

11-1-2020

Canadian mayors respond to Tent Cities: The old bums rush or a new script for homeless populations?

Dani Coffey
Western University

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Canadian mayors respond to Tent Cities:
The old bums rush or a new script for homeless populations?

Subject Key Words: Tent city, social construction, Narrative Policy Framework, homelessness,
urban mayors

Geographical Key Words: Vancouver, Abbotsford

MPA Research Report

Submitted to:

The Local Government Program
Department of Political Science
Western University

Dani Coffey
November, 2020

Abstract

This paper seeks to examine how Canadian urban mayors respond, in the media, to homeless encampments in their communities. A qualitative content analysis of news articles involving tent cities and the current mayors of two Census Metropolitan Areas (CMAs) in British Columbia is completed. Social constructions of the homeless population will be considered through the coding of media “frames.” Through the integration of frames with the Narrative Policy Framework, the interplay between social constructions and housing policy solutions generated at the local level will be explored.

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Introduction

The presence of homeless encampments - popularly dubbed “tent cities” in the news media -has been steadily increasing in North America over the past two decades (NLCHP, 2017). While the potential causes for this increase are multifaceted and proposed solutions often beyond the fiscal realities of local government (e.g. additional social housing stock, transitional housing, rent supplements), the fact remains that poverty manifests itself spatially. Mayors across Canada have to respond to the presence of tent cities in their communities; deciding whether to sanction or remove encampments, how to assist the homeless, how to fund any assistance, how to respond to other citizens’ concerns, and whether or how to lobby other levels of government.

Mayors have not been absent from the rhetoric around housing and homelessness. This dates back to 1998 when the Big City Mayors group, led by Mel Lastman, declared homelessness an ‘unnatural disaster’ (Smith, 2020). Twenty years ago, the first annual report Card on Homelessness for the city of Toronto – presented by the Mayor’s Homelessness Action Task Force – criticized a number of federal and provincial policies that continue to be recognized today as structural reasons for deep poverty (Hulchanski, 2007). They include: transferring responsibility for the building of affordable housing to the private sector, a reduction of social assistance, Tenant Protection Act changes, and ‘a continuing serious lack of community-based mental health supports for people who have been discharged from institutions’ (City of Toronto, 2000). As the Federal government retreated from social housing, provinces and municipalities were left with increasing responsibilities without the corresponding financial resources.

Beginning in the 1950s, the provision of housing for low income families was facilitated by the federal government. However, during the late 1980s the federal government began to

withdraw funding and by 1993, no new social housing was being funded. Administrative responsibility for existing units was transferred to the provinces in 1999. All but three provinces (Alberta, Quebec, and PEI) experienced downloading of administrative and funding roles from the federal government. However only Ontario subsequently downloaded fiscal and administrative roles to local governments who have had difficulty funding the maintenance of current social housing stock (AMO, 2019). In addition to reducing funding capacity for social housing across Canada, a federal withdraw from the portfolio meant there was no unified way to track the development of social housing. The Housing Services Corporation, a non-profit created when Ontario downloaded social housing costs to municipalities, notes the following:

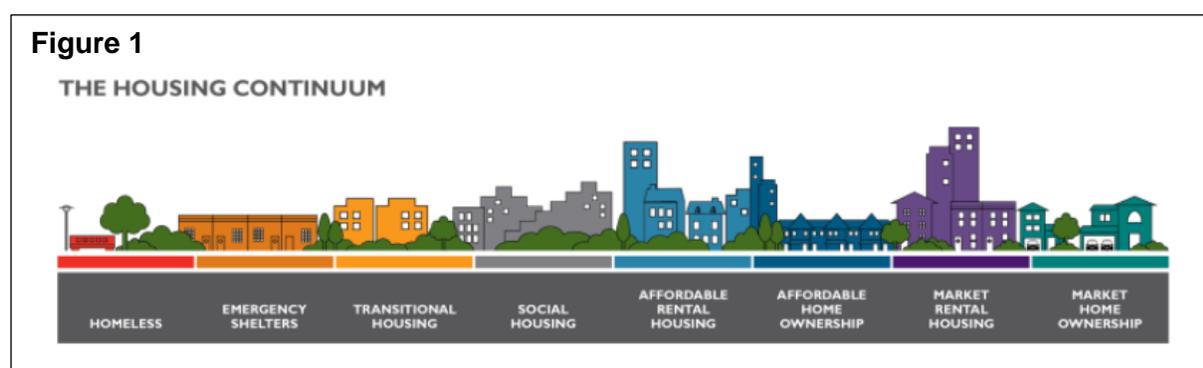
Since devolution, data on social and affordable housing in Canada has grown increasingly fragmented...Provinces and territories (P/Ts) have developed their own data collection and administration approaches. This makes sense as they are ultimately in charge but there is no national requirement for P/Ts to report to the public in a standardized way (Housing Services Corporation, p. 5).

Through the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM), the Big City Mayors Caucus (BCMC) continues to lobby other levels of government on housing issues. They presented 'Ten principles for a transformed housing system' in 2017 when the Federal Liberals released their National Housing Strategy after almost two decades of disengagement from the social housing portfolio (FCM, 2017). FCM states that "local governments are on the front lines of the [housing] affordability crisis and the growing disconnect between rents, home prices, and incomes" (2019). Additional research to examine the influence of the Big City Mayors caucus on federal housing policy would provide insight into the effectiveness of this advocacy work, however, the purpose of this paper won't be to focus on the formal policy statements of the caucus but rather to explore the media's reflection of how urban mayors respond to homeless encampments in their communities.

The reason for this approach is that housing policy addresses a spectrum of housing situations and their attendant populations. In their response to the federal National Housing

Strategy, the BCMC prioritized infrastructure funding for the remaining social housing stock administered by municipalities and a “mixed-income” approach to future development (FCM, 2017). The one recommendation directly relating to homelessness called for enhanced support to the federal-municipal Homelessness Partnering Strategy that would ‘empower communities to fund initiatives that reflect local realities’ (FCM, 2017, p 14). How those initiatives may create large-scale housing opportunities for complex-needs populations like the homeless is less clear. Some researchers suggest that much of Canada’s housing policy concerns itself with creating more opportunities for those who can afford market or near-market conditions (Hulchanski, 2007).

The Canada Mortgage Housing Corporation (CMHC) presents housing as a continuum (Figure 1) – with homelessness on one end of the spectrum and market home ownership on the other.



CMHC recognizes that ‘not everyone has the financial means to access or compete in the housing market,’ however it also highlights that its policies have assisted the almost 80% of Canadians who do access market-rate housing. These interventions, in contrast to those that affect those on the vulnerable side of the spectrum, are what David Hulchanski refers to as ‘Canada’s dual housing policy:’

This dualism means that there are two separate parts to Canada’s housing system, a primary and a secondary one, each with its own distinct and unequal range of government activities and subsidies – and each, therefore, with separate policy

trajectories....The primary part consists of about 80 percent of households, including most owners and those tenants who live in the higher end of the private rental market. It also includes households in the co-operative housing sector and a few who live in non-profit and public housing. These households have secure tenure in good-quality housing appropriate to their needs and at a price they can afford. The secondary part consists of everyone else, including tenants in the lower half of the rental market (where housing quality is low), residents of poor-quality and poorly managed subsidized housing, and rural and impoverished owners (2007, p. 6).

Following Hulchanski's logic, a third set of policies could be determined to exist for those on the very far end of the spectrum – those in temporary housing that provides physical and/or psychological supports, those relying on emergency shelters, and those without any sanctioned shelter. While CMHC's continuum suggests a person may work through the various stages of housing, that they are interrelated with the ultimate goal of market ownership, Hulchanski advises that certain housing sectors have 'separate policy trajectories' and activities in one area don't necessarily affect conditions in another (2007). These distinctions are important when it comes to parsing the housing policies presented by elected officials.

Housing policy for homeless persons requires unique government interventions. Solutions directed at other areas of the housing spectrum will not necessarily alleviate need for those without shelter. Back in their municipalities, mayors are often stymied for solutions to encampments. The situation can be polarizing, with high media exposure that captures a mayor's interaction with the various stakeholders and shifting dynamics of occupied public space. Through their response to tent cities, mayors reflect a policy position on housing options for the homeless. They indicate to the public, and other levels of government, their understanding of extreme poverty's contributing factors, its implications for cities, and possible solutions. They have an opportunity to influence public opinion and the housing policy process.

Public opinion and social constructions of homeless populations, presented via the media, can also influence mayors. The language and sentiment associated with tent city news coverage is available for an integrated analysis with how mayors respond homeless encampments. As Schneider and Ingram note:

The actual social constructions of target groups, as well as how widely shared the constructions are, are matters for empirical analysis. Social constructions of target populations are measurable, empirical, phenomena. Data can be generated by the study of texts, such as legislative histories, statutes, guidelines, speeches, media coverage, and analysis of the symbols contained therein (p.3).

This research paper completes a social construction analysis by selecting “frames” that are associated with homelessness and coding news articles for their frequency and context. The Narrative Policy Framework is then employed to consider how urban mayors navigate social constructions to present palatable policy solutions to the public. The goal is to draw realistic conclusions regarding the interplay between social constructions of homeless populations and the housing policy positions of urban Canadian mayors (Bengtsson, 2016).

Literature Review

The following sections will provide background information on the emergence of tent cities in a North American context. It will also discuss how the social construction of homeless populations affect policy decisions related to encampments. Finally, the role of the media as both communicator and influencer of policy is examined.

In their introduction to *Tent City U.S.A: The Growth of America’s Homeless Encampments and How Communities are Responding*, the National Law Centre on Homelessness & Poverty (NLCHP) provides emerging trends around tent cities in the U.S. The data collected is primarily quantitative and is generated from 1600 news reports published between 2007 and 2017. The report analyzed articles as well as information from paid search engines to determine certain facts about homeless encampments: they are growing, they are everywhere, they are becoming semi-permanent features of cities, and most are not sanctioned (p. 7-8).

The number of unique media reports of tent cities during the past decade in the U.S. has increased over 1000 percent. An initial 19 encampments were reported in 2007 rising to

274 reported in 2017. Researchers note that increases continued after the Great Recession of 2008 was declared over (p.7). Homeless encampments can be found in every state across America, this suggests that cities responding to encampments are demographically diverse and vary in community characteristics (population, median income, etc.).

Residents of encampments in both the U.S. and Canada are also demographically diverse. In *The State of Homeless in Canada 2013*, Gaetz et al. advise that while nearly half (47.5%) of Canada's homeless are single adult males, youth make up 20%, aboriginal people are overrepresented, and 'there is some evidence that family homelessness is a growing problem in Canada' (p.8).

There is a lack of systematic research on the prevalence of tent cities across Canada, however, some news media acknowledge the issue as a national one. The Globe and Mail recognized that while British Columbia has some of the most politicized tent city battles – with top courts weighing in – cities in all provinces across the country contend with the issue of visible homelessness (Stueck, 2019).

Tent cities typically require a response from local government as the occupation of public space begins to conflict with the goals or expectations of other populations. This can include surrounding businesses and residents who view the presence of encampments as interfering with their safety, enjoyment, or economic potential. It can include developers and governments themselves when economic or political gains are being sought through the transformation or restoration of occupied spaces. Finally, it can include tent city residents, homeless advocates and, most recently, health administrators who make appeals on humanitarian or public health grounds for alternative dwelling spaces.

When responding to homeless encampments, Schneider and Ingram suggest that political actors will consider the social construction of this target groups. Their research, along

with problem framing literature, has implications for both the articulation of policy beliefs and the implementation of housing solutions at the local level.

Social Construction and Problem Framing

In their article *Social Construction of Target Populations: Implications for Politics and Policy*, Schneider and Ingram advise politicians are both influenced by and help facilitate the social construction of groups to which they direct policy. The perception of correctly proportioned beneficial (or punitive) policy to address recognized social problems assists politicians with re-election (p. 3). Presumably to assist in directing limited resources, societies create constructs of who deserves what. The following definition of social construction is provided by the authors:

Social constructions are stereotypes about particular groups of people that have been created by politics, culture, socialization, history, the media, literature, religion, and the like. Positive constructions include images such as "deserving," "intelligent," "honest," "public-spirited," and so forth. Negative constructions include images such as "undeserving," "stupid," "dishonest," and "selfish." There are a wide variety of evaluative dimensions, both positive and negative, that can be used to portray groups (p. 3).

Powerful groups who are constructed in a positive light expect governmental policy to benefit them. These groups have personal interests that are accepted as aligning with the public good. Elected officials will be rewarded for rewarding this group and they will be oversubscribed to various benefits. Conversely, those constructed in a negative light who are not powerful enough to mobilize opposition against government (either openly or surreptitiously) will receive a disproportionate share of what the authors term 'burdens.' This is due in part to the lack of influence these groups have on the direct election of public officials but also because other groups accept punishment doled out by government as the appropriate response to certain groups (p. 5).

Individuals receive messaging from the various sources mentioned above regarding which group they belong to and begin to internalize either their entitlement or lack thereof,

further cementing the ease with which government actors can distribute benefits and burdens. Finally, participation in the political process is impacted as individuals accept whether their actions can influence the policy process. While powerful, positively constructed groups accept the efficacy of and utilize traditional political participation such as voting, groups on the other end of the spectrum become disengaged:

Groups portrayed as dependents or deviants frequently fail to mobilize or to object to the distribution of benefits and burdens because they have been stigmatized and labeled by the policy process itself. They buy into the ideas that their problems are not public problems, that the goals that would be most important for them are not the most important for the public interest, and that government and policy are not remedies for them (p. 12).

Schneider and Ingram's theory of social construction can be applied to an examination of political responses to homeless persons and may help explain why enforcement policies are brought to bear on this group despite the substantive evidence that these approaches are not effective (NLCHP, 2017).

Tent cities often present a situation where there is obvious interplay between powerful, positively, constructed groups such as neighbourhood and business associations, and the powerless, negatively constructed homeless. A mayor's response to a homeless encampment can communicate their policy beliefs in a way that reinforces or detracts from typical social constructions and can illuminate where burdens and benefits are likely to be distributed.

A consideration of the closely related concept of framing can assist in understanding the process by which social construction of homeless populations takes place. Problem framing is used by stakeholders in the policy process to create or deflect public attention around a particular issue as well as to position policy actors as providers of a response or solution (Crow and Lawlor, 2016). Crow and Lawlor invoke Entman's definition of framing as the "act of 'select[ing] some aspects of a perceived reality and mak[ing] them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal

interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation” (p. 2). Like poverty in general, problem framing for homelessness tends to be divided along two distinct lines of attribution, both attempting to address *why* an individual may find themselves in that situation. Researchers have identified one set of frames as contributing to an ‘individualist’ attribution and another set as contributing to a ‘structuralist’ attribution (Black, 2010).

Individualist and Structural Attribution

Individualist attributions focus on ‘personal characteristics and behaviors’ (Truong, 2012) of the homeless population such as substance abuse, laziness, relationship violence and mental illness. Conversely, a structural position will draw attention to social factors such as deinstitutionalization, the ‘unavailability of living wage work, declining government assistance and social services, and lack of affordable housing and health care’ (Truong, 2012, p. 14). Black suggests the opposing positions are a debate ‘over personal values’ (2010) and this could explain why managing the emergence of a tent city becomes an emotionally-charged community issue.

While another set of research seeks to understand how both structural and individualist factors interact to contribute to homelessness, Truong maintains that an awareness of the two polarizing positions is necessary when considering political responses:

Whether homelessness is attributed to structural or individualistic causes has important implications for how homelessness is understood and the policy decisions that are made...Viewing homelessness as a structural problem is associated with support for policies and programs that address structural inequities (e.g., lack of safe, affordable housing), whereas individual attributions (e.g., laziness, substance use) are typically associated with policies that target individual behavior (e.g., anti-loitering ordinances) (p.25)

Attributing homelessness to individualist causes can have a significant impact on actions taken by local governments in response to tent cities. Some activists and researchers have

described a set of laws or policies that seek to ban, evict, fine or otherwise punish those using public space for dwelling as the 'criminalization of the homeless' (NLCHP, 2017). In their review of 187 cities in the U.S., the NLCHP found the majority enact policies that facilitate the criminalization of homelessness or else fail to protect the rights of homeless people. The following is a sample list:

- Prohibiting camping in public places
- No requirement that alternative housing be offered prior to evicting encampment residents
- No requirement that notice be given prior to clearing an encampment
- No requirement that storage of personal belongings be provided if an encampment is cleared

The authors of the law society report note that criminalization and enforcement approaches can cause homeless people to lose their identification and other important documents, 'further entrench homelessness' by involving individuals in the justice system, and create life-threatening medical conditions (p. 28-36).

Stephen Gaetz recalls the categorization of deviant 'squeegee kids' and legislation to restrict their activities in *The Criminalization of Homelessness: A Canadian Perspective*:

Comments by local politicians and newspapers fanned the flames, with such homeless youth being framed as 'dangerous' and 'delinquent', and as a threat to public safety and the local economy, particularly tourism. The result in cities such as Montreal and Toronto, and the province of British Columbia was to enact legislation outlawing begging and restricting the use of public spaces. Laws such as the Ontario Safe Streets Act (2000), while not mentioning homeless persons (or even youth) in the actual language of the legislation, were essentially designed to address these public concerns. (p. 3)

The point here is not to debate the 'right' response to panhandling, or homeless encampments but rather to note that some actors focus public attention on individual characteristics of those living in poverty and the ways in which those characteristics compromise community safety. The result may be to enact policies that assuage a demand for action and 'manage' poverty without necessarily alleviating it (Gaetz, 2013).

Other advocates and policy actors maintain the reason for an increase in tent cities is primarily due to government policy decisions that facilitate - or fail to mediate - market inequalities. The NLCHP states the 'growth of homelessness is largely explained by rising housing costs and stagnant wages' (p. 7). They equate a 5 percent rent increase in Los Angeles with the addition of 2,000 homeless people:

The growth of encampments is a predictable result of policy choices made by elected officials. California, where the most homeless encampments were reported in our study, has acknowledged for a decade that it needs to be building approximately 180,000 units of new housing a year—but has been building less than half of that. Consequently, the *majority* of California renters now pay more than 30 percent of their income on rent, and nearly one third pay more than 50 percent, putting them just one missed paycheck or medical emergency away from eviction and possible homelessness (p. 8).

The authors site medical debt as a main contributing factor to homelessness in some states and also suggest the inadequacy of the shelter system – whether it be a lack of physical space available or the processes associated with accessing a shelter. In addition to health care costs and insufficient housing options, Truong points to factors such as lower wage service work replacing manufacturing jobs, as well as declining government assistance for the unemployed (2012).

Gentrification is another factor in the displacement of low-income people from areas where housing was previously available. Black discusses the impact of 'zoning and housing policies supporting capital investment' (p. 43) and attributes the pervading neoliberal ideology of market-driven competition to the systematic marginalization of low-income people:

Neoliberal governance has resulted in the transformation of urban spaces and uneven development, as public space is being eroded and replaced with space that belongs to the consumer or the business owner. This has been accompanied by increasing practices of segregation and exclusion (p. 46-47).

In Canada, researchers have also proposed structural or systemic reasons for the rise in homelessness since the 1990s. In *Structural and Systemic Factors Contributing to Homelessness in Canada* Buckland et al. suggest policies associated with social assistance for unattached individuals have been a contributing factor to the increase of single homeless

people throughout the 1990s. He states that “rising homelessness in Toronto appears to be coincident with declines in the single social assistance caseload, suggesting the transition of some from social assistance to loss of income and the streets, as opposed to transition to work” (p.16). Like Hulchanski, he suggests that Canada has policies to drive supply for those who can afford housing at the higher ends of the market spectrum and this, coupled with income polarization, helps to explain why record rates of construction for new housing and rising average incomes can be seen at the same time as rising rates of homelessness across the country (p.17). Homeless individuals are unable to afford market-rate housing as their attachment to the labour market is associated with precarious, low wage work. Buckland also advises the ‘deindustrialization, and the decline of resource-based economies’ has impacted the availability of employment for homeless individuals – many of whom have low education and literacy levels (p. 18).

It’s not difficult to see that framing the homeless problem as a series of complex, interrelated, systemic issues like income inequality, gaps in the education system, changes in the labour market, and punitive social assistance policies – would be a more difficult sound bite than the notion that an individual has made their own bed. However, the fact that individualist attribution potentially provides for more straightforward cognition of this complex issue does not entirely explain the media’s preference for it. Ideology also has important implications for influencing and reflecting the beliefs of both the public and policy makers.

[Ideology and Homelessness](#)

Although individualist and structuralist attributions for poverty may present the problem of oversimplification, they are a useful dichotomy for analyzing tent city stories in the media. Similarly, ideological underpinnings of these attributions should be considered. Researchers have discussed the impact of neoliberalism – marked by confidence in free market solutions, a

preference for the needs of the consumer, and minimal state intervention – as the ideological foundation for the exclusion of low-income individuals from communities (Black, 2010).

Black's treatment of ideology in relation to tent cities is particularly interesting because of her focus on the manipulation of public space. In *Private Dwelling in Public Space: Edmonton's Tent City*, she uses the work of French philosopher Henri Lefebvre to discuss the 'interaction between space and social relationships' (p. 42):

Lefebvre views the active development of private property as reducing space to hierarchically organized landscapes; urban redevelopment schemes fashion an attractive environment for the consumer and an unwelcome environment for non-consumers (which includes homeless individuals). As spatial arrangements reinforce and enhance social inequalities, various groups are displaced to the margins of the newly created social and physical spaces. This results in a series of social struggles that define, or redefine, the community and the understanding of who is legitimately included in various spaces (p. 42-43)

Public space is not just designed for the consumer but sometimes actively made hostile for those experiencing poverty. *Tent City, USA* notes that cities "spend thousands of dollars on fences, bars, rocks, spikes and other 'hostile' or 'aggressive' architecture, deliberately making certain areas of their community are inaccessible to homeless persons without shelter" (p. 33).

The following is a sample list from the report:

- \$57,000 in San Diego, CA to install jagged rocks set in concrete underneath an overpass in advance the Major League Baseball All-Star game
- \$150,000 in Spokane, WA to install rocks under their overpasses
- \$1000 per box in Santa Cruz, CA to install loudspeakers on timers under several overpasses that emit high pitched noises at night that cause headaches (33-34).

Tactics such as these are not above a more collectivist Canadian ethos where, in 2001, governments mobilized to address squatters on contaminated industrial lands in Toronto in advance of a 2008 summer Olympic bid (Nicol, 2001). In 2014, city staff in Abbotsford British Columbia "dumped chicken manure on a site where homeless people had been staying in preceding months in an escalation of efforts to make the squatters feel unwelcome" (Stueck, 2019).

Ideology consistent with structuralist attribution largely reflects a preference for government intervention when the market fails certain groups. These beliefs also have policy implications for those with low or no income including wealth redistribution, universal health and childcare, increased amounts of income assistance, urban planning that incorporates a range of incomes in neighborhoods, and the use of public land for social housing. Responses to tent cities can be studied with a view to understanding how attribution and ideology both reflect and influence public opinion and policy decision-making.

Where does the public receive much of its information related to homeless encampments? Researchers have noted most citizens do not have a lot of personal contact or connection with homeless populations (Mao, 2011). Media is where most of the public receives messaging around tent cities and, as Truong notes, 'representations of homelessness can influence attitudes and beliefs and play a significant role in advancing different attributions for homelessness' (p. 25). The following section discusses how the media can influence policy associated with homelessness through tent city stories.

The Role of the media in Tent City Stories

News media influences policy narratives in 2 important ways. First, it contributes to how the public conceptualizes a given issues. Second, it communicates the 'stance' being taken by politicians, it presents their 'policy beliefs' to the public (Crow and Lawlor, 2016, p.2). Politicians are aware of the power of the media to influences the public's perception of an issue as well as the public's perception that it is receiving the correct political response from an elected representative (Mao, 2011).

News stories create and contribute to political agenda-setting by presenting social problems to the public. In addition to influencing what the public perceives as issues of importance, Crow and Lawlor suggest the media contributes to the policy process by

“problematizing policy in a way that attaches meaning to it in a manner that is comprehensible.”

This is accomplished through problem framing and the construction of narratives:

...Media are active marketers of public opinion in that they report conflict in a policy story and market policy values by including or excluding certain story elements... Journalists are taught to tell stories through the experiences of people because audiences care about other human experiences and stories more so than abstract societal issues... Stone (2011) describes all meaningful communication as packaged in the form a story, which helps create social meaning from events or actions... Narratives are how we communicate about the world around us, how we organize complex sets of facts, and how we persuade one another (p.7).

Public opinion and government intervention are interconnected. Mao et al. state that politicians “operate under an assumption that how media organizations ‘frame’ issues and debates will influence how publics form their opinions” (p. 3-4). The influence of tent city stories for housing policy may be significant as Truong’s research on stereotyping suggests the news is inclined to favour individualist attributions:

Poverty and homelessness tend to be portrayed in the media as an individual rather than a structural problem (Alyengar, 1990; Kendall, 2005). When media frames predominately focus on personal characteristics and behaviors, particularly “deviancy,” responsibility for homelessness is likely placed on homeless people themselves rather than structural causes. This, in turn, influences support for housing and homeless policy (p. 8).

As mentioned above, politicians who believe homelessness is caused by structural factors may have difficulty conveying a compelling narrative that does not rely on entrenched stereotypes of homeless people. Complicating this is consensus amongst researchers and advocates that individualist factors like mental illness and substance abuse *do* contribute to homelessness. However, Truong notes that this applies only to single homeless adults and not to families who now comprise 30% of the homeless population in the U.S. (p. 30-31). Mao advises that those interested in harnessing public support for new policy responses will have to be skilled in “flipping the script:”

Because the public learns of real-world issues through socially constructed concepts, knowledge of how these concepts are constructed might help effect social change (Hackett and Zhao, 1998). For example, participants in a successful social movement

must be able to define new frames (Kitzinger 2004). Specifically, advocates for the homeless who understand prevalent frames might more successfully present alternative frames to influence public opinion and enhance their own credibility (p. 2).

Presenting alternative narratives, or else supporting the status quo, is the opportunity mayors in Canadian urban centres have when responding to homeless encampments in their communities. A media content analysis of tent city stories allows for an investigation of social constructions created around the homeless population. Previous research has examined the media's use of negative frames with regards to homeless populations, however, this research will expand on this to examine the role of mayors in tent city narratives.

Methodology

This research paper uses a qualitative content analysis of news media articles to analyze the response of two urban Canadian mayors to highly publicized homeless encampments in their communities.

Framing is an effective way to situate social constructions of the homeless population in media coverage of tent city stories however, a consideration of the overarching narrative is necessary to incorporate the influence of politicians. The Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) is an effective method for considering how broader elements of the story – the characters and setting – influence the policy process. Further, the NPF allows for a consideration of how policy solutions presented by mayors relate to prominent frames and narratives. Crow and Lawlor suggest framing can be incorporated into the NPF for a broader understanding of a policy issue:

It is essential to clarify that framing and narratives are not the same thing, nor are they interchangeable terms. They are, however, closely linked. While framing is the act of making aspects of a story more salient in a way that may imply a problem definition or a prescriptive outcome, a narrative is an exercise in storytelling that presents the reader with a far more explicit set of moral evaluations and recommendations for treatment (2016, p. 10).

The following sections will discuss the NPF as well as its integration with frames relating to homeless populations.

Narrative Policy Framework

The Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) was developed to better understand the role of policy narratives in the policy process. Narrative analysis has grown out of the post-structuralist tradition that asserts ‘the important elements of reality (those elements scholarship should focus on) are socially constructed’ (Jones et. al, p. 6-7). The term ‘narrative’ has been explored by researchers to understand its role in ‘shaping beliefs and actions’ (Jones et. al, p. 3). The following definition is provided by Jones:

A narrative is a story with a temporal sequence of events unfolding in a plot that is populated by dramatic moments, symbols, and archetypal characters that culminates in a moral to the story (p. 3).

Researchers have noted narrative analysis can ‘illuminate policy obstacles and opportunities in policy implementation’ (VanderStaay, 1994, p.9), with particular attention to the political change that can occur when policy actors and institutions begin to accept and act on ‘dominant’ stories (Jones et. al, p. 7). Jones references health-care reform in the United States and the subsequent flurry of media discourses that either condemned or praised the concept by invoking references to Hitler and fascism or presenting emotional personal stories from those experiencing illness. He notes these kinds of narratives are ‘powerful in shaping public opinion and ultimately in shaping governmental action’ (p. 2).

So-called ‘wicked problems’ such as extreme poverty in otherwise wealthy, advanced nations are especially fertile ground for narrative research:

In the face of large, complex issues like homelessness, the consistent failure of social and economic predictions to unfold as expected, and the persistence of age-old problems and inequities in the face of astounding technological progress, the [policy] field had little choice but to reevaluate its tools and purposes. Analysts began to doubt whether they could always determine which criteria to apply; quantitative data, like budgets, began to seem more textual than factual (Roe, 1988); and there emerged a

growing awareness of the role and impact of language in the study, debate, and formation of policy. (VanderStaay p. 4).

When applying narrative analysis to explore why Washington D.C. first granted and then rescinded a universal right to shelter for homeless persons, VanderStaay underscored the work of previous researchers in arguing that ‘narratives are told by political actors (particularly interest groups and elites) in efforts to expand their power and ultimately win in the policy process’ (p. 18).

Studies in the narrative tradition were oriented toward a qualitative research design and explored topics like problem definition, values, sources of knowledge, and other contributing factors to policy development (Jones, 2014, p. 10). Research tended to be inductive in nature with the aim of illuminating how “reality” is socially constructed through various discourses and suggesting that dominant discourses “win” in policy development (Jones, 2014).

For some public policy scholars, the absence of an experimental research design and the inability to falsify or replicate narrative analysis meant it was dismissed from mainstream public policy scholarship. And yet, as Jones states, those who adhered to the “post-positivist” approach were correct in asserting that “narrative matters and the science supporting [post-positivists] interpretive descriptions is ubiquitous just about everywhere but public policy” (e.g. marketing research, communications, political science, neurosciences and literary studies) (2014, p. 2-3). As narrative analysis in public policy evolved, so did a trend “toward increased methodological sophistication and more generalizable findings” (2014, p. 3). In 2010, scholars developed the Narrative Policy Framework as a way of explaining “the role of policy narratives in the policy process” (Shanahan et. al, 2017). NPF has been described as “an attempt to apply objective methodological approaches (i.e. science) to subjective social reality (i.e., policy narratives)” (Jones et. al, 2014, p. 3).

The Narrative Policy Framework is deemed to have “five core assumptions” that will assist researchers in applying it to their analysis:

- 1) *Social construction*. Meaningful parts of policy reality are socially constructed.
- 2) *Bounded relativity*. The meaning of those social constructions vary to create different policy realities, but this variation is bounded (e.g. by belief systems, ideologies, etc) and this is not random but, rather, has some stability over time.
- 3) *Generalizable structural elements*. Narratives have specific and identifiable structures.
- 4) *Three interacting levels of analysis*. Narratives operate at three interacting levels, micro (individual), meso (group), and macro (cultural and institutional).
- 5) *Homo narrans model of the individual*. Narrative is understood to play a central role in human cognition and communication, i.e. people prefer to think and speak in story form. (Shanahan et. al, 2017, p.2)

Structuralist scholars seized upon point three and suggested ways to “operationalize narrative structure and/or content to test clearly “hypotheses” (Jones et. al, 2010, p. 10). Structuralists further qualified how the four components of a story - setting, plot, characters, and “moral-of-the-story” – can qualify it as a “policy narrative.” Jones provides the following guidance for defining and operationalizing policy narratives:

Setting: A policy narrative is directed toward addressing a specific policy problem and must situate that problem in a specific context. That context is the setting.

Plot. Usually having a beginning, middle, and end, policy narrative plots connect characters to one another and to the policy setting. Of course, plots can do this in a myriad of ways. Thus, NPF does not endorse a specific operationalization of plot but has had success using Deborah Stone’s story types. Stone’s story types include the story of decline, stymied progress, and helplessness and control.

Characters. Policy narratives have distinct characters. Relying heavily on the work of Deborah Stone (2002) and Steven Ney (2006), NPF operationalizes characters as heroes (the potential fixer of a policy problem), villains (those who are causing the problem), and victims (those harmed by the problem).

Moral of the story (Policy Solutions). A policy narrative usually offers a policy solution in the form of a moral of the story. For example, a policy narrative about climate change might offer a solution such as nuclear energy; a policy narrative about gun violence might offer a solution such as an assault weapons ban; and, in some cases, the moral of the story is quite simply to maintain the status quo. (Jones et. al, 2014)

NPF allows narrative analysis research to be conducted with experimental designs that measure how narratives influence different aspects of the policy process. Although less

research has been completed with the NPF and social policy issues, tent city stories appear well positioned for this type of analysis. Research on homeless encampments is amenable to the five core assumptions of the NPF. As outlined in the pages above, scholars have long recognized that the “reality” of poverty is socially constructed, and causation can either emphasize individual or societal factors. Stories of poverty also exhibit predictable narrative elements over time. For Jones, the scientific study of policy narratives must address the problem of narrative relativity – the notion that all content can be interpreted differently by everyone and is therefore random. While acknowledging the interpretation of content can be relative, they advise it can be studied systematically when grounded in belief systems that are stable over time (2014, p. 8). This paper has suggested that ideology is one way to ground poverty narratives like tent city stories.

Homeless encampments also meet the 4 structural criteria for a policy narrative: 1. They present a specific policy problem. The occupation of public space by those without private dwellings creates both a literal and philosophical policy context. Where should people without homes dwell? Should all people have a private place to dwell? Should government authorities support, sanction, or dismantle tent cities? 2. The plot of a tent city is timed-bound around the inception and ultimate fate of the encampment. There are typically multiple and divergent conflicts that see actors vying for public and governmental support 3. Tent city residents, property owners, business owners, and elected officials cast, and are cast into, the roles of victim and villain and 4. A policy solution is inevitably offered in the resolution to a tent city story. Solutions may manifest as “enforcement” based (banning, fining, evicting, arresting) or as collaborative approaches (sanctioning tent cities, enlisting social service supports, advocating to other levels of government) (NLCHP, 2017).

Integrating Frames and the Narrative Policy Framework

Integrating frames related to homelessness in tent city stories will assist in contextualizing the type of response mayors advocate for. Media frames regarding homelessness tend to revolve around two aspects of the tent city narrative – the setting and characters of the story. The setting is the public space that homeless persons have occupied as a place to dwell. It is the epicenter of the conflict that takes place. For academics, it is a metaphorical space where individuals compete for inclusion and recognition:

The politics of rights is constructed in and through space and place; rights are constantly being (re)negotiated, at risk of either being weakened or expanded. Space is therefore a critical site from which human rights can be examined and citizenship can be expanded (Black 2010, p. 46).

Black's research suggests that homeless individuals choose encampments over the availability of emergency shelter beds because the latter provides the political benefits of community including 'spatial resistance,' 'placemaking,' and negotiating with state officials for housing (56).

For researchers at the National Law Centre on Homelessness & Poverty, the legal status of encampments contributes to the ongoing dialogue of "rights:"

During the period of 2007-2017, 73 percent of relevant news stories contained data regarding the legal status of reported homeless encampments. Of these reports, 4 percent were reported to be legal, 20 percent were reported to be semi-legal (tacitly sanctioned), and 76 percent were reported to be illegal (p. 24).

The authors note that residents of illegal encampments (the majority) are constantly under threat of eviction by local authorities with no requirement for alternative housing to be provided. The significance of being deemed "illegal" is manifest in various enforcement solutions.

However, for neighbouring residents and businesses, the space occupied by a homeless encampment is one threatened by deterioration caused by litter, defecation, and open drug use. VanderStaay reports that "right to shelter" proponents in Washington DC effectively lost public

and political support when the narrative changed to portray encampments as spaces threatening to the safety of the rest of the community:

No longer is the *story* a conflict between homeless people who want shelter and a city government which won't provide it. Rather, the conflict is between 'alcohol-consuming, quarreling, middle-aged men' and 'preschoolers,' 'toddlers,' and a '2-year-old.' In contrast to [homeless advocate] Snyder's straight-forward description of the District's homeless as 'God's children,' the [writers of an opinion piece] draw heavily on adjectives of disorder and decay to create a metaphoric 'frame' of deterioration (p. 14).

Public safety is powerful rhetoric for decisions regarding public space. When responding to homeless encampments in their communities, Canadian mayors are contributing to competing narratives of occupied places. Do people without shelter have a right to occupy public space or is their presence an affront to the rights of others? While VanderStaay refers to a "deterioration" frame, this paper suggests "disorder" more adequately captures the media frames regarding the affront to safety and enjoyment presented by neighbouring residents and businesses.

The concepts of victim and villain found in the Narrative Policy Framework present another opportunity to integrate frames with characters in tent city stories. Individual behaviours – substance use, violence - correlate to the "deviance" frame noted by researchers as associated with negatively constructed, powerless groups (Schneider & Ingram, 1993, Truong, 2012). Powerful, positively constructed groups such as business owners and home-owning residents are victims of anti-social behaviours such as open drug use, intimidation, and property crime.

Deviance frames present individual characteristics and behaviours of homeless populations that are anti-social and imply they are architects of their current fate. Further, they have the potential for victimizing surrounding residents and businesses. Disorder frames suggest homeless populations are unjustly creating chaos in neighbourhood by accelerating the deterioration associated with excess refuse, open drug use, and a decline in a perceived sense of safety. In contrast with these two frames is "systems." This frame associates homelessness

with structural causes such as insufficient wage, inadequate social assistance rates, and the unavailability of affordable housing.

The “moral-of-the-story” in the NPF are the policy solutions presented by mayors. This paper posits that urban mayors who communicate with high focus on deviance and disorder will be inclined to short-term enforcement approaches that can be executed at the local level. Communication that focuses on systems will result in attempts to collaborate with other levels of government to create structural changes. Figure 1.2 is a collection of frames that will be used in the media analysis.

Figure 1.2

Frame	Example Key Words/concepts	Assumptions
Deviance		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. High focus on deviance of homeless individuals and safety of neighboring residents results in short-term, enforcement policies enacted at the local government level. 2. High focus on structural factors causing homelessness results in multi-level government collaboration efforts for policy reform.
	Substance use	
	Violence	
	Choosing to live outdoors	
	Criminal activity	
Disorder	Safety of neighboring community	
	Illegal	
	Deterioration	
Systems		
	Insufficient mental health supports	
	Wages/employment	
	Welfare/social assistance	
	No alternative housing	

Article Selection

The articles were extracted from Factiva using the search terms [City] + Mayor + [Mayor last name] + “tent city”. Dates, sources, and authors were left open. Figure 1.3 provides a breakdown of the number of articles retrieved and their respective publications.

Figure 1.3

Media

City	Globe and Mail	Post Media	Toronto Star	Abbotsford News	The Province	Canadian Press	Vancouver Sun	Total Number of Articles
Abbotsford	1	4	0	15	1	1	1	23
Vancouver	15	10	4	2	4	2	0	38

Qualitative research software (NVIVO) was used to code articles based on selected frames and corresponding text/concepts. Additional coding was completed inductively if significant themes presented themselves in the research. The number of references for respective frames and examples of associated text is presented in Appendix B.

Limitations

Limitations of this research include the number of mayors and cities included in the study. Results from two cities may not be generalizable across a broad selection of locations and politicians. This paper relied on one media source (newspaper articles) for content. Although Mao et al. states that in Canada “newspaper readership has not declined to the same extent as in the U.S.” they also acknowledge ‘newspaper readership characteristics might affect study generalizability’ (2011, p. 4). Retrieved articles were unequally distributed in total number between the two cities, as well as in national versus local perspective. Some articles were duplicate media releases completed by ‘staff writers’ (no formal author). Multiple recurring themes in one article were coded and the number of references per theme reflects this. Finally,

this research did not employ inter-coder reliability and future studies would benefit from multiple coders.

Analysis

Vancouver and Abbotsford Background

Tent cities in Vancouver and Abbotsford were selected for the high number of homeless persons they attracted, as well as a highly publicized media coverage of the local government response.

Kennedy Stewart was elected mayor of Vancouver in 2018. As with politicians in other urban cities across Canada, housing was a significant campaign issue – spurred by the increasingly narrow availability of options those with middle and low incomes. British Columbia's largest Census Metropolitan Area (CMA) continued to grapple with a high-profile tent city in Oppenheimer Park - located in the city's Downtown Eastside (DTES) - a neighbourhood already notorious for entrenched poverty. Media placed the number of people occupying the vicinity around 300 and the area was drawing attention due to reported spikes of violence, including gang activity (Bailey and Bula, October 28, 2019). Jurisdiction over the park is further complicated in Vancouver, the only city in Canada, where authority for park operations rests with a park board. When the encampment was finally cleared, Vancouver experienced what other cities have in terms a re-emergence:

Earlier this year, people living without a home were at a camp in Oppenheimer Park. When it was shut down by authorities, residents moved to a parking lot beside CRAB Park on the waterfront east of Canada Place. When port authorities got a court injunction to end the CRAB Park camp, residents moved to Strathcona Park (Griffin, September 14, 2020).

Articles examined in this report relate to both Oppenheimer and Strathcona Park tent cities.

Henry Braun was elected mayor of Abbotsford in 2014 and re-elected in 2018. With a population of approximately 180,000 people, the city represents one of four CMAs in the

province. While Braun was still a member of Council the city came under scrutiny for its approach to the homeless population when city workers “dumped chicken manure in an area on the side of Gladys Avenue, across from the Salvation Army, where the homeless commonly set up camp” (Godfrey, December 29, 2018). Gladys Avenue tent city became the setting for councillor-turned Mayor Braun to address the housing crisis related to the homeless population. Like Vancouver, by-law and police enforcement was not proving effective:

The game, coined the “Abbotsford Shuffle” by the city’s homeless community, sees bylaw officers kick them off city land and force them to move to nearby BC Hydro land. BC Hydro then orders them off the private land and they move back city land (Abbotsford News, September 19, 2019).

As Braun and Stewart respond to homeless encampments in their respective communities, they will be aware of how media frames are influencing public opinion (Mao, 2011) and will themselves help shape the narrative around housing for homeless people. The following section will examine the selected frames of deviance, disorder, systems, and policy solutions as they relate to the tent city stories in Vancouver and Abbotsford, British Columbia. By integrating the Narrative Policy Framework with a frames analysis, this research will examine how mayors contribute to or detract from social constructions of the homeless population and indicate what implications this may have for housing policy.

Deviance and Disorder

Deviance is a prominent frame in news reporting related to British Columbia’s tent cities and encampments associated with property crime, drug abuse, and violence. Police appear to have a significant role in communicating the dangers of congregate homeless populations. The status of Oppenheimer Park tent city is described as dire when, with journalists referencing police as saying “the homeless camp in a park at the heart of Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside is attracting so much violence, drug dealing and gangs that it has become an intolerable crisis” (Bula, September 19, 2010). Some journalists utilize statistics provided by the Vancouver police

that indicate increases between 50-68 percent for weapons calls and neighbourhood break-ins, respectively (Griffin, September 14, 2020). Tent city residents attract a ‘criminal element,’ particularly in the form of gang activity. The reason for gang activity, according to police, is the “lucrative market of selling drugs to homeless people” (Bula, September 19, 2019). Police reported the situation to be so bad, they are wary of their own safety and are “concerned about sending officers into the one-block square park” (Bula, July 22, 2019). Reports of violence increase the sense of urgency with which local politicians must respond to encampments, reinforcing calls to have them dispersed. Says Mayor Stewart:

When I hear there has been an underaged girl that has been assaulted, when I hear there’s 20 fires, when I hear there’s 500 police calls [this year], and there’s other things I can’t share with you, something has to move (Hager, September 5, 2019).

Substance use is another marker of deviance highlighted in media reports and tent cities are areas where “discarded needles are found everywhere – daily” (Mason, September 1, 2020).

Drug activity is not contained to sites themselves but is reported by one neighbourhood association as spilling over onto the private properties of home-owning residents:

The Strathcona Residents’ Association (SRA) has been logging incidents that those living in the neighbourhood have brought to its attention. Just the other day, for instance, a young family returned to their home with a young baby in the backseat of their car and found two people shooting up in their driveway. When the couple asked the pair to leave, they were sworn at and threatened with physical violence (Mason, September 1, 2020).

While no other media coverage reviewed for this paper identified violent crime perpetrated against an area resident by a homeless person, the SRA also advised that residents – and their pets - are in danger: “Residents have been intimidated with knives, crowbars and guns. Dogs have been kidnapped” (Mason, September 1, 2020).

Abbotsford media also reports on how the behaviors of homeless populations negatively impact others. Gladys Avenue is a place where ‘discarded drug paraphernalia and sanitation issues’ (Rodgers, November 4, 2015) persist and “complaints about the homeless come from businesses and residents who are tired of the garbage, discarded needles and drug use which

comes with them” (Spencer, February 26, 2015). However, Abbotsford does not report on the type on violence and gang activity seen in Vancouver’s coverage of tent cities. Rather, the focus in the smaller of the CMAs appears to be on the disorder caused by homeless populations. Closely related to the deviance frame, the concept of disorder is the antithesis of a desired neighbourhood space. As we know from VanderStaay’s research – community safety is a powerful narrative created by residents, associations, and other actors and may be even more effective than vilifying the homeless.

In an opinion piece to a local paper, one letter writer asks, “do the rights of the homeless trump those who are not in similar circumstances” (Abbotsford News, March 1, 2015)? This question captures the perennial conflict between congregate homeless populations and surrounding residents. For residents, the right to the safe enjoyment of public property is something perceive as needing to be secured through political participation. They “keep track of incidents in the park” (Abbotsford News, 2015), attend council meetings to lobby their local politicians:

Braun added he has spoken with residents in neighbourhoods who are frustrated the city isn’t doing more to address homeless camps. He said it creates tension as the city has a responsibility to residents who feel “they can’t use the neighbourhoods that they live in” (Abbotsford News, 2015).

While Braun expresses sympathy for the frustration of area residents and Stewart reiterates that escalating violence cannot be ignored – it is important to note that neither mayor ascribes negative behaviours to homeless populations *as a whole*. Likewise, neither mayor conflates negative behaviours associated with homeless persons as justification for punishing policies like camp sweeps.

Unfortunately, mayors may find themselves in a lose-lose situation when a potential solution to tent cities – new social housing builds – is also rejected by area residents for perceived impacts to their safety and financial well-being. When Abbotsford secured an

arrangement with the province to have modular social housing units built on city-owned property, residents decried the impacts it would have on property crime rates, property values, and the safety of near-by school children (Butler, November 3, 2014). As Truong notes, politicians and others will have to be skilled at selecting and promoting new frames to assist in making solutions to homelessness more palatable for affected residents:

Because the public learns of real-world issues through socially constructed concepts, knowledge of how these concepts are constructed might help effect social change. For example, participants in a successful social movement must be able to define new frames. Specifically, advocates for the homeless who understand prevalent frames might more successfully present alternative frames to influence public opinion and enhance their own credibility (p.2).

Appendix B presents a quantitative list of references for selected frames as well as example text.

The media appears to remain inclined to framing congregate homeless populations as deviants who create disorder by open drug use and either perpetuating or attracting criminal activity. Neighbourhood advocates, including business improvement and neighbourhood associations, receive coverage for their portrayal of the negative impacts homeless encampments have. This can contribute to a narrative that suggests residents and businesses are victims of the deviant homeless population. However, a small amount of media coverage was also provided to homeless advocates. These advocates come in the form of non-profit legal groups, anti-poverty activists, and tent city residents themselves.

One camp spokeswoman, Chrissy Brett, asked how she “as a grandma with absolutely no weapons, can stay half the week [in the tent city]...how is it [the police] can characterize this place as being so scary?” (Abbotsford News, September 19, 2019). Brett and others, including Vancouver Councillor and long-time anti-poverty activist Jean Swanson, suggest that safety of the homeless population – not just area residents – should be a consideration. Swanson stated Police were using a shooting incident near Oppenheimer Park “as an excuse to displace

people” and argued homeless people are safer together (Bula, July 22, 2019). In Abbotsford, homeless residents of Gladys Street tent city paired up with a Vancouver non-profit legal firm and secured a Supreme Court Ruling that established the right to shelter when no other housing was available (Sinoski, October 22, 2015). The ruling supported Schneider and Ingram’s acknowledgement that “much of the beneficial policy achieved by the powerless, negatively constructed target groups has been through court actions and court mandates to ensure their rights” (p. 6).

Mayors also played a role in advocating for the homeless. Through their presentation of policy solutions to encampments, mayors signal whether they will support negative social constructions of homeless populations and distribute punishments to this group or whether they will seek structural changes. This is not an easy public relations tasks as the concerns of other stakeholders must be legitimized for mayors to avoid the perception they are siding with deviance and disorder. The unrelenting focus of both mayors, but particularly Stewart, on a multi-level governance approach to the construction of supportive social housing -while not rewriting the story of poverty – at least helps to at least create a secondary narrative.

[Systems and Housing Policy Solutions for the Homeless Population](#)

Structural causes of poverty did not feature significantly in articles from either city. Perhaps this is because, as mentioned previously these “abstract social issues” are not the preferred method for delivering or consuming a news story (Crow and Lawlor, 2016). Rather than outline or debate the potential causes for deep poverty resulting in homelessness, mayors focused on the policy solution. For Jones et al. the policy solution represents the moral-of-the-story and has implications for policy formation and implementation (2014). Policy solutions were referenced more than any other of the frames discussed in this research (see Appendix B). Possible solutions coded include the following in order from fewest to most mentions: Increasing by-law and police enforcement to disperse camps, building additional homeless shelters,

accessing Federal money through the Homelessness Partnership Strategy (HPS), sanctioning tent cities, purchasing Single Room Occupancy (SRO) hotel spaces or other social housing units, and partnering with the provincial government to build modular housing on city-owned property. It is beyond the scope of this paper to complete an analysis of each option. The urgency and complexity of encampments, as well as the competing demands of advocates, often require some combination of solutions. However, Mayors Stewart and Braun appear to have chosen successfully when with two key messages: homeless populations need purpose-build social housing and cities need provincial and federal funding to pay for it.

Kennedy Stewart chose “build housing” as the message residents needed to hear regarding tent cities. He states, “the only way to end homelessness is by building housing, not evicting homeless residents without a plan for where they are to go next” (The Canadian Press, June 18, 2020). This presumably carried some ring of authenticity to it for residents who had seen tent cities dismantled in one part of the city only to appear again nearby. With the solution identified, there is still the not insignificant challenge of how to facilitate it.

It is broadly accepted by the general population that cities don't have the financial capacity through property tax dollars to fund social housing. However, it should be noted that Stewart and Braun's messaging, combined with their advocacy work at other levels of government, did not amount to “jurisdictional squabbles” seen many times before in stale-mated debates about social housing (Hulchanski, 2007). Instead, the mayors crafted and persisted with a narrative that turned public attention to more senior levels of government as the only ones who could deliver on the only solution that made sense: “The federal and provincial governments have the means to deliver the housing we need, all that's required is the will to do so” (Stueck, May 21, 2020). Demonstrating a willingness to have public space used for social, as opposed to capital, gain Stewart committed city-owned property for modular housing. These quickly constructed, relatively inexpensive structures will be built and operated through funds

provided by the provincial government. Other cities are now looking to Vancouver to understand how partnerships with other levels of government to produce modular housing can help alleviate homelessness in their communities (Lornic, 2020).

Mayor Braun echoes a reluctance for cities to tackle social housing stating “it’s not a mandate for local government to get into housing, because we can’t afford to do it out of property taxes.” Even after the Supreme Court decision to allow overnight sheltering for homeless people in Abbotsford, Braun pointed out that “judge recognizes that the parks are for the community as a whole....[homeless people] can still go to the park, but they have to leave every morning at 9 a.m. with their belongings” (Abbotsford News, October 21, 2015). Like Stewart, Braun does not believe sanctioning tent cities is the answer. Instead, he also advocates for provincial and federal funding noting that cities “need the help of senior levels of government” (Olsen, July 12, 2019). Abbotsford also agreed to utilize city-owned property for provincially funded modular housing, It seems that for in both Vancouver and Abbotsford residents and councils will, if reluctantly, accept the necessity of social housing in a way that they cannot accept public space being used for tent cities. Abbotsford began adding modular housing units on city land, providing residences for homeless people at the provincial social assistance shelter rate of \$375 a month (Stueck, June 11, 2019).

In 2019 neighbouring Maple Ridge began to grapple with the emergence of a homeless encampment in the community of approximately 80,000. The mayor chose to fuel tensions between the homeless population and other residents with incendiary comments in the media, including vowing to take all the necessary enforcement measures. When asked for his thoughts, Mayor Braun compared Maple Ridge to a film he’s glad he no longer stars in: “The clips that I see in Maple ridge remind me of a movie I saw here 10 years ago...the community will have to come to a point where it realizes something different will have to be done.”

Conclusion

Increased rates of homelessness are contributing to an increase in the presence of homeless encampments in cities across the U.S. and Canada. Although local governments are unable to fund social housing initiatives through property tax dollars, they are required by citizens to respond to 'tent cities' as they emerge on public lands. Media coverage of tent cities continues to generally reinforce negative social constructions of the homeless population as deviants who create disorder in the neighbourhoods they occupy. This is complicated by legitimate concerns from a variety of stakeholders and advocates around issues such as sanitation, criminal activity, and overdose prevention. Neighbourhood residents and advocates in the form of neighbourhood and business associations assist in creating a narrative where community safety is incompatible with the presence of encampments.

Mayors of urban Canadian cities can either support established narratives regarding homeless populations or attempt to construct new ones. Experience has demonstrated that relying on individualist rhetoric and using enforcement approaches to dismantle encampments results in the relocation of homeless populations to other areas of the city. Further, homeless advocates and court proceedings have successfully argued for an individual's right to shelter in a public space when no other housing is available. If mayors attribute causes of homelessness to individuals themselves and subsequently opt for enforcement approaches, they will be likely to have to deal with the re-emergence of encampments or court rulings on the right to shelter. However, mayors also risk politically alienating business and residents if they suggest tent cities are the result of a complex and interrelated set of structural factors.

This paper completed a content analysis of news media stories in two British Columbia Census Metropolitan Areas, Vancouver and Abbotsford. It examined high-profile, highly politicized tent cities in both cities to determine how the response of mayors relates to social

constructions of homelessness and the implications for housing policy at the local level. It determined that mayors could create an alternative to the deviance/disorder narrative associated with homeless populations by focusing on the policy solution or “moral-of-the-story.” Media and public attention were directed to the federal and provincial governments as those responsible for the provision of social housing for the homeless. Partnerships between both cities and the provincial government have resulted in modular housing being provided for homeless populations at the provincial social assistance shelter rates. Other Canadian cities, including Toronto, are now looking to Vancouver and Abbotsford for an end to their own tent city stories (Lorinc, 2020).

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Appendices

Appendix A

Frame	Number of References	Selected Quotes
Deviance	20	<p>Oppenheimer has become a drug infested, crime-riddled disaster zone in which a murder was committed, women were beaten and sexually assaulted, guns were found in dangerous hands and violence was commonplace” (Globe and Mail, September 1, 2020).</p> <p>The situation in Oppenheimer, Vancouver Police Deputy Chief Howard Chow said Thursday, has ‘created a flourishing market for the criminal element’” (Post Media, September 20, 2019)</p>
Disorder	33	<p>Staff, trustees and parents of students at Dogwood School spoke of the impact of the issue of homelessness on school grounds, such as finding remnants of waste left behind on school property (Butler, 2014).</p> <p>Residents have been threatened in their own space, businesses can’t run because workers don’t want to be there (Denis, 2019)</p>
Systems	5	<p>The 2019 homeless count report showed the stark reality of disappearing affordable housing in Vancouver: There is currently a zero per cent vacancy rate for apartments that rent for less than \$750.00 (Bula, 2019)</p>
Policy Solutions	87	<p>The main issue, Braun said, is a persistent lack of housing in Abbotsford. Two modular housing projects are already full and have provided housing to many former campers. But, he added, ‘we need more, and we continue to advocate at both levels of government.’</p> <p>Mr. Stewart’s motion asks for staff to work with BC Housing and other government agencies to secure long-term options, and for the mayor to request federal and provincial funding to cover costs associated with any alternatives approved.</p>