Housing: Social Policy's Lost Opportunity

Friday, March 11, 2005 – Today, to our shame, 100,000 Canadians have no homes at all, while another 1.7 million (almost 16% of the population) are in core housing need – unable to afford shelter that meets accepted adequacy, suitability and affordability norms. Core housing need is highest among lone parents, Aboriginal peoples, seniors and recent immigrants.

In addition to the human suffering that lies behind these statistics, they represent a failure to see housing as a key social policy tool.

David Hay, Director of CPRN's Family Network, underlines housing's social policy role in ***Housing, Horizontality and Social Policy***, a paper prepared for an Expert Roundtable in Vancouver in January, part of a country-wide consultation process led by Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) in collaboration with Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC).

Hay reiterates a fundamental argument of recent research by CPRN and others, that adequate, affordable housing is essential to the success of many other social and economic policies. He reviews the impact of housing on health, on the integration of immigrants, on seniors, on Aboriginal peoples, on crime prevention and income security.

Housing's many dimensions (physical, spatial, financial, psychological and social) and its intersection with so many areas of economic and social policy, make it a "horizontal policy issue", one that crosses established departmental lines and jurisdictions. Tackling core housing need in Canada requires collaboration across governments, between governments, and between public, private and community sectors.

Hay calls for "place-based policy approaches" that emphasize the integration of local knowledge, local participation and local capacity-building to replace the old one-size-fits-all approach. He goes on to suggest ways to strengthen the role of housing in social policy that take advantage of the contribution and savings affordable, decent housing can produce.

To access or download a copy of his paper, click here.

Canadian Housing Policy in Comparative Context

As a useful accompaniment to David Hay's paper, CPRN is also circulating for a wider audience a recent paper by Duncan Maclennan, former Mactaggart Professor of Land Economics and Finance at the University of Glasgow, and Director of the ESRC Research Centre for Housing and Urban Research.

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His paper, ***Housing Policies: New Times, New Foundations***, draws on the housing policy experiences in the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand and Canada to suggest the components of a housing policy for the future. While differing in the specifics of their cultural responses to housing need, these countries have all experienced a retrenchment in housing expenditures and consequent loss of organizational and human capital in the field. They have also lost sight of the important economic and social contribution of housing. They must now reinstate housing in its rightful place in economic and social policy and rebuild their capacity to deliver appropriate housing solutions.

Maclennan, recognizes the changes that have taken place in recent decades that demand a new approach to the governance of housing programs in favour of multi-level collaboration and a much more significant role for communities in planning and delivery. There are important pointers here for the role of federal, provincial/territorial and municipal governments.

You can access or download a copy of his paper by clicking here.

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