
Subject: Homelessness Point-in-Time Count Report

Report to: Public Health and Social Services Committee

Report date: Tuesday, June 15, 2021

Recommendations

1. That this report **BE RECEIVED** for information.

Key Facts

- The purpose of this report is to provide Regional Council and the community with the results of the 2021 Point-in-Time (PiT) Count in Niagara.
- The PiT Count is a provincial and federal requirement that supports Built For Zero-Canada (BFZ-C) objectives and A Home For All: Niagara's 10-Year Housing and Homelessness Action Plan (HHAP).
- On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared the global outbreak of COVID-19 a pandemic, triggering a number of measures to prevent and mitigate the spread of infection, which postponed the 2020 PiT Count.
- Niagara Counts 2021, Niagara's third homelessness PiT Count, was conducted in late March 2021, in consultation with Niagara Region Public Health. Similar counts took place in 2018 and 2016.
- Niagara's PiT Count found 665 people to be experiencing homelessness on March 23, 2021, in emergency and Violence Against Women (VAW) shelters, in transitional housing programs, and in unsheltered locations. This number includes 121 children aged 0-15 years and 24 seniors (65+).
- As part of the Count, 439 surveys were completed, providing valuable information on the demographics, experience and service needs of Niagara's homeless population.
- Due to the pandemic, Indigenous magnet events, in collaboration with Indigenous-led service providers, were not able to take place. As a result, this interim report recognizes that critical input from local Indigenous communities is still needed to ensure that the experiences and extent of Indigenous homelessness in Niagara is represented and heard.

Financial Considerations

Niagara's PiT Count was fully funded through Canada's COVID-19 Economic Response Plan agreement between Niagara Region and the Ministry of Employment and Social

Development Canada. This was a new agreement for the period from April 1, 2020 to June 30, 2021 to respond to and support the increased needs of people experiencing homelessness during the COVID-19 pandemic. Costs of approximately \$58,000 incurred as a result of the legislated count, were eligible under this agreement. These eligible costs mainly comprised of administrative costs and honoraria for community agencies and survey participants.

Analysis

Niagara's PiT Count, termed Niagara Counts 2021, was planned by a steering committee comprised primarily of community agency staff from across the region, with representation from emergency and VAW shelters, homelessness prevention providers, transitional housing providers, the Niagara Assertive Street Outreach (NASO) team, Niagara Regional Native Centre and Fort Erie Native Friendship Centre. It also included Regional staff, with a member of the Homelessness Services division functioning as the coordinator.

The federal government released a COVID-19 Community Impact document to allow adaptations to standard Point-in-Time Count methodology to reduce the risks of implementing the count during the pandemic. Niagara's steering committee reviewed the considerations and Niagara Region Public Health was consulted regarding all modifications. The count was modified by using community agency staff rather than volunteers, implementing enhanced COVID-19 safety measures including the use of personal protective equipment, postponement of Indigenous magnet events and the use of a digital survey platform.

A PiT Count is intended to provide a snapshot of homelessness at a single point in time (typically conducted at a similar point in time every two years) through a homeless enumeration and an accompanying survey. As a consequence of the pandemic, this interim report recognizes that additional, critical input from the local Indigenous community is still needed to ensure the experiences and extent of Indigenous homelessness in Niagara is represented and heard.

The homeless enumeration total was achieved through:

- Occupancy data from emergency and VAW shelters, and transitional housing programs
- Counting survey responses indicating an unsheltered overnight location, or with an "I don't know" response to "Where are you staying tonight?"

- A tally of observed individuals in unsheltered environments, where it was not possible to conduct the survey or the individual declined the survey

The PiT Count survey was administered to everyone over 15 years old who was experiencing homelessness on the reference night and who consented to participate. It included mandatory federal and provincial survey questions as well as optional questions deemed locally important by the steering committee. The survey population also included a small number of people experiencing hidden homelessness¹ who were not included in the homeless enumeration. All survey participants were given an honorarium for their participation, which consisted of a \$5 gift card, a two-ride bus ticket, mini chocolates and a Niagara 211 resource card.

In 2018, magnet events were held to better capture youth and Indigenous homelessness in the PiT Count. Due to provincial pandemic guidelines, magnet events were postponed and alternative plans are being discussed with Niagara Regional Native Centre and Fort Erie Native Friendship Centre for one or two magnet events to take place in the summer, dependent on the current state with the pandemic. In order to try to mitigate the negative impact of not hosting an Indigenous magnet event, staff from the Fort Erie Native Friendship Centre and Niagara Regional Native Centre joined agency staff at various sheltered sites and assisted NASO with the street count on the day of the PiT Count to increase support for Indigenous individuals experiencing homelessness.

The sheltered count took place all day on March 23, 2021, with some surveys completed over the next few days (however, only for individuals with overnight stays on the 23rd). Close to 70 agency and Friendship Centre staff from 34 different programs providing emergency shelter, VAW shelter, and transitional housing, conducted the count and administered the survey to guests/clients. The response rate in sheltered environments was 74% (compared to 80% in 2018). Agencies received an honorarium to cover any costs incurred as a result of their participation in Niagara Counts.

Instead of having community volunteers as in 2016 and 2018, the street count was conducted by the Niagara Assertive Street Outreach team partnered with staff from Niagara Regional Native Centre and Fort Erie Native Friendship Centre. Between 7:00 a.m. and 7:00 p.m. on March 23, NASO and Friendship Centre staff travelled across Niagara to conduct the PiT Count survey and tally observed homeless individuals, including in hard-to-reach areas and encampments. NASO's current hot spot mapping tool, as well as the walking routes from Niagara Counts 2018 were reviewed by a mapping sub-committee² to identify locations where individuals experiencing

unsheltered homelessness would be encountered. All participating agency staff attended mandatory training prior to the count, covering methodology and survey administration.

Because of changes enacted to protect the health and safety of all parties involved, the results of the 2021 Count may not be directly comparable to those of years past. For example, the survey methodology approach was modified to account for COVID-19 health and safety protocols, which may have had an impact on the rate of response to the questions asked, when compared to previous years. Fair comparisons to certain data indicators can be made, but it is to be interpreted with caution.

Homeless Enumeration Results

Based on the PiT Count, at least 645 people were experiencing homelessness in Niagara on March 23, 2021, as illustrated in the table below. Included in this number are 121 children aged 0-15 years and 67 youth aged 16-24 years and 24 seniors. In 2018, 625 people were found to be experiencing homelessness in Niagara on the night of the PiT Count.

	2021	2021	2018	2018	2016	2016
Overnight location on the night of the Count	Surveys (#)	Individuals Counted (#)	Surveys (#)	Individuals Counted (#)	Surveys (#)	Individuals Counted (#)
Unsheltered/Unsure	47	75	20	38	5	41
Emergency and VAW shelters, crisis beds	219	351	226	350	147	210
Transitional housing	128	239	125	237	129	214
Hidden homelessness	35	0	29	0	0	0
Motel homelessness	10	0	8	0	0	0
Total Surveys	439	N/A	408	N/A	281	N/A
Total Homeless Enumeration	N/A	645	N/A	625	N/A	465

There was no significant difference in the number of individuals counted in transitional housing between 2018 and 2021. However, fewer individuals were counted in emergency and VAW shelters in 2021 than in 2018, and substantially more individuals

were counted in unsheltered locations, or who responded with “I don’t know” to the question of where they were staying overnight in 2021 vs. 2018.

There are several possible reasons for the higher number of individuals in the Unsheltered/Unsure category. A greater number of individuals may have been sleeping in unsheltered settings in order to avoid the congregate environment of an emergency shelter during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, Niagara Assertive Street Outreach, a group of outreach workers from four agencies who work together as one team, has been operating for a year and has a well developed sense of where individuals in unsheltered locations are staying. NASO also has greater capacity for outreach work than what was in place in 2018 and they were able to travel to all known locations in the region.

The occupancy rate of emergency shelters in 2021 was much lower (84%) than in 2018 (117%). While it may be true that individuals have been avoiding shelter during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is also the case that emergency shelter beds were added to the system since 2018. Approximately 70 beds were added to the regular emergency shelter system in Niagara between 2018 and 2020. In addition, over 30 beds were added as a result of the pandemic through COVID-19 funding, primarily to operate a Housing-Focused Shelter/Bridge Housing Pilot program.

In Niagara, rents have continued to increase steadily. In the five year period from 2016 to 2020 the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) average market rents in St. Catharines-Niagara increased by \$171 (from \$904 to \$1,075), representing an average annual increase of about 4.2%³. According to Padmapper, St. Catharines was the thirteenth most expensive rental market in Canada at the end of 2020, with the listing rate for a one-bedroom unit being \$1,300 and a two-bedroom unit being \$1,500 per month⁴. In Niagara, the core housing need⁵ indicator identified that non-census singles (84%) and single parent households (14%) have the highest need. These measures indicate that access to affordable housing remains a critical component in reducing the risk of homelessness for low- and moderate-income households.

Impacts of COVID-19 on Homelessness

The COVID-19 pandemic has created many health, social and economic impacts that have disproportionately affected individuals experiencing homelessness. It is well recognized that people experiencing homelessness are vulnerable to COVID-19 infections due to the prevalence of underlying health conditions, lack of safe housing, and the congregate living situations that most homeless individuals find themselves in

that could increase the spread of COVID-19⁶. Additionally, intersecting factors such as mental illness and substance use may contribute substantially to the difficulties faced by these individuals in being able to engage and follow public health guidelines (e.g. wearing personal protective equipment, physical distancing, and frequent hand hygiene)⁷. An increasing proportion of people experiencing homelessness are older than 65 years, a factor that also exacerbates the vulnerability and severity of COVID-19 infections⁶.

Research has indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic has amplified risks for people with substance use issues. The implementation of public health restrictions, issues and concerns with drug supply, and reduced access to a range of services including treatment and harm reduction services throughout the pandemic, has posed greater health risks for people experiencing substance use issues⁸. Among individuals who are experiencing homelessness and have substance use issues, this may contribute to increased substance use and high rates of substance-related morbidity or mortality⁶. Throughout the pandemic, opioid use and opioid-related-deaths have also continued to increase. Local data indicates that there has been an increase in the suspected opioid overdoses responded to by Niagara Region Emergency Medical Services, during the pandemic⁹.

Throughout the pandemic, many organizations that provide supports to victims of gender-based violence (including VAW shelters) saw increases in the severity of service needs. Locally, Niagara Regional Police Services saw a 9.2% increase in the numbers of calls related to domestic violence between March and November 2020, compared to the same time period in 2019¹⁰. Organizations in Niagara that provide shelter and housing supports for victims of gender violence, also saw increased service needs, documented a greater number of calls to crisis lines, and also observed women requiring supports as a result of more serious domestic violence occurrences¹¹.

COVID-19 has had a significant impact on the housing market and the overall affordability of housing in many communities across Canada. Housing prices have continued to increase, while many people have experienced job losses and rising costs of living. It has made it more difficult for people, especially those who are from low to moderate income households, to ensure that they are able to remain securely housed. Due to this, many individuals may be at risk of becoming homeless, in the process of losing their housing and/or becoming homeless for the first time.

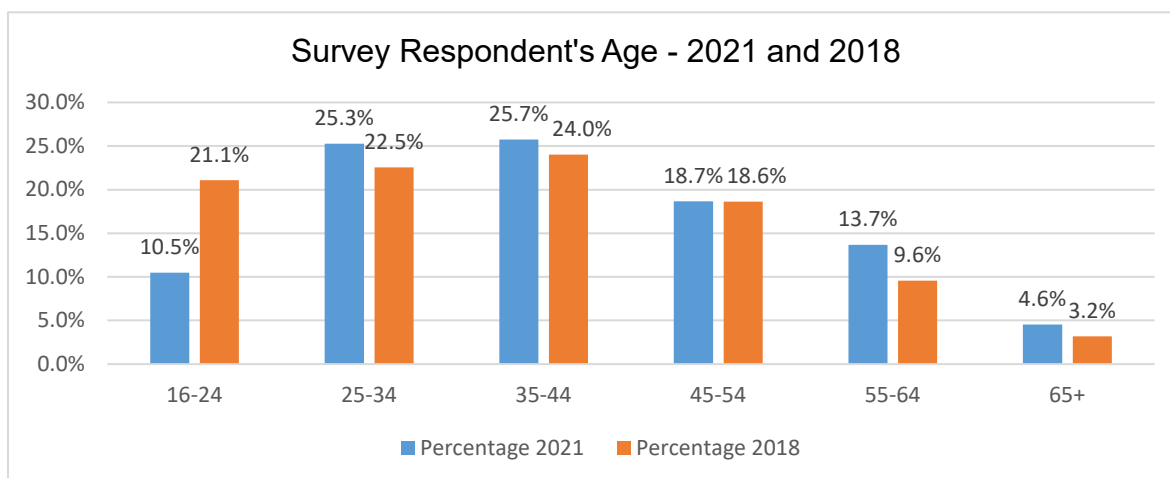
A recent report on the long-term impact of the pandemic on homelessness in Canada highlights that the pandemic has induced an economic downfall that could directly

impact the level of homelessness across the country. The report indicates that the impacts of the economic downfall on rising Canadian homelessness is complicated by a lag effect of up to five years, and several other factors, including differences from one community to another (e.g. labour market and housing market trends)¹². This means that it could be years before the full effect of rising homelessness in Canada, as a result of various factors such as reduced incomes or job loss or difficulty with remaining securely housed due to the impacts of COVID-19, is actualized. The report also indicates that young people, women, non-married persons and those without high school accreditation, have been most directly affected by the labour market changes as a result of the COVID-19 economic downfall¹².

The many health, social, and economic impacts of COVID-19 are expected to require the implementation of effective policy measures by multiple levels of government to support recovery and mitigate the continued challenges to be faced by some of the most vulnerable in our community. Housing and homelessness experts suggest that continued emphasis on the development of affordable housing, increasing social assistance income benefit levels, and incorporating housing-focused practices at emergency shelters is necessary to not only address the current issue of homelessness, but also to prevent additional homelessness, especially in light of the impacts of COVID-19.

Survey Results

In total, 439 unique surveys were completed, providing valuable information on the demographics, experience and service needs of Niagara's homeless population. The results that follow are based on self-identification in survey responses. The graph below outlines survey respondent's ages, comparing 2021 and 2018.



The 2021 PiT Count indicates that there has been a decrease in youth experiencing homelessness, when compared to 2018 survey respondents (21.1%). In Niagara, shelter diversion programs for youth have been successful in preventing youth from entering the shelter system. The shelter diversion programs, established in 2019, are a collaborative effort involving multiple shelter organizations in Niagara, and supports youth 16 – 24 with finding alternative housing options in the community. Many youth shelter programs in Niagara have also increased their focus on housing and reconnecting youth to their family, friends, schools, and their home communities. Through these efforts, youth shelter organizations such as The RAFT, have seen tremendous success in preventing youth from entering the shelter system and ensuring that youth who are in shelter are connected to long-term housing and supports. However, it is also important to note that magnet events for youth did not take place in 2021 due to COVID-19 health and safety protocols. As such, it is uncertain to what degree the impact of shelter diversion programs may have had on the decreased percentage of youth experiencing homelessness in Niagara.

The age data also highlights that there has been an increase in older adults (55+) experiencing homelessness. The 2021 survey found 18.2% of survey respondents were 55+ compared to 12.7% of survey respondents in 2018. As Canada's population continues to age, it is expected that there will be an increase in the population of older adults experiencing homelessness as well.

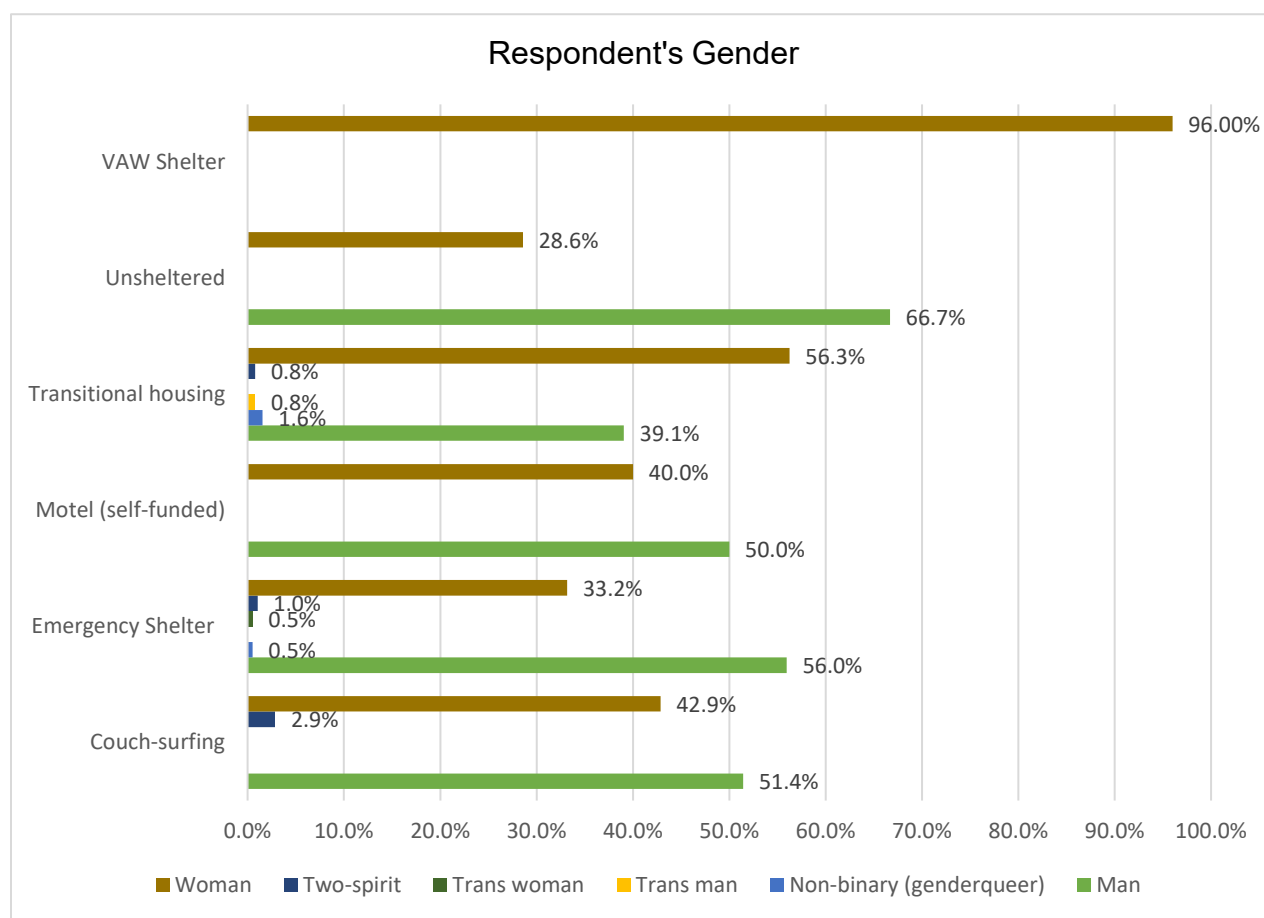
The data indicated that 22.6% of respondents identified as Indigenous or having Indigenous ancestry. This continues to remain vastly disproportionate to the 2.8% of Niagara's overall population with Indigenous identity¹³. People with Indigenous identity and/or ancestry are dramatically overrepresented in the homeless population across the country. Due to the pandemic, Indigenous magnet events in collaboration with local Indigenous-led service providers were not able to take place. Once these magnet events take place, there will be a greater understanding of the extent of homelessness in Niagara's Indigenous population and their experiences.

The majority of survey respondents self-identified as being White. Of those who did not identify as being White, 44 respondents (10.0% of survey respondents) self-identified as being Black (this includes Black Canadian / American, Black African, Black Afro-Caribbean or Afro-Latinx). Fifteen survey respondents identified as Latin American, and a further nine individuals indicated that they identified as either East Asian, South Asian / Indo-Caribbean, or Arab. In Niagara, 1.8% of the overall population is Black, which indicates that this population is also disproportionately represented in the homeless population¹³. While Niagara has service providers that offer housing supports and

services to newcomers and refugees, respondents who self-identified as being Black were not limited to individuals who indicated that they access these services.

Approximately 8.0% of survey respondents indicated that they had come to Canada as a refugee or refugee claimant, and a further 6.8% indicated that they had come to Canada as an immigrant. Among those who indicated they had come to Canada as either a refugee or refugee claimant, 64.7% indicated that they had arrived within the past 10 years. For respondents that indicated they had come to Canada as an immigrant, 60% indicated they had been here over 15 years.

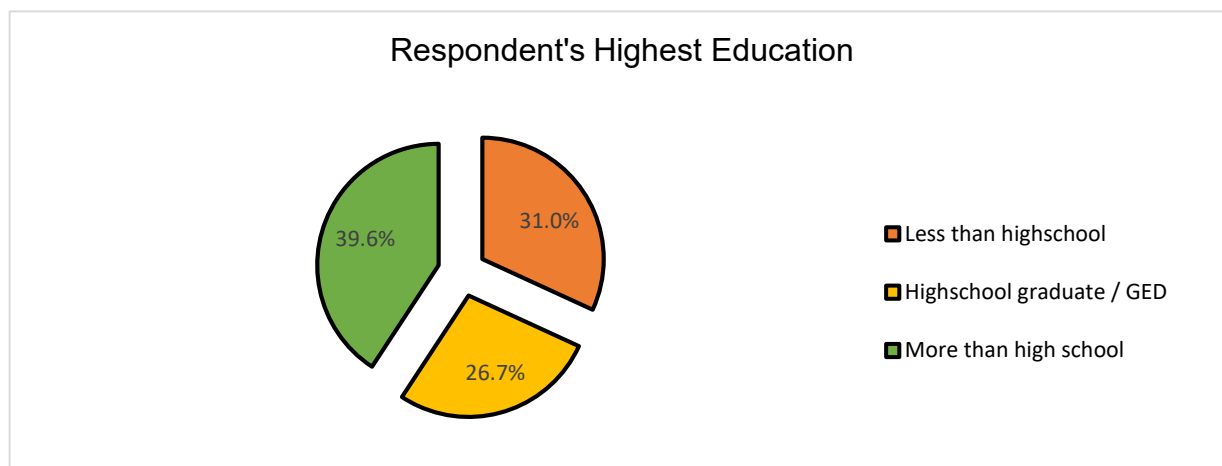
The graph below outlines survey respondent's gender identification.



The majority of survey respondents in emergency shelter (56.0%), accessing motels (50.0%), identified as 'couch-surfing' (51.4%), and unsheltered (66.7%), identified as men. 56.3% of respondents staying in transitional housing programs identified as women.

A large majority of survey respondents described their sexual orientation as straight/heterosexual (82.0%). 8.43% of survey respondents identified as being part of the LGBTQ2S+ community.

The pie chart below demonstrates the respondent's highest education.



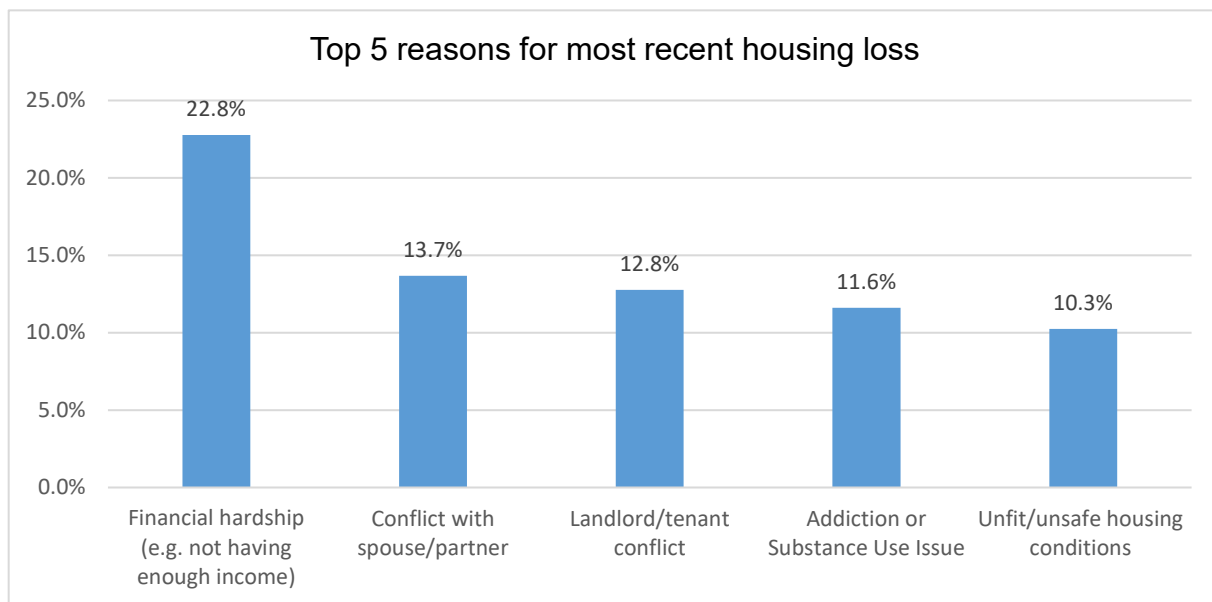
The data suggests that more survey respondents indicated as having received higher education levels when compared to individuals that were surveyed in 2018. Thirty-one point zero percent of respondents (compared to 37.5% in 2018) had less than a high school diploma, 26.7% of respondents (compared to 24.5% in 2018) graduated from high school or had received their GED and 39.6% (compared to 35.3% in 2018) had more than a high school education (e.g. post-secondary, trades apprenticeship experience, graduate degree).

Approximately 96% of respondents indicated that they had a source of income, with the top three sources of income being welfare / social assistance (Ontario Works), disability benefits (ODSP), and the GST / HST refund. Overall, 71.1% of respondents indicated that their source of income was social assistance (Ontario Works and/or ODSP). 9.3% of respondents indicated that formal employment (e.g. full-time, part-time, casual employment) was a source of income.

The survey data indicated that 78.8% of survey respondents identified Niagara as being their home community. 13.0% of survey respondents (compared to 22.1% in 2018) indicated that they did not identify Niagara as their home community (e.g. they indicated that their home community was out of the region, out of the province, or out of the country). Due to the pandemic, Niagara Region Homelessness Services implemented several changes related to admissions to emergency shelter to ensure the health and

safety of clients and staff as well as to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Similar to many municipalities across Ontario, a home shelter policy was applied such that emergency shelters were not accepting any individuals who identified that Niagara was not their home community until clients had completed the necessary self isolation. As such, this may have led to the lower percentage of survey respondents who indicated that their home community was outside of Niagara.

The graph below demonstrates the top five reasons for the most recent housing loss.



While the reasons for housing loss have not significantly changed when compared to 2018, more survey respondents indicated that financial hardship (e.g. not having enough income) was the most common reason for housing loss in 2021. It should be noted that the 2021 survey questionnaire gave respondents different options to indicate reasons for their most recent housing loss (e.g. option to indicate that housing loss was due to a landlord/tenant conflict). The 2021 PiT Count survey also looked to identify the impact of COVID-19 on housing loss and 35 survey respondents indicated that their most recent housing loss was also related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

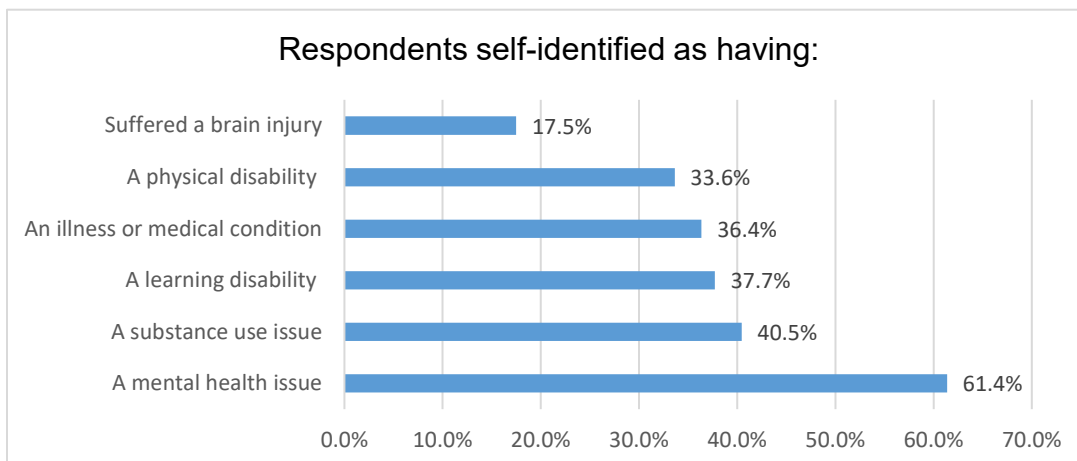
The following table illustrates the systems interactions over the past year (self-reported):

Number of Systems Interactions	2021	2018
Number of emergency room (ER) visits	231 individuals had visited ER for a total of 801 visits.	219 people had visited ER for a total of 663 visits.
Number of days in hospital	120 individuals had spent a total of 1,727 days in hospital.	125 people had spent a total 1,333 days in hospital.
Number of interactions with police	171 individuals had a total of 1,250 interactions.	161 people had had a total 628 interactions.
Number of days in jail	83 individuals had spent a total of 4,600 days in jail.	70 people had spent a total of 3,276 days in jail.
Total number of survey respondents	439	408

Over the past year, 41.5% of respondents had been homeless 6 or more months (i.e., chronically homeless).

In 2021, 39.4% of respondents had experienced homelessness for the first time as a child or youth (i.e., under 25 years old) compared to 49.3% of respondents in 2018. In addition, 23.7% of respondents (compared to 33.1% in 2018) indicated that they experiencing homelessness the first time before age 18. 22.8% of respondents indicated that they had been in the child welfare system.

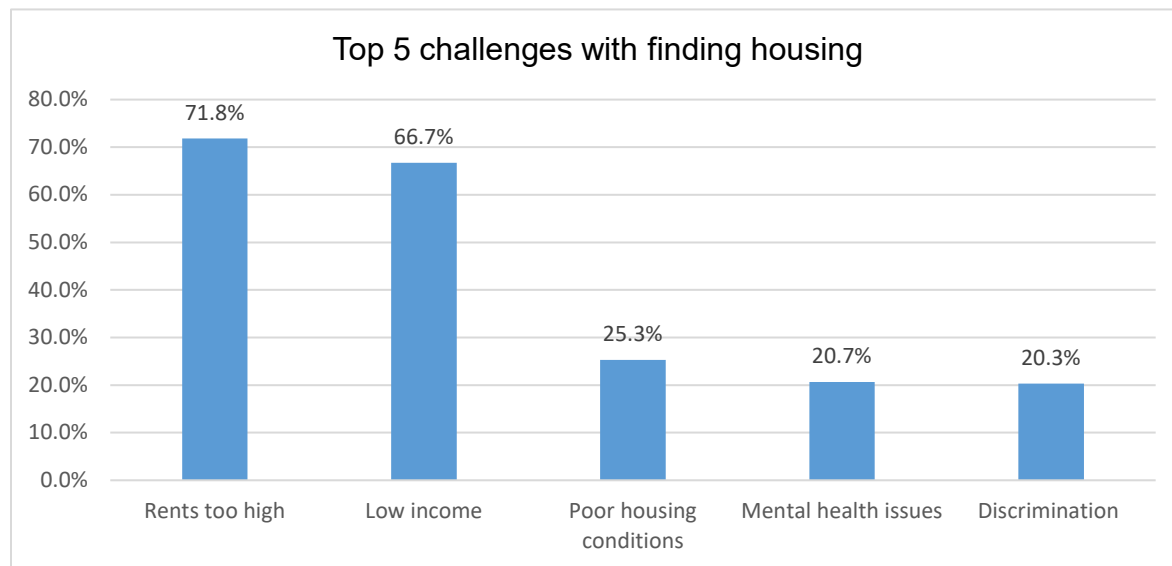
The graph below indicates conditions that respondents self-identified as having.



More than 60.0% (compared to 53.9% in 2018) of survey respondents self-identified as having a mental health issue and 40.5% (compared to 34.3% in 2018) of respondents self-identified as having a substance use issue. While having a mental health or substance use issue does not equate to experiencing or being at risk of experiencing homelessness, people experiencing homelessness are disproportionately affected by mental health and addictions issues. Often, the stress of being homeless may exacerbate a previous mental illness or substance use issue, and/or the difficulties of being homeless may encourage anxiety or depressive disorders.

The 2021 survey gave respondents the option to indicate whether they self-identified as having a learning disability or cognitive limitation (e.g. ADHD, dyslexia, autism spectrum disorder), which 37.8% of survey respondents indicated that they did. Respondents self-identified 33.7% of the time (compared to 24.5% in 2018) as having a physical disability (e.g. an issue with mobility, dexterity, capacity). Based on the 2017 Canadian Survey on Disability, this is higher than the estimated one in five (20%) of individuals that indicated they had one or more disability¹⁴.

The graph below demonstrates the top five challenges with finding housing.



The challenges with finding housing have remained relatively the same when compared to 2018, with high renting costs and low income being the biggest challenges that a large majority of survey respondents continue to face in 2021. Approximately a quarter of survey responses indicated that poor housing conditions presented as a challenge when finding housing. Other key challenges included having mental health issues, and

experiencing discrimination (e.g. discrimination based on income/social status, age, or race, etc.).

Implications and Use of Results

Conducting a PiT Count further supports the work associated with the goals of the HHAP, and supports BFZ objectives. The data captured from the PiT Count will assist Niagara, as the municipal Service Manager, to continue to build system capacity, create population-specific responses to improve client outcomes, and improve the effectiveness of the housing system.

Niagara's PiT Count data will be submitted to the provincial and federal governments to support their ongoing work to enumerate and understand homelessness.

Alternatives Reviewed

The Point-in-Time Count is a federal initiative as well as a mandatory requirement for municipal service managers under recently implemented provincial legislation.

Relationship to Council Strategic Priorities

Niagara Counts 2021 relates to Council's ongoing commitments to BFZ, the HHAP, and increasing healthy and vibrant communities by addressing affordable housing needs.

Other Pertinent Reports

- COM 16-2018 Homelessness Point-in-Time Count Report

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¹ “...living temporarily with others, but without guarantee of continued residency or immediate prospects for access to permanent housing” (3.2 in the Canadian Definition of Homelessness). Also called “couch-surfing”.

² The mapping sub-committee was made up of Regional staff, NASO, community agencies and representatives from Indigenous partners.

³ Canada Mortgage Housing Corporation (CMHC). (2021). Rental Market Statistics Summary by Zone. [Link to Rental Market Statistics Summary by Zone](#).

⁴ PadMapper. 2020. The average cost of rent in Canadian cities for December (MAP). [Link to the average cost of rent in Canadian cities for December \(MAP\)](#).

⁵ The Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) defines a household as being in core housing need if its housing: “falls below at least one of the adequacy, affordability or suitability standards and would have to spend 30% or more of its total before-tax income to pay the median rent of alternative local housing that is acceptable (meets all three housing standards).”

⁶ Perri, M., Dosani, N., and Hwang, S. (2020). COVID-19 and people experiencing homelessness: challenges and mitigation strategies. [Link to COVID-19 and people experiencing homelessness: challenges and mitigation strategies](#).

⁷ Koziel, J., Savidov, M., and Frick, A. (2020). A Brief Scan of COVID-19 Impacts on People Experiencing Homelessness: Health Impacts and Responses. [Link to A Brief Scan of COVID-19 Impacts on People Experiencing Homelessness: Health Impacts and Responses](#).

⁸ Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction (CCSA). (2020). Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on People Who Use Substances: What We Heard. [Link to Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on People Who Use Substances: What We Heard](#).

⁹ Niagara Region. (2021). Opioid Usage - Statistics in Niagara. [Link to Opioid Usage - Statistics in Niagara.](#)

¹⁰ Based on Niagara Regional Police Service data presented during a Community Recovery Planning Table meeting on December 14, 2020.

¹¹ Based on data provided by Gillian's place presented during a Community Recovery Planning Table meeting on December 14, 2020.

¹² Nick Falvo. (2020). The long-term impact of the COVID-19 Recession on homelessness in Canada: What to expect, what to track, what to do. [Link to The long-term impact of the COVID-19 Recession on homelessness in Canada: What to expect, what to track, what to do.](#)

¹³ Statistics Canada. 2017. Niagara, RM [Census division], Ontario and Ontario [Province] (table). Census Profile. 2016 Census. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 98-316-X2016001. [Link to Niagara, RM \[Census division\], Ontario and Ontario \[Province\] \(table\).](#)

¹⁴ Statistics Canada. 2018. Canadian Survey on Disability, 2017. [Link to Canadian Survey on Disability, 2017.](#)