greater victoria
coalition to end
homelessness

hope has found a home

patterns of homelessness in greater victoria

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Acknowledgements

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Introduction

Homelessness is a persistent issue in Greater Victoria. Since 2008, the Greater Victoria Coalition to End Homelessness has been committed to ending homelessness in Victoria. In this report, we analyze longer-term patterns of homelessness for people who use emergency shelters in Victoria, BC. By looking at patterns of homelessness over time we can get a better understanding of the housing and support needs of people who are experiencing homelessness in our region. In order to better understand these patterns, we examined in depth the shelter records of more than 4,300 individuals over four years to get a glimpse of their cycles of homelessness. In total we examined 45,943 shelter records from five adult emergency shelters.

It is important to recognize that homelessness is not a static state and people often move through different housing situations. The definition below is one that is commonly used in Canada to define homelessness and the different types of housing situations that someone who is homeless or at risk of homelessness might experience.

Homelessness is defined by the Canadian Homelessness Research Network as:[1]

- **Unsheltered**, or absolutely homeless and living on the streets or in places not intended for human habitation;

- **Emergency Sheltered**, including those staying in overnight shelters for people who are homeless, as well as Violence Against Women shelters;

- **Provisionally Accommodated**, referring to those whose accommodation is temporary and who do not have their own home or security of tenure;

- **Insecurely Housed**, referring to people who are 'at-risk' of homelessness, and whose current economic and/or housing situation is precarious or does not meet public health and safety standards.

In this project, we specifically looked at emergency shelter records to get a sense of how often and for how long people stayed in emergency shelters over a four-year period. In this report, we begin by discussing previous indicators that have been used to assess the extent of homelessness in Victoria and the contribution this in depth analysis provides to understanding patterns of homelessness in Greater Victoria. Then we describe what we did, what we found, and the implications of the findings for addressing homelessness in Victoria.

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[1] Canadian Homelessness Research Network (2012). Canadian Definition of Homelessness. Available online at Homeless Hub.

Homelessness Indicators

For the past four years in the annual Report on Housing & Supports, we have tracked the number of unique individuals accessing emergency shelter services using data from 5 of 6 emergency shelters in Greater Victoria. Figure 1 shows the annual number of unique shelter users in Greater Victoria from 2010 to 2014. This annual number reflects the unique individuals over the age of 19 who stayed at least one night in one of Victoria's five emergency shelters. These figures have remained relatively stable since 2010 and fluctuations are likely due to the availability of shelter beds, among other factors.

Figure 1

Number of Unique Shelter Users in Greater Victoria, 2010-2014
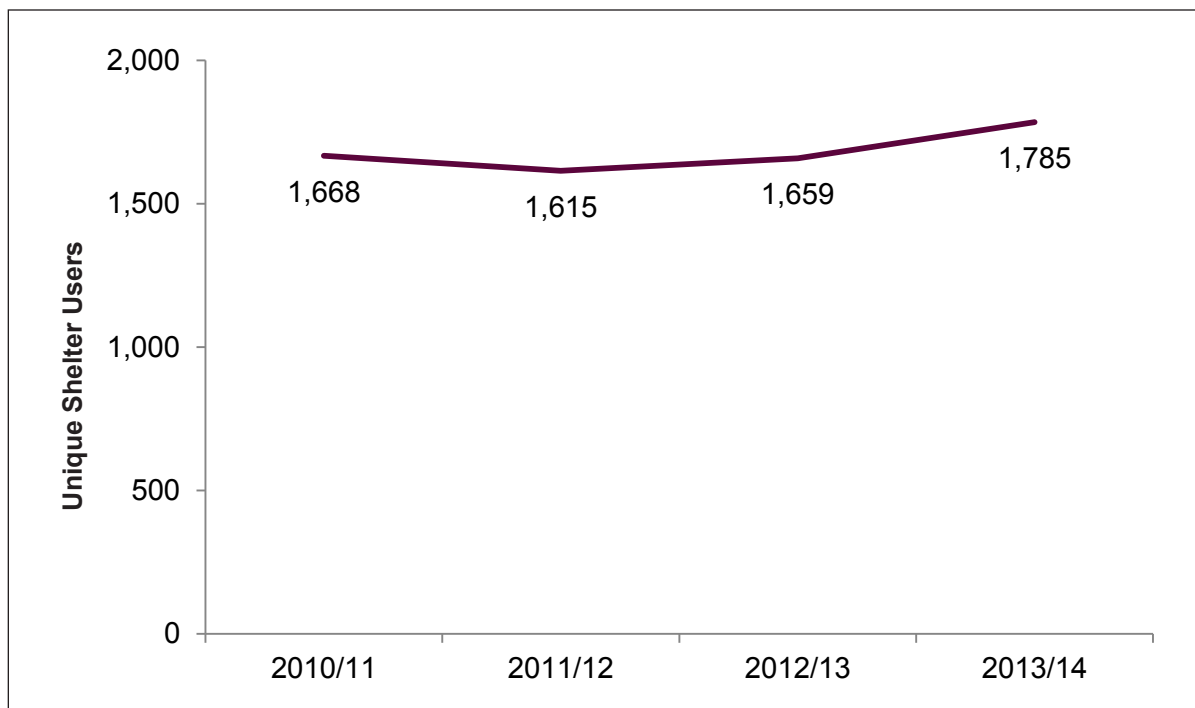
Source: BC Housing. (2014). Homelessness Services System (HSS), 2008-2014; Victoria Cool Aid Society. (2014). Homeless Services System, Crystal Reports Occupancy for Rock Bay Landing Mat Program and Divine Intervention.

Another way of examining the persistence of homelessness in Greater Victoria is by looking at the number of people turned away from emergency shelters because no beds were available. In 2011/12 there were 3,284 instances of turnaway at only one emergency shelter in Greater Victoria because there were no beds available.[2] In 2012/13 there were 5,405 instances of turnaway at one emergency shelter, with an average of 450 turnaways monthly.[3,4]

Due to space limitations, emergency shelters often open up and operate additional sleeping spaces to accommodate those in need of shelter. The additional spaces are usually mats on the floor of a communal area and are over and above the regular number of beds in the shelter. In Figure 2, these additional mats are included in the occupancy rates and reflect that the shelters are running over capacity or above and beyond the capacity for which they were built.

Figure 2

Emergency Shelter (ESP) Occupancy Trended 2008-2014					
2008/09	**2009/10**	**2010/11**	**2011/12**	**2012/13**	**2013/14** (Updated Occupancy Figure)
86%	103%	95%	111%[5]	112%[6]	112%[7]

Source: BC Housing. (2014). Homelessness Services System (HSS), 2008-2014; Victoria Cool Aid Society. (2014). Homeless Services System, Crystal Reports Occupancy for Rock Bay Landing Mat Program and Divine Intervention

Another indicator used to enumerate the extent of homelessness in Greater Victoria is the facility count. The facility count is a point in time, one night count of individuals who are emergency sheltered or provisionally accommodated without security of tenure. The facility count enumerates the number of individuals staying in emergency shelters, extreme weather shelters, seasonal emergency shelters, transitional housing facilities, hotel/motel accommodation, people in treatment without housing, and other facilities.[8] The facility count does not include individuals who are sleeping outdoors, couch surfing or living in overcrowded or inadequate accommodation. Figure 3 shows the annual Greater Victoria facility count from 2011 to 2014. From Figure 3 we can see that each year, homelessness is a risk or challenge for over a thousand residents of Greater Victoria.[9,10]

[2] Pauly, B., Jackson, N., Wynn-Williams, A., and Stiles, K. (2012). Quiet Crisis: Homelessness and At Risk in Greater Victoria, Victoria, BC, Greater Victoria Coalition to End Homelessness.

[3] Annual turnaway numbers cannot be compared due to inconsistent data recording. We are unable to report on turnaways for 2013-2014 due to changes in how turnaways were recorded.

[4] Pauly, B., Cross, G., Vallance, K., Wynn Williams, A., & Stiles, K. (2013). Facing Homelessness: Greater Victoria Report on Housing and Supports 2012/13. Victoria: Greater Victoria Coalition to End Homelessness and Centre for Addictions Research of BC.

[5] Total occupancy rates were over 100% primarily due to extra 40 mats on the floor at Rock Bay Landing since May 21, 2011, which are not included in ESP capacity but recorded by provider as shelter stays in HSS. Other shelters also have additional capacity, which is not included in bed-nights available but is included in bed-nights used.

[6] In addition to the regular shelter beds available through the year, this occupancy figure includes the emergency mats provided at emergency shelters in Victoria to accommodate all those in need of shelter during the winter months. The 2012-13 occupancy rates for emergency shelters funded through BC Housing's Emergency Shelter Program (ESP) excluding additional mats on the floor was 96%.

[7] Note that the 2013/14 occupancy rate excluding the additional mats is 93%.

[8] Pauly, B., Cross, G., Vallance, K., Wynn Williams, A., & Stiles, K. (2013). Facing Homelessness Data Supplement for 2012/13 Report on Housing and Supports. Victoria: Greater Victoria Coalition to End Homelessness and Centre for Addictions Research of BC.

[9] Pauly, B., Jackson, N., Wynn-Williams, A., and Stiles, K. (2012). Quiet Crisis: Homelessness and At Risk in Greater Victoria, Victoria, BC, Greater Victoria Coalition to End Homelessness.

[10] Pauly, B., Jackson, N., Thompson, D., and Kerr-Southin, M. (2011). Hungry and Homeless in Greater Victoria: Fitting the Pieces Together. Victoria: Greater Victoria Coalition to End Homelessness and Centre for Addictions Research of BC.

Figure 3
Annual Greater Victoria Facility Count, 2011-2014
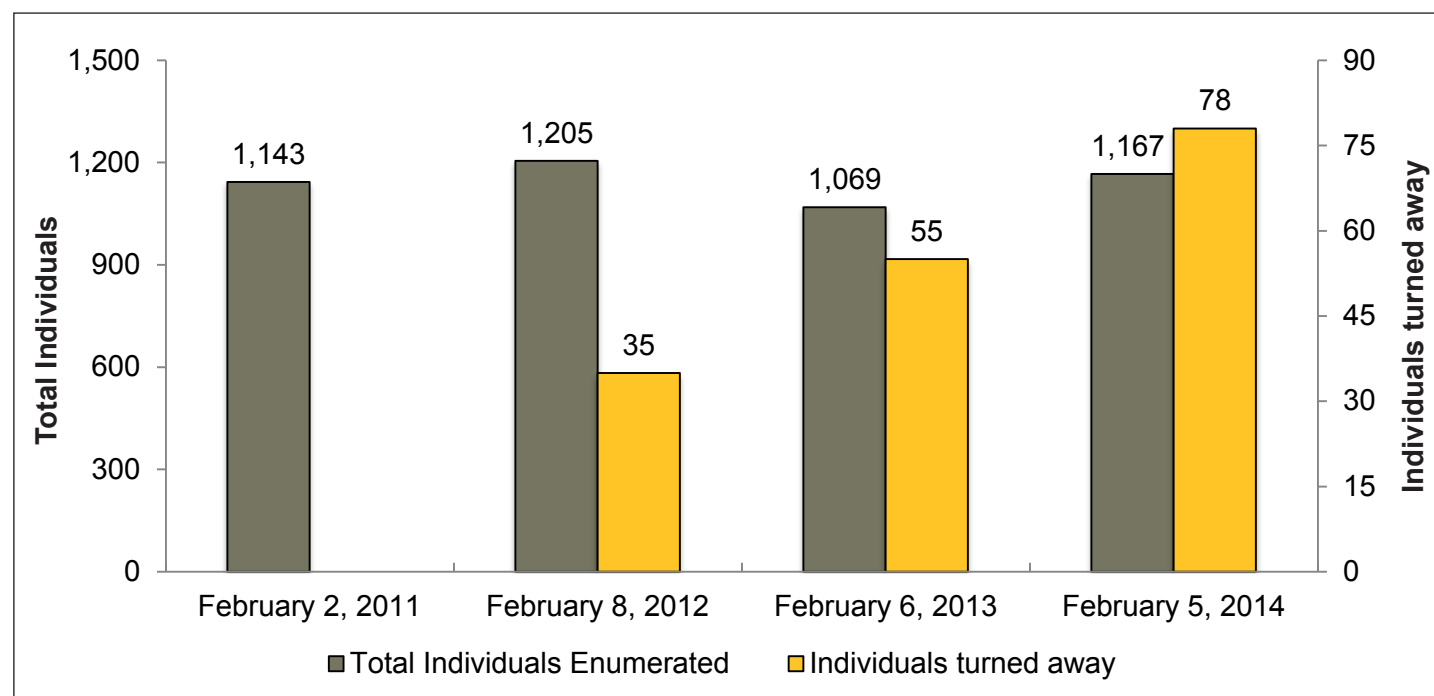
Despite hundreds of annual exits from homelessness into housing, the annual emergency shelter numbers above, the number of turnaways from emergency shelters and the number of people in emergency or provisional accommodation indicate homelessness continues to persist and there is still work to be done to address problem of homelessness in Greater Victoria.[11,12,13,14,15]

But what is left out?

While the figures above provide a snapshot and annual comparisons of the extent of homelessness in Greater Victoria, these indicators do not tell us about the flows in and out of homelessness over time. Every month, it is likely some individuals cycle through the various types of homelessness: from emergency sheltered to insecurely housed, back to provisionally accommodated, unsheltered and so on. In other words, we know little about the cycles or patterns of homelessness over time for people who use emergency shelters.

[11] Since 2008, between 535-639 people each year have transitioned from homelessness into housing.

[12] Austen, T. (2010). Greater Victoria 2010 Report on Housing and Supports. Victoria: Greater Victoria Coalition to End Homelessness.

[13] Pauly, B., Jackson, N., Thompson, D., and Kerr-Southin, M. (2011). Hungry and Homeless in Greater Victoria: Fitting the Pieces Together. Victoria: Greater Victoria Coalition to End Homelessness and Centre for Addictions Research of BC.

[14] Pauly, B., Jackson, N., Wynn-Williams, A., and Stiles, K. (2012). Quiet Crisis: Homelessness and At Risk in Greater Victoria, Victoria, BC, Greater Victoria Coalition to End Homelessness.

[15] Pauly, B., Cross, G., Vallance, K., Wynn Williams, A., & Stiles, K. (2013). Facing Homelessness: Greater Victoria Report on Housing and Supports 2012/13. Victoria: Greater Victoria Coalition to End Homelessness and Centre for Addictions Research of BC.

Understanding Emergency Shelter Patterns Using Cluster Analysis

To increase our understanding of shelter patterns in Victoria we looked at individuals' emergency shelter stay records to gain insight into their cycles or patterns of homelessness. We used administrative data from five of Greater Victoria's adult emergency shelters over a four-year period to examine the patterns of those who are emergency sheltered in Greater Victoria over time.

The goals of this analysis were to:

- Identify the total number of people using adult emergency shelters in Greater Victoria over a four-year period

- Identify the main types of emergency shelter use in Greater Victoria, and identify the proportion of individuals by type of use

- Identify demographic trends for each type of use

- Make recommendations regarding housing and supports needed in Greater Victoria based on people's shelter use

This kind of analysis is important to help identify different needs for housing and supports among those who use emergency shelters.

What did we do?

Based on a methodology developed by Randall Kuhn and Dennis Culhane, we analyzed patterns of emergency shelter stay histories for 4,332 people over a four-year period using a statistical methodology called cluster analysis.[16] The stays of people who used emergency shelters in any of the five Victoria emergency shelters were examined from May 2010 – May 2014. We analyzed 45,943 shelter records of the 4,332 people who used emergency shelters during the four-year period.

In their cluster analysis, Kuhn and Culhane developed three groups of homeless individuals based on their cluster analysis of shelter stays: transitionally homeless, episodically homeless and chronically homeless. The transitional homelessness population was defined as experiencing homelessness once, for a short period of time. The episodic homelessness population was defined as people with the most episodes of emergency shelter use, moving between shelters, jails, hospitals and other settings over time. The chronic homelessness population was defined as "people who are likely to be entrenched in the shelter system, and for whom shelters are more like long-term housing than an emergency arrangement."[17] In their analysis, those in the episodic and chronic cluster tended to have more physical, mental health and substance use problems than those in the transitional cluster. This is not surprising as homelessness contributes to these problems.

Tim Aubry and colleagues tested and re-defined these groups in his 2013 Canadian study of homelessness in Toronto, Guelph and Ottawa, Ontario. Although the clusters identified were similar, Aubry et al. renamed these groups: temporary, episodic and long stay.[18]

In our analysis, we wanted to see whether or not these three groups were reflected in the shelter patterns of people in a smaller city, with a more temperate climate, such as Victoria, BC.

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[16] Kuhn, R. & Culhane, D. (1998). Applying Cluster Analysis to Test a Typology of Homelessness by Pattern of Shelter Utilization: Results from the Analysis of Administrative Data. American Journal of Community Psychology. 26, 2, 207-232.

[17] Kuhn, R. & Culhane, D. (1998). p.211.

[18] Aubry, T., Farrell, S., Hwang, S., & Calhoun, M. (2013). Identifying the Patterns of Emergency Shelter Stays of Single Individuals in Canadian Cities of Different Sizes. Housing Studies.

Our methodology

Using a statistical clustering method we examined two factors: 'total days' and 'total episodes' to determine if there were clusters in our data similar to previous analyses. If shelter stays were separated by less than 30 days, they were collapsed into a single episode. If two stays were separated by 30 days or more they were considered as two episodes of homelessness.

What did we find?

Main types of shelter usage

Like earlier analyses in other cities, our analysis produced three clusters.[19] The three clusters that emerged from the analysis were similar to the clusters found in three other cities in Ontario.[20] We have further refined and described the three clusters based on our analysis below.

Temporary shelter use is when a person suddenly becomes homeless, the period of emergency shelter use is not prolonged and other arrangements outside of the emergency shelter are established.

Episodic shelter use is when an individual moves in and out of the emergency shelter several times over a period. This individual may acquire short-term housing in a motel, may couch surf, may end up in the hospital, or may acquire housing. However, they do not retain their accommodation and return to the emergency shelter more than once and often multiple times.

Long-stay shelter use is when an individual experiences prolonged homelessness and seeks emergency shelter for an extended period of time. All of the emergency shelters in this analysis have policies limiting the number of continuous days that an individual can stay at the shelter. Therefore, long-term shelter use does not imply stable accommodation.

Figure 4 presents the average number of stays and average length of stay in each cluster over the four-year period. The results yielded statistically significant differences between the clusters, meaning that each of the clusters was distinct.

Figure 4

Three Clusters			
Cluster	Average number of stays	Average duration of stay per episode	Description
Temporary	1.4	17.6 days	Staying in a shelter a few times, for a limited duration.
Episodic	5.1	30.8 days	Staying in shelters more times, for short durations.
Long-Stay	4.6	179.6 days	Staying in shelters over long periods of time.

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[19] We adopted the same names for the three clusters in this study as the three clusters in the Aubry et al. study.

[20] Aubry, T., Farrell, S., Hwang, S., & Calhoun, M. (2013). Identifying the Patterns of Emergency Shelter Stays of Single Individuals in Canadian Cities of Different Sizes. Housing Studies.
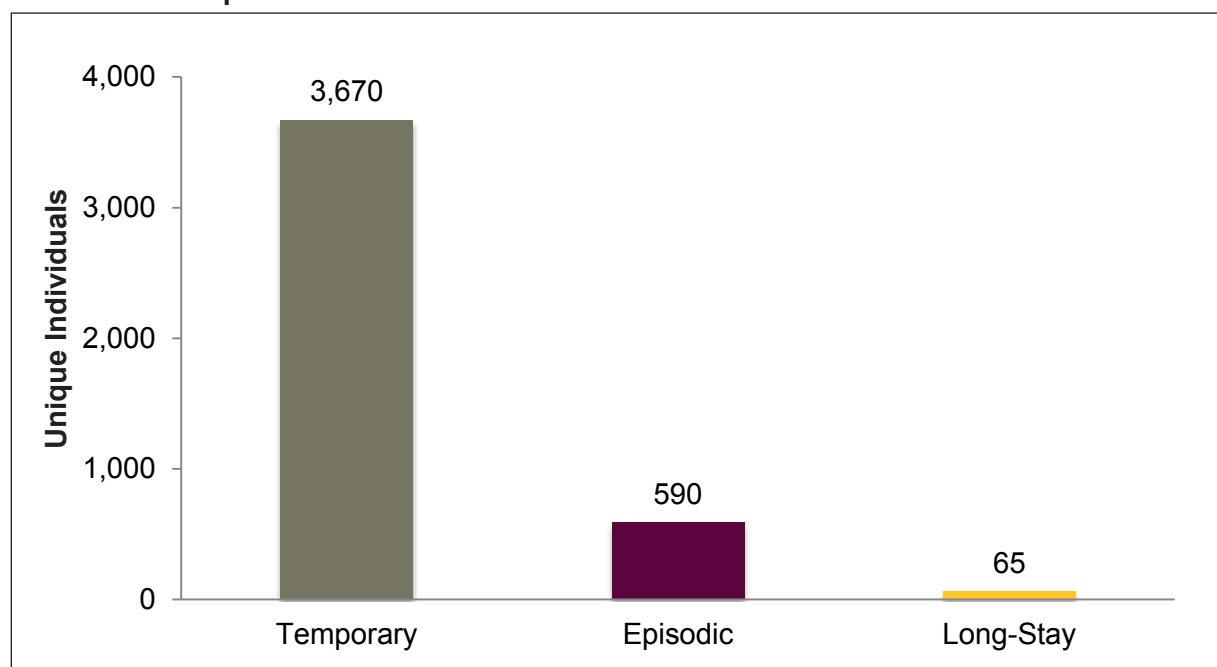
Figure 5

Number of Unique Individuals

Figure 5 shows over the period: 3,670 individuals experienced temporary homelessness, 590 experienced episodic homelessness and 65 experienced long-stay homelessness.

These results indicate the large majority of individuals staying at emergency shelters in Greater Victoria only experience homelessness for a short period of time. These individuals stayed in emergency shelters on average 1.4 times with an average length of stay of 18 days per episode over the four-year period.

Individuals in the episodic cluster had the highest average number of episodes of homelessness over the period at 5.1 episodes, and an average duration of stay of 30 days. Our analysis found that 85% of individuals in the episodic cluster experienced 4 or more episodes of homelessness over the period. In some cases, individuals in the episodic cluster had up to 17 episodes of homelessness.

Individuals in the long-stay cluster had on average 4.6 stays, with each stay lasting on average 180 days, or 6 months. Given that 180 days is the average length of stay for this cluster, we can assume that some stays were significantly longer.

These results are consistent with those found by Aubry et al. in 2013.[21] Figure 6 compares the percentage of shelter users by cluster in Greater Victoria with those in Ottawa, Toronto and Guelph, Ontario. In both studies, people who used shelters on a temporary basis were by far the largest proportion of shelter users. People who used shelters on an episodic basis were the second largest group and people who stayed at a shelter over a long period of time were the smallest cluster of individuals. When compared with the Ontario cities, the Victoria episodic cluster had a higher proportion of individuals, and the long-stay cluster had a smaller proportion of individuals. These differences may in part be a reflection of the differences in shelter policies related to length of stay. Limiting length of stays would contribute to more episodic use.

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[21] Aubry, T., Farrell, S., Hwang, S., & Calhoun, M. (2013). Identifying the Patterns of Emergency Shelter Stays of Single Individuals in Canadian Cities of Different Sizes. Housing Studies.

Figure 6

| Percentage of Individuals by Cluster – Victoria and Ottawa Comparison			
	Temporary (%)	Episodic (%)	Long-Stay (%)
Victoria, BC	**84.9**	**13.6**	**1.5**
Aubry et al. - Ottawa	87.8	10.5	1.8
Aubry et al. - Toronto	87.5	8.5	4.0
Aubry et al. - Guelph	93.6	3.4	3.1

Proportion of shelter use

The temporary cluster made up the largest group of people using shelters. Although there were fewer people in the episodic cluster and long-stay clusters, these two groups use a greater proportion of the available beds in the shelters and account for a larger proportion of total bed nights.

Figure 7 shows how the long-stay cluster only made up 1.5% of individuals, but made up 16.0% of total bed nights over the period. The episodic cluster made up 13.6% of individuals over the period, but 38.7% of total bed nights. Taken together the episodic and long-stay clusters account for about 15% of those who use shelters but account for more than 50% of the bed night stays.

Figure 7

Percentage of Unique Indidivuals and Bednights by Cluster
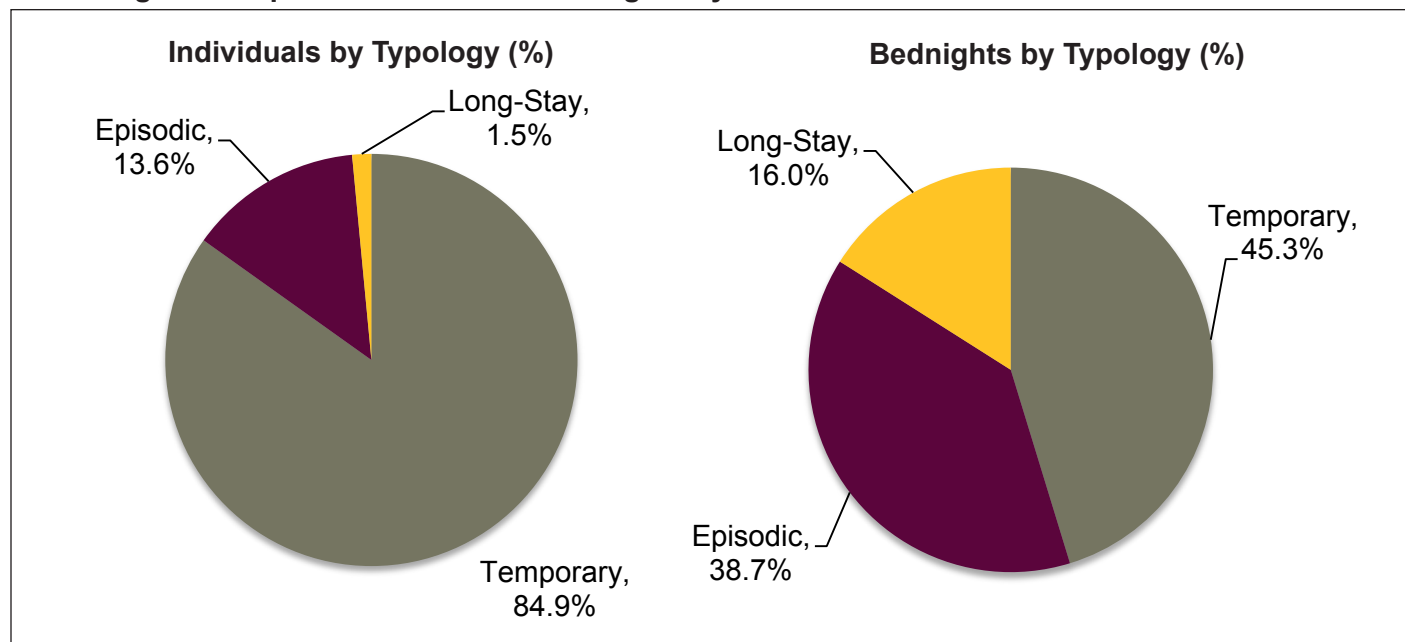
Demographic trends for each type of use
Gender

Figure 8 shows the percentage of genders for the three clusters. Around 30% of each cluster were female and 70% were male. This is consistent with previous Coalition findings.[22] Transgender individuals made up less than 1% of any cluster. The episodic cluster has the highest proportion of men, making up 73% of individuals in the cluster.

Figure 8

Percentage of Gender by Cluster
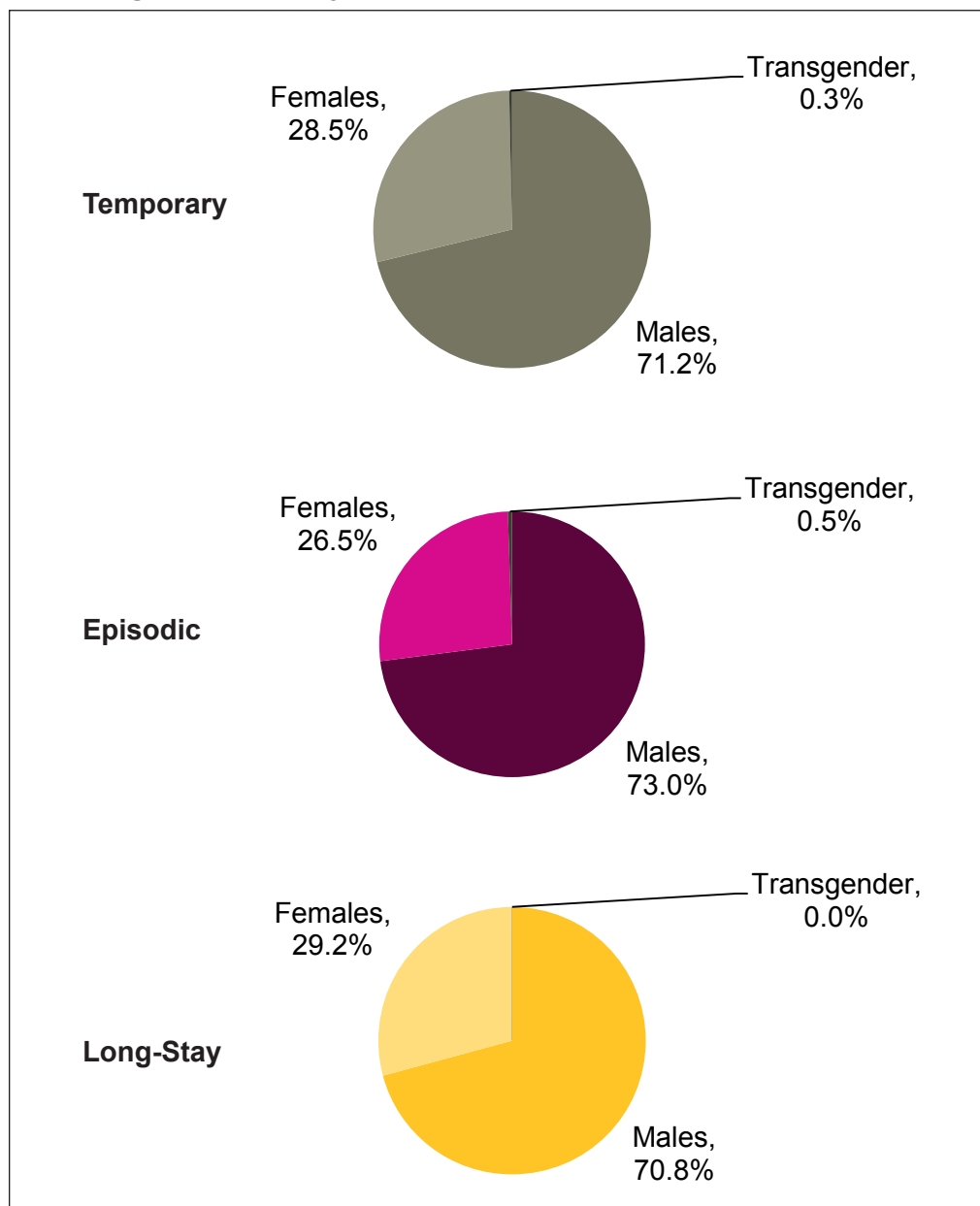
These results indicate that men may be more likely to move in and out of the emergency shelters episodically. In Victoria's emergency shelters there are more shelter spaces allocated to men. There is recognition in other homelessness research that women tend to use emergency shelters less frequently than men due to: lack of available shelter space, concerns over safety, and greater social networks to facilitate alternative accommodation. Thus the ratio between men and women of 7 to 3 is not an accurate representation of the incidence of homelessness among men and women but rather who uses emergency shelters.

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[22] Pauly, B., Jackson, N., Wynn-Williams, A., and Stiles, K. (2012). Quiet Crisis: Homelessness and At Risk in Greater Victoria, Victoria, BC, Greater Victoria Coalition to End Homelessness.

Age

People's ages were categorized into four groups: Youth (16-19 years old), young adult (20-39), middle age (40-59), and seniors (60+). Figure 9 shows the percentage of age groups for the three clusters.

The temporary cluster had the highest percentage of young adults from ages 20-39. The episodic and long stay clusters had the highest percentage of middle age adults from ages 40-59. The long-stay cluster, when compared to the other three clusters, had the highest percentage of seniors aged 60 years and above.

Figure 9

Percentage of Age Group by Cluster
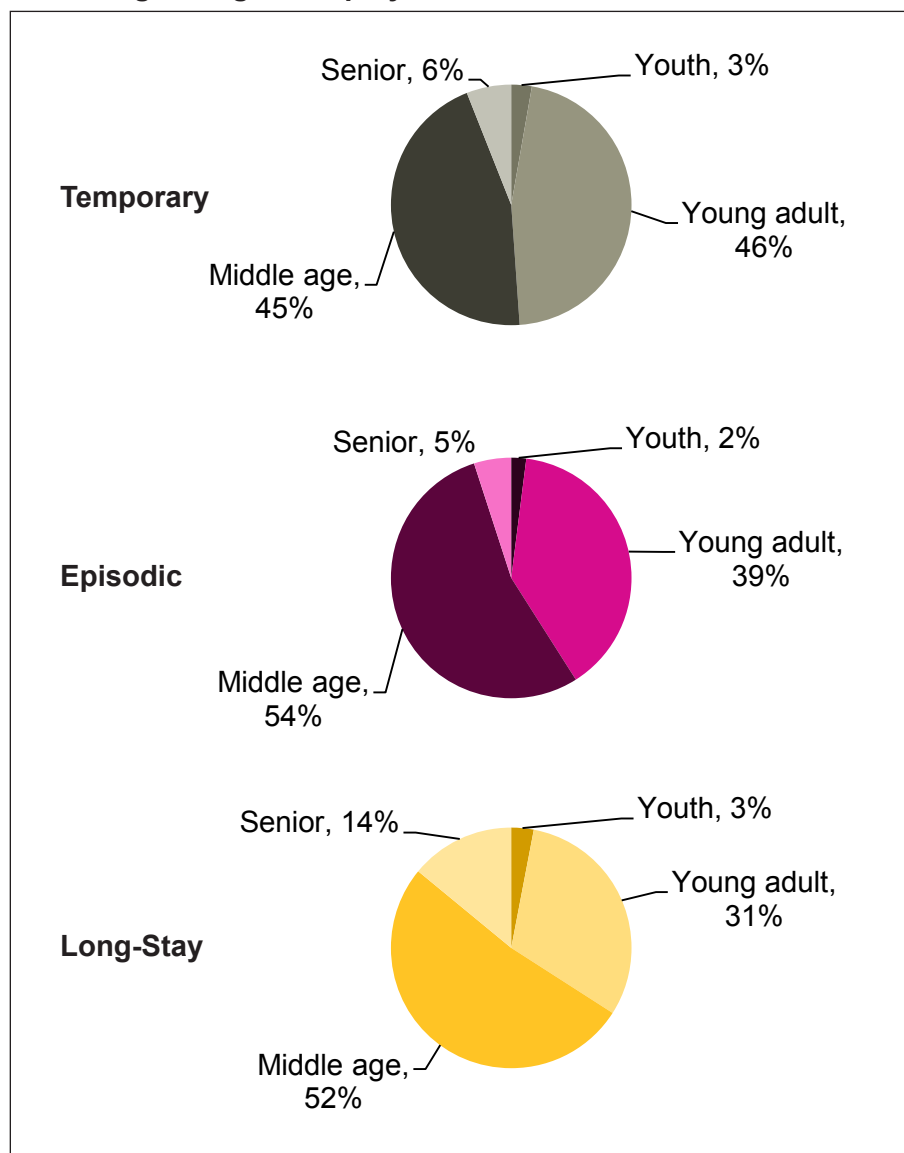
These results indicate that young adults are the most likely to be temporarily sheltered and seem more able to quickly find new long term housing arrangements. Middle age individuals are the most likely to cycle in and out of the emergency shelters. Seniors are disproportionately more likely to use the emergency shelters over an extended period of time. This indicates that some seniors face particular difficulties securing housing. On the next page we discuss the limitations and implications of these findings.

Limitations

With any kind of research there are limitations on what the findings can and cannot tell us. In this analysis, we are able to get a better understanding of the patterns of homelessness among people who used emergency shelters in Victoria at least once over the four-year period. This analysis only includes people who can and do access shelters, and does not include those that do not stay in shelters as they do not want to be indoors, are banned, or do not want to comply with the rules and structure of emergency shelters. In doing this kind of analysis, we are dependent on shelter records collected by a number of different staff for administrative rather than research purposes. As well, HIFIS data does not include information about income, mental health, substance use or other health problems that can provide more insight into the need for supports. Cultural or ethnic background is also not available. Additionally, youth, families, and women are likely under-represented in this analysis as there are fewer emergency shelter beds available for these groups in the adult emergency shelters.

Discussion

Victoria's homelessness patterns are comparable to those in Ottawa, Toronto, and Guelph. This suggests that the perception that more people are chronically homeless in Greater Victoria due to the availability of services and/or moderate climate is groundless.

Approximately 3,600 individuals experienced homelessness for at least one night in Greater Victoria from May 2010-May 2014, and as a group represent the temporary cluster. The majority of individuals in the temporary cluster were from 20-39 years old, with an average length of stay of 18 days. These individuals seem to have been able to exit from homelessness. However, the sheer number of individuals who resorted to accessing emergency shelter indicates a lack of homelessness prevention services and emphasizes the need to address low income and affordable housing issues in Greater Victoria to prevent homelessness, and the need to support rapid re-housing for this group.

The pattern of episodic and long-stay clusters making up a greater proportion of bed nights is consistent with findings in Ottawa, Toronto and Guelph. However the long-stay cluster in the Aubry et al. study made up 39% of bed nights in Toronto and 27% of bed nights in Ottawa, versus 16% of bed nights in Victoria. This is likely due to the lack of available beds and previously reported high incidence of turnaways at emergency shelters in Greater Victoria. Individuals are unable to stay long enough to fall into the long-stay cluster and thus are categorized in the episodic cluster. Thus, the number of individuals falling into the long-stay cluster could be an under-estimate of the number of individuals who experience persistent homelessness in Greater Victoria over a long period.

590 individuals experienced episodic homelessness over the four-year period. On average these individuals experienced 5 episodes of homelessness, each lasting 30 days. The majority of individuals in this cluster were between the ages of 40-59. This cluster used 39% of bed nights over the period. The episodic cluster in the Aubry et al. study made up 26% of beds in Ottawa and 21% of beds in Toronto. This is consistent with the findings above, which suggest that in Victoria, the episodic cluster may include those who are actually chronically experiencing homelessness.

Almost 600 adults in Greater Victoria, 61% between the ages of 40-59, experience on-going challenges acquiring and retaining housing and experience extreme instability in their living arrangements. In previous research, Kuhn and Culhane found a higher proportion of physical, mental health and substance use problems among people in both the episodic and chronic homelessness clusters.[23] They suggested that because of the episodic nature of their shelter use, individuals in this cluster may 'slip through the cracks' and have less opportunity to access necessary health and social supports.

65 individuals experienced homelessness on a long-term basis over the four-year period and like those in the episodic cluster, are more likely to have physical, mental health and substance use problems as these problems often worsen with extended homelessness. As described above, the number of individuals in the long-stay cluster is likely an underestimate due to shelter availability.

There were few gender differences noted among the groups. Youth are equally represented in both the temporary and long-stay clusters. Overall, middle age adults and seniors are more likely to be among those who experience episodic and chronic homelessness. Thus, experiencing the greatest difficulty in exiting homelessness.

[23] Kuhn, R. & Culhane, D. (1998). Applying Cluster Analysis to Test a Typology of Homelessness by Pattern of Shelter Utilization: Results from the Analysis of Administrative Data. American Journal of Community Psychology. 26, 2, 207-232.

Recommendations

1. Rapid rehousing initiatives would address the needs of first time and temporary emergency shelter users. Access to income and affordable housing should be prioritized for this group. Individuals who experience temporary homelessness would benefit from initiatives such as the Homelessness Prevention Fund, case work services within the emergency shelters and housing outreach services within drop-in centres to help them transition back into housing as swiftly as possible.

2. Those experiencing episodic and long-stay homelessness would benefit from Housing First programs that include rental subsidies and/or subsidized housing and a range of housing supports.

3. Housing with Intensive supports would address the needs of those experiencing chronic homelessness. This group likely requires the most support in order to exit homelessness permanently. It is likely a number of the individuals in the episodic group are experiencing chronic homelessness. Specific consideration should be given not only to Housing First programs, but also to programs that have built in supports to address mental health and substance use needs.

4. Specific supports that are tailored for youth and seniors are also needed.

5. Additional areas for research include specific health needs, and related supports for those in the episodic and long-stay homelessness clusters.