



# **KOOTENAY HOMELESSNESS RESEARCH PROJECT**

**Final Report**

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**Prepared for  
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to the**

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## DISCLAIMER

While HRDSC funded the study, Canadian Mental Health Association for the Kootenays sponsored it and many contributed to its content, the researchers are solely responsible for the positions and opinions expressed herein.

Agnes Koch and Jeff Hunt, Researchers

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

### **The Research Project:**

This research was carried out between March and September 2004, and was done to add to our knowledge about homelessness in the Kootenays. It used a participatory action research methodology and focused on four objectives:

- Estimating the extent of homelessness in the Kootenays
- Characterizing homelessness
- Determining the services and gaps in services for the homeless
- Identifying strategies to address the gaps in services

One hundred and six support service providers and the agencies and organizations in which they work provided most of the information contained in this report. In addition, ten people from Cranbrook who are or have been homeless were interviewed to provide information about the homeless in the East Kootenays to add to research previously conducted in the West Kootenays, which focused on youth and adults with housing issues. Taken along with the work done in the West Kootenays, this research was designed to examine rural homelessness as much less research has been done in places like the Kootenays than in the more metropolitan areas in Canada and elsewhere.

For the purposes of this research, both absolute homelessness and episodic or relative homelessness were examined although the approach taken here did not include those who spend 50 % or more of their income on housing or those living in substandard housing as part of the definition. It did however include those who lack housing security and which as a result they are either at risk of homelessness or have experienced it in the past.

### **Economic Context:**

Homelessness, both rural and urban, is rooted in poverty or general economic challenges. Therefore, the region's economic characteristics provide important context for understanding the issue of homelessness. Communities in the Kootenays:

- Have traditionally relied on primary extractive industries, particularly forestry and mining and at present employment levels in these traditional industries is declining,
- Have experienced a loss of government jobs recently, and
- Have been looking more towards tourism as an economic base, but in this sector, the jobs are often at minimum wage, and are part-time and/or seasonal.

Socio-economic indicators for the region show that in comparison to the province as a whole:

- The average income is lower
- Relies more heavily on government transfers
- Has a higher proportion of the population is on income assistance
- Has a more equal distribution of income,
- Has fewer low income families

### **Overall Finding:**

This research found that the greatest barrier to addressing homelessness in the Kootenays from the perspective of those most familiar with it is the issue's invisibility. The idea that the homeless are people who live in the streets and sleep in doorways is widely held by community members outside the support service providers. Because these community members do not see many people matching their description of homelessness, they do not think that it is a significant problem in the Kootenays. This idea of homelessness is characterized as absolute homelessness but it is only part of what researchers and practitioners understand to be homelessness. To capture the full extent of homelessness, the definition needs to capture those lacking housing security and therefore experience homelessness from time to time or are at constant risk of doing so; the relative or episodic homeless.

Those with more intimate knowledge of the most vulnerable in the community attest to the fact that the number of people experiencing absolute or relative homelessness is increasing because of:

- The increase in reliance on tourism as the economic driver which has driven up housing and rental costs and decreased the stock of affordable housing.
- The hotter housing market, which is having an upward pressure on housing, costs and is decreasing housing stock.
- The decrease in housing programs and ancillary services provided by government leaving more people without programs to help them.
- More stringent eligibility requirements, which has increased the number of people who no longer qualify for assistance of various kinds.
- The lack of foster care and other programs for youth which has left youth more vulnerable to homelessness.

## **Strategies of Adaptation:**

The issue of homelessness in the Kootenays is largely invisible because of the ways that those in the situation chose to respond to their situation. Their strategies of adaptation typically include:

- Couch surfing- relying on friends and family for a few days at a time.
- Finding abandoned cars, cabins, RV's or buildings where they can spend the night(s) but not necessarily known to others.
- Being taken in by church / neighbours / teachers as a temporary solution.
- Moving away [a lot of those homeless in the Vancouver Downtown East Side come from rural BC and many are from the Kootenays] especially among youth.
- Returning to abusive relationships because the alternative is being without shelter, relying on friends and family for temporary accommodation, or moving to where services exist.

## **Service Infrastructure:**

Support service providers in the region are reporting that there has been a decrease in the services available to help address the underlying issues causing or contributing to the increase in homelessness that they are seeing. The following characterize the changes to the system of services they are reporting:

- The system is increasingly concerned with the cost of the system; not to address or even more importantly to prevent the problems of the most vulnerable in our communities.
- There are more stringent eligibility criteria.
- The access to services is made difficult because of the need for an address; parental signatures; social insurance number etc.
- The cuts to services and operating expenses of the support organizations have decreased the ability of the providers to:
  - lobby and advocate on behalf of the vulnerable,
  - provide the range and types of services needed, and
  - address long term solutions and to pursue prevention rather than simply responding to a crisis situation e.g. most communities have emergency or transitional housing for women in abusive situations but most lack 2<sup>nd</sup> stage housing. So the emergency situation has some solution but there is limited ability to house these women in the longer term.
- The decrease in discretionary funds along with increasingly narrower definitions of eligibility and application of program funds has decreased the flexibility of service providers to respond to the problem.

- The lack of affordable housing available in community; housing allowance simply not sufficient to find housing.
- The lack of a drop in centre/shelter/youth centre where there is a stable and safe enough environment to address underlying or concurrent issues.
- Legal aid and legal services have been withdrawn.
- The lack of public transportation especially with the increasingly regionalized service provision has made it even more difficult to service the needs of this population.
- The increase in services accessible only via a call center.

### **Service Gaps:**

Those interviewed in this research identified the decrease in the level of services available for those experiencing homelessness or at risk of doing so; but they identified the lack of community awareness of the issue as the major barrier in addressing it. The four key service gaps identified through the research were the need for:

- Increased community education and awareness
- More tolerant public attitudes
- Increased community involvement
- Increased specific services

### **Recommendations:**

1. Designate or create a community organization willing to put homelessness on the public agenda
2. Include local government and business representatives as well as those experiencing homelessness in the community organization addressing homelessness
3. Develop a region wide coalition to ensure and benefit from a coordinated approach to the issue
4. Develop a formal and systematic way to collect and store data on Kootenay homelessness
5. Find additional resources to support the work of implementing the strategies and recommendations coming from this research

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## **1. BACKGROUND:**

### **1.1 Project Origins**

For over a year prior to November 2003, staff from the Canadian Mental Health Association for the Kootenays (Association) was involved in meetings with a broad representation of local support service providers. A number of local social issues were discussed at these meetings, but the issue of homelessness came up time and again. There was a general perception that homelessness in the Kootenays was a problem and that it was getting worse. However, the means to demonstrate this was the case was severely limited by the lack of good data and information regarding homelessness in the Kootenays. Recognizing this situation, the Association felt that a good first step in addressing the issue would be to gather better data. They were successful in getting a grant from the Government of Canada's National Homelessness Initiative as recommended by the BC/Yukon Regional Homelessness Research Committee of Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRDSC).

With the funding in place, the research project began in March 2004, with discussions to frame and focus the research. A review of the literature was then undertaken to glean insights from the previous research done on homelessness, particularly in rural areas in Canada. Unfortunately, there has not been a great deal of research conducted on homelessness in communities like those in the Kootenays. Notable exceptions to this were two pieces of research on housing issues in the West Kootenays, commissioned by The Advocacy Centre in Nelson a member agency of the Nelson District Community Resources Society. One focused on the housing issues related to youth; *Roofs4Youth: Understanding Youth Housing Issues and Homelessness in the West Kootenays* and the second a more general one; *Faces of Homelessness in a Rural Area: Housing Issues and Homelessness in the West Kootenay and Boundary Region*. This research project has relied heavily on these pieces of research and the on-going work of the Nelson Committee on Homelessness (NCOH) and as a result has concentrated more of the primary data collection in the East Kootenays.

### **1.2 Conceptual Framework:**

The researchers' first undertook a careful consideration of the needs of the committee whose interest in the issue of homelessness prompted the project and the advice of the BC/Yukon Regional Homelessness Research Committee to CMHA for the Kootenays in their letter of notification.

From this review and in consultation with those initially involved with the issue of homelessness in the Kootenays, the decision was made to focus the research on:

- a. Estimating those experiencing homelessness in the region. And, to determine the degree to which it is deemed relatively significant.
- b. Determining and examining the characteristics of the homelessness; particularly with respect to youth, and those with mental health and/or substance abuse issues.
- c. Developing an inventory of service gaps in addressing homelessness.
- d. Developing strategies and inventory best practices for addressing the service gaps.

While these were the objectives established for the project at its earliest stages, from the beginning there were some issues around what could be accomplished in a methodologically sound way in the time frame of the project. These issues are outlined here in order to establish clearly what the project intended to accomplish initially. (See Appendix 1 for a copy of the proposal for framing and focusing the research for the full discussion of these ideas as they were articulated at that time.)

### **1.2.1 Objective 1: Extent of Homelessness**

From the outset, the researchers were aware of the challenge in estimating the degree of homelessness. In the first place, all research on homelessness has been beset with definitional problems; who we define as homeless determines how we count them and affects the numbers of homeless that result. Over time the concept has evolved with two fairly standard sub-concepts each with substantial agreement among researchers as to the characteristics that distinguish them. These two sub-concepts of homelessness are:

- Absolute homelessness: those living out in the elements or in emergency shelters or makeshift shelters not designed for accommodation (Glass: 2002 p.3)
- Relative homelessness or at-risk of homelessness: those who for a variety of reasons would find themselves in absolute homelessness if any circumstances change (Glass; 2002 pp3-4). This is sometimes referred to as episodic homelessness because those that experience it tend to move in and out of homelessness as their circumstances dictate.

This latter definition often includes those who spend more than 50% of their income on housing and those living in substandard housing and / or budget hotels/motels/hostels referred to in the literature as SRO's (single room occupants). These conditions broaden the concept more than warranted for our purposes, so unless there were other conditions along with one or the other of these latter characteristics, these were not considered as part of the at-risk of homelessness population. Instead, we focused on absolute homelessness and those with personal circumstances where a crisis had in the past resulted in the loss of a permanent

home (relative or episodic homelessness). This puts our definition in line with that used in the National Homelessness Initiative which considers homelessness to be:

“any person, family or household that has no fixed address or security of housing tenure”

Even with some assistance from previous research in standardizing the concept of homelessness another more significant problem was encountered in fulfilling the objective of determining the extent of homelessness. Typically, determining the extent of homelessness is done by periodic counts of people in places that temporarily house and/or provide services for the homeless (City of Calgary, 2004). The Kootenay region has only a few specialized emergency shelters (transition homes for those leaving abusive relationships) and very few institutionalized programs and services in existence exclusively or primarily for the homeless. So there is no way to obtain an accurate determination of homelessness in the Kootenays using urban methods where these services exist. The support service agencies in the Kootenays whose front-line workers come into contact with clients know they have clients which fit the definition of homelessness but, the information these agencies routinely collect does not differentiate between clients who are homeless and their other clients who are not. As a result there were no existing data sets which could be used to meet this objective. There is one last way that the extent of homelessness is often determined; researchers comb the streets for those fitting the characteristics of homelessness and counting them. For us to employ this methodology for the research area in question would have been prohibitively expensive and time consuming; it was well beyond the financial resources and time available to this project. Moreover, this method becomes even more challenging in a rural environment because it is widely reported that homeless individuals will resort to substandard shelter outside of city limits in tents and abandoned cars or trailers. At best, this research was able only report support service providers' anecdotal information about the extent of homelessness and to make recommendations to build a data collection process in the future (see section 8 for a more detailed discussion of this recommendation).

### **1.2.2 Objective 2: Characterizing Homelessness**

The proposal for the research identified three common target groups within the homelessness population; youth; those with substance abuse issues and those with mental health issues. The expectation was that the research would focus on these homeless characteristics in the Kootenays to see if those homeless in the Kootenays resemble those elsewhere and if so were there any particular services or service gaps associated with each of them. The second objective was therefore to develop a profile of the Kootenay homeless population. In fulfilling this objective, first the literature was searched for insights with respect to these characteristics of those homeless. Then, secondly we noted references made about the characteristics of the homeless in the stories we heard in the data collection process. But it became

clear that with the exception of youth, there was little of relevance associated with the population profiles in the Kootenays to add to what is commonly known about the characteristics of the homeless. What emerged though as much more relevant was a characterization of the issue itself. As a result, the research focused on characterization of the issue rather than characterization of the homeless. This is not uncommon in exploratory research in that what are thought to be important variables before the research is undertaken are found to be less so and other elements not considered before the research begins are found ultimately to be more significant.

### **1.2.3 Objective 3: Service Gaps**

This was one of the key objectives of the research project. Two symposia were developed to gather information explicitly on these service gaps and the strategies developed to address them. The research quickly found that the support service providers were much more concerned about the underlying community characteristics that make it difficult for them to do much to address homelessness. This led as can be seen in Section 6 to some very clear and significant insights about service gaps but the most important of these were very different than would be expected by those like ourselves not intimately involved with the issue in the community.<sup>1</sup>

### **1.2.4 Objective 4: Strategies for Addressing Gaps**

Like all applied research, this project had a practical goal. We wanted to ensure that through the process of collecting the data associated with the objectives in the research, we would also be able to identify some strategies that could be used to address the issue of homelessness. This was especially with regard to the service gaps identified in Objective 3. We also wanted to ensure that these strategies would come from those most knowledgeable about the issue and with whom the work associated with the strategies would most likely come. Therefore, both the methodology and the research results were designed to focus on these two objectives. This focus was also consistent with the advice for the project coming from the BC/Yukon Regional Research Committee.

At the same time as the research was being framed; insights from research on homelessness done previously was being sought. There is a very large and comprehensive literature associated with the issue and so the review of the literature focused only a very small portion of it deemed significant for our research purposes.

## **2. A REVIEW OF SIGNIFICANT LITERATURE:**

This research project focuses on the homeless population with a specific emphasis on youth, those with substance abuse problems, and those with mental health issues. However, to develop a more meaningful context in which to examine these sub-populations and by virtue of the fact that that these segments represent a large majority of the homeless population and that they are largely interdependent, the literature review was conducted with a broad research scope. But at the same time the large number of research studies done on homelessness necessitated some focus to the review so that this section would not be overwhelmed with detail. The focus chosen was on some key themes in the literature relevant to this research project. The themes summarized in this review include:

- How homeless is typically defined and measured
- Homelessness specifically in rural areas and within Canada
- Some of the quantitative and qualitative characteristics of the homeless population and the homelessness issue.

### **2.1 A Brief Chronology:**

From late 19<sup>th</sup> to the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the homeless – mostly unattached and transient labourers – congregated in the poorer districts of cities (often called Skid Row). In the 1960s and 1970s, the mechanization of low-skilled or menial tasks reduced the economic function of these areas as a source for cheap labour.

Between 1950 and 1970, the populations in poor areas dropped by 50 %. The urban renewal that took place during the late 1950s to early 1970s removed the cheap, substandard housing of the poor areas, but did not replace it with affordable accommodation.

Homelessness today, in large part, is an outcome of the shortage of inexpensive housing for the poor. As a result of the disappearance of cheap housing, the poor must pay a larger proportion of their limited income for shelter, or, if their income is insufficient or non-existent, be pushed out of the housing market altogether. In addition, the current economic climate and cries for public service accountability has forced some rationalization of critical housing programs, and support services for the disadvantaged populations.

### **2.2 What Does “Homeless” Mean**

There are almost as many definitions of “homeless” as there are studies on the subject of homelessness. Unfortunately, experts have been unable to come to a consensus on who should be included in the definition and who should be excluded to what conditions the definition should be applied.

The spectrum of definitions is wide. At one end of the spectrum, a “homeless” person is defined simply as one absolutely without shelter in the strictest sense. At the other end, many researchers propose a broad and inclusive definition adopted by the UN which states “a “homeless” person is not only someone without a domicile who lives on the street or in a shelter, but can equally be someone without access to shelter meeting the basic criteria considered essential for health and human and social development.”

Most research in Canada relies on the first definition – homelessness is literally without shelter. However recent studies in Vancouver and the West Kootenay / Boundary region have chosen to include not only those without shelter, but also those who are “at-risk” of homelessness.

Who we define as homeless determines how we count them. By defining “homeless” as literally without shelter, we run the risk of underestimating the gravity of the situation. As Barbara Murphy states in her book *On the Street: How We Created Homelessness*, “Overestimating invites public cynicism; underestimating incurs the wrath of service agencies that rely on public funding”.

### **2.3 Homelessness in Canada**

There were 30 percent more Canadians living in poverty in 1996 than there were in 1986, and most anti-poverty advocates – and a number of economists – argue that the increase in homelessness is a direct result of cuts to government spending within Canada.

Since the 1980s the Federal Government has been withdrawing its support of new social housing and offloading the responsibility to the provinces. In 1993, the federal government stopped funding to social housing altogether. When affordable housing units were built, low-income tenants moved out of their low-cost housing which opened up spaces for those on a waiting list. With no new social housing being built, these low-cost units are no longer “recycled” and the neediest end up on the street.

Unfortunately, governments disagree as to who is responsible for the homeless. Municipalities argue they are short of funds for social welfare programs because provincial governments have slashed spending. Provinces argue they have no money because of cuts in transfer payments from the federal government.

Recently though there appears to be a change in way that government at all levels have approached the problem. In the late 1990’s the Federation of Canadian Municipalities formed a National Housing Policy Options Team and by 2000 a “National Affordable Housing Strategy” was proposed. The key element of this strategy was the development of “a long-term approach by a partnership of

government, housing and social-service providers and industry” to address the need for a healthy housing system in Canada. The strategy is made up of three components:

- A ten year flexible federal capital grant program,
- Development of measures to attract new investment including:
  - tax measures and
  - strengthening Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation’s role in facilitating affordable housing, and
- The creation of provincial/territorial shelter and rental initiatives (Federation of Canadian Municipalities; 2000: pp 5-6).

Because organizations such as the Federation of Canadian Municipalities have “declared homelessness in Canada ‘a national disaster”, we know that the number of homeless in Canada is unacceptably high but to this date, there is no official data on the homeless population in Canada (Federation of Canadian Municipalities: 2000: p. 3).

## 2.4 What Causes Homelessness

There is much debate as to the relative weight that must be given to the variety of contributing factors, which include poverty, shortage of low-cost housing, substance abuse, and mental illness. It is also important to note that the causes and risk factors for homelessness are not the same for everyone. Each subgroup may have distinct and significant differences. For example, domestic violence is a common indicator for homeless women and youth, whereas individuals from ethnic minority groups may have difficulty securing accommodation due to language barriers and racism.

“Combine a growing number of poor and a growing number of expensive housing units and we have people on the streets. Add to this a failure to recognize that the mentally ill cannot manage on their own, and we have even more people on the streets.”

At the root of all homelessness, however, is poverty. There are simply too many poor people and not enough low-income places for them to live. Traditionally, low-income individuals and families have lived in the downtown of a city. However, increasing numbers of middle class professionals now prefer to make their homes in the downtown area close to where they work. They directly compete with the poor for existing housing units. Low income housing is converted to upscale single family homes or high-rise condos. Between 1971 and 1996 this process has resulted in a combined net loss of 250,000 housing units in Canada’s four major cities reducing the population density by 25 percent.

In the greater Vancouver area, rental rates for bachelor apartments increased by almost 13 % from 1991-1996, while incomes showed a decline of approximately 4

% . A recent study of the West Kootenay area showed that almost a third of renters in Nelson were paying 50 % or more of their monthly income to rent.

The continuing lack of demand for unskilled labour still contributes to today's homelessness and helps account for the poor employment and earning records of the homeless. The past decade has seen a bulge in the proportion of persons between the ages of twenty and thirty-five, a direct outcome of the post-war baby boom. The consequence of this "excess" of young persons, especially males, was a depressed earnings level for young adults, and an elevated unemployment rate.

In the most basic sense, the root causes of homelessness can be stated as:

- Increase in number of Poor People
- Decrease in number of low-income housing units
- Deinstitutionalization of Canada's mentally ill population

A 1997 study of homeless shelter users in Calgary found that structural barriers to housing (such as low minimum wage, job loss, housing availability, high rents and damage deposits) had a greater impact than did psychosocial factors (i.e. disruptive early childhood, domestic problems, and emotional difficulties). In fact, over 40 % of homeless individuals surveyed in Calgary were employed, but did not earn enough to find stable housing.

There is some dissent on whether substance abuse is a significant influence to transitions to homelessness. Some experts believe that substance abuse only places an individual at greater risk of literal homelessness, but is not a direct factor in its explanation. However, most agree that once homeless an individual's misuse of alcohol and drugs will certainly impact their ability to positively change their housing situation.

As well, the policy of de-institutionalization of the mentally ill has significantly contributed to the homeless population. People with mental illness and/or substance abuse problems become homeless because they are poor, and in many cases suffer from ongoing discrimination and even violence. Many people with serious mental illness are unable to work consistently, if at all, in part due to active symptoms of these illnesses.

## 2.5 How Many Homeless Are There

"As of October 1998, there were at least 200 000 homeless people in Canada -- people literally without home, people with no private spaces in which to live, people existing day to day, 24 hours a day, in public places. And the situation is getting worse."

It is difficult, to say the least, to find a consensus on the size of the homeless population. On a world scale, it is estimated that more than one billion are poorly housed and that 100 million of them are literally living on the street. Two US researchers have given estimates for the US as a whole varying between 250,000 and 3 million. And in Canada, where only a handful of attempts to count the homeless

have been carried out, the figure ranges from approximately 40,000 to 200,000 for any given year.

Early attempts to enumerate the homeless in Canada were less than successful. There was a low participation rate by service agencies and a failure to include those individuals not staying in shelters. As a result, it's believed that the scope of the problem in Canada has been underestimated.

Significant variations in the number of homeless people reported in one country or even one city may be explained by the different definitions or methods adopted by researchers. The definition of homelessness will itself determine the number.

However, even given the difficulty of estimating an exact number, experts agree that the homeless population is growing and the composition of the population is becoming increasingly varied.

## **2.6 Some Statistics**

- About 80 % of individuals exit from homelessness within 2-3 weeks
- Typically 70 % of the homeless population is male, and the majority is Caucasian
- Over 40 % of the Aboriginal homeless in Vancouver had been homeless for 6 months or more
- The majority of homeless are between the ages of 24-44
- 25 % of children in Canada live below the poverty level
- The majority of youths on the streets come from abusive homes
- Almost a quarter of all homeless individuals are children under the age of 18 who are with a parent
- In the US, studies report 25 % of homeless individuals were physically or sexually abused as children; 27 % percent ere in foster care or institutions as children; and 21% were homeless as children.
- 42 % of homeless youth identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual
- Between 20-30 % of the homeless in Canada are mentally ill and in need of treatment

## 2.7 Who is Homeless

Studies conducted in the 1950s revealed that the average age of homeless people was near 50 years old, while today the homeless are in their middle to low thirties. This can be due, in part, to the post war baby-boom which caused a bulge in the proportion of persons between the ages of 25 and 45. Caucasian males in their late twenties to early forties make up the majority of the homeless population.

In both Canada and the US, women make up approximately 30 % of all homeless. It has been suggested, however, that women are less evident in enumeration because counts are usually based on service users and fewer cater to women. Also, women are generally homeless for shorter periods of time than men because they often manage to find shelter in exchange for sexual or domestic services. Studies have shown that women are more likely than men to experience violence while they are homeless.

The primary need for all homeless women appears to be affordable, accessible, secure housing in combination with social support programs and appropriate health services. These could include access to counseling on nutrition, sexual activity, substance use, and pregnancy and parenting programs.

People who are homeless want and need to work, but few are employed in jobs that can help them escape homelessness.

The number of homeless families is growing. Almost a quarter of all homeless individuals are children under the age of 18 who are with a parent. 42 % of this group is under 5 years of age. An article in the Globe and Mail in February 1996 reported a 45 % increase over the previous year in the number of families seeking emergency shelter in Metropolitan Toronto. Most of these families had been evicted from their homes for failure to pay the rent. Some attribute this problem to a reduction of about 22 % in social assistance.

A 1987 survey found that 11.5 % of people in shelters were under the age of 16. Studies have also shown that most of the youths on the streets have been victims of sexual, physical, or psychological abuse. The community of other "street youths" gives them a place where they can feel they belong. Street children and runaway youth use various strategies to survive when living on the street or running away: staying with friends, engaging in prostitution, and committing offences. The longer they are homeless, the more likely they are to commit offences in order to survive. Interventions need to focus on the whole situation of the individual youth, avoiding a "one-size-fits-all" solution.

Generally speaking, the Aboriginal population differs significantly from the non-Aboriginal. The Aboriginal population is characterized by lower educational and income levels, higher unemployment and poverty levels, a larger proportion of

single-parent families, and generally poorer housing. These factors are major contributors to Aboriginal homelessness, although others (drug and alcohol abuse and mental illness) are often cited.

Recent estimates of the homeless suggest that at least 40 % have substance use disorders, 25% have some form of physical disability, and 20 % have serious mental illness. These factors contribute both to the risk of becoming homeless and to the difficulty in overcoming it. Once homeless, people with co-occurring disorders have more problems, need more help or are unable to benefit from services, and are more likely to remain homeless than other groups of people.

People with co-occurring disorders who are homeless frequently are excluded from mental health treatment programs because of their substance use disorder, from substance abuse treatment programs because of their mental illness, and from homeless service programs because of their mental illnesses and substance use disorders. It is important that treatment plans be integrated, and must be developed *with* the individual rather than *for* them. This will increase the willingness to engage in services and to remain in treatment.

As will be seen later in this report, there are some recurrent themes in homelessness research. However, when we focus on the services provided and the gaps that exist, there is still much to learn about homelessness in rural areas like the Kootenays.

### **3. METHODOLOGY:**

#### **3.1 Participatory Action Research Approach:**

This project was undertaken using a participatory action research methodology. Although there are many variations on this type of research, the approach taken here is characterized by two common elements of this type of research approach, namely:

- All those involved in the issue being explored are involved in the research, process and so there is an emphasis on participation in the approach, and
- The research is designed not just to collect data to understand an issue better but is done so for the purpose of taking some kind of action to address it.

In terms of this second element Smith's (1998) description using Bogdan and Biklen (1992) ideas explains this further:

"The second tradition, perhaps more widely approached within the social welfare field- and most certainly the broader understanding in the USA is of action research as 'the systematic collection of information that is designed to bring about social change' (Bogdan and Biklen 1992: 223)"( p. 1)

With the roots of the project in the need seen by a number of Kootenay support service providers to understand and address homeless more adequately, the use of participatory action research fit well with the nature of the research project.

From the inception, the process of defining and focusing the research to be undertaken was done with significant input from this group of involved individuals as well as Nelson Committee on Homelessness (NCOH). As the research questions and focus began to take shape and other support service providers were contacted to take part in the research, they too were made part of the process. All data collected including the summary draft of this report was circulated for comment to an increasingly larger group of people involved as participants. This sharing of the data was done with three important goals in mind:

- To ensure that the data was accurate, interpreted appropriately and was of the highest quality
- To ensure that critical data that might have been missed could be added in as the data collection process continued
- To ensure that the information being collected would be as useful as possible for those who would ultimately use it.

### **3.2 Target Population:**

Previous research in the West Kootenay had targeted those with housing issues among the youth and adult populations. With this as a foundation to build on, this research was designed to complement that research rather than duplicate it. To this end, we chose to focus our field research on the knowledge held by support service providers who had first hand experience of the issue of homelessness. This was augmented with interview data from a small sample the client population in the East Kootenay to compare to the West Kootenay research done previously.<sup>2</sup> One hundred and six support service providers, representing a broad spectrum of organizations from around the Kootenays participated in the interviews, focus group discussions and symposia held between March and September, 2004 (see Appendix 2 for a list of participating organizations).<sup>3</sup>

### **3.3 Data Collection Tools:**

The data collection took place over four phases:

- a. the research focus and framing phase
- b. support service providers experience with homelessness issue
- c. symposia on service gaps and strategies to address them
- d. interviews with a select sample of those who have experienced or are experiencing homelessness.

In the first phase, the researchers met with committees, individuals and groups like NCOH who have been involved with the issue of homelessness prior to research grant application. In this phase most of the data collection was quite informal as its purpose was to get a clear sense of what service providers were experiencing which led them to believe there was a problem with homelessness and that the situation was getting worse. In this phase of the research, twenty eight individuals were involved in the process which ultimately led to the research focus.

In the second phase, a more structured approach was taken to the data collection and a number of focus groups and personal interviews were held to obtain information from a wide variety of support service providers from around the Kootenays (see Appendix 3 for a copy of the data collection instrument). The purpose of this phase was gather more detailed information from support service providers as to their experience with homelessness. In this phase, fifty individuals took part in the focus groups and/or individual interviews.

In the third phase, two symposia were held to bring together a wide variety of those involved in the issue of homelessness in Kootenay communities. Although invitations to the symposia were primarily sent to social and educational service providers there were others represented at each symposium. In each case there was a local government representative and a representative from outside the region with a

professional interest in homelessness and/or housing issues (BC Housing Corp and SCPC consultant). The purpose of the symposia was to focus on the service gaps and the strategies to address these gaps (see Appendix 4 for a copy of the symposium agenda). In total twenty-eight individuals took part in the symposia.<sup>4</sup>

In the final stage of data collection, ten interviews were conducted with people in the Cranbrook area who were or have been homeless at some time. While this constituted a small part of the overall project because the West Kootenay research had already generated data regarding those with housing issues, it was nonetheless a very important source of data for this project. Given the methodological difficulties in enumerating a population of homeless there is no way to choose a sample of this population that could be considered representative. Due to timing issues with respect to undertaking this part of the data collection process, it was only possible to do a small number of individuals and to rely on referrals from agencies to provide timely access to the client population. This further diminished the ability to ensure breadth in the sample. That said, though, the insights provided by this small sample of homeless coupled with the research results from the West Kootenay research serve as an important complement to the support service provider data on which this research has focused.

The data from all four phases are reported where it is most relevant in the remaining sections of this report. But it became clear from an analysis of the data, that the economic situation in Kootenay communities is important to understanding homelessness in the region. It conditions the extent to which it is a problem and how it may be addressed. Therefore, an examination of the economic situation facing the communities of the Kootenays provides valuable context for the subsequent sections of this report.

#### **4. ECONOMIC CONTEXT:**

##### **4.1 Key Economic Factors:**

The region has been hit hard as has most of rural B.C. by the decline in the traditional resource based economy as a result of globalization. Unemployment in the traditional forestry and mining sectors has increased. In the retail sector in many Kootenay communities, a significant proportion of the new jobs are part-time and/or at minimum wage, which cannot sustain individuals or families economically and often yield less income than being on income assistance.

Along with the decreased employment in the resources based industries, the region has also suffered loss of government jobs as the provincial government in particular has sought to balance its budget.

And finally, the economic base of the region has for some time now been increasingly oriented towards tourism. But this sector has experienced downturns for the past two years as well. But even were this not the case many, if not most, of the jobs it generates are relatively low-paying; often part-time and seasonal by nature. The amenities and lifestyle that make these communities attractive for tourists also attract a significant number of out-of-town/province part-time residents which has served to substantially increase the cost of housing in these communities.

From an economic standpoint, this situates the Kootenays as highly representative of the findings of a group of researchers in Ontario conducting longitudinal research on the economies of rural communities. This research project, called the New Rural Economy project (NRE) and headed by researcher Bill Reimer, has found that rural communities in Canada have three distinct components which he describes as:

"Rural Canada One consists of those people and organizations that are well connected to the global economy....They are the resource corporations, the banks, the utilities doing business in rural Canada. We estimate that they comprise five to ten percent of the rural population.

Rural Canada Two is deeply involved in domestic and regional markets...they are employed men and women of rural Canada, the volunteers in rural communities and the backbone of the informal economy. We estimate they represent about sixty to seventy percent of the rural population.

Rural Canada Three are those excluded from the mainstream of rural society. They are often without credit, are unemployed or underemployed, have few property rights and suffer uncertainty in their entitlement: often depending upon the whim of governments and most susceptible to the withdrawal of services. They are frequently trapped in poverty or near poverty with few resources to escape. They are the youth, the seniors, the single parents and the aboriginal peoples of rural Canada. We estimate their numbers to be about thirty five percent of the rural population. "(2003, p. 3)

It is within Rural Canada Three in the Kootenays as elsewhere that we find the homeless. The economic conditions that serve distinguish it from the other "2 Rural Canadas" is as relevant to Kootenay communities as it is to those participating in the NRE.

## **4.2 Socio-economic Profile of the Kootenays:**

In addition to this general description of the Kootenay community economies, we can add some Statistics Canada data which provides us with a more detailed and comparable socio-economic profile of the Kootenay region.

### **4.2.1 Unit of Analysis:**

A problem emerges though with respect to the unit of analysis to be used here to report the data. There were three options for which data was readily available:

- Community level data - Stats Canada collects and reports socio-economic data at the level of the incorporated community,
- Census subdivision data - data is also collected and reported at the regional district level, and
- A combination of community and subdivision level data.

Each of these was problematic for our purposes. The community level data has two major difficulties for the analysis needed here (1) for a region as large as the Kootenays it means examining each indicator for 20 communities with inter-community differences that make getting a sense of the region as a whole very difficult and (2) the reporting process gets very complicated and cumbersome. It does though have the advantage of including all the incorporated communities in the entire region. The larger unit of analysis represented in the subdivision level data gives us a clear picture of the region as a whole, but unfortunately what is commonly referred to as the Kootenays takes in two entire regional districts; the Regional District of Central Kootenay and the Regional District of East Kootenay; and a portion of two others; the Regional District of Kootenay Boundary and the Regional District of Columbia Shuswap. If the two regional districts totally within the Kootenays are used as the unit of analysis; only a portion of the region is being reported on and if all four are used, it goes beyond the region typically considered to be the Kootenays. A third option was to use the two regional districts entirely in the Kootenays as well as the communities in the other two regional districts commonly considered part of the region. This provided us with coverage of the entire region and only the area considered the Kootenays, but with a change in the unit of analysis within the data set; a significant problem with comparability was introduced. Given the lack of data that meets both tests: (1) appropriate unit of analysis and (2) coverage of the entire region and only the region in question; the decision was made to use the subdivision level data for the two regional districts that are entirely within the region and which makes up a very substantial portion of what is typically considered to be the Kootenays. This was felt to be the best compromise; yielding the most accurate data readily available.

#### **4.2.2 Socio-Economic Indicators:**

For the purposes of this analysis, this section will examine the census data used to measure economic hardship.<sup>5</sup>

**TABLE 1: Indicators of Economic Hardship**

	<b>B.C.</b>	<b>RDCK</b>	<b>RDEK</b>
<b>AVERAGE INCOME</b>	64,821	53,159	61,045
<b>INCOME DISTRIBUTION</b>			
<b>&lt;20,000</b>	12	13.1	9.5
<b>(b) 20,000-79,999</b>	60.4	67.9	65.6
<b>(c) 80,000 +</b>	27.6	19.0	24.9
<b>INCIDENCE OF LOW INCOME IN ECONOMIC FAMILIES</b>	13.9	11.4	9.2
<b>INCOME SHARE OF POOREST HALF OF HOUSEHOLDS<sup>6</sup></b>	21.4	22.2	23.7
<b>COMPOSITION OF TOTAL INCOME</b>			
<b>(a) Employment</b>	75.8	69.2	76.0
<b>(b) Gov't transfers</b>	11.8	17.2	12.6
<b>(c) Other</b>	12.4	13.6	11.4
<b>INCOME DEPENDENCY</b>			
<b>(a) Forestry</b>	8%	16%	13%
<b>(b) Mining</b>	2%	3%	17%
<b>% TENANTS PAYING 30% OR MORE OF INCOME ON HOUSING</b>	44.1	48.4	39.7
<b>% OF POPULATION ON INCOME ASSISTANCE<sup>7</sup></b>	1.2	1.5	1.4

In terms of a statistical analysis, this table reveals a number of regional economic characteristics pertinent to this research, namely that:

- a. From an economic standpoint there are some significant differences between the East and West Kootenays (as represented by the regional District of East Kootenay and the Regional District of Central Kootenay).
- b. From an income standpoint the region is poorer than the province as a whole; although in terms of income inequality the region is characterized by more equality.
- c. The region has a lower proportion of incidence of low income families than does the province.
- d. It is more dependent than the province as a whole on government transfers and a greater proportion of its population is on income assistance.
- e. The proportion of tenants paying more than 30% of their income on rent is lower than the provincial average in the East Kootenay but higher than the rate in the province in the West Kootenays, and
- f. Its economy is more dependent on primary resource extraction especially forestry and mining than is true of the province as a whole.

With regard to this latter point, further analysis using the Hachman Diversity Index also shows that the regional economy is less diversified than that of British Columbia overall. This index is "constructed by comparing the diversity of a community's industries compared to the province of B.C. as the benchmark. The higher the index score the more diverse and thus resilient is the community's economy". (Anielski: 2004; p. 3). The Hachman Diversity Scores for the seven major incorporated communities in the Kootenays are less than 100 (the B.C. benchmark) and range from a high of 86.4 to 46. (Anielski, 2004, p. 5)

All these statistical data support Reimer's contention on the nature of rural economies in Canada - that they are generally poorer and less diversified and thus more vulnerable than their urban counterparts. The income distribution, equality and dependence on government transfers statistical data reported here underscore Reimer's characterization of Rural Canada Two and Three, but it also shows some regional economic advantages that should not be underestimated in an analysis of the region's economic characteristics, the greater degree of income equality and the smaller incidence of low income families, as these are community and regional assets.

With this economic analysis as context for the primary data gathered in this research we turn our attention now to the research findings.

## **5. PRIMARY DATA ANALYSIS:**

### **5.1 Key Finding:**

Homelessness exists in the region, but it is more relative or episodic rather than absolute, and it is largely invisible. If this research were only to focus on a single defining characteristic of homelessness in the Kootenays, it would be the fact that what is typically thought of as homelessness serves to render the incidence of homelessness non-significant and therefore non-problematic. People think of homelessness only as absolute homelessness and so the very real problems associated with housing security and stability are not addressed in any comprehensive way because community members don't know about and don't associate these with homelessness. This research showed very clearly that it is this notion of homelessness as only absolute homelessness that is prevalent in the communities and the region that must change for the issue of homelessness to be addressed.

### **5.2 Overview of Findings:**

Even though the research literature is getting a clearer and more realistic definition of homelessness, this has not permeated into the general knowledge of most people, particularly in rural areas. Add to this the challenges associated with measuring the extent of homelessness in general, and the result is that it is very difficult to determine with precision whether or not the problem of homelessness in the Kootenays is getting worse. But the region's support service providers across a wide variety of different services are reporting an increase in the problem and they are identifying the following set of circumstances as contributing to the increase:

- In some parts of the Kootenays, the increase in reliance on tourism as the economic driver has driven up housing and rental costs and decreased the stock of affordable housing, leaving more people, especially those who typically work in the hospitality service area more likely to experience housing problems.
- The hotter housing market which is having an upward pressure on housing costs and is decreasing affordable housing stock.
- Decrease in housing programs and ancillary services provided by government, and the lack of discretionary funds that previously had some flexibility to respond to local conditions.
- More stringent eligibility requirements which have increased the number of people who no longer qualify for assistance of various kinds.
- The special case of youth between 16-18 where the availability of foster care and other programs designed for young people has virtually disappeared. This is increasingly becoming the case for youth over 14. Thus, more and more youth are only temporarily housed or on the streets.

- A decrease in the number of jobs in traditional industries and government which were characterized by more stable employment patterns and higher incomes

In addition to these socio-economic circumstances, the more typical social-psychological elements which traditionally put people at risk of homeless still persist. These include:

- Patterns of violence and domestic abuse; taught helplessness; multi-generational living on assistance; low self-esteem; low self-motivation and the inability to achieve educational goals.
- Incidence of mental illnesses (diagnosed but in situations where there are difficulties ensuring that prescribed medication is taken as well as those with undiagnosed mental illness) and/or substance abuse (a very large proportion of people seen as homeless that social service providers are familiar with have diagnosed or undiagnosed mental illness and problems of substance abuse often used as self-medication).

This discussion provides an overview of the research project results and next we can examine more specifically, the data relating to each of the research objectives outlined earlier in this report.

### **5.3 Extent and Significance of Homelessness in the Kootenays:**

Despite the volume of literature on the issue of homelessness in Canada, there are significant challenges with measuring it accurately. To date there is no reliable method for counting the number of people who are homeless and there are no accurate national statistics. Some researchers, recognizing the futility of ever arriving at accurate counts of the homeless, have argued that in fact no level of homelessness in Canada is acceptable and therefore the resources that could be used to develop the means to count the homeless should be used instead to address it.

That said, for the purposes of this research even those estimating methodologies discussed earlier, counting those in shelters and accessing services used by the homeless and canvassing the streets, could not be used. These challenges to estimating the extent of homeless in the region proved to be insurmountable. As a result, this objective of the research could not be fulfilled in any meaningful way that this time. But a couple of elements from this research serve to address it in part at least:

- From a qualitative point of view, we did not encounter a single person in our data collection process who felt that homelessness was not increasing. Neither did we find anyone who felt that the problem, even prior to the

recent increases they report, was insignificant. Given the breadth in the types of organizations participating in the research and the ones who expressed an interest in participating but whose schedules prevented them from doing so, it is unlikely that this perception was without foundation.

- One of the strategies brought forward was to develop some means appropriate for rural areas to routinely collect data that will help quantify the issue for future research.

Aside from collecting this anecdotal information and building a foundation to address the objective in the future, this research could not, at this time, address this objective.

#### **5.4 Characterization of Homelessness in the Kootenays:**

We began this project with an idea that in this element of the research, a picture of the individual and group attributes of those homeless or at risk of homelessness would be painted, particularly of the three target groups: youth; those with substance abuse issues; and those with mental health issues. Although there is some explicit discussion of these individual and group characteristics in the literature review and embedded in the discussion below; it became clear in the data that to participants it was more relevant to characterize the issue itself rather than the people who experience it.

However, that does not mean that there was no discussion of the characteristics of those homeless or at risk of being homeless by the support service providers participating in the research. In addition, the sample of the client population was asked what circumstances led to their situation of being homeless. Both these sources of data reinforced to a very large extent the characteristics of those homeless found in other research.

With regard to the characteristics of those homeless in the Kootenays, the data in this research found that:

- As a group of those homeless, the number of youth involved is high enough to be particularly worrisome and is increasing. A staff member from the Salvation Army for example reported that “the group of people under 25 years of age accessing his (*Salvation Army*) services has grown dramatically. He believes that 25-35 percent of the individuals he sees are less than 25 years of age” (see section 5.4.3 for a more detailed discussion of findings with regard to youth).
- A large proportion of the client population of community support services who have housing issues have either undiagnosed mental illness or the illness has been diagnosed but the client is currently not taking his/her medications. Finding ways to address the housing issue without addressing the mental

illness issues is difficult. Addressing the mental illness issues is made difficult because the illness often prevents the individual from pursuing a solution and/or solutions made by others are hindered by the regulations, as this observation made during an interview attests: "The Mental Health Act is also an obstacle because you can't force people into treatment even when programs are available and they can't be committed unless a doctor is willing to commit them and its difficult here to find a doctor willing to commit people".

- The incidence of alcohol and drug use by the homeless in the Kootenays is high and characterized in this quote from our interviews as "some people who have monthly passes to the hotels and in most cases they are those who have substance abuse problems. These are people, generally males, who are 30-40 years old and have experienced long term substance abuse problems" (taken from a summary of the interview data with staff from the Salvation Army).
- The rate of homelessness among the Ktunaxa, the local First Nations people is high but resembles homelessness as experienced by non-natives in the Kootenays, except:
  - The community is smaller and has closer family bonds, creating a deeper sense of family and of belonging so word of mouth is used by those who are homeless in finding solutions to their situation. The issue then tends to stay within the community.
  - The rate of family dysfunction which is like that of non-natives is higher because of the higher levels of poverty and substance abuse associated with the historical treatment and position of First Nations people in Canada. The following analysis from a support service provider working with First Nations people supports these broad contentions: "we have a lot of people who are homeless. They crash wherever they can. Homeless kids have a real network of places where they can stay but eventually they are asked to contribute (*financially to the household*). We know about them because of word of mouth, not because they are accessing the system. That's because the community is smaller and more close-knit so the communication can happen. And as dysfunctional as some First Nations' families are, there is still a deeper sense of family there" (taken from focus group discussion).
- The relationship between substance abuse and homelessness can be both
  - A cause of homelessness (being kicked out of a home by a spouse and losing jobs as a result of substance abuse are commonly cited as reasons for being homeless).
  - A way of coping with the grim situation that homelessness brings (either as self medication or a means of income) as the following story from the field notes attests: " I knew one young man whose parents moved away, his Dad left him an R.V. but he had a party and Dad

kicked him out. He can't get into treatment because he needs his parent's signature and address, neither of which he has. So he traffics drugs" (taken from focus group meeting discussion notes).

- And finally, although the sample of clients was very small, the number who indicated problems with substance abuse and/or mental illness was very high (7 out of the 10 reporting one or another of these conditions as causing or contributing to their homelessness). In addition, all the client population reported low educational levels, problems with learning and/or low literacy levels, which also creates significant barriers to changing their circumstances.

Throughout the data collection process, we were told stories which were helpful in developing this profile of the homeless population in the Kootenays but from the perspective of those trying to address the issue, it was more important to talk about why it is difficult to get the broader community interested in addressing the issue. They don't perceive that (1) there is a problem (the invisibility of homelessness); or (2) understand the way service cuts have made the issue of homelessness much more significant; or (3) understand the underlying causes and circumstances of youth homelessness. Presented here is the discussion around these three key characteristics of the issue of homelessness that emerged out of the data.

#### **5.4.1 "Invisibility of the Problem"**

Key to local understanding of the issue, and a significant barrier to addressing it, is its invisibility. The patterns and strategies of adaptation to the situations that would typically lead to homelessness in the Kootenays make it very difficult for those outside of support service provision to be aware of the problem.

These strategies of adaptation include:

- Couch surfing - relying on friends and family for a few days at a time.
- Finding abandoned cars, cabins, RV's or buildings where they can spend the night(s) but not necessarily known to others.
- Being taken in by church/neighbours/teachers as a temporary solution.
- Moving away [a lot of those homeless in the Vancouver Downtown East Side come from rural B.C. and many are from the Kootenays] especially among youth.
- Returning to abusive relationships because the alternative is being without shelter, relying on friends and family for temporary accommodation.
- Selling sexual favours and/or drugs in exchange for housing.

None of these strategies lead to "security of housing tenure" and those who employ these strategies are, by ours and National Homelessness Initiative definition,

homeless. But by employing these strategies they serve to virtually eliminate absolute homelessness which is how the broader community defines homelessness.

The notion that these strategies are commonly employed by the homeless in the Kootenays is well supported by data provided by the homeless people in the Cranbrook sample as well as in the West Kootenay studies.

One of the most common strategies; couch surfing, is not simply a rural strategy found in this research and the two others done in the West Kootenays, but the pattern was also found in research done in Great Britain:

“Most people stay with a friend or relative upon first becoming homeless. Reasons for doing so include the lack of alternatives (particularly in rural areas); limited awareness of available options and the immediacy of need which can prohibit efforts to search out advice and assistance.(Crisis; 2003: p. 2).

That research, like this one, found that this renders the problem invisible:

“There are as many as 380,000 hidden homeless people in Great Britain, the majority of whom are sleeping on friends and family’s floors. Although their existence is widely acknowledged, their plight is rarely tackled. Part of the reason for this is the lack of knowledge surrounding the nature of their experiences and the extent of their vulnerability. This report...published by Crisis to uncover the neglected and denied extent and experiences of hidden homelessness (Crisis; 2003: p.1).

There is a sense that couch surfing is also more prevalent in rural areas like the Kootenays because of the higher level of connectedness in smaller communities, which further reduces the risk of absolute homelessness. The transient population who lack these social networks tend to use the other strategies to a greater extent; i.e. tenting, finding abandoned buildings, being taken in by churches, etc.

#### **5.4.1.1. Narrative Data:**

To provide supporting evidence, but more importantly to provide a deeper understanding of the invisibility of the problem, the following excerpts from the data are offered:

“As a matter of fact, within the last month, I had a client who could not lose her job and after staying with safe homes for 6 days, she stayed with friends for a few days then moved back in with the abuser rather than live on a couch with her young son. I fear for her and her son’s safety and have done everything possible to support and prepare her, but there is no guarantee when anyone walks into a lion’s den. She feels like she had no choice but to move back in. This is a very common scenario.” (safe home worker in a community without transition or second stage housing for victims of abuse).

“A 15 year old girl ended up living with me while I tried to access support for her because if I didn’t take her in she was going to be living in a house with three 17 and 18 year old boys. I couldn’t get support for her because she was American and her family [she came

here with her Mom who was in a new relationship] has no obligation to take her back. She stayed here a month, then was able to go and live with her grandmother in the States." (manager who was involved with the girl's Mom's needs at the time of the incident).

"Summer brings kids from everywhere and they don't have housing and so some live in tents which works for the summer, or they leave. We don't get a stable workforce with this situation."(Youth Worker).

These excerpts from the interview data correspond well to the first hand accounts reported in Glass (2002)

"A powerful sentiment came from a single mother who captured the choice that many women face on whether to leave an abusive relationship (and give up the secure income, house, family etc.) or to endure it and keep those securities" (p. 45).

"Some (of those on the street) are as young as 12-13 who left abusive homes. One participant kept an actual count of homeless visitors who stayed at his apartment, and recorded 405 overnight stays in a one-year period."(p. 42).

It is also substantiated in these excerpts from the Cranbrook sample of homeless people:

"And we've been camping at Fish Creek<sup>8</sup> since then. I bring my kids to school, drive them in from Fish Creek every day. The game warden came and gave us a problem but I told him what happened with the cabin and I said I'm not going to leave, its government, crown land. We built a camp here. I don't think we will be here for the winter, we'll try and find a place in town. Then in summer we generally go out to the camp again."

"So she kicked me out. She's ok, she still has the place over there. I'm just staying at another relations but he tells me today that his roommate is questioning him how long is he going be there for? How can I pay my rent, I can't get no welfare and I'm just living day to day."

"I've been homeless for the last couple of months and on and off for a number of years. I do odd jobs to get a place to stay or some food. It's hard to find work if you don't have a place where they can contact you."

"I know what it's like to live on the street. Last winter I nearly froze. We hit a cold spell and somebody reported me crawling into a truck and the RCMP picked me up at midnight. Last winter it was kind of warm and I was sleeping in the jungle what we call the creek and a buddy walked by and I had 2 inches of snow on me and I was still sleeping. And sometimes I go into apartments where they don't have anything to buzz you in and I sleep in the hallway."

Given this invisibility how do we know it exists?

- A crisis is precipitated which puts someone at risk and they seek or need the services of probation, the Women's Centre and/or mental health professionals and this precipitates a process where their lack of an

address or the issue that makes their current home unsafe or unavailable becomes apparent.

- The community support services become access points for some need [food, referrals, information, skills development, employment assistance] and from this, staff get the “story” which indicates that the client does not have a home (some may have an official address but it’s not safe for them to live there [spousal and parental abuse patterns make living with their partners or parents unsafe]).

The sense from those on the front lines of these services is that homelessness is becoming an even greater problem but the constraints, especially financial ones that the front line workers face are making finding solutions more and more difficult. As the stories above attest, these front line workers see the problem of homelessness emerge often out of the crisis that led the individual to them in the hope that they can alleviate their problem. But the options open to the workers are narrowing significantly as a result of the changes to the service infrastructure in rural communities.

#### **5.4.2. Support Services Infrastructure Issues:**

While there are a lot of caring people involved in the community providing support services, they report systemic problems in the provision of these services, including:

- The system is increasingly concerned with the cost of the system; not to address or even more importantly to prevent the problems of the most vulnerable in our communities. This is particularly true in rural communities where the cost of providing service is higher because of the lower population levels coupled with significant transportation costs.
- Application of eligibility criteria means that some will be cut off by definition (e.g. the designation of IQ lower than 70 for assistance for the developmentally challenged).
- Access to services is made difficult because clients need an address, parental signatures, and/or social insurance number .
- The cuts to services and operating expenses of the service organizations have decreased the ability of the providers to:
  - Lobby and advocate on behalf of the vulnerable.
  - Provide the range and types of services needed.
  - Address long term solutions and to pursue prevention rather than simply responding to a crisis situation e.g. most communities have emergency or transitional housing for women in abusive situations but most lack second stage housing. So the emergency situation has some solution but there is limited ability to house these women in the longer term.

- Decrease in discretionary funds along with increasingly narrower definitions of eligibility and application of program funds has decreased the flexibility of service providers to respond to the problem.
- Insufficient affordable housing to meet the need (especially in the tourism based communities), housing allowance simply not sufficient to find housing.
- Lack of a drop in centre/shelter/youth centre where they can go without someone “doing” something to them and where there is a stable and safe enough environment to address underlying or concurrent issues.
- Legal aid and legal services has been withdrawn.
- The lack of public transportation especially with the increasingly regionalized service provision has made it even more difficult to service the needs of this population.
- Services accessible only via a call centre and the data suggests that it’s almost impossible to get through the process to access the services that might be available.

#### **5.4.2.1. Narrative Data:**

Next in importance to the frustration that support service providers feel with regard to raising the profile of the homelessness issue in the community, is the frustration they feel about the problems in the service infrastructure as outlined above. As a thread running through the conversations we had throughout the data collection, were comments like those below indicating how support service providers perceive the services available to clients. This takes on a personal element as they are confronted by clients who come to them in a crisis that they know very well is:

- Going to be difficult if not impossible to address in the short-term under the rules of current system.
- In any case it is only a band-aid and is not focusing on preventative solutions; addressing underlying problems and/or providing for long-term solutions which would be their preference.

A few ways they believe the system to be failing can be seen in the following excerpts from our field notes:

“Couch-surfing is common here because the rents are too high and if people want to live in Brisco or Canal Flats where the rents are lower, there’s no public transportation to get them to work.” (Literacy Worker).

“Homelessness is a huge issue for those with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome; they are incapable of independent living, they don’t always accept their need for supported living but regardless, it doesn’t exist here or anywhere in the Valley.” (Social Service provider working with FASD clients).

"The cuts to the system [primarily MCFD and Social Services] provide incentives to the bureaucrats but the fallout is in the community and to our clients" (Women's Centre representative).

"And now those with mental illness and other barriers must file an employment plan which is more paper work and then it's verified by an officer and everyone knows that they can't work and sure enough after all that the decision but what for?"(Housing Worker).

These failings in the service infrastructure were also noted in Glass's 2002 research:

"Goal D: Reinvest in Support Services in Rural Communities"- Recent provincial cutbacks have clearly impacted rural communities and particularly those individuals living in poverty- the same group most likely to be facing housing challenges". (p. 75)

These perceptions of the system were not just noted by support service providers whom one might expect to see the consequences of the changes to the service infrastructure, the data from the sample of Cranbrook homeless shows similar perceptions. This can be seen in these excerpts from the interviews:

"For me a drug treatment service would be help, but until I get on assistance I can't be sponsored for treatment."

"Not yet (on benefits) we are going to be looking into this, that's what the big deal is, meanwhile you don't know whether you are going to get a cheque. And your landlord kicks you out."

"I find the Salvation Army more help than the Ministry of Human Resources and all that."

"I need more money. I only clear \$135 on welfare and I have to pay an extra 50 dollars for my room cause welfare only gives you 325 and my room costs 350 so 50 has to come out my living allowance. I go to the Food Bank and to the soup kitchen every day. "

### **5.4.3. Youth Homelessness:**

While there was significant support for the general notion that there are now very large holes in the social safety net, over and over again we heard that youth in particular are falling through the cracks. One tends to think that at least for those 18 and younger, homelessness shouldn't be a problem as in the scheme of things they still should be cared for by their parents. This idea is undermined by some stark realities for far too many Kootenay youth, namely:

- The incidence of family conflict and/or abuse
- The incidence of drug use and prevalence of a drug culture
- High rates of youth unemployment/underemployment
- Difficulties learning and/or fitting into the regular educational system

And as services in general have been cut, services to youth have been severely undermined by changes to the system such as:

- The limited number of Youth Agreements contracted through the Ministry of Children and Family Development , generally because:
  - An imperative to cut costs to the system.
  - Youth often don't want to abide by the conditions set down in the agreements.
  - Landlord/lady reluctance to rent to youth.
- Lack of foster homes for teens and emergency foster home and outreach services.
- Very little being done to assist (income, housing etc.) those over 16 and increasingly this is becoming true for those over 14.

#### **5.4.3.1. Narrative Data:**

The service providers worry particularly about youth homelessness, its causes and consequences as these excerpts from our field notes indicate:

"I've been trying to get a youth agreement with MCFD but it's impossible; if they are over 16, they can't go into care and they can't live independently in Invermere on Shelter Allowance. There is only one affordable motel and it's in Radium and full of drugs." (Probation Worker).

There's a huge problem here with kids, a lot more than you'd expect. They find themselves in abusive relationships and with the Ministry not taking kids in their late teens we are scrambling to find them places. Supported living is really needed."(Housing Advocate).

"The Ministry doesn't support a broad range of independent living arrangements, they used to provide 2 years of support between 19-25 which did allow for some to work on skill development" (Ministry Worker).

"We hear from the youth that they trade sex for drugs, crack and cocaine are readily available and once they get into drugs or alcohol [although not so much as drugs] they get into arguments with their parents and then they are out on the street or couch surfing"(Ministry Worker).

"Five to ten years ago independent living was an earned condition, now it's by default changed because of MCFD changes, the Ministry pushes them out of care on to income assistance so we saw a need for supported living for youth. There is virtually no voluntary care because the Ministry's clear focus on protection on those under 13, beyond that it's not their problem....so while we do what we can we've lost 60% of our program funding which makes it harder to meet the demand for services." (Youth Worker).

These data reiterate in a very substantial way what the *Roofs4Youth* study found, that 92% of the 89 youth interviewed indicated that they had no shelter, were couch surfing, paying more than half of their income on rent and/or lived in substandard or unsafe accommodation. They also reported that difficulties/conflict

at home; fear for safety, addictions/mental illness and/or attending alternative education as antecedents to homelessness (Advocacy Centre, 2003). And again this appears to be a more ubiquitous reality as Randall and Brown (2003) reporting on their research on youth homelessness in Britain state:

“Many having experienced problems at school, drug and alcohol addiction, mental health problems compounded by financial problems and contact with the police. *Trouble at Home* has found that the major factor immediately preceding a young person leaving home is the breakdown of their relationship with their parents.(p.1)

#### **5.4.4. Summary**

This report has devoted a substantial discussion to these three ways in which homelessness as an issue was characterized in the data because our research participants felt very strongly that these elements of homelessness are not very well understood by the public in their communities. They also felt that a much deeper understanding of the invisibility, the support service failings and the circumstances of youth homelessness was needed to address the issue.

This research as well as the two pieces of research done previously in the West Kootenays have found data that is clearly in line with what Reimer (2003) observed about Rural Canada Three:

“Those who are part of Rural Canada Three are even more vulnerable than Rural Canada Two to the capricious changes in entitlements on the part of the state. Plus, they are less able to have their voices heard. They are among the lowest educated in both urban and rural regions and are most often the least able to move, thereby being most affected by the lost service that has occurred in the new economy. ...The situation for those in Rural Canada Three is exacerbated by the stigmatizations that goes with their exclusion and marginalization. (2003, p. 3)

But having clearly recognized some of the salient characteristics of the problem, what, more specifically and most effectively, do we do to address the issue?

#### **6. KEY SERVICE GAPS IDENTIFIED:**

From a review of the original proposal that CMHA for the Kootenays submitted to the National Homelessness Initiative, the feedback from the BC/Yukon Regional Homelessness Research Committee and the early consultation process, it was clear that this research project should focus on some very practical outcomes. Not surprising from all these sources, those practical outcomes were oriented towards what services were needed to address the issue of homelessness. We expected from this to hear about the lack of direct services, programs and/or the lack of sufficient housing units. And while these did emerge and are reported at the end of this section; they were not identified as what was most needed. What wasn't anticipated by the researchers at the time the research was being framed was that the

participants were much more concerned about the fact that they represented a relatively small segment of the community that was aware of the problem. Further, they felt that any solution including the direct service gaps could not be addressed adequately until the issue of homelessness was recognized and understood by the community more broadly. Even more specifically they felt that their community's social development (and addressing homelessness was seen as central to it) was needed to be linked to its economic development by the community.

The data in this section came out of the two sub-regional symposia that were held over the summer held to:

- Review the results to date for validation.
- Further identify the key ways the issue of homelessness could be addressed.
- Develop strategies to move forward from the research into action on the issue.

In order to identify the key ways the issue of homelessness could be addressed, the question asked of symposium participants was, "What needs to be done to address homelessness?" Had the symposium question been drafted at the beginning of the research and before a number of the researchers' preconceptions regarding the characterization of the issue were being challenged by the interview and focus group data, likely a narrower more specific question around what services are needed to address the needs of the homeless would likely have been asked. Had that been the case we may well have much more focus on those services listed at the end of the section than was the case. What did emerge was as follows:

**6.1 Community Education and Awareness** - The research identified the need for public education and awareness around the issue of homelessness as central to addressing it. The research also showed that the problem of homelessness needed to be seen in the context of the broader "big picture" of community economic conditions, individual social-psychological characteristics, the decrease in government support in rural communities and that the root of the problem is poverty. As such, in order to address the issue, the wider community needs to understand the issue and recognize its relationships to other issues and aspirations in the community; in other words there needs to be a linkage between social and economic development in Kootenay communities. But to build the understanding and linkages there are clear challenges to be addressed.

**6.1.1. Need for a Common Understanding** - There is a lack of a clear definition of, and criteria for, homelessness around which a common understanding could be built. The problem this creates from a research perspective has been discussed previously; what is important for the discussion here is that most people have a stereotypical image of a homeless person as someone sleeping

in the streets and living out of shopping carts. Since there are relatively few homeless people in the Kootenays who conform to this stereotype, the common perception on the part of the broader community is that homelessness is not a problem in the Kootenays. So in identifying the need for a clear definition and criteria around homelessness, the participants in this research are drawing attention to the fact, that in order to get the community to recognize it as a problem, work needs to be done to dispel these stereotypes and at present this isn't happening.

"We know the problem exists, but because it is largely invisible, it is difficult to spread the word and make people understand the depth of the problem." (Symposium Participant).

"Without counting couch surfers, women in abusive relationships and those receiving "Greyhound Therapy" [funds provided for a bus ticket out of town to seek services not available in local area] as homeless, the problem isn't seen as significant". (Symposium Participant).

"Common language with common definitions for all communities is essential". (Symposium Participant).

**6.1.2 Need for Quantitative Evidence** - Hard numbers and statistics are lacking and so it makes it difficult to convince community members that homelessness is an issue. This gap was also identified as problematic from a research perspective, but here the issue is that even with more understanding of the nature of homelessness in the Kootenays, community members are likely to be more convinced if they are also given some quantitative evidence of the problem. This is especially true for community and regional decision-makers according to many participating in the research. This need for quantitative evidence and the notion that it is lacking however, was not an unanimous view. Some participants felt that it is really the stories that will move community members to address the issue. Others felt that there is likely a great deal of quantitative data collected already in the records of the agencies involved in service provision, just that we haven't necessarily collated or distributed it. Regardless, there was substantial support for the notion that finding some way to build upon and/or develop a method to generate the numbers of homelessness (using the definition discussed above). This will help address the overriding issue of lack of public awareness and education about homelessness.

"Difficult if not impossible to count the population and to estimate the actual numbers. Cannot get position on the agenda in Local/Regional Government without hard numbers."(Symposium Participant).

"Give the public some sense of what homelessness is, statistics, estimates of what percentage of your community population is homeless-anecdotal stories to follow." (Symposium Participant).

**6.1.3. Need for Qualitative Data** - Although the numbers are important, it is also necessary to tell the “stories” so that community members can get a deeper understanding of the issue. Participants in this research understood the value of being able to substantiate their claims about homelessness with the ability to report on the issue quantitatively, but they felt that only by putting a personal face on the issue would community members be able to relate to it.

“Report should tell personal stories. Tell the community about the problem. Make it hit home.” (Symposium Participant)

**6.2. Change Attitudes** - The research found that public education and awareness is not just about increasing knowledge about the issue but it is also about changing attitudes, especially with respect to:

- Increasing non-judgmental and more tolerant attitudes towards those with different lifestyles including sexual orientation.
- Decreasing classist attitudes (perceptions of relative worth related to one’s class in society).
- Fostering greater understanding of the issue of poverty and those who live in poverty.

Homelessness is not perceived as an issue only in part because community members lack important information about the issue. The lack of action also results from some attitudes which serve to keep it invisible and off the community and political agenda. Some of the key issues with regard to changing community attitudes are:

**6.2.1 Need to Decrease the Fear** - It is not uncommon for the homeless or those at risk of homelessness to fail to draw attention to their situation for fear of even further marginalization and stigmatization. This fear comes from the judgmental attitudes that they have experienced in the past; and the stigmatization that often accompanies those who live in poverty. As the literature on homelessness reveals a significant proportion of those who make up the homeless population are characterized with alternate sexual lifestyles, diagnosed and undiagnosed mental illnesses, the use of alcohol and drugs, or are single parents and/or live in poverty. Negative attitudes are commonly directed to these people in most communities. So they find it safer not to call attention to themselves.

“There is a feeling of stay below the radar; its not safe to be identified. Single mothers are reluctant to identify themselves as homeless for fear of losing their children. Youth feel it is better to couch surf than to end up in a group home. They will find a way- any way- to avoid identification” (Symposium Participant).

“Those with alternate lifestyles have difficulty feeling safe in the community.” (Symposium Participant).

“Change public perception on what ‘poverty’ is/means” (Symposium Participant).

**6.2.2 Need to Decrease NIMBY Attitudes** - The research found that the underlying attitudes that give rise to the fear discussed above, also work against solutions in the community that disturb mainstream lifestyles or values, commonly referred to as NIMBY or “not in my backyard”. These attitudes lead to actions opposing the proposed solutions. This attitude has two interdependent consequences:

- Instead of the community working together to find solutions and increase the quality of life for all community members, there is conflict.
- Those involved in the issue (primarily support service providers) carry the burden of trying to address the issue with a decreased opportunity for success and with their own potential burnout.

“There is a definite problem with NIMBY in the Kootenay region.” (Symposium Participant).

“Creating a place for homeless and those at risk, a place where they feel welcome, feel trust, are treated with dignity- a non-judgmental environment where there is basic respect and acceptance.” (Symposium Participant).

- The perception that the problem is self-created is present.
- The problem of the lack of anonymity in small communities exacerbated by judgmental attitudes results in some people not feeling comfortable accessing services which are available.

**6.3 Increase Community Involvement** - The research revealed that without the problem becoming an issue for more than just support service providers that good community based solutions are not likely to be implemented. In particular the involvement of local government representatives, the business community and those homeless or at risk of homelessness is needed to ensure the community is broadly represented in addressing the issue. Specifically the community involvement is needed to more effectively:

- a. Lobby for:
  - i. Putting a priority on preventative measures rather than just trying to respond to the crises.
  - ii. Increase income assistance, employment insurance rates.
  - iii. Legislative change to make those in poverty and the services that support them a priority.

iv. Access for local services that can deal with people and their issues more effectively than a call center.

b. Increase the community resources and volunteer labour needed to find and implement solutions

c. To increase the institutional supports (government funding) as well as the informal ones (community based)

d. In the East Kootenays, there is a need not only to broaden the representation but to increase the coordination and collaboration among service providers. As workloads have increased, services have been lost and a more highly competitive environment created, service providers have become more isolated from one another, more protective of their turf and now there is a need to reverse this.

**6.4. Increase Specific Services** - The research also identified a number of specific services needed to address homelessness. As stated earlier, participants in this research focused much more on the community development needs that they see as foundational to addressing the issue but not without identifying some key direct services. We can add here the services that the client population feel are needed using the data from the West Kootenay research as well as those interviewed for this research. But there is another source of information useful to our purposes here coming out of a needs analysis done for the City of Kamloops by Blair, Matson and Rothenburger (2001). Despite the fact that Kamloops is a bigger city with a lot more resources provided for homelessness and related issues; there is still a significant degree of similarity with respect to their findings and those found in this research. This was not just with the service gaps identified but is also true of the strategies employed when these services are not available. In particular, all four pieces of research (Kamloops, the 2 from the West Kootenays and this one) identified the need for a drop-in facility as one the major service gaps. From our research we heard participants say that:

“We need to develop a “place”; a drop in center/shelter where those coming would be treated with dignity and nothing is done to them and where they can access services/information etc.” (Symposium Participants)

Similarly, Blair et al states:

“Even though there are already a number of opportunities to attend drop in centers, a number of the homeless and some the agency staff identified the need for a place for people to go during the day and evening (some suggested 24/7 hours). This would provide food, socialization, and a safe warm environment, and possibly some informal counseling and advocacy.... A ‘one stop shop’ could be set up, which would expand on

the drop-in concept to offer a variety of services in an accessible, user friendly location.”(p. 30)

And Glass (2002) says:

“Drop-in spaces- to provide a place to meet and interact with others which is sorely lacking in rural communities where housing problems and homelessness continue to be largely hidden.”(p.78)

In addition, the support service provider component of this research also found the need to:

- a. Increase access to emergency, short-term accommodation
- b. Address the food security issue
- c. Teach youth real life skills
- d. Teach parenting skills to break cycle of violence and abuse
- e. Develop/encourage less waste of food and resources so that they can be used by those in need

The small client sample substantiated the need for shelter, both more stable housing (which would in turn provide an address and ability to have a phone to increase employment opportunities) as well as temporary emergency shelter as the most pressing of their needs. This was followed as it was by support service providers with food security. However, help getting into treatment and agencies that can help them find work also came out of the interviews with those who are or have been homeless. This data came from a very small and non-representative sample, so normally there is some research caution associated with these results, but in this case these results were also very similar to those obtained in the West Kootenay research. Given this degree of consistency between both components of primary data and with the more focused research conducted in the West Kootenays, these are likely the needs that rank highest with regard to direct services.

Throughout the collection of the data, there were a number of key elements which served to facilitate an effective discussion of strategies that might be pursued, namely:

- Many of the key service gaps and needs were linked to each other so by pursuing the strategies to address a particular need will serve to support meeting other needs.
- There was a clear recognition that the issue needs to be understood by and responded to by the broader community and so strategies relating to how to bring the community on board became paramount.
- There was significant commitment to working on the issue by those involved in the research because homelessness is pertinent to their

own work and that of their organization; but it is no one organization's primary mandate.

- The greater income equality that characterizes rural communities like the Kootenays as seen in the socio-economic profile can also be an asset as there is less separating Rural Canada 2 from Rural Canada 3 to put it in Reimer's terms. This can serve to help break down stereotypes and contribute to more collaborative approaches.

## **7. STRATEGIES TO ADDRESS SERVICE GAPS:**

The symposia data also produced in brainstorm fashion a number of strategies to address the gaps identified in the previous section of this report and they are as follows:

### **7.1. Increasing Community Education and Awareness:**

- a. Create a common understanding and definition of homelessness (some ideas presented: create series of situational definitions; put a human face on homelessness; create composite profiles).
- b. Lobby for legislative change (voter education) especially regarding living wages that cover primary and basic needs; providing for adequate support in the system and include self advocacy by those in the situation.
- c. Create a way to get some rough estimates on homelessness to use along with the stories that personalize the issue.
- d. Get the media on board (including using the information suggested above) e.g. getting media planners pro bono; a regional speakers bureau, develop websites.
- e. Use youth to research and teach about senior's poverty; seniors to focus on youth poverty and homelessness

### **7.2. Changing Attitudes:**

- a. Use the information generated from any of the above suggestions to break down the public stereotypes of those in poverty and/or homeless:
- b. Work in schools; focus on diversity/homelessness
- c. Work towards establishing a National Homelessness Day/Week

### **7.3. Increasing Community Involvement:**

- a. To get those more task oriented involved, take an action focus with measurable results
- b. Those presently involved should stay connected to and learn from the partnerships approach being taken in the pilot project in Nelson as part of the SCPI initiatives.
- c. Consider changes in attitudes that some social service providers may have that make working with others outside the sector, especially the business community, problematic while remaining ethical in the process.
- d. Homelessness cuts across mandates of all service providers, so use this issue to overcome territoriality and foster agency collaboration:
- e. Build on preventative measures; at present most agency work is crisis intervention and need to go back to root causes which are multi-faceted and will foster collaboration

### **7.4. Increase Specific Services:**

If the previous strategies are successful in educating the community, fostering more supportive attitudes and the community becomes involved, then the framework is created which will serve to address the need of specific services. The community will be in a position to:

- a. Lobby for any legislative changes needed and increase more direct access to government services and to develop, fund and implement the services with respect to:
  1. drop-in centers
  2. food security
  3. emergency short term housing
  4. life skills for youth
  5. parenting skills
  6. using community resources including food wisely through recycling and redistribution

Given the primacy that the homeless in this research and that done in the West Kootenays gave to drop in centers, to short term, emergency and more stable housing as well as food security; lobbying for increased services should emphasize these direct services.

## **8. RESEARCHERS' RECOMMENDATIONS:**

The participants in this research spoke eloquently and passionately about the issue of homelessness in the course of the data collection and the researchers hope that the information in this report has to some degree captured that eloquence and passion. The participants have also identified and articulated what they felt was needed to help them turn their passion for the issue into action for results. It remains then only for us as researchers to formalize what we can recommend to achieve this goal:

**Recommendation 1: Designate an existing organization or create a new organization at the community level willing to put homelessness on the public agenda through increasing community education and awareness.**

To pursue the strategies of increasing community education, awareness and involvement; there will be a need for those already involved to build partnerships to have the resources to move beyond the research and into the actions implied in the strategies. This will need in the short-term for a committee or organization either existing or new to spearhead the move from this research into the next steps.

**Recommendation 2: The organizations that are created or designated to take on the work of putting homelessness on the public agenda needs to start this process by finding ways to involve local government, representatives of the business community and those homeless or at-risk of homelessness.**

Local governments and the business community play an important role with regard to the economic conditions that this report argues is essential context to the issue of homeless. As such, we can only echo what participants have stated that representatives of these constituencies need to be involved in the issue and addressing it. And without involving those affected by homelessness, the committee's efforts to change attitudes and ground the committee's work in their reality will be undermined.

**Recommendation 3: The organizations designated or created will benefit if a Kootenay wide coalition is developed to take advantage of a more coordinated approach to the activities directed at addressing homelessness.**

Given the degree of similarity between the East and West Kootenays with respect to what needs to be done and the strategies to address the needs, there is significant potential for information and resource sharing through a coordinated approach. It is possible that with sufficient commitment on the part of the agencies already

involved with homelessness to move directly from their existing organizations to a multi level regional committee which would involve representatives from the community organizations, all levels of government (municipal; regional, provincial and federal) as well the business community and those affected by the issue. This would ensure that the committee would have the ability to ensure its work is aligned with national and provincial policy and maximize their ability to access funds from outside the region to address homelessness.

**Recommendation 4: There is a significant need for a formalized way to collect and warehouse data with respect to homelessness, both quantitative and qualitative.**

For both the public education and awareness activities as well as ensuring that the case for the direct services desired can be made, more formal data needs to be collected. This research, along with the previous West Kootenay research and the on-going work of the Nelson Committee on Homelessness, has developed a foundation for this work. What remains now is to develop a common definition of homelessness involving all those who have participated in this research as well as the previous ones and to use that as a basis for developing a tracking system specifically for those experiencing homelessness. The regional coalition, should it be created, would be the logical body to oversee this work and own the product of it.

**Recommendation 5: There will be a need to find the resources to support the previous four recommendations.**

Finding resources without building the support first within those agencies and organizations already involved and secondly more broadly within the community is not likely nor would it necessarily be effective given what came out of this research. But once some of the foundational work is done, it will be imperative that this work be supported by some paid staff time and/or some ability to engage in a number of activities outlined in the strategies or in these recommendations that will have costs associated with them.

These recommendations are intended to provide some concrete steps for moving beyond this research and have not directly identified ways to address the specific services needed. This is because if the strategies identified in this report are successful, they will in time produce the kind of community support and with it, the increased ability to more effectively lobby for the specific direct services needed.

**9. CONCLUSION:**

Before closing, we think that it is important to come back to a couple of key points raised by this research. We heard in many different ways that the fact that homelessness in the Kootenays is invisible is the most significant challenge

associated with addressing the issue. Its link to poverty is undeniable but at the same time poverty as an issue is largely ignored in rural communities. There are important reasons from both the community at large and the client population to keep the vulnerability of this population “below the radar screen” but in doing so the root causes of the issue never get addressed. This is not a unique finding, but it is important that this research add to previous research in making sure that these root causes and consequences are articulated. Without articulating these larger issues the problem of the invisibility of homelessness and the lack of community dialogue about poverty continues and the efforts employed to address the issues which don’t fundamentally acknowledge these realities may address symptoms but rarely the disease.

It is clear from previous research as well as from the data coming from the small sample of Cranbrook homeless that the issue is a complex one and there are many different paths to homelessness. The way in which those in the situation respond to and cope with their reality reflect not only the external environment which has striking commonalities from all communities around the Kootenays but also the internal environments of personal and unique life stories. These differences should not be underestimated. Indeed a greater understanding of these personal life stories on the part of the larger community and greater involvement of those affected is needed to address the issue. This is so that solutions are grounded in real experience and serve to increase lifestyle choices and ensure life with dignity.

We leave this discussion with one further observation which perhaps bears further research and analysis. We found in this research that one strategy for coping with the circumstances that could lead one to homelessness is to move away to where there are more services to access. We also heard that many of the people represented in the homeless population of places like the Downtown East Side of Vancouver are from rural areas like the Kootenays. We are familiar with the pattern of young people entering into the sex trade in rural areas as another strategy to ensure they have a roof over their heads. And there is anecdotal evidence that suggests that many of these people also end up in cities, at that point more entrenched in street life as sex trade workers. It bears more research to find out how many sex trade workers in nearby cities and the proportion of homeless people in these cities came from rural areas like the Kootenays. If this proportion is significant, could an argument not be made that by addressing rural homelessness, we would be alleviating, perhaps to a significant extent, urban homelessness? If indeed the road to chronic absolute homelessness seen in Canada’s larger centres has its roots for many in the relative or episodic homelessness in the rural areas, perhaps it is more effective from both a cost and treatment perspective, to treat it in these early stages in the rural areas.

Despite the attention that the issue of homelessness has generated recently and the priority that the government has put on it through the National Homelessness

Initiative, evidence is pointing to the fact that the problem is still growing. Given this and the complexity of the problem, clearly the goal is to pursue as many strategies, at as many different levels, in as many places, as possible. We hope that this research has made a contribution to this goal.

## NOTES

1. There will be a discussion later in this report about what was expected in terms of this objective and what we actually found out. However, it is important to point out that in exploratory research part of the process is learning that what the researcher anticipates the research will yield is different from what they actually find out in the research. Knowing this, it is important in this type of research that the methodology is open enough to ensure good data emerges and not constrained by the researcher's preconceptions. But it is also important to be transparent when differences are found between the data coming out of the research and the researcher's pre-conceptions.
2. This sample of clients was smaller than desired because of research timing issues. We didn't have the support service provider focus group and one-on-one interviews completed until early summer at which time we were ready to start doing the client interviews. But by this time, the agencies who had agreed to work with us to identify actual individuals to interview were unavailable to work with us due to their staff summer schedules. That meant we had to wait until September before this work could be done. By then the time to conduct the interviews and incorporate the data into this report before its deadline was very tight, so we did as many interviews as could be done in the time allotted.
3. This represents a smaller number of different individuals. Some people, because of the different roles they play in the community and the different research focus presented at different meetings were involved in more than one meeting in which data was being collected. For simplicity sake, we simply counted up the number of individuals involved in each meeting, focus group and symposium to reach this total.
4. Judging the enthusiasm being expressed through the interview process in the spring and early summer, we anticipated a larger number of people attending the symposia. However, the timelines and methodological constraints were such that they had to be held during the height of vacation season, so we had a large number of people in the end regretfully declining the invitation to participate.
5. BC Stats has used Statistics Canada data to develop four basic indicators of regional hardship: (a) Index of Human Economic Hardship (b) Index of Crime (c) Index of Health Problems and (d) Index of Educational Concern  
The index of human economic hardship was considered very relevant as contextual information for the research in this report. This index is made up of 4 sets of indicators : (a) Income levels (b) Income dependency (c)

Housing costs and (d) Income assistance. This data for the two regional districts analyzed here can be found at

[http://www.bcstats.gov.bc.ca/data/sep/rd/Rd\\_3.pdf](http://www.bcstats.gov.bc.ca/data/sep/rd/Rd_3.pdf)

and [http://www.bcstats.gov.bc.ca/data/sep/rd/Rd\\_1.pdf](http://www.bcstats.gov.bc.ca/data/sep/rd/Rd_1.pdf)

6. This is a measure of income inequality. In the situation of perfect equality; the poorest half of the population's share of income would be equal to that of the richest half, or the lower the number reported here the greater the income inequality.
7. This indicator used the % of population receiving basic income assistance for all ages and for a duration of greater than 1 year which shows both regional districts with more hardship than the provincial average than if a duration of less than 1 year was used. In the case of the latter the East Kootenay Regional District has a smaller proportion than the province as a whole. The decision to use the former statistic was more reflective of the overall perspective used in this research.
8. This is a fictitious name used to protect confidentiality of the client.

**Proposal for Focusing and Framing  
the Homelessness Research Project**

**Objectives**

The primary objectives provided by CMHA for the research project are:

- e. To determine the extent of absolute and at-risk of homelessness in the region. And, to determine the degree to which it is deemed relatively significant.
- f. To determine and examine the characteristics of the homelessness, developing a profile of Kootenay homelessness indicating gender, age, socioeconomic, geographic, and health status. In addition there is a need to determine the differences in the homeless population in a rural setting as opposed to what is typically known to be true of the urban homeless. And finally, this profile will include particular reference to the sub groups of: (a) youth (b) mentally ill and (c) persons with substance addictions.
- g. To inventory the services that the homeless require particularly those in the 3 sub-groups identified above. And, to determine the types and level of services that are available. The primary goal is to identify the gaps in addressing this population's needs.
- h. To develop strategies and inventory best practices for addressing the service gaps.

**Focus:**

Of the four research questions/objectives identified; the financial and time limitations imposed on the project; the methodological challenges associated with objective 1; the pre-existing research done in the West Kootenays and the advice of the funding agent; we believe it is more practical focus on objectives 3 and 4 in this research.

Having said that and with some knowledge of what the preliminary research on homelessness has brought to light, we think it may be possible to focus on objectives 3 and 4 but through this research to set the foundation for addressing objectives 1 and 2 later. The arguments for this approach are:

- To do a credible job of addressing objectives 1 and 2 given the methodological challenges and geographical size of the Kootenays within the budget and time allotted is in our professional opinion not possible.
- There appears to be sufficient local anecdotal information supported by the research evidence elsewhere (based on similar socio-economic

factors) to support the contention that there is a problem of homelessness in the region. (coupled with the fact that there is homelessness funding available through the NHI for the region based on the presumption that need could be demonstrated) This would justify focusing on service needs and gaps analysis.

- The funder recognized a need for greater focus to the research and has suggested that a focus “on field research, gap identification and recommended actions” as a possible best way to proceed.
- Although using this research to set up the foundation for addressing objectives 1 and 2 later is predicated on getting some funding to support the implementation of the next stage of research; it is our contention that it is better to build now for the possibility of doing sound and credible research later than to do poor research now. In addition; we are prepared to argue for and work with CMHA in trying to access some of the capacity building funds potentially available in the NH initiative referenced above to carry the foundation/preliminary work to the next stage.

Outlined below is our approach to addressing/setting the foundation for addressing the research objectives:

### **Objective 1:**

From our preliminary research review we have found that even where more research has been done and more resources exist to study homelessness, baseline data and clear definitions of homelessness hinder the ability to address this research objective adequately. To achieve this objective for the entire Kootenays in the space of 6 months adds to the already existing methodological and operational definition problems. But we suggest that we could in this research project design it in such a way that in addressing the service gaps/strategies objectives we use this as an opportunity to develop some operational definitions, research methodologies and some data tracking/collecting strategies as a 1<sup>st</sup> or foundational phase. This could be followed up if other funds become available (and we are thinking the data tracking/collecting ideas I have may even fit into that call that is presently out) with implementing the definitions and methodologies that come out of this phase. Most of the information we would need in phase 1 could come from taking the existing research insights (relying very heavily for the rural insights on the Glass study) and testing/modifying it with the Kootenay service providers whom we will be the target population for obtaining information on the service gaps/strategies at any rate. An important source of feedback on the insights would be the two advisory committee, which we would propose, be expanded to include a broader representation as well as included any others interested in the research.

## **Objective 2:**

Angus Glass has done a good job in his qualitative work in the West Kootenays and there is a fairly extensive literature on the profile of the homeless in urban settings that I think we can draw on to identify the major and most likely characteristics. Then we would propose using a much smaller sample (given this work that is already done) of homeless people in the East Kootenays to see where and to what extent they are the same or different from these two other data sources and to obtain participant information around services needed and available. While collecting this data (and we suggest we deliberately use the same questions as Angus did to make the results for both East and West as comparable as possible) we add on any questions arising from the data we collected through the secondary research done to further refine and modify it for phase 2. Again we see the advisory committees as important resources in this work.

## **Objectives 3 and 4:**

We propose to concentrate our efforts here and although we think that we will use some one-on-one interviewing with some key informants as part of our methodology; focus groups and maybe even some community symposium/workshop type of information gathering, which would bring a larger number of people together may be tried. We think the key to getting good information out of the interviewing/focus groups/community workshops will be in identifying the agencies, representatives and people most knowledgeable about the issue and designing the information gathering approaches and questions by making the most use of the information coming out of previous research. The advisory committees will be key in this work and as we build for the broader involvement of service providers in the community workshop/symposium. This would bring together as broad and large a number of service providers as possible to examine, debate, and test that information against their first hand experience to provide us with the insights on services and service gaps.

## Overview Work Plan:

<b>Research Element</b>	<b>Key Tasks</b>	<b>Timelines</b>
<b>Research Design</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Focusing and framing research</li> <li>○ Meetings with advisory committees</li> <li>○ Methodology design for each element</li> <li>○ Data collection instrument design and pre-testing</li> </ul>	<p>Week 1</p> <p>Weeks 1-5</p> <p>Weeks 1-5</p> <p>Weeks 5-23</p>
<b>Secondary research data collection</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Extensive review of existing research on homelessness for concept construction; relevant categories, research methodologies; data collection instruments</li> <li>○ Testing the information initially through feedback from the advisory committees</li> </ul>	<p>Weeks 1-5</p> <p>Weeks 4-7</p>
<b>Services and service provider research</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Review literature for types of services provided; service needs analysis and lists of service providers</li> <li>○ Primary research to construct list of Kootenay service providers; their services and any research done relating to homelessness</li> <li>○ Meeting/feedback from advisory groups</li> </ul>	<p>Weeks 1-5</p> <p>Weeks 1-5 then adding in additional information as acquired to- Week 18</p> <p>Weeks 4-7</p>
<b>Service availability, needs and gaps data collection</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Primary research with service providers</li> <li>➤ Stage 1: Interviewing key informants</li> <li>➤ Stage 2: surveying</li> <li>➤ Stage 3: focus groups</li> <li>➤ Meeting/feedback from advisory group</li> <li>➤ Stage 4: community workshop/symposium</li> </ul>	<p>Weeks 1-5</p> <p>Weeks 6-14</p> <p>Weeks 10-18</p> <p>Weeks 15-18</p> <p>Weeks 15- 18</p> <p>Weeks 19-23</p>
<b>Field research on EK homeless sample</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Construct a list of potential interviewee and create sample</li> <li>○ Meeting/feedback from advisory group</li> <li>○ Interview sample</li> </ul>	<p>Weeks 14 - 16</p> <p>Weeks 15 - 17</p> <p>Weeks 16- 23</p>
<b>Data Analysis and Reporting (tentative until HRDC reporting deadlines are known)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ 1<sup>st</sup> report</li> <li>○ 2<sup>nd</sup> report</li> <li>○ Final report</li> </ul>	<p>Weeks 6-7</p> <p>Weeks 16-17</p> <p>Weeks 26-27</p>

**LIST OF COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS  
PARTICIPATING IN RESEARCH**

Youth Probation  
United Way  
Cranbrook Women's Centre  
ANKORS  
Joblinks  
Royal Canadian Mounted Police  
Canadian Mental Health Association for the Kootenays  
Summit Family Services  
Steele O'Neil (Creston)  
Ministry of Children and Family Development  
Kootenay Community Society  
Fernie Family Housing Society  
Fernie Alternate School  
Salvation Army  
East Kootenay Drug and Alcohol  
Junior Alternate School - Cranbrook  
Cranbrook Community Learning Centre  
Council Member; City of Revelstoke;  
Revelstoke Housing Committee  
Community Connections Revelstoke Society  
Interior Health; Mental Health and Addiction Services  
Arrow and Slocan Lakes Community Services  
Columbia Basin Alliance for Literacy  
Columbia Valley Action Team  
Kimberley Family Centre  
Nelson Community Services  
Stepping Stones For Success  
The Advocacy Centre  
City of Nelson  
Nelson food Cupboard  
Castlegar Freedom Quest  
Nelson Mental Health  
City of Trail  
Nelson Committee on Homelessness  
Alpine Employment Centre  
Ktunaxa Kinbasket Child and Family Services  
City of Cranbrook  
Prince Charles Senior Secondary Alternate Program  
Fernie Women's Centre  
Canadian Red Cross

**Interview Guide**

***Canadian Mental Health Association – Kootenay Homelessness Research***

**1. Introductions**

CMHA Kootenay has been awarded a contract from HRDC to undertake a research project investigating homelessness in the Kootenay. Agnes Koch and Jeff Hunt have been retained to perform the work on their behalf. Agnes is the Manager, Monitoring and Evaluation at the Columbia Basin Trust and is formally trained as a social researcher and anthropologist, and educator. Jeff is an organization planning and evaluation consultant from Kimberley and former researcher and instructor.

**2. Purpose of the Research Project**

The specific objectives are:

- a) To determine the extent of absolute and at-risk of homelessness in the region. And, to determine the degree to which it is deemed relatively significant.
- b) To determine and examine the characteristics of the homelessness, developing a profile of Kootenay homelessness indicating gender, age, socioeconomic, geographic, and health status. In addition there is a need to determine the differences in the homeless population in a rural setting as opposed to what is typically known to be true of the urban homeless. And finally, this profile will include particular reference to the sub groups of: (a) youth (b) mentally ill and (c) persons with substance addictions.
- c) To inventory the services that the homeless require particularly those in the 3 sub-groups identified above. And, to determine the types and level of services that are available. The primary goal is to identify the gaps in addressing this population's needs.
- d) To develop strategies and inventory best practices

**3. Purpose of the Focus Group/individual Interviews**

- To learn from the participant's experiences with the homeless population and understand the level and characteristics of homelessness within the Kootenay region.

- To validate a list of organizations and people with whom the research team should be discussing the issue.
- To discuss best strategies for interacting with homeless group (if applicable)

To this end, the researchers will be asking a series of questions intended to achieve these objectives. We will be preparing a summary of the interview and, if appropriate, will ask that you validate it before it is used in the final analysis.

#### **4. Ethics and Protocol**

- a) 30-60 minutes
- b) Consent Forms
- c) Confidentiality (for all attendees) and privacy
- d) Final Report

#### **5. Introductions**

- First names only for the participants.
- Focus group interviews with agency providers can offer full names.

#### **6. Discussion**

*Note:* our definition of homelessness has been delimited to absolute (without shelter, sleeping in the streets) and episodic (e.g. couch surfers)

- a) Please tell us what you **know** about homelessness in your community or within this region. To the degree possible please reflect on your personal experiences. Specifically we are interested in a better understanding of circumstances, impact, and causes if possible. How do you know?
- b) To what extent do you view this as a significant problem in the community? Why? What makes you say that?
- c) Has the nature of this community problem changed over time? How so?
- d) What service do they access?
- e) What are some of their challenges in accessing housing and other services? Why do these challenges exist?

**Kootenay Homelessness Research Project  
Symposium  
AGENDA**

9:30 AM	Coffee/Tea/Muffins
10:00 AM	Introductions
10:15 AM	Background on project
10:30 AM	Nelson Homelessness Committee Work
10:45 AM	Project Overview <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ Research Objectives</li><li>○ Methods</li><li>○ Key Results to Date</li></ul>
11:00 AM	Goals of Symposium <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ Review Results to Date</li><li>○ Identification of gaps in addressing homelessness</li><li>○ Development of strategies to address gaps</li></ul>
11:15 AM	Plenary session: Review Results to Date
<b>Lunch Break</b>	
1:00 PM	Small Group Session 1: “What’s needed to address homelessness”
1:45 PM	Plenary: From small group discussion: what are the key priorities in terms of addressing homelessness?
2:00 PM	Coffee Break
2:15 PM	Small Group Session 2: Strategies to Address Key Priorities
3:00 PM	Plenary: From small group discussion: what can we do?
3:30 PM	Summary of symposium results
3:45 PM	Closing remarks

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