

Heading Home: The Right Thing To Do - 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness 2010 - 2020

HOUSING NEEDS COUNT

A comprehensive report
about the homeless population
in Wood Buffalo

2012



Acknowledgements

The Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo would like to specially recognize the essential contributions of the homeless individuals whose willingness to participate made this project possible. The Municipality also recognizes the many volunteers and service providers who contributed considerable talents and efforts in support of the 2012 Housing Needs Count.



326 people identified themselves as being homeless in Wood Buffalo on October 12, 2012. This is essentially unchanged from 2010, and remains 41% below levels experienced in 2008. This statistic highlights progress made in implementing the 10-Year Plan to End Homelessness.

2012 Housing Needs Count | Key Findings

The 2012 Housing Needs Count established the following additional information:

- Males represented 64% of identified individuals; Females represented 25.8% of identified individuals; 10.1% respondents did not report their gender.
- 34% of individuals reported they had lived in Wood Buffalo for less than six months; a 5% increase from 2010.
- 11% of individuals have been homeless in Wood Buffalo between six months and two years.
- The majority of individuals (51%) surveyed were within the 31-54 year age range.
- 32.8% of individuals surveyed were observed as being Aboriginal reflecting a slight decrease of 2.2% from 2010.
- 31.6% of individuals surveyed were observed as being Caucasian reflecting a 13.4% increase from 2010.

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Section 1 | Introduction

Homelessness is one of Canada's most serious social problems and remains prevalent with certain groups across the country.¹ Close to 300,000 experience homelessness nationwide and this number continues to increase despite Canada's growth in stature as one of the top performers of all major economies in the world.²

The Canadian Council on Social Development reported that about 1 in 4 households in Canada experience housing insecurity issues caused by the growing gap between housing costs and personal or household income.³ Emergency shelters and/or transitional housing provide vital access to services to persons in crisis, but often capture only a small fraction of those in need of permanent housing, and do not address the long-term needs of the homeless.

Communities across the country conduct comprehensive counts to estimate the magnitude and demographic profile of their homeless population. While Canada's homeless population is diverse certain subpopulations such as Aboriginal Canadians and new immigrants continue to be disproportionately represented in municipal homeless counts.⁴ Community-based strategies aimed at preventing and reducing homelessness exist at the national (Homelessness Partnering Strategy) and provincial (*A Plan for Alberta – Ending Homelessness in 10 Years*) levels of government. These strategies provide essential structures, supports and direct funding to help the homeless achieve self-sufficiency.

The Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo is on course with the implementation of *Heading Home: The Right Thing To Do – 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness 2010-2020*. Building on comprehensive feedback from the community, the Plan provides a framework for eradicating homelessness in the region. The Plan focuses on five primary goals to build community support and manage the transition to a Housing First model: education, change management, preventing homelessness, rapid re-housing, and supportive services. The Plan is based on a housing first approach where housing is viewed as a right to everyone in society. The approach is a combination of housing relocation services and provision of other supportive services that enable families to break the cycle of homelessness. Housing First facilitates long-term stability by providing formerly homeless persons considered at risk of another episode of homelessness with the support and skill building necessary to remain in permanent housing. In Wood Buffalo, Housing First service providers help homeless persons move into affordable rental housing in residential neighbourhoods as quickly as possible. By helping individuals and families rebuild their lives in permanent housing, they are given the opportunity to participate in society as members of a neighbourhood and a community.

In order to generate accurate and useful data about the local homeless population, the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo conducted its first homeless count in 2003. These biennial counts serve a number of goals, including:

- To measure changes in the magnitude and demographics of the local homeless population;
- To track progress made towards ending homelessness by 2020 as prescribed in the Municipality's 10-Year Plan to End Homelessness;
- To improve on the ability of service providers to plan, implement, and evaluate programs and services that meet the needs of the local homeless population;
- To educate the public and increase awareness of homeless issues and involve the community in implementing effective solutions.

The information presented in this report offers an updated assessment of homelessness in Wood Buffalo. Where feasible, comparisons with the 2008 and 2010 local Housing Needs Count and the 2012 Municipal Census are provided. A glossary is also provided with operational definitions for homelessness and other relevant concepts. It is hoped that by providing current statistics in various contexts, the 2012 Housing Needs Count will enhance ongoing efforts to prevent and reduce homelessness in Wood Buffalo.

Section 2 | Point-in-Time Count Methodology

The overriding purpose of the 2012 Housing Needs Count was to produce a point-in-time snapshot of the number of people in Wood Buffalo who experience homelessness. A description of the methodology and planning strategy used for the count follows.

Components of the Housing Needs Count Methodology

The point-in-time count methodology had two main components:

- the shelter count – an enumeration of sheltered homeless including those in day-time only shelters;
- the street count – an enumeration of unsheltered or absolute homeless individuals

Survey sites were selected 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 also completed at eight agency locations, five of which provide sleeping accommodations for individuals experiencing homelessness. The evening counts commenced at 6 pm and concluded at 11:59 pm. The same survey instrument was used for both the street count and the shelter count. Environment Canada reported the recorded temperature on October 12, 2012 as four degrees below the freezing point (maximum temperature was -1 degrees; minimum temperature was -4 degrees Celsius). The City also experienced its first substantial snowfall of the year on the day of the count.

Interagency Coordination and Community Involvement

Local homeless service providers, including agencies implementing housing first programs, were active and valued partners in the planning and implementation of this homeless count initiative. Volunteers were mobilized from among a number of partner institutions, including members of the Community Housing Agencies Team (CHAT). In addition, many residents of Fort McMurray turned out to support the efforts of the count.

Challenges

There a number of challenges in any non-intrusive, point-in-time, visual homeless count. In addition to inclement weather and other logistical challenges, point-in-time counts provide data relating to one day/night and may not account for seasonal variations and other variables that may cause fluctuations and compositional changes in the homeless population during the course of the year. Participation in the survey was voluntary; hence, some respondents did not complete all survey questions. Furthermore, some surveyors did not complete sections of the survey related to observed characteristics of the homeless.

Section 3 | Housing Needs Count Results

The following is an overview of the findings generated from the Housing Needs Count conducted in Wood Buffalo on October 12, 2012. The findings also include the results of surveys administered by trained volunteers.

Numbers and Trend

The primary purpose of the 2012 Housing Needs Count was to determine how many people are homeless on any given day in Wood Buffalo.

Figure 1: Homeless Count Results, 2012

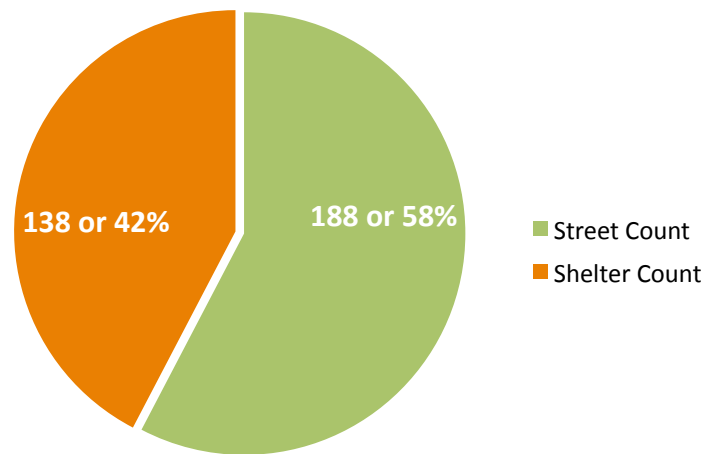


Figure 2: Total Number of Homeless Individuals Enumerated, 2010 and 2012

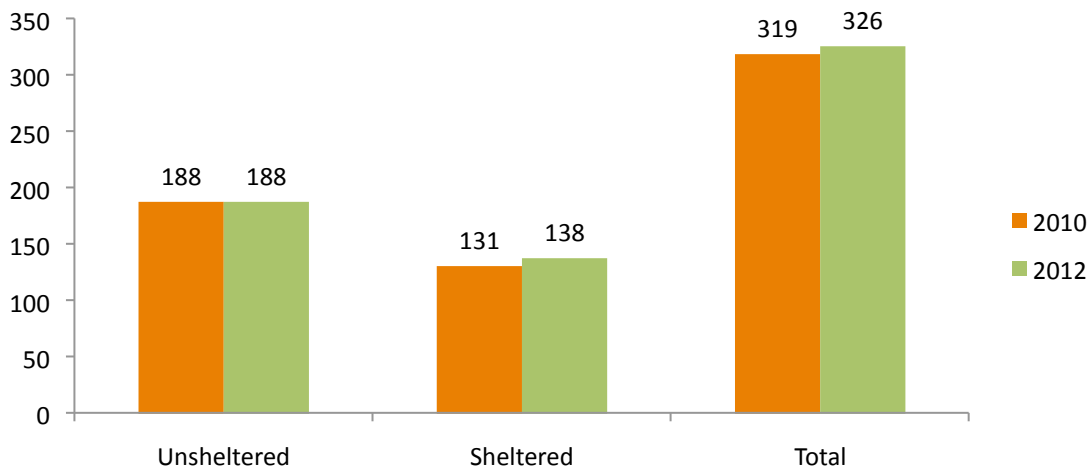


Figure 3: Homeless Count in Wood Buffalo, 2004 to 2012

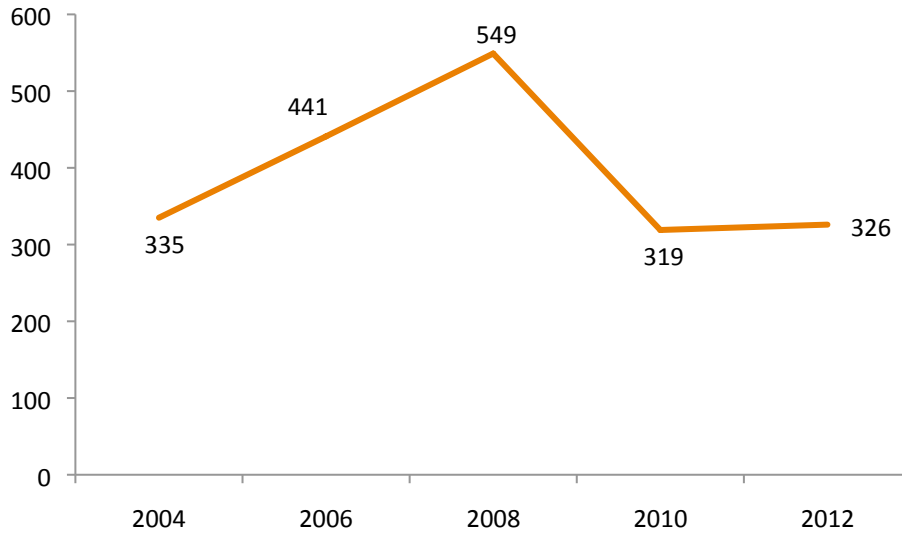


Figure 4: Average Annual Growth Rate for the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo, 2002 to 2012



On any given day in Wood Buffalo, there are an estimated 326 homeless people throughout the region. There are 188 unsheltered homeless representing 52% of the total number of homeless individuals enumerated. The largest single group of homeless individuals were adult Aboriginal men between the ages of 31 and 54. Of the unsheltered population enumerated, 58% were men and 29% women, 13% were adults of undetermined gender.

Between 2012 and 2010, the number of individuals enumerated during the homeless count increased by 7 individuals or 2% (from 319 in 2010)⁵. It is worth noting that the annual growth rate the Municipality between 2000 and 2012 is 7%.⁶ This rate of growth is higher than the average annual growth rate of Canada for the same period of time (1.1%)⁷. In the same time interval, the City of Calgary only experienced an average annual growth rate of 2.2%⁸. In recent years, the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo has embarked on comprehensive collaborative efforts to prevent and eliminate homelessness. New and expanded programs designed to meet the goals of *Heading Home: The Right Thing To Do – 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness 2010-2020* have no doubt contributed to the relative stabilization of the homeless population, even in the face of rapid population growth.

Spatial Distribution

The 2012 Housing Needs Count collected data on the spatial distribution of sheltered and unsheltered homeless individuals in Wood Buffalo. Data on the locations where the homeless individuals were enumerated is presented in the following charts.

Figure 5: Distribution of Sheltered Homeless Individuals Enumerated, 2012

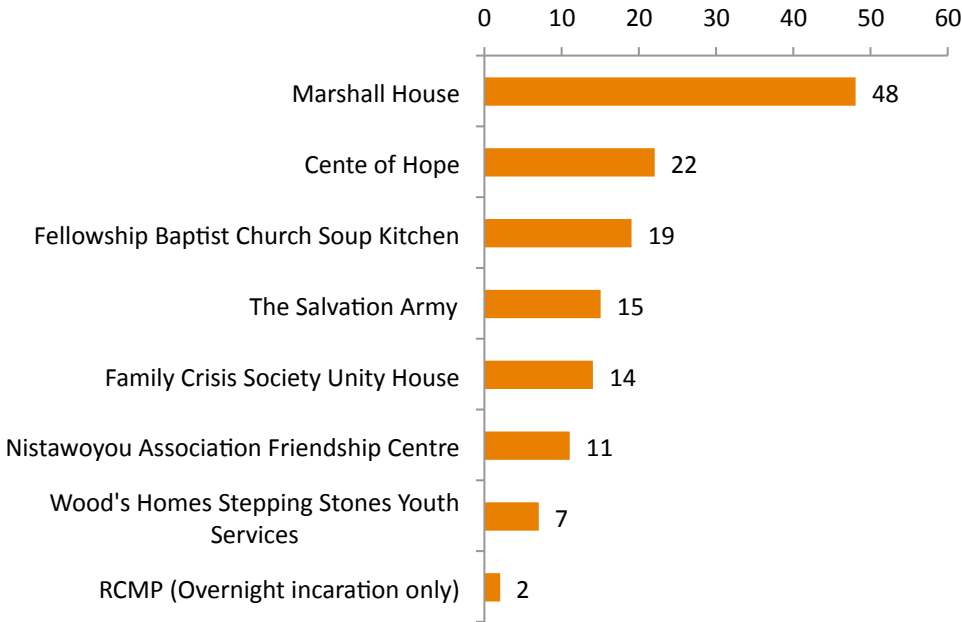
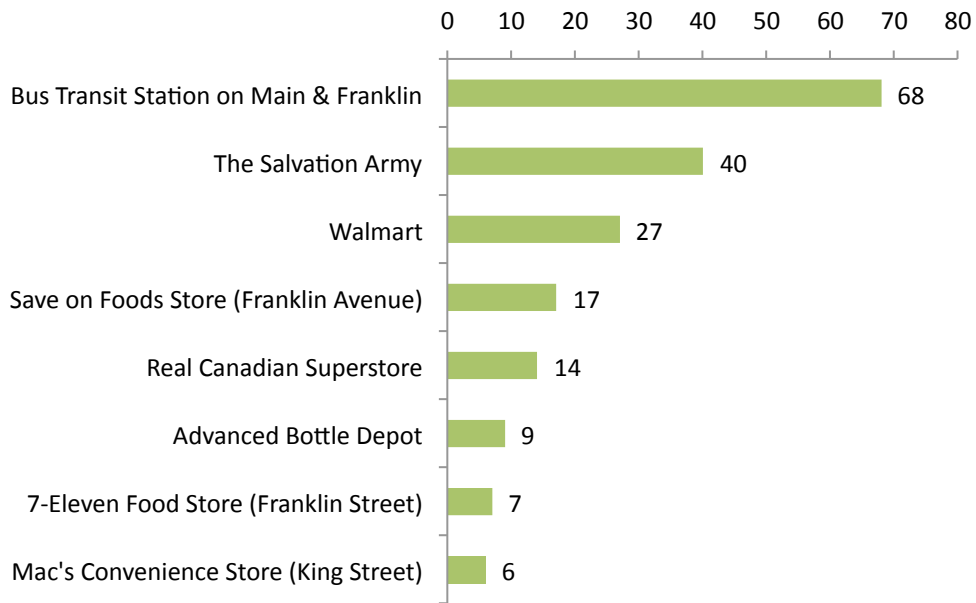


Figure 6: Distribution of Unsheltered Homeless Individuals Enumerated, 2012



Homeless individuals in Wood Buffalo are more likely to be found within the boundaries of Fort McMurray City Centre where the majority of shelter and support services are located. On the day and night of the count, the largest population of sheltered homeless individuals was in Marshall House, reporting 35% of the total from the shelter count. Conversely, the largest number of unsheltered homeless enumerated was in the vicinity of the Main & Franklin Transit Station, representing 36% of the street count total. It is important to recognize that this site is adjacent to the Salvation Army and the 7-Eleven Food Store, collectively representing 69% of the homeless individuals enumerated on the streets of Fort McMurray. This is by far the highest concentration of unsheltered homeless in the Wood Buffalo.

Section 4 | Demographic Survey Findings

In order to measure the diversity of the homeless population in Wood Buffalo, the 2012 Housing Needs Count included a survey administered by trained volunteers during the course of enumeration. Some respondents did not complete all survey questions, hence the total number of respondents for each question will not always equal the total number of homeless people enumerated.

Age

Homeless counts conducted in other cities across North America reveal a common finding – the largest age cohort of the homeless population is the 31 to 54 age range.^{9, 10, 11}

Figure 7: Homeless Age Prevalence Rates, 2012

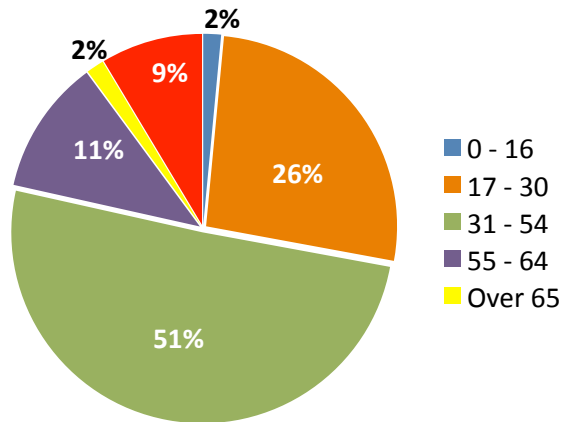
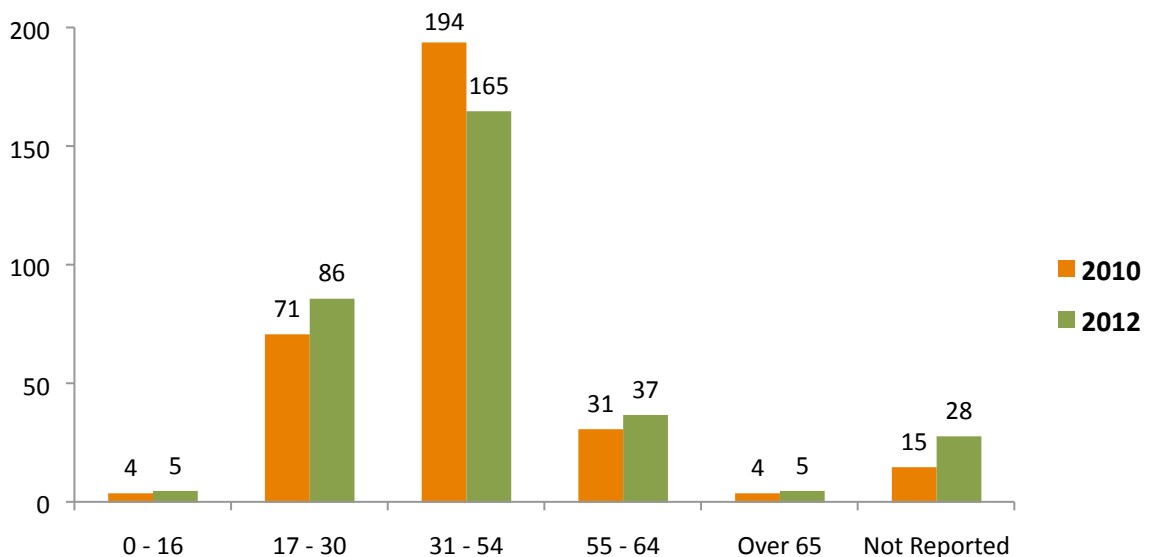


Figure 8: Homeless Age Totals, 2010 and 2012



This is also true in Wood Buffalo as well, with 51% of respondents falling within this age range. Young adults were the second most reported age range with 26% of respondents aged between 17 and 30. Wood Buffalo offers ample opportunities for residents to participate in the workforce, and this allure has resulted in an influx of individuals from rural hamlets as well as other parts of Canada and the world. The homeless age prevalence rates are consistent with the 2010 homeless count, as well as, the 2012 Municipal Census results which reflect a young urban community with an average of 31.¹² All homeless youth in the 0 to 16 age cohort were sheltered homeless enumerated at the Wood’s Homes Stepping Stones Youth Services.

Gender

Males are over-represented in the homeless population, a finding supported by baseline data from previous local counts as well as homeless count data from other communities.

Figure 9: Homeless Gender Prevalence Rates, 2012

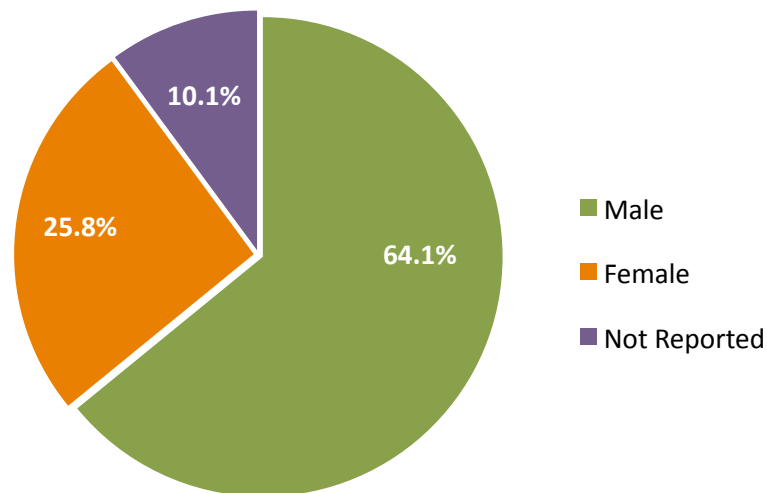
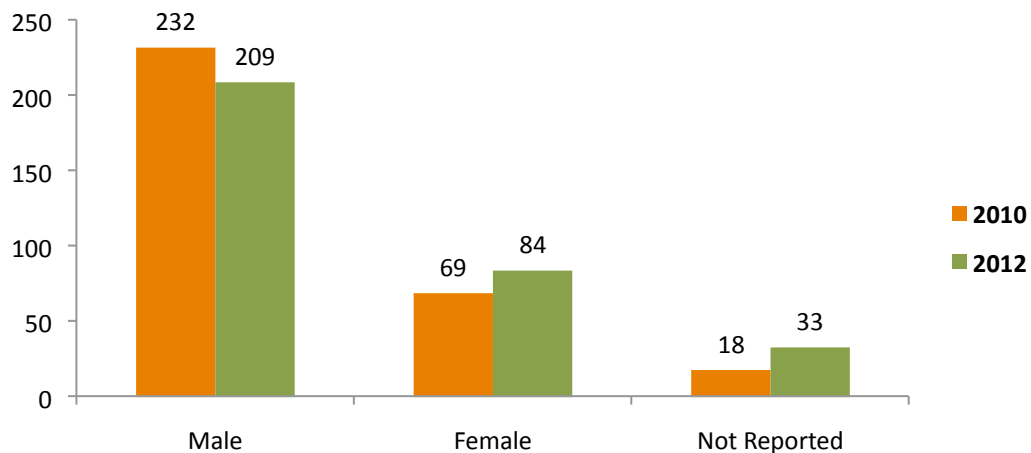


Figure 10: Homeless Gender Totals, 2010 and 2012



An estimated two-thirds of the total number of homeless persons in Wood Buffalo were males and less than one-third females. Surveyors were unable to determine the gender of 13% of the respondents, which may have undervalued the gender gap in the local homeless population. The gender gap was even wider (close to three-quarters) for the sheltered homeless, with service providers reporting 73% of their clients were males. The 2012 Municipal Census results reveal a wider gender gap in Wood Buffalo compared to other municipalities in Canada. Men make up 57% to 64% of the entire urban population, a finding supported by the demographics from oils sands work camps that reveal an even wider gender gap.

Ethnicity

Across the country Aboriginals and other visible minorities like new immigrants are increasingly overrepresented in homeless populations. This trend supports the need for specialized programs targeting specific subpopulations of the homeless.

Figure 11: Homeless Ethnicity Prevalence Rates, 2012

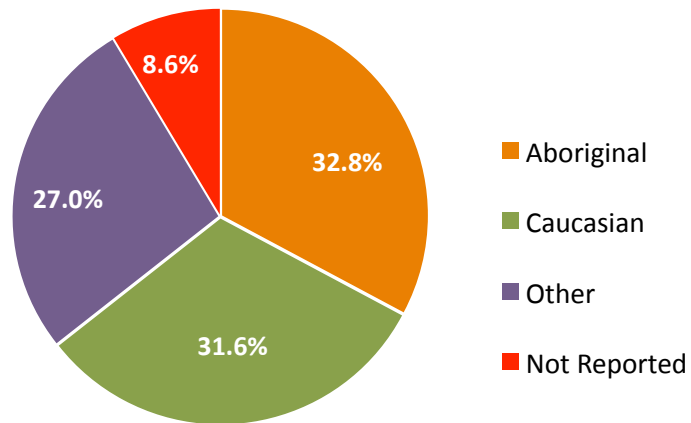
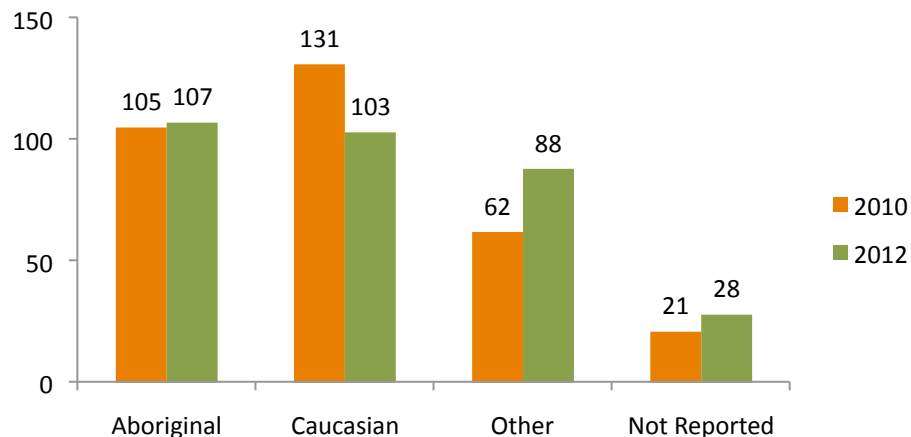


Figure 12: Homeless Ethnicity Totals, 2010 and 2012



The Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo includes within its boundaries rural and/or aboriginal communities such as Anzac, Janvier, Conklin, Fort Chipewyan and Fort McKay. In addition, the Municipality is also home to the reserves and traditional lands of five First Nations and seven Metis Locals. Increased investment in the Oil Sands industry is a catalyst for a rural-urban shift with some rural and aboriginal residents moving to the urban centre to access economic and social opportunities. The 2012 homeless count results indicate a relative stabilization in the aboriginal homeless population, with 32% of the respondents enumerated. There was a decrease in the Caucasian homeless population from 131 in 2010 to 103 in 2011. Whereas the findings show an equal proportion of aboriginal and Caucasian individuals, there was an increase in number of other visible minority respondents. The need to cater for this subpopulation was identified through the Housing First program and a targeted program for new immigrants is now being implemented by the Fort McMurray YMCA.

Length of Residency

The need for collaborative efforts to prevent and end homelessness is dire when one considers the fact that a lot of homeless individuals find it very difficult to navigate out of homelessness on their own. For too many, their first homeless experience can last a long time without access to supportive programs and services.

Figure 13: Prevalence Rates of Respondents' Length of Stay in Wood Buffalo, 2012

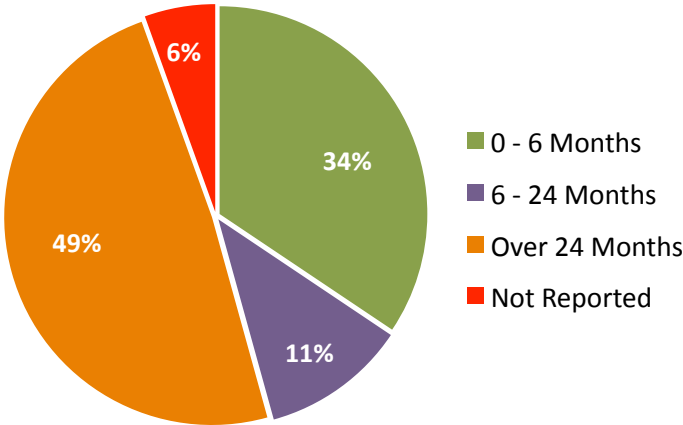
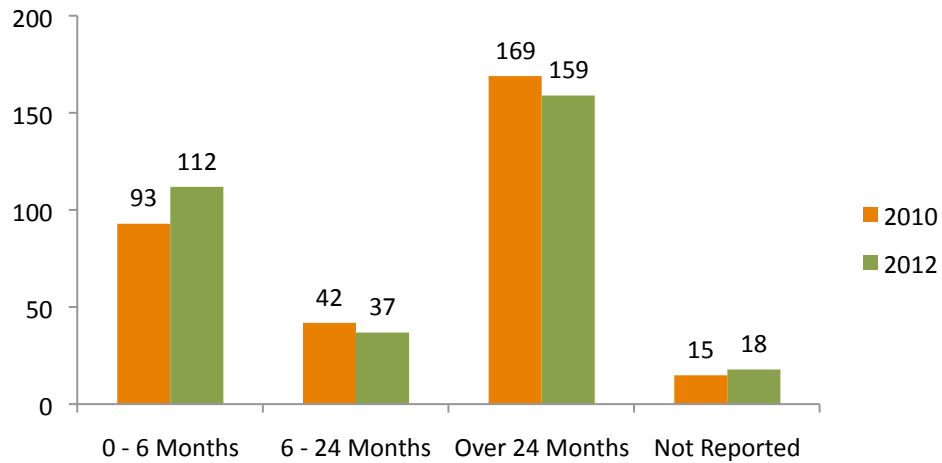


Figure 14: Length of Time Respondents Have Lived in Wood Buffalo, 2010 and 2012



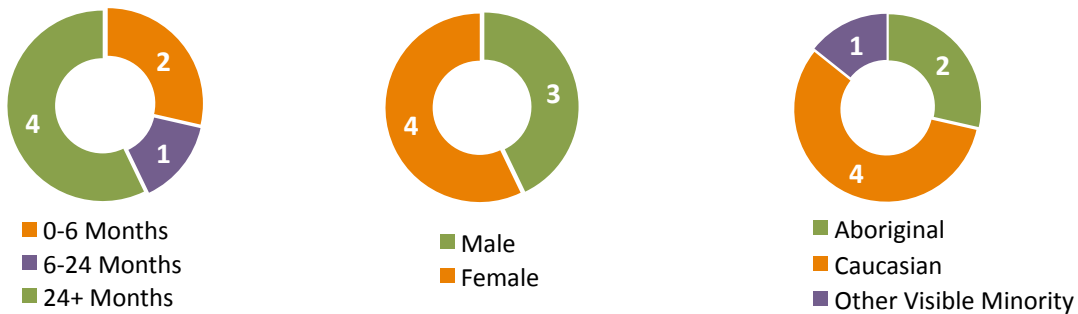
An estimated half of the homeless individuals in Wood Buffalo have lived in the region for over two years, while 34% were relative newcomers to the region, having taken up residence less than 6 months before the count was conducted. This finding is consistent with 2010 data and continues to highlight the need for targeted services and programs that cater for the unique needs of vulnerable newcomers to the local community. The finding also highlights the high rate of chronic homelessness amongst the homeless population. Managing chronic homelessness can be challenging and requires a systemic approach to deal with contributory factors like mental illness and addictions. The public incurs significant costs in dealing with the chronically homeless, hence the focus of *Heading Home: The Right Thing To Do – 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness 2010-2020* on providing permanent housing, wrap around support services including reducing financial instability while promoting improved health and wellbeing.

Section 5 | Summary of Subpopulation Demographics

Results below provide information on the demographics and compositions of three homeless subpopulations. The 2012 homeless count represents the first time information has been collected about veterans. Note that all youth were sheltered homeless and all veterans and seniors enumerated were adult men.

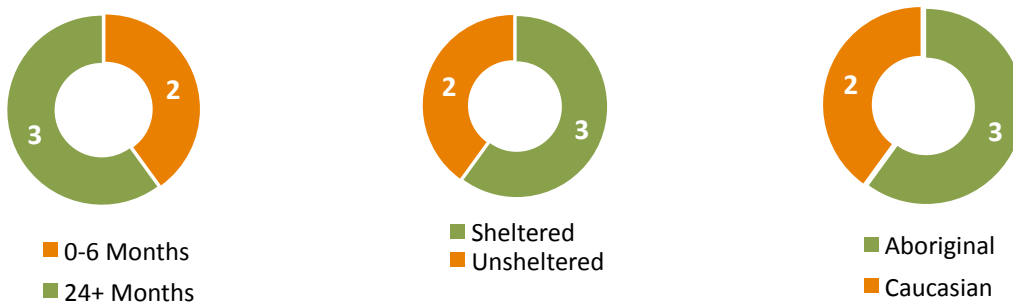
Youth

Figure 15: Youth Length of Residency, Gender and Ethnicity Totals, 2012



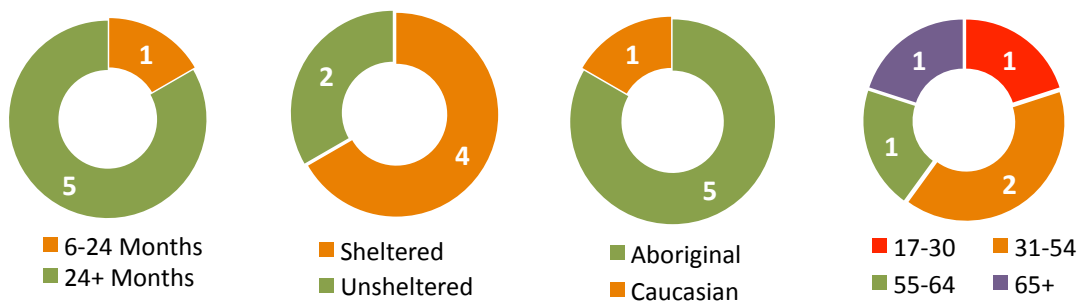
Seniors

Figure 16: Seniors Length of Residency, Location and Ethnicity Totals, 2012



Veterans

Figure 17: Veterans' Length of Residency, Location, Ethnicity and Age Totals, 2012



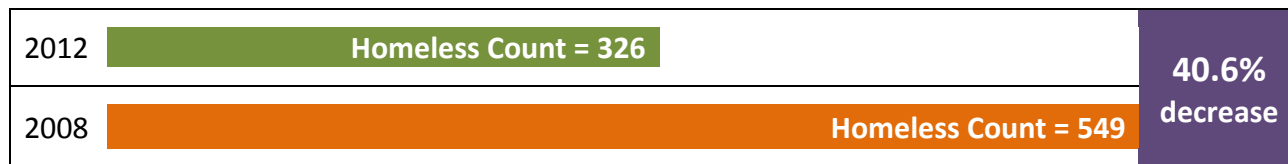
Section 6 | Ending Homelessness in Wood Buffalo

The relatively stable size of the homeless population in Wood Buffalo should not obscure the fact that many individual lives have been changed for the better through the implementation of Wood Buffalo's 10-Year Plan to End Homelessness. The results of the 2012 count should be considered within the context of local efforts to move individuals and families out of homelessness, through the provision of housing and support services.

Wood Buffalo's point-in-time Housing Needs Count for 2012 was conducted at a time when the region was experiencing changes in its demographic size and composition. The size of the regional population (74,000) had increased at an average annual growth rate of 7% since the last biennial homeless count in 2010. Growth projections in the Municipal Development Plan point to a projected increase in the regional population to 174,000 by 2020. The implication here is that the regional population is expected to double in size as implementation of *Heading Home: The Right Thing To Do – 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness 2010-2020* comes to an end.

The results of the 2012 homeless count give cause for hope that the Municipality is on course to achieve the outcomes set out in its homelessness reduction plan. Though the count registered a slight increase in the homeless population, this should not detract from the exceptional progress that has been made in addressing issues of homelessness in Fort McMurray. Within an economically attractive urban centre like Fort McMurray, several variables impact the size and composition of the homeless population. The absence of family and friends to provide a support network could increase a newcomer's vulnerability leading to homelessness. An alarming 34% of homeless individuals had lived in Fort McMurray for less than 6 months before experiencing homelessness. Several barriers prevent homeless persons from getting back into affordable and appropriate housing including the shortage of affordable housing; poor credit and eviction histories; lack of access to funding for security deposits for rental housing and utility services; and, unemployment; and, a poor credit history. In addition, homeless persons may suffer from a history of mental illness, domestic and/or substance abuse that make it even more difficult to break the cycle of homelessness.

It is important to consider the results of the 2012 Housing Needs Count within the context of the Housing First program and other initiatives that provide linkages to permanent housing, support services to retain housing, and coordination of community-based resources for the homeless. It is only within the context of such community-based collaborative efforts that an explanation can be provided for the changes depicted below.



Conclusion

The Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo has made great progress in implementing new and effective programs over the last couple of years. The information included in this report illustrates the magnitude and complexity of the challenges in ending homelessness in Wood Buffalo by 2020. The 2012 Housing Needs Count provides valuable information specific to the current magnitude and demographics of those who continue to live in the streets and local shelters of Wood Buffalo. The data contained in this report is intended to assist local efforts in implementing *Heading Home: The Right Thing To Do – 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness 2010-2020*. Service providers will use this data to better plan and deliver the programs and services necessary to see reductions in these numbers over time. The Homeless Initiatives Strategic Committee remains committed to steering its efforts towards the provision of innovative and creative housing programs and support services in order to end homelessness in Wood Buffalo.

For more information and to access additional material on homelessness in Wood Buffalo, please visit www.woodbuffalo.ab.ca.

Glossary

7 Cities: The 7 Cities on Housing and Homelessness (7 Cities) is a collaborative forum comprised of representation from each the 7 major urban cities in Alberta. The overall purpose of the 7 Cities is to provide a forum and collective voice to address issues of common interest and concern in the implementation of individual community plans to end homelessness in Alberta. The 7 Cities also provides a forum for dialogue with the federal and provincial representatives on housing and homelessness.

Absolute Homeless: Individuals and families who have no housing alternatives and live in places not intended for human habitation.

CHAT: Community Housing Agency Team- team of agency representatives that directly deal with the homeless in the community of Fort McMurray.

Emergency Shelter: Temporary accommodations for individuals experiencing homelessness.

HISC: Homelessness Initiative Strategic Committee – a group of community leaders and funders who meet monthly to advocate for the ending of homelessness in this region.

Homelessness: A complex problem that results from a number of complicated issues. Each homeless individual or family has a unique set of circumstances that contributed to their homelessness.

Housing First: A program where permanent housing is provided along with support services. Providing support services helps formerly homeless people maintain their housing over the long term.

Permanent Residence: A safe housing option meant for human habitation.

Point-in-Time Count: A one day snapshot of homelessness that captures numbers and basic demographics of individuals staying in emergency shelters, short term housing, jails, hospitals and on the streets. This does not measure the full picture of homelessness.

Sheltered homeless: Individuals and families who are living in temporary emergency accommodations or condemned housing and do not have a permanent place to live. Also includes individuals using day-time only shelters with that do not provide accommodation services.

Transitional Housing: A secure living environment where an individual can receive assistance and practice life skills before living independently.

Endnotes

Secondary Sources, Reports, News Media

- ¹ Laird, Gordon (2007). "Shelter-Homelessness in a growth economy: Canada's 21st century paradox." A Report for the Sheldon Chumir Foundation for Ethics in Leadership.
- ² "Homelessness," The Globe and Mail, June 12, 2006; National Housing and Homeless Network, 2007.
- ³ "Almost 3 million households paying more than they can afford for housing," Canadian Council on Social Development (CCSD), January 30, 2007, www.ccsd.ca.
- ⁴ "Homelessness," The Globe and Mail, June 12, 2006; National Housing and Homeless Network, 2007.
- ⁵ 2010 Housing Needs Count Report, Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo.
- ⁶ Census 2012, Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo.
- ⁷ Statistics Canada, 2001 and 2011.
- ⁸ 2012 Civic Census Results, City of Calgary.
- ⁹ 2011 San Francisco Homeless Point-in-Time Count and Survey.
- ¹⁰ 2011 Greater Los Angeles Homeless Count.
- ¹¹ Tubbs, Rebecca (2008). Continuing and Shifting Patterns in Nanaimo's Homeless Population: Based on the September 2008 Homeless Count.
- ¹² Census 2012, Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo.

