

Discussing Homelessness

Understanding Homelessness, Dispelling Stigma,
& Considering Next Steps

Presentation by Health for Homeless 

 @health.for.homeless  @healthforhomelesscanada

What comes to mind when you hear the word
HOMELESSNESS?

Canadian Definition of Homelessness

Homelessness

describes the situation of an

INDIVIDUAL, FAMILY, or COMMUNITY

without

**STABLE, SAFE, PERMANENT or
APPROPRIATE HOUSING**

or the immediate prospect, means,
and ability of acquiring it.



<https://www.blogto.com/city/2021/03/people-toronto-say-new-plan-shelter-homeless-pr-student-evict-encampment-residents/>

QUIZ!

How many people do you think experience homelessness in Canada every year?

A Around 20,000

C Around 150,000

B Around 100,000

D Around 200,000

QUIZ!

How many people do you think experience homelessness in Canada every year?

A Around 5,000

C Around 150,000

B Around 100,000

D Around 200,000

235,000

Canadians experience homelessness at some point every year

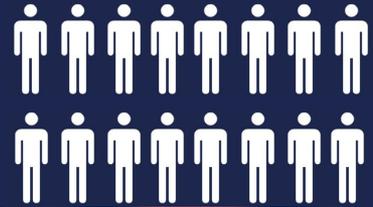
25-35,000

will be homeless tonight!

But, across Canada, emergency shelters can only offer

16,000

beds.



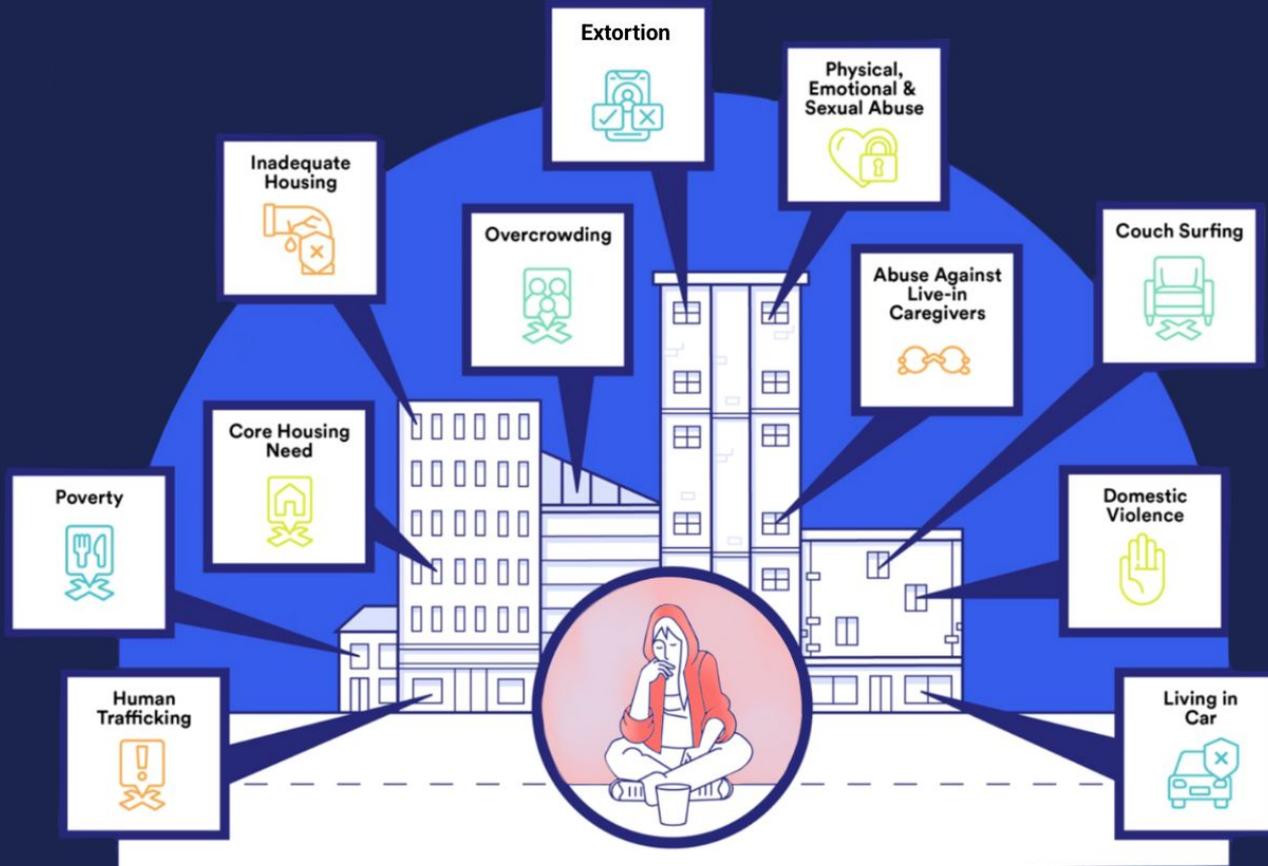
A Little Perspective...

35,000 people > **1.76x** the seating capacity at the Scotiabank Arena



Types of Homelessness

Visible and Hidden!



What are Emergency Shelters?



The shelter system allows people a warm place to sleep for a maximum of **30-90 days**.

Sometimes, there will be other services provided, like food, clothing or counselling.



What are Encampments?



Encampments are temporary, outdoor, public spaces where people live in tents.



Causes of Homelessness



An interplay between 3 domains



**Structural
Factors**



System Failures



Personal circumstances



Structural Factors

Economic and Social Issues

Poverty



Lack of
affordable housing



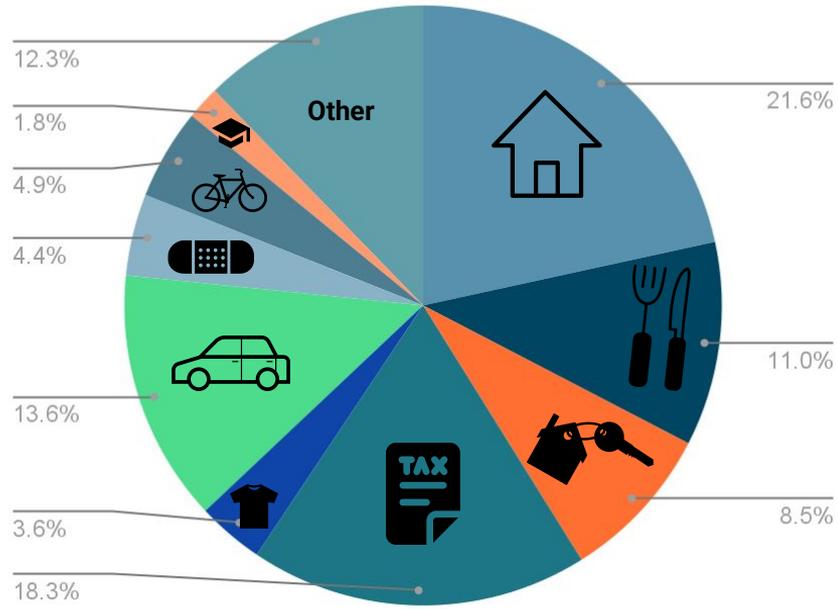
Discrimination



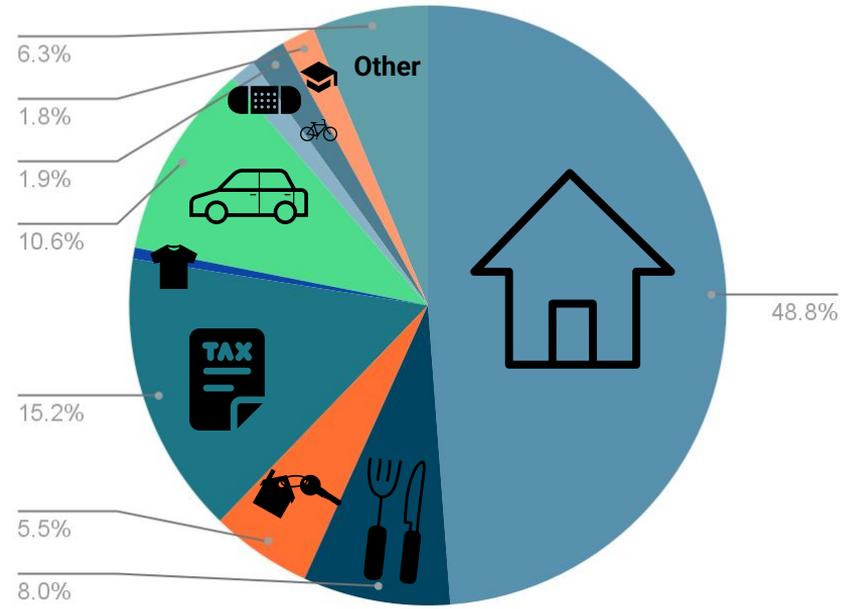


Structural Factors

Average Household Expenditures



Families living in Core Need





System Failures

Shortcomings of systems of care and support

Inadequate discharge planning for people leaving hospitals



Addictions facilities



Mental health support



Support for immigrants and refugees





Personal Circumstances

01

Personal Crisis

Including...

- Traumatic events
- Domestic violence
- Job loss
- Family break-up
- Illness

02

Mental Health and Addiction

- Can be very debilitating
- Can interfere with individual's capacity to handle day-to-day challenges



Personal Circumstances

Many who are homeless struggle with physical illnesses or disabilities, substance abuse, and/or mental illness. Each of these can affect one's ability to keep a job or maintain a home, but **none are choices**.



And many don't know where or how to access help!

Demographics



QUESTION !

Which of the following groups do you think experience disproportionate rates of homelessness?

A

Indigenous Community

B

LGBTQ2S+ Community

C

Women

D

Racialized Community

E

Men

F

Newcomers to Canada

QUESTION !

Which of the following groups do you think experience disproportionate rates of homelessness?

A

Indigenous Community

B

LGBTQ2S+ Community

C

Women

hidden homelessness!

D

Racialized Community

E

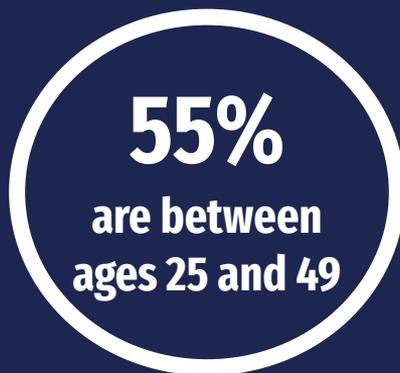
Men

Visible, chronic homelessness!

F

Newcomers to Canada

Population Demographics of those Experiencing Homelessness



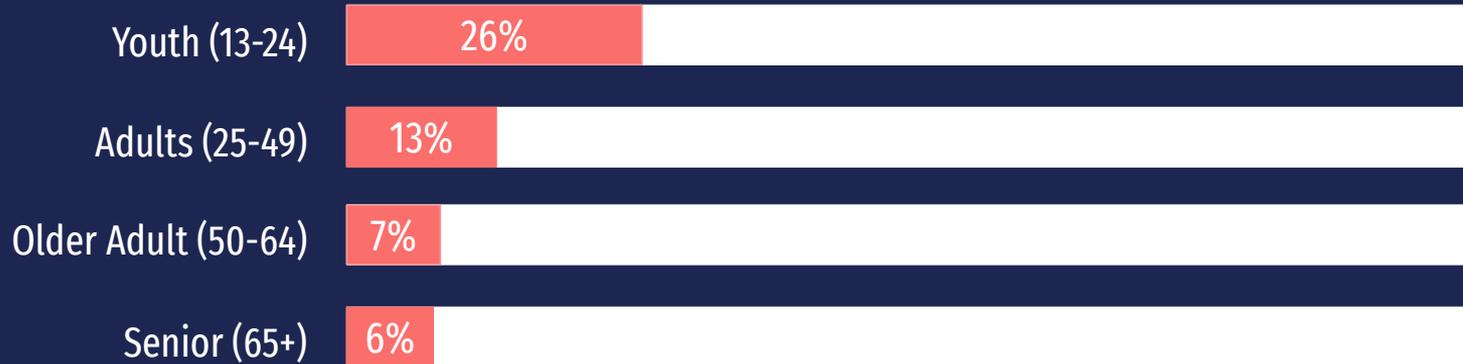


Homelessness & the LGBTQ2S+ Community

Everyone Counts 2020-2022 survey
on homelessness in Canada:

13%

Identified as LGBTQ2S+



Among all Canadians:

4%

Identified as LGBTQ2S+

Youth Homelessness in Canada

Ages 13 to 24

Leave homes where they may have been socially and economically dependent on adult caregivers



20% of Canada's homeless population are youth (~40,000 people)

Due to their age and relative inexperience, often unable to get a job or stable housing

Much more vulnerable to crimes and exploitation

Insights From Youth with Lived Experiences

“My trauma led me down a wrong path, and I didn’t know that I had ... places where I could go to access help for that. And my family didn’t know how to support me with my mental health. So they ended up giving up on me because they didn’t know... how. And they didn’t have... anyone show them or teach them how to take care of someone with those circumstances.”

Kamloops Youth

“Education is hard to get because housing is hard to get.”

Calgary Youth

“To access BC housing or any youth rent subsidies, you have to be homeless for a **minimum of six months before they’ll even look at you.** Six months is a long time... some of them can make it through that time period, but some can’t.”

Vancouver Youth

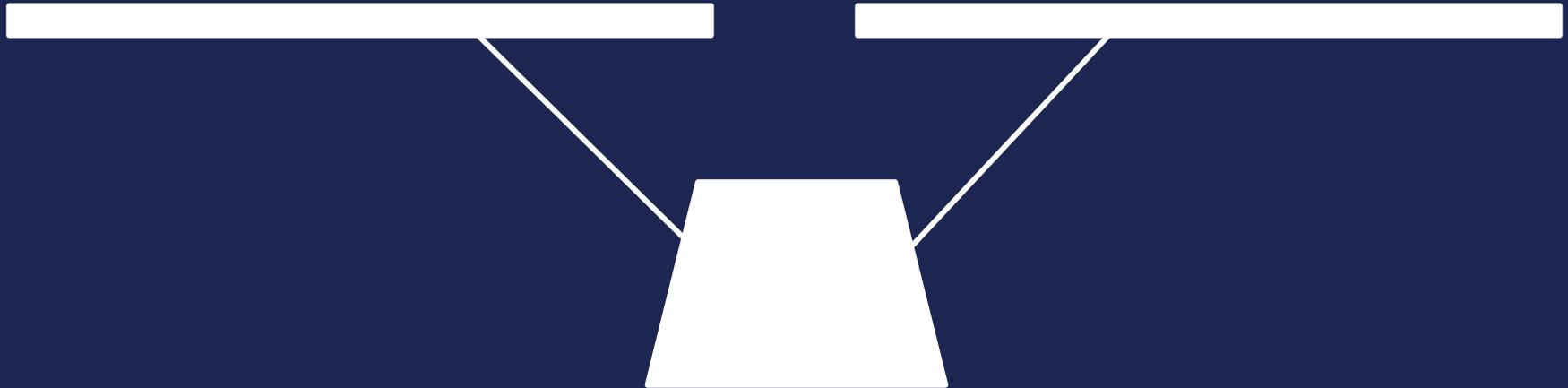
Stigma about Homelessness



Which do you hear more often?

They are homeless
because of **who they are.**

They are homeless
because of **what has
happened around them.**



Which of the following statements were actually said online?

- A. “Maybe we should spray homeless people with febreze.”
- B. “There’s this crazy homeless guy sitting on our porch... just in case I die, you all know.
- C. “I only give money to homeless people if they’re old or disabled. If you’re my age you need to get a job. Stores pay people to hold signs.”
- D. “When I see a homeless person I honestly don’t know if they're faking or not so they get nothing from me.”

Common Stigmas

They're homeless because they're lazy!

They *choose* to live on the street.

They don't care about hygiene!

All homeless people have substance use problems.

Homeless people are dangerous or violent.

Common Stigmas

They're homeless because they're lazy!

They *choose* to live on the street.

It is hard to stay clean when you don't have access to a bathroom, shower, sink, bar of soap, or toothbrush!

All homeless people have substance use problems.

Homeless people are dangerous or violent.

Common Stigmas

They're homeless because they're lazy!

They *choose* to live on the street.

It is hard to stay clean when you don't have access to a bathroom, shower, sink, bar of soap, or toothbrush!

Some do. Many don't. Substance use may be a coping mechanism *after* they've become homeless.

Homeless people are dangerous or violent.

Common Stigmas

They're homeless because they're lazy!

They *choose* to live on the street.

It is hard to stay clean when you don't have access to a bathroom, shower, sink, bar of soap, or toothbrush!

Some do. Many don't. Substance use may be a coping mechanism *after* they've become homeless.

Homeless people are more likely to be **victims** of crimes than perpetrators.

Common Stigmas

They're homeless because they're lazy!

Many don't know what options they have for getting help or feel betrayed by the system!

It is hard to stay clean when you don't have access to a bathroom, shower, sink, bar of soap, or toothbrush!

Some do. Many don't. Substance use may be a coping mechanism *after* they've become homeless.

Homeless people are more likely to be **victims** of crimes than perpetrators.

Common Stigmas

They're homeless because they're lazy!

Many don't know what options they have for getting help or feel betrayed by the system!

It is hard to stay clean when you don't have access to a bathroom, shower, sink, bar of soap, or toothbrush!

Some do. Many don't. Substance use may be a coping mechanism *after* they've become homeless.

Homeless people are more likely to be **victims** of crimes than perpetrators.

They're homeless because they're lazy!



This type of thinking...

- makes unhoused people feel *other*
- *Reflects assumptions* we make about their personal attributes.
- makes it easier for us to look down on people because we think that they must deserve their situation.
- *normalizes physical, mental, and social suffering*

**Stigmas simplify complex situations.
They turn systemic problems into personal blame.**

Consequences of Stigma

The Salvation Army (2011) found that...



> **1/3** of Canadians are scared
of homeless people



~ **40%** of Canadians believe
homelessness is a lifestyle that
is deliberately chosen

Implications

The topic of homelessness is rarely
discussed with any forward-looking image.

Stigmatized groups face **7X** higher rates of
unemployment.

Stigmas further ostracize already vulnerable
populations.



CASE STUDY

Stigmas, Criminalization, & Homelessness



This is Matt. He is 32 years old. He has been homeless for the last 2 months, and it has been hard.

He does not have enough money to buy lunch today, so he sits outside a store with his guitar and a cup in the hopes that passersby will donate some change.

The store owners call the police, worried Matt might steal something or break in.

The police shows up and pedestrians in the area watch.

They whisper between one another, creating stories about Matt being a criminal.



Criminalizing homelessness

Ontario's *Safe Streets Act* makes **panhandling** and **squeegeeing** illegal.

- You can be fined \$500
- Second offenders can be fined up to \$1,000 and spend up to six months in jail



- Such laws only try to make homelessness less visible. They **do not tackle the underlying causes** of homelessness.
- Police involvement when there has been no wrong-doing can make the unhoused population appear “dangerous” in the public view.

Real Case: Penticton, BC spent **\$30,000** on legal fees in their prosecution of Paul Braun who had racked up **\$145** dollars in fines from panhandling tickets.

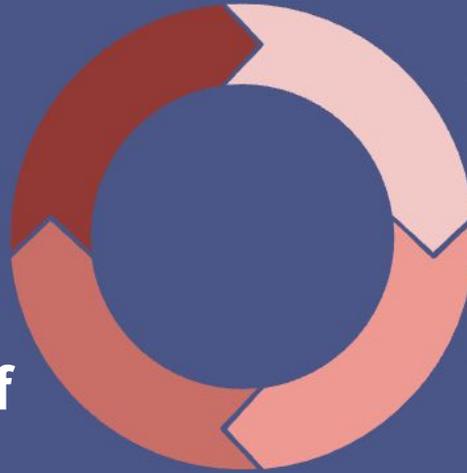
A vicious spiral

Social systems fail

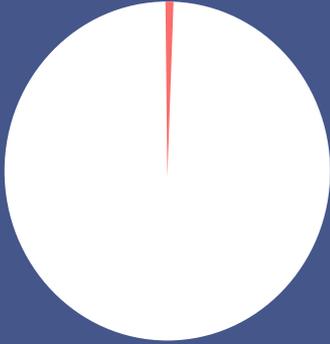
Arrest + imprisonment

**Greater public fear of
homeless people**

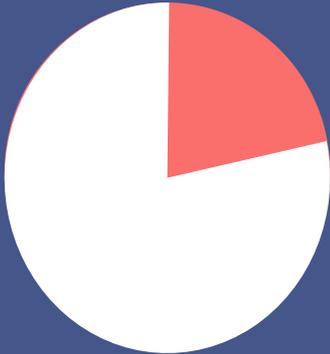
**Permanent label as
a “criminal”**



Homelessness and Canada's prisons



0.6% of Canadians experience homelessness in a year



But **23%** of the Canadian prison population were experiencing homelessness when they were incarcerated

Why work towards destigmatizing homelessness?

These harmful misconceptions about homelessness
are **long standing** and **hard to get rid of**.

Learning to recognize and challenge stigma can hopefully result in sensitive and compassionate conversations, which may lead to innovative solutions and policies that address the roots of homelessness.



Myth Busters!

TRUE OR FALSE?

How to participate:

- Different statements will appear on the screen.
- Discuss for a minute with your classmates
- If you are comfortable, raise your hand if you agree

Hopefully, you will learn something new and challenge some assumptions you may have!

Myth Buster

TRUE OR FALSE?

Homelessness only
includes those living on
the street.

False

Remember that homelessness also includes people living in:

- Emergency shelters
- Homes that don't meet health and safety standards
- Overcrowded homes
- Friends' homes
- Their car
- Homes where they are abused or extorted

Myth Buster

TRUE OR FALSE?

Unhoused people are lazy.
They choose not to have
jobs.

False

“Many people experiencing homelessness do not have the option of being stagnant or lazy.”

- Homeless Hub

Myth Buster

TRUE OR FALSE?

If unhoused people are able to find a job, they will eventually be able to escape homelessness.

False

Unhoused people have a really hard time finding and keeping a job.

- No permanent address
- No phone number
- Health problems
- Disabilities
- Discrimination

And 20% of unhoused people in Toronto are employed!

Myth Buster

TRUE OR FALSE?

There are plenty of support services for the unhoused population. The difficulty is in getting people to use them.

Partially False

Canada mainly uses an emergency response approach to homelessness

But this on its own is not very effective because it is not supported by a sufficient number of long-term solutions and prevention programs like...

- Life-sustaining (ex. food, shelter, clothing)
- Counselling
- Child care support
- Employment services (ex. resume building)
- Money management courses
- Health and wellness promotion
- Social engagement initiatives

Myth Buster

TRUE OR FALSE?

It is impossible to end homelessness.

FALSE

There are many organizations that are striving to end the homelessness epidemic, and we can each do our part to help!

More on this next...

Debrief

Mythbusters

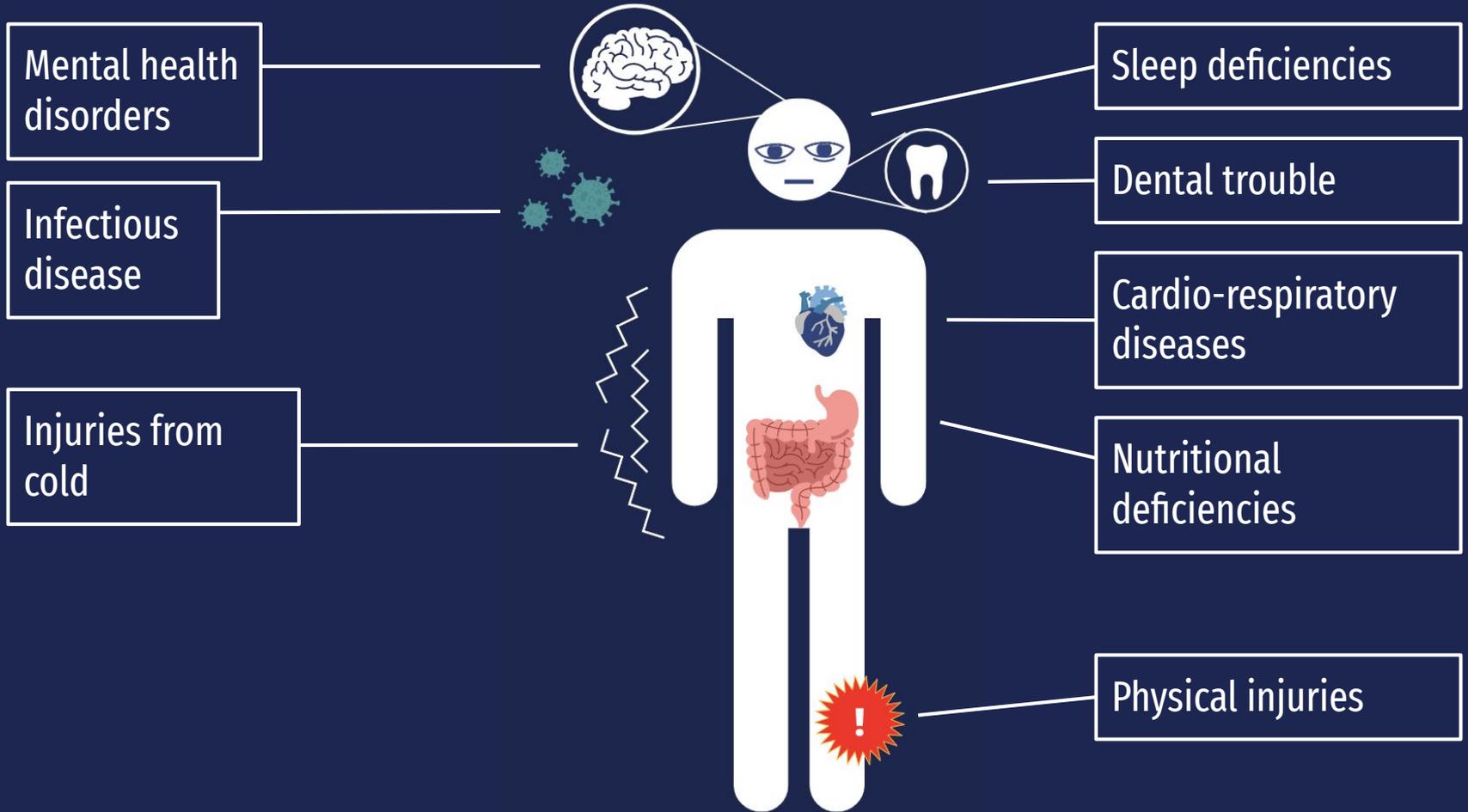
- Did anything surprise you?
- Did you learn anything new?
- What are some ways you think you can help work towards helping the unhoused population?

Health in the Unhoused

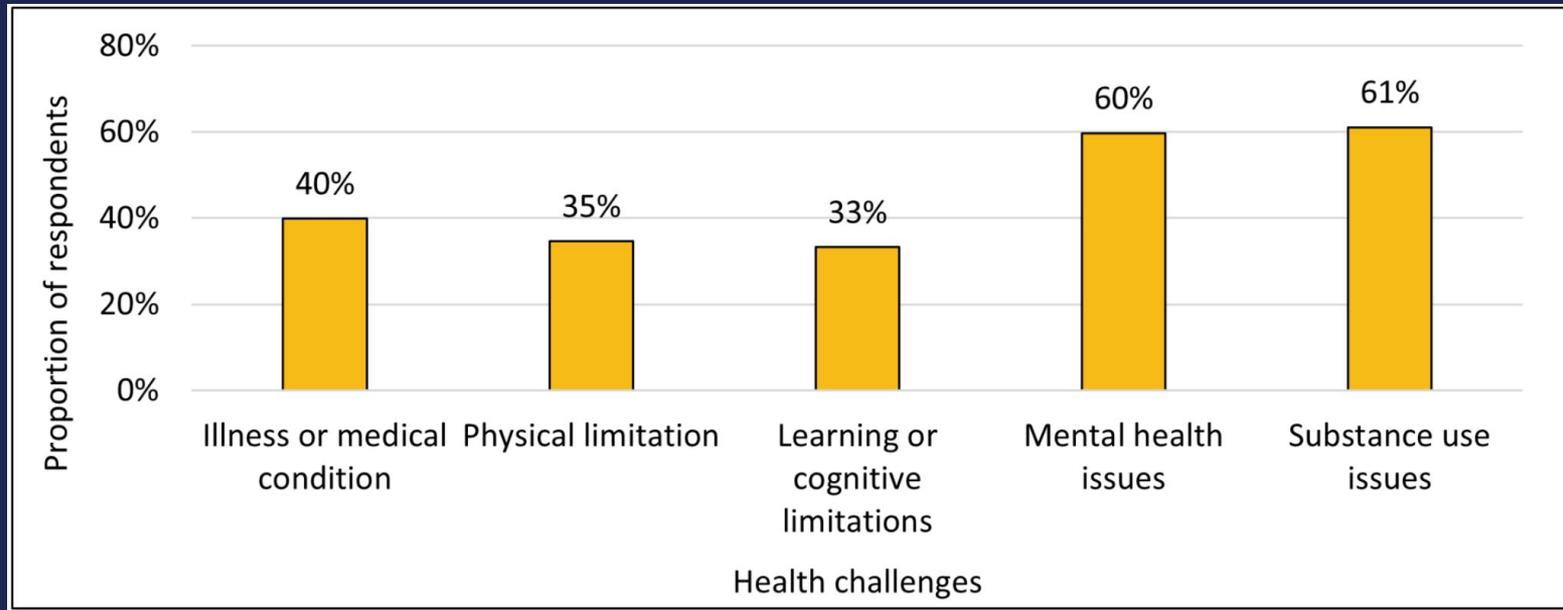


↓ Income ↓ Health

Poor Health ↔ Homelessness



85% have at least 1 health challenge.
67% have more than 1.





Road to Solutions

What does ending homelessness mean?

According to the Canadian Definition of Homelessness:

The “problem of homelessness and housing exclusion refers to the failure of society to ensure that adequate systems, funding and support are in place so that all people, even in crisis situations, have access to housing”.

**Ending homelessness does NOT mean that
no one will ever need emergency housing**



Prevention Strategies

1 Primary prevention



Structural and systemic level prevention of homelessness

Examples

- ✓ Affordable healthcare
- ✓ Programs aimed at people with low-income
- ✓ Mental health supports
- ✓ Anti-discrimination policy

2 Secondary prevention



Targeting individuals at risk of homelessness

Examples

- ✓ Emergency financial assistance
- ✓ Mediation with landlords

3 Tertiary prevention



Ongoing support to individuals experiencing homelessness

Example

The Housing First Model

- ✓ Provides housing and also various services to prevent the recurrence of homelessness

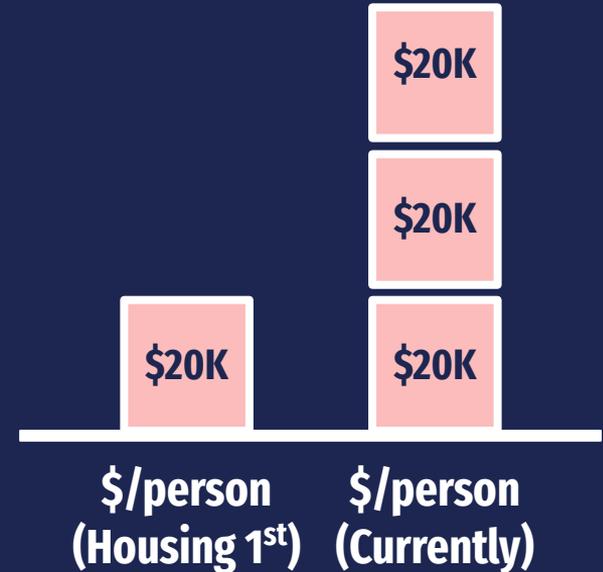
Housing First

The premise:

- Individuals experiencing homelessness are provided with:
 - Their own private living space
 - Support services for nutrition, stress, job searching, skill building, and more are provided by professionals

The benefits:

- Up to 85% of people provided with housing and these supports do not return to being homeless
- Housing first is **3x cheaper** than doing nothing to help
 - Average cost of a street-dwelling individual: ~ \$60,000
 - Average cost per person of Housing First: ~ \$20,000

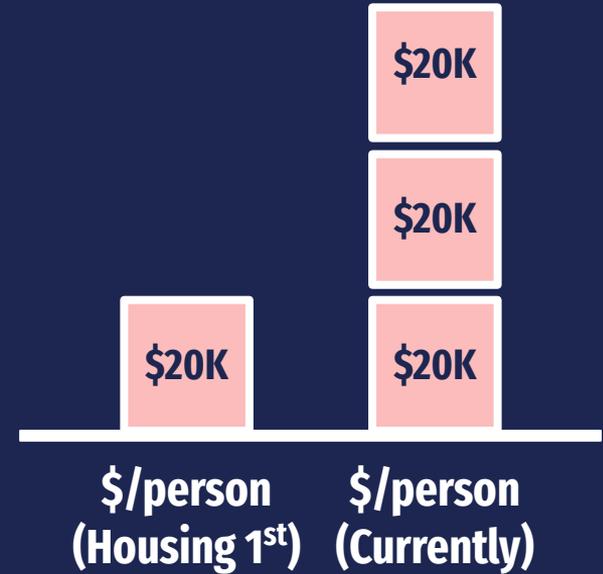


Housing First



KEY TAKEAWAY:

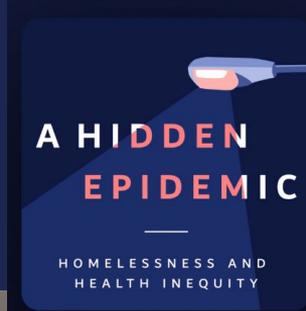
- Housing First is a tried and tested solution to help those experiencing homelessness and it saves everyone money!



What has **HSH** been up to?



Educational workshops in schools across GTHA and Kingston



PODCAST

A Hidden Epidemic: Homelessness and Health Inequity

Health for Homeless

Podcasts with people researching or working with the unhoused

Assembly of care kits



We set up sock pantries around the GTA!

References

1. Gaetz S, Barr C, Friesen A, Harris B, Hill C, Kovacs-Burns K, Pauly B, Pearce B, Turner A, Marsolais A. Canadian definition of homelessness. Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, Toronto [Internet]. 2012.
2. Gaetz S, Gulliver T, Richter T. The state of homelessness in Canada 2014. Canadian Homelessness Research Network; 2014.
3. Statistics Canada. Table 14-10-0353-01 Homeless shelter capacity, bed and shelter counts for emergency shelters, transitional housing and domestic violence shelters for Canada and provinces, Employment and Social Development Canada [Internet]. Canada: Government of Canada; 2022 Mar. Available from: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1410035301>
4. Homeless Hub. Homelessness 101. Toronto, ON: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press.
5. Schwan, K., Gaetz, S., French, D., Redman, M., Thistle, J., & Dej, E. (2018). What Would it Take? Youth Across Canada Speak Out on Youth Homelessness Prevention. Toronto, ON: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press.
6. Statistics Canada. Table 11-10-0222-01 Household spending, Canada, regions and provinces [Internet]. Canada: Government of Canada; 2021 Jan. Available from: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1110022201>
7. Government of Canada. "Housing, Infrastructure and Communities Canada - Everyone Counts 2020-2022 – Results from the Third Nationally Coordinated Point-In-Time Counts of Homelessness in Canada." *Housing-Infrastructure.canada.ca*, 20 Dec. 2023, housing-infrastructure.canada.ca/homelessness-sans-abri/reports-rapports/pit-counts-dp-2020-2022-results-resultats-eng.html.
8. The Trevor Project. *Homelessness and Housing Instability among LGBTQ Youth Background* 7. 3 Feb. 2022.
9. Government of Canada. "Facts, Stats and Impact: 2SLGBTQI+ Communities." *Www.canada.ca*, 16 May 2024, www.canada.ca/en/women-gender-equality/free-to-be-me/federal-action-2slgtqi-communities/facts-stats.html.
10. Homeless Hub. Youth Employment Toolkit. Toronto, ON: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press.
11. Kim NJ, Lin J, Hiller C, Hildebrand C, Auerswald C. Analyzing U.S. tweets for stigma against people experiencing homelessness. *Stigma and Health*. 2023;8(2):187–195.