Snapshot of an Object in Motion: Quantifying Homelessness

by

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Abstract

Politicians and planners increasingly require statistics to justify expenditures on social issues such as housing and homelessness. The federal government is now requiring communities that receive federal homelessness funding to develop local portraits of homelessness. Communities across Canada have shifted their goals from managing towards ending homelessness. This study explores the most useful way to measure homelessness for developing solutions to it and measure progress on reducing homelessness. Key issues are identified from expert interviews and four case studies. Three methods of homeless enumeration are assessed. Cost and implementation complexity, and comprehensiveness emerge as a major trade-off. Conducting infrequent comprehensive point-in-time counts is the recommended approach, along with establishing locally integrated administrative homelessness management information systems to track trends using administrative data. Also important are considerations of contextualizing homelessness within broader socio-economic trends, measuring dynamics of homelessness such as average duration, and using enumeration results to guide funding priorities.

Keywords: Homelessness; homelessness measurement; point-in-time count; period-prevalence count; data collection; addressing homelessness

Dedication

To Jannit Rabinovitch. I wish so much to sit and discuss these ideas with you. This research is also dedicated to all of the clients at Rock Bay Landing who taught me about life, human dignity, and survival. In particular MR, I hope you find home.

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Executive Summary

Policy problem and research objectives

As federal, provincial, and municipal governments shift their focus from managing to ending homelessness, measures to track homelessness trends and the impact of homeless interventions are increasingly required. Different measures are used in communities across Canada to quantify the extent of homelessness and the number of individuals experiencing homelessness in their region. Each of the methods provides a range of information and requires various levels of planning and resources to implement. Costs range from $12,500 up to $194,000 per enumeration. The federal government is now requiring communities receiving federal homelessness funding to develop local portraits of homelessness.

Without up-to-date, reliable, comprehensive data on homelessness, services and interventions will not target the specific needs of the local homeless population. Attempts to eliminate homelessness will be less effective, contributing to its persistence across the country. The goal of this research is to determine the most useful way to measure homelessness for developing solutions to it. An assessment of the advantages and disadvantages of current methods has not yet been conducted. What motivates this research is ensuring communities collect the most useful data in the least costly way to inform policies to solve homelessness.

Policy Options

Several homeless enumeration methods are considered and are reduced to three over-arching policy options. I first consider point-in-time (PIT) counts, in which a census of all individuals experiencing homelessness is conducted over a 24-hour period, consisting of both an outdoor count and a count in emergency shelters. The second method is a report card on homelessness with a period prevalence count. A report card joins several indicators of homelessness – such as social assistance rates, housing vacancy rates, and changes in the cost of housing – into a report outlining the extent of homelessness. In a period prevalence count, administrative data from emergency shelters are used to measure how many people experience homelessness over a period

of time, usually one year. The third option is a Homeless Management Information System or Homeless Individuals and Families Information System based report – a detailed analysis of administrative emergency shelter records. The analysis could include a longitudinal cluster analysis, which analyzes emergency shelter usage patterns over time.

Interviews and case studies

Expert interviews and case studies inform my analysis. I conducted interviews with 16 experts on homelessness including city councillors, city and regional planners, research experts, and community developers. I undertook case studies of four cities of different sizes that use different enumeration methods: Vancouver, Victoria, Toronto, and Calgary.

My thematic analysis of the interview results identifies key explicit and underlying themes. First, interviewees outlined four uses of homelessness measures: understanding the problem, measuring progress, planning purposes, and raising public awareness. Second, interviewees identified methodological limitations of current enumeration methods, such as inconsistent data collection, unrepresentativeness of people sampled, and the inability to measure the number of people experiencing hidden homelessness. Interviewees also discussed tension around expending resources on data collection in the context of limited budgets and service delivery demands.

Interviewees identified several types of data that they would like to have, but do not currently have access to. They expressed the need for homelessness enumerations to be situated within local socio-economic contexts such as changing housing costs, rates of in-migration, and demographic trends. Finally, interviewees discussed the need to conceptualize homelessness as a dynamic phenomenon. They discussed how temporal measures of homelessness provide insights into the nature of people's experiences.

Case studies revealed how leadership structures impact how enumerations are conducted and reported. The Calgary and Toronto cases demonstrate the ideal of having annual PIT count data coupled with ongoing administrative data from a

centralized homelessness management information system. This data, when taken together, allows the community to track changes in local experiences of homelessness in a timely manner. It is most effective when used to inform local funding priorities.

Policy assessments

The three policy options are assessed based on effectiveness in measuring homelessness and resources required. Three effectiveness criteria were used: (1) comprehensiveness of the measure – how many sub-populations are counted, (2) depth of information – how many variables does the method measure, and (3) effectiveness in tracking progress. The two resources criteria used are cost and implementation complexity.

No policy option clearly dominates the others. The analysis highlights that the cost and implementation complexity criteria trade-off with the comprehensiveness criterion. This trade-off raises the question of the importance of comprehensiveness.

Recommendations

My broad recommendation is that communities obtain a comprehensive sample of the homeless population on a periodic but infrequent basis, and more frequently use administrative data to track trends and changes in the dynamics of homelessness. I recommend communities conduct PIT counts every three to five years, doing a census in the downtown core and sample of outlying areas, like in Toronto. In communities where administrative data is available, I recommend conducting a longitudinal cluster analysis every three years to track changes in shelter usage patterns. I recommend report cards that contextualize homelessness within local socio-economic trends be produced in other years. I also recommend that the federal government develop funding for communities without an integrated homelessness management system to hold community consultations to negotiate implementing HIFIS.

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List of Acronyms

CAB	Community Advisory Body for Homelessness Partnering Strategy
CE	Community Entity for Homelessness Partnering Strategy
CHF	Calgary Homeless Foundation
HIFIS	Homeless Individuals and Families Information System
HMIS	Homeless Management Information System – Calgary
HPS	Homelessness Partnering Strategy
NHI	National Homelessness Initiative
PIT	Point-in-time
RSCH	Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness – Vancouver
SHARC	Streets to Homes Assessment and Referral Centre – Toronto
SMIS	Shelter Management Information System – Toronto
SNA	Street Needs Assessment – Toronto
SPDAT	Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool - Calgary
VAT	Vulnerability Assessment Tool – Vancouver
VAW	Violence Against Women, often in reference to VAW shelter

Chapter 1.

Introduction

Precisely quantifying the extent of homelessness in a community is nearly impossible. Individuals experiencing homelessness move in and out of accommodations daily. People experiencing homelessness are inherently mobile and transient because of their lack of secure housing and/or permanent address. Traditional census methods cannot capture the total number of individuals experiencing homelessness at a given point in time, nor the frequency, duration, or recurrence of it in a community. Because the number of individuals experiencing homelessness in a community is constantly in flux, accurately quantifying its extent is like taking a snapshot of an object in motion.

Despite these challenges, policy makers today increasingly rely on numeric statistics to demonstrate the extent of social issues such as homelessness (Widdowfield, 1999). Statistics are used to track the issue over time, to educate the public, to justify expenditures, to report to funders, and to inform regional, provincial and federal policies to address homelessness. Different statistics are used in communities across Canada to quantify the number of individuals experiencing homelessness in their region.[1]

The different methods for quantifying homelessness in Canada have a range of costs, provide a range of information, and require various levels of planning and resources to execute. Some methods require pre-existing administrative data sets, some require co-operation from multiple data providers, some require statistical expertise, and

[11] Communities throughout this study refers to the federal government's 61 designated communities in the Homelessness Partnering Strategy (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2014, December). In this context, 'community' ranges in population size from the city of Toronto, Ontario, to the city of Prince Albert, Saskatchewan.

some require recruitment of hundreds of volunteers. Additionally each quantification method produces information of varying utility for policy makers.

Measures to track homeless trends and the impact of homelessness interventions are increasingly required as federal, provincial, and municipal governments shift their focus from managing to ending homelessness. Some communities have already developed a consistent method of measuring homelessness. In select communities, these methods have become entrenched over time without critical re-assessment. Other communities have not yet developed a consistent measurement method. With the federal government's recent funding requirement that communities develop a local portrait of homelessness, communities that have not yet developed a consistent measurement method will have to select one.

What motivates this research is ensuring that communities across Canada produce the most useful data to inform the development of policies to address community homelessness and not waste precious funds and time on developing less informative, costly data. Without up-to-date, reliable, comprehensive data on homelessness, services and interventions will not target the specific needs of the local homeless population. Services will then be less targeted, resulting in less effective use of limited public funds. Without adequate data, attempts to eliminate homelessness will fail, contributing to its persistence across the country.

While certain quantification methods have been evaluated, a comparative assessment of current methods to determine the preferred method has not yet been completed. An assessment of the advantages and disadvantages is needed to ensure the most informative measures are used to inform policies to solve homelessness. Using the most informative measures should contribute to reducing it in the future.

In the context of limited funding, discussions of homelessness are often heated. Debate swirls around the definition of homelessness, the causes of it, and the best solutions for addressing it. In the homelessness arena, funds spent on data collection and research are funds not spent on increasing affordable housing and supports, or on improving service delivery. Moving beyond these debates is critical in order to identify

the most effective responses. And effective responses require solid information about the nature of the problem. As Farrell and Reissing (2004) assert:

> Enumeration of persons who are homeless or street homeless remains fraught with methodological challenges; however, increasingly obtaining more reliable estimates and an understanding of the characteristics and service needs of the population leading to more effective policy developments and intervention/prevention strategies are promising rewards for researchers, policy makers, homelessness advocates, and homeless persons alike. (p. 154)

This study investigates the enumeration of homelessness using qualitative research methods. These methods are semi-structured interviews with subject-matter experts and comparative case studies of community approaches to enumeration. The interview responses analyze more theoretical, abstract questions of enumeration, as well as the thinking of people involved in the issue. The case studies analyze the issue in more specific, concrete local contexts. Data sources include 16 interviews with subject matter experts, such as city councillors, city and regional planners, researcher experts, and community developers. The four case studies that inform the analysis are Vancouver, Victoria, Toronto, and Calgary. Methods for quantifying homelessness are broadly assessed on what information the methodology provides, the resources required for the methodology, as well as how useful the information is for stakeholders in measuring progress.

Chapter 2 outlines a background on homelessness in Canada and the related institutional jurisdiction. Chapter 3 discusses the academic debate on its enumeration. Chapter 4 outlines current methods for enumerating homelessness in Canada. Results from the expert interviews are summarized in Chapter 5, and the case studies are presented in Chapter 6. Chapter 7 outlines the three major policy options under consideration, and the criteria used to assess the policy options are presented in Chapter 8. The policy analysis and recommendations are presented in Chapters 9 and 10, respectively.

Chapter 2.

Background

This chapter summarizes the policy context of homelessness in Canada as a foundation for the subsequent analysis of enumeration methods. This chapter begins with a brief history of homelessness in Canada and the involvement of different levels of Canadian government in addressing it. Second, national attempts to measure homelessness are outlined, followed by a description of community-level measures. The chapter ends with a discussion of the policy shift in Canada from managing to ending homelessness.

2.1. Policy context

Over the past four decades, homelessness has become a growing and persistent social problem across Canada. No single level of government in Canada has responsibility for addressing it. All levels of government – federal, provincial, and municipal – are involved in creating policies to address it. Municipalities often bear the greatest associated costs.

Historical context

Starting in the 1980s, rates of homelessness in Canada steadily increased, but since the 2000s rates have stabilized (Gaetz *et al.*, 2013; Segaert, 2012). Some have called it a crisis or epidemic (Toronto Disaster Relief Committee, 1998). Previously homelessness was associated with images of a single male on skid row, often an alcoholic (Layton, 2000). It now affects a growing diversity of Canadians beyond the stereotypical single male to include women, youth, seniors, and families (Gaetz *et al.*, 2013; Segaert, 2012). Structural explanations for the increasing rates include loss of

federal funding for affordable housing, declining social assistance benefit rates, deinstitutionalization, and decreasing housing affordability in relation to income (Gaetz *et al.*, 2013; Moore and Skaburskis, 2004; Layton, 2000). Some argue that the origin of growing homelessness in Canada was the Mulroney government's dismantling of cooperative and social housing programs in the late 1980s (Layton, 2000). Others attribute the increases to the transfer of responsibility for social housing from the federal government to the provinces in 1993 and 1996 (Hulchanski, 2004). This restructuring was a part of major federal public expenditure reductions to address the federal budget deficit crisis in the 1990s.

Federal involvement

Public concern over homelessness mounted in the 1990s as its visibility increased in cities across Canada. In addition, a growing number of homeless people were dying in the streets from the cold (Layton, 2000). In 1999, because of mounting public pressure and high profile reports published at the time, the federal government introduced a de-centralized, community-based initiative, with funding dispersed to community groups addressing homelessness. The initiative was called the National Homelessness Initiative (NHI) (Klodawsky and Evans, 2014). Through that program, the federal government identified 61 cities across the country to develop community action plans on homelessness. Cities received federal funding through their Community Advisory Boards (CAB) or Community Entities (CE). The goal of the funding was to develop and implement the community action plans.

There have been several phases of the program since 1999. The first phase lasted from 1999-2001 with $759 million, and was renewed in a second phase with $405 million from 2003-2005 (Klodawsky and Evans, 2014). Initial goals in the first years of the program were convening community advisory boards and developing community action plans. Funding was renewed from 2007-2008 with $269.6 million under the new name – Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS). In 2009, the new program was extended to 2014. In 2014, HPS funding was renewed for 2015-2019 with $119 million per year. It has a new focus on housing-first initiatives (Gaetz *et al.*, 2014). HPS funding

is now also available to rural communities and Aboriginal-serving organizations, in addition to the 61 designated communities.[2]

Because of the decentralized structure of HPS, 61 designated communities across Canada have developed homelessness-related Community Advisory Boards (CAB). These CABs have produced mandated community plans to address homelessness. Developing the mandated HPS community plans has forced communities to develop local plans. These plans are federally mandated and are structured to meet HPS reporting and funding requirements and not to meet unique community needs. In addition to the required HPS community plans, many communities have also developed their own tailored plans to end homelessness. Community plans are discussed in more detail in Section 2.5.

One condition of receiving federal funds from HPS is using the Homelessness Individuals and Families Information System (HIFIS) as the software management program for emergency shelters. HIFIS is software for bed management developed by the federal government. Generally only emergency shelters that directly receive federal funding use HIFIS, which is provided to HPS community entities free of charge. HIFIS serves two purposes. First, it provides emergency shelters with free bed management software that includes case management tools. Second, it provides the federal government with consistent, comparable, and reliable data on homelessness across Canada. Data from HIFIS are shared between communities and HPS through Data Sharing Agreements (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2013).

In the 2014 renewal of HPS funding, the federal government added a requirement that communities develop a local portrait of homelessness to inform community Housing First initiatives. The federal government specified which data sources can be used (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2014, December). While most communities already produce enumeration reports, this funding requirement will force all CABs to produce community portraits of homelessness, by April 2015 for

[2] For more information on the history, evolution, and assessment of the National Homelessness Initiative and Homeless Partnering Strategy see Klodawsky and Evans (2014).

the 10 communities with the most significant homelessness problems,[3] and by April 2016 for smaller communities (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2014, December). Additionally, community portraits will have to be updated regularly so that Housing First initiatives are based on the most up-to-date information.

These programs demonstrate consistent federal engagement on homelessness. The decentralized, community-based nature of the program has aimed to support local efforts to prevent and reduce homelessness with minimal federal involvement (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2014, April). Annual funding levels however have decreased and are far less than what was spent on social housing in the 1980s. The federal government has not re-engaged in ensuring an adequate supply of affordable housing in Canada, and it lacks a comprehensive housing or homelessness strategy.

Provincial involvement

Beginning in the 1990s, provinces have been increasingly responsible for the provision of social housing. Hulchanski (2004) asserts that the redistribution of this responsibility to the provinces was decided unilaterally by the federal government and did not arise from a question of constitutional jurisdiction. By implication, this was a federal downloading of responsibility and was not a provincial attempt to gain more responsibility or autonomy (Housing Services Corporation, 2014; Klodawsky and Evans, 2014). The federal role and funding for social housing continues to decline, especially with the recent and upcoming expiration of long-term social housing agreements (Housing Services Corporation, 2014; Klodawsky and Evans, 2014).

In addition to being responsible for social housing, some provincial governments are also specifically addressing homelessness in their province. Provinces with specific plans include New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador, Quebec, and Alberta (Gaetz *et al.*, 2013). Ontario includes addressing homelessness in their *2014-2019 Poverty*

[3] The ten communities are: Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton, Winnipeg, Toronto, Hamilton, Ottawa, Montreal, Québec City and Halifax (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2014, December).

Reduction Plan (Ontario Government, 2014), while BC includes homelessness in their provincial housing strategy, *Housing Matters BC* (BC Government, 2014). In most provinces, homelessness is addressed alongside provincial responsibility for social housing.

Municipal involvement

Though homelessness does not explicitly fall within municipal responsibility, municipalities bear the greatest financial burden in dealing with it. Municipal and regional services, such as policing, emergency shelters, hospitals, and bylaw enforcement deal with many of the consequences of homelessness (Gaetz, 2012). Municipalities can also use their zoning bylaws to determine the location of social services, emergency shelters, and subsidized housing (Hulchanski, 2004). Furthermore, municipalities have a number of zoning instruments they can use to incentivize increasing the supply of affordable and rental housing (Newton, 2009). These strategies can help address the lack of affordable housing (Newton, 2009).

First Nations

Aboriginal people represent a disproportionate number of individuals experiencing homelessness in Canada (Patrick, 2014; Gaetz *et al.*, 2014). Despite this, First Nations governments have largely been excluded from discussions and plans to address homelessness (Patrick, 2014). Aboriginal Peoples face inadequate housing both on and off reserves. Research has shown that inadequate on-reserve housing is tied to urban aboriginal homelessness. There is a growing movement in British Columbia for municipal governments addressing homelessness to meet and work with First Nations governments. These communities recognize the connection between on- and off-reserve housing for First Nations people, and recognize that many experiencing off-reserve homelessness have ties with reserve communities where housing is poor (Patrick, 2014; Gaetz *et al.*, 2014).

2.2. Why measure homelessness?

Today, policy makers, politicians, and the media increasingly demand and expect statistics on homelessness and other social issues (Cloke *et al.*, 2001; Widdowfield, 1999). Statistical data are used to demonstrate the magnitude of a problem and show how many people are affected (Widdowfield, 1999). Statistics are also used to inform and justify spending decisions (Marianne Alto, interview, December 8, 2014). Today the demand for quantitative indicators is even more pronounced with the rise of social media and infographics as major mechanisms for discussing social issues.

Over the past few decades, the need for statistics to describe the extent of homelessness has grown as the federal government, provinces, and municipalities begun investing significant resources into interventions to address it. Policy makers need to know which people in what circumstances are experiencing homelessness in their communities, and what levels and types of supports they require to exit and successfully stay housed. Meanwhile, the federal government increasingly wants to quantify the issue in order to justify their continued investment in HPS and to track the outcomes of their funding.

2.3. National measures

As the federal government began committing funding to addressing homelessness, the desire to quantify the extent of it nationally has increased. The federal government has made several attempts over the past decades to quantify the number of people experiencing homelessness in Canada. Though results vary between measures, all measures demonstrate that this is a persistent problem for hundreds of thousands of people in Canada each year.

The first federal quantification of homelessness was a 1987 report by the Canadian Council on Social Development (Segaert, 2012). The report used statistics from emergency shelters across Canada to estimate the number of individuals who accessed services in 1987. The report estimated that, in 1987, between 130,000 and 250,000 individuals stayed in emergency shelters in Canada (Segaert, 2012).

The second national attempt was completed by Statistics Canada as part of the 1991 Census. Because of poor data quality, the results were never released. After the failure of the 1991 Census, HPS estimated that between 150,000 and 300,000 unique individuals experience homelessness each year in Canada based on figures from the 1987 report and 1991 Census estimates (Segaert, 2012). This was an imprecise estimate.

Three recent reports estimate the number of individuals experiencing homelessness in Canada: HPS's *The National Shelter Study: Emergency Shelter Use in Canada 2005-2009* and Homeless Hub's *The State of Homelessness in Canada 2013,* and *2014*. The HPS study used data from HIFIS and Toronto's Homelessness Management Information System (HMIS) to produce an estimate of the number of individuals experiencing homelessness in Canada from 2005 to 2009 (Segaert, 2012). The study included adult, youth, women/children, and family shelters. Using administrative data, the study estimated the number of unique individuals accessing emergency shelters in Canada in each year. The study estimated that, in 2005, 156,030 unique individuals experienced emergency shelter homelessness in Canada, and 146,726 individuals experienced it in 2009.

In 2013, Homeless Hub, in partnership with the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness, produced the first national estimate from outside the government. Building on HPS's 2012 report, this report adds estimates of groups excluded from the 2012 report including women staying in Violence Against Women (VAW) shelters, people who are unsheltered, people staying in temporary institutional accommodation, and estimates of the hidden homeless (Gaetz *et al.*, 2013). Numbers from recent regional homeless counts are also included. This report estimates that on any given night, an average of 30,000 individuals experience homelessness in Canada, 50,000 are hidden homeless, and annually at least 200,000 individuals experience homelessness. The Homeless Hub figures do not include estimates of the number of Canadians at risk of homelessness or provisionally accommodated. Therefore the 200,000 figure is a minimum estimate. In 2014, these figures were re-estimated at a minimum of 235,000 individuals experiencing homelessness in Canada each year, excluding those at risk or

provisionally accommodated (Gaetz *et al.*, 2014). These figures show that homelessness is a persistent issue for a large number of Canadians each year.

2.4. Community measures

Municipal and regional governments in Canada typically use one of three methods for quantifying the extent of homelessness in their communities. Some communities use more than one. The three main methods are

- Point-in-time counts
- Period prevalence counts, and
- Report cards.

Homeless counts, point-in-time (PIT) counts, or surveys try to quantify the total number of individuals experiencing unsheltered and emergency sheltered homelessness in a community over a given 24-hour period (Policy and Practice Branch, 2010). Period prevalence counts use pre-existing administrative data to quantify how many unique individuals experience homelessness in a community over a specific time period. Report cards involve amalgamating a number of indicators together into a single report to illustrate the extent of homelessness in a community.

As part of the federal government's push toward quantifying homelessness in communities across the country, the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, a non-governmental academic organization, is developing a standardized toolkit for communities to conduct PIT counts. The resource will be provided to communities free of charge and include a draft planning framework, draft budget, volunteer training materials, etc. The PIT count toolkit is part of an initiative to develop consistent Canada-wide point-in-time count data.[4]

[4] In February 2015, HPS launched the first national initiative to conduct a coordinated PIT count in communities across Canada in January 2016. To find out more visit: http://www.esdc.gc.ca/eng/communities/homelessness/point_in_time.shtml

2.5. Community plans to end homelessness

An important change in Canada over the past decade has been the shift from managing to ending homelessness (Pauly *et al.*, 2012b). More and more communities across Canada have initiated community plans to end homelessness, with specific targets and timelines. This shifting focus impacts which measures are most informative. When managing homelessness, community measures focus on the quantity of services demanded to ensure sufficient and appropriate services are available to meet demand. When trying to end homelessness, community measures focus on the need levels of the diversity of people experiencing it. As well, data on the number of people with each level of needs is required to determine how much of which types of housing and interventions are required. Furthermore, understanding which interventions are most effective for which sub-populations is also crucial when trying to end homelessness (Pauly *et al.*, 2012b).

Several communities have adopted official plans to end homelessness. These communities include Fredericton, Montreal, Ottawa, Toronto, Hamilton, Kingston, Peel Region, Chatham-Kent, Winnipeg, Saskatoon, Lethbridge, Calgary, Edmonton, Red Deer, Wood Buffalo, Medicine Hat, Vancouver, and Victoria among others. These plans specify the year in which homelessness will be ended and the community's specific goal around ending it. For example, the Vancouver goal is to end street homelessness. The Chatham-Kent goal is that no household is homeless for more than 30 days. And the Calgary goal is that no family or individual is homeless for more than 7 days.

A brief sample of community plans to end homelessness in Canada reveals a range of statistics used to document the extent of homelessness. Table 2.1 shows the most commonly used statistics.

Table 2.1 Types of statistics used in community plans to end homelessness

Measure	Community		
Annual emergency shelter statistics	Chatham-Kent	Medicine Hat	Toronto
Point-in-time count	Vancouver	Lethbridge	Saskatoon
Number of households on social housing waitlists	Chatham-Kent	Medicine Hat	Toronto
Average rent levels	Vancouver	Medicine Hat	Toronto
Results from survey of homeless individuals	Chatham-Kent	Saskatoon	Vancouver
Number of households in core housing need	Medicine Hat	Toronto	Vancouver
Number of households evicted (time period)	Medicine Hat (6 months)	Toronto (one year)	

Data for this table were drawn from an overview of community plans to end homelessness across Canada. The plans are found on individual community-profile pages at: www.homelesshub.ca/CommunityProfiles.

Other statistics used in community plans include demographic characteristics of homeless individuals in the community, number of social housing units required, number of households accessing rental assistance funds, rental vacancy rates, the change in the number of emergency shelter beds, and service-based point-in-time counts. These statistics, taken together, measure the extent of homelessness in a community.

2.6. The cost of homelessness

Part of the shift from managing to ending homelessness is the recognition that managing it is costly. Gaetz (2012) argues that the cost of the status quo – of having large numbers of Canadians without housing – exceeds the costs of solving homelessness or providing people with affordable housing. Gaetz outlines the high public costs of having people stay in emergency shelters, access day programs and soup kitchens, and use additional emergency services. Research also shows that homelessness contributes to worsened physical and mental health outcomes, resulting in higher health care utilization (Kuhn and Culhane, 1998). Additionally, visible homelessness and a lack of privacy can lead to increased interactions with police and the justice system, which are high cost systems. Public costs can be reduced by up to 41% by providing the housing and support services needed for people to exit homelessness (Gaetz, 2012). A study by the Calgary Homeless Foundation, cited in the

Gaetz study, found that average daily costs are almost double for people who experience homelessness over many years than for people who are transitionally or temporarily homeless. The public cost of homelessness is one argument for addressing the issue.

2.7. Background summary

Homelessness has been a growing concern in Canada since the 1990s, with all levels of government involved in addressing the problem. In recent years provincial and local governments have shifted their focus toward ending homelessness. Federal and regional quantifications of the extent of homelessness are becoming more common and important to measure progress on ending it. Without good data, interventions will not effectively target local needs, and rates of homelessness will persist. Not only is this unjust for those who continue to experience homelessness in Canada, but it is costly to Canadian taxpayers.

Several major stakeholder groups emerge from the preceding section. The major stakeholders are city and regional planners, city councillors, provincial ministries, federal HPS analysts, leaders in the homeless-serving sector, and local and national homeless advocates and activists. These stakeholder groups each have different goals and strategies for ending homelessness, different definitions of it and different desires from enumerations. Individuals experiencing homelessness are another stakeholder group, as more informative enumerations will ensure that community services and housing interventions are more responsive to their needs. While these groups have differing goals and strategies, they all want effective interventions that reduce homelessness.

Chapter 3.

Theoretical Issues

Enumeration methodologies may not seem like a hotly contested subject; however, “estimates of the magnitude and extent of homelessness” have been “the target of heated political debate” for over twenty years (Veness, 1993, p.323). Enumerating a mobile, diverse, and statistically rare group of people is challenging. All homeless enumeration methodologies have limitations. Previous discussions of homelessness were “criticized for implications drawn from studies … fraught with significant methodological shortcomings” (Farrell and Reissing, 2004, p.144). And while methods of enumeration have improved over time, many questions and criticisms remain relevant. Debate arises in part from the urgent nature of homelessness and the sense that resources dedicated to it should be disbursed as effectively as possible (Girard 2006; Hulchanski, 2000; Peressini *et al.*, 2009; Layton, 2000).

This brief literature review outlines the major academic debates surrounding homelessness enumeration. First, I outline the recently introduced Canadian definition of homelessness and critical discussions of the definition. Then I summarize criticisms of the use of numbers to represent complex social issues, such as homelessness. The following section discusses how homeless enumerations can yield inaccurate and unrepresentative results. The literature review concludes with a discussion of the value of obtaining accurate data in the context of limited funding and significant human needs.

3.1. Defining homelessness in Canada

Debates on enumeration methods need to be contextualized by a discussion of the definition of homelessness, as different definitions have implications for how it is measured. In 2012, the Canadian Homelessness Research Network (CHRN) created an

official Canadian definition. The CHRN (2012) defined homelessness not as a single state, but as a "range of housing and shelter circumstances." The CHRN (2012) created a typology encompassing a range of possible circumstances, including:

- a state of being unsheltered,
- emergency sheltered,
- provisionally accommodated, and
- at risk of homelessness

Unsheltered refers to sleeping outdoors or in spaces not fit for human habitation such as a car. Emergency sheltered refers to staying in emergency shelters and violence against women (VAW) shelters. Provisionally accommodated refers to staying in accommodation without security of tenure or without a lease, such as institutional accommodation without other housing, transitional or program-based housing, living in a hotel/motel, or staying with family or friends with no guarantee of ongoing accommodation (CHRN, 2012). Living at risk of homelessness is split into two sub-groups, imminent risk and general risk. Imminent risk can be because of a sudden loss of employment, being served an eviction notice, living in fear of violence, or a relationship breakdown. General risk of homelessness includes living in overcrowded housing, in accommodation that does not meet health and safety standards, or paying more than 30% of pre-tax household income on housing (CHRN, 2012).

Part of the CHRN typology was the recognition that "for many people homelessness is not a static state but rather a fluid experience" (CHRN, 2012). This means that individuals experiencing homelessness often transition in and out of various states of homelessness over time. Therefore, measuring homelessness in a community is like taking a snapshot of an object in motion. Understanding the dynamic nature of homelessness involves measuring both the extent of and duration of various experiences. For example, measuring the number of people who are unsheltered, and the average duration of people remaining unsheltered contributes to a dynamic understanding. Other dynamic measures include the number of people who experience homelessness for over one year, and the average number of separate times, or

episodes,[5] people stay in emergency shelter over a year. Understanding homelessness as a dynamic phenomenon adds new variables to the analysis including duration, frequency, and type of homelessness.

This definition was introduced recently and has not yet been uniformly adopted. For example in Vancouver, BC, the Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness considers people to be homeless if they do not have security of tenure beyond 30 days, are living outdoors, are staying in an emergency shelter or VAW shelter, or are staying temporarily with another household (Greater Vancouver Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness, 2014, July). The distinction with this definition is that individuals living in transitional program-based housing are not considered homeless so long as their tenure extends beyond 30 days, even if their housing is not covered under the Residential Tenancy Act. According to the Regional Steering Committee, people who are provisionally accommodated are not counted as homeless (interview, November 11, 2014). The Regional Steering Committee's measures are not consistent with CHRN definition-based measures.

When operationalized, different definitions have a significant impact on the number and types of individuals counted in homeless enumerations (Farrell and Reissing, 2004; Layton, 2000). Differences in the definition also affect the demographic groups captured in enumerations. Farrell and Reissing (2004) found that the representation of women and youth significantly varied depending on the operational definition. Definitions of homelessness are often based on eligibility criteria for social housing programs. In Canada, being in core housing need,[6] the eligibility criteria for most social housing, is used as a threshold for being at risk of homelessness.

[5] An episode of homelessness is any period of time spent homeless not separated by a tenancy. The episode may be broken up by periods of time in prison or the hospital or couch surfing, but is still considered the same episode so long as the individual has not acquired housing.

[6] Core housing need is defined as a household spending more than 30% of its pre-tax income on rental housing, including utilities, at the median rent level of the neighbourhood (Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2014). The 30% threshold for housing affordability was introduced in the 1980s to ration the provision of social housing (Hulchanski, 1995).

In addition, different definitions are often influenced by different political or administrative motivations (Cloke *et al.*, 2001; Widdowfield, 1999). Politicians and policy makers may want a limited definition to justify minimal expenditures. In contrast, advocates and service providers may want a broad definition to justify maximum resources for their organizations (Farrell and Reissing, 2004). As Cloke *et al.* (2001) write:

> Far from being a matter of simple enumeration, the way in which homelessness is defined and quantified is thus very much a political process which reflects not only ideological constructions concerning who is and who is not deemed to be deserving of support, but also more material considerations in terms of the level of resources available to deal with the problem. (p.262)

Definitions impact the results of enumerations. And enumeration results impact resource allocation and funding justifications, which in turn impacts the people experiencing homelessness. Because of the issues regarding definitions raised in this paper, I will not be taking a stance on a particular definition.

3.2. Problems with numbers

The increasing demand for and requirement of having statistics on homelessness described in Section 2.2 have some negative consequences. One consequence of the reliance on key indicators and statistics is that issues that cannot easily be quantified, such as rural homelessness, often go un-discussed (Cloke *et al.*, 2001). As a result, these issues are often under-resourced (Cloke *et al.*, 2001).

Increasing reliance on statistics also limits the ability to discuss the complexities of homelessness. Hulchanski (2000) argues that counting the number of homeless people assumes a homogenous homeless population without distinguishing how many times and for how long an individual has experienced it. Numerical representations of complex issues create an illusion of objectivity. Numbers provide a veneer of objectivity that can obscure the motivation behind defining homelessness in a certain way (Cloke *et al.*, 2001). Reducing an issue to a number simplifies a complex phenomenon into a precise number and omits explanations for the selected definition. Cloke *et al.* (2001)

describe how quantifying a social phenomenon such as homelessness reduces discussions of interactional complexities. This simplification process can be politically motivated, for example by avoiding politically divisive topics such as poverty, a living wage, the right to housing etc. By publicizing a single figure, subtleties such as the average duration of homelessness, the number of children experiencing homelessness, and changes to the average cost of housing can be glossed over.

3.3. Inaccurate and unrepresentative statistics

Bentley (1995) outlines several additional overarching problems with homelessness enumeration. First, individuals experiencing homelessness are statistically rare and often hidden, therefore counting the entire population is nearly impossible. Second, it is not possible to accurately discern every person who is and isn't experiencing homelessness, even once a definition has been agreed upon. Individuals may also choose not to disclose whether they are experiencing homelessness. Third, it is a fluid state. Someone who is homeless today may have housing tomorrow, someone with housing today may become homeless tomorrow, and episodes can range from one night to several years. While these problems were identified almost 20 years ago, they remain relevant to current discussions.

Another criticism of street counts is their reliance on enumerators identifying who is experiencing homelessness, which is often dependent on the enumerator's stereotypes of individuals experiencing homeless (Farrell and Reissing, 2004). Variations in how enumerators identify individuals experiencing homelessness can create inconsistencies in data collection. Another concern is that it is the enumerator who decides who counts as being homeless based on a predetermined definition, and it is not the individual who decides whether he or she is homeless (Veness, 1993). Additionally, verifying someone's self-report of homelessness is not possible, such as whether the individual has access to other accommodation that they are choosing not to access (Bentley, 1995). These challenges affect the accuracy of homelessness enumerations.

Moreover, statistical samples of any population have a margin of error. A major criticism of homeless enumeration methodologies is their systematic exclusion of certain sub-groups of individuals (Peressini *et al.*, 2009). Critics argue that excluding hard-to-reach sub-groups means the most vulnerable are under-counted. This under-count could result in insufficient resources being dedicated to addressing this population's needs.

Point-in-time counts have specifically been criticized for over-sampling chronic homelessness and under-sampling other homeless populations, such as youth, families with children, or the temporarily homeless (Segaert, 2012). Segaert (2012, p.1) explains how "point-in-time counts exclude those who are not experiencing a homeless episode at the time of the count, meaning those who are chronically homeless have a greater likelihood of being included." Because point-in-time counts occur over a short period of time, they under-sample people experiencing homelessness over a short duration and oversample people experiencing chronic homelessness. And individuals experiencing chronic homelessness may significantly differ demographically and in terms of needs from other groups experiencing homelessness. This under and oversampling may paint an unrepresentative portrait in a community.

3.4. Are the data worth the cost?

Beyond issues of accuracy, debate exists within the literature on the utility of precisely quantifying the extent of homelessness. Some researchers acknowledge the importance of quantifying it for policy makers. For example, Farrell and Reissing (2004) describe how determining "the magnitude of the street homeless population in the city was important information for municipal government representatives" (p.151). Cloke *et al.* (2001) explain how numerical figures and statistics are increasingly important when arguing for public expenditures on an issue. As outlined in Section 2.2, statistics are increasingly required to prove the existence of the problem and to justify public expenditures.

Hulchanski (2000) on the other hand challenges the need for more precise numbers when we already know that thousands of individuals are experiencing

homelessness in Canada. He and Girard (2006) ask whether precision should be prioritized in light of the urgent demand for resources for homelessness interventions.

> Why should the National Post – or any of us – be worried about better statistics, when there are certainly thousands? Why not at least start by resettling a few hundred into adequate, affordable housing rather than invest time and energy in counting? (Hulchanski, 2000, p.1)

Girard (2006) takes this criticism further by questioning the relationship between precise measures of homelessness and the effectiveness of public policies. Girard asks whether quantifications can be directly tied to the effectiveness of public policies and community interventions. She argues that if public policies cannot be directly tied to precise quantifications, then resources should not be prioritized for quantifications. The relationship between enumeration and the development of policies to address community homelessness motivates my research. The goal of this research is to determine the most useful way to measure homelessness for developing solutions to it.

Chapter 4.

Quantification Methods

This chapter outlines in detail the major methods used to quantify homelessness in communities across Canada. Methodologies are described along with their limitations. Section 4.5 outlines alternative measures not frequently used in Canada but worth noting because they demonstrate new homelessness enumeration possibilities.

4.1. Point-in-time counts

Many cities in Canada conduct point-in-time (PIT) homeless counts to measure the extent of homelessness in their communities. Homeless counts, surveys, or PIT counts attempt to capture the highest proportion of individuals experiencing unsheltered and emergency sheltered homelessness in a community over one night, 24 hours or another time frame (Policy and Practice Branch, 2010). Communities that conduct annual, biennial or tri-annual counts or surveys include Toronto, Saskatoon, Calgary, Edmonton, and Metro-Vancouver (Homelesshub, 2014).

Homeless counts are the only enumeration methodology that captures those who are unsheltered and who may not regularly access social services. PIT counts comprise two components. The first is an overnight count of those in emergency shelters, including overnight and long-stay emergency shelters, youth shelters, as well as VAW shelters (Policy and Practice Branch, 2010). The second component is a count of individuals who are unsheltered or are sleeping rough (Policy and Practice Branch, 2010). This second component is conducted during daylight hours, often with the help of hundreds of volunteers. Volunteers complete the street count by walking around neighbourhoods pre-identified as where people often stay outdoors. Having hundreds of

volunteers participate in the count raises community awareness of homelessness through public engagement.

One advantage of PIT counts is that while the count is being conducted, administering a survey to collect demographic and qualitative information is convenient and cost effective. Examples of information collected in a survey include: barriers to housing, how many times an individual has experienced homelessness over the past year, which services they access, and demographic information (Policy and Practice Branch, 2010). PIT counts can also involve strategies to count specific hard-to-reach sub-populations, such as youth. Metro Vancouver initiated a youth strategy in its 2011 and 2014 counts to ensure that a greater proportion of youth experiencing homelessness were counted.

A major criticism of PIT counts is that they relatively over-capture chronically homeless individuals and under-count individuals experiencing homelessness for a short duration (Segaert, 2012). Street-based counts and censuses of individuals experiencing homelessness can be complex, costly, and cannot capture all people (Peressini *et al.*, 2010). Counting every person sleeping rough or in a space not fit for human habitation over a 24-hour period is not possible, especially in large urban areas and/or sparsely populated rural or park areas. Though volunteers are typically used to conduct the count, coordinating a regional count and analyzing data gathered from hundreds of volunteers can be costly. Another criticism of PIT counts is that results can vary by changes in the weather (Jadidzadeh and Kneebone, 2015). Thus trends in PIT count results could be as much a reflection of the weather on the day of the count, as a reflection of the local homeless population.

Some critics recommend shelters, soup kitchens, and drop-in centres as the most effective locations for conducting counts and surveys as they capture the greatest number of people, most cost-effectively. Shelters, drop-in centres, and soup kitchens have been shown in research to cover about 90-95% of homeless populations (Peressini *et al.*, 2009). A service-based PIT count saves resources spent on recruiting and training volunteers, mapping out a city, and planning a count over a large geographic area. As far as I'm aware no community in Canada uses this methodology. A service-based PIT

count includes not only people staying in emergency shelters or people who are sleeping rough, but also those who are couch surfing and access drop-in services during the day. In a service-based PIT count, drop-in services that individuals experiencing homelessness access, such as soup kitchens and emergency shelters, survey their clients on one day to identify how many individuals accessing the service were homeless the night before. Both a count and a survey can be administered at the social service locations.

4.2. Period prevalence counts

An alternative to PIT counts is period prevalence counts. Period prevalence counts are where an administrative dataset is used to quantify how many separate people experience homelessness in a community over one year. In a period prevalence count, an administrative database is used to generate a report identifying how many people stayed in the emergency shelter, or in all emergency shelters within the database, over one year. Period counts result in higher numbers of individuals than PIT counts as the sample size is 365 days (Farrell and Reissing, 2004). A crucial component of period prevalence counts is non-duplication of individuals in the count. Period prevalence counts are possible when one organization manages all emergency shelter services in a community, when an integrated data system exists between service providers, or when the community has only one emergency shelter. Examples of communities that use period prevalence counts are Ottawa and Victoria.

Period counts, based on emergency shelter data, do not include individuals who do not access shelters over the course of the year. They do however include anyone who has accessed a shelter once. Period counts cannot illuminate emergency shelter utilization patterns over the period as someone who stayed in emergency shelter for 360 days of the year will be counted in the same way as someone who stayed in a shelter for one night. Period counts can include average lengths of stay, but do not provide distribution statistics on how many people stayed for different durations.

In some communities, PIT counts are used as the basis for estimating the number of individuals experiencing homelessness over the course of a year. In 2005, the

American Corporation for Supportive Housing published a report outlining how to project from a PIT count to an annual estimate (Burt and Wilkins, 2005). In 2014, the Metro Vancouver Homelessness Count adapted the estimate formula to local contexts to produce an annual estimate for Metro Vancouver (Greater Vancouver Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness, 2014, July). This methodology for annual estimates is useful when a community has conducted a PIT count and when annual un-duplicated administrative statistics are not available.

4.3. Report cards

Another main methodology for quantifying the extent of homelessness in a community is the report card method. Examples of communities in Canada that utilize this method include St. John's, PEI, Halifax, Moncton, Fredericton, Ottawa, York, Hamilton, Winnipeg, Victoria, Whitehorse, and Yellowknife (Homelesshub, 2014).

Report cards involve amalgamating several indicators into a single report to illustrate the extent of homelessness in the community. Communities are given a grade on how their progress in addressing homelessness is going based on the indicators. Often indicators are derived from administrative data from a number of sources. Indicators are usually divided into sections such as income levels, housing affordability, emergency shelter, demand for social housing, and statistics on new housing units or rent supplements.

Sections on housing affordability include average rental price levels, change in rent price levels, and vacancy rates. Income discussions usually include identifying the minimum wage, monthly social assistance and disability amounts, and the median wage level in the region. Income levels are often compared to average housing costs, pointing to the impossibility of paying for housing and utilities below certain income levels. Emergency shelter utilization sections usually include the number of bed nights used over the past year, turn-away statistics, average length of stay, number of unique individuals, and comparisons with previous years. Most report cards include both adult and youth shelters, though not all include VAW shelters.

Figures on affordable housing are used in report cards to illustrate the availability and demand for supportive and affordable housing in a community. Report cards will often include a statistic on the number of households in core housing need in a community. Some report cards also include the number of households on waitlists for social housing, as well as the change in the number of social housing units over the period. Statistics on food bank utilization are sometimes included as an indicator of those at risk.

Because report cards rely on statistics from a variety of sources, they involve coordinated engagement from local service providers, emergency shelters, regional Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation offices, provincial ministries responsible for housing, and local social housing providers. Additionally, data providers sometimes want approval on how their data are being used, prior to report card publication. Communities that conduct PIT counts typically do not also produce report cards.

4.4. HMIS/HIFIS based reports

Producing HMIS or HIFIS based reports is possible only in communities where several shelters use the HIFIS or HMIS software. These reports enable a detailed data analysis of shelter users. HIFIS includes demographic information such as age and gender, and aboriginal and veterans' status were added as required information in 2013. Saskatoon produced a HIFIS report in 2010 (Community-University Institute for Social Research, 2010). Victoria produced a report in 2014 using HIFIS data that analyzes longitudinal emergency shelter utilization patterns over time (Rabinovitch *et al.*, 2014). Because these data are collected through consistent and reliable software, more statistically complex reports can be generated. Another advantage of HIFIS is that it prevents double-counting individuals between shelters.

Both the City of Toronto and Calgary have a HMIS system. Toronto and Calgary's HMIS systems function in a similar way to HIFIS, but are unique to those cities. Data from HMIS provides information about shelter occupancy, service utilization trends, and demographic information about emergency shelter users. HMIS data can also be used to produce in-depth reports on emergency shelter utilization.

4.5. Alternative measures

In addition to the above methods for quantifying homelessness, several other methods have been used in other locations around the world. Some of these methods have been piloted in Canada but are not consistently used.

Hidden homeless survey

Traditional telephone surveys have been used to identify the proportion of individuals experiencing hidden homelessness, e.g. couch surfing or staying with friends or relatives. This methodology was first used in Los Angeles and was replicated in Vancouver, Toronto, and five smaller communities in British Columbia (Eberle *et al.*, 2009; SPARC BC, 2011). This method involves phoning a representative sample of households to ask if anyone is staying in their home who cannot stay indefinitely. This question differentiates between a young adult living with his/her parents who can stay indefinitely, and a guest staying with the family without an invitation to stay indefinitely (Eberle *et al.*, 2009). Based on the results from the telephone survey, a regional estimate is developed. This is the only methodology that estimates hidden homelessness.

Longitudinal cluster techniques

One new way to quantify patterns of homelessness over time is through a clustering technique. First tested in Philadelphia and New York City, this method has been applied in Ottawa, Toronto, Guelph, and Victoria (Kuhn and Culhane, 1998; Aubry *et al.*, 2013; Rabinovitch *et al.*, 2014). This technique uses administrative data from emergency shelters over several years to develop groups of shelter users with similar patterns of shelter use (Rabinovitch *et al.*, 2014). Individual files are grouped together based on their average number of episodes and average total days stayed over the period. The result is a proportional breakdown of shelter users over the period by stay pattern – an estimate of the proportion of users who access shelters once or twice, who access shelters many times, or who access shelters for a long period of time. A community-wide homeless management information system is necessary for this technique to track people's emergency shelter use between shelters. This technique can

help identify the nature of people's homelessness in a community by measuring the average duration and number of episodes of the different clusters of shelter users. For example, this technique can identify what proportion of people staying in emergency shelters stay only once and do not return, or by contrast, what proportion of people stay for very long periods of time – an average of 6 months at a time. This information can be used to provide policy-relevant insights into the support needs of individuals accessing emergency shelters. For example, individuals who stay only once or twice may benefit more from homelessness prevention services than from housing-based services (Kuhn and Culhane, 1998). By contrast, individuals with stays of over one year may require more intensive supports to successfully stay housed.

Chapter 5.

Interview Results

5.1. Interview Methodology

In-depth interviews were conducted in person and over the phone with stakeholders on regional and national homelessness issues. Interviews were used to glean expertise, to understand how communities implement enumerations, and to understand the perceptions and opinions of experts on enumeration. Interviews examined what enumerations are used in the region, how the enumeration results are used to inform responses to homelessness, what additional data would be useful, what limitations there are to the community's quantification method, and what resources are available in the community for quantification. Interviews were conducted with 16 municipal and regional planners, provincial analysts, community developers, municipal politicians, and researchers. These interviewees were selected to gain a broad understanding of the issue from different perspectives. Interviewees were also contacted based on their work in one of the four selected case study communities. Interview participants were identified through my professional and personal networks. 14 interviews took place in person and two took place over the phone. All interviews were recorded using a voice recorder and were transcribed from the recordings. Interview participants were asked whether their name, title, and the name of their organization should be kept confidential or could be used. Consent was given for the use of all names and titles included in this capstone. A sample interview schedule is provided in Appendix A and a list of interviewees who consented to having their names released is found in Appendix B.

Interview transcripts were analyzed using a qualitative thematic analysis. The transcripts were coded by subject area using the NVivo application. Explicit and

underlying themes on enumeration were then identified across the subject areas (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Quotes were selected for inclusion based on precision, and the extent to which they captured ideas raised by several interviewees.

Several significant themes emerged from the interview results. Some themes were explicitly identified by interviewees, while others emerged through the thematic analysis as latent issues underlying interviewees' responses (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Interviewees described four core pieces of data that they need to understand the extent of homelessness in their community. The first is a count of the number of people experiencing homelessness in their community, either from a one-day PIT count, or from a period prevalence count. The second is a demographic breakdown of those individuals, including age, gender, aboriginal identity, immigrant status, etc. The third is information on people's duration of homelessness, though this information is not always available. The last piece of information, most often lacking, is an aggregated measure of acuity, or support needs of people experiencing homelessness in the community. These four items form the measure for the depth-of-information criterion used in the subsequent policy assessment in Chapter 9.

A number of interviewees stressed the importance of consistent measures for establishing a baseline. Once that baseline is established, communities can begin more nuanced assessments of progress from that baseline. As Stephen Gaetz explained, "It helps you understand the problem. It gives you a baseline for measuring progress. Can't tell if your interventions are working if you can't measure progress" (interview, November 4, 2014). A baseline is essential for measuring progress on addressing homelessness. This baseline became the gauge for the tracking-progress criterion used in the policy options assessment.

5.2. Use of measures

Interview participants identified three major uses of homelessness-related data. Uses include increasing understanding, measuring progress, and planning purposes.

Understanding the problem

The most basic use of homelessness enumeration is to increase decision makers' understanding of the issue locally. Interviewees with decision-making power, such as funders or city councillors, spoke of the importance of quantifying the issue in order to defend or justify spending resources on addressing it. As Councillor Alto stated, "we use it [the Report Card on Homelessness] to inform our decisions and to defend our decisions" (interview, December 8, 2014). PIT counts also raise community awareness about the issue through the hundreds of volunteers who participate in the count, and media publicity of the results.

Measuring progress

Second, count results are used to measure changes in the rates of homelessness and how the community is progressing on plans and initiatives to solve the issue. As Councillor Meggs stated: "It's the only sound way to proceed, to measure if you're making progress" (interview, November 25, 2014). In communities that are investing heavily in new housing and interventions, such as Vancouver, enumeration results are used to measure the impact of the investments on the number of individuals who continue to experience homelessness in that community.

An emergent theme in the interviews was that there are both positive and negative implications when the number of people experiencing homelessness in a community stabilizes. As one expert identified, when "the numbers have stabilized, that's got huge implications in terms of knowing that the work we're doing is making a difference… Shows that if you didn't do anything, we'd be back to the increases we saw in the past" (interview, November 11, 2014).

Other interviewees emphasized that stable numbers indicate a continued inflow of people. As the Executive Director of the Greater Victoria Coalition to End Homelessness Andrew Wynn-Williams stated, "if we know we're housing a certain number of people [each year] and the numbers don't change, then there's an influx" (interview, November 5, 2014). Absolute measures must be contextualized alongside the number of people exiting homelessness each year. The number of absolute homeless and the number of people exiting, when summed together, provides an estimate of how

many people in the community fall into homelessness each year. These three pieces of information – the number of exits, the number of homeless, and the number entering homelessness – provide the data needed to assess progress.

Planning purposes

Homelessness measures are also used to inform strategic long-term community, municipal, and regional plans to address housing affordability and homelessness, as well as service plans for homeless serving agencies. Several interview participants referred to local plans that were significantly informed by local data. Specific plans include Vancouver's *Housing and Homelessness Strategy* (2011), Metro Vancouver's Draft *Regional Homelessness Plan* (2014), the City of Toronto's *Housing Stability Service Planning Framework* (2013), and the Calgary Homeless Foundation's *10 Year Plan to End Homelessness* (revised in 2011).

Homelessness measures informed both high-level strategic regional plans to address housing and homelessness, as well as service delivery plans for outreach and emergency shelter services (Laural Raine, interview, November 12, 2014). Annual service-utilization statistics inform service planning and plans to address high service-use groups. In Vancouver, data from the homeless count is used to determine where winter shelters will be opened each year (Kerry Jang, interview, December 12, 2014). For groups with funding authority, results from PIT counts inform geographic funding priorities across the region (interview, December 5, 2014). In Calgary, PIT count data is used among other data to modify which programs and services serving which sub-populations are prioritized for funding (Nicole Jackson, interview, November 3, 2014).

5.3. Limitations of current methods

Interview participants identified many limitations when discussing current homelessness enumeration methods. A major limitation was inconsistent data collection. Use of secondary administrative data from emergency shelters means that "the quality of your data is dependent on who's entering it" (interview, December 5, 2014). Frontline staff who do not see benefits in their work from data collection will not invest time and

energy into precise data entry. Similarly in PIT counts, data is collected by hundreds of different volunteers with minimal training. This can create issues around data collection consistency.

Another limitation identified by interview participants of using administrative data is that individuals who do not access emergency shelter services are not included. In cities where a PIT count is not currently being conducted, such as in Victoria, no data is available on individuals experiencing homelessness who do not access emergency shelters. This was a major rationale for conducting PIT counts among interviewees in communities that do conduct them.

In both PIT counts and shelter data, interviewees identified that women, youth and families were likely undercounted. These groups are undercounted as their homelessness is more hidden, potentially because of safety concerns or concerns of child apprehension. Interviewees' worry that certain groups are under-represented relates to Peressini *et al.*'s (2009) concerns regarding the systematic exclusion of groups experiencing homelessness from the measures outlined in Section 3.3. Interview participants identified having representative measures as an important objective.

Two other PIT count limitations identified by interviewees were that accurately completing a census-like sample of individuals experiencing homelessness through a PIT count is much more difficult in rural and forested areas (Alice Sundberg, interview, November 10, 2014). As well, surveying all individuals in a PIT count is challenging in urban areas with thousands of individuals experiencing homelessness. Interviewees' concerns of the weaknesses of current methodologies corroborate Farrell and Reissing (2004), Bentley (1995), and Perrissini *et al.*'s (2009) concern that implications about local homelessness are drawn from counts with methodological limitations.

Hidden homelessness

Hidden homelessness, often couch surfing or sleeping in a vehicle, was frequently named by respondents as a type of homelessness not effectively captured by current measurement methods. Most interview participants recognized that these forms of homelessness are hard to measure. This limitation relates to the definitional issues

brought up in Section 3.1 around which groups of individuals experiencing homelessness are included or excluded from measures. Don Elliot, Housing Development Coordinator with the Greater Victoria Coalition to End Homelessness explains: "[The hidden homeless] are the hardest to track, the hardest to research. They're mentioned, but in a way that frankly treats them as different" (interview, November 3, 2014). This quote gets at the difficulty of measuring the hidden homeless and hints at the tension of whether they even should be included in enumerations.

Another interviewee questioned whether investing resources into researching the hidden homeless makes sense in the context of not yet adequately addressing the needs of rough sleepers and the absolute homeless (Nicole Jackson, interview, November 3, 2014). Additionally the interviewee raised that effective responses to address this population's housing needs have not yet been established. The interviewee questioned whether investing resources into quantifying this population is strategic if effective interventions are yet unknown (Nicole Jackson, interview, November 3, 2014).

5.4. Tensions between data collection and service delivery

Some interview participants spoke of the tension between investing resources into documenting homelessness, and funding service delivery. Other interviewees stated that both are essential and that the two cannot be viewed in competition. Laural Raine, City of Toronto's Policy, Planning & Projects Consultant explained this tension well.

> A challenge in the human services field, particularly when you're dealing with such marginal and vulnerable people, is to be able to invest resources into the evidence and data side of things. There is so much pressure on funding for service delivery. You can make the argument that investing resources in research and data is important in developing interventions that are going to improve people's lives, but it's a tough argument to make when there's people who would make the argument that every dollar we invest in some kind of head office function is a dollar that's not available to someone for a direct service. interview, November 12, 2014

This tension connects to Hulchanski (2000) and Girard's (2006) concerns regarding the value of homeless enumeration.

Other interviewees by contrast felt that having accurate and clear data is indispensable. As councillor Geoff Meggs stated, “I don’t think we can afford to trade-off... It would be virtually impossible to convince people to give us money if we couldn’t demonstrate that there is a problem. And the more you know the better job you can do” (interview, November 25, 2014).

Another expert described how evidence-based decision-making can save money by creating system efficiencies. “Allocating resources based on what the evidence tells you creates some efficiencies along the way” (interview, December 5, 2014). Interview respondents demonstrated the same tension found in academic discourse about the need to accurately understand homelessness in order to effectively address it, in the context of limited financial resources and significant human needs.

5.5. Missing but desired data

Several interview participants listed different data they wish they had access to. Interviewees identified how system-wide data are often lacking. Some data are unavailable due to a lack of measurement tools, while others are not available because of privacy concerns or privacy laws. People’s trajectories through the homeless-serving system were frequently cited as important but missing data. Several interviewees wanted to be able to understand people’s movement through emergency shelters, hospitals, jails, as well as transitional and supportive housing programs. Because shelters and housing are often managed by different organizations, tracking people through the system is not possible because of privacy legislation. As Nicole Jackson with the Calgary Homeless Foundation explained: “Since 2008 PIT counts have been around 3500. Since 2008, we have housed 6000 people. So there is this disjuncture between these two numbers. Questions we start to ask is: have people been through our system more than once?” (interview, November 3, 2014).

Another piece of missing data are the average length of time individuals experience homelessness, or average frequency of episodes. This information is sometimes collected in a PIT count survey, but is hard to compare year-to-year due to changes in survey administration and questions. When administrative emergency shelter

data are used it cannot accurately convey people's duration of homelessness between stays in emergency shelters.

Aggregate data on the acuity or need level of individuals experiencing homelessness was also identified as missing. Several cities in the case studies have an assessment tool for measuring the need level of individuals experiencing homelessness. However, this tool is most often used for determining housing placements and assessments, and is infrequently analyzed at an aggregate level to inform housing development plans.

Other data that are greatly desired is the effectiveness of local housing interventions. Several research studies, such as the Mental Health Commission of Canada's At-Home/Chez-Soi study, have measured the outcomes of Housing First interventions. However data on how successfully local interventions move individuals permanently out of homelessness is often lacking. Without knowing this information, regional committees cannot measure progress based on current interventions.

Related to the effectiveness of local interventions is a question of the capacity and utilization of current supportive housing stock. Some interviewees raised the question of whether current supportive housing stock is run at full capacity and is housing the most appropriate people (Rob Turnbull, interview, November 24, 2014). Interviewees questioned whether some individuals might be better served in other housing types, such as living in private market housing with rent supplements. Without knowing current capacity and utilization levels, decision makers cannot assess whether improved performance is possible within the current system, or whether building new affordable housing is the only option for reducing homelessness.

5.6. Situating trends in broader contexts

A significant underlying theme from interview participants was the desire and need to situate homelessness trends within broader social contexts. Population growth was a frequently cited external context. In cities with large in-migration, such as Calgary, rates of homelessness remaining stable indicates progress when compared to

population growth. Research has shown that inter-provincial in-migration increases demand on affordable housing, which decreases vacancy rates, increases housing costs, and decreases the availability of affordable housing (Eberle *et al.*, 2001). Additionally, in regions with strong economic growth, such as in Alberta, wages may not keep apace with increasing costs of living. Increases in the cost of living, coupled with the decreased availability of affordable housing can lead to growing rates of homelessness (City of Grande Prairie, 2009). For these reasons, rates should be contextualized by population growth or rates of in-migration, and changes in the cost of living.

Another relevant demographic trend is the growing seniors population. Many communities are concerned with the growing number of seniors experiencing homelessness in their community. This may be tied directly to the growing number of seniors in population-wide demographics. Mapping out homelessness against population changes can provide insight into potential future trends for community planners.

Another way to contextualize homelessness is within broader housing trends. Tracking changes in the costs and affordability of housing situates progress on addressing homelessness in a broader context. Some interviewees identified a need for more fine-grained analysis of local and regional housing affordability, as well as the need to track losses of low-cost affordable housing. Without tracking changes in the supply of affordable housing, tracking homelessness, or the demand for affordable housing, only captures one side of the issue.

5.7. Homelessness as a dynamic phenomenon

Interview participants had an understanding of homelessness as a dynamic phenomenon, rather than a fixed state. Despite this, many community measures do not capture changing dynamics. In many communities, absolute numbers of individuals experiencing homelessness is the most commonly used figure to measure the extent of homelessness. This figure excludes several dimensions.

As Stephen Gaetz explains, three dimensions are important to understand: "what happens leading to people's homelessness, what happens during people's homelessness, and what happens after people leave homelessness" (interview, November 4, 2014). Understanding how many people become homeless each year, how long different people experience it on average, and how many people exit each year forms a holistic understanding of the extent of homelessness in a community. If duration were tracked year-to-year, a community could measure progress not by how many people experience homelessness each year, but by how long people remain homeless before re-entering housing. As Hulchanski (2000) outlined, understanding homelessness as a dynamic process instead of as a fixed state has significant implications for what measurement tools are used, how data are collected and interpreted, and how the community responds to it. Communities focused on dynamic aspects, such as lowering the average duration, will focus on temporal measures.

5.8. Conclusions from interview results

Measuring progress in addressing homelessness is essential for communities to evaluate the impact of their investments and interventions. But measuring progress is fraught with challenges. Currently few communities publicly measure whether existing housing for the homeless is operating at full capacity and full utilization, or the effectiveness of local housing interventions. Many groups, such as youth and the hidden homeless are not fully included in homeless measurements. Homelessness needs to be understood and reported in a more nuanced way, situating trends within broader population trends. Communities want to know more about people's durations and trajectories through homelessness, emergency shelters, and supportive housing. Understanding more about the dynamics of homelessness in a community is a critical aspect of measuring progress. Finally, though homeless enumeration is essential to justify continued investments in housing interventions, communities are sensitive to spending money on research and data collection in light of service delivery pressures and the marginal subsistence of individuals experiencing homelessness.

The results from the interviews shape the criteria I use to assess my policy options in Chapter 9. First, the types of data used by interview respondents – such as

absolute and dynamic measures – formed the measures for the depth of information criteria I outline in Section 8.1. Second, questions of the reliability of the data are incorporated into the definition of the tracking progress criteria. Third, the concern that some groups are not included, or are undercounted, is incorporated into the comprehensiveness criteria. Fourth, the implementation challenges of the PIT counts outlined in Section 5.3 are taken into consideration by the implementation complexity criteria. And lastly, the tension between spending limited funds on data collection versus on delivery of services is incorporated into the cost criteria. These interview results inform both the criteria through which I analyze my policy options, and the analysis of the policy options.

Chapter 6.

Case Study Results

6.1. Case Study Methodology

A multi-case case study design was used to compare methods and uses of homeless enumerations (Yin, 2008). Case studies were undertaken to compare enumeration methods in four communities in Canada – Vancouver, Victoria, Calgary and Toronto. The four cases were selected to investigate differences between larger and smaller communities, communities with different institutional contexts, different enumeration methods, and access to different resources. Data for the case studies were collected through online research of publicly available documents, as well as through in-person and over-the-phone interviews with expert representatives on local homeless enumeration. The interview data that inform the case-study analysis are from the same 16 interviews I analyze in the preceding chapter. Appendix B lists the interview participants by case study location.

Units of analysis for each case include the institutional setting for community homelessness planning, the enumeration methods that are used, how enumeration results inform community planning, and the resources available for enumeration in each community, both administrative and financial. The first case analyzed in Section 6.1 is Metro Vancouver's tri-annual regional PIT count and the City of Vancouver's annual PIT count. The second case analyzed in Section 6.2 is Victoria's reporting from emergency shelter HIFIS data, service-based indicator reports, and annual service-based PIT facility count. Toronto's Shelter Management Information System (SMIS) software system and PIT counts are analyzed in Section 6.3. Calgary's Homelessness Management Information System (HMIS), PIT counts, and integrated intake system are analyzed in Section 6.4. Table 6.1 below outlines relevant key facts for each community.

Table 6.1 Summary Table of Case Studies

	Metro Vancouver	Greater Victoria	Toronto	Calgary
Population in 2011 Census	2,313,328	360,000	2,684,277	1,096,833
Relevant City Characteristics	Largest city in BC. Consistent annual population growth. Region expects continued in-migration.	Provincial capital.	Financial centre of Canada. Centre for international immigration and refugees. Largest city in Canada.	Centre of Canada's oil and gas sector. High median incomes, low unemployment rates, and consistently high in-migration.
Municipal Structure	18 municipalities, townships, non-municipal areas.	14 municipalities.	Ward system of 44 wards.	Ward system of 14 wards.
Regional Government	Metro-Vancouver	Capital Regional District	City of Toronto	City of Calgary
Lead on Addressing Homelessness	Metro-Vancouver based Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness, as well as the City of Vancouver.	Greater Victoria Coalition to End Homelessness, an independent organization.	City of Toronto, Department of Homelessness and Housing Services – Shelter, Support and Housing Administration.	Calgary Homeless Foundation, an independent organization.

6.2. Vancouver

Homeless-serving landscape

In Vancouver, homelessness is addressed at both a regional and municipal level. The Greater Vancouver Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness (RSCH) is the community entity for federal HPS funding and the Lu'ma Native Housing Society is the regional recipient of the Aboriginal HPS stream. Metro Vancouver, the regional government, and the RSCH developed a *Regional Homelessness Plan*, which was re-drafted in 2014. The City of Vancouver has developed a municipal *Housing and Homelessness Strategy*, and the mayor of Vancouver has committed to ending street homelessness by 2015. The City of Surrey also has a *Master Plan for Housing the Homeless*. Not all municipalities in Metro Vancouver have a committee or plan for addressing local homelessness. The RSCH is not a funder of local homeless-serving

agencies and at the time of the interviews did not have any paid staff to implement committee plans.

Vancouver's homeless-serving landscape is a complex un-centralized system. Many different service providers deliver emergency shelter, outreach services, supportive housing, VAW shelters, youth shelters, family services, and drop-in centres. The City of Vancouver received significant funding from BC Housing in recent years to develop and renovate 13 large-scale sites to house individuals experiencing homelessness. These sites are and will be run by several social housing agencies.

Homelessness data

Vancouver's main source of data is the tri-annual Metro Vancouver regional homeless count and survey. The count is coordinated by the RSCH and has been conducted every three years since 2002. The City of Vancouver also conducts a city count each year between the regional counts.

In 2014, the Vulnerability Assessment Tool (VAT) was introduced in Vancouver to develop a consistent method of prioritizing individuals experiencing homelessness for being accepted into housing. Emergency shelters and outreach teams use the VAT for individuals applying for housing. Aggregate data from the assessment tool had not been released publicly. BC Housing has also developed a centralized intake for supportive housing in Vancouver,[7] though this is used only for BC Housing-funded sites. Many emergency shelter and housing services in Vancouver do not receive federal funding and therefore do not use HIFIS. Permanent and seasonal emergency shelters use a range of information management software. At present, no comprehensive administrative data on homelessness is available in Greater Vancouver.

[7] Supportive housing integrates long-term tenancy with on-site support services intended for people who are experiencing homelessness or living at risk of homelessness, many of whom are managing multiple barriers including mental health and/or addiction issues (Ministry of Community and Rural Development, and the Ministry of Housing and Social Development of BC, 2010).

How results are used

Because the Metro Vancouver Homeless Count is the most reliable and consistent data available in Vancouver, it is the main data source used for all homelessness planning in the city and region. The count results are used for municipal and regional planning purposes, public education, political purposes, and secondary analysis. Planning purposes included "community planning, policy making, and/or service planning" (Eberle *et al.*, 2010, p.35). The counts are also used to inform politicians and unelected officials, and to influence policy. Regional planners use data from the counts to increase their understanding of issues in particular regions. Communication of count results in the media is also used to increase the profile of the issue (Eberle *et al.*, 2010). Other homelessness data used in Vancouver and Metro Vancouver's housing plans include shelter capacity, shelter turn-aways, social housing waitlists, the number of households in core housing need, SRO rent levels, and housing vacancy rates.

The Vancouver Homeless Count results are also used to assess the effectiveness of homeless interventions. The City of Vancouver and BC Housing have invested heavily in recent years in developing housing for the homeless. PIT count results are used to measure the impact of those investments on the number of individuals who continue to experience homelessness in Vancouver.

Resources

The Metro Vancouver Homeless count is conducted in 18 municipalities or regions. The tri-annual count is conducted in every municipality and township to ensure that the extent of homelessness is documented across the entire region and not just in Vancouver and Surrey. This is done largely for political purposes. This requires a large amount of organization. As one interviewee explained, it's a "tremendous amount of work for everyone who is involved. It's a lot of coordinating very tedious and detailed work" (interview, November 11, 2014). The budget for the 2014 count was $194,000, not including significant in-kind Metro Vancouver staff time or in-kind volunteer time (Homeless Secretariat, 2013). In total, 915 volunteers helped conduct the 2014 Homeless Count.

6.3. Victoria

Homeless-serving landscape

In 2008, the City of Victoria and the Capital Regional District together formed the Greater Victoria Coalition to End Homelessness (Coalition). The Coalition is the leadership organization dedicated to ending homelessness in Greater Victoria and is the regional Community Advisory Board for HPS funding. Managers from the majority of homeless-serving agencies are involved in the work of the Coalition. Like the RSCH in Vancouver, the Coalition does not fund local homeless-serving agencies except through the limited HPS funds. Island Health, the regional health authority, manages a centralized housing application system for all transitional and supportive housing for people experiencing homelessness in the region.

Homelessness data

A unique feature of the homeless-serving landscape in Victoria is that five out of six adult emergency shelters are managed by one organization that receives federal HPS funding and uses HIFIS. This excludes the youth shelters, VAW shelters, and the sixth adult shelter run by the Salvation Army. Having five shelters run by a single agency means that consistent HIFIS data is available for a majority of adults accessing emergency shelters in Greater Victoria.

The Coalition uses three main types of data to inform their strategies on ending homelessness. The first is report card data that the Coalition collects from over 15 data providers (Pauly *et al.*, 2012a). The second data source is annual and longitudinal emergency shelter statistics provided by the Victoria Cool Aid Society, which runs most of the city's adult emergency shelters. The third piece of data is an annual one-night facility count of the number of people who are emergency sheltered and provisionally accommodated. The facility count includes adult and youth emergency shelters, seasonal shelters, VAW shelters, transitional housing, families living temporarily in hotels and motels, and people in treatment, emergency rooms, detox, halfway houses, and jail and prison with no other accommodation (Albert *et al.*, 2014). The facility count

does not include individuals who are unsheltered. Aggregate data from Island Health's centralized housing application process have not been published publicly.

How results are used

For several years the Coalition produced an annual Report on Housing and Supports – Victoria's report card. In 2014, the Coalition opted not to produce a report card and instead produced two additional reports exploring different aspects of homelessness in the region in more depth, as well as the annual facility count. The first report was a longitudinal cluster analysis of emergency shelter use patterns. This report grouped emergency shelter users over a four-year period into three clusters: temporary, episodic, and long stay. From this research, the Coalition determined the proportion of emergency shelter users by stay pattern. Emergency shelter user stay patterns were then linked to housing needs. A revised housing procurement plan is currently being produced from the results of the *Patterns of Homelessness in Greater Victoria* report (Don Elliott, interview, November 3, 2014). The second report was a qualitative study on the pathways into and out of homelessness for families in the Capital Region. Of note, individuals who are unsheltered are not included in any Coalition reports as no street counts are conducted in Greater Victoria.

Resources

In 2014, the Coalition's research budget was $40,000. This budget produced the annual facility count, the *Patterns of Homelessness in Greater Victoria* report, and the qualitative report on family homelessness. The Coalition is able to produce such comprehensive, high quality reports by leveraging research and organizational partnerships. The Coalition has an ongoing research partnership with the Centre for Addictions Research of British Columbia (CARBC) at the University of Victoria. The majority of reports produced by the Coalition are co-authored by CARBC. In this way, the Coalition has access to rigorous academic research at low cost. Senior researchers at CARBC use their own research funding to pay their wages when working and providing advice for the reports, so the costs are not included in Coalition budgets. This partnership has enabled the Coalition to produce and receive informative reports on local homelessness at low cost.

6.4. Toronto

Homeless-serving landscape

A unique feature of Ontario social services is that in the early 1990s many services were downloaded onto municipalities, such as the provision of social housing and social assistance. Municipalities in Ontario are responsible for providing or overseeing the provision of a number of social services.

The community entity for HPS in Toronto is the City of Toronto's Department of Homelessness and Housing Services. The City of Toronto's Department of Homelessness and Housing Services – Shelter, Support and Housing Administration is responsible for overseeing the delivery of all social housing and emergency shelter services in the city. This is the only example I have come across where a municipal body, without an independent Board of Directors, is responsible for delivering HPS funds. As a city department, Homelessness and Housing Services is not able to advocate to the province or other funders for the need to address the issue in the same way as other HPS community entities. Nine of the 57 emergency shelters in Toronto are run by the city, with 48 locations run by sub-contracted organizations.

Toronto has a centralized intake and referral system for emergency shelters through the Streets to Homes Assessment and Referral Centre (SHARC). Individuals can access SHARC over the phone, in person at SHARC, or at an emergency shelter. Through this system, emergency shelter availability is consistently updated and communicated between emergency shelter providers. This system is facilitated by Toronto's Shelter Management Information System (SMIS).

Homelessness data

The City of Toronto conducts a PIT count and survey called the Street Needs Assessment (SNA) every three to four years. Because the city manages SMIS and SHARC, the Shelter, Support and Housing Administration has up-to-date data about individuals experiencing homelessness in Toronto. Additionally, the SNA provides the city with data about individuals experiencing homelessness who do not access

emergency shelters. Emergency shelter capacity, occupancy levels, and turn-aways are tracked using SMIS data.

How results are used

Laural Raine, Policy, Planning & Projects Consultant for the Shelter, Support and Housing Administration, describes how SMIS and SNA data inform the administration on both a strategic level and in day-to-day service system operations (interview, November 12, 2014). SMIS and SNA data informed Toronto's 10-year housing plan, and are used to evaluate programs delivered by external agencies to ensure they are fulfilling their mandate and contractual obligations. Analyzing SMIS data, for example trends in family shelter utilization, reveals how shelter use patterns can be tied to significant policy changes, such as changes in national refugee and immigration policy. SMIS and SHARC data help the administration predict and respond to seasonal emergency shelter demand.

Resources

Toronto's 2013 Street Needs Assessment cost approximately $66,000. Because the SMIS data is integrated into service delivery budgets, no estimate is available for the cost of collecting and analyzing the data.

6.5. Calgary

Homelessness serving landscape

In 1998, the Calgary Homeless Foundation (CHF) was established as a unified front to reduce homelessness in Calgary. CHF is the leader in addressing homelessness in Calgary and is the community entity for HPS funding. The foundation is a leader nationally on best practices for creating an integrated responsive homeless serving system. CHF produces Calgary's homelessness plans and is a funder for local housing and homeless interventions. CHF leverages their role as a funder by ensuring integrated service delivery amongst the agencies they fund.

CHF manages Calgary's Homeless Management Information System (HMIS). HMIS is an integrated information system that CHF-funded agencies are required to use. Several of Calgary's main emergency shelters are not funded by CHF and do not use HMIS. In addition to HMIS, CHF also supports the Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool (SPDAT). The SPDAT is a centralized intake system into Calgary's social and supportive housing. Data from the intake system is used to prioritize housing placements and is included in people's HMIS file upon entry into Calgary Homeless Foundation funded housing.

Homelessness data

The Calgary Homeless Foundation has a wealth of data from both HMIS and the centralized intake system. Through HMIS, CHF can track people's movements through CHF-funded shelter and housing programs. The SPDAT provides CHF with comprehensive information about the characteristics of people accessing CHF funded housing and support services. Additionally, Calgary has been conducting biennial PIT counts and surveys using roughly the same methodology since 1992 (Nicole Jackson, interview, November 3, 2014).

How results are used

The HMIS and PIT count data allows the foundation to determine if funding and programs are consistent with homeless population trends. As Nicole Jackson, Research and Policy Analyst with CHF described, "PIT counts and HMIS data are among the pieces of data that help us make decisions, determine funding allocations, and roll out changes. HMIS lets us make real-time adjustments" (interview, November 3, 2014). Comparing demographic PIT population data with program data allows the foundation to adjust funding priorities to community needs. This combination of data was used to update *Calgary's 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness* in 2011. The combination of consistent population and program data along with funding oversight is the Cadillac of homelessness data mobilization in Canada. Few communities have access to such a wealth of information, accompanied by funding authority.

In Calgary and Toronto, results from PIT counts inform funding priorities. In these two communities, funding is dispensed at a regional level. Changes and trends from PIT count results are used to set service and funding priorities.

Resources

CHF has 6 full-time staff working on HMIS, 2 full-time researchers and policy analysts, and 1.5 full-time data analysts. Nine full-time and one half-time staff are dedicated to enumerating and analyzing homelessness data in Calgary. CHF staff time is used to conduct the annual PIT counts. The annual PIT count budget is minimal and covers expenses for honoraria and incentives for participants in the count. The PIT count budget does not include in-kind staff time.

6.6. Conclusions from case studies

The case study results reveal factors leading to more successful enumeration, or lead to more effective use of enumeration results. The first factor that emerged from the case studies is that having strong, clear leadership on the issue, integrated with community social services, produces the most useful enumerations. For example the Coalition in Victoria, the CHF in Calgary, and the City of Toronto are all clear leaders in addressing the issue in their region and work closely alongside homeless-serving services.

The second factor is that the enumerator either be a funder or a credible advisor to funders. Measuring progress on addressing homelessness is only useful when measures inform funding priorities for service delivery and housing development. The combination of enumerations and funding decision-making power – as in Calgary – leads to the most effective evidence-based funding allocations, responsive to changing community needs. Community groups, such as HPS CABs often do not have significant funding decision-making power, especially in smaller communities. CABs can, however, advise other levels of government, such as regional health authorities and provincial governments, on what interventions should be prioritized based on their analysis. For

example in Victoria, the Coalition advises the provincial government on what interventions should be prioritized based on the results of their analysis.

Who the community leader on addressing homelessness is has a major impact on how enumeration results are used. In communities where the leader is the municipal government, such as in the City of Toronto, advocacy, based on homeless count results, is limited. In Metro Vancouver, where the leader is an organization highly tied to the regional government, enumeration results are presented without analysis or interpretation, and results are left to community organizations and politicians to interpret. In Victoria, where the Coalition operates at arm's length from the city and regional government, the organization produces reports that analyze and interpret results and advocate for solutions. An organization with the ability to interpret the data, make recommendations, and advocate for evidence-based solutions uses enumeration results most effectively.

The third factor for success is having enumerations from at least two different data sources. This is demonstrated by the City of Toronto and Calgary Homeless Foundation case studies. Having a combination of PIT count data and administrative data provides the most useful, up-to-date information. The case studies also revealed how administrative data sets, such as centralized housing application systems, are under-utilized for tracking aggregate level trends among the homeless. This administrative data could be used as a secondary data source in communities without other integrated administrative datasets.

The fourth factor for successful enumeration is having integrated homeless serving systems. More integrated systems make in-depth data easier to acquire and share. Integration between homeless and housing service providers is ideal for tracking patterns of usage between services. The fifth factor for success is leveraging partnerships. The Calgary Homeless Foundation leverages its role as a funder to facilitate system integration. The Coalition in Victoria leverages its position as a community organization to partner with researchers interested in community-based research. Having integrated services and leveraging partnerships reduces the cost of data collection, increases the comprehensiveness of the data, and makes enumeration

results more useful. These five factors – clear leadership, funding advice, multiple data sources, system integration, and partnerships – are the keys to more successful homeless enumerations and more successful use of enumeration results.

Chapter 7.

Policy Options

Enumeration techniques currently used in communities across Canada were outlined in Chapter 4. These methods present a suite of potential policy options. The purpose of this capstone is to assess which methods are preferred. This chapter describes the three final options that are assessed in the policy analysis. The goal of assessing the policy options is to provide the most informative, least costly measure for policy makers and community planners so that local interventions are evidence-based and meet the needs of people experiencing homeless in the community.

Various types of point-in-time counts form Policy Option 1. Period prevalence counts and report cards were amalgamated into Policy Option 2, as period prevalence counts are the most frequently used enumeration method in report cards. HMIS/HIFIS based reports were also amalgamated with the cluster analysis technique into Policy Option 3, as cluster analysis is a method of analysing HMIS/HIFIS data. The hidden homeless survey was excluded from further analysis as this method only measures one sub-group of the homeless population. As well, there was a lack of consensus among research participants on whether enumerating the hidden homeless population is strategic, given that effective interventions to assist this population are not yet known.

7.1. PIT counts

Point-in-time (PIT) counts are one overarching method of enumerating homelessness. PIT counts can be conducted in a number of ways. They include both an enumeration of individuals sleeping outdoors or in spaces not fit for human habitation, and an enumeration of individuals staying in emergency shelters. PIT counts can be

paired with a survey of people's demographic information, housing history, barriers to housing, and service needs.

Census or sample

Toronto implements their PIT count – the Street Needs Assessment – by conducting a census in the downtown core. The rest of the city is then divided into numbered areas representing roughly similar density and size. In each count, a representative sample of outlying suburban and rural areas is sampled. Results from the sample areas are used to develop a citywide estimate of the extent of homelessness in Toronto, which is totalled with the downtown census-like results. Metro Vancouver on the other hand conducts a census-like PIT count in all 18 municipalities or townships in Greater Vancouver. Two policy sub-options are a census style PIT count or a PIT count of a sample of pre-defined geographic areas.

Frequency of PIT count

The frequency of conducting PIT counts varies across Canada. The City of Vancouver conducts annual PIT counts. Edmonton and Calgary conduct biennial PIT counts. Metro Vancouver and Toronto conduct counts tri-annually. The frequency of conducting the PIT count presents another variation of the PIT count policy option.

Service-based PIT count

As outlined in Section 4.1, a service-based PIT count is an alternative type of PIT count where social service locations sample the people accessing their services to find out if they were homeless the night before. While this method is lower cost than street counts, it captures only those individuals who access social services. Therefore individuals who do not access services are excluded from the count results.

7.2. Report cards with period-prevalence count

Report cards are another common method of measuring the extent of homelessness in communities. Communities that put together report cards generally do not also conduct PIT counts. Most report cards include a period-prevalence count of the

number of people who access emergency shelters each year. While the number of unique individuals who access emergency shelters in a year is not an accurate census of the total number of people experiencing different types of homelessness, it is a consistent proxy measure. By itself, a period-prevalence count cannot provide much information beyond a trend-line of how many people are experiencing homelessness each year. The trend-line develops more depth and significance when paired with other contextual housing, income, and migration trends. A report card explicitly tracks progress on addressing homelessness over time. In a report card, a grade is given to the community based on changes in the indicators over the past year. This grade provides an explicit signal of how the community is progressing in addressing homelessness.

7.3. HMIS/HIFIS based reports

Finally, HMIS/HIFIS based reports provide information and analysis about the local emergency shelter population. HMIS or HIFIS data tell a community about aggregate changes in emergency shelter utilization, such as average length of stay, average number of episodes, and average days homeless per year. Longitudinal analysis of the types and proportions of individuals experiencing homelessness, as outlined in Section 4.5.2, is possible using HIFIS and HMIS data. Repeating the longitudinal analysis each year would not yield significantly different results because of the long time horizons in the analysis.

Chapter 8. Criteria and Measures

This chapter outlines the criteria used to assess the pros and cons of the policy options outlined in the preceding chapter. The criteria present a consistent method of assessing the policy options so that bias in the policy assessment is minimized. Policy assessment based on pre-determined criteria and measures is still influenced by subjective interpretations and analysis. This analysis is not an objective one with the criteria leading to a final recommendation, but rather a broad holistic analysis to identify key issues. The criteria assessment process is intended to uncover the major trade-offs between the policies under consideration. The recommendations arise from the criteria assessment as well as the interview and case study analyses.

The ultimate goal of this research is to contribute to increasing the effectiveness of community responses to homelessness, thereby reducing it, by employing the clearest, most cost-effective measurement method. A universal gauge for measuring reductions in homelessness has not yet been established. The criteria for assessing the policies are separated into two over-arching categories: effectiveness and resources. These criteria are outlined in more detail below. Ease of communication is another category of criteria that could be used to assess the policy options. While communicating enumeration results to the public is an important use of enumerations, this paper focuses on enumeration for planning purposes and therefore the communication criterion is not included in the analysis. Stakeholder acceptability is another criterion that could be used to assess the policy options; however because all stakeholders want the most informative enumeration method, this would be a double counting of effectiveness. Finally, equity is another criterion that could be used to assess the policy options. As outlined in the background and theoretical issues, no enumeration method effectively captures all sub-groups of individuals. If sub-groups are not measured, then resources may not be allocated to meet their housing needs, creating inequities between groups

experiencing homelessness. This objective, however, is captured within the comprehensiveness criteria.

8.1. Effectiveness

The first group of criteria is categorized under effectiveness. Effectiveness refers to how accurately the policy measures the extent of homelessness in a community. These criteria gauge the extent to which the policy provides the robust information necessary to develop plans and responses. Three effectiveness criteria are included in the analysis: (1) depth of information, (2) comprehensiveness, and (3) tracking progress. The three criteria, their definitions, and measures are outlined in Table 8.1.

The first of the three criteria is based on the four types of information identified by interview respondents as necessary in Section 5.1. These four types of information were: number of individuals, demographic characteristics, duration, and need levels.

Table 8.1 Effectiveness Criteria and Measures

Criterion	Definition	Measure	HML
Depth of Information	How deep is the data produced by the enumeration method? How many variables of information are produced by the method?	Population number only	Low
		Demographic data	Med
		Duration	Med
		Episode frequency	High
		Need Level	High
Comprehensiveness	How wide is the data produced by the enumeration method? How many subgroups of individuals experiencing homelessness are measured by the enumeration method?	Includes only one group	Low
		Includes a few groups	Med
		Inclusive of most groups	High
Tracking progress	Do the data provide relevant and reliable measures for tracking progress on addressing homelessness? Relevant, refers whether the data can provide insightful information to assess plans. Reliable refers to whether the methodology is consistent over time.	Neither relevant nor reliable	Low
		Relevant but not reliable, or reliable but not relevant	Med
		Both relevant and reliable	High

8.2. Resources

The second category of criteria is grouped under the resources category. The resources category refers to what financial and administrative resources are required to implement the enumeration method. These criteria are especially relevant when assessing the policy options in different contexts. Two resource criteria are included in this analysis: (1) implementation complexity and (2) cost. Implementation complexity is measured using an un-weighted average of the four sub-criteria. Table 8.2 defines the two criteria and their measures.

Table 8.2 Resources Criteria and Measures

Criterion	Definition	Measure	HML
Implementation complexity	Does the methodology require pre-existing administrative data sets?	Yes	Low
		No	High
	Does the methodology require collaboration with multiple groups? How many collaborators are typically involved?	> 5	Low
		2-5	Med
		0-1	High
	Does the methodology require the recruitment, training, and management of volunteers?	Yes	Low
		No	High
	Does the methodology require advanced statistical expertise?	Yes	Low
		No	High
Cost	Resources required. Budget to implement enumeration	> $50k	Low
		$20-50k	Medium
		< $20k	High

Chapter 9. Policy Analysis

9.1. Assessment based on criteria

This chapter presents the final analysis of the three policy options based on the criteria outlined in the previous chapter. Table 9.1 summarizes the key findings from the policy analysis. The analysis begins with an assessment of each policy option based on the effectiveness and resources criteria. Major trade-offs between the policy options are then identified, followed by a discussion of relevant additional considerations that emerged from the interviews.

Table 9.1 Summary Table of Policy Analysis

Criteria	1. PIT Count	2. Report Card with Period Prevalence	3. HMIS / HIFIS based Report
Comprehensiveness	High	Low	Low
Depth of Information	Med	Med	High
Tracking Progress	Med	High	High
Cost	Low	High	High
Implementation Complexity	3 Low, 1 High = Low	2 High, 2 Low = Med	2 High, 2 Low = Med

9.1.1. PIT count

This policy option was assessed based on homeless count reports, such as the *Results of the 2014 Homeless Count in the Metro Vancouver Region* report, results from interviews with professionals involved in coordinating Vancouver homeless counts, and an assessment by SPARC BC of the Metro Vancouver Homeless count (Eberle *et al.*, 2010).

Comprehensiveness, depth of information, and tracking progress

As shown in Table 9.1, PIT counts are the most comprehensive and inclusive measure and therefore scores highest on the comprehensiveness measure. PIT counts include the broadest number of sub-groups of individuals experiencing homelessness – people sleeping rough, and people staying in emergency shelters, cold/wet weather shelters, VAW shelters, etc. PIT counts with a survey produce the most comprehensive in-depth information about people's experiences through the survey responses. Several dynamic measures can be measured in a PIT count survey, such as the average number of episodes over the past year. Given that PIT counts are the most comprehensive policy option, the service-based PIT count, which is a less comprehensive measure, is excluded from further consideration.

However, PIT count data is collected by hundreds of volunteers with minimal training through handwritten surveys, which presents challenges in inputting the data and limitations in data collection consistency. The combination of large numbers of volunteers collecting the data with minimal training reduces data collection consistency. One interviewee explained that despite PIT counts producing a rich dataset, because of methodological limitations, the results cannot be used for rigorous statistical analysis (Kerry Jang, interview, December 12, 2014). For example, in the 2014 Metro Vancouver homeless count, readers were told that results to a question on whether someone was experiencing episodic homelessness needed to "be treated with great caution because volunteers reported that this question was very confusing and the data may not be accurate" (Greater Vancouver Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness, 2014 July, p.60). Because of the rich data, coupled with methodological limitations, PIT counts score medium in terms of depth-of-information.

Several PIT counts results are used to develop trend-lines, such as the number of people experiencing different types of homelessness or changes in the proportion of people staying in emergency shelters versus sleeping rough. However results from PIT counts are also impacted by external factors such as weather on the day of the count and refinements in count methodology (Jadidzadeh and Kneebone, 2015). For example, Metro Vancouver saw significant increases from 2002 to 2005 in the number of individuals enumerated in the count, but some hypothesize that this increase can be

attributed to refinements in the methodology (interview, November 11, 2014). Increases in the numbers of youth found in the Metro Vancouver 2014 count could be attributed to the success of the new youth engagement strategy or could be the result of more youth on the street (Kerry Jang, interview, December 12, 2014). The challenge with PIT counts is the inability to distinguish whether trends are the result of changes in the count methodology, the weather, or real changes in the extent of homelessness. Therefore this policy option scores medium on tracking progress.

Cost and Implementation complexity

From my case study research, PIT count budgets ranged from $194,000 in 2014 in Metro Vancouver, to $66,000 in Toronto in 2013, and less for Calgary's PIT counts. Therefore, as shown in Table 9.1, PIT counts score low in terms of costs, meaning that it is a high-cost policy option.

The high cost of PIT count budgets is explained partly by their complexity to implement. As one interviewee stated "the count is a challenging, frustrating exercise" (interview, November 11, 2014). PIT counts involve recruiting and training hundreds of volunteers, mapping an entire region, and planning a count over a 24 hour period through large geographic areas. PIT counts entail collaboration with emergency shelters, and in some cities also park staff and emergency services such as hospitals, jails, and police. PIT counts also require data entry for thousands of handwritten surveys. PIT counts do not require pre-existing administrative datasets. Because of the complexity of implementing a PIT count, this policy option scores high on implementation complexity.

9.1.2. Report card with period prevalence

This policy option was assessed based on report cards on homelessness, such as *Quiet Crisis: Homelessness and at Risk in Greater Victoria,* and *2013 Report Card on Ending Homelessness in Ottawa*, as well as results from interviews with professionals involved in developing report cards.

Comprehensiveness, depth of information, and tracking progress

Because period-prevalence counts include only individuals who access emergency shelters in homelessness measures, this policy option scores low in terms of comprehensiveness. Report cards and period-prevalence counts include a population number, demographic information, and sometimes data on average duration. Therefore this policy option scores medium in terms of depth of information.

As shown in table 9.1, report cards track progress most effectively of all of the policy options. Annual period-prevalence counts create a clear trendline of the number of unique individuals accessing emergency shelters and act as a reliable proxy measure of the extent of homelessness in a community over time. In report cards this trendline is also contextualized by other local social and economic factors. This addresses the desire raised by the interviewees, as noted in Section 5.6, to have homeless quantifications contextualized within local socio-economic trends. Therefore this policy option scores high in terms of tracking progress.

Cost and Implementation complexity

Based on the Greater Victoria Coalition to End Homelessness's 2014 research budget, I estimate that a report card costs approximately $15,000 to produce (Andrew Wynn-Williams, interview, November 5, 2014). Therefore this policy option scores high on costs, meaning it is a low-cost policy option.

Report cards with a period-prevalence count score medium in terms of implementation complexity as they require a pre-existing dataset, such as HIFIS or HMIS, from which the unique number of individuals experiencing homelessness is drawn. As well, report cards require collaboration with numerous service and data providers (over 15 data providers in Victoria), and data providers often want to approve how their data is presented and interpreted. Report cards do not require the recruitment and training of volunteers.

9.1.3. HMIS/HIFIS based report

This policy option was assessed based on results from interviews with staff at organizations that analyze HMIS and HIFIS data, and knowledge gained as a researcher on the HIFIS study *Patterns of Homelessness in Greater Victoria*.

Comprehensiveness, depth of information, and tracking progress

HIFIS or HMIS only includes a single group of individuals in the data – people accessing emergency shelter services. Therefore this policy option scores low in terms of comprehensiveness. As shown in Table 9.1 above, a HIFIS-based analysis can produce the most detailed statistical analysis of the frequency and duration of homelessness of all of the policy options. This is a relatively new and infrequently used method for assessing the extent of homelessness. With statistical expertise, a HMIS/HIFIS-based analysis can reveal significant insight into people's experiences of homelessness. Several dynamic measures are produced by a HMIS/HIFIS-based analysis, such as average duration, average total days stayed in shelters over-time, proportion of emergency shelter use by stay pattern, and average number of episodes. Acuity or need level information is not gathered by HIFIS, but shelter usage patterns provide an indication of need level (Kuhn and Culhane, 1998). For these reasons, this policy option scores high in terms of depth of information.

Results from an analysis of HIFIS or HMIS can be used to develop and track different trendlines, such as average length of stay, proportion of individuals accessing emergency shelters once, average total days homeless per year, proportion of individuals accessing emergency shelter multiple years in a row, etc. Much of this information is contained in PIT count surveys; however, administrative data provides more consistent, reliable figures. This policy option therefore scores high in terms of tracking progress.

Of note, an annually repeated longitudinal HIFIS analysis would not provide significantly new information, since the analysis uses longitudinal data that will change only marginally from year to year. However, produced tri-annually, this method would provide new insights.

Cost and Implementation complexity

The budget for producing the *Patterns of Homelessness in Greater Victoria* report was $12,500. This budget included collaboration with the data provider, contracting a statistician, report writing, and publication. This policy option scores high on the cost criterion meaning that it is a low-cost policy option.

A HIFIS- or HMIS-based report requires a pre-existing dataset, collaboration with the data provider, and advanced statistical analysis. Contracting a professional statistician may be required. In communities that do not already have a shared emergency shelter information system, such as Vancouver, this policy option is much more complex to implement. Implementing a shared information system requires consensus among service providers, changing administration systems, training for staff, and developing memorandums of understanding between service providers for information sharing. HIFIS is provided to organizations free of charge. However, training is available, and the system has already been developed and does not need to be newly designed. For the above reasons, this policy option scores medium on implementation complexity.

9.2. Summary and trade-offs

Table 9.1 above shows that no policy option clearly dominates the others. All policy options have both positive and negative aspects, and score both red and green on a criterion. The HMIS/HIFIS report option has the most positive aspects. The only negative aspect of this option is its non-comprehensiveness. This raises a question of how important or how heavily the comprehensiveness criterion should be weighed.

In terms of tracking progress on addressing homelessness, no policy option clearly wins out and each policy option presents advantages and drawbacks. Report cards contextualize rates of homelessness within broader social and economic trends, though often using only one main indicator – the unique number of individuals accessing emergency shelters. HIFIS/HMIS analyses can measure several different indicators of emergency shelter homelessness over time, but the analysis applies only to shelter

homelessness. PIT counts can also measure multiple trends by the proportion of people surveyed in different sub-categories, but these trends can be attributed to changes in count methodology or changes in weather, as well as real changes in the homeless population.

The comprehensiveness of the enumeration method appears to trade-off with both the cost and complexity of the method. Intuitively, more comprehensive data are more costly and complex to collect. Surveying people in a PIT count costs significantly more than using a pre-existing administrative dataset such as HIFIS or HMIS, or using several pre-existing datasets in a report card.

The trade-off between cost and comprehensiveness raises the question of the value of more comprehensive information in relation to the cost of collecting that data. This trade-off relates to the issue of unrepresentative statistics raised in Section 3.3, in terms of which groups are over- and under-represented. Not including people who are sleeping rough means a significant visible segment of the homeless population is systematically excluded from the measure.

Having comprehensive information on a wider sample of the homeless population from a PIT count means decision makers are informed about the experiences of a broad set of people experiencing homelessness. Having more comprehensive data also means no groups are privileged over others, fewer groups are excluded, and the needs of most groups are considered. Better-informed plans, based on more comprehensive data, should lead to more appropriate and effective housing interventions. Having more appropriate and effective interventions should contribute to reducing homelessness. Therefore comprehensiveness is weighed more heavily in the analysis.

9.3. Additional considerations

Several other considerations emerged from my research beyond deciding which method of enumeration is most useful to inform policies to address homelessness.

These considerations relate to how to most effectively use and interpret enumeration results as well as other potential sources of data.

Contextualizing within broader trends

Enumeration results need to be contextualized within broader local social and economic trends, regardless of the enumeration method. Communities can compare homeless trends with important local trends such as regional in-migration, changes in the proportion of youth or seniors in the community, changes in housing costs, etc. The 2014 Metro Vancouver Homeless Count report compares homeless population trends with Metro Vancouver population trends from 2008 to 2014 in one sentence (Greater Vancouver Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness, 2014, July). This trend comparison is not referenced elsewhere in the report.

Presenting homeless enumeration results alongside broader data trends shifts the focus from the individual experiencing homelessness to the broader society. Contextualizing homelessness alongside population-wide trends highlights how individuals experiencing homelessness do not live in isolation, disconnected from society, but are embedded within the same community's circumstances. Individuals experiencing homelessness are affected and motivated by many of the same social and economic phenomena as society at large.

Focusing on dynamics

As outlined in the introduction, homelessness is a dynamic experience. Someone who is homeless today may have housing tomorrow and may not have been without housing yesterday. Two people experiencing homelessness can represent vastly different durations – from one week to ten years. Planners increasingly want to know not just how many people experience homelessness in their community, but also what those experiences are like. Both the frequency and average duration episodes are important measures for understanding the nature of people's experiences and their need levels. Measures of how many people enter and exit homelessness each year are also important for understanding local dynamics. However these statistics are infrequently collected and are not specifically included in any of the enumeration methods considered.

Communities need to focus more attention on changes to the average duration, and changes to the number of people experiencing chronic homelessness, than on changes in the absolute number of people. Dynamic measures are salient in communities with specific goals for ending homelessness. For example, Calgary's reduction goal is that no one experiences homelessness for longer than seven days. Therefore Calgary should focus their measures on the average duration of people's homelessness. In a community committed to reducing chronic homelessness, measures should focus on the number of individuals experiencing homelessness for greater than one year.

Housing Trajectories

As described in Section 5.5, several interviewees wanted to be able to track people's trajectories through both housing and homeless serving systems. Interviewees also wanted more information on the effectiveness of local interventions. However, system-wide data for both housing and emergency shelters is not available in most communities in Canada. Another measure of community dynamics is housing retention rates in homeless intervention programs, such as supportive housing. Housing retention rates can be used as a proxy measure for both the effectiveness of housing interventions and trajectories through the housing and homeless-serving system. Presently those rates are not published publicly and are not included in homelessness reporting.

Guiding funding priorities

Another applicable use of homeless enumerations is to compare homeless population data with the level of funding provided to services for each sub-population. Homeless population data could then help to shape funding priorities. When a major funder and/or service provider – such as the Calgary Homeless Foundation and Toronto's Shelter, Support and Housing Administration – conducts enumerations, the data can directly guide funding priorities. In communities where an organization that does not fund service provision conducts enumerations, funding priorities are not inherently guided by enumeration results and may be guided by other priorities, such as which organization most effectively advocates for its cause. Having funding partners

conduct or explicitly support homeless enumerations ensures that results are used to inform funding priorities and that funding decisions are evidence-based.

Other potential data

In addition to collecting raw data from enumerations, communities have access to other sources of data to use as proxy measures. One example is aggregate-level data from a centralized housing application system. Trending from this aggregate data shows changes in the need level of the homeless population that is seeking housing and information about what types of housing these individuals require. Housing histories are usually included in housing applications and could be used as a proxy measure for average duration of homelessness. This data already exists in many communities, and in some provinces, and would only need to be aggregated into population-wide statistics. Aggregation could occur both cumulatively and on an annual basis. Housing application data represents a rich underutilized data-source to contribute to developing a comprehensive community portrait.

Chapter 10.

Recommendations

This chapter presents the final policy recommendations at the community and federal levels that follow from the preceding analysis. The first set of recommendations is directed at community-level leaders, such as local CABs, city councils, or other community organizers involved in planning and collecting homelessness enumerations. The second set of recommendations is directed at Employment and Social Development Canada's Homelessness Strategy. The chapter finishes with a brief conclusion for the study.

10.1. Community-level recommendations

My recommendation is that communities take an inclusive measure of homelessness every three to five years to develop a deep knowledge of the local homeless population. More frequently, communities should use reliable administrative data to track dynamic changes captured through emergency shelter data. Together this data would provide communities with a comprehensive understanding of the characteristics of the homeless population through a PIT count, and a deep understanding of the changing dynamics through a HMIS/HIFIS based analysis.

At the community-level, I recommend that a PIT count of individuals experiencing homelessness be conducted at least once in each community. Having comprehensive data, inclusive of the broadest range of individuals, ensures housing plans and homelessness interventions are reflective of the entire homeless population in the community. I recommend conducting a PIT count every three to five years. This time frame is sufficiently frequent for developing deep knowledge of the local homeless population, and sufficiently infrequent to lessen the costs of conducting a PIT count.

I recommend that communities conduct a sample/census PIT count – a census of the downtown core and a sample of outlying areas. A map of areas outside the downtown core and a system of sampling those areas should be developed in consultation with Toronto's Street Needs Assessment experts or experts from the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness. Having a robust estimate of the homeless population on a three to five year basis would cost-effectively provide a baseline of individuals experiencing homelessness in a community. For communities that have not previously invested the funds to conduct a PIT count, the value of having inclusive comprehensive data on the homeless population is worth the expense of collecting the data every five years. While conducting a PIT count is the most costly method of quantifying homelessness, it is the most inclusive measure.

In a community with an integrated homelessness management information system, HMIS/HIFIS data should be used to publish tri-annual reports that track progress using a longitudinal cluster-based analysis. This analysis uses dynamic or temporal measures to track changes in the proportion of individuals experiencing transitional versus long-term homelessness, and changes in the average duration and frequency of episodes. In off-years, a community report card with a period-prevalence count and other indicators should be produced. These reports should situate homelessness within local socio-economic trends, such as changes to the cost of housing and population growth.

If a community does not yet have an integrated HMIS, they ought to consult with HPS representatives about the feasibility and support available to adopt HIFIS. Communities could also begin discussions with local service providers about the opportunities and challenges of adopting HIFIS. Regardless of whether HMIS/HIFIS data is available, aggregate data from centralized housing application systems can be used as a proxy measure for the homeless population, and as a measure of the level of need or acuity of people experiencing homelessness. Housing retention rates can also be used to measure trajectories through housing, and to measure the effectiveness of existing initiatives. Communities without a HMIS should produce report cards that track progress on addressing homelessness in PIT count off-years.

10.2. Federal-level recommendations

In light of the federal government's interest in quantifying homelessness across Canada, I recommend that funding for community consultations to implement HIFIS be made available to HPS community advisory boards and community entities that do not currently have an integrated homelessness information system. While HIFIS is available from the Government of Canada free of charge, developing the partnerships, cooperation, and data sharing agreements necessary to implement an integrated information system costs the homeless serving system time and executive resources. HIFIS consultation funds could further expedite the development of an integrated information system. This could lead to numerous benefits including more complete national estimates, better community-level data, and more integrated service-delivery among the homeless-serving sector.

10.3. Conclusion

At present, Canada does not have adequate community-level data on homelessness. Without good data, homeless interventions, service plans, and strategic housing plans are not tailored to local needs. Multiple methods of enumeration are required to adequately and usefully measure the extent of homelessness in a community. No single measure provides the complete requisite information. Homeless enumerations need to shift from seeking an accurate, absolute number of people experiencing homelessness, to seeking a range of pertinent measures. These measures should include temporal measures, such as the average duration of homelessness. These measures also need to be contextualized within changing socio-economic trends. With this community-level data, community plans and interventions can most effectively target the needs of individuals experiencing homelessness. This should lead to reductions in homelessness, and could eventually lead to ending it.

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Appendix A.

Sample Interview Schedule

Interview Notes

Date, time and location:

Name of person being interviewed, if not confidential:

1. What homelessness data do you most often use in your work and how do you use that data?
2. How do you use that data in your work for the city?
3. How much do you rely on annual data trends? How do you interpret those trends when they are stable?
4. How is homelessness related data is used in your community to inform service planning or community plans to address homelessness?
5. What data do you wish you had access to? If you could have any data in the world, what would you want?
6. How much does your city spend on annual counts or reports?
7. What is your opinion of how homelessness is quantified and understood in your community?
8. Can you comment on the tradeoffs between spending money on quantifying and understanding homelessness and on addressing homelessness?
9. How do you measuring progress in addressing homelessness?
10. How is time included in your homelessness data, or people's trajectories of homelessness over time?
11. Comment on the limitations and caveats of homeless counts, and how they impact your ability to communicate with the public about them.

Appendix B.

List of Interview Participants by Case Study Location

Name	Title	Organization	Location
Alice Sundberg	Acting Chair	Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness	Metro Vancouver, specifically Surrey
Geoff Meggs	City Councillor	City of Vancouver	Vancouver
Kerry Jang	City Councillor	City of Vancouver	Vancouver
Margaret Eberle	Senior Housing Planner	Metro Vancouver	Metro Vancouver
Rob Turnbull	Chief Executive Officer	Streets to Home Foundation	Vancouver
Andrew Wynn-Williams	Executive Director	Greater Victoria Coalition to End Homelessness	Greater Victoria
Bernie Pauly	Scientist & Associate Professor	Centre for Addictions Research of BC	Victoria
Don Elliott	Housing Development Coordinator	Greater Victoria Coalition to End Homelessness	Greater Victoria
John Reilly	Senior Planner – Social Issues	City of Victoria, Sustainable Planning and Community Development Department	Victoria
Marianne Alto	City Councillor	City of Victoria	Victoria
Laural Raine	Policy, Planning & Projects Consultant	City of Toronto, Shelter, Support and Housing Administration	Toronto
Stephen Gaetz	Director & Professor	Canadian Observatory on Homelessness / Homeless Hub	Toronto / National
Steve Barnes	Policy Analyst	Wellesley Institute	Toronto
Nicole Jackson	Research & Policy Analyst	Calgary Homeless Foundation	Calgary