Step-by-Step Guide to Estimating Rural Homelessness

Developed by RDN for Rural, Remote, and Indigenous Communities across Canada

Second Addition
Updated: October 2022

RURAL DEVELOPMENT NETWORK

AUTHOR
Zain Abedin

MANAGING EDITORS
Abebe Essayas
Julia Juco

EDITORS
Dee Ann Benard
Jonn Kmech

This publication is available for download in English at: www.ruraldevelopment.ca/publications/step-by-step-guide-to-estimating-homelessness

To receive a French version, please reach out to info@ruraldevelopment.ca

Land Acknowledgement

RDN's physical office is located on the Traditional Territories of Treaty 6 and is home to Métis Nation Region 4. As a national organization, we also acknowledge that RDN staff live, gather, and organize across Turtle Island.

Indigenous peoples are experiencing homelessness at disproportionately high rates compared to non-Indigenous people in Canada. Unlike the common, colonialist definition of homelessness, Indigenous homelessness is not simply defined as lacking a structure of habitation; rather, it is more fully understood as a loss or breakdown of relationships between individuals, families, and/or communities and their land, water, place, family, kin, each other, animals, cultures, languages, and identities. RDN recognizes the ways in which settler relationships to both the land and the Peoples of this land have been broken and misused, causing and contributing to Indigenous homelessness. We also recognize the ways in which our presence on this land continues to uphold colonialism and reproduces dispossession and violence for Indigenous people, further perpetuating experiences of Indigenous homelessness.

In an ongoing effort to support Indigenous communities in addressing issues of housing, homelessness, and service needs, we are committed to working to decolonize homelessness research and advocate to funders for Indigenous self-determination.

We share this acknowledgement to reaffirm our responsibility and commitment to reconciliation.

We also recognize that this land acknowledgement is just that, an acknowledgement; it is but one step in our journey. We commit to working to uphold the conditions of the treaties that govern this land.

Table of Contents

About this Guide

This step-by-step document has been developed by the Rural Development Network (RDN) for rural communities across Canada that wish to accurately estimate the number of homeless individuals in their community. RDN is a non-profit organization dedicated to promoting the well-being of rural communities. Please visit our website www.ruraldevelopment.ca for more information about RDN and its mission.

This guide was first published in 2017 and was based on a review of the Homelessness Partnering Strategy's Coordinated Point-in-Time Count (HPS PiT) Guide in Canada, case studies published on the Homeless Hub, as well as counts and estimations conducted in Cape Breton (Nova Scotia), Leduc County (Alberta), and rural communities in South Carolina (USA). This guide reflects input from a review committee composed of front-line service providers, academics, members of advocacy groups, and government representatives from rural communities, including Indigenous communities, across Canada.

This is the 2nd edition of the guide and the survey questions and guidelines have been updated based on the learnings and feedback from the rural communities that utilized the first edition of the guide to conduct rural homelessness estimations. Additionally, updates have been made to the second edition based on learnings over the past two years. RDN intends to continue updating the guide every two years based on further feedback from rural communities that conduct homelessness estimations using this guide.

DISCLAIMER: The Rural Development Network (RDN) encourages communities and organizations that intend to utilize this guide to approach us for further information and support to ensure they fully understand the estimation process. The guide should not be construed as providing any type of policy or legal advice. Communities and organizations utilizing this guide should provide proper reference to this guide and the methodology developed by RDN within any reports or documents produced. While a community or an organization may adopt the guide and methodology when conducting a homelessness estimation, RDN does not support or endorse any results produced, nor will RDN be held responsible for the integrity or outcomes of such estimations, including but not limited to the data collected, analysis, interpretations, or recommendations, without explicit written consent by an RDN representative and a thorough review of the pre-and post-survey methodology that was utilized.

***Due to the unique circumstances of rural communities, the data obtained by following this guide to estimate homelessness is by no means a complete representation of all the homeless individuals within a community. It is possible that the methodology will miss homeless individuals who are completely hidden, and may not have reached out to any service agencies during the estimated time.**

How to reference this document: Rural Development Network. (2022). Step-by-Step Guide to Estimating Rural Homelessness: Developed by RDN for Rural and Remote Communities. Retrieved from https://www.ruraldevelopment.ca/publications/step-by-step-guide-to-estimating-homelessness

Privacy Considerations

The homelessness estimation process outlined in this guide will require private organizations (including non-profit organizations) and public bodies to collect the personal information of individuals who have chosen to participate in the estimation. This personal information must be adequately protected by the collecting organizations and bodies in accordance with any applicable privacy legislation in the jurisdiction in which the organization or body operates.

While the developers of this guide have considered the importance of maintaining the privacy of individuals, and have developed a form of consent to be included with the survey, participating organizations and bodies are required to review this guide in tandem with their privacy policies and the privacy legislation(s) applicable in their jurisdiction. Organizations and bodies should consider their legal obligations, including the following:

1. Whether a privacy impact assessment should be conducted before the initiation of the homelessness estimation, or in circumstances where personal information will be handled differently from previous estimations conducted by the organization or body;
2. Whether data handling and storage will be done through a third party (and whether appropriate service agreements are in place to address the protection of personal information and whether participants have been provided appropriate notice of how their information will be handled by these providers); and,
3. Ensuring appropriate physical and electronic safeguards are in place within the organization or body to maintain adequate protection of all collected personal information.

Upon obtaining the data from the surveys used to conduct the homelessness estimation, all original copies of surveys must be stored in a locked and secure location to lessen potential unauthorized access, use, or disclosure. Original surveys should be retained for as long as the organization reasonably requires the personal information for legal or research purposes, or by an amount of time prescribed by applicable privacy legislation.

In circumstances where original surveys need to be transferred to another body for further handling or processing, the organization or body must do so using a secure method of delivery, and ensure that survey participants have provided appropriate notification and consent for the disclosure.

Federal, provincial, and territorial Information and Privacy Commissioners and Ombudspersons are able to provide further specifics about an organization or body's obligations concerning privacy protections.

Ask us about our Data Governance Policy for more information on how to manage the ownership, storage, and security of project data.

Acknowledgements

Rural Development Network acknowledges the contribution of experts and community leaders from across Canada and the U.S. whose guidance and input contributed towards the development of the 2nd Edition of the guide.

“A Step-by-Step Guide to the Best Practices for Cost-Effective, Efficient, and Reliable Homelessness Estimates in Rural and Remote Communities Across Canada”

Introduction

This step-by-step guide has been developed by the Rural Development Network (RDN) to provide rural, remote, and Indigenous communities with the tools to estimate homelessness and service needs in their community. This guide incorporates cost-conscious, efficient, and reliable practices specific to rural and remote communities and their surrounding areas.

Homelessness is often hidden in rural communities and rarely presents as it does in urban centres, so collecting tangible data on this population has proven difficult. Consequently, rural communities are often met with disbelief when efforts to address homelessness are brought up due to the lack of tangible data on this population, affecting resource allocation and funding. This skepticism is the underlying motivation behind the development of effective and inexpensive practices to collect data and identify the scope of homelessness and housing insecurity in rural, remote, and Indigenous communities in Canada and beyond.

What does the term “homelessness” mean?

Often, when people think of homelessness, the common perception is of people living on the streets in downtown areas, frequently in large urban centers. However, this is only a fraction of people who are now considered to be homeless.

This Guide utilizes the Canadian Definition of Homelessness as established by the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (COH), as well as separate definitions that account for the unique experiences of youth and Indigenous (First Nations, Métis, and Inuit) peoples in Canada. Taken together, they form a comprehensive definition of how Canadians are affected by homelessness or housing instability in a variety of social and cultural contexts.

Homelessness

Homelessness is the situation of an individual, family, or community without stable, safe, permanent, appropriate housing, or the immediate prospect, means, and ability to acquire it. It is the result of systemic or societal barriers, domestic violence, a lack of affordable and appropriate housing, the individual/household's financial, mental, cognitive, behavioral, or physical challenges, and/or racism and discrimination. Most people do not choose to be homeless, and the experience is generally negative, unpleasant, stressful, and distressing. Individuals who become homeless experience a range of physical living situations. These various living situations include:

- Unsheltered: Homeless, living on the streets or in places not intended for human habitation. (e.g. living on sidewalks, squares, parks, vehicles, garages, etc.)

- Emergency Sheltered: People who are staying in overnight shelters due to homelessness as well as those staying in shelters due to family violence.

- Provisionally Accommodated: People with accommodation that is temporary or that lacks security for tenure. (e.g. couch-surfing, living in abandoned buildings, living in places unfit for human habitation, people in domestic violence situations, people whose housing may be condemned for health, bylaw or safety violations, etc.)

- At Risk of Homelessness: People who are not yet homeless but their current economic and/or housing situation is precarious or does not meet public health and safety standards. (e.g. people who are one rent payment missed from eviction)

Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, Canadian Definition of Homelessness. (2012)

Youth Homelessness

Youth homelessness refers to the situation and experience of young people between the ages of 13 and 24 who are living independently of parents and/or caregivers but do not have the means or ability to acquire a stable, safe or consistent residence.

Youth homelessness is a complex social issue because as a society we have failed to provide young people and their families with the necessary and adequate support that will enable them to move forward with their lives in a safe and planned way.

In addition to experiencing economic deprivation and a lack of secure housing, many young people who are homeless lack the personal experience of living independently and at the same time may be in the throes of significant developmental (social, physical, emotional, and cognitive) changes.

Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, Canadian Definition of Youth Homelessness. (2016)

Indigenous Homelessness

Indigenous homelessness, according to the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, is a human condition that describes First Nations, Métis, and Inuit individuals, families, or communities lacking stable, permanent, appropriate housing, or the immediate prospect, means, or ability to acquire such housing. Unlike the common colonialist definition of homelessness, Indigenous homelessness is not defined as lacking a structure of habitation; rather, it is more fully described and understood through a composite lens of Indigenous worldviews, which includes a breakdown of relationships.

These include individuals, families, and communities isolated from their relationships to land, water, place, family, kin, each other, animals, cultures, languages, and identities. Importantly, Indigenous people experiencing these kinds of homelessness cannot culturally, spiritually, emotionally, or physically reconnect with their Indigeneity or lost relationships.

The complex interactions between these factors in Indigenous homelessness produce situations that interact with the classification of the four kinds of homelessness which includes Unsheltered, Emergency, Emergency Sheltered, Provisionally Accommodated, and at Risk of Homelessness.

To learn more about the various elements of this definition please refer to Jesse A. Thistle's definition of Indigenous Homelessness published by COH.

Jesse A. Thistle, Indigenous Definition of Homelessness in Canada. (2017)

Why is it Necessary to Estimate Homelessness?

Primary Benefits

There are multiple benefits to conducting homelessness estimations. The estimate can be used by communities to:

- Track a community's progress in reducing and preventing homelessness.
- Direct public attention towards the issue of homelessness; conducting a homelessness estimation enables communities to have a more holistic understanding of the issue and facilitates efforts that look beyond just those who are visibly homeless.
- Improve organizational planning and program development that addresses homelessness and housing.
- Reduce homelessness in communities by funneling the appropriate resources along the continuum of homelessness including those who are at risk of homelessness.

- Influence local, provincial, territorial, and federal policies and practices on housing, homelessness, and support services.
- Establish indicators for performance measurement and service delivery standards.
- Provide data that will help the community and service providers accurately project service needs and allocate resources accordingly.
- Help secure funding to improve resources to help people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.
- Provide demographic information to better understand who is experiencing homelessness and to identify where community resources are most needed (e.g. additional support for veterans, seniors, or youth).
- Help target interventions for sub-populations experiencing higher levels of homelessness or who are at higher risk of experiencing homelessness or poverty.

Secondary Benefits

Some of the indirect benefits observed from estimating rural homelessness using this guide include:

- **Enhanced collaboration among service agencies** within local and surrounding communities. A successful homelessness estimation process requires the engagement of several service agencies and local stakeholders through active participation and cooperation. Such a collaboration facilitates more open communication, increased resource-sharing, and information exchange which goes beyond the data collected.

This can result in the beginning of a local Coordinated Access system that streamlines access to housing and wrap-around services for people experiencing homelessness. Communities can identify what services exist, the type of services that are most needed, and how to better address the gaps in between.

- **Communities planning to conduct an estimation in their community can refer to reports published by comparable communities** that followed the guide in the past and may be able to reach out to them for guidance. Communities can then establish a supportive connection moving forward and may be able to use their learnings to determine the post-estimation trajectory for service improvements within the community (e.g. starting a volunteer mat program as a temporary emergency shelter, securing funding for a community navigator or housing support worker, creating a local homelessness and housing task force, etc.).

Methods to Estimate Homelessness

Homelessness can be estimated using two methods: Point-in-Time (PiT) count and Population Estimation. The method used to determine the number of homeless people in a particular area depends on the geographical area under consideration, the resources available, and the capabilities of the parties involved.

Point-in-Time Count (PiT)

The Point-in-Time (PiT) count is the Canadian national standard for measuring homelessness in an area. The PiT method is designed to count sheltered and unsheltered homeless people in a single period (typically 24-48 hours). Volunteers canvas throughout the community and count the number of sheltered and unsheltered homeless individuals by conducting surveys both on the street and in local shelters. This survey provides information on the characteristics of the local homeless population (gender identity, age, ethno-racial background, etc.), which helps the community identify needs and develop strategies to implement resources to support the homeless population.

Population Estimation

The Population Estimation (or Service-Based Estimation) methodology can be used for the same purposes as the PiT count. The difference is that Population Estimation gathers information on the homeless population by using survey data gathered through service agencies. This data highlights the number of people who accessed services within a predefined time frame (e.g. one month), which gives an estimate of the number of homeless individuals within a service area. This method is mostly used when there are limited resources to conduct a PiT, where homelessness is mostly hidden, or where the population is spread out over a large area, making it difficult for volunteers to conduct a PiT count efficiently.

Survey Limitations

Both methods only provide estimations of homelessness in a community or region, and each has its own limitations.

Given that PiT Counts only count people over a 24-48 hour period, and only count people who are absolutely unsheltered or currently within a shelter system, it is effectively a "snapshot" of the situation, often conducted only annually or biannually. Therefore, many people who may be precariously housed and utilizing local services (ie. "the hidden homeless" or people at risk of homelessness), as well as many people who are completely unsheltered and who were not counted during the period (as volunteers tend to only cover specific areas), are not seen in PiT Counts, creating an under-representation of local need and service utilization.

Population Estimations can be better at determining the scope of local needs since the surveys are conducted over long periods of time, more people are surveyed and those who fall under "hidden homelessness" have more chances to access services during the duration of the survey. However, individuals who are completely unsheltered (living on the streets, living in cars or vans) but who aren't staying in "known locations" may be missed. It should also be noted that not everyone accessing services may consent to take part in the survey; not every person that accesses services may do so during the estimation period; and not every service agency in a region may choose to take part in the estimation count.

Ultimately, there is no “perfect” method that will capture 100% of the individuals struggling with housing instability in a community. Therefore, it’s important to understand the limitations of each method when using the data collected to make decisions about local service needs and measuring the success of community homelessness reduction strategies. One way to address these concerns is to use the data collected in either the PiT Count or the Population Estimation as a complement to other homelessness data collected in the area. This provides a more comprehensive picture of homelessness in a community.

What is the need for this guide?

Rural, remote, and Indigenous communities across Canada have attempted to conduct PiT Counts and/or Population Estimations to gather critical data to help address issues of housing and homelessness in their communities. This has proved difficult for many communities though, as rural homelessness presents itself very differently than urban homelessness, in which both of these methodologies were designed. This often creates distinctly rural obstacles when determining the extent of homelessness within the community, some of which include: large geographical areas; few or no resources to recruit; train and mobilize volunteers; little or no paid staff time to work on homelessness issues; and insufficient resources such as money; time and experience to plan and execute a traditional PiT count. These considerations are not reflected within the PiT guide which was developed with urban communities in mind. Therefore, data gathered through a PiT count would be insufficient, inaccurate, and not as useful for rural communities’ efforts to understand homelessness and how it affects resource handling and service delivery.

There are various approaches to conducting estimation counts. Using different estimation methods may not provide accurate data and does not allow for comparisons to be made across communities over time. This limits the usefulness of data for quantifying homelessness and determining the allocation of resources, especially over the long term. Different approaches will yield different results depending on the time of the year or even the time of day the count is held, the type of questions asked to conduct surveys, the places where the count is conducted, and the definition of 'homelessness' used to identify homeless individuals.

Keeping this in mind, there is a need to standardize the method of estimating homelessness in Canada. In 2016, the Government of Canada's Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS) developed a guide to conduct coordinated PiT Counts in Canada and carried them out in several communities in January/April 2016 and March/April 2018. Unfortunately, due to the unique circumstances of rural communities, the HPS' guide could not be applied as effectively for determining the number of individuals experiencing homelessness in Canada's rural, remote, and Indigenous communities.

The Rural Perspective

The PiT methodology for measuring homelessness in a community doesn't translate easily to rural, remote, and Indigenous communities.

Rural communities across Canada are limited in the resources they can access. Urban centres can allocate more resources to recruitment and have access to a larger pool of volunteers to walk the streets and conduct physical counts of individuals experiencing homelessness across the city. This gap in resources poses a major challenge to the ability of rural communities to collect adequate information about their local homelessness situation which affects their ability to advocate and obtain the proper resources required to support this local population.

'Homelessness' is a broad, multi-faceted term, and data collected by conducting physical counts of individuals living on the streets as the only ones qualifying under homelessness is not sufficient to understand the nature and scope of the issue in rural communities. Performing physical counts of individuals experiencing homelessness on the streets and in emergency shelters has numerous limitations, including that it only identifies those who are visibly homeless, and does little to identify those experiencing hidden homelessness and those at risk of becoming homeless. Therefore, a unique, efficient, and cost-effective alternative to estimate homelessness is required for rural and remote areas. As a result of conducting thorough research and working extensively with representatives from multiple rural communities, RDN has developed a standardized approach for rural communities.

A service-based Population Estimation approach, as defined above, estimates the number of individuals experiencing homelessness as well as those at risk of becoming homeless in a community by using data collected by service agencies over a defined period of time.

Service agencies can include soup kitchens, food banks, outreach programs, social service agencies, income support services, etc.; that is, any agency that provides support or services to individuals experiencing homelessness or those at risk of homelessness. Communities may also recruit law enforcement, clergy, schools, and other community organizations to administer surveys collectively. Collaborating with multiple service agencies will present a more comprehensive, holistic, and inclusive snapshot of the members of the community who may require more support. Please note that consistency is important; once the participating service agencies have been defined, it is advisable to enlist the same organizations again for all subsequent estimations, when possible.

An additional step characterized as "known location counts" may be incorporated into the homelessness estimation if there are certain parts of the community that act as informal residences for individuals experiencing homelessness (i.e. camping or RV parks, 'tent cities', etc.). Known location counts can be carried out if the community has extra resources to recruit and train volunteers. The known location count will help ensure that communities do not miss individuals experiencing homelessness who are not actively accessing service agencies or individuals who frequent service agencies but were unable to access them during the estimation period.

The specific environments of "known locations" may differ among communities and it is up to the community lead to secure all necessary precautions to ensure that known locations are accessed and counts are conducted legally and safely. Organizations and bodies organizing the count should consider consulting and working with local law enforcement agencies, to ensure the safety of all staff and volunteers conducting known location counts.

This methodology designed specifically to support rural, remote, and Indigenous communities benefits rural communities and has seen success for a few reasons:

1. First, it isn't reliant on volunteer time and the administration of the survey is not very resource intensive in terms of staff hours.
2. Second, most rural communities span large geographic areas, making it nearly impossible to walk across the entire community in a short period of time. By having service agencies act as the "hubs" for collecting survey data, it eliminates the need to walk across the entire community.
3. And third, by conducting the survey with service agencies across the community over 30 days, communities can capture a holistic picture of homelessness in the community.

The Process

Service agencies within a particular community begin by forming a task force to ensure as many agencies as possible are on board and that the estimation process has been read and understood. The task force hires or assigns a coordinator who will manage the entire estimation process. The coordinator could be from one of the participating agencies, from the task force, or a municipality/governing body. Alternatively, the coordinator could be someone who is hired temporarily for the duration of the estimation. In choosing a coordinator, it is important to consider the privacy of clients; if a frontline worker from one of the participating agencies is selected as the coordinator, be sure to have a plan in place to protect the privacy of clients. Once the coordinator has been assigned, all staff involved with the estimation at each participating service agency need to undergo training for the survey process and the survey itself. Agencies must understand the purpose and goals behind the process and how the count will benefit the community overall.

Understanding the scope and benefits of the process will affect the number of surveys collected as it influences the amount of effort dedicated to the process by service agencies.

Service agencies should encourage each person coming in to access their agency for services to fill out a survey during the predetermined time period.

Individuals/families are asked to fill out the survey only once during the predetermined estimation period, regardless of how many service agencies they may have accessed or how many times they may have visited the same service agency. In the event that an individual has filled out a survey more than once, only the most recent survey shall be considered. If survey respondents feel uncomfortable at any point, they can skip any of the questions or opt out at any time during the survey. In the event that a respondent skips a question but completes and submits the survey, their responses will be included in the data analysis. In such cases where respondents opt out of the survey, all of the client's information **will not** be included in the final results. However, service agencies need to keep track of the number of surveys that were started but not completed as this information will be reported on in the data analysis/reporting section.

Individuals and families who visit service agencies for support can be in vulnerable situations that prevent them from taking part in a survey at the time. Participating agencies should always focus on serving the immediate needs of the person and perform the survey only when they are in a more stable situation.

Each person who is surveyed during the estimation period is assigned a '**Unique Identifier**', which will be a combination of letters and numbers, their name, and birth date. The purpose of the Unique Identifier is three-fold:

1. It maintains privacy by keeping the identity of the participants confidential both in the records and to the coordinator who will be analyzing the data. This is particularly important in rural, remote, and Indigenous communities, which are typically small and where people are more likely to know each other.
2. The Unique Identifier prevents duplication; for example, if John Smith (born on 15th November 1960) uses multiple service agencies or even visits the same service agency multiple times within the predefined period of time, he will ultimately only be counted once. If Unique Identifiers are not used, then John Smith will remain anonymous to the agencies and will be counted as many times as he uses the service agencies, which will skew the data and provide a false estimation for the community.
3. All the Unique Identifiers gathered over time (multiple estimations) may be used to identify trends and gaps in the services offered within the community. It is possible that if a certain Unique Identifier consistently shows up in the data, it can mean that this person has been unable to secure the proper support to stabilize their situation. The community can then use the estimation data from past estimations to identify the various services this individual has been accessing and theorize possible reasons behind its recurrence and subsequently reinforce appropriate services, all without knowing this person's actual identity.

After the service agencies have collected data over the predetermined time frame, the coordinator will gather all the information, conduct basic data analysis and determine the estimated number of homeless individuals within a community along with key data to address specific issues and trends in the community. Specific details of the entire process are outlined in the following pages.

Ethical Considerations

When conducting a housing and service needs estimation, it is critical to consider the ethics of data collection and reporting. Specifically, consider the following:

- **OCAP principles.** OCAP stands for Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession and these are critical principles to follow in collecting data in rural, remote, and Indigenous communities. Service agencies should clearly articulate who owns the data being collected, as well as who has control of, access to, and possession of the data.
- **Confidentiality and anonymity.** It is important to outline processes that ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of clients who are participating in the estimation. If a client requires support in filling out their survey, how will staff ensure their information stays confidential? Additionally, consider where surveys will be submitted and stored in each service agency's office to ensure they are kept anonymous.
- **Age of consent.** In Alberta, the Social Work College considers 14 years old the age of consent. Confirm the age of consent in your province or territory and distribute the survey accordingly. Consider working with youth and family-serving agencies to allow youth to complete the survey with a guardian or parent's consent.

- **Prioritizing service provision.** Most importantly, remember that clients should, first and foremost, have their immediate needs addressed before being asked to fill out a survey.
- **Honorarium.** Service respondents are providing you with their time, energy, and expertise to provide you with the information needed to measure homelessness and understand the service gaps in your community. Whenever possible, RDN strongly encourages you to provide each survey respondent with an honorarium to show your thanks and appreciation for their efforts. An honorarium could look like a hot meal, a grocery basket, a small gift card, firewood, etc.

Step-by-Step Guide

Follow these steps to find out how many people are homeless or at risk of homelessness in your rural community:

Step 1: Establish a Task Force

Implementation Timeline – 2 Months Before the Start of the Estimation

In order to accurately estimate the number of individuals experiencing homelessness within a rural community, it is essential to secure the participation of as many service agencies as possible (ideally all). More importantly, all parties involved in the process need to understand the reasons behind the estimation count and why the community needs to know how many members of the community are experiencing homelessness or are at risk, and how the estimation will benefit them and the community as a whole. This will ensure that all service agencies support the cause.

Many rural communities already have a task force in place where all service agencies meet, discuss, and plan future strategies. If your community does not have a task force in place, then the first step toward estimating homelessness is to establish one. **It is also recommended that individuals with lived experience of homelessness be part of the task force to ensure all concerns and considerations are represented.**

Do you have a task force?	
YES	**NO**
Move to Step 2	Establish a new task force

Note: Contact RDN if your community doesn't have Service Agencies that regularly assist people. RDN will assist your community in devising a customized approach to conduct a successful homelessness estimation.

Step 2: Assign a Coordinator

Implementation Timeline – 2 Months Before the Start of the Estimation

Assign an Estimation Coordinator who will manage the entire Estimation project for the community. This person can either be someone from one of the service agencies or a person hired short-term specifically for this project. The Coordinator must read and ensure they understand the entire Estimation Guide, including the methodology therein. The Coordinator should contact RDN if they are unsure about any aspects of the method, as this can affect data reliability and integrity.

The Coordinator will: 1) manage the entire estimation for the community; 2) be responsible for ensuring service agency representatives are trained; and 3) gather and collate all collected data for analysis and report to the community. It is important that this person does not know the identity of the clients and only works with Unique Identifiers when analyzing the data. More information on Unique Identifiers is provided in Step 6: Estimation. This will maintain client privacy while reducing duplication.

<table>
<tr><th colspan="2">Do you have an Estimation Coordinator designated and have they read and understood the estimation guide?</th></tr>
<tr><th>YES</th><th>NO</th></tr>
<tr><td>Move to Step 3</td><td>Find a designated Estimation Coordinator who will manage and assume responsibility for the entire project;
and
Ensure that the Coordinator reads this guide thoroughly and understands the entire process.</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Note: The Coordinator will be responsible for managing the estimation, training participants, gathering data for analysis, and reporting to the community.</td></tr>
</table>

Step 3: Understand the Definition of Homelessness

Implementation Timeline – 1 to 2 Months Before the Start of the Estimation

It is critical for everyone to understand and use consistent definitions of homelessness as this would directly affect how much effort is directed into the process. Additionally, a consistent understanding of the definitions of homelessness can make results more comparable among other communities and/or the same community over time.

Communities should ensure all service agencies and their representatives understand the standard definitions of Homelessness, Youth Homelessness, and Indigenous Homelessness in Canada as per the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (as shown on pages XX).

Do all the Service Agencies and their representatives, as well as the Designated Coordinator in your community understand the various definitions of homelessness?	
YES	**NO**
Move to Step 4	Ensure all service agencies in your community and their representatives understand the definitions of homelessness.
Note: All service agencies participating in the homelessness estimation in your community should have a clear understanding of the various definitions of homelessness and the different categories within it. This is mandatory to maintain consistency in the steps ahead and ensure the data collected is reliable.	

Step 4: Training

Implementation Timeline – 1 Month Before the Start of the Estimation

Training is paramount to the success of the estimation. It is vital to train all service agencies on the process and guidelines for conducting this estimation to ensure standardization across service providers and frontline workers. Preparing service agencies for the estimation will include ensuring clarity of the definitions of homelessness, the benefits of estimation, how to properly complete the survey and ask questions in a sensitive manner, such as gender identity and sexual orientation (Abramovich, 2019), and how to properly report the most accurate data for a successful estimation. Consistent and relevant data can only be obtained through training – this cannot be overemphasized. Training is the only way to ensure the consistency necessary to have high-quality data. This training can be done in person or virtually, in a video call, to best suit the needs of your service agencies.

Every community works differently and, therefore, the training should be designed and implemented to meet the needs of the members of the task force. For example, one day of training delivered through lecture format should be adequate, but if the task force members require a more hands-on approach, then in-person training with mock estimations may be carried out over two days. RDN recommends each training session have a maximum of 20 participants to ensure interaction among participants. However, the group may be tailored to accommodate the community's size and capacity.

Training will focus on:

- Common language and definitions;
- The purpose of the estimation;
- The approach and methodology, by introducing this step-by-step guide;
- The survey provided with this guide;
- The process of administering the survey to the participants;
- The ethical considerations outlined on page XX;
- Cultural competency, and
- The process and timeline for returning completed surveys back to the coordinator.

Have you provided sufficient training to all the service agencies within the taskforce?	
YES	**NO**
Move to Step 5	Provide training to all the service agencies ensuring: • The definition of homelessness is understood; • The purpose of the estimation and the approach and methodology in this guide are clearly understood; • Ethical considerations have been addressed; • Cultural competency, and • Service agencies know how to correctly assist individuals to fill out the surveys and get survey data back to the Coordinator in a secure fashion.

Note: Conducting a training session is mandatory and key to obtaining consistent and relevant data.

Step 5: Marketing

Implementation Timeline – 1 Month Before the Start of the Estimation

Sufficient marketing and communication are important to successfully estimate homelessness, as it creates awareness and encourages people to access services during the estimation period. Rural communities usually do this very well, due to their small size and interconnectedness. Communities should use a personalized approach, following the strategies known to work best for the community. It is ideal to involve community members with lived and living experience of homelessness (i.e. people who are experiencing homelessness currently or who have experienced homelessness in the past).

There are a lot of stigmas associated with the term “homeless”. Additionally, respondents might not be aware that their current housing situation considers them to be homeless. Because of this, it is strongly recommended that while the survey is conducted in accordance with the steps outlined in this guide, it is marketed to community residents as a “**Housing and Service Needs Assessment**” rather than an explicit Homelessness Estimation. This serves to decrease stigma and increase participation, while still providing an honest depiction of the estimation’s purpose.

Some ways to promote and create awareness about the estimation include:

- Community gatherings (e.g. BBQ, special events, etc...);
- Newspaper advertisements;
- Radio advertisements;
- Flyers at local service agencies;
- Flyers in local convenience stores, community halls, or churches;
- Postcard-style handouts at known locations;
- Community social media pages;
- Service agency websites and newsletters or e-newsletters;
- Posters at participating agencies;
- Announcements in meetings (council, clergy, service groups, etc.); and
- Word of mouth.

Have you carried out enough marketing with a clear message to encourage people to access service agencies during the estimation period?	
YES	**NO**
Move to Step 6	Raise the awareness within your community through different marketing campaigns to encourage people to access services during the estimation period.
Note: Due to the stigma associated with homelessness and the fact that some people might not consider their current housing situation as 'homeless', RDN recommends marketing the estimation as a "Housing and Service Needs Assessment."	

Step 6: Estimation

Implementation Timeline – The Month of the Estimation

The suggested timeline for the estimation is ideally 30 days between October and November, or March and April. These times have been strategically chosen as the best times to conduct the estimation. In the fall, people affected by homelessness start looking for temporary shelters to sustain them for the winter as the temperatures begin to drop. Conversely, March and April are tax season, and individuals experiencing homelessness or those at risk may be more likely to access service agencies to get connected to support or assistance. This strategy increases the likelihood that individuals experiencing homelessness will be actively accessing service agencies for support, resulting in a more accurate estimation.

During the estimation, frontline staff at participating service agencies will invite individuals visiting their service agency to complete a survey. The standardized print-ready survey, provided on **www.ruraldevelopment.ca**, should be used for the estimation process by all rural, remote, and Indigenous communities looking to conduct an estimation unless a customized approach is required (a copy of the survey is also included in this Guide for reference purpose). The standardized survey has been created to be filled out directly by the survey participants; however, clients should be reminded that if they require assistance, a frontline staff member is available to provide guidance and can provide literary support as needed.

Note: The survey that was included in the first edition of this guide was designed to be an interview-based process where a staff member will walk through the survey questions with the respondent. However, based on feedback from communities that used the first edition of the guide, it was decided that a self-report style survey, where further assistance can be provided if necessary, may encourage respondents to answer more openly.
If a front-line staff has been asked to assist a client in filling out the survey, refer to the following steps.

The survey begins with a **statement of consent**; all service agency staff must obtain consent before proceeding with the survey. Consent is required to ensure that the respondent understands:

- why the survey is being conducted (i.e. to assess housing and service needs in the community);
- how their information will be used; and
- assurance that their information will remain confidential and anonymous.

The survey requires informed consent. Individuals/families should be counted only once during the 30-day estimation period, regardless of how many service agencies they may have accessed or how many times they may have visited the same service agency. In the event that an individual has filled out a survey more than once, their unique identifier would prevent duplication and only the most recent shall be considered.

If survey respondents feel uncomfortable at any point, they can skip any of the questions or opt out at any time during the survey. In the event that a respondent skips a question but completes and submits the survey, their responses will be included in the data analysis. In such cases where respondents opt out of the survey, all of the client's information **will not** be included in the final results. Service agencies should keep track of the number of surveys that were started but not completed, as this information will later be required in the data analysis/reporting section.

The Unique Identifier is a key component to accurately estimating the number of individuals experiencing homelessness or are at risk of homelessness in your community. The Unique Identifier is a code created by taking parts of the respondent's name, date of birth, and gender identity. This code has a three-fold purpose:

1. Concealing the actual identity of the respondent in the records and to the coordinator who will be analyzing the data. This is especially important in rural communities because people tend to know each other. Privacy is a primary concern for individuals who may want to minimize the social impact of community members discovering their situation.
2. Reducing the possibility of duplication. For example, if John Smith, a male born on 15th November 1960, uses multiple agencies within a predefined period of time, the code ensures that he will only be counted once. If Unique Identifiers are not used, then John Smith remains anonymous to the agencies and will be counted as many times as he accesses support services. This duplication will reflect in the estimation data and skew the real need in the community.

3. Identifying trends and gaps in services over time. Unique Identifiers gathered over time may be used to identify trends and gaps in the services being offered in the community. It is possible that certain unique identifiers, which repeatedly appear in the data over time, can indicate individuals experiencing chronic homelessness. This data can be used to identify the various services this individual has been accessing throughout the years and determine whether these services need to be revisited and improved.

Unique Identifier	
• Last Two Letters of the First Name • Last Two Letters of the Last Name • The Two Numbers Indicating the Day a Person is Born • Last Two Numbers of the Year of Birth	
Example: John Smith, born on 15th November 1964 - **HNTH1564** • Last Two Letters of the First Name – **HN** • Last Two Letters of the Last Name – **TH** • Sum of the Numbers in the Birth Day – **15** • Last Two Numbers of the Year of Birth – **64**	*Example*: Mary Robert, born on 29th June 1978 – **RYRT2978** • First Two Letters of the First Name – **RY** • First Two Letters of the Last Name – **RT** • Sum of the Numbers in the Birth Day – **29** • Last Two Numbers of the Year of Birth – **78**
**** In the case of any missing information to develop a 'Unique Identifier', please use "#" for the character representing the information that is missing.**	

The Unique Identifier, which is also a part of the survey, should be developed based on the criteria listed on the previous page.

The survey questions are designed to give communities a more holistic snapshot of how homelessness affects their community. This survey contains questions beyond housing that pertain to the various factors that influence someone's housing status. This information can be used to develop strategies to tackle homelessness and bolster wrap-around services where immediate housing solutions are unavailable.

Ensuring respondents' anonymity and confidentiality is paramount to the success of the survey. As such, participating staff must not include any identifying information on the survey that could potentially reveal the identity of the respondent. The Unique Identifier, apart from reducing the possibility of duplication, will help the coordinator identify the demographics of those experiencing homelessness. This code provides the community insight as to who is accessing services within the community without exposing the identity of respondents.

Known Location Count – Optional Step

An additional step may be incorporated into the homelessness estimation if there are certain parts of the community that act as informal residences for individuals experiencing homelessness (i.e. camping or RV parks, 'tent cities', etc.). Characterized as "known location counts," they can be carried out if the community has extra resources to recruit and train volunteers. Volunteers would visit pre-defined known locations and conduct the surveys with individuals on-site.

Communities must determine their own appropriate safety protocols for conducting known location counts (such as going in teams of two, only going during the daytime, etc.). The specifics of "known locations" may differ among communities and it is up to the community lead to secure all necessary safety precautions, including contacting and working with local law enforcement agencies/security personnel, to ensure the safety of all staff and volunteers conducting such counts.

If the community chooses to conduct a known location count, it must be conducted on a specific set of days during the estimation time period. Communities would benefit by conducting the known location counts more than once to capture as many people as possible. However, understanding that resources may not be readily available, communities can still glean valuable data from at least one known location count.

Data from known location counts can be used to estimate the percentage of unsheltered individuals who access local support services. If the Unique Identifiers collected from the known locations are also found in the list of Unique Identifiers collected from service agencies, it indicates that these individuals access service agencies.

However, if the Unique Identifiers collected in known locations are not found in the list of Unique Identifiers created at service agencies, then it means that the individual has not accessed support services (at least during the estimation time frame). Known location counts also provide an opportunity for the community to ensure that everyone is aware of the support and services provided by local service agencies.

<table>
<tr><th colspan="2">Do you understand how to correctly generate Unique Identifiers and complete the survey provided with the guide?</th></tr>
<tr><th>YES</th><th>NO</th></tr>
<tr><td>Move to Step 7</td><td>Review the Survey and ask for guidance or clarification from the RDN or the local coordinator;
Follow the guidelines on how to properly generate a Unique Identifier and
Fill out surveys for individuals that require assistance / provide the survey to respondents to fill it themselves.</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Note: Individuals using the service agencies complete the survey themselves, unless they ask for guidance when needed or request to have the entire survey filled by a front-line staff at a service agency.</td></tr>
</table>

Step 7: Data Entry and Analysis

Implementation Timeline – Within 1 - 2 Months After the End of the Estimation

Data entry and analysis are critical to the estimation and if not carried out correctly, it could mean the entire effort is wasted. To ensure accurate data entry and analysis, communities must engage a third party to ensure:

- A thorough quality control procedure to review all collected data;
- The ability to efficiently enter all data in a digital format (i.e. Excel spreadsheet, database, etc.); and,
- The expertise and tools necessary to analyze the data and eliminate duplication.

After the survey collection period has ended, all service agencies should ensure that all completed surveys are sent back to the appointed Coordinator promptly (i.e. within a maximum of 1 – 2 weeks). Even though all surveys should only contain Unique Identifiers on them (i.e. no identifying client information), until the surveys have been sent back to the Coordinator (using a secure method such as tracked courier mail), all paper surveys should be kept locked in a safe location. By keeping surveys locked and accessible only by authorized staff who worked on the Estimation, client privacy and confidentiality is maintained and the possibility of data breaches is minimized.

Data Input

Once the Coordinator receives the surveys from each service agency (or as they are being received), they must also be stored in a locked location.

Each community is different and will have differing abilities to manage the Data Input step of the process. Whatever their abilities, communities should engage a third party to conduct the data entry and analysis. A third party must be engaged to conduct data entry and analysis to ensure ethical standards are met. As a result, we encourage communities to reach out to RDN for guidance on data entry, analysis, and report writing. If communities choose to engage a third party other than RDN, we recommend reviewing the following points with them to ensure the best possible outcome.

All data from surveys in which respondents have provided informed consent will be analyzed for the following valuable information:

- The number of Unique Identifiers collected, which indicates the number of people in need in the community (whether or not they are experiencing housing instability, what support services are being accessed, etc.);
- The current living situation(s) of people accessing support services;
- If and why respondents feel their current housing situation is precarious;
- Respondent migration patterns;
- How transient respondents have been in a given time period;
- Whether shelter services have been needed, and reasons behind non-access;
- Where clients live on a seasonal basis;
- If they were born in Canada or entered Canada as an immigrant or a refugee;
- Their demographics, including gender identity, sexual orientation, age, racial identity, Indigenous identity, etc.

- Their occupation and how they obtain different forms of income; and,
- Where gaps exist in the support services being offered in the community.

Note: surveys that do not have explicit informed consent should not be included in the final count, based on best practices for research ethics.

Although the Unique Identifier provides a number of individuals at-risk of/experiencing homelessness within a community, the rest of the data in the survey provides a more holistic snapshot of other community factors that impact homelessness and housing insecurity. It is the Coordinator's and the third party's responsibility to ensure all the data is analyzed and presented in a way that will be beneficial to the community.

To reduce the amount of time and effort required for data entry and analysis, it is recommended that the third party use an online software to conduct the survey.
If all participating service agencies have the capacity to conduct online surveys, the Coordinator can contact the RDN for a template of an online survey which can be modeled onto an online platform such as Survey Monkey or Qualtrics, etc.

Service agencies can then collect surveys directly into an online platform which will make data automatically accessible to the coordinator. The online platform can compile survey results, making it easier and faster for the third party to analyze all the data for the development of the final report.

Note: All data presented up to this point in the process, whether to town or regional council(s), must be labeled as 'Preliminary Findings'. This data has to be cleaned, analyzed, and interpreted before any kind of recommendations can be inferred from it.

Have you sent all completed surveys to the assigned Coordinator and has the Coordinator and Taskforce engaged a third party to review and analyze the data?	
YES	**NO**
Move to Step 8 while analysis in Step 7 is on-going	Ensure all completed surveys and the data is sent to the assigned Coordinator. The third party shall start: • Entering all data into a computer if not already done; • Reviewing all data gathered from the surveys; and • Analyzing the collected data.
Note: Please contact RDN for support with data entry and analysis.	

Step 8: Feedback

Implementation Timeline – Within 1 Month After the End of the Estimation

To make the estimation process more efficient for future counts, the Coordinator should gather feedback from all affected parties after the estimation period, while data entry and analysis are being conducted (i.e. Taskforce, service agency staff, third-party analysis consultant, clients).

This should be done immediately following the estimation process, while the experience is still fresh. Communities should do this to review what works and what doesn't and to adjust future estimations accordingly. Through this review process, any issues can be identified, captured, and addressed prior to the next estimation process.

Has the assigned Coordinator collected feedback from all affected parties involved in the estimation process and is Step 7 complete?	
YES	**NO**
Move to Step 9	The assigned Coordinator should collect feedback from all service agencies involved in the estimation process, while simultaneously completing the data analysis.
Note: Collecting feedback from all affected parties is essential to make future estimations more efficient and would help with buy-in. This shall be done within a month of the data collection period while the whole experience is still fresh among participants and data analysis is ongoing.	

Step 9: Reporting

Implementation Timeline – 1 – 2 Months After the End of the Estimation

Once all the data has been analyzed, the Coordinator and the third party will collaborate to draft a report that will inform a larger discussion to identify challenges and solutions to the community's efforts to tackle homelessness. It is up to the community to determine how to best use their data, and it is recommended that reports be shared with: the task force; local, provincial, and federal politicians; other service agencies not involved in the Estimation; the media; and members of the public by making the report available for download on a central website in the community. These reports can be used to advocate for increased resources to bolster support services and reduce homelessness within the community. Moreover, the information can be used to enhance partnerships and develop innovative solutions between various service agencies where client overlap occurs. Examples of these include health care, mental health services, and affordable housing.

The format and design of the final report are the Coordinator's and the third party's responsibility. However, to keep things simple, it is recommended that the report include an introduction to the project, an overview of the methodology used, the results from the estimation and their implications for the community, and any recommendations to the community to address housing and service needs moving forward. **Please ensure that the Unique Identifiers are not published in the report and are kept in a secure location for future reference.**

Has the Coordinator and third party prepared a report highlighting the results of the survey and has the final report been shared with the task force and members of the community?	
YES	**NO**
You have successfully completed the homelessness estimation project. Refer to Step 10 for concluding remarks	• The assigned Coordinator and third party should prepare a report highlighting the results of the survey, details of the estimation process, and future plans. • The final report should be shared with the task force and members of the community and made available on a central platform/website in the community.
Note: Please contact RDN for support with report writing and knowledge mobilization.	

Step 10: Repeat

Implementation Timeline – Every 2-4 Years After the Estimation

If possible, each community should repeat the entire estimation process once every two to four years. It is important to estimate homelessness regularly to identify local trends in homelessness, housing, and gaps in service needs to reduce homelessness in the community. Additionally, for advocacy and funding purposes, it is important to have the most up-to-date and relevant data available to ensure decision-making processes are addressing current needs.

If communities wish to count individuals experiencing homelessness in known locations, they should revisit the list of known locations prior to every count as these can change over time and compromise the quality of the data.

For additional information, resources, or support, we encourage communities to reach out to RDN at **info@ruraldevelopment.ca**

References

Abramovich, A. (2019). Creating LGBTQ2S Inclusive, Affirming, and Safe PiT Counts. Canadian Observatory on Homelessness. Retrieved from, https://www.homelesshub.ca/resource/creating-lgbtq2s-inclusive-affirming-and-safe-pit-counts

Bickerton, J., & Oake, N. (2017). Understanding Homelessness in the Cape Breton Regional Municipality: A Service Based Approach . Nova Scotia Health Authority Research Ethics Review Board , Public Health , Cape Breton.

Canadian Observatory on Homelessness. (2016). Canadian Definition of Youth Homelessness. Homeless Hub. Retrieved from, www.homelesshub.ca/youthhomelessdefinition

Department of Employment and Social Development Canada. (2017). Homelessness Partnering Strategy. Everyone Counts – Guide to Point-in-Time Counts in Canada (2). Canada. Retrieved from, http://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2016/edsc-esdc/Em12-9-2016-eng.pdf

Gaetz, S.; Barr, C.; Friesen, A.; Harris, B.; Hill, C.; Kovacs-Burns, K.; Pauly, B.; Pearce, B.; Turner, A.; Marsolais, A. (2012) Canadian Definition.

Liepert, C. (2014). HOMELESS ESTIMATE | OCTOBER 2014 . Leduc County FCSS , Leduc.

References

The Homeless Hub. (n.d.). Rural Homelessness Counts. Retrieved March 15, 2017 from Homeless Hub. Retrieved from, http://homelesshub.ca/sites/default/files/nqx033gk.pdf

Thistle, J. (2017.) Indigenous Definition of Homelessness in Canada. Toronto: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press.

Town of Cochrane. (2017, April 13). Resource Center Intake Form. (A. Tocher, Ed.) Cochrane, Alberta, Canada.

Thank You

We wish to recognize and thank the thousands of Canadians who have taken part in a housing and service needs estimation for your time, effort, and expertise. By sharing your experiences of housing and service needs in your community, you have been instrumental in supporting improvements in housing and services in rural, remote, and Indigenous communities across Canada.

Appendices

Appendix A: Housing and Services Needs Survey

https://www.ruraldevelopment.ca/initiatives/homelessness-estimation