

# Homelessness in Canada

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Published Online

April 29, 2019

Last Edited

July 9, 2019

Homelessness affects many Canadians, though some population groups are more at risk of becoming homeless than others, including single adult men, people dealing with mental health issues or addictions, women with children fleeing violence, and Indigenous people. It is estimated that approximately 35,000 Canadians experience homelessness on any given night, and at least 235,000 Canadians are homeless in any given year.



## Homelessness in Montreal

(courtesy Miville Tremblay/Flickr)

Montreal, Quebec.

## History of Homelessness as a Social Problem in Canada

The word “homelessness” was not used to describe a social problem in Canada until the early to mid-1980s. Some Canadians lived through periods of homelessness prior to that time. However, the experience was not as common as it is today, and there were different government policies and programs in place to address it. Most Canadians were housed, although sometimes in inadequate or temporary conditions, notably during the [Great Depression](#) and the [Second World War](#).

### DID YOU KNOW?

According to the University of Toronto's Dr. David Hulchanski, the word “transient” was used more often than “homeless” in the past, usually to describe single men who lived in rooming houses and received help from charities such as the [Salvation Army](#).

In the 1960s and 1970s, the federal government invested heavily in adequate housing for Canadians. The *National Housing Act* was amended in 1973, and 20,000 units of social housing were built every year. Until the 1980s, many professionals involved with social and economic policy and programs in Canada – urban planners, academics, public health officials and social workers, for example – were focused on ensuring that people had access to safe, secure housing and neighbourhoods. (See also [Housing and Housing Policy](#)).

In 1981, the [United Nations](#) (UN) announced that 1987 would be the *International Year of Shelter for the Homeless*. At the time, the UN was focused on the fact that many people in less developed countries did not have access to adequate housing. The 1981 UN resolution did not mention developed countries such as Canada.

By 1987, however, the international focus had shifted to look at increasing numbers of unhoused people in wealthier, developed countries, including Canada.

According to the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, mass homelessness in Canada emerged around this time as a result of government cutbacks to social housing and related programs starting in 1984. In 1993, federal spending on the construction of new social housing came to an end. In 1996 the federal government transferred responsibility for most existing federal low-income social housing to the provinces.

## What Does it Mean to be Homeless?

The Canadian Observatory on Homelessness defines homelessness as:

“The situation of an individual or family without stable, safe, 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.”

Homelessness can be experienced through different kinds of housing and shelter situations, over a short or long period of time.

The Canadian Observatory on Homelessness has organized these situations into four groups: unsheltered, emergency sheltered, provisionally accommodated and at risk of homelessness.

Unsheltered homelessness refers to people who are “absolutely homeless and living on the streets or in places not intended for human habitation.” It includes the temporary occupation of public space, such as sidewalks, squares, parks and forests. It could also refer to people living in cars, in garages, attics or closets, or in makeshift shelters made of salvaged materials (cardboard or tarps, for example), shacks or tents. The occupation of private space and vacant buildings, also known as “squatting,” is another example of unsheltered homelessness.

Emergency sheltered refers to 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.

People who are at risk of homelessness are not homeless but are those “whose current economic and/or housing situation is precarious or does not meet public health and safety standards.” This could include “couch surfers,” or people staying at rooming houses.

Many people who are provisionally accommodated or at risk of homelessness do not show up in official figures or statistics. This is known as “hidden homelessness,” and it is often overlooked by social policies and programs.

Chronic homelessness in Canada is more widespread than it used to be, and periods of homelessness are getting longer due to the numerous obstacles to find durable solutions.



#### Wellington Street Abandoned Tunnel Graffiti

(courtesy Coastal Elite/Flickr)

Wellington Street Tunnel, abandoned in 1994. Wellington / De la Montagne, Montreal. 13 July, 2016.

## What Leads People to Become Homeless?

Homelessness can be caused by a combination of factors such as:

- **Poverty**
- Unemployment and precarious employment
- Migration toward urban centers
- Shortage of affordable housing
- Withdrawal of the State from the field of health and social welfare income supports (e.g., social security benefits, employment insurance, social housing)
- Divorce, relationship or family breakdown
- Family violence
- Lack of social or family support
- Addictions (drugs or alcohol, compulsive gambling)
- Stigmatization of mental health problems or drug dependency and lack of adequate services
- Institutionalization and the lack of support or services for those transitioning out of youth centers, detention, mental health hospitals, etc.
- Discrimination based on origins, age or sexuality
- Low levels of schooling, social isolation and low self-esteem
- Physical or mental health problems

Where is Home? (2016) Documentary on homelessness in Southern Alberta. A film by Dan Berdusco.

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#### How Many Canadians Are Homeless?

It is difficult to say exactly how many Canadians are homeless. However, the most recent statistics from 2014 indicate that an estimated 35,000 Canadians experience homelessness on any given night, and at least 235,000 Canadians are homeless in any given year. Of that number, it is estimated that 180,000 are using emergency shelters (including women's shelters), 50,000 are being housed temporarily in other types of non-profit organizations, such as hospitals or by family or acquaintances, and 5,000 are sleeping outside.

The [Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation](#) (CMHC) defines a household as being in "core housing need" if it "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)."

According to 2016 Census data, 1,693,775 households (a national average of 12.7 per cent) had a core housing need. Regional data vary from 8.5 per cent in [Prince Edward Island](#) up to 36.5 per cent in [Nunavut](#). The core housing need prevalence rates for all census metropolitan areas varies from 5 per cent in [Saguenay \(Quebec\)](#), up to 17.6 per cent in [Vancouver \(British Columbia\)](#) and 19.1 per cent in [Toronto \(Ontario\)](#).

Statistics are higher when considering only renter households. In Canada, there are approximately 4,441,020 renter households. Of that number, 1,775,445 (40 per cent) spend more than 30 per cent of their income for housing, 795,895 (17.9 per cent) spend more than 50 per cent and 361,635 (8.1 per cent) spend more than 80 per cent. This can be explained by the slower progression of median income (\$41,586 in 2016) than the median rent (\$909, also in 2016) over the past decades.

## Challenges in Counting Homeless Populations

Several Canadian cities use something called "point-in-time counts" to try and determine how many people are homeless at any given time. This type of counting consists of "taking a snapshot" of the situation on a specific day. This may involve taking an inventory of beds and occupancy rates in emergency shelters, counting the number of people sleeping in the streets, counting the women and children living in Violence Against Women shelters, and the number of people staying in hospitals or jails with no fixed address.

For example, a recent point-in-time count conducted for Toronto's Street Needs Assessment found that on the night of 26 April 2018, there were 8,715 homeless individuals, with 2,618 of them housed in refugee/asylum claimant shelters.

"Point-In-Time Counts" are sometimes criticized for being inaccurate because they do not fully take into account hidden homelessness, especially among women and youth.

## Who Experiences Homelessness in Canada?

People experiencing homelessness in Canada are quite diverse in terms of age, gender, and ethno-racial background. However, some groups are more at risk of becoming homeless, including single adult men, people dealing with mental health issues or addictions, women with children fleeing violence, and [Indigenous](#) people. There is also an assumption that homelessness is an urban phenomenon. In fact, homelessness also exists in rural areas and on reservations, even if it is less visible than it is in cities.

Adults between the ages of 25-49 make up 52 per cent of those experiencing homelessness in Canada. Seniors (65 years and older) make up a small percentage of the Canadian homeless population (less than 4

per cent of shelter users. However, seniors and older adults (50-64) are also the only groups whose shelter usage has increased over the past decade.

## Indigenous Populations

Indigenous peoples (Métis, Inuit, First Nations) are over-represented in Canada's homeless population. While they account for 4.3 per cent of the Canadian population, they represent between 28 and 34 per cent of the homeless shelter population.

Indigenous homelessness is particularly acute in many Canadian cities. According to a 2013 study, on any given night, 6.97 per cent of the urban Indigenous population in Canada is homeless, as compared to a national average of 0.78 per cent. About one in 15 urban Indigenous people are homeless, compared with the average of one in 128 non-Indigenous people across Canada. In other words, urban Indigenous people are about eight times more likely to be homeless than the non-Indigenous population.

Several Canadian cities count a significant Indigenous homeless population including Vancouver, Regina, Saskatoon, Winnipeg, Toronto, Ottawa, Val-d'Or and Montreal (where the Inuit population is even more over-represented).

The conditions and history leading to homelessness among Indigenous populations are significantly different from other populations in Canada. There is research to suggest that the over-representation of Indigenous peoples within Canada's homeless population can be attributed to the legacy of colonialism.

The Indian Act and the impact of residential schools which took Indigenous children away from their families, communities and culture, and exposed many to abuse are often cited as factors of cultural disintegration. This, combined with extreme poverty, lack of opportunities and inadequate housing on many reserves, drives migration out of communities to cities. Additionally, the number of people per dwelling in First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities, and in urban and rural Indigenous households, far exceeds the national household average. This contributes to the creation of unsafe and overcrowded living spaces, which, in turn, contributes to homelessness.

## Youth

Youth between the ages of 13 and 24 represent 18.7 per cent of people experiencing homelessness in Canada. A high percentage of homeless youth identified as LGBTQ2S (29.5 per cent), Indigenous (30.6 per cent), or as members of racialized communities (28.2 per cent). In terms of gender, 57.6 per cent identified as male, 36.4 per cent as female, 1.8 per cent as transgender, 1.8 per cent as two-spirit, and 2.5 per cent as gender non-binary. Many were homeless at a young age; 40.1 per cent of participants in a 2016 study reported that they were under the age of 16 when they first experienced homelessness. According to a 2006 study on street youth, this segment of the homeless population in Canada is particularly vulnerable. The prevalence of Sexually Transmitted Infections and blood-borne Infections in street youth is 10 to 12 times higher than youth in the general population. They are 11 times more likely to die from suicide or substance overdose. Twelve to 32 per cent of them report engaging in sex work, and 45.8 per cent of them have injected drugs.

Without a Roof (2013). Filmmaker: Gordon Sun.

## Women

Women represent 27.3 per cent of people experiencing homelessness in Canada. Their experiences often differ from men in several ways.

Studies show that homeless women are at higher risk of violence and assault, sexual exploitation and abuse. Many women are among the hidden homeless because they prefer to avoid the shelter system and the streets, even if it means staying in dangerous situations, including domestic violence.

Domestic violence is a major cause of homelessness for women, as well as poverty resulting from gender inequality.

Several studies show that female homelessness is directly impacted by the fact that women experience more precariousness in the job market, have lower wages, and are more likely to be head of a single-parented family, all resulting in a deeper poverty than their male counterparts. This impacts the kind of housing they can afford, their food security, and their health conditions. Racialized, immigrant and Indigenous women may experience additional systemic barriers, thereby compounding their experiences with homelessness.

## Mental Health and Homelessness

Homeless people are more likely to experience mental health issues than the general population. In fact, the two conditions may reinforce each other; loneliness, social exclusion, and psychological distress often go along with homelessness, and poor mental health contributes to poverty, disaffiliation and personal vulnerability, which in turn can lead to homelessness. Research shows that an average of 30 to 35 per cent of homeless persons (and up to 75 per cent of women) have mental illnesses, and 20 to 25 per cent experience both severe mental illness and addiction.

## Single Adult Men

Single adult men compose the largest and most visible population group experiencing homelessness. Single males between the ages of 25 and 55 accounted for 47.5 per cent of the homeless population in Canada between 2005 and 2009.

## Strategies to Address Homelessness in Canada

Many non-profit organizations have emerged to answer immediate, mid-term or long-term needs of Canada's homeless population. It is commonly agreed that strategies to address homelessness must be tailored to each population group's needs.

Emergency shelters may target specific sub-populations, including men, women, families, youth or Indigenous persons. They often provide shared sleeping facilities although some offer private rooms. Some expect clients to leave in the morning. Different shelters may have varying policies regarding alcohol or drug consumption. Some shelters offer mid-term housing solutions, allowing people to stay for weeks or months at a time. Others have developed long-term housing units. Some shelters offer food, clothing and other services, such as laundry or references to other appropriate services or organizations. Other homelessness non-profit agencies provide services such as counselling, legal assistance, harm reduction and advocacy.

Other approaches, such as social housing with community support, have been promoted to offer a more durable solution.

## Government Responses

At the federal level, a National Homelessness Initiative was created in 1999 with an investment of \$251 million a year, for three years. This initiative was later renamed the Homelessness Partnering Strategy and changed orientations in 2014 to support only Housing First approaches instead of a broad variety of solutions. The budget attached to this initiative had been consistently declining, until it reached a low of \$119 million for the 2015-16 year. Funding then started to increase and is expected to reach near- original levels by 2021-22. The Housing First approach, inspired by models from the United States, targets people with mental illness who are experiencing chronic homelessness; they are offered housing and support. For example, the At Home/Chez Soi project was implemented thanks to federal funds in five cities: Vancouver, Winnipeg, Toronto, Montréal and Moncton.

### DID YOU KNOW?

During his 2007 visit to Canada, the UN Special Rapporteur on adequate housing, Miloon Kothari, found that the housing and homelessness situation throughout the country was alarming, especially for Indigenous people on and off reserve. His report called for a stronger government intervention at all levels.

## Federal Solutions

In March 2016, the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights pressed Canada “to develop and implement a national housing strategy based on human rights” and to increase its housing investment and the number of social housing units available. In its 2017 budget, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s government announced a long-awaited National Housing Strategy. Among the Strategy programs, the Canada Community Housing Initiative will provide \$4.3 billion for “provinces and territories to protect affordability for ... households [about 330,000] currently living in community housing administered by provinces and territories and supported by former federal programs ... It will also support repair and renewal of the existing supply, and expansion of the supply of community-based housing.” Another program, the National Housing Co-Investment Fund, “will consist of nearly \$4.7 billion in financial contributions and \$11.2 billion in low interest loans ... to focus on new construction and the preservation and renewal of the existing affordable housing supply.”

On April 1, 2019, the Canadian government announced the launch of Reaching Home: Canada’s Homelessness Strategy. It replaces the existing Homelessness Partnering Strategy. Reaching Home supports the goals of the National Housing Strategy, especially the reduction of chronic homelessness nationally by 50% by 2027–28. The Government of Canada has committed \$2.2 billion over 10 years to tackle homelessness.

In Quebec, the Homelessness Partnering Strategy has been delivered through a formal Canada-Quebec agreement that respects the jurisdiction and priorities of both governments in addressing homelessness. To implement Reaching Home and allocate funds in Quebec, the Canadian and Quebec governments will work together to arrive at a new agreement.

## Provincial Responses to Homelessness

Unlike other provinces and territories that have mostly dealt with homelessness at the municipal (or local) level, Quebec was early in developing provincial strategies. Following a 2008 commission on homelessness, the Quebec National Assembly released a report that included recommendations concerning income, housing, health care, social services, education, and the reduction of judicial interventions. In 2014, the Quebec government released a multidimensional policy to fight homelessness, since followed by action plans. In Ontario, the Community Homelessness Prevention Initiative has been providing annual funding since 2013. In 2015, that province established the Expert Advisory Panel on Homelessness. Other provinces and territories have been developing strategies and initiatives, sometimes with their own funding, but often in partnerships with other levels of government.

## Municipal Responses to Homelessness

Canadian municipalities are confronted with homelessness on a daily basis. Many have introduced programs to address the challenge. Several have adopted yearly street counts, a statistical strategy (imported from the United States) to evaluate and improve programs that combat homelessness. Visible and chronic homelessness is often the main target of this type of strategy.

 Homelessness in Montreal

## Emergency Shelters

Several Canadian cities provide extra space in emergency shelters for the winter period. In Montreal, the city has collaborated with a homelessness agency for several years; a shuttle bus circulates in the streets during the winter to help get the homeless to accommodation. Vacant or partly vacant facilities are sometimes used to shelter people, such as the former buildings of the Royal Victoria Hospital in Montreal, during the winter of 2019.

## Criminalization of Homelessness

Many Canadian municipalities and provinces have used the judicial system to deal with homelessness. This results in an increased criminalization or penalization of homelessness. Some adopted anti-panhandling statutes and anti-disorder by-laws, such as the 1999 Ontario *Safe Streets Act* (SSA) and the 2004 British Columbia *Safe Streets Act*. One study identified that the number of SSA tickets issued in Toronto in 2009 was 13,023, while the total number between 2000-2010 was 67,388. The total value of the tickets in 2009 was \$781,380, and over 11 years was more than \$4 million (\$4,043,280).

Another study revealed that between January 1, 2005 and December 31, 2007, at least 1,756 homeless individuals received tickets under the British Columbia SSA. Other jurisdictions, like the city of Montreal, dealt with homelessness with "open-ended existing legislation" or "made regulatory changes to the status of some public places, for instance by transforming them into parks in order for the police to control

curfews.” Between 1994-2010, almost 65,000 tickets were issued in Montreal to people who gave a homeless shelter as their address. For people experiencing homelessness, these kinds of measures can mean harassment by police forces, subway agents or security agents, judicial costs, and in some cases, even prison time. This penalization has meant further exclusion and displacement from one neighbourhood to another (often from downtown to peripheries where services are not available).

In many Canadian cities, many changes have also been made to public spaces. These include walls, fences or park benches divided by armrests, all designed to restrict access for homeless people. Those changes serve the same objective as penalization: addressing the visibility of homelessness in public space. Critics have denounced these measures as counter-productive and discriminatory.

## Costs

Beyond the human cost, it is estimated that homelessness costs Canada over \$7 billion every year. It has also been estimated that every \$10 invested towards housing and support of chronically homeless individuals results in savings of \$21.72 related to health care, social support, housing and the involvement in the justice system.

## Further Reading

Julia Christensen, *No Home in a Homeland: Indigenous Peoples and Homelessness in the Canadian North* (2017)  
 Evelyn J. Peters and Julia Christensen, eds., *Indigenous Homelessness: Perspectives from Canada, Australia, and New Zealand* (2016)

J. David Hulchanski and Michael Shapcott, eds., *Finding Room: policy options for a Canadian Rental Housing Strategy* (2004)  
 Jack Layton, *Homelessness: The Making and Unmaking of a Crisis* (2000)

## External Links

Canadian Definition of Homelessness. <https://www.homelesshub.ca/sites/default/files/COHhomelessdefinition-1pager.pdf>

The State of Homelessness in Canada 2016. <https://www.homelesshub.ca/SOHC2016>

Finding Home: Policy Options for Addressing Homelessness in Canada. 2009. <https://www.homelesshub.ca/resource/finding-home-policy-options-addressing-homelessness-canada>

Research on the Intergenerational Impact of Colonialism: Aboriginal Homelessness in Edmonton – Towards a Deeper Understanding of the Indigenous Experience of Urban Homelessness. 2015. <http://www.bluequills.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/BQ-Homeward-Trust-Report-Final.pdf>