

# Homelessness and Problematic Substance Use

*Canada's Drug Strategy is the federal response to the harmful use of substances. These include illegal drugs, alcohol, pharmaceuticals, inhalants and solvents. The Strategy takes a balanced approach to reducing both the demand for, and the supply of, drugs and substances. It contributes to a healthier, safer Canada through prevention, treatment, enforcement, and harm reduction initiatives.*

## Understanding the Connection

Like substance abuse, homelessness is a significant concern for Canadians, and there is a strong correlation between the two. A number of factors increasing the risk of substance abuse – such as poverty, mental illness, incarceration, unemployment, or the absence of strong family or peer support networks – also increase the risk of homelessness. Substance abuse and addiction themselves can also lead to homelessness, and act as a barrier to housing stability, while individuals who are having difficulty finding stable, or indeed any housing, may turn to substance use as a way of coping with these negative experiences.

In addition, mainstream supports, services and treatment for substance abuse may be less accessible to the homeless, increasing the risk of illness. For example, research in Vancouver shows that injection drug users in unstable housing are at greater risk for HIV transmission. A similar study has found street-involved youth in Montréal are at greater risk of contracting Hepatitis C, due in part to high-risk behaviours like needle sharing and involvement in the sex-trade. Women who inject drugs are also at particular risk as they are frequently connected to the sex trade.

## A Comprehensive Approach

The Government of Canada's National Homelessness Initiative (NHI), launched in December 1999, recognizes that a range of supports and services may be required to enable

people to make the transition out of homelessness, and to prevent housing loss. Through the Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative, the NHI has enabled communities to develop comprehensive plans to address homelessness, taking into account local assets, gaps and priorities. Virtually all of these community-based plans point to problematic substance use as a priority area for community investment and action, including several that have identified service gaps for youth, women and Aboriginal people with addiction issues. Other plans have identified the need for recovery and detoxification beds, structured treatment, harm reduction services and supports, and transitional, supportive and long-term housing.

## Innovative Partnership

Recognizing the connections between substance abuse and homelessness, Canada's Drug Strategy and the NHI are working in partnership to explore new approaches to prevention. Through Government of Canada initiatives such as Action for Neighbourhood Change, the NHI and Canada's Drug Strategy are investigating coordinated approaches to enhancing well-being in vulnerable neighbourhoods across Canada. They are exploring comprehensive interventions to identify and develop community resources that can contribute to health, safety and housing stability.

The NHI also operates the National Research Program, through which it is building understanding of the causes and characteristics of homelessness – knowledge that is a prerequisite to developing new approaches and effective solutions for homeless people vulnerable to other problems, including substance abuse.

*To learn more about Canada's Drug Strategy, please visit [www.healthcanada.gc.ca/cds](http://www.healthcanada.gc.ca/cds)*

*More information on the National Homelessness Initiative is available at [www.homelessness.gc.ca](http://www.homelessness.gc.ca)*

*Find out what governments, non-governmental organizations, and other partners are doing – National Framework for Action – Visit [www.healthcanada.gc.ca/cds-nfa](http://www.healthcanada.gc.ca/cds-nfa)*

