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We can’t access invisible services: A qualitative study on the visibility of homelessness services in Toronto

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Abstract
Policy and service visibility are key characteristics to ensuring the accessibility and uptake of government supports. If target populations are unaware of a service or cannot identify it in the complicated landscape, then it is rendered invisible. In a complex policy space, like homelessness in Canada, the visibility of policy is particularly prudent and for many a question of survival. This article introduces findings from a qualitative research study in Toronto where we conducted focus groups with 31 participants accessing homelessness services. Our project investigates to investigate how visible homelessness services are to those experiencing homelessness, and how information about services is shared. Our findings highlight the invisibility of services in the homelessness landscape and the importance of visibility to access. Participants offered recommendations around how best to share information and spoke about the need for more visibility throughout the homelessness delivery system. To avoid continued policy failures in addressing Canadian homelessness, there is a need to ensure the invisible is rendered visible, and for the fragmented services to be accessible to those that need them most.

Keywords: visibility, accessibility, homelessness

Résumé
La visibilité des politiques et des services sont des caractéristiques clés pour assurer l’accessibilité et adoption des soutiens gouvernementaux. Si les populations cibles ne savent pas des services ou peuvent pas les identifier dans la paysage complexe, les services seront invisibles. Dans une espace politique complexe, comme l’itinérance en Canada, la visibilité des politiques est particulièrement importante et pour beaucoup une question de survie. Cet article présente les résultats d’une étude de recherche qualitative à Toronto où nous avons mené des groupes de discussion avec 31 personnes qui accéder des services d’itinérance. Notre projet vise à enquêter sur la visibilité des services d’itinérance pour les personnes qui expérience l’itinérance, et comment cette information est partagée. Nos résultats souligner l’invisibilité des services dans le paysage d’itinérance et l’importance de la visibilité pour y accéder. Les participants ont proposé des recommandations sur les meilleures façons de partager l’information et ont parlé du besoin pour plus de la visibilité partout le système des services de l’itinérance. Pour éviter que les politiques de lutte

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contre l'itinérance au Canada ne se poursuivent, il est nécessaire d'assurer que les choses invisibles sont rendus visible, et pour les services fragmentés se rendre accessible à lieux qui les ont besoin le plus.

Mots-clés : visibilité, accessibilité, itinérance

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Introduction

The accessibility and effectiveness of a policy or service is dictated by its visibility. If a policy or service is invisible to its target population, we are left to question its utility, and the overall benefits provided. Can the target population identify the services available to them? Are they aware of the policies and services, their location, what they may provide (or not), various programming, etc.? Service users are expected to seek out the services they wish to access and without strong visibility, they are more likely to be unknown to the target population. In Canada, the fragmentation and lack of coordination of homelessness services leads to a complicated service landscape that can be challenging to navigate (Doberstein 2014; Petty and Young 2020).

This article asks: how visible are services to those experiencing homelessness in Toronto? And relatedly, how is information regarding services accessed by those needing them? To explore these questions, we conducted focus groups in different services in Toronto. Participants spoke about the invisibility of services and the barriers to accessing information. In addition to the barriers identified by participants, there was variation in the services participants accessed, where and how they accessed information, and experiences associated with different services in the city. Our findings suggest significant barriers to both service and policy visibility, which we define as the target population's awareness of a particular service or programme's existence, to whom and how it is offered, and the accessibility of such information. We use the terms "policy", "service", and "programme" interchangeably throughout this article to describe the supports provided by government and nongovernmental actors. Policy visibility is significant to the accessibility of policy and services given the complexity of the homelessness landscape. The perspective of individuals experiencing homelessness can identify gaps in visibility and offer key insights into improving policies and services.

We begin by outlining policy visibility and its relationship to other policy design characteristics and administrative burdens before introducing the Canadian homelessness context more specifically. Existing literature has considered the effects of visibility not only on the accessibility of services, but also on social and political inclusion (see for example Rosenthal 2023; SoRelle 2020; SoRelle and Shanks 2023). We then introduce the methods of a research project in Toronto. We conducted focus groups within three homelessness services and asked participants to share their experiences accessing information about available policies and services. Our findings are presented according to major themes from the focus group analysis; namely, the importance of visibility, how information is shared, the burdens associated with accessing information, and how visibility can be improved. We conclude with considerations for future research.

Visibility, delivery, and complexity of policy

Policy visibility shapes the salience of programs and is related to implementation outputs, or the services delivered (Gingrich 2014; Onyango 2019). Service users' basic knowledge about a program has been indicated as the most significant factor determining the uptake of programs (Daigneault et al. 2012). The extent to which a policy is visible influences its distribution; if services are invisible to segments of the target population, then its accessibility is hindered (Kopec 2024). The visibility of policy also has effects on political and social inclusion. It sends messages regarding the importance of a given population to governments (Pierson 1993). Existing literature has considered the vital role of visibility, and its effects related to democratic and political outcomes, as well as inclusion and perceptions of government (see for example Rosenthal 2023; SoRelle 2020; SoRelle and Shanks 2023). Visible programs can increase a particular program's inclusive and empowering effects, mobilizing alienated populations to engage in political and civil life (Barnes 2020). If and how individuals learn about policies and services influence their experiences, relationship with the state, and subsequent engagement (Gidengil 2020).

Literature on the visibility of policy often examines the extent to which citizens and target populations are aware of the processes and actors involved in implementing policies. Examining the invisibility of government social benefits, Mettler (2011) considers the role of "submerged" policies; those that obscure the role of government. This concealment leads to a lack of awareness about who is developing policies and who may be benefiting from their implementation (Mettler 2011). Neoliberalism, administrative reforms and New Public Management have led to increased complexity in public sectors because more external actors are involved in policymaking (Marciano 2022; Tayor 2000; Pollit and Bouckaet 2017). Policies and services may be developed and governed by various actors including the government and the private sector. Obscuring information about who is involved in policy development and implementation influences public support for the policies and the choice to use services (Mettler 2011), although these effects are not always negative (Barnes 2020). The visibility of policy and state involvement has also been found to vary depending on the population. Rosenthal (2023), for example, finds that white Americans do not always identify as benefiting from programs and yet can easily identify those they believe others benefit from. And yet, for Black Americans, policing makes the state more visible to them (Rosenthal 2023). Privatization has also had effects on the visibility of the state and has led to the attribution of responsibility for various problems on the individual rather than governments (SoRelle 2022). Visibility, therefore, is influenced by many contextual factors.

Contextual factors, furthermore, influence administrative capacities that reduce or enhance administrative burdens on service providers and users, which are, the costs people experience when accessing public services (Herd and Moynihan 2018). Institutional contexts, such as federalism, increase the number of actors involved in administering policies making the landscape more complex (Michener 2018). Decentralization and delegation further influence the resources provided to services and the discretion of workers that can lead to varied experiences (Herd and Moynihan 2018; Morgan and Campbell, 2011). The system's complexity further hinders the likelihood that information about access to, and eligibility of, services is broadly known by all front-line staff, let alone service users. Financial resources, administrative experiences, and organizational capacity influence the ability of front-line staff to provide accurate information which can increase barriers for those accessing services (Herd and Moynihan 2018). Additionally, the burden of sharing information may fall on frontline staff acting as the face of the state; and yet, they may exercise a substantial amount of discretion when sharing information leading to variation in the extent to which they render (in)visible an already complex service system (Zacka 2017). The increased complexity created by institutional contexts results in greater effort exerted by service users to obtain the information needed to access the services and policies they need.

Learning costs, for example, include the time and effort needed to learn about a program and learning about the specifics of the service such as the eligibility criteria, the benefits themselves, and how to gain access (Herd and Moynihan 2018). Lack of information regarding existing policies and programs and their eligibility to access them creates barriers to access and hinders program uptake. Learning costs can also include other factors influencing the take-up of services, such as location, education, language, and other program access (Herd and Moynihan 2018). Information about policies often depends on the service accessed or the frontline worker with whom an individual interacts, which may lead to variation and hindered policy visibility (Kopec 2024). A policy can only be accessed when it is rendered visible, and when the benefits provided and eligibility requirements are effectively communicated. Visibility is therefore more of a continuous characteristic; it can be there in some elements and not in others. A policy may be known to exist, but the details of it, less so.

When discussing the visibility of policies, therefore, there is a need to consider the effect of broader institutional contexts on visibility, capacity, and accessibility of services and the very real impacts on target populations. In Canadian homelessness policy, complexity has been reinforced by federalism and a complex history of devolution and decentralization. Barriers to uptake—such as visibility and accessibility—are vital to consider in relation to homelessness, particularly given the complexity of policy areas involved, and the often-resulting fragmented policy siloes (Nichols and Doberstein 2016). Homelessness is a complex policy issue involving many actors and levels of government; the coordination of which impacts the performance of policies (Bogason and Toonen 1998; Hall and O'Toole 2000; Herd and Moynihan 2018; Howlett, Ramesh and Perl 2009: Klijn 1996). Herein is the complexity of administrative burdens, policy landscapes, and visibility. Homelessness is addressed through a complex and fragmented delivery system leading to confusion, high learning costs, and reduced visibility. Thus, the visibility of services and policies to address homelessness is hindered.

Homelessness in Canada

Responding to a complex problem such as homelessness requires policy instruments designed to promote coordination across different jurisdictions and simplify the service landscape for users (Candel and BiesBroek 2016). However, homelessness policy in Canada includes several jurisdictions, policy areas, and actors, leading to increased complexity and service fragmentation (Smith 2022). Understanding how the interaction of these factors translates into on-the-ground services is a vital contribution to understanding the service landscape.

Federalism further complicates the implementation of policies and the associate capacities. Federalism increases the amount of policy venues, which can increase the interests and forces, leading to instability (Pralle 2003). Spreading responsibility across multiple levels of government can increase communication issues, variation in policy implementation, and capacity and coordination issues (Herd and Moynihan 2018). Although federalism can provide opportunities for mobilization and multiple access points, it can also lead to blame avoidance techniques and fragment not only service delivery but also the venues and opportunities for individuals and groups to express grievances (Michener 2018). The performance of policies and programs is thus impacted by the relationships between the multiple levels of governance, the complexity of multiple actors, and their coordination abilities (Bogason and Toonen 1998; Hall and O'Toole 2000; Klijn 1996). Complexity resulting from federalism and fragmentation can create challenges to service access and limit the efficacy of policy efforts to address homelessness.

Housing in Canada has been inundated by changes in federal/provincial funding models and relationships since the postwar period (Banting 1990; Suttor 2016). The early 1990s brought divestment by multiple governments from affordable housing and social support, with a steady decline in social housing and decreased federal funding (Gaetz et al. 2016; Suttor 2016). The decentralization of services addressing homelessness in Canada has left provinces, cities, and the third sector (shelters, drop-in centres, etc.) with the main task of service delivery (Kopec 2023; Rice and Prince 2013). Many services are left with constrained resources that limit their capacity to prevent homelessness due to changes in funding arrangements (Johnstone et al. 2017). This history of devolution and decentralization increases the actors and sectors involved in homelessness.

Homelessness governance in Canada includes a complex network of actors including local civil society actors, various sectors, and policy areas (Doberstein 2016). As a complex phenomenon, homelessness intersects with issues such as food insecurity, healthcare issues, employment, colonialism and generational trauma, and many others that cannot be solved within a single policy area or jurisdiction. However, the failures of the welfare state have led to the creation of policy siloes in which homelessness and its associated issues are not addressed collaboratively, resulting in gaps in policy responses. Smith (2022) argues that intergovernmental and multilevel governance dynamics explain the persistence of homelessness in Canada. Institutional structures reinforce the siloing of policy sectors which have different sectoral perspectives and approaches to addressing homelessness (Flåto 2022). Further complexity is found across Canadian cities due to the downloading of certain responsibilities to private actors, the third sector, and civil society (Smith 2022). Navigating the various policies and services in the homelessness service landscape is made still more complex by the lack of integrated services within emergency shelters (Kopec 2024; Nichols and Doberstein 2016). Thus, homelessness is managed by a crisis response or disaster management approach with a weakly knitted together safety net reliant on emergency shelter systems and means-tested income assistance (Evans et al. 2021). Lack of coordination and integration of services and policy leads to gaps that individual actors respond to, rather than addressing homelessness comprehensively.

These gaps serve to further individualize homelessness. Responsibility is therefore downloaded onto individuals rather than structural factors thus managing rather than preventing homelessness (Dej 2020). The lack of engagement with lived expertise in policymaking has left the systemic root causes of homelessness ignored by current approaches (Kopec and Smith 2024). Existing research with individuals experiencing homelessness points to their vital perspectives regarding strategies to address, and definitions of, homelessness (see for example Smith, Moor and Canham 2021; Toolis and Hammack 2015) and identifying barriers to specific services and policy areas (see for example Ramsay et al. 2019; Speed and Reeves 2023). Including the perspectives of those accessing services allows for a necessary perspective in considering the role of policy design on inequality and the outcomes of policy targets (Howlett 2022); however, research that considers multiple areas or the broader service landscape has been limited. Examining the visibility of an already complicated and fragmented service system from the perspective of individuals experiencing homelessness can point to gaps that need to be addressed and how services and policies can be made more accessible.

Methods

We utilized a bottom-up approach to better understand the visibility of a complex service landscape. A 'bottom-up approach' to studying the welfare state considers how it is experienced by the most vulnerable (Michener, SoRelle and Thurston 2022). The complexity of homelessness governance in Canada is well documented from the perspective of service workers and policymakers (see for example Nichols and Doberstein 2016; Smith 2022). More needs to be known regarding how this complexity influences access from the viewpoint of those attempting to use these services. The perspective of service users can point to the successes and failures of policy, providing essential information for improvement and innovation.

Although the complexity of governance is found across Canadian cities, and homelessness spans urban and rural areas, our focus is on the city of Toronto. Housing affordability has substantially decreased in the city, and Toronto is considered one of the worst cities in relation to the housing affordability crisis (Dahms and Ducharme 2023). Metropolitan areas are often where social welfare programs and affected populations are concentrated (Fainstein 2010). In Toronto, the city takes the lead role in homelessness governance since the downloading of responsibility from the province to municipalities in the 1990s (Smith 2022). Private and non-profit actors have also been important in providing immediate services and advocacy, and civil society actors have increased advocacy efforts since the creation of the Toronto Alliance to End Homelessness in 2014 (Smith 2022). Yet, coordination and collaboration are difficult given the size of the city and complexity of governance (Smith 2022).

As part of a broader project aiming to map homelessness services in the city, this article reports on findings from three focus groups with individuals experiencing homelessness in Toronto. Focus groups were conducted in October 2023 at three different homelessness services, following Carleton University Research Ethics Board approval. Our team conducted an internet search for homelessness services, which was then combined with data provided by 211. The final list contained over 2,000 services including non-government programming (e.g. churches) and government services (Ontario Works offices, for example). To ensure we could recruit participants and conduct focus groups within the services, we narrowed our list to drop-in centres, health centres with specific homelessness related services, shelters, and transitional housing programs, which left our list at just under 500. We mapped the services onto Google MyMaps to view where they were located. In total, we contacted ten services in different areas of the city within which to conduct focus groups. In the end three organizations agreed to assist with recruitment and provide a space for our focus groups which varied in geographic location—north, west and east of the city—and the services offered: a drop-in program within a health centre; an emergency shelter run by a multiservice agency; and an emergency shelter for newcomers and refugees. Service providers at each location shared the recruitment poster with participants and also had a sign-up sheet. Sampling therefore was more convenient depending on the ways in which information was disbursed by service providers but also opportunistic, with participants also joining focus groups on the day of as we set up the space.

Given the exploratory nature of our research question, we chose to conduct focus groups (all of which were conducted in English). We asked individuals about the services they accessed to gauge information accessibility and barriers to access. Semi structured focus groups were conducted based on the guide provided in Appendix A, however, all researchers found that the focus groups flowed as participants began speaking about each of the services (according to various needs: housing, social assistance, health, etc.) Focus groups are particularly helpful for exploratory questions and allow researchers to include several experiences at once and allow participants to share information and develop ideas together (Brinkmann 2020; Liamputtong 2015). By using a semi-structured focus group approach, we aimed to emphasize the perspective of those experiencing homelessness, decenter the perspective of the research team, and provide a site for participants to exchange information between themselves.

The research team included three researchers: an academic researcher who has conducted research on homelessness in Toronto for almost a decade, a graduate student, and a researcher with a lived experience of homelessness. Including a researcher with lived experience was a vital part of our project. They provided invaluable suggestions regarding research direction and had extensive knowledge of the service landscape as a native Torontonian and having worked in the sector for 15 years. They also provided training in conducting focus groups and interacting with people experiencing homelessness, enhancing our ability to relate to our participants and develop relationships. All researchers were involved in the project including applying for ethics approval, designing focus groups, conducting fieldwork, analysis, and writing.

Following an introduction about the project, consent procedures, and information about the research project, participants were asked about the services they accessed, barriers to accessing them, and how they receive information regarding the services available. During two out of three focus groups the team split participants into three smaller groups, each facilitated by one of us to allow for more engagement from each participant – a decision we made prior to fieldwork if focus groups exceeded five participants. Given the structure—where there were multiple groups within one room—recording was difficult and would lead to confusing audio. The focus group where we remained together was due to the small number of participants in attendance, and the decision was made to take detailed notes rather than record to establish trust.[1] The structure of smaller groups allowed us to engage more closely with participants and remain cognizant of the various power dynamics within each group (Ayrton 2019). We took notes with the group(s) on large flipchart paper and individually (in the case of the smaller focus group two notetakers and one main facilitator). We found this process helpful because the words on the paper encouraged further participation and spurred ideas. Each of us also took individual notes during the session and followed the same focus group guide (see Appendix A). Compensation was given to each participant in the form of $25 cash in addition to snacks and refreshments.

In total, 31 individuals participated in the three focus groups. One focus group included only three participants, whilst the second and third included 17 and 11, respectively. Inclusion criteria was broad: accessing the particular homelessness services, over the age of 18, and speaking English. The average age of participants was 41. Across all three groups, most participants identified as male (18 compared to 13 women). We asked participants to self-identify and share their ethnicity and race through individual questionnaires. One participant did not participate in sharing their demographic criteria. Ethnicity and race varied between the three focus groups, although at the last site, where services focused on newcomers and refugees, all participants were people of colour and a majority identified with African cultures and countries. At the other two sites, there was variation, including individuals identifying as white, Middle Eastern, and European. Across the focus groups, participants varied in how long they have been accessing the service from months to several years.

Following fieldwork, each researcher shared their notes, including reflections and observations. Photos were taken of flipchart paper used in the focus groups. All of this data was analyzed using an open and inductive coding framework to identify themes across focus groups and researchers. Data collection and analysis can differ based on researcher characteristics such as age, gender, or lived experience (Tracy 2020). Intercoder reliability was employed in our data analysis by having all researchers conduct separate analyses and then combining them to find common themes. This process allowed us to identify similarities and consider multiple interpretations of the data. Building the coding frame was therefore an iterative process that was refined by comparing codes between researchers individual open coding and developing an agreed upon framework (Given 2008; Tracy 2020; Ravitch and Carl 2020; Wesley 2011). The lack of information became a clear major theme with many subthemes: variation and inconsistency in information possessed, reliance on peers/word of mouth, variation related to service provider/frontline worker, lack of descriptive information more broadly on processes, services, programs, etc. Each focus group was analyzed separately, with variation related to the major theme of lack of information found when coded together based on the location and services offered (as discussed below).

Findings

Four common themes about service visibility and accessibility emerged upon our analysis of the focus group data: the importance of visibility, how limited information is shared, burdens associated with accessing information, and how visibility can be improved.

The importance of visibility

Focus group participants identified the importance of acquiring knowledge about services and resources available. They spoke of their individual experiences of precarity and their need to access services, but often not knowing where to start or find more information. Many participants reported that the responsibility for obtaining information rests on the individual. One participant eagerly shared their years' worth of research regarding services; they provided full notebooks with handwritten information and flyers they had collected advertising services ranging from shelters and drop-ins to applications for benefits and cell phone programs. They felt as if they had to take on the burden of putting together all the available services and carrying binders full of information for themselves and their peers. They sought to gather as much information as possible so that service visibility could be increased for others.

Participants referred to the multiple layers of visibility, with some aspects of services, at times, more visible than others. For example, in some cases participants expressed lacking information on where the services themselves were located, oftentimes in reference to other services and in neighbourhoods less familiar to them. Participants referenced the geographic connections between visibility and accessing services, often relying on common intersections when sharing locations and describing them to others. One participant spoke about having a case manager from the opposite side of the city not being aware of services where they were currently staying. And yet, this participant feared switching case managers and having someone less helpful. A common example across all three focus groups was calling Central Intake for an emergency shelter bed and being uncertain where they would be told to go and what services they would have access to.[2] Being assigned to a new area of the city means that people experiencing homelessness face additional efforts to find new invisible services, losing others due to inconsistencies of services available from area to area, and having to re-establish new networks.

Information regarding services, furthermore, governed where and how individuals accessed them. Participants indicated that if they felt that service providers were not transparent, they would be unlikely to seek those services. Information about the service's existence is needed, but knowing about the processes and eligibility requirements embedded within the policies is also necessary. A discussion in one focus group highlighted that EMS and police are often the most common access points for accessing healthcare and emergency rooms. They spoke about the lack of trust they had in medical professionals, unclear requirements around documentation, and travelling to find accessible services. In the focus group within an organization serving mainly newcomers and refugees, participants spoke to the lack of information around processes for accessing work permits and immigration services in addition difficulty accessing homelessness specific services. Programme uptake is thus impacted by the visibility of information and the perception of the transparency and accuracy of information communicated by service providers.

How (limited) information is shared

Participants reported acquiring knowledge about services from posters, front-line staff, and internet searches. However, the most common way of accessing information was through word of mouth and from others experiencing homelessness. Information about helpful programming or services such as meals, clothing drives, and food banks was reported in some cases to only be available through hearing about it from others in the community. Specifically, participants highlighted the role of churches and community organizations but indicated that information regarding these services was not widely advertised. Participants also spoke about travelling far for services if needed based on recommendations from peers. A willingness to travel for services based on peer recommendations rather than ease of access (such as location) indicated the trust associated with peer shared knowledge.

Trust between service users and frontline staff was also often discussed in relation to visibility and the variation in how, and through whom, information is shared. Relationships with staff influenced the information participants believed they had access to and how much service providers connected participants with additional services or materials. Many pointed to the lack of uniform information, arguing that at times information shared online did not match what front-line staff said. One participant discussed trying to access a drop-in food bank during a time frame provided to them and being turned away leading them to not want to try and access the service again. When the information provided conflicts with their lived experience, individuals experiencing homelessness may lose trust in the information advertised or provided to them by service workers. Where staff were found to be more trusted, participants were more likely to evaluate services and staff within the organization positively.

Many participants referred to this variation as "luck" based on the shelters and services they were placed in and the workers they interacted with dictating the information they received. One participant referred to helpful staff, stating that there are "champions and heroes but chaos" suggesting that service users are aware that (some) frontline staff are doing their best in a very complex context. Some individuals identified helpful workers or services who shared information willingly and went above and beyond to connect individuals with services within their organization and elsewhere. Others pointed to specific workers within offices that were helpful. At one site, where men and women were separate but brought together during the focus groups, it seemed as if there was different information shared, with many women seeing the men as having access to more information. These examples highlight the variation in visibility and its effects: you can only access services you know about, and you might know and get access to more depending on the attitude of the service worker, your demographic criteria, the shelter you access, and the peers you interact with. It speaks to how information is shared as well as the variation in that information.

One of the focus groups was conducted within a more integrated organization. That is, participants accessed multiple services within the one organization, including shelter, meals, case workers, and various programming. Participants spoke about the benefits associated with having concentrated access to multiple services. Service users at this location were more likely to evaluate the service positively relative to those in the other two focus groups. Participants supported one another openly and identified the co-ed nature of the shelter—where women and men were not separated—as beneficial to their sense of community and the overall culture. They also spoke more positively about the information they received, although many still pointed to knowledge gaps regarding services offered outside of the organization. This variation points to the importance of integration, where participants accessed several services in one place and had a larger sense of community, they have more specified knowledge about these programs. It also speaks to the relationships to social inclusion, with participants at this location the only ones to mention a sense of community within the service.

Burdens and barriers to information

Across all three focus groups, participants spoke about barriers associated with accessing information and resources about services they needed. They pointed to variation in information depending on workers as introduced above, and the attempts made by services to ensure information was accessible to all service users.

Participants often expressed frustration with front line staff and workers within government and nongovernment services. They shared stories about experiences with workers that expressed biases and stigmas around homelessness. Others expressed the apparent favouritism around accessible information. At times participants felt that service providers shared services and resources with some service users but not all. This included access to material goods, like clothing, and information about specific processes, services, and organizations. One group of participants lacked clarity about the process of obtaining clothing, saying staff offered it to some and not others. One participant described this discretionary access as: "it's political". Another group of participants said that you could only get services if you already knew they existed, specifically mentioning housing support and getting transit passes. As was discussed above, when staff willingly shared information, participants expressed their gratitude, often identifying workers they found most helpful.

Participants spoke about challenges accessing information. Within the services we conducted the focus groups, posters were often found on walls and participants often pointed to them. Beyond the medium, however, participants also spoke to the importance of ensuring information is shared in multiple languages. Although common across two focus groups, both of which included newcomers and immigrants, this was starkly emphasized in the focus group conducted within the newcomer and refugee specific service. Here, participants pointed to posters on the walls that only included information regarding services or programs in English. Most of these participants had recently arrived in Canada and spoke to the irony around the language limitations of how information is shared. They spoke about having to translate posters for others and the lack of thought given to how information is shared.

Further challenges to accessing information included social, financial, and technical barriers. One participant informed us that they had limited social interaction with others from the community. During the focus group, they seemed very interested to learn about services from the other participants. Limited connection to the homeless community may limit access to information through word of mouth. Accessibility, complexity, and inaccuracy of information, was often cited as a barrier. Financial barriers were brought up by a participant who mentioned trying to access information by calling 211, a hotline for information about social services. They told us that 211 was difficult to access and there was misinformation regarding the financial resources needed to access 211 from a payphone. 911 was often cited as more accessible because it does not incur a charge from a payphone. Although other resources such as libraries, The Access Point, and the Drop-In Network exist in Toronto, these services were not mentioned by participants, indicating that participants may not know they exist (Toronto Homeless Resource List 2024). The lack of access to computers, phones, and printers where individuals accessed services was also mentioned. Others spoke to the main mode of contact from various programs as limiting; many sent newsletters via email that participants could not always receive or check.

Ways forward: Increasing visibility and the information needed

Across all the focus groups, participants expressed the need for more information to be shared with individuals experiencing homelessness and were keen to offer insights about what that information should include, how it should be presented, and its relevance and importance. They attributed the access to information without barriers as key to their autonomy and agency.

It was often argued that service users need more information than just what services are available and the access requirements (such as requirements around identification). Participants indicated the need for more visibility around hours of operation, processes for eligibility, and standardized approaches to information sharing. Participants also pointed to the importance of needing more location specific awareness of services. Accessing services around where they slept—whether indoors or outdoors—was preferred and identified as important for developing relationships with service providers and knowledge of services. The uncertainty around relocation when having to go to new shelters caused fear and uncertainty that some preferred to sleep outdoors, indicating the efforts associated with learning about those offered in a different part of the city. Thus, participants indicated that increasing the visibility of services based on location is needed.

The main method of communication was word of mouth from peers, which speaks to the importance of providing opportunities for individuals to come together and communicate with one another. As we discuss below, the focus groups often became spaces of knowledge mobilization and visibility in and of themselves. In the organization where we witnessed a more integrated and community-oriented culture, the relationships between peers were strong. Where participants were likely meeting for the first time through the focus group, we witnessed bonds being created around the information some participants needed and others had.

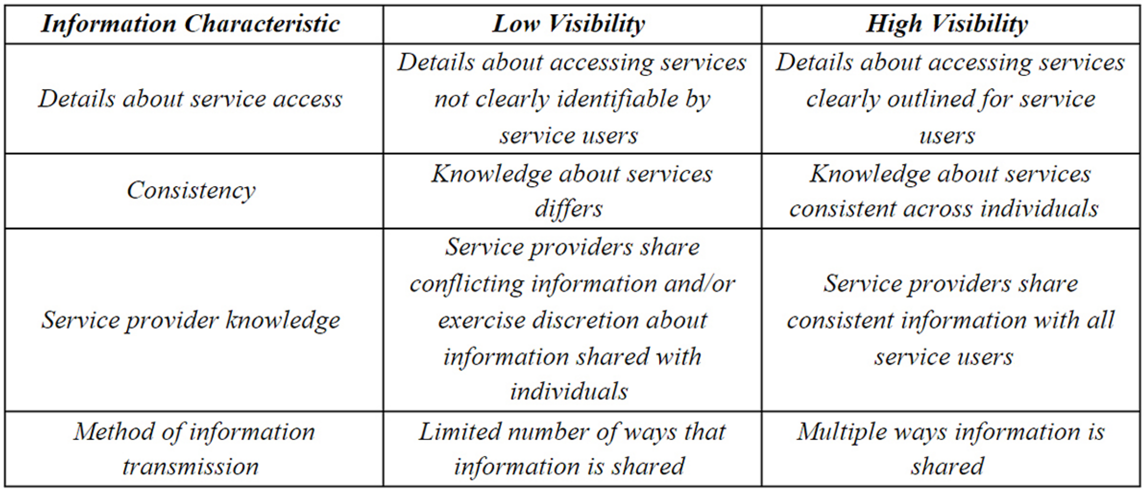
Participants shared their experiences and offered recommendations to increase the visibility of homelessness services in Toronto. They expressed the need for an easy-to-carry map or pamphlet. Some suggested information be neighbourhood specific and colour coded. Others indicated the usefulness of a phone application or website to access information.[3] There was agreement that information needs to be shared broadly, across different venues and formats, and in multiple languages to minimize barriers to visibility. Participants also emphasized that information needs to be advertised and accessible to everyone in centralized spaces.

Discussion

Various factors influence people experiencing homelessness' choice to access services. These include (but are not limited to) long wait times, required documentation, the quality of services, and restrictive policies (Ahajumobi and Anderson 2020; Daiski 2007; Smith et al. 2021; Wusinich et al. 2019). This study demonstrates that visibility of the homelessness delivery system is a key concern to individuals accessing services, which has been shown elsewhere (see Ahajumobi and Anderson 2020). However, this article examines how visibility impacts service use rather than simply identifying it as a barrier. Invisibility creates access barriers and is reinforced by a complex service landscape, variation in service and worker interactions, and different information-sharing methods. Information must include the location of services and the details about eligibility requirements, processes to access, hours of operation, and the services offered, among others. Visibility was found to not only influence the services individuals accessed but also their perspective of services and their associated experiences. Table 1 illustrates a framework that highlights the characteristics of information according to low and high visibility. As participants pointed out, there are specific characteristics necessary for information to be helpful, accessible, and comprehensive. Information needs to be detailed, consistent, and shared in various ways. This requires cohesion across services and workers, and may be more likley when services are integrated and coordinated.

Focus group participants spoke directly to the learning costs outlined by Moynihan and Herd (2018). Participants emphasized the invisibility of services, pointing to the individual burden associated with learning about the services available, where to access them, and how to gain such information. Churches and nonprofit organizations were also identified as providing important services and yet there was variation around information regarding where they were and what services they offered between participants. This speaks directly to the complexity of homelessness services in Toronto and the various actors involved (see Smith 2022). The complexity of the service landscape was further emphasized, with participants pointing to barriers associated with eligibility for specific social assistance benefits, the lack of coordination between services, and the need for more accessible information. The lack of documentation, from identification to necessary refugee documents and work permits spoke to the lack of visibility and

Table 1
Factors impacting service visibility among individuals experiencing homelessness



Information Characteristic	*Low Visibility*	*High Visibility*
Details about service access	*Details about accessing services not clearly identifiable by service users*	*Details about accessing services clearly outlined for service users*
Consistency	*Knowledge about services differs*	*Knowledge about services consistent across individuals*
Service provider knowledge	*Service providers share conflicting information and/or exercise discretion about information shared with individuals*	*Service providers share consistent information with all service users*
Method of information transmission	*Limited number of ways that information is shared*	*Multiple ways information is shared*

coordination between services, policy areas, and agencies. Policy and service visibility were reported to be limited due to the complexity of the service landscape, leading to increased learning costs for those experiencing homelessness. Individuals were left with the burden of finding services themselves, and often relied on word of mouth.

Participants expressed variation in visibility regarding the homelessness system depending on the workers they interacted with. At times, this relied on the organization and culture. In the more integrated site, participants not only mentioned the benefits of multiple services but also the commitments they felt through the culture of providing opportunities and supports to service users. Participants accessing integrated services were more likely to express hope about their future related to the training and educational opportunities available. This speaks to important relationships between visibility, integration, and social inclusion (see Kopec 2024; Rosenthal 2023; SoRelle 2020). Street-level bureaucrat literature, furthermore, often points to the discretion of workers and the biases that can influence service delivery. Given limited resources, eligibility criteria, and their own discretion, there is variation in experiences with street-level bureaucrats (see Lipsky [1980] 2010). We add to this discussion by highlighting how this variation impacts the visibility of services. It is important to note that information regarding services is complex and might vary between workers because of their own interests and time in certain spaces, along with their administrative burdens, capacity, and resources.

Our findings indicate the complexity of homelessness services in Toronto and the variation in information provided to individuals accessing services. Participants often identified the complexity of actors and discretion of workers to share information about various services. This research therefore contributes to discussions around integration and the need for policy coordination (see Tosun and Lang 2017; Catalano, Graziano and Bassoli 2015; Kopec 2024), pointing to the effects of the lack of integration on the visibility of services. The fragmentation of the service landscape leads to variation in the information provided and accessed. Where more services are provided within a particular service it is unsurprising that information is more accessible, and that individuals are more likely to access similar services than in other organizations. Although there was more visibility reported through one field site, even these participants cited needing more information regarding some policy areas. Health services were identified, pointing to the need for more integrated approaches (see Buccieri 2016), even within a universal healthcare system.

All participants spoke of the need for more information to be accessible regarding all services across the city and even within specific neighbourhoods. Clear recommendations come from participants, calling on more coordination that has been advocated by several scholars and organizations (see for example CAEH n.d.). Even more specifically, however, participants signaled the need for more information sharing technology and tools, highlighting the importance of innovative approaches like the mapping tool Navigi, and traditional services like 211, as well as more marketing of such service navigation tools among the population, especially given that participants rarely knew about such services or identified them as particularly helpful.

A reflection all researchers shared was how much the focus groups became mechanisms of increasing visibility themselves. We often witnessed participants learning from one another during the focus groups as they spoke about different services offered, which workers to ask for specific resources, where (and what locations) to access, and any barriers to accessing some services over others. They shared various eligibility criteria, documentation processes, and application information. This speaks to the methodological literature illustrating the empowering and emancipatory nature of focus groups and their ability to serve as mechanisms of knowledge production (Brinkmann 2020; Rainey 2015). In our case, this often included rendering some services more visible, increasing accessibility. Participants often expressed gratitude for the focus groups and spoke of the importance of the information they obtained.

The limitations of the research point to important areas for future research. Variation between locations, services, and information provided needs to be further investigated with more focus groups across locations and more participants. More investigation with specific subpopulations and various demographic criteria may also point to additional visibility concerns, including length and duration of homelessness. The findings related to integrated services also need further investigation. Integrated services have been found to have positive interpretive and resource effects (see Kopec, 2024). How this relates to visibility of services needs additional research to support the findings presented here. The visibility of policy may also be a helpful theoretical framework to utilize in advocating for more integration as well as more coordinated approaches to homelessness. It provides an opportunity to utilize public policy literature to highlight the need for more integrated policy responses, whilst also using language that clearly indicates the purpose for policy change.

Conclusion

Policy visibility is a key policy design characteristic, and one of significant utility within a complex service landscape like homelessness. Our research confirms the importance of policy visibility and provides an on-the-ground investigation of the invisibility of homelessness services in Toronto. The findings call for more research into the visibility, or a lack thereof, of homelessness services and to highlight its effects on individuals accessing services. How the complexity of services, actors, policy areas, and jurisdictions translates to what individuals experiencing homelessness experience on the ground is an important investigation of policy. The visibility of services and policies influences their accessibility, uptake and, ultimately, their impact on the lives of target populations. For the actors involved in homelessness governance to lay claim to their generosity, there is a need to consider the extent to which existing services are rendered visible to those that need them most.

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Notes

[1] The decision to record interviews and focus groups is reliant on contextual factors that influence data collection, making them an important methodological choice (Rutakumwa et al. 2019).

[2] Central Intake is a city-run service that refers people to available emergency accommodation (see City of Toronto n.d.).

[3] In addition to 211, there is an online mapping tool called Navigi, delivered by HelpSeeker. Participants seemed not to be aware of these tools and others complained about 211, arguing that calling 211 from a payphone required payment. There was then an additional lack of visibility even around tools meant to render services more visible.

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Appendix: Focus group guide

In each group (or depending on the room, facilitators, number of participants, in one group), we will start with an introduction (names will not be recorded, and your identity will be separated from what is said – demographic criteria). Questions will include: age, ethnicity, gender, etc. for each participant.

Following the introduction, individuals will be asked:

Follow up for each: [How did you get there?]

What services did you access today?

Where did you go to get food today?

Where did you sleep?

Where do you go for health services?

Where do you go for any programming?

In each group we will create a list of services, and participants will be encouraged to collaborate in doing so (writing on poster board, sharing their experiences, etc.). Each facilitator will have a large, printed map of Toronto as well, that can be used during the activities if individuals point to certain areas where they access services. While asking about the services individuals access, we will also ask questions that will change depending on the discussion:

Is that the "best" place to go for that? Why do you go (or don't go) there?

What else do they offer there?

Why don't you like that location? Is there a better one?

Are there any barriers to the services you faced? What do you need to show/do to get the services/benefit/etc.?

Where should information about services be shared? What should be included? In what way should it be presented? (online? A website? An app? A pamphlet?)