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EDMONTON HOMELESS COUNTS:
1999 TO 2010 TREND ANALYSIS

Prepared by

Marianne Sorensen, PhD
Tandem Social Research Consulting
marianne@socialresearch.ca

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KEY FINDINGS

- A strong escalating trend in homelessness occurred between 1999 and 2008, followed by a 21% decrease in the most recent 2008-to-2010 count interval (from a high of 3,079 in 2008 down to 2,421 in 2010). Thus, while the 2008 homeless count is nearly triple the size of the 1999 count, the 2010 number of homeless is just double that of 1999.

- In the 1990s, fiscal and social policies combined with economic conditions to lay the foundation for a situation of increased risk of homelessness in the 2000s.

- Strong economic growth throughout most of the 2000s is the primary explanation for the increasing number of homeless in Edmonton between 1999 and 2008. Since unemployment rates and income disparity decreased during this period, the growing homeless population was primarily due to secondary features of the economic boom years that stemmed from a blend of strong population growth with a diminishing number of affordable housing units resulting in decreasing vacancy rates and escalating housing and apartment rental costs.

- Inadequate policy responses to homelessness, that for the most part included band-aid solutions such as increasing emergency shelter beds, also contributed to escalating homeless during this period.

- In contrast, it is concluded that the recent 2008-to-2010 decline in homelessness is largely explained by modifications in policies and procedures in addressing homelessness which began with retrenchment policies in the 1990s, shifted to the provision of emergency services in the 2000s, and concluded with the current Housing First philosophy. A slight loosening of the rental market also likely contributed to the declining homeless population between 2008 and 2010.

- Escalating numbers of absolute homeless account for the majority (63%) of the increase in the total number of homeless between 1999 and 2008. While a good portion of this increase is due to the aforementioned tight housing market, improvements in counting the absolute homeless by expanding the number of count sites and number of volunteer enumerators also explain some of the increase during this period.

- At the same time, changes in the sheltered portion of the counts are directly influenced by changes in the number of emergency beds available for Edmonton's homeless population. For example, the only count interval in which the sheltered homeless accounted for a larger portion than the absolute homeless of the total count increase was between 2006 and 2008 (81% versus 19%), the same period in which the shelter capacity in Edmonton increased by the largest rate through all count intervals (by 75%).

- Weather appears to be unrelated to the relative proportion sheltered homeless counted across years.

- It is concluded that the count methodology suffers from duplication more so than it does from under-counting, especially in the more recent count years as coverage has improved. That said, the count trends are deemed to be reliable overall as evidenced by the extent to which the number of homeless are explainable by the structural economic, population, and policy shifts across count years.

A. INTRODUCTION

[Co]unts provide a starting point from which further extrapolations about the nature and extent of the homeless population can be made. {Counts] are an important tool as they provide a measure of the relative size of the problem and the trends over time.

Office of the Auditor General of British Columbia, Homelessness: Clear Focus Needed,
March, 2009

More than a decade of enumerating the number of homeless in the City of Edmonton provides an opportunity to examine how over-time changes in count numbers were influenced by a range of prevailing economic and policy conditions. The period of 1999 to 2010 spanned both economic boom and bust years with each presenting very different employment, income, population, and housing market situations. Policy approaches to homelessness began within an era of retrenchment of supports, moved into building emergency shelters, and concluded with the current Housing First philosophy. Each of these broad underlying structural explanations for changes in the number of homeless are the focus of the trend analysis present in Section B. The report does not address the many other causes of homelessness (e.g., mental illness, domestic violence, addiction). There is, in any case, evidence from shelter intake and general population surveys to suggest that the inability to afford housing now takes precedence as the main cause of homelessness, rather than poor mental health and/or addictions.[1]

The methods used to conduct the Edmonton Homeless Counts must themselves also be scrutinized to first ascertain the extent to which they are deemed to be reliable and second to determine if methodological deviations might explain the over-time trends in homeless numbers. It is generally acknowledged that homeless counts under-represent the number of homeless. Part of this stems from utilizing narrow definitions of homelessness that exclude those at risk or those living in sub-standard housing conditions and from the inherent invisibility and mobility of being homeless that results in under-counting couch-surfers and those reluctant to use services and supports. At the same time, one of the most difficult methodological challenges in conducting homeless counts is to avoid enumerating the same individual more than once. These issues, as well as variations in count methodologies and in the number of absolute versus sheltered homeless, are examined in Section C of the report.

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[1] Laird, Gordon (2007) *Shelter: Homelessness in a growth economy: Canada's 21st century paradox*, Sheldon CHUMIR Foundation for Ethics in Leadership.

B. TOTAL HOMELESS COUNTS

B.1 Homeless Count Trends

Figures 1, 2, and 3 display three different presentations of the homeless counts between 1999 and 2010. These depictions clearly demonstrate a strong escalating trend in homelessness between 1999 and 2008 and the uniqueness of the 21% decrease in the homeless count in the most recent 2008-to-2010 count interval (from a high of 3,079 in 2008 down to 2,421 in 2010). This reduction brings the 2010 count down so that it is lower than the 2006 count. As further shown in Figure 3, which presents the cumulative percentage increase since 1999, while the 2008 homeless count is nearly triple the size of the 1999 count, the 2010 number of homeless is just double that of 1999.[2] Hence, the analysis focuses on explaining why the most recent count declined in the face of escalating numbers in all other intervals.

Figure 1: Total Number of Homeless[1] By Count Date
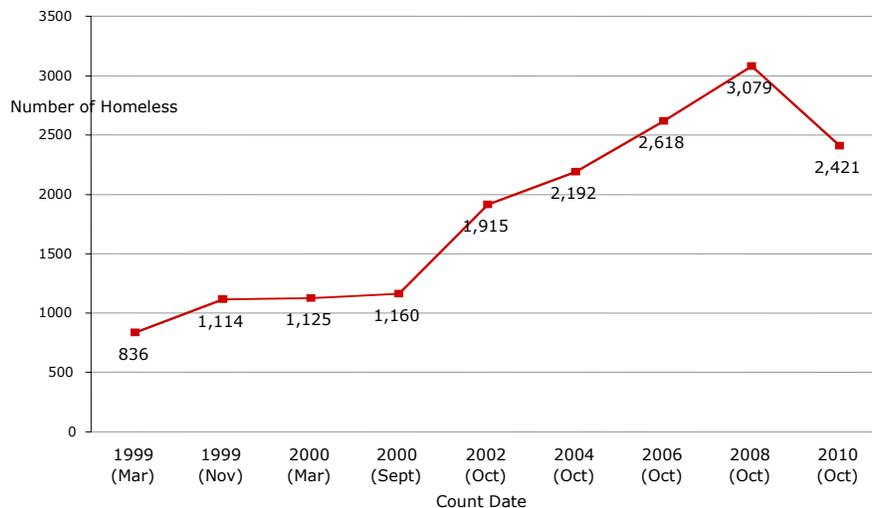
Source: Edmonton Homeless Counts

[1] The number of homeless is defined as the total number of individuals approached who reported not having a permanent place to stay on the night of count day.

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[2] As alarming as these growth rates seem, they are still lower than the count increases found in Calgary's homeless population (increasing by 311% between 1998 and 2008)(Stroick, Sharon M. et al, 2008). Despite important differences in count methodologies, the 2006 to 2008 increase, however, is in line with the rate increase in other Canadian cities: Metro Vancouver: 22%, Calgary, 18.2% (Street Needs Assessment Results, 2009).

Figure 2: Count Interval Percent Change in Homelessness[1]
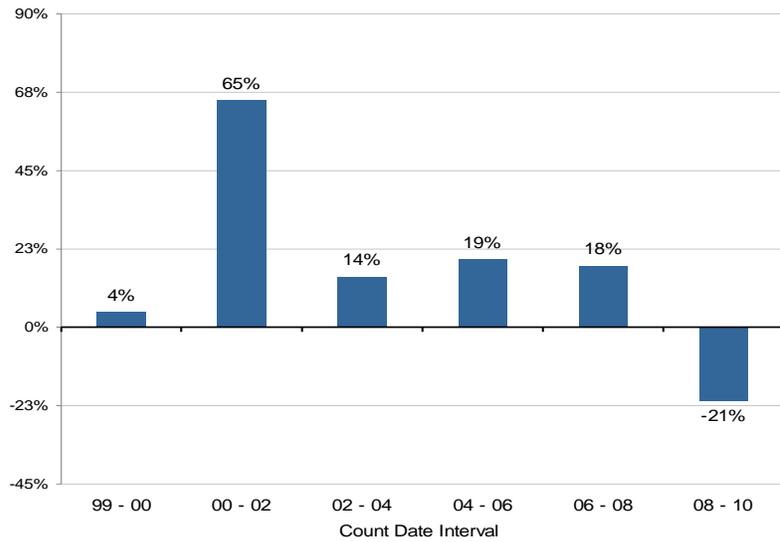
Source: Edmonton Homeless Counts

[1] All percentage changes are for two-year intervals, except between 1999 and 2000. For the purpose of making appropriate comparisons, only counts conducted in the fall are included.

Figure 3: Cumulative Growth Rate in Homeless Count Since 1999
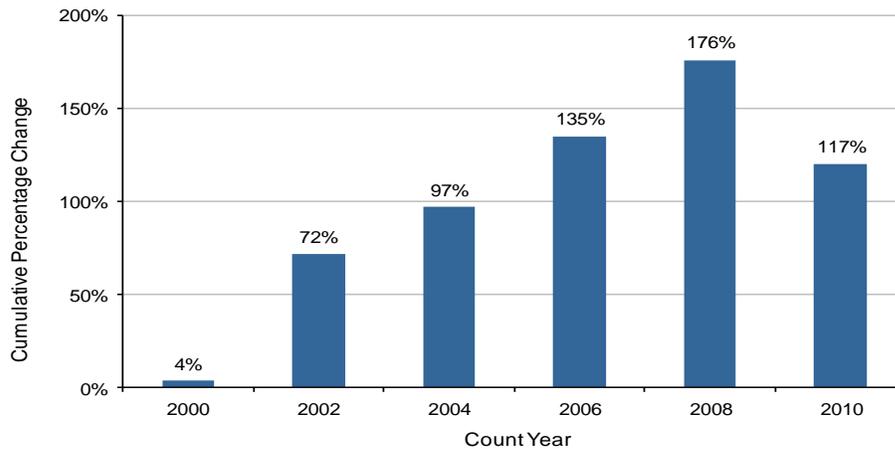
Source: Edmonton Homeless Counts

[1] All percentage changes are for two-year intervals, except between 1999 and 2000. Only counts conducted in the fall are included.

There are many possible explanations to consider when investigating why the number of homeless counted in Edmonton increased rather dramatically through most of the 2000s followed by a recent decrease. Utmost among these are changing economic conditions (and their related, population growth, housing affordability and accessibility factors), policy and procedural

responses to homelessness, and the count methodology itself. The economic and policy factors are examined below, both as they independently influence the number of homeless and as they interact with each other followed by the count methodology in a stand-alone section (C). The boom and bust years are each examined on their own to highlight the factors most likely to contribute to homelessness at that time, but also because of the incompatibility of available data across the entire decade and a shortage of available data for the current 2010 year. The analysis begins by setting the economic and policy context in the decade preceding the first homeless count.

B.2   The Prior Context (The 1990s)

In the 1990s, fiscal and social policies interacted with economic conditions to lay the foundation for a situation of increased risk of homelessness in the 2000s. As of 1993, the national affordable housing strategy had created over 650,000 housing units.[3] Soon after however, a focus on debt reduction lead to substantial cuts to social housing, reduced income support benefit rates, and an expansion of initiatives designed to move people off assistance and into jobs. In 1993, the federal government cancelled its national housing program altogether and by 1996, most of the federal housing programs had been transferred to the provinces and territories.[4] At the same time, average welfare benefits were reduced by 43% between 1986 and 1996[5] and from 1993 to 1999 Alberta cut housing spending by 67%, the biggest drop by any province at that time.[6] As a result of these national and provincial funding cuts and policy changes, the number of subsidized housing units decreased as a percentage of the total housing stock and the social safety net was compromised.

These retrenchment policies, along with the recessionary years of the early 1990s, combined to create a situation of increased risk of homelessness for individuals experiencing financial difficulties as they were now faced with fewer affordable housing options and a less secure social safety net. With an abbreviated government support system to fall back on, low-income individuals and families were more dependent on the exigencies of a difficult (high unemployment) and a changing labour market (restructuring of jobs to part-time and temporary). The national response to the ensuing boom in homelessness was largely to create emergency shelters and services to "manage" the homeless crisis with this approach, according to some, actually facilitating the rapid growth of homelessness in Canada.[7]

It is within this precarious context that the effects of economic recovery in the later half of the 1990s and the subsequent economic boom in all but the last two years of the 2000s would have further exacerbating repercussions on the homelessness situation in the City of Edmonton.

[3] Laird, Gordon (2007) *Shelter: Homelessness in a growth economy: Canada's 21st century paradox*, Sheldon CHUMIR Foundation for Ethics in Leadership
[4] Hulchanski, David (2007) *Canada's Dual Housing Policy: Assisting Owners*, Neglecting Renters, Research Bulletin 38, Centre for Urban and Community Studies, University of Toronto.
[5] Schellenberg, Grant and David P. Ross (1997), *Left poor by the market: A Look at family poverty and earnings*, Canadian Council on Social Development, Winter 97-98
[6] National Housing and Homeless Network (2002) *Six Months After Quebec City Housing Agreement: Where's the Housing?* Vancouver.
[7] Laird, Gordon (2007) *Shelter: Homelessness in a growth economy: Canada's 21st century paradox*, Sheldon CHUMIR Foundation for Ethics in Leadership.

B.3   The Boom Years (2002 to 2007)

Economic change presents a paradox for homelessness. While much has been documented about how economic downturns increase the risk of homelessness as evidenced by the early 1990s, less is known about how economic growth can also lead to homelessness. The latter situation played out in Alberta throughout most of the 2000s, perhaps no more so than elsewhere in the country.[8] All regions of the province were affected by the boom, with Edmonton, as a major economic and service hub, experiencing unprecedented growth.

Unemployment

Unemployment rates are one of the most widely recognized indicators of economic wellbeing with a high unemployment rate associated with lower incomes and a higher incidence of poverty. Figure 4 presents the unemployment rates for the 1999 to 2008 period and clearly demonstrates the improving economic conditions in Edmonton across most of the decade. Despite declining unemployment rates between 1999 and 2008, homeless counts continued to increase during the same period (Figures 1, 2, and 3), suggesting that homelessness was becoming an increasing reality for the employed.

Figure 4: Edmonton CMA Unemployment Rates: 1999 to 2008[1]
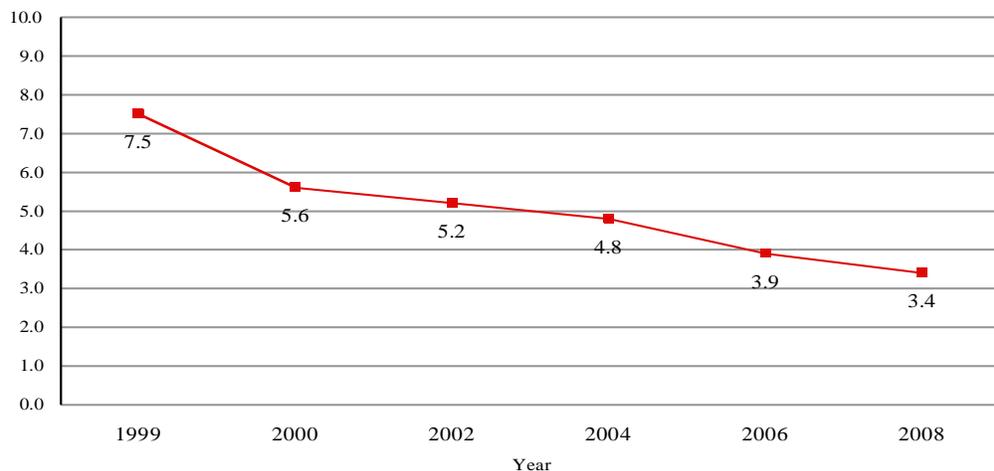
Source: Statistics Canada

[1] Unemployment rates for 1999 to 2007 are yearly and for 2008 are for the month of October.

Income and Economic Disparity[9]

Given the escalating numbers of homelessness it is clear that not all Edmontonians benefited equally from the strong economic growth, however, the percentage of people living on low

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[8] Echenberg, Havi and Hilary Jensen (2009) Risk Factors for Homelessness, Social Affairs Division, Library of Parliament.
[9] Unfortunately comparably standardized real income data are not readily available for the City of Edmonton across the full time span of interest.

incomes and at risk of poverty dropped during the boom years. For example, Edmonton average real family incomes increased from $68,100 in 2004 to $88,190 in 2008.[10] More importantly, between 2000 and 2005, the income gap closed marginally between the bottom 10th and top 90th percentile of families in Edmonton. During the same period, Edmonton became more affordable for low income earners as evidenced by a small increase in the adequacy of wages relative to the local cost of living. Edmonton was also one of only 5 of the 24 members of the Federation of Canadian Municipalities in the country that saw some decline (-0.8%) in the percentage of families considered to be "working poor."[11]

These economic indicator data suggest that factors, other than relative income alone, must explain the rising tide of homelessness in much of the current decade.

First, though the number of people on welfare in Alberta decreased by 46% between 1999 and 2005 (from 275,200 to 149,300)[12], welfare income has become increasingly less adequate to cover basic living costs. Furthermore, rather than reduced need, a combination of more restrictive administrative rules and lower unemployment explains the decline in the percentage of individuals and families receiving social assistance in Edmonton from 2000 to 2005.[13]

Second, Canada's labour markets have been responding to the globalization of competition and technological advances with a shift away from primary (or manufacturing) industries towards service provision, from demand for unskilled workers to demand for skilled workers, and from full-time permanent jobs to more contingent labour. Such a changing labour market system can increase the wage gap between high- and low-skilled labour, as well as between those with standard and non-standard work, thereby deepening poverty at one end of the income spectrum while increasing affluence at the other.[14]

But perhaps more than any other factor, rising homelessness in Edmonton has been a function of population growth and its related tight and unaffordable housing market, as demonstrated below.

Population Growth and (Un)Affordable Housing

Between 2001 and 2007, record numbers of people moved to Alberta in search of economic opportunities, and the province's population grew by more than 10%. Indeed, strong economic performance from 2004 to 2008 is mirrored in the growing population in the City of Edmonton as shown in Figure 5 below. Positive net in-migration, a slowdown in rental housing construction, and continued conversions of rental housing to condominiums resulted in a critically low vacancy rate, falling from over 5.3% in 2004 to 1.2% by late 2006 (Figure 6). With more Edmontonians looking for accommodations, rental vacancy rates remained below 2% for most of the decade.

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[10] Statistics Canada as cited in Edmonton City Trends, City of Edmonton
[11] Working poor is defined as families with incomes below the after tax Low Income Measure (LIM), who have received less than half their income from government transfers. Federation of Canadian Municipalities (1999) National Housing Policy Options *Paper, A Call for Action*.
[12] Alberta Fact Sheet #9, Revised October 2006
[13] Federation of Canadian Municipalities (1999) National Housing Policy Options *Paper, A Call for Action*.
[14] Echenberg, Havi and Hilary Jensen (2009) Risk Factors for Homelessness, Social Affairs Division, Library of Parliament.

Figure 5: Count Interval Percent Change in Homelessness and City of Edmonton Population: 1999 to 2008
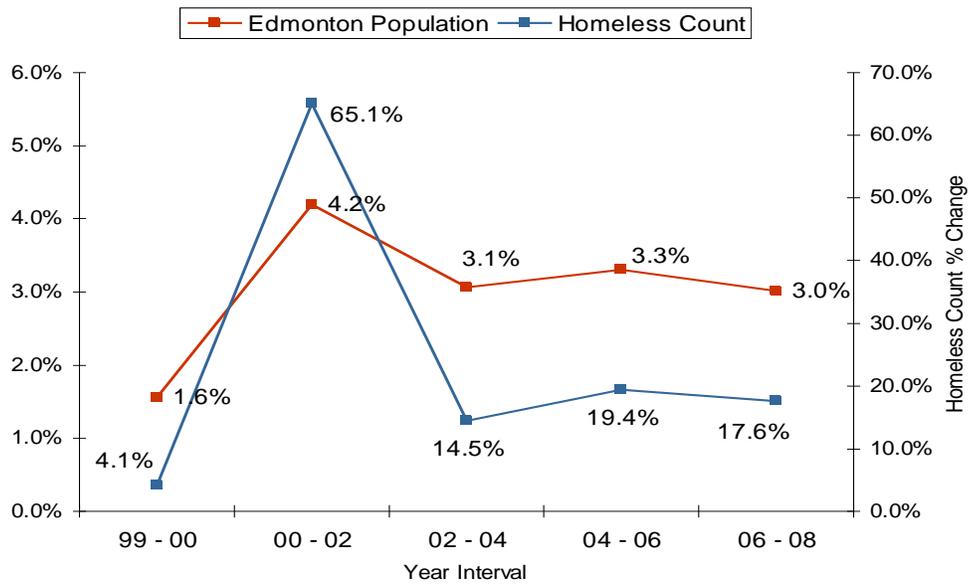
Sources: Edmonton Homeless Counts and Statistics Canada

Figure 6: City of Edmonton Apartment Vacancy Rates (%): 1999 to 2008
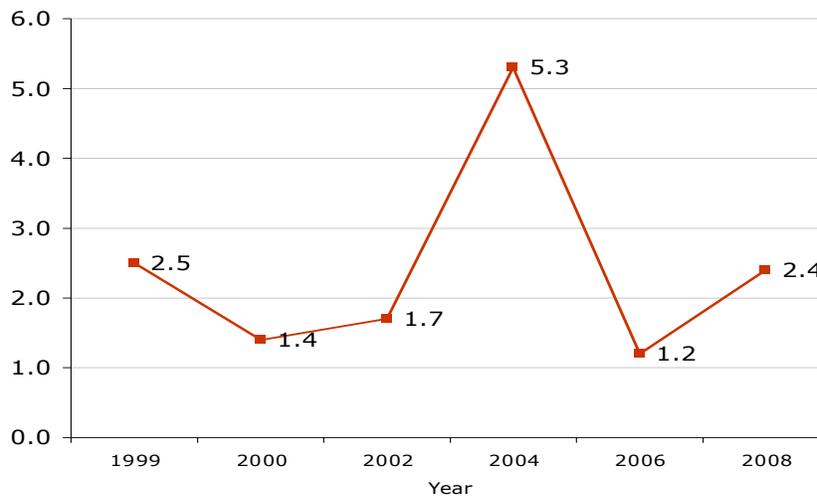
Source: CMHC

[1] Vacancy rates are for the month of October in each year.

This increased demand for housing led to dramatic rises in housing costs. Far surpassing the Canadian figures, the average cost of renting an apartment increased significantly in Edmonton throughout most of the decade (Figure 7). Previously, housing in the Edmonton region was cheap relative to many jurisdictions and to incomes. Average house prices were about 2.2 times

the average family income in the 1990s but they were four times the average family income in 2007.[15] Edmonton had the distinction of being the metropolitan centre in Canada where house prices rose the fastest relative to income between 2005 and 2007. In fact, both rent and housing price increases far outpaced wage increases between 1997 and 2007.[16] Market forces further exacerbate the situation if they are left to their own devices since construction of high-end housing tends to occur at the expense of affordable rental housing for low-wage earners.[17] As a result, very little new rental housing was built in the past decade. In addition, with rooming houses and older hotels being torn down, and a high number of rental units being converted to condos, the stock of rental units shrunk significantly.[18]

Figure 7: City of Edmonton Annual Percentage Change in Apartment Rents: 2000 to 2008
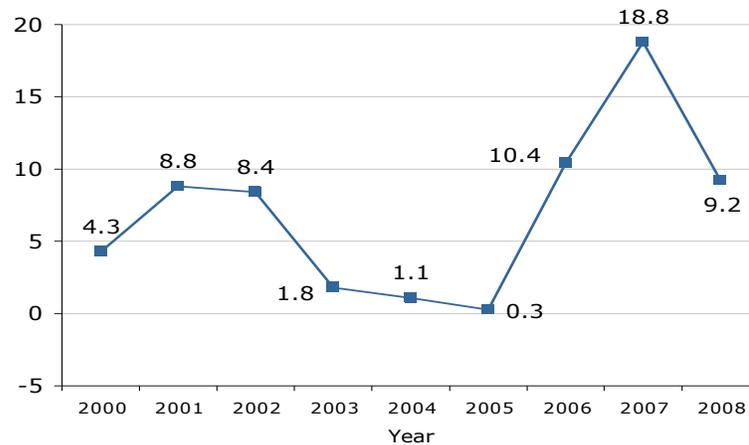
Source: Cushman & Wakefield

Together, these data meant that more Edmontonians were vying for scarce and high-priced housing accommodations, conditions that directly explain the increase in homelessness throughout the same boom years. For people trying to support themselves or a family on minimum wage, a basic pension or other fixed incomes, and for single income households and other disadvantaged groups, finding a home became increasingly difficult during this period. Hence, the link between the lack of affordable housing and growing homelessness is undisputable.[19]

B.4   The Bust Years (2008 to 2010)

Precipitated by a global recession, the economic downturn in Edmonton (and in Alberta) began in

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[15] Nichols Applied Management (2009) *Edmonton Socio-economic Outlook, 2009-2014*, City of Edmonton.
[16] Ibid
[17] Echenberg, Havi and Hilary Jensen (2009) *Risk Factors for Homelessness*, Social Affairs Division, Library of Parliament
[18] Edmonton Committee to End Homelessness (2009) *A Place to Call Home: Edmonton's 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness.*
[19] Alberta Affordable Housing Task Force (2007) *Housing First: An Investment with a Return in Prosperity*, Government of Alberta.

the fall of 2008. According to a report by Nichols Applied Management the recession began because,

> Reduced housing affordability had already put downward pressure on housing starts and house prices in late 2007 and early 2008. The additional weight of the global recession in the fall of 2008 and the associated decline in energy prices reinforced the already weakened housing market and ushered in the recession locally.[20]
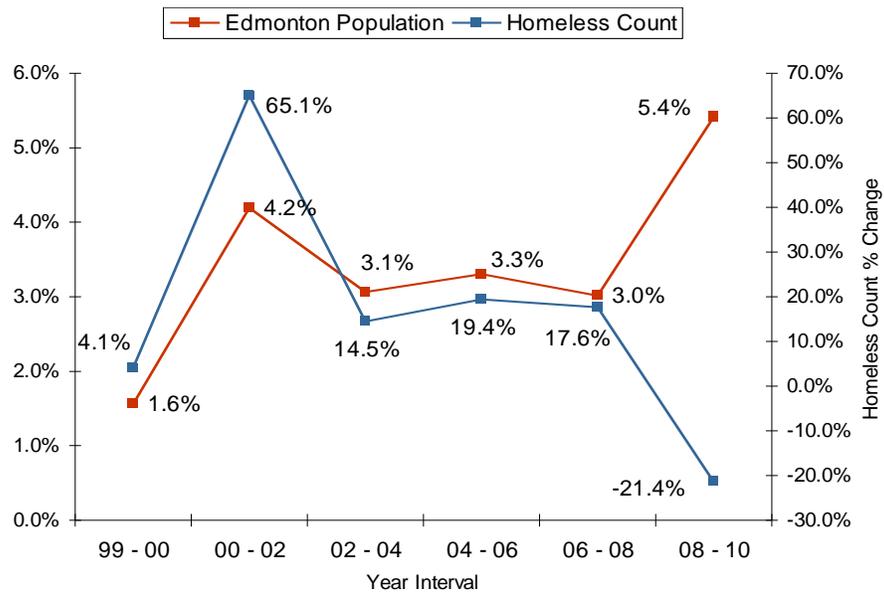
At the start of the current bust years in October 2008, Alberta's unemployment rate was 3.5%, the lowest in a decade. But by August 2009, it had more than doubled to 7.3%, the highest in 13 years. The rate has remained between 6.5% and 7.5% over the past year. Year-over-year economic indicators suggest that the Edmonton economy continued to decline between 2009 and 2010. Though there is no recent data to demonstrate this, Nichols Applied Management contends that the incidence of low income has increased in the recent downturn as unemployment has increased and wages have stagnated.[21]

The recession has reduced job opportunities, but the population has continued to grow. Between 2008 and 2009, the population of the CMA of Edmonton increased by 4%, one of the largest year-over-year increases in the decade. Using a combination of the 2008 to 2009 growth rate and an estimate of the 2009 to 2010 rate based on provincial growth figures, the total 2008 to 2010 population growth in Edmonton is estimated to be at roughly 5.4%. Figure 8 highlights the divergence of the recent population increases with the recent decline in the Edmonton Homeless Count. Whereas the homeless count increase paralleled population growth between 1999 and 2008, the homeless count decline of 21% between 2008 and 2010 stands in stark contrast to the continued population growth of 5.4% during the same period. According to the Government of Alberta's most recent Quarterly Population Reports, most of the provincial population increase in the last two years of the decade is due to international migration and natural increases (net births over deaths), rather than inter-provincial migration.

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[20] Nichols Applied Management (2009) *Edmonton Socio-economic Outlook, 2009-2014*, City of Edmonton, p13.
[21] Ibid

Figure 8: Count Interval Percent Change in Homelessness and City of Edmonton Population : 1999 to 2010

[1] The 2008 to 2010 Edmonton population change amount is an estimate based on a combination of the 4% growth rate between 2008 and 2009 and the provincial growth rate of 1.4% between 2009 and 2010.

Though there is some indication that we are slowly moving out of the recession,[22] these economic and population factors alone suggest that conditions in 2010 would be conducive to an increased risk of homelessness. Indeed, other indicators support this contention. For example, food bank usage in Alberta, which is often among the first to see the effects of negative social and economic trends, increased by 61% between 2008 and 2009 and by a further 10% between 2009 and 2010.[23] Income Support caseloads are also noticeably larger: the October 2009 caseload was 45% higher than that observed in September 2008.[24]

The rental housing market, however, is slightly more open and affordable than it has been in nearly a decade. Vacancy rates increased from 2.4% in 2008 to 5.2% in 2010. As a result, average monthly rents went from an increase of 9.2% between 2007 and 2008 to a decrease of -2.9% between 2009 and 2010, the first time a decrease has been observed since 1996.[25] As of

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[22] The most recent indicators for the fall of 2010 suggest a small turnaround in job creation and partial recovery from last years' downturn (Edmonton City Trends, Second Quarter, 2010). Housing starts are also up: In 2010, housing starts totaled 3,486 units compared to 1,089 at this time last year, indicating continued strengthening of the Edmonton economy (CMHC, (October 2010) *Housing Now, Edmonton CMA*).
[23] Food Banks Canada, *Hunger Count 2009* and *Hunger Count 2010*.
[24] Alberta Employment and Immigration (November, 2010) *Income Support Caseload*, Alberta, Fact Sheet.
[25] The percentage change in rental rates between 2007 and 2008 include all units and are provided by Wakefield and Cushman while the percentage change in rental rates for 2009 and 2010 period are provided by CMHC and are calculated only for the same units that were already existing in the earlier comparative year (i.e., they do not include newly built units or units converted to condos).

April 2010, the average two-bedroom suite in Edmonton rented for $994/month, down from $1059 a year ago. More landlords have been offering rental incentives as well (23% in 2009 compared to 3% in 2008).[26] Furthermore, marginally reduced house prices and low interest costs have increased affordability somewhat. According to Nichols Applied Management, however, low interest rates are not sufficient to counter the increase in house prices relative to incomes and given that the world economy is in uncharted waters our future may well include higher interest rates.[27]

Though the current economic and population conditions suggest that homelessness should be increasing or at least stagnating in the City of Edmonton, the loosening of the housing market and marginally increased affordability make the situation somewhat less risky for homelessness than it has been throughout most of the 2000s. Still, a reduction of one-fifth of the number of homeless in the 2008-2010 count interval is not likely due to the housing situation alone. Rather, as demonstrated in the following section, a paradigm shift in the policy and procedural approach to homelessness in the province and in the city is a more compelling explanation for this decline.

B.5   The Effects of a Paradigm Shift

The way I see it, reality is formed by the way we imagine things and the way we talk about things. That's why it's important to talk about an end to homelessness. If we continually say 'It'll always be there' we'll never get rid of it.

<div align="right">Sister Patricia Crowley, 2004</div>

It has already been noted that the policy approach to homelessness in the 1990s was largely one of retrenchment. By the late 1990s, the Canadian Federation of Municipalities declared homelessness a national disaster.[28] Soon after the National Homelessness Initiative was formed along with two three-year funding programs that were primarily used to enhance emergency support systems, band-aid methods that at best provided piecemeal solutions to discrete problems and at worst contributed to the rising number of homeless in the country. The ineffectiveness of this approach was soon revealed by the fact that there was little evidence that any Canadian municipality had significantly reduced its homeless population, with most urban centres actually reporting escalating increases.[29]

In 2005, however, new investment in affordable housing was introduced federally.[30] In the past three years, more importantly, a decidedly new approach has been developing in the province. In late 2008, the provincial government approved a 10-year plan to end homelessness in Alberta and in 2009 the Edmonton Committee to End Homelessness developed its own 10-year plan.

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[26] The indicators for the rental market and housing market are from the most recent editions of CMHC's yearly *Rental Market Report* and *Housing Market Outlook* for Edmonton CMA and from the most recent editions of the quarterly report, *Edmonton City Trends*.

[27] Canada's annual inflation rate just jumped unexpectedly to 2.4 percent in October 2010, suggesting that the Bank of Canada may indeed soon be raising interest rates again.

[28] Federation of Canadian Municipalities (1999) *National Housing Policy Options Paper, A Call for Action*.

[29] Frankish, James, Stephen W. Hwang and Darryl Quantz (2003). *The Relations Between Homelessness and Health in Canada: Research Lessons and Priorities*. A discussion paper written for the International Think Tank on Reducing Health Disparities and Promoting Equity for Vulnerable Populations. September 21 – 23 in Ottawa, Canada.

[30] Laird, Gordon (2007) *Shelter: Homelessness in a growth economy: Canada's 21st century paradox*, Sheldon CHUMIR Foundation for Ethics in Leadership.

These twin plans reflect a new approach that amounts to no less than a paradigm shift in thinking, from one that accepts homelessness as inevitable to one that focuses on ending homelessness by embracing the principle that every person has the right to a safe and secure home.

The Housing First philosophy initially emerged in the United States in the early 2000s with several communities implementing strategies that were shown to be effective in reducing homelessness. While approaches that manage homelessness concentrate on meeting emergency needs and assessing current service provisions for assets and gaps, approaches to ending homelessness require a long-term vision that targets individuals and families at high risk of homelessness and ensures both at-risk and homeless individuals and families are linked to stabilization support services and ongoing, individualized case management. In short, the goal is to make the homeless assistance system more outcome-driven by tailoring solution-oriented approaches more directly to the needs of the various homeless sub-populations.[31]

Some of the key elements of the Housing First Approach adopted by Edmonton's 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness as outlined in "A Place to Call Home", include:
•   Finding permanent housing for everyone, irrespective of their circumstances
•   Providing services and supports from a client-based perspective
•   Providing a continuum of wrap-around services
•   Acknowledging that some homeless individuals may require services indefinitely

Under the direction, coordination, and funding distribution of Homeward Trust and its partners, accomplishments during the first year of the program include the development of:
•   191 units primarily for transitional and long-term housing
•   A winter emergency plan that involves winter drop-in programs and the provision of transportation
•   A Housing First Support Program where ten teams spanning various agencies work with clients by providing permanent housing and follow-up support over the course of one year
•   A rental financial assistance program
•   A furniture bank
•   Efforts to Outcomes, a comprehensive case management and data collection / tracking system
•   The twice-yearly Homeless Connect, a broad-based, community-inspired initiative, providing free appropriate services to homeless people and those at risk of becoming homeless, on one day and at one location
•   The ROOPH Awards provided to outstanding individuals and organizations involved in Edmonton housing

In just one year (from April 2009 to June 2010), these initiatives executed by a collective of hard-working individuals and groups have resulted in 888 Edmontonians finding housing, with 85% of these individuals still successfully housed by June of 2010.

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[31] De Peuter, Jennifer and Marianne Sorensen (2005) Ending Homelessness in the City of Red Deer, Red Deer Housing Committee.

Other changes have also occurred that stem from the Housing First way of thinking but that are not yet an official policy of it. We know from the institutions participating in this year's count that at least some hospitals now make a concerted effort to try to not release individuals into homelessness. Though most correctional institutions have provisions for discharge planning (that are often aided by community-based groups such as the John Howard Society), a recent review of these initiatives in Ontario and British Columbia found that the execution of discharge provisions varies considerably from institution to institution.[32] With the current conservative government promise to "get tough on crime" by, among other things, building more jails, the number of inmates will likely increase and therefore, the numbers of inmates discharged without a home.

B.6   Summary and Conclusions

How much of the 2008 to 2010 reduction in homeless is due to structural economic, housing market, and population growth factors versus the many initiatives under the Housing First program? Though quantification of the relative influence of each factor is beyond the scope of this analysis, it can be safely concluded that, given the current recession and its detrimental effects on employment and incomes, and given the continued increase in the population, the homelessness situation in the City of Edmonton would have continued to escalate if it were not for the Housing First Program. The slight easing of the rental market may also have contributed to the drop in homelessness, or at least served as a partial stopgap especially for those at risk of becoming homeless.

Still, as effective as the first year of the Housing First Program has been, by all accounts there is much work left to do. Just what this 'work' will entail is a matter of perspective. A report by the Parkland Institute, for example, argues that homelessness will never be eradicated unless the root causes of poverty and economic disparity are seriously addressed.[33] The Federation of Canadian Municipalities further states that, while the social infrastructure to address the needs of vulnerable groups is being put into place locally, the structural determinants of poverty must also be addressed.[34]

The nature of homelessness itself also suggests that there will be lasting effects from the boom years in terms of continued homelessness for some individuals. The 'vicious circle' of homelessness is such that without a permanent address, people can't access certain services and income support benefits and without these benefits, they don't have enough money for a home. The amount of energy required to be homeless should also not be overstated; energy that is finite and that takes away from one's ability to find work and housing. Thus, as more people enter a state of homelessness, as has been the case in Edmonton throughout much of the current decade, chronic homelessness necessarily increases given that the many 'traps' of

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[32] Gaetz, Stephen and Bill O'Grady (2009) Homelessness, Incarceration, and the Challenge of Effective Discharge Planning: A Canadian Case, in Phillippa Campsie et al (Eds.). Finding Home: Policy Options for Addressing Homelessness in Canada (e-book), Chapter 7.3. Toronto: Cities Centre, University of Toronto, www.homelesshub.ca/FindingHome.
[33] Hudson, Carol Anne and Diana Gibson (2010) ACSW Social Policy Framework 2010: Visioning a more equitable and just Alberta, Parkland Institute, University of Alberta.
[34] Federation of Canadian Municipalities (2010) Mending Canada's frayed social safety net: The role of municipal governments – Quality of Life Report, Theme Report #6.

homelessness make it difficult to get out of, once you're in.

Finally, the Edmonton Homeless Counts represent the number of homeless on a given day in the City of Edmonton and do not include those without a home in the larger Capital Region. Yet, for most part, homelessness in the surrounding city region may not be detectable because the homeless tend to be less visible and more transient in rural and small urban areas. Rural and small town homeless tend to relocate to larger urban centres where services, supports, and employment are found or as a result of local intolerance strategies.[35] Until recently, the entire supply of emergency shelters and transitional housing facilities in the Capital Region were to be found in the City of Edmonton. Until the front door to homelessness is addressed at a regional level, therefore, Edmonton will continue to receive its homeless neighbours.

The recency of the Housing First strategy and issues of structural sources of poverty, the vicious circle of homelessness, and regional homelessness combined with the current recession are only some of the reasons why the number of Edmonton homeless continues to be as high as it is. A drop of 21% in just two years, however impressive, still means that thousands of Edmontonians are without a home. As we enter into the winter months and as the temperatures begin to drop below -20 degrees, the right of everyone to a safe and secure home takes on a significance that only those who live on the streets can completely understand.

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[35] Law, Robin (2001) "Not in my city: local governments and homelessness policies in the Los Angeles Metropolitan region" Environment and Planning C; Government and Policy, Vol. 19: 791-815; Social Data Research Ltd. (2005) "The Face of Rural Homelessness in Ottawa" The City of Ottawa Community Capacity Building Team.

C. Homeless Count Methododology

C.1   Evaluation of Count Reliability

The methods used to conduct the Edmonton Homeless Counts must themselves be scrutinized to determine if methodological deviations might explain the over-time trends in homeless numbers. Increases in the number of homeless between 1999 and 2008 may reflect real increases or they may in part be a function of continual improvements in the resources and methods used to conduct the counts. Before addressing these issues, however, an overall assessment is conducted to determine the extent to which the counts are deemed to be reliable.

It should be understood that this evaluation is based primarily on observing the count in 2010, discussions with those managing and coordinating the count, and on limited documentation. As a result, the evaluation is perhaps not as in-depth as we would like it to be.[36]

To enable comparability across years, a concerted effort is made to ensure that the count design is replicated across count years. Such consistency means that the count methodology can be examined in terms of the elements that are common for every year.

Overall, the count results themselves are evidence that the methods are reliable since, as demonstrated in the previous section, there are good structural reasons to believe that the number of homeless should have followed the increasing pattern that it did between 1999 and 2008 as well as the recent decline.

It is generally acknowledged that homeless counts under-represent the number of homeless. At the same time, one of the most difficult methodological challenges in conducting homeless counts is to avoid enumerating the same individual more than once.

Duplication
Elements of the count methods that reduce duplication include:
- Counting homeless individuals over a 17-hour period (as opposed to counting over a number of days) reduces the likelihood that an individual will be counted more than once.
- Volunteer enumerators were encouraged to attend an orientation session prior to the day of the count. Enumerators who did not attend the orientation received methodological, safety, and sensitivity training at their base site on count day.
- The first question enumerators ask is ""Have you been asked about your housing situation today?" and if the approached individual says "yes", the enumerator concludes the interview.
- Shelter staff are instructed to ask their clients if they have already been asked about their housing situation that day.

Elements of the count methods that increase the likelihood of duplication include:

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[36] The absence of documentation on the counts itself suggests a lack of rigour in ensuring that the counts are conducted in the same way each year.

- Instructions to volunteer enumerators were lacking in terms of reinforcing the importance of asking the first qualifying question about whether the approached individual had already been asked about their housing situation.
- The use of volunteers to conduct the count, while laudable, means that many individuals were inexperienced in the realm of homelessness, let alone established methodological principals of conducting interviews. There is also good reason to believe that some volunteers missed both the orientation and on-site training.
- In tallying the number of homeless, the practice has been to include secondary caregivers in the counts without ascertaining if they had been previously counted.
- Information on whether sheltered individuals had already been approached about their housing situation was unreliable. This issue was at least apparent for all shelters at Hope Mission in 2010, which represents more than half of all sheltered individuals counted.
- There is no way of knowing if individuals approach on the street had already been enumerated at a shelter without their knowledge.

To summarize, though there are a few checks in place, these checks are superceded by a lack of rigour and it is concluded that the count methodology likely suffers from a fair amount of duplication.

Under-coverage
Debates about the value of counting the homeless often revolve around the issue of under-coverage, with many arguing that counts only represent a minority of the total homeless population. The problem of under-coverage in the first instance stems from utilizing narrow definitions of homelessness that exclude those at risk and those living in inadequate, overcrowded, or substandard housing conditions. The intent of the Edmonton Homeless Counts is, however, to determine how many individuals are living on the street or in shelter at a given moment. The Counts purport to do no more than this, leaving estimates of relative homelessness to others.

The second issue raised is that attempts to enumerate the number of homeless under-represent the hidden homeless including couch surfers and those staying at hotels. Researchers have concluded that "service-based" methods of counting the homeless yield the most accurate and reliable results.[37] In following this model by spanning the street, soup kitchens, drop-in centres, labour offices, street outreach programs, mobile services, bottle depots, food banks, health and crisis centres, congregate areas, outdoor encampments, green spaces, under bridges, and in public facilities such as libraries and shopping malls, the Edmonton Homeless Count coverage is fairly extensive. Though the hidden homeless are likely still under-represented, they are perhaps not excluded as much as in other counts that rely either exclusively on shelter information or on extrapolating from service usage.

Determination of count sites has largely been an historically driven exercise, with each count consecutively building upon the sites of the previous count. Count sites are added after consultation with homelessness-related service agencies. Occasionally, sites are dropped if

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[37] Pressini, Tracy et al (2009) Towards a Strategy for Counting the Homeless, in Phillippa Campsie et al (Eds.). Finding Home: Policy Options for Addressing Homelessness in Canada (e-book),

previous counts have not enumerated any homeless individuals at these locations. Though these methods of site determination identify areas of the city where the homeless are most likely to be found, the absence of a systematic approach suggests that some homeless are overlooked, with the hidden homeless perhaps especially so.

While not perfect, under-coverage of the homeless in the Edmonton Homeless Count is therefore perhaps not as much of an issue as some contend, especially if it is understood that the final numbers in no way purport to be an indication of the scope of relative homelessness.

Conclusions

The influence of these two competing issues of under-counting and duplications on the count numbers are difficult to tease out, but given that less attention is paid to avoiding duplication than to ensuring adequate coverage, it is concluded that the Edmonton Homeless Counts suffer more from the former than the latter. This does not mean, however, that the counts tend to over-estimate the number of homeless. Rather, it only means that the methods err in the direction of duplication more so than in their lack of coverage. In other words, we have no way of knowing how many people are counted more than once or how many homeless people are missed in the count.

# C.2   Variations in Methodology Across Count Years

Variations in the count methodology across count years might also explain some of the changes in the number of homeless counted. A concerted effort has been made to ensure that the methods are the same across count years. Still, modest modifications have been made to successive counts largely to account for changes in service and shelter provision and for growth in the level of knowledge about homelessness. Count street routes have also been added as new known areas of homeless congregation have been identified resulting in greater geographical scope. Since the count methodology has not been well-documented over the years, however, we do not know the exact extent of these changes and, in fact, very few methodological changes have been identifiable for the same reason.

What we do know is that prior to 2006, street counts were conducted over an entire 24-hour period (from 4:30am to 4:30am) whereas they have since been limited to the hours of 5am to 10pm. In at least one year, the count sheets that are used by enumerators to record the homeless information were revised to better reflect homeless family situations. We also have some very rough estimates demonstrating that the number of volunteer enumerators used for the street count has trended upwards across time as shown in Figure 9 below. Finally, we know that a good number of volunteers for the 2010 Count had previously worked on a count providing them with cumulative experience and greater reliability in their methods.

Though there is a lack of evidence, what documentation does exist indicates that the homeless counts were successively improved upon and that the number of homeless counted became more reliable over time. Without better substantiation, however, we cannot qualify this statement by adding that it has become more reliable to a great extent, a moderate extent, or a small extent. Nonetheless, it can be concluded that at least some of the escalation in the homeless counts is

likely due to methodological improvements over time, especially with respect to the street count of absolute homeless as further demonstrated in the next section.

Figure 9: Number of Volunteer Enumerators by Count Date[1]
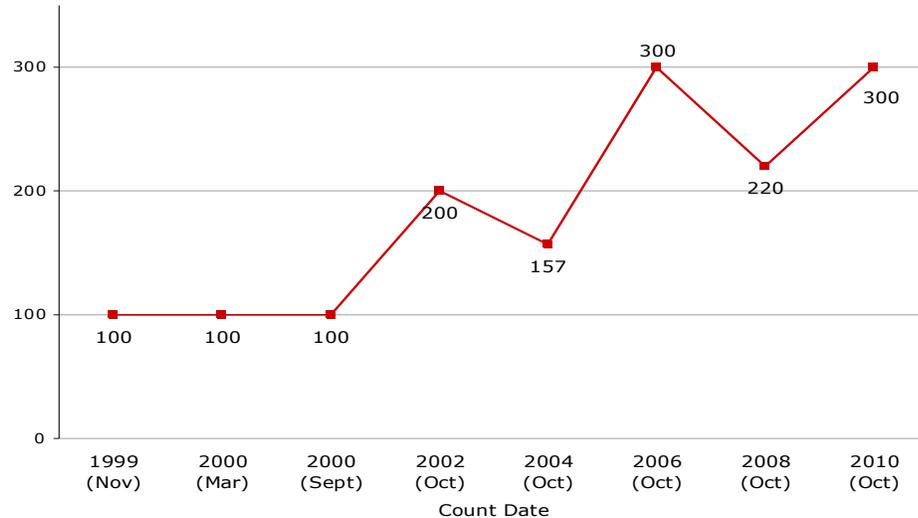
[1] The number of volunteers for the first count in March of 1999 is not available. The numbers of volunteers for 1999, 2000, and 2002 are of questionable reliability since it appears that the numbers were simply copied from report to report.

C.3   Variations in Absolute versus Sheltered Homeless

Just as it is important to examine the total number of homeless across counts, much can be gleaned by gaining an understanding of the changes in the number of absolute versus sheltered homeless, both in terms of the relative contribution of the absolute versus sheltered homeless to the total counts, but also with respect to the count methodology.

The Street and Shelter Counts represent the absolute and sheltered homeless, respectively, and draw upon the following two definitions of type of homelessness[38]:

Absolute Homeless: Individuals and families with no housing alternatives. They may be sleeping "rough" on the street, in a stairwell or campsite.

Sheltered Homeless: Individuals and families counted at an emergency accommodation and who expect to be on the street at the end of their stay.

Figures 10, 11, and 12 present over-time data for the raw numbers, the biennial percentage change, and the percentage contribution of absolute versus sheltered homeless to the count interval change in the total number of homeless. The first observation to make about the figures is

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[38] These definitions follow those used in the document *Homelessness in Edmonton: A Call to Action*; 1999.

the greater relative increase in absolute than in sheltered homelessness. In all but the 2006 to 2008 count interval, the rate increase in the absolute homeless was higher than the increase in sheltered homeless (Figure 11), with the 2000 to 2002 increase especially large (87%). Figure 12 shows that the contribution of the increase in the number of absolute homeless was higher than the contribution of the increase in the number of sheltered homeless in all but the 2006 to 2008 count interval as well. In fact, increases in the number of absolute homeless account for more than three quarters of the total count increase between 1999 and 2006.

While these increases could be due to real growth in the number of absolute homeless in the City, there is no reason to believe that the absolute homeless should have escalated at a rate that is so much larger than the sheltered homeless. Insofar as counting the absolute homeless is more vulnerable to issues of area coverage than is counting the absolute homeless (as discussed in the previous section), these over-time trends provide further evidence that some of the increase in the number of homeless, especially between 2000 and 2002, was due to improvements in the methods used to count the absolute homeless.[39]

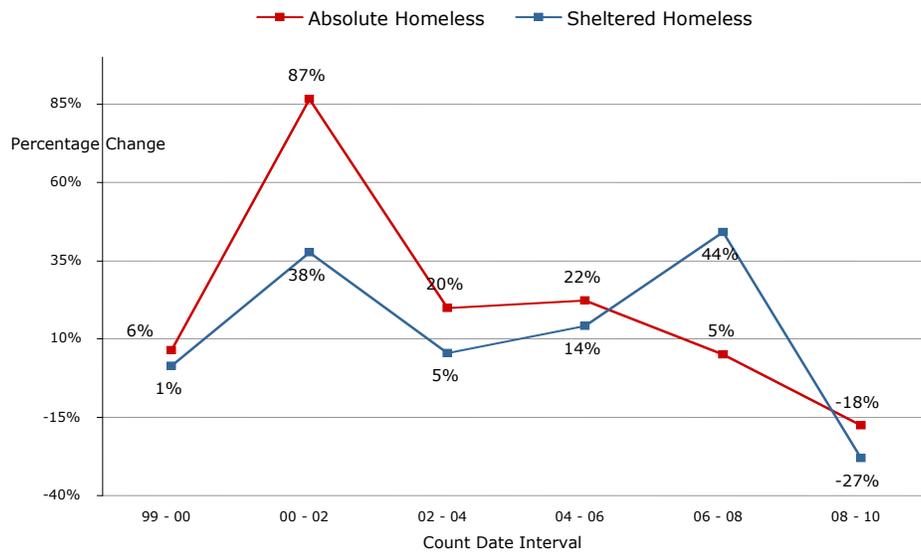## Figure 10: Type of Homelessness[1] by Count Date
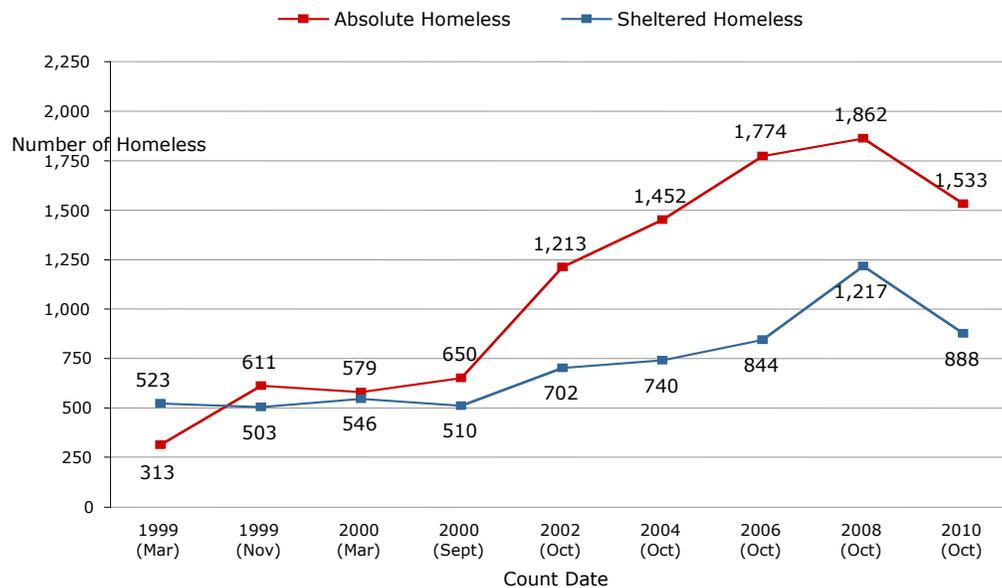
Sources: Edmonton Homeless Counts

[1] Absolute Homeless includes homeless individuals counted on the street or at service agencies. Sheltered Homeless includes homeless individuals counted at an emergency shelter.

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[39] Over-time changes in the number of sheltered homeless are also influenced by variations in shelter participation in the counts. A full 1999 to 2010 analysis of shelter participation is beyond the scope of this project.

Figure 11: Count Interval Percent Change[1] in Absolute versus Sheltered Homeless[2]
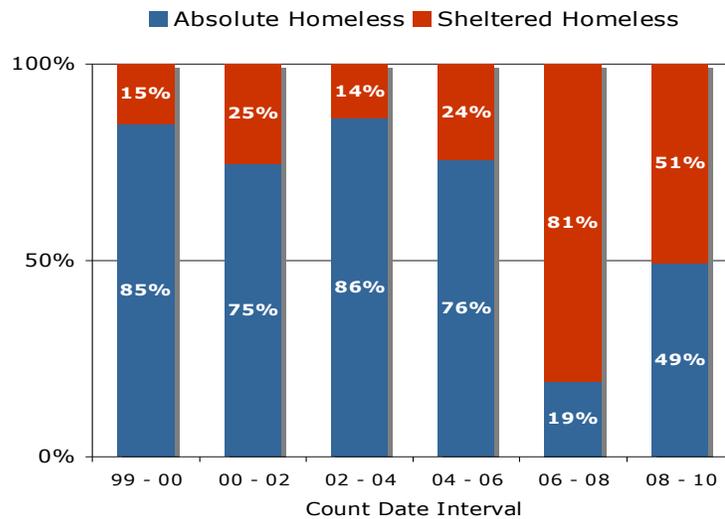

Sources: Edmonton Homeless Counts

[1] All percentage changes are for two-year intervals, except between 1999 and 2000. For the purpose of making appropriate comparisons, only counts conducted in the fall are included.
[2] Absolute Homeless includes homeless individuals counted on the street or at service agencies. Sheltered Homeless includes homeless individuals counted at an emergency shelter.

Figure 12: Percent Contribution of Absolute versus Sheltered Homeless[1] to Total Homeless Count Change by Count Date Interval[2]
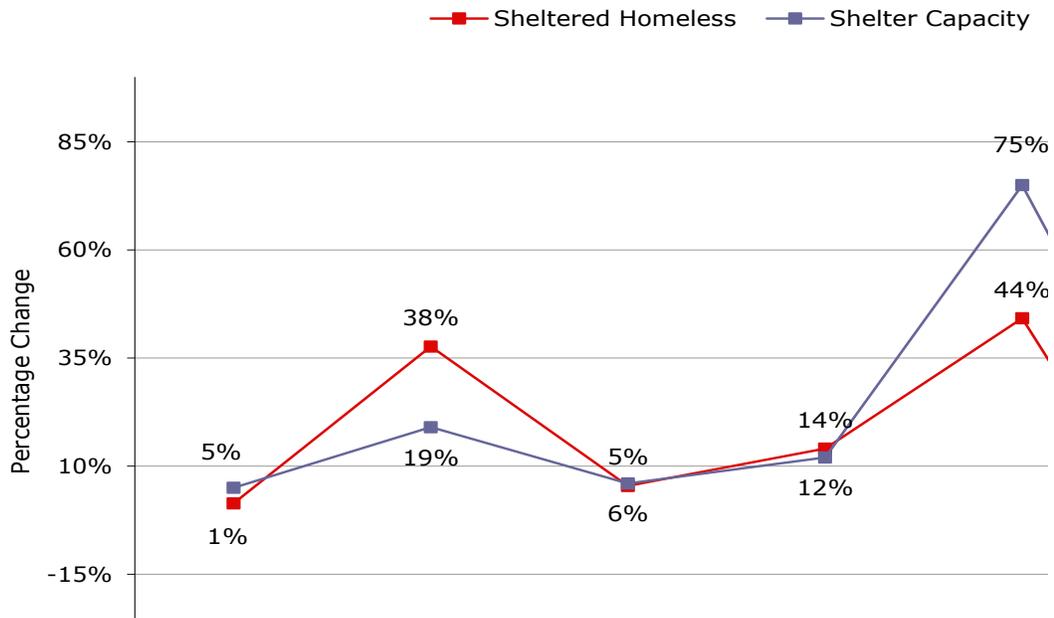

Sources: Edmonton Homeless Counts

[1] Absolute Homeless includes homeless individuals counted on the street or at service agencies. Sheltered Homeless includes homeless individuals counted at an emergency shelter.
[2] All percentage change contributions are for two-year intervals, except between 1999 and 2000. For the purpose of making appropriate comparisons, only counts conducted in the fall are included.

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Figure 13: Count Interval Percent Change[1] in Sheltered Homeless and Shelter Capacity[2]

Sources: Edmonton Homeless Counts

[1] All percentage change contributions are for two-year intervals, except between 1999 and 2000. For the purpose of making appropriate comparisons, only counts conducted in the fall are included.
[2] Shelter capacity is based on the number of available beds for shelters participating in each count year.

One final methodological consideration explains the greater increase in absolute than sheltered homeless counted. In cases where shelter staff noted that an individual had already been counted in the street count representing absolute homeless, that individual was categorized as absolute homeless since it would be impossible to determine the specific individual to remove from the absolute homeless count data. As a result, the number of sheltered homeless are under-represented and the number of absolute homeless over-represented. Since there is no way of determining the number of sheltered individuals allocated to the absolute homeless count in any one year, it is similarly impossible to quantify the variability in over-counting in any one year. This methodological shortcoming however, is apparent for each count year and, given the principal of ensuring count methodological consistency, it is assumed that the variation only minimally explains count deviations across time.

At the same time, increases in the sheltered homeless, which are perhaps more reliable than increases in the absolute homeless, provides an indication of the number of emergency beds that have been added to the system. Using the capacity figures for shelters participating in the counts, Figure 14 demonstrates rather remarkable symmetry in the direction and rate of change of the biennial percentage change of the sheltered homeless with that of emergency shelter beds available in Edmonton. The larger rate increase in sheltered than absolute homeless between 2006 and 2008 (Figure 11; 44% compared to 5%) is also explained by increases in the number of shelter beds during the same two-year interval of 75%. Changes in the sheltered portion of the

counts are, therefore, directly influenced by changes in the number of emergency beds available for Edmonton's homeless population.

As we would expect, over-time patterns in occupancy rates of shelters also parallel shelter count patterns. As shown in Figure 14, the occupancy rate generally corresponds to the number of sheltered counted in all but the 2006 to 2008 interval in which there was an increase in the number of sheltered homeless but a decline in the shelter occupancy rate. This deviation is likely explained by the significant increase in shelter beds between 2006 and 2008 of 75% (Figure 13). Still, it is notable that, after climbing from 80% in 1999 to a high of 109% in 2006, the occupancy rate has since declined such that it is now lower than any previous year (77%). Together, these data suggest that the recent decline in the number of homeless is not likely due to a reduction in participating shelters, but is due to real decreases in the number of homeless staying at a shelter in Edmonton in 2010.

Figure 14: Shelter Occupancy Rate[1] and Sheltered Homeless Count by Count Date[1]
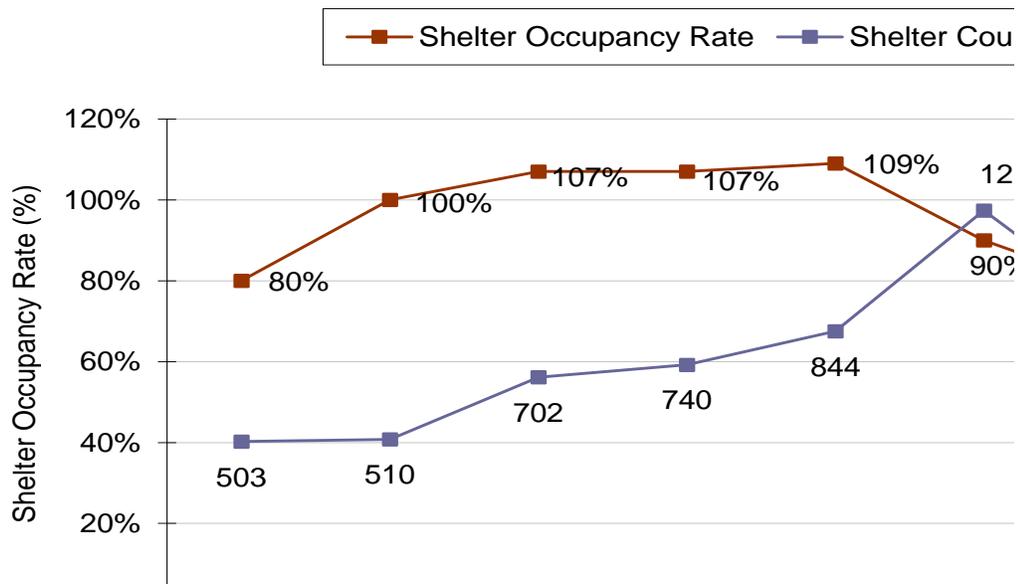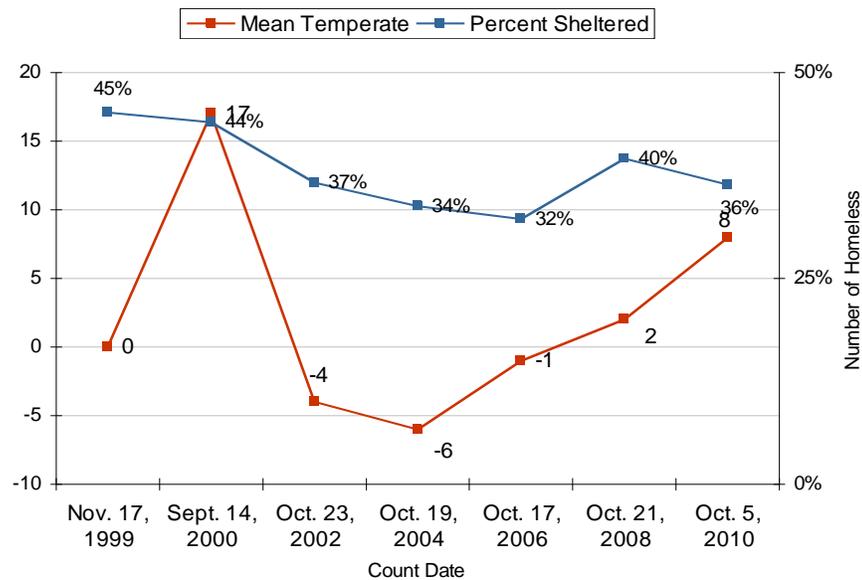

Source: Edmonton Homeless Counts
[1] The occupancy rate is calculated by dividing the total number of registered clients by the total capacity of all participating shelters. The occupancy rate for March of 1999 is not included since it was not calculated.

One final influence on the relative number of absolute and sheltered homeless across time is variation in the weather on count day. In warmer and less inclement weather, individuals are less likely to stay at a shelter.[40] In other words, the proportion of sheltered homeless counted should be inversely related to the temperature. Figure 15 displays the mean temperate on count day along with the percentage of the total number of homeless accounted for by the sheltered homeless. These trend data indicate that there is very little correlation between the two

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[40] Analysis of the Calgary counts, for example, found that shelter counts were higher on rainy days.

measures. Specifically, there is a general trend whereby as the temperature declines the share of the total homeless who are sheltered also declines. There are, however, numerous other factors that moderate the relationship between temperature and count numbers, so the connection should not be considered causal.

Figure 15: Mean Temperature (Celsius) and Sheltered Homeless[1] as Percentage Share of Total Number of Homeless by Count Date

Sources: Edmonton Homeless Counts and Environment Canada, The Weather Office, Historical Weather
[1] Sheltered Homeless includes homeless individuals counted at an emergency shelter.
[2] All percentage change contributions are for two-year intervals, except between 1999 and 2000. For the purpose of making appropriate comparisons, only counts conducted in the fall are included.

In summary, it can be concluded that the increases in homeless counts across time are primarily due to increases in the number of absolute homeless that are themselves at least partly attributable to improvements in coverage by the street count. In contrast, there is a strong correlation between the number of sheltered homeless and both the number of emergency beds and occupancy rates. The only count year interval in which the rate of sheltered homeless increased more steeply and the occupancy rate did not correlate with the shelter count was between 2006 and 2008 and this is explained by an equally steep increase in the number of available shelter beds. Variations in shelter use across time do not appear to be strongly related to variations in weather.