**Perceptions and Experiences of safety and wellbeing in downtown Brandon**

Preliminary Research Report

Prepared for:

City of Brandon (City Manager, Mayor’s office, and The Downtown Wellness and Safety Taskforce), Helping Hands, Samaritan House Ministries, Brandon Friendship Centre, YWCA, Brandon Neighbourhood Renewal Corporation, Brandon Urban Aboriginal Council

Aug 1, 2023.

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**Introduction**

The research highlighted in this report is derived from a larger, multi-site, multi-year, comparative study exploring People Experiencing Homelessness’ (PEH) perceptions of and experiences with social and health care services, criminal justice agencies, how victimization shapes marginalized community members’ everyday lives, substance use, encampments, and informal social support networks. To date, we have completed over 350 qualitative interviews and have spent many hours conducting ethnographic observation with PEH and People Who Use Drugs (PWUDs) across several Canadian cities and provinces (Edmonton, Calgary, Lethbridge, Winnipeg, Brandon, Victoria, Kelowna).

Since 2020, many Canadian cities have been experiencing a “homelessness crisis,” with jurisdictions struggling to address the challenges of responding to increases in PEH, encampment settlements, and concerns over community safety and well-being. Brandon, like many other cities, has not been immune to these challenges and concerns.

While the City of Brandon has employed diverse strategies and investments to revitalize its core, Downtown Brandon continues to face challenges addressing concerns surrounding “homelessness, mental health and addiction” (Kemp, 2022). A year prior to the onset of this research, it was estimated that there were 139 unhoused persons in Brandon, with almost half being without shelter (e.g., sleeping outdoors) (City of Brandon, 2021). In July 2023, the City of Brandon has taken steps to address concerns over social disorder through the passing of new/amended community standards to address loitering, panhandling, causing disturbances, and urinating/defecating in public and permit law enforcement to issue fines.

The City of Brandon continues to face challenges with respect to homelessness. Consequently, in the summer of 2022, we initiated research exploring PEH and People Who Use Drugs’ (PWUD) experiences and perceptions of living or spending most of their time in downtown Brandon (e.g., Princess Park and along Pacific Avenue). As this study is ongoing, and all data have yet to be collectively analyzed, this document is a *preliminary overview* of initial findings from the City of Brandon.

The research received Research Ethics Board approval from Athabasca University (25175, 23445), the University of Alberta (Pro00127559), and the University of Winnipeg (HEMS7Pro00090650, HEPro00127559).

We welcome the opportunity for further discussion about this research.

**Research Method and Demographics Overview**

* This report draws from 30 interviews with PEH and 252 hours of ethnographic research in Brandon during summer 2022. It highlights their experiences and views with the goal of amplifying their concerns, needs, and lived experiences. All participants were compensated $30.00 for their participation and knowledge sharing.
* Participants were recruited via traditional fieldwork methods. Drs. Greene, Urbanik, and Maier spent time getting to know PEH in Brandon’s downtown core. This involved us spending many hours hanging out in public spaces bordered by Lorne and Pacific Avenues and 5th and 10th Streets—an area of approximately 21 small city blocks.
* We did not recruit participants via any local community services agencies and instead invited community members to participate in an interview after getting to know people and explaining who we were and why we were in Brandon. This approach ensured we met both people who *did* and *did not* (routinely) access community services. This was important because it is not uncommon for the *most* marginalized community members to avoid or have limited access to support services. All interviews were conducted in the community (e.g., alleys, parking lots, and parks) and were audio-recorded and transcribed.
* **Participant characteristics**:
  + **Gender**: 53% (n=16) men and 47% (n=14) women.
  + **Ethnicity**: 57% (n=17) Indigenous persons, 33% (n=10) white persons, and 10% (n=3) did not report this information.
  + **Housing status**: 93% (n=28) were experiencing houselessness (staying outdoors, staying in an encampment, utilizing temporary shelters), and 7% (n=2) were in temporary places and had previously experienced houselessness.
  + **Substance use**: All participants reported using substances, including alcohol, meth, crack, cocaine, fentanyl and/or heroin.

**Findings**

**Princess Park**

Over the course of the day, Princess Park was a busy location with many people spending time and/or passing through. The park was a generally clean and well-maintained public space that was frequented by many of Brandon’s unhoused community members. At times, there were upwards of 40 people enjoying the small park, sitting with friends, or enjoying a meal/beverage. And while the researchers did find that many of the park patrons were PEH and/or PWUD, members of the larger Brandon community also spent time there (e.g., eating lunch, walking dogs, reading). Participants said they felt the park was as a generally safe space for them to spend time, meet with friends, and occasionally sleep.

***Security in the Park***

The researchers observed the park being frequently patrolled by private security guards on foot and, less often, in police vehicles. Unlike some other jurisdictions, participants *rarely reported* parksecurity officers as verbally/physically harming or displacing them. Instead, participants reported feeling frustrated by what they perceived to be security’s lack of meaningful action in, as well as disengagement from, the community. These assessments were shaped by participants’ views and experiences of security guards 1) avoiding intervention during conflicts (arguments, fights) between community members, 2) failing to respond to illicit behaviours in the park (e.g., openly drinking alcohol, using drugs), 3) providing little to no assistance during medical emergencies (e.g., drug overdoses, other health issues), and critically, 4) failing to develop relationships with community members (e.g., getting to know area residents/community, engaging in respectful conversation).

Participants consistently reported that they expected security to act and treat them in ways that would tangibly benefit community members’ safety and well-being. Specifically, participants reported that they expected park security to 1) intervene in conflicts to deescalate *instead* of relying on community members and/or police, 2) receive adequate training and be a reliable source of safety when emergencies occurred, and 3), establish respectful relationships/build rapport with *all* parkgoers.

***Public Washrooms***

Participants reported frequently accessing Princess Park’s public washrooms to relieve themselves and clean up/change their clothing. This was important to participants as many felt access to washrooms was extremely limited for them downtown. They often reported the challenges of accessing washroom facilities—in particular, the challenges associated with time limits (about 15 minutes) and hours of operation—in the park’s washrooms. If a person was in the washroom longer than expected, security guards would knock and ask the person to leave and indicated that if they did not, police would be called.

While all participants recognized the need to ensure PEH and PWUD’s safety via checking on people remaining in the bathrooms too long—due to fears of overdose—they also stressed that these facilities were some of the only ones available to them for cleaning up (washing themselves/clothes, changing clothes) which often took them up to or over 15 minutes.

As this research was conducted prior to the downtown pop-up park pilot project (Fall 2022) and following the City of Brandon’s acceptance of the recommendations from the Downtown Safety and Wellness Committee regarding increased washroom availability (24 hours, additional portable facilities), our findings cannot currently speak to the impact of these new initiatives.

That said, based on the findings to date greater access to washrooms was/is needed by unhoused community members. This is particularly important given the City’s emphasis on reducing social disorder through fines (e.g., urinating/defecating in public) which research shows are rarely paid by people experiencing homelessness and contribute to cycles of homelessness (Mogk et al., 2019; Ogrady, Gaetz, and Buccieri, 2011).

**Safety and Victimization in Downtown Brandon**

Some participants felt that, in recent years, changes had occurred in how community members interacted and treated each other and described the area as more unsafe, unpredictable, and volatile than before. Participants frequently reported being victimized by other street-involved persons. Participants’ descriptions of their victimization ranged from relatively minor (thefts) to much more serious incidents (serious physical assaults). As has been reported in other Canadian cities, PEH in Brandon felt vulnerable to threats, harassment, and physical assaults by other members of the public.

As a result of threats to their safety, many participants reported feeling that they needed to carry a weapon to protect themselves (e.g., knives, bear spray). However, participants also reported concerns about people using these weapons offensively. In addition to weapons, some respondents reported that to stay safe, they would use drugs to keep them awake through the night. They also recognized that this strategy was a temporary safety measure because without sleep, they risked experiencing “psychosis.”

**Health, Social and Housing Services in Brandon**

***Emergency Shelters***

Participants reported they typically tried to avoid staying in emergency shelters, using them only as a last resort (e.g., inclement weather, lack of space, needing sleep). Key reasons for this were shelter rules, security guard presence/checks, lack of safety, and cleanliness (e.g., bed bugs). Particularly concerning were reports of sexual abuse allegedly perpetrated by security staff. While most participants reported wanting to find permanent housing, they did not feel they had enough support to help them find and maintain housing in Brandon.

***Food***

Participants reported that their access to free food was limited*.*

***Laundry***

Participants reported access to free services for doing their laundry was often challenging, reporting that time slots were often taken up prior to their arrival. This left many to find alternative places to wash their clothes, such as park washrooms.

***Harm Reduction and Treatment***

Most participants reported a desire to use drugs safely and at some point, reduce/stop their drug/alcohol use. Participants were routinely observed taking advantage of available harm reduction services (e.g., safe supplies).

**Final note**

This report was created for the benefit of relevant community stakeholders. While we encourage the sharing of this document, we ask that the consent of the researchers be obtained prior to dissemination. Lastly, if there are other community members that you believe would benefit from this report, please let us know, and we will happily provide them with a copy.

Thank you for taking the time to read this report. We would be happy to make ourselves available for discussion.