

# **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY – 2021 OTTAWA POINT IN TIME COUNT**

## **Background**

The City of Ottawa, in collaboration with 53 partner agencies, conducted a Point-in-Time (PiT) Count during a 24-hour period, from noon on Wednesday, October 27 until noon on Thursday, October 28, 2021. The PiT Count provides the City with a snapshot of its homeless population and informs the development and implementation of services, programs, and policies that reflect the needs of residents experiencing homelessness and those at risk of experiencing homelessness.

The PiT Count was conducted to fulfill provincial and federal requirements. In 2018, the provincial government amended the *Housing Services Act, 2011* requiring all Ontario municipalities to conduct an enumeration of people experiencing homelessness in their communities every two years. The PiT Count data also provides the federal government with a better picture of the homeless population to support their ongoing work to prevent and reduce homelessness across the country.

## **2021 Ottawa Point in Time Count**

The City completed its first Count in April 2018. In total, 1,400 people were surveyed, involving 59 community agencies and 118 enumeration sites across Ottawa. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2020 count was postponed and subsequently required to be completed by December 31st, 2021. The City of Ottawa conducted its second PiT Count on October 27 & 28, 2021 during the third wave of the pandemic.

Ottawa's 2021 PiT Count was conducted at 114 enumeration sites by 265 surveyors who were trained staff from homelessness-serving agencies. Locations included: day and drop-in programs, emergency, youth and domestic violence shelters, transitional housing programs, Indigenous agencies, community health and resource centres, social service agencies, hospitals, correctional centres, transitional housing, and addiction and mental health treatment programs.

The unsheltered population was surveyed by outreach services who had designated routes and mobile vans to survey this population. The option to complete the survey over the phone by calling 3-1-1 was helpful for homeless residents who could not attend an enumeration site. All homeless individuals who completed the survey received a \$10 gift card.

## **Impact of the COVID-19: PiT Count 2021**

At the time of the PiT Count, Ottawa had a total of 30,756 cases of COVID-19. There were 214 known active cases, 29,939 cases were considered resolved, and 603 people had died from the virus. No stay-at-home orders were in place at the time of the enumeration.

As with many other aspects of our lives, the COVID-19 pandemic caused challenges and disruptions surrounding the 2021 PiT count. To mitigate the risks of COVID-19 and decrease the transmission of the virus, Ottawa Public Health's (OPH) IPAC (Infection Prevention and

Control) team reviewed the PiT Count methodology and made recommendations based on their regulations and procedures. Recommendations from OPH, such as masking and physical distancing, were mandatory requirements for the enumeration activities. Alternate arrangements were made for those participants who did not pass the OPH screening tool that was administered to every participant and personnel.

## **Methodology Changes**

Adopting a flexible approach was instrumental in the planning and implementation of the PiT Count. Changes to the methodology were carefully considered and implemented to ensure the health and well-being of the participants and agency personnel.

Due to the risk of transmission of COVID-19, all meetings were held virtually including the training sessions for surveyors. Virtual training included training on infectious disease control measures, personal protective equipment, and OPH regulations on how to properly engage with participants.

No community volunteers supported the PiT Count this year. All additional surveyors were recruited from experienced staff from homelessness serving agencies.

To adhere to social distancing regulations, the size of the enumeration teams for the unsheltered routes were smaller and mobile outreach teams were increased. Mobile teams were experienced agency personnel who work with the unsheltered population. They were able to go to various locations where participants could fill out the PiT Count survey without having to attend an enumeration site.

In an effort to reach people experiencing homelessness who could not attend an enumeration site, there was an option to complete the survey over the phone in English or French. Residents were encouraged to complete the telephone survey by calling 3-1-1. They were then connected to Housing Services staff to complete the survey. The 3-1-1 operators also gave out the locations of enumeration sites if the caller wanted to complete the survey in person. Hours for the telephone surveys took place from Wednesday at noon until midnight and Thursday from 6 AM to noon.

Each agency was provided with a survey kit that included personal protective equipment, Grade 3 face masks, hand sanitizer and face shields, resource cards with instructions to complete a telephone survey if a participant had symptoms, OPH COVID-19 Package and OPH Screening Checklists.

## **2021 PiT Count survey and sample**

The survey consisted of 19 questions that related to the respondents' demographics, family status and history, citizenship, health conditions, race, sexual orientation, language, Indigenous ancestry, reasons for homelessness, military service, and source of income.

The nationally coordinated PiT count approach includes a set of common core questions that are asked across all participating communities. This includes screening questions that decide whether someone is selected to answer the full survey. In addition, the City added 10 survey

questions to respond to our local information needs. The answers to these questions are used by communities to help understand the experience of homelessness locally and to plan services to prevent and end homelessness. They also contribute to the understanding of homelessness across Canada.

The number of homeless individuals who completed the survey from noon on October 27 to noon October 28, 2021, was 1465. In total, 125 surveys were excluded from the analyses:

- 116 were removed because the respondents either had their own apartment/house or they declined to answer where they were staying, and
- 9 surveys were removed because respondents indicated they had a permanent residence where they could stay as long as they wanted

Following these exclusions, the total number of respondents was 1340.

## **Results from the 2021 PiT Count**

Questions on the survey were divided by the following themes:

1. Demographics
2. Location of homelessness
3. Experiences of homelessness
4. Health

### **Demographics**

#### ***Age***

The PiT Count survey was administered to individuals over the age of 16 who were experiencing homelessness on the referenced night and who consented to participate. The average age of respondents was 40 years old.

Shelter operators and homelessness providers have expressed concern that the homeless population is ageing, which presents unique challenges related to the delivery of services. According to the 2021 PiT Count, more than a quarter (27%) of respondents were over 50 years old.

#### ***Gender***

Sixty-two (62%) of respondents identified as male and 33% of people identified as female. The remaining 3% included responses for each of the following: transgender, two-spirit, and other.

#### ***Sexual Orientation***

Of the total respondents surveyed, 11% identified as two-spirited, lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, questioning, intersex, asexual (2SLGBTQIA+) or declined to answer.

#### ***Racialized***

Fifty-five percent (55%) of the respondents in 2021 identified as racialized, whereas 48% were identified in 2018. Thirty two percent (32%) identified as Indigenous, 15% Black, 3% Asian, 3% Arab and Other at 3%.

### ***Indigenous or Indigenous Ancestry***

It is widely known that there is an over-representation of Indigenous people experiencing homelessness. Overall, 32% of those surveyed identified as First Nations, Metis, Inuit or having Indigenous ancestry, which was higher than previously documented. In 2018, the PiT Count data reported the same population represented 24% of those surveyed. The over-representation of Indigenous people experiencing homelessness spans across all homeless locations – in shelters, on the street, in corrections and hospitals, transitional housing and the hidden homeless populations at various percentage degrees. The City recognizes that the Indigenous community feels the actual overall percentage is higher as many Indigenous do not identify for fear of discrimination and ostracism from mainstream services.

### **Immigrant, Refugee or Refugee Claimant Status**

In total, 20% of survey respondents identified coming to Canada as an immigrant, refugee, or refugee claimant. Among them, 7% have been in Canada for less than a year.

These findings suggest that housing supports for newcomers need to address both those who have arrived in Canada recently and those who have been here for many years. More investments in Newcomer reception sites that provide such a specialized settlement support are needed.

### **Veterans**

Veteran's homelessness is a key priority for Housing Services, who is working collaboratively with Veteran Services, Built for Zero (BFZ) Canada, emergency shelters, outreach services and other stakeholders to end Veteran's homelessness in our community. This approach is structured, supportive, and maintains a data-driven focus on optimizing local homeless systems, accelerating the adoption of proven practices, and driving continuous improvement.

The number of individuals who previously served in the Canadian Military, or RCMP and are now experiencing homelessness made up 4% of all those surveyed in 2021, which was a slight decrease from 2018 when the percentage was 5%. Among them, almost half (42%) identified as Indigenous.

### **Location of Homelessness**

During the PiT Count, survey respondents were asked to identify the location where they were staying. Most respondents (55%) reported that they were staying in emergency shelters. Thirteen percent (13%) of survey respondents were staying in transitional housing and 11% were staying with a friend. Transitional Housing is a service for an intended population, such as vulnerable Indigenous and mainstream youth, second stage housing for women and children fleeing abuse, and individuals requiring post-incarceration and post-treatment services.

In October 2021, nearly three-quarters (73%) of respondents stayed in an emergency shelter in the past year, compared to 82% in April 2018.

Participants were asked "if you did not stay in an emergency shelter in the past year, what were the main reasons?". In response to this question:

- 31% of respondents reported fear of safety
- 12% reported that they had other temporary housing
- 12% reported that the emergency shelters are too crowded
- 11% indicated concerns about bed bugs and other pests in shelters

## **Experiences of Homelessness**

### **Chronicity**

Those who have been homeless for a cumulative period of six months or longer are considered to be experiencing chronic homelessness. Fifty-seven percent (57%) of survey respondents were identified as chronically homeless. This is a slight decrease from the 58% of homeless individuals who identified as experiencing chronic homelessness in 2018.

### **Family Homelessness**

Although singles made up the majority of respondents on the night of the PiT Count, 137 respondents (10%) were accompanied by children. Among them, 72% were women, 80% identified as racialized, and 10% who identified as immigrants or refugees had been in Canada for less than a year.

These survey results continue to validate the experiences of families who are experiencing increasing stress as a larger share of their income is used for housing as a result of increased cost of housing. The pandemic has heightened the need for more affordable housing for families.

Finding affordable housing in Ottawa that is large enough to accommodate a family is difficult. Two-bedroom rental units in the lowest rent bracket (under \$1200 per month) had a vacancy rate that was under 1% in 2021.<sup>1</sup>

### **Foster Care**

More than a quarter (27%) of respondents said they had previous experiences in foster care.

Among those with previous foster care and group experiences in October 2021, over one-third (34%) became homeless less than one year after leaving foster care,

### **First Experience of Homelessness**

- 43% of respondents first experienced homelessness when they were 24 years and younger.

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<sup>1</sup> Based on estimates for 2021 from the [Rental Market Report](#) released by the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation.

- 40% of respondents first experienced homelessness between the ages of 25 to 49 years old.
- 10% of respondents first experienced homelessness when they were over 50 years old.

## **Reason for Housing Loss**

People experiencing homelessness also struggle to meet their basic needs, which is crucial for obtaining and maintaining employment. Housing Loss Prevention Programs work with individuals and families to maintain their housing by providing supports and case management after someone is housed. Maintaining housing significantly increases quality of life. The 2021 PiT Count revealed that 26% of individuals surveyed identified the top reason for their housing loss is not enough income. Out of the 1,340 individuals who completed the survey, 4% of respondents reported having full-time work, 4% of respondents reported having part-time work, 2% of respondents reported having casual employment.

## **COVID-19**

The spread of COVID-19 has increased the risks associated with staying in congregate settings. Consequently, individuals who had normally resided in shelters or who were couch-surfing opted to live on the streets instead of accessing mainstream services, citing personal safety and fear of exposure to COVID-19 as reasons. Fourteen percent (14%) of respondents reported that COVID-19 was the reason for their housing loss.

## **Violence Against Women/ Domestic Violence**

The PiT Count survey was administered in several different types of programs and services. Of these:

- 98 individuals reported that reason for homelessness was due to experienced abuse by spouse/partner
- 12% of respondents said that their most recent housing loss was related to conflict with their spouse/partners.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Violence Against Women Services in Ottawa are doing the best to support survivors with diverse needs and realities. The stress of social/physical isolation measures, employment interruptions, or financial pressures may have led to risk factors that are associated with higher rates of intimate partner and sexual violence.

## **Sheltered Homelessness**

Sheltered homelessness includes people who stayed in emergency shelters, including violence against women shelters, transitional housing as well as motels/hotels. A total of 927 individuals were identified as sheltered on the night of October 27<sup>th</sup>, 2021. Among people accompanied by children, 123 respondents (66%) were staying in hotels or motels. Transitional housing for youth, Indigenous youth, adults and families throughout the city were surveyed by agency staff over the 24-hour period. One hundred and seventy-eight (178) people were identified as living in transitional housing across the city.

## **Unsheltered**

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and compounded by the lack of affordable housing options in the City, the high cost of rent, and weather conditions, the summer of 2020 saw an unprecedented increase in the number of unsheltered individuals. The estimated number of unsheltered individuals increased from 72 identified in the 2018 PiT Count, to 190 people living unsheltered on the night of the October 27, 2021. The unprecedented increase in the number of unsheltered individuals and homeless encampments has required a strong coordinated response by City of Ottawa Housing Services, multiple community partners, city departments, outreach services and other stakeholders including the National Capital Commission, Indigenous outreach providers, and homeless service providers in order to respond to the emerging needs of this population. The City of Ottawa opened Isolation Centres, as well as Physical Distancing and Respite Centres, which gave some individuals the opportunity to come in from the cold weather and access supports.

### **Provisionally Accommodated**

People experiencing homelessness who were temporarily attached to Provincial and/or Federal correctional and health facilities also received an opportunity to participate in the PiT Count. The John Howard and Elizabeth Fry Societies surveyed incarcerated individuals with no fixed address at the Ottawa Detention Centre and two supervised bail residence programs over the 24-hour period. At four hospital locations, social workers administered the surveys to patients with no fixed address. Seventy-four (74) respondents identified as homeless who were staying at public health and correction systems on the night of the 2021 PiT Count.

### **Hidden Homelessness**

Hidden homelessness refers to individuals who live temporarily with others but without guarantee of continued residency or immediate prospects for accessing permanent housing. Often known as "couch surfing", this includes people who are staying with relatives, friends, neighbors, or strangers because they have no other option. One hundred and forty-nine (149) individuals surveyed indicated they are staying with others in a temporary arrangement. This has increased since the 2018 PiT Count, where 101 individuals were identified. This population is "hidden" because they usually do not access homeless supports and services even though they are improperly or inadequately housed. Since these individuals do not access services, they are not captured on standard statistics regarding homelessness.

## **Health**

### **Health Conditions**

The 2021 PiT Count survey questioned participants regarding their health and wellness under five categories:

- Illness of medical condition
- Physical Limitation
- Learning or Cognitive Limitations
- Mental health issue
- Substance use issue

While the pandemic has strained many people's mental health, the effect is often more acute for marginalized and homeless populations who often have more severe symptoms, and face barriers to accessing services. Fifty-nine percent (59%) of respondents reported substance use, while 58% reported a mental health issue.

### **Acquired Brain Injury**

Homeless and precariously housed persons are particularly prone to traumatic brain injuries, but present occurrence rates are hindered by poor case acquisition. The percentage of individuals who are homeless and have an Acquired Brain Injury was 23% of respondents. Additionally, learning, or cognitive limitations were reported by 31% of respondents.

### **Physical Illness**

It is widely known that people experiencing homelessness have high rates of physical illness/conditions. The results from the 2021 PiT Count confirm that people experiencing homelessness have high incidents of both physical illness and other serious health conditions which affected 37% of the survey participants. Additionally, 30% responded that they were facing physical limitations.

## **Discussion and Next Steps**

### **Structural Factors of Homelessness**

The causes of homelessness reflect an intricate interplay between structural factors, systems failures, and individual circumstances. Homelessness is usually the result of the cumulative impact of several factors, rather than a single cause. Certainly, insufficient social assistance and a lack of affordable housing contributes to homelessness and makes it difficult to exit homelessness. Loss of employment, family breakdown, family violence, mental illness, poor physical health, substance use, physical, sexual, or emotional abuse, and lack of affordable housing can contribute to why people enter homelessness and struggle to leave.

The health problems facing homeless individuals may result from various factors, including a lack of housing, racism and discrimination, barriers to health care, a lack of access to adequate food and protection, limited resources for social services, and an inadequate public health infrastructure where homeless individuals can feel safe and comfortable to access the health services without judgement.

### **Moving Forward**

While considerable work has been done in our community to transform the homelessness system of care into a housing-focused approach through our 10-Year Housing and Homelessness Plan, additional work needs to be done within the homelessness system and across other service delivery systems.

As we envision a future where everyone has a home, we need to better understand the impacts of chronic and/or complex trauma, intergenerational economic poverty, discrimination, migration to address economic uncertainty, dislocation due to war or genocide, as well as the impacts of the historic and ongoing colonization of Indigenous lands. The 2021 PiT Count is not a stand-



alone exercise, but rather another series of data points to be considered as part of our ongoing efforts to improve policies programs and services for people experiencing homelessness.