
Moving Evidence Into Policy: The Story of the At Home/Chez Soi Initiative's Impact on Federal Homelessness Policy in Canada and its Implications for the Spread of Housing First in Europe and Internationally

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➤ **Abstract_** *The purpose of this study was to understand the sustainability of the At Home/Chez Soi (AHCS) project with respect to its wider impact on homelessness policy in Canada and internationally. Using a qualitative case study approach with 15 key informant interviews (with project leaders and decision-makers) and archival data, we examined the strategies adopted to achieve sustainability of the Housing First (HF) programs implemented during this demonstration project. In particular, we focused on the impacts that these strategies had on national policy. Four main themes emerged: (1) the importance of evidence that was both rigorous and contextually relevant; (2) the value of framing the evidence in a way to achieve maximum impact in the decision-making context; (3) the importance of strong researcher-decision-maker relationships, which evolved through an integrated knowledge translation approach; and (4) the value of resources and expertise provided by key stakeholders. A subsidiary theme was the importance of timing. The change in federal policy was that as of 2015, the 10 largest Canadian communities were to allocate 65% of their federal funding to HF programs for chronically and episodically homeless persons, and the remaining 41 communities and Aboriginal communities were to allocate 40% of their funding to HF programs.*

We discuss the theoretical and practical implications of what we learned about how evidence makes its way into policy and the implications of these findings for the expansion/extension of HF in Europe and internationally.

➤ **Keywords_** *Housing First Canada, integrated knowledge translation, sustainability*

Introduction

The At Home/Chez Soi (AHCS) project was the largest mental health services trial ever conducted in Canada. Conceived as a response to a national concern about homelessness in the run-up to Vancouver's 2010 Winter Olympic Games, the project implemented the Housing First (HF) model in five cities. Funded by Health Canada, and carried out by the Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC), the project used a randomized controlled trial (RCT) design, following more than 2 200 previously homeless individuals in Vancouver, Winnipeg, Toronto, Montreal, and Moncton for two years.

Housing First (HF) is an innovative, evidence-based, and principle-based (e.g., consumer choice, recovery) approach to ending chronic homelessness that utilizes rent supplements to access scattered-site market housing (usually private apartments) and recovery-oriented, clinical services that are separate from participants' housing (Aubry *et al.*, 2015). The AHCS research found that after one and two years, HF participants showed significantly more positive outcomes than Treatment as Usual (TAU) participants on measures of housing stability, quality of life, and community functioning.

Despite the positive findings emerging from the project, AHCS faced the challenge of sustaining its services beyond the research phase and influencing homelessness policy more broadly. While the project leaders had anticipated this challenge from the beginning, the need to bring sustainability to the fore became more urgent as the study approached its completion date. In this article, we focus on how the strategy for securing transitional funding for the sites influenced broader federal homelessness policy.

Internationally, demonstration projects, including those using RCTs have been increasingly adopted as a strategy for establishing and spreading successful interventions (Deeming, 2013). At the same time, such initiatives, even when successful, are vulnerable to not being sustained once the pilot phase is over. Because of

concerns about sustainability, AHCS adopted a specific strategy based on a collaborative research and knowledge translation process. The current study is valuable given that the successful results of that strategy present an example of a pilot project that effectively influenced policy. This article looks at the story behind those efforts, as well as seeks, through the lens of policy streams theory (Kingdon, 2005) to advance conceptual understanding of how knowledge makes its way into policy and practice. This study builds on a previous study which also demonstrated the utility of policy streams theory in understanding the success achieved in the conception phase of the project in advancing HF in Canada as an idea worthy of concerted study (Macnaughton *et al.*, 2013). The current study builds on that work, and helps demonstrate the relevance of policy streams theory in sustaining and spreading the AHCS demonstration project beyond the pilot phase.

Literature Review

Unfortunately, many effective demonstration projects in health and human services are not sustained, much less expanded into practice in community settings beyond the demonstration sites. Wandersman *et al.* (2008) have termed this problem the “research-practice” gap. This gap has led to the development of knowledge translation (KT) approaches. Traditional approaches to KT have emphasized top-down, “push” processes that pay little attention to the community context that surrounds and inevitably impacts the implementation of evidence-based programs (Jacobson *et al.*, 2003; Wandersman *et al.*, 2016). The limitations of “push” approaches to KT have prompted researchers to better understand the context of knowledge users and the importance of the relationship between researchers and knowledge users (Jacobson *et al.*, 2003). This recognition of the importance of user context has led to the development of more interactive approaches known as integrated knowledge translation (IKT) (Bullock *et al.*, 2010).

Central to IKT is the relationship between researchers and knowledge users. The knowledge users in IKT can include policy-makers, planners, and practitioners. With regard to policy-makers, Bogenschneider and Corbett (2010) state that it is important to break through stereotypes that researchers and policy-makers may hold of one another. Moreover, they assert that researchers need to have a better understanding of the policy-making process and context and the needs of policy-makers for research. Bogenschneider and Corbett (2010) also underscore the importance of having an ongoing relationship with policy-makers and a long-term commitment to making policy change. Finally, they argue for an educational approach over an advocacy approach in working with policy-makers, observing that policy-makers appreciate having trusted researchers on whom they can call for evidence and advice.

In the policy arena, the role of the researcher goes beyond providing research evidence and technical expertise to one of consulting about policy alternatives and solutions to problems (Goering and Wasylenki, 1993; Jacobson *et al.*, 2005). In essence, researchers become what has been called policy “operatives” (Hilgartner and Bosk, 1988) or policy “entrepreneurs” (Kingdon, 2005; Mintrom and Norman, 2009). A policy operative or entrepreneur is well-positioned to advance policy solutions in an environment in which multiple problems and solutions compete for policy attention (Hilgartner and Bosk, 1988). Similarly, within government, individuals can be positioned to be “policy brokers,” or intermediaries who can also play a policy entrepreneur function (Lomas, 2007).

Kingdon (2005) has argued that policy entrepreneurs recognize and are able to take advantage of windows of opportunity for change, when three different “streams” converge – problems, politics, and policy options. An important dimension of making change is how problems and solutions are “framed” (Benford and Snow, 2000; Fischer, 2003; Humphreys and Rappaport, 1993). Policy entrepreneurs are able to frame problems and solutions in a way that aligns multiple political stakeholders – government insiders and community members and organizations that have a stake in the issue – on a policy option. Policy entrepreneurs recognize that while research evidence is important, it is only one component of the policy change process. Discursive policy analysis (Fischer, 2003) that uses the metaphor of a drama (Hilgartner and Bosk, 1988; Greenhalgh and Russell, 2005) provides a contextualized view of how evidence can be translated into policy.

In the policy arena, IKT can be used towards different ends. One goal of IKT is to promote the sustainability or continuance of evidence-based programs beyond a research demonstration period (Scheirer and Dearing, 2011; Savaya and Spiro, 2012; Stirman *et al.*, 2012; Schell *et al.*, 2013). Another goal of IKT is to scale out or scale up an evidence-based program to other settings (Westley *et al.*, 2014). Scaling out refers to expanding a program to other settings, while scaling up is concerned with broader systems change. In the case of HF, scaling out involves the creation of new HF programs, while scaling up refers to policy change that transforms housing and services to a HF approach (Nelson, 2013; Goering and Tsemberis, 2014).

With regard to housing and mental health, there has been little research on the impacts of IKT on program sustainability or policy change. In the context of HF in the United States, Stanhope and Dunn’s (2011) case study suggests that evidence alone is insufficient to explain the G.W. Bush administration’s adoption of HF as a policy to address chronic homelessness. They noted the limitations of evidence-based policy analysis and argued that the discursive approach to policy described above provides a more robust theoretical approach for understanding policy

change. Steadman *et al.* (2002) examined the sustainability of the Access to Community Care and Effective Services and Supports (ACCESS) five-year U.S. homelessness demonstration program. Several ACCESS sites were either successful in obtaining federal, state, or local funding after the demonstration phase. Factors that enabled sites to obtain funding were: (1) the research evidence gathered during the demonstration phase, (2) a favourable political environment, and (3) having ACCESS “champions” who supported the program.

In summary, IKT has been used to bridge the “research-practice” gap, and has promise as a strategy for moving research into policy. Together with decision-maker champions, researchers who are skilled navigators in the policy arena are not only able to marshal evidence for policy options, but they are able to take advantage of windows for policy change through problem and solution framing and creating a coalition of insiders and outsiders who can promote policy change.

Methodology

The overall purpose of this research is to tell the story behind this large-scale RCT. The two main research questions are:

1. What is the chronology of the AHCS’s national-level efforts to sustain the project for a transitional period and impact social policy?
2. What are the key themes pertaining to how the study’s findings came to influence ongoing federal policy?

Data collection

Given the complexity of the knowledge exchange process related to moving evidence into policy, we adopted a case study approach, which has been recommended as the best way to understand this complexity (Greenhalgh and Fahy, 2015). The approach relies primarily on data from 15 semi-structured key informant interviews with individuals from the political and policy spheres who were involved in the project, as well as AHCS project leaders at both the national and provincial levels. Participants were identified and contacted by members of the research team and were provided with an information letter and consent form. Eleven interviews were conducted by phone and four were conducted in person. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The interviews were conducted between January and July 2015, using a semi-structured interview guide. The interviews were complemented by supplementary archival research from the period in question, including media articles, correspondence, meeting notes, and policy documents. This research was approved by the Research Ethics Board of Wilfrid Laurier University.

Data analysis

The first objective of the analysis was to synthesize the 15 key informant interviews and secondary data to produce a narrative account of the national-level sustainability story, including a description of the change, as well as the key events or turning points leading up to the change. The other objective was to identify cross-cutting themes and processes that thread their way through those themes. The approach involved constant comparative analysis as practiced in grounded theory (Charmaz, 2002) and other analytic approaches (Braun and Clarke, 2006), and entails: open or initial coding, which involves identifying and giving provisional labels (codes) to apparently similar portions of data that re-occur; and/or which appear to be emerging as significant issues or themes; focused (or thematic) coding, which involves developing more firm categories; and theoretical coding, identifying how various themes inter-relate.

The steps for ensuring the quality of the data and the rigour of the analysis included: double-checking transcriptions; memo-writing to reflect on individual coding decisions and hunches; use of a team approach for making and validating coding decisions; and member-checking (returning data analysis to participants to ensure trustworthiness of the analysis).

Findings

In the next section, we present findings related to the first research question, which was to understand the story of the project's sustainability from the national perspective.

Chronology: after the demonstration project: the story of sustainability and policy impact

The AHCS project began in March, 2009. With federal funding from Health Canada, MHCC hired a National Leadership Team and Site Operations Teams that would guide implementation in five communities that reflected the linguistic and cultural diversity of the country. From the outset of the project, there had always been a concern regarding sustainability of the project past its end in March 2013. There was also motivation to see the approach become integrated into policy, both provincially and federally. For the past 10 years, the federal government's relatively small but still significant role in homelessness policy was carried out through the Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS), which provides direct funding to 61 urban Canadian communities, as well as Aboriginal and rural/remote communities across Canada to help them address homelessness.

At the time of the AHCS project, HPS was under review, as the program requires periodic renewal. Formed in 1999 when homelessness was emerging as a national concern, the federal government created a “grants and contributions” program, known originally as the National Homelessness Initiative. During the period leading up to the program’s potential renewal date (April, 2014), concerns were expressed about the program’s effectiveness.

The existing HPS policy framework alluded to the HF approach, and there was interest within the federal government in advancing this approach. However, much of the existing evidence in support of the HF approach came largely from the United States, and it was unclear whether the model could be implemented in various Canadian contexts, although versions of the model existed in pockets. Additionally, it was understood that the Conservative government of the day was focused on reducing the “footprint” of government, and predisposed to devolving responsibilities perceived to belong to other levels of government. Despite the federal government’s long involvement in housing, this issue is technically under provincial jurisdiction.

In the beginning phases of the initiative, project leaders had always emphasized the need to “think about sustainability from Day 1”. An integral part of the strategy was to adopt an IKT approach, which entailed engaging policy decision-makers in the research process, including setting up a National Working Group and Site Advisory Groups. The working assumption was that engagement would increase the relevance of the research to decision-maker concerns, and thereby increase the chances that they would eventually “buy in” to the results. It was unclear, however, what level of government would ultimately be responsible for sustaining the programs.

Given the complexities of implementation, and the need to focus on the research, it was difficult to maintain an active focus on sustainability, and on the bigger picture of what sustainability could mean, including expansion of the approach more broadly, and its impact on policy. However, around the time the interim results of the project were being compiled (2011), the concern about sustainability did come back to the “front burner,” and the project leaders developed a task force to strategize. Within the complex homelessness policy arena, which involved federal, provincial and local players, it was evident that the “ask,” or the request for funding and policy change, had to be directed to all these levels.

In the summer of 2011, there was a deep sense of urgency when it became clear that the federal government would not reconsider their agreement to fund this demonstration after March, 2013. While the “ask” had once been considered in broad terms, with the impending end of the project, the project leaders focused on the more immediate concern of securing funding for a transitional period beyond the project’s formal end date. This would enable the analysis of the final results, as well as maintain the housing and support services for participants beyond this period.

With a growing awareness of the urgency of the need, the project leaders recognized the importance of influencing senior political leaders at various levels of government. The strategy that emerged thus blended IKT with a “full court press” effort to engage decision-makers from the bureaucratic and political spheres. Based on the interim findings, the project leaders and the MHCC Government Relations team conducted an effort described by one individual as a “relentless effort.” Developing an oral presentation with slides, they conducted a series of meetings, “briefing up and down,” with federal and provincial decision-makers.

While this was happening, they also received advice from decision-maker partners about how to frame their presentation. A key piece of advice was to frame their request in the context of “improving the efficiency of an existing government program.” At the same time, key officials from Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC), the Ministry responsible for the HPS program, including the Minister herself and leading bureaucrats, became impressed with the AHCS project’s emerging findings and considered the option of “repurposing” the program in line with HF principles. In order to “sell” this option, one official in particular, “pushed really hard [for AHCS researchers] to quantify the results” in terms of return on investment.

However, in the summer of 2012, with less than one year left in the project, project leaders had still not received an answer to their request. At this time, Michael Kirby, an influential former federal government Senator, and also the outgoing board chair of the MHCC became increasingly re-involved in the project. Kirby played a key role in the original conception of the project. As a result of meetings he convened, a senior official from one province proposed a cost-sharing agreement for transitional funding between the provinces and federal government. Kirby was also able to present the results to senior officials in the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO), who were impressed by the data concerning “the efficiency of the results, compared to other alternative approaches” for addressing homelessness. The PMO then connected with the officials in HRSDC, and learned of their support for HF.

In October, 2012, one AHCS leader “learned confidentially” that an agreement in principle had been reached between four of the five AHCS provinces and the federal government. Finally, in March, 2013, a few days before the federal budget became public, Louise Bradley, CEO of MHCC, received a phone call, informing her that there would be support for a five-year extension of the HPS program, which would be repurposed and focused on HF.

Key informants shared their perspective about why the change in policy happened. Said one: “there was good evidence at the right time that allowed the government to say or to feel that there was an important federal leadership role to continue in homelessness based on evidence”. This participant explained that the timing was

right given that a decision had to be made about the HPS program's continuation. The evidence presented in support of transitional funding (i.e. the AHCS interim findings) occurred at the time the consideration of the wider policy decision was happening. Prior to the push for transitional funding, earlier project results had also informed thinking within HRSDC in a gradual iterative process where "all the right people" were involved. As one individual said: "all the stars aligned".

Key themes in how evidence was translated into policy

In this section, we discuss underlying themes relating to the second research question, which was how the strategy adopted by the project enabled the evidence from AHCS to influence policy.

Key informants repeatedly emphasized four themes: (1) the importance of the evidence, (2) the framing of that evidence, (3) the importance of the relationships between researchers, decision-makers, and their intermediaries; and 4) the importance of resources and expertise provided by key stakeholders and partners. A subsidiary theme common throughout the main themes was the importance of timing.

The evidence

Many participants emphasized the importance of the results themselves. Said one key informant with broad governmental experience: "the thing you've got to remember in all of this, is that it only worked because the research was so good". This individual was careful to point out that evidence alone was not sufficient, emphasizing that it is "... not always true that great research gets implemented". The serendipitous timing of that evidence was also important, given that it allowed the results to quickly inform the policy decision surrounding what would happen to the HPS program beyond April, 2014.

Other stakeholders emphasized that it was not only the evidence's rigour, but also its relevance to the Canadian context. Said one government stakeholder from the Department responsible for homelessness policy:

I think At Home was really able to solidify in many people's minds, particularly in the political sense, how Housing First could work in communities big and small with different populations, Aboriginal, [and non-Aboriginal],... [that] it could work across the country with different models. So I think demonstrating success [in that sense] was really important.

Additionally, key informants noted that the study was part of a larger body of evidence that was accumulating elsewhere in Canada, as well as internationally.

Framing the evidence

Many of the key informants emphasized that it wasn't just the evidence, but the way it was framed and communicated to decision-makers. One said: "you know the way in which it was presented was as critical as the findings themselves. And, so that was really important." An issue in particular was the significance of the economic findings in the particular political context. Said one of the lead researchers: "... it was that \$20 savings for a \$10 investment that people wanted to hear and repeatedly used for their conversations. We saw it in the press. We saw it in the news release. We saw it everywhere". Another government stakeholder said:

It's a simpler argument for someone to make than them trying to explain why choice is important or why harm reduction is part of the model. So if you're from a political perspective it was just an easier sell I would say.

As mentioned earlier, it was also important that the request to government was framed not as a request for more money, but in terms of an "opportunity to reform the efficiency of an existing government program".

Despite this messaging, another government key informant explained that the caveats or "nuances" placed on the economic findings were also important to the credibility of the findings. Other key informants emphasized that the idea that economic findings themselves made all the difference was oversold. Equally important, an AHCS project leader said, was the hopefulness behind the approach: "It provided a piece of a solution to what was going to possibly be a program that was going to end".

The importance of researcher/decision-maker/intermediary relationships

Many key informants placed importance on the value of ongoing engagement between researchers and decision-makers. The extent of that engagement, which was described as "relentless" and a "full court press," led to a critical mass of individuals becoming involved. This included the "rank and file," as well as "very senior" political decision-makers. As one individual, an AHCS leader who was involved in the communications strategy, stated:

We did a pretty broad and deep set of briefings with political staff, with senior bureaucrats and elected officials not only federally but also provincially. I think, you know, they talked to each other. I think there was a bit of a groundswell.

Another factor mentioned was the quality of the researcher/decision-maker relationships, and how trusting relationships enabled the project to stay on track. As one government official said of this dialogue:

I think that's absolutely critical... It was critical for the conversations in the middle [of the project] to make sure that everyone aligned and stayed aligned, and maybe in some cases realigned to produce what I think people on the government side felt was needed to understand and, you know, have it affect policy... That's where I mean again, we're coming back to that same thing of having the research team and the decision-makers kind of arm in arm earlier on and understanding and good communication between the two. I think that's how you get it solved.

Finally, having strong researcher/decision-maker relationships enabled AHCS to gain crucial advice about how to frame their findings. A number of key individuals within government played key intermediary roles in this regard, helping the MHCC understand the importance of framing the "ask" in terms of cost-effectiveness, and in terms of opportune timing to reform an existing government program.

The resources and expertise of key stakeholders

In terms of stakeholders who contributed to sustainability, key informants spoke about the role of the MHCC and other aligned advocacy organizations. First, they noted the role of MHCC in convening the research, and in carrying out a project in a way that government itself could not have accomplished. They also mentioned the unique positioning of the organization, which enabled its results to be effectively disseminated, as its structure provided a "a receptor site, [or] a mechanism for making people aware of findings that much research naturally wouldn't have had". As another key informant, an MHCC leader explained, the Commission was positioned outside of government and strategically within the federal/provincial context.

By creating a national Mental Health Commission, at arm's length from the federal government, this unique and unprecedented body was able to dance outside the constitutional framework of health... (and) wasn't log-jammed the way the federal government would be if it tried to establish clinical services and housing interventions in five provinces where health care is very much under provincial jurisdiction.

Finally, key informants mentioned the resources brought to bear to the project that enabled the findings to be "amplified", as well as the MHCC's Government Relations expertise that helped the results to be framed effectively.

Research participants also mentioned the supportive role of the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness (CAEH) and other organizations, such as the Homeless Hub, in helping to convey a consistent message about the value of HF. As one individual from the homelessness community said: "I mean the AHCS project obviously I would say is the key thing. I think also the Canadian Alliance was something important in that. I think that coalesced with some leading national voices saying

this is the direction to go in". CAEH in particular was mentioned as an organization with unique access to the government of the time. One individual from the homelessness advocacy community noted that CAEH was able to support AHCS's message, but also provided some "political translation that helped [the government] get comfortable with it". For example, the CAEH was able to bring to bear the successful experience of HF in Alberta, and of the approaches' implementation under conservative administrations in the United States.

The outcome: Change in federal homelessness policy

A total of \$600 million was allocated to HPS from 2014 to 2019. The largest 10 Canadian communities, which received 80% of the community funding from HPS, were required to invest a minimum of 65% of their funding in HF starting April 1, 2015. All other funded communities with allocations of greater than \$200K, including Aboriginal communities, were required to allocate a minimum of 40% of their funding to HF starting April 1, 2016. Moreover, the target population for HPS funding was mandated to be people who are chronically or episodically homeless.

Discussion

Theoretical implications

Policy streams theory (Kingdon, 2005) understands policy change as the convergence of problems, politics, and policy ideas. It posits a key role for timing, and the ability of individuals or organizations to take advantage of policy windows that arise to bring together a convergence of the three elements. In the present case, the "problem" was what to do about the AHCS participants with the impending end of the project, given that no assurances had been made about continued funding. As it turned out, the government had its own challenge, which was what to do about the impending "sunset" of the HPS program, and whether to cut or devolve it in the face of favourable evidence that the federally-funded AHCS study was producing.

Because of the efforts of multiple partners, the policy idea or proposal that came to the fore was to not only provide the AHCS study with transitional funding, but to repurpose the HPS program with a focus on HF. In order for this policy idea to go forward, the timing had to be right. As the HPS review happened, the evidence in support of the transitional funding was presented while the broader policy direction was already being considered. Also, the political context had to be favourable. In the present case, this meant that key allies had to be brought on side, such as the Minister of Finance, and senior decision-makers within the Prime Minister's Office. This depended on being able to access these insiders and frame the policy idea in

a way that resonated within the current political context. Hence, there was a focus on the cost-effectiveness of AHCS and using this evidence to improve the efficiency of an existing program, rather than “expand the footprint of government,” which as one key informant emphasized, was anathema to the then-current Conservative ruling party.

In the evidence-based healthcare movement, the importance of evidence in and of itself is noted, as well as the necessity of marshaling data considered to be rigorous within an accepted hierarchy of evidence (Fafard, 2015). Much emphasis is placed on the notion of seemingly irrational “gaps” between what the evidence says and what policy and practice actually occurs. The results of our study, while affirming the importance of rigorous evidence, are consistent with the more recent turn within health policy research towards discursive policy analysis (Fischer, 2003; Fafard, 2015). Furthermore, our research suggests that rather than being viewed as incommensurate epistemological frameworks, evidence-based policy and discursive policy analysis are complementary (Nelson, 2013). Evidence based on rigorous research about “what works” is important, but so too is discursive policy analysis of the framing, context, stakeholder involvement, and timing of policy options.

Drawn from political science and policy studies, the discursive approach pays attention to the role of narrative in decision-making, or to the importance of understanding how evidence is presented or framed (Koon *et al.*, 2016) in a persuasive manner within a given political context. Moreover, discursive analysis suggests that decision-making is not a strictly rational endeavor, but is more accurately understood within the purview of rhetoric (Greenhalgh and Russell, 2005). It suggests, and our results affirm, that for evidence to be most impactful, it should be framed as a plausible policy idea for solving a salient problem, in a way that is convincing enough to mobilize a broad coalition to support it. In this light, the success of the IKT approach adopted by the AHCS leaders related to the researcher/decision-maker partnerships that developed, as it was these relationships that enabled the research to be framed in a way that mobilized a coalition of stakeholders both within and outside of government. Also important were the resources and expertise of the host agency and other key partners, that enabled the research team to carry out its communications strategy, which was both broad and deep.

It should be noted that in AHCS, evidence played a more prominent role in the sustainability phase as compared to the conception or adoption phase, where success was driven significantly by the entrepreneurial skills of certain key individuals in advancing AHCS as a promising idea to be tested in the Canadian context (Macnaughton *et al.*, 2013). In the sustainability phase, rhetorical prowess was again important, but went hand in hand with the evidence itself. In both cases, however,

the role of timing was crucial, where persuasive arguments were marshaled in the face of opening policy windows (Kingdon, 2005): at the project's inception, the 2010 Winter Olympics, and at its end, an upcoming decision-point about whether to renew the federal homelessness funding stream.

Practical implications

There were certain practical implications and lessons learned in the course of this research demonstration project. Below, we talk about what worked well, and what worked less well.

In terms of what worked well, most key informants pointed to the importance of having early findings to be able to share with decision-makers. They believed that it was also important that these findings be communicated honestly and with "nuance," so that the limitations as well as strengths were clear. Doing so actually heightened the credibility of the results. The importance of a collaborative, coalition-building approach also became evident. Having strong research/decision-maker relationships allowed both parties to align expectations around sustainability when challenges or misunderstandings arose about defining who was responsible for what. One key informant mentioned how the "generosity of spirit" of the project leaders created a climate that allowed other community-based organizations to align with AHCS, and which enabled a consistent message to come forward to government. Another key informant mentioned the importance of leaders having the skills to "hold a space," so that individuals from different perspectives could work together rather than pursue separate directions.

There were some aspects of the project that worked less well. While project leaders talked about prioritizing sustainability from the project's beginning, they acknowledged the difficulty of keeping the issue on the "front-burner," and defining clear expectations from the beginning, as well as underestimating the resources and time that the sustainability strategy would ultimately entail. While the project was fortunate in drawing on the organizational expertise of the MHCC, it took time to develop a cohesive message, and the sheer scope of the communication campaign was well beyond the initial expectations of any of the project leaders. A number of key informants also pointed to an intrinsic difficulty of mounting demonstration projects in producing evidence to convince decision-makers, given that those decision-makers often require information more quickly than researchers are accustomed to providing. In this case, the researchers had to overcome their trepidation about presenting findings that had not undergone peer review.

Implications for spreading the housing first model internationally

The question arises about the sustainability and spread of the Housing First model in Europe, and what role research is playing in its wider dissemination internationally. Conceived in New York City, HF is now indeed having far reaching application beyond North America (Padgett *et al.*, 2016). Europe, which just hosted the second International HF conference in Ireland in 2016, has seen HF grow by leaps and bounds in a short period of time, and seen a number of pilot projects being implemented and studied. Between 2011 and 2013 the Housing First Europe (HFE) initiative implemented and evaluated programs in five centres (Helsinki, Amsterdam, Budapest, Glasgow, and Dublin) (Busch-Geertsema, 2014). France has just completed a four-city RCT of HF based on AHCS (Tinland *et al.*, 2013); a three-city RCT of HF is being conducted in Spain (Bernad *et al.*, 2016); Portugal is researching and expanding HF (Ornelas *et al.*, 2014); Italy has developed a network of HF programs (Console *et al.*, 2016); based on the pilot, the HF model is being expanded in Ireland (O'Sullivan, 2016); and a multi-national HF fidelity study is underway. Also, in Australia, rigorous research on HF programs is being conducted (Whittaker *et al.*, 2015).

A significant influence on the initial adoption of HF in North America was the leadership of certain key individuals, including Philip Mangano, Sam Tsemberis, and Michael Kirby, all of whom led through their policy entrepreneurship skills, in other words their ability to persuade decision-makers to take a chance on a promising idea to end chronic homelessness (Stanhope and Dunn, 2011). As the evidence around the model accumulated, it began to be implemented more widely. Eventually, HF was recognized in the U.S. as an evidence-based practice, and in Canada as official federal homelessness policy.

The adoption of HF internationally has been influenced by research conducted in the US and Canada and IKT activities provided by the model's founder, Dr. Sam Tsemberis, as well as local champions in various countries (Greenwood *et al.*, 2013). The results of the current study suggest that moving beyond the adoption phase and sustaining and growing the model will depend not only on the research results coming out of the pilot phase, but will also hinge on the strategies adopted for communicating this emerging evidence to policy makers in a convincing way.

In the case of AHCS, one convincing aspect of the strategy was the rigour of the experimental design used to generate the evidence. Both developed and developing countries have used RCT's as a strategy to implement and spread innovative ideas; this strategy also holds promise for expediting the move towards implementation in jurisdictions where there is interest, but significant progress has not moved far beyond "rhetorical nods" (O'Sullivan, 2016) towards the HF policy. While

acknowledging the limitations of demonstration programs that fail to be sustained, Shinn (2016) highlights the role of rigorous experimental evidence in spreading HF throughout North America.

This suggests that in the European context, those jurisdictions that are studying HF using an RCT design (e.g. France, Spain) (Tinland *et al.*, 2013; Bernad *et al.*, 2016) may have an advantage when it comes to sustaining and spreading these interventions, should they prove successful. Nonetheless, our study results, and those of the conception study, suggest that methodological rigour, while certainly important, is not the sole factor that determines whether evidence about what works moves into policy and practice more widely.

Indeed, when it came to the persuasiveness of evidence, what the key informants noted as much as its rigour was its contextual relevance. In other words, despite initial skepticism about whether an American model could work, they found affirmation that the model could work across several Canadian cities with varied demographic and service system profiles. They also saw evidence that the model could be flexibly adapted to these various contexts and still be effective. This was in keeping with the premise tested by the study's designers that the basic principles (as opposed to the specific operational details) of the intervention could be implemented with fidelity to model, and that the intervention could be effective with a wider group of homelessness individuals than had been served by the Pathways HF model, employing a wider range of support (i.e. both ACT and ICM) (Goering *et al.*, 2011).

Similarly, in Europe, against the hope held for the model's promise, there has been some skepticism about whether HF would work in a continent with significant differences in demographics and social welfare systems (that differ with North America, and also vary within EU's constituent countries) (Pleace and Bretherton, 2013). Thus, there have been some questions raised regarding the jurisdictions mounting the various pilot projects about who is being served, what exactly is being implemented, and whether it would meet Housing First fidelity standards expressed in terms of the Pathways model's operational details (Greenwood *et al.*, 2013).

For instance, in France, the D'Abord study directly parallels At Home/Chez Soi's focus on people with mental disorder, with the ACT/ICM support targeting mental health and addictions-related needs (Tinland *et al.*, 2013). By contrast, in Glasgow, the focus is more squarely on addictions (Busch-Geertsema, 2012). Regardless of context, however, chronically homeless individuals typically experience complex concurrent needs. Arguably, whether addictions are more prominent than mental illness in certain European HF participants, many would also have undiagnosed mental health issues, and thus the populations would have considerable overlap

(Aubry, 2014). Though the AHCS intervention was framed in terms of mental health, the five sites typically included individuals who fell outside traditional mental health system criteria, including those with prominent addictions (Goering *et al.*, 2011).

As for differences in implementation context of the surrounding service system, arguments about fidelity of complex interventions now emphasize attention to addressing common underlying principles, rather than operational specifics (Hawe *et al.*, 2004; Pleace and Bretherton, 2013; Busch-Geertsema, 2014). Initial evidence suggests that despite some differences, and implementation failures, for the most part, the pioneering European HF programs *are* implementing the essential ingredients of the model (Greenwood *et al.*, 2013), and achieving an apparently impressive degree of housing stability for individuals experiencing chronic homelessness with complex support needs (Busch-Geertsema, 2014).

In summary, our study suggests that strategies for converting emerging European research results (and subsequent findings) into longer-term sustainability would benefit from drawing on the experimental rigour of the studies used to generate them. We recognize, however, that in contrast to the HF European evaluation (Busch-Geertsema, 2014), AHCS was able to leverage considerable resources to conduct a rigorous RCT. We found nonetheless, that in mounting a knowledge exchange strategy, the emphasis on the contextual relevance of the results was crucial. Of similar importance was timing, being able to communicate results as policy windows opened, framed in terms that resonated within the policy-making context (e.g. cost-effectiveness, “ending vs. managing” homelessness, etc.). Again, experimental rigour in the form of an RCT, though important, is not the sole factor that explained adoption or sustainability of HF.

Our results suggest further that the role of evidence may be different depending on the stage of implementation. In the adoption phase, when making the case to implement a pilot project in a new context, HF champions may cite the promise of the HF model, but acknowledge the need to show success in this new context. In the sustainability phase, actually producing such evidence is necessary to make a persuasive case to maintain and spread the model. As the research results accumulate in the European context, or elsewhere beyond North America, researchers need to keep these things in mind when seeking to sustain and grow effective HF programs.

Conclusion

This case study has shown how evidence has influenced policy in one country in the domain of homelessness, and drawn out the implications for other jurisdictions, including the European Union. The findings show that evidence alone is insufficient, but that evidence framing is crucial. Furthermore, in order to understand the decision-making context and make persuasive arguments for policy change, strong relationships must be developed with policy-makers from the outset. Implementation teams must also have the resources and expertise to communicate their messages effectively, and be able to strategize about sustainability from the beginning of the demonstration project. Given the challenges of timing demonstration projects, project leaders must also be ready to marshal interim findings and focus on communicating them while the research is still in progress. The emphasis on decision-making in the literature suggests a rational process where certain individuals deliberate on available evidence. Rather than focusing on the decisions of individuals, our study emphasizes the need to be sensitive to opening policy windows, and frame results in a way that build consensus amongst various groups of stakeholders, for this is what influences the decisions of those key policy decision-makers.

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