

The impact of the shift to a broader understanding of chronic homelessness under Reaching Home and the National Housing Strategy

Patrick Hunter, PhD | Infrastructure Canada
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OUTLINE

- A (brief) history of chronic homelessness
- Redefining chronic homelessness
- Impact of the new definition
 - Prevalence of chronic homelessness
 - Populations affected by chronic homelessness
- Conclusions and future directions



A HISTORY OF CHRONIC HOMELESSNES



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Attempts at a typology of homelessness

Early studies sought to develop “categories” of homelessness based on various characteristics related to duration and experience, such as substance use and mental health. Results varied depending on which characteristics were included, and who was included in the study sample.

Kuhn and Culhane 1998

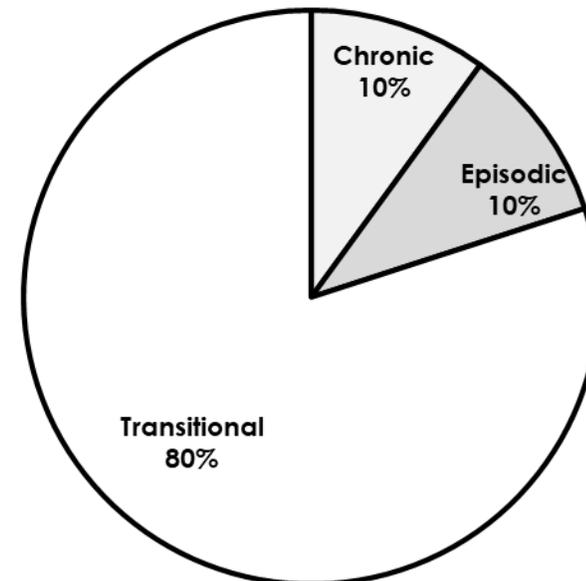
This study narrowed the analysis to focus on shelter stays using large administrative data sets from two cities in the United States.

They identified three categories of homelessness:

1. Chronic
2. Episodic
3. Transitional

This has been replicated across studies in Canada

- Proportions vary by study, as do stays and duration



A HISTORY OF CHRONIC HOMELESSNES

Impact on policy

Homelessness Partnering Strategy (2014-2019) adopted standard definitions of chronic and episodic homelessness:

Chronically homeless refers to individuals, often with disabling conditions (e.g. chronic physical or mental illness, substance abuse problems), who are currently homeless and have been homeless for six months or more in the past year (i.e. have spent more than 180 cumulative nights in a shelter or place not fit for human habitation).

Episodically homeless refers to individuals, often with disabling conditions, who are currently homeless and have experienced three or more episodes of homelessness in the past year (of note, episodes are defined as periods when a person would be in a shelter or place not fit for human habitation, and after at least 30 days, would be back in the shelter or inhabitable location).

At a national level, chronic and episodic homelessness were measured through shelter use data, but individuals did not need to demonstrate homelessness through shelter use to be eligible for supports.

A HISTORY OF CHRONIC HOMELESSNES

IMPLEMENTATION ISSUES

Determining eligibility: difficult to assess housing history, but shelter use is easier

Excluding individuals: housing first supports not available to those who did not (yet) meet duration criteria

Excluding populations: Some populations are less likely to access shelter and be included



CONCEPTUAL ISSUES

Chronic shelter use \neq chronic homelessness

Administrative shelter data misses what happens outside of the shelter, including periods of:

- secure housing
- sleeping outside
- hospitalized
- couch surfing
- staying in a hotel
- etc.

A HISTORY OF CHRONIC HOMELESSNES

New data: Point in Time counts 2016 and 2018

Annual shelter data
Chronic: **3%**
Episodic: 7%

One night shelter data
Chronic: **40%**
Episodic: 7%

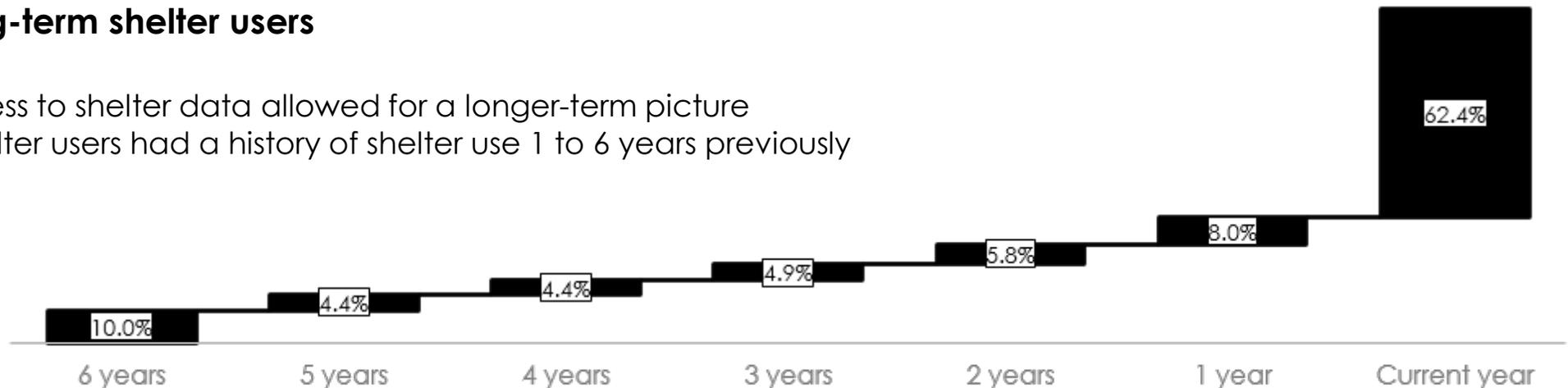
Point in Time Count 2018
Chronic: **60%**
Episodic: 8%

Point in time counts were capturing experiences outside the shelter system, demonstrating that shelter data alone underestimates chronic homelessness.

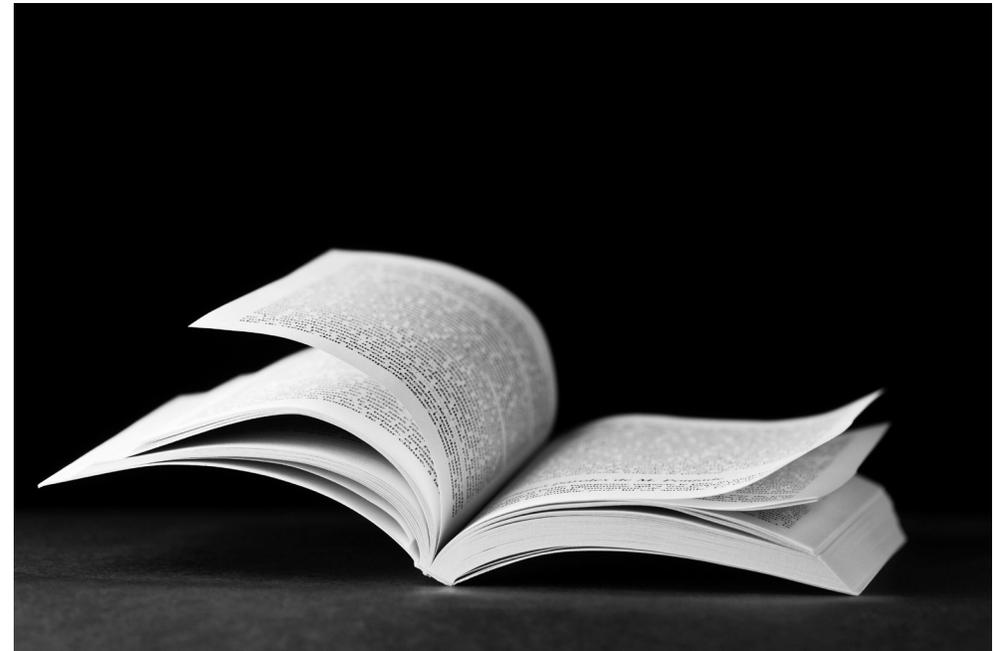
New data: Long-term shelter users

Greater access to shelter data allowed for a longer-term picture

- **38%** of shelter users had a history of shelter use 1 to 6 years previously



REDEFINING CHRONIC HOMELESSNESS



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Reaching Home and the National Data Strategy



The new findings were presented to the Homelessness Data Advisory Committee, which included experts who work with community entities, service providers, Indigenous communities, researchers, provinces and territories, and others. A new definition was developed:

Chronically homeless refers to individuals who are currently experiencing homelessness AND who meet at least one of the following criteria: they have a total of at least six months (180 days) of homelessness over the past year; **OR they have a total of at least 18 months (546 days) of homelessness over the past three years.**

Chronic homelessness includes time spent in following contexts:

- Staying in unsheltered locations, that is public or private spaces without consent or contract, or places not intended for permanent human habitation (COH Typology: 1.1 and 1.2).
- Staying in emergency shelters, including overnight shelters for people experiencing homelessness (including those for specific populations, such as youth, families, and newcomers), shelters for people impacted by family violence, and emergency shelters for people fleeing a natural disaster or destruction of accommodation (COH Typology: 2.1, 2.2, and 2.3).
- **Staying temporarily with others without guarantee of continued residency or the immediate prospects for accessing permanent housing, or short-term rental accommodations (e.g. motels) without security of tenure (COH typology: 3.2 and 3.3).**

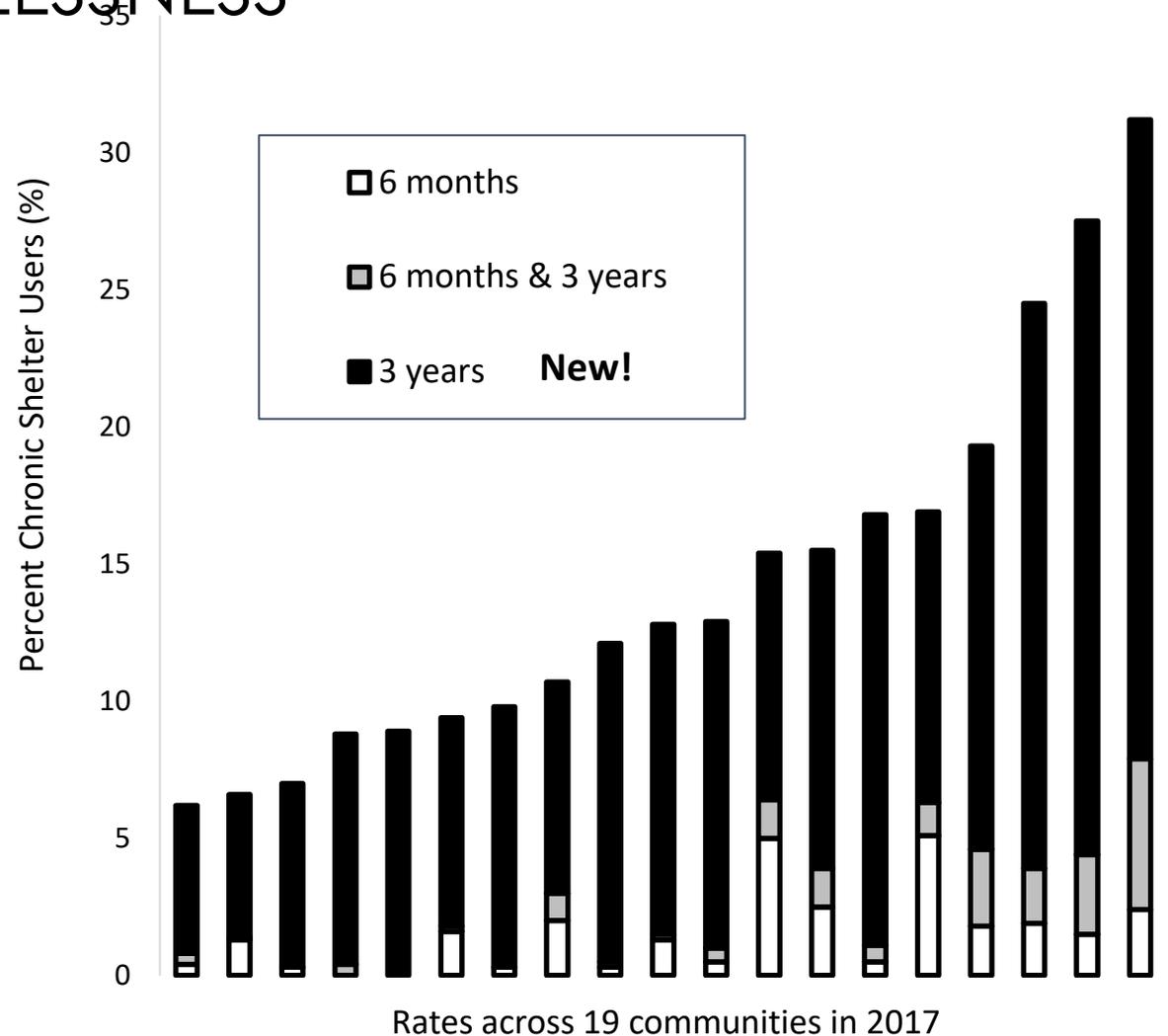
REDEFINING CHRONIC HOMELESSNESS

Challenge: For national measurement, shelter data is still the only data source that can generate a national estimate.

To minimize the reliance on shelter data, an indicator was created that identified people who are in shelter in the current year and either:

- *Had been in shelter for 6 months over the past year.*
- OR
- *Had been in shelter at least once per year over the previous two years.*

Retaining the 6-month criterion includes those with intense periods of shelter use over the last year, and ensures some consistency between the old and new measures.

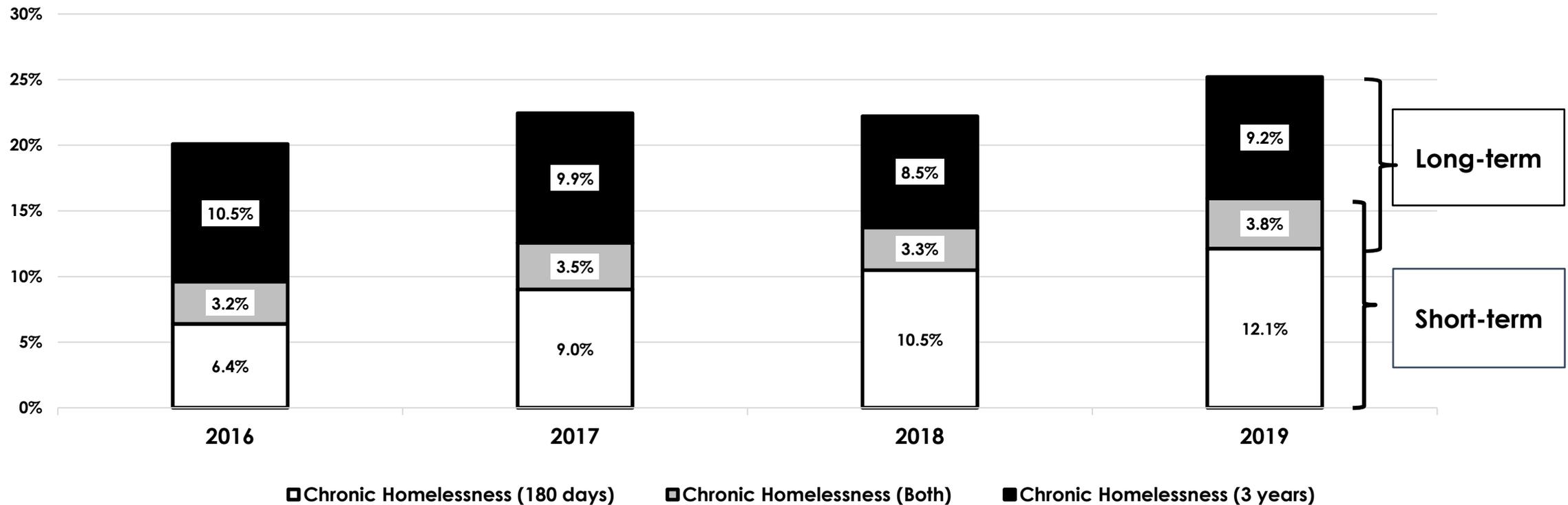


IMPACT OF THE NEW DEFINITION



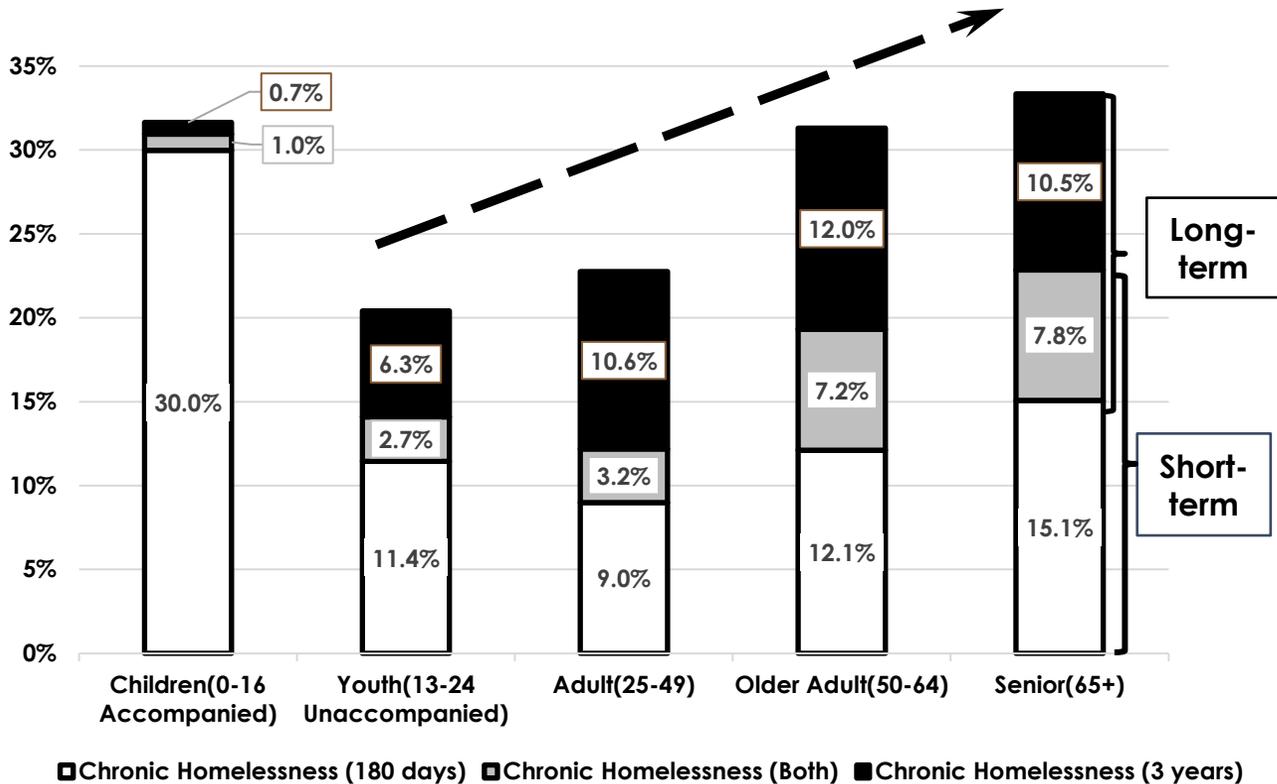
IMPACT OF THE NEW DEFINITION

Between 2016 and 2019, experiences of short-term chronic homelessness increased, however this did not translate into increases of long-term chronic homelessness, which remained relatively stable.

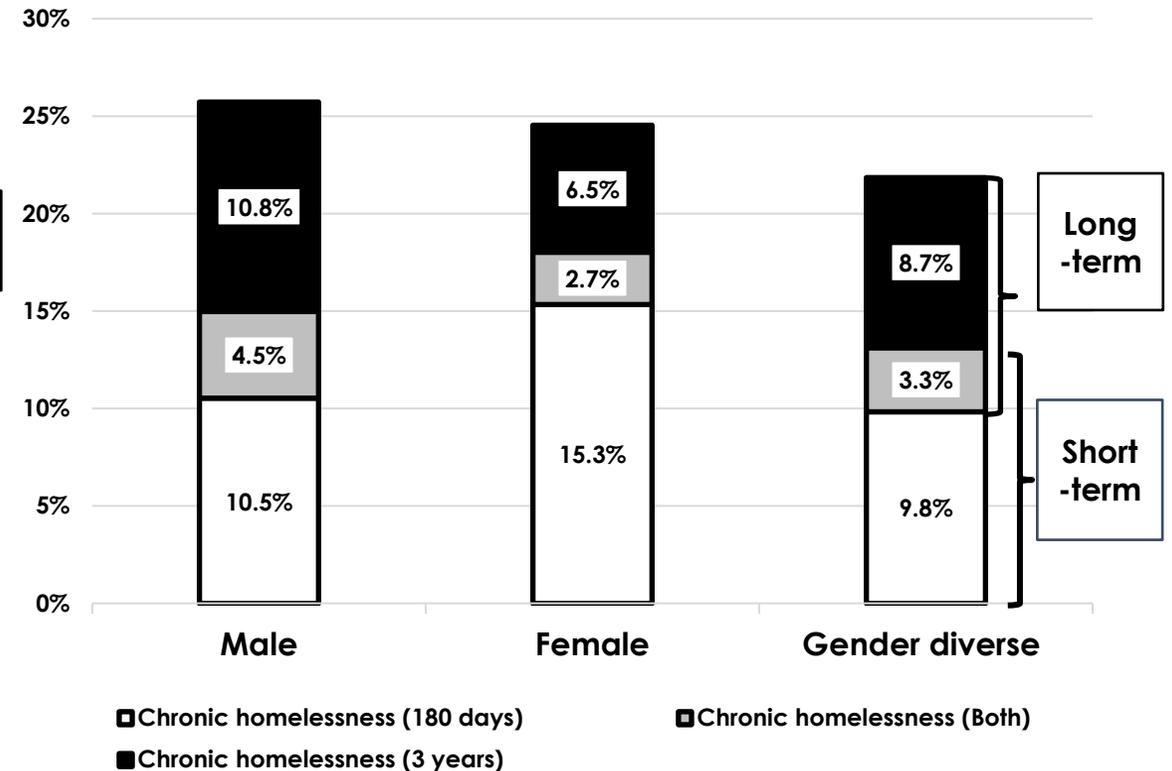


IMPACT OF THE NEW DEFINITION

Chronic homelessness increases with age, however accompanied children had high rates of short-term chronic homelessness, likely due to longer stay lengths in family shelters.



Long term chronic homelessness was higher among men, while shorter-term chronic homelessness was higher among women, while differences between gender diverse shelter users and men and women were not statistically significant.

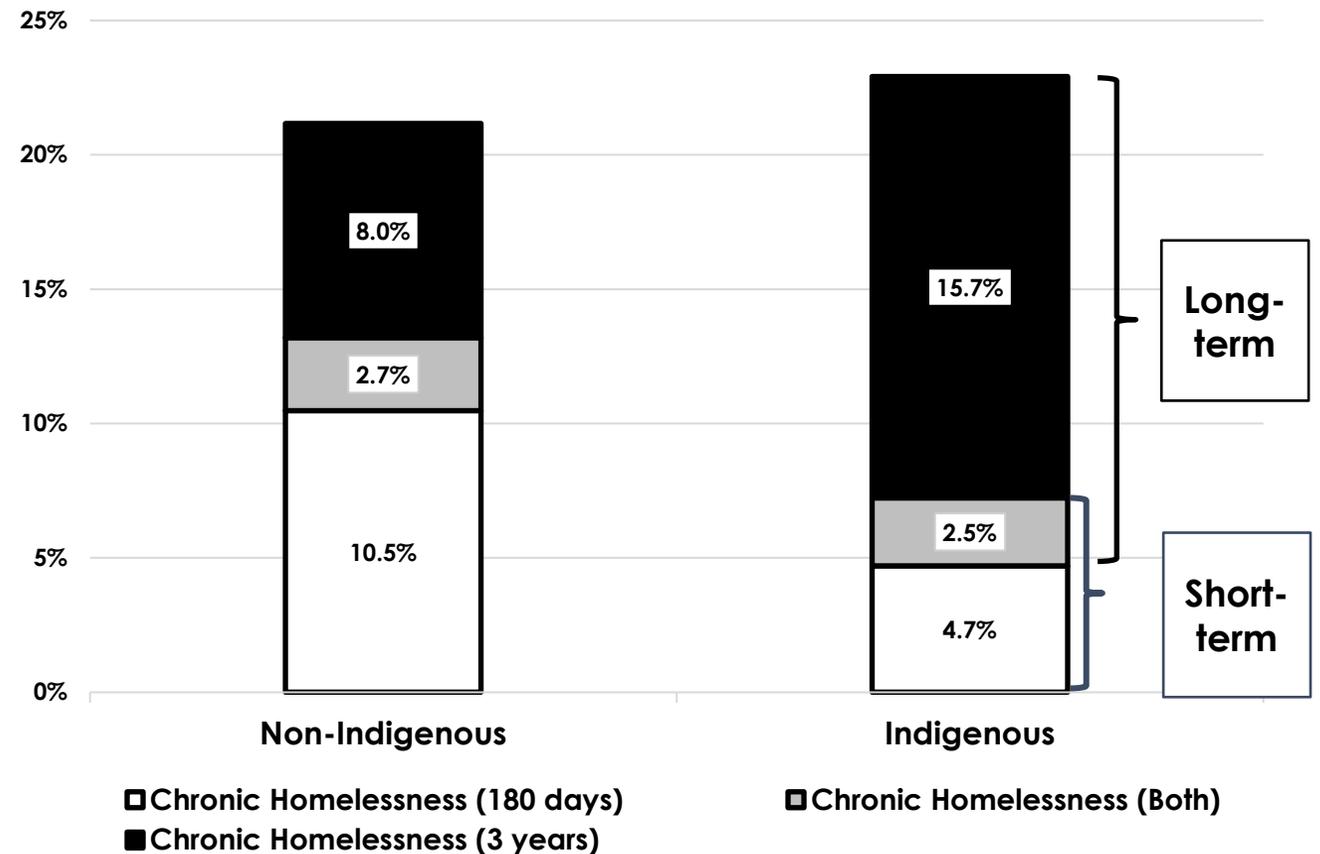


IMPACT OF THE NEW DEFINITION

Indigenous and non-Indigenous shelter users had no significant differences in overall chronic homelessness. However:

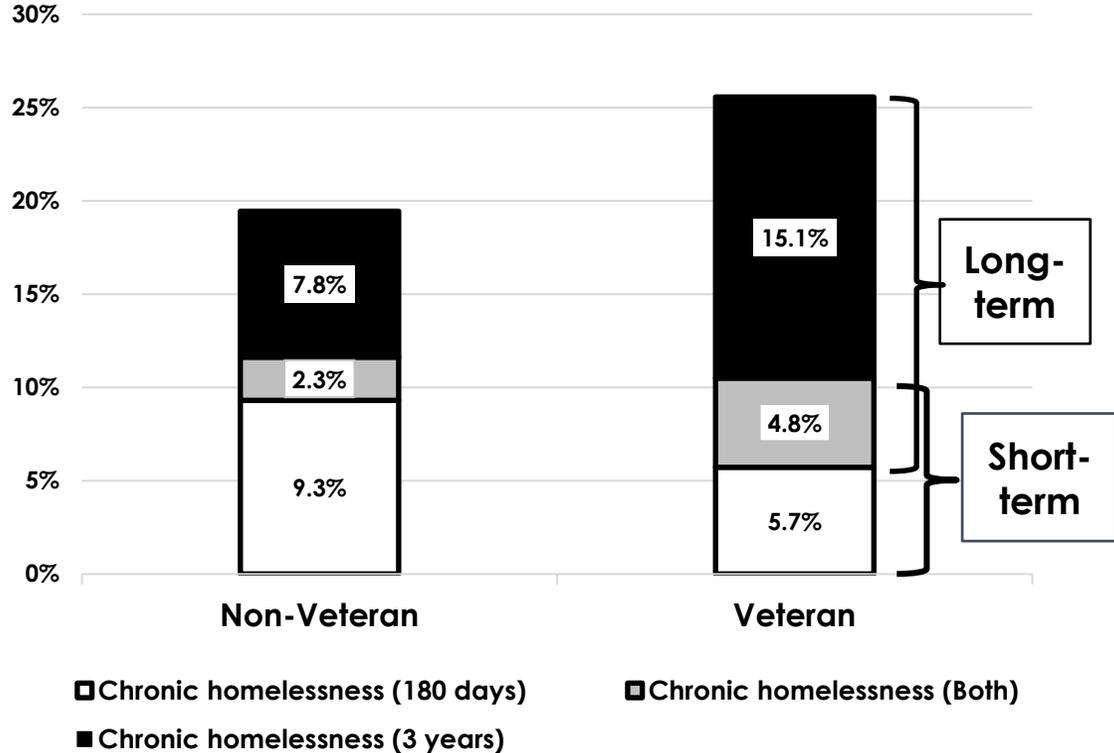
- Indigenous shelter users were more likely to experience long-term chronic homelessness
- Non-Indigenous shelter users were more likely to experience short-term chronic homelessness.

The findings are consistent with the expectation that Indigenous shelter users were less likely to access shelters in any given year, and thus be missed by the previous definitions of chronic and episodic homelessness.

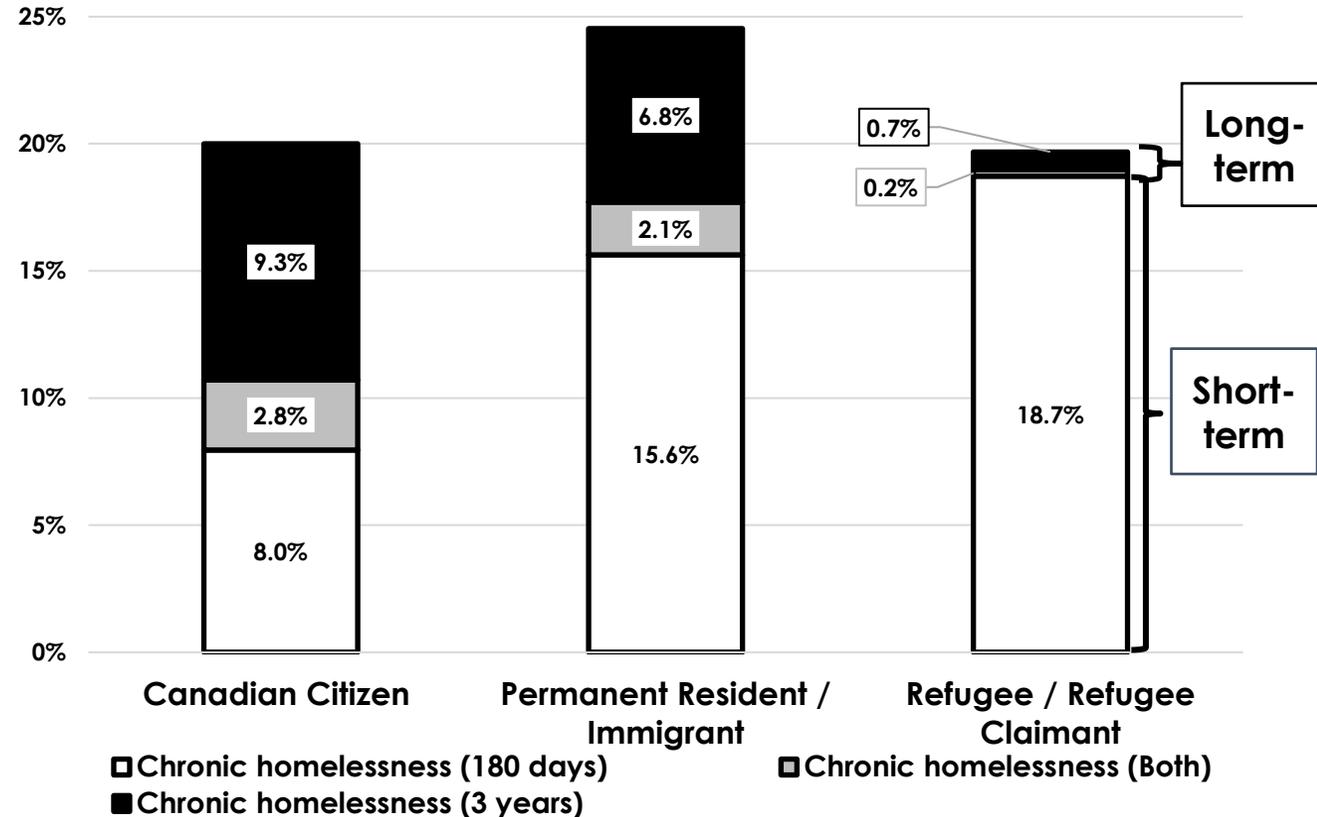


IMPACT OF THE NEW DEFINITION

Veterans were more likely than non-veterans to experience long-term chronic homelessness, while there was no difference between the groups in short term chronic homelessness.



Short term chronic homelessness was more common among shelter users who identified as non-citizens, whether permanent residents/immigrants or refugees/refugee claimants.



CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

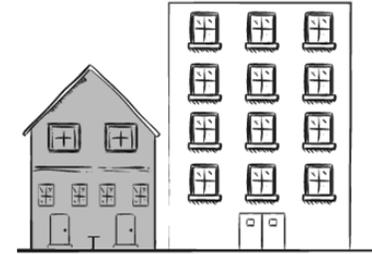


CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Benefits of a long-term view of chronic homelessness

- **Identifying multi-year experiences of homelessness has identified a group of shelter users who would have been missed under previous chronic homelessness definitions.** It confirms that by focusing less on short-term intensive shelter use, a long-term view is more inclusive of populations (Indigenous peoples, veterans) affected by protracted periods of homelessness, and who were underrepresented by previous measures.
- **A longer-term lens also helps to understand rates of chronic homelessness among newcomers and families with dependent children.** While they have higher rates of short-term chronic homelessness, they are less likely to experience multi-year chronic homelessness. This is consistent with other research showing that newcomers and families have longer shelter stays, but typically do not return to shelter.
- **In the years leading up to the pandemic, it is evident that an increasing number of people experienced greater shelter use within a year, but this did not translate into increases in multi-year chronic homelessness.** Some contributing factors may have included:
 - **Impact of Housing First:** This model prioritized people experiencing short-term chronic homelessness. Thus, those who reached this threshold may have been prioritized for housing first supports, and became less likely to experience longer-term chronic homelessness.
 - **Impact of data quality:** Community data quality has been increasing over recent years. Greater coordination in data systems may have led to better deduplication of shelter users, and a more accurate account of shelter stays within a year.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS



Chronic homelessness over the course of the pandemic

Working now on estimates for 2020 and 2021. Over these years several factors may have affected chronic rates:

- Changes in shelter capacity and increased use of temporary spaces
- Eviction moratoria
- Increased housing costs and inflation

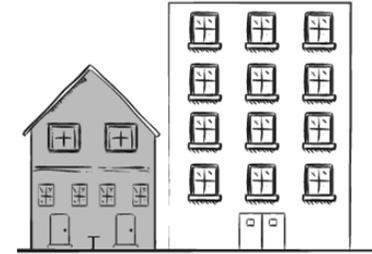
Results from community Point-in-Time counts suggest short-term chronic homelessness may have increased further over this period.

Expanding measurement beyond shelter use

Increased use of HIFIS and other data systems to capture homelessness outside of the shelter system may offer the possibility of improving national measures of chronic homelessness.

In particular, the incorporation of outreach data into HIFIS and other HMIS will capture experiences of unsheltered homelessness, and the use of housing history functionality can go beyond this to track other contexts.

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Thank you!

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INFC DATA PRODUCTS

National Shelter Capacity

- [Shelter Capacity Report 2017 - 2020](#)
- [Homeless shelter capacity, bed and shelter counts for emergency shelters, transitional housing and violence against women shelters for Canada and provinces, Employment and Social Development Canada](#)
- [National Service Provider List - Open Government Portal](#)

National Shelter Use

- [The National shelter study - Emergency shelter use in Canada 2005 to 2016](#)
- [Highlights of the National Shelter Study 2005 to 2016](#)

Point-in-Time Counts

- [Highlights: 2016 Coordinated Point-in-time Count of Homelessness in Canadian Communities](#)
- [Everyone Counts 2018: Highlights - Report](#)
- [Report on addiction, substance use and homelessness](#)

Homelessness Data Snapshots

- [Homelessness data snapshot: Veteran homelessness in Canada](#)
- [Homelessness data snapshot: The National Shelter Study 2019 update](#)
- [Homelessness data snapshot: The National Shelter Study 2018 update](#)
- [Homelessness data snapshot: Homelessness migration in Canada](#)

