



Government
of Canada

Gouvernement
du Canada

[Canada.ca](#) > [Infrastructure Canada](#)

- > [About Reaching Home: Canada's Homelessness Strategy](#)
- > [Data analysis, reports and publications](#)

Homelessness Data Snapshot: The National Shelter Study 2021 Update

On this page

- [Introduction](#)
- [Data](#)
- [Research findings](#)
- [Demographics](#)
- [Chronic homelessness among shelter users](#)
- [Limitations](#)
- [Key findings](#)
- [For more information](#)

Introduction

The National Shelter Study is an ongoing analysis of trends in homelessness shelter use in Canada. The present report provides an update on trends in 2021. The permanent emergency shelter capacity dropped dramatically in 2020 during the first year of the COVID-19

pandemic to adhere to public health measures. In 2021, there was a partial recovery in capacity.

Data

This analysis covers the period from 2005 to 2021 and uses data collected from:

- the Homeless Individuals and Families Information System (HIFIS), and
- provincial and municipal partners that have data sharing agreements with the Government of Canada.

Approximately 50% of emergency shelters in Canada were included in this analysis, representing about 70% of available emergency shelter beds. The methodology takes into account people who use more than one shelter. Domestic violence shelters, immigrant and refugee shelters, and transitional housing are not included due to insufficient data coverage.

Research findings

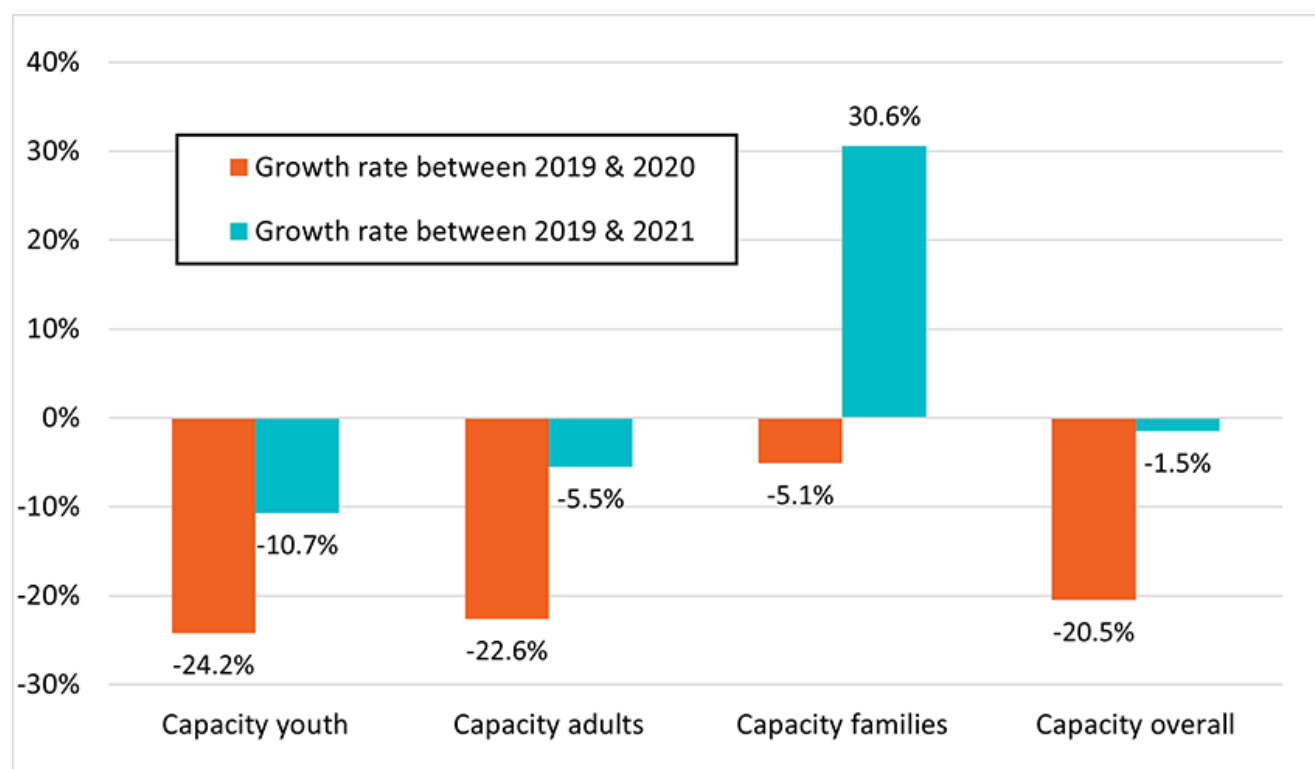
Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the shelter system

There was large drop in total permanent emergency shelter capacity over the course of 2020 after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. This substantial decrease of shelter capacity likely contributed to a reduction in the number of people accessing the shelter system in 2020 compared to previous years.

Between 2019 and 2020, shelter capacity, defined as the number of

beds available on a given night, decreased by 20.5% overall, with larger decreases among youth and adult shelters (Figure 1). The overall system capacity had largely recovered by 2021, a 1.5% decrease compared to 2019. However, growth was uneven across shelter types. Family shelter capacity increased 30.6% while youth shelter capacity decreased by 10.7% compared to 2019.

Figure 1: Capacity growth rate by shelter type between 2019 and 2020 and between 2019 and 2021



► Figure 1 - Text version

Interpreting changes in shelter use in 2021

When looking at trends in shelter use over time, it is important to consider results from pandemic years in the appropriate context. The COVID-19 pandemic progressed quickly and was coupled with a variety of government and individual responses including the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB), eviction moratoria, shelter-in-

place lockdowns, social distancing rules, shelter capacity reductions, etc. The combination of these elements contributed to reductions in shelter use in 2020 and 2021, however, this should not be equated with a reduction in homelessness.

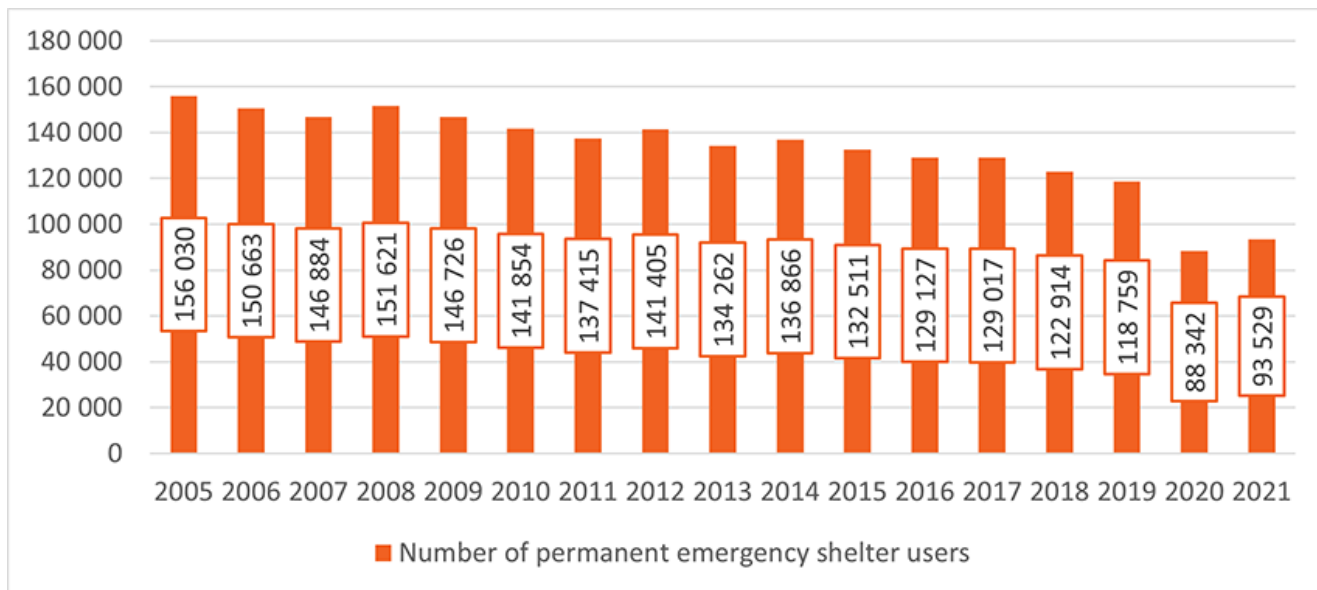
This analysis does not capture homelessness in contexts outside of the permanent shelter system including temporary sites, couch surfing and rough sleeping. While this is true of all years of National Shelter Study analysis, it is an especially important point to remember in 2020 and 2021 because it excludes those who could not access shelter due to capacity reductions or those who chose not to access the permanent shelter system in order to avoid exposure to the virus. Findings from Point-in-Time counts of homelessness¹ conducted during the pandemic suggest that unsheltered homelessness increased in many communities compared to pre-pandemic counts.

Shelter use in 2021

Between 2005 and 2019, the number of shelter users was trending downwards. The drop was more pronounced in 2020 in the first year of the pandemic, when shelter users decreased by 25.6%. Between 2020 and 2021, the number of shelter users increased by 5.9% as some emergency bed capacity was recovered.

In 2021, an estimated 93,529 people experienced homelessness in an emergency shelter, compared to 88,342 in 2020 (Figure 2). On an average night, there were approximately 13,170 people staying in shelters, compared to 11,600 in 2020.

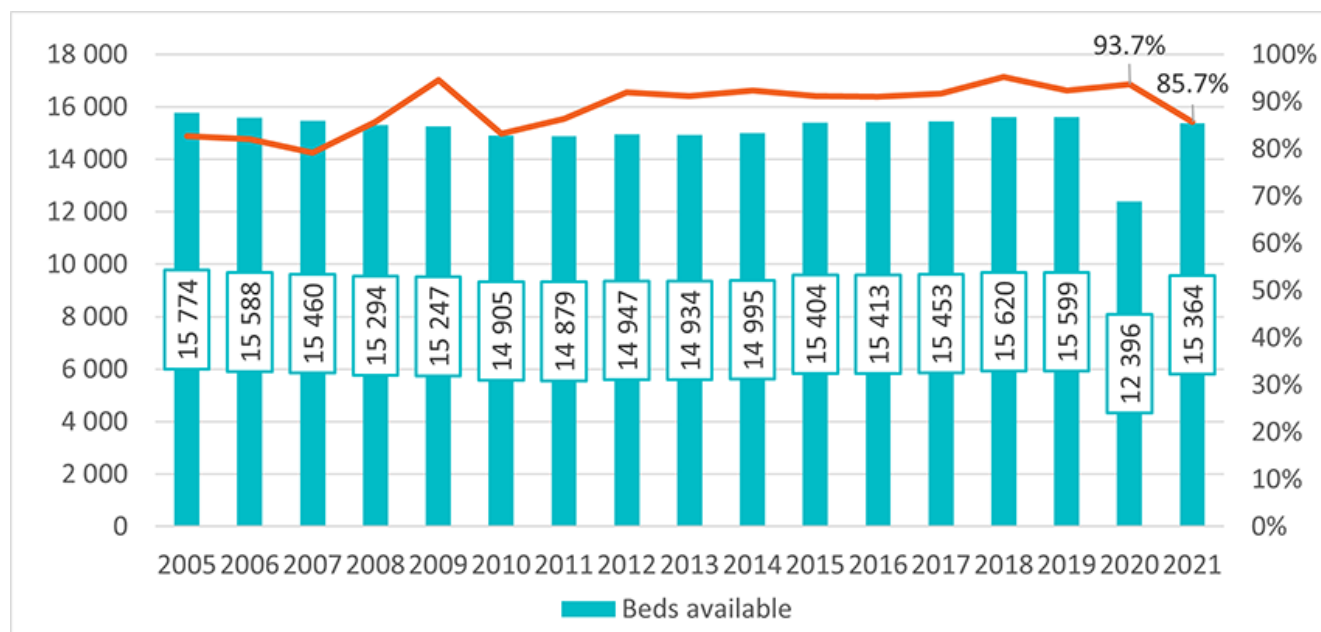
Figure 2: Number of shelter users from 2005 to 2021



► Figure 2 - Text version

Shelter occupancy dropped between 2020 and 2021 (Figure 3). In 2020, there were fewer beds, but the beds were full. In 2021, the bed numbers had mostly recovered, but shelter use did not increase at the same rate. This may be due to a combination of factors, including ongoing shelter avoidance due to the pandemic, continued use of temporary shelters (not included in this analysis), and the presence of policies like CERB and rent moratoria. The average occupancy rate among all shelters in 2021 was 85.7% compared to 93.7% in 2020. The occupancy rate for youth shelters was 69.7%, while general shelters had an occupancy rate of 83.0% and family shelters had an occupancy rate of 106.0%. This high occupancy rate in the family shelter system was notable given the large increases in capacity in 2021.

Figure 3: Beds available and occupancy from 2005 to 2021

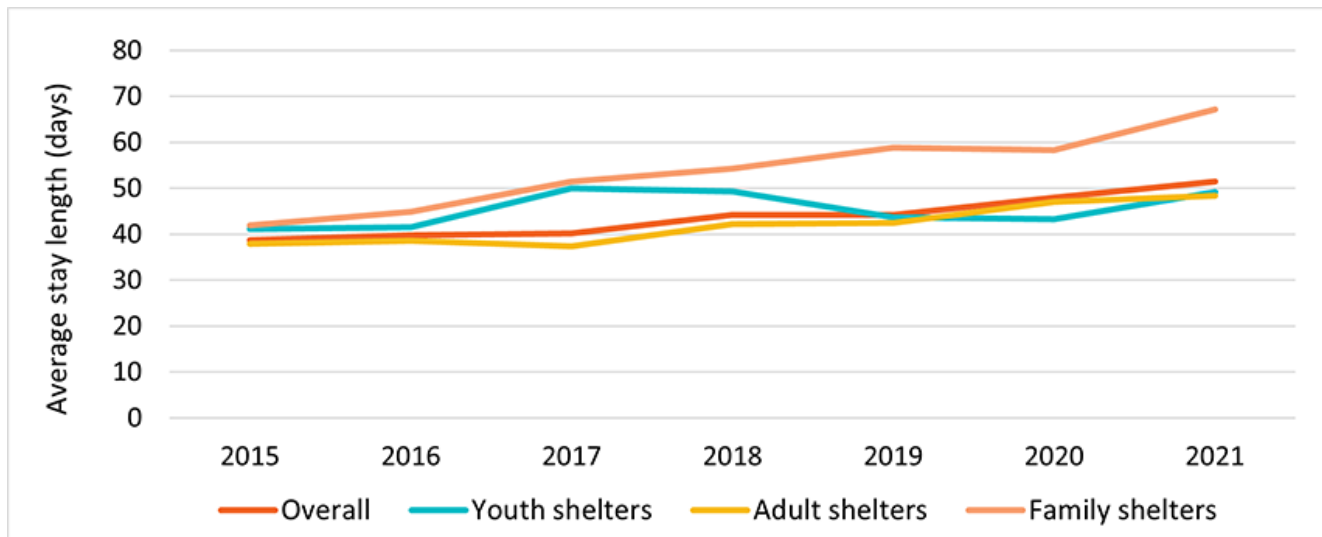


► Figure 3 - Text version

The high occupancy rate over the past several years was driven by longer stays in shelter. In 2005, the average shelter stay among all shelter users was 30.5 days. In 2021, the average stay had climbed to 51.4 days. Stay length in family shelters increased the most between 2015 and 2021 (Figure 4). Among family shelter users, the average length of stay increased by over twenty five days over the time period. Compared to youth shelters where the average length of stay increased by 2 days, and adult shelters which increased by 9 days.

Between 2020 and 2021, the total number of shelter users increased and stay lengths increased. However, this did not lead to higher occupancy rates for the shelter system. This is likely because shelter bed capacity growth outpaced demand.

Figure 4: Average length of stay per calendar year 2015 to 2021 by shelter type



► Figure 4 - Text version

Demographics

Age

In 2021, the average age of shelter users in 2021 was 38.0 years. Accompanied children (aged 0-16) represented 4.9% of shelter users. Youth (aged 13-24) made up 13.0% of shelter users. The majority (60.3%) of shelter users were adults (aged 25-49). Older adults (aged 50-64) were 18.5% of the shelter user population and seniors (aged 65+) were 3.3%. Between 2005 and 2021, there was a statistically significant decrease in the proportion of youth among shelter users (19.0% to 13.0%).

Gender

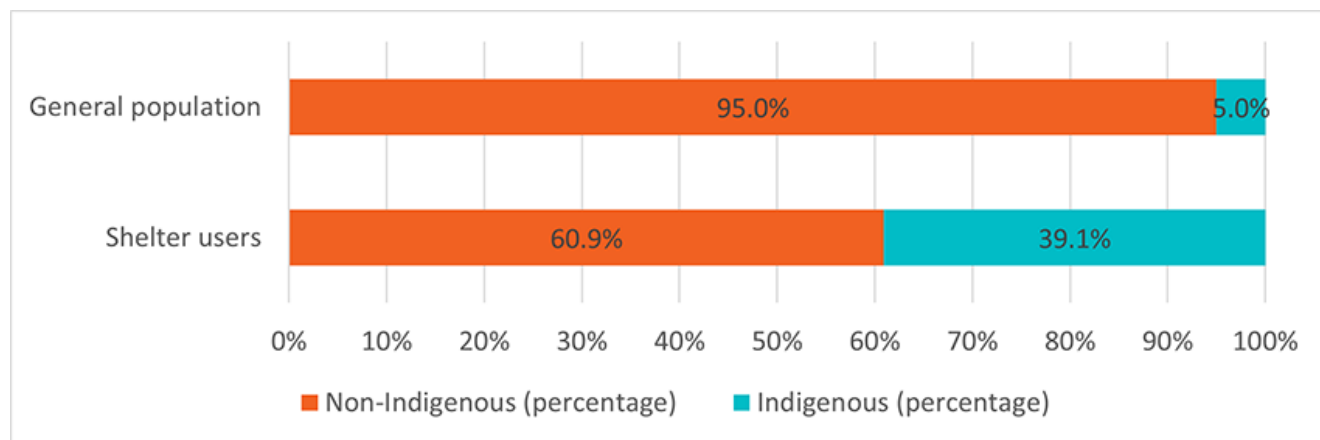
In 2021 67.8% of shelter users were men, 31.1% were women, and 1.1% identified as gender diverse. The proportion of men and women has remained statistically unchanged between 2015 and 2021. A statistically significant increase in the proportion of shelter users reporting as gender diverse was observed between 2015 (0.5%) and

2021 (1.1%).

Indigenous Peoples

The proportion of Indigenous shelter users increased in 2021, and Indigenous Peoples continued to be overrepresented in Canada's emergency shelters. According to the 2021 census, Indigenous Peoples represent about 5.0% of the Canadian population, yet the percentage of shelter users in 2021 who identified as Indigenous was 39.1% (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Proportion of shelter-using population and general population by Indigenous identity



► [Figure 5 - Text version](#)

Veterans

An estimated 1.4% of shelter users in 2021 reported serving as either Canadian Armed Forces, former RCMP officers, veterans of allied countries, or civilian veterans. This is consistent with the estimated overall proportion of veterans in Canada² (1.7%). While there was a steady downward trend in the number of veterans accessing shelters between 2017 (2,392) and 2021 (1,286), the difference in proportion

from previous years is not statistically significant. Veterans tended to be older than non veterans, with 39.9% being over the age of 50 compared to 19.6% of non-veterans. They were also more likely to identify as men (81.9%) than non-veterans (70.2%).

Citizenship

In 2021, the majority (85.8%) of shelter users were Canadian citizens. The proportion of refugees and refugee claimants in the shelter system decreased from a peak of 4.1% in 2019 to 0.8% in 2021, which may have resulted from a pandemic travel restrictions³ and a decrease in the number of asylum claims in 2020 and 2021.

Chronic homelessness among shelter users

In 2021, data from a subset of 17 communities were used to estimate chronic homelessness in Canada. The sample included 36,865 shelter users (accounting for 39.4% of total estimated shelter users in 2021). Shelter users are considered chronically homeless if they meet at least one of the following criteria:

- Acute chronicity: used a shelter for six months (180 days) or more in the past year
- Prolonged instability: had shelter stays in each of the last three years

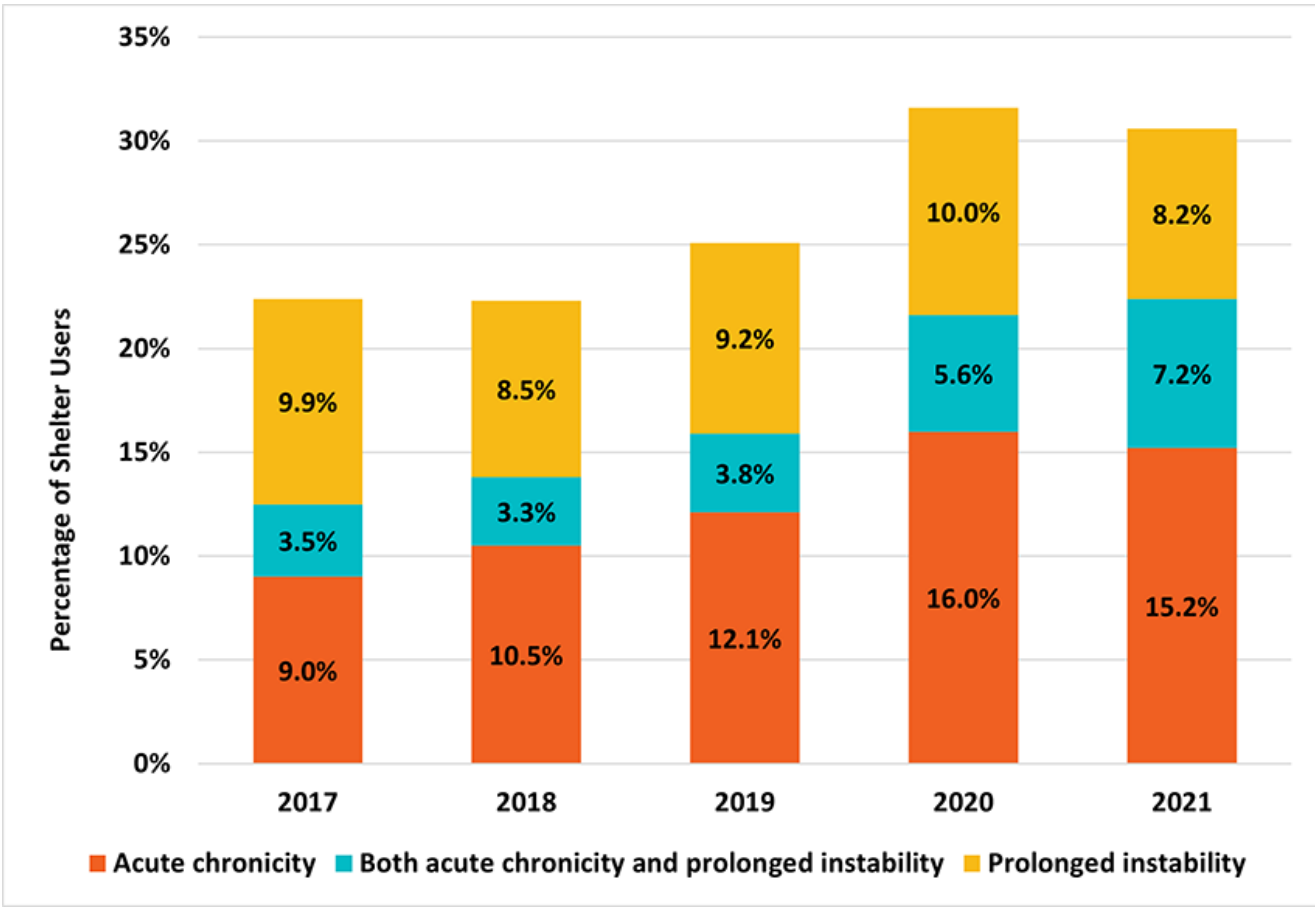
In 2021, 30.6% of shelter users in the sample met one or both of the criteria for chronic homelessness (down from 31.7% in 2020). By applying this proportion to the national estimate of shelter users, an estimated 28,631 shelter users experienced chronic homelessness in

2021, similar to the estimate from 2020 (28,004).

In 2021, 15.2% of shelter users met the criteria for acute chronicity only, 8.2% for prolonged instability only, and 7.2% for both types of chronic homelessness (Figure 6).

From 2017 to 2021, there was an increase in the proportion of shelter users who met only the acute chronicity indicator (from 9.0% to 15.2%), while the proportion who experienced prolonged instability remained relatively unchanged (from 9.9% to 8.2%). The proportion of shelter users who experienced both types of chronic homelessness was stable between 2017 and 2019 (from 3.5% to 3.8%), yet this proportion increased in 2020 (to 5.6%) and 2021 (to 7.2%).

Figure 6: Acute chronicity and prolonged instability from 2017 to 2021



► Figure 6 - Text version

Limitations

The homeless service landscape changed over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. As frontline services adjusted to meet public health guidelines, there was a shift from reliance on the traditional emergency shelter system to temporary service locations including hotels/motels, and makeshift use of public spaces. This tested the adaptability and resilience of Homelessness Management Information Systems in place and made it difficult to accurately capture the capacity of the shelter system and the size of the shelter population at the national level. The federal government continues to explore ways to incorporate the use of other types of shelters including winter and temporary COVID isolation centres in the analysis.

The COVID-19 pandemic was coupled with a variety of government and individual responses including the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB), eviction bans, rent increase freezes, shelter-in-place lockdowns, social distancing rules, shelter capacity reductions, etc. The combination of these elements contributed to reductions in shelter inflow, however, this should not be interpreted with a reduction in homelessness as this study does not capture homelessness in contexts outside of the shelter system, including couch surfing and rough sleeping.

While this is true of all years, it is an especially important point to remember in 2020 and 2021 because it excludes those who could not access shelter due to capacity reductions or those who chose not to

access shelters in order to avoid exposure to the virus. Therefore, the 2020 and 2021 results are more likely to underrepresent homelessness in Canada compared to previous years.

Key findings

- In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on homeless service delivery, significantly reducing shelter capacity. The overall system capacity had largely recovered by 2021, a 1.5% decrease compared to 2019. However, growth was uneven across shelter types (family shelters had a growth rate of 30.6%).
- The number of individuals accessing shelters in 2021 (93,529) increased in comparison to 2020 (88,342), but was still significantly lower than shelter use in previous years.
- In 2021, the majority of shelter users were adults aged 24 to 49 (60.3%) and men (67.8%). The average age of shelter users was 38.0 years.
- In 2021, Indigenous peoples continue to be overrepresented among shelter users, with 39.1% of shelter users identifying as Indigenous, compared to 5.0% of the general Canadian population.
- In 2021, 1.4% of shelter users reported to have served as either Canadian Armed Forces, former RCMP officers, veterans of allied countries, or civilian veterans.
- The majority of shelter users identified as Canadian citizens (85.8%). The proportion of shelter users who identified as refugees and refugee claimants decreased in 2021 compared to 2020, which may be explained by border closures due to pandemic restrictions.

- An estimated 28,631 shelter users experienced chronic homelessness in 2021, representing 30.6% of all shelter users. This is relatively unchanged from 2020 (28,004; 31.7%).

For more information

To find out more about homelessness research, visit the [Data analysis, reports and publications page](#).

If you have any questions about this report, [contact us](#).

Footnotes

- [1 Infrastructure Canada - Everyone Counts 2020-2022: Preliminary Highlights Report](#)
 - [2 Veterans Affairs Canada Facts and Figures March 2021](#)
 - [3 Government of Canada Asylum claim statistics by year](#)
-

Date modified:

2023-08-10