

Metro's housing crisis hits level of urgency not witnessed since Great Depression

indication that unless action is taken soon, the sad saga of Drina Joubert will be repeated in continued needless deaths on our streets of people driven out by unemployment, inadequate social programs and a critical shortage of affordable housing.

The Housing Crisis

A January, 1983 report release by the Social Planning Council of Metropolitan Toronto stated that "the issue of homelessness has reached a level of urgency not witnessed since the Great Depression. And for many low-income people in Toronto who are experiencing a crisis (it) cannot simply be called an emergency. It is a long-term state, a permanent emergency." Statistics garnered in the time following the release of that report would seem to validate this assertion. Homelessness is a greater problem in 1986 than it was in 1983.

It is estimated that there are between 6,000 to 10,000 homeless people in Metropolitan Toronto. Servicing this group is a network of drop-in centres, hostels and emergency shelters with approximately 2,000 beds. This figure increases somewhat during the winter months. And, according to David Thornley, a program director with the Social Planning Council, the situation is much worse than it was 10, or even five years ago.

"Between 1971 and 1982 Metro has been losing between 1,200 and 1,500 (rental) units per year," Thornley said. Much of this has been the product of the demographic shift in the downtown core resulting from ever-increasing numbers of owner-occupied large homes. This process is called gentrification. "More and more older homes are being renovated and occupied by higher-income earners causing a net loss in the overall rental stock. Some of these homes have had as many as 15 bedrooms prior to sale and renovation," Thornley added.

Indeed, according to an official at the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC), who asked not to be identified, the vacancy rate in the city of Toronto now stands



at 0.2 percent and 0.4 percent for the Metropolitan area. According to the CMHC, the entire "new supply" of rental housing in Metro Toronto is 4,815 units in 1986. This total includes all units either under or pending construction as well as private and assisted rentals. Of the 4,815 rental units in the 1986 "new supply," 2,547 are, or will be when completed, assisted rental units. In 1986 there are approximately 13,000 people on waiting lists for rent geared-to-income units in Metro Toronto alone.

The desperate need for housing for Toronto's poor angers those who deal with the problem. Says the Social Planning Council's David Thornley, "Ontario and Metro are extremely affluent and there are resources to meet a basic minimum of needs for the homeless. This reflects badly on our sense of collective responsibility."

The 1986 census, when completed, will undoubtedly show an increase in average

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incomes for the Metro area, paralleled by a disturbing increase in the number of homeless persons, food distributors and hostel beds. These are the questions social policy planners now find themselves asked most often: How can a large and affluent city like Toronto have such a scandalous shortage of affordable housing for those who need it most? And how is it that people can freeze to death on the streets while brand new luxury condominiums spring up, seemingly on every corner?

One of the difficulties seems to be the current levels of social assistance. In 1986 the maximum amount of general welfare assistance that a single, employable person may receive is \$394 per month. Included in this amount is a maximum shelter allowance. This figure represents a \$34 per month increase from 1985 levels. In 1985 Health and Welfare Canada set the poverty level for a single person at a \$10,728 per year. At that time the maximum amount of welfare a single, employable person would receive in a year was \$4,320. Now that amount is \$4,728.

Another problem identified by the Social Planning Council is the fact that general welfare assistance is the same across the province and does not reflect the reality of market rents. The range for most single rooms in Toronto rooming houses is \$60 to \$90 per week. If one were paying \$90 per week for rent and received the maximum level of welfare assistance, exactly \$34 would be left for all other expenses that month; namely food, clothing and transportation.

An even more serious problem than inadequate welfare assistance is the requirement that all those receiving benefits have a fixed address. Anyone not living at a permanent address will not receive welfare benefits and the likelihood of acquiring accommodation is further reduced.

Hostels

Margaret Moores is a staff person at Nellies Hostel for Women and a spokesperson for the Housing not Hostels Coalition. The coalition was formed in January in response to the recent deaths of three people by exposure on city streets and to publicize the coroner's inquest into the death of Drina Joubert. According to Ms. Moores, building more hostels is not the answer to the problem of homelessness, as hostels do not constitute adequate shelter. "The resident/staff ratio may exceed 100 to 1," Moore said. "This not only hampers the staff's ability to support individuals in making transitions, but also leads to a controlling and punitive approach to residents. These policies often force individuals to leave hostels in search of alternative shelter." In many instances this "alternative shelter," is a street corner, an alleyway or a pick-up truck.

The coalition also cites lack of privacy and storage space as a problem for hostel users which indirectly encourages a transient lifestyle. All these factors point to the conclusion that hostels are not adequate housing, yet according to the coalition, in recent years, "instead of functioning as emergency or transitional shelters, hostels have now become permanent or semi-permanent residences."

Nellies Hostel, on Broadview Avenue, can accommodate up to 30 women and children but has to turn many applicants away as up to 150 requests (for beds) per month are received. And often women return to abusive situations at home because they cannot tolerate living in a hostel. According to Moores, many Nellies residents are single mothers while others are ex-psychiatric patients who have been evicted from rooming houses for complaining about heat and plumbing.

Rooming houses are not within the jurisdiction of landlord and tenant law, so roomers can be evicted for almost any reason. Landlords can also raise rents at will.

In a series of two articles Excalibur's Paul Armstrong and photographer Mario Scattoloni investigate the complexities facing Toronto's homeless and unemployed citizens. This month's feature focuses on the housing crisis in Metro Toronto.

Her home was a pick-up truck and they called her a bag lady. Her name was Drina Joubert. She froze to death in her "home" on December 16, 1985. She was one of three people who froze to death on the streets of Toronto this winter and her story sparked a controversy that has brought the plight of Toronto's homeless out of the closet and into the public eye. Perhaps more than any other in recent memory, the unfortunate death of Drina Joubert has unsettled the collective conscience of a city that prides itself on its heart and warmth.

The prominent feature of Drina's death was that her life began with great promise. She came from a good home and had been a fashion model in France. Much later, in Canada, as alcohol and psychiatric problems took their toll, she lost her accommodation and her will, joining the ranks of the homeless and the destitute in the downtown core. Only after her death and a coroner's inquest did it become apparent that her case was not unique, but was representative of a growing problem: a problem now reaching crisis proportions. And there is every

