

# Journal of Rural and Community Development

## Rural Homelessness in Canada: Directions for Planning and Research

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**Citation:**

Waegemakers Schiff, J, Schiff, R., Turner, A., & Bernard, K. (2015). Rural homelessness in Canada: Directions for planning and research. *The Journal of Rural and Community Development*, 10(4), 85-106.



**BRANDON  
UNIVERSITY**

Founded 1899

**Publisher:** Rural Development Institute, Brandon University.

**Editor:** Dr. Doug Ramsey



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## **Rural Homelessness in Canada: Directions for Planning and Research**

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### **Abstract**

Until recently, there was little acknowledgement that homelessness existed in rural areas in Canada. With a few exceptions, most research and intervention has concentrated on individuals and families living in urban areas; consequently homelessness has most often been framed as an urban phenomenon. Rural homelessness was unacknowledged, until reports from diverse rural areas began to emerge in the last decade which shed light on the unique context of the issue. The aim of this research was to examine and describe the dimensions of rural homelessness across Canada, the locations and contexts that have been studied, and assess the extent of common themes across provinces and regions. In this process, we were able to provide a preliminary assessment of: obstacles to identification and intervention; the challenges in determining prevalence of rural homelessness and its characteristics; determining access to shelter, food and support services, and what factors contribute to housing crises in rural areas. As there is still a scarcity of information about rural specific elements, planning and implementation responses would be enhanced through the development of a combination of a research network to facilitate knowledge mobilization and a research agenda on rural homelessness. Recommendations suggest the need for a fulsome research agenda on rural homelessness in Canada be developed to capture common emerging themes from a provincial rather than community-by-community perspective. This can, and should be coordinated with international and local efforts to examine rural homelessness.

Keywords: homelessness, housing, rural, Canada, housing first, migration

## **1.0 Introduction**

Until recently, there was little acknowledgement that homelessness existed in rural areas in Canada. Understanding of rural homelessness is minimal compared to that focussed on urban populations, and assessment of needs within the non-urban population is overlooked. Rural homelessness was unacknowledged, until reports from diverse rural areas began to emerge in the last decade which shed light on the unique context of the issue (Christensen, 2011; Robertson & White, 2007; Roy, Hurtubise & Rozier, 2003). The combination of vast, sparsely inhabited spaces, a harsh climate, and minimal to non-existent social services in remote areas, provides the setting and unique challenges for those who are without adequate housing in rural Canada. Recent reports reveal considerable concerns over dwellings that provided inadequate shelter from the elements, others being unfit for human habitation, and people doubled up and living in extremely overcrowded situations (Christensen, 2012).

A combination of counts and estimates of homeless persons throughout Canada report that every night, at least 30,000 Canadians experience homelessness. Among them, almost 3,000 'sleep rough' indicating that they sleep in cars, parks or on the street and are considered unsheltered. Another 14,400 stay in emergency shelters, which are usually temporary and provide overnight sleeping facilities but often no day-time accommodation (Gaetz, Donaldson, Ruichter, & Gulliver, 2013). Longer term stay is attributed to the 7,350 who stay in domestic violence shelters, although these facilities often have a 30 or 60 day maximum length of stay. A final group includes more than 4,460 who are provisionally accommodated in hospitals, prisons or halfway houses who have no permanent residence to return to upon discharge from the facility (Gaetz et al., 2013). The foregoing reflects urban homelessness. There are no accurate reports of how many people are homeless absolutely or relatively, in rural Canada.

With a few exceptions, most research and intervention has concentrated on individuals and families living in urban areas; consequently homelessness has most often been framed as an urban phenomenon. In cities and towns, homeless individuals seek a range of support services, including food, overnight shelter and financial help at organizations established to address these needs. These activities make the urban homeless a visible population in many respects. This visibility, the ability to more readily estimate their numbers, and differences in profile (singles families, youth and seniors, aboriginal, immigrant and refugee), has made it possible to describe population characteristics and begin to determine ways of addressing their described needs in Canadian cities (Peressini, McDonald, & Hulchanski, 1995).

In contrast, rural locations often do not have specific services for homeless people and consequently there are few places available for identification of those who may be in housing distress and consequently for data collection necessary for accurate counts. As a result, the extent of homelessness in different parts of rural Canada is simply unknown. Because rural homelessness is difficult to measure with any accuracy, measures of rural poverty and core housing need are often taken as proxy indicators. As such, they suggest that the rate of rural housing instability is similar to that in urban areas (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2011; United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, 2015). However, researchers in the United States (Fitchen, 1992; Lawrence, 1995) note that rural housing insecurity may be as ubiquitous as it is in urban settings, and homeless rates may be even higher than in urban areas when those living in substandard or unfit housing are included.

Houses which would be routinely condemned in urban areas, fall outside of the view of local officials in rural areas and remain inhabited despite their unsafe condition (Robertson, Harris, Noftsinger, & Fischer, 2007).

While rural homelessness has received some attention in Australia (Grigg, Judd, Ryan, & Komiti, 2005.), the United States (Fitchen, 1992; Lawrence, 1995; Robertson et al., 2007) and England (Cloke, Milbourne, & Widdowfield, 2000, 2001, 2003), what little is known about rural homelessness in Canada is confined to small body of academic literature and a group of local reports which generally focus on discrete communities and sub-regions in disparate parts of the country. Some have a general overview of rural homelessness in a given region and others are focused on discrete populations such as Aboriginal people (Belanger & Weasel Head, 2013), northern remote areas (Christensen, 2012), and those with a serious mental illness (Forchuk et al., 2010). The lack of consolidated information across the country hinders a clear understanding of the specificity and complexity of Canadian rural homelessness and thus hampers efforts to tailor programs and initiatives aimed at alleviating homelessness in rural environments.

The aim of this review was to examine and describe the dimensions of rural homelessness across Canada, the locations and contexts that have been studied, and assess the extent of common themes across provinces and regions. In this process, we anticipated being able to: identify obstacles to identification and intervention; identify the challenges in determining prevalence of rural homelessness and its characteristics; determine access to shelter, food and support services, and what factors contribute to housing crisis in rural areas.

## 2.0 Methods

The search included a review of the common databases that would normally include articles on homelessness: PsychInfo, Medline, SocIndex, Urban Studies Abstracts, Family & Society Studies Worldwide, Academic Search Premier. For internet searches, we used several search engines designed to capture government reports and studies usually not found elsewhere. These included Google, Google Scholar, Bing, Ask.com and Yippy. We used the terms 'homeless\*', 'housing', and 'rural' combined with 'Canada'\* (\* denotes variations of the word), and also looked at 'poverty' combined with 'rural' and 'Canada' as an ancillary search term to examine these databases. In order to capture work that was primarily in French we also used words such as *l'itinérance*, *la pauvreté* et *l'exclusion sociale*, and were assisted by other researchers in locating this body of work. Our search included both qualitative and quantitative studies. Due to limited number of Canadian studies in this area, we did not restrict our search to specific dates.

For the purpose of this review, we included literature which examined homelessness as defined by the Canadian Homelessness Research Network (Gaetz et al., 2013). This definition includes unsheltered, emergency sheltered, provisionally accommodated and individuals at risk of homelessness. For definitions of what encompasses the term rural in a Canadian setting, we used two different descriptions.

The first description comes from Du Plessis and colleagues (Du Plessis, Beshiri, Bollman, & Clemenson, 2002) who identified six different definitions used by Statistics Canada, based on the relative weighting of parameters of population size, density and context and include consideration of the size of a territorial unit: local, community or regional. They recommend that rurality be classified according to the

nature and needs of a specific study or project, with parameters that describe zones within which one can allow for commuting to urban areas, large or small, and those outside of commuting zones but within proximity of towns of 1,000 or more. We chose this definition with the caveat that one aspect of Canadian rurality not covered, but significant, is remote towns whose population may range from 7500 to 15,000 but who act as regional service centres (health and social services) for vast underpopulated surrounding areas. These isolated centres attract many who become homeless in more remote areas, travel to the centre seeking health and other services, and then remain in town.

Another method used to define rurality uses criteria that rely on economic parameters. These methods profile rural communities according to whether they were growing, stable or slow growth, declining, dormitory, retirement or northern, (Bruce et al., 2005). An additional, American perspective identifies frontier communities: those that have a very low population density (defined as less than seven persons per square mile), where people live in relative isolation across vast areas, and where the predominant economy is a single source such as ranching, mining or forestry (Robertson et al., 2007). In the US these are described as existing primarily in the western states. In Canada, these descriptors would be relevant for many areas of most provinces. This review of Canadian rural homelessness included all of these considerations.

The search results were sectioned into two parts: those arising from the academic literature and those found in the grey literature, primarily from local and regional examinations of various aspects of homelessness. Within these results we then looked at the major themes and foci of those that came from qualitative studies (surveys and focused research studies of distinct populations) and completed a separate analysis of the qualitative research, primarily interviews and policy papers.

### **3.0 Results**

The literature and local reports provide a rich understanding of the profiles of homeless persons in the areas covered. In addition to some descriptors of this population, they also include details on local economic and environmental characteristics that impact on housing needs in these communities and examined the extent of local service provider capacity to handle these demands. However, none were able to provide more than a preliminary estimate of local homelessness as they all acknowledged the methodological challenges of this undertaking. Overall, articles and reports covered some or all of British Columbia (BC), Alberta (AB), Saskatchewan (SK), Northwest Territories (NWT), Ontario (ON), Quebec (QC), Nova Scotia (NS), Prince Edward Island (PEI), Newfoundland (NL) and Labrador (LAB). While there are local reports on poverty and rural planning, we were unable to find information specific to rural homelessness from Manitoba (MB) and New Brunswick (NB).

Compared to the plethora of studies that document the profiles, histories and experience of urban homeless persons, the information on those who live in rural areas is sparse. All of the studies that we found were place-specific, that is, focused on a specific area in one province. The only exception was a study from PEI that encompassed all of the rural regions of the province. Considering the size of this province (5,660 km<sup>2</sup>), and its ready access of roads and hamlets, that was feasible. Other reports covered large areas (e.g. Timmins region in northern ON, the Kootenay region in BC), but still only a small portion of the entire province. We are

thus left with reports that provide a snapshot of factors contributing to rural homelessness in a few scattered areas of the country.

Of the six journal articles on rural homelessness issues in Canada, two use the term 'rural' in the title but were not actually situated in the definition of rural areas. The examination of migration between Vancouver and Kelowna (BC), does not include small or rural communities (Gray, Chau, Huerta, & Frankish, 2011), and the description of homeless youth in Fort Erie (ON), focuses on a municipality of over 29,000 persons adjacent to large population centres (Skott-Myhre, Raby, & Nikolaou, 2008). Since neither of these studies fell in the range of our definition of 'rural', these articles were excluded from this further examination. We were thus left with four articles, one of which was a policy analysis paper on rural poverty that we include because of its references to rural homelessness. We also found one Master's thesis that dealt with homelessness in the context of social housing policy in south-eastern rural ON (Elias, 2009) that is included in this academic literature.

The academic literature that deals with rural homelessness focuses on Aboriginal migration in northern SK (Peters & Robillard, 2009), people with persistent mental illness in southwestern ON (Forchuk et al., 2010), and inhabitants of various small communities in the NWT (Christensen, 2012). All examined the dynamics of mobility between urban and rural locations. They each used a mixed methods approach, a significantly large participant pool and thus provided rich data on the dilemmas of homelessness in these areas.

The experiences of coping with a persistent mental illness for rural resident were presented in a secondary analysis of a study with 550 participants in 63 focus groups set in rural southwestern ON (Forchuk et al., 2010). Respondents included those who were from rural areas or continued to live in rural areas, but it is unclear what proportion of them continued to live in a rural setting. More rural, northern and remote studies come from two other sources. Christensen (2012) provides a well-documented and detailed examination of rural poverty and homelessness within a northern context. It considers both historical factors and current issues regarding property ownership, social housing and government responsibilities in this vast area. In a similar vein, Peters & Robillard (2009) present an in-depth examination of the role of rural reserves in the mobility pattern among hidden homeless First Nations persons living in Prince Albert, who originated from 45 different reserves in five provinces. They examined both reasons for leaving the home reserve and mobility patterns influencing migrations between the city and the reserve.

The secondary search of the grey literature was more fruitful, uncovering 21 reports specific to rural housing and homelessness in various regions of Canada. The reports covered large territories including (but not limited to) northern ON, the NWT (Abele, Falvo, & Hache, 2010), Nunavut (Tester & The Harvest Society, 2006) and PEI (Smith & Fuller, 2007) as well as regions such as the Kootenays in BC (Glass, 2002), rural AB (Belanger & Weasel Head, 2013; Waegemakers Schiff & Turner, 2014a) the Laurentian area, north of Montreal in QC (Carle & Belanger-Dion, 2003), the Montérégie area, south of Montreal in QC (Roy, Hurtubise, & Rozier, 2003), and NS (Robertson & White, 2007). The publication or release dates of this body of work ranged from 1999 to 2013, with the majority produced since 2008.

The reports were found on government websites and those of local housing, homelessness and poverty-focussed organizations. Many of these reports had strong methodological rigour, and some are extensive and involved a mixed methodology

that included semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Some examined primarily consumers (Belanger & Weasel Head, 2013; Karabanow, Aube, & Naylor, 2013) and included interviews with service providers (Kauppi et al., 2009; Kauppi, C., Pallard, D. H., Lemieux, S., & Matukala Nkosi, T, 2012 ; Smith & Fuller, 2007; Stewart & Ramage, 2011; Schiff, Connors, & O'Brien, 2012; Waegemakers Schiff & Turner, 2014a). Other reports included data drawn from both homeless individuals and service providers/stakeholders (Carle & Belanger-Dion, 2003; Forchuk et al., 2010; Grodzinski, Londerville, Sutherns, & Bentham, 2011; Lee, Budgell, & Skinner, 2007; Roy et al., 2003). Three reports had a primary focus on poverty; two of which had a national scope (Burns, Bruce, & Marlin, 2007; Rupnik, Tremblay, & Bollman, 2001); one provided a national scan of a small sample of rural communities (Waegemakers Schiff & Turner, 2014b), and one focussed on northern BC (Halseth & Ryser, 2010). We include the discussions of poverty in rural Canada because they made substantial reference to the housing plight of the rural poor. However, it is important to note that poverty is a major, but not the sole factor, that leads to homelessness. A detailed review of the literature on risk and resiliency factors for homelessness found numerous individual factors including adverse childhood experiences, domestic and familial violence, experiences with assaults and trauma, health, mental problems and addictions as well as aboriginal status, justice system involvement and migration (Tutty et al., 2009). In addition, structural factors such as lack of adequate and affordable housing, local economic conditions that drive up rents, as well as landlord discriminatory practices were reported. Thus the literature is clear on the fact that poverty is not the sole or necessary condition for homelessness.

### ***3.1 Context of Rural Homelessness in Canada***

Rural homelessness is frequently reported as hidden and several publications described homelessness in the rural context as being far less visible than urban homelessness. Homeless individuals in rural communities often rely on informal networks, among family and friends, to couch surf and double up (Carle & Bélanger-Dion, 2003; Forchuk et al., 2010; Glass, 2002, Hallstrom, Coates, Mindel, Richter, & Finseth, 2013, Lee et al., 2007; Roy et al., 2003; Smith & Fuller, 2007).

Some researchers note that while on the one hand informal networks 'absorb' part of the local need, they also have an underside. Small towns are known for their lack of privacy: it is easy to know who the at-risk youth are, who has a substance abuse problem, has a mental illness and is unemployed (Forchuk et al., 2010) and may become known to landlords as problematic tenants (Glass, 2002). Glass (2002) notes that those so identified often have an even greater challenge in finding accommodation and a landlord who will rent to them. The Glass report notes that prejudices and labelling of community members in some close-knit communities have been acknowledged as among the factors contributing to the hiddenness of rural homelessness. Similarly, some communities are reticent about accepting migrants and reject potential trouble-making elements (Carle & Belanger-Dion, 2003; Forchuk et al., 2010; Roy et al., 2003; Stewart & Ramage, 2011).

Some regions suggest that homelessness is not a significant problem. In the Kootenays of BC (Glass, 2002) and the Laurentian region, (Carle & Belanger-Dion, 2003) homelessness is mostly visible during the summertime and is thus often associated with seasonal tourism, although both reports indicate that this assumption is unproven and misleading. This provides stakeholders with a perception that it is a

seasonal phenomenon, brought to their area by vacationers who occupy scarce housing, driving low income individuals temporarily out of doors, and fostering the potential (mis)belief that local homelessness simply does not exist.

### **3.2 Factors Contributing to Rural Homelessness in Canada**

In the Canadian academic literature, findings on the factors contributing to rural homelessness were sparse and tended to concentrate on several themes including; migration, youth, Aboriginal people and homelessness, mental illness and addictions, family violence, income and cost of living, and housing and support service options. Most of the commissioned reports were initiated by local communities and provide a profile of homelessness in the specific geographic area featured. Many of these also described the various types of people who experience homelessness, their challenges and the realities of the local housing and support services available (Glass, 2002).

*3.2.1 Migration patterns.* One of the most recurrent themes was that of migration between rural areas and urban centres (Christensen, 2012; Forchuk et al., 2011; Gray et al., 2011; Peters & Robillard, 2009). Some of these were specifically focussed on the mobility of Aboriginal people between reserves and urban areas (Belanger & Weasel Head, 2013; Christensen, 2012; Peters & Robillard, 2009) though not specifically of the problems and dilemmas or the rural homeless experience. One paper looked at mobility of homeless mentally ill adults in southwestern ON (Forchuk et al., 2010). Mobility of homeless youth was the subject of a scoping study (Skott-Myhre et al., 2008) as well as two reports from Alberta (Hallstrom et al., 2013) and one from Nova Scotia (Karabanow et al., 2013).

*3.2.2 Youth homelessness.* While many reports mention youth as among the homeless, the plight of homeless youth in rural areas is specifically explored in two regions. Pathways to homelessness for youth leaving rural NS communities and migrating to Halifax were explored by Karabanow and colleagues (2013). Using qualitative analytic techniques this team interviewed eleven youth who were already situated in an urban location (Halifax). Rural experiences of these youth were based on retrospective accounts, which are subject to recall biases. This study stops short of an in-depth examination of the rural conditions that prompt youth to leave their rural communities. In Alberta, the Camrose 'Open Door' youth program developed a local needs assessment specific to homeless youth (Hallstrom et al., 2013). This assessment focused on youth at risk, but its analysis of the service network in Camrose extended beyond the needs of youth to include recommendations to add emergency shelter facilities for adults, detox and addiction treatment facilities, as well as additional transitional housing. Together with the Karabanow report, these provide the best portrait of the homelessness-related challenges facing rural youth.

*3.2.3 Income, housing, and support services.* Some of the best descriptors of rural housing and support services outside of a metropolitan commuting zone come from several sources: the Kootenay region of southern BC (Glass, 2002), northern BC (Halseth and Ryser, 2010), the YWCA in Yellowknife (YWCA of Yellowknife - Yellowknife Women's Society, 2007), Happy Valley-Goose Bay (HVGB), NL (Lee et al., 2007; Schiff et al., 2012; Schiff and Brunger, 2015), the Laurentides and Montérégie in QC (Carle & Belanger-Dion, 2003; Roy et al., 2003), rural PEI (Smith and Fuller, 2007), and rural NS (Robertson and White, 2007). Collectively they provide a fairly consistent picture of low income, lack of affordable housing, subsidized housing, and lack of support services as main factors in homelessness in



these areas. These reports all suggest that rural housing options in many communities are limited, consisting mostly of single unit, free-standing housing, with some small multi-unit dwellings available in slightly larger locales.

The impact of energy-sector initiatives on housing markets, housing availability and rising homelessness is noted by several researchers: Lee et al. (2007), Schiff et al. (2012), and Schiff & Brunger (2015). They identify issues caused by rapid economic change due to resource development such as oil, gas, mining and hydroelectric projects. The influx of workers and management professionals with relatively high incomes can drive prices both for market homes and rental housing beyond affordability levels for many local residents (Schiff et al., 2012; Schiff & Brunger 2015). The situation is exacerbated when landlords impose restrictions around children and pets or prefer to rent to professional working couples (Lee et al. 2007). Service providers report discrimination against those with low income, a criminal record or mental health issues who are forced to live in substandard conditions (Lee et al. 2007). These reports emphasize the need for affordable housing, with a mix of publicly funded and private market units (Lee et al., 2007; Schiff et al., 2012). Due to high construction costs and a low rate of return on investments, there may be few developers willing to undertake building low cost or affordable housing. In growing communities, new housing construction is often targeted towards affluent workers moving into town (Schiff et al. 2012). In dwindling communities, development of affordable housing may be perceived as economically unaffordable.

Homeless and at risk persons reported paying well over 30% of their income and in many instances upwards of 50% of their income for housing (Glass, 2002; Goodfellow, 1999; Robertson & White, 2007; Schiff et al., 2012). In some instances, such as HVGB, a sheer lack of any available housing is driving prices both for market homes and rental housing up beyond affordability levels for most local residents (Schiff et al., 2012).

In most rural and remote areas, incomes are reportedly lower than in many urban communities, while food and utility costs are substantially higher. Living costs in rural areas are also impacted by the need to have an automobile because of the pervasive lack of public transportation (Goodfellow, 1999). In addition to lack of housing, many rural buildings that are more than 30 years old are in need of substantial repairs, with a noticeable number failing to meet minimal health and safety standards (Glass, 2002). In many cases owners might fail to qualify for financing to improve their homes or the residents are tenants with building owners who may be reluctant to spend money on rehabilitation (Glass, 2002).

*3.2.4 Mental health and addictions.* In rural communities, mental health and addiction problems are recognized as propelling some people into homelessness. Substance abuse, with the exception of alcohol, is generally not reported at rates as high as in urban settings (Kauppi et al., 2012) although the prevalence of alcohol abuse in rural areas is estimated rather than firmly documented. Substance abuse is however, reported as a significant factor in migratory experiences of Aboriginal people leaving reserves (Belanger & Weasel Head, 2013) and homeless men migrating between the inner lands of BC and coastal cities (Gray, Chau, Huerta, & Frankish, 2011). It is also documented as a migratory factor for Aboriginal people in SK (Peters & Robillard, 2009). For those who struggle with addictions or mental illness, lack of treatment and support services are scarce and there is little (or none, depending on the location) supportive housing (Callahan & Turnbull, 1999; Forchuk

et al., 2010; Glass, 2002; Grodzinski et al., 2011; Lee et al., 2007; Nunavut Housing Corporation, 2013; Smith & Fuller, 2007; Stewart & Ramage, 2011).

Support providers in Yellowknife were under the impression that homeless Aboriginal people migrated to cities in order to more easily access alcohol and other substances (Christensen, 2012). However, this study also indicates that while a majority of the homeless individuals reported substance misuse, only a minority had actually moved to the city to access drugs or alcohol. Discrepancies in provider views of migration, and needs of homeless persons, was also documented by Glass (2002). Although a significant source of housing loss in urban areas, it appears that the abuse of illegal substances and resultant loss of employment, income and housing, might not be as prevalent in rural areas. Another reality described by authors is the lack of addictions treatment and support services, which are sparsely distributed across rural and remote areas and are accompanied by the lack of supportive and transitional housing which are often essential to the rehabilitative process (Christensen, 2012; Glass, 2002; Grodzinski et al., 2011; Hallstrom, Coates, Mindel, Richter, & Finseth, 2013; Stewart & Ramage, 2011; Yukon Anti-Poverty Coalition, 2011).

*3.2.5 Domestic violence.* Family discord, domestic violence and marital breakup are frequently cited as psycho-social stressors that lead to rural homelessness (Glass, 2002; Kauppi et al., 2012; Lee et al., 2007; Peters & Robillard, 2009). Within this context, domestic issues are a significant precipitant of housing loss experienced by women, with and without dependants, who are victims of abuse. In rural areas, the situation is exacerbated by the lack of emergency housing and support services for women and women-led families fleeing domestic violence (Callaghan & Turnbull, 1999; Yukon Anti-Poverty Coalition, 2011). Youth fleeing abusive situations will couch surf with friends and relatives during winter months and camp in warmer months (Karabanow et al., 2013). These dynamics are consistently reported by investigators in communities across all regions. One report provided some detailed descriptors that coloured the uniqueness of rural homelessness:

Another rural issue was the challenge faced when marriages or relationships break down. As a single adult, particularly with children, the challenges of rural living can be serious, especially in smaller communities. Gathering firewood, tending produce, repairing machinery, and feeding animals amongst other activities can be particularly arduous when only one adult is doing it. One woman commented (after separating from her husband) that she no longer had access to the tools (truck, chainsaw etc.) to collect firewood (Glass, 2002, p. 50).

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*3.2.6 Immigrants.* While some reports focussed on examination of specific groups such as those who have a mental illness (Forchuk et al., 2010), Aboriginal people (Belanger & Weasel Head, 2013; Peters & Robillard, 2009) and youth (Karabanow

et al., 2013), there are none that specifically look at the plight of women and children, the elderly, those with addictions, Aboriginal people who do not live on a reserve, or immigrants and refugees in rural environments. While immigration is often viewed as an urban phenomenon, some rural communities are attracting cohorts of immigrants—Brooks AB, for example, has a large immigrant cohort drawn by available work in a local meat processing plant—who often lack the income and housing for successful integration. In the light of the federal government's encouragement of immigration to support a growing economy, lack of housing to meet the needs of immigrants could be an area of concern across rural communities. One report provides a description of homelessness among a diverse group of participants from several ethno-cultural communities in Windsor/Essex County, Ontario (Anucha, 2006). While it did not specifically address rurality as a dynamic in their experiences, the report notes that newcomers' homelessness in the area is precipitated by housing unaffordability, discrimination in the housing and labour market, as well as struggles to access assistance. A report from rural Alberta noted that one community with a high immigrant workforce, Brooks, faced significant over-crowding and sub-standard housing (Waegemakers Schiff, & Turner, 2014a).

### ***3.3 Mobile Homes and Trailer Parks***

Mobile homes may be found on individual properties or congregated in groups under the moniker of a mobile home park. In small towns throughout Canada, mobile home parks have been in existence for at least 40 years. They are, for example, ubiquitous on the rural prairie landscape. Their importance as a form of housing in rural communities has not been explored or appreciated. Although they are a feature in many rural communities, there is no estimate of the number of ageing and substandard units in small towns. We found one clear description of mobile homes and their vulnerabilities in rural areas (Glass, 2002) and a second report that noted the importance of this issue (Waegemakers Schiff, & Turner, 2014a). In addition, two articles from the American literature report on trailer parks and rural homelessness (MacTavish & Salamon, 2001; Salamon, & MacTavish, 2006). The reality that they are part of a rapidly ageing housing stock that has limited viability for repair or rehabilitation makes this an issue of growing urgency. Thus we note the potential importance of this relatively unacknowledged and unaddressed issue.

### ***3.4 Rural Aboriginal Homelessness***

Aboriginal housing and homelessness is frequently reported as a separate issue that needs to be examined in the context of colonial and neocolonial legacies (Hill, 2010). In many places in Canada, Aboriginal people are over-represented in the homeless population although the extent to which this applies in rural settings is unknown. The issue of Aboriginal people who experience homelessness has most often been framed in terms of urban homelessness (Christensen, 2012; Hanselman, 2001; Schiff & Waegemakers Schiff, 2010; Turner et al., 2010; Urban Aboriginal Knowledge Network, 2012; Walker, 2008). Some literature and reports have focussed on migration between reserves and urban centres (Belanger & Weasel Head, 2013; Christensen, 2012), or have included migratory behaviors as part of a more overall report (Carle & Belanger-Dion, 2003; Kauppi et al., 2009; Peters & Robillard, 2009). These reports and articles all concur on the over-representation of Aboriginal people among the homeless in Canada, regardless of whether the focus is on urban or rural homelessness. Some also note that research on this topic is scarce.

In these reports, little mention is made of those who choose to remain in small town and rural areas. Those that examine rural homelessness refer to issues of Aboriginal homelessness in smaller communities, and the impact they have on local services and housing (Schiff et al., 2012; Stewart & Ramage, 2011; YWCA of Yellowknife - Yellowknife Women's Society, 2007). Little is mentioned on the plight of Aboriginal people who choose to remain close to, but not on their home reserves and live in rural Canada. One of the challenges of many of the existing reports that focus on Canada's larger cities is the assumption, despite the lack of evidence, that there is no stopping place for people leaving the reserve and that they largely seek big city life and its services (Schiff, R., Turner, A. & Waegemakers Schiff, J., in press). There may be some reality in this as many small communities have continuing racist sentiments that are unwelcoming to Aboriginal people (Waegemakers & Turner, 2014b). While Aboriginal homelessness is a significant urban and reserve problem, it is important to recognize this as an important rural issue requiring its own attention (Schiff, R., Turner, A. & Waegemakers Schiff, J., in press).

In addition to reporting the over-representation of Aboriginal people in the homeless population (Kauppi et al., 2009; Hallstrom et al., 2013; Stewart & Ramage, 2011), some rural literature focussed on the context and process of mobility between reserves and urban areas (Belanger, Weasel Head & Owasago, 2012; Christensen, 2011; Peters & Robillard, 2009), though not specifically of the problems and dilemmas of their rural homeless experience. Stewart & Ramage (2011), reported on pathways to homelessness among individuals from reserves in northern Ontario who become stranded in urban areas. This path often begins when some become homeless after missing a flight home following a medical appointment. Others, after being arrested and brought to urban centres for trial or incarceration, do not have funds to return to their community or choose to stay and live on the street.

An in-depth examination of different issues underlying mobility patterns of Aboriginal peoples in southern AB and the NWT are provided by several researchers (Belanger & Weasel Head, 2013; Christensen, 2012; Peters & Robillard, 2009). All of these studies report that homeless Aboriginal people may move to cities to be near urban family members, make changes in their lives, escape family conflict and on-reserve living conditions, or because of a lack of adequate housing on their home reserve. There is some consensus that some Aboriginal people become homeless when they leave extremely crowded housing conditions on reserves or abusive domestic situations (Peters & Robillard, 2009; Bellanger & Weasel Head, 2013). They also report that some people—after moving to the city in search of different social opportunities, job opportunities, improved education, health care, and other urban services and programs—become stranded and homeless in urban centres due to loss of income or lack of adequate housing. This research also found that some Aboriginal people choose to live without a formal home or permanent shelter in order to remain close to their social circle. They remain homeless until they find a rental unit or house closer to home or move constantly from place to place, staying with friends or family (couch-surfing and doubling up) (Bellanger & Weaselhead, 2013; Peters & Robillard, 2009).

Migration back to reserves is often about reconnecting with family, seeking out cultural reconnection, contact with homeland, and escape from discrimination and other negative influences found in the city (Belanger & Weasel Head, 2013). Reserves have social networks that individuals can rely on in difficult times, socially and emotionally (Peters & Robillard, 2009). However, continuous migration

between reserve and city negatively impacts on an individual's ability to secure employment and housing. This suggests that mobility between places of residence contributes to homelessness in (Belanger & Weasel Head, 2013). Circular migration, from reserve to urban areas and the reverse is a common feature and can be accompanied by homelessness where lack of financial stability becomes a major obstacle to secure adequate housing.

For Aboriginal women in the NWT and Nunavut, family violence was the most common precipitating factor to homelessness (Christensen, 2012). For many northern Aboriginal women, escape from and access to resources for victims of family violence can be a decisive factor in their decision to move from a rural to an urban movement, or the reverse (Peters & Robillard, 2009). Women will also move to be close to children who have been relocated to urban centres under the child welfare system. Among both men and women the desire to reconnect with birth parents is a motivating factor behind movement of adults who, as children, had grown up in foster care. In this context, the child welfare system becomes a significant factor in both pathways to becoming homeless and in perpetuating homelessness (Christensen, 2012).

### ***3.5 Northern and Remote Communities***

This review was not intended to examine northern and remote communities in specific detail, as in many ways they have circumstances unique to their northern and remote locations. We include a brief mention because by almost all definitions they are rural areas. The capital cities of the Yukon, NWT and Greater Nunavut are all relatively small cities serving as metropolitan hubs for northern communities. Happy Valley/Goose Bay (HVGB), LAB is also a northern and remote community, rural because its size of just under 8,000 inhabitants classifies it as a small town, remote because it is a 500 km road trip over partly unpaved road to its nearest neighbour, Labrador City, with a population of 9,500. Similar to Yellowknife and Whitehorse, HVGB is a regional centre with medical and social services for the extended rural communities of Labrador East, most of which are Aboriginal and coastal in nature. We examined the housing and homeless plans from Whitehorse and Nunavut (Yukon Anti-Poverty Coalition, 2011; Nunavut Housing Corporation, 2013) as well as a report prepared by the YWCA of Yellowknife and the Yellowknife Women's Council (2007) to understand the dynamics of homelessness in these communities. We also examined the housing and homeless reports from HVGB and a journal article to ascertain what the community response has been to previously identified homeless issues (Lee et al., 2007; Schiff et al., 2012, Schiff & Brunger, 2015). The homeless and housing reports from these areas all recognize their role in regional migration and settlement patterns and emphasize the need for affordable housing, with a mix of publicly funded and private market units. While mental health and addictions are acknowledged as important issues, they are not singled out as the primary causes of homelessness for many persons.

These reports note the dire condition of many rural housing units and that this situation continues to deteriorate. In addition, these communities experience an influx of rural residents who seek health and support services in town and are then reluctant to return to their home communities where there is an even greater lack of resources. This is similar to the dynamic reported by Stewart & Ramage (2011) in northern ON.

## **4.0 Discussion**

### ***4.1 Literature Gaps and Research Priorities***

Overall, limited academic literature specific to rural homelessness exists in Canada. Most articles and reports cite literature on rural housing and homelessness in other countries. There is a danger in extrapolating rural phenomenon in Australia, the UK and the US into the Canadian context. Rurality and climate are inter-connected factors that influence the lived experiences of those in specific geographic locations and thus the British country-side has little relevance to remote forests, mountainous regions and places that routinely have critically cold temperatures and harsh weather. They lack road access in winter weather, and often have no electrical or phone service (including no cell phone connection). In addition to being an economic problem of insufficient income, homelessness also reflects on the social support network and safety-net in each country. Thus an examination of Canadian realities needs to account for unique dynamics, including sparsely populated areas with limited social supports and economic boom and bust cycles in energy-sector developments, which impact the rural experience.

This review of the literature revealed a number of shortfalls and gaps. The academic articles were few and were narrowly focussed on a specific locality or carefully defined region and target population. While this local and regional perspective is important, it is unable to provide a comprehensive picture of homelessness across the rural expanse. In contrast, although more grey literature on case study communities exists, these localized reports were of varying focus and methodology. The lack of consistency of approaches makes comparisons across reports challenging and they provide few opportunities for comparative analysis to identify common trends and dynamics across regions. Based on our analysis, key emerging gaps centre on: enumerating the magnitude and prevalence of rural homelessness; the role of migration; rural homelessness among Aboriginal people; and the distinct needs of specialized populations. Our findings also reveal needs with respect to the impacts of macro-economic shifts, policy, and funding issues. The specific and unique realities of Aboriginal people in rural Canada and the distinct nature of remote and Northern communities is of particular concern since relatively sparse analyses exist. This is an area requiring dedicated focus given the unique dynamics impacting housing accessibility, stability and service access.

### ***4.2 The Magnitude and Prevalence of Rural Homelessness***

First acknowledged in the UK and the US, hidden homelessness was reported as a unique characteristic across the different articles and reports reviewed. Canadian researchers, similarly to American academics (Fitchen, 1992; Lawrence, 1995; Robertson & Toro, 1999) reported that rural homelessness is pervasive and its prevalence is difficult to measure accurately; it is most often experienced through couch surfing and doubling up with friends and family. The extent to which homelessness is different across various regions of Canada is simply unknown. Methodological issues of data collection make accurate measurement an almost impossible challenge. In contrast to urban areas where estimates can be made as they rely on counts of people using services, no methods for conducting homeless counts were found, and rural communities did not have well-developed means of assessing trends longitudinally. This will be important moving forward, particularly as some researchers argue the prevalence rates of rural homelessness can be even higher than

in urban regions. Indeed, there is no way to account for those who sleep rough or in unsafe dwellings, seasonal ‘cottages’ and recreational trailers during all seasons.

### ***4.3 Role of Migration***

Migration between rural areas and urban centres was another important theme identified. The focus on migration into cities in some literature is an important contribution, particularly in relation to Aboriginal people's movement between home communities and urban centres. A stereotype that homeless people migrate to rural areas for cheaper housing exists in the UK (Cloke et al., 2001; Cloke & Milbourne, 2006). As a result of this impression, homeless people are often blamed for bringing negative and anti-social behaviour to the community. In contrast to patterns of outward migration and preference for the rural ‘idyllic’ life, the Canadian experience seems to be the opposite (with the exception of recreation-seeking). In different parts of Canada, the frequent pattern is for homeless persons, including youth, to migrate to urban centres where there are services available.

Another aspect of rural migration that receives little attention is the use of ‘bus therapy’ or the ‘Greyhound solution’. Although only one speaks specifically to the practice of providing tickets for homeless persons to go to the nearest urban area where emergency shelters and services are available (Carle & Bélanger-Dion, 2003) this migratory influence, generally unspoken because of its political repercussions, has been anecdotally noted as a reality of rural migration for the homeless. For rural communities this solution is both more expedient and economically feasible than providing local services. It is unclear if those provided with transportation to a larger town actually prefer to remain in their home community and are displaced by officials seeking to dispose of social problems. This ‘solution’ (bus therapy) may be more often accessed than is generally recognized, as most urban shelters do not track if people are newcomers or were homeless before they arrived in town.

### ***4.4 Rural Aboriginal Homelessness***

The issue of Aboriginal people who experience homelessness is often framed in terms of urban homelessness and little mention is made of those who remain in small town and rural areas. Reports that examine rural homelessness refer to issues of Aboriginal homelessness in smaller communities, and the impact displaced people have on local services and housing (Schiff, Connors, & O’Brien, 2012; Stewart & Ramage, 2011; YWCA of Yellowknife & Yellowknife Women's Society, 2007), but these reports omit the impact of these lived experiences, and the perceived needs, of Aboriginal people who remain close to, but not on, their home reserves and live in rural Canada. An additional confounding factor is the assumption in some reports that there is no stopping place for people leaving the reserve and that Aboriginal people largely seek big city life and its services. However, there is no data to support this belief and preliminary reports suggest that a significant cohort remain in rural areas but not on reserve (Waegemakers Schiff & Turner, 2014a). Infrequently mentioned, but of considerable import, is the uncomfortable reality that Aboriginal individuals often face racism in small communities, which impacts their access to housing and supports. While Aboriginal homelessness is a significant problem, it is important to recognize this as a significant issue requiring its own attention. Moreover, the dynamics behind Aboriginal over-representation in some rural communities merit specific and concerted attention in future research.

#### ***4.5 Distinct Needs of Specialized Populations: Women and Children Fleeing Violence, Rural Youth, Immigrants, Refugees, and Seniors***

The experience of domestic violence in rural communities requires additional focus, particularly to discern solutions specific to these contexts. While some work on youth homelessness in rural areas was completed by several investigators, it was limited to areas that lack the remote and northern contexts that typify a great deal of the country. We also do not know the extent of a natural sequence of adolescent 'rebellion' and adventure-seeking that drives youth to urban areas, as opposed to those scenarios where youth are forced to flee to cities because of domestic violence, intolerance of alternative life styles, unsafe living circumstances in their home communities or lack of resources to help them stay in place.

Notably, there was very limited literature found on immigrant or refugee homelessness in the studies reviewed. Although most immigrants tend to migrate to urban areas, some move to rural areas. These moves entail challenges for immigrants in communities that have fostered inward migration to meet worker shortages. The needs of immigrant and refugee women and children fleeing violence are another critical gap that spans the issues of domestic violence and immigrant challenges.

Seniors are also a group that has not received attention in either academic literature or community-based reports. Many who have lived most or all of their lives in small towns and remote locations are reluctant to move into urbanized areas as their ability to manage the challenges of daily living are gradually reduced. Poverty makes the options of senior residences a faint possibility and often the sale of real estate may depend on long-overdue rehabilitation that the individual cannot afford and for which there are no financial mechanisms available. The import of these dynamics in an ageing population demand further exploration and government action.

#### ***4.6 Macro-economic Impacts***

Rural homelessness has distinct dynamics from urban regions, particularly related to the availability of social infrastructure, the impacts of macro-economic shifts, housing markets and migration. There are indications in some reports that the economic impact of energy and mineral related exploration and development results in a population surge that competes for scant housing with current residents (Waegemakers Schiff & Turner, 2014a). This drives housing costs up and further marginalizes the rural poor. In turn, when exploration dwindles out and this work force leaves, housing costs do not necessarily return to pre-boom levels. Yet, little research exists to discern how such dynamics play out to contribute to housing instability. While the role of tourism in seasonal homelessness receives some discussion along with oil and gas boom and bust cycles, these influences, along with proximity to urban centres, and even economic stagnation in rural homelessness are key areas of focus for future research.

#### ***4.7 Tailoring Interventions***

An overall lack of examination of rural homelessness responses remain at the program and policy levels. Very few analyses on the applicability of homeless system of care responses or programmatic interventions such as *housing first* in



rural contexts exist (Waegemakers Schiff & Turner, 2014b). *Housing first* has become widely adopted as both the philosophy of placing priority on securing permanent housing for the homeless but also a specific program model effective for chronically homeless persons who have co-occurring conditions of mental illness and substance abuse (Hwang, Stergiopoulos, O'Campo, & Gozdzik 2012; Waegemakers Schiff & Schiff, 2014).

Recent adaptations suggest that a variation of the *housing first* program model which uses a telehealth component to support persons living in rural communities is a viable approach for those with co-occurring disorders who live rurally in Vermont (Stefancic, Henwood, Melton, Shin, Lawrence-Gomez, & Tsemberis, 2013). *Housing first* programs are based on the assumption that support services are available to help people transition from the streets or hidden homelessness into more stable lives, and that these supports are not time-limited. Often, small communities lack a comprehensive service network upon which to organize *housing first* initiatives. Some rural adaptations of *housing first*, such as the Vermont Pathways program results suggest that this barrier may be overcome with a cost-effective program that provides a computer and internet access to people living rurally. While this may be a viable approach in some parts of Canada, there are many rural regions that are remote and lack internet access. While we can talk about paradigm shifts to *housing first*, we need to recognize that many more sparsely populated areas do not have access to housing stock or network of support services and personnel to implement a housing program.

#### **4.8 Policy Responses and Funding Allocation**

The availability of affordable housing and rent supports in rural communities can make a considerable impact on the magnitude of homelessness; further, uneven distribution of these resources can result in a mismatch of supply-demand. Analysis of the policy responses and funding allocation patterns of various government levels and their impact on rural homelessness may point to shifts at the policy level to mitigate rural homelessness (Elias, 2009). Creative funding mechanisms or grants that allow for the rehabilitation of decrepit housing for seniors and those with marginal incomes need further exploration.

While we talk about system planning, we need to acknowledge the system in place at the rural level is likely full of gaps, making it difficult to introduce a comprehensive (and resource-intensive) homelessness strategy when disparities exist across social services (seniors, economic development, transportation, child care). In other words, why is homelessness the priority in light of a multitude of other issues that remain unfunded or under-resourced?

#### **5.0 Conclusion**

This search proved to be valuable in several ways. We were able to document a consistent report of rural homelessness across rural areas in Canada. Descriptions of those who are absolutely homeless or living in marginal conditions are consistent across reports reviewed, and the specific challenges incurred were dependent on the nature of the economic climate and extent of remoteness and 'northernness' of their location. Groups reported to experience higher rates of homelessness in urban areas are also those most often mentioned in the rural context: women with children, youth, those with a serious mental illness and/or addictions, and Aboriginal people. Those living in extremely remote and isolated areas reported the least availability of

alternative housing, the greatest likelihood of doubled-up living and the greatest struggle to pay for food and shelter. The reality that specialized health and social services are congregated in urban areas increases the likelihood that needs of rural people are often not met within their home communities.

Several Canadian-specific dynamics were consistently reported. The boom and bust cycles which are fuelled by energy and mineral sector exploration and development are factors specific to Canada, and not mentioned in reports from other countries. Their paradoxical effect of increasing the local economy while driving housing competition and costs beyond affordability for local residents has been reported from across the country and needs to be considered an important hazard in safe-guarding the welfare of poor and vulnerable people. Individual vulnerabilities interact with lack of housing of all types: rental units, subsidized and social housing units, and fiscal mechanisms to rehabilitate poor housing units.

The lack of information from some areas is regrettable because it omits perspectives from these regions and their potentially regionally specific nuances. Moreover, many of the commissioned reports were qualitative and provide cohort descriptions but no ability to assess causal or predictive relationships. Without concerted effort on developing an evidence-based slate of solutions at the policy and program levels, our ability to respond to rural homelessness will be limited. Nevertheless, these reports are a good start to understanding perspectives and approaches to responding to on homelessness across various regions of Canada.

As there is a scarcity of information about rural specific elements, planning and implementation responses would be enhanced through the development of a combination of a research network to facilitate knowledge mobilization and a research agenda on rural homelessness. To date, attempts at capturing rural homelessness trends have been largely localized focusing on one community or region. While this article aimed to develop a comparative view of the issue across the available literature, it was intended as a preliminary effort rather than a comprehensive definition of the issue. To this end, it is recommended that a fulsome research agenda on rural homelessness in Canada be developed to capture common emerging themes from a provincial rather than community-by-community perspective. This can, and should be coordinated with international and local efforts to examine rural homelessness.

The development of a research network with a focus on rural homelessness is also recommended. Rural community members should be fully engaged in the creation of such a network and research responses alongside academic and government peers. This engagement can thus also lead to the development of a local structure to implement tailored responses at the community level. Resourcing the ongoing knowledge generation and mobilization of such efforts will be critical for long-term impact.

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