TYPES OF HOMELESSNESS

People who experience homelessness do so in many ways. Staying in an emergency shelter is just one of those ways.

What is homelessness? This is a surprisingly difficult question to answer. The difficulty stems in part from there being many shades of homelessness. Understanding these shades is important for appreciating problems of measurement and the problems inherent in defining appropriate public policy responses.

The Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (COH) identifies homelessness with a range of living conditions. People who live on the street or in places not intended for human habitation are described as *unsheltered*. Those who are *emergency sheltered* are making use of emergency shelters, including shelters provided for people impacted by family violence. For many observers, these two categories describe the population of people identified as experiencing homelessness because they are literally without shelter other than what is provided on an emergency basis. However, there are also people staying in institutions or living with others (the latter sometimes referred to as "couch-surfers") but without immediate prospects for housing should they be required or asked to leave. Not literally without shelter, these people are identified as *provisionally accommodated*. Finally, there are people whose ability to pay for housing is so precarious that they can be identified as being *at risk of homelessness*.

On an average night in Calgary, about 1,400 people stay in an emergency shelter. This does not account for people who will not have physical shelter and people whose shelter can at best be described as precarious.

Given how challenging it is to simply define homelessness, it should come as no surprise to learn that it is even harder to determine how many people can be described as falling into each of these categories. But this is important because the appropriate public policy response varies by the type of homelessness being experienced. Appropriate responses also depend on the age of people experiencing each category of homelessness, their ethnicity, their family connections, and other characteristics.

Point in Time Count Data in Alberta, April 2018			
	Provisionally Accommodated	Emergency Sheltered	Unsheltered	Total
Calgary	1,478	1,374	44	2,911
Edmonton	1,194	679	70	1,971
Fort McMurray	53	108	24	190
Grande Prairie	78	139	7	228
Lethbridge	75	136	7	223
Medicine Hat	45	21	0	68
Red Deer	39	86	12	144

Source: 2018 Alberta Point in Time Homeless Count. The total reported for each community includes a small number of people of unknown location but who are identified as likely homeless.

Enumerating the number of people who are emergency sheltered is relatively straight-forward since shelter operators record the number of people using their services each night. The number of unsheltered and provisionally accommodated people is much harder to determine. An estimate is obtained using periodic *point-in-time counts*. During a point in time count, volunteers interview people they find on the street late at night and after shelters have closed to determine their number. An effort to develop an estimate of the number of provisionally accommodated is also undertaken at this time.

The table reports, for each of seven cities in Alberta, results of the last province-wide point-in-time count conducted on April 11, 2018. Just over half of the emergency sheltered in Alberta on that night were in Calgary while only one-quarter were in Edmonton, a city similar in size to Calgary. Differences like these suggest the reasons for homelessness, and how people respond to the circumstances leading to homelessness, vary by community. Writing in 1993, Martha Burt noted that these differences suggest that local governments have important roles to play in tailoring policy responses to meet local needs and local conditions.