

# Homelessness support is a growing sector of the labour force

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## Highlights

- There were 10,130 people working in the homelessness support sector in 2021, an increase of 60.7% (+3,825) compared with 2016. This outpaced the growth in the total number of employed people (+3.4%) over the same period.
- About 7 out of 10 homelessness support sector workers (70.8%) lived in large urban population centres, accounting for 7,175 of the total 10,130 workers in the sector.
- Homelessness support sector workers who lived in rural areas (910) represented 9.0% of the total sector.
- The fastest-growing age cohort in the homelessness support sector workers category since the 2016 Census was among those aged 15 to 24 years (+132.8%). This group more than doubled in size from 625 in 2016 to 1,455 in 2021.
- Workers in the homelessness support sector living in one-parent family households nearly doubled since the 2016 Census, growing by 94.0%.

## The number of homelessness support sector workers grows in nearly every province

Nationally, nine provinces saw the homelessness support sector grow in 2021. Ontario (4,000 workers) and British Columbia (2,270 workers) accounted for the largest number of workers in the sector, which is mainly driven by the size of the population and number of large cities where services for homeless individuals and families are most commonly available. While accounting for more than half of the workers in the sector, the number of workers in Ontario (+79.0%) and British Columbia (+63.9%) also grew faster than the overall growth rate (+60.7%) of the sector.

The six largest cities in Canada accounted for nearly half of all homelessness support sector workers in 2021. Toronto (15.6%), Vancouver (12.3%), Montréal (8.2%), Edmonton (4.4%), Ottawa–Gatineau (4.3%) and Calgary (3.8%) were the census metropolitan areas with the largest percentages of homelessness support sector workers in Canada.

While more services are located in larger centres, homelessness support sector workers who lived in rural areas (910 workers) represented 9.0% of the total sector in 2021. This rate was below the percentage of all workers that lived in rural areas in 2021 (17.3%), but the number of homelessness support sector workers that lived in rural areas grew by 8.3% since the 2016 Census, while the number of total workers in rural areas declined by 3.3% over the same period.

## Women outnumber men in the homelessness support sector by nearly three to one

Nearly three out of four homelessness support workers (73.8%) were women, according to the 2021 Census. This share was larger than the share of women in all occupations (48.2%).

The growth rate in the homelessness support sector since the 2016 Census was strongest for men, where the number of workers grew to 2,655 (+1,175; +79.4%). The number of women working in the homelessness support sector grew to 7,475 (+2,650; +54.9%) over the same period. The stronger growth in the number of men working in the homelessness support sector led to a decline in the overall share of women in the sector, down from 76.5% in the 2016 Census to 73.8%.



## **Growth in the homelessness support sector is strongest among those who have a bachelor's degree or higher**

Nearly 4 out of 10 homelessness support sector workers (39.8%) had a bachelor's degree or higher, according to the 2021 Census. These people represented the largest group of homelessness support sector workers based on highest certificate, diploma, or degree held. This group grew by 82.6% since the 2016 Census, while across all workers in all sectors, the number of people with a bachelor's degree or higher grew by 19.8% since the 2016 Census and represented nearly one out of three (31.7%) workers overall according to the 2021 Census.

The 4,035 individuals with a bachelor's degree or higher working in the homelessness support sector were divided across 3,055 people who had a bachelor's degree and 985 people with a graduate degree or certificate above the bachelor's level. Focusing on workers with a graduate degree or certificate above the bachelor's level, the number doubled (+101.0%) from 490 since the 2016 Census. In 2021, the group represented nearly 1 in 10 homelessness support sector workers.

## **Homelessness support sector workers are more than twice as likely to be Indigenous**

Over 1 in 10 (11.0%) homelessness support sector workers had an Indigenous identity in 2021, which was more than double the rate of all workers (4.1%). This rate changed very little from 2016, when 10.6% of homelessness support sector workers had an Indigenous identity compared with 4.0% of all workers. Despite the rate remaining stable within the homelessness support sector, the number of workers who reported an Indigenous identity increased by almost two-thirds (+65.7%), growing from 670 in 2016 to 1,110 in 2021.

## **Racialized groups account for more than one in four homelessness support sector workers**

In 2021, over one in four homelessness support sector workers (28.4%) were part of a racialized group. The census collects data on the main racialized groups in Canada, including: South Asian, Chinese, Black, Filipino, Arab, Latin American, Southeast Asian, West Asian, Korean and Japanese populations.

From 2016 to 2021, the number of racialized workers in the homelessness support sector more than doubled (+134.1%) from 1,230 to 2,880. While the growth of racialized groups in the homelessness support sector was stronger, it follows the trend seen among all workers who were part of a racialized group (+30.0%) and changes in the workforce that have been driven in large part by immigration.

## **Homelessness support sector workers are more likely to be in poverty**

Homelessness support sector workers were more likely to be in poverty (6.7%) than all workers in all sectors (6.0%) in 2020. This gap was also present in 2015 where 11.6% of homelessness support sector workers were in poverty compared with 10.7% of all workers in all sectors.

From 2015 to 2020, the gap in the poverty rates narrowed from 0.9 to 0.7 percentage points at the same time as median employment income for homelessness support sector workers shrunk. The median employment income for homelessness support sector workers was \$34,000 in 2020, 3.4% lower than the \$35,200 recorded in 2015, not adjusted for inflation. For all workers in all sectors, the median employment income grew 4.0% from \$39,600 in 2015 to \$41,200 in 2020, not adjusted for inflation.

[Income growth was faster for those with lower incomes in 2020](#), reflecting greater contributions of the Canada Child Benefit and COVID-19 pandemic relief benefits to the incomes of lower-income families. The contributions of these benefits to total income, when combined with employment income, helped drive the relative changes in poverty rates observed from 2015 to 2020.

## Note to readers

### Using the Census of Population labour indicators

The Census of Population collects labour data on the long-form questionnaire from a 25% sample of private households in Canada. The large sample size allows for detailed analysis on relatively small sectors of the labour force, including the homelessness support sector. The census includes demographic characteristics and a variety of labour-related variables, which provide a better understanding of the sector.

The homelessness support sector provides support to individuals experiencing homelessness, and to individuals accessing services that are targeted toward those at risk of facing housing crises. Labour market variables were employed to create a proxy for the homelessness support sector by using the two standard industry and occupation classification systems: the North American Industry Classification System (NAICS) and National Occupation Classification (NOC). The NAICS and NOC were used to identify workers depending on the characteristics of the employer and of their job, respectively.

Homelessness support sector workers can be found in the community food and housing, and emergency and other relief services industry (NAICS 6242). This industry group comprises establishments primarily engaged in the collection, preparation and delivery of food for the needy; providing short-term emergency shelter; and providing food, shelter, clothing, medical relief, resettlement and counselling to victims of domestic or international disasters or conflicts. There are also homelessness support sector workers employed in the social workers occupation (NOC 41300), which aims to help individuals, couples, families, groups, communities and organizations develop the skills and resources they need to enhance social functioning and provide counselling, therapy and referral to other supportive social services. Social workers also respond to other social needs and issues such as unemployment, racism and poverty. Finally, social and community service workers (NOC 42201), administer and implement a variety of social assistance programs and community services, and assist clients to deal with personal and social problems.

Workers in these industry and occupation categories clearly provide support to homeless people in Canada. However, it is also clear that they may also provide support for individuals who may not be facing homelessness. Taking that into consideration, a homelessness support sector worker was defined as someone working in the community food and housing, and emergency and other relief services industry, as either a social worker or a social and community service worker. This combination of industry and occupation more clearly overlaps with services that are targeted towards supporting Canadians facing homelessness. Any discussion of the homelessness support sector refers to jobs that fit this intersection between industry and occupations. Industry and occupation data are not available for second or third jobs. This definition, therefore, may not capture workers employed in homelessness support sector industries who had more than one job, workers temporarily hired through agencies or other contractors, or volunteers.

It should also be noted that narrowing down the population to this intersection provides an approximation of the targeted homelessness support sector population; however, employing a method based solely on labour market variables may lead to the exclusion of workers in other occupations that may in fact be providing services to homeless individuals as a result of focusing only on the intersection of specific NAICS and NOCs groupings. The analysis in this study also uses the characteristics of the primary job held during the reference week for people who worked at the time of the census. For those who did not, the industry and occupation information is for the job held for the longest period of time from January 2020 to May 2021.

### Income and poverty concepts

The reference period for income variables is the 2020 calendar year. At the same time, the industry and occupation data can refer to the job held during the reference week, but for people who did not work during the reference week, they can refer to the longest job held since the start of 2020. The differences in reference periods may result in an individual's income not corresponding directly to their job characteristics. In addition, fewer Canadians received employment income in 2020, particularly women, lower-income earners and older workers, while at the same time over two-thirds of Canadian adults received income from one or more COVID-19 pandemic relief programs.

The Poverty Reduction Act was adopted in June 2019. It set [targets to reduce poverty](#) in Canada and established the [Market Basket Measure \(MBM\)](#) as Canada's Official Poverty Line. The targets align with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal of [ending poverty, in all its forms, everywhere](#).

The MBM refers to Canada's official measure of poverty based on the cost of a specific basket of goods and services representing a modest, basic standard of living developed by Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC). The MBM thresholds represent the costs of specified qualities and quantities of food, clothing, shelter, transportation and other necessities for 53 different geographic areas—19 specific communities and 34 population centre size and province combinations. When the disposable income for the MBM of an economic family or a person not in an economic family falls below the threshold applicable to the family or the person, the person or every member in the case of an economic family is considered to be in poverty according to MBM.

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**Definitions, data sources and methods: survey number [5269](#).**

The article "[A profile of workers in the homelessness support sector, 2021](#)" is now available in the *Income Research Paper Series* ([75F0002M](#)).

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