



# *Findings and Facts: Panel Study on Homelessness in Ottawa*

**Aubry, T., Klodawsky, F., Hay, E., & Runnels, V. (2004).  
Centre for Research on Community Services. University of Ottawa.**

These findings and facts are from the first wave of the panel study. This study provides an up-to-date descriptive picture of people who are homeless in Ottawa. Thank you to the participants who so generously offered their time to share their experiences with us. It's sincerely hoped that the information they provided will be used by all levels of government and by health and social service agencies in the important work of ending and preventing homelessness.

## What's the Panel Study on Homelessness about?

- It's about how and why people lose housing, how they become homeless and how they become re-housed.
- It's called a panel study, because the study tracks a 'panel' of the same people over a period of time.

**“Homelessness” is defined as “a situation in which an individual or family has no housing at all, or is staying in a temporary form of shelter.” (Region of Ottawa-Carleton, 1999, p. 2).**



## What does the research tell us?

This research describes some of the key characteristics for each group of people interviewed (adult males and youth, adult females and youth) as well as the emergency facilities they utilized.

The researchers asked questions about who the people were (demographic characteristics) and a large number of questions about housing history, income history, difficult life events in childhood, substance use, employment history, health status, social networking, and health and social services utilization.

A total of 416 individuals were interviewed in the study, and included 88 **adult men**, 85 **adult women**, 79 **male youth**, 81 **female youth**, and 83 **adults within families**. (Youth are adolescents between the ages of 16 and 19 years of age).

The 231 women represented 55% of the total interviewed, and the 183 men represented 44% of the total sample.



The study provided information on how different social and economic factors might affect homelessness and how these same factors may affect access to and maintenance of permanent housing.

It also helped the researchers to develop ways of tracking persons who are homeless so that they could be located and interviewed in the future.

### Marital status

15% of participants were married, in a common-law relationship, or living with a romantic partner. 29% of those adults in families who were interviewed were in a relationship.

### Mothers, mothers-to-be and homelessness

Most **adults in families** who are homeless are single mothers.

Among **female youth** who were mothers (n=13), almost half (47%) had children who were in the care of the Children's Aid Society.

Over one-fifth (21%) of the **adult women** who were mothers (n=58) had children who were in the care of a Children's Aid Society.

**15 women** were pregnant at the time of the interview of which 8 were female youth. These 8 young women represented 11% of the female youth subgroup.

**Citizenship.** The majority of male adults (94%), male youth (97%), and female youth (98%) identified themselves as Canadian citizens. Among adults in families, 39% were non-Canadian with 18% identifying themselves as political refugees and another 16% reporting being landed immigrants.



**Aboriginal or Inuit Identity.** There is a higher proportion of study participants of aboriginal descent who were homeless, (17%) relative to their proportion in the Ottawa population (1.1%) based on 2001 Census data. Having an aboriginal background was especially high among female adults (26%) and youth (i.e., 22% of male youth and 20% of female youth).

**Employment.** 11% of the total sample was working for pay. In the different groups, percentages of participants working for pay ranged from a low of 5% among adults in families to a high of 15% among female youth.

### Education

The majority of youth had dropped out of school and had not completed high school. One-third of female youth (33%) reported that they still attended school while only 10% of male youth stated that they were still in school. Approximately three-quarters of those participants not currently in school expressed an interest in returning to school.

### What caused the people to be homeless?

The most commonly cited immediate reasons for homelessness in general were

- Eviction (29%), followed by
- conflict with family, spouse, partner, or roommates, (21%)
- and inability to pay the rent.(23%)

Problems in the areas of physical health, mental health, and alcohol and drug abuse were indicated by a minority of respondents as factors contributing to their homelessness.



Adults within families cited

- **economic difficulties (47%)** as the most common reason for homelessness followed by
- **spousal abuse (24%)**

**Single adults** cited **eviction (29%)** and **economic reasons (23%)** as the two most common reasons for their losing housing.

**Youth** identified **family difficulties (21%)** as the most common reason that initiated their homelessness.

### Noteworthy characteristics of the surveyed population in summary

- **Individuals in families** displayed profiles that were most distinct from the other sub-groups.
- The participants generally are quite isolated: most individuals are single, separated, divorced or widowed (71%).
- The majority of youth (females 85%; males 87%) have dropped out of school and have not completed high school .
- Most adults in families who are homeless are single mothers.
- There is a high proportion of people of aboriginal descent among single adults and youth (17%), relative to their proportion in the Ottawa population (1.1%).

### What were the Housing Experiences of panel study respondents?

- **Most study participants (66%) had moved several times within the last 3 years**, both within the City of Ottawa and between different regions of the country. Families tended to exhibit somewhat less mobility than was the case for the other subgroups.



- Almost **one-third of male adults (31%) and one-quarter of male youth (25%) reported having been homeless for more than one year**
- Many study participants were long time residents of the city. **The average length of residency for respondents in the study was a little over nine years (112 months).**
- A majority (64%) of participants had experienced homelessness on multiple occasions.
- **67% of participants had experienced a relatively brief period of homelessness (less than six months) in their most recent episode**
- **91% of adults in families had been homeless for less than six months.**
- **Male adults (49%) were more likely than others to have**



### How healthy are homeless people?

- In comparison to a general population sample, study participants reported a significantly lower level of mental health.
- Individuals' self assessments of their own physical health compared closely to the general population.
- But study participants reported a much higher level of prevalence of a number of chronic physical health conditions compared to the Canadian population.
- All of the subgroups, with the exception of adults within families, had a much higher risk of suffering injuries that limited normal activities.
- A significant minority acknowledged alcohol abuse (28%) and drug abuse (39%)





### **What do patterns of health care usage look like?**

The survey found that people who were homeless had less contact in the past twelve months with general practitioners, dentists or orthodontists than the general population. Individuals were more likely to have been an overnight patient in a hospital, nursing home, or convalescent home than the general Canadian population.

Study participants were more likely to identify having unmet health care needs. Single adults and youth identified a lack of treatment of physical health as being the most common unmet health care need.

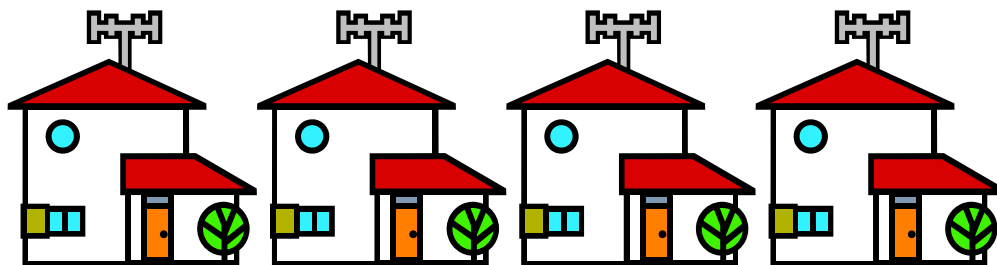
### **What can be done to address homelessness based on these findings?**

Because of the complexity of the problem and the diversity and mobility of the population, all levels of government need to be involved.

The development of safe, affordable permanent housing through a revitalized social housing sector is a much needed step towards addressing homelessness.

There is a need for effective policies and programs that target problems related to income, education, family violence, child welfare, mental health and addictions to avoid homelessness.

There is also a need for a range of health and social services that can address the unique needs of the different subgroups of persons who are homeless.





### **WHAT'S NEXT for the research?**

The next stage of the study is to complete follow-up interviews with the same group of participants in order to examine the pathways that help people out of homelessness.

### **Who did the research?**

A multi-disciplinary team of researchers at the Centre for Research on Community Services and the Institute of Population Health at the University of Ottawa, Carleton University, St.-Paul University, the City of Ottawa's Housing Branch, and the Alliance to End Homelessness in Ottawa.

Researchers were advised by members of a Community Advisory Committee, and helped considerably by staff who work in emergency shelters in Ottawa. Researchers found the information by talking to people at emergency shelters, drop-ins and through other services for people who are homeless in Ottawa.

### **Who paid for the research?**

The researchers gratefully acknowledge the financial support to conduct the first wave of the of the Panel Study on Homelessness from the federal government's Supporting Community and Partnership Initiative provided through the City of Ottawa. Without the recognition of the City of Ottawa for this kind of research and its willingness to direct federal research funds to its initiation, this project would not have been possible.

### **Where can I get more information about this research?**

There's an executive summary and a complete report at the website of the Centre for Research on Community Services at:

<http://www.socialsciences.uottawa.ca/crcs/eng/> (English)

<http://www.socialsciences.uottawa.ca/crcs/fra/index.asp> (français).

