

WHO ARE THE HOMELESS? NUMBERS, TRENDS AND CHARACTERISTICS OF THOSE WITHOUT HOMES IN CALGARY[†]

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SUMMARY

In 2008, Calgary was the first city in Canada to institute a 10-year plan to end homelessness. The plan was introduced in part due to the steady and rapid growth in homelessness in the city since 1992. Since 2008 growth in the number of homeless people has stopped despite a rapidly growing city. The number of people enumerated as homeless by point-in-time counts has fallen from 304 persons per 100,000 population to 256 persons per 100,000 population in 2014, a drop of more than 15 per cent.

Looking beyond simple counts of the number of homeless people, we examine how people who are homeless use emergency shelters. Tracking shelter use over a five year period by nearly 33,000 individuals, we find that, contrary to what might be thought to be true, the great majority (86%) of people who use emergency shelters in Calgary do so very infrequently and for only short periods of time. Visiting shelters less than twice (on average), these “transitional” users stayed in shelters for an average of only 15 days spread during the five years of our study. Another 12% of people used emergency shelters more frequently; an average of 8 times spread over five years. These “episodic” users stayed for a total of 113 days on average. Only a tiny minority, just 1.6% of all shelter users, stayed in shelters for very long periods. These “chronic” users visited shelters an average of three and a half times and stayed a total of 928 days over the five years of our study.

Because they stay in shelters for long periods, chronic shelter users occupy one-third of shelter beds. The implication of this is that finding stable, supportive housing for just 1.6% of those experiencing homeless – a total of about 900 individuals in Calgary -- would free-up one-third of beds in emergency shelters. Providing supportive housing for episodic users as well would free-up another one-third of beds and so enable shelter providers to focus on their main function as providers of emergency housing. Moving people from emergency shelters into supportive housing delivers savings in the form of reduced interactions for these people with the criminal justice and health-care systems; savings that have been shown in other studies to significantly off-set the cost of supportive housing.

Planning to end homelessness has always been an ambitious goal. While the homeless serving community has made significant gains in understanding how best to solve the problem, greater effort may be required of local, provincial and federal policy makers to find ways of resolving the issue that is at the heart of Calgary’s homelessness problem; namely, the lack of affordable rental accommodations.

[†] We thank the Calgary Drop-In & Rehab Centre Society for permission to use their data. We also acknowledge and appreciate the very helpful comments of two independent reviewers. The cost of publication and dissemination of this report has been supported by a public outreach grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.

INTRODUCTION

In 2008, social agencies, businesses, governments and faith-based groups worked together to implement a 10-year plan to end homelessness in Calgary with the goal of developing a more effective and efficient homeless-serving system. Starting with very little information on the scale and the nature of the problem of homelessness, the Calgary community has constructed important databases designed to enable researchers to identify the characteristics of persons who experience homelessness, the number and length of homeless episodes, and the relative effectiveness of interventions intended to reduce the incidence of homelessness. Examination of these data is ongoing and will prove invaluable for increasing our understanding of how homelessness arises and what public policies will most effectively reduce or eliminate its incidence.

In this paper we begin by reporting very basic measures of the number of persons in Calgary who are without homes, we report how this number has changed since 1992, and we provide some basic characterizations of persons experiencing homelessness. With this information as background, we then examine some key information provided by data describing the frequency and patterns of use amongst people experiencing homelessness who utilize emergency shelters. That more detailed analysis will focus on shelter-use patterns at the Calgary Drop-In & Rehab Centre Society. Comparing our results with those reported from other cities identifies some common themes important for understanding what appropriate public policies for ending homelessness are.

PAST TRENDS AND A SNAPSHOT OF 2014

From 1992 to 2008, the City of Calgary conducted a biennial count of people experiencing homelessness. The Calgary Homeless Foundation took over responsibility for conducting the count from the city and has since conducted counts in 2012 and 2014. In each of those years the CHF conducted two counts; one in January and the other in the summer (Aug. 15, 2012) or fall (Oct. 16, 2014). The count in October 2014 was part of a co-ordinated count by seven cities in Alberta all held on the same night.¹

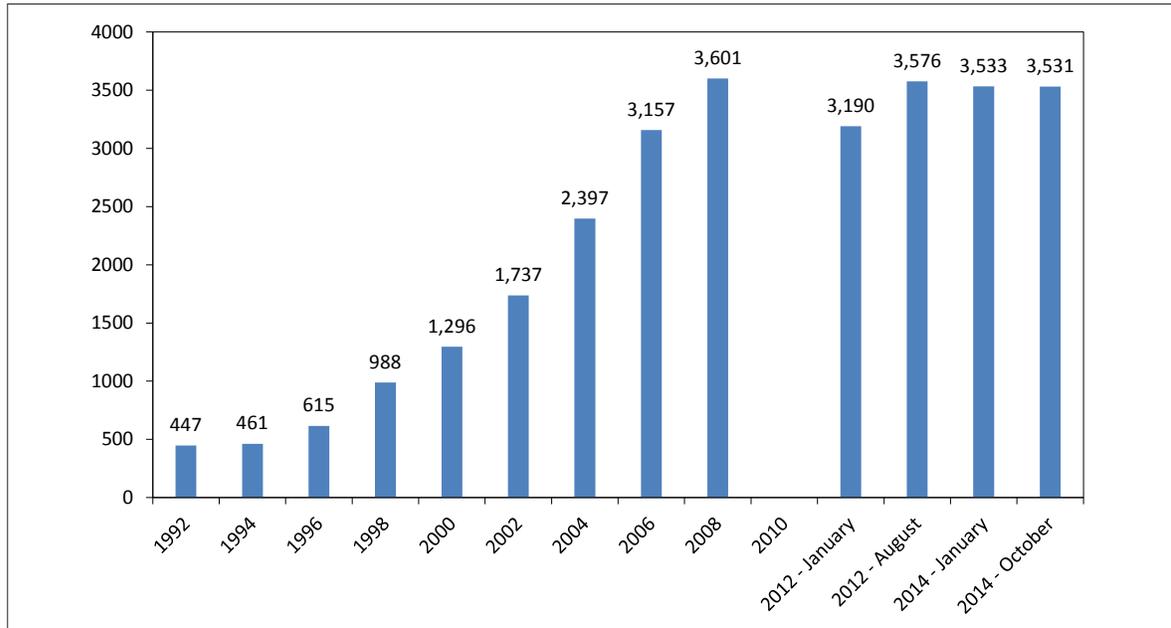
Figure 1 presents the results of those homeless counts. The figure illustrates a dramatic change in the trend of the number of persons experiencing homelessness since the 10-year plan was instituted in 2008.² The growth in the number of persons counted as homeless has halted, a result made all the more impressive when one considers the rapid growth in Calgary's population over the same period.³

¹ The other cities were Edmonton, Red Deer, Lethbridge, Grande Prairie, Medicine Hat and the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo.

² The values reported for the 2004, 2006 and 2008 counts reflect a recalibration of the original counts in order to remove people who were in permanent supportive-housing units. This facilitates an accurate comparison with point-in-time counts conducted since 2008.

³ The number of persons enumerated as homeless in point-in-time counts has fallen from 304 persons per 100,000 population in 2008 to 256 persons per 100,000 population in 2014; a fall of over 15 per cent. These calculations are based on data for the population of Calgary contained in Statistics Canada CANSIM series v72547460 and our assumption that between 2012 and 2014 Calgary's population grew at the same rate it did from 2002 to 2012.

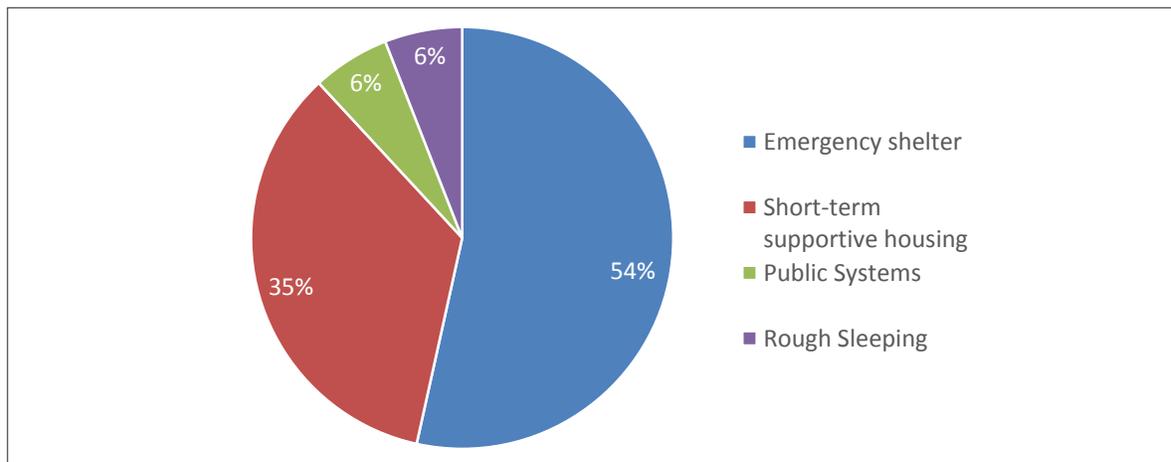
FIGURE 1 RESULTS OF POINT-IN-TIME COUNTS, 1992-2014



Source: Point-in-Time Count Report, Calgary Homeless Foundation, Winter 2014.

Homeless counts are intended to obtain a reasonably accurate snapshot of the number of people experiencing homelessness making use of shelters, those currently housed in institutional settings such as remand centres or hospitals, those in short-term supportive housing, and people who sleep outside (known as “rough sleepers”).⁴ As one might guess, an accurate count of rough sleepers, many of whom do not wish to be found, is the biggest challenge to obtaining an accurate count of all persons experiencing homelessness. It is fortunate, from many perspectives, that those sleeping rough make up a relatively small fraction of those enumerated in point-in-time counts as being homeless. Figure 2 reports where those enumerated in the January 2014 point-in-time count were found.

FIGURE 2 WHERE THE HOMELESS ARE ENUMERATED (PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL)



The majority of those identified as having “no fixed address” the night of the count were enumerated in

⁴ Point-in-time counts make no effort to enumerate those who are at high risk of homelessness or the “hidden homeless” who are couch surfing, or are in unsafe or inadequate housing.

emergency shelters (1,892 persons).⁵ Just over one-third of those enumerated (1,224) were persons who had been placed in *short-term supportive housing* (STSH). STSH differs from the shelter provided by emergency shelters in that it provides time-limited supports in addition to providing a place to sleep. STSH is designed to facilitate the movement of clients into independent living or permanent housing. Those enumerated in what are identified as *public systems* include those counted while in hospital, correctional institutions, families staying in hotel rooms provided by Alberta Works, and others (a total of 202 persons). Finally, *rough sleepers* are those persons without homes who, due to concerns about safety, their privacy or for other reasons, sleep outdoors rather than in emergency shelters.⁶

Still using information from the January 2014 count, Figure 3 identifies those enumerated as homeless on that night by ethnicity. Here the notable value to report is that 20 per cent (706) of those enumerated as being homeless were self-identified or identified by point-in-time volunteers as aboriginal; this despite the fact aboriginal people make up less than three per cent of Calgary’s population.⁷

FIGURE 3 ETHNICITY OF THE HOMELESS (PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL)

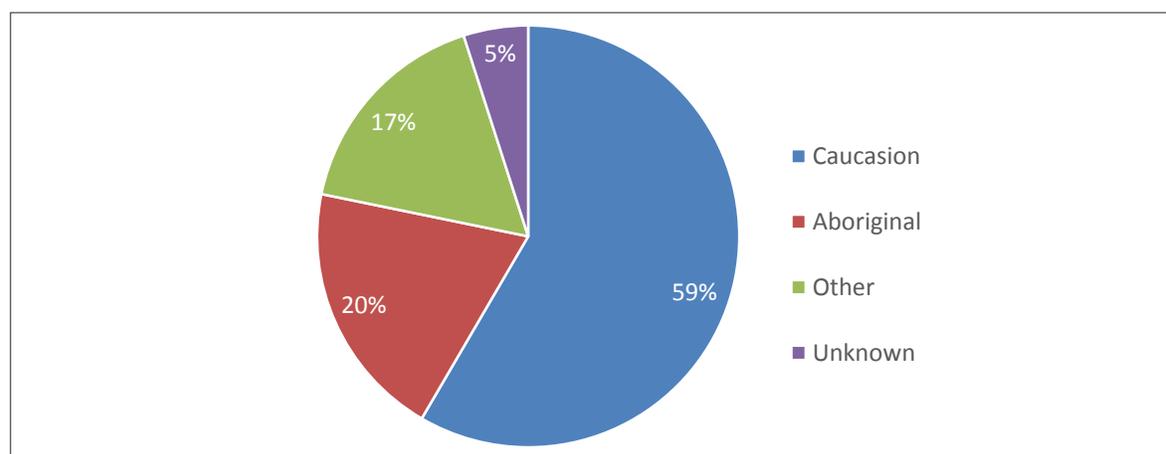


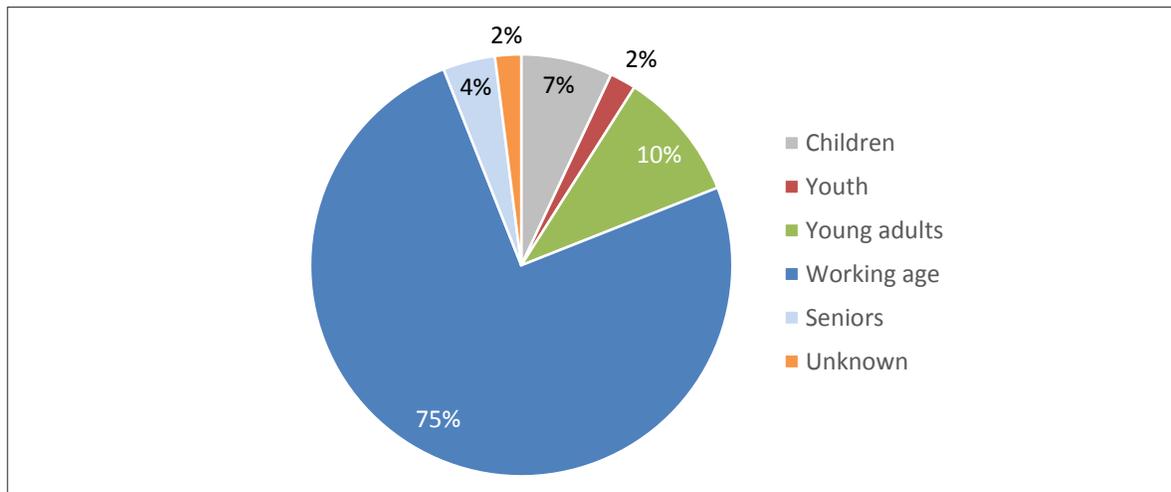
Figure 4 shows the age distribution of those identified as homeless on the night of the January 2014 count. Those of working age (25 to 64 years) comprise three-quarters of those identified as being homeless. Young adults (aged 18–24 years) define the next-largest age group. Children (0–12 years) and youth (13–17 years) define a distressing nine per cent of the homeless (a total of 332 children and youths).

⁵ In Calgary, the three largest emergency shelters are the Drop-In Centre, the Mustard Seed and the Salvation Army. These three agencies provide about 85 per cent of the emergency-shelter beds in Calgary.

⁶ It is important to keep in mind when looking at the data presented in Figure 2 that they represent a snapshot of homelessness on a particular night. In recent research, Ali Jadidzadeh and Ron Kneebone (“Shelter from the Storm: Weather-Induced Patterns in the Use of Emergency Shelters,” University of Calgary School of Public Policy Research Paper, Volume 8, Issue 6, February 2015) show that in Calgary, the number of persons without homes who choose to sleep rough rather than stay in shelters is dependent on weather conditions on the night of the count. Thus, depending on weather conditions on the night of the count, the percentage of homeless sleeping rough as opposed to sleeping in shelters will vary.

⁷ Reported in *Point-in-Time Count Report*. The same source reports that almost half (103 of 215) of those sleeping rough on the night of Jan. 15, 2014 were aboriginal. As ethnicity is self-reported or estimated by volunteers in situations where a survey cannot be administered, the percentage of those counted as aboriginal may be an underrepresentation.

FIGURE 4 AGE PROFILE OF THE HOMELESS (PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL)



CHARACTERIZING HOMELESS SHELTER STAYS

As we saw in the previous section, people experiencing homelessness differ by ethnicity and age, but they also differ by the circumstances that resulted in them becoming homeless. Poverty, mental-health challenges, addictions, domestic violence, unstable incomes, and a simple lack of housing that is affordable for those working at low-wage jobs are all routes into homelessness and each presents unique challenges for exiting from homelessness. To be effective, program and policy strategies aimed at ending homelessness must therefore contextualize the experiences and needs of support of unique subgroups in the homeless population.

A good deal of research has attempted to assess the level of acuity and intensity of support needs for distinct groups experiencing homelessness.⁸ However, relatively little research has been undertaken to identify another important aspect of homelessness, namely, the frequency and length of homeless *episodes*. Are episodes of homelessness frequent but of short duration or are they typically fewer in number but of longer duration? Understanding the characteristics of homeless episodes is crucial for designing effective programs to end homelessness.

U.S. Studies

The seminal study of homeless episodes is the work of Randall Kuhn and Dennis Culhane⁹ who examined patterns of shelter stays in New York and Philadelphia by analyzing administrative data from public shelters over a two-year period in Philadelphia and a three-year period in New York, in the early 1990s. Table 1 summarizes their typology of shelter-stay patterns; a typology based on the length of stay and rate of readmission. Shelter stayers were classified based on three distinct stay patterns: *transitional*, *episodic*, and *chronic*.

⁸ See, for example, Ralph Bodor, Derek Chewka, Meagan Smith-Windsor, Shari Conley, and Nicole Peteira, *Perspectives on the Housing First Program with Indigenous Participants* (Edmonton: Homeward Trust, 2011), <http://www.homewardtrust.ca/images/resources/2012-07-05-10-26BlueQuillsWEB3.pdf>; and Bernie Pauly, Dan Reist, Lynne Belle-Isle and Chuck Schactman, "Housing and Harm Reduction: What is the Role of Harm Reduction in Addressing Homelessness," *International Journal of Drug Policy* 24, 4 (2013): 284-290.

⁹ Randall Kuhn and Dennis Culhane, "Applying Cluster Analysis to Test a Typology of Homelessness by Pattern of Shelter Utilization: Results from the Analysis of Administrative Data," *American Journal of Community Psychology* 26, 2 (1998): 207-232.

TABLE 1 PATTERNS OF SHELTER STAYS

	Few Episodes	Many Episodes
Short Stays per episode	Transitional	Episodic
Long Stays per episode	Chronic	--

Transitional shelter users are those experiencing a small number of short stays in shelter use over a multi-year period. This might be someone with an unstable home life or a transient worker moving from city to city who uses shelters only occasionally and for short durations. Episodic users are those experiencing more frequent shelter stays but with each stay still being relatively short. This pattern may be the result of the homeless person spending time in jails, hospitals and treatment centres. Chronic shelter users are those for whom each episode of shelter use is of long duration with the result that only a few separate episodes are experienced over a specified period.

Kuhn and Culhane reported that, from their sample of just over 73,000 shelter users, 81 per cent exhibited a pattern of shelter use they identified as being transitional, 9.1 per cent exhibited an episodic pattern, and 9.8 per cent could be classified as being chronic users of homeless shelters. These findings challenged the stereotype of shelter users as being chronic users and instead identified the great majority of the homeless as being infrequent users of shelters who stay for only short periods. By reframing homelessness through the lens of distinct typologies, policy-makers can implement targeted interventions designed to separately serve what are likely the high needs of chronic shelter users and the relatively low needs of transitional users; those who are by far the largest users of shelters. Perhaps most importantly, these results suggested the possibility that policy-makers could embrace efforts to actually end homelessness as opposed to merely managing it. In 2002, the first 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness was launched; 10-year plans have since become common language in cities across North America. Calgary launched its own 10-year plan in 2008, the first Canadian city to do so.

Canadian Studies

Another important result of the Kuhn and Culhane study was to show the importance for policy-makers of collecting and analyzing finely detailed data describing shelter use. In 2013, Tim Aubry, Susan Farrell, Stephen Hwang and Melissa Calhoun¹⁰ made the important contribution of investigating whether the U.S. results also described patterns of shelter use in Canadian urban centres.

Aubry et al. used data on shelter use in three Canadian cities — Toronto, Ottawa and Guelph — collected over a four-year period from 2004 to 2007. The data from Toronto consisted of detailed administrative data maintained by the City of Toronto. Those data provided information on 56,533 shelter clients. The data describing shelter use in Ottawa and Guelph were drawn from the Homeless Individuals and Families Information System (HIFI) maintained by the federal government. HIFI contains data on approximately 20 per cent of homeless emergency shelters in Canada and allows for comparison of unique shelter users across all shelters whose data are included in the system. Ottawa and Guelph are two cities whose data are contained in HIFI. Those data provide information on 18,879 individuals in Ottawa and 1,016 individuals in Guelph.

Applying the same empirical approach as Kuhn and Culhane, the analysis of data for Toronto, Ottawa and Guelph produced results broadly comparable to those found by the U.S. study. In Toronto, Ottawa and Guelph, clients classified as transitional users of shelters made up 87.5 per cent, 87.8 per cent and 93.6 per cent, respectively, of the samples in those cities. Similarly, clients classified as episodic shelter users made up 8.5 per cent (Toronto), 10.5 per cent (Ottawa) and 3.4 per cent (Guelph) of the sample

¹⁰ “Identifying the Patterns of Emergency Shelter Stayers of Single Individuals in Canadian Cities of Different Sizes,” *Housing Studies* 28, 6 (2013): 910-927.

of clients in those three cities. As was the case in the U.S. study, in all three cities in Ontario chronic users of shelters made up the smallest share of all shelter clients (four per cent in Toronto, 1.8 per cent in Ottawa and three per cent in Guelph).

A still more recent study by Hannah Rabinovitch, Bernie Pauly and Jinhui Zhao examining the pattern of shelter use of 4,332 individuals in Victoria, B.C. provides more support for the conclusion that the great majority of shelter users are transitional users. Those researchers found that in Victoria over the period of May 2010 to May 2014, 84.9 per cent of shelter users were transitional, 13.6 per cent were episodic and just 1.5 per cent were chronic.¹¹

THE CALGARY SITUATION

Canadian cities differ quite considerably by their response to homelessness. In Alberta, for example, there are more shelter beds per 100,000 people than in any other province.¹² In part this reflects differences in need but may also reflect differences in approaches to dealing with homelessness. In Vancouver, for example, one observes a greater willingness on the part of the city to keep inexpensive long-stay hotels open and available as an alternative to publicly funded shelters. In Calgary, the opposite approach — closing long-stay hotels and opening publicly funded shelters — means there are possibly significant differences in patterns of shelter use in different cities.¹³

The objective of this study is to determine the number of chronically, episodically and transitionally homeless shelter users in Calgary, to better inform both emergency and system responses in that city. Through this research there is an opportunity for local knowledge creation on the types of shelter stayers, which can help better direct limited resources in a way that is based on data and evidence. Understanding the scope and magnitude of the chronic and episodic homeless population allows for more informed action in the planning and delivery of housing and supports to successfully meet the targets of Calgary's Plan to End Homelessness.

The Data

The Homeless Individuals and Families Information System (HIFI) does not contain comparable data on shelter use in Alberta. A database used in Alberta, ETO (Efforts to Outcome), collects information from emergency shelters across the province on the nightly number of shelter users but includes no identifying information. It is, then, not possible to track the use of shelters by individuals using the ETO database. For our analysis, we rely on administrative data comparable to that contained in HIFI, but describing stays in only one shelter only in Calgary: the *Calgary Drop-In & Rehab Centre Society* (hereafter, the DI). These data provide a fine level of detail on shelter use by nearly 33,000 individuals over a five-year period.

¹¹ See Hannah Rabinovitch, Bernie Pauly and Jinhui Zhao, *Patterns of Homelessness in Greater Victoria* (Greater Victoria Coalition to End Homelessness, 2014).

¹² In 2012, there were 128 shelter beds per 100,000 people in Alberta. This compares to 113 beds per 100,000 people in Saskatchewan, 83 per 100,000 in B.C. and 77 per 100,000 in Ontario. See: Canada. Employment and Social Development Canada, *2012 Shelter Capacity Report* (Homelessness Partnership Secretariat, 2013).

¹³ Differences in patterns of shelter use also vary along an urban-rural divide. Rural homelessness is an emerging topic in Canada. Recent research suggests homelessness is well hidden in rural communities and must be contextualized within the socio-economic factors of those communities, including social infrastructure such as homeless supports and emergency shelters, macro-economic trends, the housing market and migration. For a thorough analysis of rural homelessness and how it differs from homelessness in urban areas, see Jeanette Waagemakers Shiff and Alina Turner, *Rural Alberta Homelessness* (University of Calgary and Alberta Centre for Child, Family and Community, 2014), http://www.research4children.com/data/documents/Alberta_Rural_Homelessness_Report_June_11_FINAL.pdf.

While we are limited to using data from only one emergency shelter in Calgary, it is important to note that the DI is the largest shelter in the city (with an average of 960 emergency beds across two sites over this study’s time period) and represents 60 per cent of all emergency-shelter beds for single adults in Calgary. Comparing the distribution of stays for other emergency shelters, we found that the other shelters mimic the distribution of stays in the DI. Therefore we believe that the DI is representative of the characteristics of single homeless adults in Calgary.¹⁴

Our data cover the period April 1, 2009 to April 1, 2014 and include the following data elements: daily check-in, daily check-out, date of birth, gender and ethnicity. The classification of ethnicity as “Caucasian,” “aboriginal” and “other” is based on observations by shelter intake staff. During the study period, we observe a total of 1,386,153 data points (stays in the shelter) distributed among the shelter users. Table 2 shows a snapshot of the data.¹⁵

TABLE 2 DATA SUMMARY: APRIL 2009 TO MARCH 2014

Date	# of obs.	Unique IDs
2009	281,496	13,852
2010	268,826	9,551
2011	238,605	9,327
2012	245,141	10,280
2013	273,049	11,586
2014	79,036	5,672
2009-14	1,386,153	32,972

The majority of shelter users were male (83 per cent); the average age of shelter residents was 39 years with a minimum age of 16 and maximum of 89. The majority (68 per cent) of shelter users were Caucasian with 19 per cent observed as aboriginal and 12 per cent as other. It is noteworthy that these observations for DI clients are nearly identical to the age, ethnicity and gender profile describing all shelter users in Calgary collected in point-in-time counts and summarized above. It seems unlikely then, that our sample using only DI clients provides an inaccurate picture of the characteristics of emergency-shelter users in Calgary as a whole.

Methodology

Our data allow us to construct variables consistent in definition to those employed by Kuhn and Culhane in their U.S. study and by Aubry et al. in their study of shelter stays in Toronto, Ottawa and Guelph. In particular, our data describe, for each unique individual;

- Number of episodes of homelessness: This variable is constructed by summing the number of times an individual is admitted to, and discharged from, the DI emergency shelter. Episodes are calculated so that stays in the shelter that are separated by fewer than 30 days are represented as one single episode. If two stays are separated by 30 days or more there are considered two distinct episodes.

¹⁴ Data similar to that which we use in our analysis are also available for two other Calgary emergency shelters: Alpha House and Mustard Seed. These data, however, describe shelter use of individuals over only one year rather than the five-year period available with the DI data. Our analysis of these data produces results quite similar to those described below.

¹⁵ Aubry et al. limited their sample by including only those who checked into a shelter after the beginning of their sample period, and who checked out before the end of it. We did not make this adjustment. Had we done so, the number of chronic users would have been less. The longer the time period covered by the sample, the smaller is the size of this problem.

- Number of days in shelter: This variable represents the number of cumulative days stayed within the shelter by each individual.
- Average days per episode: This variable represents the average number of days stayed in the DI emergency shelter per episode.

Our method of data analysis is also consistent with Kuhn and Culhane and with Aubry et al. in that we utilize a k-mean clustering analysis to identify three unique clusters each with standardized values for average days per episode and total episodes.¹⁶ Thus we are able to identify three clusters defined in the same way as the earlier studies and as summarized in Table 1 above.

Results

Over the five-year time period for the sample, 62 per cent of DI emergency-shelter users stayed seven days or less, and 33 per cent stayed only one night and never returned to this shelter. The majority of emergency-shelter users then, have only a very light “touch” on the shelter system. The average length of stay for all shelter users in the five-year period was about 42 days indicating that some shelter users established episodes of very long duration.

Table 3 identifies the number of unique emergency-shelter clients whose shelter stays can be classified as *transitional*, *episodic* and *chronic*. Those shelter users labelled as transitional users define 85.96 per cent of the sample or 28,344 unique individuals. These shelter users had the lowest number of episodes (an average of 1.74 episodes over the five years from 2009 to 2014) and the lowest number of total days spent in shelter (an average of 15.13). On average, the length of each episode was 8.39 days, and transitional shelter users utilized 30.96 per cent of all shelter beds.¹⁷

Similar to findings in other cities, episodic shelter users had a larger number of episodes in shelter (an average of 8.28 episodes) with each episode lasting approximately two weeks and total days stayed in shelter of 113. Episodic shelter users utilized 33.53 per cent of all shelter beds even though they define only 12.43 per cent (4,097 clients) of unique clients.

Finally, those identified as chronic shelter users were only 531 in number (1.61 per cent of total clients) but filled 35.51 per cent of shelter beds. This is explained by the fact these shelter users experienced very few episodes (an average of 3.48 per client) of very long duration (an average of 484.86 days per episode).

¹⁶ The *NbClust* package in R-project is used for analysis.

¹⁷ All *t*-tests comparing the three clusters were highly supportive of the conclusion that the characteristics of transitional, episodic and chronic shelter users reported in tables 3 and 4 are significantly different. Results of these hypothesis tests are available on request.

TABLE 3 PATTERNS OF SHELTER STAYS IN CALGARY (2009–2014)

	Transitional	Episodic	Chronic
Unique Clients	28,344	4,097	531
Per cent of Clients	85.96	12.43	1.61
Average No. of Episodes	1.74 (1.09)	8.28 (2.94)	3.48 (2.31)
No. of Episodes (%)			
1	59.5	--	23.9
2	19.9	--	17.5
3	10.6	0.2	18.3
4	6.6	2.2	10.9
5	3.4	8.2	10.0
6 or more	--	89.4	19.4
Average No. of Days	15.13 (39.98)	113.43 (119.86)	927.09 (388.48)
Average No. of Days/Episode	8.39 (25.43)	15.92 (20.34)	484.86 (494.33)
No. of Days/Episode (%)			
1-30	93.6	84.2	--
31-60	3.5	10.7	--
61-90	1.3	3.8	6.6
91 or more	1.5	1.2	93.4
No. of Occupied Shelter Beds	429,121	464,745	492,287
Per Cent of Occupied Shelter Beds	30.96	33.53	35.51

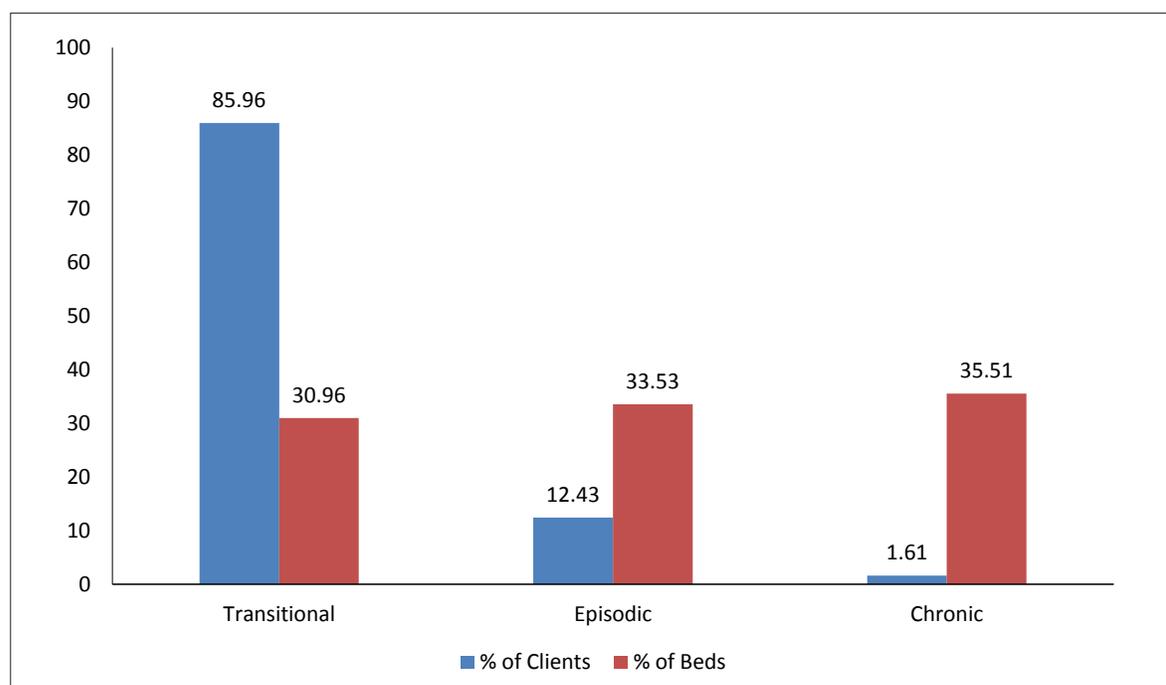
Note: Numbers in the parentheses are standard deviations.

The percentage of emergency-shelter users in Calgary classified as being transitional, episodic and chronic users of shelter beds is consistent with what Kuhn and Culhane found in New York and Philadelphia, and what Aubry et al. have found for Toronto, Ottawa and Guelph. That is, the great majority are transitional users of shelter beds. In Calgary, the percentage of transitional users is 86 per cent while in the Ontario cities, the percentage is slightly higher (87 per cent) and in the U.S. cities it is somewhat lower (81 per cent). More significant differences occur with respect to chronic users. In Calgary, only 1.6 per cent of shelter clients are chronic users; notably less than the four per cent in the Ontario cities and the nearly 10 per cent in the U.S. cities.¹⁸

The implication of these patterns for occupying shelter beds is summarized in Figure 5. Roughly one-third of beds in the DI emergency shelter are occupied by clients of each of the three typologies.

¹⁸ An important difference in our analysis compared to that undertaken in other studies is our reliance on data from a single shelter as opposed to using data on all shelters within a metropolitan area. For example, transitional users at the DI may be chronic users at a different emergency shelter, in which case we would be understating the number of chronic users of the DI. As we report in footnote 14 however, examination of a more limited dataset describing stays at two other emergency shelters in the city does not yield very different results.

FIGURE 5 PERCENTAGE BEDS OCCUPIED BY TYPE OF SHELTER USER



Designing appropriate public policy responses requires that we identify possible differences in the demographic composition of each type of client. This information is summarized in Table 4.

TABLE 4 THE DEMOGRAPHIC COMPOSITION OF TRANSITIONAL, EPISODIC AND CHRONIC EMERGENCY-SHELTER USERS (2009-2014)

	Transitional	Episodic	Chronic
Unique Clients	28,344	4,097	531
Gender (%):			
Male	82.6	85.5	90.6
Female	17.4	14.5	9.4
Average Age	38.30 (12.27)	40.53 (11.07)	48.03 (9.78)
Age Groups (%):			
Youth (16-19 years)	4.0	1.7	0.0
Young adult (20-39 years)	50.2	41.9	19.4
Middle age (40-59 years)	41.2	52.5	69.5
Senior (60 years and older)	4.3	3.9	11.1
Ethnicity (%):			
Caucasian	68.7	64.7	81.2
Aboriginal	18.8	25.2	9.8
Other	12.5	10.1	9.0

Note: Numbers in the parentheses are standard deviations.

From Table 4 we observe that chronic users of the DI emergency shelter are older, more likely to be male, and more likely to be Caucasian than transitional and episodic users. It is noteworthy that seniors make up 11 per cent of chronic users. The age and gender characteristics of transitional, episodic and chronic shelter users of the DI are not noticeably different from what was found by Aubry et al. in the three cities in Ontario.¹⁹

LIMITATIONS

While we believe our analysis and similar analyses are important for providing information required for more effective program interventions aimed at ending homelessness, we also recognize there are limitations to this approach.

One important consideration is to appreciate that analyses like ours can only tell us the number of transitional, episodic and chronic shelter users and not necessarily the number of people who are transitionally, episodically or chronically homeless. Thus, some of those identified as transitional users of emergency shelters may be rough sleepers who only occasionally engage with the shelter system when the weather forces them inside.²⁰ Other people may be episodic or transitional users of emergency shelters but be chronically homeless, with time outside of the shelter system spent in other institutions (jail, supportive housing, hospital or other health-care institutions, etc.) or other locations of homelessness (rough sleeping, couch surfing, etc.). Still others may be individuals who are otherwise housed and employed but must use the shelter system for short periods of time while, for example, waiting for the first of the month to gain a rental unit, waiting for seasonal labour opportunities, etc. Some of these latter cases may reflect environmental factors that shape Alberta's shelter system and trends in homelessness, including the draw of labour market opportunities, substantial and growing migration, as well as low vacancy rates and high rental costs.²¹ For these reasons, the number of transitional and episodic shelter users in Calgary might be inflated relative to what might be observed in other cities with different weather and rental and labour market conditions. All of this is to say that it is important for every jurisdiction to conduct its own analysis because local conditions play a crucial role in determining the size and nature of homelessness, including patterns of emergency-shelter use.

We also acknowledge that our data allow access to only a limited amount of information on demographic characteristics of shelter users: age, ethnicity and gender, all of which are reported as observed by intake staff. Many communities, including Calgary, are working to consolidate administrative shelter records with detailed information describing the needs of people experiencing homelessness in order to better plan and design interventions of support. With that information, we could paint a better picture of the characteristics of transitional, episodic and chronic shelter users and in this way provide information useful for the better design of programs of support.

¹⁹ Aubry et al. did not report on the ethnicity of shelter users.

²⁰ While on any day the number of rough sleepers forced into emergency shelters by the weather is relatively small, particular combinations of cold temperature and precipitation can result in a very large movement. See Jadidzadeh and Kneebone, "Shelter from the Storm"

²¹ See Stephen Gaetz, Tanya Gulliver and Tim Richter, *The State of Homelessness in Canada: 2014* (Toronto: The Homeless Hub Press, 2014).

Finally, as noted earlier, we are also limited to using data from just one emergency shelter in Calgary. If that shelter has policies with respect to access that differ from other emergency shelters in the city, our breakdown of shelter users into transitional, episodic and chronic may not be representative of shelter stays in the same way as the results reported for New York, Philadelphia, Toronto, Ottawa and Guelph.²² Having said this, it is also important to note that the DI provides shelter for approximately 60 per cent of all adult emergency-shelter users in Calgary.²³

PROGRAM AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Gaining an understanding of patterns of emergency-shelter use and the characteristics of those using shelters is clearly important for understanding what are appropriate policy responses and program interventions. The great majority of those who use emergency shelters are transitional shelter users and for these people emergency shelters are, by and large, functioning as they should: as an emergency resource for shelter. Our results, and those of other studies examining other cities, suggest however that only one-third of shelter beds are being used for this purpose. Two-thirds of emergency-shelter beds are being used by chronic and episodic users.

An obvious implication of our results is that a well-designed and effective program intervention targeted toward chronic users of the DI emergency shelters would lead to a substantial reduction in the required number of emergency-shelter beds. Recognizing that the DI accounts for 60 per cent of emergency-shelter spaces available to adults in Calgary and assuming an analysis utilizing data describing all emergency-shelter beds in the city yielded similar results, then targeting roughly 900 chronic users of emergency-shelter beds for placement into supportive housing would enable about one-third of all emergency-shelter beds to be put to more appropriate uses. The attraction of such a targeted intervention is enhanced by the recognition that providing stable, supportive housing for these individuals would generate savings; savings in the form of reduced interactions with the legal, justice and health-care systems.²⁴

A second clear implication of these findings is that it would be useful to determine the relationship between the total days stayed by episodic shelter users and the likelihood of those users “graduating” to become chronic users of emergency shelters. This would allow limited resources to be targeted toward providing rapid re-housing of episodic users most at risk of a long-term dependence on emergency shelters.

Calgary’s homeless-serving system is emphasizing responses in both these directions.²⁵ The evidence presented in Figure 1 suggests an important battle has been won in the sense that the rapid growth in homelessness in Calgary has been halted. To win the next battle — to begin reducing the number of persons without homes in Calgary — it is likely that Calgary’s homeless-serving system needs to continue its efforts to gain more information on individuals who use shelters. Importantly, a better understanding of the health status of these clients is critical, as previous research suggests individuals

²² It is also useful to note that the DI is a “wet” shelter, meaning it has relatively few restrictions on behaviours that might be prone to biasing our findings toward chronic, transitional or episodic users of emergency shelters.

²³ Our study, like the others that have applied this approach, has focused solely on users of adult emergency shelters. It would be useful and important to integrate these data with similar information pertaining to users of youth emergency shelters. Doing so might provide insights into steps required to limit or prevent the rate at which youth “graduate” into the adult shelter system and to develop interventions to prevent the entrenchment of youth in adult homelessness.

²⁴ For measures of the size of these cost savings, see Paula Goering et al., *National At Home/Chez Soi Final Report*, (Calgary, Alta.: Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2014).

²⁵ See *Calgary’s 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness* (Calgary, Alta.: Calgary Homeless Foundation, January 2011).

experiencing the greatest difficulty exiting homelessness are those with substance-abuse problems.²⁶ Understanding whether this is true in Calgary is important for effective program interventions that must recognize the nature of those issues and be designed to accommodate solutions that are sensitive to the unique and varied trajectories into homelessness.

One important way the homeless-serving sector is responding to this need is through the newly created program Coordinated Access and Assessment which is designed to improve the targeting of program interventions through the use of standardized assessments and intake processes, and directing specific target populations, including chronic shelter users, with the programmatic intervention best suited to meet their needs.²⁷

It is also important to emphasize that an eventual victory in the battle against homelessness requires interventions and efforts that are beyond the reach of Calgary's homeless-serving system. In particular, it is now recognized that at the heart of Calgary's problem with homelessness is the extraordinary lack of affordable rental accommodations.²⁸

The homeless-serving system in Calgary is working to navigate a tight rental market through a number of innovative, collaborative strategies to overcome the challenges of ending homelessness despite little available housing. One example is the RESOLVE campaign, a collaborative partnership with nine social service agencies to raise \$120 million to build affordable and supported housing for 3,000 people.²⁹ Another initiative is the Home Builder's Project which is working to build eight permanent supportive-housing buildings leveraging capital grants provided to the Calgary Homeless Foundation from Alberta Municipal Affairs.³⁰ Seventy per cent of the funding for these buildings is from Municipal Affairs, and the remaining funds will come from the Home Builders. Additionally, the homeless-serving system in Calgary is working hard to improve efficiencies and co-ordination in accessing scattered-site units through the private market by including Housing Location positions within housing programs to help facilitate access.

Solving this problem, however, will require a concerted effort on the part of federal, provincial and municipal governments to engage the private sector in building rental accommodations; efforts that require consideration of tax incentives, zoning changes and housing regulations.³¹

²⁶ See, for example, Tim Aubry, Fran Klodawsky and Daniel Coulombe, "Comparing the Housing Trajectories of Different Clusters within a Diverse Homeless Population," *American Journal of Community Psychology* 49 (2012).

²⁷ Coordinated Access and Assessment represents a single, standardized process for people experiencing homelessness to access housing and support services. More information on Coordinated Access and Assessment can be found here: http://calgaryhomeless.com/wp-content/uploads/Backgrounder_CAA.pdf.

²⁸ See, for example, Ronald Kneebone, Herbert Emery and Oksana Grynishak "Homelessness in Alberta: The Demand for Spaces in Alberta's Homeless Shelters," University of Calgary School of Public Policy Research Paper 4, 13 (September 2011). More recent reports indicate that Calgary has the smallest rental universe of any major city in Canada (Brian Burton, "Calgary's rental vacancy rate rises," *Calgary Herald*, December 30, 2014). The Calgary Homeless Foundation reports that in 2013, for the 10th consecutive year, Calgary's rental universe has grown smaller (see in *Point-in-Time Count Report*).

²⁹ Municipal Affairs is now within the Ministry of Seniors. For more information on the RESOLVE Campaign, see: <http://www.resolvecampaign.com/>.

³⁰ Eight homebuilders will balance the funding provided by Municipal Affairs to build eight new apartment buildings. The builders include: Albi Homes, Brookfield Residential Properties Inc., Calbridge Homes, Cardel Homes, Cedarglen Living, Centron, Homes by Avi, Hopewell Homes, Jayman MasterBUILT, Morrison Homes, Qualico and Shane Homes. To read more about the initiative, see: <http://calgaryhomeless.com/what-we-do/own-housing/new-projects/>.

³¹ For a thorough discussion of these possibilities, see Marion Steele and Peter Tomlinson, "Increasing the Affordability of Rental Housing in Canada," University of Calgary School of Public Policy Research Paper 3, 2 (2010).

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