WELLINGTON COUNTY
POINT IN TIME COUNT

April 2014
Measuring Rural Youth Homelessness
MEASURING RURAL YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

Introduction

In April of 2014, the County of Wellington ("the County") in partnership with the Community Resource Centre of North and Centre Wellington and Wyndham House initiated a Point in Time (PIT) count in order to measure youth homelessness in Wellington County for the first time. This count was facilitated as part of a larger project currently underway towards the development of a Rural Youth Homelessness Solution Model for Wellington County. Funding and support for these projects has been received through the Mobilizing Local Capacity to End Youth Homelessness Programme.

A PIT count is designed to provide a snapshot of the numbers and demographics of those experiencing homelessness by capturing the magnitude of homelessness on a particular day of the year within a specified time frame. PIT Counts provide information about the extent of homelessness, and through providing a benchmark from which to measure, assist policymakers and program administrators to follow progress toward the goal of ending homelessness over time. While efforts are made to minimize the potential for duplicate counting inherent in PIT counts, the data yielded by such counts is not considered to be absolute and has recognized limitations. We have identified these and intend for the count to reveal information regarding the scope and magnitude of youth homelessness in the County, information not readily provided by other available measures.

In close consultation with the community, the County of Wellington recently released a 10-Year Housing and Homelessness Plan (HHP) for Guelph Wellington entitled “A Place to Call Home.” This plan outlines eight goals and 38 actions combined which provide a roadmap for achieving the desired vision where “everyone in Guelph Wellington can find and maintain an appropriate, safe and affordable place to call home.” Goal #8 as listed in the HHP identifies a desire to seize opportunities to turn research knowledge into action, speaking to targeted efforts to improve community awareness and understanding of homelessness through building local research capacity. This count is an integral piece of this goal, and represents our efforts to better understand the scope of youth homelessness, and to turn this knowledge into actions which will assist us in more effectively meeting the needs of this unique population.

Locally, our PIT count occurred on Wednesday April 16th, and included agencies, schools, and organizations involved in providing services, programming and supports to the youth of the County. All those participating in the count were asked to complete the PIT count tool (see appendix A) on the evening of Tuesday April 15th through the day of Wednesday April 16th, and to indicate the number of

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youth they are supporting through their agency who are experiencing homelessness in the County. For the purposes of this count, we define youth as unaccompanied individuals aged 16-24.

The County of Wellington and Efforts to End Youth 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 (e.g. childcare, social assistance, social housing) to the County of Wellington and the City of Guelph. The County is an upper-tier municipality that encompasses seven lower tier municipalities which include Minto, Wellington North, Mapleton, Centre Wellington, Erin, Guelph/Eramosa and Puslinch. According to the 2011 census, there are approximately 86,672 people living in Wellington County.³

For the purposes of this count focusing on rural youth, only youth currently staying in the County and youth who had been staying in the County prior to experiencing homelessness have been included. For example, City of Guelph youth who are experiencing homelessness have been intentionally excluded from this count, with the exception of rural youth who have come to the City of Guelph temporarily seeking shelter.

Currently many Canadians are at risk of homelessness because of the high cost (and unavailability) of housing, inadequate incomes and family violence.⁴ These risks are also prevalent locally, where we are seeing increases in several triggers that commonly lead to homelessness in Wellington County: poverty, substance abuse, lack of well-paying jobs, and lack of affordable and suitable rental housing.⁵ When we’re talking specifically about Wellington County youth, poverty and substance abuse are the leading causes of homelessness, followed by mental health issues.⁶ The good news is that if we understand the causes of homelessness, we can do something about it. Initiating this PIT Count is our attempt to better understand the issues around youth homelessness in the local context.

Results of the PIT Count

On a single night in April 2014, 29 Wellington County youth were experiencing homelessness based on data from this PIT count which saw the participation of 13 individual service providers. A large majority of the youth (90% or 26 youth) were experiencing relative homelessness, meaning they were living sheltered in precarious, informal or transitional spaces, or living in sub-standard conditions at-risk of housing loss (e.g. couch surfing, staying with a friend). Three youth were experiencing absolute homelessness, meaning they were staying in emergency shelter or living unsheltered in spaces not

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⁶ Ibid.
intended for living (e.g. on the street or rough sleeping).

Only one of the youth experiencing absolute homelessness had been staying in emergency shelter in the City of Guelph. This speaks to the low usage rate of shelters in the City by youth of the County. This low usage rate is often equated to the strong social connections held in rural areas, and the desire to stay close to these connections and ‘make do.’ With the lack of infrastructure, such as emergency shelters, drop-in centres and public transportation in the County, youth often rely heavily on the close-knit nature of their rural communities, with rural ties and friendships being strong deterrents to leaving.

Of the 29 youth experiencing homelessness, 18 (62%) were identified as female, 9 (31%) were identified as male and 2 (8%) were noted as other, a category used to describe youth who identify as transgender, gender variant, gender questioning, or transsexual. Based on these results, female youth appear to be over-represented in the rural 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.\(^7\)

Further, our results point to a percentage of homeless youth who identify as other, 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.\(^8\) What this statistic suggests is that the percentage of homeless youth identified with other gender are either under-represented in the homeless youth population in the County; or more likely, are under-reported in this count.

### Limitations of the PIT Count Data

Given that this was our first ever PIT count, our understanding of how to effectively count individuals 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 youth who do not access services related to homelessness, the risk of omitting youth who have not reached out to service providers for support remains. This risk is even higher in rural settings, where we know based on our Rural Youth Homelessness Study that youth tend to cope with homelessness by remaining close to their social connections and coping through activities such as couch surfing or living in other precarious situations (e.g. uninhabited shelters).

This risk of undercounting as a result of the hidden homeless population is paralleled with a risk of


\(^8\) Ibid.
duplicate counting, which stems from the inability to track specific individuals as they are counted as would be only possible through the collection of personal information. By the very nature of PIT counts and the anonymous way youth were counted by service providers in Guelph Wellington, this risk of duplicate counting is present in the results. It is likely that our actual number lies somewhere between the risks of duplicate and the risks of under counting.

There are further limitations in terms of the data relating to one day/night only, and consequently 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 youth became homeless in the first place or about those youth who are at 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 youth in the County. Given the particular vulnerabilities of this segment of the population, it becomes all the more important to implement a solution that will address this issue directly. Youth make up about 20% of the homelessness population, though the prevalence rate is the same for adult men. The causes and consequences of homelessness for young people are distinct from those which afflict adults, meaning we require tailored responses.9

It is the hope and intent of the remaining work underway through the Mobilizing Local Capacity funding that this “tailored response” is arrived at and implemented. The PIT count as completed this year provides a benchmark that we intend to both continue to monitor year over year in terms of youth homelessness as well as expand to begin to count additional demographics, and to include the City of Guelph. Through several current initiatives (10 Year Housing and Homelessness Plan, Homelessness Strategy, Housing First initiatives etc.) the County will continue to play a leadership role in coordination and implementation of these plans while using PIT Counts as measurement tools for gauging success.

## Point in Time (PIT) Count Tool: Measuring Youth Homelessness in Wellington County

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<th>Contact Name, Email and Phone Number:</th>
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On the evening of **Tuesday April 15th** through the morning of **Wednesday April 16th**, of those attending your school/program or being supported by your agency, what do you believe is the number of:

- **Youth Experiencing Absolute Homelessness**: (living unsheltered in spaces not intended for living e.g. on the street, under a bridge; or staying in emergency shelter)

<table>
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<tr>
<th># of Youth Identifying as Female 16-24 years</th>
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<th># of Youth Identifying as Other 16-24 Years</th>
<th>Total # of Youth</th>
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- **Youth Experiencing 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)

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<tr>
<th># of Youth Identifying as Female 16-24 years</th>
<th># of Youth Identifying as Male 16-24 years</th>
<th># of Youth Identifying as Other 16-24 Years</th>
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### 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.

**Other Gender** – 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.

**Youth** – in the County of Wellington, we define youth as unaccompanied individuals aged 16-24.