

# HOMELESSNESS IN TIMMINS, ONTARIO, CANADA

Henri Pallard<sup>a</sup> and Carol Kauppi<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Laurentian University

<sup>a</sup>Corresponding author: CKauppi@laurentian.ca

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**Abstract:** Homelessness has been described as a crisis within Canada; yet little published research has described the extent and nature of homelessness within communities in northeastern Ontario, Canada. A period prevalence count was conducted of the homeless population using emergency shelters, social service agencies, and other services in the City of Timmins, in northeastern Ontario, Canada. The total homeless population (high-risk and absolutely homeless) identified in the study (n=720) included 257 infants, children and adolescents under age 15 even though the majority of homeless people were adults. Overall, more than a third of homeless people reported Indigenous background. The most frequently reported source of income was the Ontario Disabilities Support Program (31%). Taken together, the central reasons pertained to structural and systemic problems of unemployment, problems with social assistance, and the lack of affordable housing accounted for the largest proportion of homelessness. Absolutely homeless people made up close to a third of the homeless people who used the services of the participating agencies. Nearly half were women. Children and youth up to the age of 19 comprised half of this population. When the number of women with children and youth under age 20 are combined, they constitute about two-thirds of those who are absolutely homeless in Timmins. The findings are discussed in relation to the potential for raising awareness of this issue at the local and regional levels.

**Keywords:** Homelessness, northeastern Ontario, absolutely homeless, at risk of homelessness, youth, women, Anglophone, Francophone, Indigenous.

## I. INTRODUCTION

In the Western world, homelessness was once viewed primarily as a phenomenon largely confined to the USA. Zeneidi (2011) reinforced this view but noted that the problem has become more widespread within

recent decades and that extreme poverty and homelessness were evident in France by the 1990s. Indeed, homelessness has been recognized as an issue to be addressed within the USA (US HUD, 2014), Australia (Parsell & Marston, 2012), Western Europe, the UK (Toro, 2007) and Canada (Hwang, 2004).

Within Canada, homelessness has been described as a crisis (Gaetz, Gulliver & Richter, 2014). The focus of the Homelessness Partnering Secretariat (HPS) has shifted in recent years to the implementation of initiatives that centre on *Housing First* as a strategy for addressing homelessness in Canada. To support this strategy, HPS (2015) has announced plans to hold an American style, coordinated point-in-time (PIT) count of homeless people in 2016. The motivation to gain a better understanding of the number of homeless people in Canada is laudable. However, the proposed methodology has serious limitations for communities with a small number of shelter beds, such as Timmins.

The lack of services in northern communities impacts on attempts to use standard methodologies for counting and researching people experiencing homelessness. Given the harsher climate, people are less visible on the streets. Furthermore, reliance on utilizing shelter counts will systematically produce results that underestimate the size of homeless populations. Given the gaps in services, there is more hidden homelessness in northern towns and cities.

This study<sup>1</sup> used a period prevalence count (PPC) methodology rather than the PIT methods used in the USA. It sought to examine the extent and nature of homelessness in the northern city of Timmins. The

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study provides for an exploration of poverty, housing need and homelessness in a northern context. Previously, we have argued that homelessness is as serious an issue, on a per capita basis, as it is in southern regions of Canada; moreover, it has been a persistent problem through times of economic boom and bust. While little information has been available about homelessness in communities within northeastern Ontario, such as Timmins, we know that the extent and nature of the homelessness problem in Sudbury remained largely unchanged between 2000 and 2009 (Kauppi, Gasparini, Pallard, Garg, Montgomery & Webster, 2009). However, the quality of housing available to low income people has deteriorated since 2000 given low rental vacancy rates, strong rental demand and increases in rents (CMHC, 2011).

Published literature about the size of homeless populations, characteristics of homeless people and living circumstances within northern regions of Canada is limited and superficial. Those who have not experienced homelessness, including service providers who support this population, often have difficulty comprehending the nature of the challenging life circumstances and their varied impacts on homeless persons. Given the human and systemic costs, it is vital to acquire a better understanding of homelessness within cities in northern regions of Ontario in order to ensure that people's needs are met. In addition, research on issues of deep poverty and homelessness can support local initiatives to make positive changes, including advocacy for policies that can prevent and eliminate homelessness.

The major objective of the Poverty, Homelessness and Migration (PHM) project, a Northern Community-University Research Alliance (CURA), is to examine the extent of homelessness in northeastern Ontario communities in order to gain a better understanding of the issues related to forms of homelessness as well as patterns of migration and transience. This study describes the findings from the period prevalence count conducted in the community of Timmins in January 2011.

#### **A. Timmins: background information**

Timmins is a small urban city located on the Mattagami River in northeastern Ontario. According to the 2011 census, the population of Timmins was 43,165 (Statistics Canada, 2012). The 2011 census indicated that the population is predominantly Anglophone and Francophone. The percentage of those classified as official language minority (French) in the 2011 census was 37.1 (Statistics Canada, 2012). From 2001 to 2006, its Indigenous population increased by 14% (Carrière, 2011). The subgroup of people with First Nations heritage grew by 29%, while the Métis popu-

lation grew by 2%. Statistics Canada (2014) indicated that 8 percent of Timmins residents reported Indigenous identity in 2011.

The economy of Timmins is resource-based with its characteristic boom and bust cycle. Mining is the predominant resource industry followed by forestry activities (City of Timmins, 2012). Other economic sectors include retail stores, education, health care and other public services, construction, manufacturing, accommodation and food services, transportation and warehousing. Despite fluctuations in the economy, the unemployment rate in Timmins (7.1%) was lower than the provincial rate (8.3%) in 2011 (SHS Consulting, 2014). At the time of study, the economy of Timmins was experiencing a boom in the mining industry which was adversely affecting the vacancy rates in the rental housing market. A low vacancy rate, a strong demand for rental accommodations and increasing rents were noted as significant contributing factors to homelessness in Timmins (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2012).

#### **B. Defining homelessness**

Definitions are central to research on homelessness as they determine which individuals will be included (Tipple & Speak, 2005). The *Federation européenne d'associations nationales travaillant avec les sans-abri* or FEANTSA<sup>2</sup> (2005) developed a definition of homelessness that includes four categories: rooflessness, houselessness, insecure housing and inadequate housing. The first two categories refer to forms of absolute homelessness while the last two address the situations of people who live in circumstances that place them at high risk of becoming homeless (e.g. due to eviction, violence or unfit housing).

Like the earlier studies on homelessness in Sudbury (Kauppi et al., 2009), the current project adopted an inclusive definition of homelessness by taking into account people who were precariously housed and vulnerable to becoming homeless in addition to those who were absolutely homeless at the time of the study. This approach is similar to that described by FEANTSA (2005) and many organizations. Based on an international review of concepts and circumstances linked to definitions of homelessness, Tipple and Speak (2005) concluded that it is useful to include various groups but researchers should differentiate between people who are absolutely without housing and those who are inadequately housed. As Peressini, McDonald and Hulchanski (2010, p. 2) have noted, the use of "relative definitions", which are broad and inclusive, can ensure that the study includes a "repre-

<sup>2</sup> The name in English of the organization is Federation of European National Associations Working with the Homeless.

sentative sample of all the constituent groups". The broader definition of homelessness enables the development of strategies to address the problems that go beyond emergency response to deal with the fundamental causes of homelessness thereby preventing homelessness.

Similarly, Casavant (1999) observed that many researchers and service providers believe that defining homelessness in terms of the absolute absence of shelter (i.e., the unsheltered homeless population) is overly restrictive. Therefore, in order to gain a better understanding of the dimensions of the problem in Timmins, this study has identified and enumerated those who were absolutely without housing as well as those at risk of becoming homeless.

### **1. Absolute homelessness**

We defined absolute homelessness as situations in which a homeless person does not have a place that he/she considers to be home or a place where he/she sleeps regularly. The questionnaire provided the following definition of absolute homelessness.

A person:

- has no place to call home or
- has a home that is neither a room, an apartment, nor a house or
- has a room, apartment or house that is not one's own or
- stays there four times a week or less or
- has no arrangement to sleep there regularly.

### **2. At risk for homelessness (relative homelessness)**

Due to particular circumstances, a person is at an elevated risk for homelessness (i.e. pending eviction, extremely low income, violence or abuse, inability to pay rent, existing medical condition with no benefits). As Peressini et al. (2010) observed, studies employing relative definitions must sample from a wide range of locations to cover the greatest number of sites where persons at risk of homeless may be found.

### **3. Migration or transience**

Transience was described by Pollio (1997) as comprising four dimensions based on the concepts of migration, duration, intention and involvement. We adopted this definition in our 2009 survey of homeless people in Sudbury (Kauppi et al., 2009) but we also drew on the earlier work of Rahimian et al. (1992) who argued that definitions of migration used for domiciled populations may not be helpful in understanding migration among homeless persons. Building on a study by Rahimian et al. (1992), our definition of migration includes three groups: individuals who have been in the community less than one year are viewed as recent migrants, those who have

been in the community between one to five years are considered to be intermediate-term migrants and stayers have been in the community more than five years.

### **4. Hidden homelessness**

It is difficult to identify the hidden homeless population. This subgroup of homeless people may include people who "double up" by permitting a homeless person to live with them. Some consider doubling up or "double bunking" to be a type of homelessness since it can create housing situations involving overcrowding or housing instability. A key factor that may create a challenge in counting the "hidden homeless" is the reluctance of low income residents in subsidized housing units to reveal how they are "doubling up" because of fear that they will be penalized if the housing authority were to find out that someone was staying with them. "Double bunking" is often not permitted by public housing authorities. The study of homelessness in Timmins included hidden homeless people who accessed services during the week of the period prevalence count. However, those who did not use services did not have an opportunity to participate in the study.

### **C. Estimating homeless populations**

As noted above, defining homelessness, counting or estimating the size of the homeless population, and determining an appropriate methodology for studying homeless people continue to be somewhat problematic (Counting Homelessness, 2010). In prior studies on homelessness in Sudbury, a decision was made to utilize service-based techniques (Kauppi & Lemieux, 2000). This method was described by Iachan & Dennis in 1993 (cited in Peressini, McDonald & Hulchanski, 1996). These authors identified 14 studies of homelessness employing a service-based method and classified them into three groups.

The first set of studies employed sub-samples of service system locations (e.g., shelters, soup kitchens, day programs) because they can be surveyed inexpensively and cover most of the population. The second set of studies used probability samples of shelter and street locations to reduce the potential for bias due to under-coverage and limitations of service systems. A final set of studies, representing a compromise approach, focuses on service system samples, but also include either purposive or partial samples of high-density street locations.

Researchers working in this field have noted the difficulties in studying this population; a key problem is that particular subgroups in the population are not captured in "homeless counts" that use particular types of methodologies, such as 24-hour counts and

studies that focus on homeless persons who live on the streets—rough sleepers. In a review of methods for counting homeless people, Peressini et al. (2010) reported that “service-based methods produce the most accurate and reliable results”. Indeed, they state that such service based methods reportedly produce more accurate population estimates than the Canadian Census. Moreover, collecting data at services such as shelters, soup kitchens, health and social services and drop-in centres captures nearly all of the urban homeless population (90 to 95%).

Thus Peressini et al. (1996) noted that there has been a tendency to utilize a variation of the service-based methodology in most studies of homelessness conducted since the late 1980s. This methodology was used in the current study because it captures most of the population. The study in Timmins sought to include all agencies and programs in the city that provide services to people experiencing forms of homelessness.

The study in Timmins draws on the same methodology used in nine studies conducted on homelessness in Sudbury between 2000 and 2009. The use of the same methodology allows for the future examination of basic trends in homelessness. Service providers were asked to provide the information on homeless people using their services during a one-week period at the end of January, 2011. They collected this information from clients who consented to provide it. The data collection instrument used in conducting the unduplicated count was designed to gather the same information as in the studies in Sudbury but was refined to improve recording procedures and to gather some additional data. The data collection instrument differentiates between people who were absolutely homeless and those who were at high risk of homelessness and collects information on background characteristics, receipt of income support, and the main reasons for homelessness. In addition, the questionnaire gathers information about the physical and mental health problems experienced by homeless people, as well as migration patterns.

#### **D. Overview of the current study**

This study describes the following:

- the number of people in Timmins who are homeless and absolutely homeless;
- breakdowns on background characteristics including children, youth, women, men, subgroups in the population (i.e. those of Anglo/European origins, Indigenous people, and Francophones);
- sources of income;
- reasons for homelessness; and
- trends in referral of homeless people.

## **II. METHODOLOGY**

In order to provide accurate data and estimates that reflect the extent of homelessness in the community, our methodology utilized a service-based method, extended to a full week of data collection, in order to maximize the number of people included in the study. The study was conducted during a seven-day period at the end of the month, during the week of 24 to 30 January 2011. It focussed on obtaining a count of the homeless population using emergency shelters, social service agencies, and other services supporting this population in Timmins as well as gathering information on their characteristics, reasons for homelessness and migration patterns.

### **A. Period prevalence “count” or census of the homeless population**

We worked with local service providers in order to obtain an accurate snapshot of the homeless population during a one week period. Given the inherent difficulties in studying homeless people, as noted above, it must be recognized that any count will produce an under-estimate of the total homeless population. Nevertheless, by securing the participation of a majority of the service providers in Timmins, a reasonable estimate was obtained. A preliminary list of providers was developed and then expanded to ensure that organizations serving this population would be invited to participate. Searches were conducted to identify and locate additional services such as food banks; a list of 31 services was generated. A letter explaining the objectives of the study and the need for participation from all providers was delivered to the agencies along with a copy of the data collection instrument to be used for the count. Every provider was subsequently contacted by telephone in order to set a date and time for a meeting to review the information to be collected in the study and to determine how the data could be collected from each agency. The data collection instrument consisted of a questionnaire for collecting information on each homeless person (see explanation in the following section).

### **B. The count**

By gathering detailed information about each individual using shelters and allied services for seven consecutive days, we were able to identify the number of repeat service users and unique cases. In contrast, other researchers, such as those conducting research on homelessness in Canadian cities such as Edmonton (2010), Prince George (2010) and Vancouver (2011), have opted to conduct their count of homeless people by collecting data on a single day (17 to 24 hours). A count in Calgary (2012) was conducted over five hours in shelters and on the streets, with a focus on a

subgroup of absolutely homeless people. While this approach reduces the time and effort required to collect the data, it produces a more conservative estimate of the number of homeless people, since individuals who are not visible on the streets or using services on the day of the count will be excluded. Continuing the data collection for a one-week period captures a more accurate “snap-shot” of the homeless population.

Furthermore, by having the count conducted by providers or within agency contexts, the intrusiveness of the study was reduced and client confidentiality was maintained. Nevertheless, given limited staff resources available to perform this task and service pressures for some agencies, it was necessary to involve research staff in data collection in some agencies. The research staff were trained and closely supervised to ensure compliance with the study protocols.

The service-based method used in this study was designed to obtain an unduplicated count of the homeless population in Timmins. In order to accomplish this, the week of 24 to 30 January was identified as the time period in which the count would take place. The timing of the study was planned so that the data collection would be conducted at the end of the month when homelessness has been found to increase (Peressini et al., 1996). Some of the agencies contacted did not participate for various reasons. The data collection was operationalized by using a questionnaire that would allow us to gather information about each one of the homeless people using the service. It was found that some individuals did not want to participate. However, the senior research assistant who supervised the data collection observed that the majority of people using services were willing to complete the questionnaire. The following excerpts from field notes explain the process followed at a food bank and the reactions of people who were accessing meals at a soup kitchen:

At a busy food bank, there was a constant line up of 10 to 20 people. Four PHM staff were present to administer the surveys and we asked clients while they were waiting in line whether they were willing to participate. It was a very narrow area to administer surveys but we managed and received a lot of completed surveys.

Most people at the soup kitchen really enjoyed talking with us. One man explained to me that it [participating in the study] made his week because he never feels like anyone wants to hear what he has to say. This same man cried a lot while I administered the survey with him; at the end of

the survey, I gave him the list of support services and he was pretty happy about that.

While the method is appropriate and captures most of the homeless population, it is likely that the results provide a conservative estimate of the extent of homelessness in Timmins. In addition, some agencies did not participate in the study which may impact on the results. However it is also possible that, for example, some of the same people utilize the services of non-participating agencies and participating agencies, thereby enabling them to be included in the count.

The data collection tool was designed to obtain information providing a valid, unduplicated count of the homeless population without raising concerns about violating the privacy rights of individuals using services. The data collection tool utilized was adapted in 2000 from the Automated National Client-specific Homeless services Recording System (ANCHoR). The ANCHoR recording system was an information system designed to support the coordination of services to the homeless. It was designed to collect basic socio-demographic information about the consumers using the services, including the first, middle, and last initials, date of birth, gender, ethnicity/race or cultural group, linguistic orientation, marital status, date of entry or use of services and referral (Peressini et al., 1996). We also gathered information on employment, education, welfare status and income, reasons for homelessness, physical and mental health, history of homelessness and migration patterns.

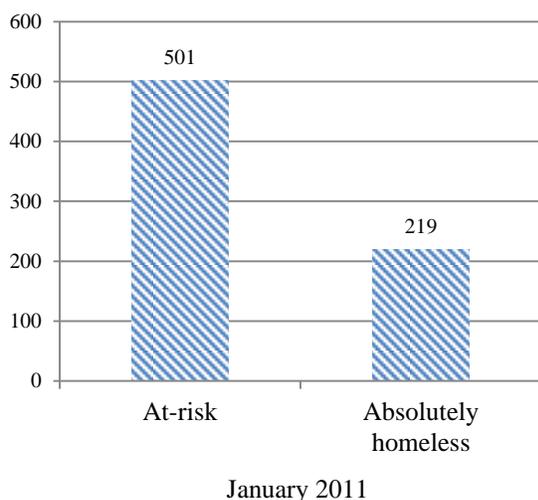
### III. RESULTS

#### A. Unduplicated count of homeless people

Those who participated in the study included 219 absolutely homeless and 501 persons at high risk of becoming homeless. Those absolutely without housing were just under a third (30%) of the homeless people identified by the participating agencies (see Figure 1).

An unduplicated count was obtained by examining the first, middle, and last initials as well as the date of birth and gender; individuals with identical information were considered to be the same person and the duplicated information was eliminated from further analysis. Most individuals provided all information required to identify duplicate cases. The raw numbers (duplicated and unduplicated cases) from the agency count of homeless people, conducted by the shelters and other service providers, indicated that there were 761 people who were identified as absolutely homeless or at risk of homelessness during the week of the study conducted during January 24<sup>th</sup> to 30<sup>th</sup>, 2011. However, four individuals were identified as duplicate cases..

**Figure 1. Number of People at Risk and Absolutely Homeless**



Parents using services identified 37 dependent children who were over the age of 17. We used the age of majority<sup>17</sup> in Ontario to define dependent children and removed 37 dependents over years of age from the database. This analysis of the background information indicated that there were 720 different individuals who were homeless during the week of the study and used the services of an agency where surveys were completed.

## B. Socio-demographic profile of total homeless population

### 1. Total homeless population

Table 1 provides a socio-demographic profile of the homeless persons in the sample and shows that women and girls comprised a slight majority of the homeless persons (52.8% females versus 47.2% males). When taking into account the age groups of men and women, several studies in Sudbury have shown that there was a gender difference in homelessness among adults. An examination of the average (mean) age of homeless men and women indicated that there was a significant gender difference in the age of homeless people in Sudbury. The average age of women was consistently lower compared to men. This was not the case in the Timmins study. The average age of adolescents or women using services (over age 14) was 42 versus 44 for adult men (this difference was not statistically significant). The average age of both men and women in Timmins was 43. No one self-identified as transgender or LGBTQQ.

The overall age distribution of homeless people showed that there were many children under 10 years old among the homeless population (27% of the homeless). Moreover, young people aged 10 to 19 also represented a substantial proportion of those who

were homeless, at 18%. Few people aged 60 and older were identified among the homeless population (8.5%). Thus, a substantial proportion of homeless people were adults between 20 and 59 years of age (47.1%) but well over a third were infants, children or adolescents (44.4%).

**Table 1. Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Total Homeless Population**

	N	%
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	379	52.8
Male	339	47.2
<b>Groups</b>		
Indigenous/First Nation	266	37.4
Anglophone	155	21.8
Francophone	278	39.0
Visible Minority	13	1.8
<b>Language</b>		
English	370	52.0
French	207	29.1
First Nation	118	16.6
Other	16	2.3
<b>Age (including dependent children)</b>		
0 - 4	124	17.6
5 - 9	64	9.1
10 - 14	69	9.8
15 - 19	56	7.9
20 - 24	40	5.7
25 - 29	39	5.5
30 - 34	48	6.8
35 - 39	38	5.4
40 - 44	41	5.8
45 - 49	43	6.1
50 - 54	47	6.7
55 - 59	36	5.1
60+	60	2.2

With regard to the self-identification of Indigenous heritage or linguistic/cultural backgrounds (Anglophone or Francophone), most homeless people reported that they were Anglophones or Francophones of European origins, compared with visible/racialized minorities or Indigenous (see Table 1). However, it is important to note that Indigenous people are greatly over-represented amongst homeless people; they made up over a third (39%) of the homeless population. According to Statistics Canada (2012), the 2011 census data have indicated that the Indigenous people, including North American Indians and Metis, made up 8% of the population in Timmins. In contrast, while French-speaking people are also a minority in the population, they were greatly under-represented amongst homeless people compared to their proportion in the general population of Timmins. Those of French origins comprised 37.1% of the total population, according to the 2011 Census.

The number of homeless people who were members of visible minority/racialized groups was small, with only thirteen individuals participating in this study (less than 2% of the homeless persons in the study). This finding reflects the small proportion of this group in the Timmins population.

## 2. Absolutely homeless population

A majority of the agencies/services identified participated in the survey (21 of 31) and nearly all of those that participated (90% or 19 of 21) identified at least one person who was absolutely homeless. The agencies included food banks, soup kitchen, and services for housing or shelter, crisis, Indigenous people, mental health, employment, substance use treatment/recovery, and family services. Table 2 compares the characteristics of the adult homeless (i.e. over age 17) who were absolutely without housing in the study.

The analysis indicated that there were significantly more men than women among those who were absolutely homeless (58% men versus 42% women). Comparing the proportions of Anglophones, Francophones and Indigenous people within the general population and in the study, the results indicate that Anglophones and Francophones of European origins were under-represented, while Indigenous people were greatly over-represented (well over a third of those absolutely without housing). Absolutely homeless Indigenous people included those who self-identified as First Nations, Metis, Cree, Ojibway or mixed heritage.

The analysis of age includes children in order to provide for an overview of the full age range of this population. The range was less than a year to 90 years. People who were absolutely homeless included

77 children under age 12 (36% of the sub-sample of absolutely homeless persons).

**Table 2. Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Absolutely Homeless People**

	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
<b><i>Gender</i></b>		
Female	48	42.5
Male	65	57.5
<b><i>Groups</i></b>		
Indigenous/ First Nations	48	40.7
Anglophone	45	38.1
Francophone	23	19.5
Visible Minority	2	1.7
<b><i>Language</i></b>		
English	65	55.6
French	29	24.8
First Nations	21	17.9
Other	2	1.7
<b><i>Age (including dependent children)</i></b>		
0 - 4	44	20.8
5 - 9	24	11.3
10 - 14	19	9
15 - 19	20	9.4
20 - 24	13	6.1
25 - 29	9	4.2
30 - 34	15	7.1
35 - 39	11	5.2
40 - 44	15	7.1
45 - 49	9	4.2
50 - 54	14	6.6
55 - 59	6	2.8
60+	13	6.1

In addition, 24 adolescents aged 12 to 17 were absolutely homeless (11%). It is remarkable that children and youth up to the age of 19 constituted

51% of the absolutely homeless population in Timmins. Furthermore, women, children and youth represented approximately two-thirds (65%) of this population. Despite the large proportion of homeless children and youth, close to half of the absolutely homeless people were adults aged 20 and over. A small number of older adults, above age 60, were among those absolutely without housing (n=13).

### C. Marital/family status

#### 1. Total homeless population

The findings of the study reinforce those of our previous studies on homelessness in northeastern Ontario indicating that the majority of homeless people are single/unattached or divorced/widowed (see Table 3). Less than half of those in the study reported that they were married or in a common law relationship.

**Table 3. Marital/Family Status of Total Homeless Population**

<i>Marital status</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Single	150	36.6
Married/ common law	165	40.2
Divorced/ Widowed	95	23.2

#### 2. Absolutely homeless population

With regard to marital/family status, about half (49%) of those who were absolutely homeless were single/unattached individuals while, additionally, nearly a quarter were divorced, separated or widowed (see Table 4). Therefore, only a minority of those who were absolutely homeless were in marital or cohabiting relationships. An examination of gender differences in marital status indicates that more absolutely homeless men were single (55%) compared to women (44%), while slightly more women were married or in common law relationships (F=39%, M=18%).

**Table 4. Marital Status of Absolutely Homeless Population**

<i>Marital status</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Single	49	49
Married/ common law	29	29
Divorced/ Widowed	22	22

Close to half of the absolutely homeless adults stated that they had custody of children (42%) and most of them were women (64%). In contrast, about two-thirds of the men (65%) stated that they did not have custody of any children. However, neither of the gender differences pertaining to marital status nor custody of children were statistically significant.

### D. Sources of income

#### 1. Total homeless population

The main source of financial support was from government sources—the Ontario Disabilities Support Program (ODSP), reported by 31% (see Table 5). The second source of income was employment (23%), followed by Ontario Works (18%), and Canada Pension Plan (CPP) or Old Age Security (OAS), mentioned by 10%. Employment Insurance (EI) was reported by 6.3%. The remaining type of government income support came from Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB) benefits. Non-governmental support came from a variety of sources such as private pension plans or family members. Further analysis of the sources of income indicates that the overall proportion of homeless people *not* reporting the receipt of any government support benefits was 27%.

**Table 5. Sources of Income for Total Homeless Population**

<i>Sources of Income</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
No income	29	7.1
ODSP	128	31.2
Employment	94	22.9
Ontario Works	72	17.6
CPP or OAS	41	10.0
Employment Insurance	26	6.3
Other (WSIB, savings, private pension, support from family, sale of personal assets)	24	4.9

A larger proportion of young people (18 to 24) indicated that they were not receiving any type of income support (20%) compared to other age groups (e.g. 6% for 25-34 year olds and 8% for 35 to 44 year olds). Similarly, more young people aged 18 to 24 reported that they were not receiving any type of government funds (52%) than did adults (e.g. 21% of those 25-34 and 44% of those 35-44).

## 2. Absolutely homeless population

Table 6 shows the sources of income for those who were absolutely homeless. Twelve percent indicated that they had no source of income. The single largest source of income, Ontario Works, was received by over a third (37%). After Ontario Works, the source of income mentioned by the largest number of individuals was a disability pension (i.e. ODSP). Only a few individuals were receiving employment income or employment insurance benefits. Even fewer of the absolutely homeless people had other sources of income; those who did cited sources such as family support or a private pension.

**Table 6. Sources of Income for Absolutely Homeless Population**

<i>Sources of income</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
No income	13	11.6
Ontario Works	41	36.6
ODSP	33	29.5
Employment	10	8.9
EI or WSIB	7	6.3
CPP	5	4.5
OAS	–	–
Other (family support, private pension)	3	2.6

## E. Reasons for homelessness

### 1. Total homeless population

Table 7 summarizes the main reasons for homelessness in Timmins. The participants were asked to identify all relevant reasons for homelessness. Taken together, the central reasons stem from the structural/systemic problems of unemployment, problems with social assistance, and the lack of affordable housing. These issues accounted for the largest proportion of homelessness from the perspectives of the participants. In providing reasons for homelessness, the largest number of people indicated that they could not find work or an adequate level of employment. Thus unemployment or underemployment, as well as low wages or lack of money identified as the central reasons for homelessness. Secondly, a substantial proportion of homeless people cited problems with social assistance—they mentioned that social assistance payments were inadequate to live on (n=101), that they did not qualify for benefits (n=63), that their

benefits had been cut (n=48) or that their payments from social assistance were late (n=42).

**Table 7. Main Reasons for Homelessness for Total Homeless Population**

<i>Reasons for homelessness<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Problems with work: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unemployment</li> <li>• Seeking work</li> <li>• Low wages</li> <li>• No money</li> </ul>	496	30.0
Problems with social assistance <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Welfare not adequate/late</li> <li>• Social assistance cut</li> <li>• Waiting for disability pension</li> <li>• Does not qualify for OW</li> </ul>	437	26.4
Problems with housing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unable to pay rent or mortgage</li> <li>• Evicted or kicked out</li> <li>• Housing not adequate</li> </ul>	199	12.0
Domestic violence and family issues (including divorce)	187	11.3
Illness or mental illness	114	6.9
Substance use	89	5.4
Out of jail	67	4.0
Travelling/transient/ relocated, transferred or moving	49	3.0
Other	17	1.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,655</b>	<b>100</b>

<sup>a</sup> Results are based on multiple responses. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding error.

With regard to the third set of reasons for homelessness, housing problems, 120 individuals reported that they were unable to pay their rent (or in a few cases, a mortgage) while another 70 people had been evicted from their homes. Participants stated that they were having problems with the landlord, family members or roommates, or that they could not obtain suitable or affordable housing.

Family problems, including domestic violence and divorce, were reasons cited by 11% of the participants. In most cases a general response indicating “family issues” was given. Divorce or separation was reported by 48 individuals as being directly linked to their homelessness. Substance use and physical or

mental illness were reported as causes of their homelessness by respectively 5% (n=53) and 7% (n=82) of the homeless people in the study. However, it is important to note that, while many people do not identify a physical or mental health problem as the source of their homelessness, such issues may be contributing factors. We noted in Table 1 that 128 homeless people reported ODSP as a source of income. These persons would have had health issues that prevented them from being employed. Finally, the number of people citing transience, relocation, or moving (n=35) or release from jail/prison (n=39) was relatively small (about 7%).

*Reasons for homelessness by gender, age and ethnicity*

Boxes 1 and 2 list, in order of importance, the main reasons for homelessness among various sub-groups based on gender and background (Anglophone, Francophone or Indigenous). The results reinforce the view that there are more commonalities than differences in the main reasons for homelessness among the various subgroups. Structural problems were cited as the main reason for homelessness by all subgroups of homeless people.

**Box 1. Main Reasons for Homelessness by Gender for Total Homeless Population**

<i>Men (adults)</i>	<i>Women (adults)</i>
Problems with social assistance	Problems with social assistance
Unemployment/seeking work	Unemployment/seeking work
Housing issues/inability to pay rent/mortgage	Family issues/domestic violence/divorce
Family issues/domestic violence/divorce	Housing issues/inability to pay rent/mortgage
Physical or mental illness	Physical or mental illness
Substance use	Substance use

Without exception, all of these subgroups reported unemployment, problems with social assistance and problems with housing as being among the main reasons for homelessness. Family issues, including divorce/separation and domestic violence were identified more often by women and Indigenous people than by men, Anglophones and Francophones. Women (65%) reported a wider range of family and relationship issues compared to men (54%); in

addition to divorce/separation and violence or abuse, as noted above, women mentioned that responsibility for grandchildren, children and aging parents contributed to circumstances leading to homelessness. Indigenous people (73%) more often than Anglophones (66%) or Francophones (41%) reported family issues as reasons for homelessness.

**Box 2. Main Reasons for Homelessness among Anglophones, Francophones and Indigenous for Total Homeless Population**

<i>Anglophones</i>	<i>Francophones</i>	<i>Indigenous</i>
Unemployment/seeking work	Unemployment/seeking work	Problems with social assistance
Problems with social assistance	Problems with social assistance	Unemployment/seeking work
Housing issues/inability to pay rent/mortgage	Family issues/domestic violence/divorce	Housing issues/inability to pay rent/mortgage
Family issues/domestic violence/divorce	Housing issues/inability to pay rent/mortgage	Family issues/domestic violence/divorce
Physical or mental illness	Physical or mental illness	Substance use
Substance use	Substance use	Physical or Mental illness

A larger proportion of Anglophones and Francophones noted unemployment, compared with Indigenous people, as the primary reason for homelessness. The latter group more often mentioned problems with social assistance. All groups in the analysis cited substance use as well as physical or mental illness as reasons for homelessness. The rank ordering of the main reasons for homelessness shown in Box 2 does not reflect the nearly equal importance of release from jail as a contributing factor to homelessness among Anglophones and Indigenous and of transience for Francophones.

**2. Absolutely homeless population**

As noted above, the questionnaire allowed participants to indicate multiple reasons for homelessness. Therefore, the number of responses is greater than the number of participants. The main reasons for absolute homelessness were based on the perceptions of the homeless individuals. These are listed in Table 8.

Viewed as a single category, structural problems such as unemployment, lack of access to social assistance, poverty and lack of affordable housing, were the primary causes of absolute homelessness in Timmins. These structural or systemic issues accounted for 69% of the reasons given by absolutely homeless persons.

The largest number of people indicated that they were absolutely homeless because they were unemployed and could not obtain employment (n=150). As we noted above with regard to reasons for being homeless among the total sample, problems with income security programs, notably Ontario Works (OW) and Ontario Disabilities Support Program (ODSP), are directly linked to homelessness. In Timmins, 144 people reported that they were absolutely homeless because they were deemed to be ineligible for social assistance benefits or their benefits were late or cut, or were simply inadequate to live on. The inability to pay rent is clearly linked to poverty and low wages and to the lack of availability of affordable housing. Many people become homeless because of eviction or inability to pay rent. In January 2011, 26 people reported that they were absolutely homeless because they had been evicted from their housing and an additional 45 people did not have enough money to pay rent. Domestic violence and other family issues, including divorce or separation were also cited as causes of homelessness. When these family-related categories are combined, they accounted for absolute homelessness among 11% of the sample (n=57).

The participants in the study reported other issues as reasons for absolute homelessness. Firstly, physical or mental illnesses were cited by 30 individuals. Additionally, a number of people indicated that struggles with substance abuse were related to homelessness. This was identified by 33 individuals. Release from jail was also given as a reason for being absolutely homeless by 26 people. Finally, transience was reported by relatively few people as the main reason for becoming absolutely homeless. In January 2011, 12 individuals stated that they were homeless for this reason.

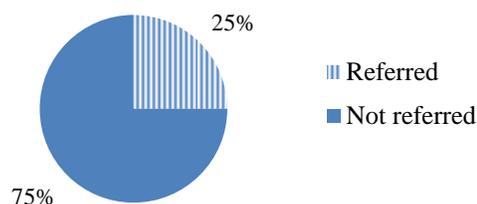
Most absolutely homeless people stated that they had not been referred to other services in Timmins (see Figure 2). A quarter (25%) were reportedly referred to other service providers in to assist with the problems they were experiencing. The main types of referrals were for housing, mental or physical health services, addictions, or income/financial assistance. However, the vast majority indicated that they had not been referred to other services.

**Table 8. Main Reasons for Absolute Homelessness**

<i>Reasons for homelessness<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Problems with work: • Unemployment • Seeking work • Low wages • No money	150	28.2
Problems with social assistance: • Welfare not adequate/late • Social assistance cut • Waiting for disability pension • Does not qualify for OW	144	27.1
Problems with housing: • Unable to pay rent or mortgage • Evicted or kicked out • Housing not adequate	72	13.6
Domestic violence and family issues (including divorce)	57	10.7
Substance use	33	6.2
Illness or mental illness	30	5.6
Out of jail	26	4.9
Travelling/transient, relocated, transferred or moving	12	2.3
Other	7	1.4
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>531</b>	<b>100</b>

<sup>a</sup> Results are based on multiple responses. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding error.

**Figure 2. Referrals Reported for Absolutely Homeless Persons**



#### IV. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study show that homelessness is a serious issue in Timmins. The number of individuals who were experiencing a serious risk of homelessness or absolute homelessness during the week of the study was higher than expected, based on our prior

research in Sudbury, Ontario. The indication that 720 people were experiencing forms of homelessness during a one-week period, in a small northern city, provides evidence that communities in northeastern Ontario are experiencing the crisis of homelessness in similar ways as larger urban centres in other regions of the province, or indeed the country.

It is notable that the profile of homeless people reveals the predominance of children, adolescents and women. Together, these groups constitute a majority of those experiencing living circumstances of homelessness—a startling finding that reflects the dramatic shifts in the nature of homelessness in recent years within Canada (Kauppi, Pallard & Shaikh, 2014). Moreover, the great over-representation of Indigenous people in the homeless population of Timmins, at approximately five times their proportion in the general population, strongly indicates a need to provide culturally safe supports for Indigenous peoples of the north who are living in urban centres.

Given the increasing scarcity of decent, affordable housing, and the challenges people face in making ends meet when relying on OW or ODSP benefits, it is worth noting that there are numerous difficulties in counting the homeless. Despite the strengths of service-based period prevalence counts and the potential for capturing 90 to 95% of the homeless population (Peressini, McDonald & Hulchanski, 2010), any homeless count is bound to underestimate the numbers of people who are homeless and precariously housed. Nevertheless, this study reinforces previous findings from our research on homelessness in Sudbury by revealing the diversity in the local homeless populations. Strategies to end homelessness in northern communities must take into account the needs of Indigenous people who are so greatly over-represented amongst those without stable housing, the lack of access to employment among many homeless people, as well as the women, children and adolescents dealing with the impacts of family struggles, abuse and violence. Those with experiences of mental illness or physical disabilities, struggles with substance abuse and those who are making the transition from incarceration to community life must also be considered.

### ***Collaborative process***

The reinforcement of the working relationships between Laurentian University, Université de Hearst local decision-makers and community agencies serving homeless people created a possibility for making change locally. The study findings drew attention to the needs of people living with circumstances of homelessness and can be used to support applications for funding from senior levels of

government. Key findings of the study were cited in the *10 Year Housing Plan* developed by the Cochrane District Social Services Administration Board (2013).

The strong partnerships between the key organizations involved in the research on homelessness in Timmins resulted in benefits to community members. For example, local residents and students from the colleges and universities in Timmins and Sudbury worked on the project, providing first-hand experience in working with homeless people and the organizations serving them.

The collaborative process that has been developed can assist with the dissemination of the project findings and may draw attention to the strategy of using research to inform the planning process around homelessness. Moreover, the study findings can provide additional community awareness of homelessness.

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