



2018 RURAL HOMELESSNESS ESTIMATION PROJECT

Okotoks
Community Report

May 2019



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The Step-by-Step Guide to Estimating Rural Homelessness
is available for download in English and French at www.ardn.ca

For more information about the 2018 Rural Homelessness Estimation Project

Canada 

This project is funded in part by the Government of Canada's Homelessness Partnering Strategy. The opinions and interpretations in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Government of Canada.

The Alberta Rural Development Network recognizes that the 2018 Rural Homelessness Estimation Project took place on the traditional territories of Treaty 6, Treaty 7, and Treaty 8.

Okotoks' Estimation Count occurred on Treaty 7 territory, the ancestral home of the Blackfoot Confederacy (comprising the Siksika, Piikani, and Kainai First Nations), the Tsuut'ina First Nation, the Stoney Nakoda (including the Chiniki, Bearspaw, and Wesley First Nations), as well as the Métis. We acknowledge and thank the diverse Indigenous peoples whose footsteps have marked these territories for centuries. The ARDN also recognizes the direct connection between homelessness and colonization¹, and it is our hope that this project provides one small step towards righting wrongs.



PARTICIPATING COMMUNITIES

The following communities participated in the 2018 Rural Homelessness Estimation Project:

Athabasca County
Banff and Canmore
Camrose
County of Grande Prairie
Drayton Valley
Drumheller
Fort Macleod
Grande Cache
Greenville
Hinton
Jasper
Kainai First Nation
Lacombe
Okotoks
Lac La Biche
Peace River
Ponoka
Strathmore
Tri-Region (Spruce Grove, Stony Plain, and Parkland County)
Wetaskiwin

COMMUNITY PARTNERS

The following local organizations participated in Okotoks' Estimation Count:

Big Brothers Big Sisters
Cameron Crossing School
High River Salvation Army
Foodbank
McBride Career Group
Okotoks Family Resource Centre
Okotoks Food Bank
Rowan House Society
Town of Black Diamond FCSS
Town of High River FCSS
Town of Okotoks FCSS
Westwinds Community
Wild Rose Community Connections

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In partnership with the Family and Community Support Services Association of Alberta (FCSSAA), the Alberta Rural Development Network (ARDN) led a province-wide effort to estimate homelessness in rural communities in Alberta. Funded in part by the Government of Canada's Homelessness Partnering Strategy, the Rural Homelessness Estimation Project (RHEP) is an initiative which facilitated homelessness data collection in 20 communities across rural Alberta over a three-month period in fall 2018.

This initiative utilized the methodology outlined in ARDN's "Step-by-Step Guide to Estimating Rural Homelessness"² whereby surveys are administered at local and regional social service agencies to gather information on the following:

- Housing instability
- Employment
- Income
- Family demographics
- Services accessed

Lead project partners connected with local service agencies in their communities to coordinate the dates for their local count. Service agencies were instructed to invite individuals who visited their agency to fill out a 28-question survey during a consecutive 30-day period.

The participating 20 communities were provided with both an online and paper version of the survey. In either format, the survey could be completed directly by the respondent or with the assistance of a staff member.

Over the months prior to the collection period, service providers were trained on the objectives, needs, and overall goal of the project, which was to collect information on housing and service needs from individuals accessing local services. Emphasis during training was placed on clarifying survey terms, ensuring respondents' confidentiality and privacy, and securing their informed consent.

Okotoks' data was collected through an online platform, where respondents had the choice to complete the survey by themselves or with a staff member. Duplicates were removed (using the Unique Identifier, as per the Step-by-Step Guide methodology) and data analysis and integrity measures were performed by ARDN analysts who then compiled, reviewed, and consolidated these results to produce the final community findings outlined in this report.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION

This report consists of an overview of the primary data collected through social service agencies in Okotoks from October 15 to November 14, 2018. Okotoks' data collection was unique as all surveys were collected through the online platform. The lead coordinator for the Okotoks' Estimation Count was Town of Okotoks Family and Community Support Services (FCSS).

The primary data collected in Okotoks' count indicated the following:

- 72 people felt their housing situation was unstable, that they could easily lose their housing, or were unsure whether their housing was stable;
- The majority of respondents who identified as housing-unstable were born in Canada (75%), identified as Caucasian (87%), and had resided in Okotoks area for more than a year (74%);
- 38% of respondents who were housing-unstable (n=72) were employed;

- The most common support services needed by all survey respondents (both stably and unstably housed) were "Basic Needs (food, shelter, medical, shower, laundry)", "Support Services (accessing government programs, accessing technology)", and "Financial Support".

As per the Step-by-Step Guide, this survey used the Canadian definition of homelessness as defined by the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness³. However, to encourage client participation, the survey was advertised as a way to better understand the housing and support needs and challenges faced by community members in Okotoks; use of the term "homelessness" was minimized due to the associated stigma, and the questions within the survey focused on respondents' "unstable housing" conditions. Unstable housing, as defined in this iteration of the project, is when a person experiences **"difficulty paying rent, spending a major portion of the household income on housing, having frequent moves, living in overcrowded conditions, or doubling up with friends and relatives"**. By re-framing the focus of the survey, this project attempted to decrease stigma, increase community members' willingness to participate, and collect quality data that stays true to the estimation's purpose.

It is important to reiterate that the aim of the project was not solely to identify the scope of homelessness and housing instability in Okotoks, but to better understand the support services potentially required to address these issues. Through the collection of direct input from individuals who access social services, a baseline depiction of the local situation can be established.

Despite this, the following data is count data. While there is possibly a small error in responses due to data entry or user error, there are no significance values, p-values, tests, or inferential statistics of any sort within this report. It is therefore not ARDN's intention with this report to:

- Guarantee that the data provides a complete or all-encompassing depiction of housing instability and service needs in Okotoks;
- Provide any interpretations of the data contained herein;
- Make any recommendations for policy changes or actions to be taken in Okotoks as a result of this data;
- Make any stake/claim about government policies, corporate actions, or externalities in Okotoks;
- Make any inferences or generalizations about the population of Okotoks.

It is the responsibility of the individual community and local community partners to draw their own conclusions and interpretations based on this data and determine how to best utilize it. ARDN assumes no responsibility or liability for any changes, decisions, or actions made as a result of the interpretation of data outlined in this report.

In the event that totals and percentages don't reflect precise, absolute figures, it's due to exclusion of non-responses and skipped questions. Additionally, certain datasets had to be omitted from this final report due to insufficient responses. A copy of the actual paper survey used in this project can be found at www.ardn.ca/publications/2018-rhep-survey.

LIMITATIONS

In this pilot study, respondents self-identified as to whether they considered their housing situation as unstable or whether they felt they could easily lose their housing. Because of the stigma associated with the term "homelessness" and the relativity of the term "housing instability", many individuals may not self-identify under either term, even though they meet the defined criteria. Therefore, individuals who may meet the Canadian definition of homelessness may have nevertheless reported their housing

situation as stable (and vice versa).

Not every person who entered a participating service agency may have consented to the survey (and therefore, not every participating agency may have been able to gather completed surveys); not every individual requiring help may have entered a participating service agency during the 30-day collection period; and not every service agency in Okotoks may have participated. As a result, this report presents a conservative estimate of Okotoks's situation with regards to homelessness, housing instability, and community service needs.

SUPPORT SERVICES

All individuals who took the survey (n=124), including those who said they had stable housing, were asked which issues they were seeking assistance for when they came into the service agency. The support services that all respondents reported as needing the most can be seen in **Table 1** (below) and multiple responses were possible. Seventeen respondents chose "Prefer Not to Answer".

The top three most common responses for support services required by survey respondents were

Table 1: Respondents were asked "what general areas or issues are you here to get support with?".

| General Support Services Needed (Multiple Responses Possible) | Responses |
|--|-----------|
| Basic Needs (food, shelter, medical, shower, laundry) Support | 55 |
| Support Services (accessing government programs, accessing technology) | 28 |
| Financial Support | 26 |
| Health & Wellness Support | 23 |
| Prefer Not To Answer | 17 |
| Other Support | 16 |
| Family/Parenting Support | 14 |
| Transportation Support | 12 |
| Legal Support | 7 |
| Domestic Violence Support | 6 |



"Basic Needs Support" (55), "Support Services" (28), and "Financial Support" (26).

COMMUNITY FINDINGS

Housing Stability

The total number of respondents who completed the survey was 124. Of those, a total of 72 individuals answered "yes" or "not sure" to the question "Do you consider your housing situation to be unstable or feel you could easily lose your housing?" and are therefore considered housing-unstable individuals (**Figure 1**). All the results that follow in this report include data solely from respondents who reported their housing situation to be unstable. This was done to both capture information from individuals facing homelessness, and better understand demand on local service agencies.

Reasons for Housing Instability

The reasons given for why individuals felt their housing was unstable can be seen in **Table 2** (page 8). Respondents had the option to give multiple answers if necessary. The top five most common responses for why they felt their housing was unstable were as follows: 41 responses for "Low Income"; 23 for "Job Loss"; 12 for "Conflict"; 11 for "Abuse"; and 10 for "Illness/Medical Condition".

124
TOTAL NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS

72
UNSTABLY HOUSED RESPONDENTS

When respondents were asked to give their primary reason that they thought their housing was unstable (one reason only), the most common responses were: 21 (31.8%) for "Low Income", 14 (21.2%) for "Job Loss", and 10 (15.2%) for "Unable to Pay Rent/Mortgage".

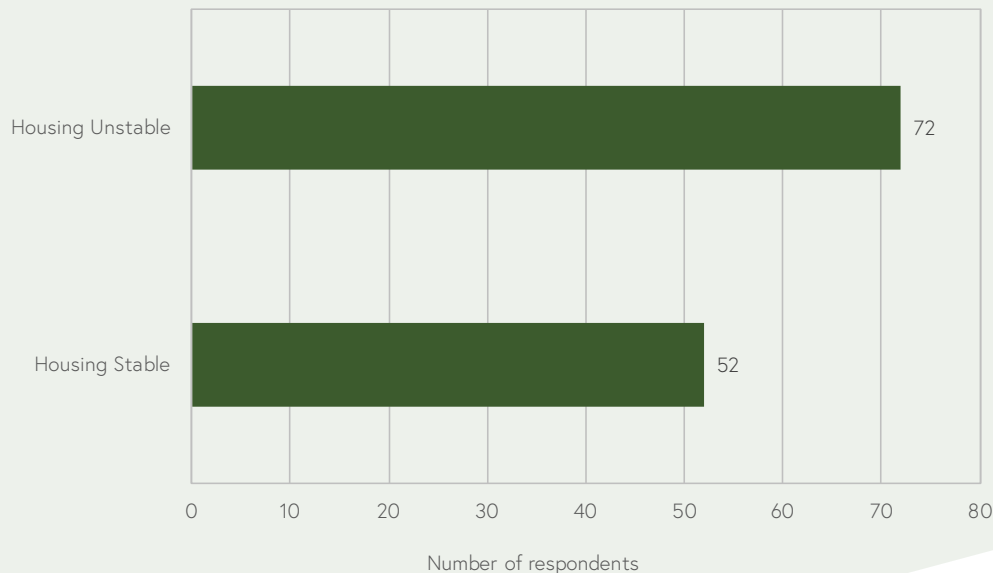


Figure 1: A total of 72 individuals answered "yes" or "not sure" to the question "Do you consider your housing situation to be unstable or do you feel you could easily lose your housing?" (n=124).

Table 2: The most common reasons provided by Okotoks respondents as to why they felt their housing was unstable. Respondents were able to give more than one response. Other options that received zero responses are not shown.

| Reasons for Unstable Housing Status (Multiple Responses Possible) | Responses |
|---|-----------|
| Low Income | 41 |
| Job Loss | 23 |
| Unable To Pay Rent/Mortgage | 21 |
| Conflict | 12 |
| Abuse | 11 |
| Illness/Medical Condition | 10 |
| Inadequate Housing | 8 |
| Addiction/Substance Use | 7 |
| Mental Health | 7 |
| Other | 7 |
| Disability | 5 |
| Transportation | 2 |

DEMOGRAPHICS

Gender

The reported gender identities of housing-unstable individuals can be seen in Figure 2. Of the survey respondents, 20 (27.8%) identified as men, 51 (70.8%) identified as women, and one (1.4%) responded "Prefer Not to Answer".

Sexual Orientation

The reported sexual orientations of respondents can be seen in **Figure 3** (page 9). Of the survey respondents, 63 identified as straight, two identified as lesbian or gay, one identified as bisexual, one identified as queer, one identified as "Other", and four responded "Prefer Not to Answer".

Age of Respondents

The age demographics of respondents with unstable housing can be seen in **Figure 4** (page 9). The average age of individuals facing unstable housing was 48 and the median age was 50.

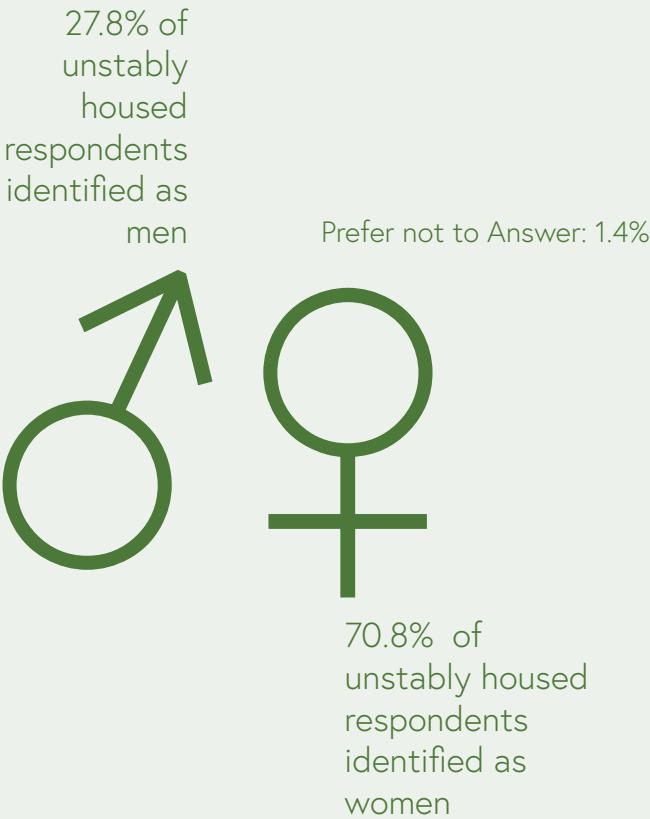


Figure 2: Gender identities of housing-unstable respondents (n=72).

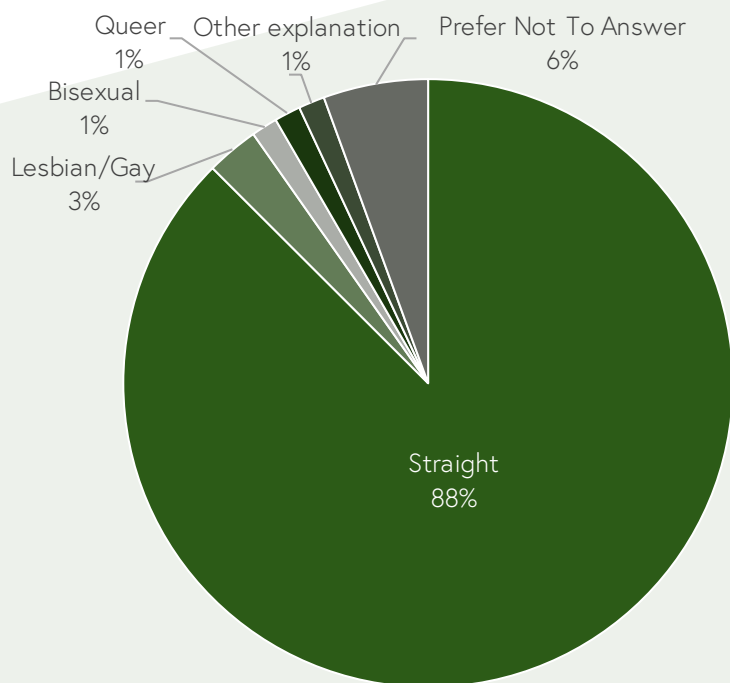


Figure 3: Sexual orientation of respondents who identified as housing-unstable (n=72).

A note about youth participation: service agencies were instructed to limit survey administration to individuals 14 years of age or older, as per the consent and confidentiality guidelines of the Alberta College of Social Workers⁴.

Migration Status and Ethnicity

Out of all housing-unstable respondents, 54 were born in Canada and 15 were born outside of Canada and three responded "Prefer Not to Answer". These results are shown in **Figure 5** (page 10).

Of those respondents who were born in Canada, 46 identified as Caucasian, three as Visible Minorities, four responded "Prefer Not to Answer", and one gave no response (**Figure 6**, Page 10).

Of respondents who had come to Canada at some point (n=15), six came as immigrants, one as a refugee, three as temporary foreign workers, 4 as "Other", and one responded "Prefer Not to Answer".

Of respondents currently facing unstable housing, 57 were Canadian citizens, 3 were permanent residents, and 12 gave no response.

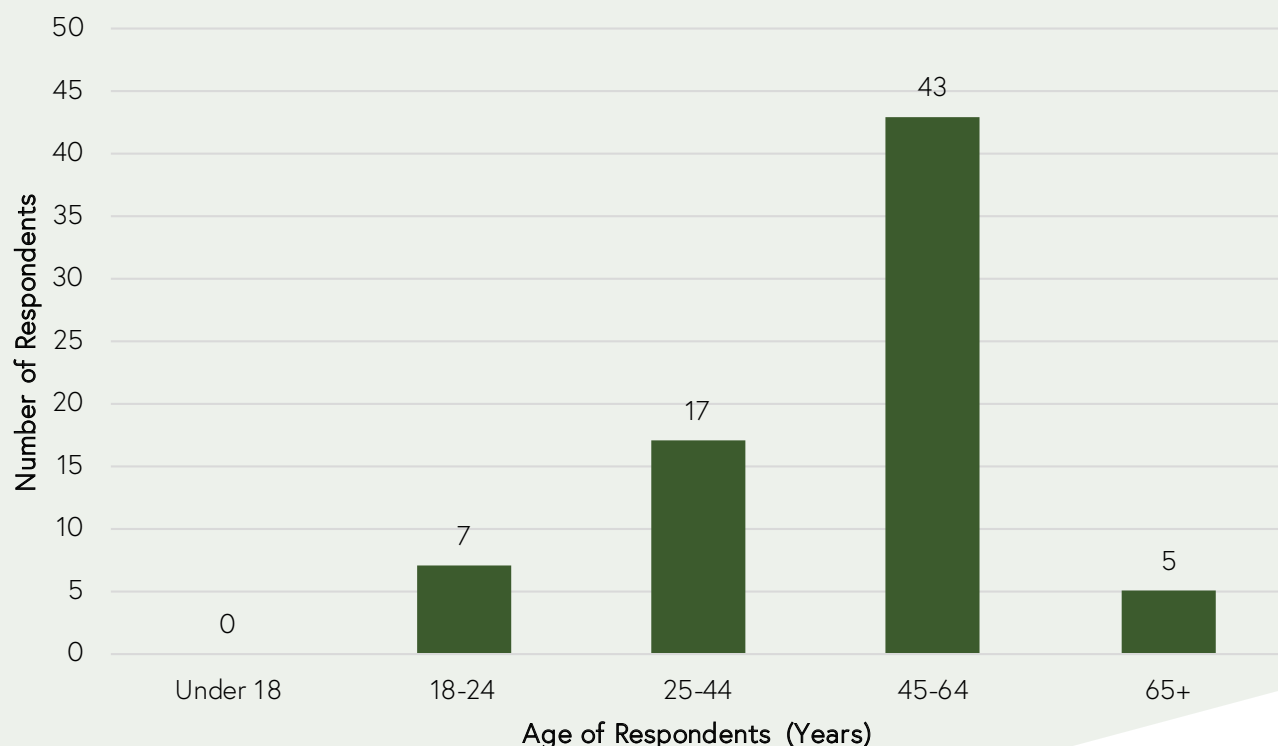


Figure 4: Age demographics of housing-unstable respondents (n=72).

RECENT LIVING SITUATION

Duration of residency

The duration of time that respondents had lived in the community can be seen in **Figure 7** (page 11). Five respondents reported that they have

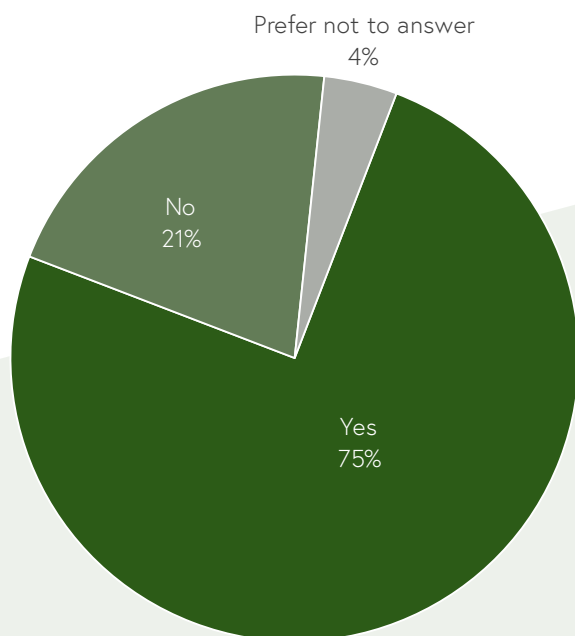


Figure 5 (above): Unstably-housed respondents who answered "yes" or "no" to the question "were you born in Canada"? (n=72).

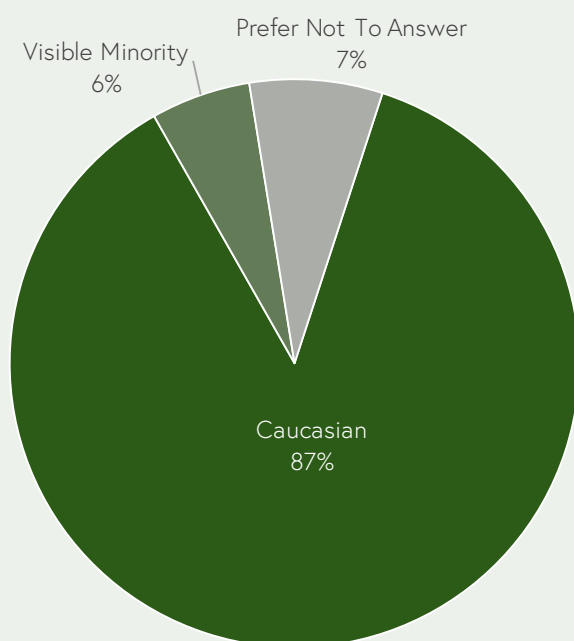


Figure 6 (above): Of respondents born in Canada, 87% identified as Caucasian, 6% as Visible Minorities, and 7% responded with "prefer not to answer" (n=54).

always lived in the community, 53 had lived in the community for more than a year, ten had lived in the community for less than a year, and four responded with "Prefer Not to Answer".

Accommodations

Respondents were asked about their most recent living situations. Respondents' most commonly reported living situations for the week prior to taking the survey can be seen in **Table 3** (below). The duration of time that respondents reported living in their current living situation can be seen in **Figure 8** (page 11).

Respondents were asked about the number of times they had moved in the past year; frequent moves can be an indicator of instability and insecurity. One respondent had not moved in the past year. Of respondents who had moved in the past year, four had moved 1-2 times, five had moved 3-5 times, one had moved 6-10 times, nine responded "not applicable", and 52 gave no response.

Table 3: Respondents were asked about their accommodations within the past week.

| Accommodations in the past week (multiple responses possible) | Responses |
|---|-----------|
| Apartment/House | 38 |
| Someone Else's Place | 13 |
| Other Accommodations | 5 |
| Prefer Not To Answer | 4 |
| Camping | 4 |
| Motel/Hotel | 3 |
| Vehicles | 2 |
| Shelter Services | 2 |
| Abandoned Building | 1 |
| Transitional Housing | 1 |

If respondents had lived somewhere else in the past year, eight moved from another community in Alberta, one from another residence in the community, two from another province, and one indicated "other" residence.

Who's Staying with You

Some respondents reported that they had other people sharing their living situation with them. Of collected housing-unstable survey responses (n=72), there were a total of 41 adults staying with

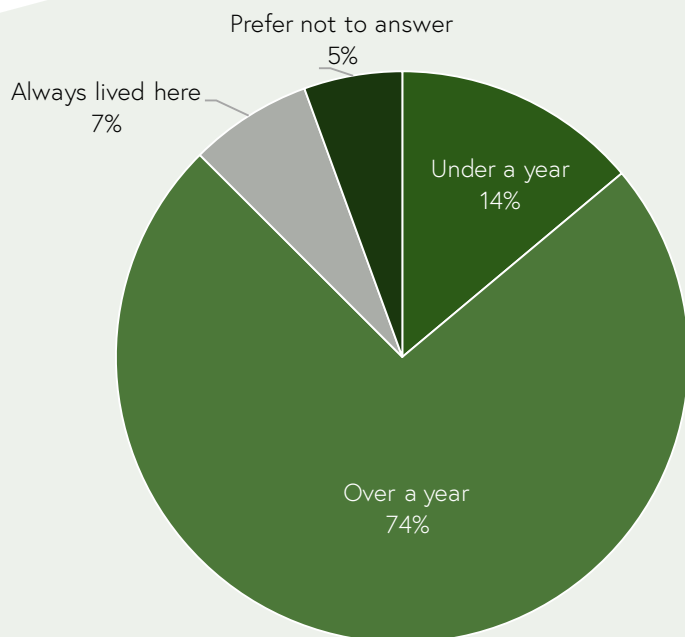


Figure 7: Respondents were asked about their current living situations. The figure above contains the response for the question "how long have you lived within the community?" (n=72).

unstably-housed respondents. The average number of adults sharing respondents' living situation was 1.78. There were also a total of 44 children staying with surveyed respondents. The average number of children sharing respondents' living situation was 1.57.

It is important to note that these individuals cannot be confirmed to be experiencing housing instability, and these numbers are just an indication that they share the same living situation or household as the survey respondent.

Two unstably-housed respondents answered "yes" to the question "are you or anyone in your household pregnant?".

Shelter Use

Finally, respondents were asked if they had spent time in an emergency shelter in the past year. However, due to a technical error, the shelter use question was not included on the online version of the survey (for all 20 communities that took part in the survey); therefore, data was only collected for respondents who filled out the paper version of the survey. As a result, this question was asked

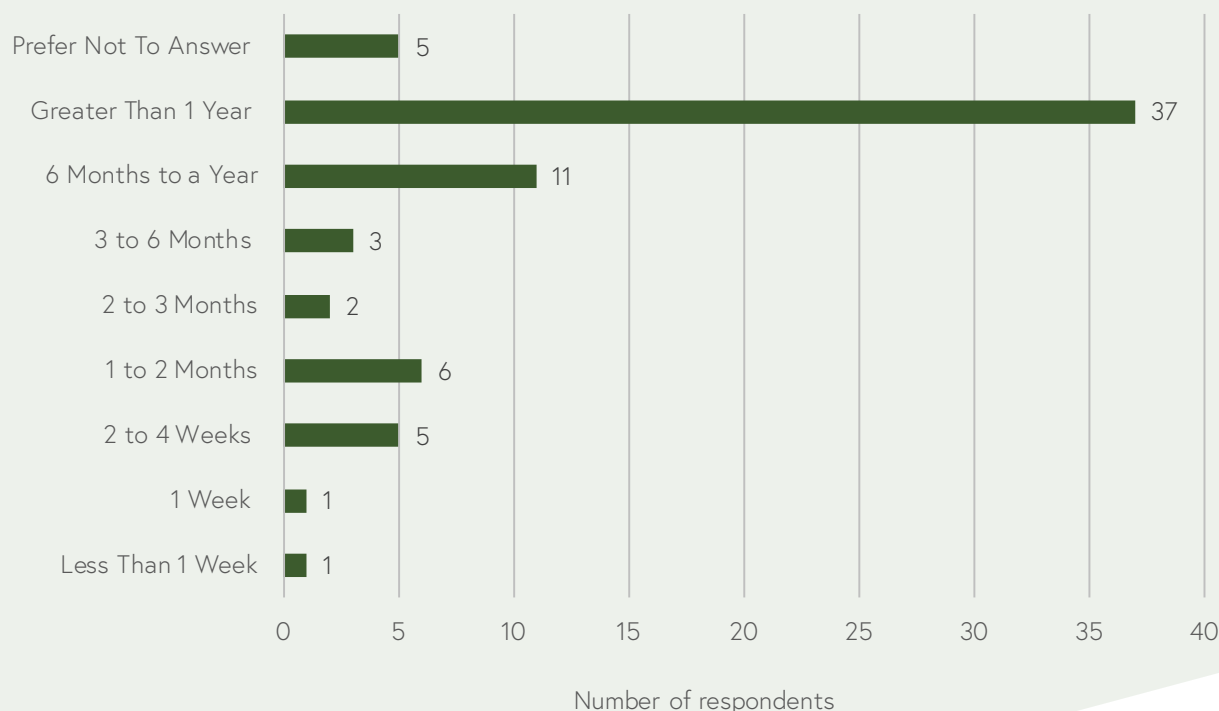


Figure 8: Respondents were asked how long they have been staying in their current accommodations (n=71).

of a smaller subset of housing-unstable survey respondents and the data is therefore incomplete. Unfortunately, as the Okotoks Estimation Count only utilized the online version of the survey, no data was collected for this question for the community. However, two respondents were identified as having used shelter services through their responses for their recent living situations.

EMPLOYMENT

The employment status of housing-unstable individuals can be seen in **Figure 9**. Out of 68 individuals who responded to the question, 26

were employed and 42 were unemployed. For those who were employed, 13 were employed full-time, eight were employed part-time, four were casual workers, and five responded "Prefer Not to Answer". The sector that people were currently employed in can be seen in **Table 4**.

Table 4: Respondents who reported being employed were asked which sector they were employed in.

| Current Employment Sector | Responses |
|--------------------------------------|-----------|
| Other Sector | 8 |
| Hospitality/Food and Beverage Sector | 6 |
| Human Services Sector | 5 |
| Health Sector | 3 |
| Agriculture Sector | 1 |
| Forestry Sector | 1 |
| Education Sector | 1 |

Military or Emergency Services

Respondents were asked whether they had ever served in the Canadian military or any emergency services. Two respondents reported working or having previously worked in emergency services.

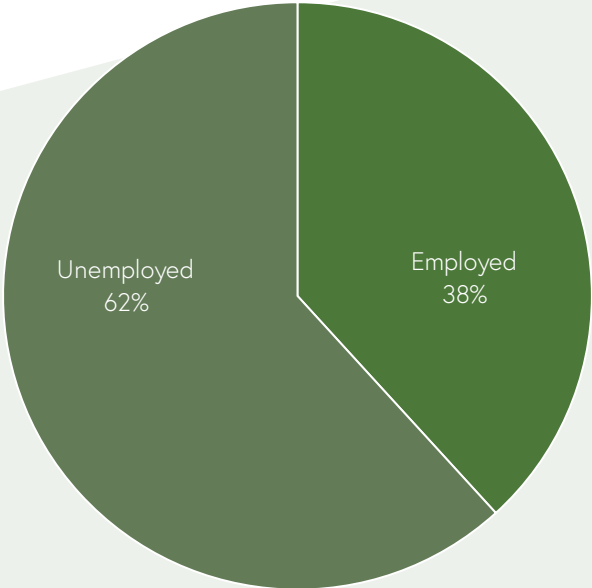


Figure 9 (above): Respondents were asked whether they're currently employed (n=68).



Sources of Income

Finally, respondents were asked to identify what sources of income they had, with multiple responses if applicable. The top responses for the community can be seen in **Table 5** (right).

UNIQUE FINDINGS

We compared Okotoks' data to the overall data from the other 19 communities that participated in the Rural Homelessness Estimation Project. This section describes unique data findings that are outliers in comparison to other communities. All findings in this section are based only on housing-unstable respondents (n=72). Percentages are rounded to the nearest tenth.

Okotoks ranked highly amongst the 20 communities for women who had been in the community for two or more years (70.6%). Okotoks also ranked highly amongst the 20 communities for both men (15.0%, highest) and women (7.8%) who were not born in the community and came to Canada as an immigrant or refugee.

Okotoks ranked highly for women who were employed in the health sector (5.9%), as well as women who reported Alimony/Child Support as at least one source of income (15.7%). Finally, Okotoks ranked highest amongst the 20 communities for men who were housing-unstable and reported senior-related benefits as at least one source of income, particularly Canada Pension Plan (20.0% of men).

CONCLUSION

The 2018 Rural Homelessness Estimation Project was a pilot project aimed at investigating rural and remote homelessness in 20 rural communities across Alberta. It represents the first coordinated effort to quantitatively estimate homelessness outside the seven major cities across the province. Its intent was to provide baseline data for further investigation into the issue of rural and remote homelessness in Alberta.

This report provides a summary of primary data collected by service agencies in Okotoks from October 15 to November 14, 2018. It is a snapshot

Table 5: Respondents were asked to identify their current sources of income.

| Sources of income (Multiple Responses Possible) | Responses |
|--|-----------|
| Employment | 24 |
| Non Senior Related Benefits: Alberta Supports Benefits | 13 |
| Other Sources | 9 |
| Alimony/Child Support | 8 |
| Non Senior Related Benefits: Other Benefits | 8 |
| Senior Related Benefits: Canada Pension (CPP) | 7 |
| Non Senior Related Benefits: AISH | 5 |
| Non Senior Related Benefits: Child Tax Credit | 5 |
| Senior Related Benefits: Old Age Security (OAS) | 5 |
| No Source of Income | 3 |
| Non Senior Related Benefits: Canada Pension Plan Disability (CPPD) | 3 |
| Senior Related Benefits: Alberta Seniors Benefits (ASB) | 2 |
| Non Senior Related Benefits: Employment Insurance | 2 |
| Senior Related Benefits: Other Benefits | 2 |
| Prefer Not To Answer | 1 |
| Money From Family/Friends | 1 |
| Senior Related Benefits: Guaranteed Income Supplements (GIS) | 1 |
| Non Senior Related Benefits: Private Disability Insurance | 1 |
| Non Senior Related Benefits: Workers Compensation | 1 |
| Non Senior Related Benefits: Private Disability Insurance | 1 |
| Non Senior Related Benefits: Workers Compensation | 1 |
| Non Senior Related Benefits: Prefer Not To Answer | 1 |

of the living situation of individuals who accessed services in the community and reported that they were experiencing housing instability.

From a total of 124 survey respondents, 72 people reported that they felt that they could easily lose their housing or that they were uncertain whether their housing situation was stable. Given the reasons outlined at the beginning of this report, there are likely more individuals who met the Canadian definition of homelessness or who are struggling with housing instability and homelessness in Okotoks.

It is important to reiterate that the information herein is intended to be presented as objectively as possible, without interpretation or recommendations from the ARDN. The intention of this report is to provide means for agencies within the community – who are most familiar with their local needs and realities – to determine their community's potential needs, as well as what concrete responses or additional research may be necessary to prevent or reduce homelessness and housing instability in Okotoks.

What has been made clear from the study is that rural and remote housing instability and homelessness exists in all 20 rural communities that were investigated, a finding that supports previous qualitative research indicating that it is widespread across Alberta⁵. More research on rural and remote homelessness, in both Okotoks and across the province, is warranted to better understand the issues unique to individual municipalities and areas, as well as commonalities shared, in order to inform best practices and local solutions. Given that it was the first such count of its kind (as well as the first large-scale utilization of the methodology described in the Step-by-Step Guide to Estimating Rural Homelessness), many lessons were learned and the results from this pilot study will help shape and improve future counts.

The Alberta Rural Development Network would like to thank Okotoks' Family and Community Support Services and all community partners in Okotoks for their work on this pilot study, as well as the Family and Community Support Services Association of

Alberta (FCSSAA) for their work coordinating the project.



ENDNOTES

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

2) Abedin, Z. (2017). Step-by-Step Guide to Estimate Rural Homelessness (1st ed.). Retrieved from <https://www.ardn.ca/estimation-guide/step-by-step-guide-to-estimate-rural-homelessness-english>

3) Gaetz, S.; Barr, C.; Friesen, A.; Harris, B.; Hill, C.; Kovacs-Burns, K.; Pauly, B.; Pearce, B.; Turner, A.; Marsolais, A. (2012) Canadian Definition of Homelessness. Toronto: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press.

4) Alberta College of Social Workers. (2015). Guidelines on the Management of Consent and Confidentiality When Working with Minors. Retrieved from http://acsw.in1touch.org/uploaded/web/NEWS_GUIDELINES_ConsentwithMinors.pdf

5) Schiff, J. W.; Schiff, R.; & Turner, A. (2016). Rural Homelessness in Western Canada: Lessons Learned from Diverse Communities. Social Inclusion. (4)4, 73-85. doi: 10.17645/si.v4i4.633





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