

GUELPH & WELLINGTON POINT IN TIME COUNT

April 2015

Measuring Homelessness Locally

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Introduction

In April of 2015, the County of Wellington (the County) administered a Point in Time (PIT) count across the service area (Guelph and Wellington) for the first time in an effort to measure the extent of homelessness in the community, as well as to capture some key demographic information of the homeless population. This year's count comes after an April 2014 PIT count, which measured youth homelessness in Wellington County.¹

A PIT count is designed to provide a snapshot of the numbers and demographics of those experiencing homelessness on a particular day of the year. PIT counts provide a benchmark from which to measure changes in the homeless population and assist policymakers and programme administrators in monitoring progress toward the goal of ending homelessness.² Communities across Canada are increasingly utilizing PIT counts to monitor their progress longitudinally, and work is being done to harmonize these efforts on a national level.³

The data yielded by PIT counts are not considered to be absolute and have recognized limitations. Despite identified limitations (e.g. the potential for duplicate counting) the PIT count still hopes to reveal important information regarding the scope and magnitude of homelessness in Guelph Wellington, information not readily provided by other available measures.

This April 2015 PIT count builds on the learning of the rural youth PIT count conducted in 2014, and represents the introduction of an annual PIT count for Guelph Wellington with the goals of:

- Improving community awareness and understanding of homelessness,
- Helping to monitor and assess developing trends over time,
- Providing a method through which to measure progress, and
- Strengthening efforts to end homelessness.⁴

Additionally, this PIT count is an integral piece of the 10-Year Housing and Homelessness Plan (HHP) for Guelph Wellington,⁵ as it represents an opportunity to turn research knowledge

¹ County of Wellington (2014). Wellington County Point In Time Count: Measuring Youth Homelessness.

² National Alliance to End Homelessness (2014). PIT Counts: Why They Are Important and What they Tell Us. Accessed April 2015 from <http://www.endhomelessness.org/blog/entry/pit-counts-why-they-are-important-and-what-they-tell-us>

³ Turner, Alina. (2014). Alberta Point-in-Time Homeless Count: Provincial Report. Accessed April 2015 from <http://homelesshub.ca/sites/default/files/2015-02-05-12-287%20Cities%20AB%20PIT%20Report.pdf>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ County of Wellington (2014). 10-Year Housing and Homelessness Plan for Guelph Wellington: A Place to Call Home.

into action, as well as improving community awareness and understanding of homelessness. Through conducting annual PIT counts, we will yield information about the scope of homelessness and will be equipped to turn this knowledge into strategies that will assist us in more effectively meeting the needs of this population.

The County of Wellington and Efforts to End Homelessness

The County of Wellington is the designated Consolidated Municipal Services Manager (CMSM) for the geographic area that includes both the City of Guelph and the County of Wellington. As a result, the County is responsible for delivering Social Services to the County of Wellington and the City of Guelph. According to the 2011 census, there are approximately 208,360 people living in Guelph and Wellington.⁶

Currently many Canadians are at risk of homelessness because of the high cost (and unavailability) of housing, inadequate incomes and family violence.⁷ These risks are also apparent locally, where we are seeing an increase in the factors that commonly lead to homelessness, including low incomes, substance abuse, mental health challenges, and lack of affordable and suitable rental housing supply. It is vital that we understand the causes of homelessness so that effective solutions can be developed. Initiating this PIT Count is one aspect of our attempt to better understand the issues around homelessness in the local context.

PIT Count Methodology

Locally, our PIT count occurred on the evening of Wednesday April 15th through the day of Thursday April 16th and included community organizations involved in providing services, programming and supports to individuals and families at risk of and experiencing homelessness in Guelph and Wellington. Two data collection tools were utilized to gather the information from participating agencies to increase the accessibility of the count. The tools included a fillable PDF form (see Appendix A) and an online survey containing the same information, both of which contained a list of relevant definitions to ensure a shared understanding by all participating agencies.

Agencies were asked to complete one of the two data collection tools by indicating the number of individuals and families they are directly connected with that they believe to be experiencing homelessness. To limit the potential of duplicate counting by staff from the same agency, agencies were asked to submit only one combined response wherever possible. Additionally we asked that agencies not submit information relating to those known to be residing in one of

⁶ Statistics Canada. (2012). Census Profile. 2011 Census. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 98-316-XWE. Ottawa. Accessed April 2015 from <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2011/dp-pd/prof/index.cfm?Lang=E>

⁷ Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness. (2013). The State of Homelessness in Canada. Accessed April 2015 from <http://www.wellesleyinstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/SOHC2103.pdf>

the emergency shelters in Guelph, as the County obtained this information directly from the shelters.

The date of the count was selected according to identified best practice, which notes the timing of mid-week and mid-month to be preferable. Research indicates that those experiencing homelessness are more likely to access services based on weekday schedules and routines, encouraging the completion of PIT counts mid-week to ensure these individuals and families are counted. Additionally, mid-month tends to be a more vulnerable time for those receiving social assistance, who may be able to pay for temporary housing at the beginning of the month when income support payments are made.⁸

The PIT count recorded individuals and families separately, and also differentiated between those experiencing absolute homelessness versus relative homelessness. Absolute homelessness refers to those living unsheltered in public or private spaces not intended for living (e.g. on the street, under a bridge), and those staying in emergency shelters including the violence against women (VAW) shelter operated by Women in Crisis. Alternately, relative homelessness refers to those living sheltered in precarious, informal or transitional spaces, or living in sub-standard conditions and at imminent risk of housing loss (e.g. couch surfing). While we have compared the numbers of those experiencing absolute and relative homelessness in this report, it is important to maintain the distinction between these populations as a way of monitoring where progress is being made and the development of trends over time. By keeping these counts separate, it is possible to compare changes over time in the emergency sheltered population for example, as opposed to the population of those experiencing relative homelessness (precariously housed), and to determine where further attention is needed.

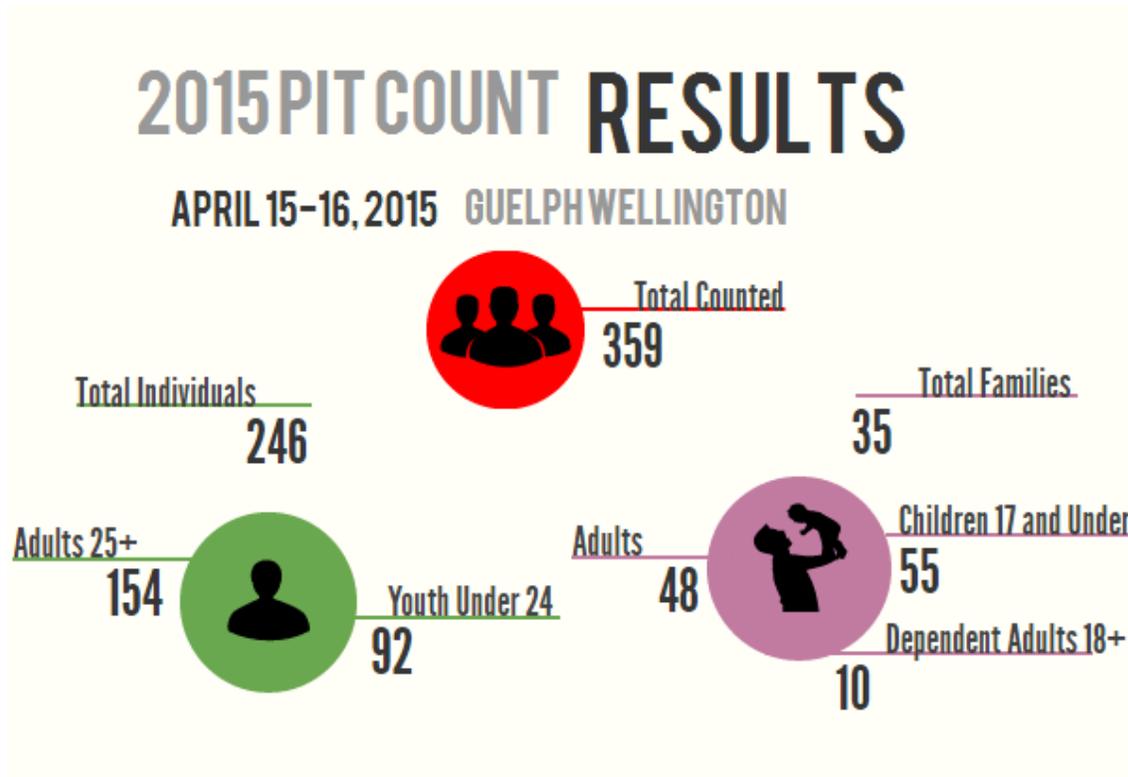
Results of the PIT Count

On a single night in April 2015, 359 individuals in Guelph Wellington were experiencing homelessness, including 154 adults, 92 youth, and 35 families (representing 113 family members), based on data from the 25 individual service providers that participated in the count. Of the participating service providers, 15 reported from the City of Guelph and 10 from the County of Wellington. Included in the 35 families counted are 48 adults, 10 dependent adults aged 18 and older, and 55 children under 17 years of age.

A large majority of people (72% or 257) were experiencing relative homelessness, meaning they were living sheltered in precarious, informal or transitional spaces, or living in sub-standard conditions and at-risk of housing loss (e.g. couch surfing, staying with a friend). In contrast, 102 people (28%) were experiencing absolute homelessness, meaning they were staying in emergency shelter or living unsheltered in spaces not intended for living (e.g. on the street or rough sleeping). The image below illustrates a high level summary of the 2015 PIT

⁸ Homeless Hub Webinar. (2014). 2015 Point-In-Time Count: Enumerating Unsheltered Youth. Accessed September 2014.

count results. For the purposes of this analysis, individual adults aged 25+, single youth under 24 and families will be examined separately.

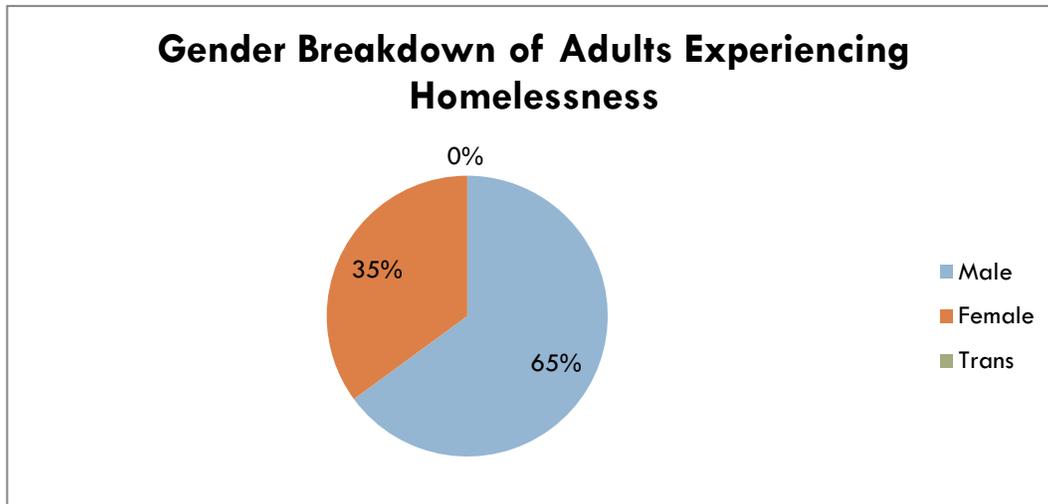


Results: Individuals Experiencing Homelessness

Of the total counted, individuals aged 25 and older made up the largest group at 154. Of those individuals, 81 adults were experiencing relative homelessness, meaning they were precariously housed on the day of the count. In many cases, these precarious housing situations are caused by the intersection of high housing costs and low incomes which ultimately mean housing unaffordability.⁹ The remaining 73 individuals were experiencing absolute homelessness, 84% of which were staying in emergency shelter the evening of the count, leaving 16% unsheltered that evening.

Out of 154 adults, 100 (65%) were identified as male and 54 (35%) were identified as female. None of the adults were identified as Trans, a category used to describe individuals who identify as transgender, gender variant, gender questioning, or transsexual. Males comprised 68% of the adults experiencing absolute homelessness with females making up the other 32%. Of those experiencing relative homelessness, males made up 62% and females comprised the other 38%.

⁹ Homeless Hub. (2014). The State of Homelessness in Canada 2014. Accessed April 2015 from <http://www.homelesshub.ca/sites/default/files/SOHC2014.pdf>



Since the gender breakdown of the general population in Guelph and Wellington is close to even,¹⁰ it is valuable to contextualize the clear under-representation of women in this count. Research indicates women are consistently under-represented in homeless counts because they are more likely to be part of the ‘hidden homeless,’ experiencing housing instability through couch surfing or living in unaffordable, unsafe or inadequate housing.¹¹

Results: Youth Experiencing Homelessness

Youth¹² aged 24 and under made up 26% of the total count. The large majority of the youth counted (73) were experiencing relative homelessness. Of the 92 youth experiencing homelessness, 19 were experiencing absolute homelessness, 63% of which were staying in emergency shelter the evening of the count, leaving 37% unsheltered that evening.

Of the 92 youth, 51 (55%) were identified as male, 39 (42%) were identified as female, and 2 (2%) were identified as Trans. Based on these results, female youth appear to be over-represented in the local homeless population, particularly when we compare the gender composition revealed by this count to the national data which indicates that there are typically two male youth experiencing homelessness for every female youth in Canada.¹³

A considerable body of emergency shelter research nationally illustrates that the differences between female and male homeless populations commonly increases with age, so while

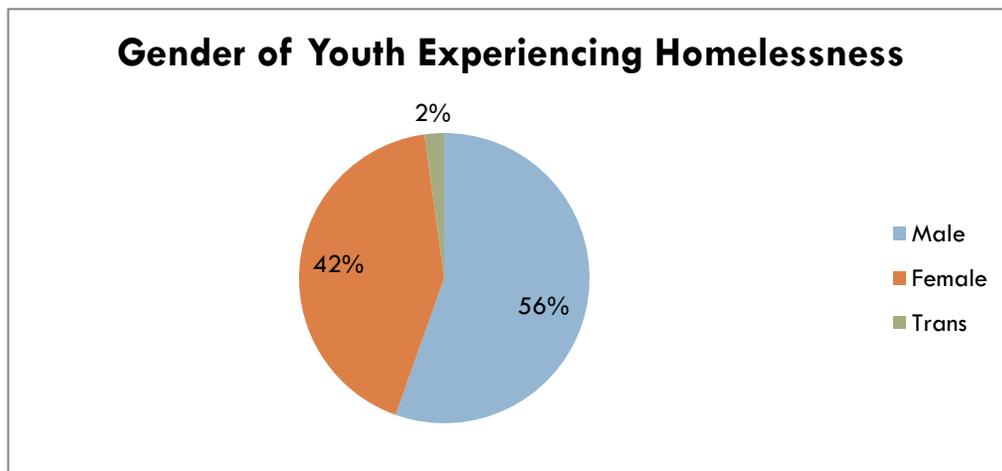
¹⁰ Statistics Canada. (2013). Guelph, CY, Ontario (Code 3523008) (table). National Household Survey (NHS) Profile. 2011 National Household Survey. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 99-004-XWE. Ottawa. Released September 11, 2013.
 Statistics Canada. (2013). Wellington, CTY, Ontario (Code 3523) (table). National Household Survey (NHS) Profile. 2011 National Household Survey. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 99-004-XWE. Ottawa. Released September 11, 2013.

¹¹ Turner, Alina. (2014). Alberta Point-in-Time Homeless Count: Provincial Report. Accessed April 2015 from <http://homelesshub.ca/sites/default/files/2015-02-05-12-287%20Cities%20AB%20PIT%20Report.pdf>

¹² In the County of Wellington, refers to unaccompanied individuals aged 16-24.

¹³ Gaetz, Stephen et al. (2013). Youth Homelessness in Canada: Implications for Policy and Practice. Accessed April 2014 from <http://www.homelesshub.ca/sites/default/files/YouthHomelessnessweb.pdf>

females typically make up about 37% of the youth homeless population, they represent a much smaller proportion of the adults aged 25 and older group at about 24%.¹⁴ This research supports local findings indicating the overrepresentation of female youth, and also illustrates the clear under-representation of female adults not only in PIT counts, but also among emergency shelter users.



Further, our results indicate a percentage of homeless youth who identify as Trans, a population that continues to make up a growing segment of the homeless population nationally. In fact, the results of many recent studies reveal that upwards of 20-40% of homeless youth identify as gay, lesbian, or transgendered, a rate substantially higher than that identified in the general population.¹⁵ What this statistic suggests is that the percentage of homeless youth identified as Trans is likely under-reported in this count.

Males comprised 68% of the youth experiencing absolute homelessness with females making up 26% and Trans comprising the other 6%. Of those experiencing relative homelessness, males made up 52%, females comprised 47%, with Trans making up the other 1%.

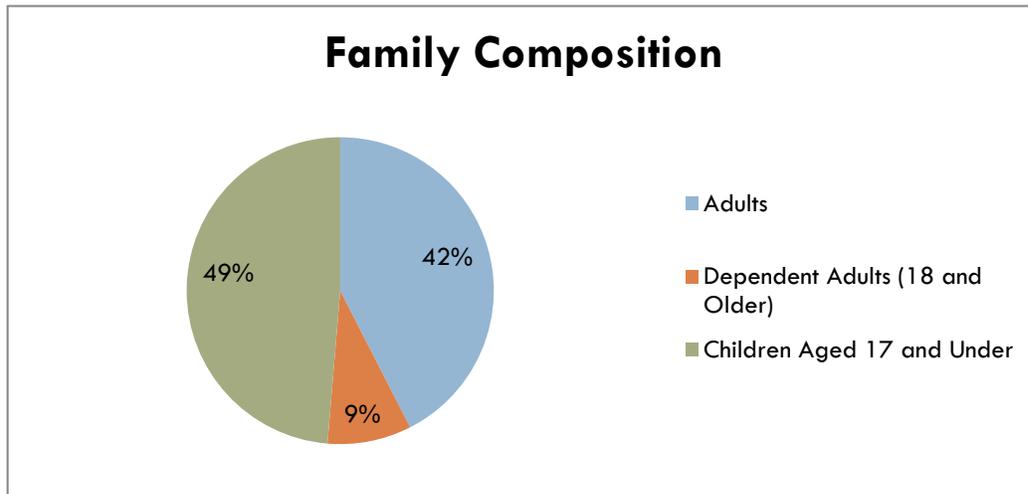
Results: Families Experiencing Homelessness

Of the total counted, 35 families made up of 113 individual members were identified as experiencing homelessness. The majority of families (32) were experiencing relative homelessness at the time of the count. The remaining 3 families were identified as experiencing absolute homelessness and had accessed emergency shelter support the evening of the count. Included in the total 35 families are 48 adults, 10 dependent adults aged

¹⁴ Homeless Hub (2012). Homelessness, Population Specific: Single Women. Accessed May 2015 from <http://www.homelesshub.ca/about-homelessness/population-specific/single-women>

¹⁵ Gaetz, Stephen et al. (2013). Youth Homelessness in Canada: Implications for Policy and Practice. Accessed April 2014 from <http://www.homelesshub.ca/sites/default/files/YouthHomelessnessweb.pdf>

18 and older, and 55 children aged 17 and under. The chart below illustrates the composition of these 35 families.



Given the growing amount of research illustrating the negative, long term, traumatic impacts that homelessness has on families, particularly children, to have any families experiencing homelessness in Guelph Wellington is concerning. “Homelessness results in a loss of community, routines, possessions, privacy and security. Children, mothers and families who live in shelters must make significant adjustments to shelter living and are faced with other problems, such as feeling ashamed of being homeless and accepting help, the anger and confusion of being relocated, and having to adjust to a new school and other new routines.”¹⁶ Given the magnitude of these impacts on families, the need to reduce the experience of family homelessness was one of the issues acknowledged in the 2014 Five Year Homelessness Strategy.

Limitations of the PIT Count Data

As we continue to complete PIT counts locally and monitor national standardization efforts, our understanding of how to effectively count individuals and families experiencing homelessness will continue to grow, including a more complete understanding of the limitations inherent in PIT counts. While we made a conscious effort to include service providers both inside and outside the homelessness sector in the hopes of including those who do not access services related to homelessness, the risk of omitting people who have not reached out to service providers for support remains. This risk is even higher in rural settings, where we know that youth in particular tend to cope with homelessness by remaining close to their social connections and managing through activities such as couch surfing or living in other precarious

¹⁶ Bassuk, E and Friedman, S (2005). Facts of Trauma and Homeless Children. National Child Traumatic Stress Network. Accessed April 2015 from http://www.nctsn.org/nctsn_assets/pdfs/promising_practices/Facts_on_Trauma_and_Homeless_Children.pdf

situations (e.g. uninhabited shelters).¹⁷

This risk of undercounting as a result of the hidden homeless population is paralleled with a risk of duplicate counting, which stems from the fact that the PIT count does not involve the collection of personal information and the tracking of specific individuals as they are counted. By the very nature of PIT counts and the anonymous way individuals and families were counted by service providers in Guelph Wellington, this risk of duplicate counting is present in the results. It is likely that the risks of duplicate counting and the risks of under counting are somewhat off-setting. Based on existing local data and observations related to homelessness, the data yielded by the count reveals a fairly accurate estimate of homelessness locally.

There are further limitations in terms of the data related to counting on one day/night only. These limitations include a lack of consideration of seasonal differences and other factors that may cause fluctuations or compositional variations in the population of those experiencing homelessness over longer periods of time. Further, the data does not provide information about why the individuals and families became homeless in the first place, the duration of the homeless episode, or information about those who are at less imminent risk of homelessness. The depth of information provided by PIT count data is finite, and highlights the need to supplement the insights provided by PIT counts with additional information.

Conclusion

Homelessness and the events precipitating it are complex issues with shared accountabilities across sectors. With a continued lack of investment in affordable and social housing and more individuals finding themselves spending more of their income on housing related costs, the risks of homelessness are greater than ever.

Regardless of the acknowledged limitations in the method of data collection utilized for this PIT Count, it is important to recognize that homelessness is a reality for many individuals and families in Guelph and Wellington. Individuals and families experiencing homelessness locally are not typically found sleeping on the streets – they often stay in local shelter, couch surf with a family member or friend, or find an abandoned building to sleep in. Research continues to illustrate the immense stress and trauma involved in these insecure, unstable living situations.

The 10 Year HHP and supporting Homelessness Strategy include a number of strategies to reduce homelessness in our communities. The County will work closely with community partners and will continue to play a leadership role in the implementation of these plans. The PIT count as completed this year provides a benchmark that will be monitored year over year through the completion of annual counts. This data will play a key role in evaluating the success of initiatives aimed at addressing homelessness locally.

¹⁷ County of Wellington (2011). Rural Homelessness Study. Accessed April 2015 from <http://www.wellington.ca/en/socialservices/resources/wellingtoncountyruralhomelessnessstudy.pdf>

Appendix A:

2015 Agency Point in Time Count: Measuring Homelessness in Guelph & Wellington County

Name of Organization:	
Contact Name, Email, Phone Number:	
Location of Organization:	

On the evening of Wednesday April 15th through the morning of Thursday April 16th, of those being supported by your organization, what do you believe is the number of:

- a) People Experiencing Absolute Homelessness: (living unsheltered in spaces not intended for living e.g. on the street, under a bridge). **While staying in an emergency shelter is classified as absolute homelessness, we ask that you do not include in your count anyone whom you know to be staying in emergency shelter. This data will be obtained directly from the emergency shelters.*

Youth (Under 24 Years)			Adults (25+)		
Identifying as Male	Identifying as Female	Identifying as Trans	Identifying as Male	Identifying as Female	Identifying as Trans
Families					
Total # of Families	# of Adults		# of Dependent Children (Aged 17 and Under)	# of Dependent Adults (Aged 18 and older)	

- b) People Experiencing Relative Homelessness: (living sheltered in precarious, informal or transitional spaces, or living in sub-standard conditions and at imminent risk of housing loss, e.g. couch surfing, staying with family members or friends)

Youth (Under 24 Years)			Adults (25+)		
Identifying as Male	Identifying as Female	Identifying as Trans	Identifying as Male	Identifying as Female	Identifying as Trans
Families					
Total # of Families	# of Adults		# of Dependent Children (Aged 17 and Under)	# of Dependent Adults (Aged 18 and older)	

2015 Agency Point in Time Count: Measuring Homelessness in Guelph & Wellington County

Important Definitions:

Homelessness – a multidimensional problem stemming from a variety of complicated issues. We describe homelessness as either absolute or relative:

- **Absolute Homelessness** - living unsheltered in spaces not intended for living e.g. on the street, under a bridge, in a car; or staying in emergency shelter.
- **Relative Homelessness** - living sheltered in precarious, informal or transitional spaces, or living in sub-standard conditions and at-risk of housing loss, e.g. couch surfing, staying with family members or friends.

Family¹⁸ – parent(s) or guardian(s) with one or more children or youth dependent on the parent(s) or guardian(s) for care. The definition is intentionally broad, with the hope of capturing a wide range of family situations. While dependent children and youth are generally defined as under age 18, the definition includes families who care for adult dependents (e.g., families caring for an adult with a disability or families who have recently immigrated and are intact with adult children). Families may be headed by one or two parents or guardians of opposite or same gender. Parents who have custody arrangements and retain visitation rights with their children, as well as parents who have been separated from their children and are actively seeking reunification, are also considered a family. Finally, women who are pregnant are included in this definition.

The definition of family does not include individuals and couples without children or youth in their care. It also does not include youth experiencing homelessness who are seeking support to live independently (i.e., not under the care of their parent(s) or guardian(s)).

Trans – category capturing individuals who identify as transgender, gender variant, gender questioning, or transsexual.

Point-in-Time Count – A snapshot of the numbers and demographics of those experiencing homelessness that captures the magnitude of homelessness on a particular day of the year within a specified time frame. PIT Counts provide information about the scope of homelessness, and through providing a benchmark, assist policymakers and program administrators to follow progress toward ending homelessness.

¹⁸ Social Planning, Policy and Program Administration (2014). *Ending Family Homelessness in Waterloo Region*. Waterloo, ON: Regional Municipality of Waterloo.