

Housing policy keeps people on street: study

\$305M in federal spending does little to attack 'root cause' of homelessness

BY KATHRYN MAY

Canada's housing policies are "dehousing" people in cities across the country and keeping the growing number of homeless on the streets, a new study says.

The report, to be released today by the think-tank Canadian Policy Research Networks, bluntly concludes most of the \$305 million the Liberals are spending on a three-year homeless initiative has been wasted because the policy keeps the homeless in shelters and does nothing to stop the poor from becoming homeless or help them find homes once they are on the street.

The program, which will expire this year, funds services and shelters for the homeless.

"The government is spending all this money to help make homelessness a little more comfortable and safe, and I don't knock that, but it's money down the drain when all you're doing is maintaining people in their homelessness. It just doesn't make sense and you are just going to have to spend more money to maintain them longer," said David Hulchanski,

director of the Centre for Urban and Community Studies at University of Toronto, who wrote the report.

The report said this kind of emergency spending is critical, but has done nothing to reduce the swelling ranks of homeless in Canada's major cities. More than 5,000 people sleep in shelters in Toronto every night, and thousands more bunk with family and friends or sleep on the street.

No one really knows how many Canadians are homeless but Mr. Hulchanski estimates up to 15 per cent of Canada's 11 million households are in "severe housing need and a small number of them would actually be without housing."

"But 20 years ago we didn't have street people and the number in shelters we do today. No one was born homeless. And that's fact. We always had skid row, down-and-outs, mainly middle-aged males, who were called hobos in the '30s, but starting in the 1980s we began to see more of them, and then came single women and by the 1990s we began to see families."

Mr. Hulchanski said the only way to fix the problem is for the federal government to get back in the business of building social housing with programs that will increase the supply of affordable accommodations. The availability of affordable housing is the "root cause" and the "single most important solution to homelessness," he said.

The report, which explores the federal government's on-again, off-again role in housing and urban affairs over the past 50 years, comes at a time when the quality of life and competitiveness of Canada's cities has shot to top of the policy agenda.

Canada's supply of social housing began to unravel 20 years ago when the Mulroney government began cutting housing programs and by 1993 had stopped building social housing completely. Over those years, the supply of new social housing fell from 25,000 new units in 1983 to zero a decade later.

The next big blow came when the Liberals gained power and replaced the Canadian Assistance Plan with the Canada Health and Social Transfer, which drove provinces to drastically cut social assistance payments to the poor and destitute by 20 per cent to 40 per cent. Some families can spend more than half of their assistance on housing and still not find a place to live, the report concluded.

"Poverty and housing tenure are becoming more and more closely connected," said Mr. Hulchanski.

In his report, Mr. Hulchanski calls for the government to double its spending on social housing, returning to the golden years between the late 1960s and 1984 when the government actively intervened in the market to ensure an "adequate supply of affordable housing."