

**Results of the pilot study to estimate the size of the hidden homeless  
population in Metro Vancouver**

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## Executive Summary

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Most of the elements of homelessness as defined by various studies are incorporated in existing data sources. For example, homeless counts in different cities in Canada demonstrate that communities are able to gather information about the number and characteristics of people living on the street, in shelters and, if known to outreach workers, places unfit for year-round habitation such as campgrounds or abandoned buildings. Statistics Canada and CMHC data provide several options for estimating the size and nature of the at risk population, including those that are overcrowded or living in inadequate housing. At present, there is no reliable source for data on the size of the hidden homeless population. This project tested an approach to estimate the size of the hidden homeless population in Metro Vancouver.

The research was modeled on the 2005 and 2007 Greater Los Angeles Homeless Count General Population Survey.<sup>1</sup> The Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA), an independent agency established by the County and the City of Los Angeles, undertook a 15-minute survey of 1,000 households (contacted through random digit-dialling) to identify the hidden homeless as part of a larger homeless count. The first General Population Telephone Survey took place in 2005, and was the first of its kind in North America ever conducted as part of a homeless enumeration. In 2007, as in 2005, the aim was to estimate the number of “hidden” homeless that self define as homeless but who avoid homeless shelters and do not stay on the street. The definition of hidden homelessness used was based on that of U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD); an “unsheltered” homeless person was someone who “resides in a place not meant for human habitation” (HUD 2004). The focus of concern in the L.A. study was homeless persons staying on private property. These places included unconverted garages, backyard storage units, porches, vehicles or tents on private property and other structures not meant for human habitation (LAHSA 2007). Projecting the results to the entire Los Angeles population resulted in an estimate of 20,746 hidden homeless individuals situated on private property.

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<sup>1</sup> Applied Survey Research. 2007 *Greater Los Angeles Homeless Count. General Population Telephone Survey*. Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority. <http://www.lahsa.org/generalpopulationtelephonesurvey.asp>

## Purpose and objectives

The present study replicated the L.A. approach using a made in Canada definition to estimate the size of the hidden homeless<sup>2</sup> population in Metro Vancouver. The L.A. study definition was deemed too restrictive for Canadian purposes; it was felt that the focus on outdoor structures not meant for human habitation would not reflect the reality of Canadian winters and would not capture the phenomenon of temporary shared accommodation. The objectives of the research were to:

- Develop a definition of the hidden homeless that can be used nationally and implemented through the pilot study;
- Refine the L.A. methodology for estimating the number of hidden homeless so that it could be used in communities across Canada;
- Determine the feasibility of identifying the characteristics of the hidden homeless population;
- Explore approaches to estimating the lifetime incidence of hidden homelessness;
- Estimate the current size of the hidden homeless population in Metro Vancouver;
- Learn about the characteristics of the hidden homeless and pathways into and out of hidden homelessness for some hidden homeless in Metro Vancouver; and
- Assess the potential for replicability of this research elsewhere in Canada.

## Methodology

This research comprised both a quantitative and qualitative component and was carried out in two phases. The method was developed in the first phase, and consisted of a literature review, scan of communities for their definition of hidden homeless, selection of a definition of hidden homeless and preparation of the quantitative and qualitative survey materials.

Researchers ruled out the possibility of estimating the demographic characteristics of the hidden homeless due to the anticipated low incidence of hidden homelessness and therefore limited base size for reliable analysis. Researchers also considered the inclusion of questions regarding lifetime incidence of hidden homelessness as stated in the objectives above. After completing the literature review, the authors elected to substitute annual incidence i.e. an estimate of the number of hidden homeless people over the course of a year instead of lifetime incidence as the period prevalence measure

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<sup>2</sup> While the term sofa surfing is used synonymously with hidden homeless by some jurisdictions, it is not consistently used. It suggests that “sofa surfers” stay in different households/places on a rotating and constant basis (versus staying with one household for an indeterminate period of time). While this may be true, it is not the preferred term, as it tends to minimize the severity of the practice. We have elected to use the term “hidden homeless” throughout this report.

of hidden homelessness. This time frame is more commonly considered in planning and policy making around absolute homelessness, see for example, the Corporation for Supportive Housing.<sup>3</sup>

The second phase implemented the research design. The quantitative research was operationalized in several questions incorporated in a monthly Omnibus, a metro-wide, shared cost telephone survey that employs multi-level random selection methods. This non-custom format enables clients to sponsor a number of questions on a random household survey at less cost than a custom survey. Interviews were completed in two waves of 500 in January and February 2009.

For the qualitative component, a two-step process was followed, first requesting a follow up interview with the host household representative completing the quantitative survey. If agreed, and once that contact was made, the interviewer attempted to speak to the person staying temporarily.

### Definition

One of the key tasks was to clarify the definition of hidden homelessness to be used in this study, and specifically to develop a way to operationalize the definition in the context of the random household survey method. Two approaches were used – a literature review and a scan of communities for their definition of hidden homeless.

The selected definition of hidden homelessness was intended to capture a range of situations:

*Hidden homeless persons are people staying temporarily with another household and who do not have a regular address of their own where they have security of tenure.*

The literature suggested that the following variables are important elements of a nuanced operationalization of the definition of hidden homelessness:

- Relationship to head of household (e.g. friend, relative etc.);
- Age group (e.g. under 25 yrs);
- Sleeping arrangement (e.g. couch, floor, basement, garage, etc.);
- Owner/tenant (or leaseholder) satisfaction/dissatisfaction with the arrangements; and
- Financial or in-kind contribution.

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<sup>3</sup> Martha R. Burt and Carol Wilkins. 2005. *Estimating the Need: Projecting from Point-in-Time to Annual Estimates of the Number of Homeless People in a Community and Using this Information to Plan for Permanent Supportive Housing*. Corporation for Supportive Housing.

The number of these variables that could be operationalized in this short random survey was limited. As such, two of these variables were selected – family relationship and a version of owner/tenant satisfaction with the arrangement.

In some jurisdictions with statutory definitions of homeless such as the U.S., family ties are enough to exclude a person from consideration as hidden homeless. That is, a family member staying temporarily with another member of the family cannot by definition be considered hidden homeless.

However, this approach was not taken in this study. While the relationship of the hidden homeless person to the host household was considered an important dimension for descriptive purposes, family relationship was not enough to exclude a person from consideration as hidden homeless. The rationale is that a homeless person may exhaust their welcome with family members, as well as others, with numerous or lengthy stays. Host dissatisfaction (whether family or not) with this type of arrangement ultimately results in a precariousness that represents lack of security of tenure. “Host household satisfaction with the arrangement” was felt to supersede family relationship and indeed other variables reported in the literature. If the host household is dissatisfied with the relationship then family status, payment of rent, sleeping location or other variables is inconsequential. Host household satisfaction was determined by asking if the visitor could stay as long as they needed to establish a home of their own. Thus a person who was a member of the immediate family was considered hidden homeless if they could not stay in the host household as long as they needed to establish a residence of their own. Importantly, this approach eliminated from consideration as hidden homeless a situation where a youth was living in the family home while in school, for example, and could stay as long as he or she wishes.

## Findings

Among the 1,027 completed household interviews, 35 host household representatives reported having 49 individuals living with them at the time of the survey. When the definition of hidden homelessness was applied using the screening question that the individual visitor “cannot stay with you until they are able to establish a residence of their own”, the number of positive responses was reduced. Applying this criterion reduced the number of households reporting a hidden homeless visitor from 49 to 8 households. They were accommodating 12 hidden homeless persons, 5 of whom were family members.

Projecting to the total population of Metro Vancouver households<sup>4</sup> it is estimated that there were 9,196 hidden homeless persons at the time of the survey. Most of them would have been un-related to the host household. The number of hidden homeless individuals in Metro Vancouver *in the past year* was estimated to be

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<sup>4</sup> Source: 2006 BC Statistics. Estimated number of hidden homeless individuals housed temporarily across 817,225 households.

23,543 persons. Most (18,000 or 75%) of these individuals were non-family members.

Since the incidence of hidden homelessness is considered a statistically rare phenomenon, these estimates produce fairly broad interval estimates. The margin of error is 7,650 at the 95% confidence level. That means that 95 times out of 100 the interval from 1,545 persons to 16,846 persons includes the actual number of hidden homeless individuals in Metro Vancouver. A much larger (and impractical) sample size would have been necessary to provide narrow interval estimates. Despite the wide variance, and given that the survey has been conducted twice in L.A. with similar results, both the L.A. study statisticians and the statistician involved in the present study concluded that the method represents a reasonable approach for estimating the size of the hidden homeless population.

Qualitative research was designed to learn from hidden homeless individuals about their previous housing situation and barriers to obtaining stable housing. Two qualitative interviews with hidden homeless persons were completed and they are included as profiles in the report. This limited number means it is not possible to draw any conclusions about the characteristics of hidden homelessness and pathways into and out of hidden homelessness.

### Significance

The study provides an estimate of the size of the hidden homeless population in a Canadian community using empirical methods. It provides figures for the estimated number of hidden homeless individuals in Metro Vancouver over four weeks in January and February 2009 and an estimate of the number of hidden homeless individuals in Metro Vancouver over the course of a year.

The figures may be an underestimate of the actual number hidden homeless due to the limitations of telephone survey research such as exclusion of some non-English speaking and cell only households.

It represents findings for one community. Given variations in regional housing markets and other contributing factors, this estimate cannot be applied elsewhere.

The study demonstrates that this approach used for estimating the size of the hidden homeless population is effective. Given the limitations associated with estimating “rare” events, replicating the survey in Metro Vancouver would confirm its validity.

Policy implications are related to the potential relationship between the number of hidden homeless persons and the number of absolute homeless persons.<sup>5</sup> There were 2,660 absolute homeless people in Metro Vancouver counted on one day in March 2008.<sup>6</sup> The estimate of 9,196 hidden homeless persons may be viewed as an indicator of housing instability or precariousness that may predict future levels of absolute homelessness. However, there is insufficient information to determine the existence or strength of this relationship. Data for both measures over several years would be required to determine the relationship.

It might be helpful to consider the hidden homeless population in the context of the European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (ETHOS) classification system.<sup>7</sup> Under this typology, the hidden homeless population would be considered under the general conceptual category “insecure” as opposed to “houseless” or “roofless”. The benefit of this approach is that it lays out clearly the conceptual category (insecure), the operational category (living in insecure accommodation), the living situation (temporarily with friends or family), and housing situation (living in conventional housing but not the usual place of residence due to lack of housing). However, it may be that the language used in the ETHOS system “... temporarily with friends or family” does not give sufficient weight to the precariousness of these housing situations.

Recommendations are provided.

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<sup>5</sup> Called the sheltered and street homeless in Metro Vancouver.

<sup>6</sup> SPARC. 2008. *Still on our Streets... Results of the 2008 Metro Vancouver Homeless Count*. For Metro Vancouver Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness. Some hidden homeless were included if they were located at outdoor locations or in homeless services such as drop in centres or meal programs.

<sup>7</sup> ETHOS - European Typology on Homelessness and Housing Exclusion  
[http://www.feantsa.org/files/indicators\\_wg/ETHOS2007/general/EN\\_2007EthosLeaflet.pdf](http://www.feantsa.org/files/indicators_wg/ETHOS2007/general/EN_2007EthosLeaflet.pdf)  
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