Homelessness Coverage in Major Canadian Newspapers, 1987 – 2007

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ABSTRACT *This article describes how the Canadian printed news media depicted the homeless and their situations between 1987 and 2007. Our study used a descriptive, cross-sectional design and a content analysis was conducted on selected newspaper articles on homelessness issues. The main themes were housing-related issues, profiling of homelessness, health-related issues, economic factors, illegal activities, community aid and support, and social factors as cause of homelessness. Housing related issues, community aid and support, profiling of homelessness and economic factors were addressed in 85.3% of the stories. This study provides a retrospective examination of the media's interests in and portrayal of the homeless and homelessness issues.*

KEYWORDS *Content analysis; Homeless; Homelessness; Mass media; Media*

RÉSUMÉ *Cet article décrit comment la presse écrite canadienne a représenté les sans-abri et leurs situations entre 1987 et 2007. Nous avons suivi une approche descriptive et transversale et nous avons effectué une analyse de contenu sur un éventail d'articles de*

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journaux traitant des sans-abri. Les journaux canadiens sélectionnés couvraient des aspects différents de leur vécu, les thèmes principaux étant : le logement, les portraits de sans-abri, les questions de santé, les facteurs économiques, les activités illégales, les ressources communautaires, et les facteurs sociaux entraînant la perte d'un foyer. 85,3% des articles mettaient l'accent sur le logement, les ressources communautaires, les portraits de sans-abri et les facteurs économiques. Cette étude effectue un examen rétrospectif sur l'attention que portent les médias envers les sans-abri et la manière dont ils représentent ces derniers.

MOTS CLÉS *Analyse de contenu; Sans-abri; Médias de masse; Médias*

Introduction

Media and professional interest in homelessness together represent important sources of data that may be useful in understanding broader societal factors that influence policy development concerning this issue (Buck, Toro, & Ramos, 2004). It is well known that homelessness in Canada has been increasing dramatically over the past two decades. In 2007, the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat (2007) estimated that more than 150,000 Canadians were using homeless shelters every year and that countless others on the streets were comprised of the "hidden homeless"—away from the public eye and outside of the shelter system.

This article describes how the Canadian printed news media depicted the homeless and their situations over a 20-year period, between 1987 and 2007. It is the first part of a larger study that focuses on the relationship between the media and outcomes related to the public's attitudes about the homeless and their issues, as well as homelessness policies. The purpose of this phase of the study is to document and explore the content about the homeless and homelessness as portrayed in the Canadian printed news media. The discussion also focuses on how the content fits with the profile of the Canadian homeless population.

Literature review

Content analysis of news stories

Content analysis of media messages (Imrich, Mullin, & Linz, 1995; Kaid, Tedesco, & McKinnon, 1996; Torck, 2001) is not uncommon, although it has not been extensively used to examine social issues. Imrich et al. (1995) used a content analysis framework to analyze the presence of prejudicial statements in media with regard to criminal cases before the courts. Kaid et al. (1996) explored the use of adwatches and commercials in presidential campaigns, and the effect these had on election results. Adwatches are media critiques of candidate advertisements designed to inform the public about truthful or misleading advertising claims. These critiques are often a source of political discourse and provide an important source of information to reporters.

Examples of media content analysis studies that looked at a social issue are those conducted by Torck (2001) and Lee, Link, and Toro (1991). Torck studied four different street newspapers, comparing and contrasting how each publication approached the topic of homelessness. Each newspaper dealt with the issue of homelessness in a unique way by writing pieces directly related to homelessness, discussing political involvement around homelessness, and/or including editorials and poetry about being homeless.

Some of the newspapers in Torck's study were written by homeless people expressing their views and opinions, while others were written by journalists exploring the issues surrounding homelessness. Torck not only used content analysis to summarize the portrayal of the homeless community in a form of print media, but also focused on the effects this would have on the empowerment of the population (Torck, 2001).

The media and homelessness

In modern society, ordinary citizens look to the media for their news (Lippmann, 1997). Issues and events can be read and interpreted in multiple ways. Politicians, policy and opinion makers, and the media are powerful translators of issues and events and spend considerable time developing and disseminating messages on the assumption that they, as the people, make a difference in how these societal issues and events are understood and dealt with (Kinder, 2007). The premise that the media holds considerable power in society is based on the media's impact on the public's attitudes and opinions and the meaning policy makers and other targeted groups or individuals give to public policy issues as a result of the media (Hutson & Liddiard, 1994; Lee et al., 1991).

This "set of interpretive packages that give meaning to an issue" is media discourse (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989, p. 3), both reflecting and contributing to the creation of public opinion. "Because public opinion is a social and communicative process, individuals' opinions are in many ways dependent, for both form and content, on the larger context of public debate" (Price, 1989, p. 198). This is not a one-way process, and journalists frequently rely on public discourse to develop and crystallize meaning (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). The manner in which the media is used by consumers often affects the quality of public discourse and contributes to distancing or influences the public's engagement with the political process. Media discourse also contributes to the process by which the public constructs social reality. The impact media coverage has on audiences' interpretation of news stories is said to influence opinions by stressing specific values, facts, and other consideration (Nelson, Oxley, & Clawson, 1997), and is well related to the construction of social reality. Soukup (2002) suggests that

> the way we look at the homeless affects the way we look at homelessness and, ultimately, the social policies we choose. Homelessness itself touches most of us, at least indirectly as we see men and women on the streets or asking for work or begging for financial support. Many of us want to do something but don't know what. We look for guidance, often to the news media. We less often think of homelessness from a social perspective. (p. 1)

The media, by asking the right questions, inciting the right emotions and revealing the facts, helps us bridge the gap between our mediated experience and our walking-down-the-street experience (Lee et al., 1991). Without the media, the majority of the public will form their opinion by the occasional experience with homeless panhandlers on street corners, squatters on sidewalks, or the homeless seeking shelter in the subway stations to get out of the cold. People who do not spend any time in the city centres or locations where the homeless frequent might not know about the homeless and their issues—unless homeless people were camping in someone's back yard or the media announces a homeless shelter in a particular subdivision.

Media impacts on policy

Once the media stories create civil discourses concerning complex solutions for this social issue, and the homelessness stories becomes a larger societal and political debate, the outcomes as a result, including the reaction of the public, may have a strong impact on policy decisions (Ono & Jackson, 2011). As pointed out by Buck et al. (2004), a large amount of attention to this matter in the media, and a large reaction by the public, could result in social and/or health policies to address the situation. On the other hand, if the media's and consequently the public's responses are minimal or dismissive it is more likely that policies will not be developed to support programs, services, or initiatives for homeless people. Not only is the public influenced by the media, but so also are politicians and government-level policy decision-makers (Hutson & Liddiard, 1994; Lee et al., 1991).

This study answers the following two research questions:

1. Between 1987 and 2007, how did major Canadian newspapers cover homeless issues in terms of population discussed, article type, monthly differences in amount of coverage, and important time periods?

2. Between 1987 and 2007, how did major Canadian newspapers cover different homeless topics?

Methodology

Research design

This study used a descriptive, cross-sectional design. A content analysis was conducted on selected newspaper articles on homelessness issues. Content analysis serves "to reduce the total content of a communication (e.g., all of the words or all of the visual imagery) to a set of categories that represent some characteristic of research interest" (Singleton & Straits, 2005, p. 371). The content analysis was focused on analyzing how major Canadian newspapers covered homeless issues from 1987 to 2007. In applying content analysis in this study, both quantitative and qualitative procedures were involved with the recognition of the subjectivity in interpreting the themes of the newspaper articles. A coding scheme was applied to obtain the quantitative aspects of the data, while the coding of the major themes of the articles was accomplished with a combination of both qualitative and quantitative procedures. Six researchers coded the themes of the news articles independently, and inconsistencies among researchers were thoroughly discussed until consensus was achieved. Through the discussions among different coders about the inconsistencies, common understandings that are more likely to best reflect the general reading audiences' interpretations of the themes were achieved and thus increased the validity of the study.

Sample

A purposive sampling technique was used to obtain articles from six chosen newspapers: the *Vancouver Sun, Calgary Herald, Edmonton Journal, Toronto Star, Globe and Mail*, and *Montreal Gazette*. The inclusion criteria for these newspapers were as follow:

• daily circulation rate of at least 100,000 on an average day as per the Canadian Newspaper Association's Daily Newspaper Circulation Report 2006

- if more than one newspaper had > 100,000 daily circulation in any particular province, then the highest one in that province was chosen
- written in English
- available online from 1987 to 2007

Two newspapers were chosen in the province of Ontario, one being a national newspaper with readership across Canada. Since this was an Alberta-based study, two newspapers were also chosen from Alberta. Some provinces did not have representation due to lower daily circulation rates and online search availability. The *Montreal Gazette* was not the most-read newspaper in Québec (CNA, 2006) but was an English newspaper accessible to the researchers online. A preliminary scan of newspaper articles on homeless people and homelessness showed a peak in the late 1980s; therefore, to obtain longitudinal data that showed possible differences in the pattern associated with change in economics and political systems over time, a 20-year retrospective study was conducted. The words *homeless, homelessness, vagrant, vagrancy, squatters, informal settlements,* and *street children* were used as search terms. A 10% sample of all articles that included the search words was obtained and rated for inclusion.

A modified rating scale adapted from Buck et al. (2004) was used. The articles were rated on a four-point scale: 1 = low intensity/little relevance, 2 = moderate intensity/some relevance, 3 = high intensity/theme, and 4 = very high intensity/major theme. All articles rated 3 or 4 were included. One team member rated each article and two other investigators independently rated a subset (20%) of the same articles for inclusion. Discrepancies were resolved by consensus. The criteria used to decide to include (3 = high intensity/theme and 4 = very high intensity/major theme) or exclude (1 = low intensity/little relevance, 2 = moderate intensity/some relevance) were based on the degree of relevance to one or more of the following themes: homelessness and politics (e.g., priorities of the government), homelessness and economics (e.g., charities, government funding practices, economic boom or downturn, loss of jobs), homelessness and the environmental (e.g., NIMBY), and homelessness and values (e.g., public value, political value). In total, 1,014 newspaper articles were included and analyzed in this study. The distribution of the articles in each newspaper is provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Distribution of selected articles among newspapers

Newspaper	Number of articles	Percent of total
Toronto Star	304	30.0
Globe and Mail	169	16.7
Calgary Herald	152	15.0
Vancouver Sun	145	14.3
Edmonton Journal	128	12.6
Montreal Gazette	116	11.4
Total	1,014	100

Coding system

Content analysis was performed on the articles using an extraction tool developed by the researchers in a pilot media analysis study that focused on only two newspapers in Alberta for a five-year period (Richter, Kovacs Burns, & Chaw-Kant, 2010). During this study three researchers were asked to each read 30 articles containing the search words. They had to come up with a coding frame related to our research questions. The development of the coding frame was also informed by a guide titled *Analysing Newspaper Content: A How-to Guide* (Lynch & Peer, 2002). The coding frame was tested and adapted by two independent coders for content validity. This previous developed coding frame was again piloted with a small number of articles for the larger study. No changes were made. Variables that were collected included newspaper name, date of publication, page number of article, word count, type of article, and population identifiers in the article.

Table 2: Main themes and subthemes of newspaper articles

Main theme	Subthemes
Housing-related issues	• Emergency shelters • Neighbourhood complaints/protests/not in my back yard or NIMBY • Tent cities, river valley camps, eviction from city parkland • Weather-related issues (cold or heat spell), seeking shelter (church, parkade, train station, etc.) • Affordable housing needs
Profiling of homelessness or homeless people	• Second-generation homeless • Profiling character traits of homeless (e.g., dirty, scruffy, smelly) • Discrimination • Rights of homeless persons • Special needs/disabled (e.g., mental, physical handicapped) • Writers' or publics' views and values, statistics, and homeless counts
Health-related issues	• Mental illness • Alcoholism • Drug abuse • Access to care/access to health services • Susceptible to disease/lack of hygiene/sanitation
Economic factors	• Government cutbacks • Government spending/aid • Economic factors as cause (e.g., minimum wage, economic boom, and jobs)
Illegal activity Begging/ panhandling	• Bottle picking/garbage dumpster diving • Illegal activity/crime related • Vandalism • Victims of crime/abuse/child abuse in past
Community aid and support	• Food and clothing • Support programs • Charity, purely giving and receiving • Donation, fundraising/actions/campaigning/awareness • Social factors as cause included family breakup and lack of support from friends and relatives

The main themes identified in the articles were also coded in this study: housing-related issues, profiling of homelessness, health-related issues, economic factors, illegal activities, community aid and support, and social factors as cause of homelessness. Each main theme included a range of subthemes (Table 2).

Inter-rater reliability
Three reviewers analyzed 117 (12%) articles of the sample to test the inter-rater reliability of the main themes. The average kappa value was 0.86, which shows high inter-rater reliability. Other items in the coding sheet do not involve as much interpretation as the themes, and the kappa value for inter-rater reliability of those "direct information" items was all above 0.9. Overall, the coding system has a high inter-rater reliability.

Results

Overall coverage on homeless issues
In different time periods, homeless issues have caught the attention of print media in different ways. Figure 1 shows the change in the overall volume of coverage on homeless issues in different years, with peak years between 1987 and 2001, and 2006-2007.

Figure 1: Number of articles published in Canadian newspapers examined between 1987 and 2007
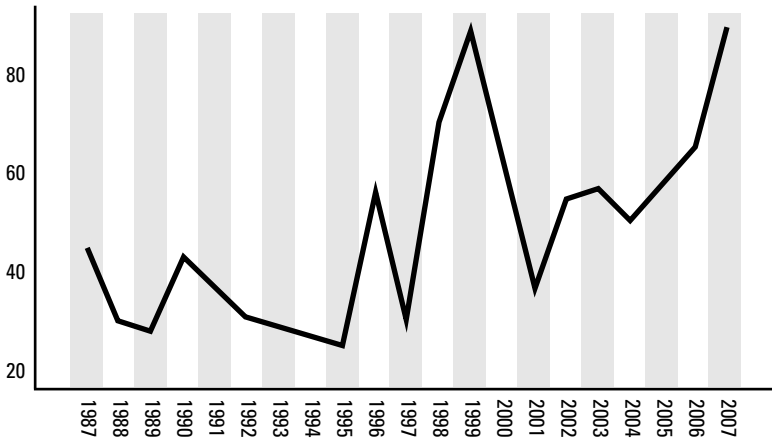
Not surprisingly, the data shows that mass the media tend to more intensively report on homeless issues in winter seasons. Overall, news coverage on homeless issues in the five winter months (October, November, December, January, and February) constituted 52.3% (n=530) of the overall coverage, and the remaining seven months made up only 47.3% of the coverage. The 530 articles on homeless issues in the five winter months were mainly focused on the following four main themes: housing-related issues (n=149, 28.1%), community aid and support (n=119, 22.5%), profiling of homelessness or homeless people (n=109, 20.6%), and economic factors (n=83, 15.7%). Figure 2 displays the trend of the average volume of coverage of homelessness issues in different months of the sample we used to conduct this study.

Figure 2: Average percentage of articles published on homelessness each month
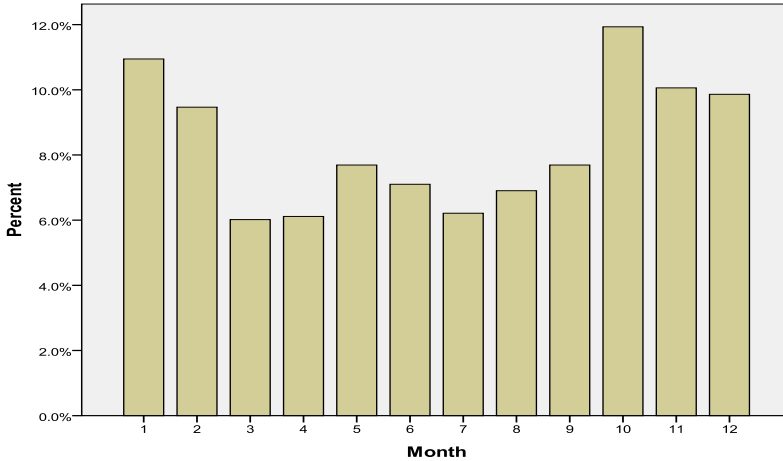
Also not surprisingly, the selected Canadian newspapers focused mainly on Canadian homelessness issues rather than homelessness issues in other countries. Among the 1,014 news articles, 913 (90.0%) were about homelessness issues in Canada, 54 (5.3%) were about the United States, and 47 (4.6%) were about international homelessness issues.

Although homelessness issues related to various populations were covered, the selected newspapers tended to report issues related to the general homeless population instead of focusing on different subgroups of the homeless population. Table 3 demonstrates the frequency of the coverage of different types of the homeless population.

Table 3: Descriptive statistics for homeless populations covered in the newspapers

Populations	Number of articles	% of total*
General homeless population	688	67.9
Homeless men	91	9.0
Street youth	85	8.4
Homeless women	40	3.9
Homeless mentally ill	26	2.6
Families	21	2.0
Other	20	1.9
Single parent with children	19	1.9
Minority	15	1.5
Seniors	9	0.9
Total	1,014	100.00

Note: *Rounded to the first decimal

Coverage of different themes

From 1987 to 2007, the selected Canadian newspapers covered different homeless issues. Overall, they covered four major themes: housing-related, community aid and support, profiling of homelessness and homeless people, and economic factors. The coverage of those four themes accumulatively constituted 85.3% of the overall coverage. The frequency of different themes covered in different newspapers is displayed in Table 4.

Table 4: Descriptive statistics for homeless themes discussed

Themes	Number of articles	% of total*
Housing-related	274	27.0
Community aid and support	217	21.4
Profiling of homelessness and homeless people	204	20.1
Economic factors	170	16.8
Illegal activity	55	5.4
Other	48	4.7
Health-related	41	4.0
Social factors as cause	5	0.5
Total	1,014	100

Note: *Rounded to the first decimal

Although Canadian newspaper articles covered a wide range of topics related to homelessness, they mostly reported in journalism/news and letters to the editor. Among the 1,014 newspaper articles analyzed in this study, 641 (63.2%) were journalism/news, and 127 (12.5%) were letters to the editors. Editorial, column, community news/events, interview, review, and other formats constitute 24.3% of the overall coverage. Accordingly, most of the articles related to homelessness were written by journalists ($n = 682, 67.3\%$) and members of the public/readers ($n = 168, 16.6\%$). However, various types of articles in the newspapers covered different homeless topics differently ($X^2 = 206.17$, $df = 42$, $p < .05$) based on the X^2 test of homogeneity. When the actual frequency (observed frequency) is significantly larger or smaller than the frequency (expected frequency) calculated statistically, then homogeneity across groups is assumed, the discrepancy between the observed frequency and the expected frequency is worth noting, and the observed frequency is abnormal.

With an adjusted residual (in absolute value) greater than 2.00, in comparing the observed frequencies with the expected frequencies, journalism/news covered more housing-related issues ($R = 3.9$) and community aid and support ($R = 2.1$) than expected, but covered less profiling of homelessness or homeless people ($R = -7.9$) than expected; editorials covered more economic factors ($R = 2.2$) than expected; letters to the editor covered more profiling of homelessness or homeless people ($R = 11.8$) than expected, but less housing-related issues ($R = -4.4$), illegal activity ($R = -2.5$), and com-

munity aid and support ($R = -3.7$) than expected; columns covered more social factors as cause ($R = 4.5$) than expected; community news/events covered less economic factors ($R = -2.03$) than expected; and reviews covered more economic factors ($R = 3.0$) than expected.

Furthermore, the selected Canadian newspapers covered various homelessness issues in different months differently ($X^2 = 107.89$, $df = 66$, $p < .05$). With an adjusted residual (in absolute value) greater than 2.00, in comparing the observed frequencies with the expected frequencies, there was more media coverage on housing-related issues than expected in January ($R = 3.8$) and December ($R = -2.02$). There was more media coverage on economic factors than expected in February ($R = 2.7$) and June ($R = 2.1$). Media coverage on illegal activities was less than expected in February ($R = -2.4$) and more than expected in July ($R = 3.1$). Community aid and support was covered less than expected in February ($R = -2.7$) and more than expected in December ($R = 5.2$). Social factors as cause was covered more in the selected newspapers than expected in January ($R = 2.1$).

Discussion

Newspaper coverage
In order to help understand the media's role in the issue of homelessness during the study period, it is important to closely examine the period of increasing newspaper coverage that occurred. The 20-year period that this Canadian study covered found a peak in the late 1990s. The largest peak in news coverage occurred in 1997 to 2001 and again from 2006 to 2007. Specific social and political contextual events can be matched with these peaks in newspaper coverage, including the cuts in funding for housing initiatives and social programs in the 1990s and their impact on housing subsidies and availability, and the shift of responsibility for housing from the federal to provincial and municipal governments in the mid-1990s, resulting in ill-prepared governments not being able to deliver on housing solutions (Bryant, 2004; Carroll & Jones, 2000; Raphael, 2007; Shapcott, 2005). During the 2006-07 period, Canada and especially the province of Alberta experienced an economic boom. This was associated with a steep rise in the prices of houses and rental properties, resulting in more homelessness, including the numbers of the working poor.

Most of the articles on homelessness in the 20-year period were found in the *Toronto Star*, followed by the *Globe and Mail*—the only national newspaper in our study—followed in turn by the *Calgary Herald*, *Vancouver Sun*, *Edmonton Journal*, and *Montreal Gazette*. Homelessness is a problem in the larger metropolitan areas. The distribution of articles on homelessness can be explained in terms of how many homeless people are in these large metropolitan areas. Despite the visibility of homelessness in Canada, there are no accurate national statistics on the size of the homeless population. Homeless counts are conducted on a biannual basis in the larger metropolitan areas, such as Toronto, Winnipeg, Edmonton, Calgary, and Vancouver. Toronto is the largest metropolitan area in Canada and also the city with the largest homelessness problem, which possibly contributes to the higher number of articles in the *Toronto Star* and *Globe and Mail*.

The Federation of Canadian Municipalities (2008) estimated that there are between 200,000 and 300,000 homeless people, including children, in Canada on any given night. They cite the following statistics for homelessness in several of Canada's major cities (FCM, 2008): In 2005, 1,127 street homeless (living on the streets as opposed to in shelters) in Greater Vancouver; and in 2006, 4,832 homeless in Waterloo, over 400 in Hamilton, and 5,052 in Toronto. In Alberta, Calgary has conducted counts of its homeless population biannually since 1992. In May 2006, the number of homeless people counted in Calgary was 3,436, which was more than seven times the number counted in 1992 (City of Calgary Community Strategies, 1994; Community and Neighbourhood Services Policy and Planning Division, 2006). Edmonton's numbers have also shown an increase; from the city's first count of the homeless in March 1999 to the October 2006 count. The number of homeless people increased just over three times, from 836 to 2,618 (Edmonton Joint Planning Committee on Housing, 2006; Edmonton Task Force on Homelessness, 1999). The key difference between the homeless populations in the two Alberta cities is that Calgary's homeless are predominantly sheltered homeless or those living in emergency shelters (82.2% in 2006) (CNSPPD, 2006), whereas the majority of Edmonton's homeless population are absolutely homeless or living on the streets (67.8% in 2006) (EJPCH, 2006).

Besides geographical location newspapers' ownership and their historical context can also influence the amount and type or emphasis of coverage of social issues. The corporate form of newspaper organization has raised concerns about the quality and diversity of information shared with the public (Harmes, 1999). It is argued that the "economic imperatives of newspaper operation are incompatible with the goals of free and democratic speech" (p. 1). Many scholars believe that the corporate form of organizing a newspaper destroys good journalism and endangers democracy. Further, scholars also believed that the commercial interests of the corporate newspapers in comparison to smaller or independent newspapers, can work to limit the diversity of opinions expressed on certain issues. The increased competition for both audience and advertisers drives newspapers increasingly toward business profitability rather than public service (Harmes, 1999). Critical theorists do not see the media as an independent institution but rather as a social change agent. In this light the press is seen as the dominant ideology that frames issues from the point of view of the corporate leaders. The dominant critique focuses on the economic logic of the newspaper industry.

This economic rationale might also play a role in our study. The *Toronto Star* had the most coverage of homelessness issues. The *Star* is Canada's highest-circulation newspaper, though its print edition is distributed almost entirely within the province of Ontario (Canadian Newspaper Association, 2006). The paper is owned by Toronto Star Newspapers Ltd., a division of Star Media Group. One of this paper's first editors, Joseph Atkinson (1899-1946), had a very strong social conscience. After his death the *Toronto Star* continued to build on the Atkinson principles, which focused on a strong, united, and independent Canada, social justice, individual and civil liberties, community and civic engagement, the rights of working people, and the necessary role of government. The *Toronto Star* is viewed as liberal in the Canadian context, which supports the paper's larger coverage of homelessness and homeless people. The *Globe and Mail*

is a Canadian English-language nationally distributed newspaper, based in Toronto and printed in six cities across the country. It is Canada's largest-circulation national newspaper and second-largest daily newspaper after the *Toronto Star*. It is owned by CTVglobemedia. The *Globe and Mail's* role in society is seen as independent but not neutral, and that could also contribute to the greater coverage of social issues and in this case of homelessness. The other four newspapers in our sample, the *Montreal Gazette*, *Edmonton Journal*, *Calgary Herald*, and *Vancouver Sun* are owned by the Can-West Global Communications Corporation, a corporate-form organization. The four corporate-owned newspapers had less coverage of homelessness.

Who are the homeless and how are they covered in the newspapers?
The diversity within the homeless population was not reflected in the news coverage; 67.9% of the articles did not differentiate between the specific populations affected. Homelessness is heterogeneous in nature, and that was not well reflected in the news articles under study. Homelessness affects all groups in society, including men, women, youth, single- and two-parent families, people of all races and ethnicities, and immigrants (Canadian Institute for Health Information, 2007; Frankish, Hwang, & Quantz, 2005; Khandor & Mason, 2007). "It is not an individual characteristic, but rather a life circumstance that can be temporary, episodic or relatively long lasting" (CIHI, 2007, p. 7). Despite the diversity of the homeless population, they all have one common factor: no permanent address (Hulchanski, n.d.).

Single men are the most prevalent homeless population in most Canadian cities, representing approximately 70% of the total homeless population in Calgary, Edmonton, and Vancouver, and about 50% in Ottawa (Hwang, 2001), but they are only represented in 9.0% ($n=91$) of the newspaper articles analyzed in this study.

Single women constituted approximately one-quarter of homeless people in Vancouver, Edmonton, and Toronto (Hwang, 2001) and about 30% of the total homeless population, but only 3.9% ($n=40$) of the newspaper articles analyzed in this study were specifically about homeless women. Homeless women are less visible for a number of reasons. According to Bryant (2004) and Crowe (2008a), families with children, and, in particular, female-headed families, are now the fastest-growing group of shelter users in Canada. It is still very difficult to present a portrait of homeless families in Canada today, and very little published research exists on this population.

The most vulnerable within the homeless population—including street youth, homeless women, homeless mentally ill, homeless families and single parents with children, minority groups, and seniors—were not well identified within the newspaper articles that reported on homelessness. For example, only 4% of the articles in our sample of newspaper articles reflected on minority groups, which included Aboriginal and immigrant populations. Hwang (2001) reports that across Canada, Aboriginal people are approximately 10 times more likely to be homeless than their non-Aboriginal counterparts. This was supported by findings of the *Street Health Report*, (Khandor & Mason, 2007) which indicated 15% of their homeless respondents identified Aboriginal heritage. In Toronto, homeless Aboriginal people constitute a higher percentage of the total sample (15%) when compared to their numbers in Toronto's total population (0.5%). Canadian homeless researchers also report a disproportionate number of new

immigrants among this country's homeless population (Daiski, 2007; Frankish et al., 2005; Hulchanski, n.d.). For example, 23% of homeless adults in Toronto were new immigrants, although the number of immigrants in the general population was not stated (Khandor & Mason, 2007).

Coverage of different themes

As stated in the results section, 85.3% of the newspaper articles covered four of the major themes: housing-related issues (27%), community aid and support (21.4%), profiling of homelessness and homeless people (20.1%), and economic factors (16.8%). It is interesting to note that only 16.8% of the articles addressed economic factors (government cutbacks, government spending/aid, and economic factors as cause, e.g. minimum wage, economic boom, and jobs), although Canadian poverty researchers cite the withdrawal of federal government funding from housing policy as one of the significant causes of homelessness in this country (Bryant, 2004; Carroll & Jones, 2000; CIHI, 2007; Crowe, 2008b; Hulchanski, 2002; Khandor & Mason, 2007; Layton, 2000; Muckle & Turnbull, 2006; Shapcott, 2004). The resulting lack of federal funding and assistance from the private sector created a crisis in the availability of rental accommodation in parts of Canada with extremely low vacancy rates for affordable units, and led to rents increasing far beyond the means of low-income households (Shapcott, 2004). The Task Force on Urban Issues purports that "tenants at the lower end of the market increasingly have no choice but to turn to shelters or remain in overcrowded conditions" (as cited in Hulchanski, 2002, p. 5). This reality is substantiated by the *Street Health Report*, in which one-third of homeless people said they became homeless because they could not afford rent (Khandor & Mason, 2007). The remaining four main themes are addressing the more people-oriented stories: illegal activities, health-related issues, and social factors as cause.

The theme that received the most attention was housing-related issues. Different aspects covered included emergency shelters, neighbourhood complaints/protests/not in my back yard or NIMBY, tent cities, river valley camps, eviction from city parkland, weather-related issues, seeking shelter, and affordable housing needs. These subjects relate very much to the housing issues described in the research literature. Homeless people often find themselves accessing inadequate housing typified by poor quality, poor location, and overcrowding (Bryant, 2004). Many homeless people sleep in shelters provided for the homeless or in places that do not meet the basic standards for health and safety, such as vehicles and abandoned buildings (Daiski, 2007; Hwang, 2001). According to Khandor and Mason (2007), within the month prior to being interviewed, homeless adults in their study stayed in shelters (88%), outside in parks or on the street (32%), with friends or relatives (26%), at hotels or rooming houses (10%), or in cars or abandoned buildings (7%). Fifty-five percent of Toronto's homeless population reported an inability to get a shelter bed at least once in the previous year, and of those, 74% were unable to obtain shelter during the winter months (Khandor & Mason, 2007). Participants in Daiski's (2007) study described shelters as being extremely violent, with frequent robberies and assaults on shelter users. Homeless adults in Toronto gave several reasons for trying to avoid shelters, such as crowded conditions, bedbugs, and, similar to Daiski's respondents, fear of violence and theft (Khandor & Mason, 2007).

Only 4% of the articles covered health-related issues of the homeless people, although it is well known that being homeless increases an individual's risk of suffering from serious health conditions (Khandor & Mason, 2007). When compared to the physical health conditions of the general population, Khandor and Mason found higher rates of nearly all chronic illnesses and physical ailments among the homeless population and particular higher prevalence of hepatitis, diabetes, heart and lung disease, cancer, and infectious diseases (Crowe, 2007; Frankish et al., 2005). Mental illness and substance abuse are much more prevalent among homeless adults than the general population (CIHI, 2007; Frankish et al., 2005; Khandor & Mason, 2007). Mental illness can be both a cause and an effect of homelessness (CIHI, 2007). Homeless Canadian women described difficulty maintaining personal hygiene when shower facilities and personal care needs are not readily available to them, as is the case with those living in shelters or on the streets (Ontario Women's Health Network, 2006). Thus, clean, safe housing with adequate hygiene facilities are profound health needs for homeless people. Another common problem that affects homeless people's health is a lack of food security and social support networks.

Types of articles
Most homeless news articles written by journalists are supposed to be factual and claim objectivity. Letters to the editor, more subjectively based on the writer's opinions, were the next most frequent group of articles to discuss the homeless topic. Letters to the editor are valuable tools improving feedback procedures for traditional print media, placing topics that occupy the public at large on the public agenda. However, how are these letters selected to be included in print? Editors judge on the rules of relevance and therefore decide which submissions are expected to be of interest to the reader (Raeymaeckers, 2005). Raeymaeckers further notes that most editors claim that the letters section provides a starting point for a prime public debate, but the fact remains that the section is a site for positing individual arguments for and against. It is, however, positive to note that a relatively large number of the articles reflected the public's feedback.

Conclusion
This article describes how six major Canadian newspapers, some national and some local, covered homelessness over a period of 20 years, between 1987 and 2007. Within this span, there are peak years between 1997 and 2001 and 2006-07 when the homeless or homelessness issues were targeted as news topics. More articles were written on various topics during these peak periods and specifically during the month of October. In Canada, one would expect the cold winters to play a key factor in producing more media stories about the homeless and how they stay warm and safe, and this is in fact the case. However, research in this area on the media coverage of homelessness is lacking in Canada, as are other studies specific to provincial strategies to address or end homelessness, even with provinces like Alberta having a major emphasis on ending homelessness in 10 years (Kovacs Burns & Richter, 2010).

Article topics generally included housing-related issues, profiling of the homeless or homelessness issues, health-related issues, economic factors, illegal activities, and

community aid and support. Relevant reasons for topic coverage will need to be explored in more detail, aligning specific political, social, and economic events in Canada during this 20-year time frame. In addition, although more recent social sciences and health determinants research related to homelessness can be found in Canada, this comparison between the media findings in this study and published literature is not included. Another analysis would be required focusing on the tensions that exist between what the media reports and what researchers find. More relevant research is needed in order to support those who are homeless with housing, health and social supports and financial aids and the need for changes in government strategies to address housing and social programs. Single men and youth who are homeless captured the most attention by journalists, which is surprising as most of society's and service providers' concerns have focused on the needs of families, particularly female-headed families, which are increasing faster than many other groups of homeless. Social research with families is a challenge to conduct but needed. Again, the reasons for the media's focus on single men and youth over families or single parents needs to be explored further in light of other social, political, and economic considerations. Homeless women are also less visible and less involved in research studies, for a number of reasons.

Studies such as this one provide a retrospective examination of the media's interests in and portrayal of the homeless and homelessness issues, which, in turn, provides an indication of what might be expected from the media during specific political, social, and economic events that could impact on the homeless or their situations. Such expectations might also provide opportunities for service providers and governments to utilize the media to convey key messages and awareness about the issues and needs of the homeless generally or in specific communities. More research is needed with media journalists to better understand their interests in and portrayals of the homeless across Canada.

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