

Purpose

To help address the complex problem of homelessness, it is necessary to study the population. Understanding the demographics of the population and identifying the trends over time will allow the Mayor's Task Force on Ending Homelessness to plan and tailor services appropriate to the homeless population, and to identify services that will be needed in the future.

To study the population over time, a survey was created. The purpose of the homeless survey is to determine, over a period of many years, the approximate number of people in Red Deer who are homeless and monitor whether the number of people who are homeless is increasing or decreasing. Understanding the population and how it changes will inform future Task Force interventions, and whether those interventions are positively impacting the homeless population (i.e., reducing the number of homeless persons through supportive housing).

To create a survey, and a data collection, analysis, and reporting process, a working group of the Mayor's Task Force on Ending Homelessness was struck in December, 2005. Representatives from a variety of organizations, institutions, and agencies formed this working group (see Appendix A). Between December 2005 and May 2006, the survey was created, a data collection process was implemented, and reporting was produced in June and November 2006. This document outlines the process and rationale that went into creating that survey and data collection process, describes the findings from the May and October surveys, and highlights recommendations and next steps required in preparing for the next survey.

Methodology

Methodological decisions were influenced by four sources: 1) Homeless count reports from other cities, 2) Conversations with staff from other cities about their homeless counts, 3) Conversations with staff from Red Deer non-profit agencies that serve the people who are homeless, and 4) Working group input.

Before creating the survey, the term homeless needed to be defined to determine who was or was not a homeless person. Definitions of what constituted the homeless in other cities' homeless counts were used to derive what constituted homeless people for this survey. Homeless counts in other cities use either broad definitions of homelessness, counting those who have no housing alternatives, or those staying in shelters (i.e., Edmonton Homelessness Count Committee, 2002; Gail, 2005; Kelowna Drop-In and Information Centre, 2004) or narrow definitions, counting only those who have no housing alternatives (Stroick, 2004). The working group decided to use a broad definition, including those people who had no housing alternatives, and those who were temporarily staying at an agency or with friends and relatives. For the purposes of this survey, homeless people are *individuals and families who lack shelter or are temporarily residing at an agency (shelter, hospital, jail) and expected to be on the street by the end of their stay or are temporarily staying with friends and relatives.*

The working group determined at the outset that a street count, often conducted in other cities, would not be conducted in Red Deer because homeless people who do live in the street are often accessing the social agencies in the City. As a result, it was decided that the best, most efficient way to collect the data and still obtain accurate numbers was to have the social agencies serving this population administer the survey. A handful of non-profit agencies in Red Deer were asked which agencies they felt would likely serve the greatest number of homeless people. A list was generated, and those agencies were approached for their participation in administering the survey. Appendix B summarizes the list of agencies that administered the survey and the number of surveys collected.

Conversations with homeless count coordinators and consulting homeless count reports from other cities determined that the survey would be administered twice a year instead of once a year (S. Stroick, personal communications, December, 2005; T. Eichler, personal communications, December, 2005). The population may change depending on the season, so at least two points in time were required. However, the points in time are determined by the community and its needs. For example, Kelowna conducts its surveys outside of fruit picking season to avoid skew by transient workers (Kelowna Drop-In and Information Centre, 2004).

The same information sources were consulted to determine the months the surveys should be administered in Red Deer. Further, conversations with agency staff in Red Deer revealed that spikes in the homeless population usually occur in January and July (i.e., influenced by overspending at Christmas and an inordinate number of evictions at both times) (Canadian Mental Health Association, personal communications, January, 2006). Such spikes are not the norm and would skew the numbers generated by other points in time. Other cities cite “transient persons” and “non-residents” as skewing summer counts (Stroick, 2004; Kelowna Drop-In and Information Centre, 2004). This agency input and the methodological decisions reached in other cities determined that the survey should be administered in spring and fall in order to determine if the population changes due to the season, while at the same time, monitoring when anomalous spikes would not occur (Stroick, 2004; Kelowna Drop-In and Information Centre, 2004). The goal is to get a true sense of the size of this population, and how it changes over time during two seasons rather than the highest numbers of homeless people. Taking into account the spikes, it was decided that May and October would be the best times to administer the survey.

The time taken to administer the survey was narrowed down to 24 or 48 hours. It was important to include those agencies that operated during the nighttime and early morning hours as well as those that operated regular daytime hours. The working group was unsure initially about how long to administer the survey – whether 24 or 48 hours. There was concern about the 48 hour timeline as more double counting may occur. Various cities conduct their surveys/counts across either 2 hours (Lethbridge), 12 (Calgary) or 24 hours (Edmonton, Kelowna) (Gail, 2005; Stroick, 2004; Kelowna Drop-In Information Centre, 2004; Edmonton Homelessness Count Committee, 2002). As a result, agency input was also sought regarding the length of time in which to administer the survey. Agencies involved in pretesting the survey felt that a 24 hour timeline versus a 48 hour timeline would be preferable to avoid double counting (G. Clark, personal communications, April, 2006; S. Dodge,

personal communications, April, 2006, C. Lockwood, personal communications, April, 2006). In keeping with other homeless counts from other cities, it was important to avoid the “distorting effects” of weekends and certain weekdays (i.e., eviction notices are given on the 15th of the month and receipt of AISH or SFI cheques occur at the beginning and end of each month) (Kelowna Drop In and Information Centre, 2004). As a result, May 17th-18th was chosen as the day to administer the homeless survey from 8am on the 17th to 8 am on the 18th. October 18th from 8 am to October 19th 8 am was the chosen date for the fall survey.

The working group determined very early on that the survey would not serve only to count the number of people who fell within the homeless definition, but also to ask specific questions of people who are homeless. The survey was drafted and pretested with various agencies that serve this population. Valuable feedback was collected and incorporated into the final version of the survey (see Appendix C).

First, respondents were asked if they were willing to answer a few questions. Since this survey does not merely count the number of people who are homeless but also asks for personal information, this question must be asked because participation is entirely voluntary. No person is required to answer the questions.

There were two screening questions. The first screening question asked respondents if they had been interviewed either the previous day or the current day of the survey by either telephone or in person. This question was worded this way to account for those homeless people who will call from an agency if they are nearing the end of their stay either at a hospital, prison, or shelter. The second screening question excludes people who are not staying in Red Deer that night or staying in their own dwelling. The intent here is to focus on those people who will be using services in Red Deer rather than the surrounding area. The response categories for this question correspond to the definition of people who are homeless described earlier.

The first question after the screening questions asks whether the person has been homeless in the past. The intent of this question is to monitor, twice a year, whether there are a significant number of people newly homeless or whether they have been homeless before. External factors such as exploding growth, low vacancy rates, and a lack of affordable housing may influence the incidence of homeless people (number of new homeless) in Red Deer.

The next question asks if the respondent is alone or with others. Others could mean family (i.e., partner, parent, children, brother, sister, uncle, aunt, grandparent, cousin, in-laws) or friends. If the person is with family, the number of adults and children with the respondent is recorded. It is important to know how many families and individuals are homeless so that the appropriate services and supports can be made available.

Respondents are also asked if they are Canadian citizens. In the last five years, the ethnic mosaic of Red Deer has changed significantly. It is of interest to the working group to determine if the people who are homeless are Canadian citizens or newcomers to the community. Again, it is important to know if specific services are required for newcomers to the community who are homeless.

Some literature indicates that a significant proportion of the homeless population is Aboriginal (De Peuter and Sorensen, 2006; Kelowna Drop-In and Information Centre, 2004). As a result, it is important to identify the services and supports required to appropriately serve this population. If a person states they are Aboriginal, s/he is asked if s/he is First Nations, Metis, or Inuit. Again, it's important to identify the various segments among the Aboriginal population in order to ensure that the services provided are culturally appropriate.

The last two questions on the survey, gender and age, serve to not only delineate basic demographics of people who are homeless but also function to provide an identifier to the respondent. A unique identifier is created to determine if a person has been counted twice. Agency staff were instructed to write in an observed age if the respondent is unsure of how old s/he is or when s/he was born.

The working group decided that surveying people who are homeless twice annually would occur for the next 10-15 years. Whether the survey should be administered annually or every two years will be revisited yearly.

Once the survey was finalized, and a list of agency staff agreeing to participate was generated, two training sessions with agency staff were held one week before the May survey was to be administered. These sessions focused on the survey content, the rationale for asking the questions, and how to administer the survey to respondents. Questions were invited at the end of each session. In October, different steps were taken. One-on-one conversations with agency staff occurred to ensure clarity and capacity to administer the survey.

After the survey was administered, feedback was sought on the survey itself and ease of administration. In May, agencies reported no problems with the survey itself, but identified that the weather may have kept homeless people away from the agencies, and that the cross-sectional nature of the survey (a point in time data collection vs. a time series) was a limitation. In October, one agency reported that respondents were tiring of being surveyed and were questioning how the information would be used by the Task Force.

Limitations

This survey is not without other limitations. Some of these limitations are within one's control, while others are not. With any hard to reach population, it is difficult to include everyone, even with the most rigorous methodology. At the outset, the working group was cognizant of the fact that not everyone was going to be included. The definition of people who are homeless itself precluded a census of the homeless population because those at risk of becoming homeless were not included. The lack of a street count, and the cross-sectional nature of the survey contributed to the idea that the best one could expect from this survey was a sample rather than a census of the homeless population. What is collected twice a year over a 24 hour period is an approximation of the number of homeless in Red Deer according to the definition described earlier. The true number of people who are homeless changes hourly, daily, weekly, monthly, yearly, and the true number may never be known.

The capacity of agencies to administer the survey may have contributed to the number of people who are homeless recorded on May 17th and 18th. Some agencies did not have the staff to participate, forgot, or were unavailable on the day of survey administration. Also, some agencies gave the survey to respondents to complete on their own – which may have affected the responses given since the survey is written so that someone must administer it to a homeless person. Steps to prevent these situations from occurring again in October included meeting with agencies face-to-face instead of having a large training session, and reminding agency staff to conduct the survey. One more agency was included in the October survey administration (Persons with Developmental Disabilities) but no surveys were returned.

The warm, sunny weather on May 17th and 18th also may have affected the number of homeless people identified. The low temperature was 12 and the high temperature that day was 30 degrees. Agency staff consistently stated that when the weather is nice, people who are homeless are not frequenting the agencies as much when the weather is rainy or inclement. Also, unusual events may also occur. During the May survey, an agency that was regularly at capacity every night, reported that only six people had entered the agency. Ordinarily, the number is much greater.

When interpreting the results, the reader should keep these limitations in mind.

Community Scan

A number of indicators and events occurred alongside the administration of the survey. These events and indicators are not meant to imply causal links to the findings, but provide a context in which to interpret the current and future findings from the survey.

- Labour participation: May – the unemployment rate in Red Deer region was 4.5%, and in October it was 3.1% (Alberta's rate of 3.0 was the lowest in 30 years) (Government of Alberta, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c).
- Vacancy rates in Red Deer were at 1% (Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2005).
- 95 units of affordable, supportive housing were made available in October. Most of the tenants for this complex were selected before October.

Results

What follows is a summary of the findings from the homeless survey conducted in May and October 2006. A total of 104 respondents were surveyed from ten agencies in May, and a total of 128 respondents were surveyed from eleven agencies in October. Unless otherwise stated all figures are derived by excluding “don't know”, “missing”, and “refuse to answer” responses. A total of three individuals may have been double counted in the May survey, and two in the October survey. It is impossible to determine with certainty.

HOMELESS SURVEY REPORT – NOV, 2006

Characteristic	May, 2006			October, 2006			
	Number of Respondents Who Answered Question*	Number of respondents with characteristic	Percentage of respondents with characteristic	Number of Respondents Who Answered Question*	Number of respondents with characteristic	Percentage of respondents with characteristic	Nature of Change Between Survey Periods (Increase or Decrease)
Males	100	62	62	125	76	60.8	Decrease
Females		38	38		49	39.2	Increase
0-24	90	21	23.3	119	31	26.1	Increase
25-34		28	31.1		33	27.7	Decrease
35-44		22	24.4		30	25.2	Increase
45-54		17	18.9		19	16.0	Decrease
55+		2	2.2		6	5.0	Increase
Canadian Citizen		96	94		97.9	125	124
Aboriginal	97	36	37.1	120	34	28.3	Decrease
First Nations	33	21	63.6	30	17	56.7	Decrease
Metis		11	33.3		13	43.3	Increase
Inuit		1	3.0		0	0.0	Decrease
Absolutely Homeless (i.e., outdoors)	99	34	34.3	106	17	16.0	Decrease
Relatively Homeless (i.e., shelter, agency)		56	56.6		73	68.9	Increase
Hidden Homeless (i.e., friends/family)		9	9.1		16	15.1	Increase
Homeless in Past	99	63	63.6	126	104	82.5	Increase

HOMELESS SURVEY REPORT – NOV, 2006

Characteristic	May, 2006			October, 2006			
	Number of Respondents Who Answered Question*	Number of respondents with characteristic	Percentage of respondents with characteristic	Number of Respondents Who Answered Question*	Number of respondents with characteristic	Percentage of respondents with characteristic	Nature of Change Between Survey Periods (Increase or Decrease)
Alone	94	53	56.4	123	84	68.3	Increase
With Family		26	27.7		20	16.3	Decrease
With Friends		15	16.0		17	13.8	Decrease
Number of Children	22	12 respondents reported 23 children	54.5	15	11 people reported 18 children	73.3	Increase in % of respondents answering question Decrease in number of children
Number of Adults	23	16 respondents reported 17 adults	69.6	15	6 people reported 6 adults	40	Decrease in % of respondents answering question and number of adults
Average Age	33.9			34.2			Increase

*Excludes missing, don't know, and refuse to answer responses

There was a 23% increase in the number of people surveyed who were homeless from May to October 2006. Reasons for this increase may be due to the colder weather, and to the fact that some agencies that did not participate or return surveys in May did so in October.

Some characteristics of people who were homeless stayed the same from May to October, namely gender, and the proportion who were Canadian citizens. However, nearly every other characteristic changed:

- The proportion of people staying in shelters, agencies, and friends and relatives increased in the fall, while the proportion staying outdoors decreased. This result is likely due to the colder weather. On October 18th and 19th, the low temperature was -4 and the high was 5 degrees.
- The proportion of 25-34 year olds decreased, while the proportion of those 55 and over increased., The population was slightly older in the fall than the spring.
- The proportion of people who have been homeless in the past increased.
- The proportion of people who are homeless that were alone increased from spring to fall.
- Of those who were traveling with family members, the proportion of people traveling with adult family members decreased in the fall. However, the proportion of people traveling with children increased.
- The number of adults and children decreased from spring to fall.
- The proportion of Aboriginal people who were homeless decreased from spring to fall.
- Of those who were Aboriginal, greater proportions were First Nations than Metis, although the gap narrowed in the fall.

When crosstabulating the results with gender, the following observations were made:

- Greater proportions of females than males stayed in shelters and agencies in both periods.
- Greater proportions of males than females stayed outdoors in both periods.
- Greater proportions of females than males were staying temporarily with friends and relatives.
- Greater proportions of males than females were likely to have been homeless in the past, but the gap between genders was closing in the fall.
- A greater proportion of males than females were alone in both periods.
- Greater proportions of females than males were with other family.
- There was a greater proportion of females under 24 in the fall than in spring.
- There was a greater proportion of males 35-44 in spring, but fewer in fall.
- There was a greater proportion of females 45-54, in spring but fewer in fall.
- There was a greater proportion of females than males who were Aboriginal in both spring and fall.

Overall, in both periods people who are homeless were most likely to:

- Be male
- Be at an agency or shelter
- Be under 45
- Be non-aboriginal
- Be a Canadian citizen
- Have been homeless in the past
- Alone

Recommendations and Next Steps

- Surveying people who are homeless will continue for another year (two more cycles).
- The survey will not change.
- The results from the next two cycles will determine the frequency of future survey cycles.
- The community scan will continue for another year.

The next homeless survey will occur in May 2007. The same measures will be taken again to ensure that agencies have the capacity to administer the survey to people who are homeless.

References

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Appendix A

Data Working Group Members

Anne Baker	Aboriginal Community Council
Barb Barber	Central Alberta Women's Outreach
Maribeth Friesen	City of Red Deer, Social Planning
Cara Lockwood	Central Alberta Women's Outreach
Wayne Morrow	Michener Centre
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Pam Ralston	City of Red Deer, Social Planning
Val Sandall	Community Volunteer
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Courtney Strome	Central Alberta Women's Outreach
Roger Will	Sutton Realty
Janice Wing	Red Deer Community Foundation

Appendix B

	May 2006	Oct 2006
Agencies That Agreed to Participate	Number	Number
Central Alberta Women's Outreach	9	0
Schizophrenia Society	1	2
Canadian Mental Health Association	5	2
Central Alberta Housing Society	10	0*
Safe Harbour	8	11
Central Alberta Aids Network	0	4
Red Deer Native Friendship Society	13	6
Shining Mountains	22	20
Central Alberta Methadone	0	0
YVC - 49th Street Youth Shelter	2	13
Turning Point - Beraccha	0	3
Potters Hands	0	27
Salvation Army	0	0
Loaves and Fishes	14	24
Central Alberta Women's Emergency Shelter	20	16
PDD	N/A	0
Total	104	128

*Central Alberta Housing Society did submit surveys in October as well as May – these surveys are included in the Loaves and Fishes numbers for October.

Appendix C

2006 Red Deer Homeless Survey

Hi, we're doing a short survey with those who do not have a permanent home. We are asking these questions to determine the number of people in Red Deer who do not have a permanent home. This survey will also help determine whether or not interventions in the community are having any impact on the people who do not have a permanent home.

Would you be willing to answer a few questions?
[IF YES, CONTINUE, IF NO, DISCONTINUE]

[UNLESS OTHERWISE STATED, PLEASE CIRCLE ONE ANSWER FOR EACH QUESTION]

Screening Questions

- | | | |
|----|---|---------------------------|
| 1. | Have you been interviewed yesterday or today in person or by telephone? [DO NOT READ LIST] | |
| | a) Yes | DISCONTINUE SURVEY |
| | b) No | |
| | c) Don't know | |
| | d) Refuse to answer | DISCONTINUE SURVEY |
| 2. | Tonight, where will you stay in Red Deer? [DO NOT READ LIST] | |
| | a) At a shelter (i.e., People's Place, Women's Shelter) | |
| | b) At another agency (i.e., hospital, jail) | |
| | c) Outdoors (street, park, alley, etc.) | |
| | d) At the home of a friend or relative | |
| | e) Other (specify) _____ | |
| | f) Own dwelling | DISCONTINUE SURVEY |
| | g) I am not staying in Red Deer | DISCONTINUE SURVEY |
| | h) Don't know | |
| | i) Refuse to answer | DISCONTINUE SURVEY |

3. Have you been homeless in the past? **[DO NOT READ LIST]**
- a) Yes
 - b) No
 - c) Don't know
 - d) Refuse to answer
4. Are you alone or do you have other people with you? **[DO NOT READ LIST]**
- a) Alone
 - b) With other family
(i.e., partner, parent, children, brother, sister, uncle, aunt, grandparent, cousin, in-laws)
 - a. # Adults _____
 - b. # Children _____
 - c) Friends
 - d) Other (specify) _____
 - e) Don't know
 - f) Refuse to answer
5. Are you a Canadian citizen? **[DO NOT READ LIST]**
- a) Yes
 - b) No
 - c) Don't know
 - d) Refuse to answer
6. Are you Aboriginal?
- a) Yes Are you **[READ LIST]**
 - a. First Nations
 - b. Metis
 - c. Inuit
 - b) No
 - c) Don't know
 - d) Refuse to answer
7. What year were you born? **[IF RESPONDENT DOESN'T KNOW OR IS UNSURE, ASK: HOW OLD ARE YOU, AND IF THE PERSON IS STILL UNSURE, PUT IN AN OBSERVED AGE]** _____

8. **[ASK ONLY IF YOU ARE UNSURE]** Are you male, female, or transgender?
- a) Male
 - b) Female
 - c) Transgender

Thank you for taking the time to answer these questions!