

What is homelessness?

The Canadian definition of homelessness, as produced by the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, describes the spectrum that includes unsheltered, emergency sheltered, provisionally accommodated, and people at-risk of homelessness.

It is important to recognize homelessness as a systems failure not an individual failure, this notion is strongly supported by data, trends and research.

There are different types of homelessness including chronic, insecure housing and hidden homelessness. Hidden homelessness is the most difficult to measure and track and can involve moving between locations “couch surfing”.

If we think of homelessness like a game of musical chairs: everyone moves around the chairs until the music stops. If there are not enough chairs it is guaranteed one will be without – due to no fault of their own. If some of the people in the circle can’t hear the music playing or have mobility issues, they are unlikely to secure one of the available chairs.

Homelessness vs Houselessness?

Home is so much more than a physical space. By calling individuals experiencing houselessness “homeless” you may be stripping away that connection. Houselessness is simply lacking a physical structure.

For many Indigenous people, being unsheltered is really about a lack of a physical home and they do not recognize this as being homeless as they have a home in their deep connection to the land. An Indigenous worldview lens helps us understand the differences between the western definition and Indigenous peoples.

Additionally, individuals without a conventional physical house will view their tent as their home, the people sleeping next to them outdoors and caring for them as their neighbours.

How did we get here?

Homelessness is a complex issue affecting many areas of the world. Some jurisdictions have implemented aggressive but effective measures to address the issue with proven results.

Canada and Saskatchewan more specifically, share some of the contributing factors other parts of the world experience, however, also have unique contributing factors.

At one time, The Canadian government was a world leader in building social housing. In the 1990s social housing creation was all but decimated. This has led to insufficient supply of social housing in relation to need today.

In 2019, changes were made by the Saskatchewan provincial government to income assistance programs (SIS/SAID). These changes came with no additional supports for recipients. In 2021, one month after SIS/SAID came into effect 31% of all recipients faced eviction due to unpaid rent.

What would prevention look like?

Social supports systems including income supports, must meet the actual need both in relation to cost of living and meeting people where they are at.

There are circumstances that lead to increased risk of homelessness among marginalized populations. This includes involvement in child welfare, justice system, poverty (including child poverty) inadequate access to education and victimization by way of domestic violence. Additionally, people with disabilities disproportionately experience homelessness.

Strong investment in education, childcare and social services more broadly help to prevent circumstances that lead to homelessness.

What is being felt in Saskatchewan is more than these risk factors. It is a lack of affordable housing, social housing, cost of living and lack of access to services.

In Saskatchewan, there are a significant number of social housing units that are sitting empty, despite people being on the streets. Barriers to access as well as a lack of investment in maintenance and repair of these units are a part of the issue.

The economic impact of not addressing these housing units far surpasses letting them sit empty.

Some jurisdictions have access to housing as a human right embedded right into legislation which has significantly impacted the number of people suffering on the streets.

Additionally, increased protection for renters embedded into legislation is an important tool. In 2021 a study was done that found 57% of all evictions in Saskatchewan were done by corporate landlords, the majority of which were related to rent arrears not more than one month behind. Renters have little protection or tools in Saskatchewan to prevent eviction.

Although certain risk factors are present and marginalized populations are at significant risk, it is important to recognize anyone could face homelessness. A life crisis coupled with insufficient supply of accessible housing and insufficient rental protections driven by profit leaves all of us at risk.

Why is SUMA Concerned About Homelessness?

It is far more costly to have people unhoused than to house them. The burden on systems is significant, having an impact on everyone.

According to data from the Canadian Institute for Health Information (CIHI), people who reported experiencing homelessness in Saskatchewan from April 2022 to March 2023 stayed in hospital for an average length of 22 days, compared to a standard stay of about 7.5 days.

According to the Saskatchewan Health Authority, in the 2023-24 fiscal year, there were about 800 patients with no fixed address who visited Saskatoon emergency departments. They accounted for 1,776 visits, and of those 211 led to admissions.

The longer they stay — whether because of poor health or no fixed address — the more the cost of care rises. In 2022-23, the average cost for a stay in Saskatchewan for someone experiencing homelessness was \$22,516. That's compared to a standard hospital stay of \$8,809 in 2021 to 2022, the most recent available data from CIHI on standard stays.

"People who are chronically unhoused live half as long as those who are housed, experience accelerated aging, have many more comorbidities, and develop health conditions at a much younger age than those who are housed. Homelessness disproportionately affects Indigenous, Black, refugee and newcomer, and 2SLGBTQ+ people." (Andrew Boozary, 2024)¹

The economic impact of homelessness in Saskatchewan is substantial, affecting multiple sectors including healthcare, law enforcement, and local economies. Addressing homelessness through preventive measures and affordable housing investments could significantly reduce these costs and improve economic and social outcomes across the province.

¹ Homelessness is a health crisis: why hospitals are resorting to building housing
Andrew Boozary, Catherine Varner and Andreas Laupacis
CMAJ May 21, 2024

Where are we at?

Reporting accurate numbers on homelessness is a challenge as they are ever changing and requiring significant coordination in point in time counts. Hidden homelessness is particularly hard to track, requiring estimates.

Saskatoon (2022)

- Total number of people experiencing homelessness 550
- Individuals experiencing chronic homelessness 59%
- Individuals staying in emergency shelters 77%

Prince Albert (2022)

- Total number of individuals experiencing homelessness 120
- Individuals experiencing sheltered homelessness 63

Regina (2021)

- Total number of people experiencing homelessness 488(2021)

Moose Jaw

In August 2023 surveyors spoke to 26 individuals who identified as being without a home and agreed to participate. Surveyors tallied 32 instances of “observed homelessness”.

Nipawin

- Estimated number of people unhouse 157 (December 2023)

As shown, these numbers do not capture all municipalities and are widely believed to be underestimations. It is also understood that these numbers have multiplied in the last few years.

What Is SUMA Asking For?

- Improved access to social housing; barriers must be addressed.
- Adequate funding to ensure existing social housing units receive ongoing maintenance to remain habitable and preventing deterioration over time
- Adaptation of the housing first model – meeting people where they are at and providing a stable home before working on other complicating issues the person may be facing. Housing is to be provided with intensive wrap around services.
- Multi year predictable funding to CBOs to provide services to complex needs individuals to connect them to housing and keep them in existing housing
- Increase of SIS/SAID rates to meet cost of living, restoring direct pay for rent and utilities.
- Examination of the current emergency shelter system – addressing barriers in access as well as reinvesting dollars into long-term and permanent solutions. Emergency shelters need to be provided and funded, however, shelter beds are not homes nor long term solutions.



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and northern municipalities are
urban hubs bringing people together.

Policy in Brief

Homelessness