



Living Without a Home: You Never Know if You're Going to Wake Up Dead

**Stories from people who live
without a home in Edmonton**

**Bissell Centre
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Everyone has a story

It's easy to get caught up in the study of homelessness—the statistics, trends, best practices, conferences, meetings, etc. It is easy to lose sight of the fact that for each number, there is a living, breathing human being. A real person who has a unique story. The purpose of this report is to try to give voice to these real stories and voices.

62 people were interviewed. 53 were currently homeless, while the remaining 9 were housed at the time of the interview. 5 people had been homeless for less than a month, 12 had been homeless between 1 and 6 months, 20 between 1–2 years, 10 between 3–5 years, 5 between 6–9 years and one person was homeless for more than 10 years.

Their ages ranged from a 16-year-old girl who had left a group home to a 71-year-old woman whose apartment was converted into a condo. 18% were under age 25, 66% were between 25 and 49, and 16% were over 50.

There was an almost even gender split—32 males and 30 females. 10 of the people interviewed had dependent children. 3 had pets.

36 of those interviewed (58%) were Aboriginal including 22 First Nations, 3 Inuit and 10 Metis.

The interviewers were Alex Lieberman, Mary Bell, and Selina Gahun. The interviews took place in June and July, 2008. Selection of interviewees was largely random, with an eye to ensuring a range of individuals in terms of age, gender, race, housing status, and length of time on the street. They were interviewing sometimes as early as 6:30 a.m. in order to catch people before they had to leave the shelters for the day.

Interviews were conducted in a variety of agencies who work with homeless people. Staff at each agency helped to identify people who were willing to be interviewed. The interviewers also went to where they would find homeless people. They visited the river valley and talked to people who were camping in the bushes and visited a rooming house. They conducted a number of “ad hoc” interviews when they observed people on the streets—a person waiting outside of a temporary job agency, one who was sitting on the curb outside of an agency when it was closed, another who was cashing bottles and pop cans at a bottle depot, and a homeless individual sitting in an alley.

This report summarizes the content of these interviews. There are few numbers in this report and little analysis. The words of the people interviewed stand on their own—we have simply placed them in categories. All quotes are the words of the people interviewed. In some cases, we have edited the wording a bit for ease of readability. We have not made any changes that would alter the meaning or intent of what people told us.



People think people are homeless because they want to be. It's not like that. One mistake can lead to it. Sometimes things happen. Everyone has a story. To paint everyone with the same brush is wrong.

What happened to make you homeless?

A combination of factors

Almost all people interviewed gave several reasons for being homeless. A combination of factors, either in succession or all at once, led to homelessness for many people interviewed.

I broke up and then I started drinking and lost my job for not being on time. I was living in low income housing. Because I was fired, I was refused services from social services. My appeal was denied and I lost my place. It was downhill from there.

My roommates don't pay rent. I've always been supporting them. I have a job, then they decide to get a dog or something and they don't have money to pay rent. Then I have a bad reputation with the landlords.

I had housing with a slum landlord. I gave money for rent and then got kicked out 14 days later. I'm going to court.



It was stressful trying to find a place. We never found one we could afford. When we did have a place, it was really stressful trying to find money for the bills.

Not enough money

A lack of enough money to pay rent and/or utilities was given by 24% of the people interviewed as a reason for their homelessness.

There was a lack of money to pay for bills from month to month. Then you give up on life. You get fed up with the struggle. Then you spend your rent money on things that you shouldn't and then you become homeless. It is hard to get out of it.

The welfare system would not help me out and pay the rent any more. I could only get a part-time job and that wasn't enough to pay the rent.

I never had enough money to maintain housing. I would get the money for the first month, but I could not maintain it.

Losing a home

A number of people indicated that they had lost their housing. Reasons given included condo conversion, fire, and health and safety issues.

A fire destroyed my place. I have not been able to find anything I can afford since.

There was mould in my place. I tried to fight with the landlord. I withheld rent and he took me to court.

It's hard to find a place because I have a criminal record. They sold my last place so I got evicted. They gave me 30 days notice.

My house was condemned by Capital Health.



They are making condos out of the apartment where I lived. I was evicted. I have been trying to find a place to live ever since.

Loss

Loss emerged as a precipitant to becoming homeless for a number of people interviewed.

I gave up everything. I blame God. I lost some family members. In a way, I chose this, I said "take it all." I gave it all away.

My wife died. I started to drink heavy then.

My son got killed by a crack head. I went searching for him.

I lost family members. I have tickets in carpentry and cooking. I had my own place.

Addictions

Addictions were given as a reason by 43% of those interviewed.

It started with solvents. My drug of choice is crack. Mostly alcohol use. I've spent most of my life from 13 to 30 in jails. Alcohol was involved in all my offences. I couldn't steal a chocolate bar when I'm sober.

My addictions made me homeless. The people I was living with did not want to stay with me.

I like beer too much. It became a priority.

I was staying with my wife's relatives and paid rent until the end of the month. But we couldn't stay there any longer because of the fights and alcohol. They are good until they are drinking.

Drugs are a big cause of homelessness.

Leaving violent relationships

For several of the women, leaving a violent relationship led to their homelessness.

He was abusive so I packed a couple of bags. I left everything and decided to do it on my own. It's a lot harder than I thought.

I was physically and financially abused. I wanted to get away. Even if it meant living on the streets.



I "AWOL"ed from my group home and they closed my bed. I could not go anywhere else. After that, I was in the inner city and it was awful.

Youth

The youth interviewed gave reasons of family conflict, addictions and difficulties with child welfare.

It is hard. I became homeless because I was with social services and they stop helping you when you are 16 years old. They tell you to go to a shelter. When I was 16, I did not feel I wanted to be in a group home and being young and not wise, I did not make the right choices. I expected things to fall into place and they did not.

I have been on and off the streets since I was 13 years old. My Mom did not want me to be around. She kicked me out.

I got kicked out of child welfare.

My family is never there for me. They expect the worst. My addiction made me homeless. I made wrong choices and got kicked out.

Daily life without a home

Hiding

There are two types of hiding for people who are homeless. The first type is to literally hide—from other people and from the police.

I make sure nobody sees me going into that shed. You can't feel safe.

I find a place in the bushes after dark. No one knows where I sleep.

Dodging the beat cops, the security. You don't want the cops to know you. They think you are up to no good.

The second type of hiding is to hide the fact that you're homeless to try to prevent the judgement that comes with it.

I never tell people I am homeless. I don't think people treat me differently. I don't give free information.

It's one thing to look homeless, dress homeless. I pay storage fees monthly. If you look and keep clean, it helps.

We don't look homeless because of the way we dress. I dress well even when I am homeless.

People look down on you. You walk around with your backpack and people know. I was good at hiding it.

Finding a “living room”

The shelters do not allow people to stay indoors during the day and you must be out of the shelters early in the morning until late in the evening. People are left looking for places to spend their daytime hours. Those who were living in tents had a living room, those who weren't spent their days looking for places where they would be allowed to stay. These places were often located near the shelters. The library was often given as a safe, drug/alcohol-free place. For most, finding a living room meant a day of constant movement.

The Breakfast Club, wrapped in cardboard, sitting by the river drinking with friends.

Somewhere to sit, relax, visit, socialize, use a computer.

Mustard Seed and Bissell are places where we hang out. In winter, when they are closed, I went to Greyhound to hang out or the river valley. Later Greyhound Depot started checking to see if you had a ticket or else they would kick you out.

With my friends who have homes or just walk the streets. Friends are not always home. The street is not always a good place to be. I have no choice. Nowhere to go.

I just kind of stay down Whyte Avenue. Wait until the youth co-op opens. Hang out with my friends. Go to the co-op to get resumes written so I can get a job.

I go around in a day. Bissell, library, Hope, Mustard Seed. I don't get bored.

I hang around close to the fire department. At least I'm in the open air in case danger comes to me. At least there's help there.

I stay at my tent. My tent is a safe place.

The library. Nobody goes there to go smoke their weed, crack or drink. It makes me feel better. I sit and read, think, write. It's away from all the needles and stuff.

Find some people doing crack. Sell my ass so I could stay in a hotel overnight.

I hang out at the “allowed to use” zones in front of Spady, Herb and Hope. I wouldn't hang around anywhere if I was Native—they [the police] beat up those guys.

I go back to WEAC unless I get kicked out of there too. It's more comfortable there. I know everyone and they know me. I'm not used to being around strangers. I'm not comfortable.



We are kicked out at 6:30 a.m. at Hope Mission and then we walk to Bissell, which opens at 7:00 a.m. On weekends, I go to the library or the park and sit on a bench. In the evening, I go to Mustard Seed. They are open until 10:00 p.m.

Seldom safe

Being homeless means seldom being safe. This applies to life on the streets and in the shelters. There are very few safe spaces for the homeless.



Being homeless is not being safe.

I am safe because I am with my boyfriend. If I was alone, I would be unsafe or killed.

I'm not safe, but I look after myself though. Sleeping outside you always gotta be careful. They beat you for what you got. I sleep under a bridge. It's OK. I get wet a little bit sometimes. I usually sleep with a stick or a knife.

The hardest thing is having to resort to prostitution. It is so unsafe. You cannot tell if someone is violent. I got slapped up against the window and pushed out of the car. The guy did not want to pay. I knew Rachel Quinney and that is scary. Another thing is the gangs—it is really bad. If you are going with one of them, they just freak if you don't do what they say.

Somebody can come behind you and hit you. It is so unsafe. It is unsafe for anybody.

I'm always on guard. Young people try to pick on homeless people. Beat them up. There's no valid reason. Why pick on those who are in a moment of darkness?

I am not safe. That is the risk you take. When I am under the influence, I don't think about it so much. But when I'm sober, I think about it.

Before I felt unsafe and did carry a weapon with me. Being young and a woman is very unsafe.

You are always watching, both on the street and in jail. It comes with the lifestyle.

I am safe as long as I am not too drunk.

Never enough sleep

Whether "sleeping" rough (where one seldom gets much sleep) or in the shelters, being homeless means never having enough sleep.



It's really hard at first. Then you get used to it. You can't really sleep soundly anywhere. I'm tired all the time. I want to get out of this.

If you have a night job, there's nowhere to sleep during the day. I had a night janitorial job for a couple of weeks, but I had to quit. I was so tired because I couldn't sleep during the day.

It's frustrating not knowing if you will even get to sleep. Not knowing how you are going to spend the next day if you do not get sleep. Not knowing absolutely nothing about the future.

The shelters try to do the right thing, but it's hard to sleep at night. Stirring people, coming in and out. I maybe got 3 hours sleep last night.

I place a blanket in the park and sleep. I sleep during the day because I cannot sleep during the night as it is unsafe.

When I'm drunk, I pass out and don't wake up. When I haven't been drinking, every little sound wakes me up.

It's tough on relationships and families

The stress of living without a home takes a toll on relationships and families. Couples are not allowed to sleep together at the shelters. Not having a home limited contact with children—10 of the people interviewed had dependent children who were either in care or staying with other family members. It is not known how the children ended up in care—more research is needed in this area.



You get down in the dumps a lot. Relationships don't go well either. You are both depressed. You have no place to go to have time to yourselves.

We built a cardboard box. It was private. It's hard to be together when the whole street's watching.

The kids are with my mother. I was in second stage housing, from which I was evicted. I was only allowed one year to stay there and after that I could not find a place to live. I could not afford the rent that was available.

It's my choice to use and drink, but it still hurts. I'd like to have a place so I could have my kids visit. Maybe I could get an "old lady."

When we were on the street, we tried to support each other but often ended up fighting.

Earning money

People who are homeless are often ready, willing and able to work—at both formal and informal employment. A few have steady jobs, most work casual labour. Many pick bottles, earning \$20–\$25/day. Panhandling, binning (finding things and selling them) and selling the street newspaper were also sources of income.

I just do casual labour. In a regular job, sooner or later, they want you to read.

If it weren't for the economy and ease of getting jobs, I don't know where we would be. I just got a job at Safeway last week.

I just started waitressing last night.

I have developed a lot of skills doing casual labour. I'd like to train as a mobile crane operator.

I am pretty blessed. I can do all kinds of work [handyman]. I'm on social assistance because of arthritis.

Few of the youth we talked to had any formal source of income.

I have no income. My boyfriend does not have a job right now.

My step dad gives me money when I ask him. My friends will buy me stuff when I need something.

The presence of police in daily life

One of the outstanding things from the interviews was the presence of police and security guards in the lives of people who do not have a home. 69% of the people interviewed had had contact with the police in the month previous to the interviews.

Tickets and fines for everyday activities

The charges laid tell the story of how daily activities such as sleeping, eating, relaxing, and drinking are illegal when you are homeless—loitering, open alcohol consumption, trespassing, taking up shelter in a public place, sleeping in an abandoned building. These activities are not illegal if done in your own home.



Police give a lot of tickets to homeless people. They can't pay them and eventually have to serve time for them. What is the point of that?

Open alcohol consumption—\$115 ticket, trespassing—\$248 ticket, sleeping in an abandoned building—another ticket. The police were pretty nice about it. They were good guys.

They are always stopping you. I got a ticket for trespassing. I was cutting through a hotel yard to get to a drop-in centre. Also, illegally transporting liquor unopened. I didn't even know that was an offence.

They take away things I find. I find them mostly in dumpsters. They say I steal them, but people throw away good stuff.

Trespassing. We didn't see the sign. It was real small.

One cop banned me from Save-On when I had the money to buy a pop. They give you tickets for trespassing—I throw them away. They arrested me when I collapsed on a bus.

The police are always hassling us. It's because we're homeless. "You can't sit on that bench, it's ETS property. You can't sit on the sidewalk, let's see your ID."

It sucks to live in the river valley. You get tickets by the cops. A \$200 ticket for sleeping there.

How is a homeless person supposed to pay a \$115 ticket for loitering?

The police were frequently responsible for keeping people moving.

They are keeping us moving along all the time. I got a \$115 fine for open liquor on an ETS bus. I was stupid. I paid the fine right away. It was a stupid thing to do.

They are always telling you to move on. They threaten to put me in a van and punch me out.

We have to keep moving. They wave me on and I move. We are not even allowed to sit on a bench and rest. This is really bad if you have been working nights. They have treated me well. They know I'm not into crime or anything.

Policing people who do not have homes

The people interviewed had mixed experiences with the police—there were about an equal number of positive and negative experiences. Most of the people interviewed stated that as long as you treated the police well, they would return the favour.

I've gotten what I've deserved. You give them respect, they give it to you.

How do you expect to be treated when you're doing something wrong? I wasn't treated rough or anything. They were just doing their jobs.

Fairly decent. They are nasty when you give them a hard time.

I'm a good person. I do what they want me to do.

They're OK. They're just like another friend of mine. I don't treat them any different than the rest of my friends. They're there to help me.

Generally, they treat me pretty good. I don't try to run away when they see me. I treat them the way I want to be treated.

There were also the negative experiences.

The cops bother you quite a bit. If you're in parks you're not allowed to sleep.

I was not treated fairly at all. They lied to me for the reason of stopping me.

He was a bully. The beat cop stopped me and went through my ID and bag. Now that I have a place to live, they treat me differently.

Depending on what trouble you are in. They treat me differently because I have addictions problems.

I got a ticket for riding my bike on the sidewalk. Everybody does it and nobody was around. They threaten you with "schooling"—beating you up.

They are not friendly when they do see you.



They treated me like a criminal. I never knew what "born guilty" was until I moved here.

Of the people interviewed, 9 had used jail as a way of getting themselves housed and fed.

I would be dead if it weren't for jail and shelters. I have committed crimes to go to jail. I need meals and a place to shower as a minimum.

When I first became homeless, I went to the police station and told them to lock me up and throw away the key. They refused and I told them that I would cut up their tires.

I was cold. I had warrants. I turned myself in for my fines.

I was getting charged with something. I could have walked away before the police got there. As I was homeless, I just stayed there. Thank God for that because the people in jail told me how to get help and where to go.

It's not called "sleeping rough" for nothing!



You never know if you're going to wake up dead.

When people cannot get into the shelters, are banned from the shelters, or choose not to sleep in a shelter, the only alternative is to find somewhere to sleep for the night (or at least "bunk down," since sleeping is often impossible or unsafe when "sleeping" rough).

There were times where I was up all night pacing the streets, pacing the streets. Unsafe, constantly looking over my shoulder.

I felt unsafe. I slept on snow with a blanket and a knife. You don't sleep when you sleep in the river valley. One of us would be awake while the other kind of slept. As soon as you hear voices or steps, you are both alert to protect ourselves from any harm. It was a very difficult experience. But you do what you have to do to survive.

It's cold and scary. I get more worried. Scared to get raped or beaten up.

I will be staying on the street as I am an alcoholic and drug addict. Shelters will not take me. I use cocaine.

Not fun. Cold. You don't know if someone's going to come up and... you know.

It was a nightmare. Our backgrounds had never prepared us for this. We stayed in a car, tent, doorways, a park bench. It was hard to keep warm during the day. We were charged with loitering for hanging around the mall.

It's OK, but too many bugs. There's always a risk of danger. Somebody could come by. Here it's OK [in Parkland] because people don't come by.

It was cold. You keep waking up if you hear noise, especially when you are a woman. The cops come around and ask you to move. It's not pleasant when you have to spend the night outside.

I got kicked out of the women's shelter for the month of April. I haven't slept. I walked around all night. I didn't know who I'd find beside me when I woke up.

Some people liked to sleep outside, while others preferred sleeping outside to the shelters.

It is better outside than to be in a shelter. It is good. You hear footsteps and you are awake. You are more natural as you are close to nature. We got mugged once. My friend and me. A few days ago. You have to have friends to make it by.

Staying in the park is a lot nicer than staying in a shelter. When it rains, we put a tarp over our blankets. It is cold and wet. I get tired of it. I would rather be in an apartment than here.

It's peaceful and quiet in my tent. Nobody bugs you. I'm a loner. It's just like camping. In the winter? You line your tent with blankets and eat before you go to bed.

I like it through the summer. Even in the winter, I buy a heating thing. It's not too bad. Most of the time I feel safe, but I'm known as a person not to fool with.

I like sleeping outside. Depending on the area, it can be a peaceful or wakeful night. You wait for the sun to go up and it feels more safer.

It makes me feel like an old traditional Indian. Close to Mother Earth. Comfortable. I usually go to a back yard at an abandoned building. It's the safest place.

I sleep outside as much as possible in the summer. It is my preference. I sleep in the river valley or on a park bench. None of the "Tent City."

A shelter is not a home

Noise, smells, crowds and violence

The people are OK. It stinks, it's noisy. You get into fights because everybody's mad. There are lots of people.

They are not sanitary. Last time I stayed in one, I saw someone get stabbed over a cigarette.

There's theft. Homeless people preying on each other.

They smell. There are always angry people, drunks. Staff try to be nice, but it is very hard to be nice when half the people are rude to you. There are lots of fights and hung over people around.

I don't like it. Too noisy, things get stolen, smelly, and I got beaten up there.

I couldn't deal with someone's arm and a leg over me.

You have to be careful with your stuff. It's degrading. Makes you feel really down. It's helpful, yet I'm embarrassed to stand in line waiting to get in.

I don't like it at all. People cough too much and you get sick.

I had one bad experience. They gave my bag away to someone else. I lost everything.

Bad negative crowd—both the residents and the employees. They are both angry. Residents take out their anger on staff and staff end up angry.

I used the overflow shelter only once. Came out with bed bugs. Had to throw all my clothes away and everything.



It's frustrating because of the noise, smell and the people you are forced to be with. There are long waiting lines to get in. Finally, you get to sleep and all's well.



I miss having an apartment so I can have a shower when I want. I miss cooking what I like. I have to eat whatever is served at the agencies. I miss a place I can call my own.

Someone else's schedule

When you don't have your own home, you are confined to someone else's schedule—whether it's a shower, a meal, when to go to sleep and when you have to wake up.

You have to get up too early [6:00 a.m.]. If you leave your stuff, you can't get it until night.

It's my home, but I don't like getting up early.

You can't come and go as you please.

Too many rules. You have to get up too early—for what?

At Hope Mission, we are kicked out at 5:30 a.m. and the warmest place is open at 7:00 a.m. In the meantime, you are walking the streets.

I get there too late because I'm bottle picking. I stay outside because I'm worried about someone stealing my bottles.

Not great for couples

Shelters have no facilities for couples or families.

We couldn't really be together. We had to sleep head to head. I'm afraid of shelters—they seem dangerous.

Since I got in a relationship, I haven't used the shelters.

Anywhere but a shelter

The conditions in the shelters lead many to stay anywhere but a shelter. The alternatives given were tents, sidewalks, cars, and old buildings. Some will only stay in a shelter when it's extremely cold, others choose to weather the cold.

Only when absolutely necessary. I don't get along with a lot of people. Don't like the bugs, fighting, theft.

When it got about 30–40 below. Other than that, I slept in my truck.

I only stay in the winter. It has to be at least -20 degrees.

Even in the winter, we are better in our van.

Depressing is the main word. I am better off in my tent.

I did not like them [shelters]. I did not want to accept that I had come to that level.

I used shelters for about two years. I stopped because they were getting violent.

It's safer in my tent than in any shelter.

Thank goodness for the shelters

Others were very grateful for the shelters and reported positive experiences.

I like them. They are a place to call home. You can get food and water and a roof over your head and you don't have to pay rent.

It's not so bad as people think. Hope has really good staff. You walk in and get a sandwich, blanket, and mat.

I don't like it. I prefer to have my own place. But thank God for the shelters. There should be more all over the city.

I'm grateful they're there.

It is hard on health

Hard on the body

Being without a home is hard on the physical body. Existing health conditions are usually made worse and new ones develop. Chronic health problems were common among those interviewed and included asthma, epilepsy, diabetes, cancer and Hep C. Pneumonia seemed to be fairly common experience.

I had pneumonia 3 times. I was dehydrated and had the flu. Now I have the pneumonia shot so I am good.

I got colds when I was homeless. I was always having trouble with my tonsils.

I have degenerative arthritis. My legs hurt when I have to carry my bags around and walk all the time. In winter, my leg is bad.

I'm 800% different since I've been housed.



I cannot take care of myself. I do get fatigue because I have to keep moving. I cannot rest as much as I want.

57% of the people interviewed had made at least one hospital visit in the last two years. Reasons included epilepsy, abscessed teeth, kidney infection, mental health issues and drinking/drug overdose.

Lots of times. 9 times for doing drugs and drinking. I stay for a day or a few hours. It is usually bad as I drink too much.

Several times, all overnight. Overdoses, almost froze to death, when I was delusional.

I passed out from drinking. It was -30 degrees. I'm lucky they found me and thawed me out.

I was there for two weeks. I had pneumonia, lung infection, a bladder infection and I was 8 months pregnant at the time. I stayed there until my son was born 2 weeks early.

I was in emergency for 10 hours with broken ribs on both sides. The police used that zapper thing. I was passed out and came awake punching, so they beat me up.



Sometimes it's depressing. Sometimes I wish I was at home [on the reserve] and it was raining so I could cry.

Hard on the mind

Being without a home means constant stress, which often leads to depression.

Living meal to meal is stressful. Never mind thinking about the whole day.

It's very depressing. Sometimes it just makes you want to cry. I used to feel sorry for people who were homeless.

My nerves are just about shot. I jump when I sleep, so I'm glad to be sleeping on the mattress on the floor.

It's the most stressful thing I've ever been through. There is no real life, just existence.

It's hard getting treated like you are "less than" and meeting basic necessities. Working, staying safe, trying to be sober, keeping yourself and your clothes clean. Altogether it is too much.

Being homeless makes existing mental health conditions worse and difficult to manage.

I'm also bipolar and schizophrenic and have a personality disorder. It's hard. It's hard to stay on your meds when you're homeless. I have been hearing some voices. I hope I will have meds tonight.

I am post traumatic stress disordered. Being homeless caused me to be suicidal.



The look you get from the general public that reinforces your feeling of "less than." It's a soul-damaging stare. But you also see fear behind their eyes. They're afraid of people like us. All I am is just another man.

It is soul-damaging

It is impossible to overstate the toll that homelessness takes on people.

The longer you are homeless, the more you are discouraged by life and the less you look for apartments and jobs. I don't like people to talk down at me.

They make you feel like you're just a problem, a rodent or cockroach.

Just feeling the verbal communication saying, "You're less than me." It damages your ego and defeats your self-esteem so much some days you don't want to get up. Belittles.

Being alone. Having to sell your body to get a roof over your head.

The aloneness. The sense you feel that nobody cares, even though you're getting help from some people.

You're limited. I could have been employed full-time if I had a stable place. Stuff like that is stressful.

It is hard to see yourself as worthless.

Physically, I'm not good. Emotionally, dead.

Labelled and dismissed

Being homeless means being constantly judged, labelled, and dismissed.

People look at you and they know you're homeless. They look at you and it's not pity. They think, "Why can't you find a place." It's not that easy.

It's not my fault. You get ridiculed. I don't know if it's me being youth or me being homeless. Just for being myself. It's harder to get jobs or get your foot in the door.

It's just harder out there. Looking for work, trying to go to school. What's your address? The look on their face, "OK we'll give you a call," and you never hear from them. I don't blame them, but it's hard.

I get treated differently from the person who is in front of me because they are dressed wrinkle-free. The people who rent apartments don't want to rent you an apartment as soon as you tell them that you live at the Hope Mission. They think you are lowlifes.

People look at me differently, like I might be on drugs and homeless. I don't use drugs. I am just homeless. I get no respect.

Generally, it is a big issue. When you are panhandling, people will not even reply to your request. They assume you are a bad person. They tell you to get a job.

The hospital wanted to check me for HIV. Just because I'm homeless doesn't mean I sleep around.

They did not look at us as though we were responsible people. We don't have time or things to shave. They look down on you. It is like a disease to me. They change their attitude when you make money and when you are homeless.

We are valuable people too. We are not a burden on society.



Most people feel you are wasting their time. They are judging and figure you are on a path to nowhere. Nobody wants to help or to be a part of you.

Frustration and anger build over time

Being homeless is extremely frustrating, stressful and, over time, this can result in anger—towards other homeless people and towards the people and systems who may be trying to help.

I was pre-judged. I don't know how to feel about that. It's not exciting. It makes me want to get violent on them.

There are good people and bad people that are homeless. I am very afraid of people. I think it should be like in Texas. Everyone carries guns. They have a low crime rate.

I don't feel they're doing enough for the people. Talking ain't going to get anything done. With the amount of money they got, why can't they put money into this?

I'm not suicidal, but I am homicidal. [Very angry]



People who are in high up positions should try living the way I do. They should try living on their own and see how it feels. How it is to survive living on no income and no supports.

Only the strong survive

Inner strength

When asked how do they find the strength to carry on, the people interviewed answered in many ways.



I don't know, I just have it. Just stay strong and to know that life will not end on the street. Just fight against it.

That depends on how it manifests itself. Anger. Depression. Weakness. Defeated. But I can manage it. I use my music.

I'm a survivor. All the shit I went through would have broke someone else's spirit long ago.

I'm a confident person. I don't let little things get to me. Any day alive is a good day.

I guess when you're 49 years old, you've been around. I never give up, just keep struggling.

The joys of helping people as best I can with what I can.

Probably just hope, I guess. Something better to come along.

My children. Knowing that I'll get to see them again someday. The fact that it's not just me out there, I have someone else.

You just maintain one day at a time. Any more than that could cause stress. Any planning is knocked out. Whatever positivity you can pick up sure helps.

My son. The fact that if I smarten up, get everything together, I get him back. That's the only reason I try so hard.

Spirituality

Some people found solace in their spiritual beliefs and practices.

Hope. From my partner. I pray a lot and read the bible. We both go to the City Centre Church a lot.

We both believe that God is the creator and there is a purpose for our life.

I pray every day. I get my strength from the good Lord above and other people, unless they are rude to me.

I go to the Light House. I talk to the pastor there. I pray. I feel I can connect there.

Others practiced their Native spirituality.

Mother Earth helps me. The ground I live on. That is the Native way. The spirits are watching over me.

I basically ask upstairs. I follow more Native traditions. I'm more with Mother Earth.

I just started to go to round dances. I never had a spiritual upbringing. I am starting to look into my own culture.

Drinking/drugs help

For some of the people interviewed, drinking or drug use was a way to cope with the realities of being homeless.

I drink. It helps my mental health, also my physical health. My legs are not as sore.

There is no stress when there is money for crack or alcohol.

Supplies of cigarettes help the stress.

The hardest part is that you shut yourself off. I started using drugs to numb myself—to make myself go away.

If you get high, you don't care and you don't feel the cold.



Beer and God. Beer comes first, it makes the physical and mental pain go away.

You've got to have friends (and sometimes family)

Many of the people interviewed gave examples of friends helping them survive life on the streets. Fewer people had support from family members; most said they had no support at all or had no family.

We help each other out—socks, smokes too, a drink now and then. That's the only way you get along on the streets.

Good friends understand it's rough for me. They make my day go by. I try to be around good, happy people like me.

Friends support me. My family used to know how I lived. My foster parents still love and care about me.

There are a few friends I associate with. They have been there and done that with me. They know how it was to be homeless and now they all have a place to live. We get together and see each other here.

My friends try to make me feel I'm special. They push me forward, support me to go forward, stay positive. They make me laugh.

Some go it alone

Some people prefer to go it alone and are strong enough to do so. They may not trust other people, particularly drinking/drug buddies. Sometimes they are not comfortable around other people.

No family supports. I don't have friends, I have acquaintances. I have drinking partners or other people I have fun with. The people I know don't know the real me. I don't give them the card to hurt me. So I don't share information.

I got no family. I don't make friends that easy. I am a loner.

All my friends are bad so I choose not to hang out with them.

Pride and independence

Being without a home is tough on anyone's pride, but a number of people expressed that their pride was important to them. A fierce sense of self-sufficiency was often expressed.



People make you believe that you will turn into a bum and a prostitute. If you think above it, then you will not let yourself do it. I thought against it.

I didn't tell my family nothing. I could phone and get money but I don't. I don't depend on nobody.

It's [being homeless] not that tough, I'm good at it.

It's not so bad but it's hard. If you don't know how to survive on the streets, you won't make it.

My parents don't understand why I live the way I do, but they are there for me. They would take me back, but I don't go back because of my pride.

My family is more supportive. They worry about me and have offered to take me in. I got myself into this, I should get myself out.

Existing services

Almost all the people interviewed had used some type of helping services in the six months prior to the interviews. Most had used more than one service. Services used included shelters, food/meal provision, job training/casual labour, health services and outreach.

Help, but not with a permanent home

The services people used and the providing agencies helped with many things, but could seldom help with finding what does not exist—affordable, adequate, permanent housing.

One woman was trying to help photocopy stuff for me, but all the places she gave me were more than \$800/month. I can't afford that.

Because you can't. There's no housing out there that's affordable.

While hospitals did provide emergency and acute care, people were sometimes released without anywhere to go.



They just thawed me out.

I had no safe place right away. I was asked to leave and I couldn't go to the Hope. So I was stranded.

They put you out there with nowhere to go. You feel bad as there is no place safe and warm.

One doctor knew I was homeless, so she helped me stay at the emergency for 3 days after I OD'd. They then helped me to get to a shelter on my reserve.

There are some successes

Some agencies were able to find housing for the people interviewed.

Yes, they did put me, my son, and my husband in a hotel. We were at the hotel for about a week and then we moved into an apartment.

They did everything—showers, food, helped us find a place to live, drove us around, co-signed the lease.

They helped me get housing. Without them, we would still be homeless.

They drove us to look at places and they helped us to talk to the landlord. They put their name on the line to get us a place. They even cleared fights between me and my boyfriend and the landlord.

Hassles instead of help

Many of the people interviewed had experienced red tape, many rules and regulations that did not make sense to them, and sometimes, hostile workers.

They make it really difficult to get social assistance and EI. It's too hard. They should be more accessible. Poverty pushes you down and addictions make it harder. I didn't choose to be poor. I have no job skills.

Artificial regulations kept us down. Couldn't get a box of crackers from the Food Bank because I didn't have ID and an address. I wanted something to eat, but not a full hamper as I was homeless.

My social worker is going to help me find a place next time I call her. I hate group homes. They have rules. I want a place of my own so I don't have to follow rules. I don't want to be the angry, depressed person I was in a group home.

The Food Bank said I came too often. I had to go. I was hungry. I had to steal food because I was hungry and wasn't downtown.

I got no offers for assistance. I asked welfare, but they told me to get my act together—to get a rent report and job verification. She knew I was mentally ill.

I want help with social services. I've got one contact on. I can't see. I can't work or find employment because I can't see. I have to jump through the hoops because I'm employable.

The policies, like ID, address, forms, keep you from using services that you should be able to get.

It's hard to get help. There are waiting lines.



AISH? I gave up—too much paperwork. I went for a week every day and they kept wanting more paperwork.

Lack of ID is a barrier

The difficulty of getting and keeping ID and other paperwork was a barrier to getting help. A vicious circle can start where you cannot get ID without an address, and can't get things that would help you get an address without ID.

It is hard to get a place to live without ID or references.

The bank will not give you a bank account because you don't have proper ID or a home.

I don't have any ID, so it's difficult to use medical services. Because I don't have an address, it makes it difficult as well.

I'm trying to get ID. Somebody stole all my clothes. My IDs were in there.

As we do not have an address, we cannot use temporary employment services.

The ambulance, walk-in clinics and stuff want to your know exact address.

Other barriers to help

Other barriers given by the people interviewed included not knowing about what was available and feeling like they did not deserve or need help.



I didn't know about many services. I'm afraid of the inner city.

I did not actually know that I could get on AISH before. As soon as I did, I applied. I have no source of income right now. I am in the process of filling out my AISH application. They said it might take 3 months.

When you ask for help, they figure you are wasting their time.

I didn't bother to use services because I didn't care [about myself].

Personal feelings. Lack of self worth.

This year is the first year I have had no problems accessing these services. Usually, it was hard for me to get help as I was scared to ask for help. I felt I would be turned down.

I don't think that I'm actually ready to go on AISH. Everyone says that I can but I think seizures can be controlled.

What are you looking for in housing?

Location, location, location

There is a saying in real estate—it’s all about “location, location, location.” For the people interviewed, this was also the case. Of the 62 people interviewed, 26 identified location, 22 wanted away from the drug scene/street environments, and 15 wanted to be close to agencies, drop-ins and medical services. Also important were the type of housing and access to transportation (since most did not own a car or vehicle).

To make sure I’m in a peaceful area where I don’t have to look behind my back. No fear of getting jumped.

It has to be close to all the important things that a person does. I don’t want to take a bus to get groceries.

I would look on the south side or west end. Downtown and north side are too violent.

Close to jobs or transportation to jobs.

Someplace where there’s no drinking.



When I was homeless, it didn’t matter where. But after living two months in an unsafe place, I want to be safe. My standards are going up!

What everyone wants in a home

In addition to location, people who are homeless want the same things in their housing that most people want. Cleanliness, affordability, comfort... and no bugs were often cited.

Cheap, affordable. Safety. That they would understand that I was homeless and not hold it against me.

To get out of the draft and into some warmth. A place where I could maintain my medication.

I don’t need much room. I won’t live in a rooming house because it’s filled with bugs and crack heads.

No bugs, no more bugs.

Something that’s not scummy. When you go in, there’s not cockroaches. It doesn’t have to be elaborate. It’s just me. Bachelor pad. Fridge, stove, bathroom.

Something with smoking and some place where I can have pets.

The plumbing is good and so on. The other tenants and the amount of traffic going on.



Just something fairly comfortable and clean. Something a bit bigger than a cardboard box. It’s about finding it.

What would help to find and maintain housing?

It's unanimous—the answer is affordable housing

Affordability was the almost unanimous answer. 97% of the people interviewed requested help in finding an affordable place and 86% said more money would help.

We need cheaper, affordable housing.

The rent is too high. I don't know where to start.

Governments should put more money into housing. There should be a lot of different kinds of housing. No one should be homeless in Alberta.

We all live on a budget. We need wheelchair accessible places and affordable rent.

Affordable housing. Housing for single men that is long term.

I looked for a while, but everything was so expensive.



Friendlier social workers.
Information about what the social workers can help you with readily instead of finding out from other sources when you are on your last leg!

Reduce the hassle factors

A number of people interviewed expressed frustration with the hassles of obtaining existing services. There were many suggestions to remove the "hassle factors," to make it easier to access services, and to improve knowledge of what's available.

If there was one place, with all the above supports, it would be helpful. I would benefit with a life skills course.

I feel that all these services should be having more help and in reasonable time. You should be able to get in.

Services that are more accessible. I did not even know that I could get some help until I came here

Practical support would also help

Practical issues such as someone to talk to (42 of those interviewed), transportation (42), help budgeting (36) and help finding furniture/wares (35) were frequently mentioned, as well as many other suggestions as shown in the quotes below.

Somewhere to keep or store your stuff is necessary while you look for housing.

I owe so much money to Bell and Telus. I would like help in how to pay it back. I don't know where to start.

No credit checks. No references.

I would like to have some transitional housing where not everything is done for you. You get to start looking after yourself again. It would be good to have a daytime shelter for those who work nights.

I have never rented. I don't have any skills for that. There should be transitional housing.

I would need someone to handle my money at first. Right now, I would spend it on drugs. Now that I am willing to pursue sobriety, I can get direction from Bissell. I know the agency.

Maybe an outreach worker who comes to check on you after you find a place. Someone who drops by to see if you are alive and kicking.

Help with mental health needs.



If everything is included in the rent, that's all I want. So I don't have to deal with a bunch of bills.

Help to look for housing

The people interviewed said that transportation and someone to go with them would be helpful when trying to find a place to live.

Transportation. I need help with what to look for in apartments. And have someone go with me to these places.

Somewhere to leave your stuff. Someone to drive you to places to look for apartments.

Somebody to travel around with me. Sometimes I get dizzy, I tend to black out.

Help with landlords

Practical help with landlords would help, particularly to reduce the effects of discrimination. Some of the people interviewed faced discrimination based on race, some based on source of income, and for others, it was both.



If you're Native, they won't rent to you. Or a criminal record. You get so depressed that you give up.

Help with landlord/tenant problems, knowing my rights.

Landlords are more likely to rent to you if you have an outreach worker with you. They take you more seriously.

Finding landlords willing to sign rent reports to help people on welfare.

Once you're homeless, most landlords won't rent to you.

I apply for a place and they think my friends and family will follow because of the sex trade and racial abuse.

It's hard, especially when you are Native. They automatically think you're a crack head, druggie or alcoholic.

They're picking and choosing who they want. You can't go there with a rent report.

Help with addictions

Many of the people interviewed who had addiction problems said that help with addictions was needed to help with housing.

Get more detox centres. Access to detox! Help me sober up, I can't do it on my own. Then I'll go back to work, make money, and I won't need help.

We need more rehab centres so we can go straight from detox.

There should be more treatment programs. There are big waiting lists.

Aboriginal services

Most responded that it didn't matter, but for some, receiving services from an Aboriginal agency was important to them.

They seem to understand more about being raised on a reservation. They don't make you feel stupid or ashamed of your upbringing.

Maybe I can get somewhere with them. I'm a shy-type person.

Because my English is not that good. Sometimes it switches from English to Cree. People have a hard time understanding.

I would like services in Cree.

They work with Native people more. Because I'm Aboriginal.

Conclusion

We are grateful to the people who took the time to share their stories with us. It is impossible to overstate the toll that being homeless takes on a human being. The work of living without a home means trying to do everyday activities like eating, sleeping, reading, or bathing under conditions that make those things exceptionally difficult, or impossible.

Added to this are the “constants”—constant judgement and comments from people who have so much more, constant moving, constant fear for your safety and your life. The police are a constant in most homeless people’s lives and it is a rocky relationship at best. Stress is a constant and is unrelenting. Being homeless means never being able to sleep, relax, or stop being vigilant. Never knowing if you’ll “wake up dead.”

In the face of this, the services that are supposed to help often don’t. In rare cases, they do help people find housing. In most cases, they can’t. They cannot supply what is needed—affordable housing. So shelter space is offered. For many people, sleeping rough is better than the shelters. Others don’t like the smell, noise, discomfort, dirt and violence, but take the mat on the floor that is offered.

In the place of housing, agencies try to provide what they can to make homelessness more survivable. There is emergency care, addictions treatment, detox. But where do homeless people go when they are discharged? Back to the streets. Addictions or mental health treatment cannot be sustained when people have nowhere to sleep, eat, go to the bathroom, relax, or even put their belongings. Never mind trying to stay sober or clean, when being drunk or high helps you cope with being homeless.

Services often come with red tape and hassles that make them less than useful. They can add to the unrelenting stress that the homeless cope with every day. It is as if they are designed to make life more difficult. And in the case of income supports, they don’t pay near enough to afford rents in Edmonton.

It is amazing that the people we interviewed were not more angry. Some were angry, many more were too discouraged and depressed. Too “soul-damaged.” But still surviving, still with a sense of humour, still helping others when they can. Still hanging in and hoping for something better.

We can do better. If we listen to what people without homes tell us, if we actually act on what they say will help, we can do much better. In the words of one person interviewed, “No one should be homeless in Alberta.”