

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

International Journal on Homelessness, 2022, 3(2): page 51-67.

Counting the Undercounted: Enumerating Rural Homelessness in Canada

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Received: 26 Jan 2022
Accepted: 9 Nov 2022

Abstract

Until recently, homelessness in Canada was largely considered to be an urban phenomenon. This assumption has been reinforced by homelessness interventions that primarily focus on urban areas. The past decade has seen a steady increase in research and reports on rural homelessness, using primarily qualitative methods. Recently, there have been some efforts to develop enumeration methods to measure and describe the scale and scope of rural homelessness. These enumerations have resulted in unprecedented availability of quantitative data on the number and characteristics of people experiencing homelessness in rural Canada. In this article we report on research which collected and analyzed data from Canadian rural homelessness enumerations. Significantly, these reports show per capita rates of homelessness in rural communities that are higher than those seen in Canada's largest urban centres. These enumeration reports also show that a significant percentage of persons experiencing homelessness (PEH) in rural Canada are unsheltered and fall into the category of absolute homelessness. This research provides a snapshot of rural homelessness that is contrary to the dominant narrative of predominately "hidden homelessness" in rural communities. We suggest adjustments to policy and funding of homelessness programs that consider this evolving knowledge about the scale and scope of homelessness in rural Canada.

Keywords

Homelessness, Housing, Rural, Enumeration, Canada

Introduction

Until recently, homelessness in Canada was largely considered to be an urban phenomenon (Bruce 2006; Waegemakers Schiff et al., 2015). This assumption has been reinforced by homelessness interventions that primarily focus on targeted (mostly urban) communities. However, the past decade has seen a steady increase in research and reports on rural

homelessness. The vast majority of these reports focus on qualitative methods to understand the nature of rural homelessness, with attention to issues such as: rural-urban migration, pathways into and out of rural homelessness (Christensen, 2012), the hidden aspects of rural homelessness (MacDonald & Gaulin, 2020), demographics and issues specific to certain subsets of people

experiencing rural homelessness such as First Nations, Inuit, and Métis (FNIM) peoples¹ (Christensen, 2013; National Advisory Council on Poverty, 2021), victims of domestic violence, and youth (Waegemakers Schiff et al., 2015). There has been considerably less attention to quantifying rural homelessness due to a perception that the hidden nature of this phenomenon makes enumeration difficult or impossible (Kauppi et al., 2015). There are methodological issues with rural enumeration because locating people who are unhoused can be difficult due to dispersed geography and the prevalence of people living in undeveloped areas at the edge or outside of towns and settlements. Understanding the scale and scope of rural homelessness is critical for informing policy and funding allocation to address and end homelessness outside of urban centres. Given the overrepresentation of Indigenous peoples in the population experiencing homelessness in Canada – ending homelessness, including in rural Canada, is also critical for advancing work on good relations with Indigenous peoples and the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2018; Inn From the Cold, 2018; Thistle & Smylie, 2020; Truth & Reconciliation Commission, 2015;). For the purposes of this article, we use the terms “scale” to refer to the number and per capita rates of homelessness. We use the term “scope” to refer to the identity dimensions of PEH (age, gender, ethnicity etc.) and different ways of experiencing homelessness such as absolute v. hidden and chronic v. episodic homelessness.²

Recently, there have been some efforts to develop enumeration methods to measure and describe the scale and scope of homelessness in rural Canada. These efforts include the

coordinated national point-in-time count (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2021) (supported by the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness and the federal government) in which several rural communities participated, as well as the Rural Housing and Service Needs Estimation Project led by the Rural Development Network (Rural Development Network, 2020). Researchers based at Laurentian University also developed an enumeration model specific to rural and northern communities, based on a period – prevalence approach (Kauppi, 2017) that was tested in several communities in Northeastern Ontario (Kauppi et al., 2015). Additionally, some provinces such as Ontario and British Columbia have mandated counts in all municipalities – including rural regions.

These enumerations have resulted in unprecedented availability of quantitative measurement and reports on the number and characteristics of people experiencing homelessness in rural Canada. In this article we report on research which collected and analyzed data from Canadian rural homelessness enumerations.

Enumerating Rural Homelessness

Since 2016, information and tools for enumerating homelessness have become more accessible and widely used in urban areas of Canada. A few variations of enumeration methodologies have emerged and there has been some debate about the efficacy and robustness of the various methods (PiT, period – prevalence) used for enumerating homelessness (Segaert, 2016). In rural contexts, there have been concerns about the efficacy of PiT counts in particular due to the less frequent presence of homeless shelters, food programs and other services in small communities as well as the “invisible” nature of

¹ We note that many reports on homelessness refer generally to Indigenous peoples without regard for individual identity and affiliation with distinct tribes and governments. This pan-indigenisation in Canadian homelessness research is discussed at the end of this article as an issue which much be considered carefully and addressed in future research. We also want to add the following statement – adopted from the report: Building Understanding: The first report of the National Advisory Council on Poverty - regarding our use of the term “Indigenous” in this article: “Throughout this land, First Peoples represent many communities, languages, traditions, cultures and individuals. We have endeavoured to honor those communities and people by representing them

throughout the document in the essence of the words we have chosen. We acknowledge that we could not effectively reference and carry the stories of all of this land’s First Peoples. The report is limited in using the broad definition of “Indigenous” to capture the unique beauty and nuance of these communities and people.”

² We use Canadian Federal Government definitions of homelessness – including those for “absolute” “hidden” “chronic” and “episodic” as described in: Echenberg, H., & Munn - Rivard, L. (2020). Defining and enumerating homelessness in Canada. Ottawa: Library of Parliament. Publication Number 2020 – 41 – E.

rural homelessness (where people experiencing absolute homelessness are less often seen on the streets) (Buck-McFayden, 2022). All of these factors make it difficult to locate and “count” individuals through PiT methods.

Period-prevalence counts take place over several days - often 7 days although lengths can vary from 3 days to several weeks. It is widely suggested that period-prevalence counts provide a more accurate picture of homelessness in rural areas as they account for the challenges and resultant undercounting of rural PiT counts described above (Hall, 2017; Van de Hoef, 2018). In 2017 the RDN (known at that time as the Alberta Rural Development Network) developed an enumeration methodology which combines PiT approaches with period-prevalence approaches (Hall, 2017). There are inherent challenges in comparing data acquired through different methodologies - i.e., PiT v. period-prevalence, particularly due to the different time periods over which enumeration takes place.

The increased accessibility of enumeration tools and uptick in enumeration reports in Canada may be largely attributed to the national, coordinated point-in-time (PiT) count: an initiative led by the Canadian federal government and also supported through the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness (CAEH) (Government of Canada, 2021). The national, coordinated count - intended to run every two years - occurred in 2016 and 2018, but was affected by lower participation in 2020 due to COVID-19. To participate in the coordinated count, communities must conduct their count (a one-day snapshot of homelessness in their community) during a 24-hour period between March 1 and April 30 (Government of Canada, 2021). It may be important to note that the national coordinated effort is limited in its generalisability due to the count only taking place during a single 24-hour period at a unique point in the year: scheduled during the months of March- April, the effort may result in counts that would be lower or higher than in other months due to the influence of climatic variability (Hall, 2017). Additionally, March and April are experienced as winter-like in some regions and with milder conditions in others, varying the housing needs and visibility of the population across the regions counted.

“Designated communities” - which receive dedicated annual funding from the federal government to address homelessness - are mandated to conduct PiT counts and use their federal funding for this effort (Government of Canada, 2022). Designated communities are mostly composed of Canada’s largest urban centres, which means that most rural regions, as well as many small cities, do not receive regular annual homelessness funding and must apply for support under the competitive “Rural and Remote” stream of federal homelessness funding programs. Additionally, while 29% of the Canadian population are rural residents (Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation, 2021), in 2019 only 8% of federal funding was assigned to the “Rural and Remote” stream (National Alliance to End Rural and Remote Homelessness, 2021). While the funding to the “Rural and Remote” stream has increased since then, it may still be disproportionate in terms of population and per capita homelessness rates. The underfunding of the “Rural and Remote” stream is further complicated by the fact that several small cities are not “designated” communities (such as Sarnia, Ontario pop. 74,293) (City of Sarnia, n.d.) and must apply for homelessness funding under “Rural and Remote” despite their urban status. Other streams of federal homelessness and housing funding also disproportionately favor large cities (National Alliance to End Rural and Remote Homelessness, 2021). This includes the Rapid Housing Initiative which includes a “Major Cities Stream” and no stream of funding specific to rural, northern, and Indigenous applicants.

These disproportionate funding formulas are accompanied by a lack of capacity and support to conduct homelessness enumerations. Most non-designated communities (i.e., rural areas, towns, and regional centres) can access toolkits and information, but do not receive federal funding to support homeless counts. Despite this challenge, many rural regions and small cities chose to undertake PiT counts in 2016 and 2018 during the national PiT count event. Other rural communities have conducted PiT counts outside of the national event (outside of the March - April date range) and some have chosen to employ other enumeration methods such as period-prevalence counts or utilized the toolkit provided by the Rural Development Network. The Rural

Development Network (RDN) has conducted counts with numerous rural communities throughout Alberta and in the Northwest Territories as well (Rural Development Network, 2020).

Although many rural communities have completed formal homeless enumerations in the past several years, there has been little to no effort to collectively analyze these reports, with a focus on understanding what can be learned about the scope and scale of rural homelessness in Canada. To fill this gap, and contribute to greater understanding of rural homelessness trends, we implemented a search for and analysis of homelessness enumerations conducted in rural Canada over the past five years.

Methods and Materials

Due to the lack of a centralized collection of Canadian rural homelessness enumerations, we employed several strategies to locate relevant reports. We based our search on the assumption that many (most) communities that conduct homelessness counts will publish electronic versions of their reports on the internet either directly or through a regional funding body. Our search began with two regional repositories of rural homelessness reports: one for rural counts supported by the government of British Columbia and hosted on the B.C. Housing Website (<https://www.bchousing.org/research-centre/housing-data/homeless-counts>) and another with counts primarily in rural Alberta which is hosted by the RDN (<https://www.ruraldevelopment.ca/publications/2020-rural-housing-and-service-needs-estimation-project>). We supplemented this with internet searches using the terms “Point-in-Time count” or “PiT count” or “Period-Prevalence count” or “homeless” and “count” combined with the term “rural” and the name of each province, territory, and rural counties / municipal districts within each province / territory.

Inclusion criteria focused on settlement population: the search of rural homelessness counts was limited to regions that contained only

non-urban areas (population less than 50,000) as defined in the Harmonised Global Definition of Cities and Settlements (European Commission, 2021; United Nations, 2020). We excluded counts which included rural regions and cities in one aggregated enumeration, i.e., where cities included counts of surrounding rural regions in their homelessness count and did not present disaggregated rural data - such as the City of Greater Sudbury 2018 homelessness enumeration (Kauppi et al., 2018) and Durham region 2018 PiT count (Community Development Council Durham & Durham Mental Health Services, 2018). Our search was limited to counts conducted within the last five years (since 2016) and only included the most recent count for a region, i.e., if a rural region had conducted a count in 2018 and 2020, we utilized the 2020 count for the analysis presented here.

As discussed earlier in this article, there are a few different methodologies that are currently used for enumerating homelessness in Canada. In an effort to get the most comprehensive current assessment of rural homelessness enumerations, we included all reports in our analysis regardless of methodologies. Because we included reports using varied methodologies, we avoided making comparisons between reports due to the challenges of comparing data collected using different methodologies. When we did make comparisons, it was between reports using the same methodology, i.e., we only compared PiT counts with other PiT counts. We did however use comparative analysis to identify discrepancies between reports - such as those methodologies which seemed to report lower / higher per capita rates of homelessness or did not report on certain aspects of the scope of homelessness, i.e., chronic v. episodic. This comparison is discussed in the “Implications” section. It is also important to note that urban / national enumerations use PiT counts and as such, comparison of rural / urban homelessness rates³ focus on reports using the same (PiT) methodology.

³ We use “rate” and “rates” throughout the remainder of the manuscript to refer to per capita rates of homelessness.

Analysis

Each rural enumeration was entered into a row of an Excel spreadsheet. Data from each count were entered into columns for information that was reported consistently across counts including: geography / location; enumeration method; # individuals counted; proportion of population experiencing homelessness (# PEH/2016 census pop.); eligibility criteria; gender; age. We also included data extraction categories for additional characteristics that were frequently reported, and which have been identified as significant in previous studies of rural homelessness (Anderson & Collins, 2014; Ansloos et al., 2021; Kaufman, 2022; Piat et al., 2015): Indigenous identification; migration data (if individuals had moved to the location from a different region); history of homelessness / youth homelessness history; chronic v. episodic homelessness; hidden homelessness indicators and; health information. We also included a column for “additional information” which recorded data reported in a count that was not standardly / commonly reported across regions. The categories of information that were reported across most counts (i.e., 85% or more of counts) were used to frame our analysis of the “scope” of homelessness. The only exception to this were categories for hidden v. absolute homelessness and episodic v. chronic homelessness. We included categories for these characteristics since they form a core component of PiT methodologies (Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, 2017). Scale of homelessness was

analysed using the data reported on number of individuals counted and further evaluated through a calculation of the per capita rate of homelessness in each region. Per capita rates of homelessness - % of total population counted as homeless - were calculated based on 2016 Canadian federal census population data for each region; this was the most recent federal census data available at the time of analysis.

Results

We identified a total of 55 homeless counts in rural regions⁴. All counts had been conducted between 2018 and 2021. Several regions had also conducted counts in previous years (i.e., 2016) which were not included in the present analysis. This represented counts conducted in rural areas of 5 provinces - British Columbia, Alberta, Manitoba, Ontario, and New Brunswick and two territories - Northwest Territories and Yukon. These provinces and territories and others (Nunavut, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island) had also conducted homeless counts which included rural enumeration - but had aggregated these counts with urban data and as such were excluded from this analysis. Below we report findings of our analysis on the scale and scope of rural homelessness. See Table 1 for a summary of enumeration report characteristics. Scale of rural homelessness refers to the number of homeless individuals counted as well as the length and type of homelessness. Scope of rural homelessness refers to demographic, health, and migration dimensions.

Table 1
Summary of Report Characteristics

Province	Year & Enumeration Type	Geographic Location
Alberta	2020 Homelessness Estimations	Athabasca County Banff and Canmore Cardston Chestermere County of Grande Prairie Drumheller Fort Macleod Fox Creek Greenview

⁴ Each of the counts included in this analysis - as well as the urban counts and national count used for comparison purposes - are identified by an * in the reference list.

		Hinton Lac La Biche County Morinville Okotoks Peace River St. Albert Stettler and District Strathmore Sylvan Lake Tofield/Ryley/Beaver County Tri-Region (Stony Plain, Spruce Grove, Parkland County) Westlock & District Whitecourt Yellowhead County
British Columbia	2020/2021 PiT Counts	Campbell River Cranbrook Duncan/Cowichan Valley Fort St. John Merritt Parksville/Qualicum Penticton Port Alberni Prince Rupert Quesnel Sechelt/Gibsons Smithers Squamish Terrace Vernon Williams Lake
Manitoba	2018 PiT Counts	Thompson
New Brunswick	2018 PiT Counts	Bathurst
Northwest Territories	2018 PiT Counts	Yellowknife
Nova Scotia	2018 Period Prevalence Counts	Cape Breton Regional Municipality
Ontario	2018 Period Prevalence Counts	District of Muskoka Frontenac County Grey County Huron County Lanark County Manitoulin-Sudbury Rainy River District (Fort Frances & Atikokan) St. Thomas & Elgin County
	2018 Homelessness Enumeration	District of Kenora
	2020 Homelessness Estimations	Cochrane

	2021 PiT Counts	CBDSSAB Region (Cochrane, Moosonee, Kapuskasing, Timmins, Monteith)
Yukon Territory	2021 Pit Counts	Whitehorse

Scale of Rural Homelessness

One of the most striking findings was the high rate of homelessness in rural regions. Of the 55 enumeration reports that we reviewed, 32 had homelessness rates in excess of 0.30%. Many had homelessness rates of 0.60% or higher - 1.5 to 5 times higher than rates found in large Canadian cities. By comparison, only 0.21% of the population of Calgary, 0.32% of Toronto residents, and 0.08% of metro Vancouver residents were homeless in the 2018 Point - in - Time counts conducted in those cities. The

highest rates of homelessness were seen mostly in northern regions where several counts indicated homelessness rates in excess of 0.9% of the population such as in the Rainy River District of Northwestern Ontario, Yellowknife in the Northwest Territories, Thompson in northern Manitoba, and Prince Rupert in Northern British Columbia. Table 2 provides an overview of homelessness rates (calculated based on 2016 census population) for all rural enumerations and includes comparative rates from urban enumerations.

Table 2.

Comparison of Rates of Homelessness in Urban and Rural Enumeration

	Community	Population Count (2016 Census)	Homeless Count	Homeless Percentage
Urban Communities	Calgary	1,239,220	2,911	0.23%
	Thunder Bay	107,909	221	0.20%
	Toronto	2,731,571	8,715	0.32%
	Vancouver	631,486	2,181	0.35%
Rural Communities	Athabasca County	7,869	15	0.19 %
	Banff & Canmore	21,843	59	0.27%
	Bathurst	11,897	15	0.13%
	Beaver County	5,905	9	0.15%
	Campbell River	32,588	116	0.34%
	Cape Breton Municipality	94,285	278	0.29%
	Cardston	3,585	8	0.22%
	Chestermere	19,887	15	0.08%
	County of Grande Prairie	22,303	42	0.19%
	Cranbrook	20,047	63	0.31%
	District of Kenora	65,533	393	0.60%
	District of Muskoka	60,599	142	0.24%
	Drumheller	7,982	36	0.45%
	Fort Macleod	2,967	46	1.55%
	Fort St. John	20,155	76	0.38%
	Fox Creek	1,971	10	0.51%
	Greenview	5,583	65	1.16%
	Grey County	93,830	33	0.035%
	Hinton	9,882	51	0.52%
	Huron County	59,297	100	0.16%
Lac Lac Biche County	8,330	45	0.54%	
Lanark County	68,698	27	0.039%	

Manitoulin-Sudbury	15692	122	0.78%
Merritt	7,139	43	0.60%
Morinville	9,848	10	0.10%
Okotoks	28,881	29	0.10%
Parksville/Qualicum	21,457	87	0.41%
Peace River	6,842	22	0.32%
Penticton	33,761	114	0.34%
Port Alberni	17,678	125	0.71%
Prince Rupert	12,220	118	0.97%
Quesnel	9,879	121	1.22%
Rainy River District (Fort Frances & Atikokan)	10,492	111	1.06%
Sechelt/Gibsons		84	0.57%
Settler County	5,322	33	0.62%
Smithers	5,401	33	0.61%
Squamish	19,512	107	0.55%
St. Albert	65,589	46	0.07%
Strathmore	13,756	49	0.36%
Sylvan Lake	14,816	14	0.09%
Terrace	11,643	73	0.63%
Thompson	13,678	130	0.95%
Tri-Region (Stony Plain, Spruce Grove, Parkland County)	83,352	197	0.24%
Vernon	40,116	224	0.56%
Westlock & District	7,220	2	0.03%
Whitecourt	10,204	14	0.14%
Whitehorse	25,085	151	0.60%
Williams Lake	10,753	51	0.47%
Yellowhead County	10,995	22	0.20%
Yellowknife	19,569	338	1.73%

Length and Type of Homelessness

Many counts (48%) contained data that differentiated between hidden and absolute homelessness. All of the PiT counts contained this information while the RDN counts did not contain this information. These counts usually reported on those who were “couch surfing” or “staying at someone else’s place” in contrast to those who were “sleeping in a vehicle” or otherwise unsheltered. Of the 26 counts that did report on different types of homelessness, many reported very low levels of couch surfing, i.e., at less than 30% of those counted. Some regions specifically quantified the rate of hidden homeless, such as the Sudbury-Manitoulin district which reported that hidden homelessness comprised only 38.3% of the chronic homeless population. Rural counts in British Columbia

specifically documented the number of persons sleeping in vehicles. The proportion of persons sleeping / living in vehicles ranged from a low of 11% in Vernon to 26% Parksville / Qualicum and a high of 61% in Squamish. The one notable exception to reports on hidden v. absolute homelessness were the counts conducted in Alberta by the RDN - none of these counts differentiated between types of homelessness.

Most counts outside of Alberta (53% of all counts; 94% of those outside of Alberta) documented information related to episodic v. chronic homelessness, i.e., type / length of homelessness. The exception to this were the counts conducted in Alberta by the RDN as well as counts in the Kenora District (Ontario) and Cape Breton Island. Of the 29 reports, this information was presented in terms of length of homelessness. Many communities (17 of 29)

reported high rates of chronic homelessness, where 50% or more of those counted had been homeless for more than 6 months. Several reported that over 50% had been homeless for 1 year or longer, including Smithers B.C. where 80% of those counted were experiencing chronic homelessness.

Scope of Rural Homelessness

Indigenous peoples and homelessness in rural Canada

Almost all of the rural enumerations (96%) reported on and found high proportions of Indigenous peoples experiencing homelessness, particularly when compared with percentage of persons who identify as Indigenous in the local populations where each count was conducted. See Table 3 which provides information from rural enumerations on the percentage of PEH who identify as Indigenous compared with percentage of Indigenous persons in the broader population for each community.

Table 3

Over-representation of Indigenous Peoples (All Communities with Comparison Data)

Community	% Of Respondents Identifying as Indigenous	Proportion of Community Population
Campbell River	62%	12%
Cranbrook	48%	9%
District of Muskoka	17%	~3.7%
Duncan/Cowichan Valley	34%	13%
Fort St. John	57%	11%
Frontenac County	46%	5%
Lac La Biche	82.2%	23.8%
Lanark County	28.6%	3.88%
Merritt	74%	23%
Parksville/Qualicum	29%	3%
Penticton	31%	7%
Port Alberni	65%	17%
Prince Rupert	87%	39%
Quesnel	64%	17%

Sechelt/Gibsons	24%	6%
Smithers	93%	10%
Squamish	18%	5%
Terrace	87%	23%
Toronto	16%	1-2.5%
Vancouver	40%	2.2%
Vernon	40%	7%
Williams Lake	78%	20%

In every community reporting on this issue, Indigenous people are over-represented among individuals experiencing homelessness. For example, the 2021 PiT in Smithers B.C. found that 93% of respondents identified as Indigenous. This is compared to only 10% of the general population in Smithers that identifies as Indigenous, and only 3% of the general population of Canada. These trends are seen across rural counts conducted in B.C., such as in Terrace and Fort St. John where 87% and 57% (respectively) of respondents identified as Indigenous, but only 13% and 11% of the general population are Indigenous according to the 2016 census. Overrepresentation of Indigenous persons among the homeless population is seen in other provinces. In Alberta this includes Lac La Biche County where 82.2% of those experiencing homelessness identified as Indigenous but Indigenous persons represent only 23.8% of the general population. In Ontario, Frontenac County reported that 46% of those experiencing homelessness identified as First Nations or having Indigenous ancestry, yet Indigenous peoples make up only 5% of the general population. These findings are consistent with a body of literature that has previously reported an over-representation of Indigenous Peoples among homeless populations (Anderson & Collins, 2014; Belanger et al., 2013; Bingham et al., 2019; Shier et al., 2015; Thistle & Smylie, 2020).

As part of their enumerations, several communities included survey questions that aimed to gather additional information about the Indigenous identity of participants. For example, the 2018 PiT count in Thompson, Manitoba asked participants whether they were First Nations with or without status, Inuit, Métis, or had Indigenous ancestry. 95.2% of respondents who answered this question identified as First Nations, 1.9% identified as Métis, and 2.9% identified as having Indigenous ancestry.

Similarly, the 2018 PiT count in Yellowknife asked participants whether they identified as Indigenous, with further categorizations including First Nations with or without status, having Indigenous ancestry, Inuit or Métis. While 90% of participants identified as Indigenous, these additional categories captured the fact that 54% of respondents were First Nations, 28% were Inuit, 4% were Métis, and 4% identified having Indigenous ancestry. Yellowknife took this one step further and asked participants who identified as Indigenous which community they were from. The results indicated that the majority were from communities in the NWT and Nunavut including Behchoko, Hay River, Kugluktuk and Inuvik.

The 2018 District of Muskoka enumeration asked participants whether they identified as Indigenous ancestry (non-status), Métis or First Nations, and saw results of 54%, 21% and 25% respectively. Other communities that reported detailed breakdowns for Indigenous participants included the 2018 St. Thomas & Elgin County enumeration, the 2018 Rainy River District Enumeration, and the 2018 Athabasca County enumeration. Collecting additional information on the identity of Indigenous Peoples experiencing homelessness could be extremely useful for service providers. This could help to ensure that service providers offer programs that are relevant, appropriate, and culturally safe for the communities being served.

Youth, Seniors, and Families

All but one count reported on the ages of those counted. Most counts reported on youth (30) and seniors (33) however the reports included in our analysis used varying criteria for defining these age groups. Definitions of youth were most varied, with age categories ranging from under 25 or under 24 to under 30, under 20 and under 18. Nationally, youth (between 13 - 24 years of age) are estimated to comprise 20% of the homeless population according to the 2016 national youth homelessness survey (Gaetz et al., 2016). Our review of rural enumerations however, found much lower rates of youth homelessness in most rural regions and towns. For example, Prince Rupert and Merrit B.C. identified 11% and 4% (respectively) of the homeless population as persons under the age of

25. Some communities reported higher percentages, such as Smithers and Campbell River where 18% and 36% of the homeless population were youth.

Age ranges for seniors also varied with some counts defining seniors as those over 55 and others using 65 years as the baseline for senior status. Several counts reported high rates of homelessness among seniors with some regions reporting as much as 27% (Fort St. John and Duncan/Cowichan Valley) and 31% (Merritt) of the homeless population in the 55+ age group. Bathurst N.B. reported 30% in the 50 - 64 age group and 10% in the 65+ age group. Many counts ranged between 10% - 25% for senior homelessness while some reported very low rates, such as the Rainy River district where less than 1% of those counted were in the 60+ age group. The 2018 national coordinated PiT count found 3% of persons over 65 years and 22% in the 50 - 64 age group. Comparing these rural rates to national (urban) findings suggests that while some communities have rates of senior homelessness close to the national average, others may have much more significant senior homelessness concerns.

Several (27) of the enumerations had documented data related to family homelessness. This documentation was almost completely exclusive to Ontario and counts conducted by the RDN in Alberta. Yellowknife also reported on family homelessness - identifying 54 unique families in their counts. Most of the data related to family homelessness included indicators related to household composition (# single parent households) and the number of adults who were caring for minors. Documenting family homelessness may be an area for expansion in rural homelessness enumerations since maintaining family units can play a critical role in health and achieving housing stability (Bassuk et al., 2020; Sylvestre et al., 2018).

Migration

The majority of counts (47) also documented information related to residency and migration. Rates of long-term residency were high in most rural counts. Many counts reported in excess of 80% of homeless persons having lived in the area for at least one year and over 50% having lived in the region for over 10 years. The exceptions to

this were the service centre communities: large regional towns which provide administrative, social, and other services for large rural and remote areas (Schiff et al., 2021b). Examples in the north include Whitehorse, Yellowknife, and Thompson MB, where most of those counted were from outlying rural regions in the territories or provincial north. Christensen (2012) described potential causes of migration in the Northwest Territories which may be applicable more broadly to other remote and rural regions:

I suggest that uneven and fragmented social, institutional, and economic geographies result in a unique landscape of vulnerability to homelessness in the Northwest Territories. This geography emerges through the production of particular dynamics between rural settlement communities and northern urban centres. In particular, four main factors represent these rural-urban dynamics: 1) the attractions of opportunity in northern urban centres; 2) rural settlement-urban institutional flows; 3) chronic housing need in the settlements; and, 4) disintegrating social relationships in the settlements. (Christensen, 2012, p. 1)

These findings about rural homelessness may indicate that persons experiencing homeless in rural regions do not always migrate to larger centres which have more homelessness services. This finding is echoed in the broader literature on rural homelessness (Beavis et al., 1997; Kauppi et al., 2017; Kearns, 2006; Milbourne & Cloke, 2016; Waegemakers Schiff et al., 2015).

Discussion: Implications for Public Policy and Homelessness Funding

As the results of this analysis indicate, rural homelessness is indeed a significant issue in Canada. There are large proportions (high rates) of homelessness in rural Canada and the significance of this issue has most likely been underestimated in policy and funding contexts. Much previous literature has indicated that rural homelessness is largely “hidden” however this may be an incorrect application of that terminology – according to Canadian definitions of homelessness, “hidden” refers to those who are provisionally accommodated: i.e., couch surfing, in overcrowded, or unsuitable accommodation (Collins, 2010). Our analysis

however found that there are persons in rural Canada who are experiencing “absolute” homelessness where they are completely unsheltered or sleeping in emergency shelters. Instead, we suggest a shift towards understanding the “invisible” nature of absolute homelessness in rural contexts. The concept of “invisible” homelessness as discussed here could be useful in expanding understanding and definitions of homelessness in Canadian and international contexts.

Our analysis also points towards several other implications that we suggest be taken into account in the development of policy and programs to address and end homelessness in Canada. These recommendations are described below and include expanding and supporting rural homelessness enumeration, refining urban enumeration, expanded funding and support for rural homelessness service provision, and truth and reconciliation.

Expanding and Supporting Rural Homelessness Enumeration

While this analysis was able to bring together numerous rural reports from across the country, it is clear that there is a significant lack of rural homelessness enumeration. This may - in part - be due to the lack of funding, resources, and supports for rural regions to conduct enumerations (Hall, 2017). There are also several regions where rural counts are aggregated with urban counts, which makes it difficult or impossible to distinguish between rural and urban homelessness in those regions.

There is a need to ensure that rural enumerations are using the most accurate methodology. Certain methodologies come with inherent flaws, such as counting methodologies that might underestimate, or counts that use utilize police support to count individuals experiencing homelessness. This is particularly an issue when working with populations who may have a history of negative interactions with police. Some counts had service providers identify who they thought were Indigenous persons, rather than having individuals’ self - identify. This is a particularly problematic and colonial approach to Indigenous identity. Some reports lacked rigour and consistency in the methods employed and used contradictory

terminology. This included some reports which presented the Canadian definition of homelessness (Gaetz et al., 2012) but then reported results based on other terms for which definitions were not provided. These approaches can skew numbers and lead to undercounts. As such, we suggest a need for more funding for research and communities to support implementation of widespread rural homelessness counts, disaggregated from urban counts, which utilize the most appropriate and accurate methodologies for enumeration in each region. There is also a need to ensure that rural enumerations capture critical data that is often not included in current counts, such as information on family homelessness and migration.

Refining Urban Enumeration

Canadian efforts to enumerate urban homelessness are substantive and significant in their contribution to public policy, funding, and program development to address and end homelessness. As our research and other reports (Kauppi et al., 2017) have revealed, there is evidence of persons experiencing homelessness migrating between urban and rural areas. Despite this evidence, the national coordinated PiT count does not include measures to document the number of peoples who have moved to urban areas from rural environments, the reasons for those moves, nor the number of people experiencing homelessness in cities who might prefer to live in rural areas but cannot due to lack of housing and services. As such, we suggest a revision of the national coordinated methodology to include measures for improved documentation of rural – urban migration dynamics.

Expanded Funding and Support for Rural Homelessness Service Provision

Based on our findings, rural homelessness is clearly a significant issue in the Canadian context and may be a precipitator of urban homelessness. Rural communities receive a disproportionately low percentage of federal homelessness funding, and their programs lack access to multiyear funding which is available in designated communities. Additionally, due to their smaller

size and fewer human resources, many small communities do not have resources to write or compete with applications from larger towns and urban centres. Much rural and remote planning, health, and social services literature has documented that rural communities often cannot take advantage of funding opportunities because of limited infrastructure (there are fewer buildings, social and health care services in rural communities) and lack of core infrastructure funding opportunities (Reimer and Bollman, 2010; Ryser et al., 2018; Schiff & Møller, 2021; Smith et al., 2008; Strasser, 2013). As such, we suggest a revision of rural homelessness funding to take into account the need for: support for writing funding applications, particularly in small communities; multiyear funding and; infrastructure funding. Along with this there is a need to recognize the distinct nature of rural homelessness and that urban homelessness solutions cannot be simply transplanted to rural environments. There should be enhanced supports for research and development of rural – specific homelessness program models.

Reconciliation and Indigenous Homelessness in Rural Canada

A final and most important recommendation is related to our finding that, as others have reported, FNIM peoples are often overrepresented in rural homeless counts (Kauppi et al., 2017; Taylor, 2018). There is also a propensity towards pan-Indigenization in homelessness enumeration which Indigenous leaders have increasingly pointed to as concerning in its suppression of distinct identities across diverse FNIM groups. Furthermore, this pan-Indigenization complicates efforts of distinct FNIM governments in their efforts to serve their members. As described earlier in this article, ending homelessness may be a key component of work towards reconciliation and good relations with Indigenous peoples (Smiley and Thistle, 2020). These issues must be addressed in our collective efforts towards reconciliation, where “housing people when done properly is reconciliation realized” (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2019). As such, we identify a need to direct funding towards rural First Nations, Inuit, and Metis organisations and to support existing rural housing and support

services to develop culturally - safe program models.

Limitations

While we hope that this research contributes to a growing understanding of rural homelessness and rural enumeration, we identify some limitations that could be addressed through future research. A first limitation was the inability to search for reports that might be only available in print format or were in languages other than English and French. While our knowledge of homelessness enumeration in Canada suggests that most current reports are published electronically and in English or French, it is possible that we missed rural enumeration reports due to the inability to search in other languages and for documents that were not published electronically. An additional challenge was related to the variation in methodologies used for enumeration as well as in the definitions used in different reports. This included challenges related to definition of age groups such as “youth” and “seniors” for which definitions were inconsistent and varied widely across different reports. A common enumeration approach across rural Canada might be able to address these inconsistencies for future research and homeless estimation activities.

Conclusion

As our analysis demonstrates, rural homelessness is indeed a significant issue in Canada. There are high rates of homelessness in rural Canada, including those experiencing absolute and chronic homelessness. The data from Canadian rural homelessness enumerations provide a snapshot of rural homelessness that is contrary to the dominant narrative of predominately “hidden homelessness” in rural communities. Homelessness in rural Canada may be better understood as “invisible” and not “hidden” since there are large proportions of PEH in rural Canada who are unsheltered, sleeping in emergency shelters, or in accommodations not intended for human habitation. We suggest that policy and approaches to funding homelessness programs should be adjusted to take into account the

changing knowledge about the scale and scope of homelessness in rural Canada.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the article reviewers for their time and contributions to revising and enhancing this manuscript.

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