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The role of indigenous people in deterring encampment evictions in Allan Gardens: a qualitative analysis

Introduction

As cities continue to densify, the value of open spaces to enjoy fresh air and disconnect from the hustle and bustle become that much more valuable. However, it can be hard to take pleasure in them if their access is limited. With the increase of urban homelessness, the number of encampment sites in parks and plazas have significantly increased. Between 2013 to 2018, Toronto faced a 67% increase in homelessness (City of Toronto, 2013, 2018, 2020). Due to a lack of infrastructure for affordable housing and homeless shelters, many are seen forced to set camp on open public spaces. Because this affects the use and purpose of these spaces for others, the City of Toronto has carried out lawful evictions to remove the encampments. The Trinity-Bellwoods Park, Alexandra Park, and Lamport Stadium Park encampments were all removed on the summer of 2021. However, a selection of parks remained protected from the evictions. Allan Gardens was one them.

Allan Gardens is located in Downtown Toronto in the Garden District. The space is characterized for its large indoor botanical garden and strong indigenous identity. In fact, the park is recognized as indigenous territory of the One Dish One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant, as per Action 15 of the Reconciliation Act (McIntosh & Kulchyski, 2021). Although a beautiful park, not many neighbors use of its space, partially due to the sizable encampment site. Which raises the question, why does the City of Toronto allow encampments in Allan Gardens? Understanding why the encampment sites have survived in Allan Gardens may help better explain the relationship between the City and the homeless and could help provide direction toward how to tackle rising poverty rates in Toronto.

Background / Literature Review

To understand why the City of Toronto allows encampments in Allan Gardens, we needed not only to know housing laws in Canada but also have a rich understanding of the political and socioeconomic advantages and disadvantages of conducting an eviction.

As per the Toronto Municipal Code, encampments are not permitted in City Parks (2013) and erecting tents or other structures on City property is illegal (2018).

And while the Government of Canada recognizes that the right to housing is an international fundamental human right (Department of Justice Canada, 2021), legislation has failed to follow suit. Introduced in 2017, the National Housing Strategy (NHS) aimed to ensure Canadians living in poverty and/or homelessness could rely on a system for affordable, safe living. Although the NHS was introduced in the Budget Implementation Act of 2019 after heavy lobbying, the proposals were briefly touched on a surface level (Centre for Equality Rights in Accommodation, 2022), ultimately demonstrating the little intent of implementing the Strategy. Besides not advocating enough for affordable housing, the City also reserves the privilege to remove and evict the encampments, as it is stated on Encampment Safety & Clearing Protocols (n.d.). However, the political backlash of the 2021 evictions demonstrated that forceful removal of encampments comes with a price (CBC News, 2021), and this may be a reason supporting why the City has stood back on evictions. Moreover, the park is home to a City-recognized Sacred Fire site, and as per the Reconciliation Action Plan, the city cannot interrupt or remove authorized Sacred Fires in action. Although this is not lawfully binding, the question of whether the City chooses or not to interfere with indigenous people's rights is one that may hold a political answer.

Aside from that, emerging evidence from the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (2019) has shown that eliminating encampment sites does not eliminate encamping but rather relocates it elsewhere. In fact, the literature argues that the best way to remove an encampment site is through a multilateral approach uniting all levels of power—local provincial, and national— with grassroots initiatives (Centre for Equality in Accommodation, 2022). By allocating a budget to increasing affordable housing and shelter capacity, expanding social welfare programs, securing rent prices, and ensuring living wages, Cities can help prevent people from entering poverty.

Methodology

We collected a diverse array of data to work with our research question and produce a holistic analysis. Our methodology consisted of observing, mapping, photographing, soundscaping, and interviewing key players.

Having understood that learning about the nature of the encampment site was crucial to answer why encampments are allowed at Allan Gardens, we visited the camp to study its physical environment. This meant capturing photographs and recording the sounds of the park. We imagined our photos would help illustrate what the encampment site looked like and where—if even at all—did park visitors spend

their time. The sound recordings would help draw a similar picture, capturing what the eyes cannot see. Furthermore, we wanted to detect if the tents in the encampment site played any significant geographical role. So we drafted a map of Allan Gardens, identifying all the major park landmarks and highlighting the location of the tents. At last, we needed an insider's look on the encampment site; to speak with someone who has an understanding of what the City-Park relationship is like. Hence, we evaluated interviewing an agency focused on providing food, supplies, and shelter to the vulnerable. Our interviews with Dixon Hall proved to be quintessential moving pieces for our research question.

Once all the data was collected, we proceeded to analyze it by comparing it with each other and scholarly sources. In hindsight, the map, photographs, and spatial audio recordings served as launching pads; the data collected helped prepare our inductive reasoning for the interviews. The interviews with Dixon Hall were the most significant slice of data obtained; Dixon Hall introduced the invaluable role of the indigenous people and the emblematic power of the Sacred Fires, noting how crucial of a role these play in protecting encampments from evictions.

Reflection on Methods

Reflecting on our methodology there are two aspects to consider; positionality and limitations.

There are 4 main positionality aspects we identified. First, being university students affected our interviewees' responses. When interviewing we were asked where we were from and for ID. This could've led to interviewees holding back on information they believed was not suitable for students. Second, predisposed bias. The encampments have been used as scapegoats for crimes within the region, and as a result has created a negative narrative for the area that we had fallen victim to prior to the project. Third, "housing" privilege. We are privileged enough to have housing accommodation, this is something that we felt needed acknowledgement when working on a project on housing. Lastly, we are both from developing countries. This created a prior experience with encampments which may affect our bias.

We identified 3 major limitations which may affect our analysis when answering our research question. First, working with vulnerable groups limited our data. The individuals living within the encampments are a vulnerable group. This left us unable to interview them and an important perspective missing. Second, collecting audio data. This was difficult due to us maintaining a respectful distance from the encampments — as these encampments are homes— when recording visual and audio data. Lastly, the

short time period for research. While the two interviews we conducted created a wealth of information, the other groups we wished to interview fell-through due to time and scheduling conflicts. We believe these interviews would have provided differing perspectives thus creating a holistic understanding.

Results / Data

We collected data in 4 methods; map, audios, photos, and interviews.

Drawing a map of Allan Gardens —Appendix K— helped log the location of the encampments. Through this method we realized that most of the encampments are located between the two prominent paths within the park. This allowed the encampments to avoid the main roads around the park.

Sadly due to the limitations stated earlier, there was a lack of data within the audio recordings —Appendix F-J. Things that are noticeable within the audio are; the conversation between a city worker and resident —Appendix H— and the linking of pots and pans —Appendix G.

The visual data highlighted an aspect we had not noted prior; there is a strong indigenous presence within the encampments. The sign within Appendix B marks the location as a sacred fire site by the City of Toronto and Appendix C shows the indigenous artwork put up by residents indicating that Allan Gardens is on stolen land. Our other photos —Appendix A-E— depict the different measures the city has taken to maintain the space, such as portable toilets, city outreach staffers, and snow plowing.

The data we collected via interviews —Appendix L— helped us understand the true nature of the encampments within Allan Gardens. We were fortunate enough to be able to interview Jennifer and Mohammad from Dixon Hall. Dixon Hall is an organization that serves Toronto's Downtown-East community with food, clothing, supplies, and shelter. Jennifer is a manager of community development with the rooming house project at Dixon Hall and Mohammad is a food access worker at Dixon Hall. Both individuals have been working with individuals from Allan Gardens for a long time.

Analysis

When we look to answer our research question: "Why does the City of Toronto allow encampments in Allan Gardens?"

Through our interviews we found a few key issues that are contributing towards the growing encampments. First, the land belongs to the indigenous population, it is recognized by the City as a Sacred Fire Cite. Second, there is a lack of consideration for those who are a part of the government housing system, there is no real consideration for their access to resources when it comes to the process they have to follow to be housed. Third, a large group of individuals within the encampments are dependent on the government for monetary allowance through unemployment benefits and disability benefits, amongst others. However, these allowances have not increased in value with inflation.

Taking these observations into consideration, we found that as a result of action 15 of the Reconciliation Act (McIntosh & Kulchyski, 2021), that allows the indigenous peoples of the land to use the space as they see fit, the City does not have the right to evict indigenous peoples who are staying on the land. Furthermore, we believe that after the political backlash the city received for the evictions in Trinity Bellwoods they would not risk doing so again as it created a negative narrative around the police department and the city council. Lastly, Instead of addressing the encampments directly, the city through their organizations such as Streets 2 Homes are aiming to eliminate them through housing. However through our interviews we learned that many individuals leave their government provided residence as it is not close to their home base and creates social issues such as lack of community. Such instances indicated the various gaps in government provided housing and the lack of considerations made when housing individuals.

Conclusion

The City of Toronto allows encampments within Allan Gardens because of the power the indigenous communities exert on the party's political image. Evicting the encampment would severely affect the publicity of the City as it did with the evictions at other parks. However, the City is removing the encampments as their existence ruins their image as well. Through affordable housing solutions, the City works toward finding a home for those experiencing homelessness. These measures are not enough; many are underfunded and are unable to match demand. The number of the encampment fails to shrink and has increased significantly. They are projected to keep increasing as rent prices continue to increase, incomes do not provide living wages, and social welfare programs are not sufficient to cover basic needs.

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Appendix

Appendix A:



Appendix B:



Appendix C:



Appendix D:



Appendix E:



Appendix F:

[Audio 1](#)

Appendix G:

[Audio 2](#)

Appendix H:

[Audio 3](#)

Appendix I:

[Audio 4](#)

Appendix J:

[Audio 5](#)

Appendix K:

