Knowledge for Action:
Hidden homelessness in Prince George, Kamloops, Kelowna, Nelson and Nanaimo

Executive Summary   SPARC BC   July 2011

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Prepared by the social planning and research council of british columbia

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Acknowledgements

SPARC BC is grateful to the project Advisory Committee who assisted the project team throughout the research process. We are most grateful for the help of the following Advisors:

- Celeste le Duigou (Community Coordinator, Nelson Cares)
- John Horn (Social Planner, City of Nanaimo)
- Travis Holyk (Director of Research, Carrier Sekani Family Services – Prince George)
- Christene Walsh (Social Development Coordinator, Regional District of Central Okanagan - Kelowna)
- Tangie Genshorek (Kamloops Homelessness Action Plan Coordinator)
- Dennis Easter (Vancouver Native Health Society)

SPARC BC wishes to thank telephone survey respondents, hidden homeless interview participants and the following social service agencies for participating in the key informant interview process:

- New Life Mission (Kamloops)
- ASK Wellness Centre (Kamloops)
- Canadian Mental Health Association (Kelowna)
- Kelowna's Gospel Mission (Kelowna)
- Outreach Urban Health Street Level Clinic (Kelowna)
- Nelson Community Service Centre (Nelson)
- Salvation Army (Nelson)
- After Hours Drop in Centre (Prince George)
- Active Support Against Poverty (Prince George)

The following community-based researchers were invaluable contributors in the interview process involving hidden homeless individuals. A special thanks is extended to:

- Patrick Coon (Carrier Sekani Family Services – Prince George)
- Louise Richards and team (Kamloops and District Elizabeth Fry Society)
- Leslie Clarke and team (Nanaimo Women's Resources Society)
- Janette Mulloy and Janet Sawyer (The Advocacy Centre - Nelson)
- Alex Lipsett and Kim Stanyer (Canadian Mental Health Association – Kelowna Branch)

Executive Summary

Objectives and Research Questions

The goal of this research project is to develop a better understanding of the hidden homeless populations in five (5) smaller urban centres in British Columbia: Prince George, Kamloops, Kelowna, Nelson, and Nanaimo. The guiding questions for this study are:

- To what degree has homelessness been studied in Prince George, Kamloops, Kelowna, Nelson and Nanaimo?

- What is the estimated number of hidden homeless persons in the participating communities at a current time point and over the course of a year?

- What are the characteristics of people who house the hidden homeless and what are the characteristics of people who are part of, or have recently been part of, the hidden homeless population?

- What are the characteristics of a sample of services and programs available to people who are part of the hidden homeless population?

- What programs, services and supports would help end the problem of hidden homelessness?

Methodology

This project used a mixed research method involving quantitative and qualitative approaches to study hidden homelessness. The methodology included: a review of literature on homelessness in each community, a telephone survey of 1,000 randomly selected households in each community, key informant interviews with service agencies, and face-to-face interviews with hidden homeless individuals.

The methodology for this project was based on the study by Eberle, et al., (2009), which estimated the size of the hidden homeless population in the Greater Vancouver CMA (Census Metropolitan Area).

The following definition of hidden homelessness was used in this study: Hidden homeless persons are people staying temporarily with another household and who do not have a regular address of their own where they have security of tenure. (Eberle, et al., 2009; p.6)

Key Findings

Findings from review of homeless counts

Formal homeless counts were done in four (4) of the five (5) communities. Nelson did not have a formal homeless count. In Kelowna, 279 homeless were counted. Nanaimo had 115, Prince George enumerated 361 and Kamloops reported 103. Nelson reported 276 but this number is based on the number of individual clients in 2010 at Stepping Stones (a local community service) and at winter emergency bed shelters and should be compared with caution to the other communities.

Community-specific events such as RCMP sweeps and 'clean-up' efforts in Prince George and Kelowna may have displaced homeless populations prior to the count, which may have reduced the numbers in their respective counts. As in other homeless counts, men made up the majority of the homeless population and Aboriginal peoples were over-represented in all of the homeless counts.

There was no formal methodology used to identify the hidden homeless in any of these communities. However, Prince George, Kamloops and Nanaimo did report on the location where people said that they had spent the previous night, which provided some insight into hidden homelessness.

Findings from household telephone survey

The household surveys were completed January 18-26, 2011. Random Digit Dialing (RDD) was used to obtain 1,000 surveys in each of the five (5) municipalities. Forward Sortation Areas (FSA) were used in setting the quotas to ensure respondents were from the various geographical areas of their municipality.

The surveys found seven (7) current hidden homeless in Prince George, four (4) in Kamloops, two (2) in Kelowna, eleven (11) in Nelson and nine (9) in Nanaimo. Projections based on these samples indicate that there may have been between 75 current hidden homeless in Nelson to 299 in Nanaimo. Rare events such as the numbers of current hidden homeless also produce a wide range within the 95% confidence interval. For example, the range in Nanaimo was between 137-567 current hidden homeless.

The numbers were even larger when considering the number of hidden homeless within the past year. The surveys found twenty-two (22) hidden homeless in Prince George over the past year, thirty-four (34) in Kamloops, thirty-two (32) in Kelowna, forty-five (45) in Nelson and twenty-four (24) in Nanaimo. Projections based on these samples indicate that there may have been between 306 hidden homeless in Nelson to 1,167 in Kamloops over the past year. As with the current hidden homeless, there was a very wide range in the numbers based on the 95% confidence intervals.

Friends, rather than family most frequently housed the hidden homeless over the past year. According to the survey, hidden homeless on average generally stayed 6-12 weeks with their host. Lack of income/lack of employment, lack of available housing, and low income/can't afford available housing were mentioned as top reasons for why the hidden homeless were not able to secure a place of their own.

An interesting result from the household surveys was that the majority of households housing the hidden homeless were home owners and a significant number of households were paying more than 30% of their income on housing. This suggests that many of the participating households are insecurely housed themselves.

The numbers clearly show that hidden homelessness is likely an issue in British Columbian communities. Based on the low estimate for past year hidden homeless in Kelowna (the lowest reporting city), there would have been 38,061 hidden homeless people over the past year in BC. That number is a similar size to the entire estimated population of the city of Vernon (38,895) in 2010 (BC Stats, 2010). In the worst case scenario (high estimate), there would be 78,550 hidden homeless people over the past year in BC. That number represents more people than the estimated total population of the city of Prince George (75,568) in 2010 (BC Stats, 2010).

Findings from interviews with service agency representatives

At least two (2) service providers were interviewed in each community. The organizations were typically quite large and provided a wide range of services such as addiction and counseling services, housing and housing support, etc.

Most of the respondents indicated that their communities had identified homelessness as a high priority issue and that poverty and homelessness was identified as an issue among Aboriginal peoples.

Although some respondents believe that progress in fighting homelessness was being made, many identified that there was a need for long-term solutions to deal with the barriers to ending homelessness.

Findings from interviews with hidden homeless individuals

Fifty (50) interviews were conducted with individuals who are currently or have recently experienced hidden homelessness.

While there were a larger proportion of female respondents, since one of the organizations referring candidates serves only women, the other characteristics of this sample was reflective of those that are commonly found in other research on the homeless. For example, there was a similar overrepresentation of Aboriginal peoples as there has been in other studies.

There were also similar significant issues identified in this study and in other studies on homelessness. For example, health issues were prevalent in the hidden homeless individuals who were interviewed, with over half reporting a mental health challenge and/or a substance use challenge. Not surprising, low income and lack of affordable housing were the most often noted major barriers to obtaining stable housing.

While half of the hidden homeless were satisfied with their temporary housing, just over one third of participants felt a risk to their personal safety while living with others temporarily.

Conclusions and Recommendations

If any homeless person in a community is too many, then each of the five (5) participating communities has a problem with homelessness.

There are three major complimentary strategies for ending homelessness: adequate income; appropriate, affordable and, where needed, supportive housing; and, client centered services that are responsive to and empowering of each individual's unique and diverse abilities. It is clear that each of these three ways to ending homelessness involves the collaboration of multiple levels of government, community based agencies and services providers as well as other key sectors including business and the academic community.

This study provides conclusions and recommendations concerning homelessness research and programs and services to better address hidden homelessness.

Homelessness research

Each community in this study had some type of approach to enumerating the homeless and such data was seen as important in creating public awareness about the issue of homelessness and the type of programs and services that are needed. At the same time, there was variability between the methodologies that were used in the homeless counts for either obtaining the data or for reporting on that data.

A central focus of this research was to develop a strategy that provided an estimate of the number of hidden homeless in each community. This research built on the work undertaken in the previous BC-based study on hidden homelessness (Eberle et al, 2009) with a focus on using/adapting that method to understand the specific needs and circumstances in smaller communities. While estimating "rare events" such as hidden homelessness has many challenges, we believe that the results of this approach have produced findings that are both credible and reliable.

Our review of existing homelessness studies and counts in the five (5) participating communities and the new data that has been generated through this study allows for important insights to be made about how to enhance how Canadian communities address homelessness. We believe that there are a number of improvements that can be made in this regard.

1. Greater understanding about the scope of homelessness at the regional, provincial and national levels would be improved if there were a more consistent approach used when studies of homelessness are undertaken. It is therefore recommended that the Homelessness Partnering Secretariat, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada should develop a manual that provides a common methodology and templates for reporting the data for point-in-time homeless counts. Furthermore, it is recommended that the Secretariat establish a repository of homeless count data so that researchers can conduct secondary and comparative analysis of that data.

2. Given that the results from the household telephone surveys indicate a potentially very large number of hidden homeless, it is recommended that the Secretariat replicate the household survey in other communities in Canada in order to attain a better understanding of the scope and nature of the problem. If the survey is replicated, it is further recommended that the screening question be refined to obtain additional information on those who stay but are not considered hidden homeless for this study.

3. The study findings noted that a large percentage of those who provide housing support for the hidden homeless are themselves facing affordability challenges in their own housing situation. It is therefore recommended that future household surveys include questions about the nature of their current housing situation and their reasons for making their housing available to the hidden homeless. Such information could provide further insight into the income and housing dynamics of this population.

Programs/services and hidden homelessness

Housing and income issues came up repeatedly in the telephone interviews with the households and from the interviews with the hidden homeless.
This study also identified that services and programs can provide major points of support for people who are experiencing a transition in their lives and who are experiencing hidden homelessness.

The fact that hidden homeless individuals have a place to stay suggests that their existing network as well as their available resources have been sufficient to allow them to avoid street or sheltered homelessness (at least for the time being). As such, it is important to consider ways to help these individuals to regain their stability and move to more permanent stable housing in order to prevent the 'drift' into street or sheltered homelessness that can sometimes occur. This would include investing in programs and services that would enable the hidden homeless to move from being temporarily housed to more stable, permanent and affordable accommodation - an address of their own.

While there are some unique situations in every community, respondents felt that expanded services were needed to better assist people experiencing hidden homelessness and to help prevent the 'drift' into absolute homelessness. This included enhanced access to housing and supports at all points along the housing continuum (from emergency shelters to independent accommodation). It also included mental health and addiction services, health services, food security programs, counseling and life skills training, as well as more accessible medical and dental services. We believe that there are a number of improvements that can be made in this regard.

1. Our study confirms lack of income is a barrier to securing an address of one's own. This reinforces the importance of public policy decisions and program related to income assistance and skills development and job training. The current maximum shelter allowance of $375 is not sufficient to enable people receiving income assistance in British Columbia to access adequate shelter. As a result, to successfully prevent homelessness in the future and increase the housing stability of those that are at risk of homelessness, it is important for government to ensure that existing housing and support programs are structured in a way to prevent homelessness and increase housing stability for those that need it most.

2. The hidden homeless population had difficulty in obtaining employment, with only a few having full-time jobs. It is therefore recommended that skill training and job placement services be developed to assist the hidden homeless.

3. Aboriginal peoples are overrepresented among the hidden homeless populations to a similar extent as they are overrepresented in other counts of the homeless. It is therefore recommended that funding for housing and services targeted to Aboriginal homeless be directed to Aboriginal service providers as much as possible.

4. A significant percentage of the hidden homeless report dealing with mental health and substance use issues. People with concurrent disorders will need to have access to appropriate services if they are to become stable in their housing. The findings from this research suggest that the "housing first" approach now being adopted in many communities should be continued.

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