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DEEP Briefing is published by the McGill Department of Equity, Ethics and Policy (DEEP). This series summarizes key research findings, highlighting considerations for population and public health.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Sector fragmentation, lack of knowledge about homelessness, and barriers to accessing services perpetuate instability for at-risk individuals.
- Stigmatization and inadequate support, especially during detention, worsen vulnerabilities and contribute to cycles of homelessness and legal involvement.
- Notable differences exist in the types of services, intervention strategies, and coverage of homelessness prevention programs across Québec.
- Regionally coordinated homelessness prevention services, strengthened housing options, and cross-sector collaboration are needed to support individuals at risk when they leave correctional settings across Québec.

ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN OF HOMELESSNESS PREVENTION PROGRAMS IN CORRECTIONAL SETTINGS IN QUÉBEC

People who leave correctional settings without secure housing face heightened risks of recidivism, ongoing legal problems, and social marginalization. This issue of **DEEP Briefing** presents the findings of an environmental scan of correctional settings in Québec by McBurney Fellow Mariella Berberi. It discusses critical service gaps, regional disparities, and systemic barriers to housing and reintegration. It recommends that all administrative regions in Quebec, particularly those where a provincial detention center is located, implement dedicated homelessness prevention services for individuals at risk.

INTRODUCTION

The Québec Homelessness Prevention Collaborative (QHPC) is a partnership founded by the Old Brewery Mission and McGill University's Department of Equity, Ethics and Policy (DEEP). It engages a broad group of researchers, and Montreal-based community organizations working with homeless populations, to develop evidence and practice-based proposals for policy and judicial reform to prevent homelessness in Québec. One QHPC working group focuses on judicial and correctional processes. It formulates recommendations for preventing homelessness among people in the justice system by providing flexible, humane support for people throughout their judicial trajectory. Individuals who personally experienced the judicial system highlight several key issues—distrust towards correctional services, obstacles to planning their housing situation post-release while they are in detention, and blind spots regarding adaptation of services for individuals with complex health and social needs, in the provincial correctional system. Although the QHPC proposed recommendations to improve the issues that people in the provincial correctional system have been facing, it remains a challenge. Understanding current challenges is essential to develop more effective policy and practice.

This policy brief presents key findings from the research of Mariella Berberi, DEEP McBurney Fellow, during a 3-month internship at the QHPC and Sortie carcérale planifiée in Montreal. It examines the availability of programs aimed at preventing homelessness among people exiting the judicial system in Quebec. It also highlights current issues related to supporting justice-involved individuals in securing stable housing, accessing essential services, and successfully reintegrating into society. Policy considerations are proposed for building a more effective system and breaking the cycle of homelessness in correctional settings.



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CONTEXT

People who are unhoused or at risk of homelessness face significant challenges related to fragmented legal support and barriers to accessing services.

Inadequate support and coordination

People at risk of homelessness often face greater instability as they move through the legal process. Each stage, especially incarceration, can bring major personal, financial, and health losses that contribute to housing instability (1–3). A lack of coordination between the police, courts, prisons, community groups, and health services means people must repeatedly explain their life story, which is exhausting (4). Many live in material and financial conditions that increase the likelihood of police or legal encounters (5). Without income, it is difficult to meet basic needs such as food, shelter, and rest, leading to behaviors that draw further legal involvement. Stigma related to homelessness and legal history often results in negative experiences with services, causing setbacks, loss of motivation, and distrust of social institutions (4). For those with severe mental illness or cognitive vulnerabilities, these outcomes can lead to ongoing cycles of homelessness and justice involvement at enormous human cost. Detention environments (incarcerations between 2 weeks and 6 months) impose barriers such as lack of social assistance before release, costly phone calls, unpredictable inter-facility transfers, limited probation support to help with social reintegration, and insufficient mental health and addiction services (6).

“Without stable housing, many justice-involved people will not be able to effectively reintegrate into society”

John Howard Society of Canada
Locked Up, Locked Out Report, 2024

Barriers to access services

People at risk of or experiencing homelessness face numerous structural, organizational and interpersonal barriers to access services (4). These may include uneven geographic distribution of services, limited program capacity, complex referral processes, and difficulties navigating available resources. Therefore, it is essential to identify and remove barriers to accessing services and improve the services and resources that are offered.

Lack of understanding

Issues also arise because of the lack of understanding of the realities of homelessness. People who are homeless or at risk of homelessness experience a double stigma linked to their situation (poverty, welfare, homelessness) and legal status. Lack of understanding of the realities of homelessness, the diversity of people in this situation and the factors involved in entering and exiting homelessness lead to poorly adapted or uncoordinated judicial and correctional services for this population (7).

OUR RESEARCH

There is limited scientific literature on effective homelessness prevention approaches for justice-involved individuals. The few existing studies highlight several major challenges. Studies examining transition support programs for individuals released from correctional settings have shown limited improvement in housing stability or health (8). There are programs across Quebec aimed at supporting social reintegration, providing guidance, and reducing recidivism among vulnerable individuals exiting the judicial system. However, these programs are few and face challenges in their implementation. The available evidence highlights the need to strengthen the capabilities of personnel in these judicial trajectories through improved access to services, stronger collaboration, and recognition of experiential knowledge.

To deepen understanding of key challenges, the QHPC conducted an environmental scan in the summer of 2024, supported by DEEP scholar Mariella Berberi. The scan identified programs across Quebec that support unhoused individuals or at-risk individuals exiting the provincial system (9). Using the snowball method, 40 organizations were interviewed. This process revealed key differences in program approaches, areas of intervention, specific challenges, and factors that support their work.

Our findings reveal notable variations in the types of services offered, intervention strategies, and regional distribution across Quebec.

Variations in program focus and scope. Some programs specifically support individuals involved in the judicial system, offering tailored support during incarceration, release, and beyond (e.g., programs such as Sortie Carcérale Planifiée or Programme Trajectoires Justice de Pech). Other programs do not target the

correctional release transition specifically, but provide services to individuals experiencing or at risk of homelessness who are involved with the criminal justice system (e.g., Programme d'Accompagnement Justice et Intervention Communautaire). Finally, some services can identify and assist at-risk groups like the homeless and may address criminal justice involvement, though not specifically targeting this population.

Variations in intervention priorities across practices. Some programs focus mainly on substance use and mental health, while others emphasize stable housing, social networks, or connecting individuals to additional resources. Notably, some critical targets, like enhancing social networks and referrals to social resources, are underrepresented, indicating a need for development in these areas. Strengthening support for these programs would broaden assistance and better meet the needs of diverse vulnerable populations. In some non-urban regions, innovative service models address health, social, and housing needs in an integrated way. Prioritizing documentation and evaluation of these innovative service models could enable their expansion and replication.

Urban concentration of services. While some services like PAJIC or Social Integration Agents (AIS) program are available across Quebec, most services are concentrated in urban areas such as Montréal and Québec City. Figure 1 shows the distribution of these services in Quebec. Green or blue dots represent regions with a range of prevention-related services for this population. Red or yellow dots only limited services. Such stark geographic disparities in access result in certain areas benefiting from a wider range of resources than others.

Complexity of Client Needs. There is a shift in the population served by homelessness prevention services. Many providers note that aging clients often live with mental illness alongside cognitive and functional impairments, complicating providers' daily work. Many programs and housing situations are poorly adapted to meet these functional limitations.
across Québec

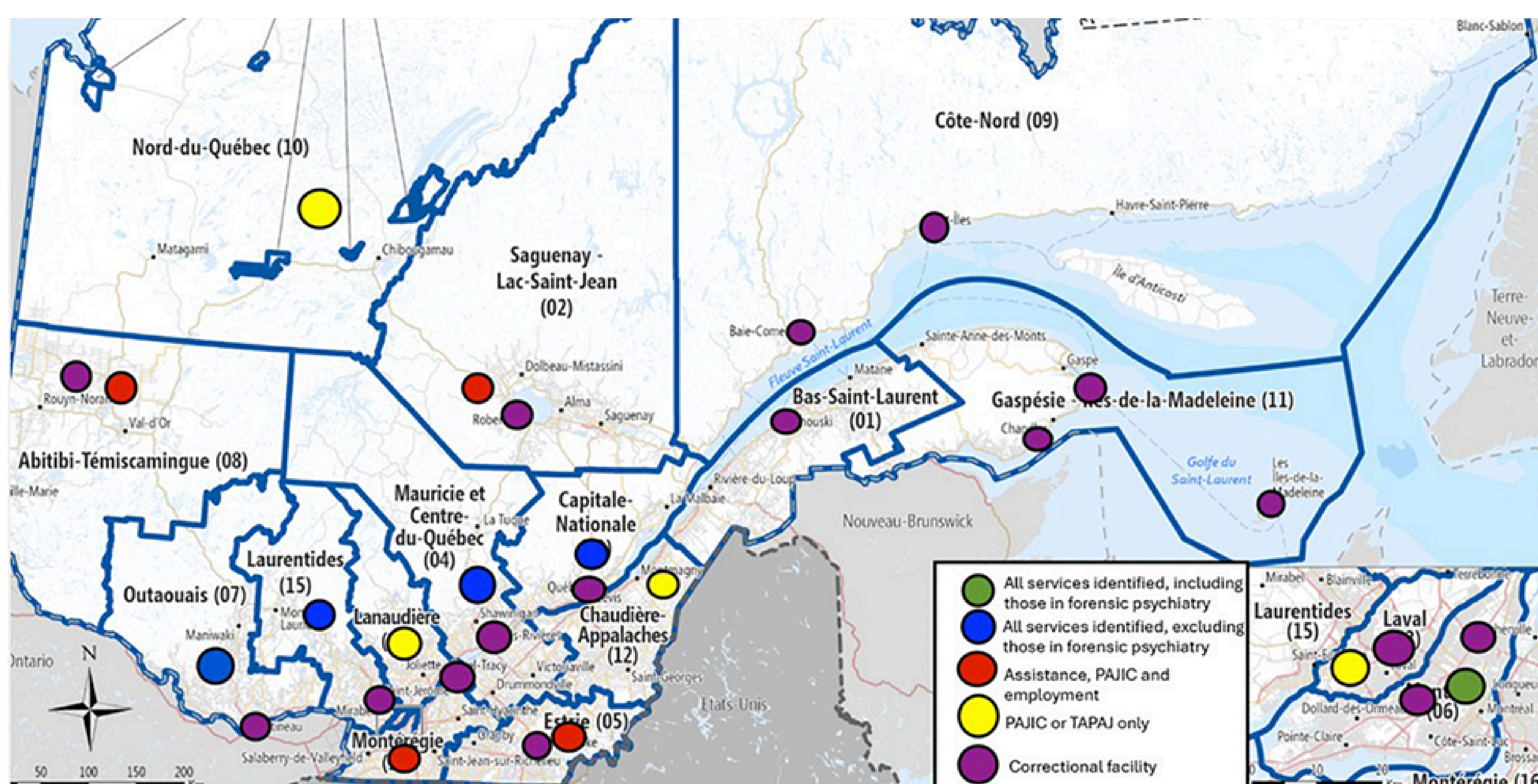
“Every Canadian deserves a safe and affordable home”

Government of Canada
National Housing Strategy, 2017

POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

Based on these findings, the following recommendations are proposed to build capacity for homelessness prevention linked to judicial and correctional processes in Québec:

1. Include a comprehensive homelessness prevention strategy (10) as a focal point in action plans dedicated to poverty, socioeconomic inclusion, aging and older adults, disability, mental health, and addictions.
2. Ensure that each administrative region of Québec, particularly those where a provincial detention center is located, has dedicated homelessness prevention services for individuals who are (1) released from correctional and forensic settings and (2) identified as at risk of homelessness throughout the criminal justice trajectory.



3. Strengthen the current housing options offered to individuals at risk of homelessness released from correctional settings, across all Québec regions. Expanding the geographic availability of these services would promote more equitable access, helping individuals receive the support they need to reintegrate into everyday life without falling into the same self-perpetuating cycle.
4. Support the development and implementation of cross-sector activities or communities and practice centered on homelessness prevention for individuals involved in judicial and correctional facilities. Greater integration of health and rehabilitation services within homelessness prevention is urgently needed.

CONCLUSION

Addressing homelessness among individuals exiting correctional settings in Quebec requires a coordinated and flexible approach, yet this is not a straightforward process. Strengthening access to services, housing, and cross-sector collaboration is challenging but essential for a more equitable and effective support system across the province.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

This policy brief was written by Mariella Berberi, McBurney fellow, under the supervision of Dr. Laurence Roy. She majored in psychology (honors) and minored in sociology at McGill University. She strives to make a positive impact on at-risk populations through evidence-based research while also addressing broader systemic issues within our communities. She is currently undergoing a doctorate in clinical psychology at University of Montreal (UdeM).

NOTES

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