



The Evolving Understanding of Chronic Homelessness in Canada

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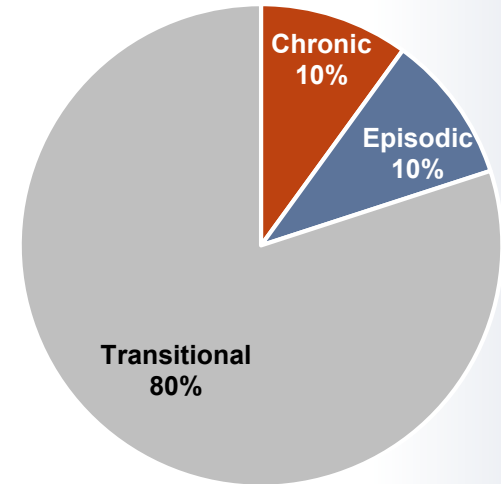
History of Chronicity: Typologies of Homelessness

Early Studies

- Typologies of homelessness based on duration and experience characteristics, such as substance use, mental health
- Results varied depending on the characteristics of the sample and which factors were included

Kuhn & Culhane (1998)

- Cluster analysis using shelter stays from large, multi-year administrative data sets in two cities
- Resulted in a 3-category solution: Chronic / Episodic / Transitional or Temporary



History of Chronicity: Typologies of Homelessness

- Replications of Kuhn & Culhane
 - Results have been replicated in the United States and in Canada
 - Aubry et al. (2013) – Toronto, Ottawa, Guelph
 - Kneebone et al. (2015) – Calgary
 - Rabinovitch et al. (2016) – Victoria
 - The 3-category solution can be replicated, but the proportions vary by study, as do the number and duration of stays
- Other solutions:
 - McAllister et al. (2011) noted that characteristics of the data and the approach to the analysis can lead to different best-fit solutions
 - They argue that no single typology is optimal for all purposes, and that the analysis should include non-temporal factors as well



History of Chronicity: Impact on Policy

- In Canada and the United States, policy shifted to prioritize supports for people experiencing chronic or episodic homelessness
- Definitions and operationalization varied:
 - In the US, focus on those experiencing chronic homelessness and who had a disabling condition
 - In Canada, focus on those experiencing chronic and episodic homelessness
 - Both emphasized absolute homelessness (sleeping in shelters or in public spaces)
- These definitions were used to determine prioritization, or eligibility, for specific programs and supports
- In Canada, federal focus on Housing First through the Homelessness Partnering Strategy (2014-2019)



History of Chronicity : Impact on Policy

Canadian definition of chronic and episodic homelessness 2014 - 2019

- **Chronically homeless** refers to individuals, often with disabling conditions (e.g. chronic physical or mental illness, substance abuse problems), who are **currently homeless** and have been homeless for **six months or more in the past year** (i.e. have spent more than 180 cumulative nights in a shelter or place not fit for human habitation).
- **Episodically homeless** refers to individuals, often with disabling conditions, who are **currently homeless** and have experienced **three or more episodes of homelessness in the past year** (of note, episodes are defined as periods when a person would be in a shelter or place not fit for human habitation, and after at least 30 days, would be back in the shelter or inhabitable location).

At a national level, chronic and episodic homelessness were measured through shelter use data, but individuals did *not* need to demonstrate homelessness through shelter use to be eligible for supports.



Practical Issues



For identifying **eligibility**, shelter use is easy to demonstrate, but unsheltered homelessness presented a complication



Measurement of chronic and episodic homelessness relied on shelter data or point-in-time self-report



Lower shelter use among certain populations meant that they were less likely to meet eligibility requirements that focus on shelter use



Conceptual Issues

Ultimately...

chronic shelter use \neq chronic homelessness

Research that described patterns of *shelter use* may not adequately describe patterns of *homelessness*



Conceptual Issues

In most cases, administrative data tells us nothing about **gaps** in shelter stays. They may include fundamentally different situations:

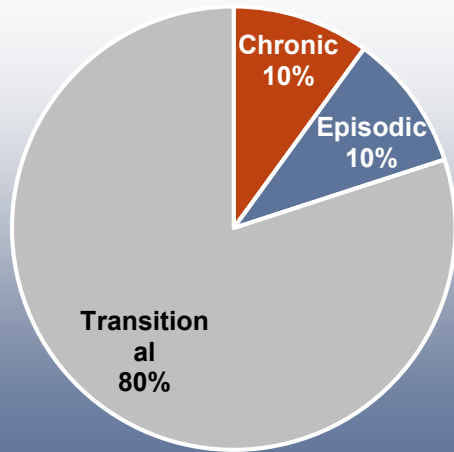
- sleeping outside
- incarcerated
- hospitalized
- couch surfing
- paying for a hotel
- secure housing...



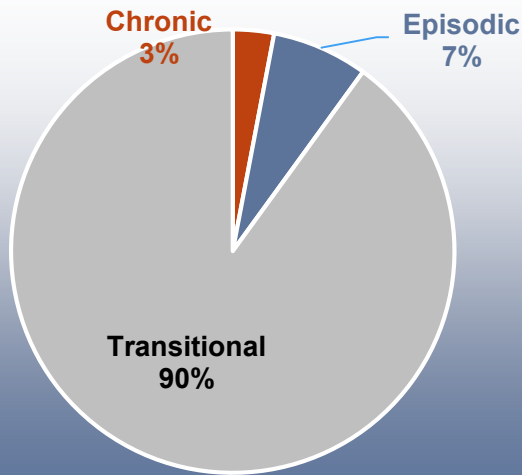
New Evidence: PiT Counts

- How to fill the gap?
- Nationally-coordinated Point-in-Time Counts in 2016 and 2018 offered data on self-reported homelessness that was not limited to shelter use

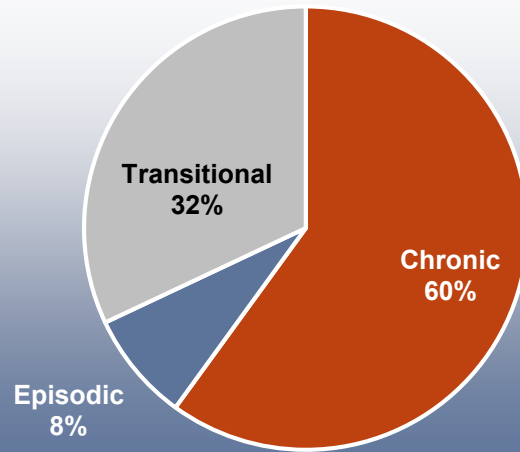
Kuhn & Culhane (1998)



Canadian Shelter Data



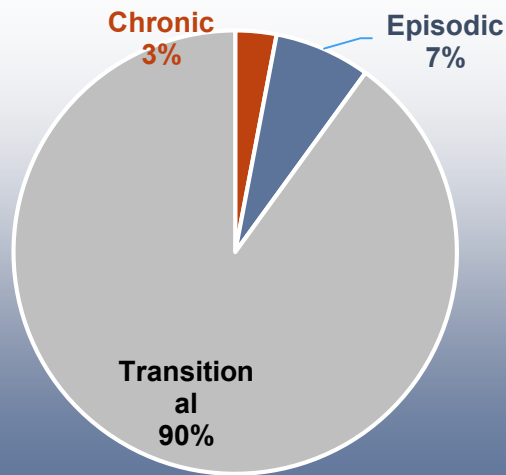
PiT Count 2018



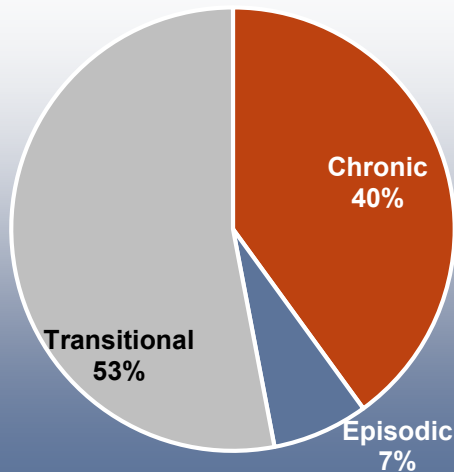
New Evidence: PiT Counts

- Is it because it was a point-in-time measure? People experiencing chronic homelessness are more likely to be homeless at any point-in-time. However..

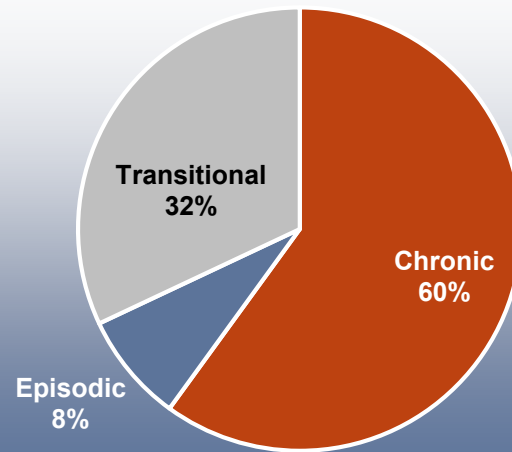
Annual Shelter Data



One-night Shelter Data



PiT Count 2018



New Evidence: PiT Counts

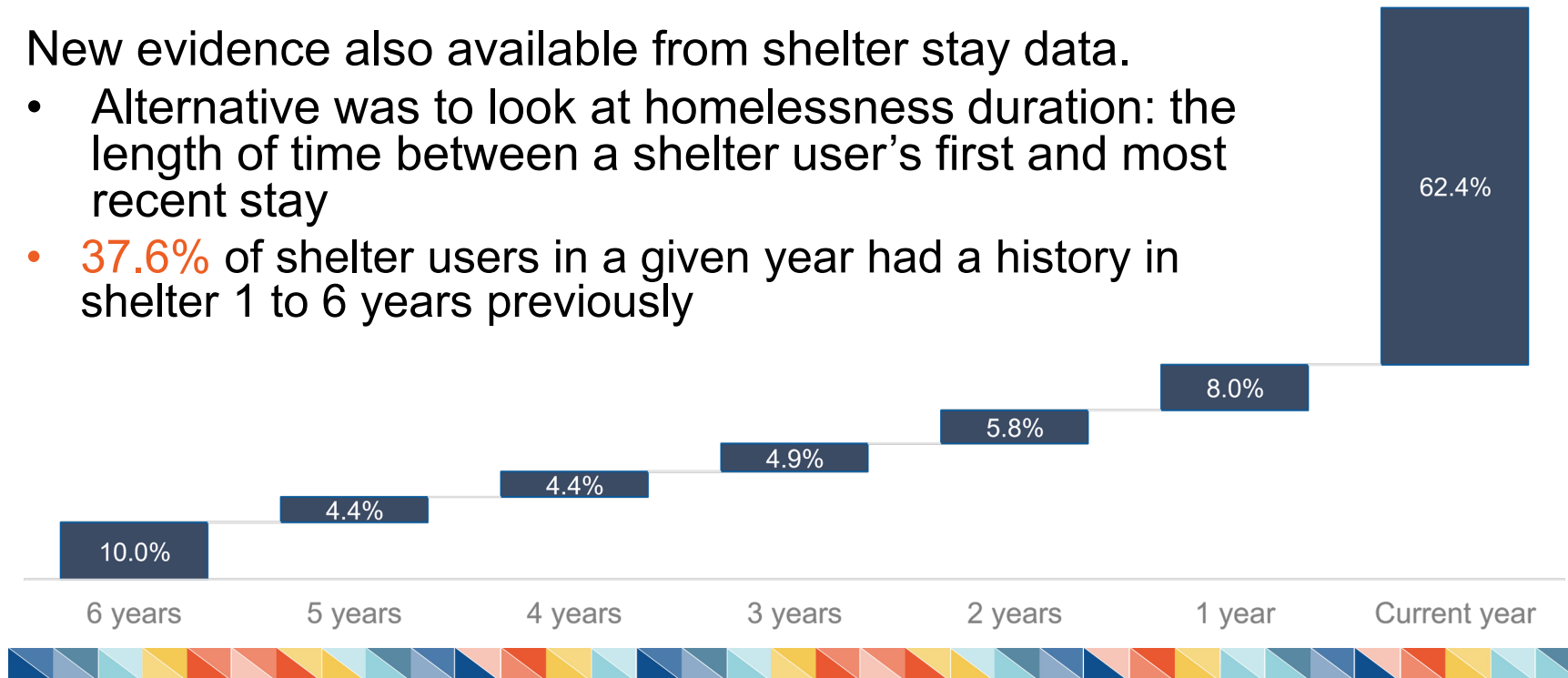
- Are people mis-reporting their experience of homelessness?
 - For chronic homelessness, the estimate does not have to be exact. Responses of 6 months or greater were considered chronic.
 - **39% indicated that they had been homeless the full year**
 - Populations that are known to have higher rates of chronic shelter use also reported higher rates of chronic homelessness.
- Are people accounting for homelessness outside of shelters?
 - Probably, yes. Calibration text asked people to include experiences of hidden homelessness and any other experience where they lacked access to secure housing.



New Evidence: Shelter Data

New evidence also available from shelter stay data.

- Alternative was to look at homelessness duration: the length of time between a shelter user's first and most recent stay
- **37.6%** of shelter users in a given year had a history in shelter 1 to 6 years previously



Revised Definition of Chronicity

Chronically homeless refers to individuals who are currently experiencing homelessness AND who meet at least one of the following criteria: they have a total of **at least six months** (180 days) of homelessness **over the past year**; **OR they have a total of at least 18 months (546 days) of homelessness over the past three years.**

Chronic homelessness includes time spent in following contexts:

- Staying in **unsheltered locations**, that is public or private spaces without consent or contract, or places not intended for permanent human habitation (COH Typology: 1.1 and 1.2).
- Staying in **emergency shelters**, including overnight shelters for people experiencing homelessness (including those for specific populations, such as youth, families, and newcomers), shelters for people impacted by family violence, and emergency shelters for people fleeing a natural disaster or destruction of accommodation (COH Typology: 2.1, 2.2, and 2.3).
- Staying **temporarily with others** without guarantee of continued residency or the immediate prospects for accessing permanent housing, or **short-term rental accommodations** (e.g. motels) without security of tenure (COH typology: 3.2 and 3.3).



New Definition: 2017 Chronic Shelter Users

For measurement, shelter data is still the only data source that can generate a national estimate.

To minimize the reliance on shelter data, an indicator was created that identified people who are in shelter in the current year and either:

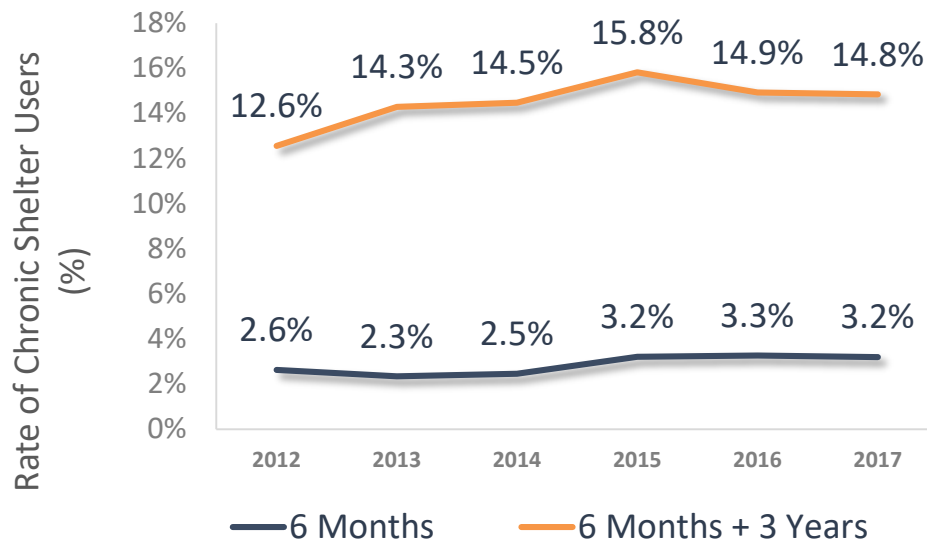
- *Had been in shelter for 6 months over the past year.*
- OR
- *Had been in shelter at least once per year over the previous two years.*

Retaining the 6-month criterion includes those with intense periods of shelter use over the last year, and ensures some consistency between the old and new measures.



Comparison of Chronic Definitions

- The revised chronic measurement captures a significantly larger proportion of shelter users
- Based on data from 19 communities, the percentage of shelter users who meet the chronic definition in 2017 increased from 3.2% to 14.8%



Ongoing Challenges



CAPTURING DATA ON PEOPLE WHO DO NOT ACCESS SERVICES



IDENTIFYING FALSE POSITIVES AND NEGATIVES



IDENTIFYING NEW DATA SOURCES



Addressing challenges

Understanding patterns of homelessness

- Study underway by the team responsible for the Health and Housing in Transition Study (HHiT; Hwang et al. 2011). Analysis of housing history data for over 1,000 people in three cities who have experienced homelessness or precariously housing.
- Housing history fills the gaps between shelter stays, which means we can look at patterns of homelessness, rather than shelter use.
- It will also help to identify the impact of the revised definition of chronicity, including the extent of false positives and negatives from a shelter-based measure.

New data sources: Coordinated Access/Entry

- Increased prevalence of community-level data, allowing for deduplication of individuals within a community.
- More detailed information available on clients' housing, including information on reasons for inflow and outflow.
- Yet, ongoing issue understanding the experience of homelessness for those who do not access services.



Icons

thenounproject.com

- **homelessness** by Nayeli zimmermann from the Noun Project
- **people search** by Eliricon from the Noun Project
- **nap** by Guilherme Silva Soares from the Noun Project
- **Error** by vighnesh anvekar from the Noun Project
- **hyper** connected and real time by Wichai Wi from the Noun Project



Thank you!



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Recent reports on homelessness in Canada

Point-in-Time Count 2018

<https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/homelessness/reports/highlights-2018-point-in-time-count.html>

National Shelter Study 2005-2016

<https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/homelessness/reports-shelter-2016.html>

