Conclusion

“What causes homelessness?”

“Ah shit. What doesn’t cause homelessness?” (personal interview 2014)

Across the country, people have poured their hearts, minds, and resources into the task of ensuring that everyone has a safe and adequate home. Indigenous-led organizations and local service providers have been at the forefront of these efforts. Despite their work, the number of people who are unhoused or underhoused continues to grow. Faced with a seemingly never-ending task, groups have come together to develop plans, responses, and strategies to produce social protection for people who are unhoused and are experiencing homelessness. In big cities across the country, the governance networks that have developed to do so (and continue to evolve) vary greatly. The municipality has been a powerful and leading actor in Toronto and, at some points in recent history, in Vancouver as well. Third-sector groups work closely with governments in Montreal, and the private sector has driven the agenda in Calgary. In addition to different lead actors, we see varying degrees of involvement of other actors as well as different levels of coordination and collaboration among them, with some groups collaborating extensively and others working at odds with one another.

This book has been motivated by a desire to understand why these different governance networks emerge. I began with the assumption, grounded in the literature, that governance matters for social policy. It matters for policy innovation, the quality of outputs, the responsiveness of interventions, and the ability of a complex system to make sure individuals do not get lost and cycle through homelessness for years on end. This book takes a necessary step back to ask what shaped these governance networks in the first place. To better understand these
dynamics, I conducted nearly 100 semi-structured interviews with actors from all levels of government, as well as third- and private-sector and Indigenous actors about their involvement in advocacy, policy development, and the financing and implementation of responses to homelessness. I closely reviewed hundreds of primary documents, including a multitude of plans, reports on plans, policies, and reviews; and I participated in meetings, conferences, and homeless counts. What I found sheds light on what we know about multilevel governance, the welfare state, and homelessness in Canada.

What Have We Learned

This research has documented what some may find to be a surprising number of plans, policies, and actors dedicated to fighting homelessness. Some actors joked that there are more plans than there are people experiencing homelessness; this is an exaggeration, but it makes clear the fact that there is some frustration with the governance of this complex policy. Recall the actor in Vancouver who said: “We’ve got too many people deciding what to do … So all of a sudden something that is really very simple has become an overwhelming, confusing process. It’s stagnant. It’s not moving forward the way it should. It’s costing way too much and it sucks energy out of everything that is going on” (personal interview 2014).

Multilevel Governance

The four in-depth case studies offer insight into the forces that structure the involvement and interactions of actors in multilevel governance. This close look at a single policy area allows for extensive within-case analysis of the forces that drive involvement and interactions, as well as across-case comparison of how those forces play out in different institutional environments. Many of this study’s findings confirm the
conclusions of Robert Young in his groundbreaking work in the Fields of Governance research series, including those related to the structuring role of resources. Indeed, extensive cuts across the social safety net have in many instances been made during times of economic recession and decline, including during the 1990s at the federal level and a few years later at the provincial level in BC, Ontario, and Alberta. Private-sector actors were also able to leverage money (many of them called it “new money”) into fast action, and at times drove government agendas through partnership.

Other sorts of resources, including locally based expertise, Indigenous knowledge, and private-sector management expertise, have allowed groups to become involved. These resources are not always equally valued, however; this study has shown that to date, private-sector management and locally based expertise have been the most valued forms of expertise. Institutions also matter, notably jurisdiction (or the lack thereof), and so do locally based housing powers such as density bonusing and inclusionary zoning. Toronto is the most extensively involved municipality in the governance of homelessness because it has formal jurisdiction. Absent jurisdiction, other institutional powers can enable municipal involvement as well; this has been the case in Vancouver, where powerful density bonusing and inclusionary zoning powers have put the city in a position of power. Furthermore, Indigenous leaders are in some cases involved institutionally – through Indigenous HPS networks, for example – and third-sector groups are involved in policy-making at different levels in Quebec. Institutionalization enables these actors to be more outspoken, to criticize, and to exercise greater influence in the process.

Yet we have seen governments and other actors defying the expectation that they act in accordance with their resources and institutions. To shed light on why, this study has looked carefully at the role of ideas, specifically regarding the responsibility to produce social protection, the conceptualization of local governments, and the nature of homelessness. An important conclusion of previous work on multilevel governance has been that resources are sometimes more powerful than institutions (including jurisdiction) in structuring involvement. This present work demonstrates that ideas may be more powerful still.

**Ideas and Multilevel Governance**

Ideas regarding the responsibility to produce social protection go a long way toward explaining some of the most puzzling cases. Those ideas relate to the actors’ understanding of their own role in homelessness
Multiple Barriers

governance as well as that of others. For example, they help us understand the lack of municipal involvement in homelessness governance in Calgary. The municipal government there has sought to limit its involvement because its officials view the responsibility for producing social protection for people experiencing homelessness as lying elsewhere. From the 1990s until the mid-aughts, city officials viewed that responsibility as lying primarily with the provincial government; later, as the Calgary Homeless Foundation gained more power, those same officials insisted that they had not become more involved because the Calgary Homeless Foundation was responsible. In other cases – notably Vancouver and Calgary – the private sector increased its involvement in homelessness governance in the mid-aughts. This was in part because of a belief in the role of the private sector in contributing to this effort, but also because of a belief that the role of governments should be limited.

Ideas about the responsibility to produce social protection can interact with ideas about federalism. In this book, this is most clear in Quebec, where the province increased its involvement in housing in the 1960s and 1970s in order to limit the federal government’s involvement in areas of provincial jurisdiction. Ideas about federalism have led provincial officials in Quebec (from all political parties) to jealously guard their jurisdiction. In fully and energetically occupying this policy field, the province is simultaneously engaged in acts of jurisdictional offence and defence: in offence, the province is exercising its powers by fighting homelessness; in defence, it is protecting the policy field from federal encroachment. This is also seen in the provincial–federal bilateral governance model for implementing the NHI/HPS in Quebec; elsewhere in the country, this relationship is strictly federal–local. As I explain below, Quebec is one of the most deeply involved provinces in the country because ideas about federalism and the responsibility to produce social protection have combined with some of the broadest ideas in evidence about the nature of homelessness. Federal involvement has also been shaped by these ideas, with Stephen Harper’s conservative government viewing housing and homelessness as provincial jurisdiction, whereas Justin Trudeau’s Liberal government views them as shared.

At the local level, this book confirms Martin Horak’s findings regarding the importance of how local officials conceive the role of the local government. In Vancouver, city officials insist that they do more than just pick up the garbage – they are engaged in taking care of the people who live there. InSite is often cited as an example of this. It is in Toronto that the conceptualization of the local government’s role is the most
expansive, and senior officials went to great lengths to stress the ways in which the municipality is more like a province than other municipal governments. The idea that Toronto is a large, democratic government has for years led officials there to exercise and defend housing policy the way a jealous province would, almost as though the responsibility for housing policy is proof that Toronto is more than a municipality. In Montreal, we see nuanced ideas regarding the city’s role: city officials are careful to point out the primary responsibility of the province, including over municipalities, noting that Montreal is a “creature of the province”; also, ideas regarding federalism have permeated the local level in Montreal, as this book has shown. Yet officials in Montreal are becoming more assertive in their relationship with the province, insisting that they can and should do more than fix potholes (a never-ending job in Montreal). Coderre’s quest for Metropolitan status, and the central role that the fight against homelessness played in his justification for increased city powers, is another clear example of how this idea drives municipal involvement.

Conceptualizations of local government and ideas about the responsibility to produce social protection tend to drive cities’ involvement, whereas ideas about the nature of homelessness tend to structure the interactions of groups. There has been considerable evolution in how homelessness is understood. In the 1990s and 2000s, dominant understandings of homelessness emphasized individual-level causes, including drug use, and mental illness. These were understood at the time to be the individual-level barriers to housing. Over time, definitions have come to identify structural and systemic causes of homelessness, including, fundamentally, a lack of affordable housing but also a host of other structural and institutional failures and weaknesses. These barriers can interact with individual-level factors to contribute to homelessness, but there is now an understanding that barriers to housing exist not just within individuals but also within systems.

Yet there have also been persistent disagreements over the nature of homelessness. One definition relates homelessness to the absence of housing; homelessness is always, in this understanding, a lack of housing. Housing is sometimes defined narrowly as a permanent residence; other times, it is defined more broadly as safe, adequate, and affordable. Federal officials and many provinces outside of Quebec, as well as private-sector groups (where they are involved), understand homelessness to be the absence of housing. Another definition understands homelessness as resulting not just from a lack of housing but from a lack of community integration as well. Accordingly, homelessness is the lack of a home, which is understood as more than four walls,
a door, and a roof; it is also something that facilitates social inclusion and participation. Solutions must therefore involve social and community supports. This definition has been broadly, though not universally, adopted in Quebec.

This might be understood as a divide between English and French Canada, but I found evidence that both definitions of homelessness are used by different actors across the country; for example, the TDRC and some third-sector groups in Vancouver espouse this expansive understanding, and Montreal-based groups (such as the MMFIM) use the housing-based definition. Meanwhile, an Indigenous definition of homelessness has been articulated by Jesse Thistle. This definition identifies homelessness as not just the lack of a physical structure or even a lack of integration. Rather, it is the result of forced displacement from land and culture, and ongoing colonization that leads to a separation from “All My Relations.” Indigenous actors across the country, even those who were unfamiliar with this specific definition, explained in interviews that homelessness is more than a lack of housing, because a home, from an Indigenous perspective, is understood in a different, more holistic sense.

Where actors agree on the nature of homelessness, they are likely to coordinate and even collaborate. In Calgary, widespread agreement on the nature and definition of homelessness has allowed for a great deal of power to be centralized in the Calgary Homeless Foundation. In Toronto, changing ideas have led to ideational convergence among powerful actors regarding the nature of homelessness and the responsibility to produce social protection, leading to collaborative co-governance between the city and third-sector actors. In Montreal, by contrast, we see strongly conflicting ideas regarding the nature of homelessness, with one group (RAPSIM) advancing a broad definition of homelessness that relates to housing and inclusion, and another group (the MMFIM) proposing a narrower definition linked to accessing and maintaining housing. Neither of these groups blocks the other’s actions, but they are critical of each other and do not formally collaborate.

Where homelessness governance is fragmented, disagreements over the nature of homelessness can raise barriers to stable, responsive governance. Yet ideational differences, when coordinated institutionally, can lead to a rich and diverse service system. This is seen at the regional level in Montreal, where two plans with two different sources of funding advance different approaches to homelessness. These plans are highly coordinated. Because these two plans are overseen by the same person, liaise regularly, and involve many of the same groups in their development, they are able to fill each other’s gaps. They are not
fighting over funding because they have different sources; thus, each can do its own work implementing its own plans without stepping on the toes of the other, or worse, undoing the other’s work. Similarly, at the regional level in Vancouver, groups implementing the federal NHI/HPS coordinate closely. This includes an Indigenous group that is motivated by a definition of homelessness that is not just housing-based, but more in line with Thistle’s definition of Indigenous homelessness. Fragmentation, and even irreconcilable ideational disagreements, are not fatal blows to efforts to combat homelessness. Indeed, a diverse but coordinated system can be highly effective because it allows genuine space for different approaches to meet the needs of a highly diverse population.

Ideas regarding the nature of homelessness tend to structure the interactions of groups, but they can also influence actor involvement. The Government of Quebec has adopted a broad definition of homelessness, which has driven the involvement of not just a lead Ministry (health, in Quebec), but a number of ministries and departments. By contrast, homelessness has been understood in BC as more strictly related to housing. As a consequence, BC Housing leads in efforts to combat homelessness and does not collaborate as extensively with other provincial departments, though this has changed under the NDP government and more Ministries are increasingly involved. Also, in Vancouver we find that different understandings of the nature of homelessness drive actor involvement. This was particularly the case in 2008, when Gregor Robertson was beginning to implement his plan to end street homelessness. Disagreeing with this focus on street homelessness, the StreetoHome Foundation moved forward with the implementation of its own, separate ten-year plan.

To be sure, is not always clear that ideas on their own exert an independent force in every instance of changing involvement or interactions; in some instances, something else may well be at play. For example, changes in governance dynamics are sometimes driven by ideological differences. Conservative governments tend to see a more limited role for themselves in the production of social protection than Liberal or NDP governments. Provincial and local government involvement has at times changed in line with what we would expect from ideology; for example, the Progressive Conservative Ford government in Ontario limited its involvement in governance, whereas the NDP government led by Horgan in BC expanded its role.

A change in leadership can also lead to a change in ideas. There can be subtle ideological differences between leaders of the same party, with some leaning more to the left (or right) than their predecessors.
For example, after Christy Clark, a Liberal, was elected BC’s premier, the provincial role in the production of social protection for people experiencing homelessness became much more limited than it had been under Gordon Campbell, also a BC Liberal. Also, a change in leadership at the Calgary Homeless Foundation in 2015 led to more positive interactions between the CHF and the Aboriginal Standing Committee on Housing and Homelessness. So changes in leadership or ideology sometimes explain changes in involvement and interaction; other times, though, they do not. This is seen at the federal level, where the NHI/HPS remained virtually unchanged for nearly twenty years of Liberal and Conservative governments. Similarly in Quebec, we see consistency in definitions of homelessness between Liberal and PQ governments. And there was no leadership change in BC in 2005/2006, when the province reengaged.

Ideational Theory

In instances where changes do not align with what we would expect, ideas have been important. Below I consider two ideational mechanisms have been at play. First, in a number of instances across the country, groups were starting to feel that their work was not succeeding. Some actors went so far as to frame their work as having failed. This recognition that the status quo was not working and that something needed to change can be understood as an environmental mechanism, one that “works to expand the space for discussion of alternatives” (Jenson 2010). It can lead to a changing degree of involvement of different actors but also, importantly, to a change in the nature of their interactions. Importantly, there is no external change, but rather ideas lead groups to understand their environment differently. With respect to homelessness, this meant that actors come to understand that they are limited in what they can do to end or reduce homelessness and that responsibility for the production of social protection is shared. This was seen with the Calgary Homeless Foundation as well as the City of Toronto. An actor in Calgary explained that by the mid-2010s, the CHF was taking a step back from its leadership role in the community after what they called a “big learning” that everyone needs to be “at the wheel.” The CHF has come to collaborate, and call on senior government involvement, more than it originally did. And in Toronto, an actor recalled that people were frustrated with banging their heads against the wall and not getting the results they wanted and needed; this led groups to create new partnerships.
The second mechanism of ideational change we have seen is a cognitive mechanism (Jenson 2010). Because of their ambiguity and positive valence, actors can use ideas to redefine a problem and create coalitions of people working toward new solutions. In this way, particularly powerful ideas can transform into coalition magnets. Recall that according to Béland and Cox (2016), an idea becomes a coalition magnet when it results in the redefinition of a problem, is promoted by key actors, and brings together a group of people, some of whom may disagree on politics. As the empirical chapters in this book have demonstrated, these ideas tend to be specific and are informed by a particular definition of homelessness. The most notable coalition magnet has been the idea of ending homelessness.

In a number of cities across the country in the mid-aughts, homelessness was redefined by key entrepreneurs. Motivated by a new and narrow understanding of homelessness, some key community leaders (entrepreneurs) argued that homelessness could be ended and that doing so (as opposed to managing homelessness) would save money in the long run. This idea was introduced by a powerful policy entrepreneur – Philip Mangano – who visited Vancouver, Calgary, Toronto, and Montreal to redefine homelessness. The idea of ending homelessness, and saving money in the process, was appealing to a wide-range of people, including private-sector business leaders, faith-based organizations, and social justice activists. With homelessness not clearly defined in early efforts, ending homelessness was also somewhat ambiguous, allowing groups to bring their own values, assumptions and ideas regarding the nature of homelessness to their collaborative efforts. These groups were drawn to work together by the idea of ending homelessness: for some, that idea was a human rights solution to a violation of human rights and a failure of public policy, whereas for others, it was a cost-cutting solution to an expensive problem.

Magnetic ideas attract groups and draw people to work together, but they can also push groups apart. That happened at the local level in Montreal, where the MMFIM sought to end homelessness through Housing First. The MMFIM invited the RAPSIM to participate in its efforts and join the coalition, an invitation that was strongly rebuffed. The RAPSIM expressed scepticism about Housing First and the idea of ending homelessness. Specifically referencing the provincial definition and approach to understanding homelessness, which it supported, the RAPSIM refused to collaborate (RAPSIM 2014). So disagreements over powerful and magnetic ideas can push groups apart, a novel contribution of this study.
The ambiguity of ideas can also make them volatile. This was seen in Vancouver, where a strong local coalition came together around the idea of ending street homelessness. But as conflicts among actors arose, it became clear that while coalition members agreed on the idea of ending homelessness, their actions were driven by different understandings about its nature and what ending it actually meant. City officials and other powerful actors involved in implementing the coalition’s plan, including other local groups and provincial officials, were motivated by a housing-based definition. They therefore viewed low-barrier shelters as a short-term solution to the longer-term objective of using Housing First programs to find supportive housing for people experiencing homelessness. Others involved in the coalition, including those at First United Church, did not necessarily disagree with this objective, but they also sought to create a community in the low-barrier shelter, one that would welcome anyone who wanted to use the space. For them, homelessness could not be ended if people, even when housed, remained isolated and excluded. Their shelter space welcomed everyone, including people who, by the definition used by the city and the province, were not experiencing homelessness because they had access to subsidized housing. So the powerfully magnetic idea of ending street homelessness brought together an ambitious and committed coalition, but disagreements about what ending homelessness meant were fomented by the idea’s ambiguity, which made it volatile and led to the breakdown of part of that coalition. This underscores an important contribution of this work to ideational theory: ambiguous ideas are powerful coalition builders, but they are also volatile.

This book has also examined how ideas and institutions interact. The ideational disagreement between city and Vancouver actors and the StreetoHome Foundation was very small, for example, but was amplified by local institutions – notably the local party system – that turned minor differences into political ones. As a result, the two approaches solidified and a chasm between them developed. Once the initial shock of the partisan origins of the StreetoHome Foundation wore off, the foundation was able to work with city officials along the continuum of homelessness, with the city focusing on shelters (as well as permanent and transitional housing) and the STHF on Housing First approaches. Institutions can also enable groups to overcome significant barriers posed by different understandings of homelessness; as noted, formal coordination between two different plans at the regional level in Montreal – one motivated by a housing-based definition of homelessness and the other by a community-based definition – has managed this profound disagreement, allowing these different groups to coexist.
Welfare State

This book also makes a number of contributions to the study of the welfare state. The federal nature of Canada’s welfare state has received considerable attention in the academic literature. This is unlikely to change, and scholars should continue to examine how federalism and competing interpretations of federalism have shaped the welfare state. But the federal welfare state is also urban. This presents an additional challenge, both theoretical and practical, to social policy governance and the production of social protection. Complex policy challenges tend to concentrate in urban centres, spaces that in Canada are increasingly unaffordable and unequal, thus posing even greater challenges to equitable social protection. And complex social problems like homelessness tend to be hyper-localized: things are different in Vancouver than they are in West Kelowna, but they are also different in East Vancouver than they are in Kitsilano. Local groups are the ones that know this best, but their expertise has often been overlooked, and they usually do not have the resources, mandate, or both to respond on their own.

Much of what has been learned in the preceding pages comes from locally based actors. Federal and provincial governments took scissors and in some cases a chainsaw to the social safety net, carving out large gaps through which people could, did, and continue to fall. Local actors, mainly third-sector and Indigenous-led groups, have reinforced the safety net when no one else would, stretching it to cover more people and mending the holes with duct tape. Understanding social protection in Canada, including how inequality is reproduced, how social risks change over time, where ideas come from, how policies are developed and why, who is prioritized and who is not and why, all of these questions require a close examination of local and even hyper-local levels, actions, and actors. Studies of complex social policy are incomplete without a careful consideration of local groups, Indigenous actors, and municipal governments. And the success of complex policy-making depends on the inclusion of the knowers – Indigenous leaders, lived experts, and service providers – so understanding barriers to their participation is urgent.

This work also buttresses a path-breaking conclusion drawn by urban scholars like Kristin Good: municipal governments are democratic governments in their own right (Good 2009). This is evident in the different degrees and types of involvement we see among municipal governments, which are partly a consequence of variations in institutional realities and choices informed by specific ideas identified here. Most obviously, Toronto is responsible for housing and homelessness. Other,
less obvious institutional features also matter to this involvement, such as density bonusing and inclusionary zoning powers, which some cities have and use aggressively. Municipal officials have made it clear that they belong at the policy-making table; if not invited, many have simply invited themselves and pulled up a chair. If anyone still believes that municipalities are uninvolved in social policy or are all the same and should be treated as such, this simple reality is powerful evidence otherwise.

This research also reveals an important conclusion regarding housing and the welfare state. Housing policy has not typically been considered central to the welfare state in Canada, or even internationally; Ulf Torgerson famously called housing the “wobbly pillar” of the welfare state (Torgersen 1987). While ending homelessness may be about more than housing, depending on the definition, homelessness is always the absence of housing. The centrality of housing to so many aspects of health and well-being should once and for all put this debate to rest: while housing has at times been considered an economic good or infrastructure, it is and always will be social protection from a host of social risks as well. Given that it centrally determines so many other measures of health and well-being, housing is not the welfare state’s wobbly pillar but rather its load-bearing wall. Especially given the housing crisis in many large Canadian cities, future studies (and governments) should treat it as such.

To the extent that housing has been studied, it has tended to be prior to the federal cuts in the 1990s. This present research reinforces some of the conclusions drawn in previous studies of the welfare state, including how housing policy and federalism interact, but gaps in our understanding of housing in the federal welfare state remain. Consistent with studies from the past, this research has found that not all provinces are concerned about protecting their jurisdiction from what can be interpreted as federal encroachment. This is notably the case with the federal NHI/HPS. Quebec is the only province to co-govern this program with the federal government, a fact that one federal bureaucrat admitted was baffling. Yet for decades, provinces have behaved differently when it comes to protecting their jurisdiction over housing (Banting 1990, 129). This study also finds that federalism continues to operate with a footnote, as Alain Noël so aptly noted in 2000: the multilateral agreement between federal and provincial governments regarding the implementation of the NHS contains that famous footnote to indicate Quebec’s protest against federal encroachment into provincial jurisdiction. Continuing to explore federal, urban, and place-based dimensions of housing and the welfare state will provide important insights to these literatures.
Finally, this book contributes to a small but growing body of research on the governance of homelessness. In this careful documentation of the involvement of multilevel and multisector actors in homelessness governance, I have identified the ways in which actors are involved in the production of social protection across the country. Many of these actors are deeply engaged. This multitude of highly involved actors can in some cities lead to fragmentation. This does not necessarily diminish the effectiveness of governance networks, especially when different groups collaborate or coordinate. This finding challenges some of what has been concluded about homelessness governance in other studies, including Nienke Boesveldt’s study of homelessness governance in Europe and Charley Willison’s study of homelessness governance in the United States. The conclusion that homelessness governance requires a central agency (Boesveldt 2015) or recentralization (Willison 2021) is useful in some contexts. But it is difficult to apply in others, such as Vancouver and Montreal, where a number of actors are involved and centralizing authority in one body would risk alienating some groups. The alienation of some groups can result in an uncoordinated and less complete network or, at worst, a fragmented system where groups work at cross-purposes. Besides which, we would lose their expertise. Centralization is not, therefore, necessarily necessary, and in some instances the productive potential of coordinated fragmentation is clear to see.

The existence of multiple definitions of homelessness in Canada is important to document and keep in mind as policy-makers develop responses to ensure that people living in Canada have adequate, safe homes. This suggests that the understandings of what is motivating the actions of decision-makers may be even more complicated than previously thought. In the United States, Charley Willison (2021) identified two “social constructions” of homelessness: individual and structural. That a community-centred definition of homelessness was identified across Canada but was not identified by Willison suggests there are perhaps important differences in social protection between Canada and the United States, or perhaps community-based definitions are present in cities not covered in Willison’s study. Similarly, a comparison of the results of Canadian and American studies raises the important question of the role of Indigenous people in homelessness governance in the United States. What is their role in the production of social protection in the US? Is there no Indigenous perspective on homelessness in the United States? Why or why not? These are some questions to consider in future studies, informed by the Canadian experience.
Erin Dej also considers two of the definitions identified above: the housing-focused one and the Indigenous one proposed by Thistle. Her book, *A Complex Exile*, was based on extensive fieldwork, including participant observation, in two homeless shelters in Ottawa, Ontario. This intensive look at two services allowed her to invest considerable time in each resource and with the people using the services, which made for a rich empirical study of how the services provided in those shelters do and do not respond to the causes of homelessness. Dej concludes that homeless shelters, through mental health supports, pathologize homelessness, reinforcing the exclusion and isolation of homeless people. Given the existence of another, community-focused definition of homelessness, and given the centrality of community and inclusion in Dej’s recommendations for policy, my research suggests that it would be fruitful to also consider services offered by agencies that adopt a community-focused definition of homelessness in future research to see how they compare and if they are more success at addressing the root causes of homelessness than interventions motivated by the housing-based definition.

**Theorizing the Multilevel Governance of Complex Policy Problems**

Individual Canadians, however, might wonder whether all this really matters. Are federal/provincial battles simply a game beloved by bureaucrats and politicians, driven by a territorial imperative, but devoid of real consequences—“full of sound and fury, signifying nothing”? Or do subtle shifts in the models that structure the distribution of power have major impacts that are visible at the grassroots, where real people need better housing? The complexities of federal/provincial relations do, in fact, have important implications for the broad patterns of public policy. (Banting 1990, 144)

Drawing on studies of multilevel governance and the welfare state, this book has sought to explain why different governance configurations have emerged with respect to homelessness across the country. This variation in governance dynamics is not unexpected, but we know that governance shapes policy. As this book has found, it is not just federal–provincial dynamics that matter, as Banting noted thirty years ago, but broader multilevel dynamics do as well. The following sections walk through what we have learned about how resources, institutions, and ideas shape the involvement and interactions of third-sector groups, private-sector actors, Indigenous groups, local governments, provincial governments, and the federal government in the multilevel governance of homelessness in Canada.
Third-Sector Involvement and Interactions

Though many third-sector groups have the expertise and capacity to develop and implement measures to end homelessness, they are not always involved, or not always involved at all stages of policy development. A variety of forces structure the involvement of third-sector groups in the governance of homelessness. Institutionalizing their involvement ensures that their expertise is brought right into policymaking and affords them some degree of independence in the process. This is the case in Quebec, at both local and provincial levels, where third-sector groups are government-funded and independent and have access to the policy process through a number of venues and channels (Laforest 2011a). Where they have not been invited or institutionally involved, third-sector groups employ a number of methods to push their knowledge into decision-making processes. Absent formal institutional structures, third-sector groups in other parts of the country are sometimes able to leverage connections with sympathetic “insiders” in government. The Toronto Disaster Relief Committee, active for about fifteen years in Toronto, benefited from an important insider on Toronto City Council: Jack Layton. Layton championed TDRC ideas, including a plan to declare homelessness a disaster. Judy Graves, the City of Vancouver’s advocate for the homeless, brought the perspective of service providers and people experiencing homelessness to decision-makers at City Hall. Libby Davies was another important insider: as house leader for the federal New Democratic Party, she championed the concerns of third-sector groups from Vancouver, notably regarding the creation of a National Housing Strategy.

Third-sector groups also engage decision-makers more broadly. Emily Paradis contrasts grassroots activism with advocacy.1 They write that grassroots advocates “embrace a radical and intersectional analysis ... They often take a direct approach, and their campaigns tend to be reactive to local events.” This contrasts with the lobbying approach to engagement, which is more moderate: “While the role of inequities based on race, gender, and disability is often acknowledged, fundamental critiques of capitalism and institutionalization are typically absent, and state-led solutions are promoted” (Paradis 2016, 100). Paradis also notes that groups can adopt an insider or an outsider stance, referring to “the extent to which their discourses, activities and demands align with or are contrary to those of the powerful entities they seek to influence” (2016, 101).

The CHF, the TAEH, the MMFIM and the CAEH tend to adopt the lobbying approach from an insider stance, whereas the TDRC, OCAP,
and RAPSIM adopt more grassroots methods. The TDRC and OCAP have approached their work as critical outsiders, an interesting contrast with the RAPSIM, an organization that believes government is part of the solution, not the problem. Because of institutionalization in Quebec, the RAPSIM is both an insider and an outsider. These two methods of engagement, advocacy and grassroots, are effective, but in different ways. The lobbying approach is targeted and behind the scenes. Groups or their leaders carefully select a small number of officials (both elected and bureaucratic) to target with key messages, solutions, and demands. CAEH president Tim Richter is a clear example of this; indeed, he had a background in lobbying prior to his work in the homelessness sector, and his lobbying efforts are rapid and razor sharp. On her second day on the job as Minister of Veterans Affairs, Jody Wilson-Raybould received a letter from the CAEH regarding veteran’s homelessness, a priority for the CAEH. The TAEH also takes a more targeted approach with the City of Toronto, distinct from the grassroots method the TRDC employed and that OCAP continues to take. Senior actors with the TAEH explained that they do not want to be simply another advocacy group; they want to participate in decision-making.

A concern raised by Withers (2021) is that proximity to power may leave these groups compromised, unable to criticize governments and needing to self-censor when they do. The grassroots approach is employed by groups that tend to be more critical or radical in their approach, and their actions seek to build broad support. In the film *Shelter from the Storm*, we see TDRC officials storming City Hall with a megaphone, demanding to know the location of Mel Lastman. The use of a megaphone was not required in order to find Lastman, but of course finding Lastman was not their only goal: it was also to make their presence, their discontent, and their demands known widely throughout City Hall. RAPSIM members also use a megaphone at rallies and spread their message broadly. Their objective is to inform not just policy-makers but a wider constituency, who will help apply pressure on decision-makers. The ultimate objective, as Michael Shapcott so eloquently explained, is to create space for political leaders to go further. Grassroots approaches, especially when taken by radical movements, risk alienating decision-makers, though this is not always seen as a problem by organizers. A former senior official recalled with exasperation that they found working with OCAP nearly impossible, and that you give them what they want and they still protest. Another senior city official said they are “annoying as hell” but still appreciated the need for advocacy.
Though some groups tend to use more grassroots approaches than lobbying ones, as defined by Paradis, most groups employ a variety of methods for making themselves heard. The RAPSIM carries out grassroots organizing, but at the same time, its leaders communicate directly – and more quietly – with elected officials. The CAEH also does grassroots organizing, an example being its 2021 Vote Housing campaign, which sought to build a movement to pressure political parties to commit to housing and ending homelessness in the upcoming federal election. It can be difficult to employ different methods of engagement, but many third sector leaders insisted on the importance of relationships with political decision-makers. One highly respected insider advocate explained their strategy for how to maintain a critical stance without alienating allies: “In my own experience, [politicians] are like dogs – if you whack them all the time, it just confuses them. But if you whack them a few times, and then the next time you fluff them behind the ears, they start paying attention” (personal interview 2014). Scholars interested in the different approaches taken by social movements will find a closer look at this history exciting and theoretically enriching.

Ideas lead third-sector groups deploy their resources to connect with insiders and advocate. One of these ideas is the deeply held belief that they have a role to play in the production of social protection. Across the country, third sector leaders generally agree that the main responsibility for homelessness governance lies with governments, though some groups – notably the Calgary Homeless Foundation and the Movement to End Homelessness in Montreal – have sought to assume more of a leadership role. There is nevertheless widespread agreement among the third sector that effective and responsive governance of homelessness requires substantial input from third-sector groups.

Ideas regarding the nature of homelessness are powerful in structuring the interactions between third-sector groups and other actors. In some instances, we see little disagreement. This is the case in Calgary, though the understanding of the nature of homelessness has evolved considerably since 2008. The CHF was able to use the highly magnetic idea of ending homelessness and saving money doing so to build a powerful coalition, in the process crowding out or winning over groups that disagreed. By contrast, there were divergent understandings of the nature of homelessness in Toronto in the late 1990s and early 2000s, with the city adopting a more narrow definition than the then powerful TDRC and allied network OCAP. This contributed to climate of hostility and distrust. In 2015, the Toronto Alliance to End Homelessness emerged, espousing an understanding of homelessness that largely aligned with that of the city. This ideational convergence on the nature
Disagreements about the nature of homelessness can also cause conflicts within the third sector. We see this clearly in Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver. Some groups, such as the RAPSIM in Montreal, the leaders of a former HEAT shelter in Vancouver, and the TDRC and OCAP in Toronto view homelessness as related not just to housing but to poverty, inclusion, and community as well. These groups are critical of plans and strategies that prioritize people who experience chronic homelessness, because their understanding of the problem is related to much more than housing. Other groups, such as the MMFIM, the CHF, the TAEH and the national CAEH have a narrower understanding of homelessness as related to housing and believe that people who experience chronic homelessness should be targeted first. These different understandings of homelessness can coexist; groups can work together by targeting specific forms or types of homelessness, filling gaps left or created by others. But disagreements can also raise barriers to the development of effective governance and ultimately an effective service system. The MMFIM and RAPSIM have at times worked at cross-purposes, competing for funding or to influence government agendas. Given the importance of third-sector involvement, particularly in Montreal, these conflicts can destabilize and weaken the overall governance dynamics.

As this makes clear, the third sector involves a great diversity of actors advancing different approaches and visions, and who often compete with one another for limited funding. This is not a novel finding, as anyone who studies or works in the third-sector will know, and is consistent with the literature on civil-society and community-led efforts to produce social protection (Hudson and Grafe 2012). This is a strength; the homeless population is diverse, meaning many different types of services are required, including harm reduction in some cases, abstinence-based programs in others. Further, while some shelters are safe for people of all genders, some women or trans people feel safer in segregated spaces. Youth, queer people, seniors, and people with disabilities also have unique needs that are not always met in large homeless shelters, and may find better support in smaller environments where services are more sensitive to them. As is often said, one size does not fit all.

What is notable about the third sector when it comes to serving people who are homeless is that some agencies or services believe that the work of others is undermining their own. For example, Matthew Pearce, who ran the Old Brewery Mission in Montreal for years, wrote
that “shelters had inadvertently become facilitators of homelessness; they enabled people who had nothing to stabilize their lives within a state of homelessness. Shelters allowed homelessness to become more than a difficult period in someone’s life – they allowed it to become normalized as a lifestyle” (Pearce 2018, 88–9). That is a controversial statement, but Pearce is not afraid to speak up about what he thinks it will take to end homelessness in Montreal, and across the country for that matter. And he is by no means the only one to criticize services and how they are producing social protection. The deep commitment of service providers to their work leads some groups to criticize others, a dynamic that leaves third-sector groups involved in homelessness particularly divided. These criticisms and divisions are frequently the result of different understandings of homelessness, and fundamental disagreements can indeed be very difficult to coordinate.

Private Sector Involvement and Interactions

Where they are involved, private-sector actors are influential in the governance of homelessness. Different kinds of resources, primarily money and management expertise, help explain why these actors are involved. The private sector is the least involved in homelessness in Montreal; actors attribute this to a lack of resources and to the fact that private philanthropy in the province has historically been minimal. In Calgary and Vancouver, however, where private-sector groups are influential in homelessness governance, the ability to bring “new money” to the table was important in driving this involvement. Actors in Vancouver recall meeting with a former premier who was pleasantly surprised to learn that they did not simply want to influence decisions about provincial spending but were prepared to co-fund solutions as well. In Calgary, the ability to write a big cheque to fund a pilot project allowed the CHF to hit the ground running and not wait on government funding or a long grant processes. Besides bringing material resources, private-sector actors pride themselves on offering management expertise; what they lack in knowledge of homelessness, they purport to make up for with their proven ability to manage complex problems and systems. In the mid-aughts, the homeless system was understood to be something of a technical challenge; community groups were told that they had what they needed to end homelessness, they just needed to put the parts together. An experienced private sector leader was seen has having the skills to do this, and in Vancouver and Calgary, there is strong evidence that government officials also valued this private-sector experience and expertise.
Private-sector actors can also draw on personal connections with top, and sometimes very top, elected officials. In Calgary, for example, some scholars have concluded that there are around 300 people, mostly private-sector individuals from the oil and gas sector, who are powerful and connected enough to influence government agendas (Feng, Li, and Langford 2014). In other words, private-sector actors are not always connected to an insider who is sympathetic to their cause, but they have strong enough relationships with senior officials that they can win them over, effectively creating not just a sympathetic insider for their cause, but a sympathetic mayor, premier, or minister. This is an important insight of this research and allows for a more nuanced understanding of power dynamics between third sector groups and private sector groups. Private sector leaders in some cases have access to the very top elected officials, often in a personal way that allows them to ask for a meeting, even just a few minutes, with political leaders; this is valuable access that other sectors tend not to have.

Ideas allow us to more fully understand why private-sector actors have chosen to leverage their connections and bring their resources to the governance of homelessness in particular. Ideas regarding the responsibility to produce social protection – both whose responsibility it is and whose it is not – have been important. In Calgary and Vancouver, private-sector actors noted that they believe they have a responsibility to help those in need. In both cities, however, actors also noted that homelessness should not be left to government alone. In fact, the private-sector has often increased its involvement as a means to limit government involvement in efforts to make the overall system more efficient.

Ideas regarding the nature of homelessness have also driven involvement. In Vancouver, Calgary, and Toronto, at key moments, private-sector actors organized around homelessness out of concern about what homelessness was doing to local economic activity and productivity. In Vancouver, business leaders wrote a letter to then Mayor Sam Sullivan in 2006, imploring him to do more to address an “urban malignancy” that was interfering with economic activity. In Calgary, business leaders in the early-aughts believed that Calgary was on the cusp of becoming a global economic hub and that homelessness threatened that future. Similar concerns were expressed by business leaders in Toronto in a report by the Toronto Board of Trade. In these cases, private-sector actors sought rapid solutions to a problem they had defined in negative and stereotypical terms (crime, disorder), reflecting a narrow understanding of homelessness. Involvement in solutions were at least in part self-interested.
While continuing to embrace a narrow understanding of homelessness, and sometimes out of self-interest, private-sector leaders in Canada have also been interested in long-term evidence-based solutions to homelessness, and they have been some of the most enthusiastic champions of Housing First programs in Canadian cities. Private-sector support for Housing First was based in part on presentations made at various breakfasts (many of them Prayer) by Philip Mangano, who insisted that plans to end homelessness through Housing First were succeeding in US cities. Interestingly, this private-sector support of evidence-based policy measures contrasts with findings in the United States, where Charley Willison’s work on homelessness governance found that business leaders tend to support individualized and criminalized responses to homelessness as opposed to Housing First (which she finds is more often supported by local governments) (Willison 2021).

There is ample evidence that the private sector deeply respects the work being done by third-sector groups and that it is willing to partner. Private-sector actors at times collaborate effectively with third-sector groups. But also evident are disagreements between sectors over the nature of homelessness. As the CHF was developing its ten-year plan, some third-sector groups in Calgary came to feel that they were being pushed off their own turf. The CHF eventually won over many sceptics (a process helped by CHF officials’ evolving ideas regarding the nature of homelessness); even so, early disagreements on the nature of homelessness (and whether it can be ended) created a rift between some service agencies in Calgary and the CHF. As private-sector-led organizations have spent more and more time in the field, and have experienced failures or at least slower successes than they had expected, third-sector groups have come to be seen in a much more positive light, as necessary partners rather than obstacles. The same can be said of governments.

**Indigenous Leaders**

I think the non-Indigenous community needs to step back a little bit and give the lead to the Indigenous community to say, “This is what we need and what we want. Thank you very much for listening to our voice and please don’t interpret it from your perspective.”

Member of an Indigenous Community Advisory Board

Indigenous groups across the country are involved in the governance of homelessness, producing social protection in accordance with
Indigenous knowledge in a colonial country. Because of its focus on urban spaces, this book has considered a small dimension of Indigenous involvement in homelessness governance, which has generally been in terms of networks that have been created to implement federal NHI/HPS funding and with other local advocacy groups. Indigenous knowledge has not been systematically included, or perhaps more accurately it has been systematically excluded, by all levels of government and sectors of society in the development of responses to homelessness. To the extent that Indigenous people are involved and interact with other groups in homelessness governance, it tends to be informal and at their own initiative (as opposed to by invitation) – as one actor explained in an interview, “You put yourself out there.”

Even when they do put themselves out there, Indigenous leaders are frequently met with resistance, illustrating the additional burdens that are placed on Indigenous people to identify and push to resolve problems. This was the case for Indigenous service providers concerned about the over-policing of Indigenous men, for example. One leader interviewed had to fight to have their voice heard; once they were listened to, they ended up educating local police officers on the history of policing and Indigenous-police relations. In addition to this practice of putting themselves out there to have their voices heard, a number of Indigenous people interviewed referenced the fact that they serve on a number of local committees (frequently on a volunteer basis) and that they use those opportunities to advocate. Not all these committees are specifically related to homelessness, but people interviewed said they used every opportunity to speak and advocate. This approach is in contrast to what was seen among third-sector leaders, who tend to rely on a sympathetic insider, and private-sector leaders, who often have personal connections with senior political leaders.

An important lesson emerged regarding the necessity not only of regular and institutionalized involvement, but also of different channels of communication. An Indigenous leader involved in developing a municipal response to homelessness explained that were frequent meetings that brought together all the partners involved in developing and implementing the plan, but that this environment was not the best place for this person to advocate:

I guess I found it a bit difficult to be heard in that scenario. The city had developed what it thought was its mission, so they were going forward. The only way you could be heard in that is if you were a Type A personality and just wanted to be heard and were not afraid to speak out. Not
that they were excluding voices. But it’s a bit intimidating sitting in that room with council and the chief of police and say, “uuuuuuuum I have a question.” One of the ways around that I found was to be strategic in how you get your voice out there. So I would send emails or speak to people outside the room. The mayor is very open in terms of being able to be in contact with him. (personal interview 2014)

Through the Community Advisory Boards required to access federal homelessness program funding, Indigenous people have some degree of institutionalized role in NHI/HPS implementation, though the institutional structure is imposed and was originally set up by the federal government in a way that could only have failed. The original NHI model for Indigenous communities sought to use Indigenous labour-based organizations, to implement NHI funding. Because of that institutional set-up, projects funded by the NHI had to have an employment element to them in order to receive funding, a totally inappropriate set-up for funding intended to combat homelessness that was changed within two years. Additional constraints remain, however. Indigenous CABs have tried to be flexible with regard to what programs they fund and how they fund them; this includes allowing groups to use a larger up-front investment instead of spreading the funding out over three years. However, they have been told by federal actors that they cannot release the funding that way. Their choices are constrained, but Indigenous groups are resisting. The NHI/HPS structure, which relies on volunteer members, has emboldened some of those who serve. They note that, as volunteers, they can’t be fired. Relying on volunteers who are already overburdened cannot be a best practice. This structure does give some power to community groups (indeed, this structure relies on them), however, and it means some Indigenous leaders can and do push back against federal requirements and constraints.

A lack of adequate funding is also a major obstacle to Indigenous involvement. Indigenous people are significantly overrepresented among the homeless population across the country, a legacy not just of social policy failures but of ongoing colonization. Members serving on Indigenous CABs have noted that the funding breakdown between what they get and what the Designated Community CAB gets does not reflect the breakdown of the homeless population. The fact that the NHI/HPS has been so underfunded means that Indigenous services and the people who use them have been hit particularly hard. While the Designated CAB funds Indigenous services as well, some Indigenous CAB members suggest that they should be the ones making those decisions, or at least have a say.
In addition to institutional and resource constraints, two further barriers exist to the involvement of Indigenous people in particular in the governance of homelessness: systemic racism as it specifically relates to policy-involvement\(^4\) and the exclusion or devaluing of Indigenous knowledge. Recall an actor who ran an Indigenous service in Toronto who had to convince provincial officials to release Aboriginal Housing dollars. The province held on to this funding, certain that no Indigenous service could administer it. Indigenous capacity was drastically underestimated. Similarly, in the original set up of the federal NHI, the federal government chose to administer funding for Indigenous communities through existing labour-market focussed agencies, seeming to suggest a lack of trust in Indigenous service providers to administer the funding themselves.

Furthermore, Indigenous knowledge has not been valued and has been excluded from policy development. In that regard, this book has not presented anything new, but rather has confirmed what has been found in reports and studies and what has long been known among Indigenous groups – that Indigenous people must do the work of making connections, of educating, and of convincing governments that their experience and knowledge is valuable. These barriers risk undermining responses to homelessness by excluding Indigenous knowledge that is so important to efforts to combat homelessness. Though this knowledge has not been centred in policy development or governance, Indigenous leaders have taken up a resurgence approach to produce social protection. This was made clear in an interview with senior officials involved with Indigenous services across the country, including one who works with elders who do ceremonies during outreach: “[The elders] seem to break down those barriers.”

Interviews pointed to the importance of Indigenous leadership at organizations serving Indigenous populations. One leader gave the example of sweat lodges: without Indigenous knowledge and experience, sweats can be dangerous for some people, including people who use or are early in their recovery, but they can be healing and safe (physically and spiritually) when led with by Indigenous healers and knowledge-keepers. Indigenous leaders noted with some appreciation a growing awareness of the importance of incorporating Indigenous knowledge in services and of reconciliation efforts, but expressed concern that this was being done in some cases without the guidance or involvement of Indigenous leaders, healers and elders. Faced with failures of social protection and of reconciliation, Indigenous elders have stepped into outreach vans to drive into ravines to perform ceremonies with some of the most isolated people experiencing homelessness.
This connection to culture and ceremony has been profoundly healing for many people experiencing homelessness, illustrating the need to include this knowledge and expertise not just in vans during outreach, but in the design and reform of systems to end and prevent homelessness in the first place.

Indigenous leaders understand that homelessness is about more than a lack of housing or even housing and community integration. Murray Sinclair explained how common conceptions of homelessness overlook the reality that homelessness is experienced in different ways: “Today, when we think about homelessness, we tend to think about somebody on the street in downtown Ottawa asking for money, without putting it more in the Indigenous context of landlessness, moving around, not having that settled home space, whatever form it may take” (personal interview, Murray Sinclair 2018). Ideas translate into different approaches to producing social protection, including funding projects that are not technically eligible for NHI/HPS funding and according to the housing-based definition that motivates that federal program. Guided by a different definition of homelessness, Indigenous networks have nevertheless funded a wider range of programs to meet those needs.

Homelessness is understood in different ways across the country, but those different ways are not necessarily incompatible. Different definitions can coexist and be coordinated, as is seen in Vancouver, where the two HPS networks – one Indigenous, the other non-Indigenous – coordinate formally. Because the two groups coordinate and communicate regularly, these different approaches can coexist without getting in each other’s way or undoing each other’s work, though both groups are so underfunded that they are limited in their ability to meet existing needs, let alone duplicate services. This is increasingly happening in Toronto as well, but only very recently. That said, disagreements about the definition of homelessness can also result in fragmented governance dynamics and the exclusion of the Indigenous perspective. This was the case in 2008 in Calgary, where the Aboriginal Standing Committee on Housing and Homelessness was isolated from the Calgary Homeless Foundation’s plans on homelessness and ended up creating its own plan. Diverging perspectives regarding the responsibility to produce social protection (the exclusion of Indigenous knowledge by the CHF) and regarding the nature of homelessness (Indigenous-leaders did not find the housing-focussed approach taken by the CHF to respond to their experiences) led to fragmentation. The relationship between the two groups has since improved, following a change at the CHF and a recognition that the Indigenous plan is valuable.

Indigenous knowledge has not always been sought, or has been ignored or rejected, but there are indications that this may be changing.
The federal government has acknowledged an Indigenous definition of homelessness, one that identifies colonialism as a cause. There is increasing agreement that there is a need for an Indigenous housing strategy at the national level, and that this strategy must be Indigenous-led, and important work is being done locally to inform groups that Housing First can and should adapt to Indigenous definitions of home and homelessness (Distasio et al. 2019). Though ideas among federal officials have evolved so that they now recognize there are different causes and experiences of homelessness among Indigenous people, the federal government has historically been unwilling to fully share power, even in the NHI/HPS, which is often seen as early example of place-based policy (Leo and August 2006). The effectiveness and justice of future interventions requires this to change and for power to be shared.

The involvement considered here has mostly been through a federally imposed structure. Future work should consider Indigenous involvement in homelessness governance outside of urban spaces and beyond these federally created networks. That includes the North, where Indigenous communities are seeking increased authority over housing in a nation-to-nation relationship with the federal government. For example, Jason Snaggs of the Yellowknifes Dene First Nation said recently that “if the federal government sincerely wants to improve its nation-to-nation relationship with First Nations, prioritizing Indigenous-led housing initiatives would be a good way to do that” (Taylor 2020; see also Yesno and Maher Lopez 2020). Further study of recent developments in urban spaces should be conducted as well – developments such as the landmark agreement between the Squamish First Nation and BC Housing to develop the first provincially funded on-reserve housing for people who are unhoused or underhoused (Chan 2020).

Local Governments

The municipal government in Vancouver, Toronto, and Montreal are all involved in the governance of homelessness. Whatever their involvement, municipal officials in all cities referenced a lack of financial resources as a key constraint on what they were able to do with respect to homelessness. A Toronto official recalled that their top three priorities in municipal efforts to combat homelessness were “funding, funding, funding” (personal interview 2014). Another, reflecting on the city’s efforts in the mid-2000s, concluded: “Could we have done more? Absolutely. But we needed more money” (personal interview 2014). A former mayor said that mayors are always going to other orders of
government, cap in hand, asking for more money. Yet another said that their role was to be a professional fundraiser (they also noted, almost as an afterthought, that they had always hated fundraising).

Though the resources are scarce, municipal officials in three large cities have found ways to become involved in homelessness to various degrees. This is in part thanks to another type of resource: expertise. Councillors, bureaucrats, and mayors noted that their locally based understanding of homelessness allowed them to develop more responsive plans. In Montreal, Mayor Denis Coderre explicitly linked the city’s increased involvement in homelessness governance with knowledge of local needs: “We have the numbers, we know what the needs are” (Paré 2015, author’s translation). As a Calgary city councillor explained: “As politicians and decision-makers, we are not in Edmonton or Ottawa, we are [in Calgary] and we see it and live it every day. We don’t just show up on Friday. When you are here and you see it, you can sit there and close your eyes and say ‘not my jurisdiction’ for only so long” (personal interview 2014).

Institutions have also enabled some municipalities to increase their involvement in homelessness governance. Indeed, the differences in involvement among the four cities studied here can be understood to be in part a function of institutions. The most obvious is jurisdiction: Toronto is the only city that is officially responsible for homelessness and housing, which explains why Toronto is so involved. Expanding our understanding of institutions to include other features and tools that municipalities have, however, I find that some cities have other meaningful powers for fighting homelessness. Density bonusing and inclusionary zoning are two important tools. All cities have both powers, though in Calgary, Toronto, and Montreal, inclusionary zoning has only recently been introduced. Furthermore, these tools are not equally powerful across the country. Land is particularly valuable and limited in Toronto and Vancouver, and developers are eager to increase their profits by building taller and denser (others might point out that in this context, the use of these powers should be limited in favour of the development of more deeply affordable housing). With density bonusing or inclusionary zoning, municipal governments can leverage that eagerness into public contributions (Dingman 2021). Where developers are less eager (Calgary and Montreal), these powers are of less consequence. Also, inclusionary zoning in Toronto is currently not allowed city-wide but only near transit hubs. In Calgary, where land is less limited, incentives to build “dense,” especially when something must be given in return, is not as strong as it is in Vancouver and Toronto, which makes these powers less meaningful.
Interacting with these institutional forces are ideas. First, consistent with the literature, I found evidence that conceptualizations of the local government matter. Where a municipality was involved in homelessness governance, the local government was understood by key local officials to be more than just a policy-taker or a garbage collector. This was clearest in Toronto, where officials repeatedly compared the city to a province. I also found evidence that municipal involvement is strongly structured by ideas regarding the responsibility to produce social protection. Interestingly, in some cases, the lack of involvement in homelessness was in part justified by the understanding that other actors are responsible. Calgary’s former Mayor Naheed Nenshi was one of the fiercest advocates for increased city powers, and the city is involved in poverty reduction and affordable housing; yet in Calgary, homelessness in particular has been understood to be either a provincial or third sector responsibility.

Former Vancouver mayor Gregor Robertson tried to some extent to go it alone in his plan to end street homelessness, or to at least go it without the province, believing that the municipal government could and should fill the gap created by a lack of senior government efforts to produce social protection. Looking back on those efforts, he now sounds somewhat regretful. Gary Mason, after interviewing him for the Globe and Mail, summarized Robertson’s retrospective analysis: “And [Robertson] said, unless you have Ottawa and the provincial government willing to bankroll housing and the necessary health supports to help people overcome their various problems, it’s a lost cause. Cities simply don’t have the ability to raise the funds necessary to have a critical impact on the homeless situation” (Mason 2020). It seems that this lesson has been learned, if he needed to learn it, by the current mayor, Kennedy Stewart, who has switched back to advocacy, asking senior governments for more and playing the role of Vancouver’s lobbyist-in-chief (McElroy 2019); Mayor Plante in Montreal has also been more collaborative than Mayor Coderre, who tried to assume leadership over homelessness when he was Mayor.

When it comes to cities’ interactions with other actors, ideas regarding the nature of homelessness are of great importance. Small but sharp disagreements over the nature of homelessness in the mid-2000s in Vancouver interacted with the local party system, leading to the fragmentation of homelessness governance. The city and the StreetoHome Foundation worked on different plans, implementing their efforts at the same time, but separately, because they understood the problem differently. Toronto further illustrates how ideas regarding the nature of the problem can structure relations at the local level. In the 1990s and
early 2000s, discord over the nature of homelessness led to conflict between the city and the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee. A new civil society group has since emerged in Toronto, the Toronto Alliance to End Homelessness, which espouses a view of homelessness that is closer to the city’s, including support for Housing First, efforts to collect data, and a belief in ending homelessness. The relationship between the city and the third sector as represented by the TAEH is now much more collaborative.

Ideas regarding the nature of homelessness also shape intergovernmental relations, particularly municipal–provincial. For example, the Province of Ontario re-engaged only timidly in homelessness policy in the early 2000s. Its program, Off the Streets Into Shelters, was implemented as the city began to expand its housing and homelessness responses. A senior Toronto official explained: “In 2005, if I wanted to shelter 3,000 homeless individuals, the province would pay a portion ... if I wanted to house the same people, which is more cost effective, I couldn’t get a dime” (personal interview 2014). City officials had related homelessness squarely to housing and were working to find housing for people experiencing homelessness. Provincial officials, by contrast, did not understand homelessness as related to housing; rather, they viewed it as a short-term emergency, and these ideas risked undermining municipal goals. Frustrations with the province were also seen in Vancouver, where city officials sensed that they were not on the same page as the province in their efforts to end street homelessness. A municipal official involved in housing and homelessness said with exasperation: “I don’t know what their goal is” and noted that the city’s planning process did not specifically engage the province.

Municipal officials understand that their relations with the provincial government are important, however, and that they need some degree of support from the province to achieve their goals. An actor involved in implementing Gregor Robertson’s plan described the city’s relationship with the province in family terms, with the city playing the role of annoying little brother and the province the annoyed big brother. Though the relationship was difficult, they were still family. Respect for the provincial role was particularly evident in Montreal, where city actors are working to acquire a greater say in issues related to homelessness but are doing so slowly and cautiously. Montreal officials are well aware that their city is a creature of the province and that they cannot engage directly with the federal government, for example. On this last point, no city official outside of Montreal mentioned that cities are creatures of the province in this way, suggesting that ideas about federalism have uniquely penetrated local government actions in Montreal.
Municipal officials saved their harshest words for the federal government, which may not surprise students of urban politics in Canada. The Vancouver actor who had called the province big brother had this to say about the federal government: “It always feels a little unfair to bash the province around these issues because the real people who should be on the hook are the feds” (personal interview 2014). Many actors declared that for most of the past twenty years, the federal government simply hadn’t shown up. This was particularly the case with interviews conducted in 2014, when calls for a National Housing Strategy were falling on deaf ears in Ottawa: “The federal government, I can tell you, they are not a player” (personal interview 2014). This person went on to say that when they were involved in implementing a municipal response to homelessness in the mid-aughts, “the feds were not in any meaningful way at the table.” A city councillor put this in less diplomatic terms: “[the federal government] is nowhere. Bunch of assholes. They are bums in seats and they don’t understand the individuals. I haven’t seen one of those motherfuckers out here. Not one has come out and meet with us” (personal interview 2014).

There was a sense that municipalities were being disregarded and that their role was not being appreciated or respected. When asked how to improve Calgary’s relationships with the province and the federal government, one city councillor insisted that the relationship needed to change: “When I look at who we are as a country, 75 per cent of us live in urban areas now. And I say we have a governance structure that no longer reflects the reality of where we live. The governance structure reflects who are were one hundred years ago, but not who we are now.” When asked how that change could be made, they implied that they were tired of being treated as a child: “The federal and provincial governments need to recognize that municipalities are grown-ups. It’s as simple as that. We are grown-ups” (personal interview 2014).

Provincial Involvement and Interactions

Over time, the provinces have become more involved in the governance of homelessness, though some have a longer history of involvement than others and there is variation in their degree of involvement. In some respects, this involvement is structured by resources. After the federal government decided to cut investments in social housing in the mid-1990s, most provinces, having lost significant revenue through the new social transfer program, also ended their commitments to housing. Yet BC and Quebec continued to develop housing, including supportive housing for people experiencing homelessness, evidence that resources alone do not
explain provincial involvement. Furthermore, Alberta was not involved in housing or in the rising challenges related to homelessness in 2005 during a period of surplus. Instead of investing in efforts to alleviate and reduce homelessness, Ralph Klein’s Progressive Conservative government sent a $600 cheque to every Albertan.

Indeed, in many cases we see changes in a province’s involvement without a change in party and even without a change in party leader. Resources can constrain or facilitate provincial involvement, but these alone do not explain different degrees of provincial involvement in homelessness governance or variations over time. This points to the importance of ideas, notably regarding how homelessness is understood and whose responsibility it is to produce social protection against it. While some ideas align with what we would expect from parties given their left or right ideology, in other cases, ideas lead to actions that defy those expectations, illustrating the powerful role they can play independently of political ideology.

In some cases, provincial officials devolved responsibility for the production of social protection to the local level, be it formally or informally, actions that were intended to limit the province’s role in the production of social protection. In 1999, PC Premier of Ontario Mike Harris devolved responsibility, but not additional funding, for housing to the local level. This can be understood as consistent with a broader ideological project to limit government involvement. This new context makes future provincial re-engagement very difficult. Liberal premiers of Ontario have focused on collaborative partnerships in producing social protection, primarily with the federal government but also with the local level. Intergovernmental and multilevel collaboration in an area of complex policy such as housing and homelessness is important and necessary for effective responses, but in Ontario there is a particularly challenging mismatch of resources at the provincial level and authority at the local level. This has made identifying a leader in this governance network difficult. Responses to homelessness in Toronto have been most productive when there has been ideational alignment across levels of government and sectors of society responsible for producing social protection. When there is ideational disagreement, however, this mismatch can be nearly impossible to overcome because of the institutional context.

Ideas about the responsibility to produce social protection have structured provincial involvement in BC as well, but in a way that is not so closely related to ideology as what we saw in Ontario. For all but five years in the early 2000s, the government of BC has been involved, mostly as a leader, in housing and homelessness governance because housing and homelessness have generally been understood to
be government – specifically provincial – responsibilities. In 2001, the province announced plans to stop investing in housing, but only five years later it reversed course and began investing again. In the early 2000s, housing was understood to be a private-sector responsibility, but this changed after key senior officials embraced a redefinition of homelessness as having not just individual-level causes. Though actions under the Liberals have prioritized a relatively narrowly defined group of people, the prioritization of people who use drugs or live with mental illness reinforced provincial involvement because homelessness was now defined in terms of housing and health, both of which are usually understood to be provincial responsibilities.

Ideas about the responsibility for producing social protection are also at times shaped by ideas about federalism. This has notably been the case in Quebec. Federalism has tended to be understood differently there, where provincial jurisdiction is jealously guarded (Rocher 2009), though Western premiers also have strong history of protesting federal encroachments on provincial jurisdiction (Banting 1990). Quebec’s initial commitment to housing in the 1990s was driven more by ideas about federalism than by ideas about the responsibility to produce social protection; yet changing ideas have led the province to assume a strong leadership role in homelessness governance from which it is now difficult to step back. There are ideological differences between parties, on both the left/right spectrum and the federalist/sovereignist spectrum. But all Quebec provincial parties (Liberal, PQ, and CAQ) have been consistently willing to exercise and defend areas of provincial jurisdiction, including housing and other areas of social policy related to homelessness and have continued to fund plans consistently.

Ideas about the nature of homelessness structure interactions, but with the provinces we also see these ideas shaping provincial involvement. The Province of Quebec has developed a broad definition of homelessness and a strong propensity to defend and exercise its powers. These ideational and institutional forces have converged, resulting in strong provincial involvement in homelessness. The province’s broad definition of homelessness has contributed to the development of a significant coalition of twelve provincial ministries working together on homelessness plans and policies; these are viewed as having to work together to reduce homelessness. It was also the understanding of the nature of homelessness that drove increased provincial involvement in Alberta in 2008, when the CHF announced that it would develop and implement a plan to end homelessness in ten years. The province re-engaged, but its ensuing actions were motivated by a narrow understanding of homelessness as largely an individual-level issue, albeit one
requiring access to more housing. Convinced by these ideas about the nature of homelessness (and more specifically the possibility of ending it), the province limited its involvement to inadequate investments in housing and to tinkering with other related policy areas, such as income security. This involvement was at the direction of local groups and can be almost pinpointed to a meeting between an oil and gas executive and an Alberta premier. This changed again in 2014, though this was by all accounts an ideological change that followed the election of an NDP government for the first time in the province’s history. While governance matters, provincial efforts to end homelessness in Alberta are an important reminder that resources are also necessary. The inter-agency council was a sophisticated governance network that brought various governmental and non-governmental leaders together, but was undermined by the lack of investments in affordable housing.

When asked about cities’ involvement and their interactions with municipal officials, provincial officials noted – sometimes with mild condescension – that municipal efforts were appreciated but that political and financial leadership came from the province. A senior provincial actor noted: “The strategy is being built with 90 per cent of the funding from the province. It’s great to have city land and philanthropic contributions, but they represent 10 to 12 per cent of the total cost. And no operating funds” (personal interview 2014). City actors do not deny this, but they also point out that given the distribution of revenues and resources, the province is better able to provide most of the funding. In other words, given the unequal resource availability, this partnership is more equal than a strict financial breakdown would lead one to conclude. Quebec provincial actors similarly insist on provincial leadership over housing and homelessness. While the province works in partnership with municipal governments and community groups (which play an institutionalized role in policy development in Quebec), it is with the understanding that the province is the lead actor.

Interestingly, before the National Housing Strategy was announced in 2017, some provincial officials expressed concern when questioned about the fact that the federal government could play a greater role, though again this concern was typically expressed in provinces that were already engaged in housing and homelessness. The concern was that a greater federal role would reduce the provinces’ authority and leadership. When asked about the desirability of a National Housing Strategy, a senior BC official explained:

It’s interesting, I always love that question. What do you mean by a National Housing Strategy? ... You don’t want the federal government setting
standards or administering programs. So what do you mean? Do you want CHMC to come back and directly administer programs in an area of provincial jurisdiction? Well, no. No. But do you want them to set standards that apply across Canada? Well, probably not. When you narrow in down, you want a stable form of funding, which I believe needs to be administered by the provinces who partner with local governments to identify local needs and deliver the programs and services. (personal interview 2014)

After the federal government introduced the National Housing Strategy, BC enthusiastically partnered with it, and it has used that funding to implement Homes for BC (in addition to implementing federal priorities, a condition of the funding). So too did the other provinces (including Quebec). Where they are involved in homelessness, provinces like having the upper hand to set priorities and make policies. They want and need funding from the federal government, but they define homelessness as a provincial responsibility.

**Federal Government Involvement and Interactions**

The federal government cut housing expenditures during a period of economic decline in the 1990s. Yet in 2008, it increased investments in housing at a time of economic decline in addition to investing in extensive studies of homelessness. Investments in homelessness have remained virtually unchanged for twenty years, surviving economic and ideological changes. This involvement has depended not just on resources and institutions but on ideas as well. At the federal level, ideas about the responsibility to produce social protection often interact with ideas about federalism to structure involvement. Justin Trudeau’s Liberal federal government insists that housing and homelessness is a shared jurisdiction rather than a provincial one (which is how the previous Conservative administration saw it). But the main idea we see shaping federal involvement and interactions with other actors has to do with the definition of homelessness. In 1999, the federal government introduced the National Homelessness Initiative (NHI) for three years. The NHI was consistently renewed for one- to three-year periods until 2014, when it was renewed for five years. Implicit in this governance structure, which bypassed the provinces and all their social policy might, was the dominant understanding of homelessness as a short-term problem requiring emergency-type interventions. Advocates remember with great frustration how Claudette Bradshaw, the minister responsible for developing and overseeing the NHI, insisted that homelessness was *not* related to housing.
In understanding homelessness in such limited terms, the federal government confined its role to that of a short-term funder, directly transferring money (if wholly inadequate amounts) to the local level, bypassing all provinces except Quebec. In a sense, it is appropriate that the federal government got out of the way of local officials who know the problem best, and local groups appreciated this element of the program’s design. Yet the federal government kept to itself a key aspect of the process – the definition of homelessness. The TDRC was instrumental in igniting federal involvement in what its members decried as an emergency; however, those same advocates also insisted, loudly, that homelessness was related to housing, a perspective that the federal government at the time ignored. In defining the problem so narrowly, the federal government prevented local groups from implementing the most effective and lasting solutions related to housing, and from doing so in partnership with provinces that had the authority to reform systems related to homelessness and could have contributed material resources to the effort.

This has changed with the advent of the National Housing Strategy. For the first time ever in Canada, homelessness is now directly linked to housing, marking a sea change in how the problem is understood. It is no longer viewed as just a short-term problem requiring emergency responses; instead, it is seen as related to social policy – notably housing – and as resulting from structural rather than individual forces. This is a striking ideational shift, and it is significant that it occurred within the Liberal Party, the same party that created and defended the NHI as a short-term, emergency, non-housing-focused program and the same party that cut investments in housing entirely. Though they insist that the NHS has been developed in close collaboration with community groups and provinces, federal officials see themselves taking a leadership role: “we are setting up a very specific direction and expecting everyone to follow that direction” (personal interview 2018).

An actor involved in developing Reaching Home was aware of the resentment other levels of government felt toward the feds, noting that federal officials “are used to getting yelled at” when they make decisions. But this actor also insisted that the federal and provincial governments were on the same team and share blame strategically:

I talk to provinces and territories quite regularly and they say, “Please be the bad guy. We really want this too, but it’s too hard for us at our level to go out and publicly say X. But if you go out and say it, then we can say, “Oh, the feds are making us do it”... A lot of what gets said publicly and what happens behind the scenes are often two different things. (personal interview 2018)
This actor added that some federal–provincial tensions are, from the federal perspective, simply politics: “We have very good working relations with Ontario, but at the same time, if we implement something they are going to grumble publicly but behind the scenes, they’re going to absolutely help us to implement it.” Moreover, there were advantages to collaborative governance other than just pooling resources and expertise: “That’s one … advantage of a shared governance model, or of a partnership or shared jurisdiction. Risks can be shared and blame can also be shared” (personal interview 2018).

**Can We End Homelessness?**

The answer to that question depends, of course, on how you define homelessness. If we broadly define homelessness as related to social inclusion, poverty, and housing, the answer may be no. Indeed, actors who espouse a broad definition of homelessness tend to be the least likely to also demand an end to it. When it comes to a narrower definition of homelessness, the answer is different. Those who do push for an end to homelessness tend to have a housing-based definition in mind, often refer to chronic homelessness, and have become increasingly specific about what that means (Turner, Albanese, and Pakeman 2017), perhaps having learned from the mistakes of the past when this was left open to interpretation. They also specify that there will always be a need for emergency supports, including shelters, as well as for a sturdy social safety net to ensure that supports are there when people need them. We may not put an end, once and for all, to every kind of homelessness, but by the same token, we should not be trying to convince ourselves that large numbers of unhoused or underhoused people is an inevitable reality of Canadian society. It is not. We can and should drastically reduce the number of people who are without safe, adequate homes.

The lack of investments in permanent solutions, in prevention, and in robust health and social supports, along with a failure to commit to meeting the most basic prerequisites for reconciliation as defined by Indigenous people, has meant that for many years, service providers were left on their own to paddle upstream. Through a storm. Without a paddle. This was tremendously unfair to those providing services as well as to those needing them. That people in Canada so often find themselves without a home is the result of government decisions and lack of investment. Ensuring that everyone in Canada has access to a safe and adequate home will require investments and system reform, and as this book has shown, it will also require inclusive,
collaborative governance. This means ensuring that all the actors are at the policy-making table through all stages of policy development and that they are talking to one another, listening to one another, and working together. It may mean senior governments need to get out of the way in some instances. Of utmost importance are voices that have been excluded for far too long: those with lived expertise and Indigenous knowledge. Beyond investments and reforms, this requires a shift in power.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been devastating for many people. Given the centrality of home in public health precautions, this has particularly been the case for people who are unhoused or underhoused. The tent cities and homeless encampments that emerged in 2020 and 2021 across the country revealed what had long been known to service providers, advocates, and people experiencing homelessness – the social safety net is not sturdy enough to protect people from becoming and remaining homeless. Leilani Farha, the former UN ambassador on the right to housing and current leader of The Shift, an organization committed to the right to housing, explains that to some, encampments represent the deprivation of the right to housing. Yet she explains that in the context of an inadequate housing and social security system, encampments are also a claim to housing by those who live in them (Farha 2021). They are a demand that governments do more, that they stop ignoring fault lines and weaknesses in the welfare state. They are a challenge to do better.

Encampments are a demand for housing but also a reminder of the importance of community. The pandemic has been an intensely isolating experience for many. While we were told to remain home, we were also told to limit contact with others and maintain only a small bubble. Prolonged periods of isolation, also imposed by public health mandates, have made clear the need for community and the consequences of being isolated from it. In this sense, homeless encampments have not just been a claim to housing; for many people living in them, they have been a claim to community as well. The voices of people living in encampments reveal that many feel they found a community and a family in those environments (Dawson 2021; Encampment Support Network n.d.; Jewell 2021; Winter 2021). There were safety concerns as well (CBC News 2020; Winter 2021), though safety concerns (including fire safety) are present in supportive housing developments as well (Miller 2021). Encampments are not generally understood to be a
long-term solution to homelessness (Farha and Schwan 2020). But the emergence of so many encampments, the fact that many of them continued through the winter, and the conflicts that resulted from efforts to put an end to them (including violent clashes with police in Toronto) are sending important messages about the nature of homelessness and what it will take to ensure that everyone has access to a home.

Recognizing the pressure under which the emergency shelter system was operating, provinces and cities have rushed to buy or lease hotels, arenas, and other temporary forms of housing to allow for isolation and distanced service use. Some of these spaces have been offered to people living in encampments; some of these offers have been declined (Encampment Support Network n.d.). A former resident of an encampment in Victoria, BC, said in a CityTalks webinar hosted in 2021 that she accepted temporary housing after living an encampment. She experienced homelessness for the first time in her life during COVID, and spent four months in an encampment, which she described as a community, even a family. The housing she was offered was, in her eyes, inadequate, and the experience was isolating. In her own words, “I’m inside. But that’s it.” That’s it. For her, no longer being homeless needs to be about more than just being inside.

This makes crystal clear that for many people, home is more than a physical structure. This is not too much to ask. The pandemic has made abundantly clear the importance of home, but also the importance of place and the importance of community. Ending homelessness for some people may mean more than getting people inside and keeping them there. The people best-suited to explaining how to do that are people with lived experience, who should be involved and centred throughout the policy-making process. That includes Indigenous people, who have developed some of the most effective interventions in Indigenous-led services. Involving and valuing the expertise of people with lived experience and Indigenous knowledge will require acknowledging that like it or not, homelessness means different things to different people.