ENRICHING OUR UNDERSTANDING

Of Homelessness

What we know in Whitehorse

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INTRODUCTION

Homelessness has a direct impact on all people in Whitehorse whether we choose to turn a blind eye to those impacted or face the issue head on. The future health of the community is largely dependent on making changes to how we currently deal with this issue.

There is undoubtedly a housing crisis in Whitehorse and there is increasing evidence that homelessness is on the rise for both individuals and families. This is somewhat consistent with trends across the country. There is however another trend – a movement to understand homelessness and the experience of housing exclusion differently. This is exciting for a number of reasons. Most importantly, it is contributing to some phenomenal shifts being made in how communities are planning and intervening to END homelessness.

A lack of clarity around homelessness gets in the way of effective solutions. Holding a common definition offers communities and all levels of government with the language for understanding homelessness and thus the tools to identify strategies and interventions for preventing and ending homelessness[1].

This report offers both language and an expanded definition of homelessness. It is hopeful that this language will be adopted and used to harmonize the conversation on a local level. Following a general discussion around the contributors to homelessness is a closer look at what we know about homelessness in Whitehorse. Finally, the report wraps up with some recommendations. These recommendations are meant to be tangible and action-oriented.

Although this report is the start of a much larger conversation, it is also meant to put us all on the same page so we have the same understanding of what we are talking about when we say 'homeless'. It is here that we will be able to come together and truly innovate, ending the experience of homelessness for one person and one family at a time.

Acknowledgements

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[1] Stephen Gaetz, Jesse Donaldson, Tim Richter, & Tanya Gulliver (2013): The State of Homelessness in Canada 2013. Toronto: Canadian Homelessness Research Network Press

WHAT IS HOMELESSNESS?

Conventional definitions of homelessness typically focus on a person who is experiencing *absolute homelessness*. To be absolutely homeless generally means you have no shelter, however, in some instances can also refer to a person who makes use of emergency shelter services if and when the opportunity presents itself.

This rigid definition presents challenges to the organizations and services working to support those with lived experience of homelessness. It also does nothing to decrease stereotypes or improve the dignity of a person or family experiencing homelessness.

More recently, advocates and researchers working to end homelessness have presented a more expanded definition of homelessness because, **homelessness is not always visible.**

Canadian Definition of Homelessness[2]:*"Homelessness describes a range of housing and shelter circumstances, with people being without any shelter at one end, and being insecurely housed at the other."*

Unsheltered: Absolutely homeless and living on the streets or in places not intended for human habitation.

Emergency Sheltered: Includes those staying in overnight shelters for people who are homeless, as well as shelters for those impacted by family violence.

Provisionally Accommodated: Refers to those whose accommodation is temporary or lacks security of tenure.


At Risk of Homelessness: Refers to people who are not homeless, but whose current economic and/or housing situation is precarious or does not meet public health and safety standards.

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[2] Canadian Homelessness Research Network (2012). Canadian Definition of Homelessness. Available online at Homeless Hub.

It is useful to look at homelessness as a continuum, noting that the continuum is not necessarily linear. Homelessness and housing exclusion is not a fixed state for individuals or families. It is a fluid experience characterized by shifts in frequency and duration. A person's experience of being homeless is dependent on a range of factors.

| Unsheltered | Emergency Sheltered | Provisionally Accomodated | At Risk of Homelessness |
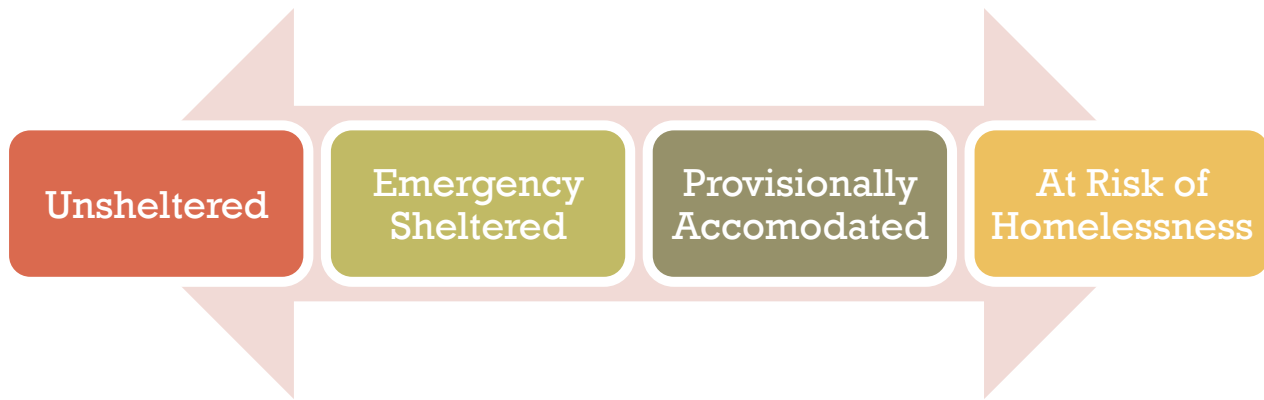
Patterns of homelessness

When looking at how to prevent, reduce or eliminate the impacts of homelessness it is common to raise questions around how *long* people are homeless or how *many* people are homeless. Do these questions matter?

The short answer is yes. However, it is not as simple as getting out on the street and counting people. There are methodological challenges to gathering data due to the fluid and transient nature of those who find themselves without shelter.

Research tends to point toward the fact that for most people the experience of homelessness is **temporary** (infrequent and short duration). This means that the other proportion is made up of individuals who either experience homelessness as **episodic** (increased frequency and longer duration) or as **chronic** (decreased frequency, increased duration)[3].

Knowing the patterns of homelessness in any given community is crucial to developing and implementing services and supports that are reflective of the people's experience.

If you organize patterns of homelessness into a pyramid, the most common model would look as follows. This is not to say this balance is true for every community. For those whose experience may be described as chronic, typically have more complex needs and are more costly to support if their homelessness is prolonged. **Support should go to these individuals first**. They are more isolated and more vulnerable to exploitation and violence.

Temporary

Episodic

Chronic

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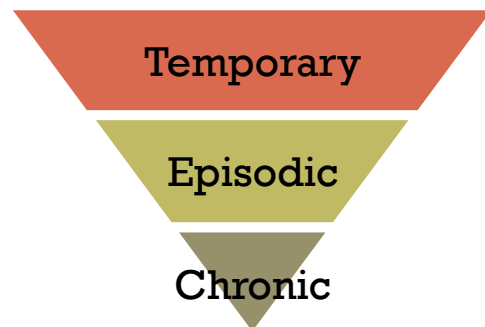
[3] Stephen Gaetz et al. (2013): The State of Homelessness in Canada 2013. Toronto: Canadian Homelessness Research Network Press

CONTRIBUTORS TO HOMELESSNESS

Every story or pathway into and out of homelessness is unique. It is never appropriate to adopt a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to supporting individuals and families with lived experience of homelessness.
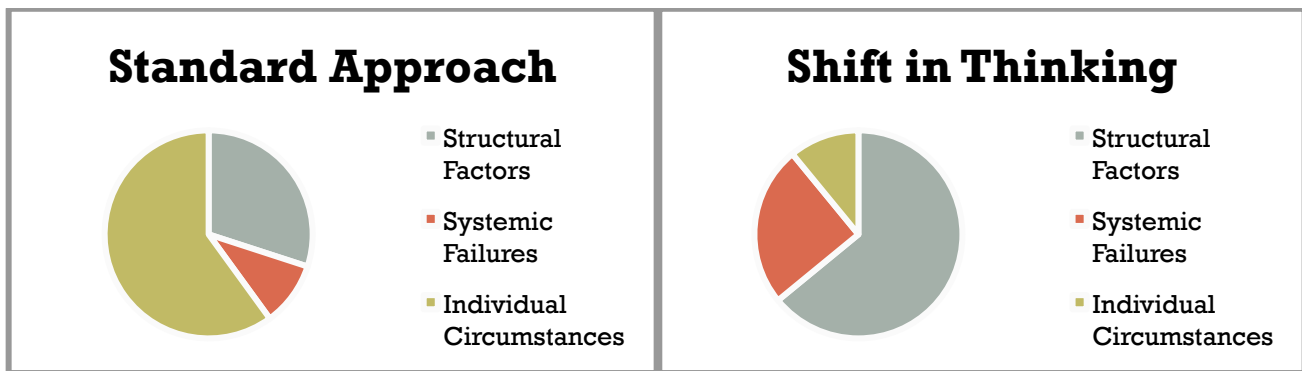
It is more helpful to examine the interaction of structural factors, systemic failures and individual circumstances in order to gain a better understanding of how a person or family ends up homeless in the first place[4].

With this knowledge we can tailor our services and supports in a dignified and just way.

"**Structural factors** are economic and societal issues that affect opportunities and social environments for individuals.[5]" Examples may include, lack of affordable housing, lack of adequate income, or experience of discrimination.

"**Systemic failures** occur when people fall between the cracks or are trapped in the fault lines in our systems of care.[6]" This can include the all too common practice of discharging individuals from hospitals or correctional facilities or when youth are transitioned out of the child welfare system into homelessness.

Individual circumstances may include traumatic events (e.g. house fire) or personal crisis (e.g. family violence or job loss). It may also involve some level of mental health or addictions issues or another disability (e.g. acquired brain injury or fetal alcohol spectrum disorder) making it challenging to navigate systems and get needs met[7].

Standard Approach
- Structural Factors
- Systemic Failures
- Individual Circumstances

Shift in Thinking
- Structural Factors
- Systemic Failures
- Individual Circumstances

 * It is common to blame the individual for becoming homeless in the first place. In the past, it has been the **standard approach** to presume an individual needs to engage in some level of treatment or rehabilitation in order to be housed. There has been a **shift in thinking** where more of the onus is being placed on the structural factors or systemic failures that interact with personal circumstances to increase a person's risk of housing exclusion or homelessness.

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[4] Stephen Gaetz et al. (2013): The State of Homelessness in Canada 2013. Toronto: Canadian Homelessness Research Network Press.
[5] Ibid
[6] Bernie Pauly, Geoff Cross, Kate Vallance, Andrew Wynn-Williams, & Kelsi Stiles (2013). Facing Homelessness: Greater Victoria Report on Housing & Supports 2012/13. Greater Victoria Coalition to End Homelessness.
[7] Stephen Gaetz et al (2013): The State of Homelessness in Canada 2013. Toronto: Canadian Homelessness Research Network Press

Housing Stability

One cannot discuss homelessness without also looking at the nature of one's housing stability. The Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) suggests a household is in core housing need if it's housing: *"falls below at least one of the adequacy, affordability or suitability standards and would have to spend 30% or more of its total before-tax income to pay the median rent of alternative local housing that is acceptable (meets all three housing standards).[8]"*

A person's housing is considered:

- **Adequate,** if the resident reports that it does not require any major repairs.

- **Affordable,** if the dwelling costs less than 30% of total before-tax household income.

- **Suitable,** if it has enough bedrooms for the size and composition of the resident household, according to National Occupancy Standard (NOS) requirements.

Many individuals and families facing homelessness or housing exclusion are also faced with a variety of complex needs related to trauma, personal crisis or health. It also makes sense to include a discussion around *support* in the context of housing stability.

For some individuals, support to access or maintain housing may be temporary, while for others the need for support will be life-long. Neither scenario is better or worse. It is a simple reality that we all need support at one time or another in our lives.

We all deserve to know that we can stay in our own home as long as it is appropriate. A desire to live in a different neighbourhood or an addition to the family may influence the permanency of our living situation. If our support needs change this doesn't mean that the location of our home needs to change too.

In order to better support people facing homelessness we need to talk in terms of **transitional supports** as opposed to **transitional housing**. This practice makes good economic sense and will prolong a person's journey out of homelessness.

Underlying Barriers – Housing & Income

The dialogue around the barriers facing those who experience homelessness and housing exclusion is exceptionally complex. However, a close look at the current housing market and some questioning around income reveals a telling picture. There are some very real and very deeply entrenched obstacles making it challenging to prevent and eliminate the experience of homelessness.

Housing

A cornerstone of preventing homelessness is access to safe and affordable housing. There has been a sharp decline in the availability of affordable housing in Whitehorse and across Canada since the early 1990's[9]. This includes both private market and social housing. Increasing access to rental markets in particular, is a key strategy to preventing and ending homelessness.

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[8] Canadian Homelessness Research Network (2012). Canadian Definition of Homelessness. Available online at Homeless Hub.

[9] Stephen Gaetz, Jesse Donaldson, Tim Richter, & Tanya Gulliver (2013): The State of Homelessness in Canada 2013. Toronto: Canadian Homelessness Research Network Press

Vacancy Rates[10] & Median Rents[11]

These charts were adapted from the Yukon Bureau of Statistics Rent Survey, June 2013 and are not representative of the entire rental market in Whitehorse (only those units surveyed). Vacancy rates in Whitehorse have been steadily decreasing over the past 10 years, while median rents have been increasing.

SUBDIVISION	VACANCY RATE
Downtown	1.9%
Porter Creek	1.9%
Riverdale	0.5%
Upper Whitehorse*	2.2%

*Includes Takhini, Granger, Hillcrest

It is notable to look at how the vacancy rates and median rents shift as you move further outside the downtown core. The majority of essential services are downtown and if a person has restricted mobility or limited access to transportation, having to move outside of downtown to find a home or afford rent is less than ideal. For those whose support and social networks are downtown it may be more pragmatic to remain provisionally accommodated or unsheltered.

UNIT SIZE	VACANCY RATE
Bachelor	0.7%
1-Bedroom	1.5%
2-Bedroom	1.8%
3-Bedroom	0%

The challenge becomes more apparent when we look at the decreased vacancy rate for bachelor units and for larger households - there is no vacancy for 3-bedroom units.

SUBDIVISION	MEDIAN RENT
Downtown	$845
Porter Creek	$913
Riverdale	$900
Upper Whitehorse*	$750

*Includes Takhini, Granger, Hillcrest

Choice is instrumental to a person's sense of home and will impact their success and desire to continue to succeed and possibly to engage with the community.

The Real Cost to Rent

UNIT SIZE	MEDIAN RENT
Bachelor	$700
1-Bedroom	$800
2-Bedroom	$900
3-Bedroom	$1050

A look in the local newspaper[12] reveals a more realistic picture on actual rental costs:

**Bachelor: $950
1-Bedroom: $1200
2-Bedroom: $1500
3-Bedroom: $1850**

There is also quite a variance in terms of if and how utilities are included, the expectation of damage deposit or first and last months rent and the characteristics a landlord may be looking for in a renter. Discrimination based on source of income, family size, race, and pet ownership is still quite common.

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[10] Yukon Bureau of Statistics, Yukon Rent Survey, June 2013
[11] Ibid
[12] Yukon News Classifieds, Friday, November 29, 2013

Income

Making an adequate income is becoming increasingly challenging for many individuals and families and is yet another key factor in preventing and ending homelessness. While rents increase, income levels tend to stay the same, particularly if you earn minimum wage or access social assistance.

Instead of a living wage, low-income individuals and families are earning at or somewhat above minimum wage. This is widening the income gap in Yukon.

The average weekly income = $ 950.06[13]

Earning minimum wage carries the additional worry of job insecurity, lack of benefits and in Yukon, a trend to work seasonally.

Earning minimum wage ($10.54) @ 40 hours per week = $421.60 before-tax

Inadequate financial security nets put individuals and families at an increase risk for homelessness. Trends across Canada point to more and more people relying on low wage, part-time work to make ends meet[14].

Homelessness in Whitehorse

Discussions around homelessness in Whitehorse have always been somewhat problematic. There has never been a clear picture or understanding of **who** we're talking about and **how many** individuals and families are impacted. Although this remains to be the case, there seems to be a wider spread acknowledgment that homelessness may be an issue for our community.

There are several challenges to quantifying homelessness, all of which are common across jurisdictions. First and foremost, homelessness is impossible to measure with 100 percent accuracy[15]. The experience of homelessness is often marked by movement within and across the continuum discussed earlier. Those most vulnerable and isolated are not necessarily engaging with support services and are therefor more difficult to count or follow.

Most community members would agree that a person living outdoors or in an emergency shelter is homeless. There is far less agreement when evaluating the experience of those who are couch surfing, staying in a hotel or in transitional housing. This poses additional challenges to quantifying homelessness and to developing strategies to decrease housing exclusion[16].

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[13] Yukon Bureau of Statistics, Yukon Monthly Statistical Review, October 2013

[14] Stephen Gaetz et al (2013): The State of Homelessness in Canada 2013. Toronto: Canadian Homelessness Research Network Press

[15] National Coalition for the Homeless, August 2007, http://www.nationalhomeless.org/publications/facts/How_Many.pdf

[16] Stephen Gaetz et al (2013): The State of Homelessness in Canada 2013. Toronto: Canadian Homelessness Research Network Press

The Value of Local Knowledge

There are significant gaps in data around homelessness and housing experiences in Yukon. Unlike some other jurisdictions there have been no coordinated shelter counts and no point in time counts completed[17]. There is some debate about the efficacy of point in time counts in northern communities. It is unlikely that a shelter count or a point in time count would capture the real numbers of those who are experiencing housing exclusion. Although anecdotal, all signs point to high rates of couch surfing and other forms of provisional accommodation. The hidden homeless population is extremely challenging to identify but are nonetheless worthy of attention.

Local service providers are gathering data and developing unique systems of tracking client housing experiences. While there may be some benefit to unifying indicators and methods of collecting data, it is crucial to acknowledge the value of anecdotal and informal data. A great deal of time passes when studies are done on issues we already know about. This is even more true for those who are experiencing daily crisis and absolute homelessness.

The Anecdotal Picture

The following information was gathered in autumn of 2013 through consultations with local service providers. To be clear, the information and data provided is not entirely comprehensive and is based on the voluntary response of the individuals and agencies cited. There are many other service providers gathering information related to the housing status of their client group.

> Broadly speaking, Whitehorse experiences an increase in the homeless population throughout the summer months. This is likely due to more manageable weather patterns, out of territory travellers and an increase in movement back and forth from work camps. It is also common for individuals to arrive from rural communities for medical appointments, to shop or to connect with services and to find themselves without transportation back home. Relatedly, individuals from rural communities are often discharged from the Whitehorse Correctional Centre without adequate planning to reconnect them with the supports in their home community. As a result, they end up homeless in Whitehorse.

It should be noted that for the most part, these individuals make up the temporary homeless population and may need some service and support but do not need to be the primary focus of intervention.

Frontline service providers report instances of clients sleeping outside all times of the year in tents, makeshift camps and directly outside. Individuals have also been known to break the law, injure themselves or become dangerously intoxicated to obtain temporary shelter at either the hospital or in jail. Reports of couch surfing in unsafe places, staying in abandoned buildings or vehicles, or trading sex for shelter are becoming increasingly common. Finally, outreach workers are aware of individuals sleeping in bike boxes and bank lobbies when other options are exhausted.

Some facts

- "Approximately 30-40 "regulars" spend more than 30 nights of the year there (19); at least 20 of these "regulars" have been living at the shelter quite consistently for at least the past five years[18]"

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[17] 'Shelter counts' and 'point in time' counts are basic methods of counting numbers of homeless people on any given night through walking the streets and tracking stays at emergency shelters

[18] Falvo, Nick (2012) Poverty Amongst Plenty: Waiting for the Yukon Government to Adopt a Poverty Reduction Strategy. (Toronto: The Canadian Homelessness Research Press).

- The Salvation Army shelters over 350 unique clients every year[19].

- FASSY found that 17% of their clients identified as homeless September 2013[20].

- There were approximately 53 Social Assistance recipients staying in local hotels/motels and 4 staying in hostels in the month of November 2013. This does not include those individuals or families accessing income assistance through their First Nation or through Indian and Northern Affairs Canada Yukon Region. This number is not static and represents households, not individuals only[21].

- In November 2013, the Whitehorse Food Bank database indicated that of 612 households in their registry:

  o 58 were 'staying with family and friends'; 5 were 'on the street'; 87 in 'social housing'; 83 in 'Band owned' housing; and 282 in 'private rental'

- Overcrowding and couch surfing within Kwanlin Dun is reported to be on the rise causing increasing challenges for the community[22].

- Substance use and addictions are serious barriers to obtaining and maintaining housing.

The 2010 Whitehorse Housing Adequacy Study[23]

This report is currently the most statistically rigorous data we have and as such, it is arguable that this is as good a place as any to start. Given that it is 3 years post-findings, it is likely that the numbers stated below are conservative and findings would likely be higher if the research were to be updated today.

The study found of 748 respondents, 107 individuals self-identified as being homeless or staying somewhere temporarily without paying rent. This included camping, staying in emergency shelters, in abandoned buildings and vehicles, couch surfing or staying temporarily with family or friends.

- "Respondents who self-identified as Aboriginal were 3.9 times more likely to be homeless than those who did not."

- "Respondents reporting under $20,000 gross household income in the past year were twice as likely to be homeless than respondents who reported a higher household income"

- 24% of homeless respondents stated needing supported housing

Who is most impacted by homelessness?

Although homelessness can impact any individual or family there are some groups of people or subpopulations that are more likely to be homeless than others. There is no specific data around subpopulations most affected in Whitehorse however, anecdotal reports point toward similar trends.

It is important to understand the needs of these subpopulations so due weight can be given to planning and implementing support services and housing models that will work for these individuals. Further, engaging those with lived experience through consultations are equally valuable through the planning and implementation phases.

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[19] Captain Shannon Howard, The Salvation Army Whitehorse

[20] Michael McCann, Executive Director, Fetal Alcohol Syndrome Society Yukon

[21] Yukon Health and Social Services, December 2013

[22] Kwanlin Dun Health Centre Staff, Personal Communication, December 2013

[23] Westfall, Rachel (November, 2010). 2010 Whitehorse Housing Adequacy Study. Whitehorse: Yukon Health and Social Services. November

First Nation, Inuit and Metis people

Aboriginal people are overrepresented across the continuum of homelessness in communities in Canada[24]

It is important to include the historical, experiential and cultural differences of Aboriginal peoples as well as to reflect on the impact of colonization and racism when planning and implementing interventions for those affected by homelessness and housing exclusion

Aboriginal peoples must be part of any solutions to homelessness[25] [26]

Disabilities

Individuals who experience homelessness are often deemed to have multiple, complex disabilities. This may include physical disabilities as well as cognitive disabilities and/or mental health issues. A systematic review of homeless individuals found that the rate of traumatic brain injury was higher amongst this population than it was across the general public[27]. There is also reason to believe that the same may be true for those with fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, although this assumption is grounded in local, anecdotal information[28].

Women and families[29] [30]

- Women and women-led households make up a large percentage of the hidden homeless population

- Family and spousal violence is a major cause of women's homelessness and family dislocation

- Women typically make lower incomes and are therefor at an increased risk for homelessness

- Once homeless, women are at an increased risk for violence, assault and sexual exploitation

Young People[31]

National trends point toward the increased prevalence of homeless youth aged 16 to 24. Here in Whitehorse there has been considerable debate around the prevalence of youth homelessness and while the Skookum Jim Emergency Youth Shelter is used, it is believed that local youth are relying more on couch surfing and the support of friends to get their shelter needs met.

- Homeless youth are more vulnerable to exploitation and crime

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[24] Stephen Gaetz et al. (2013): The State of Homelessness in Canada 2013. Toronto: Canadian Homelessness Research Network Press

[25] Ibid

[26] David Turner, Sharon Goulet, Nelly D. Oelke, Dr. Wilfreda Thurston, Alanah Woodland, Cynthia Bird, Jack Wilson, Cindy Deschenes, & Mike Boyes (2010). Aboriginal Homelessness: Looking for a Place to Belong

[27] Jane Topolovec-Vranic, Naomi Ennis, Angela Colantonio, Michael D Cusimano, Stephen W Hwang, Pia Kontos, Donna Ouchterlony and Vicky Stergiopoulos (2012). Traumatic brain injury among people who are homeless: A systematic review. BMC Public Health, 12:1059

[28] Michael McCann, Executive Director, Fetal Alcohol Syndrome Society Yukon

[29] Judie Bopp, Rian van Bruggen, Shylah Elliott, Lyda Fuller, Mira Hache, Charlotte Hrenchuk, Mary Beth Levan, & Gillian McNaughton (2007). You Just Blink and It Can Happen: A Study of Women's Homelessness North of 60. Available at http://ywcacanada.ca/data/publications/00000009.pdf

[30] Stephen Gaetz et al. (2013): The State of Homelessness in Canada 2013. Toronto: Canadian Homelessness Research Network Press

[31] Ibid

Where to from here?

While the primary intent of this report is to offer the community language to talk about homelessness in a constructive way, it would not be complete without some suggestion of how to move the conversation forward. What follows are **7 recommendations** to guide the next chapter of an evolving conversation.

Much of what is happening in Whitehorse in terms of service provision for vulnerable and marginalized persons is positive. In this respect it is important to remind ourselves that **we do not need to reinvent the wheel** and that building on what is already working for people is often the best place to start. Likewise, the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness exists with the express purpose of supporting communities across the country to end homelessness.

Having said this, an evaluation of the current gaps in service for the community's most marginalized men, women and children points sharply to the **urgent need for more affordable housing options in conjunction with the supports** to access and maintain this housing.

It is all too common to get bogged down by the complexities facing those with lived experience of homelessness. It is equally as common to hide behind restrictive mandates and to argue that it is a lack of resources, financial or otherwise that prevents us from better supporting those who are homeless today. This is not good enough.

Armed with the language to talk about a complex issue in a dignified and realistic way, we are now better equipped to develop effective solutions to ending homelessness in Whitehorse. There are both sound moral and economic arguments as to why it is healthier for communities to tackle homelessness head on. If we step up our coordination and stand together with the united vision of ending homelessness, the development and implementation of a **clear plan to END homelessness** is well within this community's reach.

Recommendations

- Work with community stakeholders, including all levels of government, to develop and implement a **clear plan to end homelessness** for Whitehorse.

- **Develop a multimedia tool** to further the understanding of homelessness in Yukon communities outside Whitehorse. This tool could also be targeted to the general public and used as an **education** tool within Yukon schools.

- **Adopt a clear stance** on **housing first** and **harm reduction** and continue educating all levels of government and the general public on the value of embracing these philosophies.

- **Encourage** immediate **action** throughout the community, including within all levels of government, on the **urgent need** for more **affordable housing stock** in Whitehorse.

- Continue to **build partnerships** within the **community**, paying particular attention to being active and present as Yukon Housing Corporation develops and implements it's **Housing Action Plan**.

- Prioritize the **inclusion** of and **partnership** with **Yukon First Nations** in all discussion on providing supports and ending the lived experience of homelessness for Whitehorse's Aboriginal citizens.

- Promote the importance of **targeting** housing and supports to those who are identified as being **chronically** and **episodically** homeless.