

HOUSING FIRST — IN — RURAL CANADA

Rural Homelessness & Housing First Feasibility
Across 22 Canadian Communities



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The following communities participated in this effort:

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- Chicoutimi, Quebec
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- Happy Valley/Goose Bay, Newfoundland & Labrador
- Iqaluit, Nunavut
- Kenora, Ontario
- New Glasgow, Nova Scotia
- Old Crow, Yukon
- Pincher Creek, Alberta
- Pointe-à-la-Croix, Quebec
- Revelstoke, British Columbia
- Rocky Mountain House, Alberta
- Rural Newfoundland
- Rural Atlantic Area
- Rural SE New Brunswick
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- Whitehorse, Yukon
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Executive Summary

Purpose

This study examined rural homelessness dynamics in 22 communities spanning Canada's provinces and territories. The main aim of the research was to develop a preliminary understanding of the scope of rural homelessness from a comparative lens and identify whether and how Housing First as an approach and program type can be implemented in a rural context.

Methods

Twenty-two interviews were conducted over the course of the study with local homelessness experts from rural communities. Communities were selected based on their size (under 25,000) with appropriate representation from across Canada. Most participants in the study worked in non-profit or government positions in the homelessness or broader social services sector, or volunteer leaders, often from faith communities.

Interviews were conducted via telephone, with some in-person meetings. Detailed notes were taken during the interviews, which were then developed into community profiles. The data collected from interviews was analysed thematically to deduce recurring patterns. Additional reports from the case study communities were also analysed and included in the literature review.

Key Findings

The following themes emerged from the analysis of the 22 case studies and review of the literature.

1. Rural homelessness has distinct dynamics from urban regions, particularly related to the availability of social infrastructure, the impacts of macro-economic shifts, housing markets and migration.
2. Homelessness is reported to be 'on the rise' across rural areas, though it is unclear whether this is a result of increasing visibility and recognition.
3. Though visible homelessness is challenging the idyllic image of rural communities, public recognition and local leadership vary considerably across regions.
4. Despite homelessness in rural communities being primarily hidden (couch surfing, sleeping in poor or un-affordable housing), visible forms of rough sleeping are common (sleeping in cars, public places, camping in parks).
5. The presence of chronic homelessness was reported across Canadian communities, characterized by long-term bouts of absolute homelessness and co-occurrence of mental health, addictions and/physical health issues for a small portion of the homeless population.

6. Aboriginal migration impacts homelessness in rural communities significantly where proximity to Aboriginal communities exists and where regional centres act as access points to services and opportunities. The dynamics behind Aboriginal over-representation in some rural communities merits specific and concerted attention in future research.
7. The most common responses to homelessness consist of the establishment of emergency shelters and food banks/soup kitchens, although permanent housing and prevention were considered important parts of a comprehensive service continuum.
8. HPS community designation has had significant positive impact on rural community capacity to develop local homeless-serving systems of care and social planning infrastructure.
9. Coordination to respond to homelessness varies across rural communities, with official support and resourcing being key factors in local capacity to develop systematic efforts.
10. The availability of affordable housing and rent supports in rural communities can make a considerable impact on the magnitude of homelessness, though uneven distribution of these resources can result in a mismatch of supply-demand.
11. Understandings of Housing First as an approach and programmatic intervention vary considerably across Canada, demonstrating the need for concerted education and awareness efforts.
12. There is a high level of interest in Housing First, though notable challenges to implementation were identified, namely: lack of funding for implementation, lack of local clinical expertise, insufficient housing stock for scattered-site approaches, and inability to reach efficiencies of scale due to low client numbers.
13. Nevertheless, a number of innovative rural Housing First implementations exist which leverage existing community resources to deliver case management, housing location, rent supports and permanent housing. These have also taken on a regional implementation approach leveraging available resources across rural communities.

Limitations

This study relied on a limited number of interviewees reporting on rural homelessness trends locally, which confines the applicability of the findings. This study relied on one interview per community, which may have led to individual reporting bias and thus potentially skew the findings.

As the scope of the research was limited, the team could not undertake a comprehensive review of the literature on rural homelessness or examine the full body of grey literature available. A comprehensive research agenda on rural homelessness in Canada is required to fully examine the extent and dynamics of the issue.

Recommendations

Based on the analysis, a number of recommendations were identified:

1. *Develop a common understanding of Housing First as an approach and program type.* These should include materials and technical assistance tailored to rural communities.
2. *Explore innovative Housing First adaptations for rural communities.* While some examples were identified in the study, a full analysis and program design should be pursued specific to rural implementation. Funding and studying these programmatic designs should be pursued. Encourage the use of telehealth practices to support front-line practitioners and service recipients in rural areas.
3. *System planning approaches to rural homelessness should be developed,* particularly as a means of mitigating the need for response that solely rely on emergency shelters. Regional service delivery mechanism should be considered as a means of mitigating resources and scale restraints in smaller communities.
4. *Enhance research on rural homelessness in Canada.* The development of baseline data on homelessness in rural communities can significantly improve understandings of the issue from a comparative perspective. A comprehensive research agenda should be pursued at the national level; a concerted effort should be made to examine Aboriginal rural homelessness.
5. *Support the development of rural communities of practice via targeted networking and capacity building activities* in the areas of Housing First implementation, performance management, system planning, and research.

Introduction

The recent upsurge of interest in Housing First approaches to address homelessness has been largely focused on the urban milieu. Housing First is both a philosophy that emphasizes the right to a place of one's own to live, and is also a term used to describe a specific program model of housing and wrap-around supports based on consumer choice.

While its efficacy for those with co-occurring mental illness and addiction problems is well established, the evidence on the effectiveness of the program design for other groups of homeless persons remains inconclusive. As a philosophy however, Housing First's call for housing as a human right has appropriately become a moniker for addressing homelessness.

Housing First evolved in an urban context. Whether this approach is viable in rural areas is an unanswered question. Until recently, the thought that a person living in a rural environment in Canada could be homeless was not considered as a possibility for any significant number of people.

Homelessness is highly visible in urban centres: rough sleeping on subway grates and in doorways offering a break from cold wind is seen across Canadian cities. In rural areas, homelessness tends to be invisible and unnoticed until reports about overcrowded dwellings lacking basic shelter from the elements, and people doubled up and living in overcrowded

living units began to emerge in the last decade.

HPS & Housing First

In its renewal of the Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS), the Government of Canada has prioritized Housing First as a key strategy to reduce homelessness, particularly amongst chronically and episodically homeless populations. HPS considers the Housing First approach to focus on moving people who are experiencing homelessness as rapidly as possible from the street (including hidden homelessness), or emergency shelters into permanent housing with supports to maintain housing stability.

HPS' Housing First funding is focused on two priority populations:

- **Chronically homeless** refers to individuals, often with disabling conditions (e.g. chronic physical or mental illness, substance abuse problems), who are currently homeless and have been homeless for six months or more in the past year (i.e. have spent more than 180 nights in a shelter or place not fit for human habitation).
- **Episodically homeless** refers to individuals, often with disabling conditions, who are currently homeless and have experienced three or more episodes of homelessness in the past year (of note, episodes are defined as periods when a person would be in a shelter or place not fit for human

habitation for a certain period, and after at least 30 days, would be back in the shelter or place) (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2014).

HPS funds are used to support sub-projects to address homelessness across 61 designated communities in addition to rural, remote, and Aboriginal communities via Community Entity (CE) organizations who have formalized agreements with Government of Canada to manage funding. A critical shift entails moving funding allocation, particularly in communities with larger HPS allocations towards Housing First programs.

More details on the HPS Housing First approach can be found here:
http://www.esdc.gc.ca/eng/communities/homelessness/housing_first/supports.s.html.

In light of the shift to Housing First, HPS recognizes that the application of the program and approach in rural communities will be distinct from the experience of larger centres. Although smaller designated, rural and remote communities that receive HPS funding are not required to meet Housing First targets, some have expressed an interest in Housing First and its application in a rural context.

The main focus of this report is to examine the viability of Housing First in the context of rural Canada. The key question is whether Housing First is a possible approach in the vast regions outside of the Canadian urban mainstream.

The remainder of this report provides a discussion of the study methods, a preliminary review of the literature on rural homelessness, and presents the thematic analysis from the case studies. A number of recommendations are discussed, followed by the 22 case study reports.

Methodology

For purposes of this study, we used the description of rural to include those living outside urban areas with populations under 25,000 in the towns proper. Some communities included in the study were larger than this, however, as the interviewees reported on rural homelessness in the respective region the larger center served, they were included. We included remote communities and regions as an additional component of the rural complex.

We developed a short semi-structured interview used as a guide in speaking with key informants across rural Canada (See Appendix 2). The interviewees were asked to review a consent form before participating; the study was approved by the University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board (CFREB).

Twenty-two interviews were conducted over the course of the study with local homelessness experts from rural communities across all provinces and territories. Communities were selected based on their size and we ensured appropriate representation from across Canada.

Representatives were identified through the researchers' professional networks, thus represent a convenience sample. Where no contacts existed, communities were selected by examining government reports or newspaper articles regarding rural homelessness to identify agencies or individuals who could speak knowledgeably about the subject.

Most participants in the study worked in non-profit or government positions in the homelessness or broader social services sector. They consisted of service providers engaged in affordable housing, shelter operations, poverty alleviation and other social issues who were employed primarily in the non-profit sector or by municipal government. In communities lacking formal homelessness infrastructure, respondents were also volunteer leaders, often from local faith communities.

With respect to recruitment, the researchers contacted potential participants and provided them with background to the study via telephone or email. It is of note that more than 40 approaches were made to gain access to the 22 community representatives who agreed to partake in the study. It is unclear why the non-response rate was so high at this time. We speculate that the concerns over privacy and visibility as well as doubts around the utility of this study fueled many non-responses.

Most interviews were conducted via telephone, with in-person meetings serendipitously occurring with service providers and decision-makers from Old Crow, Goose Bay, St. John's and Cochrane. All but three interviews were conducted in English; the three Quebec interviews were conducted in French.

Detailed notes were taken during the interviews, which were then developed into community profiles. In addition, we developed a matrix outlining other indicators on a per community basis along with key findings across the case studies, which will be developed into

further reports in the future. Additional reports from the case study communities were also analysed and included in the literature review.

Because of the multi-method approach undertaken to data collection, the analysis was similarly multifaceted. In keeping with methods of grounded theory, where no precise theory guided the research process, analysis of the interviews was undertaken throughout the data collection period over the course of the study rather than a one-time effort. This allowed us to guide and modify the interviews somewhat to capture newly emerging themes as we spoke with people across the country.

The data collected from interviews was analysed thematically to deduce recurring patterns. Quotes that particularly highlighted the theme were also used in analysis to provide a richer understanding of participant perspectives. In order to determine whether the findings were in fact main themes, these were tested between the two researchers on an ongoing basis.

We used quantitative data to complement the information from the interviews for the case studies mainly from the 2011 National Household Survey (Canada, 2001) (<http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/index-eng.cfm>) to gain an overview of demographic trends, particularly with respect to housing affordability and conditions. A fulsome analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data was beyond the scope of this project, and is not included in this analysis.

As the project proceeded, the research team encountered tremendous interest from participating rural communities. During the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness 2013 conference, several rural community representatives also approached the researchers to express their interest and support for the project as one of the only endeavours that systematically tackled the issues of homelessness in small communities from a comparative perspective.

As the data collection progressed, the research team uncovered considerable information that painted the local dynamics surrounding housing stress which were beyond the original scope of the study. We nevertheless captured this data as an unprecedented opportunity to shed light on emerging issues nationally.

Limitations

There were several limitations to this study. Limitations of time precluded a prolonged advisory and engagement process. The time frame limited the recruitment process to those available and willing to participate at that moment in time and finding alternative respondents was not always possible. Future work should seek out to identify missing respondents and address this gap.

This study relied on one interview per community, which may have led to individual reporting bias and thus potentially skew the findings. We recognize that some factors. In many cases, because of the small size of the community, few persons were available

who could (or would) speak
knowledgably to the issues presented.

More comprehensive needs
assessments are needed on an
individual community by community, as
well as comparative (between
communities) basis. A comprehensive
study on rural homelessness in Canada
which includes multiple contacts with
communities is required to fully
examine the extent and dynamics of
the issue.

Preliminary Literature Review

The main aim of this study was to complete a preliminary, comparative scan of rural communities to determine whether a Housing First approach to helping homeless persons was feasible in rural areas.

To this end, it is important to understand the context of rural homelessness, and what dynamics led to lack of adequate housing outside of urban areas. We turned to a review of the literature in order to best understand what rural homelessness looks like across Canada, who is identified as homeless, where they find shelter, food and support services, and what some of the factors that contribute to their housing crisis might be.

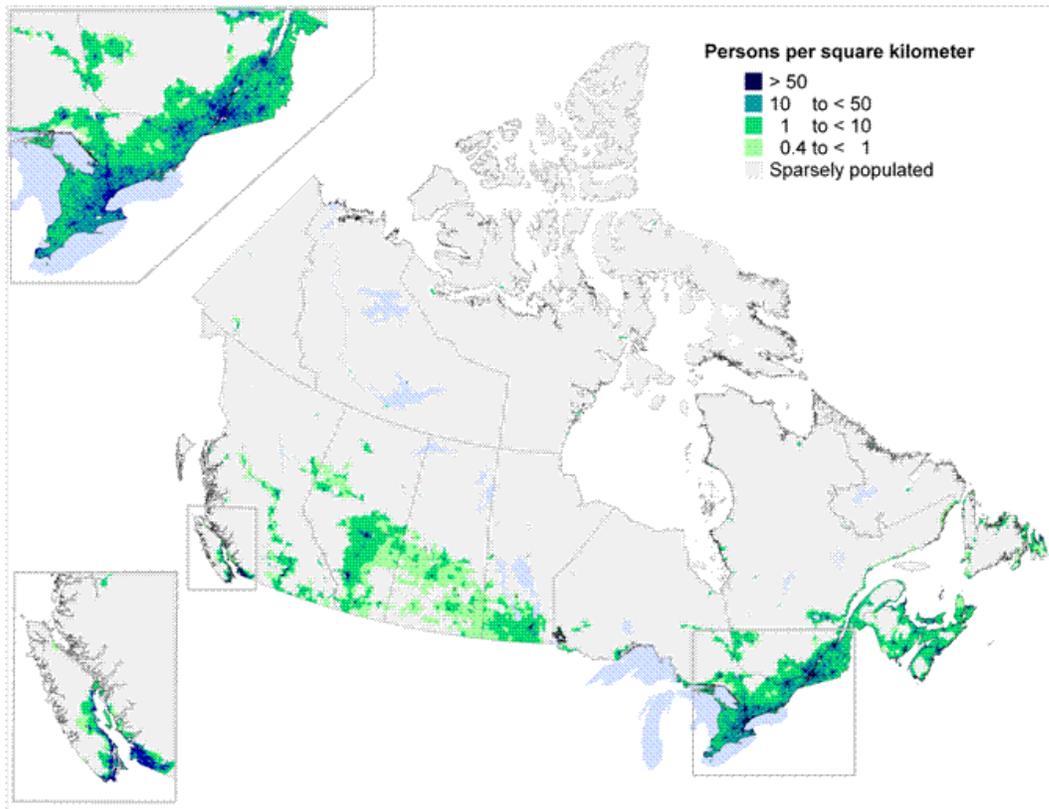
We found pre-existing literature reviews on homelessness in rural Canada to be inadequate and missing key pieces of work which we uncovered during the course of the study. To this end, we endeavoured to complete a literature review and analysis of additional data collected to move the body of knowledge further in this area. Though not part of the scope of this project, we share preliminary results of this additional work with Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS) and look forward to advancing the rural

homelessness research agenda forward.

We provide a more fulsome discussion of the literature is included in our forthcoming report on rural homelessness in Alberta, funded by the Alberta Centre for Child, Family, and Community Research with the Alberta Interagency Council on Homelessness.

Rurality in the Canadian Context

The term rural has multiple definitions and meanings. Du Plessis (Du Plessis, Beshiri, Bollman, & Clemenson, 2002) and colleagues identified six different definitions used by Statistics Canada. These were based on the relative weighting of parameters of population size, density, context, and consideration of the size of a territorial unit (local, community or regional). They recommend that rurality be classified according to the nature and needs of a specific study or project, with parameters of zones that allow for commuting to urban areas, large or small, and those outside of commuting zones but within proximity of towns of 1,000 or more. The following map from Statistics Canada provides a quick visualization of this population spread throughout the country.



A look across the provinces and territories details the rural population more specific to each region.

Rural populations by province/territory as reported by Statistics Canada (2011)¹.

Province/Territory	Rural Population (2011)	% rural population
Newfoundland and Labrador	208,970	41%
New Brunswick	356,692	48%
Nova Scotia	400,389	43%
Prince Edward Island	74,661	53%
Quebec	1,534,731	19%
Ontario	1,806,036	14%
Manitoba	333,554	28%
Saskatchewan	343,398	33%
Alberta	614,855	17%
British Columbia	609,363	14%
Yukon	13,335	39%
Northwest Territories and Nunavut ²	33,430	46%

¹ Statistics Canada 2011 data is available online at <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/tables-tableaux/sum-som/I01/cst01/demo62a-eng.htm>.

² At the time these statistics were collected, data from the NWT and Nunavut was still combined.

Rurality can also be categorized according to criteria with an economic basis. Bruce and colleagues (Bruce et al., 2005) profile rural communities according to whether they were growing, stable or slow growth, declining, dormitory, retirement or Northern. Robertson adds an American perspective of frontier communities: those that have a very low population density (defined as less than seven persons per square mile), where people live in relative isolation across vast areas, and where the predominant economy is a single source such as ranching, mining or forestry. In the U.S., these are described as primarily existing in Western states. In Canada, these descriptors would be relevant for many areas of most provinces.

In Canada, we also have rural communities that vary in size and complexity seasonally. Cottage country adjacent to metropolitan areas such as the Muskoka and Halliburton regions of Ontario, the Eastern townships of Quebec and the Kootenay region of BC are areas attract economically prosperous persons who seek a second seasonal residence. This demand drives land and housing prices up, though buyers do not become part of the year-round population.

Another form of rural community exists in resource-rich areas where oil, gas and mineral exploitation or development of large-scale energy generation (e.g. Church Hill Falls and Muskrat Falls, Labrador, Fort Mac Murray, AB, Fort Nelson, BC).

While Aboriginal homelessness is a significant urban and reserve problem,

it is important to recognize this as a significant issue requiring its own attention (Belanger & Weasel Head, 2013). We have included this critical issue in this discussion, although we emphasize our recognition of its severity and complexity. At the same time, while many remote communities have large numbers of Aboriginal people, they are often heterogeneous and thus require inclusion in this examination.

Most Aboriginal reserves are located away from major urban centres (the T'su Tina reserve adjacent to Calgary Kahnawake Mohawk Territory adjacent to Montreal and the St. Mary's Reserve adjacent to Fredericton are a few of the notable examples of exceptions). Because of their location, most reserves would be considered to be rural and often remote as well. While some would suggest that the rural and remote Northern communities should receive separate distinction and consideration, the extreme Northern Inuit and Innu communities are included in this description.

We include all of these rural descriptors because each has a specific impact on the housing availability and needs of residents, both temporary and permanent. It also impacts the socio-economic environment of these areas and this adds a significant contribution to local experiences of homelessness.

A Caveat on Existing Literature

Most articles and reports cite literature on rural housing and homelessness that arises in other countries. There is

a danger in extrapolating rural phenomena in the UK or Australia into the Canadian context as rurality and climate are inter-connected factors that influence the lived experiences of those in specific geographic locations.

One report (Cloke & Milbourne, 2006) notes that homeless people migrate to rural areas for cheaper housing; this results in homeless people being blamed for bringing negative elements into the community. By contrast, the Canadian experience seems to be the opposite. In different parts of Canada, the frequent pattern is for homeless persons, including youth, to migrate to urban centres where there are services available (Christensen, 2012; Forchuk et al., 2010; Stewart & Ramage, 2011).

Studies further suggest that this migratory pattern also exists for Aboriginal people who are reported to frequently move between their home reserve and urban areas (Belanger & Weasel Head, 2013; Peters & Robillard, 2009). This research (along with a lack of rural homelessness research in general), assumes a trajectory of rural to urban migration by those who become homeless and a nomadic pattern by Aboriginal persons (Graham & Peters, 2002). These reports do not capture the extent to which homeless people stay in rural areas or migrate within rural areas and between rural settlements and neighboring reserves (Schiff, Connors, & O'Brien, 2012).

The extent of homelessness in different parts of rural Canada is simply unknown. Several investigators have reflected on the lack of knowledge of the extent of rural homelessness,

noting that methodological issues of data collection make this an almost impossible challenge.

In urban settings, most of those who are homeless seek support services, ranging from food at a soup kitchen or food bank to overnight shelter and social assistance for financial help. While some sleep rough, most can be counted in regular “sweeps” by trained volunteers. Rural people, by virtue of their location, usually do not have a place to congregate unless they move to a town or city that has identified services.

It has been postulated by researchers in the U.S. that housing insecurity may be as ubiquitous as it is in urban settings and proportionately speaking, homeless rates may be even higher than in urban areas (Lawrence, 1995; Robertson, Harris, Noftsinger, & Fischer, 2007). When those living in substandard or unfit housing are included, the rate of housing insecurity and at high risk of homelessness in rural areas is probably higher than in urban settings.

Homelessness in Northern and Remote Communities

Northern and remote communities are rural areas by most definitions. The capital cities of the Yukon, Northwest Territories and Nunavut are all relatively small cities serving as metropolitan hubs for Northern communities.

We examined the housing and homeless plans from Whitehorse

(Yukon Anti-Poverty Coalition, 2011) and Nunavut (Nunavut Housing Corporation, 2013) as well as a report prepared by the YWCA of Yellowknife and the Yellowknife Women's Council to understand the dynamics of homelessness in these communities (YWCA of Yellowknife & Yellowknife Women's Society, 2007).

The homeless and housing reports from these areas all emphasize the need for affordable housing, with a mix of publicly funded and private market units. These reports also note the dire condition of many rural housing units and that this situation continues to deteriorate. These communities also experience an influx of rural residents who seek health and support services in town and are then reluctant to return to their home communities where there is an even greater lack of resources.

We concluded that Northern/remote homelessness has features unique to those areas, including how housing is developed, owned and regulated. For this reason we suggest that future work examine remote homelessness in Northern areas under its own lens and not bundled together with issues more prevalent in the southern half of Canada.

Housing First in Rural Communities

Housing First has become widely adopted as both the philosophy of placing priority on securing permanent housing for the homeless but also a specific program model effective for chronically homeless persons who have co-occurring conditions of mental

illness and substance abuse (Hwang, Stergiopoulos, O'Campo, & Gozdzik, 2012; Tsemberis, Gulcur, & Nakae, 2004).

Recent adaptations suggest that a variation of the Housing First program model which uses a telehealth component to support persons living in rural communities is a viable approach for those with co-occurring disorders who live rurally in Vermont (Stefancic et al., 2013). Housing First programs are based on the assumption that support services are available to help people transition from the streets or hidden homelessness into more stable lives, and that these supports are not time-limited.

Often, small communities lack a comprehensive service network upon which to build Housing First. The Vermont Housing First program suggests that this barrier may be overcome with a cost-effective program that provides a computer and internet access to people living rurally. While this may be a viable approach in some parts of Canada, there are many rural regions that are remote and lack dependable, if any, internet access.

While we can talk about paradigm shifts to Housing First, we need to recognize that many more sparsely populated areas are not in starting from the same place in terms of available housing stock or network of support services and personnel, as centres like Calgary or Toronto, or have the same accessibility to the internet that is available even in Vermont. Even if this is possible, Housing First programs would apply to that segment of the

population that has mental illness and addiction challenges and not to everyone who experiences homelessness. This means that responses to homelessness, have to factor in the availability of access to support resources inherently distinct in rural communities.

Why is rural homelessness different?

The research on rural homelessness suggests that while some dynamics are similar in both urban and rural homelessness (mental health, addictions, domestic violence), they may not have the same prominent role in all communities. Additionally, the local context impacts those facing these challenges in very distinct ways. For many it involves dealing with unmet needs. Furthermore, it is accepted that homelessness is more hidden in smaller communities, and those in need rely on informal networks to couch surf/double up. There is also no way to account for those who sleep rough or in unsafe dwellings, seasonal “cottages” and recreational trailers during all seasons. What is also paramount, but not clear, is the extent to which the existence of homelessness in some rural areas is also denied.

In discussions about rural homelessness as hidden, one major consideration is not often mentioned. Rural housing tends to be largely single unit, free-standing housing, with some small multi-unit dwellings available in slightly larger locales. There are thus fewer living units available and few developers willing to undertake building

low cost or affordable housing. In growing communities this housing is often targeted for the affluent streaming into town. In dwindling communities, development of affordable housing is extremely limited.

Unlike apartment and condo living, the demands of rural housing include tending to heat and utilities, and sometimes the lack of adequate services. In most areas, the long winter months mean that snow removal becomes an additional burden which is a major difficulty for the disabled, elderly and single-parent families headed by women with young children. Living demands include reliable transportation in order to access food and health services, since public transportation is generally non-existent.

Proximity to large urban centres for some rural communities has also meant that a certain amount of regional migration for service access is acceptable and encouraged, particularly for treatment facilities, etc.. Urban centres also attract migrants seeking work/education opportunities, etc. At the same time, some rural communities attract migrants for the employment/services they offer in relation to other smaller centres. This puts pressure on scarce housing resources and in turn contributes to high housing costs in the area.

While on the one hand some informal networks 'absorb' local need, they also have an underside. Small towns are known for their lack of privacy: on the one hand it is easy to know who the youth at risk are, who has a substance abuse problem and is unemployed, etc.. On the other hand, word gets

around about 'problem' individuals. Those so identified often have an even greater challenge in finding accommodation and a landlord who will rent to them.

In some areas, communities of faith have a strong local presence which can serve to help those in need, or to exclude those who do not affiliate with a specific creed.

Small communities are also more likely to deny homelessness as an issue; there is little buy in from some city councils and the business sector to addressing social issues.

The existence of homelessness counters the mythology of idyllic small town living, thus it takes more to bring it to the surface as a priority issue. In some of these areas, the reported means to address problems of those who have no place to go is to provide a bus ticket to the nearest urban location known to have a homeless shelter. This "solution" may be more often accessed than is generally recognized as most places with shelters do not track those newcomers who were homeless before they arrived in town.

Another key difference comes from the higher order of governments' resource allocation patterns, which generally follow population-based formulas to determine small community shares of social support dollars, including homelessness funding through HPS. The pressure is predominately coming from urban centres which to date have taken most of the available funds. This

is exacerbated by the lack of fiscal and human resources to apply for the scarce funding available to rural communities, and the discouragement that comes with have funding applications denied.

As a result, most small communities do not have a well-developed system of care to address social issues, including homelessness. There is often no emergency shelter, transitional housing or adequate affordable housing in place.

While we talk about system planning, we need to acknowledge the system in place at the rural level is likely full of gaps, making it difficult to introduce a comprehensive (and resource-intensive) homelessness strategy when disparities exist across social services (seniors, economic development, transportation, child care). In other words, why is homelessness the priority in light of some many other issues that remain underfunded?

Housing First programs were established in urban areas with a reliance on scattered-site housing approaches that have historically utilized private sector housing. In rural settings there is little available private housing stock nor is there evidence that there is the willingness from landlords to play in this arena.

Nevertheless, the question we should be asking is not *whether* we can implement Housing First in rural communities, but *how*.

Discussion of Findings

This section presents key findings from the thematic analysis of the interviews across 22 case study communities.

Homelessness 'On the Rise'

Across the 22 communities included in the research, homelessness was reported to exist, however, as a primarily hidden phenomenon, characterized by couch-surfing and doubling up. It was not always officially recognized by government and social assistance programs as a local problem. Notably, there were instances where rough sleeping was reported, including Kenora, Ontario, Goose Bay, Labrador, Cochrane, Alberta, and Estevan, Saskatchewan.

All interviewees agreed that homelessness was not only present in the community, but in many cases, reported to be on the rise. It is unclear whether the reported increase in homelessness was a result of increased attention being paid to the issue, thereby increasing its visibility, or whether an actual rise in incidence is occurring. The inability to determine whether there is increased awareness or increased incidence is primarily a result of the lack of data on homelessness, particularly hidden homelessness, across communities.

No homeless counts were being systematically conducted in most of the case study communities, though some providers kept administrative data on the use of transitional or emergency facilities. Some communities, including

Iqaluit, Happy Valley, Camrose and Wellington undertook needs assessments to gain a deeper understanding of trends at the local level; nevertheless, without benchmarks and consistent data collection to probe shifts in the prevalence of homelessness, it is difficult to ascertain if the incidence of rural homelessness is rising, and to what extent.

As a further issue, some communities rely on volunteer responses to homelessness and lack the basic service infrastructure to adequately respond to the issue. Often (and understandably), research to probe the issue is not the immediate priority compared to developing emergency shelter or providing basic needs, etc.

Public Recognition & Local Leadership

Despite the limitations of local data collection, consistent reports from interviewees of a perceived worsening of homelessness across indicates that this is an important and growing issue that requires further exploration. Certainly, the move in cities including Calgary, Edmonton, Toronto, and Vancouver towards ending homelessness has brought new levels of public and media attention to the issue.

Respondents had often heard of plans to end homelessness, for example. This public attention may prompt local reflection on homelessness issues as well - though most admitted that hidden homelessness, at least, had "always

been there". While certain segments were certainly increasingly aware of the issue, the official recognition of homelessness as a social issue was not necessarily a given.

Some interviewees noted that homelessness was not recognized publically as an issue and there was some 'denial' of local homelessness.

By no means is this always the case: as New Glasgow, Happy Valley and Steinbach, Manitoba suggest, local governments can be key drivers for responses to homelessness. In some cases, the local faith community worked with municipal leaders to develop emergency shelters in response to a growing issue in the community. While local leadership can be a facilitator when it comes to land use approvals, for example, the ability to drive a systemic response is nevertheless limited by the availability of resources, willingness to champion the issue, and competing priorities.

Rough Sleeping in Rural Communities

It is important to note that in cases where street homelessness existed, it was reportedly caused by very different factors. For example, Estevan is experiencing a marked increase in migration due to its oil and gas industry boom, which has in turn led to increased pressure on limited rental stock. Without access to housing, migrant workers as well as those on limited incomes have had to resort to rough sleeping in public spaces, including ATMs, camping out in their cars, etc. Kenora, on the other hand,

reports rough sleeping in its parks and open spaces as result of migration from neighbouring Aboriginal communities drawn to the services available in the regional centre. Pointe-à-la-Croix, Quebec reported sleeping in cars and even the local postal office.

In New Glasgow, a declining centre with limited employment opportunities in Nova Scotia, rough sleeping was reported to be an alternative to high rents in the area and preferable to living in extremely poor housing conditions. New Glasgow's rough sleepers were less likely to be migrants from outside the community; rather, they were low income tenants whose additional barriers, including addictions and mental health, exacerbated housing instability. In Happy Valley/Goose Bay, rough sleepers occupy public park land adjacent to the central core during warm weather months and couch surf in the cold season. Some turn to un-winterized camps lacking basic utilities to hold up during cold weather. Combined with a lack of affordable and safe rental in the community, sleeping rough during milder weather months was considered a viable alternative.

Rough sleeping was also reported to occur in Northern remote communities, like Old Crow, Yukon and Smithers, BC during the milder months as a preferred option to shelter or doubling up.

In Camrose, high housing costs and low vacancies were reported to have priced lower income families and workers out of the rental market, forcing some to resort to camping out in their cars or makeshift shelter. In Revelstoke, a similar situation has

developed as result of the increased tourism in the area and out-of-towners buying up local real estate. Some lower income individuals have moved in to old worker-camp housing (trailers), which is of low quality and unsafe for habitation in many cases. Along with Camrose, Cochrane, and Rocky Mountain House, trailers and other inadequate housing options have become a means of mitigating the lack of rental stock in response to economic and demographic shifts in the locality. Rocky Mountain House has year-round camp-grounds where hundreds of people live.

The Presence of Chronic Homelessness

While rough sleeping is commonly associated with chronic homelessness, particularly in large urban centres, smaller communities reported a diverse group to make up the local street population, where it existed. Certainly those with addictions and mental health were described to be common among this group, however, in certain cases, lower income families and migrant workers were also present.

Most communities described a proportion of their homeless population was chronic, with persistent long-term unmet housing needs. This was largely attributed to their mental health and addiction challenges, coupled with lack of community supports, leading to housing instability and long-term homelessness.

Even in communities with available housing stock, the lack of support to

advocate on behalf of this population with landlords rendered them periodically without homes. In communities where rents were on the rise due to economic growth, landlords were likelier to be "choosier" with potential tenants and to evict problem renters - often those with complex barriers on limited incomes. The proportion of the homeless population that was considered to be chronically homeless varies across the communities, from 10% to 50%.

Dynamics of the Housing and Labour Market

Smaller centres tend to have a much lower number of available rental units, thus such a shift in the local housing market has notable repercussions that can be difficult to mitigate for lower income residents. Notably, the 22 case studies consistently reported very strained rental markets at the local level. This was one of the contributing factors to the homelessness issue. Interestingly, the rent levels in the small communities were reported to be comparable to those of large urban centres. While historically rurality is associated with lower cost of living, this is certainly not the case in the study communities.

There are a number of reasons behind the reported strained housing markets, which must be contextualised in relation to the larger macro-economic and public policy context impacting the locality. For example, some centres are experiencing rapid growth brought on by regional economic development, often in resource extraction. This is the

case for Smithers, Cochrane, Estevan, and Whitehorse.

Smithers is a regional centre in Northern BC that serves the region impacted by the Northern Gateway Pipeline. While the project is particularly impacting the Kitimat community, the spill-over is reaching the Smithers area. The promise of employment draws migrants, mostly male, younger workers, to the area. In some cases, advertised employment does not materialize and they find themselves without income and the means to afford housing. Others may have work and relatively high incomes, as reported in Estevan, but without rental or hotel/motel stock available to rent, they are left without a place to live. This situation is also emerging in Happy Valley/ Goose Bay as new power generating projects unfold. Rocky Mountain House is similarly experiencing a housing crunch due to the boom in the oil and gas sector; as the interviewee noted, "things get worse, when things are good" - referring to the fact that a booming economy creates stress on households.

In remote and Northern communities, economic growth strained housing stock even further because of the severe lack of available housing in such areas as Old Crow, Iqaluit, Yellowknife and Whitehorse. The disconnection of communities in the far North and reliance on flying in to access regional centres made access to housing even more perilous. In Old Crow, homeless individuals accessed the town hall or even RCMP or health facilities until they were able to double up with friends or family. This particularly concerning in

small communities where women and children are fleeing violence.

Nunavut's housing crunch is even more complex as a result of the historical and socio-economic context and public policy regime that has resulted in a reliance on federal investment in social housing and an extremely limited private housing sector. Most (60%) live in public housing; further, 40% are living in over-crowded conditions. Retrenchment from funding additional units and upgrading stock has resulted in a housing crisis in the region, which is attributed to be the main driver for homelessness in Nunavut. The absence of a dynamic private housing market is hampered by the lack of freehold tenure and high construction costs.

High growth communities with already limited rental availability are particularly vulnerable to the booms and busts inherent in the oil and gas industry. Notably, larger centers can better mitigate the spillover effects of a hot economy by drawing on the housing stock in a larger pool of units within the centre and in nearby dormitory communities. Urban centres are also able to draw on the available non-market housing supply, including emergency and transitional stock. It is important to note that the effect of high migration is both direct and indirect: workers may compete with local residents for available units, ultimately pricing out the lowest income, higher acuity tenant. Landlords are able to 'choose' more desirable tenants, often creating access barriers for those with mental health, addiction, social

assistance incomes, and Aboriginal or visible minority.

Even in areas with stable or declining populations, such as rural PEI, Kenora, New Glasgow, and St. Adele, the dynamics of local housing markets are nevertheless straining overall access for low income groups. In particular, those on social assistance or disability payments constantly struggle to afford available units. This is reported to be a result of inadequate shelter payments, which fail to align with the reality of local rental costs. The relative short supply locally has vacancy rates below 3% - and in some cases 1%. With a low local supply, landlords can raise rents and simply price out fixed income groups, who are also likelier to face additional issues (mental illness, addictions). Unused rental stock in communities with declining populations, particularly stock in poor condition, is accessed by at risk populations. Nevertheless, even in such cases, their reliance on social assistance makes affordability a challenge.

Some centers are also experiencing additional dynamics spurred by recreation and retirement property trends. Atlantic provinces and smaller Alberta and BC towns reported that urbanites who are seeking retirement in smaller centres or aim to purchase secondary home for vacationing and/or eventual retirement, are having a marked impact on the local housing market as their demands are rapidly escalating local real estate prices.

In Revelstoke for example, the prospect of renting housing to tourists and selling to out-of-towners, has created a

situation where housing sits vacant at high prices waiting for lucrative offers. In some cases, landlords know it is much more advantageous from a cost perspective to sit on renting property until the high season when they can turn a much higher profit on renting a unit out then finding a year-round local tenant. In other cases, sellers are pricing housing so high, targeting out of town buyers with higher incomes. This effectively shuts out local buyers.

Aboriginal Migration Impacts

Overall, the presence of Aboriginal communities near a case study community was reported to lead to the over-representation in the homeless population. Landlord discrimination against Aboriginal tenants was consistently reported across the case study sites. This is particularly an issue in areas experiencing a strained housing market, and further exacerbates the over-representation of Aboriginal people in local homeless populations.

In areas like Kenora, where a high number of Aboriginal communities and reserves exist near the town, this is even more visible given that the majority of homeless people are reported to be Aboriginal. However, in some areas, First Nations people are discouraged from using town services and encouraged to “find their way down the highway” to larger centres.

Migration from Aboriginal communities is motivated by a number of factors, including poor housing conditions on-reserve, lack of employment and education opportunities, as well as the

need to access services (medical, judiciary, counselling, etc.). Often, smaller centres, regardless of their local economic growth, attract Aboriginal populations who lack access to such services in their own communities. Others are banished from their home community and have to live elsewhere. Notably, the movement to and from reserves is very common and Aboriginal residents tend to migrate regularly.

In the Yukon, Northwest Territories and Nunavut, migration is further complicated by the availability of transportation into remote Northern communities, though reliance of regional centres (such as Iqaluit) is common to access basic services. Notably, Iqaluit lack addiction treatment facilities and those who seek assistance have to access these outside Nunavut altogether.

Emergency Responses

By far the most common local response to homelessness is to develop an emergency shelter. Whether the local leadership on such initiatives was made up of formal political representatives, service providers or faith communities, the consistent theme emerging was to initiate a community response for those seeking shelter from the elements. This was often the case where homelessness was visible and rough sleeping prompted community concern, media attention, and ensuing action.

As aforementioned, the formal leadership (town and county councils), was not necessarily leading the charge

even in those areas that had mounted some response to local homelessness. In Steinbach for example, a group of volunteers developed, fully funded, and operated the local shelter. This was also the case for New Glasgow and Estevan. In other areas, no emergency shelter existed: Camrose only provides emergency accommodation for women fleeing violence and their children and Cochrane employs a family services agency to routinely send people to Airdrie or Calgary for shelter. In Cochrane it is a local volunteer thrift store and food bank that provides supplements to those in need.

What is of particular note is that a strong focus on developing shelters or expanding existing shelter facilities was the most commonly cited priority at the local level. This is especially the situation in communities lacking a formal organizational and government sponsored response to homelessness. The interviewee from Whitehorse reported the service provider community was working on expanding the shelter facility to improve conditions, expand the number of beds, and potentially incorporate a transitional housing component in a new facility. The Steinbach representative also noted that enough demand is being experienced that a downtown, large emergency shelter is under consideration to replace the current 3-bed facility housed in a single family residence in a suburban neighbourhood.

There is considerable variance in the availability and operation of emergency shelters at the local level. Firstly, some provinces, such as Ontario, Quebec

and BC, have made investments in social housing and a continuum of shelter and transitional housing stock alongside federal funding. Communities like Smithers, St. Adele, Chicoutimi, Pointe-à-la-Croix, Kenora, Iqaluit, and Wellington report having a service continuum in place that is largely government-funded and operated by local government in partnership with non-profit providers. This formalized service continuum includes affordable housing, income assistance, and rent supports funded through provincial/territorial sources and ensures a range of supports are available to those in need.

It is important to note that such resources are by no means reported as adequate to meet growing demands, however, they do distinguish such communities from those where government investment is either sporadic or extremely limited, such as New Glasgow, Steinbach and Estevan, and communities where it is non-existent. The latter rely on volunteer and donor resources to respond to homelessness running in parallel with relatively limited local and provincial government engagement.

The Impact of HPS Community Designation

One important validation of HPS investment and involvement in these communities emerged from these interviews. Communities where HPS investment was present had a considerably higher level of understanding of local issues and available responses. HPS-funded

needs assessments in certain sites, like Camrose, Iqaluit, and Happy Valley /Goose Bay were key (if not sole) sources of understanding about homelessness.

HPS funding for designated communities provided the foundational resource for the local response. In Whitehorse, it was primarily used to fund the emergency shelter - thus serving an essential role in the community. In Happy Valley/Goose Bay it has supported an emergency shelter and the development of a transitional housing program for high needs women. In that community it also continues to raise awareness through co-sponsored activities with providers.

This also served the function of tying designated communities into a larger network of practice and enabled the development of local planning infrastructure through the requirement of community plan development for CABs and CEs. Nevertheless, the HPS level of funding remained limited in small communities and in some cases it was used to fund basic emergency responses, rather than the comprehensive continuums we see in larger centres. The impact of HPS support in smaller and regional centres is a subject that warrants its own investigation as it points to the importance of government support for local community-based action.

Of the 61 designated HPS communities, the 44 with the largest funding allocations will have Housing First targets. Of those, 34 will have a 40% funding target, and will have two years to phase it in. Smaller

designated communities will be encouraged to adopt Housing First, but they will not have prescribed targets.

In the absence of other funding to support the necessary service infrastructure, it was difficult for those interviewed in HPS communities to envision shifting towards the Housing First model. There was consistent concern expressed that a shift to using HPS funding for Housing First would not be realistic in communities where there was no private rental stock in which to place clients. Those in smaller centres expressed a need for consultation on the applicability of the concept and guidance on its application locally.

Despite these concerns, there was acknowledgement that HPS funding played a critical role for those who received it by spurring local mobilization to develop planning on homelessness and funding key services. With inconsistent provincial and territorial investment in homelessness, HPS funds are considered a staple in local responses and one of the only consistent sources that spurs local infrastructure to develop to manage service coordination locally.

For those who did not receive HPS funds however, there was a confusion and concern about why their community was not eligible for the funds given the perceived magnitude of the homelessness problem locally. For example, New Glasgow applied and was denied HPS funds to operate the local emergency shelter, and a local partnership between private developers

and an NGO for affordable housing in Pincher Creek was denied. Others were not aware about the HPS program at all.

Coordination to Respond to Homelessness

The level of coordination and service planning differed considerably from community to community. While large urban centres tend to have one or more organizations leading planning and the coordination of local responses, this was not the case in smaller centres. Where government investment in housing and social supports was fairly considerable, such coordination was usually present. This was the case in Wellington, Whitehorse, Kenora, Revelstoke, and Smithers.

The need to manage funds through community-wide processes, which accompanies federal dollars, prompted the creation of coordinating bodies (CABs) made up of key stakeholders from the service and advocacy community, government and to some degree, private sector. The coordination was nevertheless limited in its efficacy by the availability of funds to implement initiatives.

For example, all Ontario municipalities were required to develop 10 Year Plans to End Homelessness by the provincial government in 2013. While such planning occurred, interviewees noted that there was no additional funding committed to their implementation. In Quebec, while discussions on Housing First were reported, the community-level implementation was reportedly

limited to lack of resourcing for implementation.

This uneven patchwork of government engagement in homelessness has resulted in a high degree of variability in local responses in smaller centers. Jurisdictional issues between territorial/provincial and federal governments, as well as local administrative boundaries for counties and districts complicate local responses further.

For example, Wellington County's main city is Guelph with the remainder of the region being quite rural in nature. Operationally, social services are provided by the County, although most resources are located in Guelph proper. This makes access to services for the majority of the region problematic. In the case of Kenora, the District Board is responsible for social services and housing delivery to 8 municipalities - though each of these is governed by its own city council. In this sense, the regional centre has the mandate from the Government of Ontario to develop a wider response to homelessness than they technically control politically at the local level.

Affordable Housing and Rent Supports

In communities where provincial/territorial funding existed, there was a higher likelihood that a range of local supports for homelessness and those at risk existed. BC and Ontario communities reported having access to rent supports funded through the provincial governments. In some cases, the same community entity responsible for HPS

funds also managed provincial social assistance and social housing, as in the case of Kenora. This allowed for a higher level of integration at the service delivery level. In such cases, the district was able to leverage its accountability for social housing, social assistance, homeless shelters and transitional housing to develop a more coordinated response.

Realizing that those at risk were the same clients across these portfolios, the Kenora District Board is in the process of shifting its case workers' roles towards enhancing social assistance clients' housing stability. Workers can access rent supports, eviction prevention funds, social housing units and emergency shelters beds to respond to client needs. Similarly, in Revelstoke, using provincial funds, a support worker provides those at risk and homeless with advocacy and assistance with landlords to access and maintain housing. There is also rent support and damage deposit/first month's rent funding available through local non-profit to mitigate housing loss.

In terms of affordable housing, most communities reported having some stock available - though this was consistently cited as inadequate in light of demand. Again, in communities with engaged provincial governments, a higher emphasis was placed on increasing affordable housing as well.

Interestingly, the availability of social housing in small communities varied on a regional basis. This is most notable in the Kenora region where certain centres within the district reported high

waiting lists for social housing, while others reported high vacancies. The District Board has to balance the value of underutilized stock in lower demand communities given the waitlists in others. The portfolio's efficacy had to therefore be managed at the regional rather than community levels.

This uneven utilization of social housing was attributed to the desirability of certain communities as places to reside within the region: while some were centers for employment and services, others were considered to be declining or stagnant spurring migration into desirable areas, and thereby exacerbating demand. The availability of social and affordable housing varies greatly across provinces and regions within provinces. If governments are committed to maintaining a rural population, more resources will need to be made available to house people in their home communities.

This was a theme not only relevant to social housing, but rental stock in general. Rural New Brunswick and Smithers reported a similar trend where lower income tenants accessed available, lower cost rental units in parts of the region that were less desirable. This created notable challenges as such sites had less recreational, employment and service access opportunities. Ensuring transportation was available regionally to enable movement from less desirable areas with rental units into those with low vacancies and desirable attributes was considered a key part of the homelessness response.

Nevertheless, the challenge of living in a community because of necessity rather than choice meant that already marginalized populations were further disconnected from their social networks, leading to reported feelings of isolation and lower perceived quality of life. This was notably the case in the Chez Soi pilot in rural New Brunswick which relied on moving the target client group willing to live in rental units outside their home community or community of choice because of availability and affordability.

Understandings of, and Interest in, Housing First

Within the varying dynamics aforementioned, Housing First as an approach and program takes on a number of local adaptations. Firstly, it is important to note that Housing First can be used to describe an approach to providing immediate shelter for homeless persons (before requiring treatment or abstinence), but it can also be used to describe a specific program with detailed services for persons disabled by mental illness and co-occurring substance use/dependency issues. In this research we asked respondents to clarify which concept they were referring to in their answers.

Most commonly, Housing First was understood as an approach rather than specific programmatic response. Nevertheless, there was considerable variance in what exactly Housing First entailed.

All respondents had heard of the term, but they had a wide array of

interpretations of it in practice. For example, in New Glasgow, Housing First was considered a harm reduction approach to providing homeless clients with housing before requiring them to demonstrate abstinence. This was a similar interpretation for respondents from Quebec communities, Camrose and Estevan. Where variance occurred more markedly was when respondents were probed around the application of the concept in their community.

In certain cases, the respondents equated implementing Housing First locally with creating transitional housing (e.g. New Glasgow, Kenora, Camrose). In other cases, like Steinbach, Yellowknife, Whitehorse, or Estevan, the focus was on creating emergency shelter in order to then implement rehousing initiatives.

In Nunavut, interviewees noted that despite a lack of available housing stock, they were considering implementing the program's case management support, including assistance for clients to connect with mainstream benefits and medical services, employment and education supports.

In some cases, the Housing First response was considered to be a sequential response to emergency shelter services: "you have to have a shelter first to then house people" - as one respondent remarked.

The association of Housing First with what the literature considers the 'traditional' housing continuum approaches is of note in some interviewees' responses. This continuum has historically consisted of

shelter and housing in supported, supervised congregate facilities for those with a serious mental illness. Rehousing to more independent apartments, with some choice of roommate and eventually an independent living unit of choice was predicated on demonstration of acceptable living skills and sobriety from alcohol and drugs. Clearly this continuum has never been available in rural areas. The lack of understanding of Housing First as a reaction to coercive housing practices in urban areas is not only indicative of the need to increase awareness about the basic tenets of the approach, but speaks of a larger underlying issue that predicated the viability of Housing First in smaller communities.

Rural centres are often challenged by an under-developed service infrastructure, particularly in areas lacking significant and predictable provincial/territorial and federal investment in social supports and housing. Adding Housing First programs to a disaggregated and patchy local system becomes problematic as the local implementing body has limited access to the necessary service infrastructure. Housing First implementation required to be successful. For example, Housing First programs often rely on social housing units to place low income, high acuity clients as a means of overcoming barriers to accessing private rental stock. In rural communities lacking such stock, reliance on the market is the only option. However, as reported above, the rural housing stock is particularly strained and expensive, making placements very difficult to start with.

The additional challenge to implementing Housing First as a program is that the clinical expertise that needs to accompany Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) teams and Intensive Case Management (ICM) models is not available in rural contexts. The only example of such a program found in the case studies was the At Home/Chez Soi implementation in rural New Brunswick. Admittedly, this program was federally funded via the Canadian Mental Health Commission, and was therefore able to overcome the resourcing challenges facing every other community in the research. Nevertheless, the sunset of the project renders the future of rehoused clients tenuous, without a clear commitment from the provincial government for ongoing supports.

Nevertheless, there was considerable interest in exploring Housing First implementation across the rural communities studied. While concern existed around resourcing such initiatives and whether they were feasible in light of limited available housing stock, participants expressed interest in learning more about the concept and connecting with similar communities to learn from their experience.

Specifically, there was interest in learning about adaptations of the Housing First approach in rural communities sharing similar barriers. Participants remarked that there was limited access to learning opportunities and networking; further, most resources and research on Housing First, and homelessness in general, tended to focus on the urban experience - which

was not of immediate relevance to them.

One observation summed up the rural dilemma about Housing First: it is both the only viable approach and not one that can be applied. That is, in rural areas with limited or no emergency shelters, housing people has to be the first response. In terms of Housing First as a program for hard to house homeless persons, the resources were unavailable to implement this approach.

Rural Housing First Implementations

Despite the barriers to implementation noted by communities, some were indeed implementing aspects of the Housing First approach in practice. For example, some communities, of which Revelstoke, Happy Valley Goose Bay and rural Newfoundland communities are examples.

Rural Newfoundland communities each hired an outreach worker whose main focus was to liaise with landlords to ensure clients at imminent risk of homelessness could maintain housing stability. The worker has access to a pool of rent and damage deposit funds which could be accessed to support clients. Many of the clients served by these programs were reported to have limited income (disability, social assistance) and face mental health and addiction issues. To address their needs, the outreach worker is charged with liaising with other partners, including public systems, to ensure clients were prevented from losing housing.

It is of note that Revelstoke and some of the rural Newfoundland communities

do not have an emergency shelter in place, thus rough sleeping and doubling up are the main options for those who lose housing. In this manner, the worker is able to bypass or mitigate the need for an emergency shelter response for this population, although at times this option is strained beyond acceptability.

The community support worker model used throughout Newfoundland and Labrador is challenged by the outreach workers' isolation from peers. Since they are alone within their targeted communities, their need to liaise with other agencies without organizational authority over any other local service providers forces a collaborative model that can be thrown awry by individual and agency agendas that conflict with the housing mission. Workers are also frustrated over lack of adequate housing stock. Nonetheless, they are reported to be making an impact.

In Smithers, clients were moved into available rental housing in nearby communities with higher vacancy rates and lower rents by local non-profit support workers. This enabled them to afford rent with their social assistance incomes and no additional rent subsidies. To implement this measure, a transportation program leveraging volunteers was developed to move people between these areas as Smithers remains the regional centre for services and employment, as well as recreation. Yellowknife also had a worker that supported clients in accessing housing by liaising with landlords and providing some support - yet, this was solely one person managing a high level of demand.

The adaptation in rural New Brunswick as part of the Chez Soi project addressed the lack of affordable stock similarly leveraged certain parts within the region with higher vacancy rates as they were less desirable than communities with more services and job opportunities. To enable the application of the Housing First model, they provided clients with the choice of moving into rental units within these higher vacancy areas. In this manner, the clients had a choice between being housed in a less desirable area or potentially staying homeless in a high-demand city with low vacancy of available and affordable housing.

While the strategy resulted in clients being placed in housing successfully, there were concerns regarding their ability to maintain sobriety, sense of exclusion given the lack of social connection in the new setting, and limited transportation and recreational opportunities. Where clients were unwilling to move to less desirable areas, Chez Soi proposed house-sharing between clients and even encouraged migration to Moncton, where housing opportunities exist, along with key services (mental health, addiction treatment, etc.).

Recommendations for Housing First Implementation in Rural Canada

Based on the findings of the study, the following discussion presents considerations to facilitate responses to homelessness in rural communities. A particular focus is accorded to answering the main tenet of the study, which is the feasibility of Housing First in rural Canada.

1. Developing a common understanding of Housing First as an approach and program type.

The study revealed a number of challenges that would impact Housing First implementation in rural communities. This points to a need for education regarding the concept of Housing First in smaller centres that are not necessarily part of national networks. It should also be supported by capacity building to enhance understanding of the concept and application.

Materials explaining Housing First as a program and approach to homelessness as applicable to rural communities will be critical to ensuring a common understanding. Toolkits and other materials to support implementation can facilitate this further; importantly, ensuring these materials speak to the needs and contexts in which rural communities operate will ensure their relevance.

For example, a focus on ACT and need to include a number of health

professionals in teams would be difficult if not impossible in a community lacking adequate health care for the general population. In other words, the Housing First program model will need to be adapted to the realities of small centres.

2. Exploring innovative Housing First adaptations for rural communities.

From the study communities interviewed, strict Housing First program adoption following the Pathways ACT model, for example, is likely to be most challenging in implementation. To begin with, there are no reliable estimates of the number of persons disabled by a serious mental illness, with and without co-occurring addictions, who would require this level of housing with supports. The extent of local acceptance of independent living for those disabled is also an unknown factor. This is compounded by a number of logistical barriers:

- lack of funding for a relatively costly program,
- lack of access to housing units,
- challenges hiring program staff, particularly those in the medical field.

ICM may be a more feasible option, though the housing market's strained vacancies in some sites and access to funding would remain a challenge. ICM program models would require adaptation to accommodate to the local/regional environment to overcome these barriers. Nevertheless, the New Brunswick Chez Soi example

could be an option that could be further developed. Furthermore, the Vermont model using an ICM rather than ACT support basis may be another viable approach.

Adapting Housing First also requires recognition that rural homelessness is not necessarily characterised by the visible, chronic homelessness for which ACT and ICM teams are designed. Relatively small numbers of such eligible clients exist on a community basis (in some cases 2-3 chronic homelessness are reported in a locality); homelessness is largely hidden and potential clients exhibit a range of acuities. The ability to develop separate programs to target each acuity type (ACT, ICM, Rapid Rehousing, System Navigation, etc.) we see in larger centres would not be feasible, or necessarily desirable, in smaller communities.

In this sense, Housing First programs would need to have the capacity to manage diverse client needs at once or use a regional approach to providing targeted services simply to achieve efficiencies of scale. This would also leverage the centres that operate in this fashion already, serving smaller communities throughout a particular region.

One challenge to moving clients out of their home communities is maintaining access to recreation, employment, services, and familial and social connections. Transportation into main centres would need to be made available, as is the case in Smithers (client transportation program relying on volunteers). Leveraging areas with

higher vacancies and taking a regional approach may also address some of the implementation cost challenges by serving a larger region. Given that most communities in the study reported having between 2-10 chronic homeless, even if these numbers are underestimates, it is likely that having an ACT team per community would not only be challenging to fund, but would likely be under-utilized.

To overcome the lack of funding and/access to mental health, medical and addictions support, communities could also develop telehealth options to deliver support to clients. This could be combined with case managers that provided in-house, wrap around supports, then leverage the medical expertise using technology. Clients would have to have access to the Internet to enable this option - and some communities in remote areas would be excluded due to lack of consistent internet access. Where this is a viable option, it should be explored further.

The Vermont model to adapt Housing First in rural communities has been highlighted by HPS as a promising alternative. It essentially relies on a modified ACT team approach to provide case management and clinical supports, and also to provide and link up with housing supports. The ACT team interacts with clients using both in-person and virtual meetings.

The ACT team serves 20-70 clients at each of its 6 sites across the state of Vermont and is managed centrally out of a head office. Two regional teams that comprise of a nurse, and

supportive employment, computer literacy specialist, substance abuse and peer specialists provide outreach support to the sites complementing onsite case coordinators (1:20 client to worker ratio) (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2014). The program has been reported to have achieved an 85% housing retention rate over three years (Stefancic et al., 2013).

If we look beyond the ACT model, we can consider adapting the basic elements of Housing First i.e. providing access to housing (landlord liaising, rent supports) and the supports needed to maintain it (case management, system navigation). As noted from the case studies, communities can examine current services and leverage these with some adaption to deliver these functions. For example, case workers operating currently in diverse areas of social service delivery (housing and homelessness, youth workers, social assistance case workers, etc.) could be reconfigured into Housing First workers with additional training and access to necessary supports, including rent supports and mental health, addiction expertise. As these positions likely exist in some form and operate in communities already, they would need to be enhanced and supported to make the transition in their role to include housing stability.

As some communities report a lack of access to rent supports or inadequate shelter allowance from provincial social assistance, their capacity to place clients in costly rental housing compromises the ability to deliver

Housing First. Nevertheless, this could be mitigated by partnering with similar small centres to advocate for the creation of a pool of funds provincially for rent supports and eviction prevention that can be accessed by Housing First programs. Another option is also to undertake a regional approach to housing clients in communities with lower rent costs and higher vacancies where appropriate and desirable to clients.

The community support worker model used throughout Newfoundland and Labrador would merit further exploration in this context, as well as the aforementioned adaptations in Revelstoke and New Brunswick. Emerging pilots across Alberta may also present important opportunities to explore Housing First implementation in rural contexts.

The ability of some centres to leverage multiple funding streams from diverse provincial departments and federal sources should be explored as smaller communities often rely on one entity to deliver services on behalf of these funders. A common Housing First approach may open the possibility of leveraging these funds for Housing First activities.

Engaging private sector landlords in solutions will also require marketing to this group, particularly given the small number operating rental in these communities. Supporting advocates and providers with materials to educate small scale landlords about working with homeless populations can assist in the implementation of Housing First further.

3. System planning approaches to rural homelessness.

Besides the implementation of Housing First, there remains a need to address the expressed concern with providing emergency shelter. While some communities are already mobilizing to develop emergency responses, others are just beginning to grapple with the issue.

Providing alternatives to the large emergency shelter facility would not only shift conversations from traditional response to developing a systems approach to ending homelessness, but can also act as a vehicle to pilot innovative solutions at the community level that can guide the future of homelessness responses across the country using the Housing First approach.

- Do we need to have any emergency shelter facilities in order to end and prevent homelessness in a community?
- Are there ways through which we can bypass the trajectories entrenched in larger centers over the past 20 years which rely on expensive, institutional responses to homelessness by focusing on housing clients rather than sheltering them from the start?

As commonly reported in the study, the first response to homelessness in a community is to develop an emergency shelter. Yet, some communities have developed alternatives to the large

facility responses we see in larger centres. Small-scale, flexible shelter arrangements that can later be used as supportive housing could be explored. Nevertheless, there is still concern over increasing access to emergency facilities as the main means of addressing homelessness. It would be worthwhile to explore piloting an alternative with interested small centres to undertake a system planning approach that bypasses traditional emergency shelters, by investing resources in supportive housing, prevention, rent supports, Rapid Rehousing and ICM. This may prove to be less costly long term, while encouraging smaller centres to learn from the experiences large cities have amassed over the past 20 years regarding the role of emergency shelters.

Rural communities have already developed alternatives to shelters. For example, the idea of a Safe Couch program from Wellington would rely on a network of rooms within homes where host families are trained to provide support to those experiencing homelessness. These are primarily emergency and/or transitional beds that would need to be funded and monitored from safety and housing quality perspective. Case managers would work with sheltered individuals and families to find housing to ensure their stay in this program is temporary.

Another alternative comes from Steinbach where local volunteers pooled funds and time to open a shelter in a single family residential home in 2012. The operation is funded solely through donations for less than \$70,000

annually. Upstairs, house parents oversee the housing and basic needs of up to 4 shelter users per night. The actual capital asset is owned by a volunteer and the rent for the upstairs tenants who act as house parents is covered by the donations. Instead of expanding shelter services by developing a larger facility, additional demand could be met by adding another house. Longer term, single family homes could be operated as supportive or simply affordable housing.

The increase of supportive housing and affordable housing stock across rural communities can have a marked impact on homelessness. Reliance on private sector units can be mitigated by the creation of additional non-market stock, particularly for clients who require long term housing and supports. In addition, the engagement of provincial and territorial governments to develop local social service infrastructure will be critical long term. There is a need to address the lack of adequate addiction and mental health, along with transportation, child care, and other essential social services in rural communities along with housing and homelessness supports.

While system planning approaches to ending homelessness should in practice be easier in smaller centres with fewer stakeholders, in the absence of a well-developed network of services and adequate funding to support responses, the feasibility of such approaches is limited. Though the development of plans to address homelessness is an important step in

local responses, the resourcing of their implementation is even more important.

Notably, in centres with high economic growth, the need for social infrastructure is particularly important for long-term sustainability from an economic and social perspective. Communities like Kitimat, where economic growth is in high gear, need to be prepared for the inevitable increase in housing instability and homelessness they will experience as result of migration and limited affordable rental stock. Such sites should plan ahead and develop a resourced, proactive response tied to proposed economic development. This speaks to the need for increasing public awareness and leadership in small centres to recognize homelessness as a problem in the first place, as well as creating buy-in to address it. By creating coalitions with other small centres, rural communities can develop policy and funding asks to raise awareness about local challenges and ensure appropriate resourcing reaches vulnerable populations beyond large urban centres.

The over-representation of Aboriginal people amongst homeless populations in certain rural communities points to the need to recognize the factors engendering ongoing housing instability for this group on and off reserves. The capacity of small communities to absorb the needs of Aboriginal migrants without additional funding is limited and further entrenches disparities.

4. Enhancing research on rural homelessness in Canada.

To date, attempts at capturing rural homelessness trends have been largely localized on one community or region. While this study aimed to develop a comparative view of the issue across Canada, it was intended as a preliminary effort rather than comprehensive analysis of the issue.

To this end, it is recommended that a fulsome research agenda on rural homelessness be developed to capture common emerging themes from a national rather than community-by-community perspective. A number of local needs assessments and strategic plans were located during the course of the study; future research should leverage this information to enhance existing information and analysis.

The development of basic, baseline data that could be obtained from regular homeless counts could go a long way in helping us develop a national picture of rural homelessness and its local dynamics.

5. Supporting rural communities of practice.

This study demonstrated the variable extent to which understandings about Housing First exist at the local level. While some sites have had the benefit of learnings through participation in initiatives such as the HPS CABs network or Canadian Alliance to End

Homelessness conferences to enhance understanding of homelessness responses, most are largely left on their own.

Further, capacity building resources are usually intended for urban centres, where homelessness is most often visible. Resources on applying Housing First, undertaking performance management and system planning, managing emergency shelters and other homeless system components, should be tailored to the needs of smaller centres.

In light of the diverse contexts in which providers and leaders in rural homelessness responses operate, it would further be beneficial to support the development of a community of practice to enhance mutual learning and collaboration. There is a high level of interest from the participants in the study to learn from peers in similar rural contexts and connect with others facing similar issues.

Many reported feeling disconnected from the broader movement on homelessness, particularly when they were not part of the HPS-designated group. Developing a network on rural homelessness would enable mutual support and the sharing of learnings for hundreds of small communities grappling with similar challenges nationwide. At a local level for example, in rural Newfoundland, community coordinators bring providers together to act as their own support network.

Community Case Studies

In an internal report, this section presents the interviewee summaries from the 22 case study communities in further detail to outline the housing and macro-economic context in which homelessness trends and responses play out. To make every effort to protect the identity of participants, particularly in smaller communities, these summaries have been removed in the public version of this report.

Camrose, Alberta

Key Indicators

Population: 17,286

Low Income: 12%

Core Housing Need: 27%

Aboriginal Population: 4%

NHS 2011: <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/as-sa/fogs-spg/Pages/FOG.cfm?lang=E&level=3&GeoCode=833>

Chicoutimi, Quebec

Population de Chicoutimi est 60,000, mais l'organisme couvre le territoire de toutes les municipalités avoisinantes dont entre autres, St-Fulgence (1,949), St-Honoré (5,257), L'Anse St-Jean (1,200).

NHS 2011: <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2011/dp-pd/prof/details/Page.cfm?Lang=E&Geo1=CSD&Code1=2494068&Geo2=PR&Code2=24&Data=Count&SearchText=chicoutimi&SearchType=Begins&SearchPR=01&B1=All&Custom=>

Cochrane, Alberta

Key Indicators

Population: 17,580

Low Income: 7%

Core Housing Need: 13%

Aboriginal Population: 3%

NHS 2011: <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/as-sa/fogs-spg/Pages/FOG.cfm?lang=E&level=4&GeoCode=4806019>

Estevan, Saskatchewan

Key Indicators

Population: 12,973

Low Income: 7%

Core Housing Need: 15%

Aboriginal Population: 4%

NHS 2011: <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/as-sa/fogs-spg/Pages/FOG.cfm?lang=E&level=4&GeoCode=4701024>

Happy Valley/Goose Bay, Labrador

Key Indicators

Population: 7,552

Low Income: 10%

Core Housing Need: 13%

Aboriginal Population: 53%

NHS 2011: <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/as-sa/fogs-spg/Pages/FOG.cfm?lang=E&level=4&GeoCode=1010025>

Iqaluit, Nunavut

Key Indicators

Population: 6,595

Low Income: n/a

Core Housing Need: 11%

Aboriginal Population: 61%

NHS 2011: <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/dp-pd/prof/details/page.cfm?Lang=E&Geo1=CSD&Code1=6204003&Data=Count&SearchText=Iqaluit&SearchType=Begins&SearchPR=01&A1=All&B1=All&Custom=&TABID=1>

Kenora, Ontario

Key Indicators

Population: 15,348

Low Income: 12%

Core Housing Need: 20%

Aboriginal Population: 18%

NHS 2011: <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/as-sa/fogs-spg/Pages/FOG.cfm?lang=E&level=3&GeoCode=598>

New Glasgow, Nova Scotia

Key Indicators

Population: 9,562

Low Income: 18%

Core Housing Need: 19%

Aboriginal Population: 3%

NHS 2011: <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/as-sa/fogs-spg/Pages/FOG.cfm?lang=E&level=4&GeoCode=4701024>

Old Crow, Yukon

Key Indicators

Population: 240

Low Income: N/A

Core Housing Need: N/A

Aboriginal Population: 100%

NHS 2011: <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/dp-pd/prof/details/page.cfm?Lang=E&Geo1=CSD&Code1=6001043&Data=Count&SearchText=Old%20Crow&SearchType=Begins&SearchPR=01&A1=All&B1=All&TABID=1>

Pincher Creek, Alberta

Key Indicators

Population: 3,685

Low Income: 9%

Core Housing Need: 16%

Aboriginal Population: 9%

NHS 2011: <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/dp-pd/prof/details/page.cfm?Lang=E&Geo1=CSD&Code1=4803014&Data=Count&SearchText=Pincher%20Creek&SearchType=Begins&SearchPR=01&A1=All&B1=All&TABID=1>

Pointe-à-la Croix, Quebec

Key Indicators

Population: 1,445

Low Income: 32%

Core Housing Need: 21%

Aboriginal Population: 3.5%

NHS 2011: <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/dp-pd/prof/details/page.cfm?Lang=E&Geo1=CSD&Code1=2406030&Data=Count&SearchText=Pointe-%C3%83%C2%A0-la-Croix&SearchType=Begins&SearchPR=01&A1=All&B1=All&TABID=11>

Revelstoke, British Columbia

Key Indicators

Population: 7,139

Low Income: 13%

Core Housing Need: 24%

Aboriginal Population: 6%

NHS 2011: <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/as-sa/fogs-spg/Pages/FOG.cfm?lang=E&level=4&GeoCode=5939019>

Rocky Mountain House, Alberta

Key Indicators

Population: 6,933

Low Income: 9%

Core Housing Need: 19%

Aboriginal Population: 7%

NHS 2011: <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/as-sa/fogs-spg/Pages/FOG.cfm?lang=E&level=4&GeoCode=4809015>

Rural Atlantic Area (anonymous)

Key Indicators

N/A

Rural S.E. Region of New Brunswick

Key Indicators

Not available for specific S.E. region.

Rural Newfoundland

Key Indicators

N/A for region.

Ste-Adèle, Quebec

Key Indicators

Population: 12,137

Low Income: 15.7%

Core Housing Need: 27.2%

Aboriginal Population: 0.5%

NHS 2011: <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/as-sa/fogs-spg/Pages/FOG.cfm?lang=E&level=4&GeoCode=2477022>

Smithers, British Columbia

Key Indicators

Population: 5,404

Low Income: 13%

Core Housing Need: 17%

Aboriginal Population: 11%

NHS 2011: <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/as-sa/fogs-spg/Pages/FOG.cfm?lang=E&level=4&GeoCode=5951043>

Steinbach, Manitoba

Key Indicators

Population: 13,524

Low Income: 19%

Core Housing Need: 22%

Aboriginal Population: 5%

NHS 2011: <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/as-sa/fogs-spg/Pages/FOG.cfm?lang=E&level=3&GeoCode=605>

Wellington County, Ontario

Key Indicators

Population: 11,477

Low Income: 15%

Core Housing Need: 22%

Aboriginal Population: .05%

NHS 2011: <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/as-sa/fogs-spg/Pages/FOG.cfm?lang=E&level=4&GeoCode=3523050>

Whitehorse, Yukon

Key Indicators

Population: 27,889

Low Income: N/A

Core Housing Need: 22%

Aboriginal Population: 17%

NHS 2011: <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/as-sa/fogs-spg/Pages/FOG.cfm?lang=E&level=4&GeoCode=6001009>

Yellowknife, Northwest Territories

Key Indicators

Population: 19,024

Low Income: N/A

Core Housing Need: 16%

Aboriginal Population: 25%

NHS 2011: <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/as-sa/fogs-spg/Pages/FOG.cfm?lang=E&level=4&GeoCode=6106023>

Appendix 1 - Canadian Definition of Homelessness

The Canadian Homeless Research network has developed a definition of homelessness that has several components, as outlined below.

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, with the consent of owner
- People in makeshift shelters, shacks or tents

2) Emergency Sheltered

This refers to people who, though they are technically homeless (i.e. they do not have permanent housing), are accessing emergency shelter and system supports, generally provided at no cost to the user. Such accommodation represents an institutional response to homelessness provided by government, non-profit, faith based organizations and / or volunteers. Shelters typically have minimal eligibility criteria, offer shared sleeping facilities and amenities, and often expect clients to leave in the morning. These facilities may or may not offer food, clothing or other services.

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. Some emergency shelters allow people to stay on an ongoing basis others are short term and are set up to respond to special circumstances such as extreme weather.

2.2 Violence-Against-Women (VAW) shelters

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 otherwise without permanent shelter, are accessing accommodation that offers no prospect of permanence. Those who are provisionally accommodated may be accessing temporary and supported housing

provided by government or the non-profit sector, or may have independently made arrangements for short-term accommodation.

3.1 Transitional Housing for people who are homeless

This is a systems-supported form of interim housing that is meant to bridge the gap between unsheltered homelessness or emergency accommodation and permanent housing. While not permanent, transitional housing generally allows for a longer stay (in some cases up to three years) than do emergency shelters. Transitional housing typically provides services beyond basic needs, and offers residents more privacy, and places greater emphasis on participation. Transitional housing targets those who would benefit from structure, support and skill-building prior to moving from homelessness to housing stability, with the ultimately goal of preventing a return to homelessness.

3.2 People living temporarily with others, but without guarantee of residence 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. They are typically not paying rent, their duration of stay is unsustainable in the long term, and they do not have the means to secure their own permanent housing in the future. They differ from those who are staying with friends or family in anticipation of prearranged accommodation, whether in their current hometown or an altogether new community. This living situation is understood by both parties to be temporary, with no prospect of it becoming permanent.

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, Single Room Occupancy hotels (SROs), rooming houses, etc. Although occupants pay rent, the accommodation does not offer the prospect or promise of permanency. People living in these situations are often considered to be part of the 'hidden homeless' population.

3.4 People in institutional care who lack permanent housing arrangements

Individuals are considered to be provisionally accommodated and 'at risk' of homelessness if there are no arrangements in place to ensure they move into safe, permanent housing upon release from institutional care. This includes individuals who:

- a) were homeless prior to admittance (where their stay may be short-term or long-term) and who have no plan for permanent accommodation after release; or
- b) had housing prior to admittance, but lost their housing while in institutional care

In either case, without adequate discharge planning and support, which includes arrangements for safe or reliable housing, there is a likelihood that these individuals may transition into homelessness following their release. Institutional care includes:

- 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) Insecurely Housed

Individuals or families, whose current housing situations are dangerously lacking security or stability, are considered ***Insecurely Housed***. 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, discrimination, a lack of other available and affordable housing, and / or the unsuitability of their current housing (which may be overcrowded or does not meet public health and safety standards) residents may be “at risk” of homelessness.

An important distinction to make is between those who are at “imminent risk” of becoming homeless and those who are “precariously housed”.

No matter the level of probability, all who can be categorized as being “at risk” of homelessness possess a shared vulnerability; for them, a single event, unexpected expense, crisis, or trigger is all it may take for them to lose their housing. As the risk factors mount so too does the possibility of becoming of homelessness.

4.1 People at imminent risk of homelessness

Many factors can contribute to individuals and families being at imminent risk of homelessness. Though in some cases individual factors (such as those listed below) may be most significant, in most cases it is the interaction of structural and individual risk that, in the context of a crisis, influence pathways into homelessness. In the absence of an intervention, those classified as being at “imminent risk” will almost undoubtedly become homeless in the immediate future. Factors that may contribute include:

- **Those whose employment is precarious.** Many people have unstable employment and live pay cheque to pay cheque. An unanticipated expense, increases in cost of living or a change in employment status may undermine their ability to maintain housing.
- **Those experiencing sudden unemployment,** accompanied by few prospects and little to no financial savings or assets.
- **Households facing eviction,** with little to no financial resources, or living in areas with low availability of affordable housing.
- **People with severe untreated mental illness, active addictions, substance use, and / or behavioural issues**
- **Breakdown in family relations,** ranging from separation, divorce, conflicts between caregivers and children, and / or instances of violence, in which the affected do not have the resources to secure stable housing.

- **People facing or living in direct fear of violence / abuse in their current housing situations**, including:
 - Women facing domestic violence and abuse
 - Children and youth experiencing neglect, physical, sexual, and emotional abuse
 - Seniors facing abuse
 - People facing abuse or discrimination caused by racism or homophobia

4.2 Individuals and families who are Precariously Housed

Many individuals and families experience severe housing affordability problems, due to their income, the local economy and / or the lack of availability of affordable housing that meets their needs in the local market. The income of these households is not sufficient to cover the household's basic shelter and non-shelter costs. This includes people who are on government benefits but who do not have sufficient funds to pay for basic needs.

Appendix 2 - Interview Guide



RURAL COMMUNITY QUESTIONNAIRE

Study lead: Jeannette Waegemakers Schiff, PhD.

We have been asked by Human Resources Development Canada to assess the feasibility of implementing a Housing First approach to housing those who are homeless in small towns and rural areas in Canada. We are contacting you as a person in either local government services or a social services organization to explore the identified need for Housing First and its feasibility in rural areas.

For purposes of this project we identify those who are homeless as falling into one of three groups:

1. Those who have no shelter (sleeping rough or in places not meant for human habitation)
2. Those in a temporary shelter for homeless persons or victims of domestic violence
3. Those who are “doubled up” or “couch surfing” and have no living place of their own.

Does your community identify homelessness as an issue? **yes** **no**

Comments _____

If homelessness is an identified issue is there a formal plan to address this issue? **yes** **no**

Comments _____

Are there any organizations involved with addressing the social services needs of local residents?
Do these organizations include provision of housing or temporary shelter?

Comments _____

If a local resident or family loses their housing what resources are available to them?

Comments _____

Has “Housing First” as an approach to helping people who are homeless been discussed within your community?

Comments _____

How do local people describe a “Housing First” approach?

Comments _____

Is this approach seen as a viable answer to housing problems faced in your community?

Comments _____

Note: Housing First is used to describe an approach to providing immediate shelter for homeless persons (before requiring treatment of abstinence AND it is also used to describe a specific program with detailed services for persons disabled by mental illness and co-occurring substance use/dependency issues. In this survey we will distinguish which concept you are referring to in your answers.

Supplementary information:

For service providers who are part of a larger system of service delivery the following optional questions may be addressed.

1. Where does your organization fit within the overall homelessness prevention and assistance service system in your community (i.e., your Continuum of Care)?
2. Would adopting a Housing First approach alter this role? If so, in what way?
3. Would a Housing First service fill an identified gap or need, complement or enhance existing services, or be duplicative?
4. Would a Housing First approach align with your agency's mission, goals, values, and practices?
5. Does the agency already provide a similar component of services (e.g. housing search and placement, landlord recruitment, rental assistance, case management) or can it easily adapt to provide them?
6. Who else in your community is providing these services?
7. Does the agency provide financial assistance for low-income families, to provide a security deposit and first month's rent to households served through the program ?
8. Who is and is not being served?
9. How long do participants remain in the program(s) on average?
10. On average how many days pass between intake and permanent housing placement?
11. How many participants exit program services with permanent housing in place?
12. Approximately how many households are served annually by your agency ?

Appendix 3 - Case Study Analysis

This appendix provides our analysis of key trends from the case studies, including information from the 2011 National Household Survey. We found Bruce et al.'s 2005 analysis of the connection between the geography of housing needs of low income persons in rural Canada very useful to deduce associations between reported housing and homelessness trends and broader economic shifts. We used the following chart to categorize the case study communities, and found it particularly applicable.

Type	Geography	Economy	Demographics	Case Study Communities	Barriers	Housing Situations	Opportunities
Growing communities	Located close to urban centres, usually along major highways	Fueled by new economic activity; service centre for other areas	Broad mix of population cohorts; more single, young males; usually 5,000 – 10,000 pop.	Brooks, AB Kingston, NS	NIMBY; need for community services; need for community leadership; social assistance rates	Low or falling rental vacancy rates; rising costs	Supply of affordable land; proactive community leadership' market demand for seniors
Stable or slow growth communities	Usually within an hour of a large urban centre	Service centre for other areas; presence of social services is important	Broad mix of population cohorts; usually 2,500- 5,000 pop.	Port Elgin, ON Saint Fabien-de-Panet, PQ St. Stephen, NB	NIMBY; limited land for development; economic uncertainty; poor social conditions; lack of viable housing market; need for community services Social assistance rates	Low or falling rental vacancy rates; poor quality units; high heating and operating costs	Supply of affordable land; housing policy; Conversion of non-residential buildings; proactive community leadership; market demand from seniors; manufactured housing; integrated housing and services
Declining Communities	Usually more than 2 hours from a large urban centre	Slow erosion of the economy through business closure; may have been, or still is, a single industry community; seasonal activities may be important	Youth out-migration; older population' usually fewer than 2,500 population	Maniwaki, PQ Marystow, NL Wawa, ON	Lack of construction sector; limited land for development; limited economic options; poor social conditions; lack of viable housing market; need for community services; need for community leadership; social	poor quality units; high heating and operating costs	Supply of affordable land; land assembly/subdivision; proactive community leadership

					assistance rates		
Dormitory communities	Located near a large urban centre	Retail and services dominate	Young adults and families' semi-retired professionals	Mississippi ills, ON			
Retirement communities	Reasonably close to a large urban centre May serve as a regional population centre	Retail and services; health care sector	High elderly population	Russell, MB Preeceville, SK			
Northern communities	Usually isolated and far distance from markets	Resource and service oriented; large gap between high and low paying jobs, limited expansion options	Younger population; mostly Aboriginal	Coral Harbour, NU			
<p>Bruce, D., Essex, S. J., Gilg, A. W., Yarwood, R. B., Smithers, J., & Wilson, R. (2005). The geography of housing needs of low income persons in rural Canada. Rural Change and Sustainability: Agriculture, the Environment and Communities. Cambridge, MA: CABI Publishing, 265-280.</p> <p>Ch. 17 Geography of housing needs of low income persons in rural Canada</p>							

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