

THE STATE OF  
**HOMELESSNESS**  
*in*  
**CANADA**  
**2016**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**



**Canadian  
Observatory on  
Homelessness**  
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**Canadian Alliance to  
End Homelessness**

# The State of Homelessness in Canada 2016

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# Executive Summary

Mass homelessness in Canada emerged in the 1980s, following a massive disinvestment in affordable housing, structural shifts in the economy and reduced spending on social supports. Since then, stakeholders across the country have tried and tested solutions to address the issue. These responses, largely based on the provision of emergency services, have prevented meaningful progress. Fortunately, there are many signs that we are entering a new phase – one that will lead to an end to homelessness in Canada.

This next phase is marked by the promising results of the Housing First model across Canada, significant reductions in homelessness in Medicine Hat and Hamilton, federal interest and investment in housing and homelessness, and importantly, the return to a National Housing Strategy – a long overdue conversation in Canada.

We know that ending homelessness in Canada requires partnerships across public, private, and not-for-profit sectors. It means working upstream to prevent homelessness, as well as providing safe, appropriate, and affordable housing with supports for those experiencing homelessness. With support from all orders of government, a commitment to housing as a human right, and evidence-based solutions we can, collectively, prevent and end homelessness.

The *State of Homelessness in Canada 2016* provides a roadmap for the way forward. Including a series of joint recommendations – drafted by the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness and the Canadian Alliance to end Homelessness – for the National Housing Strategy.

*“Every segment of our society must be treated with dignity and respect and be given the opportunity to make a meaningful contribution.*

*The face of homelessness is changing and we have to adapt to provide the adequate support to communities to build capacity to help homeless population’s lead valuable lives.”*

- The Honourable Jean-Yves Ducloux,  
Minister of Families, Children and Social  
Development

## How is homelessness changing in Canada?

Historically, individuals experiencing homelessness in Canada were older, single men. The homelessness crisis we see today is much more diverse. More women, families and youth are experiencing homelessness than in the past. With the introduction of the 2016 Coordinated Point-in-Time (PiT) Count and the Government of Canada’s recent report on emergency shelter data, we have a clearer picture of who is homeless in Canada and what their experience looks like. This information is important to consider as local, provincial/territorial and national governments build sustainable solutions to end homelessness.


## Here is what we know:

### WHO IS HOMELESS?



**35,000** CANADIANS  
ARE HOMELESS ON A GIVEN NIGHT

at least  
**235,000**  
CANADIANS EXPERIENCE  
HOMELESSNESS IN A YEAR



**27.3%**  
ARE WOMEN



**18.7%**  
ARE YOUTH

THE NUMBER OF  
**OLDER ADULTS (50-64)  
AND SENIORS (65+)**  
EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS IS GROWING



*making up a combined*  
**24.4% OF SHELTER USERS**



**28-34% OF THE  
SHELTER POPULATION  
IS INDIGENOUS**

**4.3% OF CANADIANS  
ARE INDIGENOUS**



**FAMILIES  
STAY IN SHELTERS  
2X AS LONG  
AS INDIVIDUALS**



*approximately*  
**2,950 VETERANS**  
EXPERIENCE HOMELESSNESS

**2.2% OF SHELTER POPULATION**

*Historically, individuals experiencing homelessness in Canada were older, single men. The homelessness crisis we see today is much more diverse. More women, families and youth are experiencing homelessness than in the past.*

### WHAT DOES HOMELESSNESS LOOK LIKE?

*There has been a steady decline in the number of Canadians using shelters in the last 10 years.*



IN 2014 THERE WERE ALMOST  
**20,000 FEWER  
PEOPLE USING  
EMERGENCY SHELTERS**  
*than in 2005*



*most shelter stays*  
**ARE BRIEF WITH YOUTH  
AND ADULTS STAYING ON  
AVERAGE 10 DAYS**

**BUT FOR ADULTS (50+) AND  
FAMILIES, THE AVERAGE  
LENGTH OF STAY IS  
2X AS LONG**



**THE NATIONAL  
OCCUPANCY RATE**  
*- how full shelters are -*  
**INCREASED BY  
MORE THAN 10%  
BETWEEN 2005-2014**

## Progress across Canada

Across the country communities are ramping up efforts to prevent and end homelessness. We are seeing new partnerships, innovative solutions, systems-based plans to end homelessness and improved data collection and measurement of the issue. Encouragingly, this work is being supported – in many cases – by local, provincial/territorial and national governments.

For instance, the newly elected federal government has renewed its interest in housing and homelessness by providing valuable short-term funding to reverse the historical disinvestment in affordable housing.

The 2016 federal budget commits \$2.3 billion over two years in affordable housing through various channels, chiefly the reinvestment in the Homeless Partnering Strategy (HPS). Other initiatives include:

- Doubling the funding for the Investment in Affordable Housing Initiative over the next two years;
- Short-term investment in social housing where operating agreements are set to expire by March 2018;
- Introducing a new Affordable Rental Housing Innovation Fund to support new housing models; and
- Building new and repairing existing shelters for victims of violence.

Most importantly, the Government of Canada coupled their investment with a commitment to create a National Housing Strategy (NHS).

Progress has been seen locally and provincially. Ontario, Quebec, Alberta and Newfoundland and Labrador have launched community and provincial plans to reduce and end homelessness. Further, cities such as Medicine Hat and Hamilton are tracking their progress as they close in on ending homelessness in their communities. With the support of the province, Montreal is working towards an end to chronic homelessness. In the east, St. John's is committed to ending homelessness by 2019 through system coordination and Housing First.

These examples confirm what we know: local leadership, adequate funding and a collective resolve to do more, can have an impact on the prevalence of homelessness in Canada.

## There's no one-size-fits-all solution to preventing and ending homelessness

The more data we gather through PiT Counts, by-name lists, and other data sources, the more we learn that experience of homelessness is not homogenous. In this report we look at the unique needs of three

different groups of people. We must consider the unique causes and consequences of homelessness across demographics if we are to create effective, thus tailored, responses to homelessness. As a result, our recommendations for the National Housing Strategy, found in the conclusion of this report, include recommendations specific to each of these priority populations.

## **YOUTH**

A number of communities and provinces have identified youth homelessness as a key priority. In support of their efforts, A Way Home - a national coalition with the mandate to end youth homelessness in Canada – emerged in 2015. A Way Home provides communities with on the ground supports to build their capacity through Collective Impact, as well as inspire similar coalitions internationally that will have the effect of building collaboration across borders. Through the efforts of A Way Home, its partners and other key players, we are poised to improve our collective responses to youth homelessness through new innovations such as Housing First for Youth.

## **VETERANS**

Recent numbers reveal that 2.2% of the emergency shelter population identified as veterans. Of those, many are episodically and chronically homeless. Housing First models that provide supports specific to the needs of veterans have shown promise. Collaboration with Veterans Affairs Canada demonstrates the kind of partnerships needed to have an impact on homelessness at the systems level.

## **INDIGENOUS PEOPLES**

Indigenous Peoples are overrepresented among people experience homelessness across Canada. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's final report identified our collective responsibility to apologize for the intergenerational trauma inflicted by residential schools. Now, we must foster healing and work towards stronger partnerships with Indigenous communities. While the report did not mention homelessness specifically, the impact of residential schools can be seen as a direct cause of the overrepresentation of Indigenous Peoples experiencing homelessness. The new short-term federal investment in affordable housing for Indigenous Peoples both on and off reserve is only a first step towards improving outcomes for Indigenous Peoples. Further political, social and financial backing is required to end Indigenous homelessness in Canada.

## **What we need in a National Housing Strategy**

In order for the National Housing Strategy to be effective, it needs to prioritize preventing and ending homelessness from coast to coast to coast. The recommendations emphasize the need to work on preventing homelessness in the first place, while urgently moving people into appropriate housing when homelessness does occur. Above all, our recommendations show that it is possible to prevent and end homelessness in Canada, but it will require a major financial investment. One beyond the short-term funding laid out in budget 2016. We call for a federal long-term, 10-year investment in housing and homelessness worth \$43.788 billion. This amounts to an additional annual investment of \$50 per Canadian – that's less than \$1 a week per Canadian to prevent and end homelessness in Canada.

## Addressing Homelessness in Canada

Our recommendations for the national housing strategy are echoed by our partners and other stakeholders across the country and include the following.



### **Recommendation #1: The Government of Canada should adopt a national goal of ending homelessness with clear and measurable outcomes, milestones and criteria**

A commitment to end homelessness should be at the core of the National Housing Strategy. This will require provinces/territories, Indigenous governments and local governments to find effective strategies that meet local needs. To make this goal a reality, the strategy should do the following:

- Adopt a Housing First philosophy
- Emphasize prevention
- Support local leadership
- Prioritize effectively
- Use data in decision making
- Improve local system coordination



### **Recommendation #2: Renewal of the Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS)**

Effective solutions to preventing and ending homelessness require long-term stable funding. We call for the HPS to be renewed in 2019 for a ten-year period, emphasizing the following mandate:

- A continued commitment to Housing First
- Developing and implementing a Homelessness Prevention Framework
- Renewing a commitment to evidence informed decision making, including an expansion of the National Homelessness Information System, mandatory PiT counts, and program evaluation
- Supporting the 61 Designated Communities in developing integrated systems plans that include co-ordinated service delivery and shared data agreements.



### **Recommendation #3: A new federal/provincial/territorial framework agreement that defines local leadership on homelessness and housing investment**

Clearly defined roles are essential to a comprehensive strategy. The Government of Canada sets out the national direction for preventing and ending homelessness in Canada along with the investment and support required to operationalize the plan. Provinces/territories are responsible for many of the social services that must work in partnership with one another to effectively prevent and end homelessness. Municipalities have the local knowledge needed to implement housing investments that are best suited to their community.



### **Recommendation #4: Targeted strategies to address the needs of priority populations**

The National Housing Strategy should prioritize three homeless populations with specialized interventions:

- Develop a national youth homelessness strategy, including a focus on Housing First for Youth
- Housing options for veterans, with tailored supports and greater access to veteran benefits
- Develop an Indigenous homelessness strategy led by Indigenous communities

## **Addressing Affordable Housing in Canada**



### **Recommendation #5: Retain and expand existing affordable housing stock**

As the federal operating agreements expire the Government of Canada must find ways to keep the affordable housing units we have while building new housing. Our recommendations outline a number of possible solutions to this end, such as removing the funding cap for the mortgage pre-payment program, expanding the Affordable Housing Initiative and investing in new initiatives including the Canadian Housing Finance Authority and a Sector Transformation Initiative.





## **Recommendation #6: Implement a National Housing Benefit**

A National Housing Benefit acts as a monthly cash payment to low-income households, similar to the 'child tax' benefit. The program is a key prevention strategy that would help prevent those at risk of homelessness from losing their housing.



## **Recommendation #7: Affordable housing tax credit**

An affordable housing tax credit will give private equity investors reductions in federal income tax for dollars invested in affordable housing projects. The initiative has the potential to significantly increase Canada's affordable housing stock and will foster partnerships with the private sector to prevent and end homelessness.



## **Recommendation #8: Review and expand investment in affordable housing for Indigenous Peoples**

The National Housing Strategy must address the lack of safe, affordable and appropriate housing on reserve and the unique challenges Indigenous peoples have accessing affordable housing off reserve. We recommend an audit of on reserve housing, to allow us to make well-informed decisions going forward. An Indigenous Innovation Demonstration Fund can invest in new solutions to housing and supports for Indigenous Peoples living on and off reserve.

The recommendations outlined above and unpacked in the body of this report provide us with a roadmap forward. The National Housing Strategy is a significant opportunity. We must do more than react. We must strategize, innovate and invest until we have prevented and ended homelessness. By doing so, we will send a powerful message: No one should experience homelessness.