

Study: A portrait of Canadians who have been homeless

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Although a minority of Canadians experience homelessness at a certain point in their life, some groups are at an elevated risk, including sexual minorities, Indigenous people and Black women.

These results are from a new *Insights on Canadian Society* article released today, "[A portrait of Canadians who have been homeless.](#)"

Using data from the 2018 Canadian Housing Survey, the study examines the characteristics of individuals who had previously experienced homelessness.

It also examines the current well-being of these individuals. While the experience of homelessness has immediate detrimental impacts on individuals, those who experienced homelessness in the past are more likely to have poor health and financial difficulties in their present situation.

Given the nature of the data, the results of this study are representative of Canadians who are housing decision makers within their households, but not necessarily of all Canadians aged 15 and older. Despite this limitation, the results of this study contribute significantly to our understanding of this social issue in Canada, particularly because information on unsheltered homelessness is very scarce.

About 3% of Canadians responsible for housing decisions within their households have experienced unsheltered homelessness in the past

Unsheltered homelessness is defined as having lived in a homeless shelter, on the street or in a park, in a makeshift shelter, or in an abandoned building.

In 2018, about 3% of Canadians responsible for housing decisions within their households had experienced unsheltered homelessness in the past, with no significant difference between women and men.

Also, more than one in seven people (15%) who make housing decisions for their household had experienced hidden homelessness, defined as having to temporarily live with family or friends, or anywhere else, because they had nowhere else to live.

Among those responsible for housing decisions within their household, about 1 in 10 off-reserve First Nations people and Inuit have experienced unsheltered homelessness

Higher rates of homelessness among the Indigenous population are well documented and are associated with systemic barriers to employment and education, racial discrimination in the housing market, and the intergenerational effects of colonization and residential school experiences.

In 2018, among Indigenous people responsible for housing decisions within their households, about 12% of off-reserve First Nations people, 10% of Inuit and 6% of Métis said that they had experienced unsheltered homelessness in the past. The corresponding proportion for non-Indigenous people was 2%.

Sexual minorities were also at greater risk of unsheltered homelessness. In particular, among women responsible for housing decisions within their household, almost 8% of those with minority sexual orientations had experienced unsheltered homelessness in the past, compared with 2% of their heterosexual counterparts. Several factors could explain these results, including increased rates of family violence, discrimination and victimization.

Overall, Canadians belonging to population groups designated as visible minorities (2%) were slightly less likely to have experienced homelessness than those who were not a visible minority (3%).



Among specific groups of Canadians responsible for housing decisions within their households, South Asian (1%) and Arab (1%) Canadians were significantly less at risk of having experienced unsheltered homelessness. In contrast, 5% of the Black population had experienced homelessness in the past, a proportion that increased to 6% among Black women.

Finally, Canadians responsible for housing decisions within their households who reside in Nunavut (14%) were the most likely to have experienced unsheltered homelessness in the past. Residents of Yukon (8%) and the Northwest Territories (6%) also had higher rates of homelessness. Conversely, those living in Quebec (1%) had the lowest rate.

People who had experienced both unsheltered and hidden homelessness in the past were experiencing several financial difficulties at the time of the survey

The study also found that people now responsible for housing decisions, but who experienced homelessness in the past, had substantially worse socioeconomic and health circumstances than those who did not.

For example, they were more likely to report fair or poor general health and mental health. They were also more likely to have faced recent economic hardship, including turning to charity because their household was short of money.

While these conditions were valid for both men and women responsible for housing decisions, women who had experienced homelessness in the past reported worse socioeconomic and health circumstances than men in the same situation.

For example, among Canadians now responsible for housing decisions and who experienced both unsheltered and hidden homelessness in the past, women were 23 percentage points more likely than men to report that they had difficulty meeting their financial needs in the year before the survey.

Note to readers

Data source

This study used data from the 2018 Canadian Housing Survey (CHS). The 2018 CHS was a voluntary survey conducted over five months from November 2018 to March 2019. The target population of the survey included private households in the 10 provinces and Yukon and Nunavut. Data for the Northwest Territories were provided from the 2019 Northwest Territories Community Survey, which collected similar housing information as the CHS.

The sampling unit of the CHS was the dwelling. One questionnaire was completed per dwelling by the respondent (reference person) aged 15 and older who was responsible for housing decisions within the household.

The homelessness questions were asked only of the reference person, the person who was responsible for housing decisions within the household. Given that information on homelessness is available only for the reference person, this study discusses households where the reference person has (or has not) experienced homelessness.

The article "[A portrait of Canadians who have been homeless](#)" is now available in *Insights on Canadian Society* ([75-006-X](#)).

The infographic "[Homelessness in Canada](#)" is now available in the series *Statistics Canada – Infographics* ([11-627-M](#)).

For more information, or to enquire about the concepts, methods or data quality of this release, contact us (toll-free 1-800-263-1136; 514-283-8300; infostats@statcan.gc.ca) or Media Relations (statcan.mediahotline-ligneinfomedias.statcan@statcan.gc.ca).