

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Overview

This study has confirmed many of the same trends revealed in our first report based on the July, 2000 data collection. The magnitude of the problem was verified, with 341 homeless individuals identified in January compared with 407 individuals identified in July. Furthermore, in January, 2001, 100 of these individuals (29%) were absolutely homeless, using the restrictive definition of homelessness that has been rejected by many as underestimating the problem (Casavant, 1999). The strong presence of women and children among Sudbury's homeless population was confirmed in the current study, as was the over-representation of First Nations people. However, one important difference between the Time 1 and Time 2 studies was that the proportion of Francophones in the homeless population matched their numbers in the total population in the latter, while they were under-represented in the former. The neighbourhood survey also produced similar findings as the earlier study, with 10 homeless individuals identified in July, 2000 and 7 in January (4.2% and 3.6% of households, respectively).

Introduction and Background

At the local level, the Social Planning Council of Sudbury (SPC) has been working with the Advisory Committee on Emergency Shelter (ACES), the City of Greater Sudbury, and other community partners to gather information on the extent of the problem, coordinate local services, and address the issue. In July, 2000, the SPC conducted the first comprehensive study of homelessness in Sudbury. A mixed-methods study was designed to enable the collection of quantitative and qualitative data on the problem. After the release of the findings of the July, 2000 study, the City of Greater Sudbury made a joint commitment with the Social Planning Council to undertake a three-year program of research on homelessness in order to track changes in homelessness over time and to study various dimensions of the problem locally.

This report describes the following:

- the numbers of people who are absolutely homeless and those at high risk of homelessness;
- breakdowns on background characteristics including children, youth, women, men, cultural groups (i.e. those of Anglo/European origins, First Nations people, and francophones);
- agencies used by homeless individuals and families and reasons for homelessness;
- the extent of hidden homelessness;
- local residents' opinions regarding homelessness; and
- observations of sites in the city centre occupied by homeless people during the winter.

Defining Homelessness

Like the Time 1 study on homelessness in Sudbury, the current project adopted an inclusive definition of homelessness by taking into account people who were vulnerable to becoming homeless in addition to those who were absolutely homeless at the time of the study (i.e. the approach taken by the Mayor's Homelessness Action Task Force, Toronto). The definition used in the Toronto study was based on work by Daly (1996) and views homeless people as those who are absolutely, periodically, or temporarily without shelter, as well as those who are at substantial risk of being in the street in the immediate future. However, the Time 2 study also identified and enumerated those who were absolutely without housing.

Research Methodology

To enable comparisons with the Time 1 study conducted in July, 2000, the same mixed-methods design was used. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected in three phases that were ongoing simultaneously during the week of January 22nd to 28th, 2001 (a survey of service providers was not repeated in Time 2). The three phases included:

- A count of the homeless population using emergency shelters, social service agencies, and other services supporting this population in Sudbury, including the identification of individuals who were absolutely homeless;
- A face-to-face survey of households in a random sample of neighbourhoods in the city of Sudbury; and
- Qualitative field research in settings occupied by homeless people in the downtown core.

Key Findings

Phase I: Count of Homeless People

An unduplicated count was obtained by examining the first, middle, and last initials of each individual, as well as their date of birth and gender; individuals with identical information were treated as the same person and the duplicated information was eliminated from the final database. The background information enabled us to identify 341 different homeless individuals who used the services of one or more of the agencies during the week of January 22nd to 28th or were staying temporarily less than five nights per week in the homes of participants of the neighbourhood survey. The overall number of homeless people was slightly lower than in July, 2000 when 407 individuals were identified. The characteristics of the homeless population were as follows:

- 100 people in Sudbury were absolutely homeless in late January, 2001. Half of these individuals were female (50%), 19% were Aboriginals, 20% were Francophones, and just over half were of Anglo/European origins (54%). Over a third were children (9%) or adolescents (27%) and the remainder were adults between the ages of 20 to 59 years of age. The children were with their mothers at the YWCA Geneva House.
- The 341 people identified in the homeless count included 43 infants and children under age 13, 61 adolescents aged 13 to 19, and four seniors over the age of 65. These findings were similar to those noted in Time 1.
- Women represented a slightly larger proportion of the people who were homeless in January (40.6%) compared with July (36.9%).
- As was also found in July, 2000, the majority of homeless people had European backgrounds (72.5% in 2000 and 75.6 in 2001).
- While Francophones were under-represented in the July 2000 count, they accounted for 24.2% of the homeless people in January 2000.
- Similar to the finding in July 2000, Native people were greatly over-represented among the homeless population, with 25.8% being Aboriginal in July and 21.5% in January.
- The majority of both men and women who were homeless were single/unattached (85% of the men and 77% of the women).
- In January, a slightly larger proportion of the homeless adults with children were women, single or divorced individuals, and people who were not receiving any social assistance or government benefits, compared with July.

- As in July, the subgroups of the homeless population who were less likely to be receiving social support payments were youth, seniors, and Francophones.
- While the same reasons for homelessness were given at both data collection points, the relative importance of the reasons differed somewhat. While the primary reasons given for homelessness in July were unemployment and low wages, these were cited by a smaller proportion of people in January. In contrast, domestic violence was the main reason for homelessness in January.

Phase II: Neighbourhood Survey

The survey gathered information on public opinions regarding the reasons for homelessness in Sudbury, factors related to homelessness, personal experiences with homeless people and perceived solutions to the problem. In total, 195 residents participated in the survey in January compared with 236 in July. The Time 2 participants ranged in age from 17 to 87, with a mean of age 44.

- Seven homeless individuals were identified as staying temporarily in the homes of relatives or friends (i.e. 7 in 195 households). This represents 3.6% of those surveyed, a rate that was slightly lower than that observed in July, 2000 (4.2%).
- The respondents in the January, 2001 neighbourhood survey generally identified the same reasons for homelessness in Sudbury as did the sample from July, 2000. The two main reasons identified were government policies and cut-backs and unemployment or lack of education.
- A larger proportion of the 2001 respondents believed that government policies, cut-backs, and a lack of funding for social assistance were causes of homelessness. In addition, nearly twice as many people identified mental health or health problems as reasons for homelessness.
- The main difference between the responses of residents and the homeless people regarding the reasons for homelessness was that the residents did not recognize the extent to which domestic violence is a factor related to homelessness.
- Another difference stemmed from the belief of some residents that homelessness results from personal failure or a lifestyle choice while none of the homeless people reported this.
- A smaller proportion of the residents in the January study reported that they, a family member, or a personal friend had been homeless compared to the July, 2000 study (19% vs. 34.6%, respectively). The primary reasons given for the homelessness were family issues, unemployment or poverty, domestic violence, substance abuse, and a lack of affordable housing.
- In comparison with the July, 2000 survey, a smaller proportion of the January, 2001 respondents indicated that *they personally knew someone in Sudbury* who was homeless (35.9% versus 23.2% respectively). Those who knew someone stated that the most common reasons gave somewhat different responses compared to the more general question on personal experiences with homelessness (i.e. among themselves, family, or friends) since substance abuse, unemployment, family issues, problems with social assistance, and mental illness or illness were given most often as explanations for acquaintances in Sudbury being homeless.
- As in the Time 1 survey, the primary solution to homelessness identified by the residents was to provide more government funding for welfare, social services and programs to support homeless people. In addition, over twice as many of the Time 2 respondents mentioned the establishment of shelters compared to Time 1. The other strategies mentioned most often in both studies pertained to creating more jobs and job assistance and working to create affordable housing.

Phase III: Field Observations

Foyer Notre Dame House (Outreach Program), the Youth Action Centre Intravenous Drug Unit (IDU), and the Sudbury Regional Police Service assisted with the study by serving as key informants and enabling members of the research team to accompany front-line workers or officers on regular evening/night shifts during the week of the Time 2 study. The frigid temperatures in January had an obvious effect on the homeless population—it is simply not possible for people to sleep outdoors in the park or on benches. The temperature during the seven days between January 22nd and 28th varied between a maximum of -1 °C and a minimum of -17.5 °C with a mean temperature of -8, and snow or ice pellets were recorded every day except for January 26th. The main themes emerging from the field observations in July, 2000 and January, 2001 were quite similar. Eight issues were identified through the field work, including mental illness, substance abuse, the routinization of homelessness, supportive relationships among homeless people, accessing services, health issues, and finding a place to keep warm, and homeless adolescents.

Recommendations

Seventeen recommendations were developed on the basis of the findings of the July, 2000 study and these recommendations were reviewed by service providers in Sudbury. They also prioritized the recommendations to identify ten that should be the focus of local action. Given the similarity in the trends identified in the two studies, it is recommended that community efforts to address homelessness continue to focus on these ten priorities:

- 1) Provide more funding for shelters and beds for homeless people.
- 2) Implement measures to ensure that new affordable rental housing is developed and existing low cost, appropriate rental housing is preserved.
- 3) Develop strategies for addressing the needs of homeless people with mental illness.
- 4) Provide more support services and financial support to homeless and low income people to assist them in making the transition to stable housing and to reduce the risk of homelessness in the future.
- 5) Consult with First Nations and Francophone organizations in order to develop strategies for addressing the needs of homeless people in these cultural groups.
- 6) Review the shelter arrangements for women who are not victims of domestic violence and establish beds for women who do not require or are averse to heightened security arrangements.
- 7) Enhance outreach services to homeless people in Sudbury in order to connect them with existing community resources.
- 8) Involve consumers in the development of new services and the enhancement of existing services.
- 9) Press the federal and provincial governments to implement policy changes that will address the underlying causes of the problem.
- 10) Provide funding for community-based workers who will engage in follow-up activities with clients and offer ongoing support services to assist clients in making a successful transition into stable housing in the community.