

# Toward the Right to Housing in Canada: Lived Experience, Research and Promising Practices in Deep Engagement

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Résumé de l'article

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# Toward the Right to Housing in Canada: Lived Experience, Research and Promising Practices in Deep Engagement

Jayne Malenfant, Jes Annan, Laura Pin, Leah Levac, Amanda Buchnea

**ABSTRACT** Canada's 2019 Housing Strategy Act (NHSA) lays the groundwork for important advances in ensuring the right to housing for all. Two key approaches outlined in the NHSA for communities in greatest need are conducting research and providing participatory ways for those communities to shape housing rights responses. This article presents insights from a project that explored how people with lived experience of housing need and homelessness engage in research on housing precarity in Canada. We review the literature on housing precarity that features people with lived experience as research participants, applying an intersectional framework and acknowledging the settler colonial context of Canada. And, as a research team who has members with lived experiences of housing precarity, we emphasize the importance of meaningfully incorporating people's lived experiences, seeing deep engagement as a way to advance housing rights by harnessing lived knowledges.

**KEYWORDS** Lived experience; right to housing; engagement; homelessness

## Canada's National Housing Strategy Act and the Need for Deep Engagement

Canada's 2019 National Housing Strategy Act (NHSA) (S.C. 2019, c. 29, s. 313) is an important step toward recognizing the human right to housing across the country. Two integral aspects of the NHSA are to "focus on improving housing outcomes for persons in greatest need" (S.C. 2019, c. 29, s. 313, 5 (2) (c)) and "provide for participatory processes to ensure the ongoing inclusion and engagement of civil society, stakeholders, vulnerable groups and persons with lived experience of housing need, as well as those with lived experience of homelessness" (S.C. 2019, c. 29, s. 313, 5 (2) (d)). Likewise, the principles of the National Housing Strategy (NHS) include prioritizing groups with distinct housing needs: women and children (including those fleeing violence), seniors, young adults, Indigenous Peoples, people with disabilities, people dealing with mental health and substance use issues, veterans, people who identify as LGBTQ2S+, racialized groups, recent immigrants (especially refugees), and people experiencing homelessness (Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2018). The NHS also recognizes that people with lived experiences (PwLE) of housing need and homelessness are important research and policy actors whose knowledge is critical for realizing housing as a human right.

As authors, we echo this sentiment and, in response, we conducted a literature review exploring questions of lived experience engagement in housing-focused research in Canada. This work was undertaken by a team of researchers, almost half of whom have lived experience of housing precarity themselves, and our analysis is based on nearly 300 research articles that included the knowledge of PwLE. This research revealed two shortcomings: the lack of a framework prioritizing deep, ongoing engagement with PwLE and the lack of engagement strategies involving the most marginalized groups (who tend to be overrepresented in the experience of housing rights violations). This includes a lack of engagement strategies that focus on Indigenous-specific housing needs and self-determination in realizing housing as a right.

In this article, we explore the why (and how) of deep engagement with PwLE of homelessness in housing research and emphasize the need to develop a better understanding of the ways that PwLE can shape the right to housing in Canada. In our analysis, we maintain that advancing the right to housing requires an intersectional and justice-oriented approach that allows for access to housing to be explored with respect to systemic barriers and discriminations that relate to social locations such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, class, and physical ability (Crenshaw, 1989; Nelson, 2020). The lived experience (LE) of people who experience multiple forms of marginalization must be not only acknowledged but also prioritized in housing-related research and sustainable, community-oriented, and reciprocal engagement—or what we conceptualize as deep engagement—must become an integral tool for homelessness researchers who hope to impact policy, planning, and practice (Frederick et al., 2018). Overall, engaging with PwLE is essential for conducting effective and just housing-related research, particularly research that aims to address and shift policies. By centring the perspectives of those most affected, illuminating systemic inequities, ensuring accountability, and identifying gaps in current research, policy, and practice, researchers (with and without LE) can develop more effective and inclusive solutions to the complex issue of unmet housing needs.

### **Defining Engagement: Existing Definitions and Deep Engagement of PwLE**

An assessment of what engagement (deep or otherwise) of PwLE in research looks like, and to what extent the recent NHSA has advanced such engagement, is difficult. Neither the NHSA nor literature on LE research participation outline standard characteristics of engagement. Research projects may reference engagement or participatory methods without explaining what these entail or reflecting on their effectiveness. And while some researchers are beginning to reflect on the challenges of maintaining engagement with PwLE (for example, Andrews & Heerde, 2021), there is a significant gap in the evaluation of PwLE engagement. When LE engagement is discussed, it is often homogenized and lacks information about the diversity and intersectional experiences represented, which can erase the multiple knowledges PwLE bring to this work.

We recognize there are many barriers preventing researchers from highlighting the labour and knowledge contributions of PwLE, including narrow standards within many academic journals and rigid knowledge hierarchies in the academy. As a result, researchers' engagement with PwLE may not always be included in the resulting literature, suggesting there is more

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engagement happening than evident in this review. We are also aware that research prioritizing the knowledges of PwLE can be shared through non-academic channels and thus is not captured in academic literature. Nevertheless, we think documenting deep engagement with PwLE in housing-related research is an important contribution to literature on housing, homelessness, and community engaged scholarship, asserting the urgent need to ensure deep engagement is part of the literature on homelessness in Canada, including academic knowledge mobilization.

We also highlight the importance—and current dearth—of PwLE participation in assessing the effectiveness of engagement in research projects. We wish to advocate for the transparent and ongoing use of deep engagement strategies by, and in partnership with, PwLE. Effective evaluations of engagement must consider how meaningful the strategies are for PwLE, not simply from the perspective of those undertaking the engagement. While currently rare or absent in homelessness-related research, PwLE's contribution to evaluating engagement approaches can provide invaluable knowledge for building more equitable modes of deep engagement across projects and disciplines.

### **Our Approach: A Literature Review of PwLE of Homelessness and Core Housing Needs in Canada**

This article draws on the work of a team made up of researchers with and without LE from locations across Canada. We undertook a secondary analysis of publicly available research and reports from Canada where PwLE of homelessness and/or core housing need were involved. Our goals were to better understand not only the level of lived experience engagement research projects were employing but also what they could contribute to improving the implementation of the NHSA. We undertook the work in response to a request from Canada's National Housing Council (NHC). Initially, the work was intended to engage with PwLE of housing precarity and homelessness to explore the impact of the NHSA on their housing experiences, identifying recommendations for its reform. However, after initial discussions with the NHC, we decided that a review of existing literature was more appropriate because of limited time and available resources<sup>1</sup>, as well as ongoing pandemic-related challenges. Additionally, our approach avoided the trap of over-researching and the associated risk of re-traumatizing historically marginalized groups. Further, reviewing existing literature allowed us to amplify recommendations and insights from research already done in collaboration with (though only rarely led by) PwLE. Finally, our baseline definition of engagement was the inclusion of PwLE beyond the role of research participants.

The analysis presented in this paper is based on the dataset of literature we developed for the NHC and updated in 2023. Our search strategy ensured a comprehensive but not exhaustive review of Canadian studies focused on the housing-related experiences of PwLE. We searched several databases, including JSTOR, EBSCO, Scholars Portal, Sociological Abstracts, Scopus, Public Health Database, and Web of Science. We also used Google and Google Scholar to identify additional academic articles and community literature (for a literature review that

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<sup>1</sup> Emerging best practices for engaging PwLE consistently highlight the need to take time to build strong relationships of trust and reciprocity (for example, see Lived Experience Advisory Council [LEAC], 2016).

includes gray and community literature, see Levac et al., 2022). Further, we searched individual journals with particular relevance to the topic, including the *Radical Housing Journal*, *Journal of Poverty*, and *International Indigenous Policy Journal*. One team member did a limited French-language search to include the work of francophone scholars and communities.

We conducted searches using the terms ‘Canada’ and ‘housing and homelessness’ or their derivatives (i.e., hous\*, homeless\*). We also used a combination of secondary search terms aimed at uncovering research with and about the experiences of commonly marginalized groups, including ‘youth,’ ‘families,’ ‘women,’ ‘queer,’ ‘LGBTQ\*,’ ‘newcomer,’ ‘refugee,’ ‘Black,’ ‘racialized,’ ‘Indigenous,’ ‘disab\*,’ and others. We ran our searches for terms appearing anywhere in the article and limited them to articles appearing since 2000. We also searched a small number of well-known housing-related websites and research repositories including the Homeless Hub, Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness, Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, and Canadian Lived Experience Leadership Network.

We designed our search strategy with several considerations in mind. First, as noted earlier, we faced considerable time constraints, which meant that while we largely coordinated our search efforts, individual team members also relied on their previous training to adapt their searching techniques as they went. Second, our team’s institutional distribution meant that each member had access to slightly different databases and journals. These considerations informed our decision to search a broad set of journals and databases, with some variability in combinations of search terms, and without complete consistency. We also searched a limited number of websites and community repositories. When we began repeatedly turning up the same articles, we determined that our collective efforts had led to a sufficiently comprehensive review for the purposes of this research. Our updated search in 2023 was conducted by only one team member but replicated the approach described above. For inclusion in our review, articles and reports had to engage PwLE at least as research subjects, be in English (except for the targeted search for French literature noted above), be published since 2000, and be explicitly about housing. In other words, if the focus of the research was mental health and some of the findings spoke to housing-related challenges, the article was excluded. The choice to focus on literature about housing was driven by the mandate of the National Housing Council to understand experiences of housing need and homelessness.

Our final dataset includes 283 documents, including primary academic research, secondary analyses of data gathered with PwLE, and research undertaken by community organizations. Our research for the NHC also included community housing and homelessness plans, but we excluded these from this analysis because they rarely distinguish between engaging with PwLE and community members more generally (for an exception, see Bernas et al., 2019). Of these, we identified 49 as engaging with PwLE beyond their role as research subjects. We grouped these documents into four categories: LE authorship, LE participation throughout the project, LE participation through follow-up interviews and member-checking, and LE participation in recruitment and data collection. We do not suggest that each of these categories constitutes deep engagement, only that they engage PwLE beyond their role as research subjects. We also recognize that these forms of engagement may not always represent a desire to value lived

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knowledge and may be utilitarian in nature (e.g., primarily intended to increase recruitment). While our research engages with the quality of lived engagement (and, in particular, the need for PwLE to be involved in reflecting on, shaping, and evaluating the effectiveness of engagement), we do not wish to suggest a hierarchy of lived engagement. For example, community-based and participatory methods are often seen as the pinnacle of lived experience engagement, but emerging critiques suggest that these methods have limitations (Nelson, 2020). Instead, we present a continuum of engagement strategies, both to foster a clearer understanding of what types of engagement of PwLE are currently happening in research spaces and to highlight how engagement may be meaningful across methods and approaches.

As mentioned above, our findings are also dependent on the amount of information shared by researchers in the literature. For example, few studies describe the role of PwLE in establishing the overarching research question, securing funding, undertaking analysis, or shaping the team structure. We also recognize that some literature may not outline all the engagement strategies and efforts used in a given project, which may relate to how knowledge mobilization is expected to take place within academic institutions, even as the importance of research that foregrounds community knowledge is increasingly recognized (Yarbrough, 2020). However, for our purposes, if details about deeper forms of engagement were absent, we could not classify the articles or reports as having engaged with PwLE beyond research subjects. While understanding the limitations caused by access to funding and requirements regarding authorship (which highlights the need for research funders to play an integral role in the engagement of PwLE), we maintain that it is researchers' responsibility to ensure that the labour and roles of PwLE are made visible, even while navigating academic publishing constraints. Instead of confining PwLE to the role of advisor, consultant, or participant, researchers should consider co-authorship and commit to transparency and visibility of diverse labour in their publications.

We recognize that interrelated issues, including access to education, civic engagement, criminal legal processes, cultural supports, and the arts, are important to shaping housing stability, and research may engage PwLE on a variety of topics that impact them. These issues fell outside the scope of this project but represent points of future inquiry for the research team, as we recognize the importance of engaging PwLE across a range of issues intersecting with homelessness. We also recognize that our choice of journals and databases may not have captured relevant literature across all disciplines. For instance, we did not explicitly seek out articles in education-related databases and journals. While additional searching may uncover further articles, we are confident that the wide range and large number of articles we reviewed provide a comprehensive picture of the extent of deep engagement (or lack thereof) with PwLE in housing-related research.

### **Realizing the Right to Housing on Stolen Land: Centring the Lived Experiences of Indigenous Communities in Research**

A tension we wish to highlight across homelessness research, engagement of diverse PwLE, and housing rights work is that rights within a settler colonial system are built upon the dispossession

and displacement of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis People. Within Canada and globally, Indigenous Peoples have unique rights to self-determination (UNDRIP, 2007), rich knowledge systems, and ongoing experiences with colonialism that demand unique consideration when advancing strategies for achieving the right to housing. Thistle (2017) specifies that “Indigenous homelessness is not defined as lacking a structure of habitation; rather, it is more fully described and understood through a composite lens of Indigenous worldviews” (p. 6). Leviten-Reid and Parker (2018) argue that to address barriers to accessing housing and housing supports, there must be a shift toward integrating Indigenous knowledges (p. 479). When considering research to advance the right to housing, there is a call for Indigenous knowledges, methodologies, and researchers to lead (National Indigenous Feminist Housing Working Group, 2022). Therefore, we wish to echo the argument that many Indigenous scholars have made: that assuring Indigenous rights or justice is not necessarily dependent on settler colonial legal, policy, and housing systems (Coulthard, 2014; Palmater, 2019). As researchers who have varying identities and relationships to the settler colonial nation state, we recognize that a comprehensive understanding of how to best engage diverse Indigenous communities and knowledges in housing rights research must be led by Indigenous scholars and community members, in ways that may follow or diverge from the deep engagement strategies outlined more broadly for PwLE here. We recognize that Indigenous sovereignty, resistance, and self-determination need not depend on the frameworks of the settler colonial state (Coulthard, 2014) and instead may refuse these engagements in powerful ways (Simpson, 2014). We maintain that Indigenous-led and culturally appropriate research on housing justice is a key element of community engagement around the right to housing in Canada, particularly as the state aims to respond to people most impacted by housing rights violations in Canada, many of whom are Indigenous.

While all Indigenous communities on Turtle Island have some lived experience of settler colonialism and its role in Indigenous Peoples’ displacement and disconnection from land (Thistle, 2017), research engagement of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis PwLE in the areas of homelessness must hold special consideration for the inclusion of traditional knowledges, languages, and Indigenous methodologies (Thistle & Smylie, 2020). Indigenous-led research may result in community tables and alternative forms of knowledge mobilization rather than traditional academic outputs. For example, the Indigenousization of affordable housing options is emphasized in a report based on a series of Elder and Knowledge Keeper circles conducted by the Aboriginal Standing Committee on Housing and Homelessness (ASCHH) with members of the Kawkewistahaw, Little Black Bear, Kainai, Stoney Nakoda, and Siksika First Nations in Calgary, Alberta. The Elders and Knowledge Keepers involved in these circles emphasized the necessity of housing that offers opportunities for Indigenous tenants to reinforce their culture, identity, and connection to cultural supports such as Elders and ceremony (Williams and Lucas, 2019). These calls are supported by other Indigenous scholars who echo the need for Indigenous-specific models for addressing unmet housing needs (Baspaly et al., 2022) and by non-Indigenous housing researchers who highlight the urgency of centring the knowledges and LE of Indigenous Peoples in both the National Housing Strategy (e.g., Gaetz et al., 2016) and the National Housing Council (Paradis, 2018).

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Research led by Indigenous communities should be at the forefront of housing rights policy work and that research within settler-colonial Canada requires additional considerations for honoring lived knowledges, community experiences, and deep engagement in research structures. Further, researchers engaging with Indigenous communities should adhere to the research and data guidelines created by diverse Indigenous communities across Canada. One such guideline is the well-known OCAP principles (Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession). OCAP is one of several available sets of principles developed by Indigenous Peoples in Canada to govern research and data collection that involves Indigenous communities, knowledge, and information. OCAP principles emphasize the importance of respecting Indigenous sovereignty, self-determination, and the rights of Indigenous Peoples to steward, control, and govern their own data and information. While Indigenous research principles are developed to specifically address the extractive and predatory research practices of settler-colonial institutions and are thus contextually unique, they reiterate the need for ethical, reciprocal, and transformative research methods for all research involving marginalized or vulnerable communities while highlighting the unique needs and research standards each Indigenous community holds.

A small number of articles we reviewed demonstrated deep engagement and Indigenous leadership. We recognize the small percentage of literature outlining meaningful engagement of PwLE in Indigenous research may stem from multiple sources, including Indigenous control and self-determination of research data, Indigenous researchers opting to refuse Western and settler colonial knowledge mobilization of research (Simpson, 2017), and a strong focus on community-grounded, lived-experience-led, and relational outcomes within Indigenous research methodologies (Lee & Evans, 2021). Again, we understand this limitation as deeply related to academic scholarship's perceived inaccessibility and lack of impact. While the majority of studies on Indigenous homelessness in our review were designed and written by non-Indigenous researchers, some studies did engage with Indigenous individuals and communities.<sup>2</sup> This includes recent literature about how the Housing First approach—in particular, its strategies to address those who use substances—may be indigenized to better meet the distinct needs of Indigenous Peoples (Distasio et al., 2019; Distasio et al., 2018; Firestone et al., 2022). In a study on culturally relevant responses to housing instability among Indigenous Peoples in Winnipeg, Distasio et al. (2019) worked closely with Indigenous Elders, community members, and those with lived or living experience of housing precarity to develop a set of guidelines for service agencies. Distasio et al.'s guidelines describe community-based program creation and governance, long-term trust and relationship building with local Indigenous leaders and community members, and a strengths-based framework as key to creating Housing First programs that are localized and responsive to the needs of Indigenous Peoples.

Distasio et al. (2018) also identify a major barrier to ending housing inequities for Indigenous people, stating that “mainstream housing models have remained rooted in Western ideals” and “may have intrinsic cultural biases and often do not fully comprehend the worldviews, housing

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2 Some Indigenous researchers may not have explicitly positioned themselves; however, there remains a need for non-Indigenous researchers and authors to position themselves, explore the complexities of Indigenous leadership in research, and foster more fulsome representations of Indigenous perspectives in the literature.



needs, and self-determination of urban-based Indigenous peoples” (pp. 4-5). In response to this pressing need, several Indigenous-led, localized housing initiatives that are responsive to their cultural contexts have developed in recent years (for example, as outlined in Bodor et al., 2011; Pauly et al., 2016). Despite settler-academia’s exploration of the unique and multifaceted housing requirements of Indigenous communities in Canada, there still exists a pressing need for Indigenous-led and controlled research to address unmet housing needs. This necessitates a broader shift in how settler institutions and sectors, including universities and policymakers, engage with the existing knowledge and recommendations offered by Indigenous communities and the inherent power imbalances stemming from the historical and ongoing consequences of colonization on Indigenous communities.

### **Intersectional Approaches to Engagement in the Existing Literature: Data Gaps and Selective Engagement**

In addition to settler colonial structures, it is important to consider the multiple systemic barriers and rights violations that many communities navigate. In our literature review, many articles spoke to the engagement of specific populations overrepresented amongst those experiencing housing precarity, many of whom are also prioritized by the NHSA as members of “vulnerable groups.” While 29 articles engaged distinct communities (e.g., women, families, newcomers, those living rurally, or members of specific linguistic or cultural communities), they often focused on one aspect of an individual’s experience rather than understanding intersections of how they navigated housing in Canada. Failing to consider multiple forms of oppression when developing engagement strategies can obscure important aspects that PwLE can help illuminate through their engagement in research: namely, how systems operate to organize housing need within a Canadian context and how solutions may be structured to ensure the housing rights of all. One example of a study that explored the intersections of multiple social and material conditions was Benbow et al.’s 2019 narrative inquiry with 26 women who had histories of homelessness. It aimed to explore the complexities of social exclusion experienced by mothers in Southwestern Ontario, illuminating experiences of discrimination based on class, mental health, motherhood, and ethnicity. These experiences led many of the women to feel as though they had to reach ‘rock bottom’ to receive access to support, highlighting the experience of being pushed to the periphery due to intersecting nodes of oppression. However, this kind of deep engagement and framing remains less common, and in the absence of an intersectional approach, research can reinforce the idea that individuals’ experiences of homelessness occur in a vacuum outside of connected systems and injustice.

A promising first step toward understanding multiple and intersecting experiences of housing need is better accounting for, and disaggregating, LE voices and recommendations in research and reports. This is paramount when filling “data gaps related to the housing needs of Canada’s most vulnerable populations” (CMHC, 2018, p. 20). Filling data gaps is a prioritized research commitment for the NHS, but it does not prioritize LE engagement,

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often relying instead on point-in-time (PiT) counts<sup>3</sup> or other statistical analyses of census data or housing data from the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, which is important but insufficient. Combining these data with deep engagement of PwLE may be effective in increasing government and systems accountability to diverse communities. It is also important for researchers—and the service providers and organizations who collect data for research—to adopt a commitment to intersectionality to better understand and disaggregate unique and intersecting communities’ housing needs. We suggest that, at minimum, this should include attending to equity-oriented, anti-racist, anti-oppressive, and critical disability frameworks that can help to respond to structural power imbalances and prevent and reduce existing bias and discrimination within the homelessness and housing sectors.

On a positive note, the literature we reviewed reports some success among Housing First (HF) program models that were adapted to better support participants from diverse ethno-racial groups, with one study noting “the effectiveness of a HF adaptation, using anti-racist/anti-oppressive practice, in improving housing stability among homeless adults with mental illness from ethno-racial minority groups” (Stergiopoulos et al., 2016, p. 9). PwLE who identify as Indigenous, Black, racialized, refugees, members of 2SLGBTQ+ communities, and/or living with disabilities confront layers of bias and discrimination in their housing and homelessness experiences, and their knowledge may play an important role in leading efforts to address data gaps and biases. At the same time, our analysis shows that, in addition to rarely engaging with PwLE beyond their roles as subjects, existing housing research methods and practices rarely use Indigenous, anti-racist/anti-oppressive, or gendered frameworks. The current landscape of engagement with PwLE is particularly concerning for marginalized groups whose experiences of homelessness are often invisible in the literature and are marked by multiple forms of discrimination, oppression, and systemic violence.

### **Giving Voice to Lived Experiences: The Role of PwLE in Shaping Housing-Related Knowledge**

We recognize that deep engagement with PwLE is a difficult undertaking in many existing research spaces, though we believe an understanding of the current engagement landscape can direct our work moving forward—and that academic literature is an important source through which to understand this landscape. As demonstrated through our research, PwLE are rarely involved beyond their capacity as research subjects in academic studies on homelessness, and literature may fail to outline how engagement happens beyond labeling a practice as “participatory.” In a large majority (over 80%) of the documents we reviewed, LE was presented through the data collection undertaken by researchers and analyzed without apparent further

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<sup>3</sup> A note on the role of PiT counts in the landscape of PwLE engagement: while some communities may engage advisory committees that include or are composed entirely of PwLE, the federal standards which guide PiT counts do not include lived experience engagement (Government of Canada, 2023). As these standards guide all PiT counts, the extent to which PwLE are engaged in PiT counts, or in community advisory groups connected to PiT counts, depends heavily on the choice of each individual community.

input or inclusion of PwLE. Altogether, only 49 of 283 included documents engaged with LE in more generative ways.<sup>4</sup>

We do not wish to suggest a complete absence of research with PwLE demonstrating deep engagement. It is true that across the articles we reviewed, details on the processes, aspects, and effectiveness of engagement with PwLE were scarce (for an in-depth summary, see Levac et al., 2022). That said, several articles engaged PwLE throughout the entire cycle of the research project, including Indigenous youth (Brown et al., 2007) and youth/peer researchers (Kidd 2019; Nichols & Braimoh, 2018). Some literature highlighted the potential for training peers or those using homelessness services to work as researchers, facilitators, and writers on a given project (Paradis, 2018). When PwLE are supported to lead the development of research questions, data collection, analysis, and knowledge mobilization (such as in Phipps et al., 2021; Phipps & Masuda, 2018; Schwan et al., 2021), literature was more likely to elaborate on the processes of engagement. A small number of articles discussed participatory processes throughout a project but did not elaborate on how this took place (Forchuk et al., 2022; Fotheringham et al., 2014). A number of articles also highlighted engaging PwLE at specific phases in a given project, including member checking on emergent recommendations and research themes (Benbow et al., 2019; Brais & Maurer, 2021; Nelson et al., 2016; Thulien 2018) and including peer researchers in recruitment and data collection (for example, Abramovich, 2021; Fleming et al., 2019; Grewel, 2021; Hwang et al., 2003; Logan & Murdie, 2014; Somers et al., 2013). Several articles also outlined the development of community or lived experience advisory groups (Leviten-Reid et al., 2020; Sakamoto et al., 2007; Stewart et al., 2010). Authorship by PwLE, however, remains a rarity in the current literature landscape and can be difficult to assess, as authors who engage in critical methodologies and reflexive practice rarely positioned themselves as PwLE of homelessness and/or intersecting issues, particularly in ways that shaped their access, approach, and knowledge of the topic they were studying. The rarity of literature with PwLE as authors<sup>5</sup> reflect a number of potential barriers, including the barriers PwLE face to entering academic spaces (Gupton, 2017), as well as the seeming irrelevance of academic literature in the lives of people actively navigating housing rights violations. While we do not wish to create a hierarchy of engagement and recognize that multiple approaches can constitute deep engagement of different communities, we argue that collaboration, partnership, and fostering the leadership of PwLE throughout the cycle of a project can bolster the community knowledge contributed to a given body of research more effectively than one-off engagements, the absence of relationships of trust, and tokenistic forms of inclusion (Nelson, 2020).

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<sup>4</sup> A report summarizing additional findings from our original literature search (Levac et al., 2022) cites 51 documents in this category. This included 7 community housing and homelessness plans that are not considered in this article, as well as 10 documents which we downgraded on further inspection for this manuscript. The results of our updated search brought the new total to 49. It is possible that other studies we looked at included people with LE, but that this was not noted in the study or report and thus was not possible to assess.

<sup>5</sup> Exceptions that include PwLE as authors are Chapple, 2016; Leblanc, 2021; Malenfant, Watchorn, & Nichols, 2023; Nelson, 2021; Nichols, Malenfant, & Youth Action Research Revolution, 2023; Nichols & Malenfant 2022; Sesula & Kassam, 2014; and Voronka et al., 2014.

### **Promising Practices: Nothing About Us Without Us**

The scarcity of articles involving the engagement of PwLE beyond the role of research subjects demonstrates that barriers remain to deep engagement in research on housing and homelessness in Canada. Although limited, a growing body of literature authored by PwLE offers important insights about how to appropriately centre their knowledge. LE scholar Nelson (2020) outlines the difficulties of structuring and organizing LE knowledge around homelessness in a Canadian context, while maintaining the necessity of doing so if we wish to ensure the right to housing. Literature focusing on building capacity and centring PwLE as knowledge holders offers a promising alternative to the common practices of excluding LE knowledge in research (Nelson, 2020; Yarbrough, 2020). Other LE scholars point out that recognizing the material and social supports PwLE require to fully participate as collaborators can transform knowledge creation spaces by using LE to inform responses to homelessness (Malenfant et al., 2023).

While literature authored by PwLE is relatively uncommon, there is a significant body of literature that focuses on community-driven social change, centred on the ethos of “nothing about us without us” (Jarrett, 2016; Nelson, 2020; Yarbrough, 2020). Nelson outlines the relationships between critical disability justice movements and the emergent movements for housing justice by those with lived experiences of homelessness in Canada (2020). While academic literature on housing and homelessness has limited research related to this area, there are several key documents that researchers and allies can reference to support LE leadership. In 2016, the Lived Experience Advisory Council published “Nothing About Us Without Us: Seven Principles for Leadership & Inclusion of People with Lived Experience of Homelessness.” The Council also developed additional tools to facilitate inclusion and leadership, including a “Checklist for Planning Inclusive and Accessible Events” (2016). This document includes a call for the inclusion of PwLE in policy development, research, and all housing-related initiatives, as well as guidance for how organizations can support environments and relationships that are equitable to PwLE.

The launch of the “Seven Principles” was accompanied by calls from LE authors to include lived knowledges in the development of the NHS itself. Reflecting on the overly political creation of the Lived Experience Advisory Council, which was born out of protest during a national homelessness conference in 2014, Jarrett (2016) highlights the importance of LE for ensuring the realities of homelessness are understood while also emphasizing the need for intersectional engagement:

In order to be effective, the NHS must be inclusive to and led by those directly affected by poverty and homelessness, including Indigenous people, women, families, single men, survivors of violence, people with disabilities, people who have been criminalized, and illicit drug users.

This reflection suggests that to successfully address housing need in Canada, the NHS needs to combat the exclusion of those with lived experience and poverty. We may see plans to address homelessness in specific communities (e.g., federal investment in an Urban, Rural and

Northern Indigenous Housing Strategy), but these plans must happen in collaboration with, and deep engagement of, impacted communities.

Promising practices for research that ensure PwLE are at the core of data collection include training peer researchers and mobilizing participatory, community-based, and narrative methods (Frederick et al., 2018). Approaches that engage PwLE throughout all phases of research and that pursue opportunities for community-defined, non-traditional outputs should be prioritized (Schwan et al., 2018; Vaccaro, 2020). Over a third of articles focused on youth homelessness involved young people with LE beyond the role of research participants, suggesting that the relative acceptance of participatory methodologies in this research may increase the likelihood of deep engagement with youth participants. Overall, there is growing attention to the use of participatory and community-based approaches that have long been used in intersectional ways by and with communities facing marginalization (Wallerstein et al., 2020). These include calls for homelessness research oriented toward justice and emancipation (for example, Ilyniak, 2022). Within this literature, researchers have also highlighted the institutional, disciplinary, funding, and symbolic barriers to undertaking this work within academia—a context that historically has overlooked and stigmatized multiple lived knowledges (Chatterton et al., 2010; Hill, 2012; Jeppesen & Nazar, 2018). While these approaches signal an important shift in many disciplines toward recognizing research that is grounded in community, we caution against seeing these methodologies as inherently demonstrating deep engagement of PwLE. Rather, we understand them as representing a first step that requires active ongoing effort and reflection to ensure LE leadership and the integration of research principles led by PwLE (for example, Canadian Lived Experience Leadership Network, 2022). With an increased transparency about ways engagement happens—including the limitations to fostering engagement of PwLE—we can garner a collective understanding of how deep engagement might be fostered in more effective ways.

We wish to note that while this review focuses on PwLE engagement and leadership in research specifically examining experiences of homelessness/housing precarity, PwLE are also engaged on intersecting issues in the literature (for example, mental health research has a long history of engaging PwLE). While outside of the scope of our project, this is an important area for understanding the role of PwLE in shaping housing rights through research. Cultivating deep and long-lasting relationships will build a strong base for the engagement of lived expertise across research foci in Canada.

### **Self-Determination and LE Leadership: Frameworks for Ethical and Generative Research with Diverse PwLE**

Albeit sparse, the growing body of research led and authored by PwLE demonstrates a shift from their roles as research subjects to leaders, not only in terms of understanding homelessness and core housing need, but also in terms of realizing the right to housing across Canada (Cataldo et al., 2021; Jarrett, 2016; Loignon et al., 2018; Malenfant & Smith, 2021; Nelson 2020). Further, increased transparency about methods and evaluation of engagement would clarify efforts to include deep engagement in research and illuminate where these efforts are not achieving their intended effects. For those most impacted by intersecting experiences of

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systemic discrimination and housing precarity, including Indigenous communities, Black and racialized communities, LGBTQ2S+ communities, and those with psychiatric labels (Akomo et al., 2008; Andrews & Heerde, 2021; Tuck & Yang, 2014), self-determination and LE leadership are key to ensuring research for social change is grounded in community needs and knowledge.

### **LE in Research on Housing Rights: Data Gaps and Challenges**

We recognize that there are limitations to our approach that may impact our understanding of the current landscape of LE engagement in research for housing rights. As we were primarily interested in articles that engaged with PwLE, we did not assess the articles for quality but rather the degree that PwLE knowledge was embedded throughout each stage of research. Regarding intersectional understandings of LE, research without disaggregated data made it difficult for us to assess the degree to which intersectional approaches were integrated. Across our literature review, we did not find any examples of PwLE evaluating their experiences of engagement with research projects, which is part of a broader gap of insufficient LE perspectives on engagement in research. Moving forward, we hope to better understand how particular groups that are more frequently engaged (e.g., youth) or are unlikely to be engaged (e.g., people with disabilities, older people, newcomers, or Black communities) can contribute to developing stronger intersectional and deep engagement with diverse PwLE. And while we engaged with limited French-language articles, we also recognize that undertaking the review in English excluded relevant literature written in other languages.

Our review highlights that while some communities may be overrepresented in populations experiencing homelessness, the engagement of PwLE in research projects does not necessarily reflect those most likely to be navigating housing precarity. For example, we found the experiences of people with disabilities; gender diverse people (including trans, Two-Spirit, and non-binary people); Indigenous Peoples living outside of urban centres, on reserves, and in remote communities; families; older adults; and Black communities were rarely engaged beyond research subjects (Sakatmoto et al., 2010; Nelson et al., 2023 a, b; Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, 2017). Those experiencing hidden homelessness were also much less likely to be engaged (or to be the focus of research at all).

Overall, we view a lack of diversity and intersectionality as a significant gap in the practice of deep engagement of PwLE, where communities with LE of homelessness and housing rights violations are often discussed as a homogenous group. Recognizing that the priority groups of the NHSA are communities overrepresented in groups of PwLE, we believe that deep engagement is impossible in research spaces without acknowledging the diverse needs of PwLE who come from communities navigating intersecting and multiple forms of precarity and discrimination. Different populations require different considerations for engagement, and there is specifically a lack of discussion of intersections of experiences (e.g., across gender, ability, and race), leading to the siloing of engagement strategies. In the absence of considerations of robust intersectional engagement approaches, researchers risk reinforcing narrow notions of participation that fail to engage people who may not fit normative trajectories of housing precarity/stability.

### **Discussion: Working in Solidarity with Impacted Communities**

In this article, we have outlined the work that must be done to foster deep engagement with PwLE in service of advancing housing rights through the NHSA and homelessness research. We hope to emphasize the importance and necessity of this work. The literature already outlines gaps in assuring the right to housing for all, and the contributions and deep engagement of communities most impacted by housing injustice can further illuminate what actions must be taken. Many researchers and advocates, with and without lived experience, suggest that barriers to achieving the right to housing are already well-researched (Baspaly et al., 2022). To complement this existing knowledge, future research is essential for deepening understandings of, as well as building strong relationships of trust with, impacted communities. Only then will we be able to shift from responses for those with lived experience of housing precarity toward working in solidarity *within, between, and across* impacted communities. Drawing on existing work that PwLE have done, including a plethora of recommendations to government, service providers, and researchers (Boilevan et al., 2019; CLELN, 2022; LEAC, 2016), is a fruitful first step toward honouring lived knowledge.

A shift to deeper engagement must also be accompanied by accountability to existing documented knowledge of PwLE. As reports such as Paradis' (2018) "If You Build It, They Will Claim: Rights-Based Participation and Accountability in Canada's National Housing Strategy" note, PwLE are acutely aware of the many instances in which their 'engagement' is tokenistic and feels like an exercise in researchers and policymakers checking a box (pp. 16-18), forgotten soon after. Elevating and acting on LE can lead to better outcomes for individuals, communities, and society by putting resources and efforts toward housing and programs that reflect and respond to the diverse experiences of community members. Overall, it is clear that the current approaches, tools, and processes most often used for LE engagement (e.g., surveys, focus groups, one-off consultations) are limited and that there has yet to be a comprehensive demonstration of commitment to shifts in power dynamics and accountability to PwLE of homelessness and intersecting forms of discrimination.

Through deep engagement with PwLE, research can amplify areas where current policies and practices are falling short of addressing the unmet needs of those most affected by inadequate housing systems. In Canada and elsewhere, efforts to address the human right to housing contain a disconnect between an increasing commitment to engaging with PwLE and realizing this commitment (see Authors 2022, p. xx). For example, the principles of the NHS recognize that "good housing policy requires transparent and accountable partnership between the federal government... and people with lived experience of housing need" (Government of Canada, 2018, p.5). They also acknowledge that "First Nations, Inuit and Métis Nation housing strategies must be co-developed" (Government of Canada, 2018, p. 5), which highlights both the importance of LE engagement and the unique right of Indigenous Peoples to self-determination. Moreover, the priorities of the NHC include emphasizing an active role for PwLE, and Chapter 7 of the NHS discusses partnerships with Indigenous governments and groups. However, Chapter 8, which focuses on fostering research that "will identify barriers to accessing housing, measure and assess the impact of existing housing policies, identify future

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research opportunities, and shape the National Housing Strategy” (Government of Canada, 2018, p. 20), does not prioritize funding for research by and with PwLE. This disconnect is apparent in the extensive document dataset we reviewed.

While many of the studies we reviewed were undertaken before the introduction of the NHS, the trend of engaging minimally with PwLE, and primarily as research subjects, is clear, problematic, and ongoing despite the language of engagement included in policies such as the NHS. To advance the commitment to the right to housing as outlined in the NHS and to uphold the commitment to centring LE knowledge, research institutes, funders, and government bodies should prioritize and compensate PwLE as research designers, implementers, analysts, authors, and disseminators. Prioritizing LE knowledge also means more intentional, continuous, and transparent engagement, training, and resourcing of people with LE in housing research and advocacy spaces. This level of deep engagement requires a significant investment of time and labour, which should be recognized as necessary for meeting the aims of honoring and learning from PwLE. The promising practices outlined in this article provide a starting place to shift the landscape of research by and for those most impacted by housing rights violations.

### **Conclusion: Emergent Learning on Deep Engagement with PwLE**

Our commitment to recognizing the expertise of PwLE means centring their knowledge. This means recognizing all people—including those who are experiencing homelessness—as rights holders, making affordable and adequate (that is, accessible, free from discrimination, and appropriate) housing available for all, and interrogating and working to redress the causes of inadequate housing (Farha & Schwan, 2020). Within a settler-colonial context such as Canada, this also includes following the leadership of the lived and living knowledges of Indigenous communities, as well as supporting self-determination in the face of colonial displacement and institutional discrimination. Deep engagement with PwLE in research and policy work requires grounding engagement in reciprocal, long-term relationships that move beyond participation as knowledge extraction towards models of co-creation and partnership. In turn, this requires a commitment to foregrounding LE knowledge at all stages of project development through participation in the conceptual stages of a project and mutual negotiation of project parameters and boundaries. Projects must be impactful for communities that are participating and co-creating and reject research generation for its own sake. It is imperative that researchers uphold their responsibility to the communities they engage with and derive knowledge from. Accountability is not limited to research ethics alone but also involves a commitment to amplifying LE knowledge and advocating for its integration in future projects. While the research team on this project includes PwLE and researchers with relationships with LE communities, the operational constraints governing this report made it impossible to engage in an approach we would describe as deep deep engagement. As such, we recognize this article grapples with challenges we outline here and presents emergent—and ongoing—learnings on how to undertake this work rather than prescriptive conclusions on how it must be done.



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