

The 1996 Count of Homeless Persons



THE CITY OF
CALGARY
COMMUNITY STRATEGIES

Homeless Persons, 1996

In 1992, the City of Calgary's Community and Social Development Department (formerly Social Services Department) conducted its first in a series of biennial surveys of various downtown human service providers to determine the number of homeless persons who used such services on a given night. The night chosen for the 1996 count was May 23.

The timing for the count was determined in 1992 by members of the Street Liaison Committee (consisting of representatives of emergency, street level social services in the downtown area), based on their experience that peak need generally occurs on a week night during the third week of the month, just prior to the issuing of various income support payments. The count has continued to be taken around the third week of May subsequently. As a result, we now have data for the years 1992, 1994, and 1996.

While there is much debate about the definition of "homelessness", for the present study, persons who are homeless (hereinafter, homeless persons) were considered to be those who did not have a permanent residence to which they could return whenever they so chose. Included in this definition are those who used emergency shelters and those who found shelter on the streets. It is well recognized that these numbers will not include the "invisible homeless",¹ those who have stayed with friends or family that night, who slept outside or in places where they would not have been seen e.g. in vehicles or abandoned buildings, those who used shelter services located outside of the downtown core, or those who simply did not bed down for the night. As such, the total number underestimates the actual number of homeless people in Calgary, but does provide a reference point for trend analyses.

Method

Participating agencies included women's shelters, men's hostels, hospitals, police, emergency social services, and outreach services. Nineteen organizations, most of which were included in the 1994 survey, again provided data. For the night of May 23, 1996, they were asked to record the total number of clients using their facilities, the total number of families (defined as a couple, a couple with children, or a single adult with children), and if possible, to identify these clients' age, sex, and social race (i.e., Aboriginal, Asian, Black, or Caucasian)². Each organization also noted its maximum capacity and any unusual events or circumstances which may have affected the count (e.g. inclement weather, unusual numbers, etc.). The agencies returned their results to the Community and Social development Department, Research and Planning Unit, where they were compiled.

Results

The total number of clients using shelters or counted on the streets for the night of May 23, was 615³: 147 females and 468 males, the majority of whom were between 25 and 54 years of age (n=419; see Table 1). While most facilities cannot accommodate families, 28 families were in shelter that night (compared to 25 in 1994). Eighteen of these families were in women's shelters. The total count included 55 children ranging from 0-14 years (22 were under the age of 5 and most were in women's shelters), 41 youth aged (15-19) and 47 young adults (20-24 years). Nine percent of the sample (n=53) were seniors ranging in age from 55 years or older.

Women and girls represented 24% of homeless persons in 1996, up from 16% in 1994; an 8% increase (see Table 2). Age ranges of both males and females have also changed. There was a substantial increase in the 5-14 age group, from 2.4% in 1994 to 5.4% in 1996. In 1992, age and

sex data were not collected. The 15-24 year olds who were homeless decreased from 20% in 1994 to 14% of the total in 1996. However, in 1994, there were nearly three times as many males (n=68) as females (n=24) in this category. In 1996, this gap had narrowed with 32 females and 56 males. A sharp decrease was seen among 25-44 year olds, from 60% of the total sample in 1994, to 49% this year. The most significant change was in the 45-64 year old age group. In 1994, this category represented only 1.1% of the total sample. This climbed to 25% in 1996, and the clients were mostly male (n=134 males and 20 females).

The majority of homeless persons were Caucasian (n=448, 73%), followed by Aboriginal persons (n=121, 20%), Asian (n=19, 3%), and Black (n=18, 3%) persons. The social race of nine persons was unknown although most recorders listed these as "immigrants", while two were identified as Iranian (see Table 3). The socio-racial composition of homeless persons counted has not significantly changed since 1992.

The hospitals that participated in the count provided no shelter for homeless clients in their emergency departments that evening, but most shelters were filled or nearly filled to capacity. Only the police and hospitals reported an unusually quiet night.

Another factor affecting capacity could have been the weather. It was unseasonably cool on May 23, with a high of 10 degrees Celsius and a low of 3 degrees. Normal temperatures for this time of year are highs of 18 degrees and lows of 4 degrees. In addition, Calgary received 2.4 millimetres of rain throughout the evening and night. However the cool weather is not the main factor for the numbers observed. In both 1992 and 1994, the nights the counts were taken were unseasonably cold as well. In 1992, it was snowing and in 1994 there was a steady, heavy rain. Yet, for those years, homeless totals were 447 and 461 respectively.

To what can we attribute the increase to 615 persons counted this year? Table 4 provides a comparison of the total numbers of homeless persons reported by agencies in 1992, 1994, and 1996. In comparing the 1994 and 1996 counts, there has been an increase of 154 homeless persons or 33% over the two years. Part of this increase (n=82, 53%) is due to the fact that four additional agencies were added in the count [Anchorage (n=18), Connection Housing (n=18), Mary Dover House (n=26), and the Native Women's Shelter (n=20)]. The remaining increase (n=72, 47%) is a result of an overall increase in the number of homeless persons counted by agencies which had previously participated in the count in 1994.

Conclusion

These data suggest that the number of people seeking temporary or emergency shelter is increasing, even after the effects of adding new agencies to the count are considered. The demographic composition of homeless people is also changing as noted earlier. More women, children, and seniors are seeking emergency shelter than in the past. The increase in the former two groups is due largely to the new Native women's Shelter, and to Mary Dover House making available emergency beds due to the demand at the Calgary Women's Shelter.

Footnotes

1 One local agency, reported that 148 persons who they defined as "invisible homeless" used their services on May 23, 1996. This number is not included in the total count for this report but represents an increase from 39 people in 1992 and 72 people in 1994 who were placed in this category by this agency.

2 The term "social race" denotes that race is a social category based on visible physical features. It is not a biological term.

3 To accommodate its closure during the week of the official count, Alpha House recorded its numbers one week earlier, on May 16, 1996. The Drop-In Centre noted that up to 18-22 of their clients (on May 23) may have stayed at Alpha House on May 16, thus possibly inflating the overall count.

Tables

Table 1: Age and Sex Distribution of Homeless Persons, 1996

Age Group	Number		Total	
	Female	Male	N	%
0-4	10	12	22	4%
5-14	17	16	33	5%
15-19	17	24	41	7%
20-24	15	32	47	8%
25-44	67	235	302	49%
45-54	15	102	117	19%
55-64	5	32	37	6%
65+	1	15	16	3%
Total	147	468	615	100%
	(24%)	(76%)	(100%)	-

Table 2: Age and Sex of Persons who were Homeless, 1994 and 1996

Age Group	1994				1996			
	N		%		N		%	
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
0-4	4	12	.9	2.6	10	12	1.6	2.0
5-14	4	7	.9	1.5	17	16	2.8	2.6
15-24	24	68	5.2	14.8	32	56	5.2	9.1
25-44	37	239	8.0	51.8	67	235	10.9	38.2
45-64	4	1	.9	.2	20	134	3.3	21.8
65+	0	11	.0	2.4	1	15	.2	2.4
Subtotal	73	338	15.9	73.3	147	468	24.0	76.1
Age unknown	2	7	.4	1.5	0	0	.0	0
Sex unknown	41		8.9		0		.0	
Total	461		100.0		615		100.0	

Note:

In 1996, the number of youth (aged 15-24 years) was comprised of 17 females and 24 males aged 15-19 and 15 females and 32 males aged 20-24.

In this same year, the number of mature adults (aged 45-64) was comprised of 15 females and 102 males aged 45-54, and 5 females and 32 males aged 55-64.

Table 3: Observed Social Race of Homeless Persons Counted, 1996

Social Race	N	%
Aboriginal	121	20%
Asian	19	3%
Black	18	3%
Caucasian	448	73%
Other	9	1%
Total	615	100%

Table 4: Number of Homeless Persons Counted by Surveyed Agencies, 1992, 1994,¹ and 1996

Agency	N of Persons		
	1992	1994	1996
General Shelters			
Alberta Safe House	4	8	8
Alpha House ²	26	41	50
Anchorage	-	-	18
Avenue 15	13	15	16
Booth Centre	139	160	176
Calgary Drop-In	120	110	182
Connection Housing	-	-	18
Harbour Light	38	-	-
Mustard Seed	-	5	14
Women's Shelters			
Calgary Women's Emergency	27	32	28
Mary Dover House	-	-	26
Native Women's	-	-	20
Sheriff King	30	21	20
Non-Shelter Agencies			
Alberta Family and Social Services	2	2	0
Calgary Police Service	16	5	9
Community and Social Development	5	7	15
- Connaught	0	34	15
- East Downtown			
Foothills Hospital	-	0	0
General Hospital	3	0	0
Holy Cross Hospital ³	0	0	-
Latour Centre	-	3	-
Peter Lougheed Hospital	-	0	0
Rockyview Hospital	-	0	0
Sonshine Centre	24	18	-
Total Number of Persons	447	461	615
Note: "-" Indicates the agency was not included in the count in that year.			

Footnotes

1 The following agencies have participated in the homeless count during 1992, 1994, and 1996: AFSS, Alberta Safe House, Alpha House, Avenue 15, Booth Centre, Calgary General Hospital, Calgary Drop-In Centre, Connaught Outreach, Eastern Downtown Core Outreach, Sheriff House, Women's Emergency Shelter, and the Calgary Police Service.

The 1992 and 1994 homeless counts include agencies that are no longer in operation (e.g. Harbour Light) or have changed their mandate (e.g. Sonshine Centre), and, as such were not included in the 1996 count. Some agencies were only included in two of the three counts (e.g. Mustard Seed - 1994 and 1996, Sonshine Centre - 1992 and 1994). In 1996, the new agencies are: Anchorage House, Connection Housing, Mary Dover House, and the Native Women's Shelter.

Although some of these (e.g. Connection Housing) are not new agencies in terms of their existence, 1996 was the first year in which they provided shelter bed services and, as a result, were included in the count.

2 To accommodate its closure during the week of the official count, Alpha House recorded its numbers one week earlier, on May 16, 1996. The Drop-In Centre noted that up to 18-22 of their clients (on May 23) may have stayed at Alpha House on May 16, thus possibly inflating the overall count.

3 Closed in 1996.