



# **Whitecourt**

## **2020 Rural Housing and Service Needs Estimation Project**

Community Report

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# About This Report

This project is funded in part by the Government of Canada’s Reaching Home: Canada’s Homelessness Strategy. The opinions and interpretations in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Government of Canada.

The Rural Development Network recognizes that the 2020 Rural Housing and Service Needs Estimation Project took place on the traditional territories of Treaty 6, Treaty 7, and Treaty 8.

Whitecourt’s Estimation Count occurred on Treaty 8 territory, the ancestral home of the Cree, Dene, as well as the Métis. We acknowledge and thank the diverse Indigenous peoples whose footsteps have marked these territories for centuries. The RDN also recognizes the direct connection between homelessness and colonization<sup>1</sup>, and it is our hope that this project provides one small step towards righting wrongs.

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# Acknowledgement

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## List of partner organizations

Alberta works

Lorne's Blanket transitional home

Primary care network

Probations office

Tennille's Hope soup kitchen

Victim services

Wellspings womens shelter

Whitecourt food bank

This report and the information within was made possible through the efforts of many dedicated individuals and groups. We wish to thank the front line staff at participating service agencies across Whitecourt and partnering regions for their tireless efforts during this challenging time.

# Executive Summary

## **In October 2020, services agencies within Whitecourt participated in a large-scale effort to estimate housing and service needs across 24 rural communities in the province**

Funded by Reaching Home, the Government of Canada's official homelessness strategy, the Rural Housing and Service Needs Estimation Project (Estimations' Project) was led by the Rural Development Network following the methodology outlined in the "Step-by-Step Guide to Estimating Rural Homelessness".

This project was an opportunity to better understand the needs of existing residents, as well as complement and improve official data for Whitecourt. This year's estimations' project built on robust refinements from the pioneer project in 2018 that allowed service agencies to better connect and listen to the needs of Whitecourt's residents. Collecting data during this period -where physical access to local establishments have been severely limited/affected by a global pandemic - offers a unique opportunity to examine how residents' needs are exacerbated during a time of crisis, as well as measuring the gaps that arose in Whitecourt's services and responses.

The Soaring Eagle Support Society connected with local community organizations to prepare and coordinate their local count. Service agencies were instructed to invite individuals who visited their agency during a consecutive 30-day period to fill out a 30-question survey.

Surveys were intended to gather a holistic view of the interlocking needs that affect an individual's ability to access/maintain safe, stable housing, which includes their ability to access proper services and resources within the community.

Whitecourt's data was collected through paper and online surveys, where respondents had the choice to complete the survey by themselves, with assistance from staff, or on their own time with the use of online access codes. Collected surveys were examined and analyzed for duplicates and errors by RDN analysts to ensure data integrity and validity. Data was then compiled, reviewed, and consolidated in the final findings outlined in this report.

**Out of 23 people surveyed, 14 (54.9%) were found to be living in situations defined as homeless or 'housing-insecure'.**

**Housing-insecure respondents identified 5 dependents and 11 adults that live with them. In total, there are 30 individuals within Whitecourt and partnering municipalities that either live in insecure housing conditions, or share the same living situation.**

The most common factors affecting respondents' current living situation were: a lack of money, mental health struggles, struggles with addictions/substance use, unaffordable rent or mortgage payments, and a lack of transportation options.

This report breaks down the places of residence, services needed, demographics, housing, employment, and income sources of those experiencing housing insecurity or homelessness. This report also provides a qualitative sample of feedback from those most vulnerable within the community.

**“In many instances, there are discrepancies between what people need or want, what service providers can offer and what the provincial or local governments can afford or support as best practices.”**

-Marybeth Shinn,  
International Homelessness:  
Policy, Socio-Cultural, and Individual Perspectives<sup>3</sup>

# Definitions

**“Homelessness** describes the **situation** of an individual, family or community **without** stable, safe, permanent, appropriate **housing, or the immediate** prospect, means and **ability of acquiring it.**

It is the **result of systemic or societal barriers, a lack of** affordable and appropriate **housing,** the individual/household’s **financial, mental, cognitive, behavioural or physical challenges,** and/or **racism and discrimination.**

**Most people do not choose to be homeless,** and the experience is generally negative, unpleasant, unhealthy, unsafe, stressful and distressing.”

-Canadian Definition of Homelessness,  
Canadian Observatory on Homelessness<sup>4</sup>

**Q11.** Thinking about your living situation **this past month**, which of these statements apply to you? (Check all that apply)

- I own the house I'm currently in
- I rent the apartment I'm currently in
- I live in accommodations provided by my employer
- I live in a house that is owned by/rented out by the Band
- I share a house/apartment with roommates
- I live in a house/apartment that I share with family/dependents
- I find it difficult to pay rent and I feel like I spend more than a third of my monthly income on my housing
- I live in housing that needs major repairs (heating or plumbing problems, mould, leaky roof, etc.)
- There are not enough rooms for the number of people in the house I'm in
- I lived in supported housing (e.g. Housing First)
- I stayed in a medical/detox/rehabilitation facility
- I slept in a friend's/family's house because I had no other place to stay
- I stayed in a jail / prison/ remand centre
- I stayed at a women's / domestic violence shelter
- I stayed with someone I didn't know because I had no other place to stay
- I slept in a shelter
- I slept in a makeshift shelter, vehicle, tent, or shack
- I slept in a public space (sidewalks, park benches, bus shelter etc.)

*Figure 1: table used in 2020 questionnaire to determine respondents' housing security. Refer to Appendix A for full questionnaire.*

The accompanying typology<sup>2</sup> identifies a range of housing and shelter circumstances:

## Provisionally Accommodated

People who are homeless whose accommodation is temporary or lacks security of tenure, including interim (or transitional) housing, people living temporarily with others (couch surfing), or living in institutional contexts (hospital, prison) without permanent housing arrangements.

## At Risk of Homelessness

People who are not homeless, but whose current economic and/or housing situation is precarious or does not meet public health and safety standards.

## Emergency Sheltered

Staying in overnight emergency shelters designed for people who are homeless

## Unsheltered

Living on the streets or in places not intended for human habitation

# Background

When it comes to homelessness and understanding its causes, the urban experience tends to dominate the conversation due to the “visibility” of individuals experiencing homelessness. The issue of homelessness within rural and remote areas is far less understood or even acknowledged by the wider public because of its “hidden” nature. Individuals experiencing housing insecurity in rural and remote communities are more likely to couch surf, live in overcrowded housing, or own/rent housing that may need major repairs—often leveraging the relationships around them in for support.

RDN initially developed the Step-by-Step Guide to Estimating Rural Homelessness due to the lack of available, accurate, and current data on rural homelessness. This limits the ability of rural communities to advocate for better resources for their residents in greatest need. The guide is unique in that it tackles the issue of housing insecurity and homelessness from a rural perspective, and recognizes the difficulties that come with conducting standard Point-in-Time (PiT) counts in rural and remote areas.

This tool allows for anyone, including small nonprofits and local front-line agencies, to gather data on gaps in local housing and service needs and has been instrumental in helping rural communities gather credible evidence on homelessness to subsequently improve the kind of services offered within the community.

## Methodology & Data Collection

The methodology employed in this Housing and Service Needs Estimate is a modified version of that found in the Step-by-Step Guide to Estimating Rural Homelessness, published by the Rural Development Network. Methods

for estimating homelessness and housing insecurity in urban centres are not suited to rural and remote ones. Conducting traditional Point-in-Time counts over larger swaths of service area is not always feasible for already under-staffed/-resourced community agencies. This inability to participate in PiT counts translates to no data, which translates into no need within the community. When there is no tangible data, rural and remote communities can't advocate to address service gaps or for an increase in funding.

The model used in this project allows for a variety of service agencies to offer questionnaires to clients in places they already visit and know. This approach leverages existing infrastructure (service agencies such as FCSS, libraries, Friendship Centres, churches, food banks etc.) within the community as opposed to devoting resources to scour the town core for visibly unsheltered individuals. Due to the sensitivity and the associated stigma surrounding homelessness and housing issues, this method relies on the relationships that service providers have established and cultivated over time with their clients to ensure respondents feel comfortable and safe at all times during the survey process.

The current survey was developed in accordance with the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness' definition of homelessness. However, rather than using the term "homelessness", the survey was advertised as a better way to understand the housing and support services needed within the community. This builds off feedback from multiple service providers that are committed to minimizing stigma that could cause distress to their clients. By re-framing the language of the survey, service providers were able to encourage all clients to participate, instead of pointedly targeting certain individuals.

In relation to stigma, previous findings suggest that clients are often reluctant to label themselves as homeless or housing-insecure. For this project, respondents were asked whether they consider their living conditions to be secure, AND to fill out checkboxes that determine their objective housing

situation. Subsequent data analysis would determine – based on responses to the latter survey question – which respondents were housing-insecure. As we see in the results, some individuals who don't consider themselves to be either homeless or at-risk actually qualify based on national definitions of homelessness. The majority of the report focuses on the responses of individuals who were living in objectively housing-insecure conditions. Insecure housing.

**Insecure Housing is when a person experiences difficulty paying rent, spends a major portion of the household income on housing, frequently moves, lives in overcrowded conditions, or doubles up with friends and relatives.**

Before the survey period began, RDN provided orientation and training sessions to the Lead Coordinator, and staff at the participating agencies. Emphasis during training was placed on clarifying survey terms, ensuring respondents' confidentiality and privacy, and securing their informed consent. During these training sessions, resources were provided to improve outreach for both community members and potential agency partners, while promoting the benefits of understanding the need of clients. Training also covered various ways to administer the survey in an open, non-intrusive manner, placing extra consideration for meeting individuals' reasons for visiting the service agency before offering the survey.

This report consists of an overview of the primary data collected through social service agencies in Whitecourt from October 1st to the 31st 2020. The lead coordinator for the project was the Soaring Eagle Support Society. After recruitment of participating agencies, the Rural Development Network provided virtual training for those who would be delivering the survey. Two versions of the survey were provided for distribution: a paper version which could be filled out on location, and an online version which could be filled out on location, or accessed with an access code later on.

Regardless of the version of survey completed (paper or online) respondents were each assigned a unique ID. This ID is composed of initials derived from respondents' name and birthdate, scrambled in a certain order to maintain confidentiality. This ensures that if the respondent took the same survey at a later date, the data would show further need by the individual without inflating the number of respondents.

A note about youth participation: service agencies were instructed to limit survey administration to individuals 14 years of age or older. In compliance with the consent and confidentiality guidelines of the Alberta College of Social Workers, individuals under 14 years of age were required to secure guardian's approval prior to participation.

## **Limitations**

Despite our best attempts to reduce stigma and increase accessibility of the survey, not all clients who entered participating agencies chose to take the survey. The survey was voluntary, and accessing services was not contingent on their participation. There remains a portion of clients whose voices were not captured.

Additionally, not every individual requiring help may have entered a participating service agency during the designated 30-day collection period,

despite advertising efforts leading up to the survey. Some service agencies may not have been able to fully participate, given the urgency of the services they provide and the length of time required to complete the survey. As a result, although trends and highlights of the data are very informative, this report presents a conservative picture of the service needs and housing insecurity in the community as a whole.

The data found in this report is survey data. There are no significance values, p-values, tests, or inferential statistics of any sort within this report. It is therefore not RDN's intention with this report to:

- Guarantee that the data provides a complete or all-encompassing depiction of housing instability and service needs within the region;
- Provide any interpretations of the data contained herein;
- Make any recommendations for policy changes or actions to be taken as a result of this data;
- Make any stake/claim about government policies, corporate actions, or externalities.

However, we encourage individual community members and local community leaders to use this data to inform their own conclusions and policies, and to determine how to best make use of this information. RDN assumes no responsibility or liability for any changes, decisions, or actions made as a result of the interpretation of data outlined in this report.

Finally, it's important to note that due to exclusion of non-responses and skipped questions, subtotals and percentages may not exactly reflect absolute totals. A copy of the actual paper survey used in this project can be found at [ruraldevelopment.ca](http://ruraldevelopment.ca).

# Survey Results

Across the participating agencies, 23 people were surveyed. Of those, 16 completed paper surveys, and 7 responded through an online survey. A copy of the survey questions used can be found on [ruraldevelopment.ca](http://ruraldevelopment.ca).

## Support Services

The results in this section outline results for all respondents who completed a survey, regardless of their housing security. This was done to capture overall service needs of clients within the County and partnering municipalities that participated in this year's Rural Housing and Service Needs Estimation project.

All survey respondents (n= 23) were asked about where they most often sought services, and what kind of services they needed most often during their visits to local service providers.

Figure 1 shows the responses, weighted by frequency, to the question "In which community do you most often seek services? Primarily respondents sought services in Whitecourt however many of the surrounding communities were included.



**Figure 1** – Word Cloud of the community in which respondents most often sought help from service agencies.

Taking into account the nature of interlocking needs, respondents were able to provide multiple responses (see Table 1).

Table 1 Main reason(s) for visiting the office today	# of respondents
Family/parenting	6
Health and wellness	6
Support services	3
Prefer not to answer	2
COVID-19 assistance	2
Basic Needs	1
Not listed	1
Crisis financial support	1

**Table 1-** *Table of reasons for respondents' visit to the service agency (multiple responses possible); Other possible options with no responses: Financial, Transportation Needs, Legal.*

Of the options provided, the top three types of support services sought by survey respondents were “Financial Support” (16), “Basic Needs Support” (11), and “Health and Wellness Support” (9).

Respondents were then asked to identify the primary reason for their visit in an open field response. Due to the freeform structure of the question, answers were varied but the most common keywords are listed in Figure 2.

When asked about the perceived socio-economic opportunities available within the community, most respondents felt that the community did not provide enough employment opportunities, recreation and social opportunities, sufficient social services, and accessible affordable housing (Table 2).



**Figure 2** - Word Cloud of the most common responses to the “Primary Reason” for visiting the service agency

Does the community provide enough:	Yes	No	Not Sure
Employment Opportunities?	6	11	5
Free or Accessible Recreation and Social Opportunities?	5	10	6
Sufficient Social Services?	4	11	7
Accessible Affordable Housing?	2	15	5

**Table 2** - Respondents answer the question: “does our community provide enough of the following opportunities?”

## Housing Needs

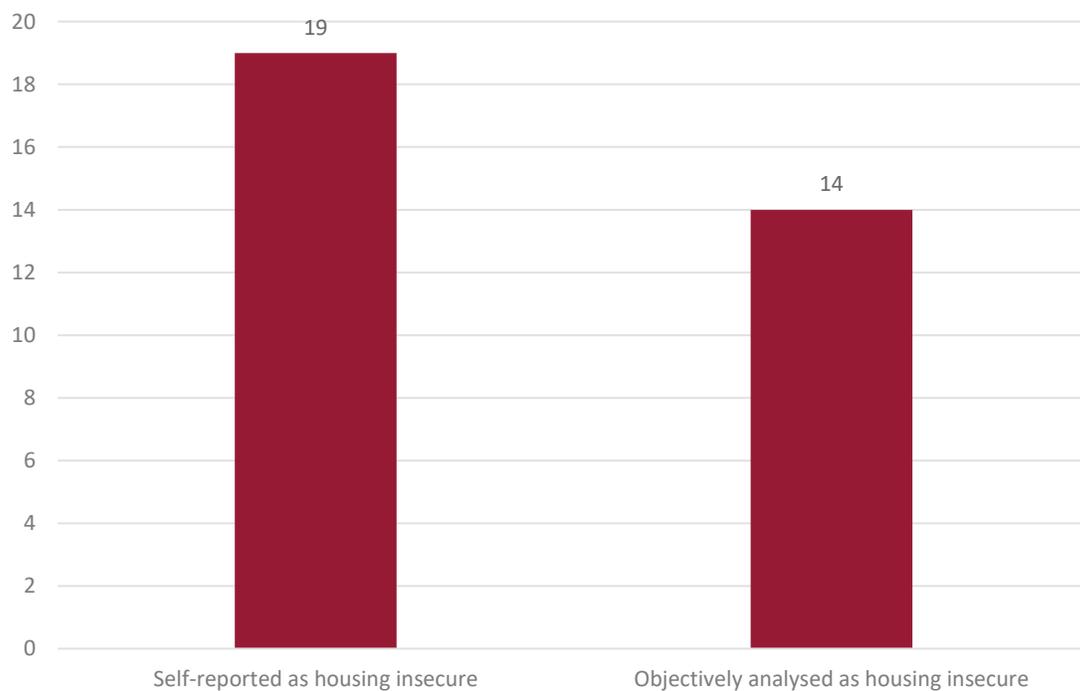
When respondents were asked whether they considered their “housing situation to be unstable or felt they could easily lose their housing”, 65.2% replied ‘Yes’ (Figure 3). These respondents are reported as ‘housing-insecure (self reported)’.

Following this question, respondents were asked to identify the current living situation(s) that have applied to them in the past month (Table 3). Respondents were asked to select all options that apply. The options themselves represent a range of physical living situations, from secure to

insecure. According to the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, any option in Table 3 listed from “I find it difficult to pay rent and I spend more than a third of my monthly income on my housing” to the bottom of the list constitutes housing insecurity and homelessness.

After analysis, there are approximately 14 respondents (60.9% of total) whose housing conditions are considered to be insecure and/or absent. These respondents are reported as ‘objectively housing-insecure’, and make up the primary source of data for the remainder of the report.

Finally, respondents were asked about the length of time they’ve been in their current living arrangements. Their responses can be seen in Figure 4.

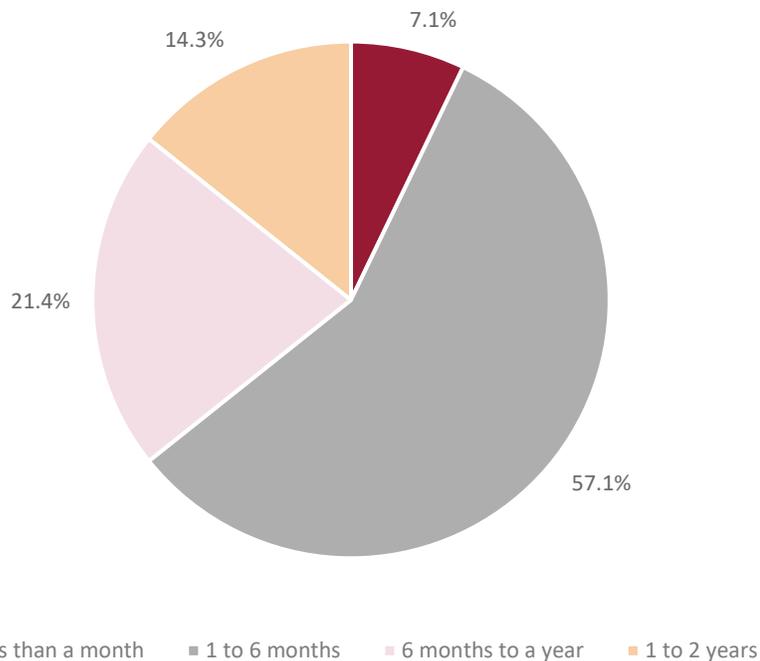


**Figure 3** - Respondents who feel their housing is unstable/insecure vs. respondents who objectively fit living conditions that constitute insecure housing under COH<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Some respondents who believed they were living in insecure housing conditions also identified with living situations that constitute insecure housing as defined by the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness. Thus, there may be some overlap between these two indicators as shown in Figure 3.

**Table 3 – Current living situation. “Which of these statements apply to you (thinking about the past month)?”**

I own the house I'm currently in	3
I rent the apartment I'm currently in	6
I live in accommodations provided by my employer	0
I live in a house that is owned/rented out by the Band	0
I share a house/apartment with roommates	2
I live in a house/apartment that I with family/dependents	7
I find it difficult to pay rent and I spend more than a third of my monthly income on my housing	6
I live in housing that needs major repairs (heating or plumbing problems, mould, leaky roof, etc.)	3
There are not enough rooms for the number of people in the house I'm in	2
I live in supported housing (e.g. Housing First)	0
I stayed in a medical/detox/rehabilitation facility	0
I slept in a friend's/family house because I had no other place to stay	2
I stayed in a jail/prison/remand centre	0
I stayed at a women's/domestic violence shelter	0
I stayed with someone I didn't know because I had no other place to stay	3
I slept in a shelter	2
I slept in a makeshift shelter, vehicle, tent, or shack	6
I slept in a public space (sidewalks, park benches, bus shelter, etc.)	0



**Figure 4** - Respondents answer the question “how long have you been staying in your current living arrangements?” Other options with no responses were: ‘More than 2 years’.

Of all surveyed respondents, 3 (23.1%) stated they had once stayed or are currently staying in foster care or youth group home.

## Reasons for Housing Insecurity

After identifying the respondents who were found to be without housing, or living in insecure housing situations, we asked whether any of the following options was/were a contributing factor(s) (Table 4).

Respondents who were objectively housing insecure, identified the following reasons as main contributing factors to their living situations: 8 responses for “I don’t make enough money”; 7 for “Mental health issues”; 7 for “Addictions/ Substance use”; 5 for “I can’t afford rent/mortgage payments”, and 4 for “Lack of Transportation”.

Table 4 - "Why do you feel your housing situation is insecure?"	Perceived housing unstable	Objectively housing unstable
I don't make enough money	10	8
Mental health issues	9	7
Addictions/Substance use	7	7
I can't afford rent/mortgage payments	6	5
Lack of Transportation	4	4
Illness/Medical condition	4	3
My house needs major repairs (mould, etc.)	3	3
Conflict	4	3
I lost my job	3	3
COVID-19-related	3	2
Prefer not to answer	2	2
Family rejection	0	1
Domestic/Family violence	1	1
My rent went up	1	0

**Table 4 -** Respondents answer the question "why do you feel your housing situation is insecure?"; Other options with no responses were: 'Physical disability', 'Mental disability', 'Spouse/Partner lost their job', 'Abuse', 'Racism/Discrimination', 'I was in jail/prison', 'Relationships'.

Respondents were then asked in an open field question to identify the main factor that affected their housing insecurity, whether from the list they had seen previously, or from their own experience. While most of the responses can be seen under the Qualitative Data section of this report, the most common responses can be found on page 23.

## Demographics

The following sections of 'Demographics', 'Household Makeup', 'Shelter Services', 'Community Residency', and 'Employment and Income Sources' report results from those respondents who were found to be housing-insecure. (n=14)

### Age, Gender, and Sexual Orientation

Respondents were asked about their current age. The median age of individuals experiencing housing insecurity was 34.

The reported gender of both housing-secure and insecure respondents can be seen in Figure 5. Due to low response rates for some possible answers, this figure uses "Gender Diverse" to account for the following responses in the survey: Two-Spirit, Trans Male/Trans Man, Trans Female/Trans Woman, Non-binary, and Identity Not Listed. This is to avoid the use of identifying information due to low numbers.

The reported sexual orientation of respondents can be seen in Figure 6.

**“Local law enforcement take grim view of van dwellers. And places to legally park/camp are extremely limited”**

**“No affordable housing for my dog and I”**

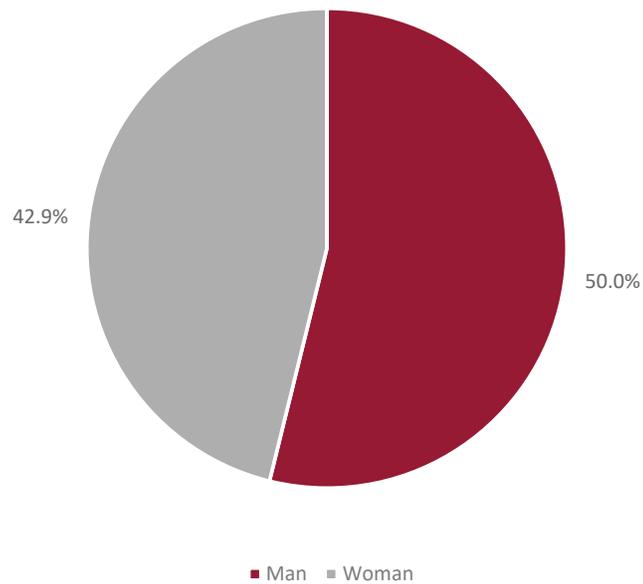
**“Lack of work.”**

**“Support with daily fear of government cuts to AISH program, which would directly affect ability to live.”**

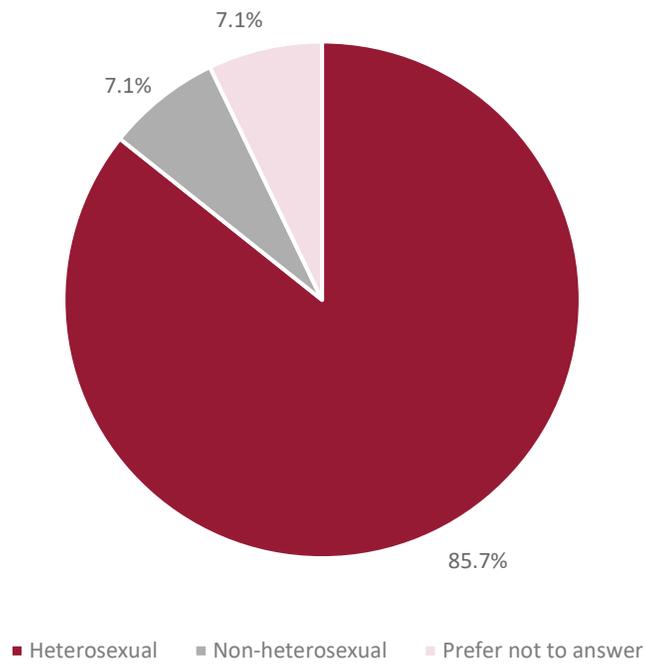
**“The cost of rent in our community is too high, basic needs are hard to maintain”**

**“Mould”**

**“Struggling to get into an addictions treatment program. May lose housing when I leave for treatment”**



**Figure 5** - Respondents answer the question “how do you describe your gender identity?”



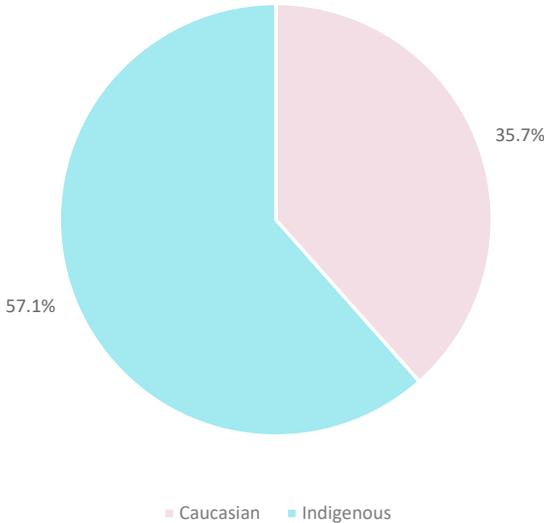
**Figure 6** - Respondents answer the question “how do you describe your sexual orientation?”

# Ethnicity and Migration Status

Of housing-insecure respondents, 5 identified as Caucasian, 8 as Indigenous, and 1 identified with other ethnicities. Of respondents that identified as Indigenous, 5 identified as First Nations and 3 as Métis (Figure 7).

All of respondents experiencing housing-insecurity (100.0%) were born in Canada

All respondents facing housing insecurity (100.0%) currently identify as Canadian Citizens.



**Figure 7 -** Respondents answer the question “what ethnicity do you identify with?”; Other possible answers with no responses: African, Asian, Hispanic/Latino, Middle Eastern.

## Education

Of all survey respondents, the majority (34.8%) indicated that the highest level of education they’ve completed is a High school diploma or GED. This is closely followed by 17.4% of respondents who completed some grade school, and those who obtained a College certificate or diploma (13.0%). Detailed responses can be seen in Table 5.

Table 5 – “What is the highest level of education you’ve completed?”	# of respondents
High school diploma or GED	8
Some grade school	4
College certificate or diploma	3
Some post-secondary	3
Some high school	3
Apprenticeship, trades certificate, or diploma	3
No formal education	1

**Table 5 - Respondents answer the question “What is the highest level of education you’ve completed?”; Other possible options with no responses: ‘Post-secondary degree’, ‘Graduate/Professional Degree’, ‘Don’t Know’.**

## Household Makeup

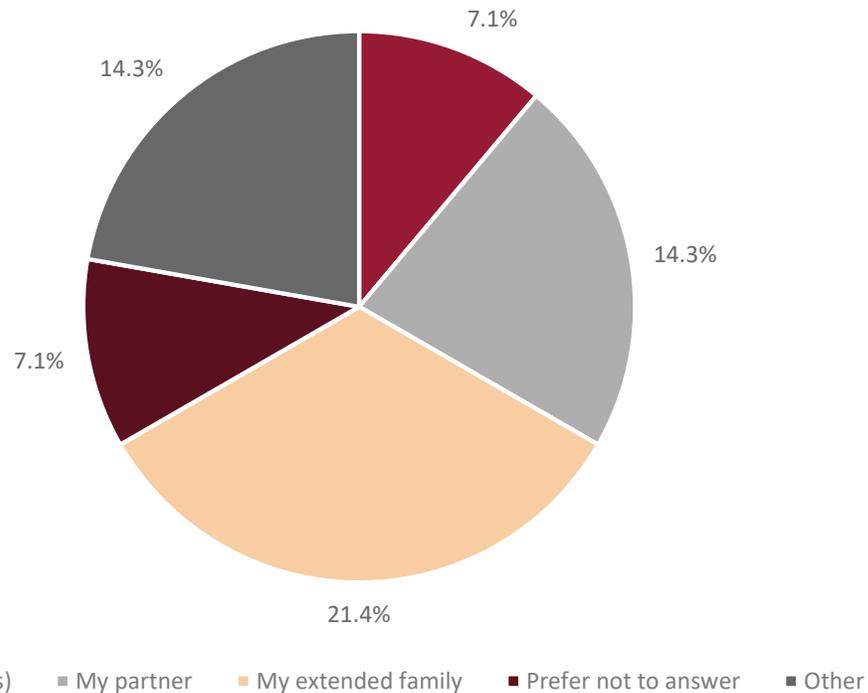
The survey included questions regarding household or family members who are currently sharing accommodations with each respondent.

2 housing-insecure respondents reported that either they or someone in their household was pregnant, and 5 said that they were currently a single-parent household.

21.4% of housing-insecure respondents were living with dependents under the age of 18. Of those, 2 had one dependent and 1 had three for a total of at least 5 dependents sharing living conditions with those living in housing-insecure conditions. For respondents that listed out the number of dependents staying with them, 60.0% of listed dependents were between 0 and 4 years of age, and 40.0 % were between 10 and 14. There was more boys (80.0%) than girls (20.0%).

Some housing-insecure respondents reported that they had other adults living with them. The total number of adults sharing respondents’ living situation was 11, an average of 1 per respondent. The relationships of these cohabitants can be found in Figure 8.

Taken together, the number of dependents (5) and adults (11) who were reported to be sharing living conditions with respondents reveal 16 individuals not directly surveyed who are potentially housing-insecure.



**Figure 8 - Co-habitant relationships to housing-insecure respondents.** Other possible options with no responses: 'My adult children', 'My co-workers', 'There are no adults staying with me'.

## Shelter Services

Of respondents experiencing housing insecurity, 35.7% reported accessing a shelter within the past year. Of respondents who needed a shelter but did not access shelter services within the past year, the following reasons were provided (Table 6).

Table 6. "If you needed a shelter in the past year and didn't access one, what were the reasons?"	# of respondents
I didn't need shelter services	4
The shelter was full	4
No shelters in my area	3
I didn't feel safe	3
Separation from family member/partner	3
No pets allowed	2
Reason not listed	2
Health concerns (bed bugs, dirty, etc.)	1
Prefer not to answer	1

**Table 6 -** Respondents answer the question "If you needed a shelter in the past year and didn't access one, what were the reasons?"; Other possible answers with no responses: 'Hours of operation', 'Lack of disability accommodations', and 'Lack of transportation'.

## Community Residency

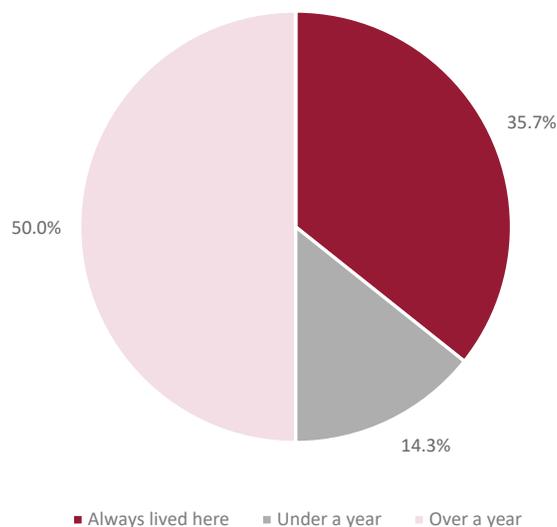
Respondents were asked to indicate where they currently reside. Figure 9 displays those responses, weighted by frequency.

Respondents to the survey varied in terms of how long they've been a part of the community. 35.7% of respondents facing housing insecurity reported that they have always lived in the community (Figure 10).



**Figure 9 -** Word Cloud of responses to "where do you currently reside?"

Of those who had moved to the community at some point, Figure 11 describes where they had resided previously.

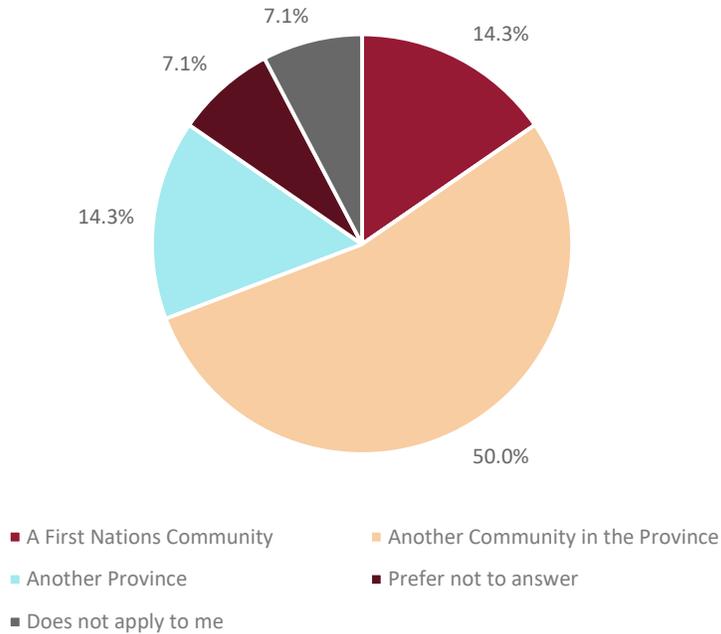


**Figure 10** - Respondents answer the question “How long have you lived in this community?”

Of those who moved to the community at some point, Table 7 describes the primary reasons for the move.

Table 7 – “What is the main reason you came to this community?”	# of respondents
To look for work	6
To find housing	4
My family moved here	3
To access services/supports	3
Fear for safety	3
To access emergency shelters	2
To visit family/friends	2
Other	1
To start a job	1
To attend school	1
Prefer not to answer	1

**Table 7** - Respondents answer the question “what is the main reason you came to this community?”; Other possible answers with no responses: ‘To move in with spouse/partner’, ‘Environmental displacement’, ‘COVID-19 treatment or supports’.



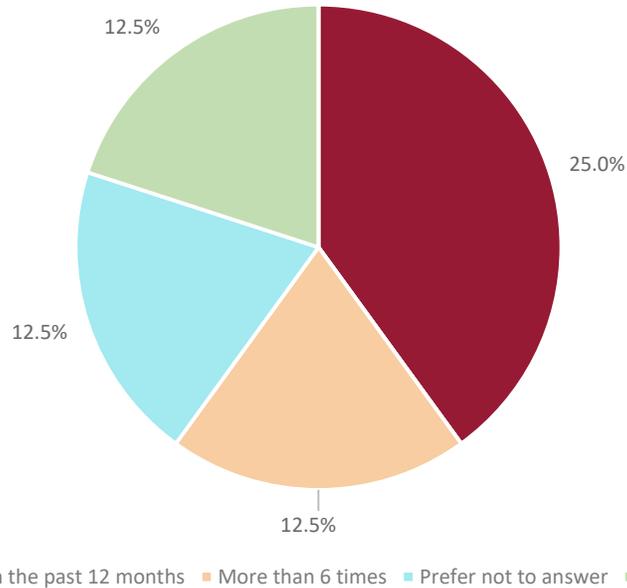
**Figure 11** - Respondents answer the question “Where did you live before you came to this community?”; Other possible options with no responses: A Métis Settlement, An Inuit Community, and Another Country.

Respondents were asked about the number of times they had moved in the past year; frequent moves can be an indicator of insecurity and precarious housing. 14.3% of those facing housing insecurity have not moved in the past year. Of respondents who had moved in the past year, 42.9% had moved 1-2 times, 14.3% moved 3-6 times, and 21.4% moved more than 6 times (Figure 12).

Respondents were also asked if they would have stayed in their previous community if they had better access to services or programs. 22.2% of respondents said “Yes”, while 44.4% said “No”.

## Employment And Income Sources

Of respondents who are experiencing housing insecurity, 21.4% reported being employed in some capacity. 33.3% were working on a casual basis. Of the 2 respondents who indicated which sector they were employed in, 1 said retail/ personal services, and the other said Health



**Figure 12 -** Respondents answer the question “How many times have you moved in the past 12 months?”; Other possible options with no responses: 1 to 2 times, 3 to 6 times, Other.

## Military/Emergency Service

Out of all respondents experiencing housing insecurity, no one identified as a veterans of the Canadian Armed Forces, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), or had served in Emergency Services.

## Sources of Income

Identifying sources of income can provide a better snapshot to the personal situations of respondents that would require increased support. For employed individuals, it can also provide insight into the disparity between wages and costs-of-living in the community.

4 people facing housing-insecurity reported employment as their main source of income. Sources of income varied though, and respondents were encouraged to select all that apply as shown on page 32.

Table 8 – “What are your sources of income?”	# of respondents
Informal income (e.g. bottle returns, panhandling, etc.)	5
Child and Family Tax Benefits	5
Employment	4
Income assistance	4
Canadian Emergency Relief Benefit (CERB)	4
GST refunds	3
Money from family and friends	3
Disability Benefits	2
Employment Insurance	2

**Table 9** – Respondents answer the question “What are your sources of income?”; Other possible answers with no responses were: Seniors Benefits, My partner/spouse’s income, Alimony/Child Support, Prefer not to answer, Not Listed, Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy (CEWB), Canada Emergency Student Benefit (CESB), Veteran’s Benefits, Student loans.

## Qualitative Findings

To compliment the large amount of quantitative data encompassed in this report, we also included some of the qualitative findings that respondents included in their surveys. In addition to respondents providing answers to multiple-choice questions, some parts of the survey collected responses, to allow respondents to provide additional information.

When asked to provide the main reason why respondents find themselves to be homeless or at-risk, we received the following replies:

- “No affordable housing for my dog and I”
- “Local law enforcement take grim view of van dwellers. And places to legally park/camp are extremely limited.”
- “Mould”
- “Lack of work.”
- “Rent is too high”

- “The cost of rent in our community is too high, basic needs are hard to maintain”
- “Conflict with parent”
- “Struggling to get into an addictions treatment program. May lose housing when I leave for treatment”
- “Rent too high, no rental here”
- “Lost my job, boyfriend lost his job as well”
- “My baby is coming soon and CERB is over, can’t work with new baby”

## What does homelessness look like?

In a report that is ostensibly composed of data and graphs, it is possible to overlook the humanity behind the numbers. Using the most common responses from the survey, we were able to compile a profile of a “typical” respondent facing housing insecurity.

In the case of Whitecourt, this turns out to be a man, in his mid-40s, who has lived in the community for over a year or more. He finds it difficult to pay rent and feels like he spends more than a third of his monthly income on housing. He notes that he slept in a makeshift shelter, vehicle, tent, or shack. He is unemployed, and there is a ~29% chance he has at least one dependent that he needs to look after.

The true diversity of the respondents is of course illustrated in the Survey Results section. For instance, in contrast to this example, there were 3 affirmative answers to having to stay with someone they didn’t know because they had no other place to stay. Taken together, this serves to highlight the diverse needs of those facing housing in-security in within Whitecourt.

# Exploring Next Steps

This report refrains from offering concrete recommendations for Whitecourt because in-depth dialogue between RDN, decision-makers, and administrators within the locale have not informed the findings within this report. It is the goal of the report to support decision-making at all levels by providing a credible, evidence-based document that can be used and referred to in the community. In the past, local organizations and governments have used information gathered using the methods outlined in the Step-by-Step Guide to Estimating Rural Homelessness to explore new programs and initiate new collaborations, such as:

- Establish an overnight shelter
- Grow awareness within communities about homelessness and housing instability
- Highlight the need for an affordable housing project and other economic development strategies
- Increase dialogue with neighbouring communities and First Nations' groups
- Start a mat program in the community
- Start the development of a coordinated community response programs
- Support efforts to increase public knowledge of existing programs (financial aid, affordable housing repair, etc.)

## Conclusion

This report provides a summary of primary data collected by service agencies in Whitecourt from October 1st to the 31st. It is an overview of the needs and factors that affect housing security for individuals who accessed services during the survey period.

This project was coordinated in the midst of a global pandemic where

in-person services offered by organizations has been severely reduced. Whitecourt's participation represents a unique set of data that provides insight into the resiliency and strength of individuals even in times of crisis.

This project confirms that housing insecurity exists in rural and remote communities, presenting concrete data from respondents in 26 participating communities. This supports previous qualitative research which examined the pervasiveness of housing issues across the province.

The intention of this report is to provide means for agencies and leadership to determine their community's needs, as well as the necessary responses and potential avenues to prevent or reduce homelessness and housing instability in the Whitecourt.

## **Disclaimer**

The data and information in the data set provided here are intended for use by persons possessing technical skill and knowledge in data management and analysis. While the data is provided in good faith and to the best of RDN's knowledge, RDN does not commit to it being updated.

While every effort is made to ensure data quality and integrity, the data is provided "as is". The accuracy of any external user's statistical analysis and any reported findings are not the responsibility of RDN. Nothing arising from the data should be taken to constitute RDN's professional advice or as a formal recommendation.

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# Endnotes

1 Thistle, J. (2017.) Indigenous Definition of Homelessness in Canada. Toronto: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press.

2 Gaetz, S.; Donaldson, J.; Richter, T.; & Gulliver, T (2013): The State of Homelessness in Canada 2013. Toronto: Canadian Homelessness Research Network Press

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