REPORT: 2021 Estimate of the Homeless Population in British Columbia

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Acknowledgments

WE GRATEFULLY ACKNOWLEDGE the First Nations traditional territories across the province on which we live and work, the Métis Chartered Communities, and Inuit living in B.C.

All inferences, opinions, and conclusions drawn in this Preliminary Findings Report are those of the authors, and do not reflect the opinions or policies of the Data Innovation Program or the Province of British Columbia.

The following material was developed as part of the Preventing and Reducing Homelessness project, commissioned by the Ministry of Housing, Province of British Columbia.

Contents

Executive Summary

HOMELESSNESS, the risk factors leading to homelessness, and impacts of being unstably sheltered have far-reaching implications for all segments of the population.

This report provides an estimate of the number of individuals who experienced homelessness in British Columbia in 2021, based on service utilization using administrative data from the Government of B.C. This report also provides an analysis of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on service use, which affects the population estimate of individuals experiencing homelessness.

- In 2021, 26,240 individuals are estimated to have experienced homelessness.
  - Of these individuals, 40% (10,424) did not meet the definition of experiencing homelessness in 2019 or 2020 so are identified as new to the homeless cohort.
  - Of the 24,270 people who experienced homelessness in 2020, 41% (10,013) were not identified as experiencing homelessness again in 2021.
  - Additionally, 1,559 individuals who previously experienced homelessness in 2019, but not 2020, were identified as having experienced homelessness again in 2021, making up 6% of the 2021 homelessness estimate.
- The monthly average of people experiencing homelessness in 2021 was 11,896 (range = 11,331 in February to 12,758 in December).
- Men aged 25 to 54 made up 48% of the total population estimated to have experienced homelessness in 2021.
  - Men made up the majority of the individuals:
    - 68% Men
    - 32% Women
  - Age distribution of the individuals:
    - 11% are 24 years old or younger
    - 71% are aged 25 to 54 years old
    - 18% are aged 55 or older
- 733 or (2.9%) more people are estimated to have experienced homelessness in 2021 than in 2019. 1,970 or (8.1%) more people are estimated to have experienced homelessness in 2021 than in 2020.
- From 2019-2021, there was an increasing trend in the number of people experiencing homelessness of approximately 91 new cases per month on average with a prominent seasonal pattern, reaching an annual maximum in December (+433) and annual minimum in May (-433).
- After accounting for seasonal variation and the overall increasing trend in the monthly homeless count observed across the three years (2019-2021), there was an unusual dip in the homeless count in April 2020 of approximately 504 individuals (and a total of 848 fewer than expected for all of 2020), likely a result of changes in service use due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Background

The *Preventing & Reducing Homelessness Integrated Data Project* was initiated to create a reliable cohort research dataset, to help the Province better understand, respond to, and prevent homelessness in B.C.

This project developed an analytical definition of homelessness to estimate the number of individuals who have experienced homelessness in B.C. This is a novel approach and represents a method, using administrative data, of estimating homelessness for British Columbia.

For the purposes of this project, an individual is considered to have experienced homelessness if at minimum they have:

1. Spent three consecutive months on social assistance with a No Fixed Address (NFA) flag
2. Stayed one night in a BC Housing-affiliated shelter, or
3. Had both experiences

This project further categorized the experience of homelessness as either non-chronic homelessness or chronic homelessness:

TABLE 1. Categories of homelessness: Chronic and Non-Chronic

Data Source	Non-Chronic Homelessness	Chronic Homelessness
No Fixed Address	3-5 months consecutive NFA	6-12 months consecutive NFA
1+ Shelter Visit	180 or fewer days in a shelter OR 1-2 unique visits to a shelter (separated by 30 days)	More than 180 days in a shelter OR 3 or more unique visits to a shelter (separated by 30 days)
Both	As per above	As per above

The project is enabled by the *Data Innovation Program*. Data analytics were conducted by the Data Science Partnership Program—a service provided through BC Stats, Ministry of Citizens' Services.

Cross-Agency Team

The Preventing & Reducing Homelessness Integrated Data Project was initiated in 2019 and is a partnership between the Ministry of Housing (HOUS), the Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction (SDPR), the Ministry of Citizens' Services (CITZ) and BC Housing.

Methodology and Considerations

Gender

The Preventing and Reducing Homelessness Integrated Data Project has integrated gender identity data from various sources and specified a hierarchy for data quality. Please see the *2019 and 2020 Technical Documents* for further information for a comprehensive overview of analytics methods used.

The number of individuals in the shelter data who identified as non-binary was very small. This low number presented a possible statistical disclosure risk for that population of individuals. Therefore, in order to retain gender information about the individuals identifying as non-binary, the project used the gender data present in SDPR or Medical Services Plan (MSP) data for these individuals.

Some of the data has historically confused the terms sex and gender and used the binary sex classifications Male and Female to collect gender data. This project has recoded the values to use gender classifications (e.g., Man, Woman, Non-Binary) following the *Province of British Columbia's Guidelines to the Gender and Sex Data Standard*. The *Gender and Sex Data Standard* instructs government bodies to collect the minimum amount of personal information necessary for the purpose (e.g., program and service delivery and evaluation). The gender classifications Man and Woman are inclusive of cisgender and transgender individuals.

Project Considerations

The Preventing and Reducing Homelessness Integrated Data Project uses administrative datasets and therefore only captures individuals who have accessed the examined services. If a person experienced homelessness but did not access a shelter and/or receive BC Employment and Assistance (BCEA) for 3 consecutive months with No Fixed Address, they are not included in the estimate. Both services used to define homelessness have age requirements—BCEA program eligibility is 19-64 and most shelters are for adults age 19+. Therefore, this methodology for determining homelessness is limited in capturing those under the age of 19 and those over the age of 64.

Other limitations of the project include:

- A person's location is determined by the place they accessed services, which may not always match the community they identify with.
- The report does not describe Indigenous homelessness. By working with Indigenous partners, future reports may include an identifier to estimate the number of Indigenous individuals experiencing homelessness.

Additionally, as methods used to confirm the identify of individuals accessing services and/or data quality improves, more individuals can be identified and included in the annual estimates. Therefore, it can be expected that previously released annual estimates will be updated to reflect the improved methods of inclusion.

Results

Chronic and Non-Chronic Homelessness (2019-2021)

The annual provincial estimate of homelessness identifies how many unique individuals experienced homelessness at some point between January and December 2021. The annual estimate of the homeless population in 2021 was 26,240 individuals (Table 2).

In 2021, slightly more people are estimated to have experienced chronic homelessness compared to non-chronic homelessness. Approximately 55% of people experienced chronic homelessness and 45% experienced non-chronic homelessness. These percentages are the same as the 2020 estimates.

TABLE 2. Homeless Counts by Category (2019-2021).

Definition	2019	2020	2021
Total Homelessness	**24,507**	**24,270**	**26,240**
Non-Chronic Homelessness	12,511 (51%)	10,786 (45%)	11,908 (45%)
Chronic Homelessness	11,996 (49%)	13,484 (55%)	14,332 (55%)

Change in the Estimated Number of People Experiencing Homelessness Over Time

In 2021, 733 or (2.9%) more people experienced homelessness than in 2019, and 1,970 or (8.1%) more people are estimated to have experienced homelessness than in 2020. The increase in the estimate in 2021 over 2020 may be attributed to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which decreased service use. At the onset of the pandemic, there was heightened fear of accessing shelter spaces. In response to COVID-19 Public Health Restrictions & Guidance, shelters were required to reduce capacity to ensure physical distancing. The impact of the reduction of number and fewer individuals using shelter spaces can be seen in the highlighted red area in Figures 1 and 2 below.

In 2021, an average of 11,896 people experienced homelessness each month in B.C. This represents an increase of 22% and 13% over the average monthly estimates of individuals experiencing homelessness in 2019 and 2020 respectively.

Figure 1 shows the monthly estimates of people experiencing homelessness over the three years of the project to-date. The number of individuals who experienced homelessness in 2021 ranged from 11,461 in January 2021 to 12,758 in December 2021. On a monthly basis, the December (seasonal peak) homeless count increased by approximately 2,000 individuals, from 10,748 in 2019 to 12,758 in December 2021.

February 2021 had the lowest number of people who experienced homelessness (11,331 individuals) in 2021. Monthly population estimates include the total number of individuals who experienced homelessness during that month – some individuals experienced homelessness in 1 or 2 months of the year and others for many months of the year; as such, adding counts from each month does not equal the annual estimate.

Analyzing the monthly estimates of the homeless population for 2019-2021 revealed the presence of a seasonal pattern in the estimated monthly number of individuals experiencing homelessness, with an annual high from November (+398) to December (+433) and an annual low from April (-414) to May (-433). After accounting for this seasonal variation and the overall increasing trend in the monthly homeless count (mean = +91 new cases per month), there was an unusual dip in the homeless count in April 2020, by approximately 504 individuals (and a total of 848 fewer than expected for all of 2020), likely in response to the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic.

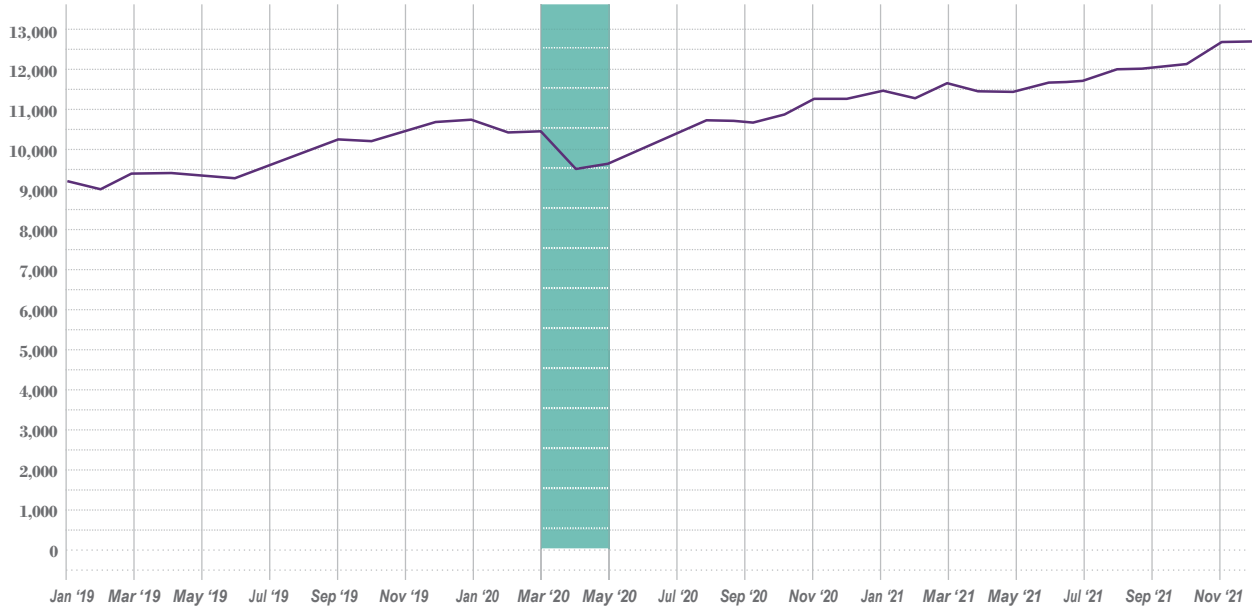

FIGURE 1. ***Estimated Homeless by Month (January 2019-December 2021). The estimated number of individuals experiencing homelessness decreased from 10,492 in March 2020 to 9,484 in April 2020 and 9,092 in May 2020 at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic (teal area) before climbing back up to 10,083 in June of 2020.***

Shelter Occupancy in British Columbia (2019-2021)

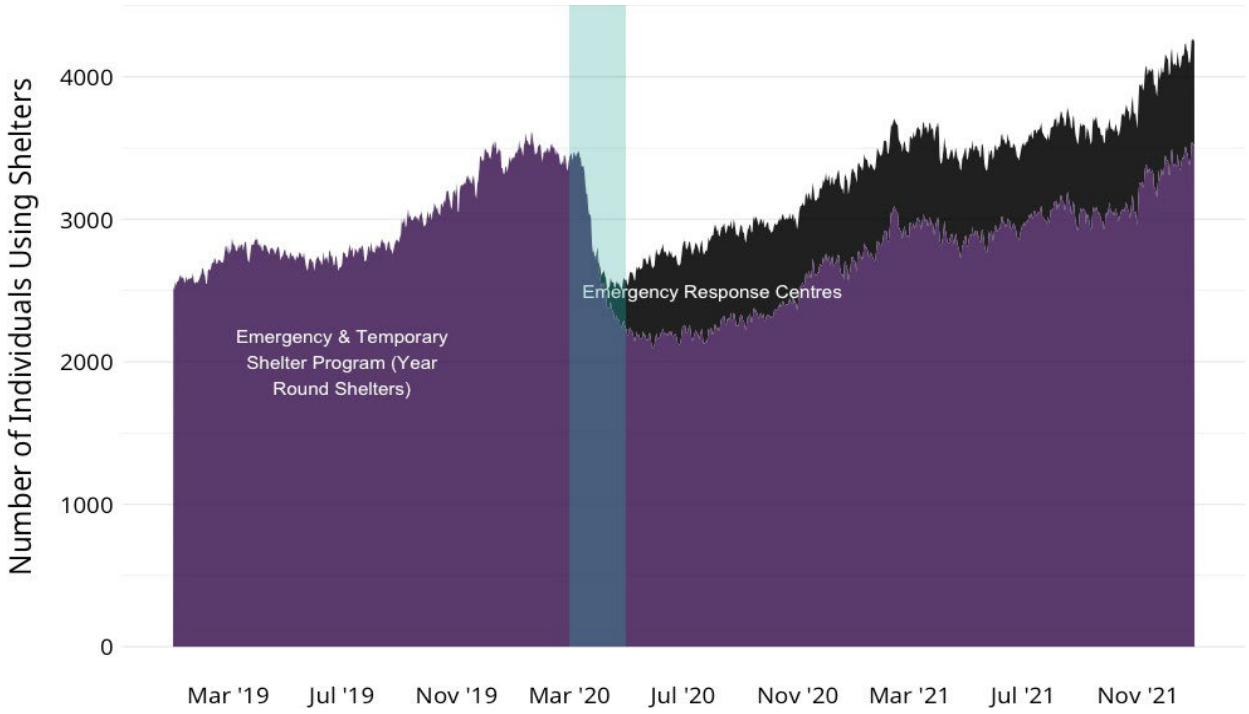

FIGURE 2. ***Shelter Occupancy in British Columbia (2019-2021). The estimated number of individuals accessing shelters and Emergency Response Centres decreased from an average of 3,209 in March 2020 to 2,552 in April 2020 and 2,655 in May 2020 at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic (teal area) before climbing back up to 3,277 by December of 2020.***

Shelter use is a function of capacity, number of spaces available and people frequenting the spaces. BC Housing shelter use data is collected through the Homeless Individuals and Families Information System (HIFIS). In Figure 2, purple represents shelter capacity for approximately 190 of shelters across B.C. Figure 2 demonstrates that shelter use declined in March/April 2020, which aligns with the dip in homelessness in April 2020 observed in Figure 1. Shelter use increased as the Emergency Response Centres (ERCs) provided more shelter capacity across the province.

B.C. Employment and Assistance and the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB)

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the federal government launched CERB, a temporary income support program for workers who, in the 12-months prior had earned at least $5,000 and for whom COVID-19 significantly reduced their employment earnings.[1]

1 Canada. Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB). https://www.canada.ca/en/services/benefits/ei/cerb-application.html

Persons who applied to CERB received $2,000 every four weeks, for a maximum of 28 weeks, regardless of actual lost earnings. Because some income and disability assistance recipients were eligible for CERB, this made it necessary for each provincial income and disability assistance program to determine how to treat CERB and other emergency federal programs for eligibility and benefit purposes.

B.C. chose to fully exempt the CERB for existing income and disability assistance clients that were recipients of assistance on April 2, 2020. That is, the CERB benefit had no impact on an existing client's eligibility for social assistance nor on their benefit amount: they received both their full benefit and the full CERB. However, if a new applicant to social assistance in B.C. was already receiving the temporary income support from CERB it was not exempt. This could have resulted in fewer new social assistance clients during the CERB eligibility period and thus impacted the estimated number of people experiencing homelessness using these data.

Income assistance caseloads fell during 2020 despite rising by double digits in 2019, and the Disability Assistance caseload had its lowest growth rate in years. People may still have had No Fixed Address, but if they were not eligible for social assistance while they collected CERB, they would not have been counted as homeless unless they also used a BC Housing-affiliated shelter. The magnitude of this impact on the BCEA caseload is currently unknown; SDPR is waiting on federal data to provide further insight.

Annual Estimate of Homelessness by Service Use

Our estimate of people experiencing homelessness is based on people using social assistance and shelter services. A higher proportion of the estimated population was detected through social assistance use. In 2021, 42% of individuals received social assistance with a No Fixed Address flag for at least 3 months, 30% of individuals stayed at least one night in a BC Housing-affiliated shelter only, and 28% used both services. This is similar to the pattern of service use observed from 2019 and 2020.

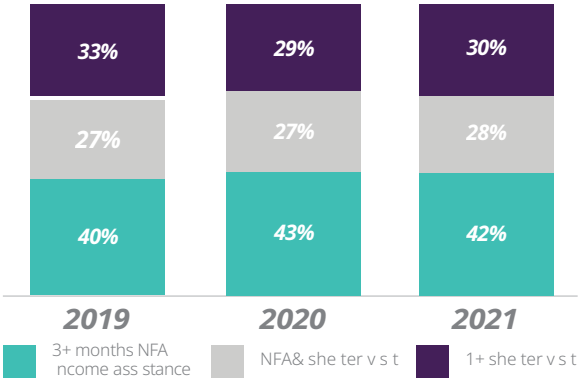

FIGURE 3. ***Annual Homeless Cohort by Data Source (2019-2021)***

Between 2019 and 2020 there was an increase in the number of people estimated to be experiencing homelessness through the No Fixed Address social assistance data only, and a decrease in people entering homelessness through the HIFIS data only. This likely reflects a reduction in shelter occupancy due to COVID-19 safety measures and individuals adjusting behaviours. Both trends have levelled off in 2021; approximately the same proportion of individuals entered the cohort through No Fixed Address social assistance data in 2020 as in 2021. A similar trend was seen in the HIFIS data.

Demographics of People Experiencing Homelessness

Figure 4 shows the age and gender demographic characteristics of the population estimated to have experienced homelessness in 2021. Men have been overrepresented in the estimated homeless population for all three years of the project (2019-2021). Men make up approximately two-thirds of the estimated 2021 homeless population, with men aged 25-54 making up approximately 48% of the population.

The age distribution of the 2021 homeless population estimates that 11% are 24 years old or younger, 71% are 25-54 years old, and 18% are 55 years old or older. The proportion of the homeless population that is 25-54 years old has remained stable from 2019 to 2021. One limitation of our method is that our data coverage prior to the age of 19 years or beyond the age of 64 years is less comprehensive because individuals are only eligible to apply for social assistance support from SDPR between the ages of 19-64. However, individuals younger than 19 years-of-age or older than 64 years-of-age will still be included in the homeless cohort research dataset if they access shelters.

The age distribution between the estimated 2021 homeless population and the 2020-21 Point-in-Time (PiT) count is similar.[2] Among survey respondents to the PiT count, 11% were 24 years old or younger, 69% were aged 25-54, and 21% were 55 years old or older.[3]

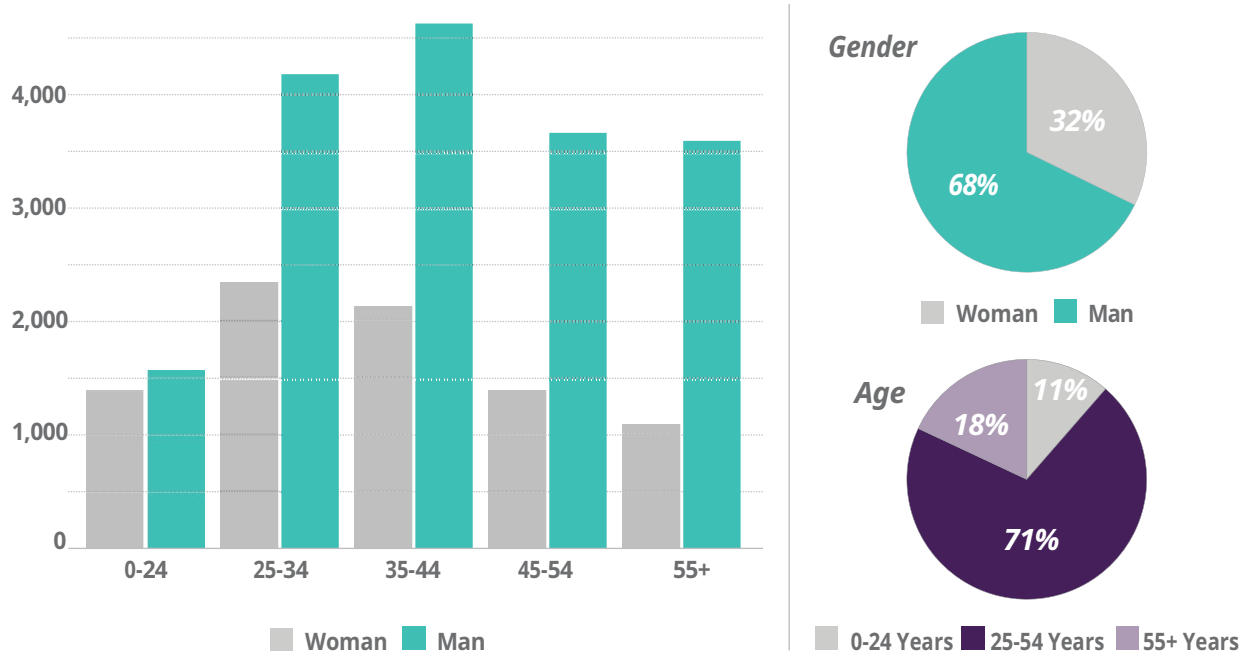

FIGURE 4. ***2021 Homeless Population Estimate by Age Groups & Gender***

2 For a discussion of the Preventing and Reducing Homelessness Integrated Data Project and Point-in-Time (PiT) Counts, see: British Columbia. Preventing & Reducing Homelessness: An Integrated Data Project, 2019 Homeless Cohort Phase 1 Findings, p.10. https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/housing-and-tenancy/social-housing/supportive-housing/report_preventing_and_reducing_homelessness_integrated_data_project_province_of_british_columbia_2021.pdf

3 The Homelessness Services Association of BC (2021). 2020/21 Report on Homeless Counts in B.C. Prepared for BC Housing. Burnaby, BC. https://www.bchousing.org/publications/2020-21-BC-Homeless-Counts.pdf

Estimated Homeless Population by Census Division

Over the three years of the project (2019-2021), 84% of individuals who have experienced homelessness have accessed services in one census division, as compared to 16% of individuals who have accessed services in more than one census division, suggesting that most individuals have not moved among census divisions to access services.

The maps below (Figure 5) show the census divisions in which the individuals experiencing homelessness in 2021 resided both as an absolute number and as a percentage of the census division population. Greater Vancouver was the census division in which the greatest number of individuals experiencing homelessness reside, but Fraser-Fort George is the census division with the highest level of homelessness on a per-capita basis. Skeena-Queen Charlotte had the 3rd most homelessness per-capita (Figure 5) and was also one of the top 5 census divisions that saw the greatest increases in homelessness (Figure 6). Cariboo was the census division with the 4th most homelessness per-capita (Figure 5) and was also one of the top 5 census divisions that saw the greatest reduction in homelessness (Figure 6).

	TOP 5 *Census Divisions Counts by Geography*			**TOP 5 *Census Divisions Percentage of population***	
	Census Division	**Count**		**Census Division**	**%**
1	Greater Vancouver	11,392	1	Fraser-Fort George	1.2%
2	Fraser Valley	2,262	2	Alberni-Clayoquot	1.1%
3	Capital	2,043	3	Skeena-Queen Charlotte	1.0%
4	Fraser-Fort-George	1,262	4	Cariboo	0.9%
5	Central Okanagan	1,244	5	Thompson-Nicola	0.8%

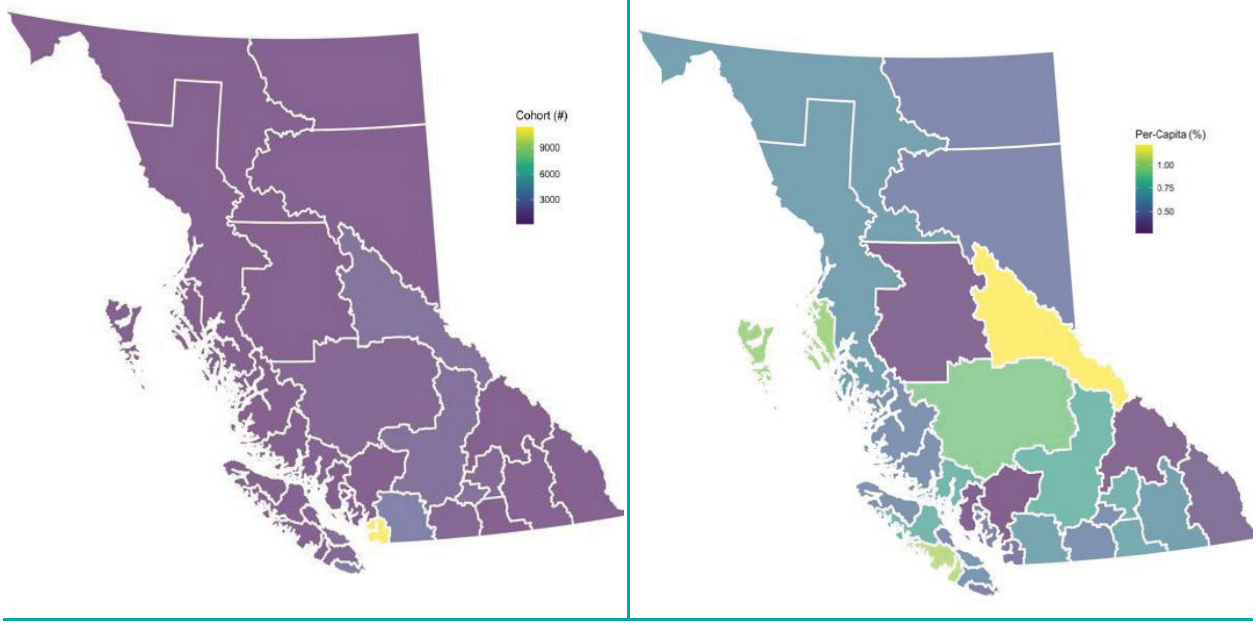

FIGURE 5. ***Homeless Counts by Census Division (2021)***

Figure 6 shows the year-over year percentage change in the estimated homeless population from 2019 to 2021. Overall, the population of people experiencing homelessness has remained relatively stable across much of the province, while the largest changes were mostly observed in southeast census divisions. Three of the five census divisions with the greatest increases in the number of individuals experiencing homelessness are in southeastern BC (Kootenay Boundary, East Kootenay, and Columbia-Shuswap). Squamish-Lillooet, and Skeena-Queen Charlotte are the other two census divisions with the greatest increases in their homeless populations. The top two census divisions with the most increase in the homeless population, Kootenay Boundary and East Kootenay, are located on either side of the Central Kootenay census division, which saw the greatest decrease in the homeless cohort population.

Other than Central Kootenay in southeastern BC, the census divisions with the greatest decreases in the number of individuals experiencing homelessness are primarily located along the central coast and inland (Kitimat-Stikine, Powell River, Bulkley-Nechako, and Cariboo).

TOP 5 *Census Divisions with % Increases 2019-2021*				**TOP 5 *Census Divisions with % Decreases 2019-2021***			
	Census Division	**Change**	**Count**		**Census Division**	**Change (%)**	**Count**
1	Kootenay Boundary	189%	151	1	Central Kootenay	-32%	-190
2	East Kootenay	169%	150	2	Kitimat-Stikine	-27%	-97
3	Columbia-Shuswap	84%	82	3	Powell River	-17%	-12
4	Squamish-Lillooet	49%	43	4	Bulkley-Nechako	-12%	-17
5	Skeena-Queen Charlotte	41%	58	5	Cariboo	-8%	-54

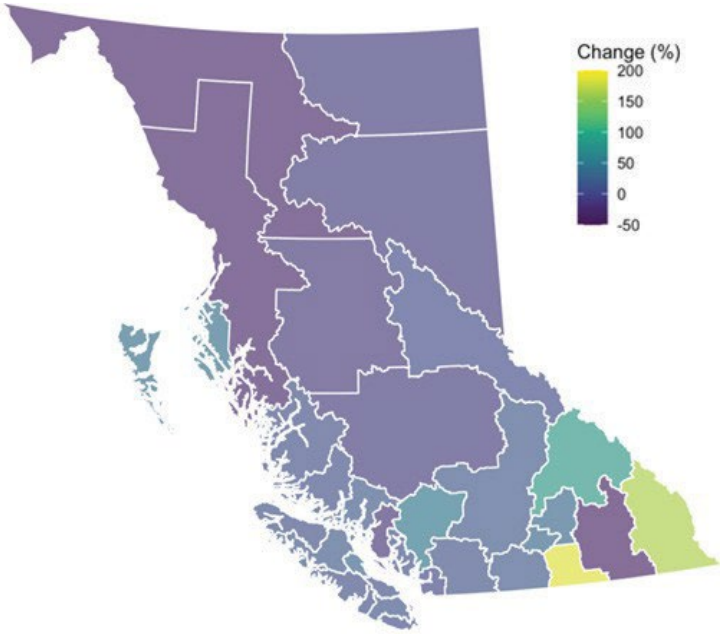

FIGURE 6. ***Year-over-year percent change in the Homeless Cohort counts by census division (2019-2021).***

Entering and Leaving Homelessness: Early Findings and Next Steps for Further Analysis

With three years of data, the Preventing and Reducing Homelessness Integrated Data Project can now make some preliminary observations on how people enter and exit homelessness (Figure 7). To examine how people enter and exit homelessness, three new attributes to describe homelessness were identified and defined:

- ***Newly Identified as Homeless:*** individuals who have not been identified as homeless in any of the previous years.
- ***Left Homelessness:*** individuals who left the homelessness cohort and have not been identified as homeless in the subsequent year.
- ***Re-Entered Homelessness:*** individuals who have previously left the homelessness cohort and have re-entered after (at minimum) 1 year away.

It is important to note that leaving the homelessness cohort does not necessarily mean the individual obtained housing. Further analysis is under way to understand the experiences of individuals who have left the cohort of people who experienced homelessness and those who have re-entered. Homelessness is often cyclical in nature. Exiting homelessness and remaining stably housed can take several attempts, which may explain the number of individuals who have re-entered homelessness.[4] It is expected that by uncovering population-level patterns and trends, better interventions can be designed to prevent and address homelessness as well as measures to support individuals to remain stably housed.

The 2019 estimate of the homeless population was 24,507 individuals. As 2019 is the baseline year and data for previous years is not available, all individuals who experienced homelessness in 2019 are deemed to be newly identified as homeless; but it is unknown if individuals experienced homelessness prior to 2019.

Of the 24,507 people who experienced homelessness in 2019, 45% (11,149 of 24,507) did not meet the definition of experiencing homelessness in 2020 so are deemed to have left homelessness, which does not necessarily mean that they obtained housing. This is illustrated by the grey Flows Out arrow in Figure 7. Of the 24,507 people who experienced homelessness in 2019, 55% (13,358 of 24,507) also met the definition of experiencing homelessness in 2020. In 2021, 35% of the people (8,567 of 24,507) who experienced homelessness in 2019 also continued to meet the definition of experiencing homelessness in 2020 and 2021.

The 2020 estimate of the homeless population comprised 24,270 individuals. Of the 24,270 people who experienced homelessness in 2020, 45% (10,912 of 24,270) had not previously met the definition of experiencing homelessness in 2019 so are deemed to be newly identified as homeless. This is illustrated by the turquoise Flows In arrow in Figure 7. The remaining 55% (13,358 of 24,270) of individuals included in the 2020 estimate previously met the definition of experiencing homelessness in 2019. Of the 24,270 people who experienced homelessness in 2020, 41% (10,013 of 24,270) did not meet the definition of experiencing homelessness again in 2021, as illustrated by the grey Flows Out arrow in Figure7. Of the people who experienced homelessness in 2020, 59% (14,257 of 24,270) also met the definition of experiencing homelessness in 2021.

4 Jacque Tremblay. 2009. Keeping the Homeless Housed. Wellesley Institute.

The 2021 estimate of the homeless population was 26,240 individuals. Of these individuals, 40% (10,424 of 26,240) did not meet the definition of experiencing homelessness in 2019 or 2020 so are deemed to be newly identified as homeless. This is illustrated by the light blue Flows In arrow in Figure 7. The remaining 60% of the individuals included in the 2021 estimate of the homeless population (15,816 of 26,240) experienced homelessness in 2019 and/or 2020, of whom:

- 36% (5,690 of 15,816) experienced homelessness in 2020 only, making up 22% (5,690 of 26,240) of the 2021 homeless estimate.
- 54% (8,567 of 15,816) met the definition of experiencing homelessness in both 2019 and 2020, making up 33% (8,567 of 26,240) of the 2021 homeless estimate.
- 10% (1,559 of 15,816) previously experienced homelessness in 2019, but not 2020, making up 6% (1,559 of 26,240) of the 2021 homeless estimate. These individuals are deemed to have left homelessness in 2019 and re-entered homelessness in 2021.

The analysis of the flows out of homelessness for the 2021 year will be reported as the analysis becomes available.

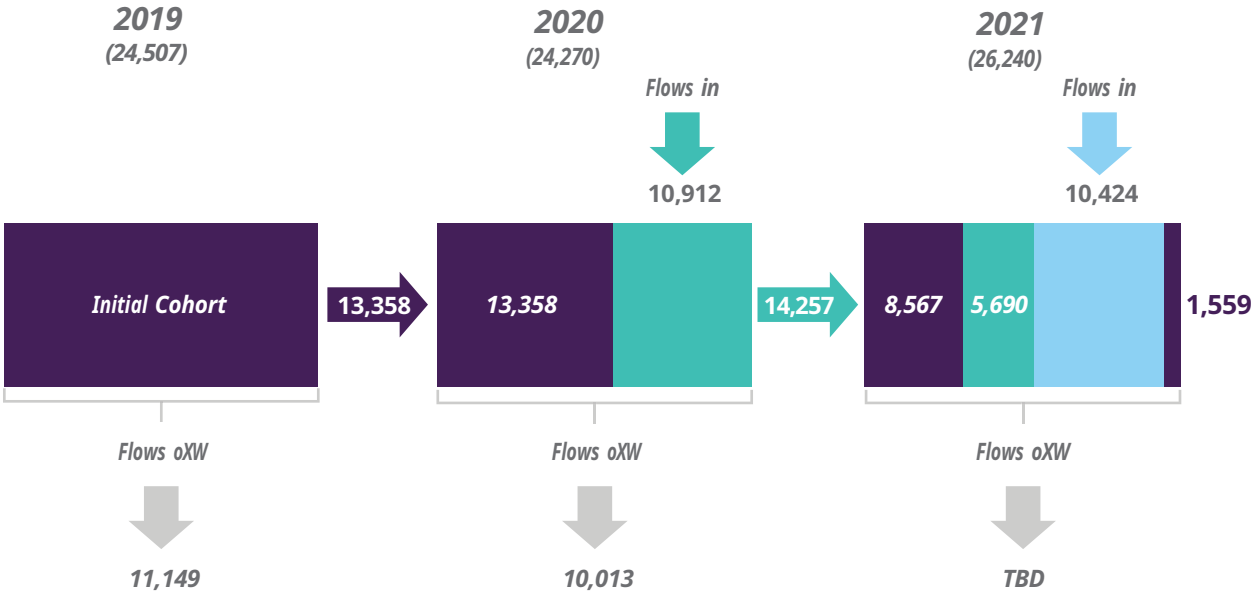

FIGURE 7. ***Entering and Leaving the Homelessness Cohort (2019-2021)***

Appendix: 2021 Data Tables

TABLE 1. 2021 Homeless Cohort – monthly estimate

MONTH	Total Number of People who Experienced Homelessness
January	11461
February	11331
March	11670
April	11493
May	11511
June	11694
July	11801
August	12058
September	12102
October	12210
November	12669
December	12758

TABLE 2. 2021 Homeless Cohort – age & gender

Gender	Age Group	Number of People who Experienced Homelessness
Female	0-24	1415
Female	25-34	2373
Female	35-44	2145
Female	45-54	1425
Female	55+	1102
Male	0-24	1587
Male	25-34	4211
Male	35-44	4672
Male	45-54	3689
Male	55+	3621

TABLE 3. 2021 Homeless Cohort – census division

Census Division	Number of People who Experienced Homelessness	Census Division Population 2021	Percent Population
Alberni-Clayoquot	366	33521	1.09%
Bulkley-Nechako	125	37737	0.33%
Capital	2043	415451	0.49%
Cariboo	612	62931	0.97%
Central Coast/Mount Waddington	84	14421	0.58%
Central Kootenay	410	62509	0.66%
Central Okanagan	1244	222162	0.56%
Columbia-Shuswap	180	57021	0.32%
Comox Valley	378	72445	0.52%
Cowichan Valley	535	89013	0.6%
East Kootenay	239	65896	0.36%
Fraser-Fort George	1262	96979	1.3%
Fraser Valley	2262	324005	0.7%
Greater Vancouver	11392	2642825	0.43%
Kitimat-Stikine	256	37790	0.68%
Kootenay Boundary	231	33152	0.7%
Nanaimo	996	170367	0.58%
North Okanagan	690	91610	0.75%
Northern Rockies/Peace River	362	66010	0.55%
Okanagan-Similkameen	503	90178	0.56%
Powell River	60	21496	0.28%
Skeena-Queen Charlotte	199	18181	1.09%
Squamish-Lillooet	131	50496	0.26%
Strathcona	383	48150	0.8%
Sunshine Coast	146	32170	0.45%
Thompson-Nicola	1151	143680	0.8%

Population Statistics from Statistics Canada. Table 98-10-0015-01 Population and dwelling counts: Canada, provinces and territories, census subdivisions and dissemination areas.
https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=9810001501

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