

# Examining the library as a site for intervention: A mixed-methods case study of the 'Innovative Solutions to Homelessness' pilot project

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## Background

- It is estimated that between 150,000-300,000 Canadians will experience homelessness throughout the year, with 35,000 being homeless on any given night, and 50,000 experiencing hidden homelessness. Considering the clear and concerning reality of homelessness prevalent in Canada, and the variability of needs and assistance required by the population, social work services must provide pathways for immediate assistance and future success, particularly in larger urban centres.
- Libraries often house a number of services and supports which may be extremely helpful to those experiencing homelessness; one initiative is to hire a Homelessness Prevention Outreach Worker (HPOW) situated within the Library system
- **The purpose of this study was to evaluate the year-long 'Innovative Solutions to Homelessness' project, a partnership project which centralized the role of the library in addressing homelessness in Mississauga, ON.**

## Qualitative Results

### Strengths of pilot project

- *"It's great to have the HPOW as a resource to the system. I no longer feel that we're failing the homeless but have a strategy to work with them and improve their lives."* (focus group participant)
- *"It helps to have [the HPOW] in the library as a go-to person who is skilled and qualified to handle situations as they arise."* (focus group)

### Recommendations for future improvement

- *"[The HPOW] is one person, and even from a security perspective, it would help to have someone at each centre..."* (focus group participant)
- *"I'd say the library could be a place to educate, not just the people who are at risk of homelessness, or who are homeless, but to educate the public more about it. I think it could be a safe space to facilitate communication between all groups."* (focus group participant)

### Homelessness Prevention Outreach Worker Comments

- *I knew the mandate was homelessness and to address housing. Then I started thinking about barriers around housing, and ID was one... [also] it [w]as a way to engage, or something practical to give people, because sometimes you're just another social worker, like, "who are you, I've seen ten people like you, what are you going to offer me"? So, I thought it was a way to at least offer a service that is practical, and a way to engage people, right, because ID is at least a way to get people in, and to talking."*
- *"I'm learning how homelessness and mental health, how it intersects with so many different services in the city... Animal Services, they are saying "help us". I spoke to municipal by-law enforcement, and they are saying help because they are having contact with people with hoarding and other issues. Transit operators are having contact with individuals. [Having it] centralized, it is easy to have an internal contact with someone who they can call."*

## Methods

### Measures

- Tracking data to monitor the number of interactions between the HPOW with clients over the course of project.
- Online surveys – Participants completed open- and closed-ended questions regarding their understanding and perceptions of the project.
- Focus groups – Provided further information regarding employee experiences with the project.
- Individual interview – Identified effectiveness and strategies for addressing homelessness through libraries in the future.

### Participants

- Online Survey: Library staff ( $n = 82$ ), Security services ( $n = 11$ )
- Qualitative Interviews: 3 Focus Groups with library and security staff ( $n = 12$ ); Individual interview with HPOW ( $n = 1$ ).

### Data Analysis

- Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and t-tests to examine differences in responses between participants who had received training related to homelessness compared to those who had not received training.
- Qualitative data were analyzed using deductive and inductive thematic analysis (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014) to examine perceptions of the impact of the project, strengths and challenges of the project, and suggestions for improving the program in the future.

## Quantitative Results

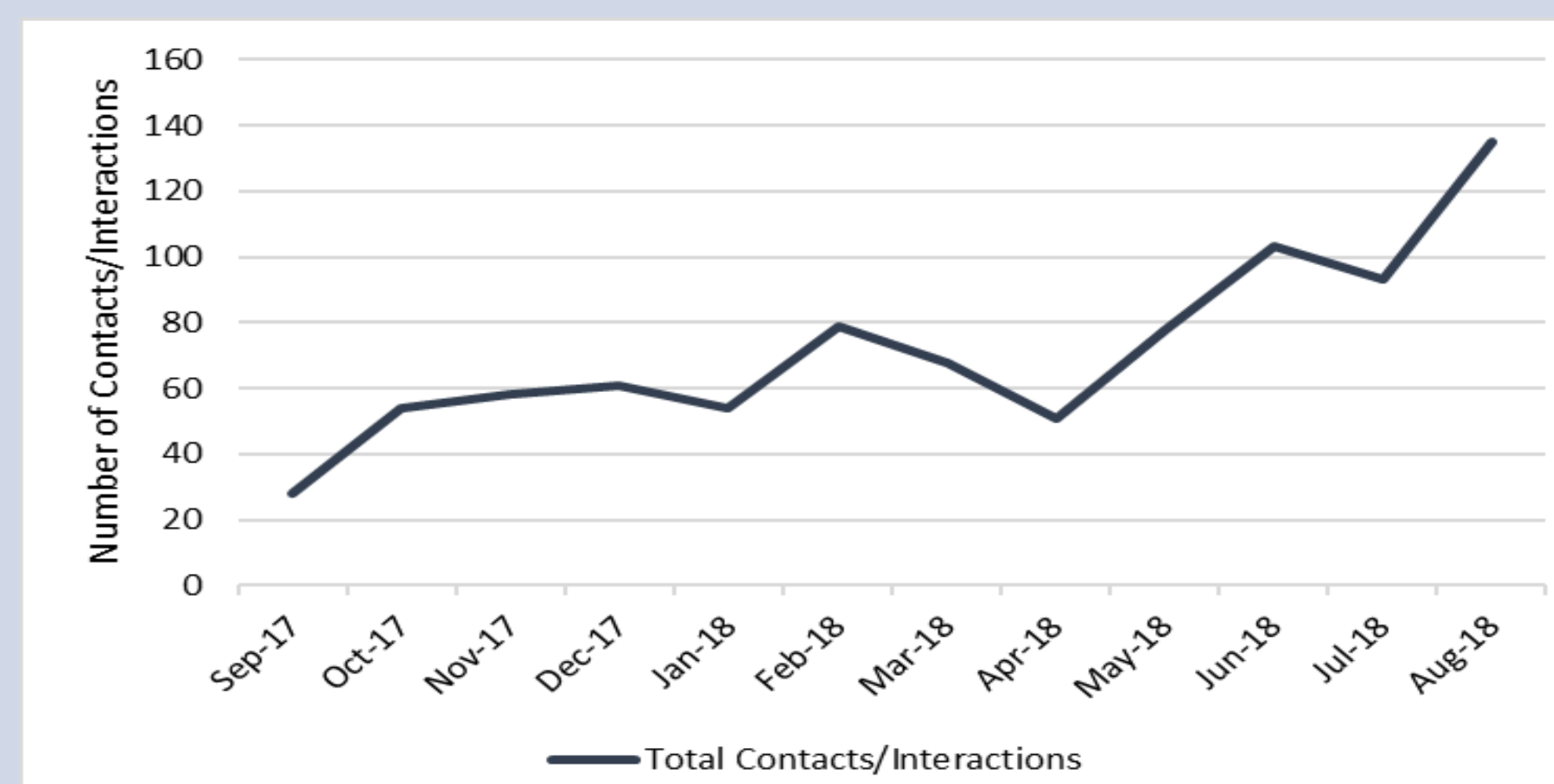


Figure 1. Number of interactions between HPOW and homeless clients per month.

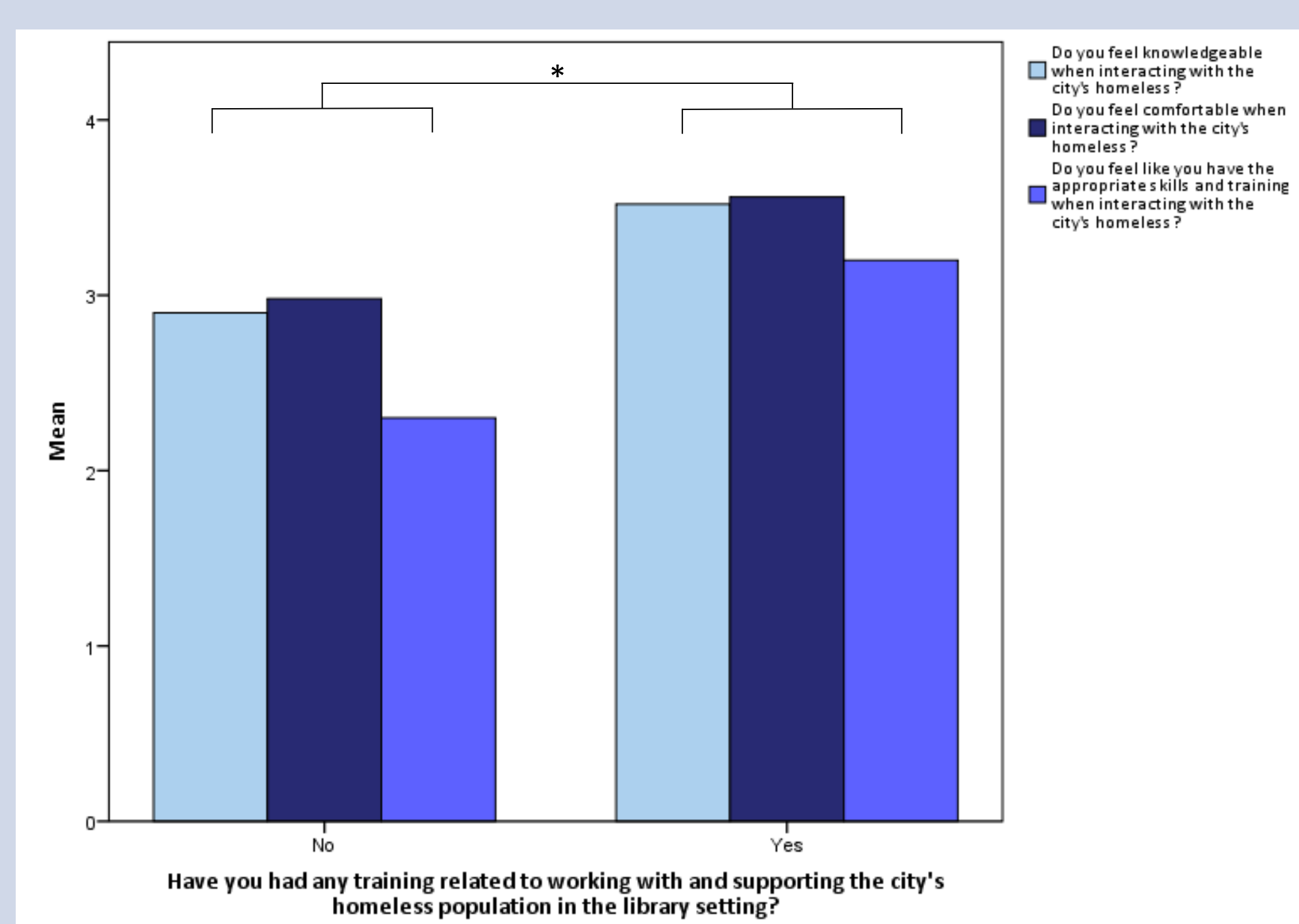


Figure 2. Staff who had received training about homelessness reported significantly higher knowledge, comfort, and feeling they had appropriate skills when interacting with homeless individuals compared to untrained staff.

### Services Provided to Homeless Individuals by Library Staff

1. Assistance with library resources/services (computer, photocopier, etc.)
2. Providing a First Step card or other library services
3. Connecting with the homeless prevention outreach worker
4. Recommending shelters and housing resources
5. Food/food bank referrals
6. Helping with job searches
7. Assistance with printing and scanning government forms
8. Information on shower passes

## Discussion/Conclusion

- The HPOW was critical in providing support for Library staff and linking resources for homeless individuals.
- Challenges of the project included an ongoing lack of affordable housing, low rental vacancy rates, and difficulty securing temporary shelter for individuals. Another struggle was project communication, staff training and awareness.
- Suggestions for others implementing a similar project include communication to front facing employees to ensure knowledge about resources available within the library system.