MULTIPLE BARRIERS
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1 Introduction

Nowadays, people don’t seem to be shocked that children, pregnant women, seniors are homeless. But it certainly was very shocking for us [in the 1990s]. A clear sign that something was happening. Not just more alcoholics. There was something going on in the housing system causing this catastrophic failure and more and more people were out there.

Toronto advocate Michael Shapcott (personal interview, 2014)

The reality for the Indigenous population in Canada is that the government of Canada at all levels, federal and provincial particularly, worked very hard for many generations to render Indigenous peoples landless. The result was that Indigenous people were moved from place to place, or forced to relocate, or had their rights, their entitlement to stay in a particular area taken away from them or interfered with …

There’s no question that the impoverishment of Indigenous people was a forced impoverishment. This was created impoverishment by the Government of Canada.

Murray Sinclair (personal interview, 2018)

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in March 2020, the instruction from public health officials was to stay home. This assumes, of course, that everyone has a home. That is far from the reality in Canada, where tens of thousands of people are unhoused or underhoused. The global health crisis collided with the Canadian housing crisis, and homeless encampments developed across the country. These encampments would appear to be related to COVID-19, and in a very direct way they were; for example, emergency shelters decreased their capacity in order to enforce social distancing to limit the transmission of the respiratory virus, meaning
people were forced outdoors. But the reality is that the pandemic exposed what was already known, turning a largely hidden, or ignored, reality of homelessness into a highly visible one in public spaces and parks.

The housing system in Canada consistently fails to provide a safe and adequate home for everyone, instead forcing people to live in insecure environments – in emergency shelters, overcrowded spaces, or inadequate or unsafe housing. The pandemic was a shock to a system that was already inadequate, and the profound housing insecurity in which some of the most vulnerable people in Canada live is nothing new. Indeed, activists and advocates have long warned that our emergency shelter system is vulnerable to an infectious respiratory virus (Crowe 2019; Leung et al. 2008). They begged and pleaded with governments to implement housing-based solutions to homelessness, to no avail. Weaknesses and fault lines were known. Under the pressure of a global pandemic, the system burst apart. Understanding why a country as rich, and as cold, as Canada has failed to protect people from homelessness is an important motivation of this book. It is not inevitable that tens of thousands of people do not have homes. Rather, it is the result of colonialism, of action and inaction, and of decades of decisions about policies and priorities. Homelessness is political.

It is difficult to know exactly how many people experience homelessness in Canada. Figures vary widely depending on the definition of homelessness that is used, and any estimate is almost certainly an underestimate. While challenging to measure, a widely cited study by researchers at the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness estimates that between 30,000 and 35,000 people are homeless on any given night in Canada and that 235,000 people are homeless over the course of one given year. This is in addition to upwards of 50,000 people per year who are said to experience hidden homelessness, including those who lack permanent housing of their own but find shelter by couch-surfing with friends or acquaintances, or live in overcrowded or otherwise unsafe environments (Gaetz et al. 2016). A 2020 poll reinforced the finding that homelessness is a relatively widespread experience, with 5 per cent of respondents indicating that they had experienced homelessness themselves and 10 per cent saying they have a family member who has experienced homelessness (CAEH 2020c). This suggests that 1.5 million Canadians have been homeless at some point in their life. More and more seniors and children are counted among the homeless
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population; Indigenous people, racialized people, and queer youth are overrepresented among the homeless population (ESDC 2017), revealing deep and wide inequities in social protection. This is a tremendous failure of the welfare state.

The Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness (CAEH) estimates that it would cost $44 billion over ten years to end homelessness in Canada (Gaetz et al. 2014). Much of this would be for investments in affordable housing and supports. Housing and social services, including various forms of health care and income support, have been woefully underfunded in Canada, leaving vulnerable people unable to access the services they require to find and maintain adequate housing. Calls for increased funding are justified, for expanded services are sorely needed. Systemic and structural reforms – including to child welfare, drug policy, health, and policing – are needed just as urgently so that homelessness is prevented in the first place. But ending homelessness is not just a spending problem: efforts to combat homelessness must also be coordinated. This book endorses the call for increased funding and system reforms as necessary measures in fighting and preventing homelessness. But it also assumes that homelessness is a complex problem and requires the involvement of a multiplicity of actors. Its primary purpose, therefore, is to identify why groups and governments do or do not become involved in the fight against homelessness in the first place, and why they do or do not work together in their efforts. Funding matters. But so does governance.

Governance Matters

Studies have shown that governance dynamics – who does what and with whom – directly affect the quality of the social protection produced by the Canadian welfare state. Keith Banting’s work has demonstrated that the intergovernmental mix that characterizes the governance of different social policies matters to the social protection that is produced and how that protection evolves over time (Banting 1990, 2012, 2020). Banting has found that policies under shared governance arrangements (such as pensions and health care, which involve federal and provincial governments) tend to be more stable and resistant to retrenchment because such changes require intergovernmental agreement (Banting 2012). Policies governed by one actor, such as social assistance, however, are more vulnerable to change and retrenchment because a single government can act on its own without needing the consent of another. These governance dynamics help explain what many see as a baffling contradiction of the Canadian welfare state, which is that health care has remained universal whereas other areas of social protection, including
housing and social assistance, have become much more targeted and less generous.

With respect to homelessness, Canadian and international scholars have also found that governance matters to the effectiveness of policy solutions. Examining cities in Canada, the United States, and Europe, using a variety of methods ranging from participant observation to statistical analysis, these studies are uniform in their conclusion that governance matters. Carey Doberstein (2016) studied networks created to implement the federal National Homelessness Initiative/Homelessness Partnering Strategy in Vancouver, Calgary, and Toronto and found that inclusive and institutionalized governance networks design more innovative solutions than ones that are not. In Vancouver, local homelessness governance networks meet regularly, bringing together a wide-ranging membership that includes representatives from civil society, Indigenous communities, and the local bureaucracy. This inclusive and institutionalized network allows actors to bring their expertise and different perspectives into conversation frequently, resulting in innovative and coordinated action. In Toronto, by contrast, the city has long dominated the homelessness policy field, historically seeking little input from civil society actors. In part due to the lack of inclusive and institutionalized governance, the city’s response to homelessness was stagnant for years. In a similar study of the local governance of homelessness in Amsterdam, Copenhagen, and Glasgow, Nienke Boesveldt finds that “heterogeneous” governance networks lead to more effective policy outputs, such as improved quality of housing and emergency shelter services, and that “centralized” systems tend to be more efficient. She concludes emphatically that “governance really does matter” (Boesveldt 2015, 179).

Christopher Leo and Martine August draw similar conclusions regarding the importance of governance dynamics. In their study of the early operations of the federal National Homelessness Initiative in Winnipeg, they found that local leaders were not involved in setting the community objectives for NHI funding. The exclusion of Winnipeg-based voices meant that the NHI was not responsive to the fact that homelessness in Winnipeg is different than it is in other cities. They conclude that the NHI precluded “the types of solutions that will actually work to alleviate homelessness in Winnipeg” (Leo and August 2006, 1). They go on to note that local interests and expertise must be considered more closely all throughout the policy-making process if national policy is to be more responsive to local needs.

Governance dynamics are found to be of similar significance to homelessness policy in the United States. David Lee and Michael McGuire conclude that intergovernmental alignment – from the local to the
national level – leads to improved homelessness program outcomes: “county governments aligned with federal and state governments are likely to provide more permanent housing properties than county governments not aligned” (D. Lee and McGuire 2017, 640). They continue, “the federal homelessness program has a larger impact on the chronic homelessness population ... when county governments have direct, official intergovernmental alignment than in county governments not aligned in this way” (640–2). Also in the US context, Charley Willison (2021) asks what shapes the involvement of municipal governments in homelessness governance. She contends that the decentralization of responsibility for homelessness and a lack of coordination among policy actors (service providers, economic elites, municipal governments, and states) results in increased policy opportunities for private-sector actors. Where governance dynamics privilege private-sector actors over service providers and homeless people, policy responses tend to criminalize homelessness. In contrast, when policy actions are coordinated and less decentralized, municipalities are more likely to adopt evidence-based approaches to homelessness.¹

These studies of the local, intergovernmental and multilevel governance of homelessness make clear that governance matters. But they leave unexplored the pressing questions of what shapes the governance networks that have emerged and why they are so different. Local governance dynamics clearly impact homelessness policy innovation, effectiveness, and efficiency, and intergovernmental alignment has been shown to lead to greater reductions in chronic homelessness. It is because governance is clearly so important that this book takes a necessary step back to ask what shapes these governance networks in the first place. What factors influence the development of homelessness governance networks? Why do some actors with ample authority and resources sit on the sidelines while others with no authority and scant resources take the lead? Why do some actors work together whereas others do not? Why are some governance arrangements more inclusive than others? The remainder of this book considers these questions, evaluating two decades of action and inaction in Vancouver, Calgary, Toronto, and Montreal from 2000 to 2020.

Overview of Cases

As this section will explain, the governance of homelessness varies considerably in big cities across Canada. This book considers why these homelessness governance networks have developed and continue to evolve so differently across Canada, specifically in Vancouver, Calgary,
Toronto, and Montreal. I ask why some governance networks are centralized while others are more fragmented. Where networks are fragmented, I ask whether actors collaborate, and if not, why? If they do not collaborate, do they coordinate? Where they are centralized, I ask about the roles played by other actors: Are they included by the centralizing agency? If yes, how? If not, why? What role do Indigenous-led services and organizations play in homelessness governance? What role do people who are or who have been homeless play in homelessness governance? Are they meaningfully involved in policy development? Deep case studies and cross-case comparisons provide valuable insights into what forces shape governance. In identifying what motivates the formation of these governance networks and their evolution, I hope this book will help strengthen the governance of homelessness in large Canadian cities and reinforce social protection for those who find themselves without a home of their own.

Vancouver

Homelessness governance in Vancouver is fragmented and includes deep divisions not just between but also within sectors. Six actors or networks are involved in homelessness governance: the province; the city; the StreetoHome Foundation; two regional networks – the Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness and the Aboriginal Steering Committee on Homelessness – which were set up to steward federal homelessness funding in 1999; and, though they do not have a specific plan on homelessness, third-sector groups are also deeply involved in homelessness governance.

Actors coordinate with one another relatively well, with certain exceptions. British Columbia has long been one of the most interventionist and innovative provinces in Canada when it comes to housing policy, and it plays a leading role in homelessness governance in Vancouver. After the federal government stopped funding new social housing in the 1990s, the province of BC continued to invest in the development of new units. Except for five years in the early 2000s, BC has continually committed to funding new housing developments, most of which are now for people experiencing homelessness. In 2006, the responsibility for homelessness was transferred from the Ministry of Social Development to BC Housing, allowing for a direct link between housing and homelessness in provincial policy. The City of Vancouver has also been involved in homelessness governance for decades, though it has done so without official jurisdiction. Following a series of plans that depended extensively on senior government funding in the early 2000s
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(and were undermined by a lack of said funding), left-of-centre mayor Gregor Robertson, elected in 2008, made the bold promise to end street homelessness by 2015 and, importantly, to do so using city powers as much as possible. This promise was ultimately not kept; even so, the city invested significantly in homelessness services, and for years the fight against homelessness was the city’s top priority.

The StreetoHome Foundation, a non-governmental group with strong ties to the private sector, emerged at the same time that Robertson was implementing his plan to end street homelessness. The StreetoHome Foundation, which resulted from right-of-centre Mayor Sam Sullivan’s Project Civil City, was intended to increase the participation of private-sector actors in homelessness governance. It developed a ten-year plan to end homelessness (2010–20), which, though it did not meet its goal, contributed to the creation of partnerships with the province and municipal governments to develop new supportive housing throughout the city. Third-sector groups do not have a formal policy or plan on homelessness, but they are deeply involved in advocacy at all levels. They also participate directly in policy development and implementation, particularly at the local level (and especially when their political allies are in control of City Council). Finally, two regional networks, one Indigenous and one non-Indigenous, are involved in the governance of homelessness in Vancouver, specifically in the administration of federal funding. These two regional groups are well organized, meet frequently, and coordinate closely.

There are power struggles among various actors in Vancouver, notably with respect to who should lead in the fight, yet there is also a high degree of coordination and collaboration among them. For example, a 2003 plan developed by the Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness directly influenced both the StreetoHome Plan (2010) and two 2005 City of Vancouver plans. The two regional networks coordinate consistently, and the province and city collaborate on projects to develop housing for people experiencing homelessness, with both partners bringing valuable resources and expertise to the policy-making table. And while there are tensions between the city and the province in terms of blame and credit, officials at both levels nevertheless insist on the importance of working together and describe their relations in family terms. The province has also been very willing to work with the federal government on housing and homelessness projects. Local actors involved in homelessness governance coordinate their efforts formally and informally, even when they are advancing slightly different goals. Some deeper divisions exist, however, notably within the third sector and within the political party representing the political left, which can
destabilize governance dynamics, resulting in decreased influence and involvement of those actors. At times, influential groups have been at odds with one another, pulling in different directions, a dynamic that is unfortunate but not unique to Vancouver.

Montreal

The governance of homelessness is similarly fragmented in Montreal, where the province, the city, two local third sector networks, and two regional networks are involved (one to implement the provincial plan and one to implement the federal NHI/HPS; unlike other cities, there is no “Indigenous community” network to oversee federal homelessness funding specifically for Indigenous people in Montreal, as I will discuss below). Some groups coordinate and collaborate fully, but others – especially locally – do not. The province has taken a leadership role for decades. In 1999, provincial officials insisted on jointly governing, with their federal counterparts, federal NHI/HPS funding that everywhere else in the country flows directly to the local level. The province also adopted a plan on homelessness in 2010, a homelessness policy in 2014 (including an updated definition), and a second plan on homelessness in 2015. The plans are led by the Minister of Health – an interesting contrast with BC Housing’s leadership in BC. Quebec’s involvement and actions are informed by extensive community consultation and involvement; even so, provincial documents make clear the view that the province of Quebec is the main actor responsible for homelessness.

In Quebec, third-sector groups have an institutionalized role in policy-making, meaning they have access to the policy-making process in a number of venues and channels; they therefore play an important role in homelessness governance. Homelessness service providers organized in the 1970s to create the RAPSIM (the Réseau d’aide aux personnes seules et itinérantes de Montréal), an organization that represents homeless people as well as service providers. The RAPSIM is frequently identified by the city and the province as a main partner in the fight against homelessness. The RAPSIM does not have a plan per se but does have an approach to ending homelessness that it has long promoted: social housing with community supports. More recently, the MMFIM (Mouvement pour mettre fin à l’itinérance à Montréal) has been created, a group that has strong ties to Canadian networks, including the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness. The MMFIM advances a different approach to homelessness than the RAPSIM – Housing First – and developed a plan to end homelessness in Montreal in 2015. The two groups overlap considerably in terms of their membership – even
in terms of their founding members – yet they advance different visions of homelessness, propose different solutions to it, and do not coordinate formally.

The City of Montreal has been involved in homelessness governance since at least the 1980s, when city officials developed a definition of homelessness that was subsequently adopted by the province. That definition remained in effect until the provincial policy on homelessness was introduced in 2014. City officials have been guided by a liaison committee on homelessness since the 1990s, which is comprised of service provider representatives and advocates, and they have relied on that committee to inform their actions and decisions related to homelessness. The committee wrote a draft plan on homelessness for the city in 2007; it was not immediately adopted, but it informed the city’s first official plan on homelessness in 2010. In this early municipal plan, the city was narrowly involved in homelessness governance, stressing that its limited powers prevented it from doing more; rather, the city looked to the province for leadership. This changed in 2013 with the election of Mayor Denis Coderre, who saw a greater role for the City of Montreal in the fight against homelessness and in urban governance more generally. Accordingly, he sought to increase the city’s powers through negotiations with the province. The 2014 city plan on homelessness introduced under Mayor Coderre broke from provincial plans and priorities and sought to expand the city’s powers so that it could assume more of a leadership role in homelessness. Valérie Plante, who replaced Coderre as mayor in 2017 (and defeated him again in 2021), was critical of many of Coderre’s policies; Mayor Plante has nevertheless maintained significant continuity with the 2014 plan, but is also seeking to align the city’s work with future provincial plans.

A regional group is responsible for developing an action plan for Montreal for federal NHI/HPS funding. When the federal government imposed requirements on this funding in 2014, stipulating that 65 per cent of the funding in big cities must go to Housing First programs (a development reviewed more fully in chapter 3), some local groups objected and demanded that the co-governing province object. The federal government would not change these terms, and the province agreed to them. Following this decision, however, a second regional plan was developed to implement the province’s homelessness plan, which specifically did not prioritize Housing First. These two plans were overseen by the same person, allowing for coordination and information-sharing between them despite their different objectives, resulting in a rich array of services available at the regional level. Unlike in big cities outside of Quebec, there is no Indigenous network in Montreal to
oversee the implementation of federal National Homelessness Initiative/Homelessness Partnering Strategy funding for Indigenous people, perhaps a result of the colonial division of powers between federal and provincial governments that give the federal government authority for Indigenous people and their lands (Section 91(24)). The province is not involved in the administration of this funding, and Indigenous groups apply directly to the federal government (though they can also apply to the non-Indigenous regional network).

**Calgary**

These fragmented models of governance can be contrasted with Calgary, where a single organization, the Calgary Homeless Foundation (CHF), dominates the homelessness policy space, though the province and an Indigenous network have come to play an influential role over time as well. The CHF was founded in the late 1990s by a small group of business leaders primarily from the oil and gas sector. From a small organization with five employees in the late 1990s, it has grown into a large foundation with dozens of employees. By 2008 it was overseeing tens of millions of dollars per year in funding, and was tasked with implementing a ten-year plan to end homelessness in Calgary. The CHF administers provincial and federal homelessness funding, including dollars that are designated for Indigenous communities by the federal NHI/HPS. Most service providers in the city have aligned with the CHF and its vision. Where there have been disagreements, agencies have tended to be either marginalized or eventually won over by the CHF. The Aboriginal Standing Committee on Housing and Homelessness (ASCHH), the community advisory board for the federal NHI/HPS, developed what was at the time the only plan to end Indigenous homelessness in Canada in 2012; this plan was developed following frustration and disappointment that Indigenous voices were not more fully included in the CHF’s plan to end homelessness. During the early 2000s, the relationship between the ASCHH and the CHF was difficult and characterized by distrust; this relationship has started to improve, however, as the CHF has become more inclusive and less dominant in Calgary.

The municipal government has had little involvement in homelessness governance, though in the 1990s the City of Calgary was one of the first cities in Canada to begin regularly conducting homeless counts. Yet even this responsibility was transferred to the CHF in 2008, and the city now plays a supporting role in the CHF’s efforts. Of the municipal governments considered here, it is the least involved in the issue. The heavy-hitting business leaders who positioned the CHF to become the
lead actor in the fight against homelessness were instrumental in getting the municipal government and even the provincial government to support the plan and invest in it. Working with allies in other cities across Alberta, business leaders convinced the province to develop its own ten-year plan on homelessness, in close collaboration with what was being done at the local level, an example of local business leaders uploading social policy and driving the provincial agenda. The province has thus gone from a laggard in the 1990s and early 2000s to a leader in Canada: it was the first province to adopt a ten-year plan to end homelessness and has developed extensive coordination between agencies and departments. That said, the ten-year plans to end homelessness in Calgary and Alberta did not succeed. Key actors identify the lack of investment in affordable housing and a lack of systemic reforms as the main reasons for this. Under the leadership of the NDP and Rachel Notley, the province committed to developing a provincial housing strategy for the first time since the 1990s, but that commitment has waned significantly under Jason Kenney’s United Conservative Party.

**Toronto**

One actor dominates the governance of homelessness in Toronto as well: the municipal government. Having been given the responsibility for housing and homelessness through provincial devolution in the 1990s, Toronto is the only municipality under study here to have official jurisdiction for the administration and funding of housing and homelessness. In addition to formal jurisdiction, the city also has density bonusing powers and was recently given inclusionary zoning powers by the province, meaning it is institutionally the strongest municipality in this study. The City of Toronto guarded its housing and homelessness powers jealously for many years, leaving little space for third-sector, private-sector, or Indigenous-led groups to contribute expertise to the policy-making process. That has changed recently: city officials have opened the door to more collaboration with third-sector groups, particularly the Toronto Alliance to End Homelessness (TAEH). The province is involved in homelessness governance through funding transfers to the City of Toronto and by stewarding the housing system. In this capacity, the province’s involvement has evolved over time, peaking in the mid-2010s, when provincial officials committed to ending homelessness in Ontario. That commitment has faded under Doug Ford’s Progressive Conservative government.

As noted, the city has long governed homelessness with little formal involvement of private or third-sector groups. It is somewhat surprising
that the city’s strong private sector and its passionate third sector have not been more institutionally involved in homelessness governance in the past, though not all movements seek formal involvement (Withers 2021). The Toronto Disaster Relief Committee, lacking a formal or institutionalized relationship with the city through the 1990s and early 2000s, was at key moments able to influence not only Toronto’s responses to homelessness but federal ones as well. The TDRC disbanded in 2012; following this, province-wide groups such as the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (OCAP) and, very recently, the Encampment Support Network (ESN) pressured the municipal government to act, sometimes with important success (Withers 2021). But there was no Toronto-specific advocacy group that filled the gap created when the TDRC disbanded until 2015, when the Toronto Alliance to End Homelessness (TAEH) formed with the explicit purpose of engaging with the city. This has led to the creation of a venue for the co-governance of federal homelessness funding, though this is not without controversy (Withers 2021). The city also controls non-Indigenous federal NHI/HPS funding. Federal NHI/HPS funding for Indigenous communities is governed separately by an Indigenous advisory board and administered by the Aboriginal Labour Force Development Agency. There is increasing collaboration between the Indigenous HPS network, the non-Indigenous one (TAEH), and the city, but this is recent. In Toronto, therefore, significant power is concentrated in the city, and its institutional strength has increased recently with the addition of inclusionary zoning powers to its policy toolbox. Despite this increase in institutional strength, the city has also become more open to third-sector involvement.

**Argument**

The objective of this book is to more fully map and explain these very different power and governance dynamics. For more than two decades, service providers, outreach workers, Indigenous-led organizations, and others have worked ingeniously to turn shoestring budgets and inadequate resources into – with no hint of exaggeration – life-saving solutions to homelessness. Abandoned by senior governments on the front lines of what advocates have long called a crisis, they have supported thousands of people who have been left with nowhere to go but the streets. If the welfare state is a safety net, the federal and many provincial governments have made cuts to it, wide and deep. Primarily local groups have done their very best to patch the safety net back together; to continue the analogy, lacking adequate financial resources they have done so in the classic Canadian fashion of repair with duct tape. Despite
their efforts, the number of people experiencing homelessness continues to grow as more people fall into homelessness year after year. This book seeks to understand why, from a governance perspective, that is the case. Doing so will shed light on why progress in the fight against homelessness has been so difficult. Theoretically, this will contribute to our understanding of the drivers of multilevel governance in complex policy areas and to our ability to assess the state of social protection in the context of a federal, but also highly urbanized, welfare state.

I begin this book with the assumption, supported by the literature, that governance matters. The purpose of this book, then, is to explain why different patterns of governance have emerged in Vancouver, Calgary, Toronto, and Montreal and to consider what consequences this may have for social protection in Canada. As I will show, the causes of homelessness are complex and can be traced to the actions and inactions of various levels of government and sectors of society. It follows, then, that homelessness governance and the production of social protection for people who are homeless require the involvement of all these groups and sectors. To make this even more challenging, it requires not just the involvement but the collaboration, or at least coordination, of multiple groups. In the pages that follow, I consider as many as seven distinct groups of actors: the federal government; provincial governments; municipal governments; third-sector actors; private-sector actors; and two regional or otherwise local networks set up to administer federal NHI/HPS funding, one for Indigenous-led groups (referred to as Aboriginal Communities and more recently as Indigenous Communities) and one for the general population (referred to as Designated Communities, though this network also funds Indigenous-led services).

To explain different governance dynamics, I consider these actors as they relate to two dimensions of multilevel governance. The first is their involvement in various parts of the policy-making process (advocacy, policy development, funding, and implementation [Horak 2012]). I also consider who is perceived to be the leader or – as we see in a number of cases – how many different actors view themselves as the leader. The second dimension of multilevel governance is the interactions among and within the different groups of actors. In cases of relatively centralized governance (Calgary and Toronto), I ask whether the governance dynamic is inclusive of other actors, notably third-sector, private-sector, and Indigenous-led groups and networks. In fragmented cases where a number of actors are involved (Vancouver and Montreal), I ask whether they coordinate with one another, collaborate, or work at cross-purposes, and I explain why. To do this, I develop an innovative framework that combines insights from research on multilevel governance
in Canada with a growing body of research that considers ideational processes in social policy development.

I insist on the importance of ideas, but I also draw attention to ways in which actors were constrained or enabled by resources and institutions. Involvement may be easier when financial resources are abundant and may be more difficult when they are constrained. Furthermore, resources are not just financial, though financial resources are particularly important for certain actors, notably governments and the private sector. Resources of other kinds – such as expertise and political connections – are of tremendous value in complex place-based policy-making, and they often drive the involvement of local actors in particular. Literature on multilevel governance also stresses the importance of institutions, particularly the importance of policy jurisdiction (Horak 2012). If a government has jurisdiction over housing and homelessness, its involvement is much more likely; likewise, local governments with no formal jurisdiction over housing but that nevertheless have important related powers – such as density bonusing and inclusionary zoning – are more likely to be involved. Non-governmental actors are more likely to be involved in policy governance when there are institutionalized venues or other avenues for involvement that allow for relationship-building, the exchange of information, and a recognition of their value as partners. Absent an institutionalized role, these groups seek to use key relationships with sympathetic insiders or with their own personal connections to push their ideas into policy-making discussions.

A consideration of institutions and resources goes a long way toward allowing us to understand multilevel governance dynamics. The City of Toronto, for example, is responsible for housing policy; it is therefore unsurprising that its involvement in the governance of homelessness is comparatively high. Similarly, the private sector in Calgary, which led the charge in the fight against homelessness, has extensive resources and personal relationships with powerful elected officials that have facilitated its deep involvement. Yet focusing just on institutions and resources leaves important questions unanswered. For example, why did the province of Alberta remain uninvolved in housing and homelessness policy for so long, despite its clear jurisdiction over the issue and abundant financial resources? Why has the wealthy private sector in Toronto not been more involved in homelessness governance? Why did the City of Vancouver, with few material resources and no formal jurisdiction, take on such a leadership role? And why are there multiple, locally based advocacy organizations in the same city in some cases? To answer these questions, I turn to an important body of literature that points to the role of ideas in shaping behaviour, which in this case
translates into governance dynamics. An important contribution of this book is that while institutions and resources matter, ideas are often even more powerful in shaping governance dynamics.

Three kinds of ideas complete the explanation of what shapes multilevel governance dynamics. The first idea relates to social protection. Ideas regarding whose role it is to produce social protection for those experiencing homelessness differ across cities and sectors (Jenson 2013). These ideas matter for all actors and include ideas regarding their own role in the production of social protection as well as ideas about the role of other actors (i.e., which actor should or should not lead). Interacting with this idea in some instances are ideas regarding federalism, which can have implications for an actor’s understanding of the responsibility to produce social protection as it relates to the division of powers between federal and provincial governments.

The second idea that shapes governance dynamics occurs at the local level; ideas regarding the “conceptualization” of the city’s role matter (Horak 2012). If local officials conceptualize the city’s role as that of a comprehensive government with wide-ranging responsibilities, rather than simply a service provider or policy implementer, the city is much more likely to be involved in homelessness governance. The third idea that shapes governance dynamics relates to the definition of homelessness. As I will discuss in chapter 2, there has been significant evolution in how homelessness is understood by policy-makers, moving from definitions focused on individual causes to those that blame systemic and structural factors (interacting with individual-level factors) as well as colonialism. Legitimate disagreements exist as to whether homelessness is primarily about housing; about housing and community; or according to an Indigenous definition (Thistle 2017), a more holistic definition that encompasses relationships with land, ancestors, and traditions (definitions are reviewed thoroughly in chapter 2). Ideas regarding the nature of homelessness can, in some instances, drive the involvement of actors in homelessness governance, but this kind of idea more often structures the interactions of actors. Where there is agreement on the definition of homelessness, groups are more likely to work together. Disagreements on the nature of homelessness are by no means fatal to overall efforts to fight homelessness, but they can lead to fragmentation. The pages that follow include examples of disagreements over the nature of homelessness that have led to instability, but there are also examples of productive, coordinated disagreements.

Interacting with ideas, local institutions can facilitate collaboration or can drive a wedge between disagreeing groups. In other words, institutions may facilitate the coordination of ideational disagreements, but a
different institutional landscape may turn a seemingly small disagreement into a significant one. Following the work of Béland and Waddan (2015), this book concludes that ideas in interaction with institutions shape governance dynamics. Interacting with institutions, I contend that ideas influence governance networks through environmental and cognitive mechanisms (Jenson 2010). In some instances, ideas become particularly powerful and turn into “coalition magnets” (Béland and Cox 2016). When an idea becomes a coalition magnet, it attracts individuals or groups to work together in a coalition, including people with sometimes widely divergent political beliefs. Ambiguous ideas, which mean different things to different people, are particularly powerful magnets. Just as magnets can attract, they can also repel; similarly, the magnetism of ideas can pull people together but can also push them apart. Ambiguous ideas can be powerful in building diverse networks, but they can also lead to fragmentation or instability. All ideas can become coalition magnets, but I find that ideas related to the understanding of homelessness are particularly powerful and can lead to the creation of a strong governance network or, conversely, can force groups apart. As I will demonstrate, a key, but by no means insurmountable, barrier to the development of effective responses to homelessness is that there are so many different ways to define homelessness.

Agency

Failures of the welfare state that produce homelessness have led some to use the words unhoused or underhoused. These latter terms draw attention not to the characteristics or presumed deficiencies of people who are without housing, but rather to the systems and structures that force them into that situation. But that does not mean they are passive and need to be governed. People who are or who have been homeless are what Caroline Andrew calls “the knowers” (2003). Lived expert and former coordinator at a small service for homeless men in Montreal Star Gale writes, “I am often asked ‘how can I/we help the homeless?’ The best answer is, ‘I’m not sure, let’s ask them!’” Gale says this is essential because of their deep knowledge of homelessness, though she notes that it is usually untapped in policymaking because of stereotypes and stigma that devalue this form of expertise. She writes, “There are new initiatives in Canada that show great promise, such as Housing First, but the expertise needed to expand, advance, and assess the efficacy of these initiatives resides in a population so heavily stigmatized by the public and institutions that serve them that they are essentially excluded from participation. These
experts are people with lived experience, individuals who identify as being under-housed or homeless” (Gale 2015).

Governance is about power. To study governance dynamics is therefore to study who has power; those who have not historically had power risk being overlooked. To the extent that homeless people are excluded from the formal analysis of this book, it is because they have historically been excluded from the development of policies that determine their fate. This is deeply problematic; it is they who have the most direct experience and expertise regarding the system and policy failures that create homelessness. Expertise is a resource, and the lived experience of unhoused people’s lived experience is too valuable to ignore (Kopec 2022). As Gale concludes: “Transition from life in crisis on the streets to secure housing for this subpopulation has proven notoriously difficult. Therefore, it is imperative that those who have made that transition or are in the process of navigating it can provide input into what service provision and housing supports worked for them. It’s not simply helping; it is about working with” (Gale 2015). This book finds, as Gale noted, that the expertise of homeless people is often overlooked or excluded; an important conclusion is that the equity, justice, and efficacy of homelessness policies and programs requires the inclusion of lived expertise.

Contributions

Compared to other disciplines, political science has produced comparatively little research on homelessness. Chronic homelessness is a relatively new policy problem, but nevertheless it has been widely studied in a range of fields, including medicine, psychology, psychiatry, and to a lesser extent social work, sociology, and geography (Smith and Kopec 2021). Acknowledging the expertise in this rich body of literature, I look at efforts to respond to homelessness through the classic political science lens: power. For that is what governance is ultimately about: Who has power? How is that power deployed? Who does not have power and why? Understanding that service providers, Indigenous-led groups and communities, and homeless people have unparalleled expertise and experience designing and delivering life-saving solutions, as well as a profound understanding of the primary causes of homelessness, this book pays particular attention to their role. This is the value of a political science perspective on homelessness governance – to place homelessness in a political context. This means calling homelessness what it is: the result of government actions and inactions.

With that in mind, this book makes several contributions to theories of governance and social protection. It is the first comparative study of
the multilevel governance of homelessness in Canada. This approach allows us to look deep into and across cases to more clearly understand what forces are shaping governance dynamics, including why different actors are involved and what shapes their interactions. In doing so, it also presents a comprehensive history of homelessness plans and policies in four cities since 2000, considering as many as seven groups of actors. This extensive history is valuable for understanding contemporary challenges and providing a record of government actions and the stories behind key moments and decisions.

A second contribution of this book is to expose the central and powerful role that ideas play in the development and evolution of multilevel governance dynamics. In this regard, I uncover the different, sometimes political, ways in which homelessness is understood across the country. An important theoretical contribution, this emphasis on ideas (interacting with institutions) allows us to better understand multilevel governance dynamics, but also why progress in the fight against homelessness has been so difficult. Far from undermining the life-saving work being done by those on the ground, an ideas and institutions lens allows us to understand why, despite thousands of people transitioning out of homelessness every year, people continue to experience homelessness.

I also contribute to ideational theories, specifically regarding the mechanisms by which ideas influence governance dynamics. Across the four cases, I find that ideas have been used to build powerful coalitions. One of most powerful ideas in this process has been about ending homelessness; as I demonstrate, part of the power of this idea is its ambiguity, which enables people to bring different understandings to their collaborative work fighting homelessness. In addition to confirming what ideational theory and analysis has found – that ambiguous ideas can attract sometimes conflicting groups and individuals to work together – I add to this theory: like magnets, ideas attract but can also repel. Different understandings of homelessness have, in some instances, driven groups apart, resulting in fragmentation in governance dynamics. In cases where ambiguous ideas have attracted groups or individuals that are motivated by fundamentally different understandings of homelessness, coalitions can be unstable or can even collapse. As a result, part of what makes ideas so powerful and magnetic – their ambiguity – also makes those ideas volatile.

This book is also in conversation with literature on federalism and the welfare state. Studies of social policy governance in Canada have tended to look at federal and provincial actions (Banting 2012; Béland and Daigneault 2015; Boychuk 1998; Boychuk 2008; Noël 2002, 2015; Wallner 2010, 2014). Canadian scholars have long examined the consequences of the fact that the Canadian welfare state is federal (Banting
1990; Noël 2001; Rose 1980), even asking whether “federal welfare state” is a contradiction in terms (Banting 2006). Federalism implies the coexistence of difference, but the welfare state requires some degree of equality or similarity in social protection. Considerable energy has thus been spent understanding how federalism and social protection interact (Noël 1999; Wallner 2010, 2014). Federalism has been and will remain a central force in the production of social protection. But studies of social protection are incomplete when they do not also consider the roles of local and non-governmental groups.

A starting assumption of this book is that civil society groups, private-sector actors, Indigenous-led organizations, and municipalities are centrally involved in producing social protection. This look at social protection from the bottom up sheds new light on welfare state governance by bringing these local actors into full view alongside senior governments (Michener, SoRelle, and Thurston 2022). Studying the Canadian welfare state from the bottom up thus reveals a further complicating, but deeply enriching, characteristic of the welfare state: it is federal, but it is also urbanized, meaning differences within provinces can be as significant as those between provinces. In this sense, I contribute to a growing body of literature stressing the important role that municipal governments are playing in Canadian governance (Good 2009), and respond to the call from federalism scholars to include local, non-governmental and Indigenous-led groups in theories of complex policy making (Paquet and Schertzer 2021).

On that note, I find that Indigenous-led groups face additional barriers to involvement in homelessness governance, including constant devaluing and exclusion of Indigenous knowledge and expertise. Indigenous communities also face additional burdens to involvement and ultimately implementing solutions, such as over-policing (though all homeless people are generally over-policed [Bellot and Sylvestre 2017]), and racist assumptions that Indigenous-led groups are unable to manage funding. Yet Indigenous-led organizations are best-placed to understand the complexities of homelessness for Indigenous people, and they are consistently effective in their work despite a lack of resources and exclusion. In this context, some Indigenous-led service providers have adopted a resurgence approach to producing social protection and ending homelessness (Corntassel 2012). While homelessness governance requires coordination and collaboration, it also sometimes requires governments to get out of the way and let the knowers do their work with the resources that are required to do so.

Studies in Canada and internationally have been ambivalent as to the place of housing policy in the welfare state. Housing has often been
viewed – in theory and in policy – as an economic good or infrastructure (Hulchanski 2002; Pomeroy and Falvo 2013). Yet as we will see, housing is a primary means of protecting people against the risk of becoming homeless; indeed, it is central to the prevention of a host of other risks and unlocks the potential for improving one’s quality of life through employment, education, safety, and good health. Housing is central to the welfare state, and though this study does not specifically study housing as carefully as homelessness, it makes a strong case that housing policy should be brought directly into the study of the provision of social protection.

This book also contributes to a small but growing body of political science research on homelessness governance. First, it provides important background and context to Carey Doberstein’s groundbreaking book *Building a Collaborative Advantage*, which is about the local governance of the federal Homelessness Partnering Strategy. Doberstein writes that governance matters to the quality of efforts to fight homelessness and makes recommendations in light of his findings about the importance of institutionalized and inclusive networks. This book takes a step back, examining the forces that shape governance networks in the first place, including what barriers might exist that prevent inclusive governance. Furthermore, Doberstein concedes that the local actions considered in his study are not, and can never be, sufficient in the fight against homelessness: federal and provincial governments must also step to the plate. This book considers not only local networks but also the involvement and interactions of municipal, provincial, and federal actors, situating local actors within the full picture. No single actor, level, or sector can solve homelessness on its own; they must work together.

The challenge of producing social protection for people experiencing homelessness is also its strength; it requires a broad, inclusive, multilevel, multisector governance network. The title of this book, *Multiple Barriers*, is a reference to the fact that there are institutional and ideational barriers to the development of this kind of network. Historically, multiple barriers has referred to people who are homeless. In this individualized understanding that dominated in the 1990s and 2000s, people experiencing homelessness were viewed as having “barriers” to housing – drug use, mental illness, disability, unemployment, and so on. Over time, as I demonstrate in this book, dominant understandings of homelessness have changed, and barriers to housing are today less often understood as existing within individuals. Rather, they are increasingly understood to be located in systems and structures, and include discrimination, systemic poverty, colonialism, and a lack of safe, adequate, and affordable housing. The title of this book is a nod to this history
and should be a constant reminder of the importance of the definition of homelessness.

**Book Overview**

The next chapter of this book introduces the reader to homelessness in Canada, beginning with a historical overview of the definitions of homelessness used by service providers and policy-makers. In the empirical chapters that follow, when I speak of “ideas regarding the nature of the problem/homelessness,” I am referring to the definition of homelessness. As I will illustrate, the dominant understandings of homelessness have been shifting focus away from individual causes and toward more structural and systemic ones. Yet differences in how homelessness is understood persist to this day, with some definitions focusing exclusively on housing, some insisting on the equal importance of community and inclusion, and others drawing on Indigenous worldviews and knowledge to draw attention to the importance of a more holistic understanding of emplacement. I lay out, briefly, the history of homelessness in Canada, identifying some of the policy causes of homelessness. This will inform readers about some common misconceptions around why people experience homelessness as well as illustrate how all three levels of government and various sectors of society bear some responsibility for the rise in homelessness that began in the 1980s. It follows that they are all required partners in efforts to combat it.

The third chapter develops the book’s theoretical framework by bridging research on multilevel governance with ideational analysis of the governance of the welfare state. I also outline this project’s research design, including case selection and research methods. The fourth chapter is the first of the book’s five empirical chapters. I begin with the federal government, tracing its involvement in homelessness governance from 1999 until the National Housing Strategy was introduced in 2017. For nearly twenty years, the federal government’s involvement in homelessness governance was timid and short-term, prioritizing individual-level solutions. I argue that this was because of prevailing ideas at the time regarding the nature of homelessness, notably a narrow, individualized definition of homelessness. In other words, homelessness was not understood to be a structural problem. In addition to the federal government, I present the more recent history of the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness (CAEH), a powerful advocacy group that has become the most influential non-governmental actor on the national level in the development of homelessness policy.
The four chapters that then follow offer detailed case studies of the urban multilevel governance of homelessness, including the involvement of different actors and their interactions in Vancouver, Calgary, Toronto, and Montreal. Each chapter follows the same logic and structure and reconstructs history, actor by actor, though each also takes a slightly different form. For example, the provincial story is long in some cases, short in others. In some instances, I consider the operation of the federal homelessness program on its own; in others, I consider it alongside another actor and explain why. In each of these city-based chapters, I first consider the provincial government, focusing on its involvement in homelessness but also including the relevant history of its housing policy. I then consider local actors, including the municipal government, third-sector groups, private-sector actors, and groups created by the federal government’s National Homelessness Initiative in the late 1990s and early 2000s, which includes an Indigenous network (bureaucratically referred to as “Aboriginal communities”) in all cities except Montreal as well as a non-Indigenous network (bureaucratically referred to as “designated communities”). While reconstructing the involvement of each of the actors and their interactions, I highlight the importance and interactions of resources, ideas, and institutions in driving governance dynamics, drawing on evidence from interviews, archives, extensive document review, and participant observation. In the final chapter, I return to the book’s main contributions, explaining more fully the implications of this work.

The story that emerges reveals both the challenges and successes of multilevel policy-making in one of Canada’s most complicated policy areas. One of the main messages to emerge from the following pages is that the social safety net is indeed frayed across the country, but that actors not traditionally associated with welfare production, notably third-sector groups, Indigenous-led organizations, and municipalities, are using their resources and skills to fill the gaps, plug the holes, and mend the net as best as they can. With deep respect to those involved in service provision and those who are or have been unhoused, I hope that this book will help explain why, from a political perspective, homelessness continues at such intolerable levels.