Ottawa Thinks Encampments Are Criminal Enterprises. Most Of The Time They're Survival Communities.

One of the most common assumptions made by the public whenever an encampment appears is that the people there are not "really homeless" at all. The story quickly becomes that tents are being erected by organized drug dealers, criminals, or predators who are simply exploiting public sympathy while using parks and sidewalks as convenient operating bases.

And yes, drugs exist in encampments. Obviously they do. So does addiction. So does survival crime. So does mental illness. So does conflict. So does desperation.

But the way the public talks about these realities completely misses what street life actually is.

Most of the people living in these encampments are not comfortably housed criminals who chose tent living as a side hustle. They are homeless people trying to survive alongside other homeless people in whatever unstable social structure remains available to them. The people selling drugs at the lowest levels of the street economy are often experiencing the exact same poverty, trauma, addiction, psychosis, grief, institutional abandonment, and housing instability as everyone else there.

They are not separate from the community.
They are part of it.

The public imagines some clean distinction between "real homeless people" and "drug dealers," as though one category deserves empathy and the other exists outside humanity altogether. But on the street, those lines barely function the way housed people imagine they do. The guy selling half points or carrying for somebody else is often sleeping outside too. He may be using heavily himself. He may be withdrawing constantly. He may have untreated trauma, cognitive damage, psychosis, infections, or nowhere safe to sleep. He may have lost housing years ago. He may be surviving one day at a time exactly like everyone else around him.

The public sees criminality.
Street people often see survival labour.

That does not mean every street dynamic is healthy or harmless. It is not romantic. Addiction destroys people. Exploitation exists. Violence exists. Manipulation exists. Some people absolutely prey on others. But the average low-level street dealer in an encampment is usually far closer to "homeless addict surviving through informal economy" than the public fantasy of some organized

kingpin terrorizing neighbourhoods for profit.

And more importantly, the street functions socially in ways the housed world rarely understands.

Encampments are not just random collections of isolated individuals. They become survival ecosystems. People form roles. Some people organize things. Some keep watch. Some share food. Some know where services are. Some protect weaker people. Some know where to get supplies. Some carry Narcan. Some help during overdoses. Some help pitch tents. Some are emotionally stronger. Some are emotionally collapsing. Some are followers. Some become leaders without trying to. Some people are constantly helping others while barely surviving themselves.

That social ecosystem exists because mainstream society has largely abandoned these people already.

If you remove every informal support structure the street creates for itself, what remains is not suddenly safety and stability. What remains is isolation.

That is the part housed Ottawa consistently fails to understand.

People surviving homelessness are not just lacking housing. They are lacking community, safety, autonomy, consistency, understanding, and meaningful belonging inside the mainstream world. Many have already cycled through shelters, treatment systems, hospitals, rooming houses, housing programs, welfare offices, and institutions that treated them more like files than people. So naturally they gravitate toward each other, even when those environments are chaotic and dangerous.

Because chaos with familiarity often feels psychologically safer than isolation surrounded by people who fear you.

The public constantly asks:
“Why don’t they just leave those environments?”

Leave for what?

Many homeless people already know what happens when they become completely isolated. They disappear into tiny rooms alone. They relapse alone. They overdose alone. They deteriorate alone. They become invisible alone. At least encampments, for all their dysfunction, often contain people who actually understand each other’s reality.

And this is where public conversations become deeply hypocritical.

Middle-class society constantly praises “community” and “support networks” for itself while condemning poor people for building survival communities in public spaces. Homeowners celebrate neighbourhood solidarity. Condo residents celebrate social connection. Universities celebrate peer support. But when homeless people create their own informal support structures under impossible conditions, the public suddenly only sees criminality and disorder.

People look at an encampment and see a threat to property values.
Street people often see the only remaining social world where somebody would notice if they died.

That does not make encampments ideal. Nobody should have to live that way. But pretending they exist simply because people “want to do drugs publicly” is intellectually and morally lazy.

The truth is much harder to face:
encampments exist because people who have been excluded from mainstream society still need each other to survive.

And until society builds systems that provide real safety, real housing, real community, real mental health support, real addiction care, and real dignity, these informal survival ecosystems will continue forming no matter how many tents get torn down.

Because human beings abandoned by institutions will always try to build community somewhere — even if the only place left is under tarps beside a highway while the city debates how quickly to remove them.