

St. Thomas-Elgin 2021 Homelessness Enumeration Report

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Table of Contents



Executive Summary	2
Homelessness Demographics	6
COVID-19	6
Chronic Homelessness	6
Recent Shelter Utilization	6
Age	6
Foster Care History	7
Gender	7
Sexual Orientation	7
Indigenous	7
Racial Identities	7
Immigrant, Refugee and Refugee Claimants	8
Veterans	8
Health Conditions	8
Reasons for Most Recent Housing Loss	8
Income Sources	9
Emergency Service Utilization (Overall)	10
Emergency Room Utilization	10
Hospital Admissions	11
Days in Hospital	11
Police Interactions	12
Prison/Jail Utilization	12
Conclusion	13



Executive Summary



Preventing and ending homelessness begins with knowing who experiences it, in order to connect them to resources and supports, better understand the scope of homelessness, and strategically invest in solutions to overcome housing barriers. Homelessness enumeration initiatives like those launched on September 29th, 2021 by the St. Thomas-Elgin Social Services office in collaboration with its community partners demonstrate the continued commitment to reduce homelessness in St. Thomas-Elgin by generating critical data to identify trends among people experiencing homelessness and housing instability.

The COVID-19 pandemic has offered new opportunities to engage people experiencing already heightened vulnerability as they struggle to meet their basic needs. The 2021 PIT Count involved trained community enumerators deployed throughout the city and county to ensure that individuals, families and youth experiencing homelessness received an opportunity to be counted and surveyed.

During the Point-in-Time Count, **two tools** for counting people experiencing homelessness were applied: 1) **2021 St. Thomas-Elgin Enumeration Survey**; and, 2) **2021 St. Thomas-Elgin Tally Sheet** which incorporates a count of anyone observed who may be experiencing homelessness that may not have participated in the survey. Efforts were taken to analyze the information collected in both the survey and the tally sheet to deduplicate counting, however, duplication may occur. In addition, participation in the PIT Count is voluntary and therefore the numbers and data provided in this report should be considered the most up to date estimate of the minimum occurrences of homelessness in St. Thomas-Elgin.

PIT Count activities occurred in emergency shelters, on the streets, in transitional housing programs and in various facilities that serve people at risk of or experiencing homelessness, including day services and social service agencies. This homelessness enumeration event provides new, critical information for St. Thomas-Elgin to continue preventing and ending homelessness. An overview of the insights and findings of the 2021 Point-in-Time Count in St. Thomas-Elgin is provided in this report.

For the purposes of this enumeration event and based on the Service Manager Guidelines provided by the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing, the PIT Count included people experiencing homelessness who were: 1) **Unsheltered**, or absolutely homeless and living on the streets or in places not intended for human habitation; 2) **Emergency Sheltered**, including those staying in overnight shelters for people who are homeless, as well as shelters for those impacted by family violence; and, 3) **Provisionally Accommodated**, referring to those whose accommodation is temporary or lacks security of tenure.

Using this definition of homelessness, 77 unique people completed the PIT Count survey and an additional 39 people were observed (not surveyed) as experiencing homelessness and added to the tally sheet as follows:



2021 Point-In-Time Count – Numbers at a Glance

Enumeration Survey Results:

77 unique people **completed the survey** representing 100 people.

- 75 adults (ages 25 and up) - 73 survey respondents + 2 reported partners
- 4 youth (ages 24 and under)
- 21 children (ages 15 and under)

Enumeration Tally Sheet Results:

39 presumed unique people **were observed** (not surveyed).

- 29 adults (ages 25 and up)
- 10 youth (ages 24 and under)

Enumeration Survey + Tally Sheet Results:

In total, 139 people (adults, youth and children) were recorded as experiencing sheltered, unsheltered and provisionally accommodated homelessness across St. Thomas-Elgin.

- 77 people surveyed
- 39 people observed (not surveyed)
- 21 dependent children of people surveyed
- 2 adult partners of people surveyed

Demographic Breakdown

A total of 92 adults (ages 25 and up) without dependents were surveyed and/or observed (not surveyed):

- 80 single adults
- 6 couples (12 adults)

(66% of total people)

10 families with dependent children were surveyed:

- 12 adults
- 21 dependent children

(24% of total people)

***Of the families experiencing homelessness as defined by the Canadian Definition of Homelessness, 90% were in transitional housing (n=9) and 10% were temporarily living with someone else (n=1).**

A total of 14 youth (ages 24 and under) were surveyed and/or observed (not surveyed):

(10% of total people)

Accommodation Breakdown – Night of September 29th, 2021

Of the 77 survey respondents, the following accommodations were identified the night of Sept. 29th:

Transitional Housing	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- 9 families (10 adults and 19 children) (12%)
Emergency Shelter	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- 18 adults (ages 25 and up) (23%)
Someone Else's Place	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- 13 adults (ages 25 and up)- 3 youth (ages 24 and under)- 1 family (2 adults and 2 children) (22%)
Motel	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- 3 adults (ages 25 and up)- 1 youth (ages 24 and under) (5%)
Unsheltered or Make-Shift Shelter	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- 12 adults (ages 25 and up) (16%)
Public Space	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- 7 adults (ages 25 and up) (9%)

Hospital, Jail, Other Institution	- 2 adults (ages 25 and up) (3%)
Vehicle	- 2 adults (ages 25 and up) (3%)
Doesn't Know	- 3 adults (ages 25 and up) (3.5%)
Declined to Answer	- 3 adults (ages 25 and up) (3.5%)

Given the limitations of any single Point-In-Time Count, this number should be considered the estimated minimum number of people experiencing homelessness in St. Thomas-Elgin on any given night.

These critically important enumeration results will help community partners to better understand the needs and barriers of people experiencing homelessness. Well-understood, simply described and powerfully communicated data will help create better services for vulnerable community members, while highlighting opportunities to refine investments to prevent, reduce and end homelessness.

Communities frequently view enumeration activities including Period Prevalence Counts, Registry Weeks and Point-in-Time Counts as requirements for funding rather than opportunities for learning. But when completed effectively, an enumeration event is one of the single greatest tools to implement change in service delivery and orientation towards ending homelessness in a community. Homelessness enumeration activities provide an important opportunity to elevate the community's understanding of the reality of homelessness in the area and to create momentum for collective action and impact dedicated to preventing and ending homelessness.

The 2021 results contained within this report provide the data analysis and emerging trend identification to assist St. Thomas-Elgin in the quest to enhance local understanding of housing instability and homelessness and to ensure that the information gathered enhances strategic planning and service delivery. These results demonstrate continuous improvement, accountability and transparency in practice that further enhance the ability of the local system of care to respond effectively to the needs of vulnerable neighbours experiencing homelessness.

The results of the 2021 PIT Count demonstrate a slight reduction in the number of people experiencing homelessness during the 2018 Count. In total in 2018, the St. Thomas-Elgin Homelessness Enumeration event identified that 159 people were experiencing homelessness compared to 139 in 2021.



This count of people experiencing homelessness during the global pandemic as well as the resulting economic crisis demonstrates that the vulnerabilities currently experienced by local people experiencing homelessness requires the urgency of this work to be amplified. We hope that the data demonstrated in this report from the 2021 St. Thomas-Elgin PIT Count will bring targeted specificity to those important efforts.

Administration data for the 39 people observed (not surveyed) and presumed to be unique that did not complete the 2021 survey did not include the information required for more detailed analysis. The following sections of the report will therefore incorporate the information gathered for the 77 survey respondents encountered on September 29th, 2021.

Homelessness Demographics for Survey Respondents

COVID-19

Despite the considerable challenges that COVID-19 has caused everyone surviving this ongoing global pandemic, very few people experiencing homelessness identified coronavirus as the cause of their most housing loss:

- 8% of households identified COVID-19 as the cause of their most recent housing loss (n=6), while 85% did not (n=66) and 8% didn't know (n=6)

Chronic Homelessness

Homelessness, when experienced, is overwhelmingly chronic: 69% of survey respondents met the federal definition of chronic homelessness (6 months or more of homelessness in the last 12 months). This 69% chronic homelessness rate demonstrates a dramatic increase from the 38% of people that identified experiencing chronic homelessness in 2018.

Among survey respondents experiencing chronic homelessness, 61% report experiencing homelessness during every month of the last year (n=33 of 54). Chronically homeless survey respondents have endured a cumulative *47 years* (558 months) of uninterrupted homelessness. Survey respondents not yet experiencing chronic homelessness reported a cumulative 4 years (48 months) of homelessness within the last 12 months.

Recent Shelter Utilization

A total of 58% of survey respondents identified that they had stayed in an emergency shelter in the past year (n=45), while 38% had not (n=30).

Age

The average age for all survey respondents experiencing homelessness was 36 years old and the median age was 33 years of age. The 2021 PIT Count demonstrated a marked reduction in the number of transition aged youth (24 years of age or younger)



experiencing homelessness with only 3% unaccompanied youth (n=4) responding to the survey in comparison to 24% unaccompanied youth (n=22) surveyed in 2018. Almost everyone experiencing homelessness (95%) is less than 60 years old (n=73 of 77).

Foster Care History

When asked, “As a child or youth, were you ever in foster care or in a youth group in this community or some other community?”, 27% of survey respondents (n=21) replied, “yes.”

Survey respondents that disclosed foster care history identified involvement with foster care an average of 17 years ago, ranging from 4 years ago to 45 years ago.

Gender

People identifying as male/man represented 57% of all 77 survey respondents at risk of or experiencing homelessness (n=44), with female/woman representing 36% (n=28), 3% non-binary (gender queer) (n=2) and single responses for both trans man and two-spirit, each representing 1%.

Among the 21 dependent children identified by their heads of household during the survey process, 55% were female (n=12) and 45% were male (n=9).

Sexual Orientation

While 81% of survey respondents identified being heterosexual (n=62), 8% identified being bisexual (n=6), 3% identified being gay (n=2) and one person identified being pansexual (1%). Another 3% identified as questioning (n=2), 1% as “don’t know” (n=1) with 4% declining to answer (n=3).

Across all populations, no one reported that their sexual orientation was not included from the provided list with “straight,” “gay” and “lesbian” given as example options.

Indigenous Identity

Of everyone surveyed during the 2021 Point-in-Time count, 9% identify as Indigenous (n=7). This percentage is a reduction from the 18% Indigenous people identified in the 2018 PIT Count. With the 2016 Census for Ontario showing Indigenous people as 1.4% of the total population, Indigenous people continue to be significantly overrepresented within homelessness. Among people identifying as Indigenous, 72% identified as First Nations (n=5), 14% identified as Métis (n=1) and 14% having North American Indigenous Ancestry (n=1).

Racial Identities

When asked to identify from a list of racial identities, 74% of survey respondents identified as “White” (n=57), 4% identified as “Indigenous only” (n=3), 3% identified as “Latin American” (n=2) and 1% identified as “Black Canadian or African” (n=1).



Another 5% of survey respondents said their racial identity was not included among those previous options (n=4), with another 4% declining to answer (n=3). An additional 9% left that question blank (n=7).

Immigrant, Refugee and Refugee Claimants

Only 1% of survey respondents experiencing homelessness said that they had “come to Canada as an immigrant, refugee, or refugee claimant?” (n=1), who identified being in St. Thomas-Elgin for 12 years.

Veterans

Of all people experiencing homelessness, two identified service in the Canadian Armed Forces or Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP). One additional person identified being unsure of whether they were a Veteran. This represents 3% (n= 2 of 77) of people surveyed and demonstrates that ending Veteran homelessness among St. Thomas-Elgin is entirely within reach.

Health Conditions

In addition to the vulnerabilities inherent in experiencing homelessness itself, households also identified frequently occurring disabilities that demonstrate elevated risk:

Health Condition	Percent	Count
Physical disabilities	31%	24
Learning or cognitive limitation	45%	35
Mental health condition	78%	60
Substance use	64%	49

More than 3/4 of households experiencing homelessness identified mental health conditions. Compromised mental wellness has increased from 52% in 2018 to 78% for people at risk of or experiencing homelessness in 2021. Almost 2/3 identified having substance use challenges. This 64% prevalence rate for substance use also represents an increase from the 2018 Count that identified substance use concerns for 30% of the respondents. Almost half (45%) identified learning or cognitive conditions. Less than one third (31%) identified physical disabilities.

This remarkably high level of vulnerability, even beyond the challenges of homelessness alone, shows the importance of securing immediate housing options and appropriate support resources to meet these complex and often co-occurring needs. **For St. Thomas-Elgin, streamlined access to primary health, mental health and addictions supports would be beneficial for households receiving housing stability supports.**

Reasons for Most Recent Housing Loss

Identifying the “cause” of homelessness proves challenging for the people experiencing it, the staff that serve them as well as social scientists and statisticians. However



inadvertently, behind this question is a belief that if communities could simply understand why the homelessness occurred, they could better resolve it or prevent future occurrences. Amidst complex and frequently overlapping reasons for homelessness, one factor remains the same: a loss of housing caused their crisis. As evidenced below, people identified as many as four reasons for their homelessness. **Rather than spend too much time struggling to understand what caused each housing crisis, St. Thomas-Elgin should continue to urgently help people secure housing first, and to continue investing time and resources in the proven strategies that expedite the process.** From the safety of having secured housing, then support service staff can work with people to identify the risk factors and nature of their previous housing crisis (by utilizing assessment tools including but not limited to the Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool) in order to prevent returns to homelessness.

Survey respondents identified the following reasons for their most recent housing loss, with the option to choose multiple causes:

Health Condition	Count
Substance use issue	21
Conflict with neighbour, roommate, parent/guardian or spouse/partner	16
Landlord/tenant conflict	14
Unsafe housing conditions	11
Experienced abuse	10
Not enough income for housing	10
Mental health issue	9
Unable to pay rent or mortgage	8
Building sold or renovated	5
Left the community or relocated	4
Other	3
Decline to answer / don't know	3
Job loss	2

Income Sources

Of all survey respondents experiencing homelessness, 95% (n=73) identified at least one source of income. The most frequently occurring income source was Ontario Works (OW) held by 47% of households (n=36) followed by the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) held by 32% of households (n=25). Only 5% of households reported no source of income (n=4). Additional income sources are as follows:

Income Source	Percent	Count
Welfare/social assistance (OW)	47%	36
Disability benefit (ODSP)	32%	25
GST or HST refund	8%	6
Child and family tax benefits	6%	5
Employment (full time)	5%	4
Employment (part time)	3%	2
Informal income sources	4%	3



Other sources	4%	3
Seniors benefits (e.g. CPP/OAS/GIS)	4%	3
Employment insurance	1%	1
No Income	5%	4

17% of survey respondents (n=13) identified more than one source of income.

Emergency Service Utilization (Overall)

People experiencing homelessness often engage other systems of care at disproportionately high rates, from how frequently they utilize emergency rooms, receive hospitalizations, interact with police or law enforcement and stay in prison or jail. These additional vulnerabilities make it increasingly difficult to escape homelessness, when moments of reprieve from sleeping in shelters or outdoors are more likely to involve hospitalization and incarceration than permanent housing:

Emergency Room Utilization

Of all survey respondents experiencing homelessness, 81% identified staying in an emergency room at least once in the last twelve months (n=62):

ER Visits	Percent	Count
0 times	19%	15
1 time	14%	11
2 times	18%	13
3 times	12%	9
4 times	8%	6
5 times	1%	1
6 times	5%	4
7 times	4%	3
8 times	3%	2
9 times	0%	0
10+ times	13%	10
General "yes" response	4%	3

Of all survey respondents, 13% identified staying in an emergency room at least ten times within the last twelve months; indicating high health costs related to the experience of homelessness across St. Thomas-Elgin, which continue to increase. According to the Canadian MIS Database (current as of June 18, 2020) from the Canadian Institute for Health Information, the direct cost per emergency department visit has risen from \$96 in 2005–2006 to \$158 in 2018–2019. At that rate, the 336+ times in emergency rooms over the last twelve months for people experiencing homelessness have cost St. Thomas-Elgin at least \$53,088.

The estimated 336 times in emergency rooms over the last 12 months for those experiencing homelessness have cost St. Thomas-Elgin at least \$53,088.



Hospital Admissions

Of all survey respondents experiencing homelessness, 43% identified being admitted to hospital at least once in the last twelve months (n=33):

Hospitalizations	Percent	Count
0 times	57%	44
1 time	13%	10
2 times	17%	13
3 times	5%	4
4 times	3%	2
General “yes” response	5%	4

Days in Hospital

Of all survey respondents experiencing homelessness, 43% identified staying in a hospital at least one day in the last twelve months (n=33):

Hospitalization Days	Percent	Count
0 times	57%	44
1 time	3%	2
2 times	6%	5
3 times	1%	1
4 times	3%	2
5 times	0%	0
6 times	1%	1
7 times	1%	1
8 times	0%	0
9 times	1%	1
10+ times	12%	9
General “yes” response	14%	11

According to the Canadian MIS Database (current as of June 18, 2020) from the Canadian Institute for Health Information, the average cost of hospital stay in Ontario is \$5,642 per stay, ranging between \$4,900 and \$10,100. At that rate, the 60+ hospitalizations over the last six months for people experiencing homelessness have cost St. Thomas-Elgin at least \$338,520.

The estimated 60 hospitalizations over the last 12 months among survey respondents at risk of or experiencing homelessness have cost St. Thomas-Elgin at least \$338,520.



Police Interactions

Of all survey respondents experiencing homelessness, 76% identified interacting with police or law enforcement at least once in the last twelve months (n=59):

Police Interactions	Percent	Count
0 times	24%	19
1 time	13%	10
2 times	14%	11
3 times	8%	6
4 times	4%	3
5 times	4%	3
6 times	6%	5
7 times	1%	1
8 times	0%	0
9 times	0%	0
10+ times	19%	15
General “yes” response	6%	5

Prison/Jail Utilization

Of all survey respondents experiencing homelessness, 29% identified going to jail or prison at least once in the last twelve months (n=22):

Times in Jail/Prison	Percent	Count
0 times	71%	55
1 time	12%	8
2 times	3%	2
3 times	4%	3
4 times	0%	0
5 times	0%	0
6 times	3%	2
7 times	0%	0
8 times	0%	0
9 times	0%	0
10+ times	3%	2
General “yes” response	6%	5

According to the most recent “Update on Costs of Incarceration” from Ottawa’s Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer, while “the cost of incarceration varies substantially depending on the type of inmate,” the average institution-specific expenditure associated with each person was \$314 per day. At that rate, the 293+ times in jail or prison over the last twelve months for people experiencing homelessness have cost St. Thomas-Elgin at least \$92,002.



Conclusion

St. Thomas-Elgin has made progress since 2018 in its local response to homelessness by implementing Coordinated Access, a By-Name List and joining the Built For Zero-Canada movement. Furthermore, increasing supportive housing stock for people experiencing homelessness at all levels of acuity has been prioritized locally. These investments in time and resources are encouraged and proven to be effective. Increasing housing stability investments of this nature will continue advancing St. Thomas-Elgin in its efforts to address and reduce homelessness locally.

As part of the system of care beyond the homelessness sector alone, across St. Thomas-Elgin, each of the engagements with emergency services noted above reflect opportunities to address the acuity of people at elevated risk from not only experiencing homelessness, but from the additional vulnerabilities that accompany interactions with emergency services, hospitals, and law enforcement.

Housing-focused conversations across the entire system should be prioritized to offer opportunities to explore diversion and rapid resolution as a resource, connection to Coordinated Access processes and assessment, and permanent housing resources to ultimately end homelessness and the inherent vulnerabilities that accompany it.

