

Homeless in Regina: Defining the Problem

In March 2023 620 CKRM looked at homelessness in Regina: To talk about homelessness, first, we will look at homelessness, how people become homeless, and who is homeless. According to the City of Regina's latest point-in-time count, which was done in 2021, there were 488 individuals experiencing homelessness. However, that number is estimated to have gone up due to the rising cost of living, inflation, and the ending pandemic supports.

A 2022 study by Statistics Canada, titled "A portrait of Canadians who have been homeless," defined homelessness as a situation in which individuals or families live without stable, safe, permanent, appropriate housing or the immediate means and ability to acquire it. That could include living on the streets, living in places not appropriate for human habitation, or staying in shelters. According to the report, studies from various countries have examined the causes of homelessness. Most agree that it results from a complex interaction of individual factors, life events and structural (economic and societal) factors.

Individual factors and life events associated with increased risk of homelessness include low education, lack of job skills, substance use, mental health issues, domestic violence, family instability, relationship breakups, social exclusion due to sexual orientation, and adverse childhood experiences. Among these factors, a leading contributor is poor mental health, making it harder to earn a stable income or maintain relationships with family and friends. Peter Gilmer, an advocate with the Regina Anti-Poverty Ministry, said while mental health makes it difficult for individuals to find and maintain consistent housing, the more significant issue is a lack of income.

"There are folks with mental health and addiction issues who find themselves with acute challenges that make it difficult for them to maintain their accommodations with their landlords. The vast majority of our clients end up homeless just through an inability to be able to afford to continue to rent a place," he said. "Ultimately, the main criteria that we see in our clientele are simply

people whose incomes are too low and whose costs for housing and other basic necessities are too high.

Structural or social factors are also involved. For example, lack of access to social and affordable housing, unfavourable labour market conditions, unavailability of public benefits, racial discrimination in the workplace or the housing market, lack of support for immigrants and refugees, aging out of foster care (in the absence of adequate support for independent living) and leaving prison have all been associated with increased risk of homelessness. Gilmer said many of those issues exist in the Queen City. Still, the lack of quality programs and support, including the inability to access adequate and affordable housing, makes things even harder for those on the streets.

“We can certainly put together the dots as to why that has been. It’s not a coincidence that there’s been a huge growth in homelessness since 2021 when the Saskatchewan Income Support Program (SIS) replaced the traditional income assistance programs in the province,” he said. “With that program, a big part of the issue has been the fact that people no longer get the actual cost of their utilities covered by their shelter or on top of their shelter.

“With the old social assistance program, it actually covered the actual cost of power, energy, water, and then provides a basic phone benefit,” he continued. “With this (current) program, that’s all wrapped into an inadequate shelter allowance.” Gilmer said that they’d seen a lot of people needing help to cover the cost of rent and utilities in Regina since the change.

“An individual is provided \$600 to cover their rent or other housing costs and all of their utilities, and that’s virtually impossible when we see what’s actually available on the market.” Another problem lies with the Saskatchewan Assured Income for Disability program, which according to Gilmer, hasn’t seen its benefits increase for the last eight years, despite the cost of living increasing. Another big issue, according to Gilmer, is the number of people who have acute challenges gaining and maintaining housing for various reasons.

“One of the things that we’ve identified as a key need is the need to expand housing first and permanent supportive housing programs so that you start out by ensuring that people have a roof over their head,” he said. “Then you also ensure that the wraparound supports are in place, whether it’s in relation to addictions, to mental health concerns, to a range of barriers to maintaining housing, that those supports are in place.”

“The really big issue is just the lack of adequacy of the programs and the fact that they don’t come close to covering the actual costs for rent and utilities,” he said. “Along with that is looking at sort of the best use of an expansion of social housing, where rent is geared to income, where there is greater affordability of income.” Gilmer said all those issues lead to an impossible choice for residents in the city: food or rent. “The reality is that the vast majority of people that we are working with are paying much more than their income,” she said. “Often their whole incomes, if not two-thirds of their incomes, are going just to cover the cost of their housing and shelter needs.”

“Even if people are able to keep a roof over their heads temporarily, they’re losing out on being able to keep their utilities going, or they’re just not able to eat this food security question. When you’re forced with those kinds of choices, then the trickle down of that is that people end up on the street. Among Canadians who are now responsible for housing decisions within their households, about three per cent reported experiencing unsheltered homelessness at some point in their lives. This proportion was higher among Indigenous people, notably First Nations living off-reserve.

Those who identified as First Nations experienced homelessness at a rate of 11.7 per cent nationally, with those who identified as Metis at a rate of 6.3 per cent nationally. The rate for non-Indigenous was 2.3 per cent. Despite First Nations and Metis people representing around ten per cent of Regina’s population, Gilmer said around half of their clients are indigenous.

“In terms of our client caseload, what we know is that in terms of dealing with a range of incoming security and housing issues, roughly half of our caseload is Indigenous and half-Indigenous,” he said. “There is no one demographic that’s hit along by poverty or homelessness that it is a pretty wide cross-section.” The study also found that nationally, 3.2 per cent of people ages 30 to 39 were homeless, the highest of all age ranges, followed by 50 to 59 at three per cent. In Regina, Gilmer said they primarily see people between the ages of under 25 and over 55.

“Our clientele is primarily 18 to 65. We see lots of folks who are under the age of 25 who haven’t been established in the economy or have been in briefly and haven’t been able to remain in employment for whatever reason,” he said. “One demographic that doesn’t get a lot doesn’t get talked about a lot, but we know is a very significant portion of our caseload is people between the ages of 55 and 65.”

“Single unattached individuals in that age group who haven’t been able to access their federal senior’s benefits, in which most of the people that we work with find that their income circumstances actually improve fairly significantly. that’s that is actually a really big group,” he continued. “I think that when people look at poverty and homelessness, you know, there are certain demographic groups that they’re not surprised by, but that particular group is one that doesn’t get talked about a lot.

Both Gilmer and the study note that identifying the homeless population is a challenge partly because of transiency and the lack of a permanent address. Stigma and prejudice towards this population may also mean people will not identify as homeless. Also, most Canadian data cities collect are “point-in-time counts” of the situation on a specific day.¹

¹ From Homeless in Regina, Tanner Wallace-Scribner

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