



# Mini Marts & Shopping Carts

**An ethnographic dive into what 'wellbeing' means for people living on the streets of Edmonton's core — and how to enable it.**

Research by:



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# Edmonton's Inner City is an active regional hub and gateway from the North for those who fall on hard times. We set out to capture people's lived experience and surface opportunities for wellbeing.

About 50% of people using emergency housing and intensive social services in Edmonton's core are Indigenous. Many are still reeling from the trauma of the 60s scoop and residential schools. Nearly 1200 of the 1752 people living rough in 2016 had been on the streets for over a year.

RECOVER Edmonton's aims to understand "the cumulative impacts of all the different activities and systems that affect wellness in the urban core," with a focus on the Inner City's most marginalized residents — those living on the streets and experiencing mental health & addiction challenges.

**1,752**  
Homeless people in  
Edmonton (2016)

**70%**  
chronically homeless

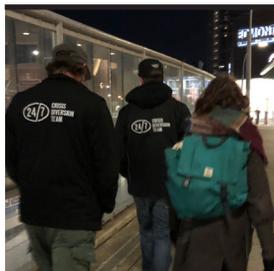
Integration of social services in the Inner City is a shared focus for solutions. Harm Reduction and Housing First are two dominant approaches. In December 2017, we spent two weeks on-the-ground listening to where people and staff were at, surfacing their pain points and their possibilities.

This research isn't a comprehensive or generalizable account. Our aim is to spark fresh conversations between people and organizations, starting from lived experience. How might we reframe challenges and generate 'what could be?' In this leaflet, we share our process & learnings.

research



**Saturday morn** handing out socks to prompt conversations



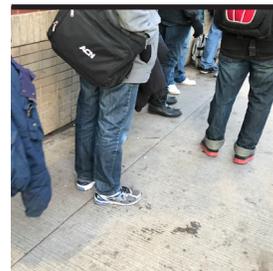
**Saturday 6:25pm** shadowing an outreach team



**Sunday 10:26pm** sharing a coffee at McDonald's

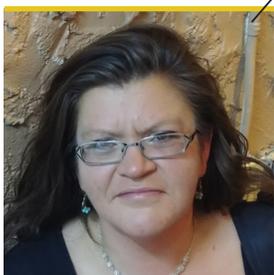


**Wednesday 6:55am** visiting employment services

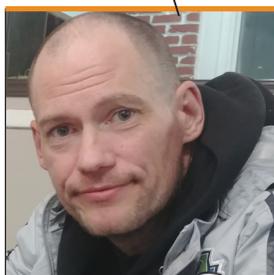


**Thursday 4pm** standing in line for dinner to meet folks

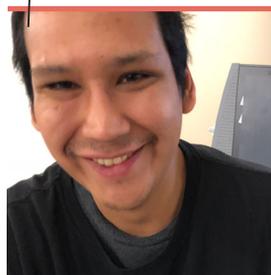
## In eleven days, we spent time with 27 people: 19 living on & off the street + 5 frontline staff + 3 businesses



**Jenn (50s)** Jenn's narrative runs against the current: she left an unhealthy life in the suburbs and found meaning while sleeping rough in Boyle McCauley. There's been a lot of pain along the way "but it's a good life." Jenn's network is large and she is at the centre of it — a street mum who holds the fragile balance here. She's "not ready to respect the rules" of housing yet.



**Crazy (42)** His life has been a revolving door: in & out of prison, but also protecting others and being disappointed when the favour isn't returned. Crazy has to reckon with poor physical health and yearns to break the cycle. His first week out he applies for housing, makes a counselling appointment, and returns to using meth to manage pain and stay alert to possible rival gang members.



**Brandon (25)** Brandon has been in Edmonton just a few weeks and every day tries to secure work or locate a program that will help him build skills for future employment. Brandon spends most of his waking time in pursuit of his goals. "I'm an explorer. I don't just sit around I walk and walk." But he's increasingly frustrated by how long it's taking to find work and get out of the shelter.

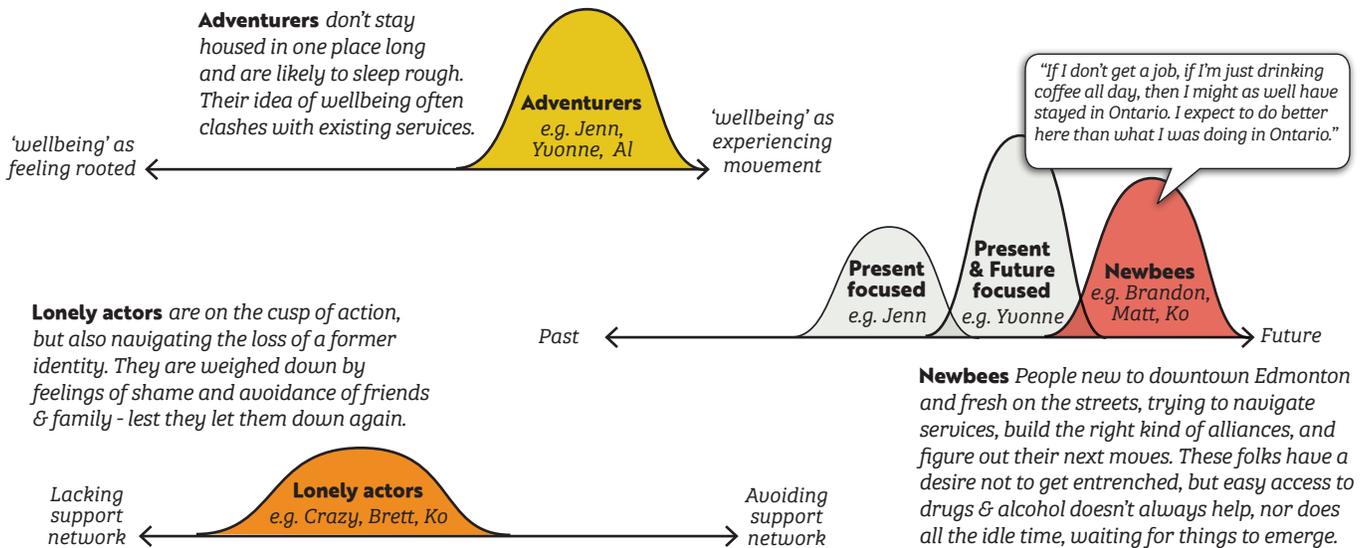


**24/7 Crisis Diversion** Two organizations operate under this name: there's the spiritual and the harm reduction team. On the luck of the draw, the drunk and 'out of place' are offered a sandwich & prayer, or an ear & a laugh. 24/7 dampens the friction between folks on the margins, and visitors to the inner city. How might we not only divert folks from immediate crisis, but from existential crises too?



**Sammy (Mini-mart owner)** Sammy sees people, not labels. Every customer is a brother or a sister. "Some of them are off the track, without anybody to rely on." He wants to be a reliable presence, so he has extended the hours of his mini-mart and carved out a seating area for people with nowhere else to go. "One of the reasons to be in this business is to contribute because it makes me so happy to."

# Through segmentation we spot what might engage people. We group people based on their desires & latent needs. For example, for some, wellbeing is about rootedness; for others, it's all about adventure.



## Strong themes surfaced: front-line staff displayed uncommon reflexivity, while those on the margins expressed marked ambition. How to leverage these standout motivations?

Perhaps what is most remarkable about Edmonton is how many informal resources exist and how few staff seem to be in the work for a paycheck. Staff described sabbaticals and intentional returns; team reflections

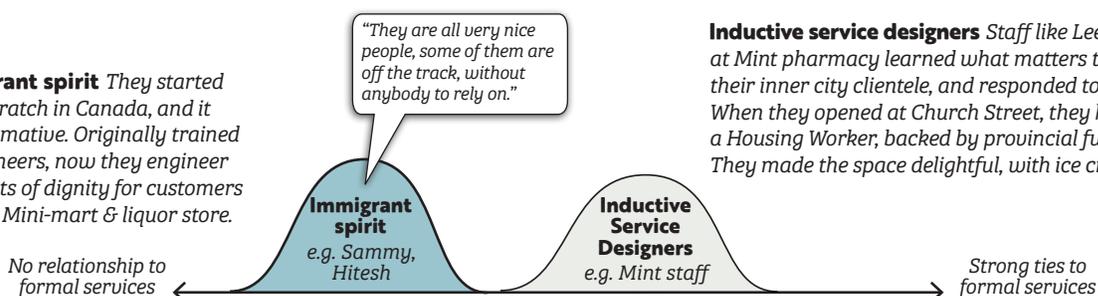
and introspective moments. Opportunities abound. What if small businesses were networked? What if staff were organized, not by agency, but by crosscutting themes & practices (e.g grief & loss, prayer & hope)?

## At the same time, we found surprising informal resource: businesses offering humanizing third spaces.



**Immigrant spirit** They started from scratch in Canada, and it was formative. Originally trained as engineers, now they engineer moments of dignity for customers at their Mini-mart & liquor store.

"They are all very nice people, some of them are off the track, without anybody to rely on."



**Inductive service designers** Staff like Lee-Anne at Mint pharmacy learned what matters to their inner city clientele, and responded to it. When they opened at Church Street, they hired a Housing Worker, backed by provincial funding. They made the space delightful, with ice cream.

# We generated 23 ideas across 8 opportunity areas, all to spark dialogue & debate. Here are three:

## Upstream Supports

for: **Lonely Actors (and Newbies + Contemplators)**

Many downward spirals to the streets started with the loss of a loved one, or a job, and a network that didn't know how to help. What if there were more just-in-time services? Relationships matter. And yet there are few services and supports that directly engage friends and family of folks struggling with mental health & addictions prior to their life on the streets, or to build new, intentional support networks around people in the early stages of change.

featured idea

### Family Doulas



What if there was a role of a family doula who worked alongside struggling families, finding opportunities to build stronger, healthier relationships, new skills, and aspirations - out of grief, trauma, and addictions?

featured idea

### Bureaucracy Busters

What if there were 'bureaucracy busters' that spent time in lines, helping people fill out paperwork, book appointments, make phone calls, and use time more productively? Possibly a peer role.



## Small Service Tweaks

for: **Newbies (and Contemplators, Precarious)**

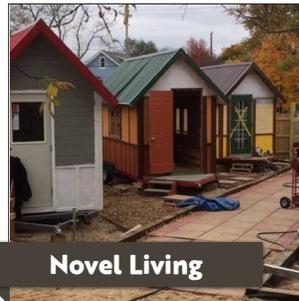
Waiting for food, for medical attention, and waiting for shelter are common threads to people's social service experiences. What if food kitchens operated a little more like restaurants? What if wait time felt less idle? What if there were smaller, more intimate settings to lessen tensions and better accommodate the introverts? How can service experiences value and promote people's sense of urgency and agency?

## Adventure Brokers

for: **Adventurers**

One of the pervasive assumptions behind services for street-involved folks is the desire for 'rootedness' and 'in-placeness.' What if there were supports with a different assumption - that of adventure, novelty, and movement? What would it look like if services operated more like travel agencies, brokering people to retreats, inter-city travel, housing swaps & interest-based communities? How could such offers orient people to new aspirations and personal development journeys?

featured idea



### Novel Living

What if there were roommate matching services based on interests, crafts, and stages of change? Supports that promoted different living arrangements, such as communities of yurts, legal campsites, and themed housing?

other ideas



visit [www.inwithforward.com](http://www.inwithforward.com) to see all segmentations, opportunity areas, emerging insights and ideas.

This Quick Dive was a collaboration with the City of Edmonton and MaRS Solutions Lab. Quick Dives are 4-week periods of ethnographic research, synthesis, and reflection.

Our research team draws out insights and opportunities, all with the intent of gaining momentum for longer-term change. More information at: [www.inwithforward.com](http://www.inwithforward.com)