

Homeless population in Canada's largest city doubles in less than four years

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Homelessness in Toronto, Canada's largest city, has more than doubled in the last three-and-a-half years, according to a report released last month.

The Toronto Street Needs Assessment (SNA) is a city-wide, point-in-time count and survey of people experiencing homelessness that was last conducted in October 2024.

The survey found that 15,418 people were experiencing homelessness across all settings and that more than 10 per cent of them, or 1,615, were living outdoors. This marks a huge increase from the previous SNA in April 2021, which produced a shocking estimate of 7,300 unhoused people in Toronto with 742 living outdoors and in encampments.

The findings should come as no surprise to anyone with even the slightest familiarity with the increasingly dire affordability crisis in Canada's largest city—a city, moreover, that includes an estimated 108,000 millionaires and 20 billionaires.

The SNA is used by the city and community organizations to plan services and programming, and will "inform the Strategic Plan for homelessness services." This is, in fact, the sixth Street Needs Assessment the city has conducted. Notwithstanding the well-intentioned efforts of those advocating for the homeless, it is clear that they are losing a battle against the capitalist profit system, which is incapable of resolving the housing and homelessness crisis.

The SNA states, "Homelessness is the result of failures across multiple systems, such as housing, health care, mental health, income support, and the justice system. The shelter system is the last resort when people have nowhere else to turn."

In October 2024, the shelter system was described as being under "significant strain," with 12,304 people being accommodated. Among that number were 1,596 families—an additional 767 families were on the shelter placement waiting list.

Unsurprisingly, the survey found that insufficient income and a lack of affordable housing were among the leading causes of homelessness. The citing of these specific factors among survey respondents has doubled since 2021, with 41 percent listing them as reasons for their situation.

Mental health issues were also listed by 44 percent as a contributing element.

The survey found that those with a background in foster care or youth group-homes tended to have their first experience with homelessness at a younger age. Specific groups, such as Indigenous, Black and 2SLGBTQ+ people continue to be overrepresented as a percentage of population among those experiencing homelessness.

The April 2021 SNA found that 77 percent of those included in the count were "chronically homeless," which is defined as being

homeless for six months or more in the past year, and more than one-third reported being homeless for more than 5 years. The report from four years ago also stated: "In the past ten years, average market rent for a one bedroom unit has increased 51 percent, while Ontario Works (OW) shelter benefit rates have increased only 7 percent. The gap between OW shelter benefits and rent has increased from \$585 in 2010 to \$1,041 in 2021. This is compounded by the lack of new rental and affordable housing."

The 2013 SNA reported an estimated 5,253 homeless people in Toronto in April of that year with 447 individuals, or 9 percent, estimated to have been living outdoors. That survey also found that respondents wanted housing and "above all else, it is a lack of affordable housing that stands in their way."

The trend is obvious and so are the symptoms, which the reports have powerfully emphasized over a period of many years. But the SNA reports avoid addressing the basic cause of unaffordable housing, poor access to health services, low-paying jobs, and other contributing factors to the homeless crisis: the capitalist profit system.

Almost all of those experiencing homelessness are members of the working class—living from one precarious paycheque to the next or surviving on deliberately inadequate government assistance. And the income and wealth gap that is increasing by the minute in Canada is putting more people at risk of homelessness. The austerity and taxation policies at all levels of government are driving a tide of wealth upwards to the wealthy and corporations at the expense of lower-paid workers and the poor.

The policies pursued by all political parties over decades have made a roof over one's head—one of the most basic human rights—an unaffordable luxury for hundreds of thousands of people across Canada.

The Ontario Human Rights Commission issued a damning and prophetic report in March 2007 entitled "The Rental Housing Landscape In Ontario." It stated:

In 1995 the Ontario government implemented a series of housing policies which dramatically decreased both the availability of affordable rental housing options and legal protections for tenants in Ontario. For example, in 1995, the government cut social assistance rates, including shelter allowances, by 21.6 percent. Also in 1995, the government cut approximately 17,000 units of co-op and non-profit housing that were then under development. In addition, it discontinued funding to existing social housing projects, and downloaded the costs and administration associated with social housing to

municipalities. The Tenant Protection Act, 1997, which the government passed in 1998, eliminated rent controls on vacant units and made it far easier for landlords to evict tenants.

The report continues:

A strong argument can be made that the decreased availability of affordable and adequate housing options, combined with inadequate social assistance levels, insufficient wages and discrimination against Code-identified groups, has contributed in a very significant way to increasing homelessness in Ontario's cities. The Golden Report recognized this effect when it recommended that "[a]t least 5,000 additional housing units with support services should be built in Toronto over the next five years, primarily to serve homeless people suffering from mental illness and/or addictions."

The report, published almost two decades ago, warned that Canada was violating its obligations under international law.

On several occasions, the United Nations has expressed significant concern about Canada's record in implementing social and economic rights. Most recently, in May 2006, the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which oversees the ICESCR, issued its review of Canada's compliance with the Covenant. The Committee was critical of the fact that 11.2% of Canada's population still lived in poverty in 2004, particularly in light of Canada's economic wealth and resources. The Committee noted with concern that poverty rates remain very high among disadvantaged and marginalized individuals and groups such as Aboriginal persons, African Canadians, immigrants, persons with disabilities, youth, low-income women and single mothers.

The Committee also noted with concern the "insufficiency of minimum wage and social assistance to ensure the realization of the right to an adequate standard of living".

Over the intervening 18 years, governments at all levels have pursued policies that have further exacerbated these problems. Following the 2008 global financial crisis, a massive transfer of wealth from the bottom to the top was orchestrated by the ruling elite and its political representatives. This was accomplished through the slashing of real wages, reductions in public service funding, and handouts to the rich. A similar process on a far grander scale was carried out at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Underscoring that the protection of the financial oligarchy's vast wealth by squeezing the working class and poor is a strategy embraced by the entire political establishment, the Justin Trudeau-led Liberal government carried through the transfer of \$650 billion to the banks and big business. At the time, the minority government was dependent on the support of the social democratic New Democratic Party for a majority in parliament. Outside of parliament, the Liberals relied on their trade union partners to smother working-class

opposition to this huge bailout for the rich, which was followed by a savage back-to-work campaign that spread the deadly pandemic throughout the population.

The ruling elite's class war agenda permeates government policy from the federal down to the municipal level. The 2024 SNA points to the delay in Toronto's allocation of the Canada-Ontario Housing Benefit (COHB) between April and October 2024 as potentially influencing the sharp rise in the latest homeless count. The COHB is a jointly funded program by the provincial and federal governments that offers the few thousand households who qualify, out of the 90,000 household long rent/geared-to-income housing waiting list, with an allowance to apply to rental costs of private units.

For six months while the City and Provincial governments disagreed over housing targets, COHB funding was allowed to run dry, resulting in people being thrown onto the street. The COHB program itself is little more than a stop-gap measure that, while offering temporary help to some, is just as much a massive subsidy to wealthy landlords from the public purse.

As governments have abdicated their responsibility to ensure adequate housing for all, they have also created a highly favourable investment landscape that facilitates the buying up by huge corporations of rental properties as financial assets. Private equity firms, financial institutions and real estate investment trusts (REITS), dedicated to delivering the highest rate of return to their investors, have been allowed to acquire huge portfolios of rental properties such that they can shape the market to suit their own profit objectives.

The 2024 Toronto Street Needs Assessment states, "A coordinated multi-sectoral and intergovernmental approach across different service systems continues to be needed to address homelessness."

Under capitalism, this pious wish will remain a pipe-dream. The only "multi-sectoral intergovernmental" approaches that the ruling class is capable of organizing are those to rearm Canada's military to wage war around the world and transfer society's wealth to the pockets of the financial oligarchy.

The resolution of the homelessness crisis—like all social ills rooted in capitalism—can be accomplished only through the independent political mobilization of the working class in struggle for the socialist transformation of social life. By placing society's vast resources under democratic control, the working class will set the stage for making human need, not private profit, the animating principle of all social policy.



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