



United Way
Bruce Grey



**BRUCE GREY
POVERTY
TASK FORCE**
Our Voice is Power

CURIOSITY BEFORE CONCLUSIONS

Asking Better Questions About Complex Community Issues

Poverty, homelessness, substance use and other complex community issues deserve difficult questions. **Good questions separate what we know from what we assume, and leave room for the evidence to change our understanding.**

Complex problems rarely have one cause, one responsible organization, or one measure of success.

START WITH THE REALITY UNDERNEATH THE ISSUE

Before judging a person's choices or a program's effectiveness, check the conditions in which people and programs are operating.

HOUSEHOLD INCOME → COST → GAP

A single person receiving Ontario Works can receive a maximum of \$733 per month, including a maximum \$390 for shelter. Compare that with the actual cost of renting locally.

A person cannot budget their way into housing they cannot afford.

A service provider cannot create an affordable apartment where none exists. An outreach worker cannot increase OW or ODSP rates. A municipality cannot independently change provincial income-support or health-care systems.

LOOK UPSTREAM

Why does homelessness continue to increase despite the money we are spending to address it?

That question invites us to examine both the forces creating new homelessness and whether our interventions are effective: housing and living costs, available income, housing supply, health and disability, family circumstances, institutional discharge and other pressures.

A worsening problem does not, by itself, tell us whether an intervention is working. Look at both inflow and outflow.

BEFORE EVALUATING THE RESPONSE, CHECK FOUR THINGS

SCOPE What is this program, organization or level of government actually responsible for?	CAPACITY How much of the need was it funded or designed to meet?
OUTCOME What would success reasonably look like for this intervention?	UNMET NEED What remains, and what does that tell us?

Imagine a 24-bed shelter that safely shelters 24 people tonight, while another 10 people need a bed. The 24 people safely sheltered are an outcome. The additional 10 are unmet need and evidence that demand exceeds capacity. They do not retroactively make the shelter unsuccessful.

UNMET NEED IS DATA, NOT AUTOMATICALLY EVIDENCE OF FAILURE.



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ASK QUESTIONS THAT LEAVE ROOM FOR THE ANSWER

Difficult questions are important. The goal isn't to make them softer. It's to make them better.

SPENDING + RESULTS

CONCLUSION BUILT IN

Why are we spending so much on homelessness when the problem keeps getting worse?

ASK WITH CURIOSITY

Why does homelessness continue to increase despite the money we are spending to address it? What is driving new homelessness, what are our interventions designed to change, and what outcomes are they producing?

SCOPE + CAPACITY

CONCLUSION BUILT IN

Why isn't the shelter system solving homelessness?

ASK WITH CURIOSITY

What is the system designed to do, how many people can it serve, what outcomes should we expect from it, and what need remains outside its scope or capacity?

SERVICES + CAUSE

CONCLUSION BUILT IN

Don't homelessness and/or food services attract homeless people to our community?

ASK WITH CURIOSITY

What do we know about where people experiencing homelessness lived before becoming homeless, what caused their homelessness, and where they go when they need help?

The presence of a service does not prove it caused the need. We would not conclude that local cancer treatment causes cancer because people with cancer come to the hospital for treatment. Treatment exists because there is a need.

WHERE SERVICES BELONG

CONCLUSION BUILT IN

Why don't we move homelessness services away from downtown businesses?

ASK WITH CURIOSITY

What makes a service location effective and appropriate, including accessibility, transportation, neighbouring uses, public spaces and impacts on the surrounding community?

Moving a service may change where a need is visible without changing the underlying need.

ENFORCEMENT + ENCAMPMENTS

CONCLUSION BUILT IN

Why doesn't the municipality just enforce the rules and remove encampments?

ASK WITH CURIOSITY

If an encampment is removed, where can the people living there actually go, and what housing or shelter options are available to them?

ONE LAST CHECK BEFORE ASKING

Watch for questions that begin with "Why haven't they...?", "Why don't they just...?", "Doesn't this service attract...?" or "Despite all the money spent...?"

- ✓ Do I know that the premise is true?
- ✓ Am I confusing unmet need with program failure?
- ✓ What evidence might change my mind?
- ✓ Am I confusing visibility with prevalence?
- ✓ Am I asking one organization to solve something outside its scope?
- ✓ If the premise is supported, ask the difficult question.

Curiosity is not the absence of accountability. It is how we get to better accountability.

ASK DIFFICULT QUESTIONS. CHECK THE PREMISE. UNDERSTAND THE SCOPE. FOLLOW THE EVIDENCE.