

Homelessness and Employment: The Case of Calgary

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On March 8, I gave a guest presentation to students in [Professor Naomi Lightman's](#) Sociology of Work class at the University of Calgary. I was joined by Alexander Kulakov and Amit Nade, employment coaches at the [Mustard Seed](#). My PowerPoint slides can be downloaded [here](#).

Here are 10 things to know:

1. **In Calgary, there aren't enough jobs to go around, and income support programs for those without work are inadequate.** According to the [most recent Labour Force Survey](#), there are almost 173,000 adults in Alberta actively searching for work [1] (in spite of this, [15% of persons experiencing homelessness in Alberta](#) do report some income from employment). While some unemployed people qualify for [Employment Insurance](#) (EI), most don't. And for those who do qualify, benefits are both modest and temporary. Unemployed people who don't qualify for EI can always apply for social assistance, but these benefits are even more modest (for an overview of social assistance throughout Canada, [see this blog post](#); and for an overview on social assistance in Alberta specifically, [see this blog post](#)).
2. **For persons experiencing homelessness, one major barrier to finding and maintaining work is poor health.** According to [Stephen Hwang](#): "Homeless people in their forties and fifties often develop health disabilities that are more commonly seen only in people who are decades older." Consider some of these findings from [one of the most comprehensive health surveys done on persons experiencing homelessness in Canada](#): 41% of persons experiencing homelessness report being "usually in some pain or discomfort." Yet, for the general population, the figure is 15%. Among people who are usually in pain, 35% of persons experiencing homelessness report that pain being "severe," while for the general population the figure is just 2%.
3. **[Mustard Seed](#) has an employment program for persons currently experiencing homelessness.** That program is funded entirely by private giving (i.e., charitable donations from individuals and foundations). One stream of this program involves one-on-one coaching. This stream is geared toward those needing the most support (typically persons with the poorest health outcomes). Staff help people with resumes and cover letters. Staff even physically go out job searching with participants. Another stream involves job preparation in a group format; this happens at the Seed Academy. Assistance is provided with writing resumes, writing cover letters and networking. Employers even come in and do mock interviews! The third stream of the program is designed for people who are very close to landing a steady job (and in some cases have even received a formal offer). Participants in this stream can get short-term financial assistance to purchase such things as clothing, tools, and transportation to another part of Alberta.

4. **The [Calgary Drop-In & Rehab Centre \(the DI\)](#) has an employment program funded by Alberta's provincial government.** The DI's program has two employment specialists who meet one-on-one with persons experiencing homelessness. The DI also provides a three-week training program in which people are trained in interview skills, employment strategies, resume writing, financial literacy, first aid, forklift operation, interviewing and employee rights. Staff at the DI then follow up with graduates at 90 days, and then again at 180 days. In the span of one month, this program gets 800 unique individuals out at a job at some point. Also during the course of one month, as many as 500 different employers use this service. [\[2\]](#) The majority of the jobs are general labour (i.e. moving and lifting things; landscaping; clean up). This particular program is especially good at helping workers to find jobs at festivals (i.e., [Canada Day](#), [Lilac Festival](#), [Calgary Pride](#), etc.). Where possible, the DI tries to turn casual positions into full-time ones—last year, they managed to get 21 full-time permanent positions created out of this initiative.
5. **There are several other employment-readiness programs for persons experiencing homelessness in Calgary.** For example, [Calgary John Howard Society](#) has a [Learning Enhanced Employment Program](#) for persons involved or at-risk of becoming involved in the criminal justice system; it's a three-week training program. Also, the DI has a [WoodWorks](#) program—it's a social enterprise that funds itself through the sale of the product. Participants work in the program for 12 weeks, with the goal of then entering directly into the woodworking industry.
6. **The most successful participants in all of these programs tend to be relatively healthy (compared to others experiencing homelessness) and be between the ages of 25 and 60.** Healthier workers having more successful outcomes will be intuitive for most readers. Meanwhile, one of the reasons workers over the age of 60 struggle with work is that some computer literacy is often required for jobs. According to Patty Rideout from the Seed: "Most jobs, even entry level work, require employees to use technology for work schedules, reporting, or organization."
7. **Persons housed by programs funded by the Calgary Homeless Foundation (CHF) see a modest improvement in employment over time.** CHF stewards a large database with information about persons funded in [Housing First](#) programs that we fund. We have data on more than 3,000 unique individuals. A quick glance at employment status upon entry, compared with three months later, suggests a modest increase in percentage of clients employed (based on self-reported data).
8. **In some cases, persons experiencing homelessness are overqualified for jobs.** One employment support worker in Calgary tells me via email: "We are taking master's degrees off of resumes to try to get clients working." This may speak to the fact that, even in Calgary, there simply aren't enough jobs to go around. (Note: this year's [Alternative Federal Budget](#) would create 470,000 full-time equivalent jobs across Canada in just one year.)
9. **More affordable child care in Calgary would make it easier for parents experiencing homelessness to access employment.** A lack of subsidized child care is a major barrier to employment, especially for women. In the case of households experiencing homelessness, this is especially challenging. The median monthly childcare fee for a [Calgary infant is \\$1,250](#). (For a recent review of barriers to affordable childcare across Canada and a proposed 'way forward,' see the [child care chapter](#) in this year's Alternative Federal Budget; and to see the Alberta picture, see the child care chapter in this year's Alberta Alternative Budget (coming soon!).

10. **Just as affordable housing can improve employment outcomes, so too can employment help end homelessness.** According to the DI's Santino Marinucci: "We have many successes in helping clients achieve their housing goals with independent living through employment. It is one of my personal goals to start tracking metrics related to employment and housing moving forward."

In Sum. Too few jobs, inadequate income assistance programs, major health challenges and a lack of subsidized child care all pose barriers to employment for persons experiencing homelessness. Fortunately, programs in Calgary offered by Mustard Seed, the Calgary Drop-In and Rehab Centre, and Calgary John Howard Society help many persons experiencing homelessness to overcome some of these barriers. For a 'big picture' advocacy ask at the federal level that could address all of these issues, check out this year's [Alternative Federal Budget](#); and for a similar 'big picture' ask at the provincial level, check out this year's Alberta Alternative Budget (coming soon!).

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[1] This figure doesn't include the many discouraged workers in Alberta who've given up looking for employment.

[2] These impressive figures may help explain why [more than 30% of persons experiencing homelessness in Calgary](#) report some income from employment, while the average for Alberta's homeless population as a whole is just 15%. Specifically, this is in response to the question: "Where do you get your money from?"