

Homelessness and Poverty in British Columbia

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Abstract

A minimum goal of a basic income is to ensure all Canadians can maintain housing and in so doing avoid homelessness. This paper examines the causes of homelessness to gain insight into whether a basic income can reduce it and, if so, to what extent. Poverty is the main driver of homelessness, as a result, a basic income may also have a positive effect on the homeless rate by better enabling people to avoid the other circumstances that contribute to homelessness, particularly addiction and mental health issues.

Introduction

Not having a home makes it impossible to fully participate in society. Homelessness is associated with poor health, a shortened lifespan, difficulty in maintaining employment, and poor prospects for one's children. It means being unable to afford the cost of treatments for the chronic health conditions that are often the cause or the result of homelessness. Homelessness means being more exposed to the impacts of pandemics than people who are housed (Jadidzadeh & Kneebone, in press). Having a home is the most basic of basic needs. A minimum goal of a basic income is to ensure all Canadians can maintain housing and in so doing avoid homelessness.

To understand how a basic income might affect homelessness, we need to understand what homelessness is. In the next section I begin by describing what is understood to be homeless. This is less straightforward than one might imagine because there are different shades of homelessness, from absolute homelessness to insecure housing. I then turn to measures of the number of people experiencing various types of homelessness so that, again, we might better understand how a basic income might affect these numbers. Given the difficulty in precisely defining homelessness, it is not surprising to find that it is challenging to determine the number of people experiencing different types of homelessness. I will describe how this problem is compounded by a lack of data on measures of homelessness in British Columbia. Finally, I turn to the question of the causes of homelessness and so gain insight into whether a basic income can reduce it and, if so, to what extent. The difficulties in defining and measuring homelessness mean it is difficult to measure precisely how sensitive the number of people experiencing homelessness is to possible policy measures. A simple model will help identify options.

What Is Homelessness?

This is a surprisingly difficult question to answer. The difficulty stems from the fact there are many shades of homelessness. Understanding these shades is important for appreciating problems of measurement and the problems inherent in defining appropriate policy responses.

The Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (COH) is a non-partisan research and policy partnership. It has developed and promotes the following definition of homelessness:

Homelessness describes the situation of an individual or family without stable, permanent, appropriate housing, or the immediate prospect, means and ability of acquiring it. (Gaetz et. al, 2012)

Expanding on this definition, the COH identifies homelessness with a range of physical living situations:

- **Unsheltered.** This describes people living on the street or in places not intended for human habitation.

- **Emergency sheltered.** This describes people staying in shelters provided for people without housing by government and by non-profit agencies. These include shelters for people impacted by family violence.
- **Provisionally accommodated.** This refers to people whose accommodation is temporary or lacks security of tenure. This might include people staying temporarily with friends, people sometimes identified as “couch surfers.”¹
- **At risk of homelessness.** Here the reference is to people who are not homeless but whose housing is precarious or whose housing does not meet public health standards.

This broad definition of homelessness is consistent with the emphasis of the COH that the problem of homelessness is due to society failing to ensure all people enjoy *housing stability*, by which it means a fixed address, housing that is appropriate for that family, and housing that is affordable and safe.

Not all elements of this definition of homelessness are easily measured. It is important to stress the problem of measurement because there is truth in the saying “what gets measured gets managed.” Developing effective public policies to address homelessness requires effort be put into measurement so we can measure changes in the size of the problem and the effectiveness of attempts at solutions. Obtaining a measure of the problem is also important for understanding the causes of the problem. Without consistent and accurate measurement of the size of the problem we wish to address and the reason for why the problem exists, we are flying blind. How we can measure the number of people experiencing homelessness is the focus of the next section.

How Many People Are Homeless?

If defining homelessness is difficult, it is perhaps not surprising to find that answering the question of how many people are homeless is also difficult. I will try to address the problem from several different angles.

Facilities for People Seeking Emergency Shelter

One way of measuring the number of people experiencing homelessness is to measure the size of the facilities provided for people without homes and seeking shelter.

The COH definition of who is emergency sheltered includes people using three types of shelters. What are generally known as *emergency shelters* are intended to provide short-term accommodation for people experiencing homelessness. Emergency shelters often limit those they serve. For example, family emergency shelters are open only to parents with children. Shelters open to single adults are sometimes open only to men or to women, but many are open to all genders. Some emergency shelters are open only to single youth. What are known

¹ This category also includes people currently in institutional care who were homeless prior to admittance and who have no plan for permanent accommodation after release. This includes people in penal institutions, group homes, and mental health institutions.

as *transitional shelters* differ from emergency shelters by the intensity of support services they provide. As the name implies, transitional shelters are intended to act as an intermediate step between an emergency shelter and permanent housing. Finally, *violence against women shelters* provide temporary accommodation for single women or women with children escaping domestic abuse. Some violence against women shelters provide only short-term accommodation and so serve as an escape during crisis, while others provide longer-term transitional housing.

Table 1

Facilities for the Emergency Sheltered by Province and Territory, 2018

	Emergency		Transitional		Violence against women	
	Shelters	Beds	Shelters	Beds	Shelters	Beds
Newfoundland & Labrador	7	67	4	102	15	176
Nova Scotia	9	220	8	119	15	192
New Brunswick	9	157	2	14	18	298
Prince Edward Island	1	7	0	0	3	45
Quebec	65	1,757	114	2,522	95	1,360
Ontario	149	6,898	104	2,188	119	2,466
Manitoba	13	650	10	229	17	364
Saskatchewan	18	476	22	328	14	283
Alberta	35	3,304	37	1,177	46	1,223
British Columbia	78	2,170	33	901	93	953
Yukon	3	27	1	2	5	49
Northwest Territories	3	82	3	63	6	44
Nunavut	2	44	0	0	5	41
Canada	392	15,859	338	7,645	451	7,494

Note. The numbers of shelter and shelter beds are from ESDC (2019b).

Table 1 reports data for 2018 on the number of shelters and the number of shelter beds provided to the emergency sheltered by province and territory and by type of shelter. Table 2 helps put these data into perspective by calculating the number of beds provided per 10,000 people in the identified jurisdiction. The number of beds provided per 10,000 people varies widely by jurisdiction. Alberta is notable for providing significantly more beds per 10,000 people than other provinces. This difference is due to that province providing many more emergency shelter beds than other provinces. The number of beds provided per 10,000 people in British Columbia is roughly equal to the average across the country.

Table 2

Beds for the Emergency Sheltered per 10,000 Population

	Emergency	Transitional	Violence against women	All beds
Newfoundland & Labrador	1.3	1.9	3.3	6.6

Nova Scotia	2.3	1.2	2.0	3.4
New Brunswick	2.0	0.2	3.9	6.1
Prince Edward Island	0.5	0.0	2.9	3.4
Quebec	2.1	2.9	1.6	6.6
Ontario	4.8	1.4	1.7	7.9
Manitoba	4.8	1.7	2.7	9.2
Saskatchewan	4.1	2.8	2.4	9.3
Alberta	7.7	2.7	2.8	13.3
British Columbia	4.3	1.8	1.9	8.0
Yukon	6.6	0.5	12.1	19.2
Northwest Territories	18.2	14.0	9.8	42.0
Nunavut	11.5	0.0	10.8	22.3
Canada	4.3	2.0	2.0	8.3

Note. The numbers of shelter and shelter beds are from ESDC (2019b). Beds per 10,000 people are authors' calculations using provincial population data from Statistics Canada Table 17-10-0005-01.

Table A1 in the appendix shows the number of emergency, transitional, and violence against women shelter beds provided in each community in British Columbia. Confirming what is reported in ESDC (2019a) for Canada, these data show that the great majority of shelter beds are provided in B.C.'s largest city.² In 2018, the City of Vancouver provided 50% of all emergency shelter beds in the province and 63% of all transitional housing beds. Beds in violence against women shelters are more evenly distributed across communities. In 2018, 14% of the province's violence against women shelter beds were available in Vancouver.

It is useful to distinguish between the type of shelters and beds provided for the emergency sheltered because explanations for their use differs. The purpose and explanation for the use of violence against women shelters is obvious, and public policies directed toward addressing the reason for their need deserve separate consideration. For that reason, in what follows I will restrict attention to people experiencing homelessness for reasons other than domestic violence.

The number of shelter beds reported in Table A1 provides an estimate of the number of people in each community in B.C. who are using shelters each night. It is only an estimate, because not all beds are occupied every night. Using data for Calgary, Jadidzadeh and Kneebone (2015) showed that occupancy rates vary by day of the week, by season, and by weather conditions. ESDC (2019a) reported that, across Canada, emergency shelters report occupancy rates of about 90% on average. Assuming the same is true in B.C., the data reported in Table A1 suggest that, on average, about 3,600 people are emergency sheltered in the province each night. A similar calculation can be made for each community identified in that table.

² In 2018, 81% of emergency shelter beds in Canada were provided in cities with populations greater than 300,000 people (ESDC 2019a).

The Number of People Experiencing Homelessness

It is important when reviewing the data presented in Tables 1, 2, and A1 to appreciate that the number of shelters and the number of shelter beds provided in a province do not necessarily reflect the size of the population that is experiencing homelessness. A community may have many people experiencing homelessness without offering shelters as a place for them to stay. In these circumstances, people experiencing homelessness enter the world of what the COH refers to as the *provisionally housed* or are simply left *unsheltered*. Many of the latter are often referred to as *rough sleepers*, people who sleep on the street or in informal camps. Some communities have greater tolerance for people being provisionally housed or left unsheltered than others and so choose to provide fewer shelter beds.

Direct counts of the number of people experiencing homelessness are possible, though the ease with which this can be done varies by the type of homelessness. Counting the number of people whose experience with homelessness involves using emergency shelters is relatively easy to do, at least conceptually. It is conceptually easy to do because one needs only to ask shelter operators to report the number of beds being used. Nonetheless, these data are hard to come by. Communities that have been successful in gathering these data from shelter operators have overcome privacy concerns, the capacity of sometimes small and minimally funded shelters to collect and report such data, and differences in definitions of what constitutes types of shelters. Though not often openly expressed, there is also at times a reluctance to provide information to a central agency when the data might be used to influence funding decisions. Some jurisdictions have successfully overcome these obstacles and make basic data like these readily accessible. On its public website, the Government of Alberta provides daily data on the number of overnight stays in every emergency shelter in every community in the province spanning the period from April 1, 2013, to the present.³ The City of Toronto similarly provides daily data on the use of every emergency shelter in its jurisdiction.⁴

The City of Vancouver, where 50% of all emergency shelter beds and 63% of all transitional housing beds in the province are to be found, does not provide this basic information, nor does the provincial government make this information available for other communities. This puts limits on what we can learn about the use of homeless shelters in British Columbia.⁵

Even if detailed data on the number of shelter beds occupied each night were available, they would not tell us about people who are unsheltered or provisionally accommodated. For this we need to rely on what are known as point-in-time counts. As the name implies, point-in-time counts provide a snapshot of homelessness on a certain date. On that date, shelter operators are asked to report the number of people using their facilities, hospitals are asked to report the number of people in wards and in emergency departments who have no fixed

³ <https://open.alberta.ca/opendata/funded-emergency-shelters-daily-occupancy-ab>

⁴ <https://open.toronto.ca/dataset/daily-shelter-occupancy/>

⁵ Appendix B discusses issues regarding the availability of data describing homeless shelter use in B.C.

address, and jails are surveyed about inmates with no fixed address. Volunteers are enlisted to count people who are unsheltered.

Point-in-time counts are defined for a certain area or jurisdiction. The information they provide and the questions about homelessness that can be answered using these data are, however, quite limited. Point-in-time counts provide a guess at the number of unsheltered, emergency sheltered, and provisionally accommodated people during the 24-hour period over which they are administered but tell us nothing about those at risk of homelessness. Nor can point-in-time counts tell us how the number of people experiencing homelessness changes from day to day, month to month, or season to season.

A limitation of point-in-time counts is that they produce counts that are based on definitions of homelessness that are not always constant over time and that are frequently different across communities. The point-in-time counts in Vancouver and Victoria differ in their treatment of certain categories of people experiencing homelessness.⁶ For example, point-in-time counts typically include people without homes staying in hospital or serving a sentence in jail. In Vancouver, people in these situations are counted with people in emergency shelters. In Victoria, people in this circumstance are instead identified as being provisionally accommodated, the same approach suggested by the COH. In Vancouver, people identified as emergency sheltered include those in transitional shelters, a treatment consistent with the COH definition, whereas in Victoria, these same people are identified as provisionally accommodated. In neither city's count does it appear they included violence against women shelters. So-called *couch surfers* are classified as being unsheltered in Vancouver but provisionally accommodated in the Victoria count. It is difficult to find consistency across point-in-time counts.

These different approaches and definitions make it challenging to compare data across jurisdictions and to arrive at an accurate picture of the number of people experiencing different types of homelessness in the province. A recent attempt to provide such an overall snapshot of homelessness in B.C. has used data collected from point-in-time counts conducted in 24 B.C. communities over a 2-year period.⁷ After efforts to adjust these data to impose some measure of consistency of definitions, the report estimated that there were 3,835 people that responded to survey questions and who were staying in an emergency shelter, a transitional shelter, or a detox centre.⁸ Another 3,820 people were estimated to be unsheltered or provisionally sheltered, giving us an estimate of 7,655 people in B.C. who were surveyed and experiencing

⁶ See *Vancouver Homeless Count 2018* (<https://vancouver.ca/files/cov/vancouver-homeless-count-2018-final-report.pdf>) and *Everyone Counts 2018* (<https://victoriahomelessness.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/2018-PiT-Count-Community-Report-FINAL.pdf>)

⁷ The Homelessness Services Association of BC, Urban Matters, and BC Non-Profit Housing Association (2018). The data summarized in the report were drawn from 12 point-in-time counts funded by the provincial government during March/April 2018, six counts funded by the federal government, two independently funded counts also conducted during March/April 2018, and four additional counts completed in 2017. These data were supplemented by data provided by BC Housing for the night of March 20, 2018, reporting the number of people staying at provincially funded shelters, including violence against women shelters, in communities participating in point-in-time counts as well as others.

⁸ This is close to our estimate (3,600) reported above based on data reported in Table A1 on the number of such beds available in 2018 and an assumed 90% occupancy rate.

homelessness on specific nights in 2017 and 2018. This does not include the number of people at risk of homelessness. There are no estimates of the number of people experiencing homelessness in B.C. for other years.

How Are People Experiencing Homelessness?

Homelessness is one position along a continuum of living arrangements. The same person may, over short periods of time, move to different positions on this continuum. Evidence on this comes from large administrative datasets that record the movements of unique individuals into and out of the homeless shelter system over time. Understanding these movements is useful to understanding both the causes of homelessness and its possible solutions.

In a seminal paper, Kuhn and Culhane (1998) used information on the use of emergency homeless shelters by 73,263 and 6,897 uniquely identified individuals in New York (1988–1995) and Philadelphia (1991–1995), respectively, over a number of years. They summarized the use of shelters in those cities using a typology of shelter use that has been widely adopted. As summarized in Table 3, they classified shelter clients according to the frequency of shelter stays and the length of each of those stays.

Table 3

Patterns of Shelter Stays

	Few episodes	Many episodes
Short stays	Transitional	Episodic
Long stays	Chronic	—

Contrary to what is perhaps a common stereotype, they found relatively few users of shelters did so for long periods of time. While these so-called “chronic” users of shelters filled about 45% of shelter beds, they accounted for less than 10% of all shelter users. Most people using shelters in those two cities—approximately 80%—used shelters very few times and for very short stays.

These results have been confirmed by examining high-frequency administrative data available in Calgary (Kneebone et. al, 2015), in Toronto (Jadidzadeh & Kneebone, 2018), and in Toronto, Ottawa, and Guelph (Aubry et. al, 2013). While lengths of stay in shelters vary by age, city, and type of shelter, the results of all these Canadian studies are consistent in identifying most clients of homeless shelters as using them infrequently and for relatively short periods of time. In Toronto, for example, Jadidzadeh and Kneebone (2018) found that 84% of single adults used an emergency shelter an average of 1.5 times for a total of 50 days over a 6-year period. In Calgary, 86% of single adults used an emergency shelter an average of 1.7 times for a total of just 15 days over a 5-year period.⁹ Rabinovitch, Pauly, and Zhao (2016) reported similar results using data describing homeless shelter use by single adults using five of the six

⁹ See Kneebone et. al (2015).

emergency shelters in Greater Victoria over a 4-year period (2010–2014).¹⁰ The average shelter user in their sample stayed in shelter 1.4 times over that period for a total of 17.6 days.

The data required to identify these patterns of emergency shelter use in Vancouver and other communities in B.C. are not available. However, the similarity of results from Greater Victoria to those found for other Canadian cities suggests that the patterns and intensity of use of shelters in B.C. may not be very different from elsewhere. For most people forced to make use of a homeless shelter, the stay in shelter is short and infrequent. Although researchers know little about the housing choices of people between the times they use shelters, the short and infrequent uses of shelters suggest they may cycle through a number of options, including being housed, being sheltered, being provisionally accommodated, etc. Homelessness, in other words, is not a static state. Most people experiencing homelessness experience many different types of homelessness.

Who Is Experiencing Homelessness?

Effective policy responses to homelessness require understanding who it is that is experiencing homelessness. Some information on this question is available from point-in-time counts, but much more detailed and reliable information comes from administrative datasets. Importantly, administrative data allow us to determine the characteristics of people according to their intensity of experience with homelessness.

Table 4

Demographic Composition of Users of All Types of Shelters in Toronto

Clusters	Transitional	Episodic	Chronic	Total
Unique clients	34,024	2,733	3,065	39,822
% male	61	81	68	63
Average age	36.0 (13.7)	37.3 (12.8)	41.6 (15.4)	36.5 (13.9)
Age groups (%)				
Youth (16–24 years)	26	21	20	25
Adult (25–49 years)	56	61	46	55
Older adult (50–64 years)	15	16	28	17
Senior (65+ years)	3	2	6	3

Note. Numbers in parentheses are standard errors. Age is defined by age on first entry into the shelter system.

Table 4 summarizes demographic information on people using homeless shelters in Toronto. The data are drawn from an examination of homeless shelter stays in Toronto over the period January 1, 2011, to December 31, 2016, by Jadidzadeh and Kneebone (2018). In Toronto over this period, males were the dominant users of shelters, and the average shelter client was 36.5 years old. Chronic users of shelters tended to be males aged 25–49 years (with an average age of 41.6 years), but a worrisome 20% of chronic users were found to be youth aged 16–24 years. Looking more closely at the use of emergency shelters by youth, the authors

¹⁰ Youth shelters and family shelters were excluded from the analysis.

reported that the percentage of youth making chronic use of shelters has been increasing over time.

Table 5

Demographic Composition of Users of All Types of Shelters in Greater Victoria

Clusters	Transitional	Episodic	Chronic
Unique clients	3,670	590	65
% male	71	73	71
Average age	40.6 (12.8)	41.8 (11.0)	45.4 (12.7)
Age groups (%)			
Youth (15–19 years)	2.8	1.7	3.1
Young adult (20–39 years)	45.7	39.5	30.1
Middle age (40–59 years)	45.6	54.2	52.3
Senior (60+ years)	6.0	4.6	13.8

Note. Information is taken from Table 2 of Rabinovitch, Pauly, and Zhao (2016).

Table 5 reports similar information based on the examination of emergency shelter use in Greater Victoria by Rabinovitch, Pauly, and Zhao (2016). Age categories differ from what is reported in Table 4, making direct comparisons difficult, but the general conclusions are similar. The authors note that an important implication of the similarity of results to those from Toronto and other cities in the eastern parts of North America is that the milder climate of the west coast does not seem to significantly influence patterns of emergency shelter use.

To learn who is experiencing homelessness in Vancouver and other B.C. communities, we need to rely on point-in-time counts produced by cities that host them. As noted previously, point-in-time counts can only provide a snapshot of who is experiencing homelessness, count only those who are found on the night of the count, and are infrequently produced. This makes it difficult for point-in-time counts to be used to produce reliable measures of trends such as the possibility of growing youth homelessness noted by Jadidzadeh and Kneebone (2018) using data for Toronto. On the other hand, data from point-in-time counts tell us more than administrative data about who is experiencing a broader range of homeless outcomes beyond just shelter use.

Table 6 provides a snapshot of the people experiencing homelessness and who responded to survey questions in 24 communities in British Columbia on a specific night in either 2017 or 2018. People in B.C. experiencing homelessness are mainly male and middle-aged. People identifying as Indigenous are over-represented. Very few of those counted were immigrants or refugees. The age at which the people interviewed first experienced homelessness shows that half did so while they were younger than 25 years of age.¹¹ There is no noticeable difference in the characteristics of people who were sheltered versus unsheltered.

¹¹ This is noticeably higher than what is reported from Calgary’s 2018 point-in-time count, where 31% reported being younger than 25 years when they first experienced homelessness. See Calgary Homeless Foundation (2018).

Table 6*Demographics from B.C. Point-in-Time Counts, 2017–2018*

	Sheltered	Unsheltered	Total
Number	4,787	2,868	7,655
% male	67	70	68
% youth (< 25 years)	15	13	15
% adult (25–54 years)	61	71	65
% senior (55+ years)	23	16	20
% Indigenous identity	32	42	38
% immigrant or refugee	4	3	4
% LGBTQ2S	8	8	8
Age when first homeless (%)			
Youth (< 25 years)	51	57	51
Adult (25–54 years)	39	38	41
Senior (55+ years)	10	4	8

Note. For source, see footnote 7. People identified as “sheltered” were staying in emergency, transitional, or violence against women shelters. People identified as “unsheltered” include individuals sleeping outside, in a tent or makeshift structure, in a vehicle, or couch surfing. The calculation reported for “total” includes information on individuals unspecified as to whether they were sheltered or unsheltered.

We can also describe who experiences homelessness by their source of income. The summary of point-in-time surveys from 2017 and 2018 reports that the most commonly reported sources of income identified by survey respondents were welfare/income assistance (40%), disability benefits (29%), and informal/self-employment (29%). People found to be homeless were therefore frequently in receipt of government benefits. Those benefits were not sufficient for them to keep their housing.

Another way of describing who is experiencing homelessness is to ask who is new to homelessness. The answer to this question requires administrative data describing the movements of uniquely identified individuals. Using such data from Calgary, Jadidzadeh and Kneebone (in press) measured the number of individuals who enter the shelter system for the first time. They calculated that 27% of shelter beds are emptied and filled again each month by people completely new to the system. This evidence highlights the importance of efforts designed to halt the inflow of people into homelessness.

How Many, Who, and How

To this point we have investigated only very basic questions about homelessness in B.C., namely, how many people experience homelessness, who experiences homeless, and how people experience homelessness. Answers to these questions are helpful for understanding what public policies might be employed to address the problem of homelessness. Except for the results published by Rabinovitch et. al (2016), who provided answers to some of these questions for those experiencing homelessness in the Greater Victoria area, we do not have very good answers to any of these questions for Vancouver or other communities in B.C.

For these other communities, we need to rely on a small number of point-in-time counts that provide, as the name implies, only a snapshot taken at a point in time.

The Causes of Homelessness

It is well recognized that the factors contributing to persons experiencing homelessness are many and varied.¹² A useful way of framing discussions into the causes of homelessness is to characterize them as being associated with the *personal characteristics* (drug addiction and mental health issues, for example) of those experiencing homelessness and *structural factors* (the state of labour markets and changing housing market conditions, for example) that impact individuals' ability to remain housed. These two broad categories are not easily dealt with in isolation from one another. Drug addiction and issues with mental health have been identified as both a result of the experience of homelessness and the cause of people becoming homeless.¹³

Recent research into the causes of homelessness has placed a greater focus on structural causes in part because in most jurisdictions, the growth of homelessness is a relatively recent phenomena not easily associated with a growth in addiction or mental health conditions. In his detailed history of the rise of homelessness in New York City, O'Flaherty (1998) noted that the timing of psychiatric bed closures and growing drug use correlates poorly with the rise of homelessness. The timing of the closing of psychiatric beds similarly pre-dates the rise of homelessness in Canada. Sealy and Whitehead (2004) noted that most psychiatric institution and bed closures in Canada occurred in the 1970s and 1980s when there was a 62% reduction in psychiatric beds. The rise of homelessness is also not well explained by rates of drug addiction. In the U.S., the onset of an epidemic in the use of crack cocaine in the mid-1980s pre-dates noticeable increases in rates of homelessness by at least 5 years (Reuter et. al, 1990). Quigley et. al (2001) noted as well that falls in the price of illegal drugs have both an income and a substitution effect that are offsetting in their implications for housing affordability, so it is not clear that lower drug prices lead to loss of housing and homelessness.

The greater emphasis on structural factors is also due to the growing appreciation that the majority of those experiencing homelessness do so for only short periods and so are likely to be using shelters because of poverty as opposed to issues related to the longer-term implications of addiction or problems with mental health. This evidence on the patterns and intensity of emergency shelter use was presented in previous sections using administrative data from Calgary, Toronto, New York, and Philadelphia. Other evidence of homelessness being mainly the result of poverty is provided by Culhane and Metraux (2008), who emphasized there is considerable overlap of those using homeless shelters and those who are poor and precariously housed. Culhane, Lee, and Wachter (1996) showed that most families admitted to

¹² For a survey of the myriad of factors contributing to homelessness, see Nooe and Patterson (2010).

¹³ See, for example, Johnson et. al (1997). Fountain et. al (2003) reported that in London (U.K.), 80% of respondents indicated they had started using at least one new drug only after becoming homeless. Similarly, a large longitudinal study of 1,399 homeless adults in California found that while 45.6% had no medical or psychiatric illness upon becoming homeless, 9.3% of these became alcohol misusers, 4.4% became users of illegal drugs, and 0.9% were hospitalized in a psychiatric facility within 12 months (Winkleby & White, 1992).

shelters in New York and Philadelphia previously lived in parts of those cities associated with very low incomes, higher rates of unemployment, labour force nonparticipation, and high rent-to-income ratios.

Recognition that the majority of those experiencing homelessness may do so for structural reasons suggests the need to pay greater attention to public policies affecting housing markets and levels of income support. As Steven Raphael (2010) noted, the theoretical connection between homelessness, income, and housing market conditions is straightforward: even if one can pay for the minimum quality of housing available in a city, if there is little income left over for other of life's necessities (food, clothing, etc.), one might rationally choose to forgo conventional housing and try one's luck doubling up with relatives or friends or temporarily using a city's shelter system. Thus, to the extent that minimum-quality housing is priced such that it would consume an extremely high proportion of one's income, a person may become homeless. All this evidence suggests that policy responses aimed at addressing the structural causes of homelessness need to focus first and foremost on housing markets.

A Simple Model

To help identify the impact on homelessness of changes to the housing market, I employ a simple model of homelessness.¹⁴

Figure 1

A Simple Model of Homelessness

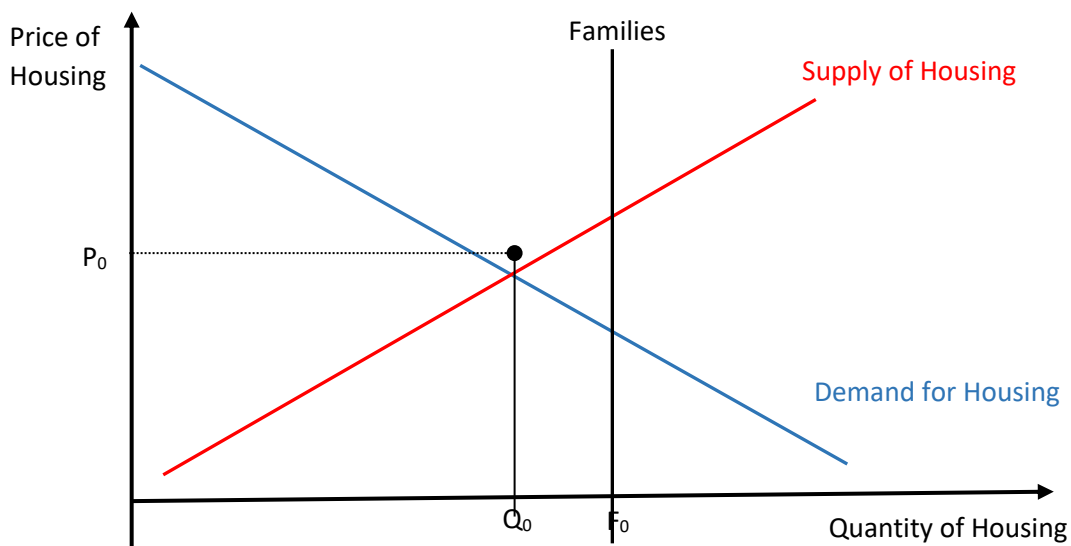


Figure 1 represents a stylized description of a community's housing market. It can be understood to describe the market for one type of housing (one-bedroom rental units, for example) or, more loosely, to describe the entire market for all types of housing. The quantity of

¹⁴ This presentation is adapted from that presented in Council of Economic Advisors (2019).

housing units is plotted on the horizontal axis while the price of these units is plotted on the vertical axis. There are F_0 families living in this community. A family may consist of a single adult, more than one adult sharing accommodations, or one or more adults with children. This could vary by the type of housing being depicted. Thus, we could define the diagram as showing the supply of bachelor rental units facing the demand for those units from single adults. The equilibrium price for this housing is P_0 per unit and at this price there are Q_0 units sold or rented. There are $F_0 - Q_0$ families or individuals unable to afford housing at this price and so are homeless. The line representing the supply of housing is not vertical, indicating the diagram is depicting a period of time long enough that suppliers of housing have responded to changes in the price they receive for that housing.

We can use this simple framework to understand how the number of families experiencing homelessness can change and how public policies can influence the number of people experiencing homelessness. These changes are the result of demand-side and supply-side changes. We will consider each in turn.

An increase in the demand for housing—shown by a shift of the demand curve to the right—reduces the number of families experiencing homelessness. Several things can increase in the demand for housing.

One is an increase in income. The size of the increase in income determines the size of the upward shift in the demand curve. The price of housing rises but by less than the increase in income. If the increase in income is the result of an improved level of prosperity in the community, there may also be in-migration that increases the number of families and so shifts the vertical Families line to the right as well. In this case, homelessness may not fall and may increase.¹⁵ An increase in income resulting from a government program that is targeted toward families with low income would be less likely to draw families to the community and so would more likely result in a fall in the number of families experiencing homelessness.

An increase in the supply of emergency shelters can make each of them less crowded. For an individual or family in deep poverty squeezed by housing costs that are high relative to their income, a shelter becomes a more viable option when crowding is less. This reduces the demand for housing, causing the demand curve to shift to the left. The number of families experiencing homelessness increases despite the fall in the price of housing. If the improvement in the quality of life in shelters also causes in-migration, the number of families experiencing homelessness increases still more. Increasing the number of shelter beds is not a solution to homelessness.¹⁶

Supply-side responses are policies designed to shift the supply curve to the right. This lowers the price of housing. If the fall in the price of housing attracts in-migration, the number of families in the community may increase. If so, the number of families experiencing housing may increase, decrease, or remain unchanged. Targeting supply-side responses toward low-cost

¹⁵ This was Calgary's experience during the energy price boom of the 2000s. See Kneebone et. al (2011).

¹⁶ Nor is increasing the quality of life in shelters in general. As noted by O'Flaherty (1996), shelters that are hygienic and safe are also attractive enough to attract people who might otherwise retain housing. Increasing the number or quality of shelters are responses to homelessness; they are not solutions to the problem.

housing reduces the in-migration of families and so increases the likelihood that the number of families experiencing homelessness will fall. Such policies include subsidizing the construction or rehabilitation of low-cost housing and zoning more land for low-cost housing.

Weather conditions also play a role. Mild temperatures make rough sleeping more tolerable and so reduces the demand for housing. Warm weather is similar in its effects on homelessness as improvements in the quality of emergency shelters; they both reduce the demand for housing by making non-housing options more attractive. This increases homelessness. In a similar way, an increased tolerance for camps of rough sleepers reduces the demand for housing and so increases homelessness. As these examples show, an increase in homelessness does not always imply a worsening of one's welfare. As discussed earlier, homelessness is often a rational response to a bad situation, one dominated by high housing costs relative to one's income. People move between the continuum of shelter options—from rough sleeping to emergency shelter use to couch surfing to poor-quality rental—as the relative quality-adjusted costs of those options vary.

Addiction reduces the demand for housing by increasing non-housing expenditures, leaving less income for housing. Mental health challenges and racial discrimination, through their impacts on income, also reduce the demand for housing. Thus, increased prevalence of drug addiction, mental health challenges, and populations subject to discrimination in housing markets all shift the demand curve for housing to the left and so increase the number of families experiencing homelessness.

This simple model suggests there are many factors that impact the housing market and in so doing effect the likelihood of people experiencing homelessness. It makes clear that central to the structural explanation for homelessness are measures of income poverty and housing costs. For those experiencing homelessness, it is the combined effects of poor labour market opportunities, limited housing options, and government programs insufficient to provide the income necessary to pay for that minimum-quality housing that makes homelessness inevitable.

A useful summary measure of the impact of these conditions is the rent-to-income ratio faced by the poor. As the cost of housing rises relative to income, individuals and families must adjust their housing choices. This may mean “downsizing” to a smaller home or having to forgo ownership for renting. For people and families with very low income, the choices are more serious. Using the typology of the COH, increases in housing costs relative to income may cause someone who is currently at risk of homelessness to become provisionally accommodated and it may cause someone who is provisionally accommodated to be forced into relying on shelters or even becoming unsheltered.

Empirical Measures

The model of the housing market is useful for identifying exogenous events and policy changes that might impact the number of people experiencing homelessness but cannot tell us the size of those connections. For that we need empirical measurements.

Using point-in-time counts from the 1990s, Quigley et. al (2001) found that the homeless rate is sensitive to conditions in the housing market, climate, and labour market conditions. They estimated an elasticity of homeless rate to rent-to-income ratio is 0.35. They concluded that tighter housing markets are positively associated with higher levels of homelessness and suggested their findings support models of homelessness that emphasize rational choice among individuals in the extreme lower tail of the income distribution. Thus, once housing costs become large enough, abandoning housing becomes a rational choice. They concluded that modest policies directed toward reducing the rent-to-income ratio—be they income supports directed toward the very poor or housing supply policies intended to reduce the cost of providing low-end housing—can have substantial effects on rates of homelessness.

Since that work, a concerted effort has been made by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) in the U.S. to coordinate point-in-time counts. There now exists a wealth of data on point-in-time counts produced by communities and counties in all 50 states since 2005.¹⁷ Studies using this panel data of point-in-time counts have supported the earlier conclusions of Quigley et. al that measures of housing affordability are key for determining rates of homelessness. Glynn and Fox (2019) used homeless counts from the 25 largest U.S. metropolitan areas to investigate the relationship between a rent index and increases in population of people counted as homeless. They found the rent-to-income ratio to be a positive determinant of homeless rates and that the sensitivity of homeless rates to the rent-to-income ratio varies by city. They found, for example, the sensitivity is eight times higher in Los Angeles than in Baltimore. Their estimates for Seattle/King Country suggest that a 1% increase in the rent index causes the homeless population to increase by 0.5%.

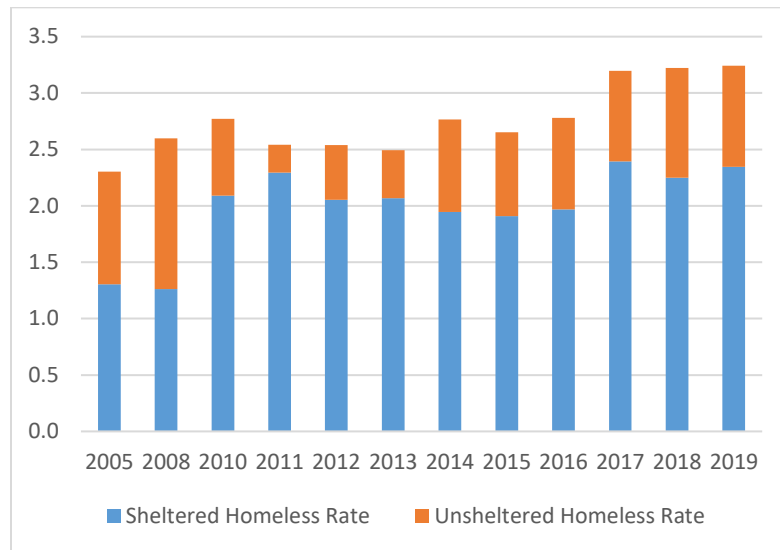
Unfortunately, there is not the wealth of point-in-time count data available in Canada as there is in the U.S. Although Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) has made recent efforts to coordinate point-in-time counts across Canada, the data are not publically available and at this point are limited to just two years of data (2016 and 2018). The best data available for investigating the sensitivity of homelessness to housing market conditions in B.C. are the point-in-time data collected by the City of Vancouver since 2005. Other communities in B.C. have a far shorter history of conducting point-in-time counts, leaving us with little in the way of historical information that would allow for an understanding of trends in or causes of homelessness in communities other than Vancouver.¹⁸

¹⁷ See the HUD Exchange. The most recent report for Washington State is https://files.hudexchange.info/reports/published/CoC_PopSub_State_WA_2019.pdf. The most recent report for Seattle/King County is available here at https://files.hudexchange.info/reports/published/CoC_PopSub_CoC_WA-500-2019_WA_2019.pdf.

¹⁸ Greater Victoria has conducted just two point-in-time counts, in 2016 and in 2018. As noted earlier, 24 B.C. communities participated in point-in-time counts in 2017 and 2018.

Figure 2

The Homeless Rate (%) in Vancouver



Note. The numbers of sheltered and unsheltered are from Vancouver Homeless Count 2019, Table 3. The population of Vancouver is from BC Stats.

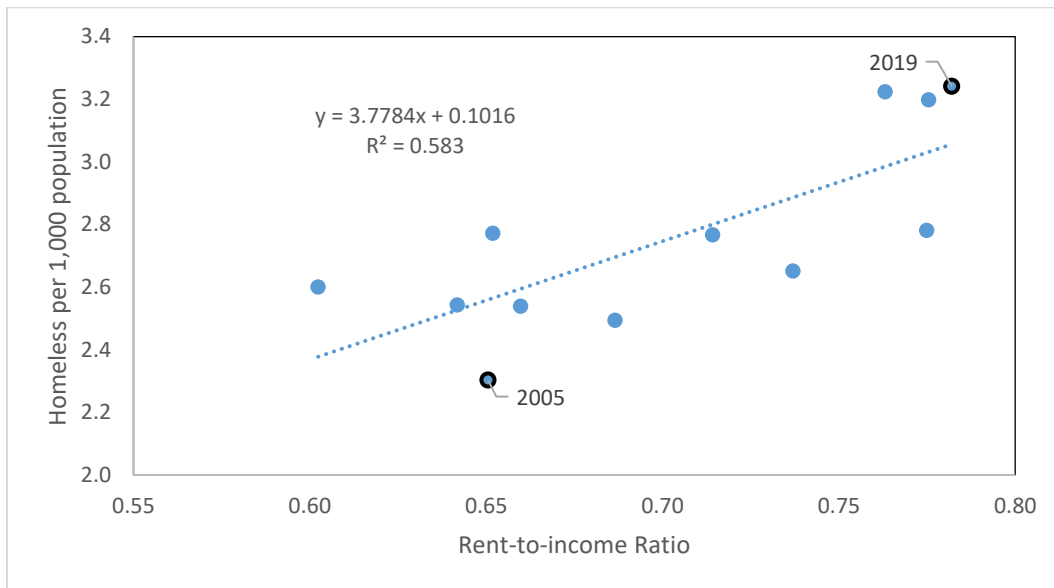
The City of Vancouver has produced point-in-time counts that provide an estimate of the number of people experiencing homelessness in Vancouver since 2005.¹⁹ Point-in-time counts were conducted in the years 2005, 2008, and 2010–2019 inclusive. Figure 2 shows data from those counts. Because the number of people experiencing homelessness is sensitive to size of population, the vertical axis measures the number of people counted as homeless per 1,000 people living in Vancouver. This is the homeless rate. Two homeless rates are shown. The sheltered homeless rate measures people identified on the night of the point-in-time count as having shelter. Using the definitions employed by the Vancouver point-in-time count, this means they were sleeping in emergency shelters or detox facilities. The unsheltered homeless rate measures people who on the night of the point-in-time count reported as staying on the street, in hospitals or jails without having a fixed address, or couch surfing.

These data indicate a growth in the homeless rate in Vancouver since 2005. Over the past three counts, however, the homeless rate has remained steady. People identified as unsheltered have, since 2014, comprised about 30% of all those identified as homeless.

¹⁹ The 2019 point-in-time count was held on March 13th. For details about the count, see *Vancouver Homeless Count 2019*, <https://vancouver.ca/files/cov/vancouver-homeless-count-2019-final-report.pdf>.

Figure 3

Point-in-Time Counts and the Rent-to-Income Ratio, Vancouver



Note. Point-in-time counts are from *Vancouver Homeless Count 2019*, Table 3. Median rent on bachelor units available for rent in Vancouver from CMHC Data Portal. Population of Vancouver is downloaded from B.C. Data Catalogue

(<https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/data/statistics/people-population-community/population/population-estimates>). Real values of social assistance incomes, deflated by the CPI for Canada, are reported in *Welfare in Canada*, Maytree Foundation (<https://maytree.com/welfare-in-canada/about/>). I am grateful to Sherri Tjorman, Anne Tweddle, and Ken Battle for providing nominal values of these data. Social assistance incomes are inclusive of tax and other benefits.

Evidence of the impact of rising rent-to-income ratios on the number of people experiencing homelessness in Vancouver is provided in Figure 3. The diagram shows how the homeless rate (the total of sheltered and unsheltered) varies with a measure of housing affordability. On the horizontal axis, we measure the median rent paid on a bachelor apartment in the city relative to the income of someone at risk of homelessness. I assume this person is single and represent that person as having an income equal to the amount they would receive were they totally reliant of social assistance income.²⁰

Figure 3 assumes two singles sharing a bachelor apartment. This sharing arrangement is what makes it possible for a single person living in Vancouver and solely reliant on social assistance to spend less than their full income on housing. Other arrangements can be considered. Assuming three singles sharing a three-bedroom or a two-bedroom rental yields similar results.

²⁰ As reported earlier, interviews with people experiencing homelessness reveals that the majority identify social assistance as their source of income. Social assistance income also closely approximates the income of a single person in the first quintile of incomes.

The implication of the relationship illustrated in Figure 3 is that changes in the affordability of housing are closely correlated with changes in the number of people counted as experiencing homelessness. The slopes are similar regardless of the rent-sharing agreements we assume. Using the mean values, the relationship implies that a one-percentage-point increase in the rent-to-income ratio is associated with a one-percentage-point increase in the homeless rate. This is a sensitivity that is consistent with those reported from U.S. studies.²¹

Reducing the Homeless Rate

The trend line in Figure 3 indicates that had the rent-to-income ratio in 2019 been the same as it was in 2005, then the homeless rate would have been 2.54 rather than 3.24 and the number of people counted as homeless during the point-in-time count on March 15, 2019, would have been 21% lower.

What could cause this movement toward a lower rent-to-income ratio? One answer is an increase in the income provided to people at risk of homelessness. To lower the value of the rent-to-income ratio observed in 2019 to what was observed in 2005, the social assistance income provided to a single person would have to have been set at \$11,530 per year versus the \$9,590 that was observed. This is an increase of \$162 per month.

This calculation is consistent with the previously cited research on homelessness in the U.S., where it was found that rates of homelessness are higher in high-cost housing markets and that the sensitivity of homelessness to housing affordability is strong enough that even very modest efforts to increase the affordability of minimally adequate housing to those most at risk of homelessness could have significant impacts on the number of people who experience homelessness.

Addressing Homelessness With a Basic Income

In Canada, the application of the Housing First approach has been identified as the preferred method of transitioning people out of homelessness and back into stable housing.²² The Housing First approach is typically aimed at helping those whom the COH defines as the *unsheltered* and *emergency sheltered* people.

As noted earlier, evidence on shelter use in Calgary indicates a large monthly inflow into shelters of people completely new to the shelter system. A basic income can halt the flow of

²¹ This elasticity is also consistent with what is calculated by Kneebone and Wilkins (2016a). That paper used data from the 2011 census to examine how the number of shelter beds provided by 51 communities varies by a measure of rental affordability, demographic characteristics, and average January temperatures. A one percentage point improvement in rental affordability was found to reduce the number of shelter beds provided by one percent. As noted earlier, the number of shelter beds provided by a community is not necessarily a good measure of the number of people experiencing homelessness in the community. However, Quigley et. al (2001) speculated that the cross-sectional variation in the availability of shelter beds is highly correlated with the variation in the incidence of homelessness.

²² The basic insight of the Housing First approach is that while individuals remain without a home, they fare poorly in dealing with the issues leading them to experience homelessness in the first place. Stability of housing provides the foundation upon which people can resolve the issues that led to their housing instability, whether unemployment, addiction, or mental health issues.

people into homelessness by providing them with the security of income necessary for them to maintain the housing they have. In doing so, it helps those whom the COH defines as *provisionally accommodated* and *at risk of homelessness*. A basic income may also help those who have lost housing, those who are emergency sheltered or unsheltered, to regain housing, though this may require the additional support available from Housing First programs.

The data summarized in Figure 3 are suggestive of how a rising rent ratio forces people in deep poverty to devote such a large proportion of their income to housing that they make the rational choice of forgoing housing altogether and so appear in point-in-time counts. These data also confirm research from the U.S. that modest improvements in income can have large impacts on rates of homelessness. The calculation provided above showed that increasing the social assistance income made available to a single person by \$162 per month would reduce the homeless rate to what it was in Vancouver in 2005, a decrease of 20%. This modest increase is what would be required to undo the past 15 years of rising homeless rates in Vancouver.

What would it cost to go further? The data in Figure 3 indicate that cutting the 2019 value of Vancouver's homeless rate in half would require that single people in that city reliant on social assistance would need to devote no more than 40% of their income to rent. In 2019, for two single people reliant on social assistance to devote 40% of their income toward sharing a median-priced studio apartment in Vancouver (\$1,250 per month) would require they each had an income of \$1,562.50 per month or \$18,750 per year. A basic income of this amount could conceivably cut the homeless rate in Vancouver in half.

Sharing the Burden

A basic income need not carry the whole burden of reducing the homeless rate. This is because there are other ways of reducing the rent-to-income ratio. Nor is it appropriate to put the whole burden for reducing the homeless rate on a basic income. There are other complementary approaches that can be taken in conjunction with a basic income. As Burt (1993) has noted, it is important to consider a wide range of options because the causes of homelessness undoubtedly vary with the unique characteristics of each community. Policymakers therefore need to be flexible in their choice of policy instruments.

The simple model of the housing market introduced earlier suggests that public policy choices can be expected to influence the affordability of housing in several ways. Interest rates and tax policies influence the housing market by affecting new construction costs, the costs of rehabilitating old buildings, and the costs of maintenance and building abandonment. Raphael (2010) noted that more onerous local housing market regulation is associated with more homelessness because it is correlated with more expensive housing and more expensive housing is correlated with homelessness. His list of possible influences includes zoning restrictions, density restrictions, building standards, and growth controls. Interventions like these are known to have influenced the disappearance of single room occupancy hotels, boarding houses, trailer parks, and other affordable housing options.

CEA (2019) emphasized overregulation of housing markets, and the effect this has on housing prices, as a key part of the explanation for why homelessness is found to be more prevalent in some U.S. cities than others. In a study using U.S. data, Malpezzi and Green (1996) showed that moving from a relatively unregulated to a heavily regulated metropolitan area increases rents among the lowest income renters by one fifth and increases home values for the lowest-quality single-family homes by more than three fifths. The largest price effects of such regulations therefore seem to occur at the bottom of the distribution in units that are disproportionately occupied by low- and moderate-income households.²³

Some evidence on the effects of housing regulations on housing costs in Canada is available from a report by TD Economics (2003). Using data from 2002, the report provides information that allows one to identify what percentage of the total cost of building a modest rental apartment is due to local infrastructure charges, application fees, and building permits. These local charges ranged from a low of 1.7% of total cost in Montreal to a high of 11% in Ottawa, suggesting that municipal governments have a role to play in addressing homelessness.

An important response to homelessness is to protect housing that is within reach of people experiencing poverty. The disappearance of single room occupancy (SRO) hotels to gentrification, demolition, and conversion has been identified as an important contributor to the rise of homelessness in the U.S. Mapes (1985) estimated that between 1970 and 1980, one million SRO units, half the national total, were lost to conversion or demolition. When the stock of such housing falls, the price of remaining units rises and with it the number of people for whom the rental prices exceed what they can possibly afford. In Vancouver, the Single Room Accommodation Bylaw and the SRO Revitalization Plan represent efforts to maintain an important element of the housing continuum relevant for people at risk of homelessness.²⁴

To the extent these approaches lower the cost of building and maintaining lower-cost housing and help maintain the stock of housing priced within reach of people with low income, they are valuable complements to the beneficial effects of a basic income. They will also lower the cost of a basic income purposed with lowering the homelessness rate.

Conclusions

There is not a clear and rigid boundary that separates people who are securely housed and those who are not. Many thousands of people in B.C. live in a wide, grey area in which they are only barely surviving. They move within a continuum of housing options that include rough sleeping, couch surfing, and the use of homeless shelters. The common denominator for the

²³ I know of no research along these lines in Canada. It is an important question to be pursued and may go some way to explaining why, for example, the stock of rental accommodations varies so widely across cities in Canada. For data on this, see Wilkins and Kneebone (2017).

²⁴ For a description of these efforts, see <https://vancouver.ca/people-programs/single-room-accommodation-bylaw.aspx#:~:text=The%20SRA%20Bylaw%20prevents%20the,less%20than%20320%20square%20feet.>

largest part of this population is an income that is low relative to the cost of maintaining secure housing.

The reasons for why this population has low income are many and varied. They include changes in the economy that have reduced employment for unskilled labour, a widening income gap, inadequate social assistance payments, and the chronic health issues that are both the cause and the result of low income. In the absence of interventions to help people maintain housing, the proportion of people destined to be chronically homeless can be expected to increase over time. There is evidence of this happening in Toronto among youth who are experiencing homelessness. An intervention strategy that prevents people from falling into homelessness for the first time would reduce the prevalence of all experiences with homelessness, including chronic homelessness. The solution to homelessness is housing, and for most people experiencing or at risk of experiencing homelessness, the solution to housing is income.

A basic income is a way of providing people living in deep poverty with sufficient income to be able to maintain housing. Its attraction as a solution is in part due to the fact that a basic income is an investment in people that yields a large rate of return. The At Home/Chez Soi study showed that providing people with secure housing resulted in them making less use of emergency departments and emergency shelters. More than half (54%) of the costs of providing supportive housing were recouped through lower expenditures on health care and shelter systems (Goering & Watson, 2012). Finally, its attraction as a response to homelessness is that it is inexpensive, especially when combined with supply-side responses that lower the cost of housing. I have shown that in Vancouver a modest basic income can have large impacts on the number of people who experience homelessness without the need for interventions such as rent control or the construction of public housing. Basic income can provide people with the means to maintain housing without surrendering their freedom to decide how best to allocate their income.

In this paper I have focused on structural causes of homelessness. This is not to deny that personal characteristics play a role in homelessness. Rather, the evidence from jurisdictions providing access to administrative datasets is that poverty, more than addiction or mental health issues, is the main driver of homelessness, so that has been the focus. It is worth emphasizing, however, that addiction and mental health issues have been shown to be both the cause and the result of homelessness. A basic income, therefore, may also have a positive effect on the homeless rate by better enabling people to avoid the circumstances that lead to their addiction and mental health issues.

Finally, although I have purposely not looked at the causes of violence against women and the impact this has on homelessness, it is important to note that evidence suggests that financial stress contributes to incidents of domestic violence (Pattavina et. al, 2015). Policies aimed at increasing income and income security may therefore reduce the need for violence against women shelters and lessen the homelessness that is the result of domestic violence.

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Appendix A

Table A1

Homeless Shelter Beds by Community and Type

Community	Emergency					Transitional Housing					VA W
	All genders	Male only	Female only	Youth only	Family only	All genders	Male only	Female only	Youth only	Family only	
100 Mile House	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Abbotsford	20	0	0	6	0	0	0	0	4	0	12
Atlin	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Bella Coola	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Burnaby	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	23
Campbell River	22	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	11
Castlegar	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Chetwynd	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Chilliwack	57	0	0	7	0	15	0	0	0	0	30
Clearwater	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Colwood	0	0	0	0	0	11	0	0	0	0	0
Coquitlam	30	0	0	0	0	30	0	0	0	0	6
Courtenay	14	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	14
Cranbrook	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	10
Creston	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
Dawson Creek	8	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	7
Dease Lake	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4
Duncan	15	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	10
Elkford	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Fort Nelson	0	6	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4
Fort St. James	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	6
Fort St. John	24	0	0	0	0	36	0	0	0	0	0
Gold River	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Golden	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Grand Forks	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	6
Hope	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	8
Invermere	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Kamloops	42	0	0	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	23
Kaslo	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1

Community	Emergency					Transitional Housing					VA W
	All genders	Male only	Female only	Youth only	Family only	All genders	Male only	Female only	Youth only	Family only	
Kelowna	0	60	20	10	0	0	0	0	0	0	16
Kitimat	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	8
Langley	30	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	22
Lillooet	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Lytton	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mackenzie	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Maple Ridge	25	0	0	0	0	12	0	0	0	0	12
Masset	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	10
McBride	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Merritt	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mission	20	0	0	0	0	0	0	6	0	0	64
Nakusp	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Nanaimo	0	23	14	0	0	0	8	0	0	0	17
Nelson	17	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	8
New Westminster	0	44	24	0	0	40	0	0	0	0	19
Osoyoos	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Parksville	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Penticton	16	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	40
Port Alberni	12	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	11
Port Hardy	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Powell River	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	9
Prince George	30	21	30	10	0	0	0	0	0	0	40
Prince Rupert	8	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	15
Princeton	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Quesnel	10	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	13
Richmond	0	10	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	10
Revelstoke	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5
Salmo	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Salmon Arm	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	10
Saltspring Island	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	6
Sechelt	19	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	27
Smithers	9	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	10

Community	Emergency					Transitional Housing					VA W
	All genders	Male only	Female only	Youth only	Family only	All genders	Male only	Female only	Youth only	Family only	
Sooke	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	6
Squamish	12	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	6
Surrey	91	0	26	0	0	52	11	0	11	0	46
Telegraph Creek	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	12
Terrace	16	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	16
Trail	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	16
Tumbler Ridge	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Ucluelet	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5
Valemount	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	12
Vancouver	645	274	82	79	0	405	90	51	28	0	134
Vanderhoof	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	11
Vernon	25	24	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	25
Victoria	84	21	25	10	2	66	0	0	25	0	68
Whistler	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
White Rock	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	12
Williams Lake	30	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	16
Provincial total	1,338	483	221	126	2	667	109	57	68	0	953

Source: BC Housing (2020), "Shelters List." Available at https://smap.bchousing.org/Shelters-ViewController-context-root/faces/shelters_list.jsf

Appendix B

Data on Homelessness in British Columbia

To understand the causes, and therefore possible solutions to homelessness, data useful for answering basic questions are important. It is a fair guess that most British Columbians who are required to rely on emergency shelters live in Vancouver. But that should not be something about which one must guess. As noted in the text, other jurisdictions make high-frequency data on the use of homeless shelters available as a matter of course. There is no reason why we cannot have an accurate picture of the number of people using emergency shelters in Vancouver each day. To be clear, these data exist in Vancouver and for other communities. Operators of homeless shelters record the number of their beds filled each night often so they can receive financial support. At the very least, then, there are good daily measures of the number of people emergency sheltered. But these data need to be collected and reported. That they are not makes it impossible to paint an accurate picture of homeless shelter use in British Columbia.

More challenging than a simple enumeration of shelter use is to gain detailed information on who is using homeless shelters and how their use varies over time. Information like this is available through the establishment of information systems that identify individuals as they access the shelter system and track their movements in and out of the shelter system over time. Such information systems enable system operators to learn about how shelters are used and so infer the causes of their use. Information systems like these are also essential for identifying candidates for Housing First and other programs designed to move people into permanent housing. Information systems like these are challenging to establish as they require the cooperation of shelter providers and protocols put in place to protect the information of shelter clients. Success stories include Calgary, where thanks to the efforts of the Calgary Homeless Foundation and the Government of Alberta, a large and rich administrative dataset exists. A similar dataset exists in Toronto that is maintained by that city's Shelter, Support & Housing Administration (SSHA). Although establishing information systems like this face considerable challenges, the benefits are significant, for they enable policymakers to better understand whether interventions intended to address homelessness are effective.

Developing effective public policies to address homelessness requires effort be put into measurement so we can measure changes in the size of the problem and the effectiveness of attempts at solutions. Obtaining a measure of the problem is also important for understanding the causes of the problem. Without consistent and accurate measurement of the size of the problem we wish to address and the reason for why the problem exists, we are flying blind.