Social Perceptions of Homelessness in the City of Regina

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By

Jeffrey George Zwack

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Abstract

The purpose of the research study outlined in this document is to examine the social perceptions of homelessness in the City of Regina through the utilization of phenomenological theory and focus group methodology. This document identifies the underlying factors that contribute to poverty and homelessness in Canada, specifically Regina, as well as the external factors that maintain the cycle of reduced functioning of homeless individuals in society. Current social support endeavors are presented as a means of evaluating resource options for individuals experiencing homelessness. Data from the focus groups, comprised of Regina citizens, was synthesized through content analysis techniques associated with phenomenology and the results are presented thematically. The review of the literature, in conjunction with the analyzed focus group material, captured Regina citizens’ perceptions of homelessness and acknowledged that this specific social issue has associated problems. The focus group participant feedback resulted in programming recommendations and public awareness suggestions which were provided to the Ranch Ehrlo Society – Ehrlo Housing Program for future programming development purposes. The recommendations are also intended to serve as a tool for social workers, and all others in the field of human service, to expand support initiatives for homeless populations.

Keywords: homelessness, housing, poverty, perceptions, support
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1.0 Introduction

Homelessness is an unfortunate reality in our society; the vulnerable and impoverished homeless individuals who live with this social problem often maintain lifestyles marred by dysfunction and instability most community members would never consider possible. Homelessness exists on a global scale; this social issue is not specific to any particular government, culture, or geographic location. Canada is no different to any other nation; homelessness exists. In recent years, the economy in Saskatchewan has continued to thrive in comparison to other national and international markets; however, homelessness levels have not declined.

The housing vacancy rate in Regina is presently experiencing unprecedented low levels; in 2012 Regina led the country with the lowest vacancy rate of 0.6% (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation [CMHC], 2012). As a consequence, the present housing shortage in Regina has resulted in drastic measures being taken by citizens in need of a residence, with particular emphasis toward low-income and impoverished individuals forced to access any available living option.

The perception that the simple remedy to homelessness is the provision of a home to those in need is not accurate (De Jong, 2007; Fallis, 2010). Rather, a myriad of circumstances impact an individual’s ability to access, maintain, and reside in a home. Furthermore, defining what constitutes a home is equally complex; whether residing in an independent or a socially supported living environment, the overarching premise of a home is similar. Simply put, a home is a safe and stable place to live (Rosenfield, 1991; Toronto Shelter, Support, & Housing Administration [TSSHA], 2007; Van Bilsen, Hamers, Groot and Spreeuwenberg, 2008).
From a social perspective, the vast majority of the Canadian population considers those who are perpetually homeless to be predominately lacking in the realm of motivation and desire to access secure housing; this mindset is much too narrow but, unfortunately, far too common (Burman, 1996). The following document examines social perceptions amongst Regina citizens through the utilization of focus groups representing residents of the City of Regina. The content from these focus group interviews will be analyzed through the utilization of phenomenological theory and presented with emergent themes, strategies, and recommendations for The Ranch Ehrlo Society – Housing Program. Ranch Ehrlo will then utilize the data findings for the purpose of future public awareness initiatives and education programming development. In addition, the following document will explore the history of homelessness in Canada, with specific emphasis toward Saskatchewan, as well as, the City of Regina.

This document will provide a summary of the phenomenological research theory and how the phenomenological approach relates to qualitative research focusing on the social issue of homelessness. As a means to establish programming and public awareness initiatives for The Ranch Ehrlo Society – Housing Program, in addition to serving as a tool for social workers and those in the field of human service, this document will strive to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the social perceptions of homelessness in the City of Regina?
2. Do citizens of Regina consider homelessness to be a problem in their city?
3. What aspects, with regard to homelessness, do citizens of Regina require education and awareness about?
2.0 Review of Literature

2.1 Poverty, Mental Wellbeing and Homelessness

Compared to other Western nations, Canada has managed to maintain relative economic stability since the global economic market collapse of 2008 (Bordo, 2008). Saskatchewan has led the nation in economic prosperity throughout the international recession due, in large part, to a thriving natural resource industry which has proven to be impervious to market fluctuation (Ebel, 2012). Yet, the booming economic reality in Canada, Saskatchewan and, to narrow the focus further, the City of Regina, remains shadowed by a housing shortage and homelessness issue.

The terms homeless and homelessness are in direct reference to one of the many facets that comprise poverty. In Canada, shelter is described as safe and secure housing which is considered to be a determinant of health, a basic standard of living, and a significant component in the elevation of an individual’s quality of life (Public Health Agency of Canada [PHAC], 2010). As a result, a person lacking housing is not simply experiencing homelessness. Rather, a homeless person is someone who had housing once, but is now unhoused due to a myriad of reasons that are negatively interrelated (Hulchanski, 2003).

As the PHAC (2010) document outlines, a key social determinant of health is described as Income and Social Status. This determinant indicates that stable income is directly associated with accessible housing; therefore, the healthiest populations are those who prosper and have an equitable distribution of wealth. From a societal perspective, “having no place to live means being excluded from all that is associated with having a home, a neighbourhood, and a set of established community networks. It means being
exiled from the mainstream patterns of day-to-day life”; furthermore, “without a physical place to call home in the social, psychological, and emotional sense, the hour-to-hour struggle for physical survival replaces all other possible activities” (Hulchanski, 2003, p. 226). As the above statement explains, homeless populations operate with a limited social determinant of *Income and Social Status* and, therefore, are impoverished due to an all-encompassing disconnection from the infrastructure of societal-based resources.

With regard to the term *poverty*, an impoverished person lacks basic standards of living. *Basic standards of living* encompass the human need for food and water, clean air, secure shelter, proper sanitization and hygiene, sleep and rest, and liberty and expression of person (Callander, Schofield, and Shrestha, 2012; Izarali, 2011). However, it is important to emphasize that the concept of poverty is relative to the community or society of focus; “what is considered a ‘basic need’ in some societies is different to that in another society” (Callander et al., 2012, p. 144). Consequently, *homeless* individuals appropriately fit the profile of being *impoverished*. As such, the terms poverty and/or impoverished will be used interchangeably throughout this document when referring to individuals lacking *basic standards of living* in relation to Canada.

A homeless individual, who lacks the basic standards of living, will also have an increased likelihood of functioning with reduced mental health. *Mental health* is a state of well-being where an individual is capable of realizing their own potential, are able to cope with normal life stresses, work productively, and contribute to their own community (Mental Health Commission of Canada [MHCC], 2009; MHCC, 2012); it should be emphasized that inherent mental illness (i.e., schizophrenia, bi-polar disorder) is only a component to an individual’s mental health and well-being. Subsequently, overt stressors
(i.e., combat exposure, abuse, violence, neglect) can impact and alter a person’s mental health and well-being and, furthermore, addiction can also negatively impact an individual’s mental functioning and well-being (MHCC, 2009). With regard to mental health and homelessness, nearly three-quarters of the single adult homeless population in Toronto is impacted by mental illness and/or substance dependency issues, which is congruent with other cities in Canada (Burman, 1996; Goering, Tolomiczenko, Sheldon, Boydell and Wasylkenki, 2002).

Due to the debilitating factors associated with poor mental well-being, in addition to, minimal availability of the basic standards of living; accessing and securing any form of housing is not realistic for an impoverished individual. Alternatively, if housing is provided, expectation of success in retaining the living environment is equally not hopeful without constant and consistent support systems readily available. Because of the depleted intrinsic and extrinsic resource networks that a homeless and impoverished individual is too often faced with, the necessary resiliency traits to effectively function in a productive manner are not existent. Personal resiliency can be described as a balanced state of mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual functioning within a person; these elements are vital to reacting and processing life-stressors in an effective and productive manner (Graveline, 1998; Greene, 2002; MHCC, 2009; MHCC, 2012). Therefore, conjuring an impoverished individual’s resiliency skill-set is congruent to the level of success the individual will be able to actualize.

2.2 Importance of Resiliency and Growth

There is no panacea to address homelessness in our country and, as such, the ordinary establishment of healthy relationships and supportive resources by impoverished
people is not a reality for the perpetually homeless person. Rather, an individual’s resiliency will dictate how well the person will react to resource provision, simply put; greater resiliency will generate healthier outcomes (MHCC, 2009; MHCC, 2012). Key factors associated with promoting resilience include: intellectual functioning, social orientation, self-confidence, self-esteem, productivity and faith (Graveline, 1998; Greene, 2002). These elements of resiliency are integral for an individual to positively respond to adverse circumstances such as homelessness.

To effectively analyze the key factors associated with resiliency promotion from a social-support perspective, it is realistic to assert that impoverished people are lacking in many of the above-described key factors. Because impoverished individuals have a limited support network, in addition to, a history of negative life-circumstances, reduced resiliency traits will hinder support initiatives. Therefore, it is the obligation of all social support networks that are involved to conjure and develop these elements.

In addition, when considering healthy development for impoverished individuals, posttraumatic growth, sometimes also referred to as stress-related growth, should be considered. The concept of posttraumatic growth recognizes a traumatic event as: sudden, unexpected, and producing prolonged effects (Joseph and Butler, 2010; Tedeschi and Calhoun, 1995). For homeless persons and the multiple problems that have contributed to their residency and personal-resource instability, trauma, in some capacity has undoubtedly impacted the person. Therefore, through assertive outreach endeavors the individual can be introduced to programming and services as a means to increase intellectual functioning, develop social support systems, and expand self-confidence and
self-esteem through life-skill development which will, ultimately, increase personal and social productivity.

2.3 **History of Homelessness and Housing in Canada**

Public opinion identifies homelessness as one of the most pressing social problems in the North America (Shlay and Rossi, 1992). However, research and understanding into homelessness has only been more thoroughly addressed in the latter part of the twentieth century (Calgary Interagency Committee for the Absolutely Homeless [CICAH], 2003; Human Resources and Skills Development Canada [HRSDC], 2011). The fact that for much of the early twentieth century, homelessness was described as “hobohemia” only emphasizes this point (Lovald, 1961; Shlay and Rossi, 1992).

The terms *hobohemia* and *skid row* were often used interchangeably when describing low socio-economic urban regions, with the latter becoming the more popular term of the two. Hobohemia settings were typically composed of low rent dwellings and boarding homes, inexpensive food establishments, and manual labour recruitment agencies. As such, hobohemia settlements primarily catered to transient and unattached males (Lovald, 1961). However, following the Great Depression and World War II (WWII) an influx of economic opportunities and housing provision initiatives in Canada all but ended this form of population clustering. As a result, what was once a quasi-designated area (skid row) specific for homeless people (males), was now transformed into a broad dispersal of impoverished people, comprised of all age and gender demographics, into downtown/core areas of city-centres.

Attention to the First Nation experience is also an important element to Canadian history, specifically to the oppressive and discriminatory efforts that have routinely been
directed toward these populations. First Nations people resided and thrived throughout North America for thousands of years before European explorers arrived and, for hundreds of years, a mutually advantageous relationship existed between the European settlers and First Nation populations (Hick, 2004). However, as greater numbers of European emigrants arrived in North America, “the presence of Aboriginal Peoples on lands needed for settlement became the ‘Indian Problem,’ and an impediment to ‘civilization’” (Hick, 2004, p. 40). Thus, the Federal Government devised the Indian Act legislation and the reserve land system was implemented; as a result, a long and devastating history of colonization and oppressive efforts directed toward First Nations people has existed ever since. Sadly, “Canada is one of the few countries to have legislated separate laws for a specific group based on race or ethnicity” (Hick, 2004, p. 40).

Introduction of the Indian Act by the Canadian Federal Government has allowed for systematic control over essentially every facet of life for the First Nations population (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). As a result, the subjugated First Nations demographic has a considerably higher reliance on social support services than the rest of the Canadian population (Anderson, 2010; Hick, 2004; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). Furthermore, First Nation people have higher incidences of incarceration, unemployment, and poverty rates than any other population demographic in Canada (Anderson, 2010; Hick, 2004; Hylton, 2006; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). Not surprisingly, homelessness amongst First Nation populations is also disproportionately represented in comparison to the general population of Canada.
In the City of Regina, 9% of the total population is comprised of Aboriginal people. However, 43% of the Aboriginal population lives under the low-income cut-off (LICO); a concept utilized by Statistics Canada to gauge the income parameters that an individual and/or family will need to allot a greater portion of income on the basic standards or living such as food, shelter and clothing compared to the average family (Anderson, 2010).

In Canada, residency in a home has historically been organized to empower homeownership over anything else due, in large part, to the private housing market supplying 95% of all homes that are sold (Hulchanski, 2003). Canadian social-housing programming accounts for 5% of housing provision compared to many European countries, where 35% or more of the housing system is socially organized (Hulchanski, 2003; Kyle and Dunn, 2008; Scanlon and Whitehead, 2004). Regardless, Canada has a considerable history of housing initiatives intended to benefit population growth and community development.

Since the 1970s, housing support strategies have focused on incentive-based programs as a means to entice homebuyers and, as a result, governmental stewardship of socially supplied housing programs has diminished (Hulchanski, 2003). To take a step back further in Canadian housing history, monumental government-based housing programs only became prominent following the Great Depression of the 1930s and during WWII when, in 1941, the Canadian Federal government introduced a crown-corporation titled Wartime Housing Limited (WHL). The WHL program was established as a means to provide rental-housing units to war workers and military veterans (Wade, 1984).
In 1944, a National community planning committee affiliated with the Federally-rooted Advisory Committee on Reconstruction recommended that the WHL program expand and embrace the role of accommodating a nation-wide and comprehensive low-income housing program (Wade, 1984). However, in 1946, after WWII ended, the WHL program was both restructured and re-branded as the Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC). The CMHC mandate, almost exclusively, shifted housing efforts toward the home ownership sector, with little attention directed toward long-term planning and low-income housing initiatives (Government of Canada, 2013; Hulchanski, 2003; Wade, 1984).

Since the inception of the CMHC, numerous homeownership-based housing subsidy initiatives have been presented to Canadian homebuyers. For example, in 1954 the Mortgage Insurance Fund (MIF) was introduced “to encourage banks to enter the then risky mortgage lending market” (Hulchanski, 2003, p. 224); for nearly two decades the MIF allowed most households to access a ‘joint public/private sector’ loan. Presently, the CMHC continues to regulate the homeownership protocols, which provides home owners with relative legislative comfort, assurance, and insurance; the CMHC is able to provide mortgage insurance for up to 95 percent of a home’s value (Government of Canada, 2013). Ultimately, the CMHC remains a crown-corporation designed to motivate the private-industry of private-homeownership and, therefore, continues to direct little resources toward social-housing efforts.

2.4 Current Service Delivery Initiatives for Homeless Populations

Presently, homelessness is an unavoidable problem in Canadian urban centres and this issue impacts every cultural and ethnic population. However, accurate statistics that
represent this ‘hidden’ problem are unavailable due, in large part, to the difficult task of
effectively capturing this populations’ lack of fixed addresses and high rates of
transience/mobility (HRSDC, 2011). Lacking the necessary elements associated with the
determinants of health, in addition to, diminished resiliency traits only exacerbate
residence instability, as well as, homeless persons’ reduced quality of life and mental
well-being. As a homeless individual regresses emotionally, mentally, cognitively, and
physically, reliance on social support networks becomes integral to survival, yet harder
and harder for the impoverished individual to access.

To specify a single factor that results in an individual becoming homeless is not
possible. Rather, numerous factors contribute to housing loss: mental and/or physical
health deterioration, substance dependency, or family/support system breakdown are
common, but not exhaustive, circumstances that contribute to a person becoming
homeless. Resultantly, stigma and stereotypical perceptions held by the general
population rarely allows for consideration of a homeless person’s significant
accumulation of negative life-circumstance. Rather, the person is often thought to lack in
personal motivation, volition, and/or social ability to effectively pursue a productive
lifestyle that is socially expected of all Canadians (Hulchanski, 2003; Kyle and Dunn,
2008; Rosenfield, 1991; Shier, Jones, and Graham, 2010).

Unfortunately, the endless cycle of shelter poverty, where essentially all of an
individual’s income is paid toward rent or shelter rates with little financial resources
remaining for food and other basic life necessities, limits access to basic standards of
living options and, therefore, maintains the undefeatable presence of poverty (HRSDC,
2011; Stone, 2004). Several current strategies initiated by various levels of government
are listed below which provide the vital elements to an individual’s ability to retain a home. As well, these initiatives work toward the removal of an individual from becoming rooted in poverty.

The Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS) through the HRSDC is an example of a Federal, provincial, and municipal conglomeration of governing-bodies working to provide structures and supports for those who are homeless, or are at risk of becoming homeless (HRSDC, 2011). The HPS incorporates all levels of government as a means to ensure that programming development and implementation is evenly represented; this partnering strategy is a tangible example of a comprehensive service alignment.

Another notable development from the HPS initiative is the Homeless Individuals and Families Information System (HIFIS). HIFIS is a computer software program designed to capture shelter usage data and has proven to be an effective tool to accumulate this particular population demographic data (HRSDC, 2011). The collection of shelter usage data is not directly associated with support/resource delivery; however, without accurately understanding the extent of the homeless population, few service-specific supports can be implemented. HIFIS is proving to be an effective method to capture homeless population service usage trends and patterns. Unfortunately, the HIFIS system is not a mandated program and, therefore, is not universally embraced throughout Canada; until all shelter and homeless support agencies utilize this program, incomplete data will continue to be collected resulting in support and service delivery gaps.

The City of Toronto has utilized the Streets to Homes program since 2005. This housing initiative focuses on ending homelessness rather than simply managing the problem; in the first two years of operation of this program, more than 1,500 homeless
people were housed (De Jong, 2007). The Streets to Homes program operates from the philosophy that once a person establishes stable housing, all other facets (e.g., addiction, mental and/or physical health, life-skills, employment) can be subsequently addressed and managed through readily available and accessible supports (Fallis, 2010).

The primary element to the Streets to Homes model is the provision of one-to-one outreach counsellors, who assist homeless persons in establishing connections with health care and social service agencies. Intensive outreach support ensures that marginalized individuals are receiving the appropriate service (e.g., physicians, social workers, employment counsellors, life skills facilitators, therapeutic-specific professionals) at the appropriate time through case management practices. The Streets to Homes approach has proven to be an effective support strategy; without this form of supported advocacy, limited progress could be realized by a socially subjugated homeless individual (De Jong, 2007; Fallis, 2010; The Homeless Hub, 2012).

2.5 Qualitative Research Theory: Phenomenology

Edmund Husserl, “often referred to as the father of phenomenology” (Laverty, 2003, p. 3), saw pure phenomenology as striving to uncover the universal foundation of both philosophy and science (Laverty, 2003; Lewis and Staehler, 2010; Moran, 2002). According to Husserl, phenomenological research operates with the intention to take entirely subjective experiences, and shape them into comprehensive objective perspectives. As such, the Husserl phenomenological perspective is often referred to as transcendental phenomenology where the theory strives to examine the lived human experience on a transcendent level, free of preexisting limitations (Creswell, 2007; Groenewald, 2004; Laverty, 2003; Moustakas, 1994). The transcendental
phenomenological model provides an ideal theoretical basis with which to analyze the social perceptions of homelessness in the City of Regina.

Furthermore, the phenomenological approach is an appropriate theory with relation to qualitative research due to the establishment of a study’s invariant structure, also referred to as the essence. Fundamentally, phenomenology is a method heaped in description (Lewis and Staehler, 2010; Moran, 2002) and often focusing on the “structure of experience” (Laverty, 2003, p. 15). As such, the invariant structures, which can be derived through researcher descriptions of participant experiences, allows for the culmination of an overall thematic essence, a component unique to the phenomenological approach (Lewis and Staehler, 2010; Moran, 2002; Moustakas, 1994).

In further explanation, the invariant structure/essence aspect to the research process consists of a textural description and a structural description; simply put, these two elements of the theory reveal what was experienced and how it was experienced. Creswell (2007) describes the textural description as “what participants experienced” and the structural description as “how [participants] experienced [the phenomenon] in terms of the conditions, situations, or context” (p. 60). The power of the essence component to phenomenological research is that it strives to make the invisible visible (Laverty, 2003; Moustakas, 1994) and, thus, becomes an important factor to shaping qualitative research analysis.

As Creswell (2007) explains, “the basic purpose of phenomenology is to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence” (p. 58). Specific to a study of social perceptions of homelessness, phenomenology provides a platform to capture the subjective elements of social perspectives regarding this social
issue, in addition to, the methodology to thematically describe and convey it on a much broader and objectified level.

Ultimately, phenomenology examines how a common phenomenon affects and impacts a collective of individuals and, subsequently, it is the researcher’s responsibility to describe the impact, or primary phenomenon, on the directly impacted individuals. Focus group interviewing is an effective means to solicit social perspectives toward homelessness. Furthermore, because phenomenological research examines how a population is affected by a common phenomenon, in the case of this research study, homelessness in the City of Regina, the phenomenological theoretical model is an effective tool for evaluation endeavors.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Research Method

This study utilized a qualitative research approach in addition to the phenomenological theory which is a philosophical perspective concerned with the question of how individuals make sense of the world around them (Bryman, 2004; Moustakas, 1994).

Qualitative research allows for the examination of cultural values through the solicitation of participant opinions and perceptions (Calderon, Baker and Wolf, 2000). To explain further, qualitative field research attempts to understand social behaviour through the means of observation and participation (Babbie, 2002). Effective observation and participation relies on three design features which Patton (2002) describes as:
- **Naturalistic inquiry** – Studying real-world situations as they unfold naturally in a non-manipulative and non-controlling manner with openness to whatever emerges.

- **Emergent design flexibility** – Adaptation of inquiry as understanding deepens and/or situations change and avoidance of the researcher becoming locked into rigid research design.

- **Purposeful sampling** – Cases for study offer useful manifestations of the phenomenon of interest; as such, empirical generalizations from sample populations are avoided in lieu of insight about the phenomena.

Numerous techniques can be embraced when conducting qualitative research which can be divided into three categories: sociolinguistic methods that explore language usage and meaning; developing theory methodology which is typified by grounded theory; and methodology focused on content and thematic analysis which describes and interprets participants’ views (Breen, 2006; Smith and Firth, 2011). This research study embraced the third qualitative technique listed above, *content and thematic analysis*, with focus group interviewing methods being utilized to solicit participants’ perceptions toward the social issue of homelessness. In addition, the phenomenological theoretical perspective was embraced throughout the research study process with the intention of capturing an overall *essence* of participant feedback.

### 3.2 Design

Focus groups, also referred to as group interviewing, were used for this research study and allowed research participants to focus on a specific topic with discussions being facilitated, ideally, by a neutral and unbiased moderator (Dahlin-Ivanoff and
The focus group approach to social research is beneficial because of the information flow, based on opinions and interactions within the participant group; these *ad hoc* discussions are recorded and transcribed and analyzed at a later time through the utilization of qualitative research methods based on systematic content analysis (Calderon et al., 2000; Hyden and Bulow, 2003; Sim, 1998). Morgan (1996) describes the participant-interactive element to the focus group approach by stating, “what makes the discussion in focus groups more than the sum of separate individual interviews is the fact that the participants both query each other and explain themselves to each other” (p. 139). Furthermore, focus groups have proven highly effective in soliciting social perspectives and attitudes toward social issues (Hyden and Bulow, 2003; Krueger and Casey, 2009) - the fundamental goal of this research project.

3.3 **Participant Sample and Selection**

Participants can impact, or even impede, the information that is expressed during a focus group because of the collective *group* sample participating in the discussions. Focus groups “enable deeper consideration of complex issues than many other survey methods” (Trochim, 2005, p. 94). Typically, focus groups are comprised of at least four, and a maximum of ten, participants who are acquainted with and able to relate to the topic of study (Babbie, 2002; Krueger and Casey, 2009; Trochim, 2005).

Purposive sampling was used to deliberately select the focus group participants. Because this study intended to capture general social perceptions of homelessness, individuals from the general population of the City of Regina were solicited through newsprint classifieds, as well as recruitment material posted at municipal leisure and
fitness centres throughout Regina. The intention of purposive sampling was to acquire a typical case sample of participants who are *not* unusual in any way (Palys, 2008).

Recruitment material provided basic details about the focus group discussion and interested participants were invited to contact the principal investigator by telephone for further details and/or to express an interest in attending in one of the two groups. The principal investigator provided answers and explanations to any questions or concerns about the research study during the initial telephone contact. As well, the principal investigator emphasized both the confidentiality and anonymity of participants during these conversations. Two factors were required for participant inclusion in the focus groups; participants needed to be at least 18 years of age or older and the individual was required to be a resident of the City of Regina. A total of 9 participants, 8 males and 1 female, attended the two focus groups that were conducted.

### 3.4 Procedure

The Canadian Association of Social Workers [CASW] (2005a) *Code of Ethics* and CASW (2005b) *Guidelines for Ethical Practice* documents were utilized during the construction of this research study. As well, the University of Regina Research Ethics Board formally approved this research study; appropriate consideration for ethical issues and/or concerns was undertaken and participants were encouraged to present any questions or concerns prior to the focus group commencement. As well, participants were informed that they could voluntarily withdraw from the research study without any explanation or penalty. In addition, all participants were informed that the principal investigator would reestablish contact with each group member following the groups to allow all participants access and approval to the transcribed focus group data; transcript
release forms were presented to participants interested in engaging in this step of the study data synthesis.

The only two identifying personal details that were requested of participants were their gender and age; all participants provided this information without incident. Emphasis or recognition of any other identifying factor was not intentionally explored in this research study. Rather, objective participant feedback was the primary research focus.

Each focus group was scheduled to run to a maximum of two hours in duration and participants were made aware of this time commitment; both focus groups were completed in less than 90 minutes. Primarily, the focus groups centred on the formal research questions; however, prior to each group commencement, general housekeeping information was provided to participants with regard to restrooms, refreshments (e.g., coffee, water, baked goods), and consent and confidentiality documents being thoroughly reviewed.

A total of eight questions were presented to the focus group participants; the questions were designed to solicit discussion amongst the focus group participants and acknowledge the three research questions associated with this research study. The focus group questions were presented as follows:

(1) From your point of view, what do you understand homelessness to be?

(2) What do you notice when you hear about, or see, the subject of homelessness featured in the media?

(3) Do you feel that homelessness is an issue in Regina?

(4) What issues or circumstances influence homelessness in Regina?
(5) What are the consequences to homelessness in Regina?

(6) What do you believe are some strategies to address homelessness in Regina?

(7) Who is responsible for assisting the homeless in Regina?

(8) Is there anything else you would like to say about homelessness in Regina?

Audio recording equipment was utilized to capture participant feedback; all participants were shown the tape recording equipment prior to the focus group commencement, and participants were encouraged to verbalize their responses loud enough for the equipment to capture their remarks.

Two individuals were present with regard to the facilitation of each of the focus groups: a moderator and a note taker/assistant. As Plummer-D’Amato (2008) states, “the moderator must have adequate background knowledge of the topic and be intimately familiar with the goals of the study”; therefore, the principal investigator of this research study acted as the moderator for both focus groups.

Any preconceived associations regarding a research topic can greatly impact a research study’s outcome. As a result, transcendental phenomenology utilizes a strategy entitled *epoche*; where the principal investigator/moderator is challenged to “bracket” any preconceived notions or conceptions while conducting the research (Babbie, 2002; Groenewald, 2004; Laverty, 2003). Because of the epoche element, deployment of the bracketing requirement to phenomenology provided the principal investigator/moderator with a platform of neutrality. The principal investigator consistently audited the analyzed focus group data to affirm that impartiality was maintained in order to “make sense out of the informants’ perceptions” (Babbie, 2002, p. 289) from a purely objective perspective.
The moderator’s primary role in both focus groups insured that the group discussions followed a structured format; the moderator presented the questions to the participants, and then monitored respondent feedback to insure that topic relevance was maintained. Participants were encouraged to express their personal viewpoints and verbalize whether they agreed or disagreed with other opinions expressed; debate was condoned, but only in a respectful and non-confrontational manner (Morgan, 1996).

In addition, the practicum supervisor attended each of the focus groups and acted as a note taker and focus group assistant. The practicum supervisor did not participate in either the question or answering elements of either focus group; however, throughout each of the sessions this individual provided assistance with site/building navigation to the group participants. In addition, the practicum supervisor sat outside of the focus group seating arrangement, which was circular in layout, as a means to avoid the creation of a power-block within the circle of participants (Plummer-D’Amato, 2008).

3.5 Confidentiality

Confidentiality and anonymity were both discussed during the initial telephone contact, and formal documentation outlining the confidentiality process was presented to each participant when they arrived to the session. Aside from the focus group participants, only the principal investigator and the research practicum supervisor were present during the focus groups.

The principal investigator personally read the Participant Consent Form prior to the focus group commencement; participants were then asked to sign and return the signed document and a second copy was offered for their personal records. Participants were assured that no identifying elements would be included in the final report of the
analyzed data; their participation would be entirely anonymous. However, due to the nature of focus group research, participant identity was compromised as a result of the other participants’ presence at the session. Therefore, participants were asked to respect the confidentiality of those other group participants in their respective session.

Access to accumulated focus group data was limited only to the principal investigator and the research practicum supervisor. After thorough data analysis, formal data storage will be carried out and secured under the supervision of the research practicum supervisor. After a period of five years of data storage, all accumulated material from this research study will be properly destroyed.

3.6 Limitations

Limitations to this research study include the male to female ratio of participants; 89% male and 11% female. Ideally, a greater number of female participants would have generated an overall broader perspective to the focus group discussions. As well, larger numbers within each would have resulted in more input for data analysis. In addition, due to the nature of the research project, no monetary compensation could be offered to participants. Attendance in the focus groups relied entirely on an individual’s willingness to volunteer their time and interest. As a result, three interested people who responded to the recruitment material declined to attend one of the groups due to no stipend being offered.

In addition, a limitation to phenomenological research is the potential to generalize participant responses when smaller proportions of participant samples may express alternative notions compared to the larger group under examination (i.e., City of Regina residents). In an effort to minimize generalizations amongst focus groups
consisting of a small participant sample of the larger general population, the creation of themes from accumulated research data was utilized to provide a much more comprehensive analysis and, ultimately, essence of the social perceptions held by Regina residents.

4.0 Analysis and Themes

4.1 Data Analysis

Hyden and Bulow (2003) explain, “the aim of analysing focus group material is often to be able to draw conclusions about the participants’ views, ideas or experiences” (p. 306). As such, two types of qualitative analysis were utilized to capture data from the two focus groups: transcript-based analysis, where the principal investigator transcribed both focus group audio recordings verbatim into text format, and a note-based analysis, where the research assistant captured notable statements from participant verbalized responses, as well as, overt non-verbal responses from both of the focus groups (Onwuegbuzie, Dickinson, Leech, and Zoran, 2009).

Transcendental phenomenology “is descriptive and focuses on the structure of experience” (Laverty, 2003, p. 15). As a result, the phenomenological model relies on the utilization of epoche, or bracketing, as a means for “investigators to set aside their experiences, as much as possible, to take a fresh perspective toward the phenomenon under examination” (Creswell, 2007, p. 59-60). The concept of epoche is imperative to transcendental phenomenological research and it is the initial step in the research process. Only when a researcher has effectively bracketed their subjectivity, can the horizontalization of accumulated data follow.
Horizontalization occurs when the principal investigator categorizes every significant statement relevant to the topic, or horizon, and assigns each an equal value (Creswell, 2007; Groenewald, 2004; Moustakas, 1994). During the data analysis process of this research study, the horizontalization step provided the principal investigator with a means to separate the lived experiences of the research study participants into themes, where data could be grouped into clusters of meaning. Ultimately, by classifying themes into common clusters of meaning, an overall essence to the phenomenon can be developed, examined and, subsequently, conveyed (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994).

With regard to the research study presented in this document, accumulated focus group data was synthesized using content and thematic analysis techniques congruent with the phenomenological theory. Participant descriptions were horizontally categorized according to the specific content; the integrated data was then separated and presented as unique themes and clusters of meaning exhibited by the focus group participants (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas 1994; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009).

Although direct acknowledgment of specific participants in the formal data analysis is considered by many in social research to be relevant (Agar and MacDonald, 1995; Hyden and Bulow, 2003), this study did not consider and/or overtly reveal individualized and subjective statements. Therefore, no specific emphasis or recognition was directed toward which particular participant stated what particular comment; rather, this research study’s intention was to accumulate group verbalizations only in an objective sense.

The following data reveals the most noteworthy statements and general response cluster-patterns that were expressed by the participants in each of the focus groups; data
was synthesized as a means to summarize the comments that were generated after each focus group question was asked. From these question response samples, important themes will follow which reveal an even greater amalgamation of the expressed viewpoints from the focus group participants and, thus, further generate the essence of the accumulated data (Breen, 2006; Creswell, 2007; Trochim, 2005).

**Question One**

The initial focus group question asked participants, from their personal viewpoint, to describe what they understood homelessness to be. One participant indicated that he did not have a concept of what homelessness is exactly, but he indicated that he “knows it exists”. Two participants described homelessness specifically as “not having a fixed address”; as well, two participants stated that homelessness is going to increase “in the coming years”. In addition, two participants directly associated the Salvation Army with homelessness and another participant stated that homelessness is “generally, not recognized as a problem here [in Regina]”. One of the participants described homelessness as a “state of hopelessness; no hope”. In addition, one respondent stated that, “homeless people are not necessarily found in the street; they’re in somebody else’s home, but they’re still homeless”; this statement was corroborated with the notion of “couch surfing” where an individual “bounces from place to place”.

Numerous statements were expressed with regard to ‘what is homelessness’ which suggested a “lacking” of various elements, for example: “lacking in productivity skills”, “lack of stability in a home base”, “lack of money”, “lack of ability”, and a “lack of social supports”. All of the “lacking” statements revolved around the concept where it was suggested that a homeless person has “lost their functionality as a productive
member of society”. These specific participant responses reiterated the limited social determinants of health that significantly impede an impoverished individuals social functioning.

One participant suggested that the concept of “what is a home?” should be defined by the group during this response period, “for the purpose of discussion”, which generated a strong interaction amongst the group which included the following statements: “a home would be a fixed place that you can claim title to, or you’re a tenant of . . . it’s your property”, “[a place] that you’re welcome to stay there . . . you’re able to go there to sleep and stay warm, or cool”, “a place that you are entitled to, whether it be through ownership or a lease agreement or a verbal agreement”. Once the group clarified the definition of a home, the following statement was presented: “I think of [homelessness] as not really having a place to belong”.

Question 2

The second question asked respondents to comment on what they notice when they hear about, or see, the subject of homelessness featured in the media. Aside from one respondent who stated that the media “typically does a good job of getting it out there”, all of the remaining respondents expressed negative opinions toward the media’s representation of homelessness. The negative associations with regard to the media were expressed through the following statements: “stigmatizing effect”, “media likes to latch-on to the worse-case scenarios”, “shock value”, and the “working poor, [are] not featured enough” in the media.

Four participants stated that “mental illness” and “addiction” are highly prevalent amongst homeless populations and, to a large extent, this aspect is frequently depicted in
the media as a means to “evoke empathy”, “scare members of public”, and “sell newspapers”. It was stated that the “mental illness” and “addiction” based stories are often “surface features” which are uncomfortable for the general population. Respondents during this period of discussion emphasized that the media “does not offer enough solutions . . . or encourage change” in its representation of mental health and addiction amongst the homeless. Resoundingly, the media was described as “negligent” regarding its ability to foster solutions. One respondent countered this premise by stating that, “I don’t believe it’s the media’s mandate to offer solutions”.

As well, four participants commented on the climate in Regina, whereby, overt homelessness within the downtown core is not as visible as “larger cities like Toronto or Vancouver”, “where it’s a little milder”. One respondent added to this area of discussion by stating that the media utilizes “highlight pieces”, often “in inclement weather”, which tend to report on those “huddled around a register somewhere” as a means to “draw attention to something, and what you do with it is up to you”.

One respondent reported that the media “tends to ignore the historical perspective”, specific to “residential schools” and the negative circumstances that resulted from this period of colonization within Canada. The respondent added that, due to residential schooling, “a lot of [First Nation people] lost their will to do anything, have a home, to have a job, because they weren’t given the will or esteem; when they graduate from those places they were broken already. A lot of them just went right from the residential school straight to jail or straight to the streets. . . . They’re mostly dead, most of them died through the addiction cycles, because they never had a home”. It was reemphasized that the media often ignores the devastating impact that residential
schooling had on the First Nation population throughout Canada and, as a result, the respondent reported “I really don’t trust the media anymore”.

**Question 3**

The third focus group question asked participants whether they believe that homelessness is an issue in Regina. All respondents recognized that homelessness is, in fact, a problem within Regina. However, five participants minimized the state of homelessness specific to Regina, compared to larger cities; this sentiment was captured in the following statements: “it’s everywhere, but I think Regina, probably because we have such a frigid climate, maybe it moved down the highway”, “I don’t really see too many homeless people; not compared to when I go to Toronto”, “it is not a ‘top 5’ issue in Regina . . . it just doesn’t make the headlines”, and “take a big beautiful City like Calgary or Edmonton, wealthy cities, people working, and business is booming and they’ve got homeless people. It seems to be even more evident than here”.

Seven participants commented on the “economic boom” presently existing in Saskatchewan; as a result, comments with regard to the “housing shortage” were generated: “you hear about a housing shortage, but you don’t hear about the ‘homeless’”, “with our new economic boom, I think that it has gotten worse, because people can’t afford rent” and “it’s only going to get worse”. Participants also referred to the fact that more children now seem to continue residing with their parents/guardians well into adulthood: “I think we’re seeing very little of what we’re going to see in another year or two”, “there are a lot of people who are living at home; it’s too expensive out there and they can’t find a place. They’re still living at home, they’re adults, and they’re homeless”,
and “as we get more and more prosperous, the division becomes greater and greater, and it becomes more and more visible”.

Conversely, the “housing shortage” topic of discussion was challenged with respect to housing placement strategies where it was expressed “there will still be that, those people who, you can try and you can give them a place, but they don’t want it”. This notion was further endorsed when the statement “yeah, for whatever reasons, you know, mental illness, drug addiction, fetal alcohol syndrome; there’s just that percentage that defy help” was expressed by one participant.

Four respondents placed a direct emphasis on the topic of “youth” and the diminished quality of a formative upbringing that has limited “motivation” and “work ethic” amongst young people today and, as a result, will contribute to homelessness in Regina “in the coming years”.

The First Nation perspective was also captured with regard to homelessness in Regina where it was stated that, “nothing has changed”, “the gangs are getting stronger . . . [which negatively impacts] the quality of the neighbourhood . . . so you’re feeding into the anti-social element of society”.

Question 4

The fourth question presented to the focus groups asked participants what issues or circumstances influence homelessness in Regina. This question generated divergent responses between the two groups; the first focus group primarily attributed the influential factors of homelessness to “the youth of today” and their general “lack of respect for authority” and their “elders”. As well, it was emphasized that there is “too much power given to youth today, and not enough responsibility”; it was stated by a
participant that we are presently experiencing “a warning that we have to deal with youth
today, to fix tomorrow’s problems”. Overall, the first focus group agreed that there is
currently “a breakdown in the family unit” with “more outside influences than ever
before” which are impacting youth and contributing to “youth homelessness”.

The second focus group provided a much broader perspective with regard to the
influencing factors to homelessness. Again, the “mental illness” component was stated
when it was expressed that “the largest contributor would probably be mental illness”,
and the “booming economy” focus was reiterated in the statement expressing that
“housing is too expensive” at present. “Addiction” was also expressed as a major
influence on homelessness, as well as, “residential schools” and the detrimental
experience of “abuse” and “neglect” during one’s formative years of development.

The second focus group digressed to the “safety net” aspect to homelessness
influences; one participant emphasized “there’s social services, safety nets, out there for
people that, if they need a hand up, or a hand out, that there are things available for
them”. The above statement was then countered with the following response “there is a
lot of red tape to certain circumstances . . . it’s not as easy as it should be to access social
services”. This portion of the discussion then directed focus toward the “systematic
racism” and the “reduction in Federal support to First Nations” by a “hostile
government”; furthermore, it was stated that there has been a “loss of [First Nation
populations] compassion for [their] own people” which, as a result, influences
homelessness from a First Nation’s perspective through a loss in “your sense of esteem,
dignity, your sense of moral integrity, your sense of ethical integrity”.

*Question 5*
The fifth question asked participants to comment on the consequences of homelessness in Regina. Four participants responded to this question by stating that “crime” is a major consequence to homelessness. It was explained that “if you are homeless . . . a mindset takes over that they don’t care. If you don’t care, you’ll probably start following what would be your own rules. We know you’re not supposed to steal, but I don’t got any money and now I’m going to steal something”. As well, with relation to “crime”, it was expressed that “the people who will be homeless, who don’t have the skills to do anything; they’ll be turning to crime” and, resultantly, “gang recruitment” may become an option for homeless individuals.

Crime victimization was also recognized by one participant who explained that “there’s personal safety factors too . . . kids that are bored, looking to get into trouble, you know, people who are homeless tend to be their target”. Lastly, in relation to crime, it was expressed that criminal acts happen out of desperation and/or the misusage of services occurs when “sometimes we have people who go to the ER or you have people who break in very obviously so that they’ll get arrested so that they can sleep in a warm jail cell for the night”.

Four participants commented on the government’s role in addressing homelessness; however, it was emphasized that the present strategies for monetary support are not effective; comments such as, “all governments are broke. Any new programs that start, any new money is borrowed money; I don’t think we can afford that. So if there are answers for things like that, it’s got to be rethinking it. Come up with a new plan with the same money, but there are no answers like throwing money at the problem, it hasn’t worked in the past”. Dissention was also directed at the Federal
governments’ priority toward military initiatives; the statement expressing, “$35 Billion directed toward] fighter jets! I mean, give me a wakeup call!” and “I’d sooner invest in people, than military equipment” emphasized this concern. Criticism was also directed toward governmental funding efforts toward impoverished nations where it was expressed that “funding to help is okay, if there is money there” with the following question being posed, “what about our people?”

Participants also explained that the consequence to homelessness in Regina creates a “stigma” that “affect[s] the mentality and the spirit of the rest of the City as homelessness grows”. Two participants also stated that having a “home base is essential if you are going to become a productive member of society” and further added that, “people are being left behind”.

With regard to the “First Nation perspective”, it was expressed by one participant that “you kind of lose faith in society” and “we don’t have a work ethic, we don’t have a sense of esteem or dignity . . . I learnt that society ain’t fair . . . I bet it was the same 100 years ago; we pretend not to look at it”. These avoidance-focused sentiments were further reinforced by two other participants who expressed that “homeless people tend to be downtown . . . for that reason, I think that is one reason why our downtown doesn’t thrive is because nobody wants to go down there”, “you don’t want to be pestered by people . . . you don’t want to run into the guy with the mental illness”, and “you don’t even really want to see it, you’ve got the blinders on . . . It makes you uncomfortable, it makes you feel a little guilty; so you just as soon avoid it . . . People just don’t want to have anything to do with it”.

*Question 6*
The sixth research question asked the participants what they believe are some strategies to address homelessness in Regina; participant responses varied greatly with regard to strategy development. Three participants emphasized that homelessness is “always going to [be] an issue”, “30 years from now you’re still going to have this population . . . homelessness will still be there” and “there’s always going to be a sect, or a portion of society that wants to be homeless. There’s going to be a group who are going to be homeless through no fault of their own”, as well as the statement, “there will always be a segment, I think, that you’ll never be able to reach”. One participant stated, “I don’t think there is one”, with regard to a strategy to support homeless populations. However, all other participants identified various approaches to addressing homeless populations.

One participant outlined a detailed National strategy, based on the program implemented “after the war, [where] the Federal government through an organization called Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation . . . built houses all across Canada, but it took at least two levels of government to do”; furthermore, this participant stated that “when a mayor of a municipality says ‘we can’t handle the housing situation on our own’, he’s telling the truth. It’s too big and it needs to be a National strategy”. This strategy was embraced by another participant who agreed by saying, “I think he’s right on the money, it’s going to take all levels of government to address the problem; one level of government on any level is not going to be able to do it. It’s going to take cooperation on every level”; this same participant also emphasized that “the whole system is so screwed up; it needs major modification”.

Another support-based strategy was expressed by four participants who suggested that “the solution will be more than giving a house or a place to live . . . it also needs to
address some of the issues that led to the homelessness; I see the homelessness as being an outcome as opposed to the problem. . . . Support needs to be put into place, where a person can learn how to apply for a job, how to keep a job, time management, maybe they need counselling to help them gain some esteem, a sense of community, and I think that sometimes that’s maybe what draws people back into the lifestyle of being homeless, is because it is a community”, this approach was echoed by other participants who stated, “it’s providing tools to people who want to get out of homeless situations” and “you’ve got to give the people some hope, to the young people especially”. Ultimately, this line of discussion recommended “a multi-faceted solution” to homelessness, as opposed to, “just simply a house”.

One participant, in agreement to the resources being provided to homeless populations, became quite domineering when he emphasized that, “if we give them a place to lie their head then we better stuff some social programming down their throat too! . . . The condition is, you’re going to take counselling, you’re going to hold down a job, how to apply for a job, how to do all this stuff . . . quit pussyfooting around with these guys”.

The First Nations focus was also highlighted when one participant suggested that “a strategy to address homelessness would be a 10 year joint venture program with the reserves and, maybe, Regina for . . . some kind of housing initiative”. It was also stated that support-based programming should also be utilized with First Nation populations, but with the expectation that any initiative is “link[ed] to their history”, further explaining, “Why is that family not wanting to work? Why is that family not wanting to
be a productive member of society? Why are the majority of teenagers ending up in the prison system? Let’s address those issues”.

**Question 7**

The seventh question presented to the focus group participants asked who is responsible for assisting the homeless in Regina; all of the participants were in agreement that *society*, in general, is responsible for the homeless populations in Regina. The following statements, “I think we all do”, “we’re all responsible”, “society, parents, parent groups, social partnerships . . . I think everyone is kind of responsible”, and “I guess that would be society; that’s just one of the costs of being a productive member of society is helping those who are not productive”; again, there was a resounding emphasis that the entire population of Regina has a role in addressing homelessness issues.

One participant explained that “having homeless people is not good for anybody, it can’t be good for business, it can’t be good for anything. . . . Maybe business has to participate in this and take a role as well in some way, shape, or form”. Another participant echoed this sentiment when it was stated “there needs to be partnerships. . . . I think that schools have a place in that, I think the government has a place in that, I think there’s a profit sector also”.

Two participants agreed that society has a responsibility in the provision of the homelessness solution; however, dissent toward the likelihood of effective solutions were described as “pie in the sky” and “it’s not going to happen” being reported by one participant, and another participant stated that, “I think the help is there for those that are salvageable and I think we provide it . . . I think the services are there; we do a pretty good job of having these needs met”; this statement suggests that appropriate supports are
currently available for homeless populations. Yet, it was added, “there’s always going to be a certain segment that are going to be beyond your best effort”.

Two participants commented on the specific role that society is required to play in assisting the homeless in Regina. One respondent explained that “people who have the ability to influence youth with the mindset to not want to be homeless . . . and developing a work ethic; buying into society’s values and society’s structure . . . it’s up to us parents, and teachers, people in authority roles in society to uphold those values”. In addition, one participant emphasized, “we have to start taking risks and try to do something about it. Risks and responsibility and awareness. . . . We need one person who can start this, who knows how to connect the government, media, et cetera”.

**Question 8**

The final focus group question asked the focus group participants whether there was anything else they would like to say about homelessness in Regina. The majority of responses to this question reiterated subject matter that was presented earlier. One participant stressed that “it needs to be preventative, as opposed to reactive, for those who do want the help”; another participant echoed this comment by stating, “you have to lend support to those who can’t help themselves, but simply putting money into projects to simply build homes . . . money is better spent on preventative efforts.

Attention was directed toward the negative prospect of continued homelessness issues in Regina when it was expressed by a participant that “I don’t know how you can answer the problem of homelessness, all I know is that it’s going to get worse”. Another participant explained that “I don’t want to see people homeless and I try to be tolerant . . . I saw them 30 years ago and if I’m alive 30 years from now, there will be different one’s,
but they’ll still be there”. In closing, one participant optimistically explained that, in Regina, “we’re wealthy enough, we’re smart enough, and we can fix this problem if we get together; there’s no reason why we can’t. The missing ingredient is leadership; somebody has got to lead”.

4.2 Common Themes

As the previous section displayed, the participant responses to the focus group questions generated both textural and structural descriptions. These participant descriptions were then analyzed and amalgamated into common themes that are presented below. Subsequently, an overall essence will follow.

Theme One: Deterioration of the Family Unit – Although attention was directed at this theme in both of the focus groups; it was primarily the first focus group who embraced the topic of youth and the overall functioning of the family unit; discussions focused almost exclusively on the youth demographics’ impending homelessness “in the coming years”. A total of 42 statements between both groups involved the topic of rearing youth.

Criticism was directed toward the present approach to raising children; “they have given too much power to the children and not teaching them enough responsibility” and “parents are limited as to what they can do”. Extensive discussion by the group participants examined why the youth demographic is struggling, these exchanges culminated with the statement, “we cannot continue to carry on the way we have been with all these kids that are a problem in school, they’re not graduating, they don’t have a job, and they have no motivation to work. This is a warning sign”.  

One participant directly stated that “a breakdown in the family unit” is contributing to homelessness”; with another participant emphasizing that “kids today have no fear” and “a lack of respect”. Several discussions digressed into analysis of youth upbringing from years past in comparison to youth upbringing practices utilized in present day. Agreement was reached among all participants when it was stated that “there’s a lot of exterior, outside influences on our children that wasn’t there; the computer”. Ultimately, a lack of motivation amongst today’s youth was deemed a fundamental reason that limited socio-economic advancement is occurring with this population.

**Theme Two: Economic Social Impact** - A total of 14 statements described the current economic prosperity being experienced in Saskatchewan; statements such as, “the booming economy is leaving people behind” and “as we get more and more prosperous, the division becomes greater and greater” effectively captured the economic-based concern expressed by participants.

The price of rent was also discussed. The statement, “with our new economic boom, I think it has gotten worse, because people can’t afford rent; rent has gone up, there are not places to rent that are affordable, there isn’t enough” effectively emphasized the financial expanse occurring presently in Regina and throughout Saskatchewan. The reality that individuals have to “find two buddies to split an apartment with” again, reiterates the high cost of living that has become the social standard.

**Theme Three: Lack of Recognition of Homelessness as a Visible Issue** - No participant denied that homelessness exists in Regina. However, several responses, 16 in total, emphasized that homelessness is more problematic in larger cities where “you
would expect more of that in a larger centre”; “Victoria”, “Vancouver”, “Edmonton”, “Calgary”, and “Toronto” all being named.

A total of 6 references were directly associated to the “climate” and “latitude” of Regina compared to milder cities, such as, “Victoria in January, February, March; the homeless folks will sleep on the street. You don’t sleep on the street here, because of death”; this line of discussion provided context as to why participants do not consider homelessness in Regina to be as prevalent as it may be in larger cities. It was added, “maybe we don’t see it as glaringly, because of the climate, as we could in British Columbia”. Furthermore, it was stated that “in [winter] weather like this, they have a place to go, but maybe for a couple of days, or maybe, just for the winter, but it’s really just sleeping on the couch or blankets on the floor; it’s not theirs”. Again, although no participant overtly denied the presence of homelessness in Regina, the above statements reiterate the not-visible factor of homelessness in Regina.

Theme Four: Impact of Historical Oppression – Direct consideration for First Nation populations with respect to homelessness was not explored during the first focus group. However, the second focus group directed significant attention toward the First Nation experience; on 21 occasions, participants explored the subject of First Nation populations.

It was thoroughly expressed that First Nation individuals “didn’t have freedom . . . until 1952” which resulted in “not hav[ing] inheritance to jump-start the economy . . . [or] economic values”. As a result, the above statements reveal that First Nation populations did not have the economic infrastructure or appropriate resources with which to build an adequate home base.
The residential school experience was also emphasized when it was expressed that “[First Nation populations] don’t have a work ethic . . . a sense of esteem or dignity; so how can you help homeless people? It’s long-term care. Sadly, [First Nation populations] don’t understand ethics, but it’s not their fault though, because they weren’t taught ethics in the residential school . . . society ain’t fair”. The above statement effectively captures the multi-generational detriment that has negatively impacted this population due to the residential school placement initiative of First Nation youth decades ago. A significant social, economic, and familial dysfunction amongst First Nation populations is a direct result of this a prolonged history of the Canadian governments colonization strategies (Hylton, 2006; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996).

Theme Five: Impact of Government Will to Address the Issue – Both approval and dissention toward all levels of government with regard to support for homeless populations was expressed by the participants. The statement explaining, “I think the help is there for those that are salvageable and I think we provide it . . . I think the services are there; we do a pretty good job of having these needs met” suggests that adequate resources presently exist for those that require them. However, on several occasions criticism toward all levels of government in Canada was expressed: “if anybody has ever worked anywhere near the government knows how poorly they communicate with each other”, “people don’t understand the dynamics of the Indian Affairs budget; [First Nations] lose 50% to administration fees”, “we have a more hostile government that we have ever had” and “the Crown . . . they interfered with deliberate de-socializing tactics to screw [First Nation people] up on reserves”. All of the above statements echo the critical perspective of government involvement regarding social service delivery.
As well, participants explained that, historically, government support efforts for impoverished individuals have typically been “reactive” and “homelessness [is] an outcome as opposed to the problem”; as a result, it was suggested that “it needs to be more of a multi-faceted solution, as opposed to just simply a house” and effective governmental interventions “needs to be directed toward prevention” and “money is better spent in preventative efforts”. Holistic and “multi-faceted” support strategies were suggested by participants, compared to simply “giving” a homeless person “a home”.

4.3 **Essence**

The intention to phenomenological research is to uncover the pure essence of the described phenomena (Converse, 2012; Lewis and Staehler, 2010; Moran, 2002; Moustakas, 1994). Thus far, data findings in this document have provided a broad collection of the focus group participant responses that were pulled from the verbatim transcripts of each of the two focus groups. Participant responses were then further consolidated into five unique themes as a means to generate an overall essence to the study. After examination of all client responses and meaning clusters, the pure essence to the research study results described in this document could be presented as:

**homelessness exists in the City of Regina; however, the element of choice, which includes low-motivation, low-volition, and a lack of work ethic, dictates whether one will become/remain homeless.**

The above essence is the present reality, or truth, that was expressed by the citizens of Regina who attended each of the focus groups. As such, recommendations should adopt the essence outlined above to ensure appropriate and effective human service efforts are being considered.
4.4 Data Reliability

In combination of both focus groups, the participants expressed a total of 209 statements. The largest number of statements expressed by one participant was 29, and the least number of statements that a respondent expressed was 13. On average, approximately 23 statements were presented by each of the participants.

Participant interactions were generally good; however, one exchange with regard to government spending escalated slightly, but was quickly abated. As well, one participant became overtly irritated when the focus shifted to issues prevalent to First Nation populations. At no time did a participant express a desire to cease their group involvement and all of the group participants were respectful toward each other. Furthermore, no single participant dominated any of the discussion topics and the moderator/principal investigator did not assert any form of bias or topic direction other than the line of direct focus group questioning.

Breen (2006) states that good focus group reliability considers participant agreement or disagreement factors and whether opinions shift throughout the focus group; reliable topic data contains high participant agreement with little opinion shift. Aside from digressed discussions from the line of questioning, the thematic depictions captured from both of the focus groups revealed high levels of agreement amongst the participants. Furthermore, no participant shifted his or her personal opinion after hearing another participant’s viewpoint. The transcribed data was made available to each of the focus group participants for review; of the 9 participants, 8 reviewed their respective group transcripts and transcript release documentation was completed. As a result, the data accumulated from this research study can be considered reliable.
5.0 Recommendations

5.1 Strategies

It is the responsibility of all levels of government to address the housing problem in Canadian communities. Realistically, accessing long-term independent housing for each homeless person is not a viable option. Rather, introduction of transitional housing opportunities for homeless populations, with the intention to move transitioned individuals into long-term independent, or communal, housing facilities are a much more tangible and socially viable solution (Dattalo, 1991; Weiner, 2003). Placing a homeless individual into a ‘stable’ living environment is only one component to the support structure; further assistance for the resource depleted homeless person is also necessary in order to build and maintain their personal resources with the goal of achieving autonomy and relative independence.

Through the utilization of assertive outreach practices delivered by social workers and those in the human service field, an impoverished individual is provided with a platform to process acquired trauma and address developmentally-destructive experiences; an example of posttraumatic growth and, subsequent development, following a maintained history of negative circumstances. Without adequately recognizing the importance of post-traumatic growth, stress-related growth, and the necessary presence of resiliency traits, appropriate support strategies cannot be composed.

Since 1966, The Ranch Ehrlo Society has been a leader in the human service field. The Ranch Ehrlo Society continues to develop and expand resources for individuals, families, and the community as a whole. The Ranch Ehrlo Society provides
support for disadvantaged and troubled populations, of which, housing support services is an integral focus (Ranch Ehrlo Society, 2013b). As such, Ehrlo Housing, a division of The Ranch Ehrlo Society, collaborates extensively with all levels of government, in addition, to various community agencies in the provision of affordable housing options for low-income families and individuals. Ehrlo Housing maintains a strong presence in the realm of social housing programming and currently operates over 100 housing units within the City of Regina (Ranch Ehrlo Society, 2013a). Because Ehrlo Housing demonstrates a strong and altruistic presence in the housing industry, the following recommendations are intended to further reinforce and sustain existing Ehrlo Housing education and awareness initiatives. The information presented in the literature review of this document, as well as, the material acquired from the focus groups have been culminated into the following list of recommendations. Additionally, the following recommendations embrace the resiliency and growth elements required for efficacy endeavors:

1) The current youth demographic are presented with a different housing market in comparison to previous generations (i.e., housing rental and sale prices, availability); formalized education should prepare youth for the current state of residency acquisition in Regina.

2) The positive economic conditions in Regina, as well as, Saskatchewan requires appropriate attention from all levels of government toward social service needs; housing support initiatives similar to the WHL programs throughout the early-1940s are an ideal infrastructure template for today’s
national housing crisis and, thus, should be governmentally re-examined through a Federal, Provincial, and Municipal tripartite partnership.

3) Similar to other major Canadian cities, Regina does have homeless populations. Although homelessness in Regina is less visible, residents should recognize that Regina is not immune to this social issue. As such, public-awareness campaigns should be presented to Regina residents as a means to inform and educate the general population of this problem.

4) Comprehensive support for disadvantaged individuals of First Nation descent should focus on life-skill development programming with the overarching goal of cultivating First Nation independence and autonomy. Education and support programming for impoverished individuals should be non-judgmental and respectful of First Nation cultural practices and traditions.

5.2 Implications for Human Service and Social Work Practice

The marginalization of homeless and impoverished populations creates extensive challenges. The provision of human service and social work practice relies on providing support in reducing the challenges homeless populations are perpetually forced to confront. Program and policy development, specific to housing, is often derived from individuals who have never experienced homelessness firsthand or functioned without adequate residency (Mullaly, 2010). Furthermore, social workers, as well as, other human service professionals are often forced to function within an organizational system designed to empower those in authority, rather than the individuals accessing support (Silver, 2000; Zufferey, 2008).
The data that was accumulated during the research study outlined in this document reveals that the general social perceptions of homelessness require sociological amelioration, as such, an attitudinal realignment of the systemic make-up of our community is necessary (Fallis, 2010). Although the recommendations and strategies are intended to support the Ranch Ehrlo Society – Ehrlo Housing program, the research data suggests that social workers and human service workers should continue educating and empowering the general population of Regina with regard to the multiple factors that negatively impact and contribute to homelessness and poverty amongst subjugated populations. As the CASW (2005a) Code of Ethics states, “social work is founded on the long-standing commitment to respect the inherent dignity and individual worth of all persons” (p. 4); although homeless and impoverished individuals operate with reduced social functioning, their dignity and self-worth remains as valuable and important as any other individual within the community.

6.0 Future Research

Due to the multitude of variables that impact and influence the social issue of homelessness, the research study described in this document revealed several areas that would benefit from further research.

In no way did this research study want to single out specific cultural and/or ethnic populations. However, analysis of accumulated data emphasized that the First Nations population, and the history of overt oppression and marginalization by Canadian governments, warrants a singular research focus with regard to the study of homelessness. Consideration for the generalized topic of homelessness, which comprised
this document, did not adequately acknowledge the atrocities that have resulted in generational oppression and marginalization amongst First Nation populations.

Also, focus group participants who participated in the research study consistently expressed that a certain proportion of society will always be homeless because these individuals *choose* to maintain a transient lifestyle. Therefore, future research regarding homelessness and poverty in relation to personal choice would provide greater insight into the *choice versus extrinsic-variables* that lead to an individual becoming impoverished and homeless; therefore, greater analysis of this social perspective would be beneficial for direct educational and social programming purposes.

**7.0 Conclusion**

Undoubtedly, homelessness, and the associated pitfalls associated with this social issue, requires both governmental and public attention, in addition to, social action. This document underscores the reality that homelessness is more than simply not having a home. Rather, numerous circumstances contribute to an individual becoming homeless and impoverished. Unfortunately, the intensive health and well-being of homeless individuals are both complex and challenging. However, homeless populations represent a group most in need of support, yet often unable to receive it as a result of personal and/or systemic barriers (Tayal, 2003).

A housing system exists in Canada; but the infrastructure for this system is designed to promote home ownership (Hulchanski, 2003). Therefore, for those individuals and families who fall below the LICO, the reality of owning a home is highly unachievable. Furthermore, only when a person is allowed to function within a stable network of healthy and holistic resources, are they able to effectively maintain stability in
appropriately accessing, maintaining, and retaining a home (De Jong, 2007). The above scenario is simple enough in theory; however, aligning the appropriate resources and services for a homeless and impoverished individual at the appropriate time and, more importantly, for the appropriate reason is a monumental task. As such, it is not surprising that the cycle of poverty continues to persist amongst impoverished individuals.

Ultimately, homelessness is a social phenomenon occurring on a global scale. The phenomenological theory provides a researcher with an interesting avenue for analyzing human behaviour in relation to this particular social issue. To prescribe a single sector of the Canadian social fabric to address the issue of homelessness is unrealistic; rather, every fibre of the Canadian populace has a role to play in working toward eradicating the social issue of homelessness. Data accumulated from the focus groups conducted in the research study outlined in this document reveal that residents of Regina recognize homelessness and consider this social issue to be a problem.

The Ranch Ehrlo Society – Ehrlo Housing Program does an excellent job in providing low-income individuals with housing and residency supports; the recommendations included in this document are intended to further advance the social understanding of the needs unique to homeless populations who require complex service facilitation.
References


Public Health Agency of Canada. (2010). What makes Canadians healthy or unhealthy?


Smith, J., & Firth, J. (2011). Qualitative data analysis: The framework approach. *Nurse*
Reseacher, 18(2), 52-62.


Appendix 1: Participant Consent Form

**Participant Consent Form**

**Project Title:** Social Perceptions of Homelessness in the City of Regina

**Researcher/Principal Investigator:**
Jeffrey Zwack, Graduate Student
Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research – Master of Social Work Program, University of Regina
(306) 596-3006,
zwack20j@uregina.ca.

**Supervisor:**
Nuelle Novik, Assistant Professor, Faculty of Social Work, University of Regina
(306) 585-4573,
nuelle.novik@uregina.ca

**Purpose and Objective of the Research:** You have been asked to participate in a focus group which is being conducted by a graduate social work student. Information that is gathered from the focus group sessions will be used to write a scholarly article which will include recommendations and suggested public awareness messages for the Ranch Ehrlo Society – Ehrlo Housing Program. There is no right or wrong answers to focus group questions. All viewpoints and opinions are important, and we would like to hear from everyone participating. Please respect other participant’s comments, even if they differ from your own. As well, we request that only one person speak at a time and all discussions and responses remain confidential.

**Procedures:** The focus group will be comprised of 4 to 10 participants and group discussions will be recorded in an audio format. The focus group will typically last from 1 to 2 hours in duration; a total of 8 questions will be presented as a means to generate group discussion. Participants are encouraged to ask questions or raise any concerns that they may have at any point during the focus group session.

**Potential Risks:** There are no known or anticipated risks to you by participating in this research. To address any potential risk, all participants will be presented with a detailed explanation of the purpose and objective to this research study prior to the commencement of the focus groups. A thorough debriefing will occur after completion of the focus group, at which time, the principal investigator will encourage participants to engage in further one-to-one discussion with the facilitator should further questions and/or concerns arise.
Potential Benefits: The goal of study is to increase awareness regarding the state of homelessness in Regina. The Ranch Ehrlo Society – Ehrlo Housing Program will be provided with recommendations and suggestions for programming and public awareness campaigns that emerge from the data analysis.

Confidentiality: All participant personal information will remain completely confidential. Participant names will not be included in the data analysis process and all collected information will remain anonymous. However, due to the utilization of focus groups, participant confidentiality is compromised. Therefore, it is expected that participants respect the confidentiality of other participants’ comments and identity. Accumulated data will be processed and stored in a secure environment under the supervision of the academic supervisor. After a period of five years of required data archiving all participant data will be destroyed.

Right to Withdraw: Participation in this study is completely voluntary and respondents can answer only questions that they are comfortable answering. Participants may withdraw from the study for any reason without explanation or penalty of any sort until April 20th, 2013, after this time the project report will be submitted. Due to the nature of focus group discussions, not all individual data can be removed; as a result, when possible (e.g., it is obvious who is speaking) data will be removed.

Questions or Concerns: Any questions or concerns can be directed to the principal investigator, Jeffrey Zwack at (306) 596-3006; or to the academic supervisor, Nuelle Novik at (306) 585-4573. This project has been approved on ethical grounds by the U of R Research Ethics Board on February 14th, 2013. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to the committee at (306) 585-4775 or research.ethics@uregina.ca. Out of town participants may call collect.

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the description provided; I have had an opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered. I consent to participate in this research project. A copy of this Consent Form has been given to me for my records.

________________________________________   ___________________________   _______________________
                        Name of Participant                      Signature                      Date

________________________________________
Researcher’s Signature

________________________________________   _______________________
                        Date

A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.
Appendix 2: Transcript Release Form

TRANSCRIPT RELEASE FORM

Title: Social Perceptions of Homelessness in the City of Regina

I, ____________________________, have reviewed the complete transcript of the focus group interview and my contributions within. I have also been provided with the opportunity to add, alter, and delete information from the transcript as appropriate. I acknowledge that the transcript accurately reflects what I said during the focus group moderated by Jeffrey Zwack. I hereby authorize the release of this transcript to Jeffrey Zwack to be used in the manner described in the Consent Form. I have received a copy of this Data/Transcript Release Form for my own records.

_________________________________  _________________________
Name of Participant                   Date

_________________________________  _________________________
Signature of Participant              Signature of researcher
Appendix 3: Recruitment Material

Research Study Participants Needed

FOCUS GROUP

“Social Perceptions of Homelessness in the City of Regina”

A Master of Social Work student is requesting residents of the City of Regina to volunteer to participate in a small group with other Regina residents to discuss the topic of homelessness and how homelessness is both impacted by, and impacts upon, circumstances unique to Regina. The information collected from these group discussions will be utilized to develop programming recommendations and public awareness messages for the Ranch Ehrlo Society – Ehrlo Housing Program.

Time: 6:30 to 7:30
Date: March 18th or March 20th
Location: Family Service Regina
2020 Halifax Street

For further inquiries or to reserve a place in one of the groups, please call:

596-3006

Approved by the University of Regina Research Ethics Board