

Fair in Unfair Circumstances: Police Officers' Perceptions of Homeless Encampments

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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Abstract

This thesis presents local police officers' experiences with Edmonton's homeless encampments and the unhoused population. For this project, I asked two research questions: 1) How do Edmonton Police Service officers reflect upon, perceive, and express their interactions with homeless encampments and individuals?, and 2) How do these accounts inform our understanding of the dynamics with policing marginalized communities? I interviewed 23 police officers who were currently policing homeless encampments or had previously worked with the unhoused population. My thesis demonstrates two broad themes related to police officers' descriptions of police-unhoused interactions. First, officers are frustrated with the problem of homelessness. They were particularly frustrated with current homelessness strategies that enable homelessness while depleting policing resources. Despite these frustrations, officers learn how to manage the city's homelessness crisis through their interactions with encampment residents, often demonstrating ways to be 'fair in unfair circumstances.' This thesis also demonstrates the range of new technologies used by officers: the benefits of these technologies and how officers' perceptions of these technologies impact police-unhoused interactions. These findings provide important insight into police officers' conceptualizations of this social dilemma.

Preface

This thesis is an original work by Celine Beaulieu. The research project, of which this thesis is a part, received research ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, Project Name “Police Officer’s Engagement with the Pekiwewin Encampment in Edmonton, Alberta in 2020”, No. Pro00108562, on March 30, 2021.

Acknowledgements

I never anticipated completing the first years of my graduate studies through the coronavirus pandemic. Yet, I am incredibly grateful for everyone that supported, encouraged, and mentored me throughout these past few years.

First, thank you to my interview participants and all the officers I met through this project. This thesis would not have been possible without your willingness to share your experiences and knowledge on this subject matter. I am incredibly grateful and indebted for your help, especially with the recruitment process. I hope this project adequately reflects the realities of your daily lives.

Dr. Kevin Haggerty – Thank you for your mentorship and for serving as my supervisor. I am incredibly grateful for your continual support, patience, wisdom, and many shared anecdotes. Thank you for keeping me on track with my project, for your direct, practical advice, and for your willingness to edit and provide feedback for multiple reiterations of my writings.

Dr. Sandra Bucerius – Thank you for serving as my internal committee member and for your encouragement and feedback, especially when I first began to write this manuscript. The dedication you and Kevin show towards your work, families, and the academic community consistently inspires me and your other graduate students. Thank you for all your wisdom, and advice – I am beyond fortunate for your support and I am excited to continue working with you both over these next few years.

Dr. Dominique Clément – Thank you for serving as my external committee member. Your constructive feedback and knowledge have been invaluable in the construction and final tunings of this project.

To my family – Mom, Dad, Mary Lynn, Kim, Shae, and Remington – thank you for your unwavering, continual, ongoing support from afar. From early morning wake-up calls to last-minute road trips back home, you have always encouraged me on my worst days and throughout this entire process. Dad, thank you for all the papers you have proofread. Mom, thank you for always checking in and offering a word of encouragement. To my sisters, you have always been my biggest cheerleaders, the first ones I call, and my best friends. You all inspire me to be the best version of myself every day. I love you all!

To my support system – school colleagues, roommates, and non-academic friends – thank you for your ongoing friendship and support, especially throughout the pandemic. Although the lengths of our friendships vary, I am incredibly grateful for all the coffee dates, social distance walks, study sessions, ice cream hangouts, and late-night drinks we have shared. All your words of affirmation, advice, and accountability remind me daily how fortunate I am.

The completion of this thesis would not have been possible without you all – thank you!

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Introduction

Alberta was once considered a pioneer in reducing homelessness in Canada. It was one of the first provinces to introduce ambitious policy strategies and related reports released by provincial agencies (Alberta Secretariat for Action on Homelessness, 2008) and municipal community partners (Turner, 2014; Waegemakers-Schiff & Turner, 2014). These reports emerged after the closure of Edmonton's Tent City (Black, 2010), with goals outlining tangible strategies to end homelessness within the province. While the promise of these strategies has yet to be fulfilled, some municipal jurisdictions, such as Medicine Hat, have been lauded for their efforts to achieve functional zero chronic homelessness (Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness, 2021).

These same results have not been echoed in Edmonton. The city's initial report released in 2009, *A Place to Call Home: Edmonton's 10-Year Plan to End Homelessness*, was followed by another report, aptly titled with the following caveat *Edmonton's Updated Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness* – alluding to the city's missed goal or trajectory. While these reports focused on the social concerns surrounding homelessness, they rarely examined the criminal justice system. In recent years though, taskforce responses to homelessness and homeless encampments in the province have begun to incorporate the expertise of police officers – with Edmonton Police Service's (EPS) chief Dale McFee serving as the co-chair for Alberta's Coordinated Community Response to Homelessness Task Force (YourAlberta, 2022). Their involvement is the result of a crucial and increasingly prevalent component of homelessness barely mentioned within these reports – that is, homeless encampments.

The term 'encampment' refers "to any area wherein an individual or a group of people live in homelessness together, often in tents or other temporary structures" (Farha & Schwan,

2020). These accommodation sites may also be referred to as homeless camps, tent cities, homeless settlements, or informal settlements (Farha & Schwan, 2020; Flynn et al., 2022). These sites are often managed by and subjected to local bylaws which prohibit the unhoused from building temporary or permanent structures in parklands and/or on public property. These regulations are frequently aligned with other aggressive ‘quality of life’ ordinances targeting mannerisms and behaviours of the unhoused including panhandling and public urination.

The rise of homeless encampment sites in Edmonton are viewed as alarming. While there is no official database for recording encampments, various public city reports and briefings cite the steadily progressing rates of homeless encampments throughout the city, alluding to the severity of this social problem once again. Over the past three years, the number of encampment-related complaints skyrocketed from 790 calls (2016) to 4138 in 2019, 4054 complaints in 2020, and 6578 complaints in 2021 (Office of the City Auditor, 2022; Community and Public Services Committee, 2019). The following quote elaborates on the state of encampments in Edmonton:

...a major underlying cause of the current rise in encampments is significant growth in the number of people experiencing homelessness. The number of people falling into homelessness doubled during the COVID-19 pandemic — this increase has widened gaps in accessing housing supports, mental health and addictions services. Another factor contributing to increased levels of unsheltered homelessness include the need for shelter resources that address increasingly complex needs of individuals accessing services. Emergency shelters are more challenged to meet the needs of people experiencing concurrent or severe mental health, physical health and/or substance use disorders (Flaman et al., 2022).

These increases in encampment-related complaints also correlate with the rising number of unhoused individuals residing in Edmonton – the number of people experiencing homelessness has gradually increased from 1,196 individuals in 2016, to 1,513 in 2019 to 2,704 in 2022 (Homeward Trust, 2023). The number of encampment residents is not explicitly recorded in local statistics. However, the closest comparative rate of unsheltered individuals demonstrates a

more marginal increase than the total unhoused population – with 447 unsheltered individuals in 2019 compared to 826 in 2022 (Edmonton Social Planning Council, 2023; Homeward Trust, 2023).

The illegal nature of homeless encampments has prompted local police divisions to become increasingly involved in managing these sites. In 2020, the City of Edmonton partnered with Homeward Trust, Boyle Street Community Services, Bissell Centre, and EPS to collaboratively respond to encampment sites and connect their residents to local services (Community and Public Services Committee, 2021; CBC News, 2020a). As previously mentioned, the Government of Alberta introduced a coordinated response to homelessness by assembling the Coordinated Community Response to Homelessness Task Force in November of 2021, which is co-chaired by Edmonton Police Service’s chief Dale McFee (Coordinated Community Response to Homelessness Task Force, 2022). The combination of these initiatives demonstrates how police officers are now deeply involved in the operations, management, and responses to encampment sites not only in Edmonton but across Alberta.

I first learned about the rise in homeless encampments while following media stories that covered one of the largest encampment sites established in recent years. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Indigenous, Black, and other members of racialized communities in Edmonton worked alongside frontline and housing workers to provide services, support and prayer for individuals experiencing homelessness.¹ From July 24 to November 6 of 2020, the camp organizers – who called the site ‘Pekiwewin’ – also challenged several inefficiencies with the

¹ This proposal describes individuals experiencing homelessness in person-first language to indicate that homelessness is not a descriptor. Rather, homelessness is a condition experienced by this specific population (Menih, 2020). Presently, current literature alternates between ‘homelessness’ and ‘houselessness’ to describe this particular experience. This thesis will use the former term for two reasons: to maintain a degree of consistency and familiarity with the term for my intended audience.

city's approach to addressing homelessness. Organizers made demands that implicated the City of Edmonton, and the EPS.² As Pekiwevin activists' list of demands evolved (Omstead, 2020c), EPS officers responded to an increasing number of calls regarding traffic concerns, social disorder, and nuisance in Rosedale (where Pekiwevin was situated) and other neighbourhoods heavily impacted by the presence of encampments (Boothby, 2020). Officers were also responsible for distributing eviction notices and were on-site during the closure and relocation of Pekiwevin camp members to temporary shelters (Boothby, 2020; CBC News, 2020b; Omstead, 2020a).

Yet, Camp Pekiwevin was not the first large encampment site located in downtown Edmonton. In 2007, Edmonton's first 'Tent City' emerged on unoccupied provincial land behind the Bissell Centre. At its peak, over 200 residents resided in this Tent City before it was closed by the provincial government for security reasons. Coincidentally, the closure of Edmonton's Tent City inevitably resulted in the release of the city's ten-year plan to end homelessness reports (Black, 2010).

The operations of Camp Pekiwevin and Tent City demonstrated the complexity of officials relations not only with individuals experiencing homelessness, but also with the outreach workers and service providers (Black, 2010). At Camp Pekiwevin specifically, police officers were more involved in these complex relations. Since it was first established, Camp Pekiwevin was characterized by organizers as an 'anti-police' site, organized in direct response to acts of police violence against individuals experiencing homelessness within the city

² Items in this list included: free transit, addressing the lack of adequate shelter available during the colder, winter months, abolishing anti-camping bylaws, defunding \$39 million from law enforcement agencies' budget in the Edmonton area and mitigating acts of racialized policing violence directed towards individuals experiencing homelessness. These acts ranged from tent slashing, and pepper spraying to the destruction and theft of unhoused individuals' personal belongings and dwellings (Pekiwevin, 2020; Omstead, 2020b; Parsons, 2020).

(Pekiwewin, 2020). For example, one of the Pekiwewin social media accounts described the actions of Edmonton’s law enforcement towards individuals experiencing homelessness as ‘abuse’, observing that “houseless members in the city get no escape from policing.”³

While these depictions of law enforcement officers were readily shared, EPS officers’ direct experiences with this encampment have not been examined. The first-hand accounts of EPS officers’ experiences analyzed in this thesis demonstrate the complexity of their interactions with a particularly marginalized population. Furthermore, understanding how the police navigate this unique and often challenging situation is pertinent amidst the increased visibility and scrutiny of police officers’ actions in the context of global discussions on defunding the police and the Black Lives Matter movement.

This thesis analyzes police officers’ accounts of their experiences with individuals experiencing homelessness. I briefly discuss literature about officers’ perceptions of their occupation, critical versus qualitative examinations of policing homelessness, and existing literature about police-unhoused interactions in Canada to contextualize my project. This qualitative research project discusses three key dimensions of officers’ perceptions. First, officers frequently expressed their frustration towards the homelessness issue, as an increasing problem within the local municipality. These frustrations were expressed by criticizing current approaches, resulting in the enabling of homelessness, while reducing policing resources in what officers viewed as more crucial areas of their work. The second dimension demonstrates how officers - despite these frustrations – exercised discretion regarding how to interact with encampment residents. Specifically, this thesis section highlights how officers navigated ways they could be fair in unfair circumstances.

³ “@PekiwewinYEG.” 2020. Status thread on August 10. Retrieved February 11, 2021 (<https://twitter.com/pekiwewinyeg/status/1292920387328606208>).

This study also demonstrates how officers use specific technologies for policing encampment sites and officers' perceptions of these tools and how they are implemented in the community. Officers' perceptions and engagement with these tools demonstrate an important dimension of risk technologies – that is, how officers' positive perception of these technologies influences their successful implementation in daily policing practices. Overall, it is important to analyze these interactions from police officers' standpoints to garner their understanding and perception as they are regularly required to respond to these sites.

Chapter 1: Literature Review

Policing and homelessness are not new topics of academic research. Yet, in recent years, scholars have begun to revisit and critically examine these subjects and intertwining subthemes. In this section, I describe the current homelessness crisis in Canada and contextualize emerging encampment research throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. With police officers as my primary focus group, I briefly summarize the policing literature with a specific focus on Canadian and international projects on police-unhoused interactions. I summarize current limitations and discuss how my thesis contributes to this scholarship.

Homelessness across Canada

Homelessness in Canada became a national crisis around the late 1980s. Scholars have argued that this dilemma resulted from the federal government's decreased investment in affordable housing, structural economic changes, and the federal reduction in social and health services (Gaetz et al., 2014). Investments focused on affordable housing have been introduced more recently by federal, provincial, and municipal levels of government through programs such as the At Home/Chez Soi project and the introduction of the Housing First philosophy (Collins & Stout, 2021).

In 2007, Alberta was the first Canadian province to introduce and implement the Housing First approach which they did in seven major cities (Calgary, Edmonton, Red Deer, Lethbridge, Medicine Hat, Wood Buffalo Regional Municipality and Grande Prairie) (Alberta Secretariat for Action on Homelessness, 2008; Gaetz et al., 2014). The central premise of this philosophy is to house individuals first, without any prerequisites. Once individuals are moved into permanent residences, they are then provided with client-centred support, accessible government programs, and emergency assistance services (Alberta Secretariat for Action on Homelessness, 2008).

Thus, the provision of a ‘home’ enables individuals to successfully break the cycle of homelessness. Scholars have extensively examined and advocated for the success of this philosophy (Collins & Stout, 2021; Gaetz et al., 2013). However, encampments challenge this approach; the mobile and temporary nature of these sites could technically hinder residents’ ability to access available resources which they might qualify for were they housed in a permanent abode. Furthermore, reports related to these strategies have previously failed to address encampment responses. Consequently, the lack of directed strategies exacerbated the presence of encampments during the Coronavirus 19 (COVID-19) pandemic, thus rendering these ad-hoc sites as localized concerns across various municipalities.

In North America, geographers have significantly contributed to our understanding of encampments. Jessie Speer, an assistant professor at the London School for Economics, has published extensively on homeless encampments in Fresno, California based on ethnographic fieldwork and interviews. Employing aesthetic theories, Speer (2017; 2019) confronts capitalist notions of urban parkland by demonstrating how encampment residents challenge conceptualizations of domestic space and urban revitalization. By not conforming to dominant expressions of home, she argues that encampment residents challenge “the notion of home as a market-based and privatized structure rooted in the model of the isolated nuclear, family or individual” (2017:531). In sum, Speer’s work demonstrates the broader influence of economic and social factors on public perceptions of encampments, including the influence of police officers.

The COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath has resulted in an academic shift from studying homelessness broadly to studying homeless encampments in Canada. The previous dearth of research on homeless encampments corresponded with various Canadian cities’

attempts to grapple with increasing rates of homelessness and the mass expansion of encampment sites across urban centres (Shingler, 2022; Nolen, 2021; Moore & Gray, 2021). Current academic literature on encampments in this country has been disseminated primarily through national and federal-funded public reports (Farha & Schwan, 2020; Flynn et al., 2022). Authors of these reports have concentrated on encampments located in Ontario, British Columbia, and Quebec – emphasizing a rights-based approach to working with encampment residents. Such works advocate for encampments to be recognized as residents’ right to housing while also calling for providing these individuals with services (Flynn et al., 2022).

The majority of Canadian encampment scholars, and corresponding research, consistently oppose local police responses to encampment sites. In their report *A National Protocol for Homeless Encampments in Canada*, legal scholars Leilani Farha and Kaitlin Schwan (2020) recommend local governments restrict police enforcement and eviction threats directed at encampment residents, noting that these responses usually place residents “at increased risk of harm, including due to risks of being criminalized or incarcerated” (26). Despite these critiques, local municipalities still resort to police officers as the primary responders and ‘last resort’ service providers to these sites (Herring, 2019).

Policing Homelessness in Canada

As noted, Canadian studies on police officers’ interactions with the unhoused have been primarily concentrated in Ontario, Quebec, and British Columbia. For instance, Zakrison, Hamel, and Hwang (2004) assessed unhoused individuals’ level of trust in paramedics and police officers in Toronto. They found that the unhoused population displayed lower levels of trust towards officers compared to paramedics and had more frequent interactions with the former. These findings suggested that the frequency of these interactions leads the unhoused to avoid the

criminal justice system and may deter this population from seeking care or support from the local police (Flanigan & Welsh, 2020).

Kouyoumdjian et al.'s (2019) study, which was also conducted in Toronto, analyzed local police administrative data to determine what types of policing interactions were experienced by the subset of Toronto's unhoused population who have been diagnosed with a mental illness. Their findings demonstrated that high proportions of the mentally ill interact with the police on multiple occasions, with their odds of having such encounters increasing significantly if they were unhoused or partially housed. Such findings suggest that those residing in encampments may have even more contact with officers.

As Canadian scholars continue to unpack the relationship between police officers and the unhoused (Walby & Lippert, 2012; Kauppi & Pallard, 2016), it is important to better understand the work of law enforcement actors who seem to have evolving relations with the unhoused population. Huey's (2007) book *Negotiating Demands* is one of the few Canadian research projects to interview officers about this subject. Through her comparative study of Edinburgh, San Francisco and Vancouver, Huey argues that exclusive and inclusive strategies towards the unhoused work together to reproduce culturally specific forms of group solidarity. Amid these exclusionary and inclusionary practices, officers work as demand negotiators and political actors, constantly reflecting on the nature of their assumed roles and local demands from the public – demands which often compete with and contradict one another.

Policing as an occupation: How do the police do their jobs?

Public perceptions of officers' role fall into at least three contrasting perspectives. First, the law-and-order view depicts officers as a 'force' tasked with crime control and law

enforcement. The second perspective, conversely, presents the police as ‘service providers’ to the public. The third view conveys a critical perspective of police officers as oppressors.

While the law-and-order perspective remains the predominant perception among the public of an officer’s role, empirical research has consistently contradicted this image (Bowling et al., 2019). Research indicates that the majority of officers’ interactions with the public focus on non-criminal matters – responding to calls for service, peacekeeping, and order maintenance. Morgan and Newburn (1997; as cited in Bowling et al., 2019) explain the police are “expected to achieve more than they can conceivably deliver.” When addressing potential ‘problematic’ situations, police officers are often the first responders, ensuring the safety of paramedics and other service providers. Yet, the realities of these situations contrast with current research findings, which argue that police intervention exacerbates these situations and jeopardizes the safety of the individuals they interact with (Normore, Ellis, & Bone, 2015; Vitale, 2017).

The view of the police as oppressors draws from Marxist and critical approaches, emphasizing disproportionate policing practices in marginalized communities and racialized populations. Current research complicates these practices by considering the varying pressures experienced by officers – not only from the broader community, but also from government actors, key stakeholders, and their superior officers. Beatrice Jauregui (2021) exemplifies how pressures experienced by police officers can demonstrate ways they can simultaneously be ‘oppressors’ and ‘oppressed’. Her research suggests that “the police” should not be treated as a homogenous entity (Stuart, 2015). Rather, police officers are capable of occupying positions of power while simultaneously being subject to control and manipulation.

This summary demonstrates some of the complexity of the police’s occupation beyond law enforcement. Despite the popular law-and-order myth, the service-based nature of

policework complicates academic and public arguments in favour of abolishing or severely restricting officers' occupational roles. Specifically, these perceptions of the police as 'enforcers of the law' and the situations they encounter are deeply embedded and intertwined within broader social structures and organizations. Police officers' encounters with the unhoused population, for example, exemplify the complexity of these perspectives. Scholars have examined the nature of these interactions by considering one of three approaches: a) aggressive or zero-tolerance policing practices, b) therapeutic policing or c) complaint-oriented policing.

Zero-tolerance policing: When policing homelessness, zero-tolerance policing is considered a contentious practice derived from the controversial 'broken windows theory'. William Kelling and J. Q. Wilson (1982) first published on broken windows theory in the *Atlantic Monthly* magazine. Drawing upon a study by Zimbardo, Kelling and Wilson argue that criminal activity results from public disorder and unresolved minor criminal offences in local neighbourhoods. Therefore, aggressively targeting visible disorder and minor offences is believed to mitigate and reduce the overall crime rate in specific neighbourhoods. Scholars have heavily criticized this approach for discriminating against and alienating people subjected to these aggressive tactics (Bowling et al., 2017). Despite these critiques, this approach still informs current policing policies throughout urban centres in North America (Stuart, 2015; Walby & Lippert, 2012).

These policies also work in conjunction with local 'quality of life' ordinances that exist in various municipalities across Canada. Quality of life ordinances, or local municipal bylaws, are consistently recognized in academic literature as promoting anti-homelessness practices by punishing behaviours and actions affiliated with the homeless, including panhandling, sleeping in public, and public urination (Goldfischer, 2020; Hartmann McNamara et al., 2013). In

Edmonton, for example, local bylaws currently prohibit sheltering in local parklands, salvaging, and panhandling (Hermer & Fonarev, 2020). These regulations are often embedded within broader networks of legal agents who enforce municipal bylaws in public spaces (Flynn et al., 2022). Furthermore, these bylaws grant officers the power to interact with anyone violating these prohibitions (Flynn et al., 2022).

Current research focused on the effects of such measures portrays police officers as third-party actors whose interactions negatively affect the experiences of encampment residents and unhoused individuals. For example, Olson and Pauly (2022) argue that the police – both their presence and the potential threat of displacement – contributes to sleeping difficulties, mental health concerns, trauma, and emotional distress among the unhoused. Similarly, Flanigan and Welsh (2020) found encampment residents tried to avoid police contact altogether. Their participants preferred to reside in secluded areas, as they felt ‘on edge’ or fearful of police officers. By staying ‘off the radar’, these residents were able to avoid potential outstanding warrants and police harassment.

Qualitative/Ethnographic Policing: While scholars often criticize aggressive, zero-tolerance policing practices, qualitative, ethnographic accounts of police-unhoused interactions demonstrate the influence of broader social and economic factors on officers’ role and responsibilities within these urban spaces. These studies also demonstrate how police officers attempt to navigate various root causes underpinning these interactions (Vitale, 2017); causes which are frequently beyond their control.

Forrest Stuart’s (2015; 2016) seminal ethnographic research in LA’s Skid Row demonstrates how policing homelessness occurs – in officers’ daily interactions. By revisiting the site of Bittner’s classic article “The Police on Skid-Row: A Study of Peacekeeping,” Stuart

examines the balancing act between punitiveness and rehabilitation, demonstrating how police officers operate in fields of poverty governance understood as unique political environments. He identifies two related, yet overlooked, characteristics of these actors. First, the police serve as political actors, constantly negotiating demands placed upon them from political and organizational environments (Huey, 2007). Second, officers exhibit high degrees of ‘loose coupling’ through their actions, allowing them to exercise discretion in their daily practices while implementing formal policies. Stuart’s concept of ‘therapeutic policing’ contextualizes these characteristics, placing “a primary emphasis on the role of the self-governing individual...[who] can and should make ‘rational choices’ and must take personal responsibility for those decisions” (Stuart, 2016, p. 254). In practice, Stuart highlights how officers sought to punitively enforce municipal bylaws while encouraging or directing individuals towards available rehabilitative services.

Stuart’s work, specifically his concept of therapeutic policing, has been widely applied by sociological scholars in the poverty governance literature. Chris Herring’s (2019) work, for example, broadens Stuart’s therapeutic policing thesis by demonstrating how police-unhoused interactions are initiated through third-party, or ‘complaint-oriented’ policing. ‘Homelessness crises’, Herring argues, has resulted from a crisis of complaints, rather than any substantive increase in homelessness. These complaints are managed by police officers through spatial, temporal, and bureaucratic ‘burden shuffling’ (Seim, 2017). These enforcement practices attempt to neutralize poverty by rendering unhoused individuals invisible or incapacitated, constantly negotiating, and redirecting their needs between different social agencies (e.g., hospitals, police, and non-profit organizations). While these interactions do not result in punitive criminal justice practices, they still inflict material, social and psychological harm on the unhoused.

Conclusion

In sum, current literature divides policing-unhoused interactions into three categories: aggressive policing, therapeutic policing, and complaint-oriented policing. Police officers' perspectives on these interactions are essential to our understanding since they consistently interact with unhoused individuals, despite frequent local and academic opposition to such encounters. While Canadian scholars have primarily relied on municipal policies and encampment residents' experiences to examine officers' engagement with unhoused individuals (Kauppi & Pallard, 2016; Flynn et al., 2022), my thesis provides a unique insight into current discussions and strategies on policing homelessness by incorporating perceptions from those who comprise another important, yet academically overlooked, aspect of these interactions. While expressing frustrations about the 'problem' of homelessness, officers continue to negotiate and exercise discretion with encampment residents, stakeholders, outreach workers, and other segments of the population. These interactions are informed by the technologies employed for police-unhoused interactions, as electronically mediated complaints often inform officers' initial interactions with encampment residents. Through this analysis, I consider the subtle nuances between my participants' experiences within the context of the contemporary research with the unhoused. While most criminological encampment research has been conducted in Ontario and British Columbia, my project advances our understanding of homelessness and policing in the western Canadian provinces.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

This project applies two theoretical perspectives, merging critical examinations of risk technologies with officers' frontline discretionary practices. This section first focuses on theoretical applications of risk technologies in policing practices followed by theoretical applications of how discretionary practices have been used by frontline workers – specifically police officers.

Discretion

The use of discretion amongst street-level bureaucrats, including police officers, is widely studied. In his book *Street-level Bureaucracy*, Michael Lipsky (2010) demonstrates how high degrees of discretion are exercised by street-level bureaucrats; these individuals are often public service employees who directly interact with citizens. He elaborates on the challenges with attempting to reduce the use of discretion in bureaucrats' everyday practices given the complex situations they encounter and the need to respond to increasingly diverse human situations. Overall, he argues that street-level bureaucrats legitimize the services of the welfare state.

Lipsky characterizes police officers as street-level bureaucrats. Empirical research on policework consistently demonstrates how discretion is exercised by operational, or lower-ranked officers (e.g., patrol officers) (Bowling et al., 2019; Wilson, 1968), yet the complexity and range of officers' interactions complicate research endeavours to assess these decisions (Huff, 2021).

These discretionary practices also apply to interactions between social actors and the unhoused. Alden (2015), for instance, critically examines how frontline service providers' discretion intersects with broader supervisory and organizational objectives. Her findings support

Lipsky's main argument that frontline officers can operate as street-level bureaucrats. Yet, these behaviours, and the use of negative discretionary practices specifically, were "attributed to a complex mesh of individual, organizational and central level concerns" (Alden, 2015, p. 74). Furthermore, Alden found the application of negative discretion in highly pressurized environments with limited resources, suggesting these environments as an important avenue for future research.

To examine these discretionary practices, it is important to consider how officers' agency, current legal statutes, and broader structural influences all impact policing-unhoused interactions – in other words, how does the law, along with social, political and economic processes shape policing practices? My research demonstrates how officers exercise discretion with encampment residents while navigating local directives, community complaints and current bylaws which inadvertently affect the unhoused population. Bowling et al. (2019, p.261) argue that "[p]olice routinely under-enforce the law, using their discretion to deal with incidents in a variety of 'peacekeeping' ways, even if an offence may have been committed. Discretion may be applied in discriminatory or other controversial ways, but it is inevitable and necessary, because of the limited capacity of the criminal justice system." In short, officers' insights into the realities of their job demonstrate how their decisions are mediated through a series of social, political, and technological factors.

Risk Technologies

Police officers see the world in particular ways. Specifically, officers view the world through official categories of risk, which shape how information is produced. These categories, consequently, are embedded into risk technologies, which lead individuals to think and act in particular ways. With rapid advances in technology, risk technologies have increasingly been

used by police organizations. While these tools are promoted as objective, scholars are increasingly concerned that human biases can shape how these technologies operate (Lageson, 2020).

Officers and frontline workers who work with these tools also still exercise their own judgments about when and how to use these devices. Hannem et al. (2019, 84), for example, concisely describe how risk technologies influence frontline workers' discretionary practices:

Risk technologies enable human actors to make decisions about how they will respond to or intervene with people and situations, by rendering assumptions of threat and insecurity as seemingly calculable and manageable. In this sense, technologies operate to mediate individuals' definition of the situation and to provide a kind of external reification of previously vague notions of risk and threat.

Ericson and Haggerty (1997, 435) also focus on the impact discretion has through these interactions: "decision making occurs within the communication formats...discretion is at once circumscribed and dispersed into the communication systems that provide for routine surveillance."

As Bowling et al. (2019, 8) explain, "all police forces have been characterized by discretion exercised by the lowest ranks in the organization, necessitated by the basic nature of policework as dispersed surveillance and control." These tools are intrinsically connected to local bylaws, yet the enforcement of criminal charges varies since officers can still exercise discretion when they implement these tools and interact with encampment residents. When it comes to officers relating to encampments, they exercise discretion by understanding and perceiving dangers, risks, and threats within these sites through these tools.

Chapter 3: Methodology

In collaboration with the local police division, my research examined the opportunities and challenges faced by police officers when they interact with individuals in homeless encampments. Specifically, my research addresses the following questions:

- 1) How do Edmonton Police Service officers reflect upon, perceive, and express their interactions with homeless encampments and individuals experiencing homelessness?
- 2) How do these narratives inform our understanding of the dynamics of policing marginalized communities?

For this project, I conducted 23 semi-structured interviews with police officers who were currently policing homeless encampments or had previously worked with the unhoused population. I completed these interviews either in-person or by telephone over four months (from October 2021 to January 2022). Given the constant fluctuation in provincial social distancing recommendations throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, I provided participants with the option to be interviewed in person (when permitted), over Zoom or by telephone. Surprisingly, I was able to conduct all the interviews (except one) in person, as most officers expressed their general dislike, annoyance, or blatant hatred of the online platform. I met with the participating officers at local coffee shops or in private rooms at various police stations to complete these interviews.

I used a semi-structured interview guide (as demonstrated in Appendix A), which was comprised of open-ended questions. These prompts reflect my original research questions (see introduction). Initially, I considered narrative criminology as the primary theory for understanding my participants' experiences. Consequently, I asked participants to share specific instances describing their interactions with encampment residents, local outreach workers and the general public. I also asked about several other pertinent topics, including how their

interactions with the unhoused population were portrayed in various media outlets (e.g., local news coverage and social media platforms), and what kinds of new policing strategies may be effective for responding to the challenges presented by homeless encampments. Given the complexity of police officers' roles, my interview questions aimed to assess the kinds of pressure officers may have experienced from individuals within EPS or from external stakeholders, with a specific emphasis on how this pressure shaped their responses towards encampment residents. By examining the types of stories officers elected to share, I was able to better understand how officers interpreted, explained and justified their actions to others and themselves (Ewick and Silbey 1995; Presser 2010).

I supplemented my interviews with 9.5 hours of fieldwork observations which I was able to conduct in the form of two walk-alongs. While conducting my interviews, officers frequently spoke about how beneficial it would be for me to directly observe the realities of homelessness and the prevalence of encampment sites located throughout the city. Given the coronavirus and pandemic restrictions, ride-alongs in patrol vehicles were not permitted at the time of my interviews. Instead, the officers and I coordinated informal walk-along sessions where I accompanied them on foot to specific areas of the city where encampment sites were most prevalent. This provided me with first-hand insights into the field site and also gave me a better sense of how my participants reacted to certain situations and if their actions were consistent with their words (Jerolmack & Khan 2014; Kusenbach 2003).

For these sessions, we mostly walked around several neighbourhoods they identified as 'prime locations' where low-risk encampment sites were located or in popular areas where they often appear. Throughout the walk-alongs, I recorded jot notes on my cellphone to remind me of specific moments or interactions between officers and the encampment residents we met. After

the walk-along session, I wrote out more detailed notes, relying on the jot notes and my memory. There were also moments where officers were concerned for my safety. As there were certain encampment sites which officers saw as dangerous (e.g., tents occupied by gang members), they only pointed these out to me. But we never approached these sites.

Sampling

I anticipated completing 15 to 20 interviews. After I received research ethics approval from the university and the local police detachment, the research analyst at EPS who reviewed my research proposal application connected me with an officer who previously worked with a designated unit created for encampment responses.⁴ From there, I employed a “snowball sampling” method (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). After each interview, I asked officers if they knew anyone else with current or previous experience working with the unhoused population or the newly developed encampment team. My participants would then forward the contact information of other officers who might be willing to participate in my study. About halfway through my initial data collection stage (after the 11th interview), I reached out again to all my participants, asking if they knew any more officers to participate in my study. Their responses allowed me to conduct the remaining 12 interviews.

Interviews ranged from 34 to 132 minutes (or 2 hours and 10 minutes); most interviews averaged around 75 minutes. The initial recruitment phase focused on officers who directly interacted with homeless encampments. As the recruitment process progressed, I began to interview officers from various other units who were keen to talk about their experiences with Edmonton’s homeless population more broadly. Some of the specialized units had high officer

⁴ Although several of the same themes were mentioned by this officer, they did not formally participate in my research project.

turnover rates. This turnover was beneficial for my project since it enabled me to talk with a wide range of officers with diverse policing experiences.

Sample Characteristics: The research sample was comprised of 16 male officers and 6 female officers. They worked across ten different units – from specialized units, patrol and beat units – in four different districts or divisions. Participants were not directly asked about their rank, but they were primarily Constables and Sergeants (either Acting Staff Sergeants or Staff Sergeants). On average, participants were 39 years old and had worked with EPS for 11 years.

I also asked officers to identify themselves based on their ethnicity. This was a mistake. Without setting any parameters for this question, my participants' responses significantly varied. Furthermore, participants often identified with multiple nationalities – citing themselves as 'Canadian', for example, along with their familial ancestry. These responses, consequently, were extremely difficult to categorize into distinct groupings. These groupings are as follows: my participants were comprised of 12 officers from European descent, 3 officers who identified as Canadian or French-Canadian, 2 Caucasians, 4 Indigenous,⁵ and 1 from the Middle East.⁶ In retrospect, I should have pre-defined ethnic categories and asked participants which ones they most identified with.

Ethics and Validity

My participants' confidentiality and anonymity was of utmost importance to me given the political sensitivity of this topic. I took several precautions to maintain participants' anonymity: I replaced all their names with pseudonyms, anonymized data and conformed to the Tri-Council research ethics policy. Before each interview, I informed participants of their right to not answer

⁵ Two officers identified their ethnic background as mixed Indigenous/European descent; they are included in this category.

⁶ One officer also requested to not record any demographic information about themselves; they are not included in this section.

any questions and to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. I reminded them that their participation was voluntary, and they had the option to remove their data up to 14 days after the interview. Two participants asked me if they could review their transcribed interviews within this 14-day period, but none asked for their interview data to be removed from my study.

Coding and Analysis

With my participants' permission, I audio-recorded all the interviews and transcribed them verbatim using Express Scribe and Otter.ai. I used NVivo 12 to organize and analyze my transcribed data. I applied principles of grounded theory to ensure analytical rigour as I inductively coded for themes emerging from my interviews. I started by coding my first five interviews line-by-line, then categorized my codes into themes. The coding and analysis of my data was an ongoing process, allowing me to focus on the specific questions in my interview guide where themes emerged during my previous interviews. I coded interviews thematically by identifying and labelling relevant categories from the various interview transcripts. I then did axial coding by making explicit connections between categories and subcategories; this involved clarifying relationships between categories (Charmaz, 2014; Silverman, 2015). I sorted the emerging categories into the themes that emerged from the data.

One of the initial themes that I decided to exclude from my final analysis was officers' perceptions of local news coverage and social media content related to their interactions with encampment responses. In Edmonton, specifically with Camp Pekiwewin, local news stations extensively covered the unfolding events throughout the duration of the encampment site. Local grassroots organizations also posted content on their social media pages – requesting food or clothing, monetary donations, or simply sharing their day-to-day experiences. A segment of these posts focused on encampment organizers' interactions with police officers within the

general proximity of the camp. The tone of these posts was often critical of the police, particularly following the deaths of George Floyd and Brionna Taylor.

Through these media outlets, I began to learn about the rising number of encampments in the city. Therefore, I thought this topic could be interesting to hear about from an officers' perspective, especially since they appeared to consistently interact with encampment residents and organizers. When it came to my interviews, however, officers were either indifferent to local media coverage, shared their thoughts in ways that did not necessarily pertain to encampment response protocols or focused on the biased nature of these platforms. Officers shared similar sentiments about social media content, telling me they were either not on social media or deliberately avoiding those forms of media content for their mental well-being. Overall, I suspect officers recognized the sensitivity of the subject and were aware of being recorded for these replies, as they were more forthcoming about such issues after the recorder was turned off. Without the ability to contrast these perceptions with unhoused residents or other individuals involved in policing-unhoused interactions, I could not adequately delve into these themes while still focusing on the central focus of my analysis – officers' views on marginalized populations.

Positionality

Policing organizations are predominantly comprised of male officers. As a female researcher in my late 20s, I often navigated what I thought were subtle gendered dynamics while interviewing older, male officers. At other times, I may have misinterpreted some dynamics as specifically 'gendered', when perhaps other factors were at play. For instance, my supervisor encouraged me to buy coffee for my research participants whenever we arranged to meet at a local coffee shop. However, they consistently declined my tentative attempts to buy them a beverage. Little did I know, officers are not allowed to accept anything from members of the

public, including myself. Therefore, what I initially perceived as a gendered difference was part of my own lack of understanding when it came to police officers' expectations with members of the public.

My experiences with EPS similarly mirror those of Holly Campeau in some ways. Specifically, Campeau's (2016) status as a non-threatening 'student', a non-'anti-police' academic and a female researcher enabled her to build rapport with the officers involved in her study. Although my project does not include the same in-depth fieldwork, I had roughly the same style of interactions throughout the interview process.

Given the growing prevalence of high-profile critiques of the police and public scrutiny of officers' actions, I frequently addressed participants' concerns about the dissemination of my research. Participants consistently asked how I intended to use their interview or the intent of my research project. Others shared their concerns with the interpretation of their responses and how their words could be taken out of context, apparently fearful that the broader police service might be portrayed negatively. As Jordan explained, "I just don't want to be another front page for saying something that maybe it was my opinion, where it paints the whole organization in a bad light."

These assumptions not only shaped broader social narratives but my positionality. My status as a young, female, graduate student influenced officers' initial assumptions, presuming that I had an abolitionist stance on policework. To manage these initial concerns about my 'outsider status' as a researcher, I would often ask lots of clarifying questions throughout the interview process, thus demonstrating my eagerness to learn about the realities of their work with the unhoused population. I would also share that one of my family members was a former Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) officer. This family member also provided me with various

tips when it came to interviewing police officers (e.g., casual dress). As such, I sought “to be open, authentic, honest, deeply interested in the experience of [my] research participants and committed to accurately and adequately representing their experience” (Dwyer and Buckle 2009:59). The combination of my personal connections, education, and genuine curiosity about officers’ interactions with the unhoused population allowed officers to accept that I was open to understanding the challenges and dynamics of this type of policework.

Chapter 4: “There is no incentive to not be homeless”: Officers’ frustrations towards the ‘problem’ of homelessness

“This is the place to write this thesis. This city is getting so bad.”

Officers were keen to express their frustration with the current state of homelessness as a ‘problem’ in Edmonton. These frustrations were broadly tied to external circumstances beyond their control rather than directed toward encampment residents themselves. Through their interviews, officers’ frustration with the broader homelessness crisis was centred around two dilemmas: 1) how current services were ineffective in reducing chronic homelessness, enabling the unhoused to deliberately choose homelessness and 2) how the need to police encampments reduced resources in other areas. These dilemmas demonstrate how officers’ perceptions of homelessness are complicated by the juxtaposition of local housing strategies and city directives to support encampment residents while enforcing legal regulations on this population through municipal bylaws. This first substantive chapter will primarily focus on how officers’ perceive local housing strategies and their impact on encampment residents.

How homelessness is enabled

“You can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make ‘em drink.”

This mantra was quoted by several officers whenever they described encampment residents’ lack of interest in available services or incentive to transition out of homelessness. Yet, officers were also keenly aware of the limited support which they could provide as ‘peacekeepers’ and ‘enforcers of the law’. Consequently, some participants had strong opinions about the shortcomings in the city’s current approach to addressing homelessness and reducing the number of urban encampments. Viewing themselves as experts in this area of policework, these officers’ perspectives can be categorized as evolving, ongoing frustrations about their work with the

unhoused population. Officers' reasons for these frustrations were often directed towards circumstances or situations beyond their enforcement role.

Inadequate Supports: One of the first reasons for officers' frustration with homelessness in Edmonton was the inadequate social and financial supports available for encampment residents. The cyclical nature of bridge housing placements, for example, was identified as a significant service shortcoming. As Jonathan commented: "Honestly, the biggest frustration, from a policing perspective – and I'm confident to speak as a whole – is the system of housing." Officers usually characterized encampment residents' interactions with the city's bridge housing system in two ways. First, officers spoke about a subset of encampment residents who had no desire or intent to access available services offered by the local shelters or to move into the city's bridge housing units – a crucial step in the city's approach to ending homelessness. Second, officers noted how unhoused individuals constantly seemed to transition in and out of these units. These regular evictions from bridge housing, officers recounted, demonstrated how encampment residents struggled to successfully live in these permanent structures, due to their inability to maintain the unit or inviting 'the wrong crowd' into their space.

Since bridge housing was not always immediately available, encampment residents could reside in shelter spaces located in the city. When I asked officers about these spaces, they listed various reasons explaining why encampment residents preferred their accommodations. In particular, shelters may be divided into male/female accommodations, they may prohibit pets from entering these premises or they do not allow residents to store their personal belongings in these spaces. Erika explained:

[T]hey can't bring any belongings in [the city shelters], that's a huge thing...they have things and they're needing to set them out on the street, or try and hide them in order to

get like a warm, safe place to sleep. So, they'd rather keep their only belongings in their life close to them. So, they choose to sleep in minus-30 weather in an encampment rather than a warm shelter, which is really unfortunate.

Erika's statement reflects how officers perceived available shelter spaces as failing to meet the direct needs of encampment residents. Officers often described the enormous volume of belongings scattered around encampment sites, the numerous shopping carts toted by the unhoused, and residents' possessive nature over their belongings. During an encampment clean-up, Tyler tried to convince an encampment resident to discard one such possession:

They want to take everything...[t]his one lady...she got into this argument with me about this, this Staples calculator. She's like, "That's gonna be for my grandson." I was like, "...your grandson is not gonna be able to even use that thing. It's broken. It's also massive, like go get him a small one or something. Like you don't need that." But, but they're so attached to these material items that they've collect. And I'm obviously not talking about like clothes or you know, shelter. It's like things like the Staples calculator. It's like, come on...the reason you can't go to any of your appointments, it's 'cause you're afraid everyone's gonna take your stuff, which is fair because it's, like it's nuts out there how many times homeless people are getting robbed by other houseless people. So, like, you need to downsize so you can bring your stuff with you so you can make these appointments, so you can, you know, get into bridge housing and that kind of stuff. So that was super challenging and frustrating.

These restrictions imposed by shelters, as Tyler explained, inhibited encampment residents' ability or willingness to reside in available shelter spaces. Furthermore, these restrictions, according to the officers, also prevented the unhoused from successfully accessing services and attending necessary appointments to transition out of homelessness.

While shelter spaces were often presented as a viable option for encampment residents, that was not always the case. Through their interviews, some officers often reiterated that some encampment residents were banned from local shelters or available programs. These temporary prohibitions imposed on specific unhoused individuals were based on real or perceived risks posed to themselves, staff workers or other unhoused individuals. So, while some encampment

residents were seen as not wanting to access available services, others were understood as being unable to use these services.

While bans could reduce some problems in the shelters, they severely limited encampment residents' chances to apply for housing. As Jonathan articulated:

There are certain individuals too that'll...say, if they get a little bit aggressive with their worker at one point, and it just take someone's perception of that person at that split second in time...you're blacklisted, and you can never be housed. So that person never gets another opportunity to try and, like you've had bad days. I have bad days. But they're not really allowed to have bad days. They get blacklisted and they're done. And then, trying to get that label removed, for street outreach, it's almost impossible.

Officers thought these temporary bans most severely affected unhoused individuals who were at the greatest risk of becoming chronically homeless. These residents often struggle with an addiction, a mental health concern or both. Landon, for example, stated:

Typically, the ones that do get banned...it's an addiction issue, or it is a mental health issue. More times than not, it's a combination of both. But that's, that's where you get where their tendencies were a little bit more violence, and really, priority is protection people inside, which includes the amenable and includes the staff.

Officers perceived that these underlying health concerns amongst encampment residents were never properly or adequately addressed by local services.

Officers often correlated the city's laissez-faire approach to homelessness with their perceptions in available services' shortcomings for encampment residents and the unhoused. In other words, officers simply thought the city allowed encampment residents to reside on public property without any intervention or repercussions. While this mentality aligns with encampment scholars' research on residents' right to housing (Farha and Schwan, 2020), it directly contradicts municipal bylaws. This contradiction is concisely demonstrated through a statement released by interim city manager Adam Laughlin's (2020):

Approximately 1900 people are homeless and of that number, 500-600 choose not to use shelter facilities and camp outdoors illegally every night... The City completely

understands the attraction of choosing to camp outdoors, particularly when the weather is reasonable. Outdoor encampments offer autonomy, an ability to set up a sense of community with others and a connection to the land that life in the shelter system does not provide.

By allowing encampment residents to “camp outdoors illegally”, current approaches to homeless encampments attempt to respect residents’ human rights while affirming the criminal nature of sheltering as outlined through Parkland By-law 2202. Therefore, the offence of ‘sheltering’ permits officers to interact with residents yet restricts their ability to enforce the law. This inherent contradiction between officers’ legal status and the affirmation of encampment residents’ rights to outdoor spaces further complicates officers’ interactions with the unhoused, as I will discuss in the next section.

Legal Enforcement Hindrances

In the current political context, officers spoke about how their interactions with encampment residents were often influenced by local officials’ directives. Some participants alluded to these directives, while others – like Kaitlin – spoke directly about them: “But for the encampments, they're like, it was just coming down from like, city council and whatnot. The direction was: ‘No enforcement. Just move them along to find, like, safer zones’ and stuff like that. It was not one bit of enforcement from [my unit].” Similarly, Jonathan explains: “that's something I really didn't understand...police officers, especially with my generation and older, think that we can make the decisions based on what the city wants or what we think that they want. But in this circumstance, because it is so politically sensitive and the issues that were raised, is that the city has to make the call.” Given the political sensitivity surrounding encampment responses within the past few years, Kaitlin and Jonathan’s remarks demonstrate the tangible shift in officers’ response to encampments. Specifically, officers recognized

themselves as the ones who could not individually decide to close an encampment; this responsibility has shifted to city officials.

In sum, officers conceptualized these frustrations as hindrances. These expressed frustrations about encampment response directives were not directed towards the unhoused specifically, but rather towards situations officers did not perceive themselves as fully equipped to address. These calls, officers explained, strayed too far away from what they perceived as a police officers' true role – to 'maintain the peace' and 'enforce the law.' Officers described themselves in these situations as 'unfit', expressing their discomfort by comparing their responsibilities with outreach workers – pointing out that they were not social workers, nor had they received the training to be one. While they believed they could not replace or perform the roles of paramedics, mental health care workers or other first responders, officers were frequently first called to respond to encampment sites before these 'more trained' professionals:

So I'd like to see, folks that aren't cops dealing with this because we're not, we're police officers. We're here to enforce the law, really, and teach safety. So when it comes to mental health and drug addiction, we're not really trained for this stuff. My opinion. We're doing the best we can like I said, but we're not subject matter experts by any stretch of the imagination. Let, let folks that are trained properly, try and address it first. The challenge is that they don't want to go down there because it's potentially violent and they don't know what they're walking into, who knows what could happen, right? God forbid, I don't want anyone to go down there who's unequipped to keep that situation safe. So that's why the cops got there or now with, you know, police slash social workers (Lucas)

Similar to Lucas, most officers felt they did the best they could, with the training they had while also recognizing that these interactions may not be to the standards of other social service providers. These additional responsibilities, though, did not take away from what officers viewed as the most important aspects of their job: to maintain public order and ensure the safety of community residents, including the unhoused. Jonathan alludes to this responsibility by stating, "the city has to make the call. It is, 'cause it's their land. It's their park. If they want to have this

camp closed or not. And that, *the police are there to keep the peace in that time and try to keep the camp as reasonable as possible*” [emphasis added].

This focus on increased responsibilities for encampments demonstrate how officers predominantly perceive their roles. Jonathan and other officers’ statements mirror the law-and-order orientation – the cultural misperception that crime control and law enforcement are officers’ primary role in society. As previously discussed, local directives restricting officers’ ability to enforce the law negatively tainted officers’ perceptions of the ‘homelessness’ problem – specifically local bylaws prohibiting the establishment of tent structures. Without the ability to enforce local bylaws, these hinderances in officers’ duties consistently correlate with their frustrations around the city’s lenient approach and explanations about the enabling of homelessness.

Repetition, repetition, repetition: In addition to their frustrations with local services, the repetitive nature of response calls to encampment sites was another source of frustration expressed by officers. Officers often compared encampment management to ‘whack-a-mole’ – a carnival game where players attempt to ‘whack’ animatronic moles with rubber mallets whenever they pop up. As Tyler explained: “There were people that you’d deal with...it was like whack-a-mole: it was every week. It was the same spot, same person over and over and over again, or...you’d help them clean up their camp and get them to move and then you’d find them a block down the street the next day fully set up again.” Officers drew comparisons between this carnival game and homeless encampments, illustrating the frequency of their encounters with the same individuals ‘over and over again’ or responses to different encampments residents in a popular area. The frequency of these responses occurred both ‘below bank’ – in open natural or

man-made clearings in the city's parkland or river valley – or 'above bank' – along sidewalks and alleyways, often concentrated in the city's urban centre close to local shelters.

Officers contextualized these repetitive response calls with the increasing presence of homeless encampments in Edmonton. When I first started my interviews, officers told me they often presumed encampment residents were not from Edmonton and frequently asked where they were originally from. Officers explained that they heard about residents coming from all areas of the province and country – from British Columbia to Ontario:

[W]e're dealing a lot more with people that we've never dealt with before. So, asking that specific question [where residents came from] gave us an idea of why people are coming to the city...we would speak quite often with people that weren't from the city of Edmonton when we'd ask them what brought you to the city of Edmonton it was essentially, the fact that the city was providing good resources for the homeless population. Our shelters were offering good food, the amenities that those shelters were offering were better than amenities that were being offered by, let's say, the province of Saskatchewan or Manitoba...the people I interacted with quite often told me, "Oh, we came from Ontario", or "we came from Manitoba". So, I think it was just, they're seeking asylum in Edmonton, just given the fact that Edmonton is providing good resources for the homeless population (Timothy).

Officers' line of questioning, or the types of information they gathered through their interactions with encampment residents changed over time. The importance regarding where encampment residents came from, for example, dwindled towards the end of my interview process – with one officer during one of my last interviews describing this factor as no longer pertinent:

Braden: [T]here's some people that were like, 'Oh, why did you come here?' and like, 'Oh, you came here in winter 2020, and we were at the ECC [Edmonton Convention Centre].' So, there's a few of those, but not much. Not a lot. That was our focus last year: first was to ask them, 'what their addictions, if they had any addictions' and 'where they were from'...what we were finding was the majority of people are from Edmonton, and some people have been here for a long time.

Celine: What kind of questions are you asking now then?

Braden: So what we ask now is, "are you suffering from mental health or substance abuse," and "do you want the supports or housing resources." That's it.

The variance in prioritized lines of questioning, therefore, demonstrates the constant shifts in policing practices. While local statistics confirm the rising number of unhoused individuals in Edmonton (Edmonton Social Planning Council, 2023; Homeward Trust, 2023), officers' responses to these calls may also be a consequence of Herring's (2017) complaint-oriented policing. This form of policing shifts the onus of policing-unhoused interactions away from officers towards the public. This line of inquiry will be further discussed when I focus on officers' perceptions of the city's 311 app.

In sum, officers referred to the inadequacies of available supports and the repetitive nature of encampment responses as 'frustrations' with the problem of homelessness in Edmonton. These frustrations were practically tied by officers to depleting resources in other areas of their work.

Reduced policing resources

Officers spoke about the practical implications or ways current police services were significantly reduced resulting from the city's problem of homelessness. The practical framework expressed by officers was apparent in their descriptions of policing shelters and the current allocation of local and provincial government funding.

Policing Shelters: Although police's relationship to shelters was not the original intent of my research focus, officers adamantly and repeatedly discussed their interactions at local emergency shelters as well as their experiences at encampment sites. These experiences were consistently described by participants to exemplify where EPS' resources were directed and contrasted with the lack of policing resources in other areas.

At the time of my data collection, two shelters were consistently mentioned by officers: the Edmonton Convention Centre, formerly known as the Shaw Conference Centre, and the

Spectrum Shelter. The Edmonton Convention Centre opened in the winter of 2020 after the closure of Camp Pekiwewin and had already closed by April 2021 before I started my interviews. The Spectrum Shelter, on the other hand, opened in May 2021 and closed shortly after I completed my last interviews in October 2021.

When I asked officers about their perceptions of available shelters for encampment residents, they emphasized unhoused individuals' safety. While these shelters were in operation, officers were instructed to ask residents if they previously stayed in these facilities. It was often through these interactions that officers heard encampment residents specifying why they did not want to stay in available shelter spaces. Timothy explains, "The most common reasons that people wouldn't go to shelters was that they're unsafe, that's at least...that's the perception that they had said. The shelters were unsafe...They're not happy with the shelters themselves, they'd rather sleep in a tent or on the streets." Officers also spoke about challenges in policing shelter spaces, sharing their concerns for unhoused individuals' safety, along with the safety of outreach and shelter staff and themselves within these facilities. Furthermore, when officers described the stories they heard from unhoused individuals, they framed these interactions around experiences of violence. Officers described instances where they were approached by individuals staying in the shelters while attending calls – mentioning experiences of physical or sexual assault.

Officers consistently discussed how they were brought in to resolve problems at local shelters only after those problems had become exacerbated. As an organization, participants explained, they were told to step away or remove themselves from these environments, only to be called on to police increasingly chaotic situations. Statements from the unhoused in shelters often led officers to believe that available shelter spaces were not properly managed. Rachael described her experience at one shelter:

[W]e've had the opportunity to go downtown...and it was eye-opening, to say the least. There was a lot going on in there, and it got so bad that they had to take police from all over the city. Like, our whole team would go down and do a shift and work there and neglect our beat here because it was so violent, no control. They had an on-site use area for drugs, and it was just, it looked like a movie. Like, it was insane. Like, everybody was just doing drugs. They had an EMS member right there, and then they were just waiting for people to OD basically so that they could knock him out, bring them back. But it was, it was out of control. The windows were smashed: \$4,000 thick glass windows, smashed, damaged, completely destroyed...People were jumping off the top tier of the Conference Center trying to kill themselves. Drugs, like it was just, it was literally like an episode of "intervention".

These experiences perpetuated concerns for officers' safety in addition to the safety of the unhoused residing in these shelters. Officers spoke of the various precautions taken by their units. For example, officers never responded to shelter calls alone with their partner. They always entered the premise in teams of four. Once inside, they never strayed from their partners, and always carried a taser. These safety precautions were echoed by Rachael during her interview: "It's gotten so bad at the shelter that we show up, we have to have four officers at all times, a CW [taser] present because there's been so many assaults on police...it's a war zone in there."

When I asked how these shelters became unmanageable, officers explained these chaotic situations emerged after the shelters were infiltrated by gang members. Participants described how gang members came to occupy and set perimeters around these areas. Gang members would single out unhoused individuals, who were perceived as 'easy targets' and could easily be exploited for drugs or money. Officers compared these accounts with similar stories they heard from unhoused individuals. Some individuals avoided shelters after previous mishaps or encounters with gang members, fearful for their own safety in these areas. These accounts reinforced the risks identified in shelters and for police officers justified their closure.

From officers' perspectives, the culmination of these chaotic scenarios occurred due to a lack of safety measures enforced in these shelters. Officers explained that they provided shelter staff with safety suggestions, which included regular bag checks conducted before anyone was allowed to enter the shelter, following through with shelter bans or consistently recording who entered or exited the facility through logbooks. For officers, these were practical strategies that could mitigate risk within these spaces. Furthermore, the lack of safety measures had tangible consequences. Before the Spectrum Shelter closed, a deceased individual was found a week after their passing in one of the shelter's custodial closets (Mertz, 2021).

While shelter staff were adamant about minimizing officers' presence, participants were increasingly frustrated that policing resources were often depleted in other areas to fix the chaos escalating within these environments. For instance, officers often compared the prolonged response to law-abiding citizens' 911 service calls with shelter and encampment responses. In this way, officers described themselves, and policing resources more broadly, as 'stretched thin', to the extent that it hindered their ability to enforce the law. Officers also attributed reduced policing resources to finances, contrasting the government funding allocation to local organizations with their services' budget.

Chapter 5: ‘Agents of the City’ – Officers’ Response to Policing Encampments

In the context of all these frustrations, how do officers describe their responses to interactions with encampment residents? Some officers viewed themselves as ‘agents of the city’. In other words, they recognized they had a responsibility to ensure the safety of whoever may enter or approach an encampment. Beyond their ‘law enforcement’ responsibilities though, officers were additionally tasked with coordinating, negotiating, and supporting other local law enforcement officials (e.g., park rangers), the unhoused population, outreach workers and other social service providers. This section demonstrates how officers sought to manage homeless encampments while coordinating formal public complaints, safety concerns, or external directives related to these sites.

Collaboration Initiatives Towards Policing Homelessness

After Camp Pekiwewin was dismantled, EPS and the City of Edmonton collaborated on a new city initiative – the High-Risk Encampment Team (HRET) (Bourne, 2021). Through this partnership, EPS officers partnered with local park rangers who were overburdened with Edmonton’s rapidly increased number of reported encampments. Prior to this initiative, a limited number of park rangers responded to all encampment sites reported in the city’s park regions. The new initiative however, expanded these borders to include all encampment responses throughout the city, including the city’s downtown core.

Overall, officers viewed the HRET initiative positively as Eli explains: “it’s been very, very busy...thankfully, we had that partnership with EPS, ‘cause it’s not just...one agency can’t do it alone. Park rangers can’t solve the homeless problem in the city or respond to their, the complaints, right? So there has to be a multi-agency approach to that, for, on the enforcement side.” Despite these positive reviews, the emergence of these initiatives blurs the lines between

police officer and park rangers' legal responsibilities. For example, while the downtown core is technically outside of a park rangers' jurisdiction, these rangers increasingly responded to encampments located in this area with their partnered officer. Furthermore, while park rangers do not have the same legal powers as police officers, this partnership provided both parties with additional access to the respective agencies' resources.

Officers regularly spoke about their increased involvement in local encampment and shelter management through the HRET and other collaborations. An EPS representative, for instance, regularly attended bi-weekly roundtable discussions with outreach staff workers, park rangers and local city officials to coordinate their responses with specific encampment residents. In these meetings, the various organization representatives decided on crucial initiatives about encampment sites, including their removal dates. These conversations also allowed outreach workers to communicate their needs with officers and vice versa, especially if outreach workers were attempting to house or provide specific services for an unhoused individual.

Alongside these collaborations, the police also negotiated with businesses, city officials and community members impacted by these encampment sites and who initially report their existence. These conversations prompted officers to speak about the disconnect or lack of understanding among citizens about the complexity of encampment sites. Therefore, officers frequently found themselves reiterating, or repeatedly attempting to describe the 'on-the-ground' realities of encampments. These interactions often pointed towards the ways officers viewed themselves as inadequately trained to support encampment residents. Yet, they often attempted to manage these scenarios since officers were consistently the initial responders attending these sites. These discretionary practices demonstrate the ways officers learned to be fair in unfair circumstances.

‘Fair in Unfair Circumstances’: Officers’ Relationships with Encampment Residents

When Eli described officers’ interactions with encampment residents during a site closure, he viewed these displacement acts as being ‘fair in unfair circumstances’: “We explain like, ‘This is why you cannot be here. And I know that we're just displacing you, but there's reasons for this as well’...we don't take a heavy-handed approach. We give people time to pack up and, and we're as fair as we can be in kind of unfair circumstances.” Eli’s statement demonstrates how officers were frequently tasked with jobs they did not necessarily relish (Stuart and Herbert, 2016). Yet, participants relied on the relationships they built with encampment residents to negotiate with community members, city officials and encampment residents while policing homeless encampments. These negotiation strategies were often employed through officers’ attempts to manage homelessness, demonstrated through tangible actions designed to reduce local complaints about encampment sites or relieve the burden of site cleanups within their divisions or the city more broadly.

In my interviews, officers often expressed sympathy towards encampment residents – frequently citing challenges with drug use and addictions and how these factors severely inhibited the unhoused’s ability to transition out of homelessness. Participants also shared various ways they tried to be compassionate with the unhoused. Officers recounted instances where they bought someone a cup of coffee or kept a supply of water bottles and granola bars in the back of their patrol vehicles to distribute. In one division, a local, donation-based program allowed officers to give socks and mittens to the unhoused during the cold, winter months.

Whether or not officers were able to establish relationships with encampment residents depended on their position. Patrol officers, for example, were often disconnected from encampment residents, overwhelmed with response calls and frequently only able to direct the

unhoused towards local shelters, services, or a specialized policing unit. In some circumstances though, the officers in some of EPS' specialized units helped initiate encampment residents' transition into bridge housing or navigate available social supports. These individuals, officers explained, often did not want to work with local outreach workers. These relationships happened since these police members had more control over their work projects. Therefore, they had the flexibility to work directly with the unhoused. After my interview with William, for example, he explained that he was driving a local unhoused woman to her medical appointment. With his partner, they were trying to help the woman apply for Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH) – a provincial benefit plan for individuals who are unable to work.

Stanley and Marvin⁷ were two unhoused individuals my participants mentioned who had established long-term relationships with local police officers and successfully transitioned out of homelessness. Officers described Stanley as an Indigenous elder they first met at a local 'tent city':

[T]his elder...he just hit one year sobriety the other day, and he's housed now...at that time he was about to get housed and things like that...[T]here was a miscommunication. I think he got a little too excited with the housing part, and he was like, 'Ohh, I'm not getting housing. So I'm going to be living on the street August 1'. And then once that happened...this member actually got donations from his family and got him housed. And he's housed now.

Similarly, Adam described Marvin as a "long-time public order nuisance type of person" before he started to work with one of EPS' specialized units:

One of my regulars [Marvin]...he was a long-time public order nuisance type of person dealing with not only mental illness issues, but he also had a very serious methamphetamine addiction...[O]ur HELP team has been able to work with him. And he now gets his, his monthly shot to deal with his mental illness...and as a result, he has been pretty darn successful. One of the last time I encountered him, he says he still does use from time to time but we went from using every waking hour to using maybe once a week and it's such a success that he's housed now.

⁷ Stanley and Marvin are pseudonyms to protect both the individual and participants' identities.

Adam, at this point, showed me a video of Marvin in a tailor store. In his brand-new suit, Marvin thanked the local detachment in the video for everything they had done for him, despite ‘not always being the best person.’ These stories provided officers with moments of positive affirmation in an environment where they often did not see encampment residents successfully transition out of homelessness. During a walk-along, I asked a couple officers how they knew if an encampment resident was successfully housed. One officer simply replied: “One day, you realize you haven’t seen that person for quite a while.” These incidents, however, seemed few and far between.

The relationships officers built with encampment residents provided them with options beyond enforcement. During his interview, Mitchell explained:

“[T]he biggest misconception is a lot of us have, like pretty good relationships with homeless people and like, you know, buy them food or coffee, like a lot of us will go and buy them clothes in the winter time, if they're cold and freezing their hands off, give them smokes or whatever. And, like, we spend a lot of time and energy just like talking to them and get to know them and helping them out and we can and then we kind of use that to like, you know, when we need them to behave. We don't have to resort to like enforcement or, like worst case scenario using force, right?”

This mentality significantly contrasts with critical scholarship perspectives on policework, exemplifying how officers do not always resort to arrest or law enforcement with encampment residents. Rather, these types of interactions point to the negotiation strategies and discretion they employ in these relationships.

Officers readily shared positive stories of the relationships they developed through their interactions with encampment residents. Yet, they were also hyper-aware regarding how their interactions with the unhoused were portrayed. In the current political context, officers were never certain about how interactions with the unhoused may be perceived by local outreach, non-profit, grassroots organizers or public members. Jordan shared his thoughts on one such video:

I was on a Facebook Live video...I was accused of being a burly man, and yelling at these women for, to have to move their stuff. 'Why can't there be female officers to deal with these, these folks?' And I'm doing this, and I'm doing this. When in reality, I went and spoke to these, these folks, just had a conv-, a candid conversation like we're doing now, asked how they're doing. How did you sleep? Have you eaten? You, you know, when's the last time you spoke to your family? You assu-, the misunderstanding about this is where it's believed you're just solely enforcing. But for some of us, they're my friends. I deal with these folks all the time. We have running jokes between us, right... 'cause it's easy to come in and say, 'Oh, you're doing this, you're doing this.' But in reality, we have stronger relationships with these folks, then, arguably anyone other than the social agencies who deal with them on a daily basis. So you're accused of being this mongerer and that's, that's not the reality of it. And so, that's where I get frustrated, because umm, I don't know, it feels as though there's just a huge misunderstanding, you know, and the police will turn into the bad guy when in reality, no one I know joined the police to, to be a bad guy, right. At the end of the day, you want to just try and help people...make a better place than when you started. That's my own goal, and I know a lot of other guys, that is what they strive for.

As this quotation demonstrates, Jordan adamantly focuses on how his actions were misinterpreted and the inability to rectify that misunderstanding. Simultaneously though, Jordan's statement summarizes the daily tension officers experience through their interactions with the unhoused. Officers consistently balanced their increasing frustrations with the problem of homelessness with navigating their legal role as law enforcement officers while building rapport with encampment residents. This next chapter on encampment technologies demonstrates how officers practically discussed these interactions.

Chapter 6: Encampment Technologies

From national criminal record databases to body-worn cameras, technology has become an inevitable dimension of policework. Despite criticism, these technologies are consistently used to assist officers, which includes policing homeless encampments. This section describes the three technologies or tools consistently used by officers to police encampment sites. These tools are: (1) the 311 collector's app, (2) the 'smarties' map, and (3) the risk matrix. While these tools are all distinct, they are integrated, consistently used in tandem and influence how officers approach their interactions with encampment residents residing in these ad-hoc accommodations.

First, Edmonton's '311' service is a non-emergency contact line for residents concerned with local bylaws and public safety matters. Accessible through various outlets (e.g., telephone, smartphone app, website), the 311 service allows citizens to submit formal requests regarding various municipal services, ranging from road or sidewalk obstructions, transit services and park maintenance. Since current parkland, public place, and waste service bylaws prohibit sheltering, panhandling, and salvaging throughout the city (Hermer and Fonarev, 2020), officers and community members alike can submit formal complaints about encampments through this service.

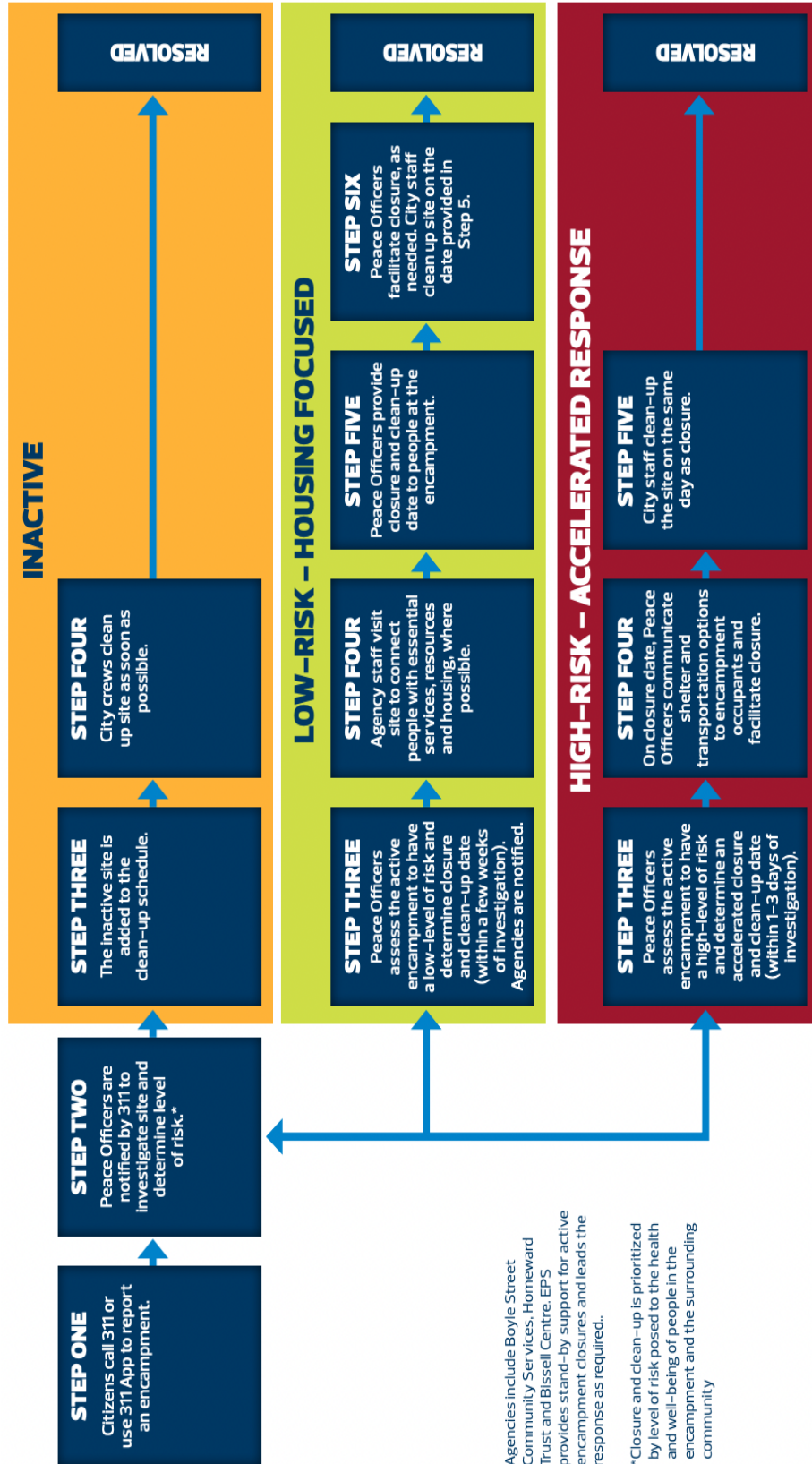
When reporting encampments, complainants are prompted to answer several questions about the site through the city's complaint request form. They provide details about the encampment: its description, whether the encampment is inhabited, its proximity to a playground or school, distinguishing features about the site, additional safety concerns, and accessibility or disability concerns (see Figure 1). The complainants' location is automatically tagged, indicating

Figure 1

311 encampment report mobile form, screenshot by the author

The screenshot shows a mobile application interface for reporting an encampment. At the top, there is a dark blue header with a back arrow on the left, the title "Encampments" in the center, and a "Submit" button on the right. Below the header is a large white square placeholder for a photo, with a dark grey button labeled "Add Photo" centered underneath it. A warning message in blue text reads: "For your safety please do not take pictures or enter an encampment. Utilize map for exact location. If someone is in distress call [911](#)." Below this is a list of form fields, each with a chevron arrow on the right side: "Location", "Description", "Does it appear inhabited?", "Distinguishing features to help locate it?", "Is camp near playground or school?", "Safety concerns? (i.e. needles, waste)", "Preferred Contact Phone Number", and "Accessibility/disability issue?". The "Accessibility/disability issue?" field has a toggle switch to its right, which is currently turned off. At the bottom, there are two more fields: "Reporter" and "Anonymous", both with chevron arrows. A thin line of text at the very bottom of the screen reads: "Reporter details will not be visible to the public, but will allow..."

Figure 2



the exact street address where the new request was started. Once an encampment complaint is submitted, the GPS tags from these complaints are uploaded onto a ‘smarties’ map.

The ‘smarties’ map is an ArcGIS-generated diagram of Edmonton, designed to track all encampment complaints reported throughout the city. Based on the information provided through the complaints, encampment sites are recorded with coloured dots – red, yellow, and green (hence, the ‘smarties’ reference). These different colours on the map reflected officers’ response time to these different sites, indicating which encampments were prioritized. During one walk-along, for instance, the accompanying officers first responded to all the ‘red smartie’ encampments, several of which were tagged as neighbouring or within the perimeter of a playground or schoolyard.

The colour of these reported encampments on the smarties map correlated with a risk matrix. The risk matrix serves as a classification guide for an encampment’s level of risk based on an officer’s initial assessments of the site. While I was not able to obtain an official physical copy of the risk matrix, other publicly available documents contextualize how the matrix is used by officers. For example, the following flow chart (see Figure 2 above) indicates how the city and its local partners are supposed to respond to encampment complaints. The chart demonstrates that levels of risk are only assigned to active encampment sites – in other words, where individuals are present at the time of initial contact. The chart also explains different response protocols depending on which level of risk is assigned by officers to an encampment.

Officers’ perceptions of encampment technologies

While the map was only accessible to select members, officers across various units spoke highly about the convenience and effectiveness of the 311 smartphone application. Specifically, officers appreciated its convenience for recording encampments and communicating with the

HRET. Landon explains: “With the 311 app on my phone, I get to quickly report [the encampment], take pictures of it, which is beautiful – like, that's a brilliant idea. And then your encampment team and peace officers will work on trying to figure out what to do with it and maybe identify who's residing there.” By submitting and requesting assistance from the HRET, the 311 service allowed officers to delegate encampment responses without depleting their own resources. In other words, they saw these technologies represent positive forms of service management, allowing officers to redirect their focus on more urgent calls for service in their local area. These statements connect with what they characterized as the cost-saving realities of these technologies – while the division increasingly feels the strain of their pulled resources, technologies are consistently recognized as a remedy for reducing officer workload (Hannem et al., 2019).

These sentiments were similarly shared by officers who previously or currently worked with the HRET: “[T]here's actually a 311 phone app, which is what we quite often would tell people...if you're walking through the river valley and you find an encampment in the bushes that you want to report – you would photograph it...where that photograph was taken, [the app] would mark it on a GPS map for us. And then from there, they can add information like that ‘yellow tent covered by a blue tarp’ [or] ‘it looks like there's two people’” (Timothy). The feedback from these tools prompted officers not only to use the tools themselves, but to also encourage community members to report encampments.

In the following quote, Jonathan’s breakdown of encampment responses highlights the complaint-driven nature of this reporting technology:

[W]e’re responding to complaints...how it works now, so people will call in through the 311 app. They’ll report an encampment, and then that encampment gets logged into the, the Ranger cue. And then it’s GPS tagged. So then, we’ll literally go out with our phones and say: “Okay, well, this is an encampment here that they're complaining about.” And

then we'll start the investigation taking into account from there – based on the risk matrix – who's there, and then, based on what the needs are from outreach.

In other words, police officers viewed themselves as reactively responding to ‘complaints’ or reported encampments by the community. The language and nature of these policing initiatives situate these interactions within ‘service-based’ literature on officers’ role in the community (Bowling et al., 2019).

Despite officers’ positive feedback, there were still shortcomings they saw with their current strategy for policing encampments. For instance, after speaking with an encampment resident, the responding officers (one park ranger and one police officer) respectively began to record notes on their separate devices. When I inquired into what they were doing, one member explained that despite their collaboration, there were still two separate reporting systems for park rangers and police officers.

Officers’ identification of encampment risks

Officers spoke about various encampment ‘risks’ or ‘triggers.’ They also explained that these triggers were outlined in their risk matrix, which served as a preliminary guide for assessing an encampment’s level of risk. I broadly categorize the triggers officers identified into two categories: criminal elements, and geographical characteristics. While these triggers are each distinct, they constantly interact with one another and can justify the closure of encampments. The following triggers under these categories will be briefly described, then considered alongside discussions of how officers exercise discretion while identifying these triggers through site assessments.

Criminal elements: The triggers comprised in this category incorporate a degree of criminality or reflect some type of criminal offence. Stolen property, drug use or possession of drugs, gang activity, and violence – often in the form of assault or make-shift weapons all fall

under this category. These risks are framed through a broader narrative of public safety, reinforcing perceived and real ‘dangers’ and threats within these sites.

Officers often mentioned the large amounts of stolen items located in these encampment sites. Bicycles were the most common stolen items officers identified, yet these items ranged from copper wire strips to yard tools, shopping carts, and patio furniture. Officers explained that selling these stolen items, along with collecting bottles and dumpster diving, were part of encampment residents’ strategy to generate revenue for themselves.

[T]hey want to find anything that can provide some income...they'll strip wire, they'll take bikes apart, sell bikes for, like, stolen bikes for parts, manufacture new bikes out of a bunch of scrap bikes, so they can get around easier...bottle collection, recycling collection, anything metal, or any of those kinds of items, I can get money. This is where you can see a lot of things getting stolen like those, the military plaques...they believe it's like copper, but it's brass. But still, the brass still gets money. But who buys those? I don't know because you're not supposed to buy that type of stuff...you know, they're very resourceful, but it's very dangerous. – Landon

Officers often found bicycles dismantled at encampment sites or during encampment closures, discussing the futility of retrieving these parts, especially if the serial number had been scratched away.

The amount of stolen property accumulated by encampment residents was presented as having a profound impact on the community. For instance, Adam describes the community’s reaction to one encampment closure: “We've had it where we're putting up an encampment and we move people along, we've had members community come over and recover a whole bunch of stolen merchandise...they come up and be like, ‘Oh, that's where my bike is! Oh, that's where my gardening tools are! Oh, well, that's mine.’ And then they thank us for finally moving them on.” Similarly, Aaron correlated a rise of encampments with an increase in property crime: “Unfortunately, a lot of the encampments...in that vicinity, there'll be a spike in property crime, right? So, if an encampment starts in a neighbourhood, property crime goes up...that's our role.

Our job is to deal with these kind of things.” Aaron would go on to contrast these short-term resolutions with their more frustrating attempts to direct encampment residents to more permanent, long-term solutions.

Officers also expressed concerns with used drug needles scattered on the encampment sites. As Braden explained: “One [site] was really bad...that site had 125 needles, like open needles just in the River Valley. The one that we just did around the corner here...a few weeks ago: 325 needles. And these are just needles.” Braden’s emphasis on the magnitude of the problem of needles justifies the perception of the dangers within these sites. Jonathan focuses on a similar, yet different concern with the presence of needles:

Obviously, we know drug use happens in almost every encampment; that’s not a foreign thing. But what we’re concerned about is where they start leaving needles close where the kids may access it or having someone who may accidentally pick it up or a pet or something like that, where it could transfer. You know, someone could get hurt or die, especially with how crazy fentanyl, and the carfentanyl is right now” (Jonathan)

Here, there is a particular emphasis on where improperly discarded needles are close to the broader public – whether it is kids, pets or anyone who may come across them. These concerns echo literature related to officers’ perceptions of the opioid crisis (Berardi et al., 2021). While some literature emphasizes the changing attitudes of officers towards harm reduction strategies, there was more of a division between officers’ perceptions of harm reduction and aggressive policing practices.

Public Risk: Officers often described observing these public risks factors such as discarded needles and accumulated stolen property in the various encampment sites they found. Kaitlin animatedly described one instance where she came across an open fire with her work colleagues:

Ohh, it was just the other day, actually...all of a sudden I just – it was night – so I could see this bright flame...I was like: “Holy man! That guy’s gonna burn!” ‘Cause sometimes

they're intoxicated. So, we went in there: "What are you doing?" And he's like: "Ahh, I just got cold, and it got a little high." And he had a little heat stove thing, but the way he hooked it up wrong, the flame was huge, and it was like this far away from the tarp! I was like, "you are going to burn yourself alive, like, please turn that down!" ...and he set all these little candles out and, just the way it's set up!...And you're just like, "This is just such an accident waiting to happen." So, we were like: "This is what you gotta do, and please move this, and please don't do that." But it's...there's some really dangerous stuff in there. Just because they don't, I don't know. They're not thinking about it, I guess.

This story points to various factors leading to the potentially lethal dangers of an open fire at an encampment site. First, residents' intoxication or recreational drug use could hinder their ability to properly manage a fire, especially when flammable items are placed close to the open flame.

Jordan recalled meeting one woman who was severely injured by an encampment fire:

There's a lady I spoke with... she was sleeping [outside] under a tarp. So it was, it was a parking lot of a building. So, we go and say, "Kay, you got to take this, this tent down." And she was pretty slow-moving. So, just struck up a conversation and I ask, I said, "Are you doing okay?" Because she looked in pain. So, what happened was, her and her fiancé had been using drugs...she had gone to sleep and I believe her spouse was using fentanyl. They had a candle set up in a tent. Well, either her jacket or the tent caught on fire. And her entire arm, she had third-degree burns on her arm. So, she showed me and she had just got them wrapped up and the wounds were a day or two old. But the wounds were tremendous to her arms (Jordan would go on to explain that he had seen severe burns with about 8-10 other encampment residents over the past year).

These factors are still included in the risk matrix however, they did not necessarily warrant the immediate closure of the site. Yet, officers stated that these elements were still considered factors that could warrant the closure of an encampment.

Geographical characteristics: An encampment's location and size are additional triggers included in officers' assessments for risk. The importance of these geographical characteristics of encampments was demonstrated through both officers' interviews and during my walk-alongs. As Brayden explains, "[w]hat we deal with first is the illegal encampments. So then high priorities, and or a high-risk encampment, which is deemed eight or more people – eight or more

tents, structures, parks, school grounds, blocking roadways, sidewalks – anything that’s going to put the public at risk.”

An encampment’s location had an immediate impact concerning its response priority. Typically, HRET officers responded to red smartie or high-risk encampment site locations first before they responded to lower-risk encampments.⁸ During one walk-along, the two officers explained that they prioritized all red smarties or suspected high-risk encampment sites within their assigned area, responding to these complaints within 24 hours. However, they responded to encampments reported by playgrounds, school yards, or daycares even more promptly, usually within the beginning hours of their shift. At the start of one walk-along shift, the officers were responding to an encampment located by a local high school. As one officer explained, “If there’s a kid that can come across an encampment, then it’s unsafe.” He would go on to share stories about other encampments responses located around or inside playground structures – usually on the slides. We also responded to an encampment reported on a playground structure. However, the resident was no longer present by the time officers arrived. This interaction speaks to the transient and mobile nature of encampment residents and their dwelling spaces.

Officers explained that these risks were directly related to the risk matrix developed in the aftermath of Camp Pekiwin. Officers explained that encampments would typically fall into a high-risk classification if they meet at least two of these triggers. Yet, the outcome of officers’ assessments and justification for encampment closures varied. During a walk-along, for instance, one encampment, within a row of encampments stretched down a side street, offered several ‘triggers’ for closure. The officers pointed out some of these identified risks: they lifted one of the tarps covering various bicycle pieces with scratched-out serial numbers, they directed

⁸ There were exceptions to this rule, especially if low-risk encampments were located relatively close, or near high-risk encampments sites.

me to watch my step whenever they spotted a needle on the ground or warned encampment residents to put out any fires they spotted. Yet, none of these encampment sites were closed.⁹ Overall, officers conveyed these risks as tangible or perceive threats to the public and encampment residents alike – thus, reiterating their responsibilities as law enforcers or peacekeepers.

Officers' discretion in encampment assessments

While these triggers could warrant an encampment's closure, the presence of stolen property, drug use or open fires – for example – did not have the same impact as other risk factors. These variations were the result of officers' own exercise of discretion while interacting with encampment residents. During one of my interviews, Timothy explained:

when we show up, there has to be some form of law that's been contravened or broken. For me, there was always that element always existed, the option for enforcement was always there. It just met based on the matrix that we utilized to determine whether it was a high-risk, low-risk, moderate-risk, or sorry, high, or high low or moderate-risk encampment that depended on what we saw in our observations that our observations, our interactions typically would result in what the outcome for that specific encounter was going to be (Timothy)

Jordan also provides another example demonstrating how officers exercise discretion when policing encampments:

I remember we gave a three-day eviction [to an encampment site] ...we left and immediately after, someone got bear sprayed and someone got hit in the face with a baseball bat...So, we went back and it was like, "Nope, that's it. It's [an] immediate [eviction] now, sorry." Like, someone has just been brutally beat...this high risk of violence has already happened, and we need everyone to leave. So that would, like, that kind of stuff would change it for us.

Potential negative consequences of encampment technologies

⁹ I may not have seen the distribution of eviction notices to encampment residents' given the limited number of walk-alongs I participated in.

It is important to consider the potential negative consequences of these technologies. The convenience and efficiency of self-reporting smartphone applications may lead to increased surveillance and displacement of encampments not only by officers but by community members as well. The persistent displacement of these sites has negative consequences on its residents (Flanigan and Welsh, 2020). This mentality may reinforce perceptions of ‘not in my backyard’ (NIMBY) or the continued criminalization of homelessness in the local area. Furthermore, it indicates how unhoused individuals who reside in encampment sites are stigmatized and not viewed as part of the local community as it relates to broader social norms or perceptions of appropriate housing or housing needs.

Furthermore, the intersection of these reporting tools with quality-of-life bylaws reinforces and contributes to encampment residents’ continued interactions with the criminal justice system. As one officer said, local bylaws permit officers to engage with encampment residents and other people of interest. Kaitlin explains: “the good thing about bylaws is it gives us the authority to get their information. So if you are breaking a bylaw or a law, we are entitled now to your information. You have to give it to us. It's not an option. That's the only thing that bylaws are handy for.”

It is useful to compare these accounts with the broader social perceptions of encampments and current tools used to respond to these sites. The 311 reporting of encampments immediately indicates these sites as ‘threats’ or ‘hindrances’ in the daily lives of city residents. The reporting process alludes to broader social perceptions of encampments as dangerous. Therefore, while there are prompts for social workers or other service providers to be the first responders to these sites, the implicit danger label embedded in the current reporting system prompts officers to be the first to respond in the name of protecting the safety of other

community members and social workers. In other words, the current reporting system for encampment sites promotes officers to respond to these sites, even if they do not believe they can adequately support the unhoused.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

This thesis demonstrates how police officers in Edmonton describe their experiences with local homeless encampments and the unhoused population. Based on the 23 interviews I conducted, my findings discuss two broad themes. First, my thesis demonstrates how officers express ongoing frustrations with the ‘problem’ of homelessness in Edmonton, critiquing current strategies that enable homelessness while simultaneously depleting local policing resources. Regardless, officers described ways they learn how to manage homelessness by exercising individual discretion or ways to be ‘fair in unfair circumstances.’ These management strategies are increasingly complicated by local city directives and community complaints against local encampment sites, demonstrating how individual officers’ decisions are mediated through broader social and political influences. The second theme demonstrated by my thesis unpacks how officers perceive and use new technologies to police encampment sites.

Limitations

The lack of distinction between officers’ interactions with Indigenous encampment residents and other encampment residents is a pertinent limitation from this thesis’ findings. While officers described some individuals in their stories as Indigenous and cited the impacts of intergenerational trauma at times, no explicitly distinct differences were drawn between how officers interacted with this segment of the unhoused population. Yet, a substantive portion of the unhoused population in Edmonton identify as Indigenous: since 2018, the number of unhoused who identify as Indigenous has risen from 901 to 1506 at the end of 2022, representing 56% of Edmonton’s current unhoused population ((Edmonton Social Planning Council, 2023; Homeward Trust, 2023). Recognizing the importance of this dialogue amidst national conversations on racial-biased policing practices, this sensitive matter may have possibly been

illuminated through ethnographic methods of research. It is often through these methods of participant observation that researchers can compare what participants share and how these interactions unfold in real time.

Future Research

Since this thesis focuses solely on officers' perspectives, the perspectives of unhoused residents who are also involved in policing-unhoused interactions would further contextualize the nature of these local interactions. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, I could not adequately assess the interplay of these interactions throughout my data collection process. However, the inclusion of the unhoused's perspective in these interactions will further demonstrate the complexity of these interactions. One potential avenue may examine how the 311 app, the smarties map and the risk matrix affect the unhoused's experiences of homelessness in Edmonton.

When it comes to policing encampment sites, local partnership between local law enforcement agencies may be another important avenue for future research. Since researchers primarily focus on conducting research with singular legal enforcement agencies, these blended partnerships between different enforcement agencies may demonstrate the increasing complexity of various legal actors and the roles they occupy. A final potential avenue for future research may examine how these interactions are influenced by the broader effects of the media. With the popularity of social media platforms and readily available access to mobile devices, snapshots of these interactions can be disseminated quickly. Therefore, the effect of these news-sharing outlets on public perceptions of the police and the unhoused warrant further examination.

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Appendix A: Information Letter and Consent Form

Police Officer's Engagement with the Pekiwewin Encampment in Edmonton, Alberta in 2020

Research Investigator

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You have been invited to participate in the graduate student research study "Police Officers' Engagement with the Pekiwewin Encampment in Edmonton, Alberta in 2020." Please read this form carefully and feel free to ask me any questions you may have.

Background and Purpose of Study

The purpose of my study is to understand the dynamics involved in policing the Pekiwewin camp and Edmonton's homeless community more generally. You were invited to participate in this study because of your involvement with the Pekiwewin encampment and/or your experience interacting with individuals experiencing homelessness in Edmonton. The findings of this study will be used in support of my master's thesis. The findings of this study will be of interest to Edmonton Police Service, River Valley Park Rangers and other policing organizations. The data collected from this study will explore the complexity of officers' work experiences and the obstacles they may have faced while working with these specific groups of individuals.

Study Procedures

I will be conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews (via phone, Zoom or in person) to explore police officers and park rangers' work experiences with the Pekiwewin community and Edmonton's homeless community, more broadly. The interviews will be scheduled to last between 45 and 60 minutes. With your permission, I would like to record our interview to assist with the transcription process although your comments will remain strictly confidential and all participants are assigned a pseudonym.

Benefits

You may receive no immediate benefits from participating. However, you may find it enjoyable to discuss your experiences with Pekiwewin and share your knowledge about interactions with individuals experiencing homelessness in Edmonton.

Risks

Interviewing can be mentally exhausting, and you might feel tired during the interview. With these risks in mind, we will be able to take breaks whenever you like during the interview. I have ample time, so please do not feel rushed at any point. If you begin to feel undue stress during the interview, we can end it. I am also able to direct you to an appropriate mental health service

accessible to you through the Edmonton Police Service if this may be beneficial to you. There may be limits with using online platforms (e.g., Zoom) in terms of potential breaches of security. To minimize this risk, the computer used to conduct this interview will be up to date in terms of security updates, antivirus protection, and firewall. If we set up an in-person meeting, I will wear a face mask for the duration of our interview and maintain six-foot distance between us in respect of physical distancing guidelines. These precautions will be established to reduce physical contact and the potential spread of the coronavirus.

Voluntary Participation

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You are free to decline from participating or to answer any question posed to you. You have the right to withdraw your consent to participate in this project at any time (including once the interview is underway) without any consequences. You may request your data be removed up to 14 days after the interview. You will have the opportunity to see the transcript before deciding upon whether to withdraw any of the data.

Confidentiality & Anonymity

The information that you give me will be kept **completely confidential**. My supervisor and I will only have access to this information.

- This research will be used for research publications and conference presentations.
- Your name will not be put on any of the data that I collect. Instead, I will use a pseudonym name. This way, nobody from outside the study will be able to tell who you are.
- Your name will not appear in my master's thesis project.
- I will be asking you if I can record your interview. To protect your privacy, I will ask you not to say your name while you are being recorded. The online interviews will only be recorded by audio. No visual footage will be recorded.
- To prevent any unauthorized access to the Zoom meetings, I will create the meeting to only allow you to join. I will do this by securing a log-in meeting ID and password.
- Any hard-copy documents relating to this study will be kept in locked filing cabinet. The transcriptions and audio-files of the interviews will be encrypted and kept on a study computer.
- Data will be kept for a minimum of 5 years after my master's thesis project ends, as indicated in the University of Alberta's Research Policy.

Questions

If you have any questions about the interview process or this research project, please feel free to contact the researchers. The plan for this study has been reviewed and follows the ethical guidelines provided by the University of Alberta's Research Ethics Board. If you have any concerns about this study, or questions concerning participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615. This office has no direct involvement with this project.

Consent to Participate: I have read and understood the description provided and have had an opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered. I consent to participate in this research project, understanding that I may withdraw my consent at any time. A copy of this consent form has been given to me for my records.

Consent

By signing below, I am indicating that I have read and understood the above information, and that I consent to participate in this research project. You can send a copy of the signed consent form to crbeauli@ualberta.ca

1	Do you agree to participate in the interview today?	Yes	No
2	May I tape-record the interview?	Yes	No

I, _____, have read the participant this form and have offered them the opportunity to ask questions.

Participant's Signature: _____

Date: _____

Researcher's Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix B: Interview Guide

Hello, it's nice to meet you! My name is Celine Beaulieu, and I am a masters' student here at the UofA. Thank you again, for your participation in my research project. I just wanted to remind you of a couple of ethical concerns before we get started. First, for my research project, I am interested in officers' experiences and interactions with homeless encampments and the unhoused population here in Edmonton. With your permission, this session will be recorded. During the interview, we will avoid mentioning each other's names just to make sure we maintain a degree of confidentiality and anonymity. If you would ever like to pause or take a break during this interview, feel free to ask me at any point in time. Also, the transcript from this interview will only be seen by myself and my supervisor but texts may appear in future publications under a pseudonym.

History & Biography:

Can you tell me a little bit about the position you are working in right now?

- What responsibilities do you have in your current position?

Policing Homeless Encampments:

Can you tell me a little bit about the policing experiences you have had so far with individuals experiencing homelessness?

Can you describe how you would characterize your interactions with:

- 1) The individuals who lived in homeless encampments?
- 2) The community organizers/volunteers involved with homeless encampments?

How are your interactions with individuals experiencing homelessness usually initiated?

- How do you generally respond when you interact with these individuals?

What are the main challenges you have experienced working with this population?

- What dynamics or challenges may be misunderstood when it comes to policing individuals experiencing homelessness?

How do you think these groups of individuals perceive you, as a police officer?

- 1) Individuals experiencing homelessness
- 2) Community organizers involved with homeless encampments
- 3) General public

What are your thoughts on how your interactions with individuals experiencing homelessness are portrayed by:

- 1) Community activists/social media platforms
- 2) Local and national news coverage

What factors shape or determine how you have responded homeless encampments?

- Have you faced any particular pressure from superiors? Politicians? Community members to deal with this situation in a particular way? (probe ONLY if participant mentions these actors)

What kind of new policing strategies do you think would be effective for dealing with:

- Interacting with the homeless population?
- Interacting with community organizers advocating for individuals experiencing homelessness?

What do you think most people in society don't understand or appreciate about the police's relationship with homeless individuals or with encampments?

Demographic Questions

What year were you born?

What is your gender?

What is your ethnic background?

How long have you been a police officer?

Final Thoughts

Is there anything else that you think is important to talk about that maybe we didn't get to?

Did you have any further questions related to this interview or my study?

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview and share about those experiences with me. If you have any more questions about this interview or my research project, feel free to reach out to me.

Appendix C: Recruitment Letter

Draft email

Dear EPS and River Valley Park Ranger members,

My name is Celine Beaulieu, and I am a masters student who is associated with the Centre for Criminological Research at the University of Alberta and who has entered into a research agreement with the Edmonton Police Service. My supervisor is Dr. Kevin Haggerty, who is a professor in sociology and criminology in the Department of Sociology and a faculty member associated with the Centre for Criminological Research

Following the emergence of Camp Pekiwewin in Edmonton's downtown area in the summer of 2020, I am interested in talking to EPS officers and park rangers in order to learn about the types of experiences and challenges they faced in policing the Pekiwewin encampment (and with individuals experiencing homelessness more broadly). Through this project, I hope to learn more about the experiences of Edmonton's police service in policing and working with the city's homeless sector and involvement with the community activists and individuals who established Camp Pekiwewin. I hope that my collaboration with the Edmonton Police Service and River Valley Park Rangers will inform future practices for policing homeless and marginalized community members in Alberta. I also hope that my findings may have implications for other policing organizations across Canada and beyond.

For this study, I am hoping to interview 20 officers who work for the Edmonton Police Service and River Valley Park Rangers. In particular, I am hoping to interview sworn members who were either directly involved with the policing of Pekiwewin encampment or have previously involved with work related to the homeless community, i.e., patrol officers.

The interviews will be *strictly* confidential and will last approximately 45 minutes. If you are interested, we will set up a conversation by phone, Zoom or in person(whichever you prefer). The specifics of these meetings will be contingent on the Alberta Health Services recommendations concerning social distancing that are then in effect.

Please email the principal investigator at crbeauli@ualberta.ca to set up the interview date, time and preferred method of communication.

Thank you very much and we are looking forward to the interviews.

Sincerely,

Celine Beaulieu
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Kevin Haggerty

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