

DEFINING AND ENUMERATING HOMELESSNESS IN CANADA

**Havi Echenberg
Hilary Jensen
Social Affairs Division**

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DEFINING AND ENUMERATING HOMELESSNESS IN CANADA *

DEFINING “HOMELESSNESS” IN CANADA

The way a problem is defined has important policy implications: not only can the definition influence the perceived extent of the problem, but it can also circumscribe the possible solutions. No single definition of homelessness is “official” in Canada, and advocates, researchers, and policy makers have interpreted the issue in a multitude of ways.⁽¹⁾ Most take into account two important facets of homelessness: the specific housing situation and the duration and/or frequency of homeless episodes.⁽²⁾

Homelessness is a broad term that can encompass a range of housing conditions. These can be understood on a continuum of types of shelter:⁽³⁾

- At one end, *absolute homelessness* is a narrow concept that includes only those living on the street or in emergency shelters.
- *Hidden or concealed homelessness* is in the middle of the continuum. These include people without a place of their own who live in a car, with family or friends, or in a long-term institution.

* This paper is the first in a series of three Library of Parliament publications related to homelessness in Canada. The other two, which deal with the risk factors for homelessness and the demographics of homelessness, will be published in the near future.

(1) The definitions of “homelessness” vary, with cited authors providing their own definitions. This publication makes no attempt to reach one definition of “homelessness,” but rather highlights the variety of meanings of the term.

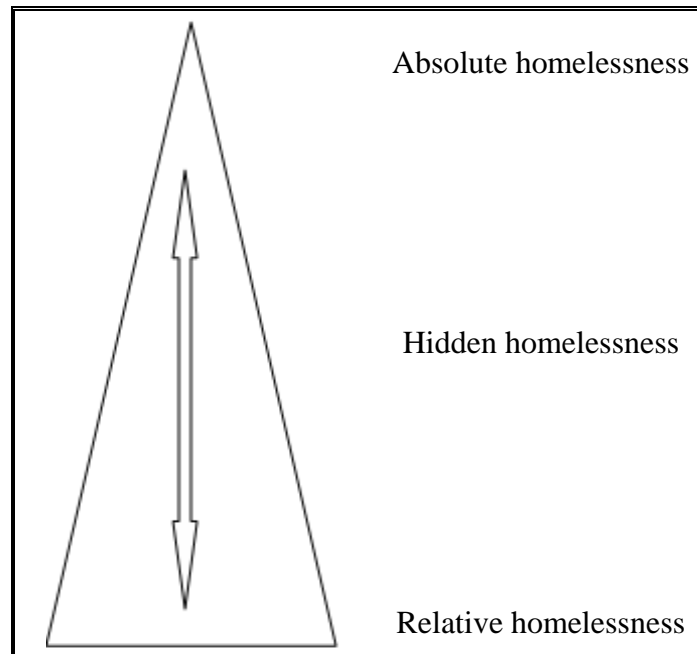
(2) Some authors have specified the problem as one of “houselessness.” The use of this term avoids confusion over the affective connotations of the word “home.” For example, see Sabine Springer, “Homelessness: a proposal for a global definition and classification,” *Habitat International*, Vol. 24, 2000, pp. 475–84.

(3) Marie-Chantal Girard, “Determining the Extent of the Problem: The Value and Challenges of Enumeration,” *Canadian Review of Social Policy*, Vol. 58, 2006, p. 104.

- At the other end of the continuum, *relative homelessness* is a broad category that includes those who are housed but who reside in substandard shelter and/or who may be at risk of losing their homes.

Another way to understand these categories is as levels of a pyramid, where absolute homelessness is only the “tip of the iceberg.” Some organizations propose that for every homeless person visible on the street, there are four whose homelessness is hidden.⁽⁴⁾

Figure 1 – Homelessness Pyramid



The European Federation of National Associations Working with the Homeless (FEANTSA) has elaborated a typology of homelessness called ETHOS.⁽⁵⁾ According to FEANTSA, homelessness exists in three “domains”:

Having a home can be understood as: having an adequate dwelling (or space) over which a person and his/her family can exercise exclusive possession (physical domain); being able to maintain privacy and enjoy relations (social domain) and having a legal title to occupation (legal domain).⁽⁶⁾

(4) Social Planning and Research Council of British Columbia (SPARC BC), *In the Proper Hands: SPARC BC Research on Homelessness and Affordable Housing*, 2007, p. 5, <http://vancouver.ca/projectcivilcity/collaboration/pdf/housing/IntheProperHands.pdf>.

(5) FEANTSA (European Federation of National Associations Working with the Homeless AISBL), *ETHOS 2007: European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion*, 2007, http://www.feantsa.org/files/indicators_wg/ETHOS2007/general/EN_2007EthosLeaflet.pdf.

(6) Ibid.

According to this more comprehensive schema, homelessness consists of housing situations ranging from *rooflessness* (living on the street or in emergency shelters), to *houselessness* (living in various types of shelters or institutions), to *insecure housing* (living under threat of eviction or violence), and finally to *inadequate housing* (living in unfit or overcrowded conditions). A summary table, including information on living conditions associated with each of the 13 subcategories, is appended to this study. These subcategories have been applied in Canadian studies.⁽⁷⁾

In addition to addressing housing situations, definitions of homelessness often contain the element of time. The frequency and persistence of homeless episodes can have important consequences for how the problem is understood and addressed. Broad categories include:

- *chronic homelessness*, long-term or repeated homelessness, often experienced by those with chronic illness or addiction problems;
- *cyclical homelessness*, resulting from a change of circumstance, for example having been released from an institution; and
- *temporary homelessness*, relatively short in duration, sometimes caused by natural disasters or a house fire.⁽⁸⁾

The various facets of homelessness inform a variety of definitions of the term. Some organizations understand “homelessness” broadly. The United Nations (UN), for example, locates the problem of homelessness within the discourse of human rights.⁽⁹⁾ The Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM), as part of its Quality of Life Reporting System, proposes that an individual is homeless if he lives in a broad range of situations, including a place unfit for habitation such as a park (rooflessness); an emergency shelter; a long-term institution (houselessness); or a residence belonging to family or friends (invisible homelessness).⁽¹⁰⁾

More concise definitions of “homelessness” are required for practical purposes such as counting or delivering services to the homeless population. The City of Calgary

(7) See, for example, City of Calgary Community and Neighbourhood Services, *Biennial Count of Homeless Persons in Calgary: 2008 May 14*, 15 July 2008, http://www.calgary.ca/docgallery/bu/cns/homelessness/2008_count_full_report.pdf.

(8) Patricia Begin et al., *Homelessness*, PRB 99-1E, Parliamentary Information and Research Service, Library of Parliament, Ottawa, 8 January 1999, p. 8.

(9) UN Habitat, *Housing Rights*, <http://www.unhabitat.org/categories.asp?catid=282>.

(10) Federation of Canadian Municipalities, *Quality of Life in Canadian Communities: Trends and Issues in Affordable Housing and Homelessness*, Theme Report 4, 2008, p. 18 <http://www.fcm.ca/CMFiles/qol20081VVM-3272008-3162.pdf>.

Community and Neighbourhood Services defines the homeless as “those who do not have a permanent residence to which they can return whenever they so choose.”⁽¹¹⁾ The element of time is specified in the definition used by the Greater Vancouver Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness. In a recent report, this organization identified individuals as homeless if they “did not have a place of their own where they could expect to stay for more than 30 days and for which they paid rent.”⁽¹²⁾

ENUMERATING HOMELESSNESS IN CANADA

Despite the visibility of homelessness in Canada, there are no accurate national statistics on the size of the homeless population.⁽¹³⁾ Canada’s National Secretariat on Homelessness has estimated that the problem affects approximately 150,000 people,⁽¹⁴⁾ although other reports identify as many as 300,000 homeless in Canada.⁽¹⁵⁾ The lack of reliable data may limit the country’s ability to address homelessness and has been a focus for international criticism. During a visit to Canada in October 2007, for example, the then-UN Special Rapporteur on adequate housing, Miloon Kothari, reported that he “was disappointed that the Government could not provide reliable statistics on the number of homeless.”⁽¹⁶⁾ The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has voiced similar concerns.⁽¹⁷⁾

(11) City of Calgary Community and Neighbourhood Services (2008), p. 2.

(12) Greater Vancouver Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness, *Still on Our Streets ... Results of the 2008 Metro Vancouver Homeless Count*, December 2008, <http://www.metrovancouver.org/planning/homelessness/Homlessness%20Docs/HomelessCountReport2008Feb12.pdf>, p. 4.

(13) Human Resources and Social Development Canada, *Understanding Homelessness*, 14 August 2008, http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/en/homelessness/general_information/understanding_homelessness.shtml.

(14) Sarah Pye, “The Homeless Individuals and Families Information System (HIFIS) Initiative: Using Information and Communication Technologies to Build Knowledge and Understanding on Homelessness,” National Secretariat on Homelessness, Gatineau, Quebec, n.d., p. 1, http://www.hifis.ca/resources/hifis/usinginfotech_e.pdf.

(15) Gordon Laird, *Shelter – Homelessness in a Growth Economy: Canada’s 21st Century Paradox*, Sheldon Chumir Foundation for Ethics in Leadership, Calgary, Alberta, 2007, p. 4, <http://www.chumirethicsfoundation.ca/files/pdf/SHELTER.pdf>.

(16) UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), *Promotion and Protection of all Human Rights, Civil, Political, Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Including the Right to Development: Preliminary Note on the Mission to Canada, Report of the Special Rapporteur on adequate housing as a component of the right to an adequate standard of living, and on the right to non-discrimination in this context, Miloon Kothari, A/HRC/7/16/Add.4*, 28 February 2008, para. 8, available under “Canada (October 2007): Preliminary note” at <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/housing/visits.htm>.

(17) UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, *UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights: Concluding Observations, Canada*, E/C.12/CAN/CO/4; E/C.12/CAN/CO/5, 22 May 2006, para. 28, <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/45377fa30.html>.

METHODOLOGICAL OBSTACLES

It is inherently challenging to count a population that lacks a permanent address or fixed location, that includes many “hidden homeless,” and that is always in flux as people move in and out of homelessness. Statistics Canada assessed the feasibility of conducting various types of homelessness counts at the national level,⁽¹⁸⁾ and estimated that a comprehensive count of the homeless could be prohibitively expensive (\$10 million) and present important methodological challenges.⁽¹⁹⁾

At the same time, national governments of other countries have published official statistics on the size of their respective homeless populations. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), as part of its 2006 Census, enumerated 104,676 individuals in situations of absolute and relative homelessness in the country.⁽²⁰⁾ The statistics agency of France, l’Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques (INSEE), has also undertaken studies on the French homeless population. Over the course of a one-week period in January 2001, INSEE found that over 86,000 homeless adults visited shelters and/or hot meal services in France.⁽²¹⁾ Of those who were homeless, 8% spent the night on the street.⁽²²⁾ Despite the limits of this study, such as its failure to address hidden homelessness in France, it provides, along with the Australian study, an example of a national effort to develop statistics on homelessness.

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT THE EXTENT OF HOMELESSNESS IN CANADA?

One proxy for the size of Canada’s homeless population is the capacity of the shelter system in the country. This information is collected by the Homeless Individuals and Families Information System (HIFIS) initiative, a project that is part of the federal government’s Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS). The initiative maintains a national database of information about organizations providing services to the homeless as well as the population

(18) François Laflamme, *Survey of Homelessness in Canada: Street Component Feasibility Study*, Statistics Canada, 11 April 2001.

(19) Girard (2006), p. 102.

(20) Chris Chamberlain and David MacKenzie, *Counting the Homeless: Australia, 2006*, Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008, p. vii, [http://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/ausstats/subscriber.nsf/0/57393A13387C425DCA2574B900162DF0/\\$File/20500-2008Reissue.pdf](http://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/ausstats/subscriber.nsf/0/57393A13387C425DCA2574B900162DF0/$File/20500-2008Reissue.pdf).

(21) Cécile Brousse, Bernadette de la Rochère, and Emmanuel Massé, “Hébergement et distribution de repas chauds: Le cas des sans-domicile,” *INSEE Première*, January 2002, p. 1, http://www.insee.fr/fr/ffc/docs_ffc/IP823.pdf.

(22) *Ibid.*, p. 2.

they serve.⁽²³⁾ According to HIFIS, there are 1,128 emergency and transitional shelters in the country.⁽²⁴⁾ Of these, 823 shelters with more than 25,000 beds are located in the communities designated by the Homelessness Partnering Initiative administered by HPS.⁽²⁵⁾

Statistics Canada also collects data on the shelter system. At the time of the 2006 Census, 905 shelters with over 19,000 residents were enumerated.⁽²⁶⁾ While these numbers are informative, Canada's shelter population is, of course, only a part of the total homeless population.

As well, attempts have been made by municipal and/or non-government organizations to enumerate the homeless population in various Canadian cities.⁽²⁷⁾ The City of Calgary count determined that, on the night of 14 May 2008, 4,060 Calgarians experienced absolute homelessness, an increase of 18.2% since 2006.⁽²⁸⁾ The Greater Vancouver Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness counted 2,660 homeless people on the day of its 2008 study.⁽²⁹⁾ While the number of homeless in the City of Vancouver increased by 6% between 2005 and 2008, the figure jumped by 35% in the other municipalities of Metro Vancouver.⁽³⁰⁾ Finally, the City of Toronto estimated that 5,052 were living on the street or in shelters or other facilities on the day of its 2006 count.⁽³¹⁾

The methods of these studies differ, making comparison between cities difficult. For example, to estimate the number of homeless people sleeping on the street, the City of

(23) Homeless Individuals and Families Information System Initiative, *About the HIFIS Initiative*, 10 September 2008, <http://www.hifis.ca/initiative/index-eng.shtml>.

(24) Homeless Individuals and Families Information System Initiative, *Shelter Capacity Statistics for the Homelessness Partnership Initiative's Designated Communities*, 1 June 2008, http://www.hifis.ca/resources/hifis/ShelterCapacityStatistics-June2008_EN.pdf, p. 3.

(25) Ibid.

(26) Statistics Canada, "Selected Collective Dwelling and Population Characteristics (25) and Type of Collective Dwelling (17) for the Population in Collective Dwellings of Canada, Provinces and Territories, 2006 Census – 100% Data," *2006 Census of Population*, 12 June 2008, <http://www12.statcan.ca/english/census06/data/topics/RetrieveProductTable.cfm?ALEVEL=3&APATH=3&CATNO=&DETAIL=0&DIM=&DS=99&FL=0&FREE=0&GAL=0&GC=99&GID=614135&GK=NA&GRP=1&IPS=&METH=0&ORDER=1&PID=93192&PTYPE=88971&RL=0&S=1&SUB=0&ShowAll>.

(27) For a summary table of point-in-time homeless counts in municipalities across Canada, see Canadian Institute for Health Information, *Improving the Health of Canadians 2007–2008: Mental Health and Homelessness*, Ottawa, 2007, pp. 10–11, http://secure.cihi.ca/cihiweb/products/mental_health_report_aug22_2007_e.pdf.

(28) City of Calgary Community and Neighbourhood Services (2008), p. i.

(29) Greater Vancouver Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness (2008), p. 1.

(30) Ibid., p. 2.

(31) City of Toronto, "2006 Street Needs Assessment: Results and Key Findings," *Toronto Staff Report*, 20 June 2006, p. 3, <http://www.toronto.ca/housing/pdf/streetneedsassessment.pdf>.

Calgary used regression analysis based on past data,⁽³²⁾ while the Vancouver researchers based their estimates on interviews in key locations.⁽³³⁾ Despite these differences, all studies suggest that their findings represent conservative estimates of the size of the homeless population in their respective cities. Because of the difficulties in measuring hidden or relative homelessness, no attempt to enumerate this group can be complete. In addition, these counts estimate the size of a population at a given point in time; they do not determine the number of people that may experience homelessness over a period of time, such as a month or a year, as housing situations change.⁽³⁴⁾

SUMMARY

Having no single definition, “homelessness,” is understood to encompass a variety of housing situations and homelessness experiences. Similarly, in large part because measuring this population poses significant methodological challenges, there are no precise statistics on the extent of homelessness in Canada. Therefore, researchers and policy-makers rely on what *can* be measured. Information about shelter capacities and more local point-in-time counts provide important insights into homelessness in Canada.

(32) City of Calgary Community and Neighbourhood Services (2008), p. 1.

(33) Greater Vancouver Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness (2008), pp. 5–6.

(34) J. David Hulchanski, *A New Canadian Pastime? Counting Homeless People*, University of Toronto, December 2000, p. 2, http://intraspec.ca/Hulch_CountingHomelessPeople%5B1%5D.pdf.

APPENDIX

European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion

	Operational Category	Living Situation	Generic Definition	
Conceptual Category	ROOFLESS	1 People Living Rough	1.1 Public space or external space	Living in the streets or public spaces, without a shelter that can be defined as living quarters
		2 People in emergency accommodation	2.1 Night shelter	People with no usual place of residence who make use of overnight shelter, low threshold shelter
	HOUSELESS	3 People in accommodation for the homeless	3.1 Homeless hostel	Where the period of stay is intended to be short term
			3.2 Temporary Accommodation	
			3.3 Transitional supported accommodation	
	4 People in Women's Shelter	4.1 Women's shelter accommodation	Women accommodated due to experience of domestic violence and where the period of stay is intended to be short term	
	5 People in accommodation for immigrants	5.1 Temporary accommodation / reception centres	Immigrants in reception or short term accommodation due to their immigrant status	
		5.2 Migrant workers accommodation		
	6 People due to be released from institutions	6.1 Penal institutions	No housing available prior to release	
		6.2 Medical institutions (*)	Stay longer than needed due to lack of housing	
		6.3 Children's institutions / homes	No housing identified (e.g by 18th birthday)	
	7 People receiving longer-term support (due to homelessness)	7.1 Residential care for older homeless people	Long stay accommodation with care for formerly homeless people (normally more than one year)	
		7.2 Supported accommodation for formerly homeless people		
INSECURE	8 People living in insecure accommodation	8.1 Temporarily with family/friends	Living in conventional housing but not the usual or place of residence due to lack of housing	
		8.2 No legal (sub)tenancy	Occupation of dwelling with no legal tenancy illegal occupation of a dwelling	
		8.3 Illegal occupation of land	Occupation of land with no legal rights	
9 People living under threat of eviction	9.1 Legal orders enforced (rented)	Where orders for eviction are operative		
	9.2 Re-possession orders (owned)	Where mortgagor has legal order to re-possess		
10 People living under threat of violence	10.1 Police recorded incidents	Where police action is taken to ensure place of safety for victims of domestic violence		
INADEQUATE	11 People living in temporary / non-conventional structures	11.1 Mobile homes	Not intended as place of usual residence	
		11.2 Non-conventional building	Makeshift shelter, shack or shanty	
		11.3 Temporary structure	Semi-permanent structure hut or cabin	
12 People living in unfit housing	12.1 Occupied dwellings unfit for habitation	Defined as unfit for habitation by national legislation or building regulations		
13 People living in extreme overcrowding	13.1 Highest national norm of overcrowding	Defined as exceeding national density standard for floor-space or useable rooms		

Note: Short stay is defined as normally less than one year; Long stay is defined as more than one year.
This definition is compatible with Census definitions as recommended by the UNECE/EUROSTAT report (2006)

(*) Includes drug rehabilitation institutions, psychiatric hospitals etc.

Source: FEANTSA (European Federation of National Associations Working with the Homeless AISBL), *ETHOS 2007: European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion*, 2007, http://www.feantsa.org/files/indicators_wg/ETHOS2007/general/EN_2007EthosLeaflet.pdf.