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Gaps in the System: Homelessness, Mental Health and Addictions in Northern Ontario

Northern Ontario Insights Series

By: Samrul Aahad

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Our main offices:

- Thunder Bay on Robinson-Superior Treaty territory and the land is the traditional territory of the Anishnaabeg and Fort William First Nation.
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- Each community is home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples.

We recognize and appreciate the historic connection that Indigenous peoples have to these territories. We support their efforts to sustain and grow their nations. We also recognize the contributions that they have made in shaping and strengthening local communities, the province, and Canada.

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About the Author

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Samrul Aahad graduated with an M.A. in Economics from the University of Saskatchewan where he was the recipient of the prestigious Boving Family Scholarship. During his Masters, he was able to contrast the conventional ways of analysis popular with economists with contemporary techniques such as ones used in machine learning. He has, previously, worked as a business/data analyst for various research organizations and industries locally and internationally.



Executive Summary

In the Spring of 2022, regional experts in Northern Ontario were interviewed to build a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities regarding the areas of food security, homelessness, mental health and addiction, immigration-migration, physician recruitment, and post-secondary education. The results of these key informant interviews led to unique insights into the state of these five subjects in Northern Ontario and highlighted the best avenues to address their challenges.

The insights received from experts are instrumental and shed light on the current conditions in the field. Learning from the individuals who have worked with and within local communities reveals opportunities to address these issues.

Findings primarily indicate a need for new policy strategies that effectively and holistically address some common issues:

1. Homelessness, mental health and addictions—alongside a lack of affordable housing, the transition between rehabilitation services or a correctional facility to life in society needs to be improved. Finally, a more collaborative approach with shared electronic records could yield a more effective and encompassing delivery of services;
2. Immigration—there is a lack of affordable housing for newcomers and a low retention rate in Northern Ontario. Additionally, the region needs to be better marketed to newcomers in order to address the existing labour shortages and high retirement rates;
3. Post-secondary institutions—in Northern Ontario suffer from a lack of funding generated by a freeze in tuition and funding levels. That is also true for Indigenous institutions, hampering their growth and stabilization. The attraction of international students has improved, but communities need to be welcoming to further attract and retain international students;
4. Food security—it has often been associated with food waste. However, insights suggest that income disparities are a more significant determinant of food insecurity. Moreover, having food that fits cultural preferences and nutritional needs is of the utmost importance. Furthermore, Indigenous land-based knowledge and self-determination present opportunities to address food security.
5. Physician recruitment—more funding and revised service agreements are needed to make health care jobs in Northern Ontario more attractive to newcomers, aligning financial incentives with position opportunities in smaller communities. As well, health professionals lack a better work-life balance, which hampers the attraction of more recent graduates to the region.

In sum, this series of insights highlighted some challenges that are perceived in Northern Ontario. However, these challenges also come with opportunities on which policymakers can act to improve the economy and quality of life in Northern Ontario.

Introduction

Good public policymaking does not happen in isolation. There are many individuals, organizations, and institutions that can – and do – provide valuable insight to decision-makers every day. As such, ahead of the Ontario provincial election in June, Northern Policy Institute interviewed experts about opportunities and challenges that exist for Northern Ontario in five different areas: food security; homelessness, mental health, and addiction; immigration-migration; physician recruitment; and postsecondary education. The results of these interviews can help to inform the newly established provincial government as ministers begin to settle into and carry out their mandates.

Of course, policy advice does not stop there. Continuing to hear and learn from experts and other residents is important in ensuring that policies and programs are appropriate for Northern Ontario regions and communities from Timmins to Sachigo Lake First Nation to Powassan and everywhere in between.



State of Homelessness, Mental Health, and Addiction

The state of homelessness, mental health, and addiction in Northern Ontario is at a point where it is a serious worry. More people are facing these challenges directly and indirectly in the North (Parson, forthcoming). Thus, it is important to understand the key issues the region faces regarding homelessness, mental health, and addiction.

When asked about the biggest issue related to homelessness, mental health, and addiction in Northern Ontario, an upper management official from one of the district social services administration boards (DSSAB) in Northern Ontario replied that it's affordable housing, specifically the lack thereof. Responding to the same question, Dr. Rebecca Schiff¹, the chair/professor of the Department of Health Sciences at Lakehead University, said that "one [issue] is affordable housing. We need more housing at affordable rates and not just private market rental housing. I don't think that is necessarily the solution, [and] I don't think we can leave it up to the private market to regulate itself very well." She added that "having cheap rent doesn't mean a lot if the housing isn't suitable." Therefore, all levels of government should put a strong focus on providing affordable, quality housing to slow the rise of homelessness.

Second, the lack of specialized services, such as psychiatry and psychology, is a major concern for Northern Ontario. While talking about the lack of infrastructure and services, the interviewee from one of the DSSABs said that there are gaps in the availability of healthcare services. They added that the existence of grants such as the Northern Ontario health travel grant points to this lack of health services in Northern Ontario. Charlene Strain², CEO of Canadian Mental Health Association Fort Frances, said that "in our particular area, in the Rainy River District, the psychiatrist comes maybe once or twice a year, [and] people have to travel about 300 kilometres to access in-person psychiatry services [the rest of the year] ... we are resource-poor in some areas." She added that "there are no safe consumption sites in the Rainy River District."

On the other hand, Dr. Schiff talked about the importance of having safe consumption sites such as managed alcohol programs. She said that "if people have a severe alcohol addiction, just cutting alcohol cold-turkey creates severe medical complications." Thus, withdrawal from addictive substances should be treated as a medical issue. For example, in managed alcohol programs, the licensed health care professionals determine the appropriate dosage of alcohol for each

individual and gradually decrease it as individuals work through the program. She added that "at the very least, they [managed alcohol programs] are reducing costs on the health care system because there are not as many ambulances called for emergency medical situations or interactions with the police because people are housed and they [individuals] are not binge drinking as much." Therefore, it is important to provide safe consumption sites and expand programs like managed alcohol programs to deal with issues such as addiction and the concerns that follow on from it.

However, there have been several initiatives that could assist in addressing homelessness, mental health, and addiction, such as lowering eligibility barriers to apply for social programs. Dr. Schiff said that approach has been very helpful. "[For people facing] homelessness and living with addictions and living with mental illnesses, having low-barrier programs that just meet people where they are at and support them has been really impactful," she said.

On the other hand, the provincial government should try to integrate services such as social justice, health care, and social services so that different organizations can communicate with each other more effectively. When asked what she would like to see happen if she could magically change things, Strain said that she would want "to see changes made so that the health and social systems can speak to each other, having shared electronic records, with the client in the middle and policies and legislation that facilitates that process." Similarly, when asked the same question, Dr. Schiff said that "we need better transitions from institutions... we need better programs that address those transitions between places like the hospital and being released, and the correctional system and being released, and addiction services and [being] released, and so on." Therefore, a better, integrated approach to issues such as homelessness, mental health, and addiction would be more effective.

In conclusion, a lack of decent housing at affordable rates and a shortage of social and health care resources in Northern Ontario are among the major issues in dealing with homelessness, mental health, and addiction. On the other hand, meeting people where they are and helping them would be an effective measure. Lastly, a collaborative effort initiated by different wings of the government where everyone communicates with each other would be greatly welcomed.

¹ Rebecca Schiff, interview by author, May 06, 2022.

² Charlene Strain, interview by Kerem Karabeyoglu, May 03, 2022.

Reference

More than Just a Number: Addressing the Homelessness, Addiction, and Mental Health Crisis in the North." Northern Policy Institute: Thunder Bay, ON. Available online at <https://www.northernpolicy.ca/more-than-just-a-number>.



About Northern Policy Institute

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We believe in partnership, collaboration, communication, and cooperation. Our team seeks to do inclusive research that involves broad engagement and delivers recommendations for specific, measurable action. Our success depends on our partnerships with other entities based in or passionate about Northern Ontario.

Our permanent offices are in Thunder Bay, Sudbury, and Kirkland Lake. During the summer months we have satellite offices in other regions of Northern Ontario staffed by teams of Experience North placements. These placements are university and college students working in your community on issues important to you and your neighbours.

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