Canadian Definition of Ending Homelessness
Measuring Functional and Absolute Zero

Canadian Observatory on Homelessness

Context

The concept of "ending homelessness" has been central in public policy and service responses in recent years. Just consider the number of plans, strategies, policy directions and funding announcements to end homelessness - not just in Canada, but internationally. However, there is no consistently recognized definition of what an end of homelessness looks like. There is no agreement as to what the indicators and targets should be confirming such an achievement, nor a process to verify whether communities have met their goals.

To this end, the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (COH), the University of Calgary School of Public Policy (SPP), and the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness (CAEH) supported a collaborative process to develop a definition of what it means to end homelessness in Canada. This comprehensive process included a review of 60 jurisdictions and consultations with people with lived experience, service providers, researchers and policy makers.
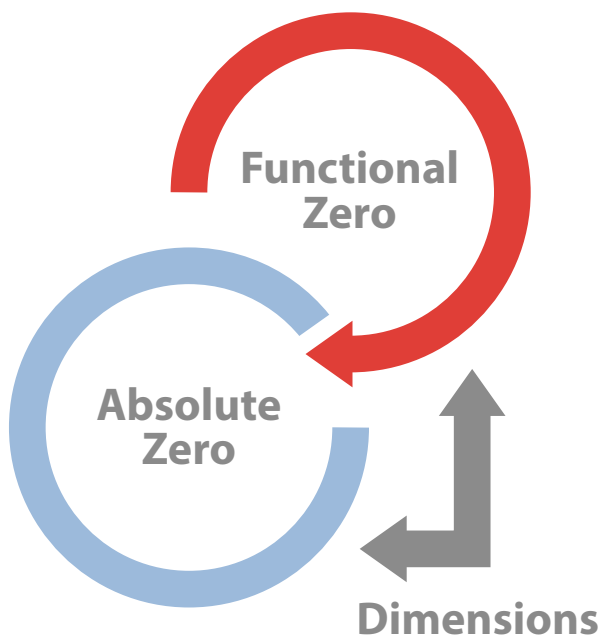
The following is an overview of the definition, which is founded on the concepts of Functional and Absolute Zero. The full discussion paper is available at: www.homelesshub.ca/endinghomelessness

Short Definitions

We need a meaningful and useful definition of "ending homelessness" that recognizes the differences between a Functional Zero end to homelessness and an Absolute Zero end to homelessness. The words "ending homelessness" often bring to mind a vision of a day when no person will ever experience homelessness - the ideal Absolute Zero concept. The goal of a Functional Zero end to homelessness, is to achieve a point where there are enough services, housing and shelter beds for anyone who needs them. This ensures that anyone who experiences homelessness does so only briefly, is rehoused successfully, and therefore unlikely to return to homelessness.

We recommend working towards Functional Zero as progress towards Absolute Zero, rather than considering these concepts in opposition. Our definition of Functional and Absolute Zero is outlined below.

A **Functional Zero** end to homelessness means that communities have a systematic response in place that ensures homelessness (unsheltered homeless, sheltered homeless, provisionally accommodated or imminent risk of homelessness) is prevented whenever possible or is otherwise a rare, brief, and non-recurring experience.

Absolute Zero refers to a true end to homelessness, where everyone has access to supports and appropriate housing so that no one becomes homeless (unsheltered homeless, sheltered homeless, or provisionally accommodated) or at risk in the first place.

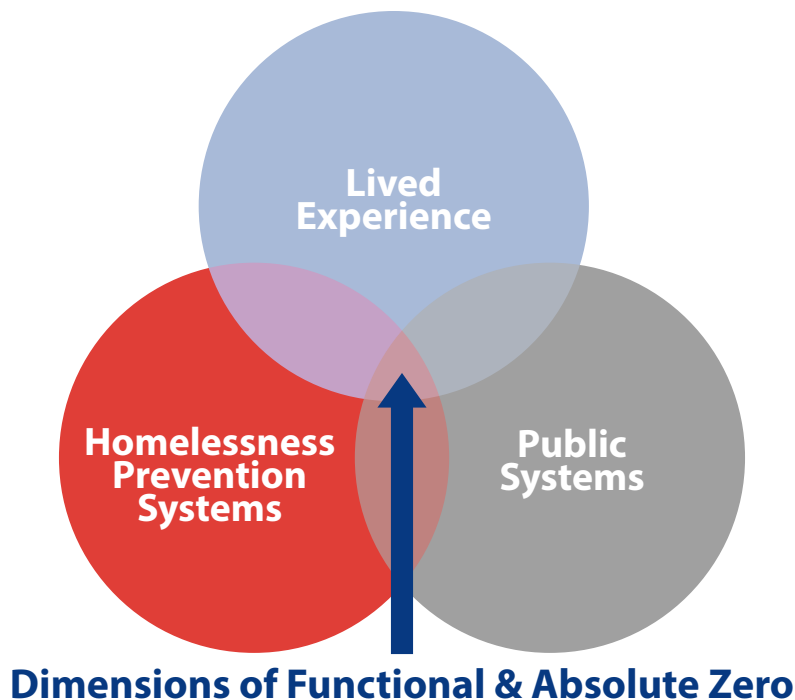**Dimensions:** Lived Experience, Homelessness Prevention Systems, Public Systems.

Rather than opposite concepts, Functional Zero describes progress towards an Absolute Zero end to homelessness.

A definition of ending homelessness must be rooted within a common definition of homelessness. For the purposes of this paper, we use the Canadian Definition of Homelessness. This ensures that Functional and Absolute Zero are aligned with the various typologies of homelessness described within the definition (e.g., unsheltered, emergency sheltered, provisionally accommodated).

The Three Dimensions of Functional and Absolute Zero

An effective response to homelessness acknowledges that interventions are needed at different levels. A comprehensive approach that tackles the structural/systemic, community, institutional, interpersonal and individual causes of homelessness is required.

From this perspective, to achieve Functional and Absolute Zero, standards and performance measures are needed across three key interrelated dimensions: lived experience, homelessness prevention systems and public systems.

Dimensions of Functional & Absolute Zero

Progress Indicators

A community has achieved a Functional and/or Absolute Zero end to homelessness when it has met the indicators outlined below, using a consistent verification process. We provide suggested verification sources recognizing that data sources vary widely across communities.

Implementation

Note that these indicators are a starting point and will be refined as communities move to implement the definition. We encourage communities, regions, provinces and territories to adapt these criteria to their local contexts and to use the concepts below as guidance rather than prescriptively.

We also suggest that communities consider adopting the definition in phases. For example, it may make sense to first focus on a lower length of stay in shelters – an indicator within the homelessness prevention system dimension - and then phase in client perception of services – an indicator within the lived experience dimension.

Dimension 1: Lived Experience

FUNCTIONAL ZERO INDICATORS	ABSOLUTE ZERO INDICATORS	VERIFICATION SOURCES
Indicators of Progress towards Outcome	Indicators of Outcome Achievement	
1.1 Program and housing participants served by homelessness prevention system (including shelter, transitional housing, Housing First etc. programs) increasingly report being moderately or highly satisfied nearing 100% with: a. Shelter quality and safety; b. Housing security of tenure affordability and safety; c. Case management services; d. Being treated with dignity, respect, and having self-determination/choice in housing and supports; e. Access to supports to address diverse needs within homeless system & mainstream public systems (addiction, trauma, mental and physical health issues, employment, education, etc.); f. Process of referral and intake into programs, shelters, housing; g. Housing secured, stabilization and aftercare supports; and h. Perception of quality of life, including sense of belonging, participation in community activities, connection with friends and family.	1.1 Program and housing participants served by homelessness prevention system (including shelter, transitional housing, Housing First etc. programs) increasingly report being highly satisfied (at or above 90% satisfaction) with: a. Shelter quality and safety; b. Housing security of tenure affordability and safety; c. Case management services received; d. Being treated with dignity, respect, and having self-determination/choice in housing and supports; e. Access to supports to address diverse needs within homeless system & mainstream public systems (addiction, trauma, mental and physical health issues, employment, education, etc.); f. Process of referral and intake into programs, shelters, housing; g. Housing secured, stabilization and aftercare supports; and h. Perception of quality of life, including sense of belonging, participation in community activities, connection with friends and family.	▪ Program participant surveys/ interviews; ▪ Lived experience consultations (surveys, focus groups, interviews, advisory groups); ▪ System/ program-level data analysis (HIFIS, PiT Counts, HMIS, By-Name-Lists, program evaluations); ▪ System of care site visits by third-party; ▪ Stakeholder consultations; and ▪ Service standards assessments
1.2 Emerging and increasing evidence of systematic and effective inclusion of those with lived experience in community coordination efforts and decision-making to develop and deliver services in the homelessness prevention system.	1.2 Transparent and verified evidence of systematic and effective inclusion of those with lived experience in community coordination efforts and decision-making to develop and deliver services in the homelessness prevention system.	

Dimension 2: Homelessness Prevention System

FUNCTIONAL ZERO INDICATORS	ABSOLUTE ZERO INDICATORS	VERIFICATION SOURCES
Indicators of Progress towards Outcome	Indicators of Outcome Achievement	
2.1 Total number of unsheltered and emergency sheltered persons is consistently decreasing year-over-year towards 0. The community has reduced their initial baseline total unsheltered and emergency sheltered count by 90%. This performance is improved/maintained year-over-year.	2.1 The total number of unsheltered and emergency sheltered homeless persons will be zero at any point-in-time.	▪ System/ program-level data analysis (HIFIS, PiT Count, HMIS, By-Name-Lists, program evaluations);
2.2 Length of stay in emergency shelters/unsheltered is consistently decreasing year-over-year towards 0. The community has reduced their initial baseline length of stay in homelessness (unsheltered and emergency sheltered) by 90% This performance is improved/maintained year-over-year.		▪ System of care site visits; ▪ Stakeholder consultations; and ▪ Service standards assessments.
2.3 The number entering versus exiting the homelessness prevention system has a steady or decreasing rate. This performance is improved/ maintained year-over-year.	2.2 Prevention services are in place to divert all persons at risk of homelessness.	
2.4 There is a high percent of positive homelessness prevention system exits (above 90%) including successful and stable natural supports placements.		
2.5 All unsheltered persons in a community are engaged with services and have been offered low-barrier shelter and housing at least every two weeks. Community has capacity to provide universal access to low-barrier shelter. This performance is improved/maintained year-over-year.		
2.6 No more than 10% of those who exit homelessness return to homelessness within 12 months. This performance is improved/ maintained year-over-year.		
2.7 People are diverted/prevented from experiencing homelessness wherever possible. As a result, there is a consistent reduction year-over-year in number of homeless persons in emergency shelter and transitional housing/outreach with no previous homelessness experience. This performance is improved/maintained year-over-year.		
2.8 Community planning and service delivery is highly coordinated using a systems approach that includes coordinated entry, assessment, formal standards of care, integration strategies with public systems, performance management and funding allocation processes. This performance is improved/maintained year-over-year.	2.3 Homelessness does not occur because systems closely coordinate and the homelessness prevention system has the capacity and processes in place to ensure all people without adequate, safe housing are immediately (same day) provided access to a permanent housing unit or other acceptable non-homeless placement (e.g., residential treatment).	

Dimension 3: Public Systems

FUNCTIONAL ZERO INDICATORS	ABSOLUTE ZERO INDICATORS	VERIFICATION SOURCES
Indicators of Progress towards Outcome	Indicators of Outcome Achievement	
3.1 Percent of those entering the homelessness prevention system from other public systems is consistently decreasing over time (e.g., child protection; corrections; social housing; health, addiction treatment etc.).	3.1 The incidence of persons exiting public systems into homelessness is eliminated.	▪ Public and private investment in system; ▪ Public system and policy stakeholders' interviews/ focus groups; ▪ Policy, procedural and funding analysis; ▪ System integration analyses; ▪ Program participant surveys/ interviews; ▪ Lived experience consultations (surveys, focus groups, interviews, advisory groups); ▪ System/ program-level data analysis; ▪ System of care site visits; and ▪ Stakeholder consultations.
3.2 All levels of government commit that no one should be forced to live on streets and provide sufficient resources to meet emergency shelter demand at minimum.	3.2 Adequate affordable housing supply is in place and accessible to meet demand from those at imminent risk of homelessness to ensure no one becomes homeless in the first place.	
3.3 Coordination efforts are emerging between homeless and public systems to ensure appropriate referrals, timely access to services/ supports to prevent and end homelessness. This includes public systems conducting standardized screening for housing status/assistance needs and having in place standardized protocols for addressing needs of people.	3.3 Formalized and effective coordination efforts are in place between homelessness prevention systems and public systems to ensure appropriate referrals, timely access to services/ supports to prevent homelessness.	
3.4 Funding is increasingly coordinated and aligned with community needs to ensure service delivery levels sustain a high functioning system.	3.4 Diverse public and private funding sources are highly coordinated and secured to maintain service delivery levels to sustain high functioning system.	
3.5 There is increasing evidence of funding and policy coordination across governments to ensure ending homelessness objectives are supported. This includes removal of laws that criminalize homelessness.	3.5 Funding and policy across governments are highly integrated to support ending homelessness objectives.	

The Benefits of Alignment

The indicators provided are envisioned as a starting point for dialogue and will be refined on a go-forward basis. A community can describe itself as having achieved various levels of the full Functional Zero or Absolute Zero end to homelessness when it has met the indicators outlined below, using a consistent verification process.

Note that each jurisdiction is encouraged to consider adapting these criteria to their local context and using the concepts below in a guidance rather than prescriptive manner. We suggested verification sources as well, knowing that in each jurisdiction the capacity of locating necessary data sources or administering suggested data collection approaches is limited and shaped by various factors. Despite local flexibility, functionally ending homelessness still requires communities to demonstrate how the dimensions of Functional Zero are being addressed.

There is a need to develop technical assistance support and tools for various jurisdictions aiming to move forward, with the understanding that adaptation for a rural northern community will look very different from that of a large urban centre. For instance, in rural centres that might not even have emergency shelters, a number of measures proposed are irrelevant, such as length of stay in shelter. In this instance, it may be more meaningful for the community to focus on preventing homelessness and developing verification sources that track hidden homelessness and access to housing and supports. Rural centres can and should be able to measure time from identification of an unsheltered person to permanent housing. While there are fewer unsheltered people in rural areas, people do lose housing in every type of community: rural, urban and even those communities with much stronger social bonds and higher levels of familial responsiveness and accommodation. In this sense, there are system qualities and responses every community needs to have in place, but the implementation approach may vary.

Conclusion

This paper proposed a common definition of a Functional and Absolute Zero end to homelessness for Canada based on existing international approaches and the perspectives of individuals with lived experience. Future work will consider implementation of the definition including: a verification process, data collection tools and capacity building for communities. Adaptations of the definitions for key groups, including youth and Indigenous peoples, should be explored as well.