

Homeless encampments proliferate across Canada as government policies fuel bonanza for property speculators

Matthew Richter
9 August 2024

The springing up of dozens of homeless encampments in large and regional cities, and even small towns across Canada is a significant indicator of the catastrophic housing crisis gripping the country. As the Liberal government, backed by the trade unions and New Democrats, spend tens of billions on waging war around the world and enriching their corporate paymasters, growing numbers of people are forced to resort to permanently living in tents with virtually none of the amenities necessary for modern living.

Canada's Federal Housing Advocate, Marie-Josée Houle, published a report under the aegis of the Canadian Human Rights Commission in February. Her findings note that a growing number of people live in homeless encampments.

In her report, she asserts that these conditions are a violation of the human right to adequate shelter. This is all the more damning given the fact that the union-backed Trudeau Liberals enshrined housing as a basic right in the 2019 National Housing Strategy Act (NHS), a move touted by liberal publications and union bureaucrats as an example of the Trudeau government's supposedly progressive credentials.

Speaking to CBC last February, Houle said that the homeless encampments were "a physical manifestation of how broken our homeless and housing system is from coast to coast in Canada. It needs urgent measures ... Government must act immediately to save lives."

Her report documented that an estimated 20 to 25 percent of the homeless population in Canada lives in encampments, from the temperate south to the prairies and the Pacific Coast, to the frigid, inhospitable climes of Labrador and Nunavut. Houle has called on the federal government to implement a national encampment response plan to ensure that those living in camps would have access to potable water, food, and healthcare. She also called for an end to evictions and a strengthening of the NHS.

Estimates of the number of homeless people in Canada vary. Statistics Canada places the number at 235,000 individuals, with an estimated 35,000 experiencing homelessness on any given night as of 2019. To put this number into perspective, it is roughly equivalent to the combined populations of Prince Edward Island, the Yukon and the Northwest Territories.

Other figures from the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness place the estimate anywhere from 150,000 to 300,000 people, larger, at the higher end, than Saskatoon, the largest city in Saskatchewan. The real number is undoubtedly much higher, if one takes into account forms of hidden homelessness, such as "couch surfing."

An accurate count is further hampered by the fractured mosaic of government agencies at the federal, provincial, and municipal levels. Homeless advocacy groups and government agencies admit as much, noting that these figures are at best wild estimates. While unsheltered

homelessness that is visible, such as those living in encampments and homeless shelters, is relatively well documented, hidden homelessness—those who "couch surf" or otherwise lack a fixed address—is less prominently covered.

However, census data, polls, and point-in-time (PiT) surveys help shed some light on the extent of the crisis. The most recent PiT survey conducted by Infrastructure Canada, the federal government agency that currently oversees national policy relating to homelessness, provides damning findings of the extent of homelessness in Canada. Published in late 2022, it provides a snapshot into the extent of the crisis in 87 communities across the country. The PiT notes that:

- 40,000 people experienced homelessness on any given night, up 5,000 from the 2019 figure.
- Among the 67 communities and regions that participated in the survey in both 2018 and 2022, the total number of homeless people increased by 20 percent.
- Unsheltered homelessness increased by an astounding 88 percent from 2018.
- Highlighting the burden that the pandemic has on the most vulnerable, counts that were undertaken in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic reported a 125 percent increase in unsheltered homelessness and a 57 percent increase in the use of shelters. This is a damning exposure of the profits-before-lives strategy of the Canadian government, which is focused on keeping business booming as workers, students, the elderly and the most vulnerable, like the homeless, get infected with a debilitating and potentially fatal disease.
- There was an increase in chronic homelessness, with 69 percent of respondents reporting that they had experienced the condition, up from 60 percent in 2018. Chronic homelessness is generally defined as an individual experiencing up to six or more months of homelessness.
- Unsurprisingly, the main reason cited by respondents as the cause of homelessness was not having enough income to cover the costs of housing. Domestic violence, mental health, and substance abuse issues were also cited.

The PiT also included revealing demographic facts concerning homelessness. Based on 25,000 surveys covering the 87 municipalities that took part in the study, it was discovered that 55 percent of the respondents were in the 25 to 49 cohort. The second most numerous cohort were the 50 to 64 age group, accounting for 24 percent of the respondents. In other words, the largest number of homeless people are of working age, which corresponds with other research demonstrating a growing number of homeless people with a job who are unable to afford exorbitant rents and other daily living costs. Indigenous people are also overrepresented at about 30-35 percent of the homeless population, despite only accounting for 5 percent of the total population.

A cross-Canada problem

Vancouver, British Columbia, has seen a marked increase in homelessness since the beginning of the pandemic, with the homeless population rising from 3,634 in 2020 to 4,821 in 2024, a 32 percent increase in a report cited by the CBC. In the Prairies, Alberta has upwards of 8,000 homeless people in Calgary and Edmonton, Regina and Saskatoon in Saskatchewan reported at least 1,000 homeless people in recent PiT surveys, and Winnipeg, Manitoba has at least 1,000 people sleeping unhoused.

Ontario, Canada's most populous province, has as many as 16,000 homeless people on any given night, with 8,000 of them in Toronto. Canada's most populous city and the home to Bay Street financial speculators only has enough space in its shelters to house 2,000 people on any given night. Smaller, de-industrialized cities in or near the GTA have also seen a proliferation of homeless encampments, including Hamilton, Kitchener-Waterloo, and Oshawa.

There are an estimated 10,000 homeless people in Quebec, with nearly half of them in Montreal. Quebec city has seen a 32 percent increase in homelessness since 2018, according to Radio Canada. Major homeless encampments also exist across Atlantic Canada, with hundreds living in tent cities, including an estimated 800 in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and 900 in St John's, Newfoundland.

As grim as all of these figures of social distress are, they are invariably an undercount for the reasons noted above. Speaking to CBC News, Brenna Jarrar, the director of housing for the Nunatsiavut Housing Commission, commented on the underreporting of homelessness in Canada. In addition to addressing the fact that the Labrador government is short staffed, she also noted that the homeless population is not always found in shelters. Noting the lack of resources allocated to the homeless crisis, she remarked, "I think it's a problem where you're often screaming for attention and there's not really enough to go around when there's such a crisis everywhere."

Encampments unfit for human habitation

Conditions in the encampments across Canada are universally squalid. Tents and other forms of makeshift shelters are entirely inadequate to shelter people from the elements, particularly the harsh Canadian winters. Improvised attempts to heat the encampments regularly lead to tragic deaths at homeless encampments.

A report in the *Ottawa Citizen* noted that two homeless people died in a homeless camp in Canada's national capital while trying to heat their tent by burning hand sanitizer in a metal can and lighting their tent with candles. Another death related to an encampment fire was reported last winter in St John, New Brunswick. Three homeless people died at an encampment fire in a Lowes parking lot in Calgary last December.

These deaths are but a snapshot of the tragic human toll that homelessness is claiming across Canada. According to a report from the Calgary Homelessness Foundation, 436 people perished on the streets of Calgary in 2023, nearly double the toll for 2022.

Toronto reported 91 deaths in homeless shelters for 2023. The Annual Review of Homeless Deaths published by the city claims that roughly half of these deaths could be attributed to opioid overdose, down 19 percent from the preceding year.

In Vancouver, 51 people experiencing homelessness passed away last year. The problem has become so visible that the city felt compelled to declare homelessness a "civil emergency" last November.

The province of Quebec does not record statistics on the number of deaths, even for those who are housed in shelters. No central database exists tabulating the number of homeless people who die each year. Estimates can only be culled from municipal statistics and media reports. One thing is clear: this is not something that the government considers to be a significant issue.

In addition to the dismal conditions stemming from exposure, the homeless in Canada also experience significant health problems. The 2022 PiT survey notes that 85 percent of all respondents have at least one significant health challenge. Substance use issues topped the list, with 61 percent citing this as a major challenge, followed closely by mental health issues (60 percent). Struggles with addiction to crack cocaine and fentanyl further complicate the picture, frequently leading to overdoses.

Access to adequate sanitation also poses a problem, as the encampments lack the amenities that housed people would enjoy, such as potable water. Unsanitary living conditions can attract rodents. Rats, for instance, were a problem at a homeless encampment in Kitchener, Ontario, posing a significant threat to the health of the residents. The authorities invariably respond to these and other problems at the encampments not by offering homeless people much-needed help, but by deploying the police to violently disperse the camps and criminalize inhabitants.

The main contributing factor to homelessness and the rapid growth of homeless encampments is the stratospheric increase in rent across the country. The median rent in Toronto was \$2,600 in July, well beyond the grasp of an individual working full time on minimum wage, which currently stands at a derisory \$16.55 per hour. Simply being able to cover the cost of rent is extremely difficult for many who are on a fixed income such as a pension or disability payments, as many homeless people are.

As noted above, affordability is cited as the main reason by many respondents to the 2022 PiT survey in all but the youngest cohort. Roughly one-third of all respondents in the cohorts aged 25 to senior cited insufficient income as an impediment to procuring housing.

The increase in rents is driven by capital seeking ever greater sources of profit from as many "diversified" sources as possible. Renovictions are one form in which this is expressed. The portmanteau refers to the legal process by which a landlord can evict a tenant to "renovate" an apartment (in practice they frequently change virtually nothing) and relist it for a much higher price.

According to a report in *Macleans*, Hamilton saw a 983 percent increase in renoviction notices between 2017 to 2022. The tenants who were evicted included everyone from single mothers, to families, to seniors. Similar stories play out in Toronto, where homeless shelters have noticed a 30 percent increase in people entering shelters for the first time due to renovictions.

Speculation in residential properties in the form of investment vehicles such as Real Estate Investment Trusts (REITs) are another glaring example of the profit motive at work in housing. Halifax is a case in point, where two REITs, Killam Apartment REIT and CAPREIT dominate the rental market.

Killam Apartment REIT reported a net operating income of \$15.24 million at the end of the last quarter, an increase of 12 percent year over year, while CAPREIT reported \$9.24 million, up almost 14 percent from the previous year. The REITs increased rents 19.6 percent and 23 percent respectively, for new tenants.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact