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## Abstract

This article details the role that networks play in the creation and implementation of a comprehensive knowledge mobilization strategy. Using the activities of the Canadian Homelessness Research Network (CHRN) as a case study, the authors draw on in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis to understand how the interactivity cultivated in a multi-stakeholder partnership can increase the impact of research on policy, practice, public opinion, and, in this case, the lived experiences of people who are homeless. The article details the diverse activities of the CHRN (e.g., its methodologies, processes, and tools), highlighting the tension points, successes, and failures of particular approaches. Findings bring into view a) the CHRN's role as a central connecting node, linking multiple and diverse individuals, institutions, and other networks; b) relations of reciprocity, which support ongoing interactivity between network members; and c) the changes (e.g., in research use) that network activities have influenced. Data suggest that the use of research evidence to co-produce "useable content" is a key indicator of network productivity.

## Keywords

Knowledge exchange; Knowledge mobilization; Networking; Productive interactions; Research impact; Case study; Homelessness

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More than thirty years ago, Nathan Caplan (1979) proposed the “two communities theory” as a way of understanding the under-utilization of social science research by people who work outside the academy. Caplan’s research identified cultural, institutional, and relational gaps between research producers/research systems and policy producers/policy systems that contribute to the under-utilization of research in policy and practice settings. His findings link meaningful interactions between knowledge producers and knowledge to increased research knowledge use in policy and practice settings. Other scholars (e.g., Bundred, 2006) trace the absence of inter-institutional knowledge exchange pathways to service delivery failures in the public sector. Caplan’s examination of research under-utilization has spurred efforts to increase interactivity between knowledge producers and potential knowledge users. Measuring the *impact* of these interactions, however, remains difficult.

To address this difficulty, Spaapen and van Drooge (2011) recommend that impact assessments focus on understanding *how* interactions between research producers and research users unfold. They aim to make “productive interactions” between research producers and research users visible and transparent. Productive interactions are “exchanges between researchers and stakeholders in which knowledge is produced and valued that is both scientifically robust and socially relevant” (Spaapen & van Drooge, 2011, p. 212). Spaapen and van Drooge suggest that the *processes* of interaction between researchers and potential users are central to the efficacy of any research use initiative.

In this article, we investigate interactions between researchers and research users, using the activities of the Canadian Homelessness Research Network (CHRN<sup>2</sup>) as a case study. This article is the outcome of a larger ongoing effort to understand how networking contributes to research impact. We have focused our investigation on networking activities because networks are understood to be central facilitators in strategic exchange relations (Börzel, 2011; Davies & Powell, 2010; Earl & Katz, 2005; Earl et al., 2006), and we want to understand why.

In order to understand how networking contributes to engagement between knowledge producers and knowledge users, we studied the CHRN’s efforts to cultivate opportunities for interactivity and knowledge exchange. Our findings bring into view a) the CHRN’s role as a central connecting node, linking multiple and diverse individuals, institutions, and other networks; b) relations of reciprocity, which support ongoing interactivity between network members; and c) the changes (e.g., in research use) that network activities have influenced. Data suggest that the use of research evidence to co-produce “useable content” is a key indicator of network productivity.

### **Our approach: Methodology and research activities**

Across the research impact literature, there is consensus that assessing the impact of research requires many data sources, retrieved through a variety of data collection methods (e.g., Bell, Shaw, & Boaz, 2011). Measuring research impact requires one to track forward from research produced to see how it is used and/or backward from decisions made to determine the influences (Davies, Nutley, & Walter, 2005). The most popular method for assessing research impact is the use of a mixed-methods case study approach (Boaz, Fitzpatrick, & Shaw, 2009). In their review of methods for evaluating the impact of research on policy, Boaz et al. (2009) also identify RAPID Outcome

Assessment, the HERG Payback Model (e.g., Klautzer, Hanney, Nason, Rubin, Grant, & Wooding, 2011), and economic analysis as key analytic approaches that have been used to evaluate research impact. In general, these authors found that qualitative methods are used more often than – or in addition to – quantitative methods. They indicate that bibliometrics, questionnaires, and surveys, while economical, are the “least likely to yield insights into the processes of research utilization” (Boaz et al., 2009, p. 265).

Issues of attribution (i.e., how to confidently attribute cause and effect in complex social systems) and temporality (i.e., how long after knowledge mobilization or dissemination to look for impact) are central concerns for those interested in assessing the policy, practice, or other social effects of research activities (Bell et al., 2011; Spaapen & van Drooge, 2011). Because of the difficulty of attributing a change to a particular piece of research, some scholars suggest that research impact be assessed at a systems level (e.g., Best & Holmes, 2010; Buxton, 2011). Buxton (2011) argues that research impact should be viewed as the product of the entire research and development system – and not simply as the result of the activities of researchers themselves. Davies, Nutley, and Walter (2005) suggest that tracking the subtle impacts of research within a system, while more challenging, may actually be most useful to our understanding of research impact.

After reviewing the literature on assessing research impact, we chose a number of data collection strategies for this study.<sup>3</sup> In this article, we focus on data collected through key informant interviews ( $n=15$ ). Interviews were conducted with stakeholders identified by Stephen Gaetz (director) and Allyson Marsolais (manager) of the CHRN. Most of these interviews were conducted by telephone. They were digitally recorded, and the audio files were later transcribed. Nichols also interviewed Gaetz and Marsolais together on multiple occasions. These interviews aimed to facilitate reflective discussions about particular strategic activities or outcomes. These discussions identified: i) stakeholders to interview; ii) additional questions to explore; and iii) documents to review. Like the other interviews, these conversations were digitally recorded, and the audio files were later transcribed. The data collection process was designed to invite descriptive accounts and reflection from participants. Except for CHRN staff, we have used pseudonyms to refer to other interview respondents.

### **Case study: The CHRN**

The CHRN was created in 2008 to increase people’s engagement with homelessness research across Canada. In order to improve the impact of homelessness research on policy and practice, the CHRN seeks to foster relationships between people who produce and use research. The CHRN consists of a national advisory body (including ad hoc committees), an executive committee, working groups, CHRN members, affiliated researchers, and a small staff. The activities of the Network have been largely funded by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Knowledge Cluster grant.

### **Findings: How networking enables knowledge exchange**

In this section, we explore how networking contributes to knowledge exchange between members. Our data indicate that networks are sustained by trusting and reciprocal relationships between individual network members and the institutions they represent.

Networking and other interactive knowledge exchange processes (e.g., research to action collaborations) represent a conceptual and practical evolution from traditional “producer push” and “user pull” theories of research use. For example, while much information technology (or IT) for knowledge mobilization serves to disseminate content, it offers few mechanisms for capturing and distributing people’s tacit knowledge. Networking and collaboration, on the other hand, offer opportunities for informal knowledge exchange, in which many types of knowledge can be shared. Nutley, Walter, and Davies (2007) suggest that knowledge mobilization and knowledge exchange are inherently social processes that centralize learning as a key outcome. Knowledge mobilization is not simply the outcome of a linear research dissemination model; it is an ongoing relational process that “happens, you know, in the corners when the people are at the CHRN meetings” (Derek, institutional leader, national social service organization). Knowledge exchange occurs as people have a chance to interact with and learn from one another across social contexts.

Because they afford opportunities for people to interact, networking, collaboration, and partnership are integral to cross-disciplinary, inter-professional, and inter-institutional planning and knowledge exchange. Gaetz, director of the CHRN, described the focus on networking at the CHRN like this:

There are different kinds of knowledge that are important, and coupled with that there are different resources and levers that people can use to contribute [to making change] ... if you have somebody in government, they understand policy making, and because they are in government, they make things happen that you cannot [make happen] as a researcher. To work in an interdisciplinary way, you can blend those skills and knowledge, and then you learn.

As Gaetz suggests above, learning from the diverse perspectives, experiences, and skills of others is a key outcome of the CHRN’s knowledge exchange activities. Networking diversifies the resources and mechanisms of action available to any social change initiative – in this case, a collaborative effort to end homelessness in Canada.

### **Creating links between networks**

The CHRN was established in 2008, supported by a seven-year SSHRC Knowledge Cluster grant. Its formation was an outcome of ongoing research and networking activities that extend back several years prior to 2008. Before becoming a university professor, Gaetz had worked in a street-level health organization for homeless youth and local government. There, Gaetz observed that research was having very little impact on homelessness in Canada:

When I worked in the sector in the 1990s, homelessness as a problem exploded in Canada. Communities were scrambling to develop emergency services to respond to the crisis. And unlike in the HIV-AIDS community, where there was also an emerging crisis and research was seen as important for policy, practice, and advocacy, this wasn’t really happening in the homelessness world ... People would say, “We don’t need research. We know what the problem is, and we know what the solution is.” I think they were wrong on all three counts.

In 2003, a small group that included researchers, representatives from community-based organizations, and local government in Toronto convened to discuss possibilities for action in response to a pan-Canadian increase in homelessness. As a result of these meetings, the first Canadian Conference on Homelessness was held at York University in 2005. The conference brought together researchers, policy makers, practitioners and people with lived experience of homelessness.

Key outcomes from the conference were as follows: leaders in the field of homelessness research and practice were identified; databases were created for people who work in the homelessness sector as practitioners, as government employees, and as researchers; a team of researchers produced an edited academic volume on homelessness (Gaetz, 2006); and, informal networks began to emerge. Subsequently, Gaetz undertook a post-conference consultation process that was funded by Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC). The findings from these consultations shaped the development of an HRSDC Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS) funding proposal, as well as a proposal to the Wellesley Institute. Once secured, these combined funds supported the development of an online research repository (the Homeless Hub, at <http://www.homelesshub.ca>), and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Knowledge Cluster grant application.

Since that time, the CHRN has become a key connecting node or hub through which people exchange knowledge that arises in other network contexts. Most members of the CHRN participate in the Network in their institutional capacities – that is, as representatives of provincial or federal government departments, university faculties, social service organizations, and so forth. Participation in the CHRN represents a single aspect of their networking activities. The CHRN is composed of people who are already tapped in to extensive professional and social change networks. As such, the CHRN has connected and encouraged joint planning among a number of key network actors across Canada:

One of the things that happens too is that you get invited to [other networks]. ... As [the CHRN] gets established, that happens more and more, where people say, “Can you come to this event or this meeting?” ... You have sort of these centred nodes all over it [the extended networking landscape]. ... There’s a lot more glue between the smaller networks than there used to be. I think that we’ve probably played a role in facilitating that through our organization’s [networking and knowledge exchange] events but also through our visibility [e.g., through the Homeless Hub]. (Gaetz, CHRN)

Interviews with other CHRN stakeholders substantiated the view that the CHRN is a central node through which other networks connect. Grace, a research and policy professional in a provincial government office, explained that in addition to her National Advisory Body (NAB)<sup>4</sup> membership within the CHRN, she participates in a provincial

homeless research consortium, and there two others on the NAB of the CHRN that are on that consortium ... The others are researchers in the field. Myself and B – are the only government representatives that are on that consortium so we

are trying to make those linkages both locally and nationally. And meeting others on the local and national level is valuable.

Participating in both networks allows for a flow of information and an aligning of agendas between the two networks. As Grace indicated, establishing provincial and national links supports her engagement with research and allows her to foster essential connections with researchers and other government officials on a local and pan-Canadian scale. It also enables the dissemination of homelessness research within a provincial policy network.

Grace and Helène are members of the CHRN who are tapped into extensive policy networks through their work with the provincial government (Grace) and federal government (Helène). When they receive newsletters from the Homeless Hub, they pass on relevant research summaries or references to their colleagues. Grace creates and disseminates “brief write up[s]” about particular research studies that she believes will have a wide appeal in the Alberta Ministry of Human Services, and she targets dissemination to the “specific people who are working on particular issues” when a study has a narrower appeal. Her goal is for research to inform local and provincial policy responses to particular issues (e.g., housing).

Some research suggests that people who have insider knowledge of a network community are best positioned to facilitate productive networks (Schönström, 2005). Most of the members of the CHRN’s NAB are positioned to facilitate a flow of information and resources between the CHRN and a diversity of other local networks (e.g., community advisory boards or CABs) and pan-Canadian networks (e.g., the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness [CAEH]; the Canadian Housing Renewal Association [CHRA]; Raising the Roof). Derek, a leader of a pan-Canadian service delivery organization, explained that having “research from Ottawa, from Vancouver, from Calgary available and having those connections through the network makes it easier to present the national scope to the organization so that they can see what’s happening across the country as well.” Links between local and provincial or federal networks allow individual communities to learn from promising practices in other jurisdictions and to situate their own local research and evaluation efforts within the broader context of homelessness in Canada. Several informants recounted personal experiences which indicate that the CHRN is successful in its efforts to create productive links between an otherwise fragmented collection of research, advocacy, policy, and service delivery networks.

From its inception, the CHRN has positioned itself as a central network through which other local bodies can connect and interact. Gaetz has actively reached out to other key network actors across the country, inviting them to shape the structure, activities, and outputs of the CHRN. Martin, a community development officer and a leader in the CABs movement and the CHRA, describes the CHRN’s strategic evolution as a network of network leaders:

When the 2005 conference was hosted ... at York University, with Steve [Gaetz] leading, I came as a delegate with a bunch of people from [our province]. ... At the end of the conference it was asked, “Where do we go from here?” ... I wasn’t



as involved in the next direct steps around the formation of a research network but I certainly supported it. ... When the proposal was going in to SSHRC, Steve and I were serving on a committee with HPS [the Homelessness Partnering Strategy]. ... When we were sitting at that table, [Gaetz] brought his proposal and he talked about it at that table with all the planning partners ... and we signed on to it.

From the beginning, the CHRN actively reached out to leaders within existing networks, inviting their input and participation in the CHRN. Four years after receiving SSHRC funding in 2008, the CHRN as a whole, and its national advisory board in particular, have become the “place where we play things out. ... The conversations when the group gets together are quite interesting and assist me with a lot of networking that we do across the country” (Derek, institutional leader, service delivery organization).

### **Reciprocity sustains links between network members**

Although the under-utilization of research is often explained “in terms of the relationship of the researcher and the research system to the policy maker and the policy-making system” (Caplan, 1979, p. 459), Caplan argues that social scientists should heed utilization theories that emphasize the lack of interaction between social scientists and policy makers. In Caplan’s view, merely increasing contact between social scientists and policy makers is not the answer; instead, fostering reciprocal relations between knowledge producers and knowledge users is key. This interactivity requires opportunities to build relationships and identify shared values, as well as technical or structural links. Leadership and organizational culture, as well as institutional supports, are key to supporting the effective sharing and use of knowledge (Bundred, 2006; Nutley et al., 2007; Percy-Smith, Burden, Darlow, Dowson, Hawtin, & Ladi, 2002).

Our own data affirm that relationship building, supported by demonstrations of mutual benefit and reciprocity, is essential to sustaining inter-network and intra-network connections. Formal partnership agreements, institutional demonstrations of support (e.g., letters of endorsement), and ongoing participation in one another’s events and activities support reciprocal relations within and between networks. Rosemarie, leader of a pan-Canadian collective of community agencies working to resolve youth homelessness, said that inter-organizational partnerships were central to her collective’s ability to have an impact. These same partnerships are integral to the knowledge flows she facilitates between the CHRN and her organization’s network of service delivery agencies:

We have our networks of community agencies that formally partner with us in two ways. One is our Toque Campaign. Last year we had 42 organizations working directly with us in that campaign, and then also we have formal partnerships through our research ... and then we just have our massive email and contact lists that subscribe for our bi-annual newsletters as well as our monthly Housing Again newsletter ... we certainly do profile the work of Homeless Hub and CHRN.

Rosemarie also explained that the CHRN has created opportunities for interaction between researchers and service providers: “Another really great outcome that happened from the relationship with CHRN is that we had a panel of researchers presenting on different topics around youth homelessness at [our national youth homelessness] conference.”

Networking facilitates mutual engagement in knowledge-to-action processes. Reciprocity – or mutual commitment – is a measure of a network’s collective progress toward shared goals for social change. Once common goals have been established and individual needs expressed, people can identify opportunities for partnerships. Sophie, a leader in a municipal homelessness foundation, explained that “it wasn’t necessarily like, ‘Oh, CHRN is going in this direction, so [our municipal] Homelessness Foundation will too.’ ... We both have our needs, and if there’s opportunities where we can partner, then we’ll do so.”

In this case, the CHRN and the municipal Homelessness Foundation both wanted to bring researchers together in order to increase the application, adaption, and extension of research by funders, service providers, advocates, and government. The CHRN had access to a breadth of research expertise, and the Homelessness Foundation – the central funder of homelessness sector activities in its municipality – had strong links to a number of service delivery organizations. Given these compatible goals and resources, their partnership proved mutually beneficial.

Reciprocity between these two networks has been solidified by ongoing mutual engagement in one another’s work. The Homelessness Foundation’s association with the CHRN “added a level of importance to [its] work because we had the national project. So it kind of reaffirmed what we were doing locally” (Sophie). The successful relationship between the CHRN and the Homelessness Foundation illustrates the importance of bi-directional outreach and mutual engagement between networks. Because the CHRN is based in Ontario and Sophie’s foundation is not, fostering ongoing communication between the two networks takes effort. In this context, it is imperative that key network leaders (in this case, Gaetz and Sophie) reach out actively.

In contrast, until recently it has been a struggle for Gaetz and Marsolais to establish links with Ontario municipalities and service delivery networks. Despite their physical proximity to Ontario networks, they observe less appetite for academic research and, as a result, less interest in forging relationships with academic researchers or research networks:

The city has its own researchers; they have their own resources and capacity – but as a government entity too ... their concerns around research are different. So they haven’t taken advantage of the opportunity that they’re sitting in, with all these universities. ... We certainly offered on more than one occasion.  
(Gaetz)

While Marsolais and Gaetz continue to reach out to local groups, they recognize that forging relationships requires mutual engagement in one another’s work. At the time of this research, Gaetz and Marsolais were observing a shift in Ontario, in which more municipalities were becoming actively engaged in research partnerships.



In order to cultivate people's interests in networking, Marsolais explains that she and Gaetz regularly create and share proposals for potential collaborative activities with stakeholders. They recognize that the ideas will only gain traction when they are taken up by others within the network: "We're always putting ideas out there, and some of them get picked up on, and those that get picked up on, we move forward with them." By casting the net widely and remaining attentive to the needs and interests of Network members, the CHRN has successfully initiated a number of projects (e.g., the creation of a pan-Canadian definition of homelessness) that reflect the knowledge and concerns of its diverse membership. Ultimately, the products of the CHRN's networking and knowledge exchange efforts find purchase in the various networks of the members whose insights informed their creation. Purposeful networking – that is, networking in support of shared goals – facilitates knowledge exchange between researchers and research users, as well as the widespread application of this knowledge.

### **Networking facilitates the production of useable content**

The literature on adult learning, knowledge management, and innovation diffusion suggests that collaboration supports knowledge exchange and synthesis (Davies, Nutley, & Walter, 2005; Nutley, Walter, & Davies, 2007; Walter, Nutley, & Davies, 2003). The CHRN provides spaces for mobilizing research within multiple networks and a mechanism for connecting people. It also works with network members to apply research knowledge in ways that a diversity of stakeholders can use. Derek explained that the network provides a structure through which a diversity of perspectives can shape a shared agenda for change. In Derek's words, the CHRN "brings people in" and facilitates learning from different people's strengths and points of view:

Different people have different experiences – different positions – that they are working from. As a result, it gives a fuller picture to the work that is being developed. So whether it's people who are working with homelessness, but specifically maybe mental health or substance abuse or youth or working from a government perspective, and then, you know, more so from a policy angle or from a delivery and services standpoint ... being able to kind of have that collaborative discussion and learn from each other as to where things can go, it's been really interesting.

Not only do these discussions facilitate learning among network members, they also enable the development and implementation of research agendas that meet their diverse needs and interests.

By coordinating and disseminating homelessness research in Canada, the CHRN fills a gap. In the words of Martin, a community development officer,

having a real space – virtual, and through committees and networks – to actually unpack [research], learn it, get to know the partners is really where you can make [research] more meaningful. ... It's about mobilizing across silos with communities and governments and business and other partners so that the research has some traction.

As Martin observes, in order for research knowledge to gain traction outside of academic settings, it has to be seen as meaningful and applicable there. Ongoing interactions between researchers and research users facilitates knowledge mobilization “across silos.” By creating opportunities for knowledge exchange between academic and non-academic sectors, researchers learn how to produce evidence-based content that people who work in government and service providing positions can use to inform their work.

In addition to formal networking structures, an up-to-date researcher database and an online resource library can support people’s use of research as they need it. Grace, a provincial government employee in a policy field, explained that it is important for people in government to be “able to link into different researchers across the country ... who are working on specific projects and [to know] where there is expertise.” Other network members (funders, lawyers, and other government employees) reiterated Grace’s observation about the importance of easily accessible research evidence and researchers.

### **Networks facilitate changes in professional practice**

The CHRN has also worked with existing professional networks to support specific professional learning goals. While the CHRN has not encountered the types of structural or political barriers to intra-professional learning that other networks report (Addicott, McGivern, & Ferlie, 2006), it did experience some difficulty in supporting professional learning within one pan-Canadian professional network. The CHRN’s work with network of youth homelessness organizations across Canada sheds light on the possibilities and challenges of using intra-professional learning networks to promote changes in practice.

In collaboration with the pan-Canadian network of youth homelessness organizations, the CHRN developed and implemented a program (the Leadership Academy on Program Evaluation) to improve program evaluation knowledge and practice among youth homelessness organization service providers. The Leadership Academy on Program Evaluation began with a three-day intensive workshop on program evaluation, utilizing the expertise of professionals within the group as well as program evaluation expertise within the university. Martin explains that he “appreciated the way [the Leadership Academy] was approached and the opportunity to have practitioners, policy makers, and academics in the same room together to look at something we rarely look at: how do we evaluate and assess our progress?”

Leah, director of the pan-Canadian youth homelessness initiative and a central leader in the network of youth homelessness organizations, also identified the three-day workshop as a space for considerable learning:

Once we actually dug into the work that was where the learning started ... It was really about what the various forms of evaluation might look like – whether there are considerations that we need to put in place when selecting a model; what have other organizations done? Where does it take you? What are the considerations of an agency? I mean, all of the pieces that help inform what an evaluative process will mean to your organization or to your program ... clearly,

there was a lot of learning there, and then subsequently with a couple of the conversations that we had, there was some learning there as well.

At the end of the workshop, people left with a resource manual, a timeline, and a set of target deliverables for applying program evaluation knowledge in their organizations.

The three-day workshop was accompanied by a year of individual consultation and trouble-shooting intended to provide supports to people as they adapted program evaluation practices for their agencies. Because the consulting work occurred on an individual basis, people did not have an opportunity to learn from colleagues who were doing program evaluation in their own organizations. In other words, the consulting process did not facilitate ongoing inter-organizational learning within this network, and participants identified the lack of peer-to-peer interaction as a drawback of the approach.

Even so, the next time the entire group came together, organizational leaders shared their experiences of doing research and evaluation within their organizations and their stories illuminated the accompanying cultural and pragmatic shifts.

In this case, the CHRN's targeted efforts to increase practitioners' application of research and evaluation strategies can be considered to be somewhat effective. Many organizations did apply what they had learned and documented the changes in their practice; others found that they lacked the institutional capacity to focus on evaluation, or that the timing was not right, and did not experience any significant shifts in their workplace practices.

Other activities of the CHRN have produced more obvious changes in the practices of service providers. Juliana, a non-profit lawyer who works with homeless and street-involved youth, explained that her participation in one of Gaetz's studies on homeless youth and criminal victimization fundamentally shifted how she conducts her legal practice. Given that she conducts approximately 350 legal intake processes a year and a great deal more consultations with youth, the effects of a change in her practice are multiple and wide-reaching.

Juliana, explained that the findings from a Hub Report (*Surviving Crime and Violence: Street Youth and Victimization in Toronto*, Gaetz, O'Grady, & Buccieri, 2010) changed how she approaches her legal practice:

When I speak to youth, the questions I ask will end up directing what legal questions and problems that they might tell me about. So, if I give a legal education session on being "an accused" in criminal offences, then I will get a whole bunch of people who might have that as a problem. If I don't mention anything about legal options for victims of crime, then I probably won't have any clients that come to me about that issue. ... With the results of one of the research papers, the stark results of the high levels of victimization, I took [victimization] as a priority in education and in client interviews.

Because of the report's finding that homeless youth are more likely to be victims than perpetrators of crime, Juliana changed her client education and intake processes such that she directly addresses legal options for young people who have been witnesses or victims of crime. Had she failed to bring up the issue of criminal victimization with her young clients, Juliana's sense is that this is not an issue the youth would have sought legal aid for. As such, she would have failed to meet an essential legal need within the street youth population, *and* her work would have contributed to a popular misconception of street youth as more likely to be criminally-involved than youth who are housed. She explained that an opportunity to collaborate with academic researchers has provided a "*real* credible backing – a current, academic perspective – for the work I do. So it's very, very important for the broad brushstrokes of directions, or even right down to the ways I decide which clients to serve and the education that we give." Juliana identified this change in practice as the direct result of her engagement with collaborative research.

Other people we interviewed talked about how their involvement in the CHRN has exposed them to different research methodologies or disciplinary perspectives. They have learned about various promising practices and models that are being employed across the country and have had their perspectives changed through discussions with people who work in different fields or disciplines. Learning facilitates practice change. It also facilitates changes in discourse. Throughout our research, we identified learning (i.e., changes in perspective, increases in knowledge, changes in practice) as a key outcome of collaborative activities. Learning also whets people's appetites for collaboration. People describe being most excited about collaborative activities that centre learning as a key outcome.

### **Conclusions**

At the outset of this article, we described our desire to understand how networking contributes to knowledge exchange and ultimately research impact. Our conclusions address this initial question. We have learned that an over-arching network structure (like the CHRN) links smaller, fragmented networking bodies. Networks are composed of people who are linked to each other in formal and informal ways. At the same time, individual network members participate in multiple other network structures, creating a field of action that extends across social and geographic contexts. People mobilize knowledge, gleaned through their participation in CHRN activities, through their other networks. These exchanges produce unique combinations of expert knowledge and skills, which enhance the overall knowledge of particular groups and the applicability of their collaborative outputs. Network leaders should capitalize on the extensive network connections of their members in order to more widely disseminate and exchange ideas and resources.

Reciprocal relations between individuals and institutions sustain links between network members. Ongoing relationship building through mutual support is key to sustaining inter-network and intra-network connections. Formal partnership agreements, institutional demonstrations of support (e.g., via letters of endorsement), and ongoing participation in one another's events and activities support reciprocal relations within and between networks.

One key outcome of a productive network is the development of useable content. Knowledge exchange and debate allows inter-organizational and interdisciplinary networks (e.g., networks of service providers, professionals, institutional leaders, academics, and government officials) to produce content that is relevant and applicable in a wide variety of settings. Learning is another key outcome of collaboration and effective knowledge exchange. Learning stimulates people's interest in collaboration and influences changes in discourse, practice, and perception.

## Notes

1. See the appendix for a research snapshot of this project.
2. In 2014, the Canadian Homelessness Research Network was renamed the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness: <http://www.homelesshub.ca/CanadianObservatoryOnHomelessness> .
3. In addition to key informant interviews, we used Google Scholar and simple Google searches to track the dissemination of reports that Gaetz has co-authored in his role as the Director of the CHRN. We reviewed Google Analytics to better understand people's interactions with the Homeless Hub website, and we reviewed findings from the 2005 conference consultation report (Canadian Conference on Homelessness, 2007) and the CHRN's funding proposals, reports, and governance documents. Finally, a research assistant was asked to produce descriptive summaries of the activities of the graduate students in the Homelessness Research Network. These were also reviewed.
4. The CHRN's National Advisory Body consists of about 50 individuals purposefully selected to represent key institutions, issue areas, and regions in Canada. The NAB includes researchers, people in government, service providers, and people with lived experience of homelessness.

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## Successful Networking Can Lead to Usable Products and Learning for All

### What is this research about?

There can be a lack of meaningful exchanges between knowledge producers and knowledge users in policy or practice settings. Producers and users need to interact, but not all interactions are going to result in research impact. For collaborations to be effective and useful, interaction needs to occur on an ongoing basis. Interactions also need to result in products or changes that meet the different needs of network participants. Using the activities of the Canadian Homelessness Research Network (CHRN) as a case study, the researchers describe interactions that increase people's engagement with research knowledge.

### What did the researchers do?

The researchers attempted to measure the CHRN's activities and their impact on interaction and knowledge exchange (KE). Key informant interviews were held with CHRN stakeholders. Stakeholders were interviewed by telephone, and discussions were digitally recorded and transcribed. The CHRN Director and Project Manager were also interviewed several times to elaborate on strategic activities and outcomes.

Google Scholar and basic Google searches were used to track the sharing of reports by the

### What you need to know:

Networking can increase the usefulness of knowledge and inform the practices of all partners involved. These relationships can be kept through reciprocity and constant interaction between all stakeholders and researchers. Two key outcomes from this process are the creation of useable content and new learning from others.

CHRN director. Google Analytics were also used to gauge people's interaction with the Homeless Hub's website (a CHRN project). Findings from a 2005 conference consultation report were reviewed, as well as the CHRN's funding proposals, reports, and governing documents. A research assistant for the CHRN also developed summaries on the activities of the Graduate Students in Homelessness Research Network .

### What did the researchers find?

Relationship building is crucial to create and maintain networks for KE. Collaboration and networking also allowed for informal KE activities. Through KE, CHRN served as a connector between stakeholders from different networks. This allowed stakeholders to do joint planning, align their agendas, and situate each of their institution's work within a broader,



national context of homelessness. They were also able to shape the activities, structures and outputs from the CHRN.

Reciprocal and mutually beneficial relationships made for lengthy and meaningful connections between network participants. They also served as a measure for meeting each partner's goals for social change goals. The researchers found that reciprocal relations depended on active outreach by key leaders of the CHRN and other networks.

Networking also helped to facilitate:

- The Production of Useable Content: CHRN was able to develop research agendas that met the distinct needs of their partners. Partners included people in government and service providers. Stakeholders were also able to access and apply evidence-based practices because of access to a researcher database and an online resource library.
- Professional Practice: Stakeholders felt their work with the CHRN exposed them to different research methods and perspectives. All of this learning brought changes to their own practices related to homelessness.

### How can you use this research?

For service providers, and policy makers, this research highlights the advantages of participating in a research network. The paper points to specific activities and network attributes that lead to productive relationships between researchers and service providers/policy actors. Scholars may also find this research useful. It refers to strategies on how to make one's research more useful to diverse stakeholders, as the CHRN has done.

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### Knowledge Mobilization at York

York's Knowledge Mobilization Unit provides services for faculty, graduate students, community and government seeking to maximize the impact of academic research and expertise on public policy, social programming, and professional practice. This summary has been supported by the Office of the Vice-President Research and Innovation at York and project funding from SSHRC.

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