

# 2 Introduction

It is important for us to begin this book with an understanding of what homelessness is and is not. According to the Canadian Definition of Homelessness:

*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 (CHRN, 2012, [Canadian Definition of Homelessness](#)).*

Understanding homelessness means having a grasp of the extent of the problem. It is estimated that over 235,000 different people are homeless every year in Canada, or 35,000 on any given night (Gaetz et al., 2014). There is no commonly used method for counting and reporting the numbers of people experiencing homelessness, so this is only an estimate

—but it is a sound one.

The Canadian Definition of Homelessness also looks at types of homelessness, including Unsheltered, Emergency Sheltered and Provisionally Accommodated. Someone may live only on the streets, refusing to go into a shelter. Someone else may become homeless and live in a shelter and never on the streets. For others, and as most of the authors share, the experience of homelessness tends to be multi-faceted and it is never smooth. Many people find temporary housing for brief periods of time, alternating with time in shelters and/or sleeping rough.

Of the approximately 235,000 different people who are homeless in Canada every year—about 35,000 who are homeless on any given night—about 13,000-33,000 are chronically or episodically homeless, meaning that they are homeless for extended periods of time.

Category of Homelessness	Living Situation	Annual Number
Unsheltered	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sleeping rough, out of doors</li> </ul>	5,000
Emergency Sheltered	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Homeless emergency shelters</li> <li>• Violence against women shelters</li> </ul>	180,000
Provisionally Accommodated	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In institutional settings (prison, hospital)</li> <li>• In interim housing</li> <li>• Temporarily with friends or relatives with no immediate prospect of housing</li> </ul>	50,000
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>235,000</b>

(Gaetz et al., 2014, p. 41)

Within this population, youth make up about 20% of shelter users, while a significant number (47.5%) are single men between the ages of 25 and 55. Family violence is a leading cause of homelessness for women (Gaetz et al., 2013).

Aboriginal Peoples are disproportionately represented in the shelter system and homeless population in virtually every community in Canada. Research shows that as one moves west or into northern communities, this over-representation increases. In fact, in major urban centres, Aboriginal Peoples are eight times more likely to experience homelessness (Belanger et al., 2012).

The stories presented in this book support this statistic, as the majority of the narratives are from people who identify as First Nations or Métis.

While entries and pathways into and out of homelessness are often varied and complex, in many ways understanding homelessness is quite simple: “Homelessness may not be only a housing problem, but it is always a housing problem; housing is necessary, although sometimes not sufficient, to solve the problem of homelessness” (Dolbear, 1996, p. 34).

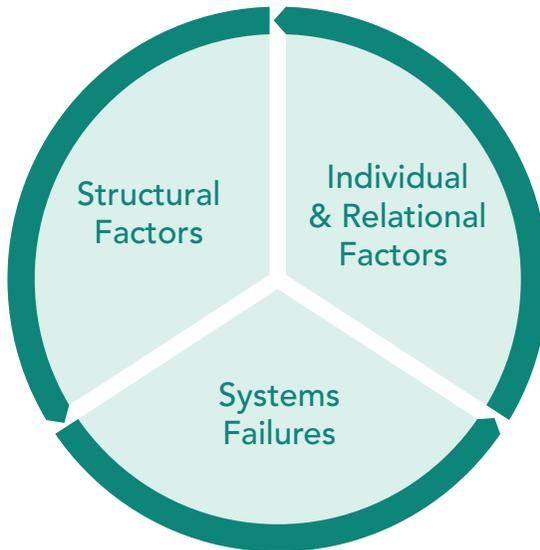
This statement about homelessness always—although not only—being a housing problem is one that has been made repeatedly over the past couple of decades (Dolbear, 1996; Hulchanski et al., 2009). In Canada, the success of the [At Home/Chez Soi initiative](#), which implemented the world’s largest Housing First demonstration project, showed the strong connection between housing and homelessness. Unfortunately, this link is often ignored because of existing, widely accepted myths and stereotypes about homelessness and the people who experience it.

There is no single pathway into or out of homelessness, as the stories in this book illustrate. Contrary to one of the most common myths, not all of the authors chose to become homeless. Even in those cases where an author struck out on their own or left their existing home, this happened in a complicated context of problematic relationships, abuse and other issues. Despite this, a recent poll commissioned by the Salvation Army found that 40% of Canadians believe that people living on the streets have both chosen to be homeless, and are not interested in housing (Salvation Army, 2011). Yet other research, including Point-In-Time counts and Street Needs Assessments conducted by municipalities across the country, have consistently shown that people experiencing homelessness would like to change their circumstances, but are limited in options due to the lack of affordable housing, low vacancy rates, high rent and a lack of income support. Often, the circumstances people find themselves in are beyond their control. At Home/Chez Soi showed that even people who are seemingly the most entrenched in their homelessness, and

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despite other issues such as mental health or addictions, can stay housed if given proper supports (Goering et al., 2014).

Another significant myth is that, most often, it is individual problems and personal failures lead to homelessness. While it is true that individual and relational factors may trigger some of the crises that lead people to become homeless, structural factors also play an important role. These can include lack of affordable housing and sufficient income, inability to find a job or lack of education. Discrimination plays an important role in preventing people from a wide variety of groups—including Aboriginal Peoples, youth, members of LGBTQ2S communities or people from racialized communities—from securing housing and income supports.



Additionally, there are significant systems failures that lead people into homelessness. When people are discharged from either prison or hospital into homelessness, it reduces their chance of recovery. Youth in care need support to prepare for the transition to independent living. If they do not get this, they may have trouble successfully surviving after aging out of care. The same is true for all kinds of supports, including addictions, mental health, education and family violence. Homelessness is a result of society’s response to marginalized communities as a whole, not just about what happens to individuals.

The stories in this book highlight a variety of systemic and structural failures in all kinds of systems, including healthcare, education, justice/correction, and child welfare. Furthermore, individuals in the book experience discrimination in both housing and employment. These are not the failings of the authors, but of society.

A final myth is that it is hard to solve homelessness, and that the issue is very complex. While the latter might be true, securing housing, income and supports are key methods of addressing homelessness. A recent report from the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness and the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness put forth practical solutions for reducing homeless and housing instability, and estimated the potential cost as under \$4 billion per year. While this may sound expensive, homelessness costs the Canadian economy over \$7 billion annually due to a dependence on emergency services.

Ever since homelessness became a major economic and social issue from the 1990s onwards, the response has tended to focus on emergency services and supports. While obviously the intention was good—a desire to protect people from experiencing the elements and suffering harm—what was supposed to be a Band-Aid has become entrenched as a solution. Shelters, though important, are not places for people to deal with addictions and/or mental health, and do not contribute towards stabilization. Shelters—except in extreme emergencies—are not a solution to homelessness, as the following stories will show.

## References

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