

# Research Community Report

Shared relevant findings from dissertation research conducted by Anna Kopec

Written by: Anna Kopec<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

In January and February 2020, I conducted research in Toronto with various organizations. I then continued the research remotely in the fall of 2021 after a pause during the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. In this report, I hope to share broad research findings and, more importantly, findings most relevant to your organization. Please feel free to ask for more information or the information in a different format as needed! I have many findings about specific policies from multiple perspectives that are not captured here. Many findings may be unsurprising, although hopefully sharing them in public venues will support some sector initiatives.

The report begins with a quick summary of the research and the methods used. I then introduce the findings more broadly and how I have, and will, use them. I then share specific findings – that are de-identified and anonymized – most relevant to your organization. I conclude by sharing recommendations that came from participants as well as some next steps for my research. I also offer a quick reflection on my experiences and their influence on my research and practice.

## Dissertation: “The Politics of Homelessness”

My research asked how policies influence the political participation of individuals experiencing homelessness. I compared Melbourne, Australia and Toronto. I wanted to know how the health, social assistance, and housing services individuals accessed changed how and where they expressed their political agency and desire for change. Political participation included voting as well as participating within services through committees and advisory groups, government consultations, and sharing experiences in more public venues like conferences and media platforms.

In addition to analyzing national election surveys, I conducted 118 interviews with individuals experiencing homelessness (61), service providers (41), and policymakers (16) in Melbourne and Toronto. In Toronto, some of my interviews were moved online due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

As you may know, I relied heavily on service providers and organizations for access to participants. My research was only possible due to the participation and support of your organization and others like it within the sector.

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<sup>1</sup> Since conducting this dissertation research I completed my PhD at the University of Toronto and started a position as an Assistant Professor at the School of Public Policy and Administration at Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada. Feel free to reach out at [annakopec@cunet.carleton.ca](mailto:annakopec@cunet.carleton.ca)!

## Main Research Findings

- Policies influence not only what services and benefits are delivered, but also the inclusion of individuals into society, their experiences with services, and their political agency.
- Policies and services vary in their inclusivity, some aspects of policies interact with one another and can counteract more positive aspects.
  - o Health is a great example that was cited in both cities as limited in visibility although both countries have “universal” systems. So although health is universal, many questioned where to go for care and called for more services targeted and, therefore, more accessible to the population.
- Integrated services not only make policy delivery more efficient but can also create more inclusive spaces that place value on lived experience and the expression of political agency. Where there are multiple services located in one area they are viewed as more inclusive and efficient. This was rare in Toronto.
- Opportunities to participate matter and many individuals experiencing homelessness want to express their thoughts and opinions and these opportunities are influenced by the designs of policies and services
- More integrated, visible, and accessible services have more opportunities for individuals to participate (within organizations and beyond).
- Participation – and opportunities to participate – need to be more than a tokenistic gesture and include more meaningful forms of participation that are recognized and valued.

I found that there are certain aspects of policies that not only dictate how individuals feel about themselves, the government and policy, but also influence how and where individuals participate. Where a policy might seem less generous, if the delivery is more accessible, individuals pointed to more inclusive spaces and services, with more positive experiences. This was particularly the case in Melbourne, where there were more integrated services. This included social assistance workers (like OW workers) who travelled to the emergency accommodation, extensive health services (including podiatry, physiotherapy, dentistry, etc.) within emergency accommodation. It is worth noting that in Melbourne, they do not have the North American style of shelters, but rather more shared housing and apartment style living for 6-week stays at a time with private and shared quarters.

I found that where services were integrated individuals felt more included. Integrated services in turn were found to offer spaces with more opportunities to participate. Where services were more integrated, participants pointed to more opportunities within organizations to express their opinions to bring change and were also asked for feedback more frequently than those who accessed more siloed services. Integrated services were more common in Melbourne.

In relation to participation, individuals spoke to participating in various ways. I organized them according to different venues: with peers, within organizations, with governments, with the public (of course some activities cross these venues, with peer workers working within organizations). In Melbourne, participants participated in more venues than in Toronto, and were particularly participating within organizations more so than their Toronto counterparts. Where more opportunities were available to participate within organizations or with government, individuals spoke to their importance, their value, and the need for more of these opportunities. In Melbourne, participants spoke more positively about their experiences participating in all venues, with those in Toronto citing more tokenistic gestures on behalf of organizations and governments. In both cities, peer work was seen as needing more development and value. Participants pointed to wanting and needing more peer workers but for there also to be more support for them, fair compensation, and more diverse positions. In both cities, participating in multiple forms was common. Although most participants in both cities voted in the recent federal elections, even a greater majority participated in other forms. Those that did not vote still participated in other ways, including sharing their story publicly, participating in committees, advisory groups and consultations, attending conferences and advocating on behalf of their peers.

## How Findings have (and will be) Shared

Beyond the dissertation, which is now available online [here](#), I presented the findings of this research at conferences, shared papers, and will be submitting papers for publication as well as writing a book for an academic press.

I have shared the findings of this research in several virtual and in-person conferences and workshops. Some have been in political science venues, such as the Canadian Political Science Association, and others in public policy venues like the International Public Policy Association. I have drafts of two papers, one based on participation and the other on policymaking that I shared during these conferences and hope to have published soon. I am also currently working on a book manuscript for the University of Toronto Press. My hope is to have the book more geared towards lived experience in policymaking, and the relationships between policy and political agency.

## Findings Relevant to CLELN

The main finding from this research is the need for lived expertise to be valued. This research therefore supports the need for CLELN. Many individuals spoke to the need for more opportunities in Toronto to participate and engage with services and policymakers, which was much more established in Melbourne. Participants wanted more peer workers, and those currently accessing services spoke to the need for more of them. Others reflected on how helpful a peer worker would have been during their experiences of homelessness. Those that currently worked as peer workers or had engaged with governments or services through consultations or advisory groups spoke to the need for more support for peer workers (to limit retraumatization), compensation that matched other workers, and the creation of space for them and their level of expertise. Individuals often felt they had to elbow their way into certain spaces and make themselves heard by others.

More value placed on lived expertise within organizations and through consultations with governments was viewed as key to positive policy change. It was also key to building trust between service users and

the services system. Peer work networks were more established in Melbourne, where there were also more opportunities to engage with governments and more integrated services.

## Recommendations (stemming from participants)

The recommendations have come directly from participants and are directly related to the findings introduced above. You are probably familiar with many of them.

As individuals shared their experiences with me, they often pointed to specific aspects of policies that need changing. This included specific changes to services as well as overall broader changes to the sector. Most participants felt that the government did not care about homelessness, with many pointing to the lack of housing and services. Almost all participants felt the need for more of their voices included in policy and service decisions, with more value placed on lived experience. Although in Melbourne peer work and consumer participation was more established than in Toronto, individuals did note there was more to be done and that there were still barriers and inequities to participating and doing so meaningfully.

- More opportunities to participate within organizations and services – and more inclusive spaces to do so
- More opportunities to participate with governments and policymakers (with more value given to lived expertise)
- More integrated services. In Melbourne, this often included many health services within short-term accommodation centres and outreach social assistance workers, which was evaluated better than more siloed services.
- Need for more long-term crisis accommodation, more housing stock, and increase in social assistance benefits
- OW and ODSP as exclusionary, with complex eligibility requirements – need for more accessible processes, compassionate workers, information regarding requirements and eligibility, and assistance with applications
- Health services are key to the population and there is a need for more targeted health services that include multiple professionals, are accessible and welcoming. Many participants in Toronto did not know where to go for health services and compared to Melbourne, few had a regular GP or used health services other than emergency departments.
- More information regarding voting and the processes involved for those without an address

## Next Steps

I am currently an assistant professor in a public policy school. I teach public policy and qualitative methods to graduate and undergraduate students. This research and my experiences are often referenced in these classes. Students are often excited about the work and always want to know more.

I will be conducting future research (if funding permits) within the homelessness space. I hope to start two new projects: one that maps the services in Canada (starting with Toronto) that includes the integration and target groups of organizations informed by these findings and a second that examines the extent to which current policies include lived experience (with a focus on consultations).

If you're interested to know more about my future work, feel free to keep in touch! I also do my best to update my website: [annakopec.com](http://annakopec.com) so you can follow along there as well!

## A (Short) Reflection<sup>2</sup>

This research has influenced how I will conduct research in the future as well as my teaching practices (and preferences). I have become quite passionate about research methods and look forward to including lived expertise in all my future research projects. Research (as much as policy) stands to only benefit from lived expertise, and the community is vital to ensuring our research remains ethical as well as effective and relevant. I will continue to share my work in venues outside of academia and look forward to working with the sector throughout my academic career. I am also passionate about ensuring researchers share their experiences more often. Rather than simply share findings, we should discuss the difficulties and various practices to inform and educate one another.

My public policy interests have also grown to include many different policy areas that interact in homelessness. The complexity needs some untangling to ensure that services are more accessible, coordinated, and integrated. In addition to research projects, I want to teach students at the public policy school (many of whom will go on to be public servants) to carefully evaluate and analyze policies and to always consider the target populations and their lived expertise.

## Conclusion

This research was only possible with the help of all the participants. It is only because of the stories of those I met, the welcoming service providers that opened doors, and the many encouraging words I heard that I was able to complete this research. Thank you!

If you'd like to chat about this report, have me edit, revise, or reformat it, please let me know!

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<sup>2</sup> You can find a detailed reflection in my dissertation (in the third chapter!).