



# 2010 HOUSING NEEDS COUNT - FORT MCMURRAY

A report of the information collected on October 7, 2010  
for the Housing Needs Count



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## **2010 FORT MCMURRAY HOUSING NEEDS COUNT: KEY FINDINGS**

The point in time survey conducted on October 7<sup>th</sup> established the following information:

- ❖ There were 319 individuals who identified themselves as being without a permanent residence. Compared to the October 2008 count, this constitutes a decrease of 41.9% of homeless individuals.
- ❖ Males represented 77% of identified individuals.
- ❖ Females represented 23% of identified individuals.
- ❖ The number of individuals that reported they had lived in Fort McMurray for less than six months was 93 or 29%.
- ❖ An additional 42 individuals, 13%, have been homeless in Fort McMurray between six months and two years.
- ❖ The majority of individuals (61%) surveyed were within the 31-54 year age range.
- ❖ There were 105 or 35% of individuals observed as being Aboriginal, 131 or 44% of people observed as being Caucasian and 62 or 21% observed as Other.

## **BACKGROUND**

The 2010 Housing Needs Count was completed on Thursday, October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2010. It was a point-in-time survey completed to gain a perspective of the numbers of homeless people on the streets of Fort McMurray on one particular day. This snapshot information is intended to assist in providing direction to the task of ending homelessness.

This Housing Needs Count was the 5<sup>th</sup> street count that has been conducted in Fort McMurray. After a baseline count in 2003, similar counts were conducted in 2004 and then every two years since then 2006, 2008 and 2010, usually in the month of October. This survey was conducted in a manner similar to the format of surveys conducted in previous Housing Needs Counts. It was organized by a Housing Count Sub-committee made up of representatives from the Community Housing Agency Team (CHAT) as well as representatives from the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo.

For the purposes of the survey the following definitions were used and reviewed with the volunteers and agencies during the orientation meetings held prior to the day of the count.

- Homeless: A person or family who has no housing alternative and is living on the street or in places not intended for human habitation.
- Permanent Residence: A safe housing option meant for human habitation.
- Absolute Homeless: Individuals and families who have no housing alternatives and live in places not meant for human habitation.
- Sheltered Homeless: Individuals and families who are living in emergency accommodations or condemned housing and do not have a permanent place to live.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Since initiating the first Housing Needs Count, there has been a concerted effort to duplicate the methodology used each year in order to ensure consistency in comparing the results from one count to the next. While the accuracy and validity of the point-in-time count has been questioned, the results do allow some comparisons and trend analysis over this seven year period.

This year, a discussion with the 7 Cities members indicated that it would be beneficial if the same methodology was used across those cities in Alberta that conducted a count. This would allow for some potential comparisons between cities. For 2010, the Housing Needs Count was also conducted in Lethbridge, Edmonton and Fort McMurray all during the week of October 4<sup>th</sup>–8<sup>th</sup>.

The overall goal of the Housing Needs Count is to identify as many homeless individuals as possible throughout the day. In order to do this, it has been noted that the questions must be concise and the survey kept short. This would allow as many people as possible to be surveyed throughout the day.

Twelve street locations were selected as survey sites in the downtown area of Fort McMurray in recognized locales where the homeless population frequent. Surveyors were present from 8:00 a.m. until 6:00 p.m. at both the street and daytime agency locations. Surveys were collected after each shift at the base location in the multi-purpose room of the Provincial Building.

Surveys were also completed at six agency locations that provide sleeping accommodations for individuals experiencing homelessness. The evening counts commenced at 6 pm and concluded at 11:59 pm and were collected on the morning of October 8<sup>th</sup>, 2010. In order to ensure consistency and to allow the collected data to be combined, the same survey used in the street locations was also used at the agencies providing shelter accommodations.

In previous counts, individuals staying in transitional housing or supported programs like the Centennial House, Horizon House, Canadian Mental Health Association house, Detox, and individuals in the START program were included in the count numbers. This year however, these individuals were not counted. No doubt this will account for a portion of the decrease in numbers seen in the 2010 results. The exact percentage of decrease attributed to this is not known as the 2008 Housing Needs Count did not break down the data in this area.

Environment Canada reported the recorded temperature was a maximum of 19.8°C and a minimum of 7.3°C.

The following table illustrates the number of spaces available in the community and the occupancy rate reported on the day of the count, October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2010.

**Table 1: Total Emergency Shelter Spaces Available**

| <b>Agency</b>              | <b>Spaces Available</b> | <b>Spaces Occupied (Oct 7<sup>th</sup>)</b> |
|----------------------------|-------------------------|---|
| Salvation Army-Shelter     | 32 beds                 | 31 beds                                     |
| Salvation Army-Mat         | 30 mats                 | 23 Mats                                     |
| WBH&DC-Marshall House      | 100 Cots                | 55 Cots                                     |
| Stepping Stones Youth Home | 7 Beds                  | 3 Beds                                      |
| Fort McMurray Unity House  | 36 beds                 | 19 beds                                     |
| <b>TOTAL</b>               | <b>205</b>              | <b>131</b>                                  |

Most locations were similar to those that had been used in previous years. Sites that had been identified in previous years as “walking sites” were again identified as sites that the volunteers would walk to find people. These included the Snye, from Borealis Park to Jean’s Landing, Main Street from the 7/11 Store to the Fort McMurray Gospel Assembly, the Superstore parking lot including the parking lot in the back of the building and Gordon Avenue behind Canadian Tire. Other street locations included Advanced Bottle Depot, Safeway parking lot, Save-On Foods parking lot, and the Main Bus Depot at the Provincial Building.

There were three additional street locations added this year including the Twin Pines Motel parking lot, the back lot of the Salvation Army building and the Mac’s Store by Keyano College. The other additional locations were added at the suggestion of the Community Housing Team member agencies. The Twin Pines motel was added at the suggestion of the RCMP. One of the Crime Reduction Units volunteered at the Twin Pines Motel count location. Teams of two officers for two hour shifts canvassed the area at the motel throughout the entire day.

In addition to the outside street locations, individuals were also surveyed throughout the day at the Centre of Hope Drop-In Program as well as at the Service Canada counter in the Provincial Building.

Agency Locations were also similar to previous years and included, Salvation Army Mat and Shelter Program, Marshall House Shelter, Unity House, and RCMP guardhouse. The Stepping Stones Youth Home was added this year as it is a new service available in the community since its opening in October 2009.

## **VOLUNTEERS**

Once the Housing Needs Count Committee was formed, recruitment for volunteers began. The committee decided to utilize their contacts in the social services field. In addition, within the Municipality, an employee messenger was sent out to all staff asking for volunteers for the day of the count. A total of 79 volunteers were recruited to assist on the day of the count.

The committee developed an orientation package to educate volunteers on the homeless situation in our community and to inform them as to what would be expected of them before, during and after their two hour shift. Due to the large number of volunteers, four separate two hour orientation sessions were held at a board room in the Municipal Building.

The orientation included an introduction about volunteering within the Municipality, a review of the definitions being used, the locations of the count, the survey and the expectations of each volunteer.

## **SURVEY QUESTIONS**

The survey questions used in the street survey were also used at the agency locations. The questions were changed somewhat from previous years. A copy of the survey used can be found in Appendix A. Surveyors were asked to approach everyone they encountered at their specific location.

Each surveyor was provided with an orange t-shirt with 'volunteer' on the front which allowed surveyors to ask individuals if they "had already spoken to someone with a t-shirt like this today". If people said they had, then the person was thanked and the survey concluded. If the answer was "no", the survey continued with the question, "Do you have a permanent residence to return to tonight?" If the responder answered in the affirmative to this question the survey ended. However, if the responder indicated that they did not have a permanent residence to return to for the evening, then the remainder of the questions were asked.

Individuals claiming to have no permanent residence were asked if they had children up to 16 staying with them that evening and, if so, to indicate how many children and how many caregivers to help out. Surveyors were required to seek further clarification to ensure the children were actually in the adult's care. Different from the questions asked in the other cities, was the next question which was to determine how long individuals had lived in Fort McMurray. The choices were between 0 – 6 months, 6 months - 2 years and 2+ years. The results of this question would give possible insight into just how transient the homeless population of this community actually was.

The next question was also unique to this survey. It asked whether an individual worked at (an Oil Sands Company or Contractor) site. If the individual responded 'no' the surveyor moved to the demographic questions. If a person answered yes, then they were asked where they stayed on their days off and were given camp, hotel, shelter, travel home and other as options. This question was asked to determine if there are individuals who access services designed for homeless individuals when they are on days off from work.

The last questions were demographic questions where the surveyor was asked to record the gender, age and ethnicity. In most cases this was observed, but the volunteer could have asked if they were unsure or felt comfortable doing so. Age

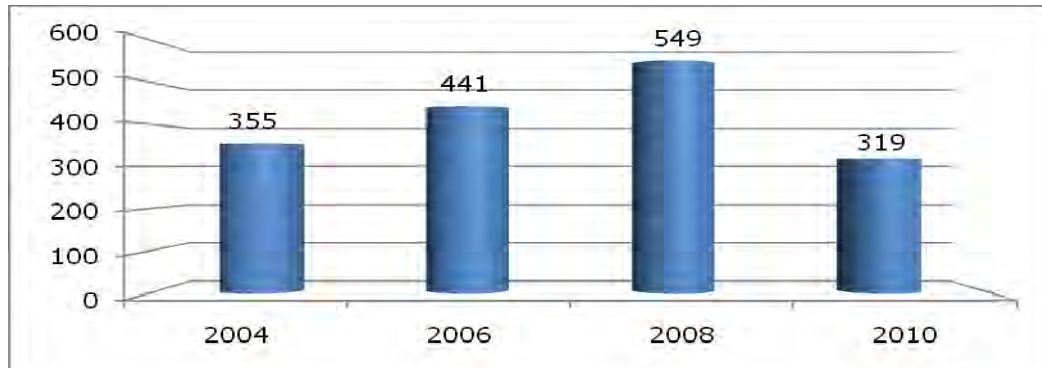
categories were divided into 0-16, 17-30, 31-54, 55-64 and 65+ and the ethnicity options were Aboriginal, Caucasian, and Other.

Once all the forms were collected, the actual results were put into an excel spreadsheet. The final results were tabulated and verified again by a second and third person to ensure accuracy.



## **SUMMARY OF 2010 COUNT RESULTS**

**Figure #1: Comparison Chart of Homeless Individuals**



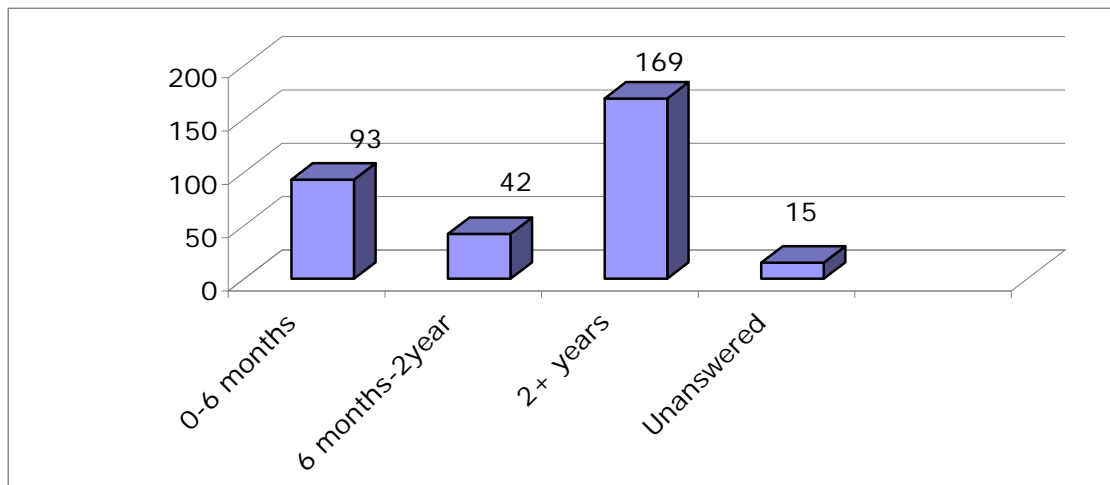
The 2010 survey results indicated that there were 319 individuals who were identified as being without a permanent residence. This reflects a 41.9% decrease since the 2008 survey was conducted. While homelessness in the community appeared to be steadily rising as indicated from the results of the 2004, 2006 and 2008 surveys, the 2010 survey reflects a statistically significant decline (41.9 %) in the homelessness population in the community of Fort McMurray.

It should be noted that in response to the question regarding children age 16 or younger staying with them, five individuals indicated they did have children with them. Three of the five individuals identified that they would have another adult with them to help care for the children. Because no other information was gathered from these individuals, it is unknown whether the three individuals who have help to care for the children are referring to the same children or if the children were independently surveyed separately from their parents.

With this unknown information, the children could not be included in the final numbers but further investigation is required as homeless families are the highest priority for obtaining housing. It is also worth noting that all individuals who indicated they were homeless were given a toque (hat) and a resource card that outlined all of the services available in the community. This would include the contact information for Wood Buffalo Housing & Development Corporation who makes it a highest priority to house families.

During the 2010 street survey, it was noted by some surveyors that several individuals who were employed as Nannies and live with their employers said they were homeless; these individuals were not counted in the final numbers. They obviously had a place to live but they did not consider it their permanent residence and so answered that they were homeless. Some of the surveyors made note of these responses on their survey forms, but it cannot be inferred that everyone did likewise.

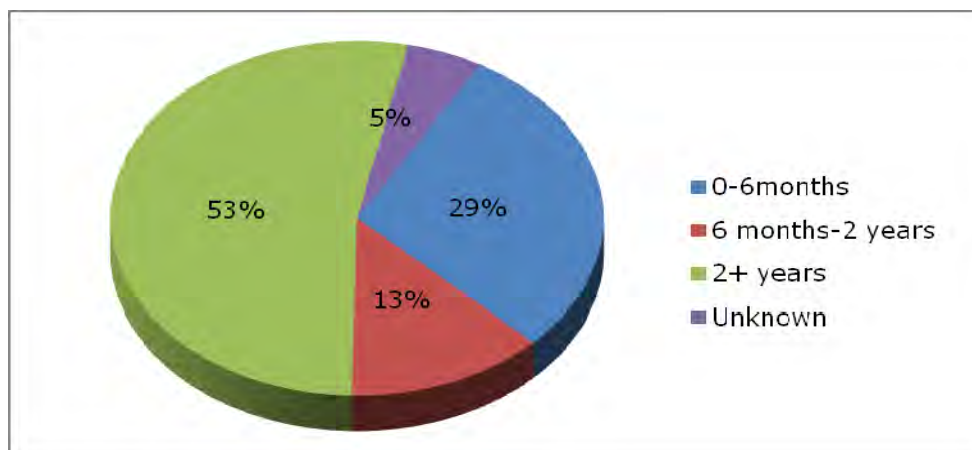
**Figure #2: Length of Time in Fort McMurray**



A question that was asked during the 2010 Survey which was not previously asked was “How long have you lived in Fort McMurray/ How long have you been homeless?” 93 people identified themselves as living in Fort McMurray for 0 – 6 months, 42 people identified themselves as living in Fort McMurray for 6 months - 2 years and 169 people identified they had lived in Fort McMurray for more than 2 years. There were 15 non-responses, so their residency here is unknown.

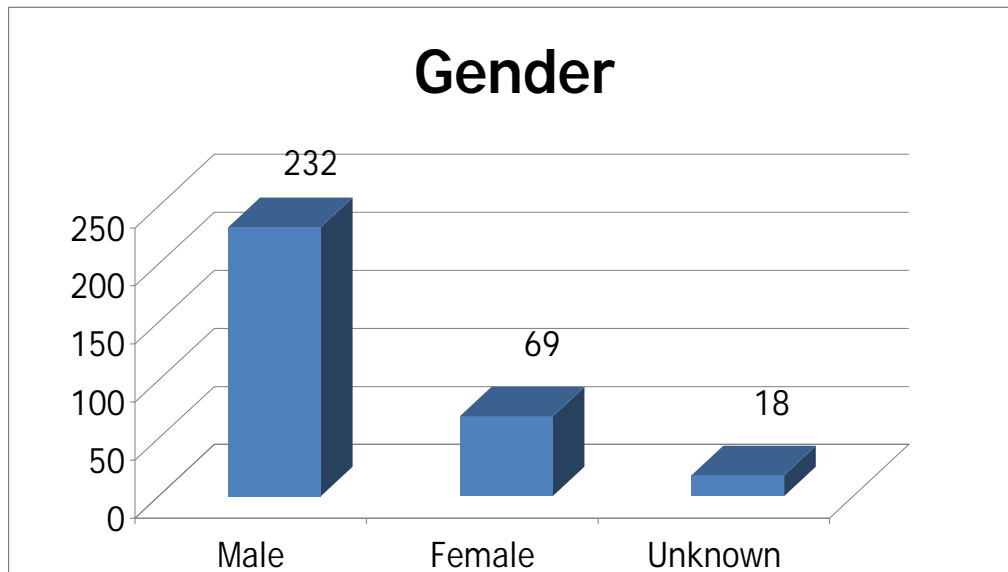
Figure #3 illustrates the percentage of time individuals identified as homeless have lived in Fort McMurray.

**Figure #3: Percentage of Length of time in Fort McMurray**



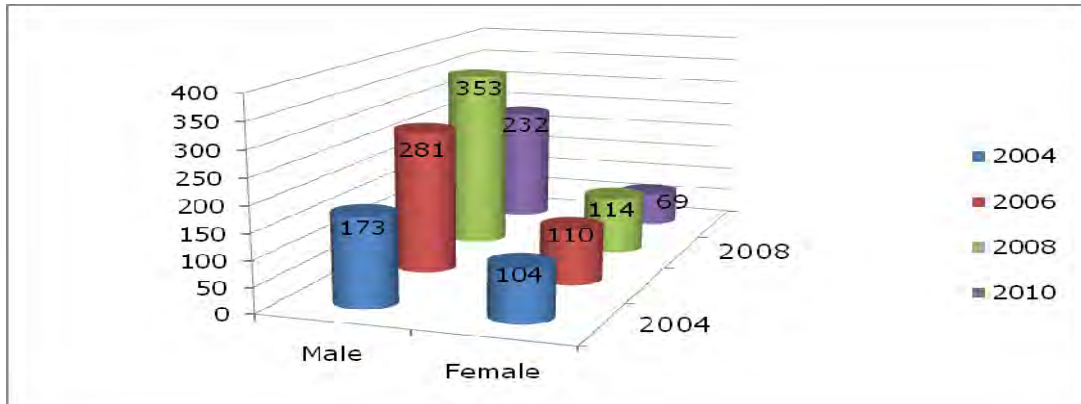
As illustrated in Figure #3, 53% of the homeless individuals have lived in Fort McMurray for more than two years. Also of interest is that 42% of those identified as homeless were not living in Fort McMurray when the last Housing Needs Count was completed.

**Figure #4: Gender of Individuals identified as Homeless**



Of the 319 people identified as being without a permanent residence to return to, 232 were male and 69 were female. 18 individuals were not identified by the surveyors as either male or female. To ensure accuracy in the calculating the percentages, the unknown numbers were not included.

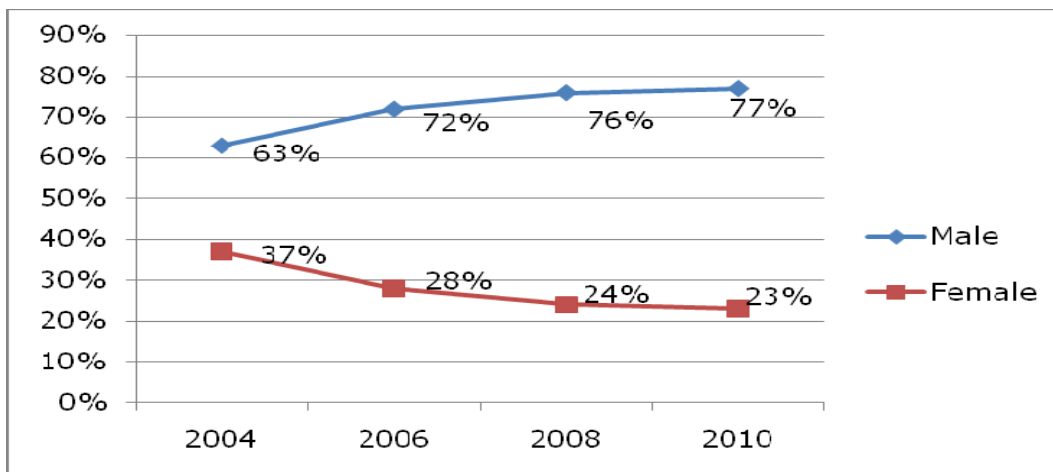
**Figure #5: Comparison of Gender by Numbers**



The chart above illustrates the changes in the numbers of males and females in the homeless population over the past four counts. In the first three counts the number of female individuals remained fairly consistent despite significant increases in the number of males recorded. In the 2010 count findings however, a significant decrease was recorded in both the male and female homeless population.

The numbers recorded reflect the actual number of individuals who identified as either male or female. The results were not included for those homeless whose gender was not recorded.

**Figure #6: Comparison of Gender by Percentages**



Of the 301 individuals who responded to this question, 77% were male and 23% were female. The above chart indicates a steady decrease in the percentage of the female homeless population, while the percentage of males steadily rises. The unknown portion of each count in the chart above was again not included.

**Figure #7: Age Categories by Number**

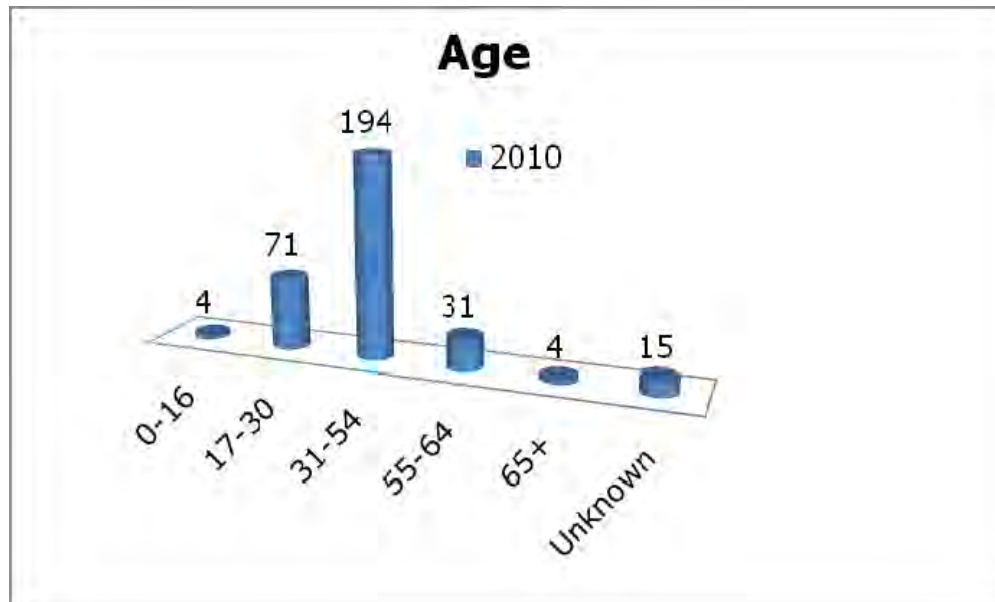
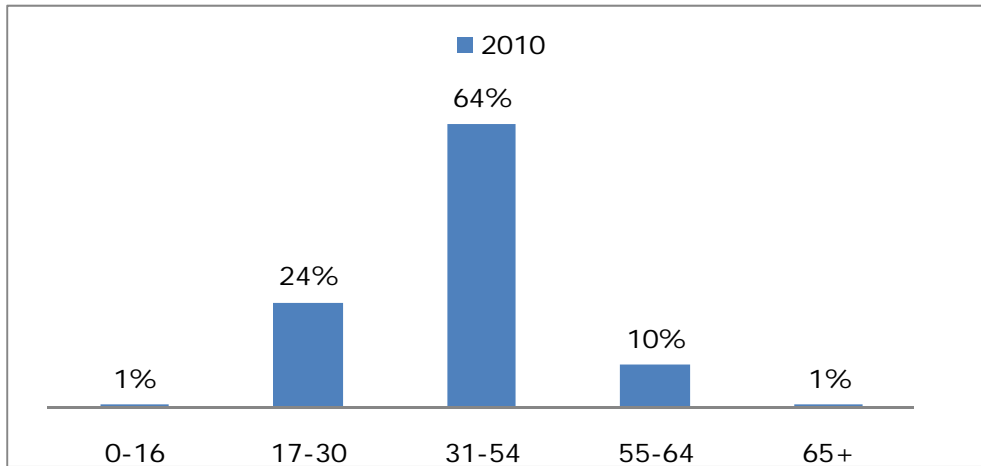


Figure #7 illustrates the numbers collected during this year's survey. It is important to note that age categories were changed for this survey from previous year's surveys in order to maintain consistency with other cities in Alberta also doing Housing Needs Counts. (Lethbridge, Edmonton, Fort McMurray).

In previous years there were four age categories, 1-17, 18-30, 31-54, and 55+. In this year's survey there were five age categories, 0-16, 17-30, 31-54, 55-64 and 65+. Because of the change in the categories, the information collected this year cannot be compared directly with previous years. However, the chart of percentages shows consistent results, in that the youngest and the oldest age categories have the fewest people.

**Figure #8: 2010 Age Categories by Percentage**



In Figure #8, the result of the information collected in 2010 is illustrated using percentages. It is interesting to note that this chart indicates 88% of the total homeless population is between the ages of 17 and 54.

**Figure #9: Comparison of Age Categories by Percentages**

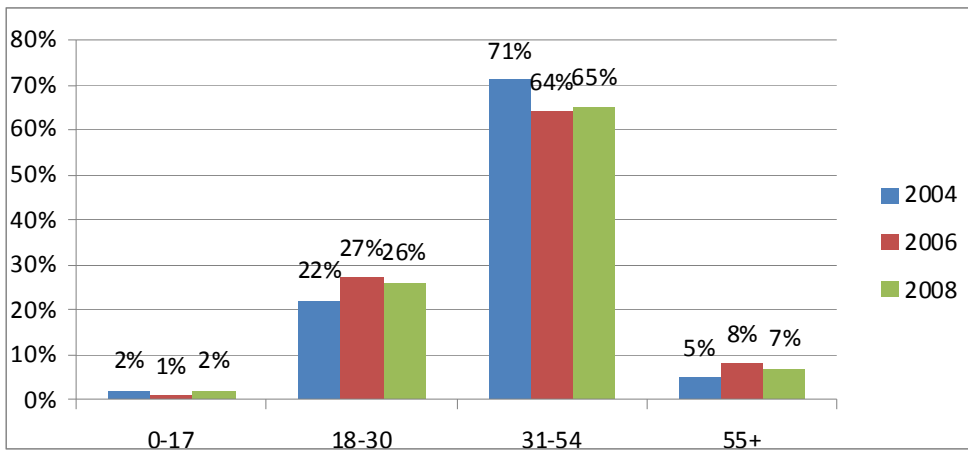
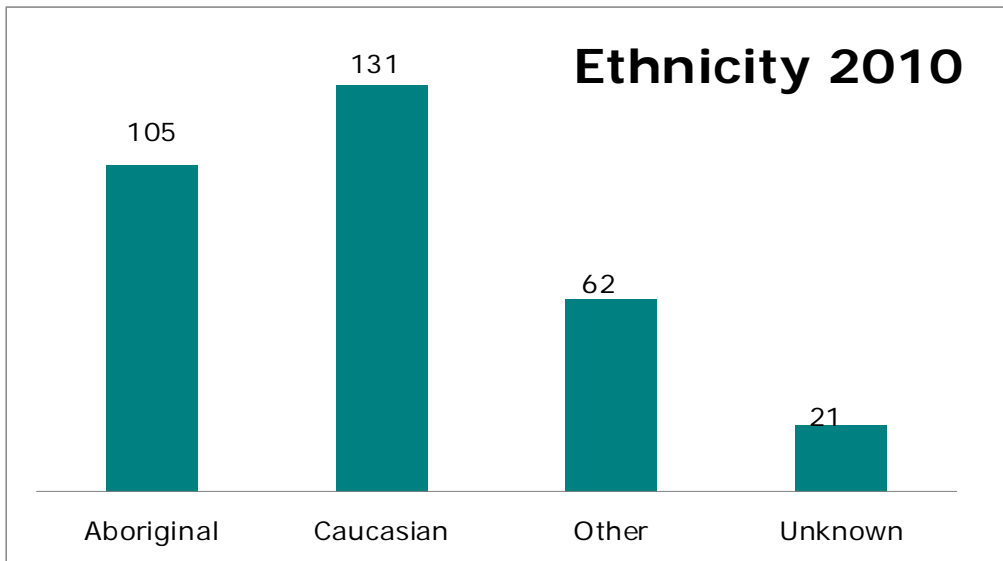


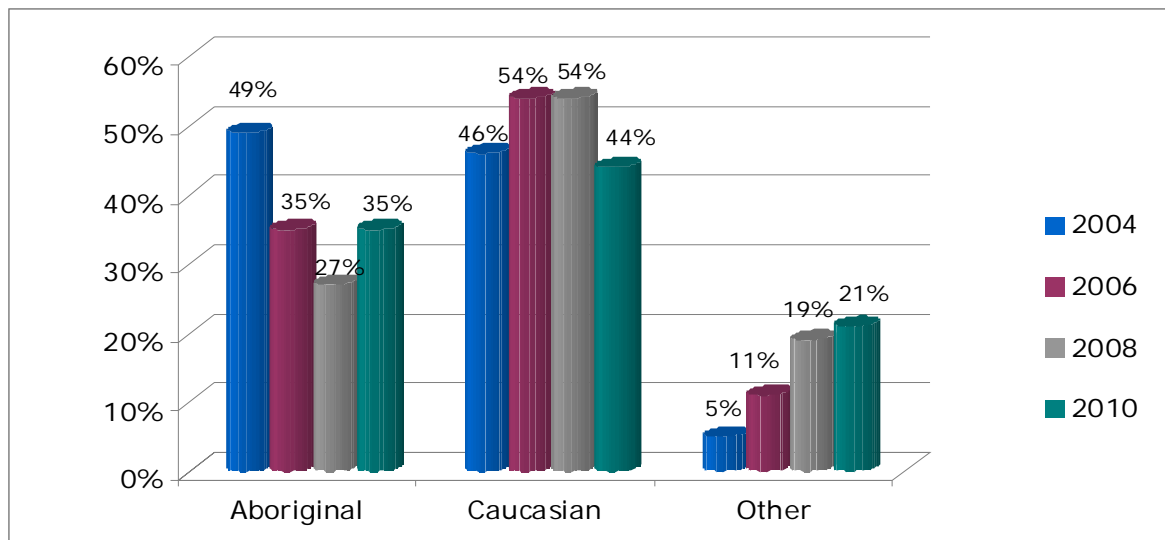
Figure #9 illustrates the comparison between the three previous surveys. Even though the categories are different, it is apparent that the trend is consistent. The age category with the highest number of individuals continues to be 31-54 which is the only consistent age category across all of the surveys. The second most common age category is the young adult group, identified in this survey as 17-30 years of age and in previous surveys as 18-30 years of age. In the counts represented here, the total percentage of those between the ages of 18-54 is more than 90% in each year. These results are still consistent with the 2010 results, even though the age categories differ slightly.

**Figure #10: Ethnicity of Individuals**



An individual's ethnicity was another one of the demographics that was recorded on the survey form. Some volunteers chose to simply record their observations regarding ethnicity while others felt comfortable in asking. How it was recorded was at the discretion of the volunteers. The choices given were to indicate whether an individual was Aboriginal, Caucasian or Other. The results of the survey are illustrated in Figure #10.

**Figure #11: Comparison of Ethnicity by Percentages**



The chart above illustrates a comparison of the ethnicity of the 2010 Survey with the results of previous years.

Of the total individuals identified, 35% were Aboriginal, 44% were Caucasian and 21% were identified as “Other”. The unknown number was subtracted from the total to determine percentage.

This chart illustrates that the number of people in the “Other” category increased by 3% with an additional 8% increase in the percentage of Aboriginal individuals. These increases were seen despite a substantial decrease in the overall number of homeless individuals. Also noteworthy is that while there was an increase in both the ‘Aboriginal’ and ‘Other’ category, there was a decrease of 10% in the Caucasian category.



The survey also posed the question regarding working at site. If individuals answered that they did work at site, they were asked where they stayed on their day off. The choices were camp, hotel, shelter, travel home or other. From the data that was recorded, it was apparent that some surveyors did not fully understand how to record the answers. Some seemed to be done correctly but others indicated where people were staying whether they worked at site or not. Therefore, the information gained from this question cannot be accurately reported.

It is evident from the information gained however, that there are individuals who work at the oil sands sites and on their days off, utilize the shelters and the mat programs. In order to determine the frequency and duration of usage by employed individuals, more research is needed before any conclusions can be made.

## **DISCUSSION**

In this year's count, there were a number of interesting trends observed that had not been seen in the past counts. First of all, to see a trend where the homeless population had decreased instead of rising at a rate of about 10% per year is most noteworthy but to see the numbers decrease by 42% in just two years is quite significant. With those kinds of statistics, one must look to factors that would possibly contribute to this trend.

Last year, the Provincial Government organized the Alberta Secretariat for Action on Homelessness to develop a plan to address Homelessness in Alberta. In March 2009, the report "A Plan for Alberta: Ending Homelessness in 10 Years" was released. This plan highlighted the Housing First approach to ending homelessness in Alberta. Its success has been rooted in the basic premise that housing should not be considered a privilege or a reward for clinical success but rather a basic human right. Essentially, an individual is housed and then the wrap around supports are provided to enable that person to maintain their housing.

With the release of the Provincial 10 year plan, all major cities were expected to complete multi-year plans to end homelessness as well. In March 2010, the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo completed its "Heading Home: The Right Thing to Do: 10 year Plan to End Homelessness, 2010-2020". Housing First was presented as the key approach to address the issue of homelessness.

Even before the release of the local 10 year plan, several homeless serving agencies started using the housing first methodology to house homeless individuals. Since the release and implementation of the local 10 year plan, momentum has increased. More

agencies have expressed an interest in the approach and other support agencies have committed to play the critical support role. Using this approach, from June 2009 until September 2010, the local agencies using the Housing First methodology have housed a combined total of 145 previously homeless individuals.

For the most part, Wood Buffalo Housing & Development Corporation has played an instrumental role in helping agencies place homeless individuals in housing. In the past, they did direct service delivery by housing individuals as well as provide them with the support necessary to maintain housing. However, they have moved away from direct service delivery and more into the landlord role. They have however, committed themselves to be a partner to those agencies that are housing individuals.

According to the Environmental Scan on rental rates completed by Mark Kay in September 2010, the cost of a 1 bedroom averages \$1666.00 and the cost of a two bedroom averages \$1980.00. It would be very difficult for an individual to afford these costs moving from the streets without a subsidy that allows them time to apply for government funding or gain employment or the skills necessary to gain employment.

Several local agencies have partnered with Wood Buffalo Housing & Development Corporation in unique ways that would allow homeless serving agencies become the landlord. When ready, Housing First clients sublet the rooms/apartments through the agency that provided them the support. Private landlords have also been engaged in the community to provide other housing options. It has been an exciting endeavour to watch individuals who have been homeless move into their own home, develop the skills necessary to remain housed, show the immense pride they feel in having their own home and then share this excitement with others.

On the day of the count, Wood Buffalo Housing & Development Corporation reported a waitlist of 201 for both social and affordable housing. Over the past year, it has been noted that there has been a shift in the clientele requiring support. The trend had always been that the greatest demand was for accommodations for single individuals. While this demand is still there, there is a trend of larger families approaching Wood Buffalo Housing & Development Corporation for two and three bedroom accommodations.<sup>1</sup>

The reduction in the numbers of homeless individuals living on the streets is no doubt in part due to the Housing First Initiative but it may also be attributed to the efforts of the RCMP in this area. RCMP officers are aware of the homeless serving agencies and encourage individuals to seek shelter and help at these facilities instead of sleeping on the streets. On occasions, the police officers will give rides to these individuals

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<sup>1</sup> Conversation with Cynthia Woodford, Director of Property Management, November 15, 2010

especially if they are disturbing the public. During the cold weather, some individuals may turn themselves in and sleep in the cells. Depending on their situation, their warrants may be processed and they would be released the following day. RCMP officers, for the most part, have built partnerships with the homeless serving agencies and are often an integral step in an individual's journey from homelessness to housed.

## **Conclusion**

2010 has been a roller coaster ride of challenges and successes. The first full year of implementing the Housing First philosophy in this community has been met with some resistance at first. Tensions have occurred as the shift in operations has taken place but tremendous success has been achieved as lives have been forever changed.

This community, led by the document "Heading Home: The Right Thing To Do", has made great strides in shifting from managing homelessness to ending it.



## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The 2010 Housing Needs Count conducted in Fort McMurray on October 7, 2010 was made possible only through the efforts of a number of volunteer agencies and individuals. Without the dedicated support of these individuals and agencies, an endeavour of this magnitude would not have been possible.

The Homelessness Initiative Strategic Committee (HISC) would like to thank the Housing Needs Count committee members for their dedication of time and commitment to seeing this project to fruition. Without the many volunteers who stood on street corners throughout downtown Fort McMurray, this would not have been possible. The agencies involved with the homeless community, as always, stepped up and did their part to ensure that as many individuals as possible were surveyed on the day of the count. And to the community of Fort McMurray, the citizens who live here and call this home, heartfelt gratitude is sent to you. You took the time to respond to the survey questions, whether housed or not, and revealed details of your situation. Special thanks are extended to Sandy Grandison of Grandison Consulting for providing research and writing as well as the verification of the final results. Without the participation of everyone involved, this project would not have been possible.

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