like you.*

Eighty-six percent of homeless people interviewed reported feeling severely isolated from the larger community. Furthermore, their daily struggle for survival limits their ability to participate in government or public affairs. Most homeless people in the study felt they had little or no voice. Only two people reported participating in traditional electoral politics. Nevertheless, some were involved in public protests and other forms of political dissent activity.

Since none of the participants were recent immigrants to Canada, linguistic barriers were not an issue for them. However, previous research indicates that an increasing number of refugees and new immigrants are ending up homeless and in the hostel system in Toronto (Chiu, Redelmeirer, Tolomiezenko, Kliss & Kwang, 2009; Ryerson Caribbean Research Centre, 2005; Sakamoto, Khandor, Chapra, Hendrick, Maher, Roche & Chin, 2008). Few staff can speak languages other than English and French. Obstacles to practicing one's own religion were also not found to be a major issue, although few shelters allowed for a diversity of spiritual practices or food considerations.

## **Discussion**

The research findings from all the sources of data indicate that homeless people in Toronto share the experiences of vulnerability of other internally displaced persons as defined by the United Nations. The United Nations document Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement identifies the laws, rights and guarantees for the protection and assistance of individuals during displacement. These principles stress that whether people are facing one or more of these conditions, the responsibility for assistance rests first and foremost with national governments. If the country is unable or unwilling to meet the minimum standards required by human rights laws, then the United Nations recognizes the right of displaced persons to receive international assistance from aid organizations working with the international community and the United Nations (Deng, 1995, Deng & Cohen, 2008).

Homelessness in Canada has been widely recognized as a human-made and human rights disaster in which individuals are displaced from their homes because of conditions such as inadequate income supports, lack of tenant protection, condominium conversions, tenant evictions and insufficient affordable housing. The Government of Canada is currently failing to meet its obligations under international law and the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, despite the fact that Canada has signed several international covenants guaranteeing human rights, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Deng, 1998).

The displacement in Toronto does not occur in the context of a developing nation. The federal, provincial, territorial and municipal governments have significant resources to address the needs of homelessness in their jurisdiction, but their response has been shamefully inadequate. The Guiding Principles of Internal Displacement can be used as a new tool by social advocates to appeal to the United Nations for assistance and apply public pressure on the Canadian government.

Internal displacement in Toronto is not the result of a sudden massive catastrophic natural disaster, nor the horrors of civil war. The problems of homelessness in Toronto are to a large extent the result of a number of structural causes. The solutions to these problems require major systems changes based upon human rights and social justice.

Internal displacement occurs not only in developing countries, but also in Western industrialized nations (Baraka & Williams, 2006; Editors of the Harvard Educational Review, 2004; Hagedorn. & Rauch, 2004; Kirgis, 2005; Institute for Southern Studies, 2008). Homelessness in Toronto has been declared a human-made disaster and fits the United Nations definition of internal displacement. A sizeable number of people have been internally displaced because of economic and social policies. Plus, the conditions of homeless people in



Toronto are similar to many of the conditions defining internally displaced people which Deng (1998) identified in his research.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

Although the United Nations holds national governments ultimately accountable for the conditions of internally displaced persons, homelessness in Toronto requires comprehensive and coordinated responses from all levels of government, with a central role for the federal government. Governments must respond to the long-term housing, income, and social support needs of homeless people as well as their short-term needs for survival. Hulchanski (2009) notes that homelessness is not a complex problem. He believes that we know the causes and solutions of homelessness in Canada. We need to ensure the political will to respond in a more concerted manner. The federal government needs to be involved again in the social housing field and ensure adequate housing for all. The government must return to the previous practice of actually building substantial numbers of housing units in order to meet the need across the country. The most common solution called for by participants in the study was the construction of more affordable housing.

The Government of Canada must ensure that displaced persons have access to basic human rights and subsistence needs. To facilitate access, the federal government should implement the One Percent Housing Solution (Toronto Disaster Relief Committee, 2003b, 2008). This solution calls for a comprehensive national housing strategy requiring new units, rehabilitation of substandard and abandoned housing, rent supplements to help low-income households, supportive housing, and emergency relief measures, including temporary shelter, for those already homeless. This approach would involve the commitment of an additional 1% of the total annual federal budget. The One Percent Housing Solution means spending an additional 2 billion dollars annually on new, affordable, non-profit social housing. The Wellesley Institute (2010) explains that the current housing crisis is the result of the federal government's dramatic reduction in funding for social housing. They call for a strong national housing plan including creating 600,000 new affordable housing units by 2020 through cost-share agreements; repairing 200,000 low to moderate income homes; and provide housing allowances for 1.5 million households. At the same time, the federal government must ensure that all people can access adequate income and social support programs including Employment Insurance and pensions as well as others.

The Government of the Province of Ontario must also adopt the One Percent Housing Solution (Toronto Disaster Relief Committee, 2003b, 2008), which would involve spending significantly more on new social housing annually; reinstating rent controls and controls on the demolition and conversion of affordable rental housing; replacing the "Tenant Protection Act" with legislation that protects tenants' security; restoring the special diet allowance; raising the rates of social assistance, disability supports to above the poverty line; indexing all social assistance benefits for inflation; adjusting the shelter component to actual shelter costs; repealing the "Safe Street Act," which criminalizes panhandling; and creating a long-term, adequate income support system which values human rights.

In the short term, the City of Toronto must immediately create at least an additional 1000 shelter beds to reduce overcrowding, violence, and disease transmission; improve shelter conditions and ensure that they meet the United Nations standards for refugee camps; equip shelters to support individuals with disabilities, compromised immune systems and

substance use issues; and provide increased funding for emergency services, including food, clothing and footwear. The City of Toronto also has a lead role to play in delivering federally and provincially funded housing programs. Furthermore, The Toronto Public Health Department must ensure access to safe water and sanitation facilities for individuals who are homeless. Finally, The Toronto Police Services Board must direct the Chief of Police to end targeted policing practices and stop removing displaced persons from public areas.

All levels of government must increase support for non-profit community organizations to assist homeless people. Non-profit organizations should pressure Canadian governments to observe the United Nations Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement and promote the specific steps outlined to protect internally displaced persons.

Should the Canadian governments remain unwilling to respond to the current crisis of displacement in Toronto, the situation may call for an appeal to the United Nations and the international community to impress upon Canadian authorities their responsibility to meet the minimum standards required by international law. In the meantime, community organizations will continue the struggle to obtain basic resources from the government, so that people who are homeless can survive.

Unfortunately, the issue of homelessness is not confined to Toronto, but is widespread throughout Canada. There are populations of internally displaced homeless people in most large and medium sized cities in the country. The magnitude of this issue requires a shift from patchwork remedies based upon inadequate and stigmatizing services to comprehensive and meaningful social change, stressing human rights principles and social justice for all.

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**TABLE 1**  
**Characteristics and Experiences of Internally Displaced Persons<sup>a</sup>**

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- 1) Discriminatory treatment
- 2) Cruel, degrading and inhumane treatment
- 3) Acts of violence
- 4) Gender-specific violence
- 5) Contemporary forms of slavery, such as sexual exploitation
- 6) Unfair detention and arrest
- 7) Restrictions on freedom of movement
- 8) Return or relocation to dangerous conditions
- 9) Deprivation of subsistence needs (food, water and clothing)
- 10) Lack of adequate safe housing or shelter
- 11) Lack of facilities and supports for individuals with disabilities
- 12) Inadequate health care and sanitation
- 13) Inability to retain personal property
- 14) Inability to retain personal identification
- 15) Barriers to maintaining the integrity of the family
- 16) Lack of opportunity for employment and economic activities
- 17) Lack of opportunity for education and skills training
- 18) Lack of opportunity for participation in community affairs
- 19) Lack of opportunity for participation in government and public affairs
- 20) Enforced disappearances
- 21) Lack of searches for missing and dead persons
- 22) Use of land mines and like devices
- 23) Hostage taking and use as human shields in conflicts
- 24) Forcible recruitment into the armed forces
- 25) Cannot leave country and seek asylum
- 26) Obstacles to practicing one's religion
- 27) Barriers to maintaining linguistic identity

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a United Nations - Mr. Francis M. Deng (1995)