

# Canadian Definition of Homelessness: What's being done in Canada & elsewhere?

Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (formerly the Canadian Homelessness Research Network)

## Introduction

There is no doubt that homelessness is a complex individual and societal problem, and this complicates efforts to define it. It is not simply an easily bounded and measurable 'category' of persons, as the boundary between the experience of homelessness and not being homeless is in many ways quite fluid. Many people experience the individual and structural problems that can lead to homelessness, but relatively few actually reach this state. It is this uncertain outcome that makes defining homelessness, especially in the preventive sense, a daunting task.

It is argued that the United States, Australia and European countries such as the United Kingdom have all experienced homelessness as a mass social and economic problem for much longer than Canada (where it really began to emerge in the 1980s and 1990s), and as a result have in general much more developed responses to homelessness. In doing so they have had to grapple with how to define homelessness in a way that supports policy development.

In this chapter, a comparative analysis is undertaken to identify the key strengths and weaknesses of different national and international definitions. The context within which definitions have been developed is explored, and the applicability of definitions (or elements of) to the Canadian context are examined. This review includes an exploration of definitions of homelessness from: a) the United Nations, b) the United States, c) Australia, and d) Europe (the ETHOS definition developed by FEANTSA). Below are some key approaches to defining homelessness from around the world.

## 1 UNITED NATIONS

For the United Nations, the interest in homelessness as a human rights issue extends all the way back to 1948. The most concrete definition of homelessness developed by the United Nations was declared in a 1998 document: *Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses* (section 1.450):

"The definition of the homeless can vary from country to country because homelessness is essentially a cultural definition based on concepts such as "adequate housing", "minimum community housing standard", or "security of tenure" (see para. 2.536-2.539) which can be perceived in different ways by different communities. The following two categories or degrees of homelessness are recommended:

- (a) Primary homelessness (or rooflessness). This category includes persons living in streets or without a shelter that would fall within the scope of living quarters;
- (b) Secondary homelessness. This category may include the following groups:
  - (i) Persons with no place of usual residence who move frequently between various types of accommodation (including dwellings, shelters or other living quarters);
  - (ii) Persons usually resident in long-term (also called "transitional") shelters or similar arrangements for the homeless.

## Summary:

Some of the strengths of this definition include its emphasis on the significance of context; that there cannot be a universal definition of a 'minimum standard of community housing', nor of 'affordable housing'. Nevertheless, the overall definition is much too broad, and the binary distinction between 'primary homelessness' and 'secondary homelessness' is neither detailed nor sufficiently sophisticated to offer much applicability to the Canadian context. In addition, it does not adequately address important Canadian concerns such as how to think about 'hidden homelessness' or people "at risk" of homelessness. While a good place to begin, this definition does not offer much that is applicable or useful in the Canadian context.

## 2 UNITED STATES

Over the past three decades, federal policy has been the driver of efforts to define homelessness in the United States, and this has shaped how it is taken up at the State and local levels, for government funding and program design are tied to the federal definition. Efforts to define homelessness have evolved in the United States, and this evolution is closely tied to shifts in government priorities regarding homelessness. Until recently, American definitions of homelessness have been distinguished by two key features: a) the narrowness of the definition (the exclusion of "at risk"), and b) the focus on chronicity, or length of time people have been homeless.

The current American definition of homelessness is a modified version that was framed in the first important piece of federal legislation relating to homelessness, the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act of 1987 (P.L. 100-77). This act defined someone as homeless if he or she "...lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence." The focus here is on *absolute* homelessness, in terms of people sleeping in "a public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings," but also includes people staying in emergency shelters designed for homeless people (here, the definition can be seen to parallel the United Nations definition).

An important point to be made here is that the definition of homelessness contained in what eventually became the McKinney-Vento Act did evolve to encompass a broader scope including people deemed to be 'at risk'. American policy has until recently considered this latter category highly problematic to address, and a low priority. Martha Burt, a leading homelessness scholar in the United States puts it this way:

"To operationalize the *public policy* of the Act's definition, at a very practical level it often gets translated into the narrowest of working definitions—having been without housing *last night*, or expecting to be without housing *tonight*. Thus people in very precarious circumstances who still manage to stay in conventional dwellings by moving every few days or weeks from one relative's house to another would not be considered homeless until they reached the situation of having nowhere to go but the streets or a shelter." (Burt, 2003:3)

The reason for this narrower focus can be attributed to the fact that at this time, the US was grappling with a growing homelessness problem and the first phase of its emergent response was to focus on the provision of emergency services for people absolutely without shelter. One can also speculate that in the US, with a much higher rate of poverty than countries like Canada, there is an ongoing desire to narrow the definition of homelessness, because if one included people who were housed, but at risk of losing their housing, the scope of the problem would broaden immensely and could not be addressed with current resources.

The second phase of the US response to homelessness began in the year 2000. This was the moment when the "10 Year Plan" model began to take hold, first articulated in the National Alliance to End Homelessness' "**A Plan Not a Dream How to End Homelessness in Ten Years**" (NAEH, 2000). Supported by the US government with funding through several programs, this



approach was to gain traction and spread throughout the States. Here, the focus was on implementing measurable targets and outcomes, which placed the US ahead of many other nations (including Canada) at that time. To support this effort to monitor progress on addressing homelessness, a standardized system of data collection and analysis was designed and implemented for the homelessness sector, referred to as HMIS, or “homeless management information systems” (HMIS). The need to enumerate homelessness, manage data and measure progress underlay the need to develop and enhance a more robust definition of homelessness.

The shift was also marked by a move away from a focus on emergency services, to helping people move out of homelessness. The priority population of this first phase of 10 year plans was the **chronically homeless**. At the same time, and supported by the 10 Year Plan model, was an endorsement of the Housing First approach, which represented a paradigm shift in the approach to emergency services, away from the notion that people with mental health or addictions issues needed to be supported by the homelessness sector before they were ‘ready’ for housing.

This development coincided with a shift in the United States, to a concern with defining homelessness in terms of chronicity. The focus on chronic homelessness was supported by research on shelter users by Randall Kuhn and Dennis Culhane (1998). They found that although those who are chronically homeless represented only a small share of the overall homeless population, they used up more than 50 percent of the services. Kuhn & Culhane popularized a useful typology to address the temporal nature of homelessness, that included Transitional / Chronic / Episodic homeless (Kuhn & Culhane, 1998). Their interest in this typology built on earlier work by Grigsby et al (1990) who organized the population into four clusters (“recently dislocated”, the “vulnerable”, the “outsiders”, and the “prolonged”) and Mowbray et al., (1993) who also used a four cluster model, but focused on mental health and addictions to define them. More specifically, though, they built on three cluster models of Lovell, Barrow & Struensing, 1984; Rossi, 1986; Hopper, 1989; Sossin et al., 1990 and Jaheil, 1992)

Kuhn and Culhane use the term ‘**Transitional homelessness**’ to refer to those who enter the shelter system or temporary housing for a single stay and a limited time period, typically as a result of a catastrophic event such as unemployment, poverty, rising rates, family discord. They are more likely to be younger and healthier, less likely to have serious mental health or addictions issues, and are generally able to move themselves out of homelessness without a lot of support. In most cases they do not return to homelessness. The transitional homeless population is the largest group (up to 80% of shelter users) and because of their self-sufficiency and short stays, should utilize fewer resources.

‘**Episodic homelessness**’ refers to situations in which people cycle in and out of homelessness. They move from shelters to inpatient units, jails or other temporary setting such as treatment programs. They too are more likely to be young, but they may also suffer from medical, mental health and addictions issues, and may be chronically employed. They make up about 10% of the homeless population.

‘**Chronic homelessness**’ refers to situations where homelessness becomes more entrenched, often characterized by longer term shelter use. This is the group that Kuhn and Culhane characterize as “those persons most like the stereotypical profile of the skid-row homeless” (p. 211). They are an older population consisting of long-term unemployed, and are more likely to suffer from disabilities, mental health and health problems, and addictions.

This focus on the **chronically homeless** meant that this definition of homelessness dominated US policy for much of the past 10 years. Definitions can reflect policy directions and drive practice, but also create boundaries and limit who the policy is directed at. The tight focus on addressing chronic homelessness meant that less attention was paid to addressing those defined as “at risk”. Martha Burt puts it succinctly:



“The consequence of this policy-driven working definition has been the development of an extensive network of homeless assistance programs that help to ameliorate the realities of homelessness for those already without housing. But most existing homeless-specific programs can do little to prevent homelessness or change the forces that continue to generate homelessness.” (Burt, 2003:4)

A major shift in US homelessness policy has occurred over the past couple of years. The United States Interagency Council on Homelessness launched a new Ten Year Plan to End Homelessness (supported by the National Alliance to End Homelessness)<sup>1</sup> titled: “**Opening Doors: Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness 2010**”. This new plan builds on the previous plans, but rather than emphasize the needs of chronic homelessness, there has been a recognition of the need to shift the focus to **prevention**, and this is in fact reflected in the title of the report. A preventive focus means putting in place strategies to stop people from becoming homeless in the first place, as well as prioritizing the strategy of **Rapid Rehousing**, meaning working to get people into housing as soon as possible once they fall into homelessness. The plan also attempts to reorient the whole emergency services sector, so that agencies are rewarded for both preventing homelessness and moving people INTO housing as soon as possible, not for filling beds in shelters.

Researcher Dennis Culhane and his colleagues, in an excellent document titled “A Prevention-Centered Approach to Homelessness Assistance” (Culhane, et al., 2010) outline the framework and evidence-base for this rather dramatic paradigm shift in the American response to homelessness. The National Alliance to End Homelessness has also produced a range of documents to support the transition to a preventive approach, and to help communities implement the new strategy<sup>2</sup>.

This new focus on prevention begs the question of how to think about those ‘at risk’ of homelessness within the definition<sup>3</sup>. A key piece of legislation that was part of this shift was “**The Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing (HEARTH) Act of 2009**” (S.896), which amended and replaced the McKinney-Vento Homeless Act by consolidating three separate homeless assistance programs administered by HUD into a single grant program. The HEARTH Act now provides the most up to date and comprehensive American definition of homeless, but in its details does not represent a radical shift in the definition contained in the McKinney-Vento act. The Act does define a range of terms, including “homeless,” “homeless individual,” “homeless family,” “homeless youth” and “homeless individual with a disability”.

The ‘General definition of a homeless individual or homeless person (SEC. 103. [42 USC 11302].) defined in the HEARTH Act is as follows:

- “(1) an individual or family who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence;*
- (2) an individual or family with a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings, including a car, park, abandoned building, bus or train station, airport, or camping ground;*
- (3) an individual or family living in a supervised publicly or privately operated shelter designated to provide temporary living arrangements (including hotels and motels paid for by Federal, State, or local government programs for low-income individuals or by charitable organizations, congregate shelters, and transitional housing);*

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1. This is in fact the first US government Ten Year Plan. While the Federal government had been supporting the use of plans previously, the first plan was in fact produced by the National Alliance to End Homelessness (a major not-for-profit organization) rather than the federal government itself.
  2. NAEH Documents include:  
Homelessness Prevention: Creating Programs that Work;  
Creating a Plan for the Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing Program;  
Homeless Prevention and Rapid RE-Housing Program (HPRP) Resources
  3. Interestingly, before the HEARTH act, the notion of ‘at risk’ of homelessness already existed in the McKinney-Vento definition, but was not used for enumeration or strategic purposes.

- (4) *an individual who resided in a shelter or place not meant for human habitation and who is exiting an institution where he or she temporarily resided;*
- (5) *an individual or family who—*
- (A) *will imminently lose their housing, including housing they own, rent, or live in without paying rent, are sharing with others, and rooms in hotels or motels not paid for by Federal, State, or local government programs for low-income individuals or by charitable organizations, as evidenced by—*
    - (i) *a court order resulting from an eviction action that notifies the individual or family that they must leave within 14 days;*
    - (ii) *the individual or family having a primary nighttime residence that is a room in a hotel or motel and where they lack the resources necessary to reside there for more than 14 days; or*
    - (iii) *credible evidence indicating that the owner or renter of the housing will not allow the individual or family to stay for more than 14 days, and any oral statement from an individual or family seeking homeless assistance that is found to be credible shall be considered credible evidence for purposes of this clause;*
  - (B) *has no subsequent residence identified; and*
  - (C) *lacks the resources or support networks needed to obtain other permanent housing; and can be expected to continue in such status for an extended period of time because of chronic disabilities, chronic physical health or mental health conditions, substance addiction, histories of domestic violence or childhood abuse, the presence of a child or youth with a disability, or multiple barriers to employment.*

As one can see, the HEARTH Act is quite detailed, and also makes clear that the notion of being ‘at risk’ is part of the broader definition of homelessness. It can be argued that given the new policy focus on prevention and the housing crisis of the last several years, that this part of the definition (which did exist prior to the policy shift) now looms larger in significance. The language in the HEARTH Act referring to the at risk population includes:

**1) People at risk of losing their housing:**

- a) *for financial reasons or by eviction: “will imminently lose their housing, including housing they own, rent, or live in without paying rent, are sharing with others, and rooms in hotels or motels not paid for by Federal, State, or local government programs for low-income individuals or by charitable organizations (SEC. 103. [42 USC 11302]. (b) p.1)*
- b) *because of domestic violence “the Secretary shall consider to be homeless any individual or family who is fleeing, or is attempting to flee, domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, stalking, or other dangerous or life threatening conditions in the individual’s or family’s current housing situation, including where the health and safety of children are jeopardized, and who have no other residence and lack the resources or support networks to obtain other permanent housing.” (SEC. 103. [42 USC 11302].(b) p.2)*

More broadly, the HEARTH act had a focused definition of “At Risk of Homelessness”:

*“The term ‘at risk of homelessness’ means, with respect to an individual or family, that the individual or family—”*

- (A) *has income below 30 percent of median income for the geographic area;*
- (B) *has insufficient resources immediately available to attain housing stability; and*

- (C) (i) has moved frequently because of economic reasons;
- (ii) is living in the home of another because of economic hardship;
- (iii) has been notified that their right to occupy their current housing or living situation will be terminated;
- (iv) lives in a hotel or motel;
- (v) lives in severely overcrowded housing;
- (vi) is exiting an institution; or
- (vii) otherwise lives in housing that has characteristics associated with instability and an increased risk of homelessness.

The question of whether persons in **institutional care** count as being homeless or at risk of homelessness is one that many grapple with. The HEARTH Act has a contradictory stance on whether people in corrections or other institutional settings are in fact homeless.

*“A person who currently lives or resides in an institutional care facility, including a jail, substance abuse or mental health treatment facility, hospital or other similar facility, and has resided there for fewer than 90 days shall be considered chronically homeless if such person met all of the requirements described in subparagraph (A) prior to entering that facility.”*  
(TITLE IV—HOUSING ASSISTANCE SUBTITLE A—GENERAL PROVISIONS SEC. 401, 3B)

However, elsewhere the act (in the general description of homelessness) it is stated:

- (d) **EXCLUSION**—For purposes of this Act, the term “homeless” or “homeless individual” does not include any individual imprisoned or otherwise detained pursuant to an Act of the Congress or a State law.

However, in spite of legislative changes and the new emphasis on prevention, the doors have not really been opened wide to the inclusion of ‘at risk’ populations. It is still the case, for instance, that in enumerating homelessness and in developing services and supports, the US still operates with a narrower conception of homelessness that does not clearly take account of people who are at risk. The fear voiced by leaders in the sector is that a definition that is too broad becomes problematic when there are limited resources, and that most people who are in fact ‘at risk’ never become homeless, or if they do, they do not use the services of the sector. If 100 people are at risk, we do not really know how many will actually become homeless, nor what in the end distinguishes them from those who stay housed.

So, the inclusion of “at risk in a definition of homelessness in the United States continues to be quite controversial. There are still a large number of people from research and policy communities who argue that broadening the definition too much in fact spreads resources too thin and dilutes the effectiveness of strategies to address homelessness. As leading homelessness researcher Dennis Culhane routinely says when this issue is discussed: “Just because you are in a bad marriage doesn’t mean you are single”.

### American definitions of Family and Youth homelessness

The US government also offers a separate definition of family homelessness as well as youth homelessness. The definition of youth homelessness is not well developed, for youth are still largely defined in terms of their relationship to parents. This definition was outlined in **Subtitle B of Title VII of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (Title X, Part C, of the No Child Left Behind Act – reauthorized, 2002).**

## Homelessness counts

The United States has a long history of engaging in counts of people who are homeless (Baumohl, 1996). Because the United States has moved in the direction of strategic plans to end homelessness, they have adopted national standards for enumeration, based on the McKinney-Vento definition of homelessness, and they also have paid special attention to measuring chronicity in their counts (chronic / episodic / transitional). They most often use “point in time” counts, and the National Alliance to End Homelessness has developed a range of tools to support local and regional governments, with the aim of having everyone use similar methodologies.

All of this is done with full recognition of the limitations of point-in-time counts of homeless persons: “The limitations include definitional issues, finding homeless people, data collection and enumeration methods, sampling and extrapolation, de-duplicating, and differing time frames” (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2007:10). Nevertheless, the use of a standard definition of homelessness, and standardized approaches to counting greatly enables the Federal government, State and local governments to measure progress on addressing homelessness, and to compare between regions.

## Summary:

The United States has extensive legislation at the Federal level addressing the problem of homelessness. The United States Interagency Council works to facilitate a coordinated response across all departments. Through the legislation and funding power of the Federal government, as well as the key role played by the National Alliance to End Homelessness in mobilizing strategies to address homelessness, States and local government are expected to develop community-based solutions in accordance with national level initiatives, laws and funding.

The development of a definition of homelessness is thus policy-driven in the United States. Key strengths of US approach to defining homelessness include:

- A detailed definition that helps specify parameters of who is homeless;
- Includes “at risk” of homelessness;
- Focus on “chronicity” captures an important dimension of homelessness, and is distinct from most typologies and definitions that focus on housing status;
- Enables more consistent approach to counting;
- Supports government priorities, including: a) determining funding eligibility for programs, b) providing guidelines for program and policy development in state and local governments, c) enabling counting and measurement of progress.

The main weaknesses of the US definition are that:

- It is overly detailed and framed in legalistic terms, and is therefore difficult to explain easily. It is not laid out as a conceptual framework.
- It is designed to frame eligibility criteria for government benefits.
- While there is an effort to define some subpopulations, the definition of youth homelessness does not really address the category of unattached homeless youth (street youth), and there is no definition of Aboriginal homelessness.

### 3 AUSTRALIA

In Australia, the definition of homelessness has evolved over the years. There have been two commonly used definitions. The first was that defined by the Commonwealth Government (Australia) in 1994 through its Supported Accommodation and Assistance Program (SAAP)<sup>4</sup>. More specifically, the definition of homelessness contained in this act states that:

“A person is homeless if, and only if, he or she has inadequate access to safe and secure housing. A person is taken to have inadequate access to safe and secure housing if the only housing to which the person has access:

- (a) damages, or is likely to damage, the person’s health; or
- (b) threatens the person’s safety; or
- (c) marginalises the person through failing to provide access to:
  - (i) adequate personal amenities; or
  - (ii) the economic and social support that a home normally affords; or
- (d) places the person in circumstances which threaten or adversely affect the adequacy, safety, security and affordability of that housing.”

In the last decade, both the National government as well as many State governments have begun to shift to adopting a common definition first put forward by researchers Chris Chamberlain and David MacKenzie, who emphasize the importance of adopting a ‘cultural’ definition that defines homelessness in relation to minimum community standards regarding housing (note the link to the United Nations definition). They feel that a cultural definition is necessary to take account of the various circumstances of people who are homeless as they move around. The key idea that underpins this cultural definition is the notion that “there are shared community standards about the minimum accommodation that people can expect to achieve in contemporary society” with the minimum accommodation for an individual person being “a small rental flat with a bedroom, living room, kitchen and bathroom and an element of security of tenure provided by a lease” (MacKenzie and Chamberlain, 2008). They then argue that anyone living below this cultural ‘standard’ is homeless, and anyone living above is housed. This cultural definition is now broadly used by policy makers and researchers in Australia. From this, Chamberlain & MacKenzie define the following three levels of homelessness:

“**Primary homelessness** accords with the common sense assumption that homelessness is the same as ‘rooflessness’. It includes all people without conventional accommodation, such as people living on the streets, sleeping in parks, squatting in derelict buildings, or using cars or railway carriages for temporary shelter. Primary homelessness is operationalised using the census category ‘improvised homes, tents and sleepers out’.

“**Secondary homelessness** includes people who move frequently from one form of temporary shelter to another. On census night, it includes all people staying in emergency or transitional accommodation provided under the SAAP. The starting point for identifying this group is the census category ‘hostels for the homeless, night shelters and refuges’. Secondary homelessness also includes people residing temporarily with other households because they have no accommodation of their own. They report ‘no usual address’ on their census form. Secondary homelessness also includes people staying in boarding houses on a short-term basis, operationally defined as 12 weeks or less.

“**Tertiary homelessness** refers to people who live in boarding houses on a medium to long-term basis, operationally defined as 13 weeks or longer. Residents of private boarding houses do not have a separate bedroom and living room; they do not have kitchen and bathroom facilities of their own; their accommodation is not self-contained; and they do not have security of tenure provided by a lease. They are homeless because their accommodation situation is below the minimum community standard.” (Chamberlain & Mackenzie, 2003:1)

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4. Supported Accommodation Assistance Act 1994 (Cth), s 4(1).



They caution that this cultural definition identifies people as homeless on the basis of their housing circumstances on census night, but it is not meant to imply that there are three separate and distinct sub-populations, for in fact most homeless people move between these various forms of temporary accommodation over time.

It should be noted that in Australia, in spite of very effective responses to youth homelessness, there is no 'official' definition. Most documents relating to homelessness, including those used by the commonwealth government, reference the above definition.

## Defining "At Risk" of Homelessness

Though there is no official definition of 'at risk' of homelessness, the language of risk is regularly used in strategic documents addressing the issue. This is perhaps not surprising given the degree to which prevention is a central strategic focus of the Australian response to homelessness, which necessarily requires that attention be paid to the understanding of risk factors and pathways into homelessness. The recent White Paper on homelessness, the "Road Home", is full of contexts that put people at risk including "older people in housing stress, women and children leaving violence, Indigenous Australians and people leaving state care" (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008:ix), as well as people in the criminal justice system (ibid:9) and those who are unemployed (ibid:). They also identify underlying issues associated with being at risk, including: "domestic and family violence, mental health problems, poverty or drug and alcohol addiction. Often, a single further pressure or event – job loss, eviction, poor health or relationship breakdown – can tip a person who is already vulnerable into homelessness" (ibid; 24).

The Department of Veterans Affairs defines "at risk" in terms of specific factors that may place housing in jeopardy, including: (but not limited to):

- Paying unsustainable high rent and experiencing severe 'housing stress'
- Experiencing health problems (such as mental health, drug or alcohol addiction, disability or ageing) that impact on the ability to maintain housing
- Severely socially isolated and not accessing welfare services or supports, may have been cut off from support or 'burnt their bridges'
- Lacking personal or social supports, living alone and struggling to live independently; or experiencing relationship breakdown and/or violence
- Experiencing adverse pressures from landlords and/or neighbours (including neighbourhood disputes).
- For the purposes of this study, veterans are considered to be experiencing homelessness and at imminent risk of homelessness if their circumstances are consistent with one or more of the Australian cultural definition and the SAAP definitions of homelessness, and/or the risk factors noted above.

## Defining Aboriginal Homelessness

One of the issues that links Australia's experience of homelessness with Canada's is that Aboriginal people are over-represented in homeless populations. The Government of Australia has attempted to address the issue of defining Aboriginal homelessness. Two national reports have attempted to define Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander homelessness: the Keys Young report, *Homelessness in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander context and its possible implications for Supported Accommodation Assistance Program* (Keys Young, 1998) and the more recent Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute's (AHURI) research report, *Categories of Indigenous 'Homeless' People and Good Practice Responses to Their Needs* (Memmott, et al., 2003). Both reports situate the problem of Aboriginal homelessness in the broader legacy of colonialism; that there is a history of physical and cultural displacement, violence and marginalization, and that this has had a huge impact on communities, families and individuals and increased their vulnerability to becoming homeless. The quote below from Keys Young (2003 p:iii) is an attempt to illustrate the significance of the cultural context:



*“The particular affiliation of Indigenous people to their land and ‘country’ is imbued with a religious, spiritual, physical and cultural significance that is unique to Indigenous Australians. Similarly, the ties to the family are particularly marked in Indigenous communities. Kinship networks comprise a complex web of mutual rights, obligations and responsibilities and constitute a central organizational plank of traditional Indigenous society ... this sense of kinship and mutual support is still very important today.”*

*“Indigenous attitudes to possessions and property are also important in understanding homelessness. There is still a strong cultural element about sharing possessions and property in Indigenous families. Not only is the sense of individual ‘ownership’ far less developed than in non-Indigenous society, but also the value placed upon physical dwellings is significantly less.”*

Both studies attempted to define homelessness after extensive consultation with Aboriginal populations. The first report (Keys Young, 1998) identified five distinct types of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander homelessness:

- spiritual homelessness (separation from traditional land or from family)
- overcrowding (a hidden form of homelessness)
- relocation and transient homelessness (which results in temporary, intermittent and often cyclical patterns of homelessness due to transient and mobile lifestyles, but also to the necessity of a larger proportion of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population – relative to the non-Indigenous population – having to travel to obtain services)
- escaping from an unsafe or unstable home (mainly women and young people)
- lack of access to any stable shelter i.e., ‘nowhere to go’.

This report identified the distinctiveness of the problem of homelessness within Aboriginal communities, compared with the broader population. They remarked on the fact that Aboriginal persons were well aware that they were overrepresented amongst the homeless. They also pointed out that as a problem, homelessness was conceptualized as not just affecting individuals and families, but communities as well. Finally, they argued that for Aboriginal populations, the problem of homelessness was different in nature, *“as it encompasses physical, spiritual and cultural aspects and dimensions”*.

The issue of whether the dominant Australian definition of homelessness (Chamberlain and McKenzie) was applicable to, and reflective of the experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander homelessness was taken up by the Aboriginal Housing Board of Victoria during an Indigenous Homelessness Workshop (Berry, 2001). They found that while there was no doubt that while *“different groups of people experience homelessness in different ways and the range of issues and needs may vary, the meaning of homelessness did not emerge as a major controversy”*<sup>5</sup>. This suggested that the three tier definition of Chamberlain and McKenzie was sufficiently applicable to the Aboriginal experience, reinforcing its usefulness as a national definition (note: this the applicability of a national definition of homelessness to Aboriginal communities will be important in Canada).

The second major research report, *Categories of Indigenous ‘Homeless’ People and Good Practice Responses to Their Needs*, built upon previous research and the Keys Young report. In this report they identified three broad categories:

### **1) Public place dwellers**

People who “live in a mix of public or semi-public places (as well as some private places which are entered illegally at night to gain overnight shelter) such as: parks, churches, verandahs, car parks, car sales yards, beaches, drains, river banks, vacant lots, dilapidated buildings, and those on the edges of small towns.” (Memmott et al., 2003:7) Sub-categories include:

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5. Australian government website: Indigenous Homelessness within Australia

- *Public place-dwellers: short-term, intermittent and voluntary*
- *Public place-dwellers: medium-term, voluntary*
- *Public place-dwellers: long-term (chronically homeless), voluntary*
- *Public place-dwellers: reluctant, necessitated by circumstances*

## 2) The At-Risk-of-Homelessness Category

This category also includes four sub-categories of people who are at risk of losing their accommodation, or “at least losing the amenity of their accommodation” (Memcott et al., 2003:10). Subcategories include:

- *Insecurely Housed*
- *Housed in Substandard Conditions*
- *Housed in Crowded Conditions*
- *Dysfunctionally Mobile Persons*

The latter category includes “persons in a state of continual or intermittent residential mobility, which includes temporary residence (e.g. crisis accommodation), that is the result of personal and/or social problems (e.g. violence, alcohol and substance abuse), lack of safety or security in a social sense, personality or ‘identity crisis’, and lack of emotional support and security. (Memcott et al., 2003:12).

In addition, one should note the culturally defined notion of crowded conditions as involving more than merely a density issue, with ‘crowding’ in the Aboriginal context referring to stressful circumstances.

## 3) Spiritually Homeless

To be spiritually homeless means separation from traditional land, separation from family and kinship networks and a crisis of personal identity. That is, one’s understanding or knowledge of how one relates to country, family and Aboriginal identity systems is confused.

The authors argue, based on consultations and past research, that for Aboriginal peoples the notion of home is not necessarily directly connected to a physical structure that one has tenure of; rather, that in some ways the notion of ‘home’ is conflated with ‘country’ or ‘land’:

“To be homeless in this context then, means to be without country; to have no such set of intimate connections, to have an incomplete identity and only a set of unanswered questions about who one’s ancestors were and what the meaning of their country was. This is a form of spiritual and psychological homelessness. Unfortunately it is the fate of many individuals and families who were removed from their traditional countries and wider circle of kin by government agencies (through dispossession, removalism and stolen children) throughout the better part of the last century (and for many coastal or near coastal groups during parts of the 19th century as well). The more temporally distant is the connection to country in terms of generations, the more inaccessible seem to be the answers about self-identity and ‘home’ (country), which in turn may have a stressful impact on an individual’s sense of spiritual health.”

Memcott et al., 2003:14).

This notion of ‘country’ as ‘home’ also informs conceptualizations of public place homelessness, for such public spaces may in fact be considered home, and that homelessness in this case describes the loss of control of the use of such spaces.

## Summary:

The Australian definition of homelessness has many advantages relative to the American definition. The use of a tripartite definition (similar to what has often been used in Canada) provides much more conceptual clarity than the American definition, bound as it is in the language of legislation. The current definition emerged from the research community, and became recognized and established by the government after the fact, rather than the other way around. There is great clarity to the definition, it references the census and could clearly be used for the purposes of enumeration. Key to note from the effort to define homelessness in Australia is that they engaged Aboriginal communities in establishing a definition. While the experiences of Aboriginal communities in Canada and Australia are clearly not the same, in both cases colonialism and racism have defined the experiences of homelessness within these communities. In the Canadian context it is probably a good idea to follow this example of engaging Aboriginal people and communities in creating a new national definition.

The main weaknesses of the Australian approach is that “at risk” populations have not been included as part of their official definition, nor is there a precise definition of youth homelessness. This is perhaps a bit surprising given the attention paid to preventive approaches in the Australian context.

## 4 Europe and the ETHOS Definition of Homelessness

The development of a common definition of homelessness in Europe has no doubt been quite challenging, given the profound differences between the 27 different member states, and the complexities of a federal model that includes local, regional, national and supra-national government structures and policy contexts. Nevertheless, the definition adopted in Europe is one of the most well-formulated in the world, and it is argued here, provides a robust model that can in many ways be adapted to the Canadian context.

### Background:

Two key organizations are responsible for the development of a common definition of homelessness in Europe. FEANTSA (European Federation of Organizations Working with the Homeless) is an “umbrella of not-for-profit organisations which participate in or contribute to the fight against homelessness in Europe. It is the only major European network that focuses exclusively on homelessness at the European level” (FEANTSA website). As its full name suggests, FEANTSA works across the nation states of the European Union to facilitate knowledge exchange in the areas of research, policy and practice. The **European Observatory on Homelessness** is the robust research arm of FEANTSA. Set up almost two decades ago, the European Observatory on Homelessness has built up a wealth of research on the subject of homelessness and housing exclusion. It includes researchers from across Europe, and regularly hosts conferences. The Observatory has made a major contribution to policy development in Europe, having produced a large number of research reports, statistical data, policy reviews, European thematic reports, books, articles as well as the European Journal of Homelessness.

The context for developing a pan-European definition of homelessness is quite challenging. There is a long history of efforts to address homelessness in Europe, and not surprisingly, there has been a broad range of approaches to defining and counting homelessness across the different nation states, reflecting profound differences in governance, social welfare provisions and poverty levels. Many countries lack a legislative framework with statutory responsibility for homelessness, and differences in how welfare systems, health care and social supports are organized are quite profound. The challenges of creating a definition of homelessness that works in Poland, Portugal, the UK and Sweden is quite profound, and should give pause to those who believe that creating a common Canadian definition is beyond reach because of the complexities of our own federal system.



Nevertheless, through the European Observatory on Homeless FEANTSA has moved forward over the past ten years to establish a common European definition. From a policy perspective, there was a recognition of the need for a common definition, for its absence was seen to negatively impact on the ability of governments to develop adequate and appropriate responses to homelessness, to measure progress, and to share strategies and results. If different nations define homelessness in distinct ways and operate within profoundly different program and policy contexts, where is the opportunity to share and learn?

There was also a strong feeling that narrow definitions of homelessness used in some nations impaired the development of effective responses focusing on prevention; on tackling the causes of homelessness. If one only addresses absolute homelessness (people living outdoors or in shelters), then the problem of hidden homelessness is not properly addressed, nor is one's ability to identify and remedy structural and systems factors that create risk and produce homelessness in the first place.

In the end, the European Observatory on Homelessness and the FEANTSA Data Collection Group engaged in a consultative process and eventually established a common definition of homelessness in Europe, known as ETHOS.

### ETHOS – the European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion

Since 2007, ETHOS has become the standardized definition of homelessness in Europe. At its most basic level, it identifies four different kinds of homelessness, including: **rooflessness** (without a shelter of any kind, sleeping rough); **houselessness** (with a place to sleep but temporary in institutions or shelter) e.g. emergency shelters, hospitals, prisons etc.; **living in insecure housing** (threatened with severe exclusion due to insecure tenancies, eviction, domestic violence). This would also include staying with family or friends or couch surfing; living in inadequate housing which includes both substandard and overcrowded accommodation (in caravans on illegal campsites, in unfit housing, extreme overcrowding). When the ETHOS framework gets mentioned, it is often accompanied by a chart (See page 14) that details the main operational categories, subcategories, types of accommodation and generic definitions of each.

The underlying conceptual framework of ETHOS goes well beyond a consideration of the housing status of the person, individual failings and deviance, to a recognition that homelessness must be viewed within the broader context of social exclusion (or conversely, social inclusion). The notion of social exclusion speaks to the process of being detached or shut out from participation in many of the key social, economic, political or cultural systems that enable individuals and families to be integrated into society in a meaningful and healthy way. It is a useful concept for making sense of homelessness, by understanding the degree to which: "the personal histories of individuals intersect with certain social, political and economic conditions that restrict people's access to spaces, institutions and practices that reduce risk" (Gaetz, 2004). People who are socially excluded are often socially, economically *and* spatially marginalized and separated from the people and places that other citizens have access to within advanced industrial societies (Mandaniapour 1998).

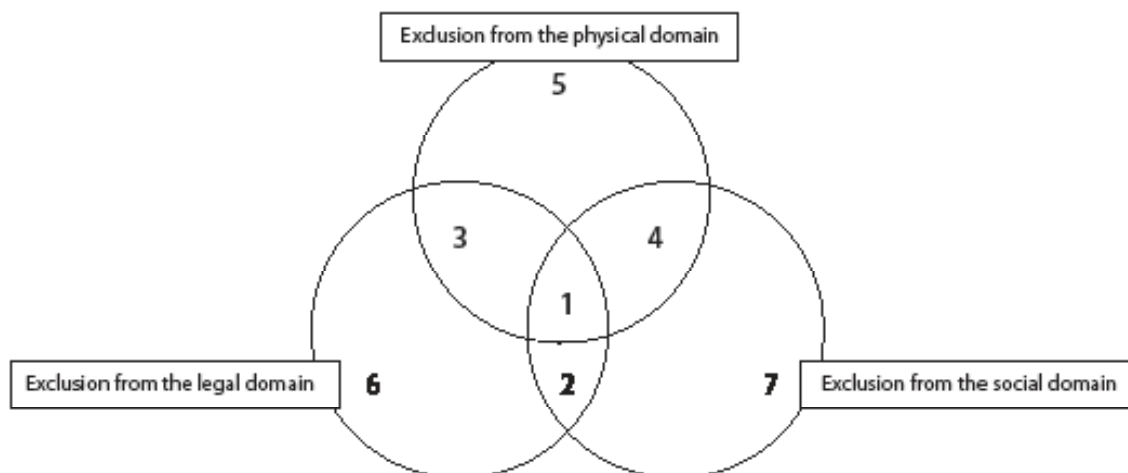
Describing homelessness as amongst the worst examples of social exclusion, The EOH came up with a model to identify and conceptualize the "extent and depth" of homelessness. This model sees homelessness as defined in opposition to, and as a reflection of the absence of *home* (and not just a house):

"Having a home can be understood as: having a decent dwelling (or space) adequate to meet the needs of the person and his/her family (*physical domain*); being able to maintain privacy and enjoy social relations (*social domain*) and having exclusive possession, security of occupation and legal title (*legal domain*)" (Edgar & Meert, 2005:14).

The figure presented below (3.1) uses this consideration of three domains of social exclusion to visualize seven theoretical types of homelessness and housing exclusion, ranging from 'rough sleeping', to living in a relatively decent and legally occupied dwelling, but without safety (women or children experiencing domestic abuse).



**Figure 3.1** The Domains of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion



These seven types of homelessness and housing exclusion formed the basis for what eventually became the ETHOS model. By 2005, the model had two main categories: Homelessness (referring to ‘rooflessness’ – people being absolutely without shelter or as they say in Europe, ‘rough sleepers’, and houselessness), and then those experiencing “housing exclusion” – which refers to those “at risk”. This evolution of the definition is best understood by observing Table 3 below:

**Table 3.1** Seven Theoretical Domains of Homelessness

		Conceptual Category	Physical Domain	Legal Domain	Social Domain
<b>Homelessness</b>	1	<b>Rooflessness</b>	No dwelling (roof)	No legal title to space for exclusive possession	No private and safe personal space for social relations
	2	<b>Houselessness</b>	Has a place to live, fit for habitation	No legal title to space for exclusive possession	No private and safe personal space for social relations
<b>Housing Exclusion</b>	3	<b>Insecure and Inadequate Housing</b>	Has a place to live (not secure and unfit for habitation)	No security of tenure	Has space for social relations
	4	<b>Inadequate housing and social isolation within a legally occupied dwelling</b>	Inadequate dwelling (unfit for habitation)	Has legal title and/or security of tenure	No private and safe personal space for social relations
	5	<b>Inadequate housing (secure housing)</b>	Inadequate dwelling (dwelling unfit for habitation)	Has legal title and/or security of tenure	Has space for social relations
	6	<b>Insecure housing (adequate housing)</b>	Has a place to live	No security of tenure	Has space for social relations
	7	<b>Social isolation within a secure and adequate context</b>	Has a place to live	Has legal title and/or security of tenure	No private and safe personal space for social relations

By 2007, the categories of homelessness were finalized, and ETHOS became the standard definition of homelessness. As mentioned, the ETHOS typology includes four categories – two of which refer to “homelessness” (Rooflessness, Houselessness) and “Housing Exclusion” (Insecure Housing, Inadequate Housing). The chart below outlines the definition of homelessness, and provides more detailed information about the different operational sub-categories under each of the four main categories. Definitions that address specific living conditions are included:

**Table 3: European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion**

Roofless		
OPERATIONAL CATEGORY	LIVING SITUATION	GENERIC DEFINITION
1 People Living Rough	1.1 Public space or external space	Living in the streets or public spaces, without a shelter that can be defined as living quarters
2 People in emergency accommodation	2.1 Night shelter	People with no usual place of residence who make use of overnight shelter, low threshold shelter
Houselessness		
3 People in accommodation for the homeless	3.1 Homeless hostel 3.2 Temporary Accommodation 3.3 Transitional supported accommodation	Where the period of stay is intended to be short term
4 People in Women's Shelter	4.1 Women's shelter accommodation	Women accommodated due to experience of domestic violence and where the period of stay is intended to be short term
5 People in accommodation for immigrants	5.1 Temporary accommodation / reception centres 5.2 Migrant workers accommodation	Immigrants in reception or short term accommodation due to their immigrant status
6 People due to be released from institutions	6.1 Penal institutions 6.2 Medical institutions (*) 6.3 Children's institutions / homes	No housing available prior to release Stay longer than needed due to lack of housing. No housing identified (e.g by 18th birthday)
7 People receiving longer-term support (due to homelessness)	7.1 Residential care for older homeless people 7.2 Supported accommodation for formerly homeless people	Long stay accommodation with care for formerly homeless people (normally more than one year)
Insecure Housing		
8 People living in insecure accommodation	8.1 Temporarily with family/friends 8.2 No legal (sub)tenancy 8.3 Illegal occupation of land	Living in conventional housing but not the usual or place of residence due to lack of housing. Occupation of dwelling with no legal tenancy illegal occupation of a dwelling. Occupation of land with no legal rights
9 People living under threat of eviction	9.1 Legal orders enforced (rented) 9.2 Re-possession orders (owned)	Where orders for eviction are operative Where mortgagor has legal order to re-possess
10 People living under threat of violence	10.1 Police recorded incidents	Where police action is taken to ensure place of safety for victims of domestic violence
Inadequate Housing		
11 People living in temporary / non-conventional structures	11.1 Mobile homes 11.2 Non-conventional building 11.3 Temporary structure	Not intended as place of usual residence. Makeshift shelter, shack or shanty Semi-permanent structure hut or cabin
12 People living in unfit housing	12.1 Occupied dwellings unfit for habitation	Defined as unfit for habitation by national legislation or building regulations
13 People living in extreme overcrowding	13.1 Highest national norm of overcrowding	Defined as exceeding national density standard for floor-space or useable rooms

## Ethos and “At Risk” populations:

The ETHOS definition of homelessness and housing exclusion is broad, and addresses a number of questions and issues that are important to consider when thinking about what might go into a Canadian definition of homelessness. The first two categories are framed in a way that is informative. For instance, **rooflessness** refers to people sleeping outdoors in parks, ravines, rooftops, alleyways, etc., as well as homeless shelters (low threshold). **Houselessness** also includes homeless shelters, but reflects the fact that many shelters in Europe (including the UK) are configured quite differently than in Canada (similar to transitional housing where people stay longer term, have single rooms with doors that lock), as well as shelters for women fleeing violence. This category also includes people in institutional settings such as prisons or hospitals, who may likely be homeless upon release. Recall that the newly expanded American definition of ‘at risk’ does not include this group.

**Insecure housing** and **inadequate housing** deal more directly with people who could be described as “at risk” of homelessness. Insecure housing includes people we would refer to as “couch surfers” – staying with friends or relatives because they do not have a place, as well as people being evicted or at risk of eviction. Finally, insecure housing refers to people, including women and children in particular, who are living in violent situations, and their housing is unstable. Inadequate housing refers to people who live in overcrowded circumstances (for instance, families doubling or tripling up), living in structures that are temporary, or in structures that are in such poor repair, people cannot maintain a minimum quality of life.

This focus on vulnerable populations “at risk”, is tied to a broader EU objective of reducing inequalities and promoting social cohesion (social inclusion). In signing on to the European Social Agenda (Nice, 2000), member states agreed to develop their National Action Plans on Social Inclusion within the framework of four common objectives in order to:

- facilitate participation in employment and access by all to the resources, rights, goods and services;
- prevent the risks of exclusion;
- help the most vulnerable;
- mobilise all relevant actors.

A social inclusion agenda thus necessitates the implementation of preventive measures (through policy and programs) to address life crises and to mitigate other factors that can lead to exclusion, including indebtedness and homelessness. To facilitate this agenda, then, a definition of homelessness and housing exclusion must explain the meaning of vulnerability and of being ‘at risk’ of homelessness. Conceptualizing a definition in this way allows for targeted prevention measures, and the ability to measure progress.

Different member states of the EU have defined vulnerability – and targeted groups for assistance – in different ways. A good example of how vulnerable populations are characterized can be found in this definition from the Netherlands (Bransen et al., 2001). Vulnerable populations:

- are not sufficiently capable of providing for their own necessities of life (shelter, food, income, social contacts, proper self-care)
- have several problems at once, which may include inadequate self-care, social isolation, squalid housing or living environments, lack of permanent or stable accommodation, large debts, mental health problems and substance dependency
- do not, from the viewpoint of care professionals, receive the care and support they need to sustain themselves in society, and
- do not express care needs that readily fit into the mainstream care system (help is usually requested by relatives, neighbours or onlookers), and therefore often experience unsolicited care or interference.





## Youth Homelessness:

There has been a struggle to develop a single definition of youth homelessness that applies across Europe. Quilgars (2010) has argued that these differences are most obviously manifest in a lack of agreement regarding age parameters: “Some Observatory correspondents (for example, in Germany and Austria) examined homelessness affecting children between the ages of 14 and 18, as well as young adults aged 18 to 25 or 27. In other countries, the age range extended into the early 30s (for example, Italy and Greece)” (Quilgars, 2010:189). The widely varying policy contexts in Europe mean that problems that might be discussed in terms of youth homelessness in one country (young people living in transitional housing such as Foyers after leaving care in the UK) would not be considered homeless, and the homelessness sector would not be involved in any way in other countries (in Germany, the broader youth service would be in charge). In other words, there is no consensus on how to conceptualize youth homelessness, or the notion of “troubled youth”, or how the two categories of social marginalization intersect.

Nevertheless, there has been some movement in the direction of establishing a definition. For instance, EU documents define youth as “under 25”, and distinguish youth from children who are “under 18”, which reflects not only distinctions in statutory responsibility (in terms of child welfare for instance) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child<sup>6</sup> which clearly states national governments are obliged to protect children under the age of 18 (unless they are legally emancipated) by “ensuring a standard of living adequate for the child’s physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development ‘in accordance with national conditions and within their means’ and ‘particularly with regard to nutrition, clothing and housing’ (Article 27; 3)” (Quilgars, 2010:190).

The FEANTSA position is evolving to include a definition of homeless youth and children (the latter including ‘children in homeless families’ and ‘unaccompanied adolescents experiencing homelessness’) (FEANTSA, 2007). They further divided the second category into four sub-categories, which intersect with the broader ETHOS categories described above:

- “homeless adolescents – young people who are homeless for a period of time who may sleep rough, stay with friends or in hostels. Some countries refer to ‘street youths’ or ‘street children’ where children sleep out and/or spend considerable time on the streets during the day;
- runaways – young people who run away from home and experience temporary or episodic homelessness;
- unaccompanied minors – asylum seeking young people under the age of 18 arriving in a country with no parent or main caregiver;
- children leaving institutions – children leaving state care institutions and foster care; also other institutions such as youth custody facilities.” (FEANTSA, 2007)

## Summary:

The ETHOS definition of homelessness is the most extensive and sophisticated definition of homelessness reviewed to date. While one must of course take the policy context in Europe into account – the more robust welfare state in most nations and focus on social inclusion – there is much to be learned from this approach to defining homelessness, and responding to it. It should be noted that in Europe, the importance of a preventive strategy has been central to their response to homelessness for the past ten years (at a policy level, the focus on prevention is relatively new in the US) and though this focus is relatively undeveloped in Canada, one can predict that in time it will also resonate here. While the ETHOS definition has been developed with policy (and measurement) in mind, it emerged from the development of a solid conceptual framework. On the other hand,

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6. <http://www.unicef.org/crc/>

the American definition discussed above has evolved bit by bit, with key changes largely driven by the shifting government priorities.

Key strengths of the ETHOS approach to defining homelessness:

- Strong conceptual framework based on social inclusion
- Addresses those in institutional care
- Extensively detailed categories
- Strong focus on “at risk”
- Ability to reach consensus across nation states of Europe (no small feat);
- The evolving definition of youth homelessness provides a strong place to start in developing a definition for Canada.

Weaknesses (in terms of transferability):

- The language of homelessness in Europe is different than Canada
- The emergency services sector is generally structured differently than in Canada
- While the definition has been adopted by FEANTSA, it is not clear how many nations actually use the definition. That is, there is the question of “buy-in” which will be worth observing for learnings that can be applied to the Canadian context.

## 5 DEFINING HOMELESSNESS IN CANADA

### 5.1 Background

Hulchanski, et al. (2009) have provided a succinct history of the development of the term ‘homelessness’ in Canada. They have remarked that prior to the 1980s, the term ‘homelessness’ was seldom used to define the phenomenon. There were, as he says, homeless persons, but not a homelessness *problem*. The word “homelessness”, they argue:

“came into common use in developed countries in the early and mid-1980s to refer to the problem of **de**housing – the fact that an increasing number of people who were once housed in these wealthy countries were no longer housed. Canada had started to experience dehousing processes.” (Hulchanski et al.: 3)

The growth in homelessness in Canada is attributed to a number of factors, including a restructuring of the economy that contributed to a growing gap between rich and poor. Most significantly were policy changes at the national and provincial levels, including the dismantling of Canada’s national housing strategy. This was part of a broader strategy by the Federal government not only to shift its housing policy in favour of home ownership (including a range of government funded subsidy programs). The result was growth in the size of the population of Canadians who no longer had homes, and the more widespread use of the term “homelessness” by politicians, the news media, service providers and the general public.

“Its widespread usage reflects what has happened to Canadian society – the way we organize who gets what, and our failure to have in place systems for meeting basic human needs in a universal, inclusive fashion. It also reflects the institutionalization of a problem.” (Hulchanski et al.: 6)



Canada has never had a standardized definition of homelessness. This is in part because homelessness as a ‘mass problem’ arrived later in our country than in others, and as a result policy development has lagged. It is also due to our federal system’s national response, which supported communities at the local level across Canada to develop ways of addressing homelessness. Provinces (until recently) have not been actively engaged in the issue. It is also true that there has not been a strong culture of planning to address homelessness in our country until recently. While communities across the country have developed *plans* of varying types, these have often been non-strategic; resources are often not coordinated or integrated; and there is characteristically an absence of targets, benchmarks or efforts to compare results across jurisdictions. Hence, there has never been a strong push from either the top or the bottom for a standardized, national definition of homelessness.

There have, however, been numerous attempts to define homelessness and to create some coherence to the concept. In this section, an overview is presented, beginning with an understanding of cultural definitions, and ending with the Government of Canada’s attempts at defining homelessness in the past, and how it is defined for the purposes of street counts across Canada. Additionally, we look at a number of efforts to shape and define factors that contribute to a definition of “At Risk” of homelessness.

## 5.2 Cultural Definitions of Homelessness

Cultural definitions of homelessness do not focus so much on a typology, but rather, seek to reveal the broader context in which homelessness emerges as a ‘problem’.

### David Hulchanski

David Hulchanski, a leading researcher on housing and homelessness, has long argued that we need to understand homelessness as a broader problem resulting from policy and practice decisions. In other words, homelessness describes a social and economic problem in our society, and is not merely a description of a group of individuals and their problems.

“People become homeless because of serious problems arising in one or more of the three key necessities of an adequate standard of living: housing, income, and support services. When systemic inequities, misfortune, ill health, or abuse interfere with people’s ability to hold on to or obtain one or more of these, a serious personal crisis can result, especially for those with a limited knowledge of available options or a weak support network.” (Hulchanski et al.: 12)

The discussion of homelessness from this perspective is important, because it also points to how the problem can and should be solved:

“We know the policy options. We need social protections that prevent Canadians from becoming unhoused. We need programs that ensure that all Canadians have what they need for an adequate standard of living, so that no one will be unhoused for more than a very brief period should a crisis of some sort arise. We need policies that correct historic and systemic inequities, and that provide adequate, affordable and secure housing, an adequate income or income support when needed, and adequate support services if these are required (for addictions, mental health, and so on). Only then will we begin to solve the problem we now call homelessness.” (Hulchanski et al.: 12)

### Homeless Hub

The Homeless Hub definition (Gaetz, 2008) echoes Hulchanski’s definition by drawing attention to housing, income and supports, but also frames homelessness as part of a broader issue: poverty. The definition also suggests a typology of homelessness based on housing status.



“Homelessness is an extreme form of poverty characterized by the instability of housing and the inadequacy of income, health care supports and social supports. This definition includes people who are absolutely homeless (those living on the streets, sometimes referred to as “rough sleepers”); shelter dwellers (people staying temporarily in emergency shelters or hostels); the “hidden homeless” (people staying temporarily with friends or family), and others who are described as under housed or “at risk” of homelessness.”

(Homeless Hub: <http://www.homelesshub.ca/Topics/Homelessness-176.aspx>)

## Disorderly People

This cultural definition of homelessness is important to consider because while it is not often brought forward as an official definition, the ideas behind it do regularly inform public policy and practice, including the enactment of laws and statutes that marginalize homeless people and criminalize their behaviours (including money making strategies). Hermer and Mosher popularized the term in Canada in their discussion of youth homelessness and the Ontario Safe Streets Act in. They define disorderly people as: “an undesirable population that are made up of squeegee’ers, welfare cheats, coddled prisoners, violent youth, aggressive beggars and loiterers.” (Hermer and Mosher, 2002, p.16).

The underlying emphasis of this definition is that society is dichotomized into two large camps: “taxpayers” and “citizens” on the one hand, and those who are not self sufficient or who do not adequately ‘contribute’ on the other hand. This latter group is disorderly, because not only are they framed as not actively participating in many of societies key institutional activities (work, school, raising families), but their visible presence in public spaces and places disrupts the normal goings on of taxpayers and citizens, as well as businesses. Their outsider status means that they are not contributors, but rather disruptors.

It is not understood exactly how broadly this way of thinking about homelessness is accepted in Canada. However, this notion of ‘disorderly people’ has without a doubt often been part of the public debate, and continues to inform our response to homelessness. That is, the Canadian response to homelessness is not only characterized by emergency services, prevention and housing, but is also strongly shaped by active efforts to use law enforcement to limit the visible expressions of homelessness. The perceived disorder of homeless persons has regularly been used to justify neo-conservative policies and legislation, as well as aggressive policing practices (using existing laws). This perspective also reinforces the idea that “taxpayers and citizens” are somehow less responsible for addressing the needs of people experiencing homelessness: “making up a disorderly set of people has come with an erosion of some of the central principles that have underpinned the democratic and equitable character of our institutions.” (Hermer and Mosher, 2002:17)

## 5.3 Government of Canada definitions

The Government of Canada has on several occasions engaged in efforts to define homelessness, recognizing that a set definition will have a direct influence on policy, on setting the parameters for strategies, responses and benefits, and in terms of measuring the extent of the problem and progress in addressing it. However, none of these definitions have become ‘official’ in the sense that they define policy, are tied to funding, or define expectations, scope of activity or enumeration methods.

### Definition of Homelessness (1999)

Retrieved from <http://dsp-psd.pwgsc.gc.ca/Collection-R/LoPBdP/modules/prb99-1-homelessness/definition-e.htm>

The first effort to define homelessness was undertaken in 1999 by the Parliamentary Research Branch (prepared by Lyne Casavant, Political and Social Affairs Division). In creating this definition, research was conducted on how other jurisdictions define homelessness, including a 1987 definition by the City of Montreal, which was subsequently used by the Quebec Department of Health and Social Services in *La Politique de la santé et du bien-être*:



“A person with no fixed address, stable, safe and healthy housing for the next 60 days, an extremely low income, adversely discriminated against in access to services, with problems of mental health, alcohol and drug abuse or social disorganization, and not a member of any stable group” (translation). (Comité des sans-abri de la Ville de Montréal, 1987)

While this definition was lauded for reflecting the complexity of the issue, it did not really provide a clear definition of housing (or lack thereof). The struggle in creating the definition was to come up with a middle ground between a very narrow definition (people living on the streets) and one that was very broad. In the end, a typology of homelessness was settled upon, that involved categorizing the homeless population into three subgroups: the chronically homeless; the cyclically homeless; and the temporarily homeless. This definition was no doubt influenced by the definitions of chronic homelessness then currently being developed and popularized in the United States (Kuhn & Culhane, 1998): Below is a definition of homelessness that resulted from this work:

“The **chronically homeless** group includes people who live on the periphery of society and who often face problems of drug or alcohol abuse or mental illness.

The **cyclically homeless** group includes individuals who have lost their dwelling as a result of some change in their situation, such as loss of a job, a move, a prison term or a hospital stay. Those who must from time to time use safehouses or soup kitchens include women who are victims of family violence, runaway youths, and persons who are unemployed or recently released from a detention centre or psychiatric institution.

Finally, the **temporarily homeless** group includes those who are without accommodation for a relatively short period. Likely to be included in this category are persons who lose their home as a result of a disaster (fire, flood, war) and those whose economic and personal situation is altered by, for example, separation or loss of job. Some researchers do not consider this group as being truly homeless and exclude them from their studies.”

## Defining and Enumerating Homelessness in Canada (2008)

Retrieved from <http://www2.parl.gc.ca/content/lop/researchpublications/prb0830-e.pdf>

In 2008, the Government of Canada did some more work on development of a definition, recognizing once again that how you define a problem also shapes how you solve it. This attempt brought forward some of the challenges regarding enumerating homelessness, and why a concise definition could help. While making clear that the publication “makes no attempt to reach one definition of homelessness” (in other words, this was not the ‘official’ government definition), they did try to shape a new and updated definition that moved away from the narrow focus on ‘chronicity’ in the previous definition to focus more on a typology of an individual or family’s housing situation. The typology put forward included:

- **Absolute homelessness:** “a narrow concept that includes only those living on the street or in emergency shelters.”
- **Hidden or Concealed Homelessness (in the middle of the continuum):** “These include people without a place of their own who live in a car, with family or friends, or in a long-term institution.”
- **Relative homelessness (other end of the continuum):** “Is a broad category that includes those who are housed but who reside in substandard shelter and/or who may be at risk of losing their homes.

Here they were clearly influenced by the development of definitions of homelessness in other countries, and in particular the European Observatory’s ETHOS definition. However, in the end this definition lacks specificity and is not as finely grained as

ETHOS (with explanatory sub-categories) and therefore was of limited use. The definition of 'relative homelessness' in particular is much too broad to be of use, as it would include almost everyone living in poverty. However, this definition is quoted often, and perhaps does represent a good starting place.

## 5.4 Canadian street counts and definitions

Because there is no common definition of homelessness in Canada, enumeration of the problem indeed continues to be a challenge. There has been no national effort to count homelessness, and the local level counts that have occurred have used different methods based on different definitions of homelessness.

For this report, the definitions used by the following municipalities were reviewed: Vancouver, Prince George, Calgary, Lethbridge, Edmonton, Saskatoon and Toronto. As expected, there is great variation in terms of how homelessness is defined and the subcategories used. Some places have a more narrow definitional focus on people living on the streets, in shelters or transitional housing (Lethbridge), while others are much more broad and encompass those 'at risk' (Saskatoon). Most others fell somewhere in between, including the 'hidden homeless' as part of their definition. The City of Toronto included people who were currently staying in corrections or hospitals as part of their definition. The typologies also tend to conceptualize absolute homelessness in different ways, sometimes distinguishing those 'on the streets' from those living in shelters.

Without sharper, well defined definitions (particularly of hidden homelessness or 'at risk'), methodological issues abound, comparability is impossible, and aggregating the data so as to enumerate homelessness across the country (or even regions) is virtually impossible.

## 5.5 Non-Governmental Organization definitions

### Ontario Municipal Social Services Association (2008)

The Ontario Municipal Social Services Association (OMSSA) is a not-for-profit organization whose members "plan, manage, fund and deliver social and community services at the municipal level throughout Ontario". OMSSA works on behalf of 47 Consolidated Municipal Service Managers (CMSMs) across Ontario. In 2008 they released a "**Strategy to End Homelessness**". In that document, they provided a definition of homelessness that combined a typology of housing situations, with one that focused on chronicity. Their definition is as follows:

#### i. The Definition of Homelessness

OMSSA has identified the term homeless to apply to people in the following three types of situations:

- Absolutely homeless: People who sleep in indoor or outdoor public places not intended for habitation (e.g. streets, parks, abandoned buildings, stairwells, doorways, cars, or under bridges);
- Lacking permanent housing: People who live in temporary accommodation not meant for long-term housing. Examples include: emergency shelters, hospitals, time-limited transitional housing programs, residential treatment programs or withdrawal management centres and more informal arrangements such as staying with family, friends, or acquaintances; and
- At risk of homelessness: Households whose current housing is unaffordable, unsafe, overcrowded, insecure, inappropriate or inadequately maintained; it also refers to situations where the person lacks supports to maintain housing stability (e.g. activities of daily living, life skills training, conflict resolution).



## ii. Degrees of Homelessness

In addition to these different aspects of homelessness, OMSSA recognizes that there are different degrees of homelessness:

- One-time homelessness: Usually the result of an unexpected event (e.g. family breakdown, eviction, employment loss, natural disaster, house fire); people may have social and economic resources to draw on to avoid becoming homeless again.
- Episodic homelessness: Periods of housing stability interspersed with periods of housing instability and homelessness.
- Persistent homelessness: Can include a variety of possible characteristics:
  - o person has experienced homelessness for a long time (often greater than one year) with a pattern of cycling in and out of hospitals or correctional facilities between periods of living on the street or in emergency shelters;
  - o homelessness has become the new “normal”; skills are oriented to survival on the streets rather than to living in housing; and/or
  - o extensive use of emergency services or a large number of disconnections from services.

Each experience of homelessness has different causes, different needs and different solutions. Yet they are all damaging to those who experience them and costly to the community.

### Federation of Canadian Municipalities (2008)

The Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM) is a member-based organization with 2,000 members, representing the interests of municipalities on policy and program matters that fall within federal jurisdiction. Members include Canada’s largest cities, small urban and rural communities, and 21 provincial and territorial municipal associations. In 2008 they released a document: “Quality of Life in Canadian Communities - Trends and Issues in Affordable Housing and Homelessness. Theme Report #4.” In this report, they put forward a definition of homelessness that includes singles and families experiencing any of the following conditions:

- Rooflessness: staying overnight in a place not meant for human habitation (e.g. a vacant building, a public or commercial facility, a city park, a car or on the street);
- Living in an Emergency Shelter: singles and families relying on the emergency shelter system on a short-term or recurrent basis;
- Invisible homelessness: temporary and/or involuntarily living with friends or relatives (“couch surfing”) or exchanging favours in return for housing, and
- Houselessness: includes people who reside in long-term institutions because there is no suitable accommodation in the community and youth living in care.

## 5.6 Hidden Homelessness

Hidden homelessness, also referred to as ‘concealed’ homelessness, generally refers to situations where people lack stable housing and live in places – often with friends or relatives – where they do not have security of tenure. These individuals and families often do not ‘touch’ the homelessness sector, and therefore are not easy to detect or enumerate.



Distasio et al. in their study of Aboriginal homelessness draw on the definition put forward by Schlay & Rossi (1992): “Concealed or “hidden” homelessness encapsulates the many would-be homeless who live temporarily in households maintained by others because they cannot afford any shelter for themselves “(Shlay & Rossi, 1992). Distasio et al. refer to the hidden homeless as not visible because they couch surf amongst family and friends. They try to make sense of the concept as being particularly relevant to the understanding of Aboriginal homelessness, as many individuals are sheltered only with the support of extended family and networks of friends, and that this is an inherent component of Indigenous value systems, a situation that is also found in Australia (Memmot et al, 2003). They argue that:

“the actual magnitude of this process is difficult to determine as it is an extremely complex phenomenon to enumerate because those that are in concealed houseless situations are not easily identifiable. Despite the lack of substantive evidence, hidden homelessness is considered to be a significant issue for the Aboriginal population in metropolitan centres of Canada. What is missing however from this simple overview of homelessness is that at the far end of the “less visible” side of the continuum lies a segment of the Aboriginal population that has continued to be mobile, moving more frequently between urban centres and home communities.” (DiStasio, et al., 2005:6)

The Homeless Hub also offers a useful definition of hidden homelessness:

“Hidden homelessness refers specifically to people who live temporarily with relatives, friends, neighbors or strangers (a practice often known as “couch surfing”) because they have no other option. They are “hidden” because they do not access homeless supports and services even though they are improperly or inadequately housed. Because they do not access services, they do not show up on statistics regarding homelessness. It is estimated that over eighty percent of Canada’s homeless people experience hidden homelessness as opposed to “absolute homelessness” (have no shelter at all and are accessing homelessness supports and services). The hidden homeless live in dire situations, but remain invisible. Every community in Canada has homeless people, even if you don’t see them on the street.” (Power, 2008)

## 5.7 “At Risk” of Homelessness

The concept of being “at risk” of homelessness has posed challenges for those seeking to develop a definition. On the one hand, if one wants to engage in preventive strategies, one needs to understand *who* is potentially at risk of homelessness. On the other hand, being defined as ‘at risk’ does not necessarily mean you will ever experience homelessness. In this case, the concern is that a definition that is too broad makes interventions difficult and potentially costly.

In countries that prioritize preventive approaches, there has been an effort to narrow the definition of at risk somewhat, to include people in crisis, or who otherwise appear to be at imminent risk of homelessness. The UK approach identifies people as being “priority need”. The new US approach to prevention argues:

“For persons “at risk” of homelessness, the degree of risk or the level of “imminent” risk will have to be determined by regulation (federal, state or local) or program rules. The case has been made here that with respect to eligibility for homeless-system funds, the level of imminent risk should be narrow, including people presenting for shelter, and/or with evidence of an actual or threat of immediate housing loss, recognizing that these criteria may have to be more flexibly interpreted in the case of rural areas. In an ideal world, people with less imminent circumstances could be referred to community-based prevention programs. An additional or alternative eligibility category could apply to people who fit some criteria for the “most at-risk” profile, including people with prior homelessness experience, young adults with recent foster care experience, people exiting institutional care, etc.” (Culhane et al., 2010: 19)

In Canada, there has been less concrete discussions around defining “at risk” of homelessness.



There have been some new developments in this area, however. Recently, the Calgary Homeless Foundation, in partnership with the University of Calgary, developed a risk assessment tool called: **HART: Risks and Assets for Homeless Prevention** (Tutty, et al., 2009). This is an interesting assessment tool that looks both at positive and resilient characteristics, but also the factors that place people 'at risk'. This balance between risks and assets is important to consider, as it helps identify who, of those considered 'at risk', may be more likely to become homeless, as well as what kinds of supports are needed. The authors of this report did not come up with their own definition of at risk, but instead drew on Hulchanski (2000), who identified a number of ways that individuals can be considered "at risk" of homelessness, including:

- People at risk of losing their housing.
- Those facing the risk of losing their shelter either by eviction or lease expiry, with no other shelter available.
- Prisoners, health or mental health clients or others living in other institutions facing release with no place to go.
- The many Canadians who are inadequately housed. While this is not the same as absolute homelessness, most homeless individuals were previously inadequately housed.

In the next section, we will explore how 'at risk' is defined in the Canadian context, looking more specifically at risk in the following areas: a) housing, b) income, c) violence, d) discharge from institutional care, and e) crisis. The latter category cuts across the others, and identifies situations where significant changes in a person's life circumstances may move the person quickly from being 'at risk', to being homeless.

## A) HOUSING

### Core Housing Need:

Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation has established the most detailed definition of "core housing need". Their definition places the notion of core housing need in opposition to what is termed "**acceptable housing**", or housing that is deemed to be adequate in terms of condition, being suitable in size and affordable. **Core housing need**, on the other hand, is housing that does not meet one or more community standards for adequacy, suitability and affordability. In the latter case, this means paying 30% or more of a household's "before-tax income to pay the median rent (including utility costs) of alternative local market housing that meets all three standards". CMHC, 2010:63). Below is a more detailed definition of the three standards of **adequacy, suitability and affordability**:

- "**Adequate** housing does not require any major repairs, according to residents."
- "**Suitable** housing has enough bedrooms for the size and make-up of resident households, according to National Occupancy Standard (NOS) requirements. Enough bedrooms based on NOS requirements means one bedroom for each cohabiting adult couple; unattached household member 18 years of age and over; same-sex pair of children under age 18; and additional boy or girl in the family, unless there are two opposite sex children under 5 years of age, in which case they are expected to share a bedroom. A household of one individual can occupy a bachelor unit (i.e., a unit with no bedroom)."
- "**Affordable** housing costs less than 30 per cent of before-tax household income. For renters, shelter costs include rent and any payments for electricity, fuel, water and other municipal services. For owners, shelter costs include mortgage payments (principal and interest), property taxes, and any condominium fees, along with payments for electricity, fuel, water and other municipal services." (CMHC, 2010:63)

Several writers have defined "**severe core housing need**" as households that are paying more than 50% of their before tax income on housing (TD Financial Group, 2003; Condon & Newton, 2007).



## Precarious Housing:

The Wellesley Institute in Toronto uses the term “**Precarious Housing**” in a way that is very similar to CMHC’s “core housing need”. They define:

“*affordable* housing as housing where the household pays no more than 30% of their income on housing. This definition stands in contrast to the federal government’s, in which *affordable*” means any rent or housing cost that is 80% or less of gross market rents. *Precarious housing* is housing that is not affordable, overcrowded or unfit for habitation.”

## B) INCOME

Inadequate income and income instability underlies poverty and housing vulnerability. Inadequate income means that people have insufficient income to cover their costs, and are in core housing need. Instability refers to the precariousness of income, and individuals and families that face job loss (for instance, during a recession) may then in turn be vulnerable to losing their housing (Co-Operative Housing Federation of Canada, 2009). Lower income families are more likely to be in core housing need (CMHC, 2010).

### LICO (Low income cut-off):

Stats Canada. Modified 2009-06-03. Retrieved from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/75f0002m/2009002/s2-eng.htm>

“LICO is an income threshold below which a family will likely devote a larger share of its income on the necessities of food, shelter and clothing than the average family. The approach is essentially to estimate an income threshold at which families are expected to spend 20 percentage points more than the average family on food, shelter and clothing.”

As Novac (2006) has pointed out, poverty is also an important dimension that places many women and their families at risk of homelessness. Women (single or single parent families) are more likely to be living in poverty and to be defined by core housing need (spending more than 30% of their income on housing). All of this is important, for while there is no separate definition of homelessness that applies to women, it makes for a much stronger case that “at risk” of homelessness should be included in the definition.

## C) VIOLENCE AND ABUSE

In recent years, researchers have begun to turn their attention to the significance of gender in their analyses of homelessness (Novac, et al., 2002; Novac et al, 2009; Paradis, et al, 2009; Klodawsky, 2006). The experience of women who are homeless is different from men in many ways. For instance, women are less likely than men to be part of the street homeless population. Research on street youth in Canada consistently shows that females account for about a third of the population (Gaetz & O’Grady, 2002; Public Interest, 2009; McKay, 2009). It is suggested that there are fewer absolutely homeless women because the streets are much more dangerous for women, and many will find ways to avoid this circumstance, even if the solutions are neither sustainable or particularly safe.

Other research suggests that women may be over-represented amongst the ‘at risk’ and hidden homeless populations (Whitzman, 2006; Tutty et al., 2009). This population of women is characterized by the experience of violence, poverty or the intersection of the two. Du Mont and Miller (2000) describe that many women fleeing violence move from one place to the

next in insecure housing situations to avoid contact with abusive partners. In the end, they recommend that abused women be officially designated as part of the hidden homeless population, and that gender safety become recognized as a key feature of any definition of adequate housing (in particular, they were referring to definitions of the UN and CMHC). In Australia, the term “*housed homelessness*,” has been coined to describe the condition whereby victims of family violence remain in the family home but inevitably lack control, safety and security of tenure (Gregory 2001).

## D) UNPLANNED DISCHARGE FROM INSTITUTIONAL CARE

Often people become homeless and require the resources of the homelessness sector because of failures in other systems of care and support. That is, when people are involved in institutional contexts such as corrections (custody), mental health facilities, or child welfare, they are at risk of homelessness if they are discharged without adequate planning and support to ensure they move into housing in a safe and planned way, and with the necessary ongoing supports.

### Child welfare

The link between failures of the child welfare system and youth homelessness in Canada is well established. We know from research that a high percentage of street youth – ranging between 40% and 50% - have had some involvement with the child welfare system (Gaetz & O’Grady, 2002). The best study on this issue was conducted by Serge et al., in 2002. They argued that “The most obvious explanation for the apparent connection between youth homelessness and previous out of home care is that the system fails to help children deal with the problems that were at the heart of their removal from their homes.” (Serge et al., 2002:4). Commonly cited is the problem of “Aging out” of the system – lack of systems and supports to allow young people to transition into independent living. “The arbitrary nature of youth leaving care at a certain pre-determined age does not necessarily reflect the age at which a youth is developmentally ready to exit” (Serge et al., 2002). System failures in child welfare – including the fact that young people can ‘opt out’ but not back in, and that young people can age out of care – means that for many young people the transition from child welfare support is not to self-sufficiency, but to homelessness. And for many of these young people, there is, then, no “home” to return to.

### Discharge from mental health facilities and residential treatment programs

It is well established that people with serious mental health problems are over-represented in the homeless population in Canada. Researcher Cheryl Forchuk has argued that this is not the result of anything inherent in the population, but rather reflects the extreme poverty that people with mental illness face, and the very poor discharge planning practices of mental health facilities. When people are discharged from mental health facilities without access to safe affordable housing, they become involved with the homelessness sector. Their mental health outcomes, compared to people who are discharged into housing, are considerably worse (Forchuk et al. 2006)

### Crime, criminality and corrections

The relationship between criminal offending and homelessness is complex. On the one hand, the experience of homelessness is known to lead to criminality, as people often engage in criminal activities to survive (Hagan & McCarthy). We also know that through legislation and practice, people who are homeless are often more heavily policed (National Law Centre on Homelessness and Poverty, 2009; Gaetz, 2004). On the other hand, many people who are held in corrections eventually become homeless (Gaetz & O’Grady, 2006; 2009; Kellen et al., 2010). When people are discharged from correctional facilities without a proper discharge plan that either ensures they return home, or are able to move into housing with appropriate supports, they usually become homeless. Part of the growing popularity of ‘get tough on crime’ policies is the withdrawal of support for transitions

into the community. At the same time, in Canada, there has been a large increase in remand populations (especially in provinces such as Ontario), and such persons are not eligible for discharge planning and support. Being held in corrections, even if you are found not guilty, can jeopardize your housing and employment (or both), and therefore is a significant risk factor.

## E) DISCRIMINATION

A key structural factor that can place people at risk when combined with other factors is discrimination. This is important to consider, knowing that in Canada Aboriginal persons, people of African descent and sexual minorities tend to be over-represented amongst homeless populations. People who are visible minorities may experience discrimination in the labour market, resulting in lower wages, or in accessing safe and affordable housing (Zine, 2002). There is a growing body of research that demonstrates that Aboriginal people experiencing discrimination are vulnerable to homelessness, and face barriers to accessing services that may otherwise ameliorate the negative consequences of poverty and homelessness (Greater Toronto Area Aboriginal Housing Consultation, 2008; Menzies, 2006; Social Data Research Ltd, 2005). Finally, a significant percentage of homeless youth report being lesbian, gay bisexual or transgendered, and research has pointed to the degree to which homophobia experienced at home, at school or in the community can make staying at home unbearable and potentially unsafe, thus leading to homelessness (Cochran, et al., 2002; Higgitt, et al., 2003; Gattis, 2009)

## F) CRISES AND TRIGGERING EVENTS

As part of the development of the HART tool (Calgary), Tutty et al. (2009), wrote about the degree to which stressful life events or crises can exacerbate existing problems and eventually push individuals or families into homelessness. The range of triggering events can be many. This includes economic factors (loss of job, eviction for non-payment of rent, increasing debt or arrears, loss of equity from a housing market collapse), personal life events including a death in the family, widowhood, relationship breakdown, or medical and health related problems including trauma, onset of mental illness (including amongst family members), injury, etc. These events have been described by Pomeroy (2007) as not so much crises, but as ‘tipping points’ that are the end point of a gradual build up of other economic-based problems. They are described as crises when the event is so profoundly destabilizing that combined with other risk factors (low income, inadequate housing, lack of other protective factors) may directly contribute to homelessness. People who are more broadly ‘at risk’ of homelessness and who experience such crises would then be described as being at ‘imminent risk’ of becoming homeless.

## 5.8 Sub-Categories of Homelessness in Canada

### Youth

Young people who are homeless are variously described as “runaways, curbsiders, throwaways, missing children, street youth and youth at-risk” (Kelly and Caputo, 2007: 727). Often, there is a sense to which youth homelessness is seen as a continuum, as many ‘street youth’ are in fact housed, but may heavily participate in street youth culture.

As strategies to address homelessness mature, there is growing recognition of the need to target sub-populations. While there are some commonalities that frame the experience of homelessness for young people and adults – lack of affordable housing, systems failures in health care and corrections, for instance – there are some important differences that need to be taken account of when developing strategic responses.

Most importantly, street youth, unlike homeless adults, leave homes defined by relationships (both social and economic) in which they were typically dependent upon adult caregivers. Becoming homeless thus does not just mean a loss of stable housing, but rather, it means leaving 'home'; an interruption and potential rupture in social relations with parents and caregivers, family members, friends, neighbours and community. Effective preventive and long term solutions must in some way address these issues.

Unfortunately, efforts to define youth homelessness tend to rely on the age categories that are determined by local programs or municipal governments (for instance, "Under 25" or "16-24"). The weakness of these approaches is that they fail to fully take account of the profound differences between the issues and concerns facing those under 16, between 16-18, and those over 18. Significant developmental differences (not to mention risk and safety) should suggest that an appropriate definition of youth homelessness should recognize these kinds of differences.

There is, then, no consistency or rigour to defining youth homelessness by age. A couple of interesting examples of definitions of youth homelessness are listed below:

### **VANCOUVER**

A study done for BC Housing (Millar, 2009) uses the term "street-involved youth" to refer to:

"youth aged 16 to 24 who are either living on the street or significantly involved in street life and the street environment and do not have a permanent place to call home (SPARC BC, 2003; Eberle et al., 2007; Karabanow, 2008). The report uses the terms street-involved youth and youth homeless population to encompass the range of youth experiencing absolute and relative homelessness in Vancouver."

### **PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND**

The following definition comes from research on the "Needs and Demands for Youth Housing and Support Services" in PEI (Bruce & Merrill, 2010). This is a particularly strong definition, that defines youth homelessness in terms of:

"Youth who have been abandoned by the guardians responsible for their care or who have left their homes without notice or guardian consent and who do not have permanent place of residence. This includes youth who are absolutely without shelter and are living on the street, or taking shelter in makeshift housing structures, under bridges, in cars, tents, etc. It also includes youth living temporarily with friends, couch surfing from one house to the next and therefore without reliable, permanent, appropriate housing or housing stability."

## Families

In 2003, Kraus and Dowling did a thorough review and consultation on the issue of family homelessness for CMHC and the Social Planning and Research Council of BC. The purpose of the study was to examine the structural and systemic causes of family homelessness and suggest ways to address the problem, including preventive strategies. Their report, titled: Family Homelessness, Causes and Solutions (Krauss & Dowling, 2003) also included a definition of family homelessness:

"For the purpose of this project, a homeless family was originally defined as a family with at least one parent or a legal guardian and one or more children under the age of 18, and where the family was:

- Living and sleeping outside or on the street;
- Sleeping in an emergency shelter, hostel or transition house for women fleeing violence or abuse;
- Living in transitional or second-stage housing;
- Doubled up and staying temporarily with others; or
- Renting a hotel or motel room by the month.

This definition was intended to be sufficiently broad to include both the “visible” and “hidden” homeless populations.

Families at risk of homelessness included those who were:

- Living in housing that is unsafe, inadequate or insecure (e.g. housing that does not meet basic health and safety standards and does not provide for security of tenure), and costs more than 50% or more of the total income or significantly more than the amount provided for under the shelter component of income assistance; or
- In receipt of a notice to terminate their tenancy. (Krauss & Dowling, 2003:1)

## Aboriginal Homelessness

While it is generally acknowledged that Aboriginal people are over-represented in the Canadian homeless population, few if any definitions reviewed for this study actually address Aboriginal homelessness. Few definitions have been uncovered, thus clearly there is work to be done in this area. The Australian experience is informative in this regard. Two definitions of Aboriginal homelessness from Canada include:

“Aboriginal homelessness (includes) those who have suffered from the effects of colonization and whose social, economic, and political conditions have placed them in a disadvantaged position. This group includes those who have no security of tenure, those who are living in substandard accommodation, those who regularly “couch surf,” and those who are frequently involved in street life. There is also a need to consider those at risk of homelessness, including those who suffer from substance abuse, those whose income requires them to use food banks, and those who, because of systemic barriers, are unable to acquire accommodation of any kind.”

(Marcel Swain, of the Lu’ma Native Housing Society, as quoted in the report: *Aboriginal Governance in Urban Settings* (The United Native Nations et al, 2002))

An additional definition comes from a research study on urban Aboriginal homelessness in Winnipeg and Regina (2001). The authors commented that:

“In the urban Aboriginal community, according to some of the people who live there, being “homelessness” usually means being “street involved” sometimes temporarily, often for a lifetime. It’s an abandonment of the Traditions and community values, which may have guided reserve life in the past, and the formation of a cultural sub-group, defined as “street culture. . . . Life on the street is doing whatever it takes to survive until the next day, even if that means a loss of dignity.” (*Indian City: The Journey Home* 2001:5)

## Summary:

The review of Canadian literature demonstrates a wealth of efforts by researchers, government officials and those engaged in developing responses to homelessness, to grapple with the definition of homelessness in all of its complexity. The depth of work at the national, regional and local levels offers a strong foundation for the development of a national definition that also includes the notion of being “at risk”. However, at this point there is a lack of coherence, which underlies the broader need to establish a pan-Canadian definition.

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## APPENDIX A

HEARTH Act 2009

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act

As amended by S. 896 The Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing (HEARTH) Act of 2009

### EXCERPTS:

Page 1:

SEC. 103. [42 USC 11302]. GENERAL DEFINITION OF HOMELESS INDIVIDUAL.

(a) IN GENERAL.—For purposes of this Act, the term “homeless”, “homeless individual”, and “homeless person” means—

- (1) an individual or family who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence;
  - (2) an individual or family with a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings, including a car, park, abandoned building, bus or train station, airport, or camping ground;
  - (3) an individual or family living in a supervised publicly or privately operated shelter designated to provide temporary living arrangements (including hotels and motels paid for by Federal, State, or local government programs for low-income individuals or by charitable organizations, congregate shelters, and transitional housing);
  - (4) an individual who resided in a shelter or place not meant for human habitation and who is exiting an institution where he or she temporarily resided;
  - (5) an individual or family who—
    - (A) will imminently lose their housing, including housing they own, rent, or live in without paying rent, are sharing with others, and rooms in hotels or motels not paid for by Federal, State, or local government programs for low-income individuals or by charitable organizations, as evidenced by—
      - (i) a court order resulting from an eviction action that notifies the individual or family that they must leave within 14 days;
      - (ii) the individual or family having a primary nighttime residence that is a room in a hotel or motel and where they lack the resources necessary to reside there for more than 14 days; or
      - (iii) credible evidence indicating that the owner or renter of the housing will not allow the individual or family to stay for more than 14 days, and any oral statement from an individual or family seeking homeless assistance that is found to be credible shall be considered credible evidence for purposes of this clause;
    - (B) has no subsequent residence identified; and
    - (C) lacks the resources or support networks needed to obtain other permanent housing; and
  - (6) (C) can be expected to continue in such status for an extended period of time because of chronic disabilities, chronic physical health or mental health conditions, substance addiction, histories of domestic violence or childhood abuse, the presence of a child or youth with a disability, or multiple barriers to employment.
- (b) DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND OTHER DANGEROUS OR LIFE-THREATENING CONDITIONS.—Notwithstanding any other provision of this section, the Secretary shall consider to be homeless any individual or family who is fleeing, or is attempting to flee, domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, stalking, or other dangerous or lifethreatening conditions in the individual’s or family’s current housing situation, including where the health and safety of children are jeopardized, and who have no other residence and lack the resources or support networks to obtain other permanent housing.

**TITLE IV—HOUSING ASSISTANCE**  
**SUBTITLE A—GENERAL PROVISIONS**

SEC. 401. DEFINITIONS.

For purposes of this title:

- (1) AT RISK OF HOMELESSNESS.—The term `at risk of homelessness' means, with respect to an individual or family, that the individual or family—
- (A) has income below 30 percent of median income for the geographic area;
  - (B) has insufficient resources immediately available to attain housing stability; and
  - (C) (i) has moved frequently because of economic reasons;
  - (ii) is living in the home of another because of economic hardship;
  - (iii) has been notified that their right to occupy their current housing or living situation will be terminated;
  - (iv) lives in a hotel or motel;
  - (v) lives in severely overcrowded housing;
  - (vi) is exiting an institution; or
  - (vii) otherwise lives in housing that has characteristics associated with instability and an increased risk of homelessness.

Such term includes all families with children and youth defined as homeless under other Federal statutes.

(2) CHRONICALLY HOMELESS.—

- (A) IN GENERAL.—The term `chronically homeless' means, with respect to an individual or family, that the individual or family—
- (i) is homeless and lives or resides in a place not meant for human habitation, a safe haven, or in an emergency shelter;
  - (ii) has been homeless and living or residing in a place not meant for human habitation, a safe haven, or in an emergency shelter continuously for at least 1 year or on at least 4 separate occasions in the last 3 years; and
  - (iii) has an adult head of household (or a minor head of household if no adult is present in the household) with a diagnosable substance use disorder, serious mental illness, developmental disability (as defined in section 102 of the Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights Act of 2000 (42 U.S.C. 15002)), post traumatic stress disorder, cognitive impairments resulting from a brain injury, or chronic physical illness or disability, including the co-occurrence of 2 or more of those conditions.
- (B) RULE OF CONSTRUCTION.—A person who currently lives or resides in an institutional care facility, including a jail, substance abuse or mental health treatment facility, hospital or other similar facility, and has resided there for fewer than 90 days shall be considered chronically homeless if such person met all of the requirements described in subparagraph (A) prior to entering that facility.

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(7) FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN AND YOUTH DEFINED AS HOMELESS UNDER

OTHER FEDERAL STATUTES.—The term ‘families with children and youth defined as homeless under other Federal statutes’ means any children or youth that are defined as ‘homeless’ under any Federal statute other than this subtitle, but are not defined as homeless under section 103, and shall also include the parent, parents, or guardian of such children or youth under subtitle B of title VII this Act (42 U.S.C. 11431 et seq.).

(8) GEOGRAPHIC AREA.—The term ‘geographic area’ means a State, metropolitan city, urban county, town, village, or other nonentitlement area, or a combination or consortia of such, in the United States, as described in section 106 of the Housing and Community Development Act of 1974 (42 U.S.C. 5306).

(9) HOMELESS INDIVIDUAL WITH A DISABILITY.—

(A) IN GENERAL.—The term ‘homeless individual with a disability’ means an individual who is homeless, as defined in section 103, and has a disability that—

- (i) is expected to be long-continuing or of indefinite duration;
  - (ii) substantially impedes the individual’s ability to live independently;
  - (iii) could be improved by the provision of more suitable housing conditions; and
  - (iv) is a physical, mental, or emotional impairment, including an impairment caused by alcohol or drug abuse, post traumatic stress disorder, or brain injury;
- (i) is a developmental disability, as defined in section 102 of the Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights Act of 2000 (42 U.S.C. 15002); or
- (ii) is the disease of acquired immunodeficiency syndrome or any condition arising from the etiologic agency for acquired immunodeficiency syndrome.

(B) RULE—Nothing in clause (iii) of subparagraph (A) shall be construed to limit eligibility under clause (i) or (ii) of subparagraph (A)

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(15) PERMANENT HOUSING.—The term ‘permanent housing’ means community-based housing without a designated length of stay, and includes both permanent supportive housing and permanent housing without supportive services.

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(23) SERIOUS MENTAL ILLNESS.—The term ‘serious mental illness’ means a severe and persistent mental illness or emotional impairment that seriously limits a person’s ability to live independently.

(27) SUPPORTIVE SERVICES.—The term ‘supportive services’ means services that address the special needs of people served by a project, including—

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- (A) the establishment and operation of a child care services program for families experiencing homelessness;
- (B) the establishment and operation of an employment assistance program, including providing job training;
- (C) the provision of outpatient health services, food, and case management;
- (D) the provision of assistance in obtaining permanent housing, employment counseling, and nutritional counseling;
- (E) the provision of outreach services, advocacy, life skills training, and housing search and counseling services;
- (F) the provision of mental health services, trauma counseling, and victim services;



- (G) the provision of assistance in obtaining other Federal, State, and local assistance available for residents of supportive housing (including mental health benefits, counseling, and medical assistance, but not including major medical equipment);
- (H) the provision of legal services for purposes including requesting reconsiderations and appeals of veterans and public benefit claim denials and resolving outstanding warrants that interfere with an individual's ability to obtain and retain housing;
  - (I) the provision of—
    - (i) transportation services that facilitate an individual's ability to obtain and maintain employment; and
    - (ii) health care; and
- (J) other supportive services necessary to obtain and maintain housing.

(29) TRANSITIONAL HOUSING.—The term `transitional housing' means housing the purpose of which is to facilitate the movement of individuals and families experiencing homelessness to permanent housing within 24 months or such longer period as the Secretary determines necessary.

(31) UNDERSERVED POPULATIONS.—The term `underserved populations' includes populations underserved because of geographic location, underserved racial and ethnic populations, populations underserved because of special needs (such as language barriers, disabilities, alienage status, or age), and any other population determined to be underserved by the Secretary, as appropriate.

**Subtitle B of Title VII of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (Title X, Part C, of the No Child Left Behind Act – reauthorized, 2002).** In this act:

*The term "homeless children and youths"--*

*(A) means individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence (within the meaning of section 103(a)(1)); and*

*(B) includes--*

- (i) children and youths who are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason; are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative adequate accommodations; are living in emergency or transitional shelters; are abandoned in hospitals; or are awaiting foster care placement;*
- (ii) children and youths who have a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings (within the meaning of section 103(a)(2)(C));*
- (iii) children and youths who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings; and*
- (iv) migratory children (as such term is defined in section 1309 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965) who qualify as homeless for the purposes of this subtitle because the children are living in circumstances described in clauses (i) through (iii).*

## APPENDIX B

### Canadian definitions from Street Counts

Vancouver, (2008)

*Greater Vancouver Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness* (2009) Still on our streets . . . Results of the 2008 Metro Vancouver Homeless Count

“Someone was considered homeless for the purpose of this count if they did not have a place of their own where they could expect to stay for more than 30 days and if they did not pay rent.

This included people who:

- had no physical shelter – staying on the street, in doorways, in parkades, in parks, and on beaches;
- were temporarily sheltered in emergency shelters, safe houses for youth, or transition houses for women and their children fleeing violence; or
- were staying at a friend’s place where they did not pay rent.

For example, someone who stayed in a garage would be considered homeless, because they do not pay rent, even if they considered the garage to be their home. Someone who stayed in an emergency shelter usually cannot stay for more than 30 days, and was therefore homeless.

Someone who stayed at a friend’s place where they did not pay rent was also homeless for the purposes of this count, because they had no security of tenure. Homelessness in suburban municipalities often takes the form of ‘sofa surfing’ (especially by youth), partly due to the lack of local services and facilities for homeless people.<sup>1</sup> To exclude these individuals from the estimate and profile of homelessness in the region would underestimate the extent of homelessness in these areas. However, the homeless count would likely only find people who are sofa surfing if they also access services used by homeless persons or congregate where homeless people stay. People who were sofa surfing were included in the count of homeless persons *if we found them*. Sofa surfers as a population will be significantly undercounted using this methodology. Similarly, families that double up with other families due to financial hardship were not included in the count if they did not access services on that day. Doubling up with other families (overcrowding) is particularly common among immigrant and refugee populations. Additional research on these populations is recommended.”

### Prince George, BC

Kuntzer, D. & Ameyaw, S. (2010) Prince George Homeless count Report. UNBC Computer-Assisted Survey Research Laboratory, for Community Partners Addressing Homelessness

#### Defining Homelessness

Homeless Count respondents were asked to self-identify with either of two definitions of homelessness, or, if they felt both definitions to be unsuitable, to provide their own definition of homelessness.

Definition A:

Absolute Homelessness – is a situation where an individual or family has no housing at all or is staying in a temporary form of shelter or in locations not fit for people to live in.



#### Definition B:

Relative Homelessness – is a situation where people have a home but are at risk of becoming homeless: this includes those that are living in places that are unsafe, inadequate or too expensive; and people who for different reasons are not able to, or don't feel comfortable, living on their own in typical housing.

#### Edmonton (2010)

Tandem Social Research Consulting (2010) 2010 Edmonton Homelessness Count. Homeward Trust, Edmonton

#### Guiding Definitions

Homeless: Persons or families living on the streets or in other places that are not intended or suitable for permanent residence. (A Place to Call Home: Edmonton's 10-year Plan to End Homelessness, 2009)

Absolute Homeless: Individuals and families with no housing alternatives. They may be sleeping "rough" on the street, in a stairwell or campsite.

Sheltered Homeless: Individuals and families counted at an emergency accommodation and who expect to be on the street at the end of their stay.

#### Lethbridge

Gail, J. (2005) City of Lethbridge Homelessness Count. Social Housing in Action: Lethbridge.

Homeless - An individual who is: living on the street; staying in places not meant for human habitation; moving continuously among temporary housing arrangements provided by strangers, friends, or family; staying overnight in temporary shelters, or; has a permanent address but is not able to stay there on the evening of October 6th (Fenton, 2004), (Research and Evaluation Working Group, 2005).

- Unable to find affordable housing – An individual who is unable to find affordable housing (30% or less monthly income).
- Hidden Homeless – The individuals who are not visible. They are either improperly housed, or temporarily staying with relatives or friend, they constitute approximately 80% of the homeless population (Raising the Roof, 2004).
- Emergency Shelters – Provide temporary accommodation for homeless individuals and families who would otherwise sleep in the streets, generally including supports such as food, clothing and counseling.
- Transitional Housing – Provides short or long-term accommodation while assistance is obtained to address problems such as unemployment, addictions.

#### Calgary

City of Calgary (2006) Results of the 2006 Count of Homeless Persons in Calgary. Enumerated in Emergency and Transitional Facilities, by Service agencies and On the Streets. City of Calgary, Community and Neighbourhood Services Social Research Unit. Stroick, S. (2008) Biennial Count of Homeless Persons in Calgary: 2008 May 14. City of Calgary, Community and Neighbourhood Services Social Research Unit.





“the number of people in Calgary on the night of the count “who do not have a permanent residence to which they can return whenever they so choose” (City of Calgary, 2006:4)

“The definition of homelessness used by the City includes people who are living on the streets, as well as those who are staying in emergency shelters or in facilities offering longer term shelter and support for people who would otherwise be living on the streets.

Saskatoon

Chopin, N.S. & Wormith, J.S. (2008) “Count of Saskatoon’s Homeless Population: Research Findings” CUISR: Community – University Institute for Social Research.

Homelessness is a complex phenomenon and there are several different types of homelessness. While there are inconsistencies in the terminology used by different municipalities and countries when discussing homelessness, the constructs remain consistent across municipalities.

Individuals and families experiencing **absolute homelessness** currently have no permanent residence. The absolutely homeless do not have conventional housing alternatives and do not stay in shelters, safe houses, or transition houses. This form of homelessness is typified by the stereotypic image of the homeless individual—a man in a sleeping bag lying atop a grate on a downtown sidewalk or a woman with a shopping cart full of bags walking down the street. These individuals may be “sleeping rough”, or sleeping in the open air (e.g., street, parks, stairwells), or in buildings not suitable for human habitation such as sheds, cars, deserted buildings, and tents (e.g., Chamberlain, Johnson, & Theobald, 2007; Edmonton Joint Planning Committee on Housing, 2006; Thompson, 2005; City of Toronto, 2006; Social Planning and Research Council of BC, 2005).

Another form of homelessness is **sheltered homelessness**, which is defined as individuals and families who self-report not having a permanent residence and are currently residing in emergency accommodations such as emergency shelters, safe houses, and transition houses (e.g., Chamberlain, Johnson, & Theobald, 2007; Edmonton Joint Planning Committee on Housing, 2006; Thompson, 2005; City of Toronto, 2006; Social Planning and Research Council of BC, 2005).

Because of the cold climate, **hidden homelessness** is likely the most common form of homelessness in Saskatoon. Like the absolutely homeless, these individuals and families do not currently have secure housing. Sometimes referred to as “couch surfers”, these individuals would have to sleep on the streets or in shelters but they are able to stay with family or friends. While remaining unseen is a common strategy for many homeless individuals, regardless of the type of homelessness they are experiencing, the hidden homeless staying in private residences are extremely difficult to access and cannot be effectively counted (City of Toronto, 2006; Robillard & Peters, 2007).

Finally, a large proportion of individuals or families are **at-risk** of homelessness because they are currently living in housing that is inadequate, overpriced, unsafe, and/or overcrowded. This population is fairly diverse. For example, members of this group may be spending too much of their income on housing (i.e., above the 30% threshold for affordability) or staying in abusive relationships. They also may be currently living in conventional housing but may be experiencing difficulties maintaining their current accommodations and may, in fact, be attempting to gain aid from agencies to alleviate their housing situation (Chamberlain, Johnson, & Theobald, 2007; City of Saskatoon, 2008).



## Toronto

Shelter, Support and Housing Administration (2010) Street Needs Assessment Results, 2009. City of Toronto

“For the purposes of the survey, homelessness was defined as any individual sleeping outdoors on the night of the survey, in addition to those staying in emergency shelters, in Violence Against Women (VAW) shelters, individuals in health or treatment facilities with no permanent address, as well as those in correctional facilities who were registered in a Toronto court as having no fixed address. This excludes the “hidden” homeless (e.g. couch surfers) and is the same definition used in 2006.

## Canada-wide:

LaFlamme, F. (2001) Survey of Homeless in Canada. Street Component Feasibility Study. Statistics Canada

### 1.1 Target Population

The population of interest for this survey is individuals who are absolutely homeless according to the 1987 United Nations definition – i.e., individuals or members of a family who either have no housing at all or are staying in temporary forms of shelter – within certain specified Canadian cities. The homeless population staying temporarily in private residences of friends or acquaintances will not be covered by this survey. On any particular night<sup>3</sup> the population of interest can usefully be divided into two distinct components – the shelter component and the street component. The shelter component means homeless individuals who are staying in some form of temporary shelter such as shelters for the homeless. The street component refers to people staying overnight literally on the street or in other locations not intended for human habitation. The street component can be further subdivided into those who have some contact with services such as soup kitchens and drop-in centers, and those who do not have any such contact. Thus in summary two components and three sub-populations are being discussed – the shelter and street components and the shelter, services and street sub-populations.