

Encampment Outreach Evaluation

November 2021

About the MARCO Study

The MARCO project is evaluating how local efforts responding to the COVID-19 pandemic serve people experiencing marginalization, and how these interventions can be improved. Changes in society to control the pandemic have affected everyone, but they place a particularly heavy burden on people who are marginalized.

We evaluated programs that support many communities who may be experiencing marginalization during COVID-19, including people experiencing homelessness, people with developmental disabilities, people who use drugs, and women who are experiencing violence. The MARCO Community Committee and Steering Committee chose the programs. The programs include:

- COVID-19 Isolation and Recovery Sites (CIRS)
- Encampment Outreach
- Substance Use Service (SUS) at the COVID-19 Isolation and Recovery Site
- Toronto Developmental Service Alliance's Sector Pandemic Planning Initiative (SPPI)
- Violence Against Women (VAW) Services

About this Report

This report is a brief summary of one of the MARCO Evaluations. This report highlights the key findings of the Encampment Outreach evaluation. The final, full length report will be released in December 2021.

The views contained in this report do not necessarily express the views of any MARCO community partner, funding agencies, MAP, St. Michael's Hospital, Unity Health Toronto, the University of Toronto, or any other organization with which MARCO authors or project team members may be affiliated.

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We also wish to thank all individuals who participated in this evaluation for sharing their important perspectives, as well as all members of the larger MARCO study team and other community groups that assisted our evaluation.

Land Acknowledgement

We wish to acknowledge the sacred land on which MAP and Unity Health Toronto operate. It has been a site of human activity for 15,000 years. This land is the territory of the Huron-Wendat and Petun First Nations, the Seneca, and most recently, the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation. The territory was the subject of the Dish With One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant, an agreement between the Iroquois Confederacy and Confederacy of the Ojibwe and allied nations to peaceably share and care for the resources around the Great Lakes. Today, the meeting place of Toronto is still the home of many Indigenous people from across Turtle Island and we are grateful to have the opportunity to work in the community, on this territory. We are also mindful of broken covenants and the need to strive to make right with all our relations.

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What we did and what we learned

What was evaluated?

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, some people experiencing homelessness lived in encampments under bridges, in parks and ravines around Toronto. Since the pandemic started, a growing number of people have been staying in encampments, which have become more visible.

New outreach groups formed and existing agencies and organizations working with people experiencing homelessness adapted to reach out to encampment residents and provide alternatives to services that were closed or limited due to COVID-19. Outreach groups included community-based organizations, volunteer groups, and city services.

We studied encampment outreach in Toronto during the pandemic to understand how these supports met the needs of encampment residents. The questions we focused on were:

- Did supports meet people's most important needs? Which needs were left unmet?
- What outreach supports and shelter or housing options were offered to people?
- In what ways did these supports affect people's lives, both positive and negative?

Our evaluation included several steps:

1. We met with key community members and groups to plan the study.
2. We conducted 127 surveys and 23 interviews with encampment residents at six encampments in Toronto between March

and June 2021.

3. We looked for patterns from the surveys and common themes in the interviews.

We also conducted 16 interviews with encampment outreach workers and volunteers. We will share findings from these interviews in a future report.

Who did we talk to?

38% of people we surveyed identified as female, and one in four identified as 2SLGBTQ+. A large number were from racialized groups, including 26% Indigenous, 16% Black, and 11% other racialized identities. People were between 21 and 64 years of age.

The people who answered our survey listed over 30 different encampments they had stayed in during the pandemic. Many had stayed in more than one encampment, and 39% were no longer staying in an encampment at the time they were surveyed.

What were the key findings?

Encampment Living:

- The month prior to the pandemic, people stayed in many locations, including 17% in an encampment, 29% elsewhere on the street, 20% in a rented place, 16% with family or friends, and 13% in a shelter.
- Half of the people surveyed reported that they moved to an encampment for reasons related to the pandemic. People also said they moved to encampments because they

People experiencing homelessness have a firm understanding of their own needs and should be listened to. Until we collaborate with people living outside to create more permanent housing options that meet their needs, encampments will continue to exist.

were not able to find housing, did not know where else to go, knew people in encampments, felt that shelters were not safe or secure, or wanted more freedom than shelters provided. Many people moved back and forth between encampments and other spaces, like shelters, shelter hotels, and respites.

- Many people described finding a community or family in the encampments among people they respected and could trust. Residents often supported each other and worked together on daily tasks, including watching each other's personal possessions, sharing food or other items, and helping people when they needed assistance. These relationships led people to visit residents in encampments after they had moved on to other shelter or housing.

Outreach Supports:

- Overall, encampment residents greatly appreciated the support they received from community-based and volunteer outreach groups.
- 69% of encampment residents said that outreach supports met their basic survival needs, like food and drink, shelter supplies and warmth, and harm reduction supplies.
- Many encampment residents valued the ways in which community-based outreach workers and volunteers provided supports:
 - Workers and volunteers were often present in the encampments. Most residents felt they could count on

workers and volunteers when they needed them.

- Workers and volunteers were flexible and respected residents' points of view. Many residents said workers and volunteers asked for their input and adapted supports to best respond to their needs.
- Workers and volunteers provided social support through a kind and compassionate approach. This helped to meet some residents' social and mental health needs.
- Residents indicated that certain outreach workers or groups were less caring and more judgemental. Residents found this approach upsetting and not helpful. Some noted that it was harder to trust workers when they acted like security, such as recording what residents were doing or telling them what to do.
- Some residents interacted with city outreach workers when they were getting shelter offers and reported feeling rushed or forced into decisions by threat of eviction.
- The greatest unmet need that residents identified was permanent housing.
- Some residents said they got everything they needed at the encampments, but others said they did not have good access to hygiene, technology, and mental health supports.

Shelter and Housing Offers:

- 60% of people surveyed tried to find a shelter bed or shelter hotel room during the

pandemic at least once, and only 13% of them were able to find one every time. Of those who tried, 68% were told that no shelter was available.

- 55% of people were offered a shelter or housing option by city staff at least once. Of those who received offers, 77% were offered a bed in a shelter hotel and only 4% were offered permanent housing.
- 75% of people who accepted an offer of shelter or housing returned to live in an encampment. The most common reasons they left the shelter or housing were:
 - 29% were kicked out
 - 16% did not like the restrictions, such as no pets, no guests, or a limit on the belongings they could bring
 - 11% felt the shelter or housing was too far away from where they wanted to be
 - 11% were worried about violence
 - Some people reported more than one reason
- Other reasons people gave for leaving or not accepting temporary shelter options included COVID-19 outbreaks, a lack of privacy, overdose risk and friends' deaths in these settings, disrespectful treatment by staff, not having their health needs met, and being tired of waiting for permanent options.

COVID-19 Risk in Encampments:

- 80% of people surveyed had been tested for COVID-19 and 13% of them reported testing positive.
- Encampment outreach workers and volunteers provided COVID-19 supplies, such as masks and hand sanitizer, to residents. Many residents reported distancing from others, washing or sanitizing hands, wearing masks, and not sharing drinks, food, or drug use equipment.
- Many encampment residents felt their risk of

getting COVID-19 was greater in indoor living settings with many people in the same space, like shelters or respites. This is compared to encampments, where residents expressed they felt safer being outdoors.

What are the recommendations moving forward?

1. Organizations should be helped to expand or maintain their outreach services and hand out survival supplies to meet encampment residents' basic needs.
2. Encampment outreach supports should be responsive, flexible, and adapt to what encampment residents need. Supports should be offered frequently and consistently.
3. Encampment outreach and shelter or housing services should support people to build and maintain their community connections.
4. Conditions in temporary shelter settings should be improved. Encampment residents should not be pressured into leaving encampments or entering shelter or housing that does not meet their needs, especially considering the risks of getting COVID-19 or overdosing in shelter spaces.
5. The city government should put a priority on providing encampment residents and other people experiencing homelessness with permanent housing. Permanent housing should respect people's dignity and meet their needs.
6. Encampment residents should be included in decisions about encampments, shelters, and housing.

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