

Canadian Definition Of Homelessness

DEFINITION

Homelessness describes the situation of an individual or family without stable, 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 describes a range of housing and shelter circumstances, with people being without any shelter at one end, and being insecurely housed at the other. That is, homelessness encompasses a range of physical living situations, organized here in a **typology** that includes 1) **Unsheltered**, or absolutely homeless and living on the streets or in places not intended for human habitation; 2) **Emergency Sheltered**, including those staying in overnight shelters for people who are homeless, as well as shelters for those impacted by family violence; 3) **Provisionally Accommodated**, referring to those whose accommodation is temporary or lacks security of tenure, and finally, 4) **At Risk of Homelessness**, referring to people who are not homeless, but whose current economic and/or housing situation is precarious or does not meet public health and safety standards. It should be noted that for many people homelessness is not a static state but rather a fluid experience, where one's shelter circumstances and options may shift and change quite dramatically and with frequency.

The *problem* of homelessness and housing exclusion refers to the failure of society to ensure that adequate systems, funding and support are in place so that all people, even in crisis situations, have access to housing. The goal of ending homelessness is to ensure housing stability, which means people have a fixed address and housing that is appropriate (affordable, safe, adequately maintained, accessible and suitable in size), and includes required services as needed (supportive), in addition to income and supports.

Numerous populations, such as youth, individuals from different ethno-cultural backgrounds, families, newcomers to Canada, people impacted by family violence, the elderly, etc., experience homelessness due to a unique constellation of circumstances and as such the appropriateness of community responses has to take into account such diversity. The over-representation of Aboriginal peoples (including First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples), for instance, amongst Canadian homeless populations, necessitates the inclusion of their historical, experiential and cultural differences, as well as experiences with colonization and racism, in their consideration of homelessness.

The Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (COH) (formerly the Canadian Homelessness Research Network) established a working group with leaders from the areas of research, policy and practice, to develop, refine and test a new definition. The CHRN Working Group included: Dr. Stephen Gaetz, Director, Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, York University; Carolann Barr, Executive Director, Raising the Roof; Anita Friesen, Senior Policy Advisor, Program Policy and Planning, Family Violence Prevention and Homeless Supports, Alberta Human Services; Bradley Harris, Social Services Consultant, The Salvation Army; Charlie Hill, Executive Director, National Aboriginal Housing Association; Dr. Kathy Kovacs-Burns, Associate Director, Health Sciences Council, University of Alberta; Dr. Bernie Pauly, Associate Professor, School of Nursing, University of Victoria; Bruce Pearce, President, Canadian Housing Renewal Association; Alina Turner, VP Strategy, Calgary Homeless Foundation; Allyson Marsolais, Project Manager, Canadian Observatory on Homelessness.

TYPOLOGY

OPERATIONAL CATEGORY		LIVING SITUATION		GENERIC DEFINITION
1 UNSHELTERED	This includes people who lack housing and are not accessing emergency shelters or accommodation, except during extreme weather conditions. In most cases, people are staying in places that are not designed for or fit for human habitation.	1.1	People living in public or private spaces without consent or contract	- Public space, such as sidewalks, squares, parks, forests, etc. - Private space and vacant buildings (squatting)
		1.2	People living in places not intended for permanent human habitation	- Living in cars or other vehicles - Living in garages, attics, closets or buildings not designed for habitation - People in makeshift shelters, shacks or tents
2 EMERGENCY SHELTERED	This refers to people who, because they cannot secure permanent housing, are accessing emergency shelter and system supports, generally provided at no cost or minimal cost to the user. Such accommodation represents an institutional response to homelessness provided by government, non-profit, faith based organizations and / or volunteers.	2.1	Emergency overnight shelters for people who are homeless	These facilities are designed to meet the immediate needs of people who are homeless. Such short-term emergency shelters may target specific sub-populations, including women, families, youth or Aboriginal persons, for instance. These shelters typically have minimal eligibility criteria, offer shared sleeping facilities and amenities, and often expect clients to leave in the morning. They may or may not offer food, clothing or other services. Some emergency shelters allow people to stay on an ongoing basis while others are short term and are set up to respond to special circumstances, such as extreme weather.
		2.2	Shelters for individuals/families impacted by family violence	
		2.3	Emergency shelter for people fleeing a natural disaster or destruction of accommodation due to fires, floods, etc.	
3 PROVISIONALLY ACCOMMODATED	This describes situations in which people, who are technically homeless and without permanent shelter, access accommodation that offers no prospect of permanence. Those who are provisionally accommodated may be accessing temporary housing provided by government or the non-profit sector, or may have independently made arrangements for short-term accommodation.	3.1	Interim Housing for people who are homeless	Interim housing is a systems-supported form of housing that is meant to bridge the gap between unsheltered homelessness or emergency accommodation and permanent housing.
		3.2	People living temporarily with others, but without guarantee of continued residency or immediate prospects for accessing permanent housing	Often referred to as 'couch surfers' or the 'hidden homeless', this describes people who stay with friends, family, or even strangers.
		3.3	People accessing short term, temporary rental accommodations without security of tenure	In some cases people who are homeless make temporary rental arrangements, such as staying in motels, hostels, rooming houses, etc.
		3.4	People in institutional care who lack permanent housing arrangements	People who may transition into homelessness upon release from: Penal institutions; Medical / mental health institutions; Residential treatment programs or withdrawal management centers; Children's institutions / group homes.
		3.5	Accommodation / reception centers for recently arrived immigrants and refugees	Prior to securing their own housing, recently arrived immigrants and refugees may be temporarily housed while receiving settlement support and orientation to life in Canada.
4 AT-RISK OF HOMELESSNESS	Although not technically homeless, this includes individuals or families whose current housing situations are dangerously lacking security or stability, and so are considered to be at-risk of homelessness . They are living in housing that is intended for permanent human habitation, and could potentially be permanent (as opposed to those who are provisionally accommodated). However, as a result of external hardship, poverty, personal crisis, discrimination, a lack of other available and affordable housing, and / or the inappropriateness of their current housing (which may be overcrowded or does not meet public health and safety standards) residents may be "at risk" of homelessness.	4.1	People at imminent risk of homelessness	- Those whose employment is precarious - Those experiencing sudden unemployment - Households facing eviction - Housing with transitional supports about to be discontinued - People with severe and persistent mental illness, active addictions, substance use, and / or behavioural issues - Breakdown in family relations - People facing, or living in direct fear, of violence / abuse
		4.2	Individuals and families who are precariously housed	Those who face challenges that may or may not leave them homeless in the immediate or near future. CMHC defines a household as being in core housing need if its housing: "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)."

For a more detailed typology of the Canadian Definition of Homelessness, go to: www.homelesshub.ca/homelessdefinition