RURAL ALBERTA HOMELESSNESS:

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PURPOSE

This study examined rural homelessness dynamics in 20 communities across Alberta's economic regions. The primary objective of the research was to develop a preliminary understanding of the nature and context of rural homelessness in Alberta using a comparative lens.

The study was limited to rural communities with populations under 25,000 in the towns proper to align methods to a concurrent national study [1]. On average, study communities had an average of 6,600 residents. The following communities were included

1. Athabasca
2. Brooks
3. Camrose
4. Chestermere
5. Claresholm
6. Coaldale
7. Cochrane
8. Didsbury
9. Fairview
10. Fort Mackay
11. High Level
12. Jasper
13. Lac La Biche
14. Redwater
15. Pincher Creek
16. Rocky Mountain House
17. Slave Lake
18. St. Paul
19. Viking
20. Wetaskiwin

Homelessness was defined according to the Canadian Definition of Homelessness (see Appendix 1). The study included both 'hidden' and visible forms of homelessness, such as rough sleeping, couch surfing and sheltered populations.

METHODS

The researchers conducted a review of the available literature – both from the academic sources and the grey literature of commissioned government and non-governmental organizations reports. Thirty interviews were conducted over the course of the study with local homelessness experts from 20 rural communities and 10 provincial stakeholders. Most participants worked in non-profit or government positions.

Interviews were primarily conducted via telephone. Detailed notes were taken during the interviews, which were then developed into community profiles. The data collected from interviews was analyzed thematically to deduce the recurrence of patterns.

KEY FINDINGS

1. Homelessness is reported across Alberta's rural communities with unique local dynamics that render the phenomenon distinct from homelessness in urban regions. Local dynamics are related to the availability of social infrastructure, the impacts of macro-economic trends, housing markets, and migration, and the impact of persons leaving neighboring Aboriginal reserves.
2. The prevalence of rural homelessness and local responses are highly variable. Communities can, however, be grouped according to main characteristics in identifying and responding to homelessness. This grouping can help tailor responses that are relevant to clusters of communities defined by these criteria rather than geographic location.
3. Homelessness in rural communities is primarily hidden (couch surfing, families “doubling up”, sleeping in poor or un-affordable housing), though rough sleeping for a small group of individuals is commonly reported.
4. A small, but consistent group of chronic homeless people was reported across Alberta communities. This group had long-term bouts of absolute homelessness and were thought to have co-occurrence of mental health, addictions and/physical health issues.
5. Housing markets in rural Alberta are limited, particularly with respect to low cost rentals. This makes the vacancy and cost fluctuations that often accompany economic growth and migration harder to mitigate, resulting in housing instability for vulnerable groups. Not all study communities were experiencing economic growth however.
6. Homelessness is reported to be 'on the rise' in some Alberta rural communities; this was often attributed to increasing pressure on limited housing stock resulting from growth in the oil and gas industry and tourism. However, some areas report a steady population of homeless persons and few note a decrease despite economic growth. Rather, some see homelessness rising as a result of economic prosperity which brings new labor to the area and increases competition for housing.
7. Aboriginal migration impacts homelessness in rural communities significantly, particularly where proximity to Aboriginal communities exists and where rural centres act as access points to services and opportunities. This was particularly evident in the case of Aboriginal women, youth and children fleeing violence who sought support in rural communities with available services and shelters.
8. Youth, seniors, and newcomer homelessness in rural Alberta were emergent areas of concern in several communities meriting further investigation.
9. The dynamics behind Aboriginal over-representation in some rural communities merits specific and concerted attention in future research. Notably, the dynamics at play on and off-reserve must be considered on their own merits, particularly in light of jurisdictional issues.
10. The emergence of "disaster homelessness" in the wake of the Slave Lake fires in 2011 and the recent 2013 floods points to the need to consider the unique circumstances impacting housing and homelessness in rural communities impacted by such events.
11. Public recognition and local leadership to address homelessness varies considerably across regions; this was connected to the notion that homelessness challenged the idyllic image of rural communities. Services coordination to respond to homelessness also varied across

rural communities, with official support and resourcing being key factors in local capacity to develop systematic efforts.

12. Rural communities have limited services available to address homelessness locally, thus migration to larger centres is often relied on as a mitigation strategy. However, significant community-based responses which draw on available formal and informal support systems do exist to address local needs.
13. With the exception of some domestic violence shelters for women, none of the study communities had provincially-funded emergency shelters in place, and none received provincial funding to deliver Housing First. Funding was often cited as a primary challenge to meeting needs locally. Some had a limited number of affordable housing in place, usually reserved for women with dependent children, and most had long waiting lists.
14. New projects funded by the federal Homelessness Partnering Strategy have emerged to address rural homelessness in several Alberta communities. The full impact of these efforts is yet to be fully understood, though the national study showed HPS support to have significant positive impact on rural community capacity to develop local homeless-serving systems of care and social planning infrastructure.
15. Understandings of Housing First both as an approach and as a specific programmatic intervention varied across the province, though most respondents saw it as a promising direction. Common challenges to implementation identified were a lack of funding, local clinical expertise, lack of available support staff and minimal housing stock of rent-supplemented units. Risk management was cited as a concern as well.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A number of recommendations in building a response to homelessness in rural Alberta were identified:

1. Develop regional and systematic approaches to rural homelessness as part of an intentional Alberta response. This would include coordinating resources and developing systemic regional strategies as well as the tailoring of strategies to groups of communities with similar challenges in service delivery. Include a comprehensive housing and service infrastructure plan to address housing instability in smaller centers as part of a broader Alberta response. This co-ordination needs to occur at the regional, provincial and federal levels.
2. Encourage exploration of innovative alternatives to shelter, which leverage local resources. Include innovative adaptations of Housing First approaches in rural communities that can be developed to encompass work already underway.
3. Increase awareness of, and leadership for, rural housing and homelessness which will champion solutions at the local, provincial and federal levels. Locally, rural communities of practice can be supported through targeted networking and capacity building activities in the areas of Housing First implementation, performance management, system planning, and research.
4. Respond to the needs of priority sub-populations: Aboriginal persons, victims of domestic violence, youth, seniors and immigrant newcomers. Aboriginal people on- and off-reserve require targeted approaches to overcoming complex jurisdictional barriers to services and

supports. Victims of domestic violence in rural Alberta need alignment with housing and homelessness responses. Targeted responses to youth, seniors, and newcomers' housing stress and homelessness in rural communities also need to be developed.

5. Ensure the integration of homelessness in future emergency preparedness initiatives to address "disaster homelessness".
6. As there is a scarcity of information about rural specific elements, these planning and implementation responses would be enhanced through the development of a combination of a research network to facilitate knowledge mobilization and a research agenda on rural homelessness.

Research Priorities

Emerging research priorities a Research Agenda on Rural Homelessness in Alberta could address include:

1. Increasing *Alberta-specific research* using a comparative and regional approach.
2. Developing *baseline information* on rural homelessness, including standardized homeless counts and needs assessments.
3. Developing *service infrastructure analysis* to assess available resources and gaps systematically.
4. Probing *macro-economic impacts* related to oil and gas and recreation/tourism industry on homelessness dynamics in rural Alberta.
5. Increasing understandings of *rural Aboriginal homelessness,* on and off-reserve and the role of migration.
6. Examining the unique circumstances at play in *remote communities*.
7. Enhancing knowledge about *rough sleeping and chronic homelessness* in rural contexts, particularly to develop viable responses.
8. Understanding *domestic violence* and rural homelessness dynamics, especially in relation to Aboriginal women and children fleeing violence.
9. Developing a fuller understanding of *homeless youth* in rural Alberta and potential responses appropriate for this group.
10. Probing the scope and nature of newcomers' housing stress in rural communities.
11. Enhancing our understanding of *senior's* housing stress and risk for homelessness.
12. Researching "*disaster homelessness*" to improve emergency preparedness and assess long term effects of such events.
13. Identifying potential *policy responses and funding allocation models* that meet the needs of rural homeless Albertans.
14. *Tailoring Housing first interventions* in rural contexts, particularly to address the needs of priority sub-populations (Aboriginal people, women and children feeling violence, youth, seniors, newcomers).

LIMITATIONS

This study was commissioned with an acknowledged short time frame that would permit rapid acquisition of timely information about homelessness in Alberta. Limitations of time precluded a prolonged advisory and engagement process as well. This study relied on a limited number of interviews, which confines the applicability of the findings.

This study relied on one interview per community, which may have led to individual reporting bias and thus potentially skew the findings. A comprehensive research agenda on rural homelessness in Alberta is required to fully examine the extent and dynamics of the issue.

Introduction

Until recently, homelessness was considered primarily an urban problem. The notion that a significant number of people living in a rural environment in Canada could be homeless was not considered a possibility. In cities, rough sleeping is highly visible on subway grates spewing hot air, or doorways offering a break from cold wind. Often those sleeping in cars are unnoticed, and those using a recreational vehicle as their only home are not included in homeless counts. In rural areas, such phenomena tend to be out of sight and consequently have been unacknowledged until homelessness was accepted as more than sleeping rough on a city street. Reports about dwellings lacking basic shelter from the elements, or unfit for human habitation, and people doubled up and living in overcrowded living units began to emerge about ten years ago.

In Alberta, now considered a leader in ending homelessness, a growing recognition of housing instability in rural environments has emerged. An increasing number of communities across the province report rough sleeping, using places normally considered not safe for habitation as shelter, or couch surfing as the measures of last resort in rural areas where no shelter beds are available. Very little research and scarce data are available to understand the scope and dynamics of rural homelessness in Alberta.

Attempts to address homelessness in Alberta are captured in *A Plan for Alberta: Ending Homelessness in 10 Years* [2]. The Plan focused on assessing need, proposing distinct initiatives and implementation options; however, these are focused on the province's seven main cities rather than on rural areas.

In January 2013, the Alberta Interagency Council on Homelessness was established in order to enhance community input and participation in guiding the future direction of the Plan. The Council is comprised of a range of stakeholders, including leaders of community-based organizations, shelters, other orders of government, and provincial ministries to coordinate a systems approach to ending homelessness.

The Ministry of Human Services recently facilitated a partnership between The Alberta Centre for Child, Family and Community Research and the Interagency Council on Homelessness. The Centre’s role is to develop a provincial housing and homelessness research strategy to support. As part of this work, the Centre has commissioned this study on rural homelessness in Alberta.

Notably, the researchers are building on work commissioned by the federal Homelessness Partnering Strategy to examine homelessness in rural Canada across 22 communities [1].

Study Overview

In order to best understand the nature and context of rural homelessness in Alberta, the researchers conducted a review of the available literature – both from the academic sources and the grey literature of commissioned government and non-governmental organizations

reports. The researchers are complementing this literature review with case studies from 20 communities across Alberta, as well as interviews with 10 provincial stakeholders.

For purposes of this study, we used the description of rural to include those living outside urban areas with populations under 25,000 in the towns proper to align methods to the national study [1] However, we were mindful of the Government of Alberta definition of rurality regarding communities of less than 10,000 residents. To accommodate this, we selected case study communities that ranged from 560 to 17,580 in population, with an average of 6,600 residents. All but four communities had populations under 10,000. We sought communities with higher populations to probe dynamics involved specific to centres close to larger cities (e.g. Cochrane, Wetaskiwin) and foreign workers (Brooks).

Homelessness was defined according to the Canadian Definition of Homelessness (see Appendix 1). We focused on both 'hidden' and visible forms of homelessness, including rough sleeping, couch surfing and sheltered populations.

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

METHODOLOGY

A preliminary but exhaustive review of the literature on rural homelessness provided the framework around which data collection from case study communities and provincial stakeholders was developed via semi-structured interviews. These interviews were then used to obtain information from a set of identified rural communities and provincial stakeholders who had experience working in and with rural communities, some of which were the same and some of which differed from those targeted for the case studies. We were guided through a snowball effort to locate these stakeholders with the assistance of staff from the Alberta Centre for Child, Family and Community Research.

As a final exercise, we developed a set of 22 variables that characterize small communities. A combination of statistical data and researcher rankings was used to produce a grid delineating communities by these identifiers. This data set was examined using a statistical procedure called cluster analysis to determine if communities could be classified according to these characteristics. This tailor, it was felt, would assist in finding locally relevant approaches that could be used by groups of communities.

Literature Review

Two approaches were used to maximize the ability to locate both peer-reviewed research in academic journals and grey literature located in websites across the province and the rest of the country.

This search began with a review of the common databases that would normally include articles on homelessness: PsychInfo, Medline, SocIndex, Urban Studies Abstracts, Family & Society Studies Worldwide, and Academic Search Premier. For internet searches, we used several search engines designed to capture government reports and studies usually not found elsewhere. These included Google (and Google Scholar) Bing, Ask.com and Yippy. We used the terms 'homeless'*, 'housing', and 'rural' combined with 'Canada'* (* denotes variations of the word), and also looked at 'poverty' combined with 'rural' and 'Canada' as an ancillary search term to examine these databases. To capture francophone reports we also searched under the terms itinérance" and "sans-abri".

Case Study Communities

As noted in the Introduction, we used the description of rural to include those living outside urban areas with populations under 25,000 in order to align with the national study though on average the size of study communities was 7,000. Homelessness was defined according to the Canadian Definition of Homelessness (see Appendix 1).

Alberta is primarily a rural province, with large expanses of sparsely settled areas and a few larger urban clusters. This project sought to reach into all corners of the province and cover the wide variety of rural landscapes found here: range land, farm land, arboreal forests as well as mountainous areas.

The focus included coverage of communities in all of the fourteen economic regions identified by the province: Battle River, Calgary, Capital, Central, Mackenzie, North Central, North East, Palliser, Pease Country, Slave Lake, south Central, South West, West Yellowhead and Wood Buffalo. The map in Figure 1 indicates their relative locations across the prairie and mountain landscapes. Although the Calgary and Capital (Edmonton area) regions are primarily urban, they reach into rural areas. They were included so that we could also target their rural settlements, which have dynamics that differ from those in more remote locations. We used this division, along with its population sizes, densities and characteristics to examine similarities and differences in experiences of rural homelessness.

Within these regions, 51 separate agencies and individuals in 27 communities were contacted. We were able to conduct interviews over the course of the study with local homelessness experts from rural communities across all of these economic regions. The information already obtained from four communities included in the just completed national rural homelessness study [3] were added to this pool, resulting in a total of 20 communities represented. These

additional communities included Cochrane, Pincher Creek, Camrose, and Rocky Mountain House (Table 1).

Communities were selected based on their size and we ensured appropriate representation from across the province. Representatives were identified through an Internet search of local social service agencies. Where no contacts existed, communities were selected by examining government reports or newspaper articles regarding rural homelessness to identify agencies or individuals who could speak knowledgeably about the subject. We used a snowball effort to locate these stakeholders with the input of Alberta Centre for Child, Family and Community Research staff.

During the initial contact, where the overall intent of the study was presented, potential participants were informed that the study was approved by the University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board (CFREB). Interviewees were asked to review a consent form before participating and their willingness to continue with the interview was accepted as indication of their agreement. They were provided with a short semi-structured interview template which was then used a guide in speaking with key informants across rural Alberta (See Appendix 2).

FIGURE 1- ALBERTA ECONOMIC REGIONS MAP [4]

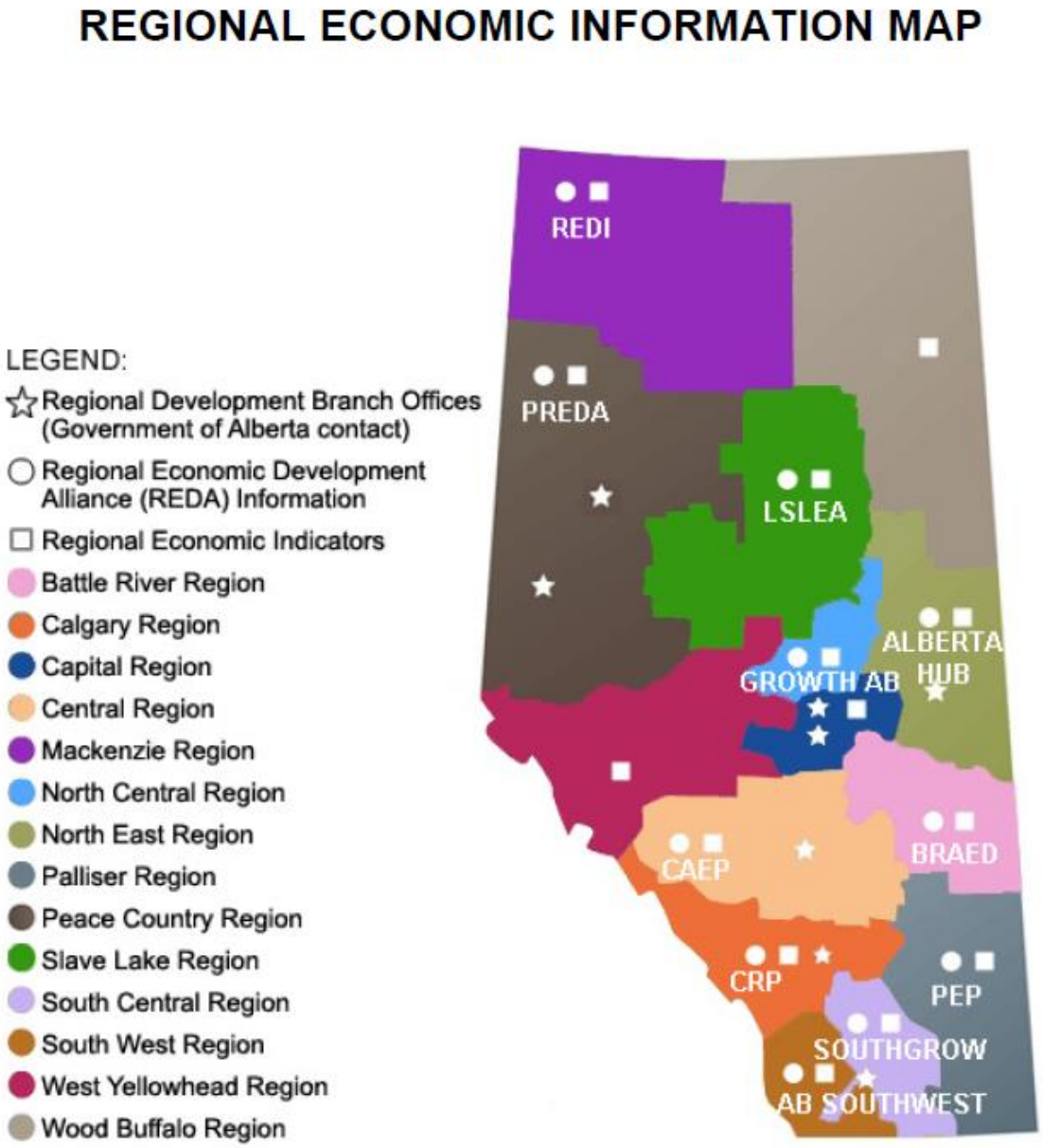


TABLE 1 - CASE STUDY COMMUNITIES

Community	Economic Region	Access to major centre	Size (NHS 2011)
1. Athabasca	North Central	Edmonton	2,845
2. Brooks	Palliser	Calgary	13,325
3. Camrose	Battle River	Edmonton	17,286
4. Chestermere	Calgary	Calgary	9,564
5. Claresholm	South West	Lethbridge	3,758
6. Coaldale	South Central	Lethbridge	7,450
7. Cochrane	Calgary	Calgary	17,580
8. Didsbury	Central	Lethbridge	4,810
9. Fairview	Peace Country	Grande Prairie	3,000
10. Fort Mackay	Wood Buffalo	Fort McMurray	560
11. High Level	Mackenzie	Grande Prairie	3,610
12. Jasper	West Yellowhead	Edmonton	3,460
13. Lac La Biche	North East	Edmonton	8,375
14. Redwater	Capital	Edmonton	1,915
15. Pincher Creek	South West	Lethbridge	3,685
16. Rocky Mountain House	Central Alberta	Calgary	6,933
17. Slave Lake	Slave Lake Region	Edmonton	6,270
18. St. Paul	North East	Edmonton	5,106
19. Viking	Battle River	Edmonton	1,041
20. Wetaskiwin	Central Alberta	Edmonton	12,050

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

The recruitment process consisted of consultation with the Alberta Centre for Child, Family and Community Research and stakeholders identified by The Centre, the researchers identified and contacted potential participants and provided them with background to the study via telephone or email. To access 20 community representatives who agreed to partake in the study, a total of 51 individuals were contacted across 27 communities; 78 contact efforts were made during 6 weeks from the beginning of February to mid-March in 2014.

Seven communities which were targeted to be included in the study were unable to locate suitable contacts. Another four communities did not have contacts that were knowledgeable on the topic, while three did not respond to researchers' invitations to participate. We speculate that the concerns over privacy and visibility as well as doubts around the utility of this study fueled many non-responses. This was the same scenario that we observed in the national study as well.

TABLE 2 - COMMUNITY RECRUITMENT EFFORTS

Region	Number of communities contacted in region	Number of individuals /agencies contacted	Number of times contact attempted
Battle River	2	3	6
Capital	5	8	14
Calgary	3	4	7
Central Alberta	2	3	7
Mackenzie	1	4	4
North Central	1	2	2
North East	3	6	9
Palliser	1	3	3
Peace River	1	2	3
Slave Lake	2	4	6
South Central	1	1	2
South West	3	5	5
West Yellowhead	1	3	6
Wood Buffalo	1	3	4
Total	**27**	**51**	**78**

The community members and agencies initially contacted spanned a range of public and non-profit individuals. Town council members were an initial target group. Many were reluctant to participate, or did not respond to initial contact. Depending on the community, agencies personnel were either very knowledgeable on the topic and participated in the project, or knew very little or nothing of the issue and were unable to participate.

Of all the communities contacted, only one person who was knowledgeable on the topic refused to participate. This was primarily due to the fact that no honorarium was offered for participation. The lack of awareness of differences between a research project that seeks persons volunteering their time and this scan that sought information about a local potential social problem may have accounted for this anomalous refusal.

Community agencies that participated in the project included: Native Friendship Centres, Family and Community Support Services (FCSS), Alberta Works, women's shelters, mental health and addictions services, FASD network members, and local housing providers. The organization that participated most frequently was FCSS. In addition, in some communities that lacked a formal service provider network, representatives of faith communities provided local profiles.

With one exception all case study interviews were conducted via telephone. Detailed notes were taken during the interviews, which consisted of semi-structured questions that had been provided to respondents ahead of time. These were then developed into community profiles. To

protect participant's anonymity, these community profiles are not included in the public version of this report.

Provincial Stakeholders

In addition to the interviews within each community, ten stakeholders representing the broad array of government, non-profit and academic sources were interviewed to gain an understanding of rural homelessness from a provincial vantage point. These complemented the rural case study interviews.

The stakeholders group included representatives from academia (2), government (3), and provincial associations/networks (6). The response rate from provincial stakeholders was high, as most were very receptive to the study. Only one organization contacted did not respond to our invitation to participate.

These representatives were identified through the researchers' as well as the funder's professional networks, thus they represent a convenience sample. We received guidance from Alberta Centre for Child, Family and Community Research to also seek out representatives of organizations that can be considered 'unusual suspects' with respect to work in the homelessness area. Nevertheless, we recognize that, given the scope and timelines of the study, a number of key stakeholders were unable to be included in this process. Future work should seek out to address this gap.

Data Analysis

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

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

Experience with the national project suggests that while there are communalities across rural areas, there are also vast differences that stem from the unique configurations of local geographies and economies. The rural case study interview responses across a number of variables that arose from the literature review were coded and analyzed.

We also used quantitative data to complement the information from the interviews for the case studies mainly from the 2011 National Household Survey to gain an overview of demographic

trends, particularly with respect to housing affordability and conditions. This information, along with community characteristics obtained from the interviews and provincial data, was subsequently be coded as variables to perform the cluster analysis. The analysis aimed to ascertain if there is a method of identifying rural characteristics of homelessness that apply across different communities. A fulsome analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data was beyond the scope of this project, and is not included in this analysis.

LIMITATIONS

There were several unavoidable limitations to this study. This study was commissioned with an acknowledged short time frame that would permit rapid acquisition of timely information about homelessness in Alberta. The opportunity to do this study during the coldest weather months many have made many more sensitive to this issue. However, it may also have kept many who are not visibly homeless out of the sight of most local residents.

Limitations of time precluded a prolonged advisory and engagement process. We relied on the experience with the national study to inform us of salient issues to include in the interviews. But this may have missed some local nuances. The short time frame limited the recruitment process to those available and willing to participate at that moment in time. Finding alternative respondents was not always possible in this timeframe. This curtailed the number of communities who had representatives willing and/or able to participate. In some instances potential participants required approval of senior administrators, and this process required greater timelines than the project would allow.

The interviews also occurred during an unusually cold and intemperate time of year and this may also have created a background not suggestive of homelessness (i.e. who would be homeless at -20C?). Some provincial stakeholders may inadvertently not have been included in this process, given the scope and timelines of the study. Future work should seek out to identify missing respondents and address this gap.

This study relied on one interview per community, which may have led to individual reporting bias and thus potentially skew the findings. This is of concern in those instances where homelessness was reported not to be a local concern. Since we recognize that some factors leading to homelessness exist in all communities, this lack of recognition is an acknowledged limitation, especially where there are no identified services to help those who were victims of domestic violence or youth fleeing troubled homes. In many cases, because of the small size of the community, few persons were available who could (or would) speak knowledgably to the issues presented. The team also was left with the impression that some communities may have minimized local homelessness for the many reasons that are often cited: shame, denial, and a strong belief that the community has no prominent social problems.

More comprehensive needs assessments are needed on an individual community by community, as well as comparative (between communities) basis. The team recognized that some government reports from individual communities would not be available through the

search methods used and would require individual contact in each rural Alberta community to determine if any work on housing and homeless issues had taken place locally. As a result of some reports only being available through such individual contact, this limited our review of the grey literature to that which was publicly posted or available through the contacts established during the interview process. A comprehensive study on rural homelessness in Alberta which includes contacts with all communities is required to fully examine the extent and dynamics of the issue.

LITERATURE REVIEW

With a few exceptions, most research and intervention focus on homelessness has been concentrated on those living in urban areas. The sheer visibility of the urban homeless, the ability to readily estimate their numbers, differences in profile from singles to families, children and youth to seniors, has made it possible to describe population characteristics and begin to determine ways of addressing need.

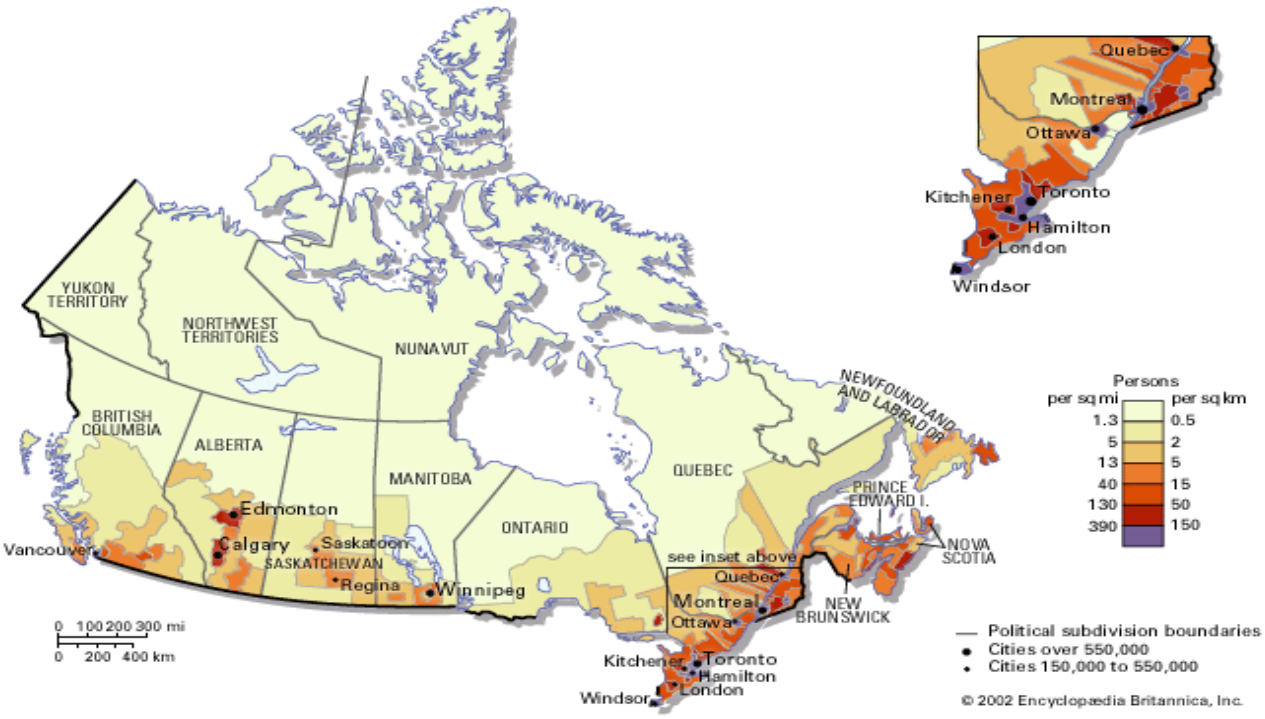
While there is a body of work from other countries such as the UK and the United States relevant to this issue, we aimed to focus our analysis primarily within Canada and then looked for additional insights from outside the country, recognizing that while there may be similarities, there are also uniquely Canadian aspects to the challenges of homelessness in this country.

This review sets out a framework on rural homelessness from an academic vantage point to contextualize ensuing analysis at the Alberta community level. It provides information on what rural homelessness looks like in Alberta and across Canada, where it has been studied, in what context, and what some of the factors are that contribute to housing instability.

DEFINING RURALITY

Geographically, Canada is primarily a rural country, with a few prominent population centres that are home to 81% of the population; the remaining 19% live rurally. Surprisingly, among the G8 countries, Canada has one of the lowest rates of rural residence at less than 20% of the total population. Yet, it has the largest landmass. Thus, rurality in Canada is spread over vast spaces that challenge the delivery of services. The following map best depicts this population spread. In Alberta, which has a lower than average rate of rural residents (compared with those living in major cities and towns), the sparseness of the rural population is abundantly clear.

Notably, not all sources in the literature that mention “rural” actually focus on rural areas. Our first task was to define rurality, so that we could apply this lens in our analysis. The term rural has multiple definitions and meanings. Du Plessis and colleagues [5] identified six different definitions used by Statistics Canada.



These definitions are based on the relative weighting of parameters of population size, density and context and also include consideration of the size of a territorial unit: local, community or regional. The authors recommend that rurality be classified according to the nature and needs of a specific study or project, with parameters that describe zones within which one can allow for commuting to urban areas, large or small, and those outside of commuting zones but within proximity of towns of 1,000 or more. One aspect of Canadian rurality that they do not cover is that of smaller towns whose population may range from 7,500 to 15,000 but who act as regional service centres for vast under-populated surrounding areas.

Rurality can also be categorized according to criteria with an economic basis. Bruce and colleagues [6] profile rural communities according to whether they were growing, stable or slow growth, declining, dormitory, retirement or northern. Robertson [7] adds an American perspective of frontier communities: those that have a very low population density (defined as less than seven persons per square mile), where people live in relative isolation across vast areas, and where the predominant economy is a single source such as ranching, mining or forestry. In the US these are described as primarily existing in the western states. In Canada, these descriptors would be relevant for many areas of most provinces and are most applicable in Alberta.

In Alberta, there are also rural communities that are seasonal in size and complexity of residents. While many parts of Canada see seasonal recreation to occur during the warm weather months, in Alberta this can occur either during winter or summer. Demand for property in recreational areas on and near lakes (Sylvan Lake, Ghost River Reservoir, Pine Lake and Buffalo Lake), have seen an escalation in prices that further places pressure for affordable housing in these rural areas. These seasonal areas attract economically prosperous persons who seek a second seasonal residence, drive up land and housing prices, but are not part of the year-round population.

Another form of rural community with impact on housing costs and demands exists in resource-rich areas where oil, gas and mineral exploitation or development of large-scale energy generation. Although Fort McMurray and Grand Prairie, for example, are regional hubs of sizable populations, we include consideration of the energy sector's impact on the surrounding rural communities because they have significant implications for the housing availability and needs of residents, both temporary and permanent. They also impact the socio-economic environment of these areas and this adds a significant contribution to local experiences of homelessness.

SEARCH RESULTS

The search results of scholarly literature were somewhat meager, yielding six Canadian-based journal articles, two of which have the term 'rural' in the title but are not actually situated in what would normally be defined as rural areas. Gray and colleagues [8] examine migration between Vancouver and Kelowna, BC, neither of which are rural communities, while Skott-Myhre [9] examines homeless youth in Fort Erie, ON which, although a small town, has a population of over 29,900 and is adjacent to large population centres and thus has more urban than rural characteristics. Neither of these studies thus addresses rural communities as defined by our guidelines. Thus we are left with four articles, one of which was a policy analysis paper on rural poverty that we include because of its references to rural homelessness. We also found one Masters' thesis that dealt with homelessness in south-eastern rural Ontario.

The three peer reviewed articles that deal with rural homelessness in a Canadian context all examined the dynamics of mobility between urban and rural locations. They have each used a mixed methods approach, a significantly large participant pool the sizes range from 95 to 120 and beyond and thus have rich data.

One study by Forchuk [10] was a secondary analysis of focus groups with 500 original participants. However, this article did not specify the proportion of the original group came from rural areas. This was also the only study where participants, rather than researchers, identified if they were initially rural residents. The mixed methods of quantitative and qualitative analysis allowed for a rich description of the experiences of participants. The locations of the studies were northern Saskatchewan [11], southwestern Ontario [10], and the North West Territories [12]. The Christensen report from the NWT has an impressive and detailed examination of the context of rural poverty and homelessness within a northern context. It considers both historical factors and current issues regarding property ownership, social housing and government responsibilities in this vast area.

The secondary search of the grey literature was somewhat more fruitful, uncovering 19 reports specific to rural housing and homelessness in various regions of Canada, two of which were placed in Alberta. These reports were found in government websites and those of local housing, homelessness and poverty-focused organizations. Some of these reports are extensive and involved a mixed methodology that included semi-structured interviews and focus groups.

Some examined primarily consumers (e.g. [8], while others also included interviews with service providers (e.g. [13; 14; 15]. We note that many of these reports had strong methodological rigor and merit appearance in peer reviewed publications.

The reports provided a rich understanding of the profiles of homeless persons in some of the areas covered. They also included details on the local economic and environmental characteristics that impact on housing needs in these communities. Some examined the extent of the local service provider capacity to handle these demands. However, none were able to provide more than a preliminary estimate of local homelessness as they all acknowledged the methodological challenges of this undertaking.

Three reports had a primary focus of poverty, of which two had a national scope and one focused on northern BC. We included these discussions of poverty in rural Canada because they made substantial reference to the housing plight of the rural poor. The publication or release dates of this body of work ranged from 2002 to 2013, with the majority produced in the last five years (since 2008)[1].

The reports covered large territories such as northern Ontario, The Northwest Territories [16] and Prince Edward Island, as well as small areas such as the Kootenays in BC [13], southeastern Alberta [17], the Laurentian area north of Montreal (Laurentides [18], the Montérégie area south of Montreal [19] and the Larauntides also in Quebec, Nova Scotia ([7]) New Brunswick, [20] and Prince Edward Island ([21]). Overall, reports and articles covered some or all of BC, AB, SK, ON, NWT, NS, PQ, PEI, NL and LAB, Notably absent was information from MB, YK and Nunavut.

There may be reports that contain information on rural homelessness which are not readily accessible because they are titled in ways that do not allow for easy recognition, such as the report on homelessness in Muskoka [22]. Other reports are in French and lack English abstracts. We caution that researchers need to include Francophone search strategies that incorporate key words in French in order to adequately capture the extent of the literature. We regret the lack of information from some areas because it omits perspectives from these regions. Nevertheless, it is a good start to understanding perspectives on homelessness across various regions of Canada. We are not aware of a similar effort to assemble this regional perspective elsewhere.

THE INTERNATIONAL LITERATURE

One of the first things that we noticed is that most articles and reports cite literature on rural housing and homelessness that arises in other countries. There is a danger in extrapolating

[1] These numbers are based on years 2008-2013.

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

We mention this literature because it has informed some of the background of Canadian articles, despite the fact that dynamics in other countries may not always match with those found in rural and remote places in Canada. However, this is in no way an examination of all international literature on homelessness. Cloke and colleagues have written a number of articles on homelessness in the rural areas of the UK, [23; 24; 25].

Lawrence [26] and Fitchen [27] were among the (few) American academics who early on advocated for homeless definitions that included conditions most often experienced in rural areas: hidden homelessness through couch surfing and doubling up as well as rampant inadequate and substandard living arrangements. These American researchers also noted that obtaining accurate indicators of the extent of rural homelessness was methodologically unfeasible at this time. Cloke and colleagues have also noted that there is a stereotype that homeless people migrate to rural areas for cheaper housing. As a result of this impression, homeless people are often blamed for bringing negative and anti-social behaviour to the community [28] . Some of these observations have been made in the Canadian literature that we found, but most seem to borrow those conclusions from the works cited above.

In contrast to patterns of outward migration and preference for the rural "idyllic" life, the Canadian experience seems to be the opposite (with the exception of recreation seeking outdoors people). In different parts of Canada, the frequent pattern is for homeless persons, including youth, to migrate to urban centres where there are services available [29; 10; 8; 30]; Stewart [15]. This migratory pattern also exists for Aboriginal people who frequently move between their home reserve and urban areas [17; 11].

Magnitude and Visibility of Rural Homelessness in Canada

The extent of homelessness in different parts of rural Canada is simply unknown. Several investigators have reflected on the lack of knowledge of the extent of rural homelessness, noting that methodological issues of data collection make this an almost impossible challenge.

In urban settings, most of those who are homeless seek some support services, ranging from food at a soup kitchen or food bank to overnight shelter and social assistance for financial help. While some sleep rough and can be largely invisible during homeless counts, most can be counted by trained volunteers. Rural people, by virtue of their location, do not usually have a place to congregate unless they move to a town or city that has identified services. Thus there are no ready places for reliable data collection.

It has been postulated by researchers in the US that rural housing insecurity may be as ubiquitous as it is in urban settings, and proportionately speaking homeless rates may be even higher that in urban areas. When those living in substandard or unfit housing are included, the

rate of housing insecurity and at high risk of homelessness in rural areas may be even higher than in urban settings. In fact, it has been noted that houses routinely condemned in urban areas fall outside of the view of local officials in rural areas and remain inhabited despite their unsafe condition [31].

In a review of literature on homeless youth in the US, Robertson and Toro (Robertson [32] noted that researchers generally concluded that those who are homeless in rural America are most often the hidden homeless – doubled up or couch surfing with friends or family. From this account, the descriptor of rural homelessness as largely an invisible phenomenon has arisen.

[As an aside we note that this 'hiddenness' may for some also be seasonal. In both Whitehorse, YK and Happy-Valley Goose Bay (Labrador) homeless persons are visibly camped in or near town during the summer, a visible reminder of their lack of shelter or housing.]

The rural homeless live with family, and friends, moving from place to place as their welcome wear thin. They may live in dwellings considered substandard or not fit for human habitation [31] or their home may be a travel trailer or car or abandoned bus [33].

Rural Homelessness across Canadian Communities

In terms of the focus of Canadian academic literature, findings were sparse and tended to concentrate on one of several themes: migration between rural areas and urban centres ([12; 34; 8; 11]. Some of these were specifically focused on the mobility of Aboriginal people between reserves and urban areas [17; 12; 11] though not specifically of the problems and dilemmas or the rural homeless experience.

The migratory experiences of homeless mentally ill adults in southwestern Ontario [10] was the focus of one other paper dealing with migratory experiences; homeless youth was the subject of one article [9] and three reports. Roy examined homelessness and transitions to the urban environment south of Montreal [19] while Karabanow looked at pathways to homelessness for youth leaving rural Nova Scotia communities and migrating to Halifax [30]. Using qualitative analytic techniques his team interviewed eleven youth who were already situated in an urban location (Halifax). Rural experiences of these youth are then based on retrospective accounts, which are subject to recall biases. This study stops short of an in-depth examination of the rural conditions that prompt youth to leave their rural communities. In a report focused on an urban area (not one of the 19 previously noted), [35], also described some reasons for migration in and out of rural areas. As this study was based on structured interviews with a larger participant group, it offered another perspective on migratory practices among homeless persons in northern Ontario.

In Alberta, the Camrose "*Open Door"* worked with the Augustana Campus of the University of Alberta to develop a local needs assessment specific to homeless youth [36]. The assessment focused of youth at risk, however, its analysis of the service network in Camrose extended

beyond the needs of youth to include recommendations to add emergency shelter facilities for adults, detox and addiction treatment facilities, as well as additional transitional housing.

Notably, Housing First is considered in the aforementioned Camrose report,:

> there was a general “philosophical” consensus among service providers that something akin to the Housing First model, was desirable. Here, providing independent living arrangements to marginalized individuals deemed ready is an important step in providing the physical and intellectual stability wherein regularized patterns of life and the possibility of skill building (e.g. cooking, cleaning, stocking a refrigerator, paying for utilities) can take place. The Open Door seems to have made an important step in this direction with its new transitional housing units, though not all interviewees were yet aware of these developments [36].

During the course of preliminary dissemination of the research results at the 2014 Alberta Rural Development Network Conference, the researchers received information that a similar needs assessments was also being conducted in Drayton Valley - future updates to this literature should include the results of this project led by the Homelessness and Poverty Reduction Team [37]. This serendipitous finding also underscores the dynamic nature of this topic, and the need for relevant reports to become more widely circulated so that they become part of a cohesive body of knowledge on this topic.

Most of the commissioned reports provide a profile of homelessness in the specific geographic area featured. Many of these also described the various types of people who experience homelessness, their challenges and the realities of the local housing and support services available. We will take a more detail look at the reported findings in this report.

Compared to the plethora of studies that document the profiles, histories and experience of urban homeless persons, the information on those who live in rural areas is sparse. All of the studies that we found were place-specific, that is, focused on a specific area in one province. The only exception was a study from PEI that encompassed all of the rural regions of the province. Considering the size of this province, that was feasible, as other reports covered similar sized areas (e.g. Timmins in northern Ontario, the Laurentides in Quebec), but still only a portion of the entire province. We are thus left with reports that provide a snapshot of rural homelessness in a few scattered areas of the country.

Some of the best descriptors of rural homelessness outside of a metropolitan commuting zone come from the Kootenay region of southern BC, [13]; northern BC [38], the YWCA in Yellowknife [39], Happy Valley-Goose Bay, NL [40;41], rural PEI [21], and rural Nova Scotia [7]. Collectively they provide a fairly consistent picture of lack of affordable housing, subsidized housing, low income, and lack of support services as main factors in homelessness in these areas.

Homeless and at risk persons reported paying well over 30% of their income and in many instances upwards of 50% of their income for housing [13;7;42]. In some instances, such as

“Happy Valley-Goose Bay”, a sheer lack of any available housing is driving prices both for market homes and rental housing up beyond affordability levels for most local residents [42].

As in other rural and remote areas, incomes are reportedly lower than in many urban communities, while food and utility costs are substantially higher. In addition to lack of housing, many rural buildings that are more than 30 years old are in need of substantial repairs, with a noticeable number failing to meet minimal health and safety standards [13]. In most cases owners either fail to qualify for financing to improve their homes or the residents are tenants with building owners reluctant to spend money on rehabilitation.

In these communities, mental health and addiction problems are recognized as propelling some people into homelessness. However, substance abuse, with the exception of alcohol, is generally not reported at rates as high as in urban settings. Thus a significant source of housing loss in urban areas, the abuse of illegal substances and resultant loss of employment, income and housing, are not as prevalent in rural areas. For those who struggle with addictions or mental illness, lack of treatment and support services are scarce and there is little (or none, depending on the location) of supportive housing [13; 43;15].

A significant precipitant of housing loss is experienced by women, with and without dependants, who are victims of domestic abuse. Domestic violence and marital breakup are more frequently mentioned as psycho-social stressors that lead to homelessness. Those without a place to live most often double up. Youth will couch surf with friends and relatives during winter months and seek summer camps and camping in warmer months. These dynamics are consistently reported by investigators in communities across regions. One report [13], provided some detailed descriptors that colored the uniqueness of rural homelessness:

> Another rural issue was the challenge faced when marriages or relationships break down. As a single adult, particularly with children, the challenges of rural living can be serious, especially in smaller communities. Gathering firewood, tending produce, repairing machinery, and feeding animals amongst other activities can be particularly arduous when only one adult is doing it. One woman commented (after separating from her husband) that she no longer had access to the tools (truck, chainsaw etc.) to collect firewood [13], p. 50).

Two other distinctly rural themes were evident. One was the scenario, at least in some communities, of ‘established families’ and networks (the “whom you know” scenario). Several mentioned that it was whom you knew that really helped in obtaining work or satisfactory housing [13].

A separate set of reports came from locations which are best described as rural, including or bordering small metro zones.

Except for two from Quebec, they all come from various areas of Ontario and they reflect dynamics found when rural residents have ready access to services found in urban areas. While the rural and remote reports indicate a lack of services, these reports from Montérégie, the [19], Laurentides [18], Essex County (Windsor, ON), Northern Ontario (Pan Northern project

including Thunder Bay, ON), Wellington County (southern ON), and Forth Erie (ON), focus on several components: descriptors of the homeless population, services available and perceived gaps in service.

The Stewart and Ramage [15] report on northern Ontario covers communities north of Sudbury including Thunder Bay. The territory encompassed is vast and scattered with few metro areas. The report listed the most pressing issues described by providers in relation to homelessness across Northern Ontario:

- Lower than average median household incomes
- Lack of public transportation
- Higher than average unemployment rates and high seasonal unemployment rates and lower than average labour market participation rates
- High and rising energy costs relative to other parts of the Province
- Extremely low housing vacancy rates
- Shortage of affordable and rent-geared-to-income housing
- Couch surfing homelessness
- Migratory homelessness
- Distinct Aboriginal homelessness issues (Kenora, Thunder Bay, Greater Sudbury and Cochrane listed several specific issues)/Aboriginal homelessness in urban centres after leaving remote reserves
- Limited available support from family and friends (with regards to migration of persons from rural to urban areas)
- Mental health issues
- Addictions issues
- Youth homelessness
- Lack of emergency shelters in rural areas; inadequate funding for emergency shelters and most funding is not annualized
- Long waiting lists for affordable housing
- Lack of awareness of homelessness in Northern communities
- Vulnerability of households on fixed incomes, especially among seniors-led households faced with higher energy costs and increasing property taxes

The theme running through most of these items is one of poverty, with psychosocial issues of poor mental health, addictions and lack of education/job skills as contributory but not necessarily the primary causes of housing insufficiency.

Transportation, which is frequently mentioned, needs also to be viewed as a poverty-related issue, as those with financial means own their own vehicle. It is the poor and disabled who most frequently need to rely on public transportation, which is rarely available in rural areas. Another aspect of vehicle ownership is that it provides a personal sleeping space for those with no other shelter options [13].

In Wellington County, primarily a rural agricultural area of south western Ontario, [43] interviewed service providers and recipients. This region has a significant metropolitan centre (Guelph), which influences perceived needs, service availability and service-seeking behavior. As such, this report shares similarities with others that include an identifiable urban area: the existence of emergency services including shelters, the lack of social and subsidized housing, the lack of support services for those who have children or suffer from a mental illness, physical disability of addiction.

Anucha [44] examined homelessness among a diverse group of participants from several ethno-cultural communities in Windsor/Essex County, however, the study did not specifically address rurality as a focus. The author does note that newcomers' homelessness in the area is precipitated by housing unaffordability, discrimination in the housing and labour market, as well as struggles to access assistance.

Mobile Homes & Trailer Parks

One finding from the American literature was a report on trailer parks and rural homelessness [45]. We found no references in Canadian literature but did find one clear description of mobile homes in rural areas [13], although they are a feature in many rural communities. Thus we note the importance of this relatively unacknowledged and unaddressed issue. Mobile homes may be found on individual properties or congregated in groups under the moniker of mobile home or trailer park. In small towns throughout Canada, mobile home parks have been in existence for at least 40 years. According to Statistics Canada, in 2011 there were 394, 640 movable dwellings. They are ubiquitous on the rural Alberta landscape. In the communities we looked at the number of movable dwellings ranged from zero in Cochrane and Chestermere to 750 in Brooks. Their importance as a form of housing in rural communities has not been explored or appreciated. The reality that many are part of a rapidly ageing housing stock that has limited viability for repair or rehabilitation makes this an issue of growing urgency.

The widespread use of mobile homes in trailer parks in and around many small communities and outlying areas throughout Canada began in the 1970s. Many of these dwelling units were not intended for long-term survival in the harsh Canadian winters. Coupled with lack of maintenance, many are now falling into a dilapidated and unsafe state, but continue to be occupied by those who lack other affordable accommodations. These units are at high risk for becoming uninhabitable in the next five years and there is no mechanism (loans, mortgages, government programs) to help these owners and renters repair or replace their homes.

Of concern is the number of these mobile home dwellings that are ageing and either in need of substantial repair or beyond their expected usefulness as habitable dwellings. They usually do not qualify for home improvement loans. Owners are often renters of the land on which they reside, and thus their housing stability is dependent on the landlord. Landlord and tenant rights vary by province but generally leave the homeowner with little leeway in the event of eviction. In some areas, gentrification has led to these parks being sold and home owners forced to leave.

Many of these owners are individuals and families with low incomes who do not have the financial resources to pay the thousands of dollars required to move their homes. This move is also predicated on their ability to find a place to relocate to. Usually it is not in the same town in which they currently reside.

Relocation is also predicated on the condition of the mobile home. Many older ones are no longer structurally intact and cannot be moved. Effectively, these owners (and sometimes renters) are rendered homeless. Because these trailer parks tend to be small in size, rarely housing more than 50 units in rural communities, the upheaval created by their demise is felt locally but rarely comes to the attention of regional or provincial authorities who may be able to offer alternatives. Over time, the dilemmas of mobile home owners will escalate as this housing stock goes well beyond its expiry date.

Rural Aboriginal Homelessness

Aboriginal people are over-represented among the homeless population in almost all areas of the country [46]. Most of this information comes from homeless counts in major cities. This leads to conclusions based on the fact that the issue of Aboriginal people who experience homelessness has, in the academic literature, most often been framed in terms of urban homelessness or migration patterns between reserves and major urban centres [17; 12; 47]; Patrick [48; 41; 49; 50]. Other reports have included migratory behaviors as part of a more overall report [35;11]. These reports and articles all concur on the over-representation of Aboriginal people among the homeless in Canada, regardless of whether the focus is on urban or rural homelessness.

Aboriginal housing issues have been mentioned in the literature for a number of years. Poor housing conditions were mentioned as a significant concern in a literature review by Beavis et al of Aboriginal Homelessness in Canada [51]. Recently Hill [52] in a comprehensive review of past and current housing policies and practices, noted vast inadequacies in the amount and quality of housing available on most of Canadian Aboriginal reserves. Some also note that research on this topic is scarce. Furthermore, little mention is made of those who choose to remain in small town and rural areas. Reports that examine rural homelessness refer to issues of Aboriginal homelessness in smaller communities, and the impact they have on local services and housing [42;15;16]. However, little is reported on the plight of Aboriginal people who choose to remain close to, but not on, their home reserves and live in rural Canada. One of the challenges of many of the existing reports that focus on Canada's larger cities is the assumption that there is no stopping place for people leaving the reserve and that they largely seek big city life and its services. However, there is no data to support this assumption.

While Aboriginal homelessness is a significant urban and reserve problem, it is important to recognize this as a significant issue requiring its own attention [46]. We have included this critical issue in this discussion, although we emphasize our recognition of its severity and

complexity. At the same time, while many remote communities have large numbers of Aboriginal people, they are often heterogeneous and thus require inclusion in this examination.

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

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

Northern and Remote Communities

This review was not intended to examine northern and remote communities in specific detail, as in many ways they have circumstances unique to their geographic locations. We include a brief mention because by almost all definitions they are rural areas.

The capital cities of the Yukon, Northwest Territories and Greater Nunavut are all relatively small cities serving as metropolitan hubs for northern communities. Happy Valley/Goose Bay, Labrador is also a northern and remote community, rural because its size or just under 8,000 inhabitants classifies it as a small town, remote because it is a 500 km road trip over partly unpaved road to its nearest neighbour, Labrador City, with a population of 9,500. Similar to Yellowknife and Whitehorse, "Happy Valley/Goose Bay" is a regional centre with medical and social services for the extended rural communities of Labrador East, most of which are Aboriginal and coastal in nature. We examined the housing and homeless plans from Whitehorse [53] and Nunavut [54] as well as a report prepared by the YWCA of Yellowknife and the Yellowknife Women's Council [39] to understand the dynamics of homelessness in these communities.

We also examined the housing and homeless reports from Happy Valley/Goose Bay Labrador to ascertain what community response has been to previously identified homeless issues [40; 42]. The homeless and housing reports from these areas all emphasize the need for affordable housing, with a mix of publicly funded and private market units. While mental health and addictions are acknowledged as important issues, they are not singled out as the primary causes of homelessness for many persons.

These reports note the dire condition of many rural housing units and that this situation continues to deteriorate. In addition, these communities experience an influx of rural residents

who seek health and support services in town and are then reluctant to return to their home communities where there is an even greater lack of resources. This is a similar dynamic to that reported by Stewart and Ramage [15] in northern Ontario.

Housing First in Rural Communities

Housing First has become widely adopted as both the philosophy of placing priority on securing permanent housing for the homeless but also a specific program model effective for chronically homeless persons who have co-occurring conditions of mental illness and substance abuse [55; 56; 57].

Recent adaptations suggest that a variation of the Housing First program model which uses a telehealth component to support persons living in rural communities is a viable approach for those with co-occurring disorders who live rurally in Vermont [58]. Housing First programs are based on the assumption that support services are available to help people transition from the streets or hidden homelessness into more stable lives, and that these supports are not time-limited.

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

While we can talk about paradigm shifts to Housing First, we need to recognize that many more sparsely populated areas are not in starting from the same place in terms of available housing stock or network of support services and personnel, as centres like Calgary or Toronto, or have the same accessibility to the internet that is available even in Vermont. Even if this is possible, Housing First programs that use the model promoted in the US require an Assertive Community Treatment team for support. This thus applies to that segment of the population that has mental illness and addiction challenges, and not to every-one who experiences homelessness. The attendant implication is that responses to homelessness, have to factor in the availability of access to support resources inherently distinct in rural communities. As there is also no strong outcome data on how long these supports need to be in place, the issue of sustainability of these programs is also a critical consideration.

Why is rural homelessness different?

The research on rural homelessness suggests that while some dynamics are similar in both urban and rural homelessness (mental health, addictions, domestic violence), they may not have the same prominent role in all communities. Additionally, the local context impacts those facing these challenges in very distinct ways. For many it involves dealing with unmet needs.

Furthermore, it is accepted that homelessness is more hidden in smaller communities, and those in need rely on informal networks to couch surf/double up. There is also no way to account for those who sleep rough or in unsafe dwellings, seasonal “cottages” and recreational trailers during all seasons. What is also paramount, but not clear, is the extent to which the existence of homelessness in some rural areas is also denied.

In discussions about rural homelessness as hidden, one major consideration, the type of housing available, is not often discussed. Rural housing tends to be largely single unit, free-standing housing, with some small multi-unit dwellings available in slightly larger locales. Secondary suites are rarely mentioned (possible because they are not legal housing units in many locations). There are thus fewer living units available. Some reports mentioned that there are few developers willing to undertake building low cost or affordable housing. In growing communities this new housing construction is often targeted for the affluent streaming into town. In dwindling communities, development of affordable housing is extremely limited.

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

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

While on the one hand some informal networks 'absorb' local need, they also have an underside. Small towns are known for their lack of privacy: on the one hand it is easy to know who the youth at risk are, who has a substance abuse problem and is unemployed, etc. On the other hand, word gets around about 'problem' individuals. Those so identified often have an even greater challenge in finding accommodation and a landlord who will rent to them.

In some areas, communities of faith have a strong local presence which can serve to help those in need, or to exclude those who do not affiliate with a specific creed. Small communities are also more likely to deny homelessness as an issue; there is little buy in from some city councils and the business sector to addressing social issues.

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

Another key difference comes from the higher order of governments' resource allocation patterns, which generally follow population-based formulas to determine small community shares of social support dollars. The pressure is predominately coming from urban centres which to date have taken most of the available funds. This is exacerbated by the lack of fiscal and human resources to apply for the scarce funding available to rural communities, and the discouragement that comes with have funding applications denied.

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

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

COMMUNITY CASE STUDY FINDINGS

This section presents the results of the thematic analysis from the 20 case study communities and 10 provincial stakeholders.

RURAL HOMELESSNESS ACROSS ALBERTA

Across the communities included in the study, homelessness was reported to exist; this was confirmed by all provincial stakeholders interviewed. Nevertheless, the magnitude of the issue and its dynamics were distinct depending on the idiosyncrasies of local contexts, and may have also been influenced by respondent bias. Some community representatives reported that homelessness was not prevalent social issue (i.e. Viking). The interviewee from Fort Mackay noted that the prevalence of homelessness was decreasing on the heels of economic growth spurring housing construction.

Nevertheless, on the whole, most community representatives included in the study pointed to the existence of homelessness as something that has "always been there" to a certain extent. Interviewees also noted that rural homelessness differs from the urban because of its "hidden-ness". This population was reported to be quite mobile, constantly moving from place to place.

Rural homelessness was described as a 'hidden phenomena,' characterized by families and individuals doubling up and couch surfing, or living in makeshift housing (unsafe housing, trailers, camping out, etc.). Doubling up and couch surfing were the most often-cited manifestations of rural homelessness. A certain amount of visible homelessness in the form of rough sleeping was also reported, along with homeless people sheltered in public facilities where these exist.

On a per capita basis, some communities reported quantifiable homelessness prevalence rates. For example, the interviewee from High Level estimated the community to have a homeless population of about 30 people; for a town with a population of 3,610, this would result in a homelessness prevalence rate of 0.8%. Comparatively, Calgary, which is known to have the highest prevalence rate nationally, reports an estimated rate ranging from 1.3% to 1.5%.[2]

Unfortunately, most rural communities do not have formalized data collection approaches with respect to homelessness to track the level of need for housing in their communities. Most provided anecdotal estimates, but were unable to point to data collection and analysis processes. This was in fact reported to be a key hurdle to making the case for investment in responses locally and to understanding the needs of the population. Without a comprehensive

[2] Calgary's rate was estimated between 1.3% and 1.5% in 2000 and 2009 respectively; this was averaged to 1.4%. The 2000 rate was reported in the City of Calgary 59. Stroick, S. and L. Hubac, *Background Research for the 10-Year Plan to End Homelessness in Calgary*. 2007, City of Calgary: Calgary, AB. Background Research for the 10-Year Plan to End Homelessness in Calgary.

needs assessment to determine the magnitude of the issue locally, and the needs of the population, service providers and advocates were hampered significantly.

There were some efforts to conduct needs assessments in Pincher Creek, Camrose and Cold Lake; however, homeless counts and needs assessments were not systematically conducted. Most information on local needs was kept on an ad hoc basis at the service provider level. Table 2 provides reported estimates from interviewees and observed trends with respect to homelessness.

Table 3 - Key Housing & Homelessness Indicators

Community	Size*	Proportion of Population in Low Income (LIM)	Proportion of households living:			Estimated Homeless Population (Interviewee Reports)**	Homeless Population Trends (Interviewee Reports)
			Below Affordability Standards	In Housing with Need for Major Repairs	In Housing below Suitability Standards		
Athabasca	2,845	7%	12%	N/A	N/A	10 youth couch surfing, 7 rough sleeping youth	Steady
Brooks	13,325	11%	22%	9%	6%	2 rough sleeping, many couch surfing	Steady
Camrose	17,286	12%	27%	6%	4%	45-60 unique shelter users annually	Increase
Chestermere	9,564	8%	23%	1%	5%	Several individuals stay in vehicles	Steady
Claresholm	3,758	10%	24%	N/A	N/A	Several youth rough sleeping	Unclear
Coaldale	7,450	9%	23%	5%	2%	12 couch surfing, no rough sleeping	Steady
Cochrane	17,580	7%	21%	4%	3%	Unknown	Unclear
Didsbury	4,810	11%	27%	N/A	N/A	Unknown	Unclear
Fairview	3,000	7%	26%	N/A	N/A	No rough sleeping but 5 chronic homeless women that stay in the shelter	Unclear
Fort Mackay	560	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	No homeless. Individuals living with family while waiting for housing (doubled up)	Decrease
High Level	3,610	16%	18%	N/A	N/A	30 with no permanent housing, 8-9 rough sleeping	Increase
Jasper	3,460	12%	28%	N/A	N/A	5-40 per month seeking assistance with housing	Steady
Lac La Biche	8,375	14%	15%	13%	4%	5-6 rough sleeping, couch surfing very common	Increase
Pincher Creek	3,685	9%	16%	8%	3%	Unknown	Unclear
Redwater	1.915	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	3 individuals over a several year period	Steady
Rocky Mountain House	6,933	9%	19%	8%	4%	1-2 rough sleepers; many hidden homelessness, women's shelter	Increase
Slave Lake	6,270	12%	20%	11%	7%	Under 10 rough sleepers; however, due to Slave Lake fire, 30-40% of pop. lost housing	Increase
St. Paul	5,106	15%	27%	12%	4%	15 rough sleeping, hidden homelessness common	Increase
Viking	1,0141	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	Hidden homeless; no known visible	Steady
Wetaskiwin	12,050	14%	30%	7%	5%	6 known rough sleepers	Increase

** The data on community size, low income rate, proportion of households below affordability and suitability standards and living in housing with need for major repairs comes from the National Household Survey. Each Community Profile provides a link to this data set. Percentages are rounded up.

* Note that these reports reflect identified “rough sleepers” and may not consider the many who are “hidden”.

Economic Booms and Busts

Interviewees who reported homelessness to be a minor issue in their community were scarce. Most noted that homelessness was not only a major challenge to the social infrastructure of their locality, but even noted its prevalence and intensity to be increasing in recent years (see Table 3).

Looking across the 20 study communities, the reported homelessness trends appear to be closely tied to macro-economic shifts in the global economy impacting Alberta related to the oil and gas industry. While some sites are intimately engaged in oil and gas, such as Athabasca and Fort Mackay, others were indirectly impacted by the ebbs and flows characteristic of the industry acting as service centres, or stop-points between resource-extraction sites and larger urban centres.

Not surprisingly, northern Alberta areas reported a much more intimate link with the oil and gas industry, which was attributed to be a main driver in their homelessness population. The ties particular communities have with resource extraction, especially in northern regions or on corridors between urban centres and these sites, have a marked impact on housing markets and homelessness dynamics.

There are a number of reasons behind the reported strained housing markets, which must be contextualized in relation to the larger economic contexts impacting the locality. For example, some centres are experiencing rapid growth brought on by regional economic development, often tied to the oil and gas industry. This is the case for Cochrane, Rocky Mountain House, Camrose, Wetaskiwin, Chestermere, Athabasca, Brooks, Coaldale and Pincher Creek. As an interviewee from Rocky Mountain House noted, "things get worse, when things are good" - referring to the fact that a booming economy creates stress on households.

Nine communities reported significant migration, which impacted their local housing markets. These were: Brooks, Camrose, Chestermere, Cochrane, Fairview, High Level, Lac La Biche, Rocky Mountain House, and St. Paul. Notably, this was attributed largely to economic growth in the oil and gas industry.

Athabasca, Brooks, Lac La Biche, Wetaskiwin and Fort Mackay specifically pointed to in-migration of Aboriginal people. In all cases except Fort Mackay, which is situated on a reserve, these migrants came from nearby Aboriginal communities. Notably however, Pincher Creek, Coaldale and Claresholm reported no significant migration underway despite economic growth.

A provincial stakeholder from Cold Lake reported strained vacancy rates due to the pressure of migration related to oil and gas industry in the region. Rents are as high as $2,500 for a house or $1,400 for a 1 bedroom apartment. Housing investment speculation leads to rapid increases in house prices, which squeeze out middle and lower income families. In turn, the pressure on an already limited rental stock increases as migrant workers and local lower income renters compete for available units, driving up costs.

The oil and gas industry has placed significant strain by also recruiting landlords directly to house their workforce. Companies rent out available units at top dollar for their workers, leaving a depleted stock for both secondary industry workers earning significantly less and the community's lower income populations.

The impacts of this housing crunch not only affect lower income, vulnerable groups, but also key workers who are unable to afford to live in such communities. These key workers include social service, mental health, addictions, etc. workers; the shortage of such critical services providers hampers the service infrastructure in such centres. For example, Cold Lake is simply unable to provide any after-school care programs. Unlike the larger urban centres where such issues related to lack of social and support services also emerge, rural communities are much more sensitive to these economic swings and have fewer resources to mitigate their impacts on these services.

Both provincial and local interviewees related homelessness to these dynamics. Notably, they reported that in general, local homeless populations resided in these communities regardless of the ups and downs of the oil and gas industry. However, an emerging homeless population was identified as attracted by the economic boom. As unskilled migrants, often struggling with alcohol or drug issues, they brought an additional layer to the local homeless population in resource-dependent communities.

In Camrose, high housing costs and low vacancies have priced lower income families and workers out of the rental market, forcing some to resort to camping out in their cars or makeshift shelter. Along with Camrose, Cochrane, and Rocky Mountain House, recreational trailers and other inadequate housing options have become a means of mitigating the lack of rental stock in response to economic and demographic shifts in the locality. Rocky Mountain House has year-round camp-grounds where hundreds of people are reported to live.

Economic growth does not necessarily equate with homelessness however. Fort Mackay, close to the Athabasca oil sands, reports no rough sleeping in the community; furthermore, hidden homelessness is decreasing there as result of recent housing construction.

By contrast to the economic growth in some local areas, Viking interviewee reports the area to be isolated and work being difficult to find. Often only casual work is available for those seeking employment. Single moms and single working parent families are struggling while others families homes beyond their means. In this context, lack of employment opportunities leads to poverty and housing instability as result of low income. Homelessness in Viking is not reported to be a pervasive issue.

Rural Housing Market Dynamics

The housing markets in rural Alberta play a key role in homelessness dynamics. Purpose-built rental housing is very limited and the rate of development is significantly lower than that of

larger urban centres. Most stock exists in the form of single family housing, spread out across a larger surface area than what is often seen in cities. While some communities report available housing to exist on the outskirts of town, the lack of public transportation limits lower income groups from accessing it.

The housing stock traditionally available to lower income groups, particularly those with complex mental health and addiction issues, is reported to take the form of rental units on the top floors of older commercial buildings in the town centre (usually on the main road going through the town). While a valuable and limited resource for those with limited incomes, these buildings are reported to be aging to the extent that many are on the slate for demolition. Other forms of housing include hotels and motels, which are rented for longer periods by oil and gas workers in some communities. However, low vacancy rates and high prices limit their accessibility for lower income families and individuals.

Another dynamic that plays out in farming communities involves the longer process of corporatization that has pushed people into increasingly smaller areas available for cultivation. Over time, some of these families become squeezed out of available land, leading to over-crowding and living in poor quality housing.

As result of these economic and housing market dynamics, low vacancy rates were reported in Rocky Mountain House, Cochrane, Camrose, Wetaskiwin, High Level, St. Paul, Lac La Biche, Chestermere, Athabasca, Coaldale, Jasper, Pincher Creek, and Fairview. In other words, 13 of the 19 case study communities - or 72%. Ten of these communities specifically noted rents were also on the rise locally, which is consistent with reported trends across Alberta as Figures 2 and 3 illustrate [60].

Alberta's reported vacancy rate in October 2013 was 1.6%, down from 2% year-over-year; average rents were $1,158 per month for a 2 bedroom apartment. CMHC projects economic activity to generate a 2.3% and 2.2% growth in employment growth in 2014 and 2015 respectively. Alberta’s unemployment rate is forecast at 4.5% in 2014 and 4.4% in 2015. This economic growth will continue to draw migration netting 71,000 people in 2014 and 63,000 in 2015. The resulting 2.5% forecast population growth will drive up housing demand and prices across Alberta, including rural communities [61].

FIGURE 2 - ALBERTA VACANCY RATES (CANADA MORTGAGE AND HOUSING CORPORATION, 2013)

1.1.1 Private Apartment Vacancy Rates (%) by Bedroom Type Alberta

Centre	Bachelor		1 Bedroom		2 Bedroom		3 Bedroom +		Total	
	Oct-12	Oct-13	Oct-12	Oct-13	Oct-12	Oct-13	Oct-12	Oct-13	Oct-12	Oct-13
Calgary CMA	1.1 a	0.8 a	1.1 a	1.0 a	1.5 a	1.1 a	1.5 a	0.4 a	1.3 a	1.0 a
Edmonton CMA	1.4 a	1.5 a	2.0 a	1.6 a	1.4 a	1.3 a	1.1 a	1.2 a	1.7 a	1.4 a
Brooks CA	**	15.5 a	5.3 d	4.5 c	6.5 b	6.0 a	15.2 d	0.0 c	6.9 b	5.4 a
Camrose CA	14.3 a	0.0 a	7.3 a	3.6 a	3.8 a	4.0 a	0.0 a	0.0 a	4.8 a	3.7 a
Canmore CA	**	**	0.0 a	**	**	**	**	**	1.6 c	0.0 d
Cold Lake CA	**	**	0.8 a	1.4 a	0.6 a	3.0 a	4.3 a	4.3 a	1.0 a	2.3 a
Grande Prairie CA	2.9 b	0.9 d	1.7 b	0.9 a	1.8 a	1.5 a	**	1.9 a	1.8 a	1.3 a
High River CA	-	-	3.4 a	0.0 a	0.9 a	0.0 c	**	**	1.7 b	0.0 c
Lacombe CA	**	**	0.0 c	1.4 a	3.4 b	0.6 a	0.0 a	0.0 a	2.5 c	0.8 a
Lethbridge CA	6.3 a	3.5 d	8.5 a	4.7 c	9.7 a	5.5 b	3.3 a	0.0 c	8.8 a	4.8 b
Medicine Hat CA	3.8 b	12.3 c	5.4 b	4.3 b	4.6 b	3.3 a	8.5 a	4.5 b	5.0 a	3.9 a
Okotoks CA	**	**	11.8 a	**	3.9 a	0.0 a	5.6 a	0.0 a	6.3 a	0.0 a
Red Deer CA	0.9 a	2.2 c	0.9 a	2.0 b	1.5 a	1.7 a	1.5 a	1.1 d	1.2 a	1.9 a
Strathmore CA	**	**	**	**	1.8 a	3.6 a	0.0 a	0.0 a	1.1 a	2.8 a
Sylvan Lake CA	**	**	**	0.0 a	1.4 a	5.6 a	**	5.0 a	1.1 a	4.9 a
Wetaskiwin CA	0.0 a	0.0 a	8.5 a	2.8 a	3.2 a	5.7 a	**	**	4.6 a	4.9 a
Wood Buffalo CA	0.0 c	2.1 b	5.2 a	3.5 a	5.9 a	6.7 a	5.5 b	0.7 a	5.6 a	5.4 a
Alberta 10,000+ (2)	**1.5 a**	**1.6 a**	**1.9 a**	**1.5 a**	**2.1 a**	**1.8 a**	**1.8 a**	**1.0 a**	**2.0 a**	**1.6 a**

[2]Does not include Alberta portion of Lloydminster CA. For Lloydminster CA data, refer to Saskatchewan Highlights report.

FIGURE 3 - ALBERTA RENTAL RATES (CANADA MORTGAGE AND HOUSING CORPORATION, 2013)

1.1.2 Private Apartment Average Rents ($) by Bedroom Type Alberta

Centre	Bachelor		1 Bedroom		2 Bedroom		3 Bedroom +		Total	
	Oct-12	Oct-13	Oct-12	Oct-13	Oct-12	Oct-13	Oct-12	Oct-13	Oct-12	Oct-13
Calgary CMA	776 a	871 a	958 a	1,040 a	1,150 a	1,224 a	1,096 a	1,162 a	1,039 a	1,118 a
Edmonton CMA	742 a	784 a	882 a	934 a	1,071 a	1,141 a	1,216 a	1,292 a	965 a	1,028 a
Brooks CA	**	598 a	693 a	716 a	791 a	814 a	798 b	817 b	771 a	792 a
Camrose CA	622 a	557 a	662 a	698 a	829 a	867 a	871 a	894 a	778 a	812 a
Canmore CA	**	**	776 a	791 a	927 a	945 a	**	**	883 a	899 a
Cold Lake CA	**	**	1,133 a	1,306 a	1,278 a	1,475 a	1,213 a	1,823 a	1,206 a	1,418 a
Grande Prairie CA	724 a	795 a	859 a	944 a	1,004 a	1,124 a	1,132 a	1,274 a	948 a	1,063 a
High River CA	-	-	764 a	835 a	831 a	889 a	**	**	809 a	877 a
Lacombe CA	**	**	748 b	664 a	784 a	786 a	858 a	831 a	781 a	754 a
Lethbridge CA	594 a	579 a	774 a	752 a	863 a	863 a	966 a	953 a	821 a	815 a
Medicine Hat CA	529 a	519 a	611 a	632 a	702 a	727 a	797 a	815 a	672 a	695 a
Okotoks CA	**	**	**	**	977 a	**	1,047 a	1,004 a	977 a	925 a
Red Deer CA	568 a	611 c	736 a	796 a	867 a	937 a	961 a	1,057 a	804 a	876 a
Strathmore CA	**	**	**	**	860 a	874 a	935 a	1,008 a	853 a	882 a
Sylvan Lake CA	**	**	646 a	666 a	747 a	908 a	**	851 a	720 a	873 a
Wetaskiwin CA	503 a	607 a	686 a	711 a	818 a	876 a	**	**	777 a	829 a
Wood Buffalo CA	1,370 a	1,443 a	1,648 a	1,742 a	2,002 a	2,162 a	2,073 a	2,393 a	1,890 a	2,046 a
Alberta 10,000+ (2)	**739 a**	**791 a**	**904 a**	**967 a**	**1,085 a**	**1,158 a**	**1,160 a**	**1,243 a**	**988 a**	**1,058 a**

[2]Does not include Alberta portion of Lloydminster CA. For Lloydminster CA data, refer to Saskatchewan Highlights report.

Recreational Areas

Alberta is home to several significant recreational areas which are fueled by both local use and a large tourist base. The recent rise in prosperity for many Albertans has also spawned an increase in secondary and recreational homes in rural areas near both summer and winter destinations. Notable are places such as Banff, Jasper and Canmore, but other areas such as Sylvan and Pigeon Lakes as well as small communities in the Crowsnest Pass.

While the timelines and resources of the present study precluded a fulsome examination of these dynamics, the report from Jasper underscores some of the dynamics these communities are experiencing. Those located in national parks boundaries have unique constraints that are distinct from those communities located near but outside of park boundaries. Service industry workers and their families are most often impacted by these dynamics.

The allocation of HPS funding to the YMCA in Banff is an example of local initiatives which recognize and have mobilized to take action around homeless issues in this town. While we recognize that the economic factors that influence this homelessness is analogous to that created by energy sector development in other areas, the influences in recreational and tourist areas has unique aspects that require a separate examination beyond the scope of this report.

Chronic Homelessness and Rough Sleeping

A smaller component of the homeless populations across Alberta communities was characterized by complex mental health, addiction, and FASD issues. Those suffering from these disabilities were regarded as relatively small group, numbering less than ten in a typical community. This group was consistently facing housing loss due to these challenges, as subsidized housing and support services are limited in rural areas. The lack of supports available to manage underlying issues leads to further housing instability.

Among those with mental health and addiction disabilities is a chronically homeless population which has become well known to the small pools of landlords in these communities. People so identified are often placed on a "no-rent list". Particularly during economic growth periods, this group is described as most often "squeezed out" of existing rental stock by incoming migrant workers.

No chronic homelessness was reported in Fort Mackay, Viking, Chestermere, Coaldale, Jasper or Claresholm. However, High Level and St. Paul interviewees noted a significant proportion of their homelessness were chronically homeless. Both also reported homelessness to be increasing overall. Other communities, like Rocky Mountain House, Cochrane, Camrose, Wetaskiwin, Lac La Biche, Slave Lake, Athabasca, Brooks and Fairview noted chronic homelessness to make up a small portion of their overall homeless population.

Some of the communities included in the study had a local women's shelter, however, none had emergency homeless shelters available to all adults or to families, to accommodate those in

need of basic shelter services. As a result, rough sleeping was commonly reported, along with individuals and families living in makeshift shelters, trailers and tents.

Rough sleeping was reported across Alberta; particularly during warmer months. A small number of homeless can be found in ditches, backyards, and parks or forested areas. Rocky Mountain House, Wetaskiwin, High Level, St. Paul, Lac La Biche, Athabasca, and Brooks, reported some rough sleeping alongside hidden homelessness. Notably, a significant proportion of chronically homeless and rough sleepers were reported to be Aboriginal people, particularly in areas with proximity to reserves or settlements.

Rural Aboriginal Homelessness and Migration

Regional dynamics play an important role in the patterns of migration for those seeking housing and social supports. A prompt to migration to access supports comes from the lack of privacy many experience in smaller communities. People avoid asking for help and seek the anonymity provided by larger centres.

Larger communities, such as Lethbridge or Fort McMurray, serve catchment areas with a comparatively comprehensive array of social and housing supports. We are not suggesting that the range of supports and housing is adequate to meet local and regional demand; rather, we note that in comparison to the sending rural communities, these larger centres are reported to have a more comprehensive service infrastructure to address needs rural communities are unable to meet. In the case of Lethbridge, Housing First programs, emergency shelter, and access to public systems (health, mental health, addictions, corrections, etc.) are available for those experiencing housing instability in home communities, particularly from nearby reserves.

The majority of communities included in this study are near Aboriginal reserves. In communities with relatively large Aboriginal populations and/or proximity to reserves, the makeup of the homeless population consistently demonstrated an over-representation of Aboriginal people (see Table 5). Many were reported to be the children of parents who survived the residential school system, and faced complex mental health and addictions issues, domestic violence and traumatic experiences, as well as FASD, which is often undiagnosed, especially in adults.

In areas like Athabasca, Slave Lake, Rocky Mountain House, Lac La Biche and Cochrane, where a high number of Aboriginal communities and reserves exist near the town, this was even more visible given that the majority of homeless people are reported to be Aboriginal. In some areas, such as Pincher Creek and Chestermere, Aboriginal people are deterred from using town services and encouraged to “find their way down the highway” to Lethbridge or Calgary.

In areas where no Aboriginal over-representation was reported in the homeless population, limited proximity to Aboriginal communities was also noted as in the case of Claresholm and Coaldale. There were however exceptions to this trend, as in the case of Fairview where Aboriginal women made up as many as 75% of domestic violence shelter users despite no Aboriginal communities being in close proximity.

Migration from Aboriginal communities is motivated by a number of factors, including poor housing conditions on-reserve, lack of employment and education opportunities, as well as the need to access services (medical, judiciary, counseling, etc.). Lack of safety, abuse, and violence are also reported to be main drivers out of Aboriginal communities. This is a particularly salient theme for Aboriginal women and children fleeing violence on-reserve who seek support outside their home communities.

Often, smaller centres, regardless of their local economic growth, attract Aboriginal populations who lack access to such services in their own communities. Others are banished from their home community and have to live elsewhere. Notably, the movement to and from reserves is very common and Aboriginal residents tend to migrate regularly. Many are reluctant to leave the rural landscape to avail themselves of more culturally sensitive services in the larger cities.

Migration is further complicated by the availability of transportation into remote communities, though reliance of regional centres is common to access basic services. For residents who struggle with addiction issues, the only available options for treatment are in larger urban centres around the province and even in other provinces.

Out-migration from Aboriginal communities is not a given however. Fort McKay is in fact reporting a trend of individuals moving back to the community since there are more housing units coming on-stream.

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

TABLE 4 - MIGRATION AND ABORIGINAL HOMELESSNESS

Community	Aboriginal % of Total Population (NHS 2011)*	Migration Trends Reported	Aboriginal Homelessness Trends Reported	Reported Proximity to Aboriginal Community
Athabasca	13%	Hub between large centers; High Aboriginal migration from nearby reserves	Majority of visible homeless	Multiple reserves nearby
Brooks	4%	High due to oil and gas boom and Aboriginal reserves in Saskatchewan	Unknown	Multiple reserves nearby
Camrose	4%	On the rise; 30% homeless are transient	20% of homeless	Hobbema nearby
Chestermere	2%	Very high due to economic growth	Not significant	Siksika nearby
Claresholm	4%	No migratory movement	Not significant	No reserves nearby
Coaldale	3%	Limited	Not significant	No reserves nearby
Cochrane	3%	Very high due to economic growth	Overrepresentation reported	Morley
Didsbury	4%	Limited	Not significant	No reserves nearby
Fairview	6%	High due to oil and gas boom	75% of women's shelter users	No reserves nearby
Fort Mackay	91%	Some Aboriginals moving back, only Aboriginals permitted to live	Almost all of the population is Aboriginal in community	Community is on a reserve
High Level	30%	Very high due to oil and gas boom	Majority of visible homeless	One reserve nearby
Jasper	2%	Tourist town; highly transient; seasonal workers have trouble securing housing	Not significant	One reserve nearby
Lac La Biche	26%	High due to oil and gas boom and nearby Aboriginal reserves	Majority of visible homeless	Multiple reserves nearby
Pincher Creek	9%	Migration not significant in the area	Overrepresentation reported	Two reserves nearby
Redwater	.05%	Seasonal oil and gas workers	Not significant	Two reserves nearby
Rocky Mountain House	7%	Very high due to oil & gas boom; squeezes lower income families into unstable housing	As many as 50% of food bank users Aboriginal; large over-representation in homeless population	Six reserves nearby
Slave Lake	25%	Migration reported from nearby "back-lakes" - Aboriginal communities	Majority of visible homeless	Several Aboriginal communities nearby
St. Paul	17%	High due to oil and gas boom	Majority of visible homeless	Four reserves nearby
Viking	.05%	Limited	Not significant	No reserves nearby
Wetaskiwin	11%	Some Aboriginal migration from nearby reserve	Majority of visible homeless	One reserve nearby
* Percentages are rounded up.				

On-Reserve Aboriginal Homelessness

It is important to distinguish the contexts in which Aboriginal rural homelessness plays out. While a notable component of homeless populations across Alberta communities, on-reserve homelessness has distinct dynamics that should be noted. As this particular study was not intended to study on-reserve homelessness, we strongly urge that future research specifically examine this issue. In the interim we briefly describe the dynamics reported in one rural Aboriginal town that is on a reserve.

Our study included Fort Mackay, which is near Fort McMurray and the Athabasca oil sands. Fort Mackay is made up of Dene, Cree and Métis community members. Though homelessness is not a visible issue in the community, there are individuals who are couch-surfing while waiting for new housing completions.

Housing in the community is provided by the band and no private ownership exists; non-Aboriginal people cannot obtain housing on the reserve. Most houses in the community are single dwelling residences between three and four bedrooms and are rented for a set rental price of $500 per month. All maintenance and renovation work is paid for by the band.

Alcohol and drug use is a significant issue in the community, which has resulted in a number of challenges. The community has been unsuccessful with multi-family residential developments. Such housing complexes have led to serious conflicts between the residents, exacerbated by problems ensuing from drugs and alcohol. Individuals who are provided with housing and have an alcohol problem often damage the houses. Fighting often occurs in the residences so many walls, doors and windows are broken. The interviewee stated that a few of the houses in the community have burned down due to individuals that were using drugs and/or alcohol.

A major issue with current housing arrangements reported is that many individuals do not pay their monthly rent. If an occupant does not pay their rent, they are not evicted from their property though maintenance and renovation work will not be completed and residents are ineligible from upgrading to a new house.

This has caused hostility in the community as residents who do not have drug or alcohol problems and are willing to pay rent are on waiting lists while those that are reported to be "destroying the houses and not paying rent are allowed to stay".

Disaster Homelessness

In addition to the examples of this reserve, several other important aspects of Aboriginal housing and homelessness need to be noted in relation to homelessness resulting from natural disasters which impact Aboriginal people disproportionally.

The June floods of 2013 severely impacted Aboriginal reserves of the Stoney and Siksika First Nations, further exacerbating already dire housing condition in Morley, Eden Valley, Siksika reserve and near Rocky Mountain House.

One of the members of this research team attended a meeting on the Morley reserve held specifically to discuss the lack of appropriate response to the housing crisis created by the June 2013 floods. Promised emergency housing has not substantially materialized in these communities and many of those forced from their homes are living in motels in Calgary, Canmore and nearby areas. Some families are doubled or tripled up with up to 19 individuals attempting to live in a three bedroom dwelling. In other instances, family sub-units rotate their place of residence among several houses occupied by relatives, a version of couch surfing that involves entire families.

The towns of Chestermere and Cochrane are not significantly engaged in efforts to address the housing needs of these nearby reserves and local emergency aid services were not reported to have prioritized the needs of this Aboriginal population. These events will continue to exacerbate an already problematic housing and homeless problem on these reserves.

Looking to the experience of Slave Lake in the wake of the 2011 fires, further learnings about the unique circumstances resulting from natural disasters emerge. The housing situation facing Slave Lake as a result of the massive fire led to more than 30% of the population losing its housing. As of 2014, rebuilding is not yet completed and many continue to live in interim housing secured from the province while they re-establish their homes. This has created unique set of circumstances whereby a large portion of the population can be considered homeless. Most often, families are couch surfing and doubling up.

Notably, there remains a reported 'base' homeless population that preceded the fire consisting of longer term homeless, who are struggling with mental health and addictions issues. Within the context of the disaster, the needs of this group were reported to take a "backseat" given the extent of the housing problem facing the general population. The interviewee reported that the over-representation of Aboriginal people among this group is connected to the proximity of Slave Lake to numerous Aboriginal communities. Further, younger Aboriginal people are reported to be migrating for work, often travelling back and forth to their home communities. This younger homeless group is likelier to be doubling up and remain hidden.

The Slave Lake fire and June 2013 floods examples highlights the unique circumstances natural disasters create in rural Alberta. A fulsome consideration of the impacts of the 2013 Alberta flood on housing markets and homelessness should be pursued to examine longer term effects of disasters on this population and consider impacts in future planning and emergency preparedness work. A specific consideration the uneven impacts of disasters on homelessness among Aboriginal people, off and on-reserve should be undertaken.

Domestic Violence in Rural Communities

Domestic violence was cited as a key driver to housing instability and homelessness, not only as a direct factor in pathways into homelessness, but also for its long term repercussions. Community and provincial stakeholders noted the impacts of domestic violence for women, youth, children and seniors, leading to loss of housing and various forms of hidden homelessness.

For example, interviewees from Camrose, Pincher Creek, Brooks, Claresholm, Fairview, Rocky Mountain House and St. Paul reported women fleeing violence to make up a key population experiencing housing stress locally. In rural contexts, the available options for those escaping abuse are much more limited than in urban centres. Women fleeing violence have to leave their communities to escape their abusers, which also takes them out of their network of social supports.

A network of women's shelters is in place across 33 Alberta communities. About 45%, or 15, of these are located outside Alberta main seven cities. By contrast, no emergency shelters were identified outside of the seven major cities.

TABLE 5 - WOMEN'S SHELTERS IN ALBERTA [62]

Women's Shelters **Where multiple shelters exist, the total is noted in brackets. Study communities are indicated in blue.**		
Banff	Grande Prairie	**Pincher Creek**
Brooks	High Level	Red Deer
Calgary (7)	High River	**Rocky Mountain House**
Camrose	Hinton	Sherwood Park
Cold Lake	Hobbema	Slave Lake
Edmonton (5)	**Lac La Biche (2)**	St. Paul
Enilda (2)	Lethbridge	Stand Off
Fairview	Lloydminster (2)	Strathmore
Fort Chipewyan	Medicine Hat (2)	Taber
Fort McMurray	Morley	Wabasca (2)
Grande Cache	Peace River	Whitecourt

The availability of women's shelters played a key role in migration to access services as women and children had to leave their community to seek safety and support in localities with such services.

This was particularly related to the experiences of Aboriginal women and children fleeing violence. In Aboriginal communities in northern Alberta, women fleeing violence were reported to be highly traumatized, facing the effects of intergenerational trauma, little education and training, complicated by mental illness and additions.

Many sought supports in other rural communities with women's shelters; the Alberta Council of Women's Shelters reports that as many as 70% of domestic shelter users across the province are Aboriginal women. In recent years, an increasing complexity of presenting issues for such centres is also reported.

Aboriginal women face the additional challenges engendered by systematic racism and sexism upon arrival at their destination. Landlords are often cautious to rent to women fleeing violence, particularly when they are Aboriginal and have children with them for fear of damages to their units or 'partying' and over-crowding from relatives and friends doubling up.

One encouraging initiative suggests that solutions tailored to this group are emerging in rural Alberta. Landlords in Camrose are working with Aboriginal women fleeing violence, making rental units available to them. Support workers advocate on behalf of the women and support housing stability. As a result, landlords are now "lining up" to be part of the initiative as the women proved to be "ideal tenants": stable, caring for the property, and paying rent on time.

Rural Youth Homelessness

Another group that has emerged as a notable sub-population of the rural homeless consisted of youth. Communities reported homeless youth to be even less visible on the street, and most likely to couch surf and double up. Youth homelessness was often un-recognized from an official perspective, though interviewees remarked it to be a notable emerging issue.

Youth were reported to be homeless most often as result of abuse in the home, which led to notable movement and transience as they sought a safe place to live outside their familial home. Youth couch surfing were specifically reported in Athabasca, Slave Lake, Camrose, Coaldale and Wetaskiwin.

In Camrose, the Open Door worked with the Augustana Campus of the University of Alberta to develop a local needs assessment specific to homeless youth (Hallstrom, Coates, Mindel, Richter, & Finseth, 2013). The assessment focused of youth at risk, identifying six demographic groups that required particular attention from a service planning perspective:

- youth with children (often single and female);
- youth under the age of eighteen;
- parents and guardians;
- First Nations youth (significantly, women and children);
- residents over the age of twenty-four; and
- youth subject to extreme instances of marginalization (2013, p. 4).

With respect to Aboriginal youth, the interrelated issues of "extreme poverty, domestic violence, gang violence, trauma and PTSD [Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder], addictions, incest" (2013, p. 15) were noted as key drivers of migration out of nearby reserves (Hobbema) into Camrose.

These dynamics often led to significant movement into urban centres, and youth serving agencies in Edmonton, for example, anecdotally report as many as 40% of youth they serve come from rural communities. The impetus for migration of rural homeless youth is an important area for further study, particularly to develop programmatic and policy solutions.

In terms of shelters for young people, Red Deer, Medicine Hat, Grande Prairie, Lethbridge, and Edmonton were reported to each have a youth-specific facility, while Calgary had two [63]. No youth shelters were reported in the rural Alberta case study communities, though Cochrane is developing a plan to end youth homelessness in response to growing concern about this group. Meanwhile, Cochrane reportedly provides transportation for youth to Airdrie and Calgary.

As in urban contexts, the service response to rural youth homelessness is entwined with child intervention services and education, particularly given the high rates of abuse reported. The lack of access to treatment for counseling, mental health and addictions locally was yet another service gap. Here, ongoing challenges of service coordination are noted to limit the range and comprehensiveness of responses to the issue. There is a need for service coordination to ensure developmentally appropriate supports and housing options for homeless youth in rural Alberta.

SENIORS

While reports of visible senior's homelessness did not emerge at this time from the interviewees, a notable number of communities referenced this population as becoming increasingly vulnerable. Seniors' initiatives were noted in Chestermere, Claresholm, Cochrane, Lac La Biche, Pincher Creek, Redwater, St. Paul, and Wetaskiwin.

The aging population's increasing accessibility needs impacts their ability to remain in their homes. Seniors' limited incomes and lack of transportation options further increases vulnerability. Additional analysis on the emerging needs of this population is required to assess the full scope of the issue.

As an example, Red Water reports that there are minimal services available, thus people that do become homeless do not stay in the community. Seniors are most commonly affected by the lack of services as there is no transportation to the larger urban centers, forcing many to relocate. In Viking, where the seniors population was reported to be high, the interviewee noted that it was "getting harder and harder but they want to stay in their home".

NEWCOMERS

Economic immigrants, refugees, refugee claimants and Temporary Foreign Workers emerged as a notable sub-population experiencing hidden homelessness in some rural communities. Where homelessness was reported among this group, it was most often described as a result of low income leading to doubling and over-crowding, or living in poor quality housing.

Brooks is well known for its immigrant population. However, across the study sites, the issue of housing stress among foreign workers emerged in Athabasca, Chestermere, and Lac La Biche as well. Not all communities reported this issue, and in some sites, foreign workers' housing needs were addressed by employers.

Foreign workers accounted for a large proportion of those living in substandard living situations in Athabasca. A large group of Temporary Foreign Workers from the Philippines live with up to ten occupants in small apartments and homes. In Brooks, a large population of foreign workers in the community work at the local meat packing plant. Many of these individuals are living together in groups in accommodations not suitable for many people. In Lac La Biche, doubling up was reported to be a common trend among Temporary Foreign Workers, in most part due to the accommodations provided by their employer.

For immigrant women experiencing domestic violence, the added element of rurality exacerbated their isolation and ability to access supports. For some, the prospect of leaving abusers to a larger urban centre with limited knowledge about Canadian social support and justice systems and competency in English leaves this group particularly vulnerable. When the spouse is also the woman's sponsor for immigration purposes, the situation is particularly more tenuous from a legal perspective as well.

Public Recognition and Leadership

The public recognition of homelessness varied across Alberta, to notable effects. This is partially the result of the mythology of the pioneer toiling the rugged Western landscape that has infused notions of 'Albertan-ness'. The idea that someone is unable to keep a roof over their head and provide for their families, counters the notion of individual efficacy and self-reliance. Further, communities established on these mythologies may have a difficult time accepting such phenomena in their backyards.

While service providers and faith groups were often aware of the issue, the official recognition of homelessness as a social issue was not necessarily a given: three communities in this study were specifically identified by interviewees as having a municipal council that is not engaged in addressing homelessness in a meaningful way, despite strong indications from service providers that it is an ongoing issue. The notion of homelessness may challenge ideas about the idyllic rural life devoid of urban plight, or the notion of Western self-sufficiency.

Nevertheless, there were notable examples of local leaders who have taken decisive action on homelessness. They acknowledged an issue at hand, supported initiatives to understand its magnitude and dynamics (needs assessments, homeless counts, etc.), engaged in developing solutions locally and advanced the issue to higher government levels. In areas where the housing crunch has reached middle income earners, particularly northern Alberta, natural disaster and/or tourism-impacted regions, public

action on housing and homelessness is more common as well. A number of communities have also began implementing homeless support initiatives and developed affordable housing projects, as will be discussed in ensuing sections.

Some interviewees reported local leaders, particularly on town council, to be very supportive on action to address homelessness. However, the lack of research on local needs, limited understanding of solutions, and jurisdictional juggling of responsibility for funding and leadership for homelessness responses limited leaders' ability to make a case for local resource allocation at the local, provincial and national levels. Beyond taking the issue to their provincial counterparts, local leaders were reported to not "know what to do", while social agencies were "maxed out already". Some also struggled with very pressing needs emerging from natural disasters in their communities, which often took precedence.

Despite advocacy from services providers and advocates, there were very limited formal responses such as action plans or strategies on homelessness reported. This was attributed to local leadership lacking "resources to do the work". The limited systematic solutions were also related in part to the smaller numbers of homeless in these localities, which made the issue less visible, leading to less public awareness and pressure for action. In fact, some interviewees noted that the notion of homelessness in their community was "weird" and "out of place" for the general resident population.

In centres where homelessness initiatives exited, the engagement of senior leaders (particularly town council) was noted to be critical. This local leadership resulted in support for homelessness initiatives; nevertheless, even in such cases, demand outstripped supply and overwhelmed service providers at times.

Local leadership was often the result of advocacy from concerned volunteers and/or service providers who undertook extensive and sustained education with town council on the issue to obtain buy for action. Despite the limited resources rural Alberta communities were often working with, in localities where town leadership supported action on homelessness, resources followed, making a notable difference in the service landscape and lives of those experiencing housing instability.

JURISDICTIONAL JUGGLING

Homelessness was spoken of as a jurisdictional "hot-potato" in rural communities. While local councils recognized the need for affordable housing, supports for the homeless, and prevention services, they were limited in their ability to allocate resources and perceived accountability to respond. Advocates in communities like Cold Lake, Rocky Mountain House, Canmore or Cochrane informed council on social issues, which were taken up further to local MLAs as provincial responsibilities.

A key issue related to government jurisdictions concerns Aboriginal people, on and off-reserves. Where Aboriginal people migrated into nearby rural communities to access services or employment opportunities, etc., they were often the subject of push-and-pull between their band and the local community. There is a lack of clarity reported regarding the responsibility to support those who become homeless off-reserve, further, a simple lack of resources on both parts.

One of the largest hurdles facing this group is related to jurisdictional boundaries between the band, local community, provincial and federal governments. Arguments regarding responsibility to resource responses persist as various parties "pass the buck" back and forth. Often, bands report not having the funds for housing off-reserve and note this should not be their responsibility; similarly, local communities argue they are not resourced or accountable for off-reserve migrants. The issue is often pushed to provincial and federal levels, where it often volleys with inconclusive results between Alberta Human Services and Indian Northern Affairs Canada.

As an example, an interviewee described the plight of a Métis woman who left her settlement with her children as result of domestic violence. She sought safety and supports walking for two days to Lloydminster. She slept in a ditch overnight and upon arrival at a social assistance office, she was asked what side of the ditch she slept on to determine if she was on the Alberta or Saskatchewan side of the town.

Such jurisdictional dilemmas are hampering the capacity of systems to respond to extremely vulnerable situations; when these play out in rural contexts, the available resources and supports infrastructure we expect in an urban context is simply non-existent, adding to the overlapping vulnerabilities those experiencing homelessness face to begin with.

Provincial Rural Housing and Homeless Supports

The range and comprehensiveness of homeless services available in rural communities is considerably different from what may be available in medium and large centres. In particular, the availability of affordable and/or supportive housing in rural Alberta is very limited; in some communities it is wholly absent. Where subsidized housing exits, lengthy waitlists accompany it; families and individuals often wait several years to access this limited stock.

The lack of specialized supportive housing for those with mental illness and addictions issues was noted as a critical gap across the province. In many instances, individuals are prompted to migrate to larger centres to access supports and local providers are only able to assist them with referrals, information, and transportation funding to leave the community.

Some communities were successful in developing new supportive or affordable housing projects. In Fairview, Habitat for Humanity is in the process of constructing two duplexes that will provide housing for the working poor while the Lutheran Church is developing a seniors complex.

Despite some success securing funding and leading the development of such projects, interviewees reported being "maxed out" by such efforts. After two or three projects, service providers or volunteer groups leading the charge become "burned out and lose steam". This is related to the issue of funding sustainability as well, given that each project also requires ongoing operational funding, which is not secured from government on an ongoing basis. A comprehensive range of sustainably funded services was reported to be needed to respond to homelessness, rather than one-off projects.

The network of programs funded through Family and Community Support Services (FCSS) was a notable source of support locally; however, available funding was limited and has not seen an increase for the past several years despite added demand. Viking, Chestermere, Fairview and Jasper interviewees specifically pointed to the key role their local FCSS played in responses to social issues, including homelessness and housing stress.

Access to funding was the most commonly noted barrier to action on homelessness across study communities. While most interviews were aware of the provincial commitment to ending homelessness and Housing First, interviewees consistently noted the lack of funding in rural communities.

There is currently no formal provincial response in place on rural homelessness. As can be observed from Table 8, homeless supports resources are almost exclusively allocated to major centres. In *A Plan for Alberta* [64], rural homelessness is not specifically addressed. Although a community-led approach and local plans to end homelessness were identified as priority actions, precedence was placed on the larger centres as opposed to small rural localities.

Often, Alberta Human Services did indeed allocate resources for women's shelters (see Table 6), however, no Housing First operations were reportedly funded provincially by the study communities.

Provincial Housing First dollars are allocated across the seven Community Based Organization of Alberta's major cities; no rural funding component exists at this time (Table 7).

TABLE 6 - PROVINCIAL HOMELESSNESS FUNDING ALLOCATIONS[65]

Community	Provincial Allocation			Percent Allocation
	2009/2010	2010/2011	2011/2012	2011/2012
Calgary	$13.8 million	$19.1 million	$21.8 million	46%
Edmonton	$9.8 million	$12.5 million	$15.4 million	32%
Grande Prairie	$800,000	$1.3 million	$1.9 million	4%
Fort McMurray	$950,000	$1.5 million	$2.1 million	4%
Red Deer	$1.1 million	$1.7 million	$2.3 million	5%
Lethbridge	$800,000	$1.3 million	$1.9 million	4%
Medicine Hat	$780,000	$1.3 million	$1.8 million	4%
Other	$4 million	$2 million	-	
Totals	**$32 million**	**$40 million**	**$47.5 million**	**99%***

* May not add up to 100% due to rounding.

In most rural areas, no emergency shelter existed: Alberta Human Services reported funding 3,208 spaces in homeless-serving facilities in 2013. Of these, 2,447 (76%) were in emergency shelters, another 538 (17%) were in short term supportive housing, and the balance of 223 (7%) were in long term supportive housing (Table 8).

It is important to note that provincial funding only covers part of a community's housing continuum, and in many cases, unfunded beds are in operation. Further, there are likely additional emergency shelter-type facilities that operate 'under the radar' or fully supported by informal networks and faith-based efforts.

While there is currently no formal mechanism to track all emergency shelter beds, including those on reserve; knowledge of these exists through informal information sharing between service providers and/or funders. It is important to recognize, however, that the majority of provincially funded shelter beds, including Adult Emergency Shelters and Women's Emergency and Second Stage Shelters are tracked for utilization. Shelters on Reserve who operate on Fee-for Service agreements supply invoices which allow for the tracking of demographics. This includes those that are located in rural communities.

TABLE 7 - ALBERTA HUMAN SERVICES-FUNDED HOMELESS FACILITIES [66]

Community	Facility Type	Capacity
Edmonton	Emergency Shelters	733
	Short-Term Supportive Housing	20
	Long-Term Supportive Housing	153
Calgary	Emergency Shelters	1,397
	Short-Term Supportive Housing	470
	Long-Term Supportive Housing	70
Lethbridge	Emergency Shelters	80
	Short-Term Supportive Housing	15
Medicine Hat	Emergency Shelters	30
Red Deer	Emergency Shelters	23
Grande Prairie	Emergency Shelters	62
	Short-Term Supportive Housing	33
Fort McMurray	Emergency Shelters	102
Lloydminster	Emergency Shelters	20
	Total	**3,208**

Notably, all but 20 (1%) emergency shelter beds were located in Alberta's seven main cities; Edmonton and Calgary, were home to 27% and 57% respectively. Of course, this is a function of the proportional distribution of need across Alberta. However, this was cited by interviewees to be a reason for migration out of smaller communities into regional and large urban centres in order to access supports.

Affordable housing grants have been distributed via Housing and Urban Affairs, and more recently Municipal Affairs, into smaller Alberta centers. This was in part prompted by the Affordable Housing Task Force [67] which called for investment in 11,000 new units. The Task Force report recognized housing stress in smaller centres via consultations on housing instability Alberta-wide [68].

As can be seen from Tables 8 and 9, 78% of provincial grant funding was allocated to Alberta's seven cities, most going to Calgary (37%) and Edmonton (26%). This distribution roughly matches Alberta's population distribution, according the 2011 National Household Survey (Table 10) [69]. See Appendix 3 for a full list of grant allocations used to generate the table.

TABLE 8 - RURAL & CITY GRANT FUNDING ALLOCATIONS

	Total Grant Funding	Rural Alberta	Seven Major Cities
Grant Funding	**$1,110,301,741**	**$226,235,063**	**$884,066,678**
Units	**11,636**	**2,601**	**9,035**
Percent Grant Funding		**20%**	**80%**
Percent Units		**22%**	**78%**

TABLE 9 - GRANT FUNDING IN MAJOR CITIES & RURAL ALBERTA

	Total Grant Funding	Rural Alberta	Calgary	Edmonton	Red Deer, Grande Prairie, Wood Buffalo, Medicine Hat, Lethbridge
Grant Funding	**$1,110,301,741**	**$226,235,063**	**$414,081,026**	**$291,837,269**	**$178,148,383**
Units	**11,636**	**2,601**	**3,615**	**3,554**	**1,866**
Percent Grant Funding		**20%**	**16%**	**37%**	**26%**
Percent Units		**22%**	**16%**	**31%**	**31%**

TABLE 10 - ALBERTA POPULATION DISTRIBUTION

City	Total Population	Percent of Alberta Total
Alberta	**3,645,257**	**100%**
Calgary	1,214,839	33%
Edmonton	1,159,869	32%
Lethbridge	105,999	3%
Red Deer	90,564	2%
Medicine Hat	72,807	2%
Wood Buffalo	66,896	2%
Grande Prairie	55,032	2%
Seven Major Cities	**2,766,006**	**76%**
Rest of Alberta	**879,251**	**24%**

The provincial homeless services landscape is undergoing a notable shift as result of former Premier Redford's restructuring of Human Services: youth, domestic violence and homeless supports are now part of the same department and internal coordination efforts are underway.

An area that merits further consideration will be whether rural homelessness will be addressed in a formal provincial strategy, and if so, what its impacts on resources allocation across population groups will be.

Further, operationalizing a rural homelessness strategy will bring to the fore a number of implementation challenges: for example, will the seven CBOs be tasked to manage rural catchment regions or will new CBOs emerge? What will the impacts of these options be on migration and service use? The reality is that the vast majority of homeless are found in Alberta's main urban centres, particularly Calgary and Edmonton. A rural response must therefore be measured in light of this distribution of need.

Coordination with other government levels will also be required on the rural homelessness file, particularly given changes underway at the federal level with the

Homelessness Partnering Strategy transitioning to Housing First. Further, coordination with Aboriginal leadership and INAC will be critical when Aboriginal individuals and families are concerned.

COMMUNITY-BASED REPONSES

It is important to highlight that despite the challenge of resources, most communities reported a number of community-based or volunteer-run services to be available for those experiencing housing stress and homelessness.

Notable informal efforts were reported in Brooks, Chestermere, Coaldale, Lac La Biche and Pincher Creek in particular to assist individuals that are at risk of becoming homeless or are homeless. As reported in Coaldale, if an individual is connected to a church in the town, in times of crisis the church community will help support the individual to get back on their feet.

The local faith community played a key role in responses. During cold weather a local Lac La Biche, for example, a local church provides mats on the floor for up to six homeless men. A Brooks church created a housing grant called “The Well” that provides a hotel room for several days for those that are in crisis.

In Chestermere, several initiatives are delivered through collaboration between services agencies and churches, including the Good Food Box, community gardens and Meals On Wheels. Individuals in need of other social services agencies are sent to Calgary to obtain support. The community’s formal homelessness fund, “Christmas with Dignity”, is a charity event that is held each year at Christmas to spread the awareness of homelessness and poverty in the community and to raise funds to assist individuals in need.

Some interviewees did however point to the lack of basic services, including shelters, noting that it was difficult to consider innovative responses when the basic emergency infrastructure was missing.

One barrier identified by several provincial stakeholders concerned the rural communities' capacity to recruit social service staff and clinicians to manage mental health and addictions in particular.

A low level of formal service coordination was reported consistently, however, where homelessness was tackled from a frontline perspective. Respondents reported that a number of local services were in fact engaged, namely: victims services, Alberta Works, women’s shelters, FCSS, Alberta Health Services, Child Intervention Services, and police. However, as one interviewee remarked, "no one's leading the charge on homelessness…..there is no one acting as coordinator of all these efforts".

HOUSING FIRST IMPLEMENTATION

All but three community representatives (Athabasca, Fairview and Wetaskiwin) reported having some knowledge about Housing First, though most reported having an interest in the concept (see Table 11).

Respondents had a wide array of interpretations of Housing First in practice. For example, in Camrose, Housing First was considered a harm reduction approach to providing homeless clients with housing before requiring them to demonstrate abstinence. Where variance occurred more markedly was when respondents were probed around the application of the concept in their community.

In certain cases, the respondents equated implementing Housing First locally with creating transitional housing (e.g. Camrose), providing access to social housing (Cochrane and Fort Mackay) to homeless clients, or implementing preventative measures (Chestermere). Cochrane and Fort Mackay reported implementing some aspects of Housing First by providing social housing to high acuity homeless clients.

Rural communities did recognize the promise of the approach locally, however, all but one interviewee expressed concern on a number of presenting barriers to implementation ranging from lack of available housing stock and funding, to safety risks, and creating dependency on supports.

Housing First was at times seen as a response more appropriately based in urban centres which had the service infrastructure needed to support this program type. This relates to funding: given the lack of funding for such a wide range of supports needed in their communities, interviewees expressed concern over the "fairness" of allocating scarce resources to homeless clients with addiction and mental health issues, when there were children and seniors who were struggling without supports.

It is important to highlight again that rural communities lack the service infrastructure present and often taken for granted in larger urban centres. When a locality is missing the 'basics' of social services, such as daycares, seniors lodges, family counseling, health services, etc., it becomes difficult to justify the "special treatment" and prioritization of chronically homeless persons which in integral to the Housing First approach.

TABLE 11 - HOUSING FIRST ACROSS CASE STUDY COMMUNITIES

Community	Housing First Understanding	Housing First Implementation	Housing First Concerns
Athabasca	No knowledge of initiative but intrigued with concept	None	None
Brooks	Knowledge of the initiative and supportive of being implemented in community	None	Houses becoming saturated with crime and drugs
Camrose	Harm reduction approach	None	Safety; lack of funding; lack of housing
Chestermere	Discussed in community; homeless prevention measures implemented	None	Creates dependency; need holistic approach
Claresholm	Agreed with concept; not been discussed in community	None	Program taken advantage of
Coaldale	Reported that initiative has been implemented in Red Deer; not discussed in community	None	Lack of funding
Cochrane	Reported as being implemented, though unclear whether it is low barrier in practice	Housing high acuity clients in social housing;	Unclear understanding of concept in local context; lack of resources to adequately fund supports, limited housing stock
Didsbury	Knowledge of the initiative and supportive of being implemented in community with supports	None	Lack of family support; need network of support; provide life skills
Fairview	No knowledge but believes it is a good idea	None	No houses in the community to use; lack of support for individuals; set up for failure
Fort Mackay	Agreed with concept; durable houses needed to house individuals with drug and alcohol problems	Provides low cost housing	Damage to houses
High Level	Understood and agreed with initiative; benefit to community to implement	None	Lack of support to individual once provided housing
Jasper	Agreed with concept; housing is biggest issue in community	None	No housing in community
Lac La Biche	Knowledge of the initiative and supportive of being implemented in community	None	Individuals that receive housing must attend training and be held accountable
Pincher Creek	Aware of the concept but unsure of how it would be used in the town.	None	Local housing context limits feasibility
Redwater	No knowledge of initiative but supportive of the idea	None	Lack of resources available; no available housing
Rocky Mountain House	Understood as approach to housing individuals, but seen as not applicable as some clients don't want to be housed.	None	Limited understanding of applicability in rural community; lack of housing stock
Slave Lake	Unclear; focus on rebuilding post-2011 fire; some community members working to develop shelter	None	Focus is on rebuilding after Slave Lake fire as 30-40% of pop. have no homes
St. Paul	Has been discussed in community but with concerns	None	Lack of funding; management and liability issues; lack of community resources and support
Viking	Aware of initiative being implemented in larger communities, no action locally	None	Community need is not prevalent; little mobilization on issue
Wetaskiwin	No knowledge	None	Lack of funding

While most communities reported no Housing First adaptation, they did express notable interest in learning more about it and recognized its promise for their homeless populations. This did require adaptation to rural contexts and realities however. There were some projects where aspects of Housing First were however being implemented, as result of HPS funding.

In our study of rural homelessness across 22 Canadian communities [3], we observed that communities with federal Homeless Partnering Strategy (HPS) investment had a considerably higher level of understanding of local issues and available responses. HPS-funded needs assessments in certain sites, like Camrose and Drayton Valley, were key sources of understanding about homelessness.

In the national study, HPS funding for designated communities provided the foundational resource for the local response. This also served the function of tying designated communities into a larger network of practice and enabled the development of local planning infrastructure through the requirement of community plan development. Nevertheless, the HPS level of funding remained limited in small communities and in some cases it was used to fund basic emergency responses, rather than the comprehensive continuums we see in larger centres.

The rural Alberta HPS funding envelope is about $425,000 with allocations ranging from $25,000-$100,000 per community. These necessarily have to be used to augment existing services, rather than create entirely new outreach and support teams. Nevertheless, the impact of HPS support in smaller and regional centres is a subject that warrants its own investigation as it points to the importance of government support for local community-based action.

HPS funding was awarded to a number of pilot projects across Alberta via the rural funding stream managed by the Alberta Rural Development Network. As a result, $424,625 was allocated to 7 projects addressing homelessness in rural and remote Alberta communities in April 2013.

Notably, the funding competition 29 applications totaling nearly $2,000,000 [70]; of these, the seven successful projects in Ashton, Camrose, Cochrane, Fort Macleod, Chestermere, Drayton Valley and Brooks are summarized in the table below. Banff was also provided with additional HPS funding in September 2013. Table 12 provides a summary of these allocations.

TABLE 12 - HPS RURAL & REMOTE INVESTMENT IN ALBERTA (ALBERTA RURAL DEVELOPMENT NETWORK, 2013)

Project Name & Funding Allocation	Project Description
Ashton Ashton's Place Youth Homelessness Project $102,324 to Ashton's Place Youth Centre	The Youth Homelessness Project will provide services in the areas of shelter, housing support, outreach, life skills training, employability, job searching, family reunification, financial support and tutoring assistance. A priority will also be placed on the provision of emergency and short-term housing, client services, partnership, awareness and sustainability development.
Camrose Outreach Housing and Aboriginal Support Program $70,284 to Camrose Women's Shelter Society	This program will provide support to women and families who are transitioning from the women's shelter back into safe community living. It includes guidance, support, nurturing, advocacy, childcare, life skills and transportation. Staff will be advocating for the women and their families, assisting them in locating affordable housing and setting up a new home. Additionally, since approximately 60% of the clients are Aboriginal, the project will enable the shelter to provide more resources and supports specifically geared to First Nations women and families.
Cochrane Community Youth Homelessness Strategy and Youth Emergency Services $64,880 to Boys and Girls Club of Cochrane and Area	This project will meet the basic needs of homeless youth, increase access to employment readiness and career development programs, create a Youth Homelessness Coalition, produce a needs assessment outlining issues and solutions, and develop a strategic plan to provide stable housing options in Cochrane and Area.
Fort Macleod Fort Macleod Housing Support Program $58,740 to Town of Fort Macleod Family and Community Support	The support program will help families and individuals secure a more stable housing environment, and support families and individuals who are at risk of homelessness to foster independence. It helps them access services, acts as a liaison between landlords and tenants, builds relationships with other service providers, develops and maintains a comprehensive housing option list for Fort Macleod, link with translators, develops strategies to assist First Nations, and generally increases awareness about homelessness and poverty.
Chestermere Chestermere Regional Resource Services $57,662 to Town of Chestermere	This funding will provide the Town of Chestermere with a full-time Community Resource Coordinator to better meets its residents' needs. This position will increase awareness of the issue of homelessness and poverty in the community, coordinate community planning, develop relationships with local service providers, and ensure that cultural diversity is considered in the development of program materials.
Drayton Valley The Drayton Valley Homelessness and Poverty Reduction Team $46,735 to Drayton Valley and District FCSS	This project will work with Drayton Valley and Area to collect information about poverty and homelessness. It will provide the community with a better understanding of the causes of homelessness, the services needed, and the capacity necessary to address homelessness using innovative approaches. That information will then guide the development of a community Homelessness and Poverty Reduction Strategy which will improve the capacity of the community to provide services.

Project Name & Funding Allocation	Project Description
Banff Homelessness to Housing $27,025 to Banff YWCA	The project will focus on ensuring that Banff's existing Homelessness to Housing Coalition fund is able to provide longer stays for those in need, creating a bridging and loan fund to assist clients with such issues as securing long-term housing and job search assistance, and making community resources available to assist with seeking out alternative revenue sources.
Brooks Brooks Champion's Centre Life Skills Program $24,000 to The Champion's Centre Inc	This program provides affordable housing and basic supports to men who struggle to live independently. The Centre addresses basic shelter and food needs of men who have been homeless or are at imminent risk of homelessness. The Life Skills Program will address some of the core issues that bring men to the Brooks Centre by working with them in the areas of nutrition and food preparation, health, interpersonal skills, and money management.

A notable shift underway federally is the renewal of HPS, through which the Government of Canada has prioritized Housing First as a key strategy to reduce homelessness amongst chronically and episodically homeless populations. HPS considers the Housing First approach to focus on moving people who are experiencing homelessness as rapidly as possible from the street (including hidden homelessness), or emergency shelters into permanent housing with supports to maintain housing stability.[3]

HPS Housing First funds can be used by communities to support Intensive Case Management (ICM) or Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) approaches. ACT programs rely on multi-disciplinary service teams who work with chronically homeless persons with mental health issues. ICM programs hinge on the case manager who works with individual clients to achieve housing stability. The case manager advocates for client to have the supports needed to obtain and maintain permanent housing.

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

The Alberta rural communities implementing HPS-funded homeless supports exhibit a range of potential adaptations of Housing First that merit further investigation to assess

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

local impact, but also gather ground-level intelligence on the applicability of Housing First in rural contexts, particularly concerning priority groups such as youth, newcomers and Aboriginal people.

For those who did not receive HPS funds, there was a confusion and concern about why their community was not eligible for the funds given the perceived magnitude of the homelessness problem locally. For example, a local partnership between private developers and an NGO for affordable housing in Pincher Creek was denied. Others, particularly in northern Alberta, reported not being aware about the HPS program at all, and ARDN confirmed that very limited applications were received from northern Alberta.

ALBERTA RURAL COMMUNITIES CLUSTER ANALYSIS

The recognition that rural communities are not homogenous led to an exploration to find a way of both capturing the many facets that describe them, with respect to housing and homeless issues, while at the same time recognizing that many would be similar in some ways and different in others. At the same time, in order to policy makers and planners to develop feasible plans to address rural homelessness, it will be helpful to be able to identify communities of similar characteristics which then can use comparable approaches to addressing housing and homeless issues. We did not feel that aspects of geography should be the only determinant of this selection (i.e. rural and remote versus those in prairie, ranch land or mountainous areas). This led to the development of a set of community characteristics that could subsequently be used to identify groupings with similar features.

As a result of the interviews, and background demographic information on the participating communities, it was possible to identify 21 variables that characterize them with respect to issues of homelessness and housing. While there may be others, the identified variables correspond to those that are frequently mentioned in other rural housing and homelessness reports. They can be categorized according to community and local housing characteristics, extent of recognition of housing and homeless problems, availability of homeless related support services and familiarity/acceptance of Housing First approaches in dealing with homelessness. These variables include the following:

- The distance to a major urban setting – its relative degree of “rurality”
- The population of the community
- The percent of low income individuals
- The percent of housing that was below affordability
- Percent of housing in need of major repair
- Percent of housing deemed fit for human habitation
- Number of moveable dwellings
- Economic trends of the community

- Stability of the housing market – rising or falling prices
- Extent of inward migration
- Percent of the population identified as Aboriginal (both status and non-status)
- The number of nearby reserves, with nearby described as within 50 km.
- Extent to which homelessness was perceived as a local issue (by those interviewed)
- Extent to which the community views homelessness as an issue
- Trends in the homeless population – rising or falling or stable
- Extent of chronic homelessness
- Existence of local emergency shelter
- Availability of basic social services locally
- Reported coordination of system-wide services at a regional, municipal district or country level
- Existence of a formal strategy (plan) to address homeless issues
- Extent of knowledge of Housing First approaches
- Extent of support for Housing First approaches

Since we were unable to obtain accurate information on the extent to which houses were in need of repair, which fell below the affordability level, and which were not suitable for habitation, for all of the communities, these variables were left out of the final computations. A preliminary clustering of the variables showed that the variables grouped together in logical combinations: issues dealing with homelessness and support services were in different groups than those concerned with community characteristics. Of note is that the variable that deals with the percent of the local community which is aboriginal is a unique aspect and it appears later in the community grouping to be a determinant in how these groups are defined. That is Fort MacKay is a unique group and the communities with a significant Aboriginal population also form a single cluster. These details also have face validity, where most would agree that this makes sense, and thus lend support for the value of this analysis

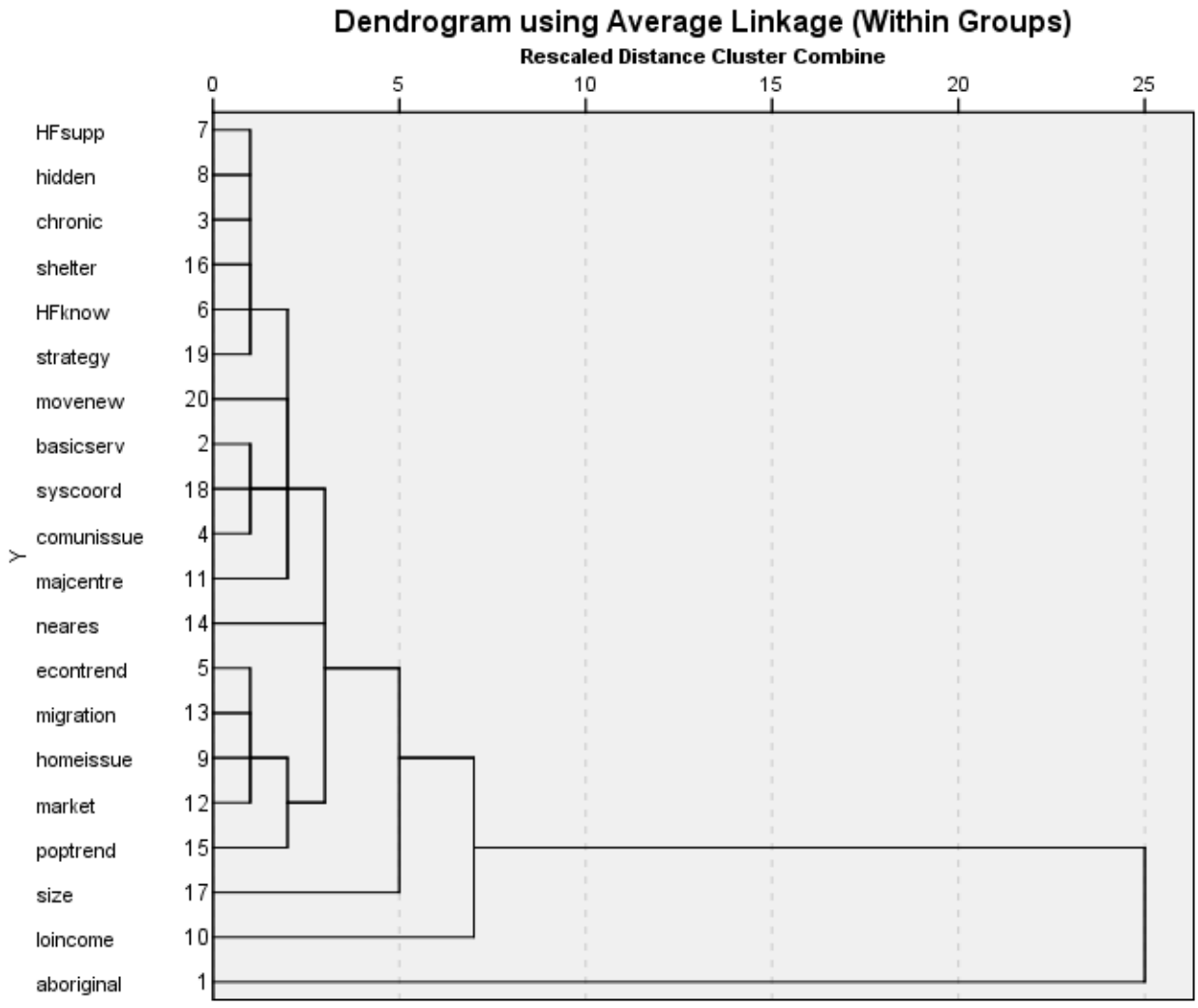


Chart 1. Cluster of Variables

Categorizing twenty communities using 21 variables is best accomplished using statistical techniques that facilitate the classification of information. Cluster analysis provides an approach that will identify groupings of communities according to these characteristics. The program used to calculate these clusters can use a variety of ways or algorithms to determine potential groupings. For purposes of this analysis, clustering using the nearest neighbor and using squared Euclidian distances for determining neighbors were included in the algorithms as this focuses the clustering process on the internal components of the group or cluster rather than on their differences from other clusters.

Some of the data for these characteristics was derived from information provided by Statistics Canada and the Alberta Rural Economic Development Network. Other data

was coded by the research team. In order to provide standardization to the coding, the research team met and mutual decided, based on scales of one to five, numerical indicators of the value of each variable that would be assigned to each community. While this may be an imprecise method, the consensus of three researchers provided some degree of consistency in the process. For three variables, the percent of housing that was affordable, that needing major repairs and that unfit for human habitation, data could not be determined for all participating communities. These variables were omitted from the final cluster analysis.

All the variables were entered at the same time, rather than in a step-wide fashion. This results in the program determining the primary clustering components. Two different algorithms were used to compute these clusters. These are explained using the graphs for illustration (see below). What is of note is in the present calculation, the primary components emerged as the extent of homelessness, the extent of chronic homelessness and the local support services available. This was despite the inability of the program to determine what the important factors in the analysis were, and that there was no way in which these components were selected by the researchers. Why the program chose these variables is unclear, but what is certain is that homelessness was a major determinant in how communities were grouped together. The dynamics behind this finding will require further exploration.

RESULTS

The first graph presented below is a result of this process. It is a three-dimensional model which is not clearly represented in this two-dimensional report. The model is based on calculating the “nearest neighbor that is, combining groups with most common features”. This model, when viewed interactively, provides a dynamic illustration of the proximity, in characteristics, of groups of communities and shows the dissimilarity to others. In this chart Jasper at the top centre and Fort MacKay at the centre right are examples of communities whose characteristics place them apart from other communities. On the left side, Cochrane, Camrose and Fairview group together, reflecting the extent to which homelessness is seen as an issue and the services in place to address the needs of the homeless.

The second chart used a different approach where the centre of the group was used to determine those most closely associated with “central properties”. It allows depiction of several important findings. The chart is not interactive and leaves the bulk of the analysis of commonalities to the investigator.

One result was that communities did not necessarily group according to geographical location. They were characterized by their recognized homeless issues and the extent to which support services were available to help those in need. A second analysis presents the communities of High Level, Lac La Biche, St. Paul, Athabasca and Slave Lake consistently grouped, presumably because of their relatively higher Aboriginal population, proximity to numerous Aboriginal reserves coupled with a low level of local support services and lack of affordable housing.

This cluster analysis is meant to be a trial exploration into classifying groups of rural communities according to a number of variables that influence housing and homelessness. It has clearly demonstrated that these communities are not homogenous, but can be identified in groups that correspond to important aspects of problem identification and service delivery. It did not include economic indicators, which were beyond the scope of the present project. However, these should be included in a more fulsome analysis and energy sector development or the presence of significant industry needs to be included. The rationale for this is that these economic influences affect both the local economy as well as the taxation income that can be used for local housing and support services development. We recommend that this path of exploration be further developed in order to provide more specific and tailored intervention strategies to differing rural communities.

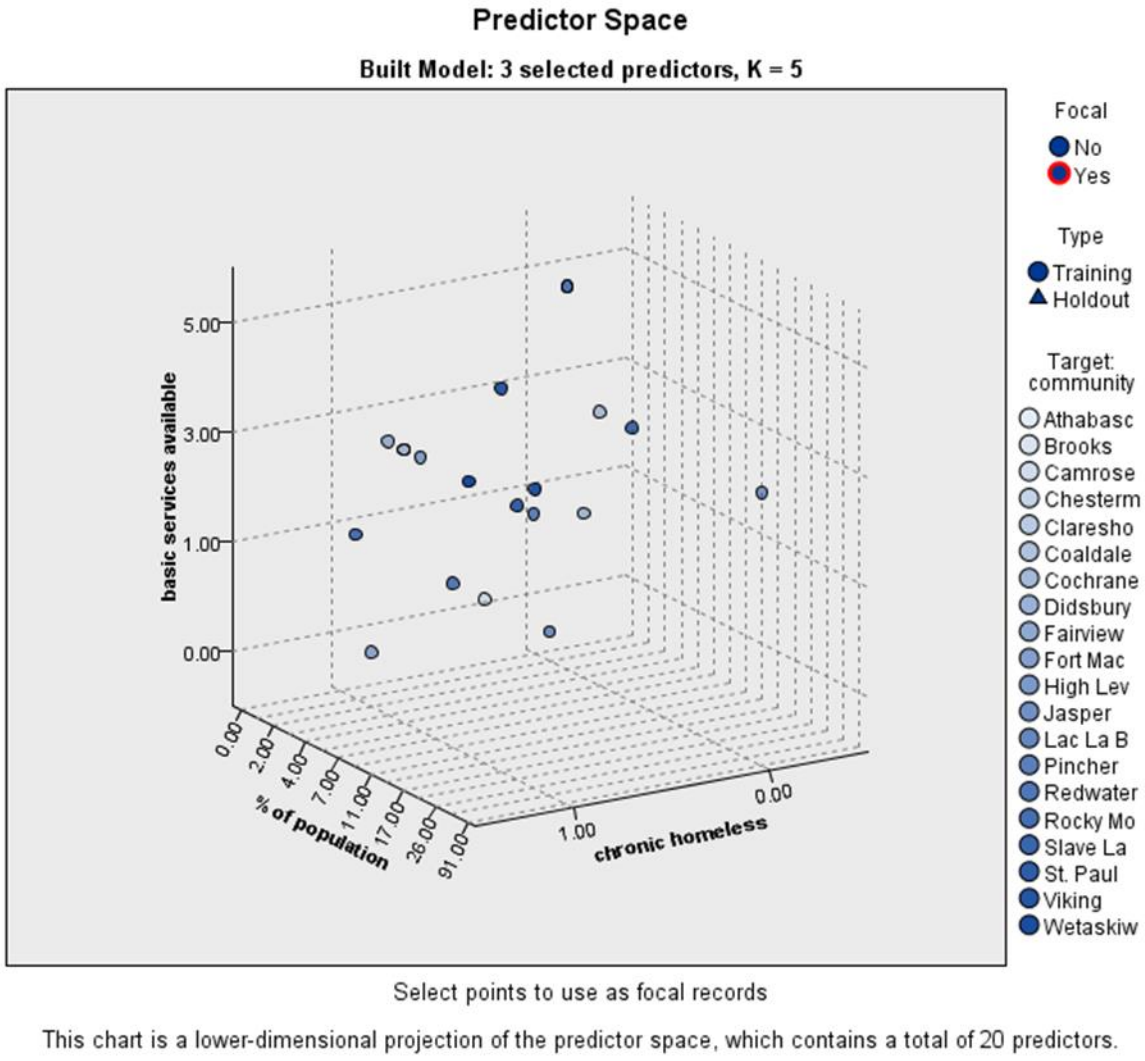


Chart 2. A three-dimensional view of clusters of communities

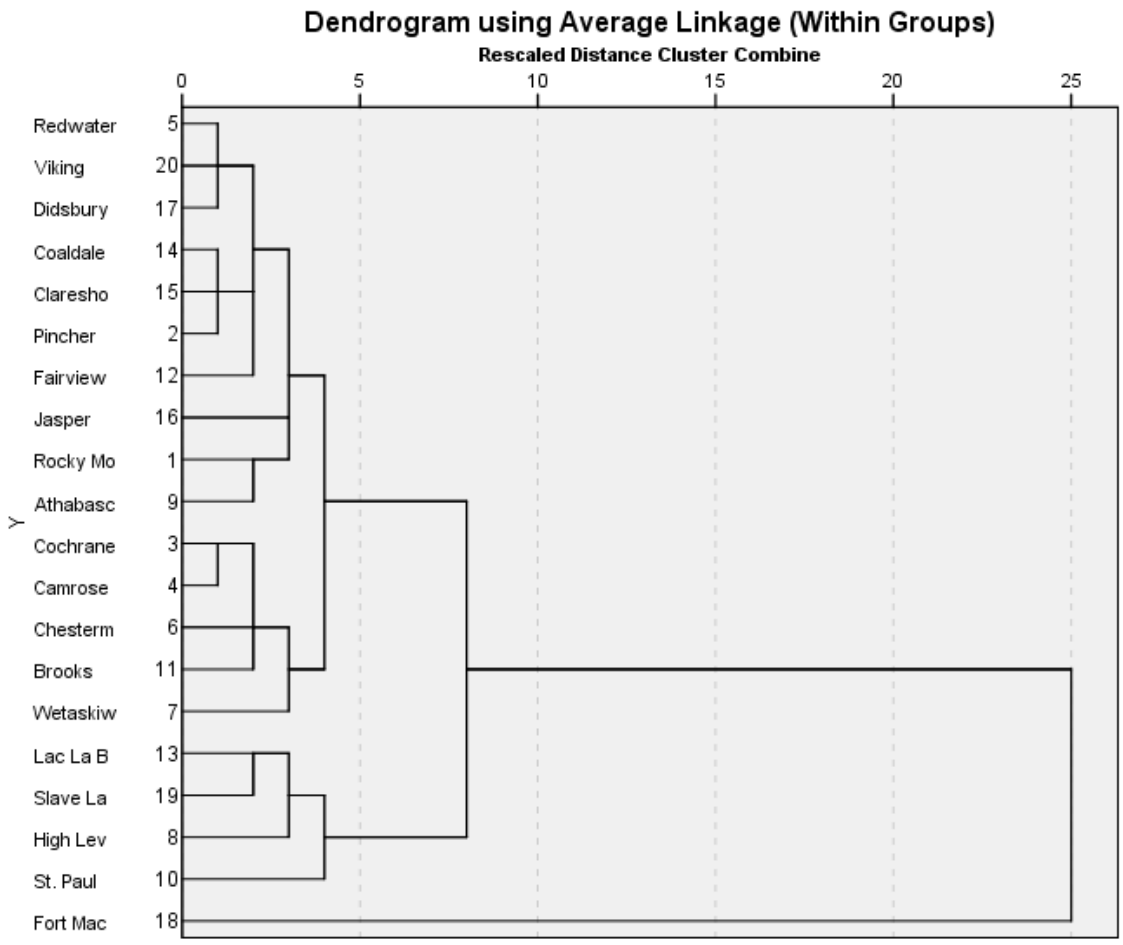


Chart 3. Clustering of communities using a herarchical algorithm

CONSIDERATIONS IN BUILDING A RESPONSE TO HOMELESSNESS IN RURAL ALBERTA

During the course of the study, a number of solutions were proposed building on the strengths of rural Alberta communities. Based on the findings of this study and our national work, the following discussion presents considerations regarding responses to homelessness in rural Alberta communities.

Some of these recommendations have been adapted from our national report given the specific dynamics of the Alberta context. Note that the following recommendations are not listed in order of importance.

DEVELOPING REGIONAL AND SYSTEMATIC RESPONSES TO RURAL HOMELESSNESS

As noted in this report, there is a diversity of homeless-serving facilities available across the province with women's shelters exhibiting the broadest reach into rural Alberta. No emergency shelter beds, short or long term facilities for those experiencing homelessness are currently funded by the province outside the seven main cities. Of course, this correlates to the need evident in these larger centres. Nevertheless, there is a need to recognize the regional dynamics this service concentration engenders and develop an intentional response that is regional at its core.

Besides the implementation of rehousing initiatives and Housing First, there remains a need to address the expressed concern with providing emergency shelter and basic services in rural communities. While some communities are mobilizing to develop emergency responses, others are just beginning to grapple with the issue. This trend was observed at the national level as well.

Similarly, the lack of availability of provincial Housing First program funding in rural communities should be considered in light of evidence of potential demand. Homeless rural clients can certainly continue to migrate to access supports from larger centres if this is indeed the intended provincial policy objective.

There is a need to consider the on-the ground impacts of locating shelters, supportive housing and Housing First programs in particular communities and intentionally develop policy that responds to local and regional needs across Alberta.

Can homelessness responses in rural communities stem migration into larger centres to access shelters and supports?

What would such responses entail from a service planning and implementation perspective?

EXPLORING ALTERNATIVES TO SHELTER

Rural communities grappling with homelessness also present an important opportunity to develop alternatives to emergency shelters. This can shift conversations from traditional responses to homelessness we have already witnessed in Calgary and Edmonton, to developing a systems approach to ending homelessness.

A commonly reported concern and response to homelessness in study communities is to the lack of emergency shelters. Yet, some have developed alternatives to the large facility responses we see in larger centres. Rural communities can become sites where innovative solutions can be developed and tested at the community level to inform future of homelessness responses across the country using the Housing First approach.

Do we need to have any emergency shelter facilities in order to end and prevent homelessness?

Are there ways through which we can bypass the trajectories entrenched in larger centers which rely on expensive, institutional responses to homelessness by focusing on housing clients rather than sheltering them from the start?

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

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

Another alternative from Steinbach, Manitoba leveraged local volunteers and raised funds to operate a shelter in a single family residential home. The operation is funded solely through donations for less than $70,000 annually. Upstairs, house parents oversee the housing and basic needs of up to 4 shelter users per night. The actual capital asset is owned by a volunteer and the rent for the upstairs tenants who act as house parents is covered by the donations. Instead of expanding shelter services by developing a larger facility, additional demand could be met by adding another house. Longer term, single family homes could be operated as supportive or simply affordable housing.

Developing a comprehensive housing and service infrastructure

Ultimately, more supportive housing and affordable housing is needed across rural communities. Reliance on the ebbs and flows reported in the limited private rental universe can be mitigated by the creation of additional non-market stock, particularly for clients who require sustained housing and supports.

In addition, the development of local social service infrastructure will be critical in the long-term. There is a need to address the lack of adequate addiction and mental health, along with transportation, child care, and other essential social services in rural communities along with housing and homelessness supports.

While system planning approaches to ending homelessness should in practice be easier in smaller centres with fewer stakeholders, in the absence of a well-developed network of services and adequate funding to support responses, the feasibility of such approaches is limited and will require innovative adaptations.

In centres with high economic growth, the need for social infrastructure is particularly important for long-term sustainability from an economic and social perspective. Communities like Fort Mackay or Athabasca, where economic growth is in high gear, need to grapple for growing housing instability as result of migration and limited affordable rental stock. Such sites require a well-resourced, proactive response tied to economic development.

Innovative means of leveraging rural housing stock should be explored. For example small old hotels that are shutting down across rural Alberta can be purchased and retrofitted into supportive or affordable housing. This can house the local rural chronic homeless population and keep them in their home communities. Further, the use of innovative social finance solutions should be explored: community members can leverage funds to develop affordable housing for a modest return.

Increasing awareness and leadership

This speaks to the need for increasing public awareness and leadership in small centres to recognize homelessness as a problem in the first place, as well as creating buy-in to address it. By creating coalitions with other small centres, rural communities can develop policy and funding asks to raise awareness about local challenges and ensure appropriate resourcing reaches vulnerable populations beyond large urban centres.

Ultimately, provincial leadership on homelessness needs to be extended into Alberta's smaller communities. At the same time, continued education and advocacy at the local level will be needed to support community champions that will continue to push for resources

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

SUPPORTING RURAL COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

This study demonstrated the variable extent to which understandings about homelessness and responses to the issue exist at the local level. While some sites likely benefit of learnings opportunities gained through participation in HPS initiatives via the Alberta Rural Development Network or attending conferences organized by the Seven Cities to enhance understanding of homelessness responses, most are largely left on their own.

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

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

Developing an Alberta network on rural homelessness would enable mutual support and the sharing of learnings for small communities grappling with similar challenges province-wide. The Seven Cities group demonstrates the value such a community of practice can bring to enhance local practice and support peer-to-peer learning. Such a network can also be leveraged by provincial and national government in policy development responding to homelessness and affordable housing.

COORDINATING RESOURCES

The ability of some centres to leverage multiple funding streams from diverse provincial departments and federal sources should be explored as smaller communities often rely on one entity to deliver services on behalf of these funders. To this end, it would be important to support communities to identify a lead coordinating body in the response to homelessness.

A common approach may open the possibility of leveraging these funds for Housing First activities. The delivery of HPS funding in some centres points to the need for coordination of funding at both local and higher government levels. A provincial response should be developed in dialogue with federal counterparts.

Faith and community initiatives can and should be leveraged in a systematic response, though we need to recognize these informal supports cannot tackle homelessness alone.

Exploring innovative Housing First adaptations for rural communities

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

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

For example, a focus on Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) with a team composed of mental health and addiction professionals would be difficult if not impossible in a community lacking adequate health care for the general population. In other words, Housing First program models will need to be adapted to an approach feasible given the realities of small centres. One potential approach, reported from rural Vermont [58] uses internet technology to keep resident and support staff connected, and is a viable approach as TeleHealth is already an Alberta reality (a more complete discussion follows on p.75).

From the study communities interviewed, strict Housing First ACT program adoption is likely to be challenging in implementation. To begin with, there are no reliable estimates of the number of persons disabled by a serious mental illness, with and without co-occurring addictions, who would require this level of housing with supports.

The extent of local acceptance of independent living for those disabled is also an unknown factor. This is compounded by a number of logistical barriers:

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

Intensive Case Management (ICM) may be a more feasible option, though the housing market's strained vacancies in some communities and access to funding for housing supports would

remain a challenge. ICM program models would require adaptation to accommodate to the local/regional environment to overcome these barriers.

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

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

As some communities report a lack of access to rent supports and inadequate shelter allowance from Alberta Works to meet rental costs, their capacity to place clients in market housing compromises the ability to deliver Housing First. Nevertheless, this could be mitigated by partnering with similar small centres to advocate for the creation of a pool of funds provincially for rent supports and eviction prevention that can be accessed by Housing First programs. Another option is also to undertake a regional approach to housing clients in communities with lower rent costs and higher vacancies where appropriate and desirable to clients.

One challenge to moving clients out of their home communities is maintaining access to recreation, employment, services, and familial and social connections and the places of worship which provide community support. Another challenge is that of individual preference as many people living in rural areas prefer this to urban living. Transportation into main centres would need to be made available. However, this also raises the possibility that small communities provide transportation to remove persons with unwanted social problems. Leveraging areas with higher vacancies and taking a regional approach may also address some of the implementation cost challenges by serving a larger region. Given that most communities in the study reported having less than ten chronic homeless, even if these numbers are underestimates, it is likely that having an ACT team per community would not only be challenging to fund, but would likely be under-utilized.

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

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

The ACT team serves 20-70 clients at each of its six sites across the state of Vermont and is managed centrally out of a head office. Two regional teams that comprise of a nurse, and supportive employment, computer literacy specialist, substance abuse and peer specialists provide outreach support to the sites complementing onsite case coordinators (1:20 client to worker ratio) [71]. The program has been reported to have achieved an 85% housing retention rate over three years [58].

The implementation of various support initiatives under the HPS funding stream managed by the Alberta Rural Development Network presents an important opportunity to explore the application of components of Housing First in a rural context. If we look beyond the ACT model, we can consider adapting the basic elements of Housing First i.e. providing access to housing (landlord liaising, rent supports) and the supports needed to maintain it (case management, system navigation).

Communities can examine current services and leverage these with some adaption to deliver these functions. For example, case workers operating currently in diverse areas of social service delivery (housing and homelessness, youth workers, social assistance case workers, etc.) could be reconfigured into Housing First workers with additional training and access to necessary supports, including rent supports and mental health, addiction expertise. As these positions likely exist in some form and operate in communities already, they would need to be enhanced and supported to make the transition in their role to include housing stability. Already, HPS funded homeless support programs are being implemented and can provide excellent case studies to explore such adaptations. It is noteworthy that the province of Newfoundland and Labrador has implemented a version of this type of support worker and would have valuable experiential information to speed its adaptation in Alberta.

Responding to the needs of Aboriginal people on- and off-reserve

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

The development of policy and funding responses for rural homelessness will have to address the jurisdictional juggling reported with respect to Aboriginal people, both on and off-reserve. Further, the introduction of any programmatic interventions, including Housing First, should be developed to meet the specific needs of Aboriginal people.

The disproportionate impact of natural disasters on Aboriginal people merits further consideration from a research and service planning perspective as well, both on and off reserve.

While we recognize this study's limitations with respect to exploring this issue, we do note that future research, policy and program development requires the purposeful engagement and leadership of Aboriginal people in rural Alberta.

Addressing domestic violence in Rural Alberta

The pathways into homelessness for many women, youth, and seniors often intersect with experiences of abuse. The development of intervention and prevention efforts to address domestic violence in rural Alberta should be undertaken in tandem with homelessness responses. Housing First adaptations for women and children fleeing violence require reconsiderations of safety guidelines, especially if implemented in rural contexts.

The consistent reports of homeless youth in rural Alberta suggest that a range of preventative and intervention responses are required at the local level which coordinate a range of provincial and local systems for maximum impact.

A focus on Homeless Youth

As in urban contexts, the service response to rural youth homelessness is entwined with child intervention services and education, particularly given the high rates of abuse reported. There is a need for service coordination to ensure developmentally appropriate supports and housing options for homeless youth in rural Alberta. Already, significant internal coordination on youth homelessness has emerged in Human Services, as evidenced by the creation of a Youth Plan to End Homelessness. Ensuring initiatives borne of this Plan account for the needs of rural youth is recommended.

Housing challenges among Seniors in Rural Alberta

While reports of visible senior's homelessness did not emerge at this time from the interviewees, a notable number of communities referenced this population as becoming increasingly vulnerable. In particular, the aging population's increasing accessibility needs impacted their ability to remain in their homes. Residence modifications to allow for decreased mobility as well as the limitations resulting from no longer driving independently are two examples of this accessibility issue. Others pointed to the limited income of seniors and the lack of transportation options for them. Further analysis of the emerging needs of this population is required to assess the full scope of the issue.

In light of the aging population in rural communities, support and housing options for this population will be increasingly important to mitigate housing instability. The experience of senior's abuse in rural communities and its intersection with homelessness and housing instability merits specific attention from a policy and programming perspective.

Responding to newcomers' housing stress.

Given reports of housing stress for newcomers, particularly Temporary Foreign Workers in some rural communities, further analysis of the causes of this in light of jurisdictional issues is needed. The development of rural responses to this group will have to account for the cultural and linguistic factors in program and policy design, particularly with respect to immigrant and refugee women and children fleeing violence.

Emergency Preparedness & Disaster Homelessness

The Slave Lake fire and June 2013 floods highlight the unique circumstances natural disasters create in rural Alberta. A fulsome consideration of the impacts of the 2013 Alberta flood on housing markets and homelessness should be pursued to examine longer term effects of disasters on homelessness.

Future disaster preparedness work should fully integrate considerations on vulnerable groups, including the homeless in rural and urban contexts equally. A specific consideration the uneven impacts of disasters on homelessness among Aboriginal people, off and on-reserve is recommended.

Enhancing research on rural homelessness

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

To this end, it is recommended that a fulsome Research Agenda on Rural Homelessness in Alberta be developed to capture common emerging themes from a provincial rather than community-by-community perspective. This can, and should be coordinated with national efforts to examine rural homelessness.

A number of local needs assessments and strategic plans were located during the course of the study; future research should leverage this information to enhance existing information and analysis.

The development of a Research Network with a focus on rural homelessness is also recommended. Interviewees noted that there has been some effort to develop such a network already that could be leveraged.

Rural community members must be fully engaged in the creation of such a network and research responses alongside academic and government peers. This engagement can thus also lead to the development of a local structure to implement tailored responses at the community level. Resourcing the ongoing knowledge generation and mobilization of such efforts will be critical for long-term impact.

A number of research priorities are proposed in the next section as a starting point to the development of the proposed Research Agenda on Rural Homelessness in Alberta.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A number of recommendations in building a response to homelessness in rural Alberta were identified:

1. Develop regional and systematic approaches to rural homelessness as part of an intentional Alberta response. This would include coordinating resources and developing systemic regional strategies as well as the tailoring of strategies to groups of communities with similar challenges in service delivery. Include a comprehensive housing and service infrastructure plan to address housing instability in smaller centers as part of a broader Alberta response. This co-ordination needs to occur at the regional, provincial and federal levels.
2. Encourage exploration of innovative alternatives to shelter, which leverage local resources. Include innovative adaptations of Housing First approaches in rural communities that can be developed to encompass work already underway.
3. Increase awareness of, and leadership for, rural housing and homelessness which will champion solutions at the local, provincial and federal levels. Locally, rural communities of practice can be supported through targeted networking and capacity building activities in the areas of Housing First implementation, performance management, system planning, and research.
4. Respond to the needs of priority sub-populations: Aboriginal persons, victims of domestic violence, youth, seniors and immigrant newcomers. Aboriginal people on- and off-reserve require targeted approaches to overcoming complex jurisdictional barriers to services and supports. Victims of domestic violence in rural Alberta need alignment with housing and homelessness responses. Targeted responses to youth, seniors, and newcomers' housing stress and homelessness in rural communities also need to be developed.
5. Ensure the integration of homelessness in future emergency preparedness initiatives to address "disaster homelessness".

6. As there is a scarcity of information about rural specific elements, these planning and implementation responses would be enhanced through the development of a combination of a research network to facilitate knowledge mobilization and a research agenda on rural homelessness.

EMERGING RESEARCH PRIORITIES

In this section, we discuss emerging research priorities based on our review of the existing literature and study findings. These are proposed as a starting point to the development of a Research Agenda on Rural Homelessness in Alberta. Note that the following is not listed in order of importance.

ALBERTA- AND CANADA-SPECIFIC RESEARCH

It is notable that very limited academic or grey literature specific to rural homelessness in Alberta was identified. Aside from the work of Belanger and Weasel Head on Aboriginal migration and the Camrose Open Door Needs assessment completed in 2013, as well as emerging work in Drayton Valley, we could not locate additional reports though these likely exist with local non-profit organizations and government bodies. We are certain additional grey literature exists at the local level which can further inform appropriate responses to this issue.

Overall, our review of the literature on rural homelessness revealed a number of gaps, particularly related to academic examinations focused on Canada. While grey literature on case study communities existed, these reports were very localized and information was not collected in systematic or comparable manner. Thus these reports offer few opportunities for accurate comparative analysis to identify common trends and dynamics across regions.

The recent report we completed on 22 Canadian communities [3] is a first look at rural homelessness from a comparative lens, and though it remains limited in scope, is a preliminary analysis of the issue. Considerably more work is required to develop a comprehensive agenda on rural homelessness nationally.

BASELINE INFORMATION ON RURAL HOMELESSNESS

There is a lack of understanding of the magnitude and prevalence of rural homelessness in Alberta; no methods for conducting homeless counts were found, and rural communities did not have well-developed means of assessing trends longitudinally in place. This will be important moving forward, particularly as some researchers argue the prevalence rates of rural homelessness can be even higher than in urban regions.

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

There is a need to develop and support methods to conduct ongoing counts of homelessness across Alberta communities. This can support the development of policy and programmatic responses significantly, while raising awareness and knowledge about the issue.

Service infrastructure analysis

The study identified a range of available supports and housing resources available at the local level, however, no systematic analysis of Alberta's homelessness service infrastructure has been conducted to date.

A comprehensive analysis of available resources (including shelters, supportive and non-market housing), women's and youth shelters should also be undertaken across jurisdictional boundaries to assess the availability of supports given local and regional demand.

Macro-economic impacts

Rural homelessness has distinct dynamics from urban regions, particularly related to the availability of social infrastructure, the impacts of macro-economic shifts, housing markets and migration. Yet, little research exists to discern how such dynamics play out to contribute to housing instability.

The role of tourism, oil and gas boom and bust cycles, proximity to urban centres, and even economic stagnation in rural homelessness are key areas of focus for future research. Our study provided some preliminary observations on this issue, however, it remains a starting point at this time.

Rural Aboriginal homelessness and the role of migration

The focus on migration into cities in some literature is an important contribution, particularly in relation to Aboriginal people's movement between home communities and urban centres. However, there is a notable lack of analysis on the experience of homelessness within these 'sending communities'.

Aboriginal migration impacts homelessness in rural communities significantly where proximity to Aboriginal communities exists and where regional centres act as access points to services and opportunities. The dynamics behind Aboriginal over-representation in some rural communities merits specific and concerted attention in future research. This include the examination of migration, but must also concentrate on discerning on-reserve dynamics and experiences.

Unique circumstances in remote communities

The distinct nature of remote communities has been noted in the literature, though relatively sparse analyses exit at this time. This is an area requiring particular focus given the unique dynamics impacting housing stability and service access in such regions. We were unable to probe this issue in this study, however, note it as an important area for future work.

Rough sleeping and chronic homelessness

Despite homelessness in rural communities being primarily hidden (couch surfing, sleeping in poor or un-affordable housing), visible forms of rough sleeping are common (sleeping in cars, public places, camping in parks). Understanding the drivers of rough sleeping and nature of the practice in rural contexts is another important area for future study.

The presence of chronic homelessness was reported across Canadian communities, characterized by long-term bouts of absolute homelessness and co-occurrence of mental health, addictions and/physical health issues for a small portion of the homeless population. Yet the response to rural chronic homelessness is less understood. The applicability of Housing First or other programmatic interventions in rural contexts must be examined, particularly in light of the lack of resources and services available to support medical needs of many chronically homelessness in rural communities.

Understanding domestic violence and rural homelessness dynamics

The experience of domestic violence in rural communities requires additional focus, particularly to discern solutions specific to the needs of women and children fleeing violence. We need to further probe the impact of service provision in rural communities, and housing responses that account for the safety of those fleeing violence in rural Alberta. The role of domestic violence in Aboriginal communities and its impact on housing stability and migration to seek support merits specific focus.

Homeless youth in rural Alberta

While some work on youth homelessness in rural areas was found by Karabanow (2013) and Skott-Myhre et al. (2008), it was limited to areas that lack the rural and remote contexts that typify a great deal of the province.

We also do not know the extent of a natural sequence of adolescent 'rebellion' and adventure-seeking that drives youth to urban areas, as opposed to those scenarios where youth are forced to flee to cities because of unsafe living circumstances in their home communities or lack of resources to help them stay in place.

The impetus for migration of rural homeless youth is another important area for further study, particularly to support the development of programmatic and policy solutions. A focus on Aboriginal youth on and off-reserve is further recommended.

Seniors' Housing Instability

A focus on understanding senior's housing stress and risk for homelessness in rural communities is needed. This is particularly important in light of an aging population in communities where accessibility is a key challenge from a housing design and transportation perspective moving forward. Options for supports to keep seniors in their homes and mitigate housing instability require further exploration. The experience of senior's abuse in rural communities and its intersection with homelessness and housing instability requires additional examination as well.

Newcomers' housing stress in rural communities

Notably, there was very limited literature found on immigrant or refugee homelessness in the studies reviewed. As most immigrants tend to migrate to urban areas, some move to rural areas. Lack of housing for newcomers is certainly an area of concern across rural communities, particularly with the advent of the Temporary Foreign Worker program. The needs of immigrant and refugee women and children fleeing violence are another critical gap.

Disaster Homelessness

The Slave Lake fire and June 2013 floods highlight the need for examination on the impacts of natural disasters on homelessness in rural communities. Future research can probe the impacts of the 2013 Alberta flood on housing markets and homelessness to discern longer term effects. Promising approaches to consider in future planning and emergency preparedness work should be examined with a focus on homeless populations. Research on the impacts of disasters on homelessness among Aboriginal people, off and on-reserve should be undertaken.

Policy responses and funding allocation

The availability to affordable housing and rent supports in rural communities can make a considerable impact on the magnitude of homelessness, though uneven distribution of these resources can result in a mismatch of supply-demand. Analysis of the policy responses and funding allocation patterns of various government levels and their impact on rural homelessness may point to shifts at the policy level to mitigate rural homelessness. Creative funding mechanisms or grants that allow for the rehabilitation of housing need further exploration.

An area that merits further consideration will be whether rural homelessness results in a formal provincial strategy, and if so, what its impacts on resources allocation across population groups will be. Further, operationalizing of a rural strategy will bring to the fore a number of

implementation challenges. In Alberta's case, will the seven CBOs be tasked to manage rural catchment regions or will new rural CBOs emerge, and to what effect?

Coordination to respond to homelessness varies across rural communities, with official support and resourcing being key factors in local capacity to develop systematic efforts. Examinations of the role of official recognition and resourcing of local coordination may point to localized solutions to rural homelessness as well.

Tailoring Housing First interventions

There remains an overall lack of examinations of rural homelessness responses at the program and policy levels. Very few analyses on the applicability of homeless system of care responses or programmatic interventions such as Housing First in rural contexts exist. This is arguably one of the most critical gaps in existing research, both academic and community-based. Without concerted effort on developing an evidence-based slate of solutions at the policy and program levels, our ability to respond to rural homelessness will be limited.

The Alberta rural communities exhibit a range of adaptations of Housing First that merit further investigation to assess local impact, but also gather ground-level intelligence on the applicability of Housing First in novel contexts. The impact of HPS support in these smaller centres is a subject that warrants its own investigation as an opportunity to examine the impact of government support for community-based action on rural homelessness.

APPENDIX 1 - CANADIAN DEFINITION OF HOMELESSNESS

The Canadian Homeless Research Network has developed a definition of homelessness that has several components:

1) Unsheltered

This includes people who lack housing and are not accessing emergency shelters or accommodation, except during extreme weather conditions. In most cases, people are staying in places that are not designed for or fit for human habitation.

1.1 People living in public or private spaces without consent or contract

- **Public space, such as sidewalks, squares, parks, forests, etc.**
- **Private space and vacant buildings (squatting)**

1.2 People living in places not intended for permanent human habitation

- **Living in cars or other vehicles**
- **Living in garages, attics, closets or buildings not designed for habitation, with the consent of owner**
- **People in make shift shelters, shacks or tents**

2) Emergency Sheltered

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

2.1 Emergency overnight shelters for people who are homeless

These facilities are designed to meet the immediate needs of people who are homeless. Such short-term emergency shelters may target specific sub-populations, including women, families, youth or Aboriginal persons, for instance. Some emergency shelters allow people to stay on an ongoing basis others are short term and are set up to respond to special circumstances such as extreme weather.

2.2 Violence-Against-Women (VAW) shelters

2.3 Emergency shelter for people fleeing a natural disaster or destruction of accommodation due to fires, floods etc.

3) Provisionally Accommodated

This describes situations in which people who are otherwise without permanent shelter, are accessing accommodation that offers no prospect of permanence. Those who are provisionally accommodated may be accessing temporary and supported housing provided by government or the non-profit sector, or may have independently made arrangements for short-term accommodation.

3.1 Transitional Housing for people who are homeless

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

3.2 People living temporarily with others, but without guarantee of residence or immediate prospects for accessing permanent housing

Often referred to as 'couch surfers' or the 'hidden homeless', this describes people who stay with friends, family, or even strangers. They are typically not paying rent, their duration of stay is unsustainable in the long term, and they do not have the means to secure their own permanent housing in the future. They differ from those who are staying with friends or family in anticipation of prearranged accommodation, whether in their current hometown or an altogether new community. This living situation is understood by both parties to be temporary, with no prospect of it becoming permanent.

3.3 People accessing short term, temporary rental accommodations without security of tenure

In some cases people who are homeless make temporary rental arrangements, such as staying in motels, hostels, Single Room Occupancy hotels (SROs), rooming houses, etc. Although occupants pay rent, the accommodation does not offer the prospect or promise of permanency. People living in these situations are often considered to be part of the 'hidden homeless' population.

3.4 People in institutional care who lack permanent housing arrangements

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

a) were homeless prior to admittance (where their stay may be short-term or long-term) and who have no plan for permanent accommodation after release; or

b) had housing prior to admittance, but lost their housing while in institutional care

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

- Penal institutions
- Medical / mental health institutions
- Residential treatment programs or withdrawal management centers
- Children's institutions / group homes

3.5 Accommodation / reception centers for recently arrived immigrants and refugees

Prior to securing their own housing, recently arrived immigrants and refugees may be temporarily housed while receiving settlement support and orientation to life in Canada.

4) Insecurely Housed

Individuals or families, whose current housing situations are dangerously lacking security or stability, are considered ***Insecurely Housed***. They are living in housing that is intended for permanent human habitation, and could potentially be permanent (as opposed to those who are provisionally accommodated). However, as a result of external hardship, poverty, discrimination, a lack of other available and affordable housing, and / or the unsuitability of their current housing (which may be overcrowded or does not meet public health and safety standards) residents may be "at risk" of homelessness.

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

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

4.1 People at imminent risk of homelessness

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

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

4.2 Individuals and families who are Precariously Housed

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

Interview Guide 1: Community Representatives

We have been asked by Alberta Centre for Child, Family and Community to probe the issue of homelessness in small towns and rural areas in Alberta. We are contacting you as a person in either local government services or a social services organization to explore this issue.

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

- Those who have no shelter (sleeping rough or in places not mental for human habitation
- Those in a temporary shelter for homeless persons or victims of domestic violence
- Those who are "doubled up" or "couch surfing" and have no living place of their own.

Key Questions

1. Does your community identify homelessness as an issue?
2. Tell me about homelessness in your community. What are key emerging trends you are seeing?
3. Is there hidden homelessness (couch surfing, doubling up)?
4. To what extent is rough sleeping an issue in your community?
5. What proportion would you consider to be chronic homelessness (long-term homeless with co-occurring mental health/addictions/physical health issues)?
6. Any estimates of how many individuals are homeless in any one year? How many would you consider to be chronically homeless?
7. Tell me about the dynamics of the housing and labour market and how these impact homelessness. Probe for vacancy rates, rental costs, labour market and migration, economic base.
8. Please discuss on and off reserves Aboriginal homelessness in your region.
9. What (if any) impacts does Aboriginal migration have on your homeless population? Is there recognition of the issue? **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
10. How does your community fund homelessness responses? (provincial sources, federal - HPS designation, donations, volunteers etc.)
11. What is the level of coordination to respond to homelessness locally?
12. Please describe the public recognition and local leadership with respect to homelessness locally.
13. If homelessness is an identified issue is there a formal plan (i.e. Plan to End Homelessness) to address this issue? Please describe this and any informal approaches to address the issue.
14. Are there any organizations involved with addressing the social services and/or affordable housing needs of local residents? Do these organizations include provision of housing or temporary shelter?
15. If a local resident or family loses their housing what resources are available to them?
16. Has Housing First as an approach to helping people who are homeless been discussed within your community? How do local people describe a Housing First approach?
17. Is this approach seen as a viable answer to housing problems faced in your community? Are there examples of implementing Housing First? Can you describe these?
18. What interest do you see around research on homelessness locally? What connections do you have with other communities or organizations with respect to knowledge mobilization and research? What interest is there in strengthening this?

Interview Guide 2: Provincial Stakeholders

We have been asked by Alberta Centre for Child, Family and Community to probe the issue of homelessness in small towns and rural areas in Alberta. We are contacting you as a key person to explore this issue at the provincial level.

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

- Those who have no shelter (sleeping rough or in places not mental for human habitation
- Those in a temporary shelter for homeless persons or victims of domestic violence
- Those who are "doubled up" or "couch surfing" and have no living place of their own.

Key Questions

1. To what extent do rural communities identify homelessness as an issue?
2. Tell me about homelessness in Alberta rural communities from your experience. What are key emerging trends you are seeing?
3. Is there hidden homelessness (couch surfing, doubling up)? To what extent is rough sleeping an issue? What about chronic homelessness (long-term homeless with co-occurring mental health/addictions/physical health issues)?
4. Any estimates of how many individuals are homeless in any one year in rural communities? How many/what proportion would you consider to be chronically homeless?
5. Tell me about the dynamics of the housing and labour market and how these impact rural homelessness in Alberta. (Probe for vacancy rates, rental costs, labour market and migration, economic base).
6. Please discuss on and off reserves Aboriginal homelessness in rural communities. What (if any) impacts does Aboriginal migration have on the rural homeless population? Is there recognition of this particular issue locally and in government? **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
7. How do rural communities fund homelessness responses? (provincial sources, federal - HPS designation, donations, volunteers etc.)
8. What is the level of coordination to respond to rural homelessness locally? What about at the federal and provincial levels?
9. Please discuss the level of public recognition and leadership with respect to rural homelessness at local, provincial and federal levels.
10. If homelessness is an identified issue in rural communities, to what extent is it addressed in a formal plan (i.e. Plan to End Homelessness)? Please describe this and any informal approaches to address the issue as well. Is there any systematic approach or will to address rural Alberta homelessness in government?
11. How are social services and/or affordable housing needs of local residents addressed in rural communities? Do these organizations include provision of housing or temporary shelter?
12. If a local resident or family loses their housing what resources are available to them?
13. Has Housing First as an approach to helping people who are homeless been discussed in rural communities community? How do local people describe a Housing First approach?
14. Is this approach seen as a viable answer to housing problems faced in rural communities? Are there examples of implementing Housing First? Can you describe these?

15. What interest do you see around research on homelessness in rural communities? What is the level of activity and interest in knowledge mobilization and research transfer? Is there openness to increasing this and how?

Note: Housing First is used to describe an approach to providing immediate shelter for homeless persons (before requiring treatment or abstinence AND it is also used to describe a specific program with detailed services for persons disabled by mental illness and co-occurring substance issues.

APPENDIX 3 - PROVINCIAL GRANT ALLOCATIONS FOR AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Government of Alberta, 2013

Distribution of Affordable Housing Funding By Community As at September 8, 2011			
Community	Units	Total Grant Funding	Estimated Capital Cost
Airdrie	69	$9,923,087	$15,461,302
Athabasca	70	$6,404,953	$14,385,219
Banff	20	$809,322	$3,551,000
Beaumont	65	$7,663,204	$11,281,192
Black Diamond	34	$4,754,795	$7,166,281
Blackfalds	20	$3,101,350	$4,430,500
Boyle	16	$1,233,040	$1,967,073
Brooks	83	$7,565,873	$9,966,754
Calgary	3,615	$ 414,081,026	$722,399,448
Camrose	98	$9,937,977	$15,673,144
Canmore	20	$1,120,064	$4,000,000
Cochrane	34	$3,490,323	$5,104,579
Cold Lake	32	$4,751,114	$7,305,384
Devon	24	$3,854,255	$6,359,371
Didsbury	20	$1,638,932	$2,521,433
Drayton Valley	30	$3,341,654	$4,767,837
Drumheller	15	$835,000	$1,143,403
Edmonton	3,554	$291,837,269	$664,547,651
Edson	54	$5,604,095	$10,496,200
Evansburgh	16	$2,010,928	$3,093,735
Fort McMurray	678	$101,700,000	$223,299,050
Fort Saskatchewan	16	$2,361,784	$3,829,562
Fox Creek	10	$1,241,170	$1,911,170
Grande Prairie	311	$21,312,300	$39,026,860
High River	47	$3,885,388	$6,043,733
Hinton	52	$5,823,416	$7,033,100
Innisfail	16	$1,639,771	$2,522,724
Jasper	42	$3,196,030	$5,075,852
Lac La Biche	62	$4,104,556	$14,197,300
Lacombe	51	$1,063,895	$1,802,125
Lamont	14	$2,100,000	$3,537,464
Leduc / Beaumont / Devon	80	$10,651,608	$16,796,609

Lethbridge	466	$23,286,276	$41,779,457
Lloydminster	27	$3,066,143	$6,409,038
Magrath	16	$1,760,000	$3,727,900
Medicine Hat	131	$10,275,333	$23,330,431
Morinville	60	$739,884	$1,386,261
Okotoks	7	$1,603,570	$2,692,330
Olds	25	$1,800,915	$3,464,802
Peace River	81	$5,948,868	$9,614,120
Red Deer	280	$21,574,474	$38,612,316
Rocky Mountain House	6	$672,960	$1,260,871
Slave Lake	130	$12,070,345	$18,922,707
Spruce Grove	162	$12,352,959	$30,516,289
St. Albert	229	$13,488,407	$28,707,002
St. Isidore	3	$313,162	$563,162
St. Paul	6	$615,000	$880,000
Stettler	3	$154,740	$306,614
Stony Plain	98	$6,946,532	$13,605,343
Strathcona County	268	$12,387,159	$33,771,654
Strathmore	114	$11,630,667	$17,335,657
Sundre	16	$1,740,391	$2,677,524
Sylvan Lake	13	$1,596,241	$2,990,748
Three Hills	18	$937,872	$1,442,880
Tofield	46	$3,000,000	$7,450,000
Turner Valley	7	$1,043,783	$1,605,820
Vegreville	42	$4,877,948	$7,064,044
Wabamum	6	$608,237	$935,750
Wainwright	2	$152,940	$286,551
Westlock	5	$991,203	$1,098,509
Wetaskiwin	54	$6,314,929	$9,928,525
Whitecourt	47	$5,312,623	$8,917,398
Provincial Total	**11,636**	**$1,110,301,741**	**$2,161,980,759**

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