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Wednesday, May 6, 2020

Rt. Hon. Justin Trudeau
Office of the Prime Minister
80 Wellington Street
Ottawa, ON K1A 0A2

Fax: 613-941-6900

Dear Prime Minister,

For people living on or near the streets of urban Canada, the desperation is palpable right now. Food security is threatened, making inner-city homeless drop-ins, soup kitchens and food banks a dystopian sight for those willing to look. Local police in these neighbourhoods know very well this to be true, making the Toronto Police Service release of this week — implying ignorance of increased street violence experienced by vulnerable populations — a shocking breakdown of communication between the front-lines and the brass.

Suicides and overdose fatalities (often indistinguishable) are way, way up, although there is no equivalent to an official census for these communities. For these Canadians, the official gazette is to be found in the often *weekly* funerals at a drop-in or mission of hundreds, and even then, there are a lot of Jane and John Does at the catch-all city-wide homeless memorials.

The shuttering of homeless respites and social service centres during COVID, for all but the very few, means that those open are oversubscribed, understaffed, and desperate. The housing crisis for them is better known and the subject of our litigation with Toronto and Ontario, along with a brave coalition.

Amid all that, everyone in these street communities are afraid. Because they're always afraid. Because generalized fear, anger and anxiety is the status quo for anyone on or near the streets, and anyone with a mental illness and/or an addiction, and of course for so many it's all of the above. But now they're even more afraid of dying from COVID, of being infected by their "neighbour," all of whom have compromised immune systems.

Amid all that, there is high anxiety for everyone else — the working poor, blue collar and middle class masses — the public anxiety that every Canadian feels inside a pharmacy or grocery, let alone public transit. That public anxiety often gets taken out on this vulnerable population.

Except that now *nobody* is allowed on the streets, unless they're going somewhere permissible, pursuant to emergency management orders provincial and municipal. So where do they go? To shelters still overcrowded or not admitting anyone new? To their leaking tent

taken down by police or bylaw officers? To the park whose amenities are closed, and where getting a \$800 ticket and shooed away is the new normal?

And *with whom*? Who is the family or neighbour of the homeless person without a family, without a neighbour, whose friends are dead or dying? The answer is that most are simply alone and desperate. Some congregate together, a proxy family of stragglers that prefer to stick together, because within the general public they are seen as a COVID bomb. Now let's consider those who may be the most vulnerable, who themselves are vilified within their own communities, those residents of Canada who are queer and trans. Among those living on or near the streets, the LGBTQ2S community travels in small groups as much as possible simply to stay safe.

Some won't believe the foregoing, citing what governments say they are doing. I could show you or introduce someone else to show you the truth. But I'd rather spend more time getting solutions to this desperation, than having to disprove its ignorance. Politicians, bureaucrats and journalists unable or unwilling to hit the streets need to weigh the motives and credibility of our voices with the absence of easy means of verification. Come to one of the few drop-ins remaining open in a major city. Stay there for a while, if you dare. Make a new friend, socially distanced. Listen to their stories. I couldn't stay long the first few times, years ago, and obviously that wasn't during COVID. I'm not saying it's easy for the privileged to walk a kilometer in the shoes of the vulnerable, or for us to fully comprehend this desperation, because we actually don't want to believe it's true.

But it gets worse. Homo- and trans- phobia is way up because public anxiety is way up. Epithets are thrown out there at everyone on the streets, all the time. More fear. More anxiety. More desperation. (The same is true for racism). Now here come the police or bylaw officers ordering the dispersal of a small LGBTQ2S 'family,' who obviously aren't a family in law. They're just together. And here is another \$800 ticket for your trouble. Now they're alone again, more afraid, more anxious, more desperate, more vulnerable.

What's the solution? Firstly, re-starting Canada's social net for the most vulnerable should be as important as re-starting the economy, to prevent more overdoses, suicides and violence to desperate people who are dying more than living. Secondly, work within our federalist system to deputize police and bylaw officers to be a major part of the solution, and less part of the problem. Stop criminalizing the homeless for being homeless. Thirdly, start thinking of vulnerable populations as akin to patients in a long-term care home, whom you wouldn't think of dispersing onto the streets, or ticketing for being ill, or depriving of care. Help.

Sincerely,



Michael Bryant