

# MACLEAN'S

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## 30,000 people homeless on a given night, first-ever national tally suggests



OTTAWA – Homelessness in Canada affects about 200,000 people every year and comes with...

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WHAT IS THIS ?

OTTAWA – Homelessness in Canada affects about 200,000 people every year and comes with a \$7 billion price tag, the first-ever national report on the issue has found.

The results paint a picture of a disaster in communities across the country, said Tim Richter, one of the report's authors and the president of the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness.

"In a natural disaster, the loss of housing or life happens because of a fire or flood or something like that," he said.

"In the unnatural disaster of homelessness, the same things are happening, but it's happening because of poverty, disability, addiction, mental illness and trauma."

But whereas natural disasters are met with emergency response plans to get people back to their normal lives, the response to homelessness is stuck in crisis mode, Richter said.

"It's time for Canadians to shift gears from managing homelessness to ending it," he said.

On any given night, at least 30,000 people are in homeless or domestic violence shelters, sleeping outside or temporarily housed in places like prisons or hospitals, the study found.

As many as 50,000 more could be considered the "hidden homeless," temporarily staying with friends or family because they have nowhere else to go, the State of Homelessness in Canada: 2013 report concludes.

The study, a joint effort by the Canadian Homelessness Research Network and the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness, marks the first time researchers have looked at the issue on a national level.

Several municipalities do count the number of homeless in their communities, but to get national numbers, the study's authors drew on new research on the number of people in the shelter system and added in estimates of those who are often overlooked in regular counts, such as women in domestic violence shelters.

The provinces and the federal government are increasing their involvement in the search for solutions to homelessness, said Stephen Gaetz, the lead author of the report and the director of the Canadian Homelessness Research Network.

That is driving the need for better information, he said.

"Those decisions on how to respond to homelessness need to be based on evidence, what we know that works, not just on ideas we pull out of the air," he said.

"We have to move forward with solid evidence on how to do this. We've got some of that evidence but now it's time to scale it up across the country and get everybody pulling in the right direction."

The report made recommendations to improve the situation.

It said communities need to develop and implement plans to end homelessness, supported by all levels of government and that those governments need to increase the supply of affordable housing.

Another recommendation called for a housing-first approach to ending homelessness.

Some communities are already following these approaches and are making significant progress, the report said.

Among recent successful efforts is the At Home/Chez Soi pilot program in five cities, backed by \$110 million in federal funding from the Mental Health Commission.

It tries to get the homeless into subsidized housing first, before then supplying them with services designed to address the underlying problems that put them on the street in the first place.

The last time a price tag was placed on dealing with homeless was in 2007, when the Sheldon Chumir Foundation estimated that the emergency response to homelessness cost between \$4.5 and \$6 billion annually, including shelters, social services, health care and corrections.

The latest report raises that to just over \$7 billion, based on the new count of the homeless and new research into the costs of housing them that came from the At Home/Chez Soi program.

What's happened is that a system designed for emergencies has become a long-term response, akin to keeping refugees in camps for decades, Gaetz said.

"When we start warehousing people, it can lead to a sense of complacency: 'well, it isn't the best situation to be sleeping with 50 other strangers in a room but it's a best we can do,'" he said.

"The reality is it isn't the best we can do at all."

The report calls for more research into the issue, suggesting the federal government should consider co-ordinating a national homeless count.

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