

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THE STATE OF  
**HOMELESSNESS**  
*in*  
**CANADA**  
**2013**



the  
homeless hub



Canadian Alliance to  
End Homelessness

# The State of Homelessness in Canada 2013

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Canadian Homelessness  
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Canadian Alliance to  
End Homelessness

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# Executive summary

The State of Homelessness in Canada: 2013 is the first extensive Canadian report card on homelessness.

This report examines what we know about homelessness, the historical, social and economic context in which it has emerged, demographic features of the problem, and potential solutions. The State of Homelessness provides a starting point to inform the development of a consistent, evidence-based approach towards ending homelessness.

Our goal in developing this report was to both assess the breadth of the problem and to develop a methodology for national measurement. We believe that homelessness is not a given and that not just reducing, but ending, the crisis is *achievable*.

The information for the State of Homelessness in Canada report has been compiled by the Canadian Homelessness Research Network (Homeless Hub)

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and the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness from the best available research to date. Because we lack strong data on homelessness in Canada, our estimates of the scale of the problem are just that: an estimate, but they represent an important starting point. As the first national report card on homelessness, the evaluation of the response to

homelessness by Canada's homeless sector provides an important means of benchmarking progress toward ending homelessness.

## Defining homelessness

In 2012, a new Canadian Definition of Homelessness was released by the Canadian Homelessness Research Network:

*“Homelessness describes the situation of an individual or family without stable, permanent, appropriate housing, or the immediate prospect, means and ability of acquiring it. It is the result of systemic or societal barriers, a lack of affordable and appropriate housing, the individual/household’s financial, mental, cognitive, behavioural or physical challenges, and/or racism and discrimination. Most people do not choose to be homeless, and the experience is generally negative, unpleasant, stressful and distressing.” (CHRN, 2012: 1)*

The accompanying **typology** identifies a range of housing and shelter circumstances:

- 1) **UNSHELTERED** - living on the streets or in places not intended for human habitation
- 2) **EMERGENCY SHELTERED** - staying in overnight emergency shelters designed for people who are homeless
- 3) **PROVISIONALLY ACCOMMODATED** – people who are homeless whose accommodation is temporary or lacks security of tenure, including interim (or transitional) housing, people living temporarily with others (couch surfing), or living in institutional contexts (hospital, prison) without permanent housing arrangements.
- 4) **AT RISK OF HOMELESSNESS** - people who are not homeless, but whose current economic and/or housing situation is precarious or does not meet public health and safety standards.

The pathways into and out of homelessness are neither linear, nor uniform. Individuals and families who wind up homeless may not share much in common with each other, aside from the fact that they are extremely vulnerable and lack adequate housing, income and the necessary supports to ensure they stay housed. The causes of homelessness reflect an intricate interplay between structural factors (poverty, lack of affordable housing), systems failures (people being discharged from mental health facilities, corrections or child protection services into homelessness) and individual circumstances (family conflict and violence, mental health and addictions). Homelessness is usually the result of the cumulative impact of these factors.

While it may be true that due to personal crises, individuals will continue to fall into homelessness, there is no reason why people should remain homeless for years, or even months on end. The problem of homelessness is not one of individual crises, however, but instead refers to: “the failure of society to ensure that adequate systems, funding and support are in place so that all people, even in crisis situations, have access to housing” (CHRN, 2012:1).

We do know that the homelessness crisis was created through drastically reduced investments in affordable and social housing in the 1990s, shifts in income supports and the declining spending power of almost half of the population since that time. Currently many Canadians are at risk of homelessness because of the high cost (and unavailability) of housing, inadequate incomes and family violence. The good news is that if we understand the causes of homelessness, we can do something about it.

# Major findings

## How many Canadians are homeless?

Estimating the number of homeless persons in Canada has been a source of debate for years. Until recently, there has never been a concerted, coordinated or consistent effort to enumerate homelessness in Canada. This means that in the past we have relied on ball-park estimates, based on unreliable and incomplete data. This is now changing.

### At least 200,000 Canadians experience homelessness in a given year

We estimate at least 200,000 Canadians access homeless emergency services or sleep outside in a given year. The actual number is potentially much higher, given that many people who become homeless live with friends or relatives, and do not come into contact with emergency shelters.

Recent data from a March 2013 Ipsos Reid poll suggests that as many as 1.3 million Canadians have experienced homelessness or extremely insecure housing at some point during the past five years.

### At least 30,000 are homeless on a given night

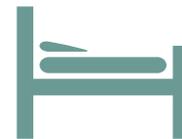
The number of Canadians who experience homelessness on any given night in Canada is estimated to be approximately 30,000 individuals. This is the best estimate of homelessness developed in Canada to date, and includes people who are:

- I. **UNSHELTERED** (outside in cars, parks, on the street)  
– 2,880
- II. **STAYING IN EMERGENCY HOMELESSNESS SHELTERS** – 14,400
- III. **STAYING IN VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN SHELTERS** – 7,350
- IV. **PROVISIONALLY ACCOMMODATED**  
(homeless but in hospitals, prison or interim housing)  
– 4,464

**30,000** PEOPLE  
ARE HOMELESS ON A GIVEN NIGHT



**2,880**  
UNSHELTERED



**14,400**  
STAYING IN  
EMERGENCY SHELTERS



**7,350**  
STAYING IN VIOLENCE  
AGAINST WOMEN SHELTERS



**4,464**  
TEMPORARY INSTITUTIONAL  
ACCOMMODATION

## As many as 50,000 Canadians may be 'hidden homeless' on any given night

Often referred to as couch surfing, this includes people who are temporarily staying with friends, relatives or others because they have nowhere else to live and no immediate prospect of permanent housing. There is no reliable data on the hidden homelessness in Canada at the national level and very little at the community level. One Canadian study in Vancouver (Eberle, et al., 2009) estimated 3.5 people were considered to be hidden homeless for every one who was homeless. While the methodology of this study is sound, it was conducted in only one city, and the differences between cities, their infrastructure to support homelessness and their homeless population are quite profound. Applied nationally with a more conservative 3:1 ratio, as many as 50,000 people could be estimated to be hidden homeless on any given night in Canada.

### Warning signs

As we attempt to determine the scope of homelessness in Canada it's important to pay attention to warning signs in national statistics that point to a larger segment of the Canadian population struggling with poverty, high housing cost and poor nutrition that may indicate homelessness risk:

- The reduction in rental housing combined with stagnating or declining incomes, benefit reductions, and economic changes meant that since the 1980s, more and more Canadians were spending a larger percentage of their income on housing. It is estimated that there are roughly 380,600 households living in severe housing need (living in poverty and spending more than 50% of their income on rental housing).
- 10% of Canadian households live below the Low Income Cut-off (LICO). In some cities, the percentage is even higher, such as Vancouver (16.9%) and Toronto (13.2%), both of which also have the highest housing costs in the country.
- 10% of Canadian families fall below the Market Basket Measure (MBM) poverty threshold, meaning they do not have enough money to meet even the most basic needs.
- 8.2% of Canadian households are experiencing moderate or severe food insecurity.
- Between 1980 and 2005 the average earnings among the least wealthy Canadians fell by 20%, even as the country went through a period of sustained economic and employment growth.

Homelessness is a problem larger than the number of people counted on the streets or in shelters.

# WARNING ! SIGNS

A larger segment of the Canadian population struggling with poverty, high housing cost and poor nutrition may indicate homelessness risk:

BETWEEN 1980 AND 2005  
THE AVERAGE EARNINGS AMONG  
THE LEAST WEALTHY CANADIANS  
**FELL BY 20%**

**10%**  
OF HOUSEHOLDS  
LIVE BELOW THE  
LOW INCOME  
CUT-OFF (LICO).



**10%**

OF FAMILIES DO NOT  
HAVE ENOUGH MONEY TO  
MEET EVEN THE MOST  
BASIC NEEDS



**8.2%**

OF HOUSEHOLDS  
ARE EXPERIENCING  
MODERATE OR SEVERE  
FOOD INSECURITY

**380,600** LIVE IN SEVERE  
HOUSEHOLDS HOUSING NEED

## Who is homeless in Canada?

While homelessness can affect any number of people, we do know that some groups of people are more likely to be homeless than others. Single adult males, between the ages of 25 and 55, account for almost half of the homeless population in Canada (47.5%), according to a Government of Canada study.



At the same time, it is also important to note that other sub-populations face unique risks and/or face special circumstances. Because the specific experiences of being homeless will differ for each group, strategies to address homelessness must be tailored to these differing needs. Key sub-populations include:

**YOUTH** – Youth make up about 20% of the homelessness population, though the prevalence rate is the same for adult men. The causes and consequences of homelessness for young people are distinct from those which afflict adults, meaning we require tailored responses.

**ABORIGINAL PEOPLE** – First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples are overrepresented amongst homeless populations in most communities in Canada. This necessitates the inclusion of their historical, experiential and cultural differences, as well as experiences with colonization and racism, in consideration of Aboriginal homelessness. Aboriginal peoples must be part of any solutions to homelessness.

*Aboriginal peoples must be part of any solutions to homelessness.*

**WOMEN AND FAMILIES** – Violence and poverty are the main causes of homelessness for women and families. There is some evidence that family homelessness is a growing problem in Canada.

## Chronic homelessness

For the vast majority of people who become homeless, the experience is rather short. In Canada, though the median length of stay in emergency shelter is approximately 50 days, most people are homeless for less than a month (29% stay only one night), and manage to leave homelessness on their own, usually with little support. For these people homelessness is a one-time only event. People who are chronically homeless (long-term) or episodically homeless (moving in and out of homelessness), form a smaller percentage of the overall homeless population, but at the same time use more than half the emergency shelter space in Canada and are most often the highest users of public systems.

Based on our estimate of the total number of homeless people who use shelters on an annual basis (200,000), we can project the following numbers of chronic, episodic and transitionally homeless persons in Canada:

**CHRONIC HOMELESS:** 4,000 to 8,000

**EPISODIC HOMELESS:** 6,000 to 22,000

**TRANSITIONALLY HOMELESS:** 176,000 to 188,000

# HOMELESSNESS COSTS THE CANADIAN ECONOMY \$7 BILLION ANNUALLY

THIS INCLUDES NOT ONLY  
THE COST OF EMERGENCY  
SHELTERS, BUT SOCIAL  
SERVICES, HEALTH CARE  
AND CORRECTIONS.

## Homelessness costs the Canadian economy \$7 billion per year

In 2007, the Sheldon Chumir Foundation estimated that the emergency response to homelessness costs taxpayers from \$4.5-\$6 billion annually. This figure includes not only the cost of emergency shelters, but social services, health care and corrections. **Our updated figure for the annual cost of homelessness to the Canadian economy is \$7.05 billion dollars.**

Homelessness is expensive because we cycle people through expensive public systems and increasingly costly and uncoordinated emergency services systems. By shifting focus to permanent solutions, we have the opportunity to reduce the long term cost of homelessness and make more efficient and effective use of public resources.

## Progress pointing to a solution

Communities across Canada have been struggling to address the problem of homelessness for several decades. The Government of Canada, as well as many provincial, territorial, regional, municipal and Aboriginal governments, have invested in creating effective solutions. A key question is whether we are making any progress? Is it making a difference?

Unfortunately, the data which does exist doesn't point to major progress being made on a national level. A recent Government of Canada study indicates that between 2005 and 2009, there was little change in the number of individuals who use shelters on an annual basis.

*A recent Government of Canada study indicates that between 2005 and 2009, there was little change in the number of individuals who use shelters on an annual basis.*

There are some positive signs of progress, however.

- In March of this year, the Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS) was renewed by the Government of Canada for five years with a financial commitment of \$119 million. The HPS encourages a housing-first approach, which recognizes that housing stability is necessary for the success of other interventions such as education and training, life skills development, management of mental health challenges – or treatment of substance abuse.
- The success of the At Home/Chez Soi pilot of Housing First programs in five Canadian cities points the way to how we can effectively contribute to an end to homelessness through the adoption and adaptation of Housing First by communities across the country.

# PROGRESS POINTING TO A SOLUTION

Success of the  
At Home/Chez Soi  
pilot of Housing  
First programs in  
5 Canadian cities



Several provincial governments are beginning to move towards strategic & integrated responses to homelessness.

Several Canadian cities, through adopting Housing First as part of their strategic community plans to end homelessness, have seen considerable reductions in their homeless populations.

Homelessness  
Partnering  
Strategy (HPS)  
renewed for  
5 years.

- Several provincial governments, including New Brunswick, Quebec, Ontario and British Columbia are beginning to move towards strategic and integrated responses to homelessness. The Government of Alberta leads the way with their plan to end homelessness which has resulted in province-wide reductions in homelessness. Further, Alberta has established the Alberta Interagency Council on Homelessness, to lead provincial planning, coordination and service integration.
- Many Canadian cities have made progress in ending homelessness, using strategic community plans, investing in affordable housing and emphasizing Housing First. Several cities in Alberta have seen considerable reductions in their homeless populations through these efforts, including Edmonton, Calgary, Lethbridge, Medicine Hat and the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo. Vancouver has seen a 66% reduction in street homelessness on their way to a goal of ending street homelessness by 2015.

These developments show that important progress is being made and demonstrate some of critical ingredients necessary to reduce homelessness including: a deliberate focus on ending homelessness, political leadership, targeted investments in affordable housing, shifting to Housing First and, importantly, taking action.

## Recommendations

1. **Communities should develop and implement clear plans to end homelessness, supported by all levels of government.**
2. **All levels of government must work to increase the supply of affordable housing.**
3. **Communities – and all levels of government - should embrace Housing First.**
4. **Eliminating chronic and episodic homelessness should be prioritized.**
5. **Ending Aboriginal Homelessness should be prioritized as both a distinct category of action and part of the overall strategy to end homelessness.**
6. **Introduce more comprehensive data collection, performance monitoring, analysis and research.**
  - 6.1 The Government of Canada should institute a national Point in Time Count of Homelessness.
  - 6.2 Funders should support communities to conduct effective and reliable program evaluations.
  - 6.3 The Government of Canada should mandate implementation of Homelessness Information Management Systems.