

USRI Final Research Output: Scoping Review on Homelessness in Canada

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August 15, 2022

With more than 235,000 Canadians experiencing homelessness annually, public concern over the homeless crisis is becoming increasingly salient and intense (Strobel et al. 2021). According to a 2020 Nanos Research poll commissioned by the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness, 72 percent of Canadians believe that ending homelessness should be one of the country's top priorities (Nanos Research 2020). At the same time, 78 percent of Canadians stated they would favour a political party that proposed concrete actions to address homelessness, and more than 80 percent supported some investment in affordable housing as part of the COVID-19 pandemic recovery (Nanos Research 2020). In response to the public sentiment, the Canadian government has begun enacting new policies aimed at alleviating housing concerns and reducing homelessness in the country. These include reforms to the federal homelessness program, the introduction of a coordinated access system that prioritizes those most vulnerable and matches them with appropriate resources, and the implementation of an outcomes-based approach (Government of Canada 2022).

Given that homelessness is a social crisis, it is important to establish what is currently known about the situation in order to develop innovative and effective solutions. While some studies have reviewed homeless for specific sub-populations such as street youth and homeless families, few have conducted a comprehensive large-scale scan of the literature pertaining to homelessness in Canada. Additionally, hardly any studies have examined how homelessness is measured in Canadian datasets from government agencies and homeless organizations. For these reasons, this study offers a scoping review of both the peer-reviewed academic research on homelessness in Canada and the homeless datasets provided by government institutions and private organizations. The purpose of this report is to present an overview of the existing

literature and databases on homelessness in Canada, as well as highlight relevant data gaps that must be addressed in future studies.

An outline of the project's design and methodology for performing the scoping review of the literature and databases is introduced at the beginning of the present study. This is followed by an analysis of the review's key findings, with the results of the literature review reported first. The findings from the evaluation of the databases are then detailed in the next section. The report concludes with a discussion of the relevant data gaps and recommendations for future research.

## PROJECT DESIGN AND METHODS

The purpose of this project was to provide a comprehensive overview of existing academic research and data on homelessness in Canada, with a specific focus on homelessness in Ontario. This objective was achieved over two stages of analysis.

The first stage of analysis involved searching the Sociological Abstracts database hosted by ProQuest for English-language, peer-reviewed journal articles relating to homelessness in Canada. Following Ramos and van Buren (2018), Sociological Abstracts was chosen as the primary database for study because it indexes a large variety of literature on sociological topics and other relevant social and behavioural sciences disciplines. Given that the issue of homelessness is not merely a sociological phenomenon, that database offers an extensive survey of homeless-related literature across a multitude of disciplines. Additionally, the time constraint and minimal funding associated with this project limited the scope of investigation across other databases. As such, Sociological Abstracts was both an efficient and exhaustive tool for locating high-quality articles as well as determining which articles could be easily and openly accessed using university credentials available to students.

The second stage of analysis involved the extensive examination of four statistical databases. The four databases scanned in this study were Statistics Canada, the Open Data Portal by the City of Toronto, the Ontario Data Catalogue provided by the Province of Ontario, and the United Way Greater Toronto organization. These databases were selected based on their depth and level of coverage of the homeless population, as well as the localities where the organizations primarily conduct their research. Statistics Canada, for example, was chosen because it is the most extensive statistical database in Canada and offers a national perspective on the issue of homelessness through its federally legislated responsibility of generating statistics for the entire country. Similarly, the open datasets made accessible by the City of Toronto and the Province of Ontario provided reliable primary data at the provincial and municipal levels, respectively. Toronto, in particular, was a city of interest for this study since it houses the nation's largest homeless population and the most homeless shelters (Kalajdzieva, 2022). As such, it was hypothesized that the breadth of data available for Toronto would be greater than that of any other Canadian city. Finally, in collaboration with various public and private agencies, United Way has curated a database of detailed information on the homeless population in three of Ontario's largest regions: Peel, Toronto, and York.

### *Stage 1 – Literature Review*

Data collection was conducted between May 9, 2022, to June 5, 2022. Using the advanced search portal on the Sociological Abstracts website, the peer-reviewed option was selected and applied in conjunction with the key search terms “Homeless\*” and “Canad\*.” These two phrases returned a total sample of 420 peer-reviewed journal articles. Only peer-reviewed, English-language, Canadian-focused journal articles were examined for this project. Furthermore, articles in which the full paper could not be accessed either directly

through the Sociological Abstract website or a redirect link to a different database on the Sociological Abstract website were excluded. Duplicate articles within the database were also removed from the analysis. Given these restrictions, 302 of the 420 items were coded. Information for the coding guide was retrieved from the abstract of the journal article in addition to the full paper itself.

The JBI Manual for Evidence Synthesis was used to construct the first codes or characteristics in the coding guide (Munn and Aromataris 2020). In their peer-reviewed book, the authors recommended a total of eight general codes to help in coding key information from journal publications. Seven of the eight codes were either directly included in the present coding guide or modified to match the purpose of this paper. These codes are addressed in the subsequent section. To further tailor the coding guide to the scope of this project, an inductive coding approach was employed throughout the coding process to update or add additional codes as needed.

Each journal article was coded for a total of 15 codes. These included: *Source*, which identified the database from which each journal article was derived, as well as *Author(s)*, *Year Released*, and *Article Title*, which were used as identificatory codes to detail each article's basic information. The code *Journal* classified which major journal the article was published in. *Site of Study (Province)* and *Site of Study (City)* situated the location of the research project on a provincial and municipal level, respectively. *Study Period (Years of Data Examined)* denoted the period during which the researchers collected their data for subsequent analysis. *Research Question* indicated what the author(s) were intending to answer or research in their paper, while *Unit of Analysis* defined where or whom the researchers obtained their data. For instance, whether researchers retrieved the data from government-released statistics or interviews with

homeless women and shelter workers. *Research Design* established what type of study the researchers were conducting. For instance, if the paper was a policy review, case study, or experiment. *Research Method (Detailed)* specified which instruments or procedures the researchers used to acquire the information, such as interviews or questionnaires. *Research Method (Short)* designated whether the research was qualitative, quantitative, or mixed. Significant discoveries made by the researchers during their investigation were presented under the code *Key Findings*. Finally, *Missing Information/Intervention Recommendations* included any policy suggestions the researchers highlighted for addressing their study topic or concern.

#### *Stage 2 – Database Review*

In this project, datasets are defined as any groupings of data that have common definitions of observation units and variables. Both unstructured and structured data were considered valid datasets and were subsequently coded for. These included but were not limited to data presented in a table and microfiles.

Data collection began on June 10, 2022, and ended on June 27, 2022. The quantitative articles collected and analyzed from the previous literature review were examined for their datasets. If the journal article analyzed secondary data, these datasets were Googled and added to the coding matrix if available. Primary data sources from these articles were only included and coded for if the datasets were made publicly available by the author within the paper or online. Datasets from Statistics Canada were obtained on the "Data" page on the office's website. In the search field, three key phrases were applied independently: "homelessness," "homeless," and "shelter(s)." Of the available 10,461 datasets, these three key terms yielded a total of three results. Given the limited data on homelessness in Statistics Canada, the pre-set "Housing" subject was selected and returned 561 datasets. To further restrict the data to be more relevant to

homelessness, four of the seven sub-subjects under "Housing" were used: "Dwelling features," "Housing prices and affordability," "Vacancy rates," and "Other Housing Content." This returned 350, 71, 13, and 65 datasets, respectively. After coding all relevant information from each Statistics Canada dataset, the same procedure was repeated for the datasets provided by the City of Toronto and Province of Ontario open databases. Toronto's database returned ten results, whereas Ontario's database produced only two. For United Way, the "Research and Reports" tab was utilized, and a total of 29 published articles were displayed. Of the 29 articles, only 11 addressed or discussed the issue of homelessness. Of these remaining articles, only four had the researchers' raw data available within the article. Any published reports by United Way that did not include the raw data embedded within the article were excluded.

Each dataset was coded for 6 major themes that included 14 characteristics or codes. These themes were derived from the topics addressed in the peer-reviewed journal articles analyzed in the earlier literature review. They include healthcare, education, social/family, housing, culture, and race/indigenous. The first code or characteristic, *Source*, distinguished which database each dataset originated from and offered a brief snapshot of the data's level of coverage. Journal articles examined in the preceding evaluation of the literature were coded under *Article Titles* if their datasets were accessible online or embedded within the article itself. Identificatory codes such as *Name of Dataset*, *Year Released*, and *Author* detailed the dataset's basic information. *Cross-sectional/Longitudinal* classified datasets based on whether they were snapshots of a homeless sample at a point in time or a long-term comparison of the same collection of homeless persons. *Open Source* established whether the dataset was available to be publicly analyzed or not. The following six codes were categorized as *Scope of Dataset* codes that detailed the topics of interest covered within each dataset. They were labelled *Scope of*

*Dataset (Healthcare), Scope of Dataset (Education), Scope of Dataset (Social/Family), Scope of Dataset (Housing), Scope of Dataset (Culture), and Scope of Dataset (Race/Indigenous).* The final code, *Notes*, was intended for any extraneous information that was not covered by the other hard codes in the coding matrix.

## FINDINGS FROM THE SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

### *Literature Review*

The paper begins with an examination of when the journal articles were published, as well as the provincial and municipal locations of the study sites. This is followed by an analysis of the articles' journal publications, research design, unit of analysis, research methods, key findings, and proposed policy recommendations.

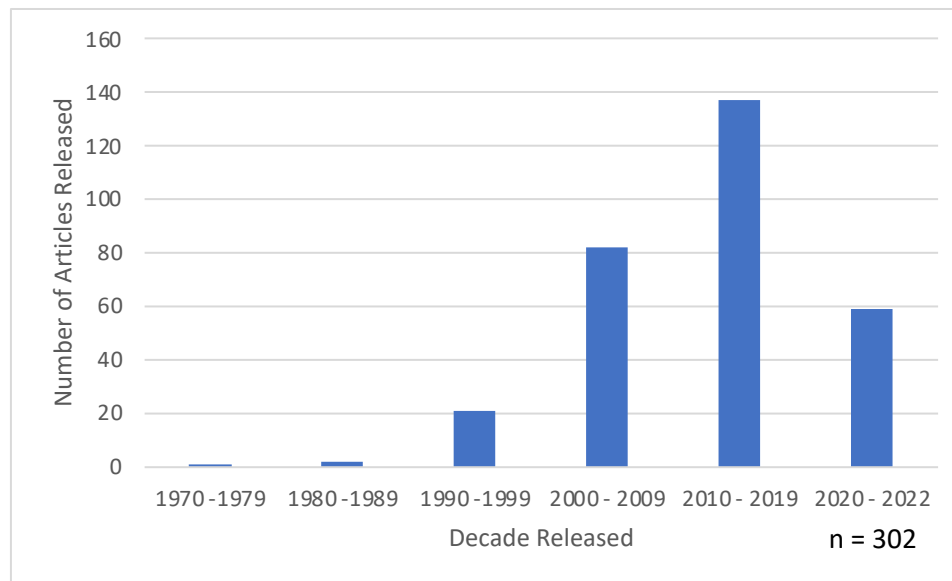
Before presenting the results of the study, it is important to note that the sample analyzed within this project is limited to articles in Sociological Abstracts and only includes peer-reviewed, English-language, and Canadian-focused research articles. Additionally, the literature review is restricted by the journals the University of Western Ontario has access to within the database.

### *Year released and provincial and municipal study sites.*

Key word searches yielded 302 journal articles extending from 1977 to 2022. As illustrated by Figure 1., the decade extending from 2010 to 2019 saw the most articles released, with a count of 137 (45 percent) of the total sample. Between 2000 and 2009 and 2020 and 2022, respectively, 82 articles (27 percent) and 59 articles (20 percent) were published. From 1990 to 1999, 21 articles (7 percent) were released. Only one paper (less than one percent) was released

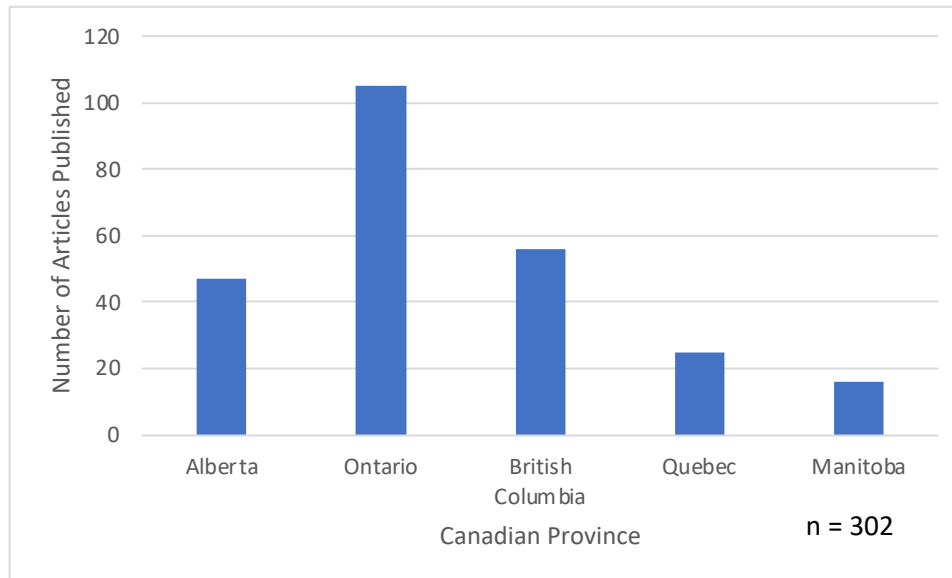


during the period between 1970 and 1979, compared to two articles (less than one percent) in the following decade, from 1980 to 1989.



*Figure 1. Number of publications released by each decade*

Across the 302 coded articles, 96 did not explicitly mention a province of study. Of those remaining in the sample, only Nunavut, Yukon, and Prince Edward Island had no documented homeless studies. As the results presented in Figure. 2 highlight, the geographic distribution of research across the provincial regions is significantly disproportionate. Approximately half of the articles in the sample were concentrated in Ontario at a count of 105 (51 percent). British Columbia was the second-most concentrated research site at 56 articles (27 percent), followed by Alberta with 47 (23 percent), Quebec with 25 (12 percent), and Manitoba with 16 (8 percent).



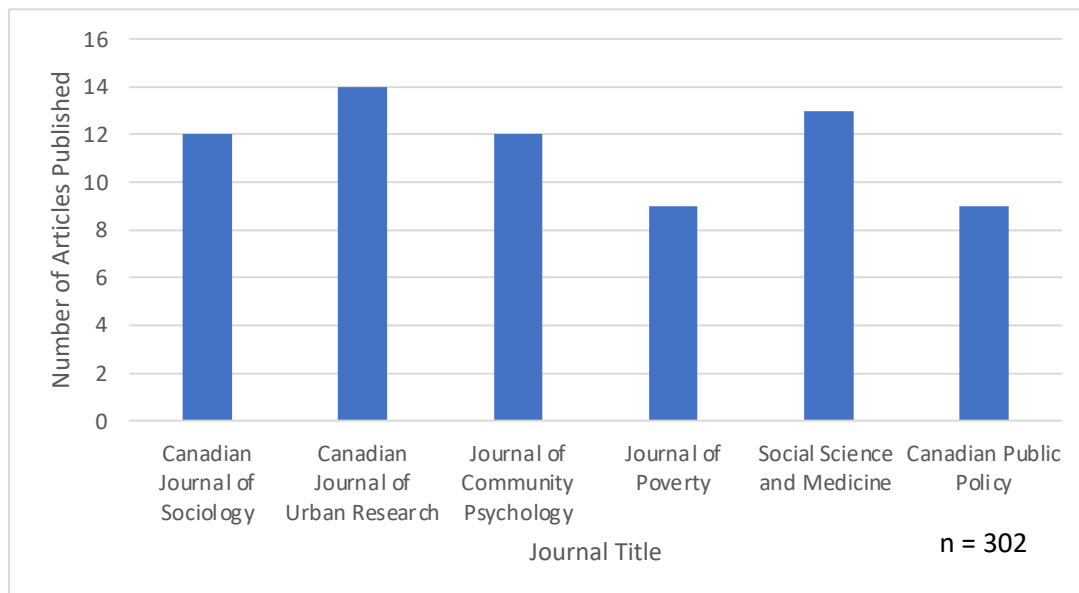
*Figure 2. Geographic distribution of research across the provincial regions*

A similar distribution ranking was witnessed across the regional study sites. Although there were a total of 40 unique regional research locations identified in the sample, the overwhelming focus of the research was situated within the larger cities and centres. Five of Canada's ten most populous cities, for example, are among the top five regional research sites (Moreau 2021). Unsurprisingly, Toronto was the most researched study site, with 70 studies (23 percent) concentrated on this location. This outcome was anticipated considering that it is not only Canada's most populated city but also houses the country's largest homeless population. The city of Vancouver ranked second in the analysis, with 47 articles (16 percent) published on the city's homeless demographic. Montreal and Ottawa, in comparison, each had 22 articles (7 percent) published on their respective populations, while Winnipeg had a total of 14 (5 percent). Other census metropolitan areas examined in the literature included Calgary, London, Saskatoon, Edmonton, Kitchener, Oshawa, St. John, Victoria, Halifax, Quebec City, and Regina. Within the sample of articles, there was a scarcity of published research on Canada's Atlantic provinces and cities. Only 5 percent (n = 16) of the journal articles in this analysis focused on Canada's

Atlantic homeless population, emphasizing the need for greater attention within this region given its significant geographic and economic differences from the rest of the country.

### *Journals.*

There were 142 unique academic journals identified within this sample of articles. Interestingly, the top six journals accounted for only 23 percent (n = 69) of the article share in the analysis, indicating that there is no predominant journal publishing Canadian-focused homeless research. As Figure 3. illustrates, the Canadian Journal of Urban Research had the most peer-reviewed entries published in this sample, with 14. The other top five journals were Social Science and Medicine (n = 13), the Canadian Journal of Sociology (n = 12), the Journal of Community Psychology (n = 12), Canadian Public Policy (n = 9), and the Journal of Poverty (n = 9).



*Figure 3. Number of articles published in the top 5 journals*

### *Research design.*

With respect to the research designs found in the literature review, case studies comprised 46 percent (n = 139) of the articles in the analysis. Other less commonly reported research

designs in the sample included quantitative cross-sectional research (18 percent, n = 54), book reviews (9 percent, n = 27), exploratory research (8 percent, n = 23), and policy reviews (7 percent, n = 21).

The results of these findings highlight a unique component of researching homelessness in that a significant proportion of research in this field is focused on developing comprehensive and individualized stories about homelessness rather than a generalized finding. This may be attributed, in part, to 1) the heterogeneity of the homeless population, 2) the myriad of pathways towards homelessness, and 3) the difficulty associated with discerning and isolating the determinants of homelessness, as demonstrated by the absence of a clear solution to the crisis. According to a study by Peressini (2007) on the demographic profiles of the homeless, there exists limited support for the association between sociodemographic traits and pathways into homelessness. Since their sociodemographic variables only explained a negligible part of the variance in the self-reported causes of homelessness, Peressini contends that unidentified confounding factors are more significant in explaining the various pathways into homelessness. Drug addiction, for instance, has frequently been cited as a gateway for youth to become homeless. However, homeless youth have highlighted that drug addiction was not the primary cause of their situation; rather, it came about as a result of their attempts to endure life on the streets (Fast et al. 2009). Given the diversity in the field of homelessness, case studies offer a valuable opportunity to collect contextualized and in-depth information about a complex population that would otherwise be difficult to obtain through other research designs, such as experiments.

*Unit of Analysis.*

Within the homeless literature in Canada, homeless adults were found to be the most commonly used unit of analysis, appearing in 54 publications (18 percent) in the sample. In comparison, homeless youth were sampled in 37 articles (12 percent), while street youth were sampled in only 31 (10 percent). Although these three terms are frequently used in the literature to describe a specific subset of individuals within the larger homeless population, none of them have a clear or consistent academic definition. For instance, while some studies specifically define street youth as individuals between the ages of 16 and 24, others employ a broader definition that includes anyone under the age of 24 (Robinson and Baron 2007; Kidd 2004). Moreover, other parameters associated with defining street youth, such as one's current homelessness status, are also inconsistent, further obscuring the distinction between homeless youth and street youth (Werdal and Mitchell 2018). While the lack of a standard measure prevents the ability to conduct comparative analyses, the larger consequence is that it creates ambiguity and complicates the capacity to develop tailored solutions for each subpopulation. Other data sources in the sample, however, such as shelter workers (n = 27) and academic literature (n = 23), were more precisely defined.

#### *Research method.*

In examining the most common research methods used in the sample, qualitative methods constituted 69 percent (n = 208) of all the journal articles. This is due, in part, to case studies making up the majority of the research in the sample. In contrast, only 25 percent (n = 74) of articles were quantitative, with the remaining 6 percent (n = 20) being mixed methodology. Interviews were the most prevalent mode of data collection, accounting for 46 percent (n = 138) of all articles' methodology. This was followed by archival research, which consisted of 13 percent (n = 38) of the sample, and questionnaires, which made up 10 percent (n = 31). The next

two methodologies, policy reports and surveys, accounted for 8 percent (n = 25) and 7 percent (n = 23) of the total, respectively. The high utilization of interviews correlates with the proportion of case studies in the sample since interviews enable researchers to elicit more detailed information from their participants as opposed to questionnaires and surveys, which only allow for limited and simple responses.

*Key findings.*

Given the diversity of research topics and questions within the sample, it is difficult to draw any definitive conclusions about such a complex population. Although this analysis has identified a few recurring patterns that exist across the literature, the outcomes presented must be considered with caution. In examining the research, abuse was found to be a prominent condition both prior to and throughout one's period of homelessness (n = 32). Women and members of the LGBTQ+ community, in particular, were identified as populations highly susceptible to abuse. According to studies by Abramovich (2017) and Lazarus et al. (2011), this is partially due to the lack of safety and privacy associated with living on the streets as well as in shelters, which are frequently not gender separated. Mental health concerns were also frequently cited within studies as a common obstacle encountered by the homeless population. While few studies have conclusively established that mental health is a direct predictor of homelessness, studies such as Whitzman (2006) have noted the emergence of mental health concerns as a consequence of being homeless. In the literature, social exclusion and isolation, as well as discrimination, were regularly highlighted as reasons for mental health deterioration and suicidal ideation in people experiencing homelessness. For homeless youth, social exclusion and abuse were mentioned as major contributing factors to their entry into homelessness. Studies found that these issues were

further compounded by feelings of worthlessness and low self-esteem once they entered homelessness.

Substance abuse was also witnessed throughout the literature as being a common problem among the homeless population. Interestingly, evidence suggests that both homeless youth and homeless women deviate from the mainstream social perception that substance abuse causes homelessness. Studies such as Mallett, Rosenthal, and Keys (2005) have revealed that addiction to illicit substances is not the precursor to homelessness for these groups but rather a means to cope with their situation after they become homeless.

A large share of research focused on Indigenous experiences with homelessness. The overrepresentation of Indigenous people is largely due to the pervasive institutional racism that continues to pervade Canadian society and politics (Caplan et al. 2020). Failures by the Canadian government to alleviate fundamental and systemic issues stemming from residential schools and historical wrongdoings have perpetuated a long-standing cycle of Indigenous homelessness. A lack of high-paying jobs, which leads to poverty, is another major contributing factor that not only causes but also sustains homelessness among Indigenous people and the greater at-risk homeless population. Unsurprisingly, the lack of affordable and accessible housing was also a recurring and prominent theme throughout the literature. With the Canadian housing market in 2022 currently in a precarious state, the possibility of alleviating the homelessness crisis through affordable housing becomes increasingly elusive.

#### *Recommendations/ interventions.*

Of the 302 articles reviewed in this analysis, only 54 offered recommendations for potential interventions related to their research topic. Of this sample, the top five most frequently mentioned solutions were more tailored homeless services and programs; a prioritization of

housing first; better training for service workers; increased access to transportation and employment opportunities; and shelter reforms. Although the literature suggests that homeless individuals are aware of their underlying problems and the need to address them, many lack the ability to access treatment programs or even find available resources, further exacerbating their situation and lack of hope. With the majority of services being concentrated in commercial centres, those living in rural regions are unable to access these resources, given not only their limited expenses but also the likelihood of the region being too distant to traverse by foot. While accessing assistance is difficult enough, individuals experiencing homelessness have repeatedly noted in studies that even if they do find resources, staff workers are often undertrained, do not know how to handle or manage homeless persons, or are not genuinely interested in assisting the homeless (Abramovich 2017; Lind 2019). According to one study, shelter personnel displayed a pervasive failure to intervene when homophobia or transphobia was witnessed within the shelters, owing to either willful ignorance or an inability to recognize homophobia and transphobia, resulting from their lack of training and knowledge (Abramovich 2017).

Changes to current shelter standards and practices were also heavily cited as a potential means to alleviate issues facing the homeless. Examples referenced include separate shelter dormitories for men and women, larger areas that may accommodate families, respect for Indigenous customs and practices, and increased personal autonomy and privacy away from shelter personnel.

As expected, housing and employment first approaches were commonly suggested as important methods to lift individuals out of their state of homelessness. However, there are a multitude of issues restricting the implementation of both these solutions. NIMBY, for instance (not in my backyard), has often prevented the enactment of affordable sheltering and service



provision programs, even as recently as 2021 in Toronto (Altstedter 2021). Because a permanent address is generally required for employment, being unable to secure one increases the difficulty of acquiring work, compounding the two issues. With shelters seldom allowing their members to use their postal code, many of the homeless are, therefore, left with limited options to improve their circumstances.

### *Databases*

The remainder of this section focuses on the analysis conducted on the Canadian databases. A brief discussion surrounding the databases from which the datasets were derived is first presented. This is then followed by an examination of the dataset's authors, years of publication, accessibility, study design, and content.

### *Source of datasets.*

Before presenting the results of the review, it is important to note that, despite the introduction of the National Homelessness Initiative by the Canadian federal government in 1999, there remains a lack of national coverage of homelessness in Canada. There were three primary objectives outlined for this initiative: 1) facilitate community capacity by coordinating Government of Canada efforts and enhancing the diversity of tools and resources; 2) foster effective partnerships and investments that contribute to addressing the immediate and multifaceted needs of people experiencing homelessness and reducing homelessness in Canada and; 3) increase awareness and understanding of homelessness in Canada (Government of Canada 2003). Given these objectives, it would be reasonable to assume that additional research would be authorized to not only better understand the needs of the homeless population in order to develop more effective interventions but also to raise awareness by providing the public with an accurate and comprehensive overview of the homelessness crisis. Although this project was

initiated over two decades ago, there still remains a noticeable absence of datasets covering homelessness at a national level. Future studies may examine the causes of this phenomenon.

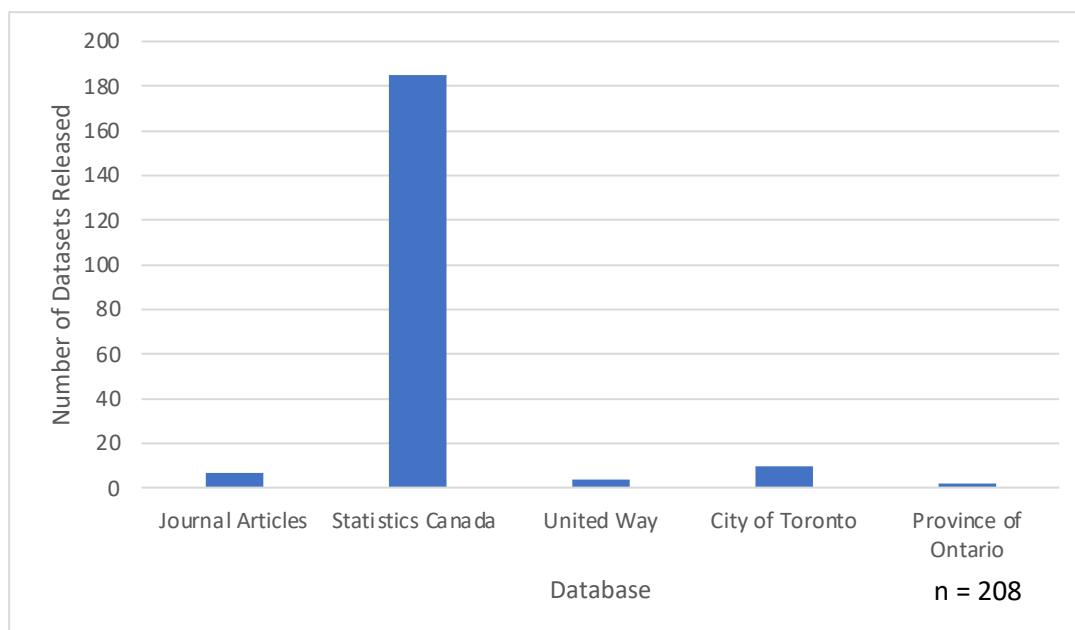
The database that yielded the overwhelming majority of results for Canadian datasets that can measure homelessness was Statistics Canada's website. Out of the 208 total datasets reviewed, the federal agency accounted for 89 percent ( $n = 185$ ). Of the remaining datasets, the City of Toronto comprised 5 percent ( $n = 10$ ), followed by datasets found in journal articles at 3 percent ( $n = 7$ ), United Way at 2 percent ( $n = 4$ ), and finally the Province of Ontario at a little under 1 percent ( $n = 2$ ). The distribution of results from the subset of data in which homelessness is the primary research topic of interest is more balanced. Of the 19 datasets that were homeless-centred, half came from research conducted by the City of Toronto ( $n = 10$ ). United Way and Statistics Canada each constituted 21 percent ( $n = 4$ ) and 16 percent ( $n = 3$ ), respectively, with the Province of Ontario contributing the remaining 10 percent ( $n = 2$ ). There were no homeless-centred quantitative datasets found within the journal articles assessed in this report. Instead, journal articles tended to use more general-focused data for their research, such as the General Social Survey or the Canadian Census. This analysis, however, is tempered by the methodological decisions to only review journal articles from Sociological Abstract and to restrict the area of research to Canada.

Although the City of Toronto produced over half of the homeless-centred datasets, only 1 out of the 10 datasets covered another subject beyond housing. This suggests that despite producing more data compared to other government agencies and organizations, the data released by the City of Toronto is not necessarily more detailed or insightful regarding the homeless population. Despite these concerns, the City of Toronto does offer a much-needed

comprehensive count of different homeless data in shelters, such as occupancy rates, shelter fatalities, and overdose deaths in homeless serving settings.

*Dataset sources.*

With three of the databases scanned in this study being government agencies, as shown in Figure 4., it is expected that the majority of datasets collected in this review would be from government entities (n = 206). The datasets solely focusing on homelessness reveal similar findings (n = 17). Of the two datasets that were not government-initiated, both were released and produced by United Way. Only one of the two, however, was completely independent of government oversight, as the other was sponsored by the City of Toronto.

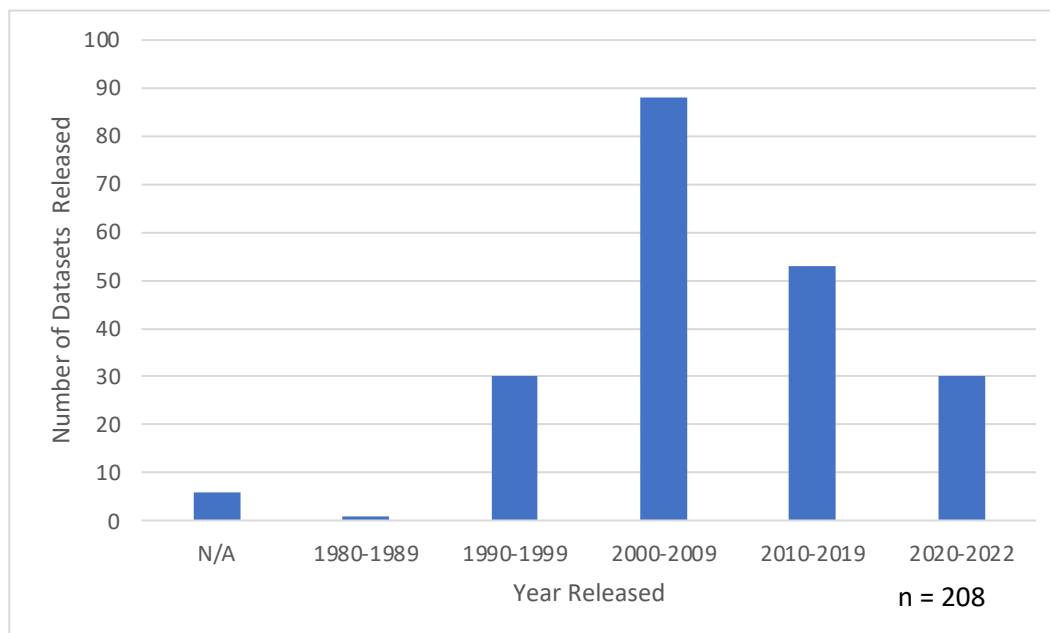


*Figure 4. Number of datasets released by each database*

*Year released.*

The period of publication for the datasets reviewed in this project extended from 1987 to 2022. Figure 5. illustrates that most datasets in this study were released between 2000 and 2009, accounting for 42 percent (n = 88) of the overall sample. The period from 2010 to 2019

contained the second most datasets at 26 percent ( $n = 53$ ), followed by the decades from 2020 to 2022 and 1990 to 1999, both with 30 percent ( $n = 30$ ). Less than 1 percent ( $n = 1$ ) of datasets were from 1980 to 1989, and datasets for which the release year could not be identified constituted the remaining 3 percent ( $n = 6$ ).



*Figure 5. Number of datasets released each decade*

Regarding the datasets that explicitly addressed homelessness, 63 percent ( $n = 12$ ) were released between 2020 and 2022. The period between 2010 to 2019 accounted for 32 percent ( $n = 6$ ), while 2000 to 2009 accounted for the remaining 5 percent ( $n = 1$ ). There were no homelessness-centred datasets available before the year 2000. The increase in datasets published after the year 2000 corresponds with the formation of the Homeless Action Task Force in January 1998 by then-Mayor of Toronto Mel Lastman (Ranasinghe and Valverde 2009). The Task Force was entrusted with undertaking a systematic study of the city's homelessness situation and subsequently proposing a series of recommendations to government leaders. As previously

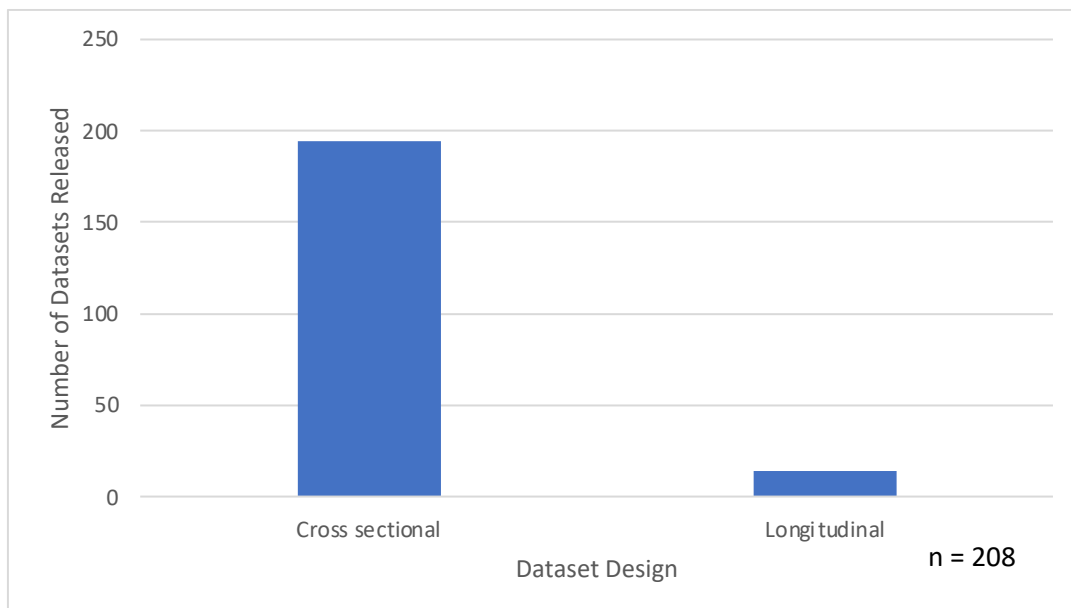
noted, the city of Toronto accounted for more than half of the datasets pertaining to homelessness, which may explain the rise of available datasets for the city after the year 2000.

*Public accessibility.*

The overwhelming majority of datasets in both the total dataset sample and the homeless-focused sample were open source. Both microfiles and data tables were counted as datasets in this analysis and assessed for their public accessibility. 95 percent (n = 18) of the datasets in the sample that focused on homelessness were open source, compared to 86 percent (n = 180) in the whole sample.

*Dataset design.*

As shown in Figure 6., of the 208 datasets examined, only 7 percent (n = 14) were longitudinal, whereas 93 percent (n = 194) were cross-sectional. Analysis of the homeless-centred datasets revealed a more homogeneous pattern, as 100 percent of the datasets were cross-sectional (n = 19).

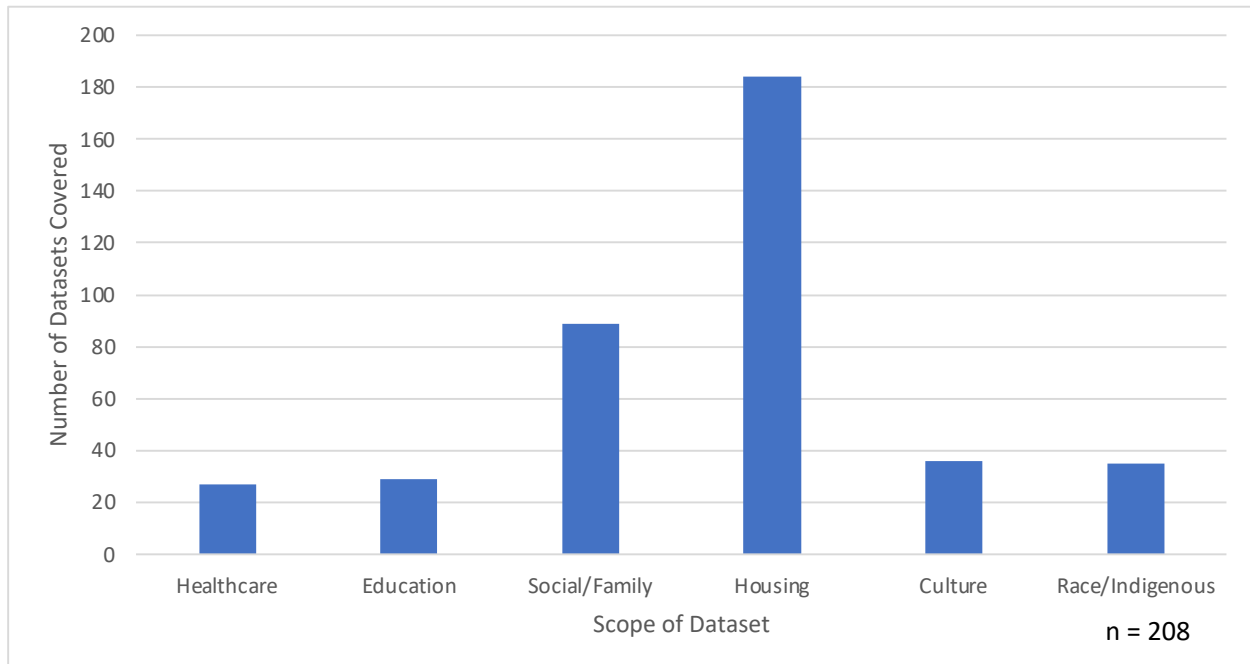


*Figure 6. Number of datasets released for each research design*

These results may be partially explained by the nomadic lifestyles adopted by the homeless population as a result of their lack of a permanent residence (Flåto and Johannessen 2010). Given the limited opportunities for continued contact and the challenges associated with following the same homeless sample over a long period of time, government organizations and independent researchers may be hesitant to conduct longitudinal research on this population. Future research, however, should prioritize longitudinal analyses since it may offer novel insights into the development of homelessness across the life course, which can subsequently be used to inform policy decisions and initiatives.

*Scope of datasets.*

Unsurprisingly, among the 208 datasets, housing was the subject that received the greatest attention, with 88 percent ( $n = 184$ ) of the datasets addressing it. It should be noted, however, that this figure may be greatly exaggerated owing to the usage of the housing subject on the Statistics Canada website during the dataset coding process. In contrast to housing, healthcare was only covered by 13 percent of datasets ( $n = 27$ ), while education, culture, and race/indigenous statuses were only marginally higher at 14 percent ( $n = 29$ ), 17 percent ( $n = 36$ ), and 17 percent ( $n = 35$ ), respectively. Additionally, Figure 7. reveals that nearly half of the datasets, or 43 percent ( $n = 89$ ), covered the topic of social or family. Similar findings were identified for the homeless-centred datasets. Housing, for example, was investigated in all 19 datasets that focused explicitly on homelessness. Race/indigenous concerns, culture and healthcare were all addressed to the same extent at 21 percent ( $n = 4$ ). Less than 16 percent ( $n = 3$ ) of the datasets discussed education, while just under 37 percent ( $n = 7$ ) focused on issues related to social and family.



*Figure 7. Number of datasets covering each topic of interest*

Within the small sample size of quantitative data specifically focused on homelessness, most datasets focus on the topic of housing over other potential determinants of homelessness such as education or healthcare. The absence of quantitative data within this scoping review highlights the necessity for more statistically oriented research on homelessness. While qualitative research offers specific insights into individuals and their needs, quantitative research may serve to generate greater standardization and objectivity across a heterogeneous population, which can be used to inform future policy decisions for improving the lives of the homeless more broadly.

## CONCLUSION

Overall, an examination of Canadian-centred articles and databases looking at issues of homelessness reveals a significant absence of quantitative homeless research. Of the 208 datasets coded, only 19 were primarily centred on homelessness, indicating a severe lack of quantitative

research in this field. Of those 19 sources, only three came from Statistics Canada, implying a lack of credible data on homelessness in Canada at the national level. Moreover, 93 percent of the sources were cross-sectional, suggesting that only regional snapshots of a very fluid and dynamic population are being recorded. With an overwhelming quantity of data concentrated at the municipal level, concerns about consistency and the capacity for comparative analysis between localities emerge since the extent to which each city investigates homelessness varies, including how each city defines a person experiencing homelessness (e.g., hidden homeless and couch surfers). Further research must be authorized at all levels of government in order to accurately capture this precarious demographic, especially in light of the potential exacerbating consequences of COVID-19 on the current homelessness crisis.

Housing was the most prevalent issue of interest in the research examined. While housing is certainly an important problem in the context of homelessness, future studies should focus on evaluating themes other than housing, as the literature review indicates that housing difficulties are frequently confounded by other variables. Nemiroff, Aubry, and Klodawsky (2010) discovered, for example, that the association between family status and physical integration remains independent of access to subsidized housing. In their study, women with dependent children were ten times more likely than women without children to be re-housed and to remain housed for significantly longer. Although other themes such as age of entry, family status and relationships, social connections, and length of homelessness appeared to correlate with housing, they were rarely discussed in both the literature and datasets.

The influence of social connections, in particular, is a major theme that should be examined more thoroughly. With multiple studies indicating that couch-surfing is a common technique among the newly homeless, investigating how friends and other social relationships



serve to either prolong or alleviate one's homeless status can aid in the development of interventions that help to reduce the risk of potential entry into chronic homelessness (Zerger, Strehlow, and Gundlapalli 2008; Tutty et al. 2013; Sherrell, D'Addario, and Hiebert 2007; Kufeldt and Nimmo 1987). By examining friends, relatives, and other social networks, researchers will get unique insight into an often-understudied community – the hidden homeless.

Research that focuses solely on housing, therefore, fails to effectively address the true issue of homelessness and provides only a limited understanding of the population. Future research should examine topics other than housing, such as healthcare, social networks, race, and culture, to better understand the elements that contribute to homelessness. Furthermore, because homelessness is a multifaceted issue, future research should analyze these elements concurrently in order to create a comprehensive description of the problem that can be used to develop innovative programs and initiatives.

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