Employment and Social Development Canada
Emploi et Développement social Canada

HOMELESSNESS Partnering Strategy

The National Shelter Study 2005–2014

EMERGENCY SHELTER USE IN CANADA

SSD-188-05-17E

Canada

The National Shelter Study 2005-2014 – Emergency Shelter Use in Canada

It is also available upon request in multiple formats (large print, Braille, audio cassette, audio CD, e-text diskette, e-text CD, or DAISY), by contacting 1 800 O-Canada (1-800-622-6232). By teletypewriter (TTY), call 1-800-926-9105.

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Executive summary

The National Shelter Study: Emergency Shelter Use in Canada 2005–2014 is the second nationwide study done using emergency shelter data collected over an extended period of time to establish a baseline count and description of the homeless population in Canada. The first national shelter study was published in 2013 and covered the period from 2005 to 2009. The second study updates information and extends findings to 2014. In 2014, statistics on Indigenous identity, citizenship and military service of shelter users are available for the first time.

The second National Shelter Study (NSS) used data provided by over 200 emergency shelters in Canada. These data were collected electronically by the Homeless Individuals and Families Information System (HIFIS), the City of Toronto, BC Housing and the Province of Alberta. Emergency shelter use is the best available indicator of large-scale trends in homelessness. As the only homelessness research using a large nationally representative sample, the results of this study are important for understanding homelessness in Canada.

Canada's emergency shelter system is at over 90% capacity

There are about 15,000 emergency shelter beds at 400 emergency shelters across Canada (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2015). The number of shelters and beds changed very little between 2005 and 2014, but demand for shelter beds has increased. On an average night in 2014, close to 14,000 Canadians slept in an emergency shelter, using over 90% of Canada's 15,000 shelter beds. By comparison, in 2005, average nightly shelter use had reached just over 80% of capacity.

Average occupancy rate at emergency shelters in 2014

92%

Number of Canadians who slept in an emergency shelter on an average night in 2014

14,000

Fewer people are using shelters each year, but they are staying longer

Although the annual number of shelter users has fallen from 156,000 in 2005 to 137,000 in 2014, emergency shelters served an average of 800 more people per night in 2014 compared to 2005. Bednights measure the number of times a shelter bed is used in a year. In 2014, shelter beds were used over 5 million times at emergency shelters in Canada, an increase of 300,000 since 2005. This indicates that although fewer people were using shelters in 2014 than 2005, they were using shelters for a longer period.

Number of Canadians who used an emergency shelter in 2014

137,000

Increase in a typical length of an emergency shelter stay from 2005 to 2014

+4.5 days

Demand for shelter beds has increased due to longer stays, especially by families and individuals aged 50 and over. A typical shelter stay by a family was over 20 days in 2014, twice as long as stays by individuals. People over 50 years of age typically spent eight or nine more days in shelters than people under 50. However, stay lengths increased for all types of shelter users since 2005. Overall, a typical shelter stay increased from 5.7 days in 2005 to 10.2 days in 2014.

The number of shelter users under the age of 50 is down, while the number of shelter users over the age of 50 is up

The overall decrease in the number of annual shelter users over the study period was due to a 25% drop for adults aged 25–49, who make up the largest group of shelter users. In contrast, the number of shelter users aged 50 and over increased by 58%. The increase was even larger for shelter users aged 65 and over, with their number nearly doubling over the ten-year study period. The number of unaccompanied youth aged 13–24 using shelters declined slightly. By the end of the study period there were more 50- to 64- year-olds using shelters than youth.

Decrease in the number of emergency shelter users aged 25–49

-25%

Increase in the number of emergency shelter users aged 50 and over

+58%

In 2014, nearly 3,000 shelter users reported having served in the military. In the same year, over 6,000 shelter users were non-citizens

In 2014, 2.2% of shelter users—an estimated 2,950 people—reported having served in the military. Shelter users reporting military service were more likely to be male and tended to be older on average than other shelter users.

About 5% of shelter users reported that they were not Canadian citizens, including an estimated 5,036 permanent residents or immigrants, 1,095 refugees and 562 temporary residents (student, work or visitor visa).

Number of shelter users reporting military service

2,950 (2.2%)

Number of shelter users reporting that they were immigrants, refugees or temporary residents

6,700 (5%)

Indigenous people are 10 times more likely to use a shelter than non-Indigenous people

It is estimated that between 38,080 and 45,820 Indigenous people used a shelter in 2014. This represents approximately 30% of all shelter users. The rate of shelter use for Indigenous people is 10 times higher than for non-Indigenous people. Indigenous people over 65 years of age and Indigenous women are especially likely to use a shelter.

The percentage of shelter users reporting Indigenous ancestry varied widely by community, from less than 5% in some suburban communities to over 90% in many northern communities. In each of the communities where data were available, Indigenous people were found to be over-represented in homeless shelters compared to their percentage in the general population.

Percentage of emergency shelter users in 2014 who identified themselves as Indigenous

30%

Percentage of Canadians in 2014 who identified themselves as Indigenous

4.3%

Family shelters continue to operate at high capacity

The average occupancy rate at family shelters was 86.3% in 2014, compared to 67.3% in 2005 – an increase of 19 percentage points. The high occupancy rate at family shelters in 2014 was driven by increasingly long shelter stays by families. A typical stay at a family shelter increased from 8.3 days in 2005 to 22 days in 2014. Approximately 6,000 children stayed in emergency shelters each year during the study period. This does not include children staying at Violence Against Women (VAW) shelters. Nearly 90% of families using emergency shelters are headed by single females.

Increase in occupancy rate at family shelters - 2005 to 2014

19 percentage points

Approximate number of children using emergency shelters annually

6,000

Summary: Rising demand for shelter beds in the face of static capacity

As of 2014, the average occupancy rate at Canada's emergency shelters had risen to over 90%—an increase of almost 10 percentage points since 2005. However, the overall capacity of Canada's emergency shelter system has not changed significantly. Although the annual number of individuals using shelters has fallen over the 2005 to 2014 study period, shelters are being used more intensively. Overall demand for shelter beds increased due to longer shelter stays.

NSS findings show that stay lengths for all shelter users increased since 2005. Moreover, there was an especially large increase in stay lengths for families and seniors, with typical shelter stays lasting more than 20 days for these groups. The age composition of the shelter-using population also changed. The number of youth and adults aged 25–49 using shelters fell, while the number of adults aged 50 and over increased.

Approximately 30% of all shelter users are Indigenous. NSS findings also indicate that Indigenous people are 10 times more likely to use a homeless shelter than non-Indigenous people.

With data collected from over 200 emergency shelters across Canada over a ten-year period, the 2nd edition of the NSS provides important insights into broad trends in homelessness in Canada. These results should be considered a baseline count and description of the homeless population in Canada against which future progress in preventing and reducing homelessness can be measured.

Introduction

The National Shelter Study: Emergency Shelter Use in Canada 2005-2014 is a Canada-wide study of emergency homeless shelter use. It is based on a sample of over 200 emergency shelters across Canada and covers the years 2005 to 2014. Emergency shelter use is the best available indicator for examining the overall characteristics of the homeless population and large-scale trends in homelessness. This is the second edition of the National Shelter Study (NSS). The first study was published in 2013 and covered the years 2005 to 2009. The second study updates information and extends findings to 2014. It also adds additional statistics about Indigenous people, citizenship and military service.

As trends in homelessness are of primary interest, the same sampling methodology has been used in the second study to ensure continuity with previous findings. This study aims to estimate the overall number of people using shelters each year, to describe the demographic characteristics of the shelter-using population, and to describe the use of the emergency shelter system in terms of measures like occupancy rate, bednights used and duration of stay. With ten years of data available, changes over time in these three areas can be examined.

Emergency shelter use as an indicator of trends in homelessness

Homelessness takes many forms, from sleeping rough on the streets, in parks or abandoned buildings to couch surfing at the homes of friends and family, to relying on emergency shelters, transitional or supportive housing. It can encompass situations where people are housed but subject to unstable or dangerous living arrangements. Some people experience homelessness for only a brief time in their lives, while others struggle with homelessness for many years. Measuring a complex social issue like homelessness presents many challenges.

The first challenge with measuring and understanding homelessness quantitatively is defining the scope of homelessness. In other words, who should be counted as homeless? The second challenge results from the homeless population being diverse, mobile, and difficult to reach. Having no stable address or way of reliably contacting homeless people makes it nearly impossible to use conventional sampling

methodologies. Even if homeless people were easy to reach, they make up such a small proportion of the population that a very large sample would be required to obtain enough cases for large-scale analysis. The third major challenge is temporal. While some people are homeless more or less all the time, others move in and out of homelessness, and others—the largest group—experience homelessness only for a brief time and possibly only once in their lives.

To address these challenges, the NSS examines emergency shelter use. For the first challenge (defining the scope of homelessness)—emergency shelter use is assumed to be an indicator of absolute homelessness. For the second challenge (reaching the homeless population), emergency shelters serve as a well-defined and accessible point of contact, distributed widely across the country. For the third challenge (timing), emergency shelter data can be collected over a long period of time to capture a wide range of homelessness experiences.

It is important to think of emergency shelter use as an *indicator* of homelessness. Remembering that shelter use is an indicator provides the proper context for thinking about what the results of the NSS mean, as well as understanding the limitations.

In terms of enumerating homelessness, or determining the size of the homeless population, shelter use provides a baseline, or minimum number. Estimating the number of people using emergency shelters over a period of time tells us that at least this "minimum number" of people have experienced homelessness over the specified period of time. By enumerating homelessness over a longer period of time (such as one year), more people are counted because not everyone experiences homelessness at the same moment in time, and because people can move in and out of homelessness.

It has been shown consistently in both Canada and the United States that when shelter use is examined over an extended period of time, a relatively large number of people are counted. The majority are temporary, short-term or what has been termed "transitional" shelter users (Kuhn and Culhane 1998; Aubry et al. 2013). In many cases, such individuals use a shelter only once and never return. Although they may experience inadequate or unstable housing situations over the long term, they are only "absolutely" homeless for a relatively brief period in their lives. Conversely, we see that a majority of shelter resources are used by the chronically homeless, who are homeless over a long period, and possibly most or all of their lives. The third general pattern is episodic homelessness, which describes people who move in and out of homelessness. Many individuals who fit the episodic pattern in terms of shelter use may actually be chronically homeless in the sense that they are always homeless, but only use emergency shelters from time to time.

Studies of emergency shelter use fail to capture homelessness experienced outside of shelters, and not everyone who experiences homelessness uses a shelter. The other common approach for enumerating homelessness entails conducting point-in-time counts (PiT counts). PiT counts are able to reach both sheltered and unsheltered individuals. However, they miss those who are not homeless at the time of a given count, meaning those who are chronically homeless have a greater likelihood of being included than others. PiT counts are thus more likely to include the chronically homeless, whose characteristics may differ significantly from the temporarily or episodically homeless. Results from various communities

show that shelter counts conducted over a one-year period enumerate between 3 and 10 times as many people as PiT counts. Studies of shelter use provide a “big picture” view of the wider homeless population. PiT counts are more likely to count the long-term and unsheltered homeless population and allow for a more in-depth survey that can provide more detail about individual experiences of homelessness.

Emergency shelters serve a large number of people over time, and they serve a wide range of demographic groups. Some shelters serve specific groups such as youth, women or families. The sampling method used in the NSS takes demographics into consideration to ensure that estimates are representative of the spectrum of different people using emergency shelters. However, Violence Against Women (VAW) shelters are not included in the NSS, which means that many of the women and children using VAW shelters are not counted in this study. The Transition Home Survey published by Statistics Canada contains information about the use of residential facilities providing services to abused women and their children, which includes VAW shelters (Burczycka and Cotter 2011).

When we look at emergency shelter use, we are looking at homelessness as a structural issue affecting a broad range of people. As a structural issue, homelessness is not simply a result of individual characteristics, experiences or behaviours. Homelessness affects certain groups or categories of people differently. In addition to providing a baseline or minimum count of homelessness, the NSS helps to understand which groups are disproportionately affected by homelessness and how this changes over time.

Methods

The NSS is based on non-identifiable information from 1.9 million shelter stays that occurred at over 200 of the 400 emergency shelters across Canada during a 10-year period.

The study uses a stratified cluster sample of emergency shelters to ensure accurate estimates of the number and gender and age characteristics of shelter users. The sample is based on emergency homeless shelters and does not include VAW shelters, transitional housing or temporary shelters. For the 2014 study, the sample has grown to include most of the largest shelters in Canada, covering 71.5% of the total emergency shelter beds in the country. The methodology also takes into account people who use more than one shelter. Key details of the methodology are outlined below. A full description of the methodology is available in *The National Shelter Study 2005-2009: Emergency Shelter Use in Canada* (Segaert 2013).

Types of shelters

This study focuses specifically on emergency homeless shelters as an indicator of trends in Canada's homeless population. Shelters are considered *emergency shelters* if they have the following characteristics:

- Most stays are less than three months in duration
- High annual turnover rate (i.e., many clients use each bed over the course of a year)
- Crisis-based service for those experiencing homelessness, with few barriers to entry (i.e., no cost to client, no referral or entry application necessary)

Emergency shelters can be divided into several sub-types based on the type of clients served: youth shelters, shelters for families, shelters for women and women with children, and general shelters. With the exception of family shelters, stays at emergency shelters tend to be short, often a single night, with some clients having multiple stays over the course of a year. Families usually stay in shelters longer and are much less likely to have multiple stays than individuals. Patterns of shelter use at various types of shelters are similar from city to city and province to province. There are no consistent differences in average length of stay, turnover rate, number of stays, average client age, or occupancy rate for shelters in different cities or provinces (Segaert 2010).

General shelters are the most common type of shelter, serving a broad clientele of unaccompanied adults and youth. About 75% of the permanent shelter beds in Canada are at general shelters. Youth shelters have age-based entry requirements, with an upper age limit ranging between 18 and 25. Youth shelters tend to be much smaller than general shelters, with an average of 16 beds compared to an average of 46 beds at general shelters. Family shelters are shelters for men or women with dependent children. They do not accept single individuals.

In the NSS, women's shelters able to serve children have been given their own category (women/women with children) for methodological reasons. These shelters are similar to general

shelters for women, but are able to accommodate children as well. They are different from family shelters because the majority of clients tend to be single women without children. If included in the family shelter stratum as representative of family shelters, the relatively few children using women/women with children shelters could lead to underestimating the number of children using family shelters overall. Conversely, although they are very similar to general shelters for women, including them in the stratum with general women's shelters would lead to overestimating the number of children using shelters. Because general shelters for women do not serve any children, women/women with children shelters are not representative of that stratum.

VAW shelters exhibit similar empirical characteristics to women/women with children shelters, with the exception that clients are less likely to have repeated stays. The major difference between women/women with children shelters and VAW shelters is their mandate. VAW shelters were established for women and their children who are fleeing domestic abuse. Although many VAW shelters accommodate women who are homeless for reasons other than domestic abuse (Burczycka and Cotter 2011), VAW shelters are not included in this study due to insufficient data coverage.

Several other types of shelters are not included in this study: shelters for immigrants and refugees, temporary shelters for extreme weather conditions (such as "out of the cold" shelters), transitional housing programs, and halfway houses.

Data and sources

The National Homelessness Database (NHDB), maintained by Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC), contains administrative shelter data obtained from emergency shelters using the Homeless Individuals and Families Information System (HIFIS) and similar data obtained from the City of Toronto, Province of Alberta and BC Housing. The study period covers the years 2005 to 2014.

Table 1: Number of shelters and observations for each year of the study

Year	Shelters	Observations (shelter stays)
2005	96	124,206
2006	102	130,013
2007	110	135,238
2008	120	135,301
2009	123	130,470
2010	172	217,318
2011	187	242,871
2012	193	263,880
2013	201	281,818
2014	209	309,641

Shelters with incomplete annual data were not used in the study. For each year of the study, there is complete annual data from 96 in 2005 to 209 shelters in 2014. The number of annual shelter stays used in the study ranges from 124,206 to 309,641 (see Table 1).

The NHDB contains information about shelter stays. Each shelter stay is associated with a unique client identifier, age, gender, shelter name, book-in date and book-out date. Starting in 2014, additional data about Indigenous status, citizenship status and military or RCMP service are available. Each shelter stay is associated with a unique client identifier that allows the identification of multiple stays at multiple shelters by the same individual, without divulging the person's identity. The book-in and book-out dates describe the beginning and end of each shelter stay.

Sample design

A stratified cluster sample design was used to produce national estimates. Eight strata, based on the target clientele and gender served at shelters, were used in the sample design (see Table 2). These strata were chosen to ensure that the results account for differences among shelter types and that the estimates reflect age and gender proportions in the shelter-using population. The primary sampling units (clusters), are shelters which were selected with probability proportional to size (PPS) within each stratum. The measure of size is the number of beds in the shelter (shelter capacity). The 2010-2014 portion of the sample contains shelters from all thirteen provinces and territories. The sampling frame covers all known emergency shelters in Canada. To obtain the final analysis weights for calculating totals or proportions, the base weights for the client-level dataset were adjusted by a "duplication factor" to account for clients who use more than one shelter (Segaert 2013).

Table 2: List of sample strata

Strata	Target clientele	Gender(s) served	Number of shelters (Number of permanent beds) in Canada 2014
1	Youth	Male	14 (237)
2	Youth	Female	9 (105)
3	Youth	Co-ed	75 (1,169)
4	General	Male	72 (4,794)
5	General	Female	41 (1,265)
6	General	Co-ed	125 (5,174)
7	Women/Children	--	29 (797)
8	Family	--	28 (1,454)

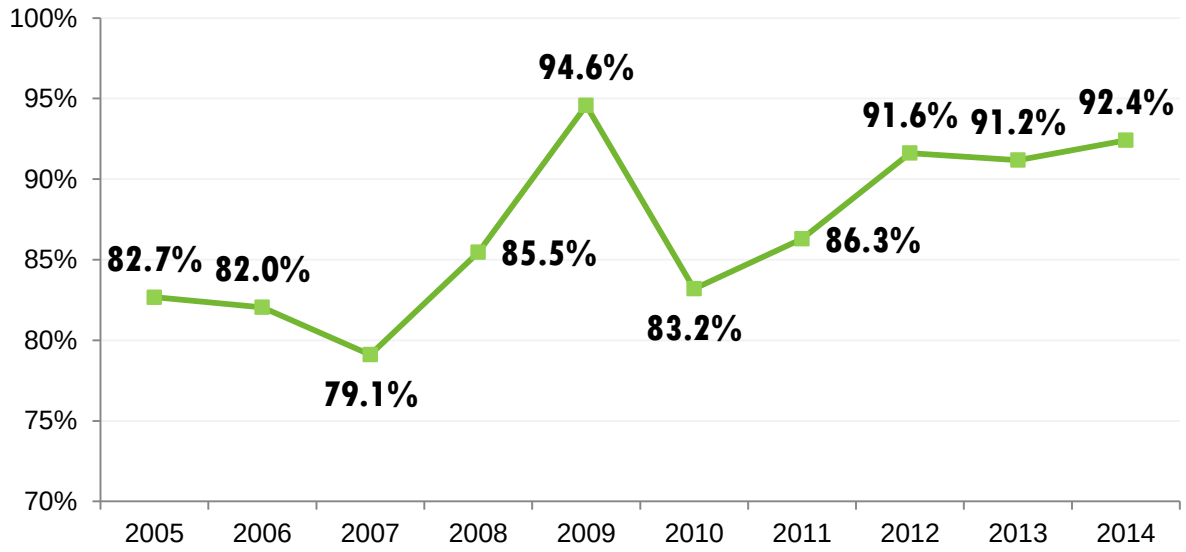
Results

Canada's emergency shelter system

Canada's emergency shelter system is operating at over 90% capacity

There are over 15,000 emergency shelter beds at 400 emergency shelters across Canada. The number of shelters and beds changed very little between 2005 and 2014, but demand for shelter beds increased. On an average night in 2014, an estimated 13,857 Canadians slept in an emergency shelter, using over 90% of available shelter beds. By comparison, in 2005, average nightly shelter use had reached just over 80% of capacity.

Figure 1: Average national occupancy rate



There was a sharp increase in the average occupancy rate in 2009. The occupancy rate returned to pre-recession levels in 2010, but gradually increased in 2011 and 2012, becoming relatively stable from 2012 to 2014. Keep in mind; this is the *average* occupancy rate for the shelter system as a whole. There are about 400 emergency shelters in Canada, some of which operate over capacity on any given night. With occupancy rates averaging over 90%, the current supply of beds may not be adequately meeting demand at many shelters. The NSS does not account for people turned away from shelters, which becomes increasingly likely as occupancy rates approach 100% of capacity.

Figure 2: Average occupancy rates by shelter type

Figure 2 shows average occupancy rates by shelter type. General shelters, which comprise three-quarters of the shelter beds in Canada, had the highest occupancy rates from 2010 to 2014. On average, nearly 95% of beds at general shelters were used in 2014. Occupancy rates at youth shelters were slightly down compared to 2005. After a small increase in 2009, occupancy rates have remained stable since about 2010. At family shelters, occupancy rates increased by nearly 20 percentage points since 2005, with a sharp increase in 2009. However, this peak use did not continue and occupancy rates at family shelters were relatively stable from 2012 to 2014.

More bednights are being used annually by fewer people

In 2014, it is estimated that nearly 137,000 Canadians used an emergency shelter. This is almost 20,000 fewer than in 2005. The margin of error is large for these estimates (see Table 3), so statistical significance is difficult to achieve.

Table 3: Estimated annual number of unique individuals using emergency shelters

Year	Estimated unique annual shelter users	95% confidence interval	
2005	156,030	142,975	169,086
2006	150,663	138,167	163,159
2007	146,884	134,317	159,451
2008	151,621	137,408	165,834
2009	146,726	134,345	159,108
2010	141,854	131,489	152,219
2011	137,415	127,197	147,632
2012	141,405	130,347	152,463
2013	134,262	124,246	144,279
2014	136,866	126,890	146,841

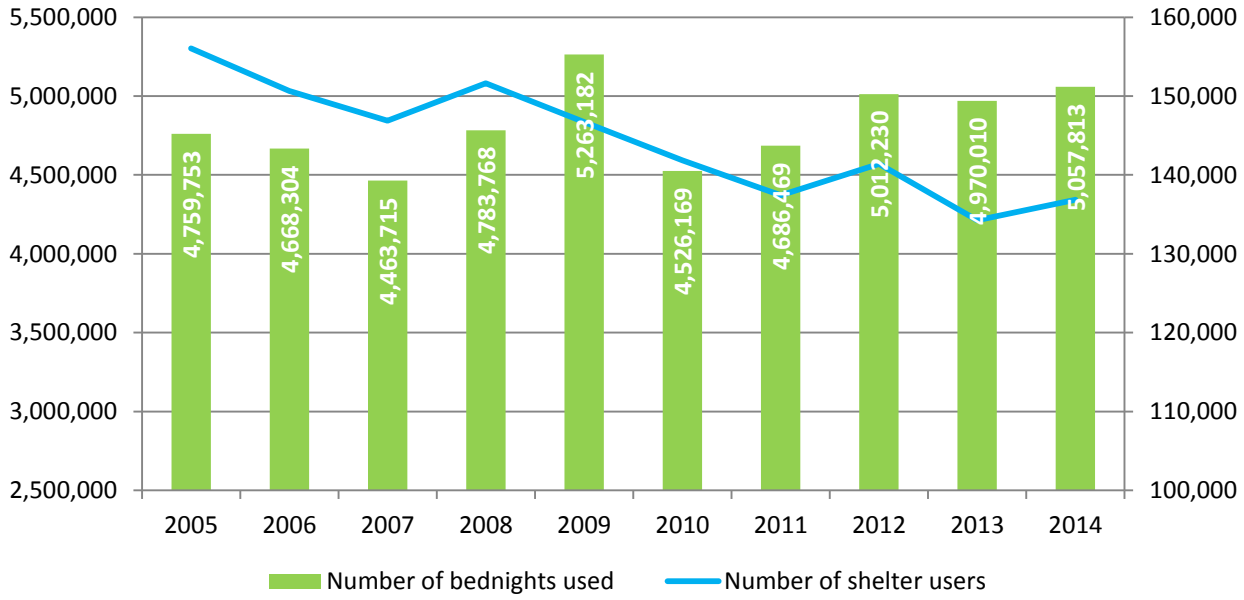
ANOVA: F (9, 1424)=1.44, p=.164

Although the overall trend is not quite statistically significant (ANOVA: F(9, 1424)=1.44, p=.164), the difference between the estimates for 2005 and 2014 is statistically significant (ANOVA: F(1, 1432)=5.24, p=.022). The estimates show consistently lower totals in the 2010 to 2014 period than in the first five years of the study, even as Canada's overall population has grown. The lowest totals are seen in the final two years of the study period, 2013 and 2014.

This is consistent with substantial reductions in the number of shelter users that have been observed over the study period in many communities, particularly some of the larger cities such as Toronto, Ottawa and Calgary. In 2005, 1 out of every 207 Canadians used a shelter compared to 1 in 260 in 2014. Taking all this into consideration, there is strong evidence that the number of unique shelter users decreased over the study period. However, this does not tell the whole story. Rates of shelter use are going up for some groups and down for others.

Despite fewer annual shelter users, emergency shelters served an average of 800 more people per night in 2014 compared to 2005. Bednights measure the number of times a shelter bed is used in a year. From 2012 to 2014, approximately 5 million bednights were used each year at emergency shelters in Canada, an increase of 300,000 since 2005. This is surpassed only in 2009 and indicates that, although there are fewer people using shelters, they are using shelters more.

Figure 3: Bednights used vs estimated unique shelter users

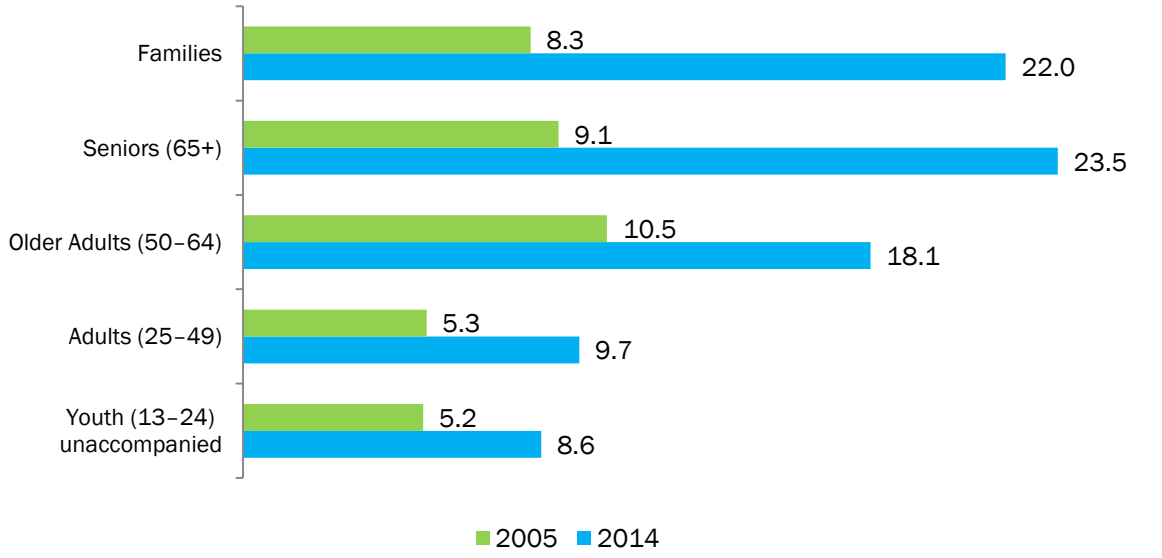


Duration of shelter stays has increased, especially among families and people aged 50 and over

Study findings indicate that the increase in the number of bednights being used can be explained by trends in the length of time individuals and families are spending in shelters. Demand for shelter beds has increased due to longer stays, especially by families and people aged 50 and over.

Figure 4 shows estimated time in shelter during a one-year period for various groups. A typical shelter stay by a family was over 20 days in 2014, twice as long as a stay by individuals. People over 50 typically spend eight to nine more days in shelter than people under 50. However, stay lengths have increased for all types of shelter users since 2005. For the system as a whole, a typical stay increased from 5.7 days in 2005 to 10.2 days in 2014.

Figure 4: Typical number of days in shelter over a one-year period[1]



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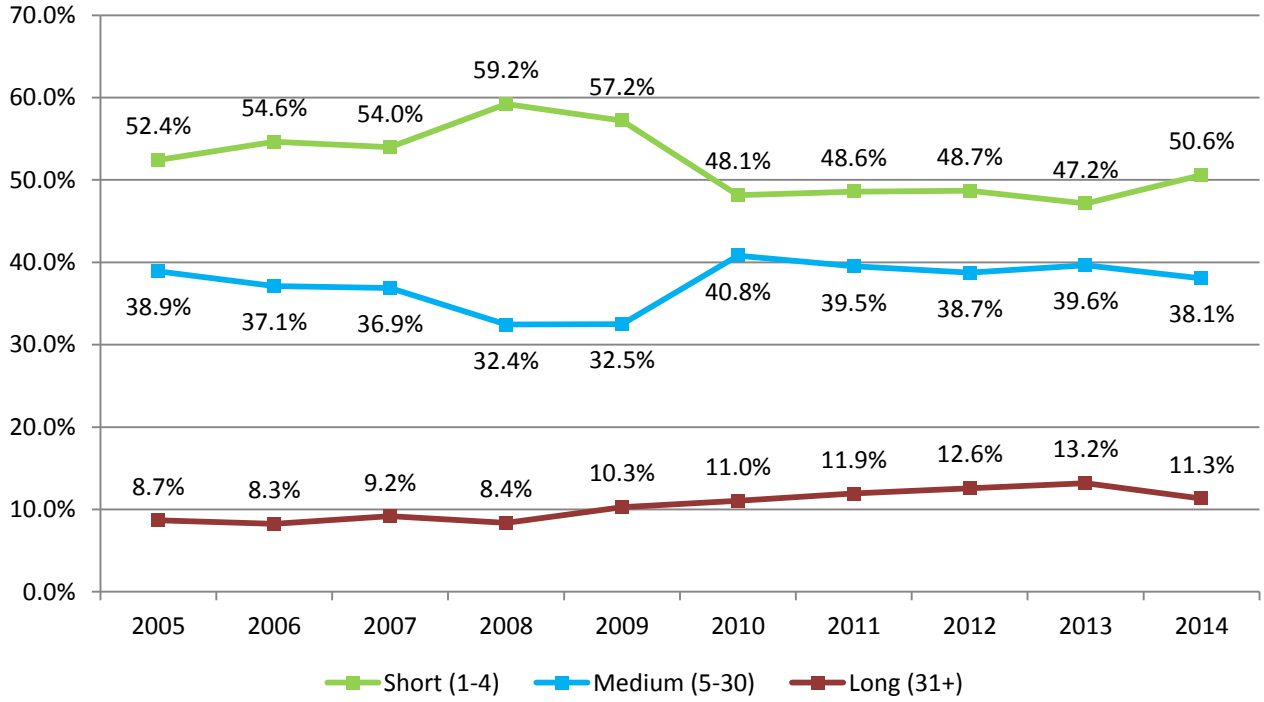
Methodological note about stay length

It is important to note that, during the study period, the length of stay at emergency shelters did not follow a normal distribution. Each year, up to one-third of shelter stays lasted only one night and there was an extreme positive skew, with a small number of stays lasting months or even years. Because of this, the mean, or average, length of stay is misleading. Another problem with length of stay is that it can be affected by many factors. Length of shelter stay can be modeled using a statistical technique called survival analysis. For this data, the best model was zero-truncated negative binomial regression. Using this technique produces an equation that can simultaneously take many factors into consideration and estimate a typical length of stay.

For example, many earlier studies reported much longer stay lengths for females compared to males. Using this method to control for use of family shelters and age shows only a small difference in stay length between adult males and females. Women stayed 1.9 days longer than men compared to 4.8 days longer than men without controlling for family shelter use.

[1] Marginal estimates from zero-truncated negative binomial regression. Estimates represent the predicted number of days in shelter during a one-year period for individuals with one shelter stay. For 2005 model: N=57,916 F(9, 80) = 182.23, p<.001. For 2014 model: N=115,940 F(9, 193)=123.91, p<.001.

Figure 5: Percentage of short, medium and long stays by year

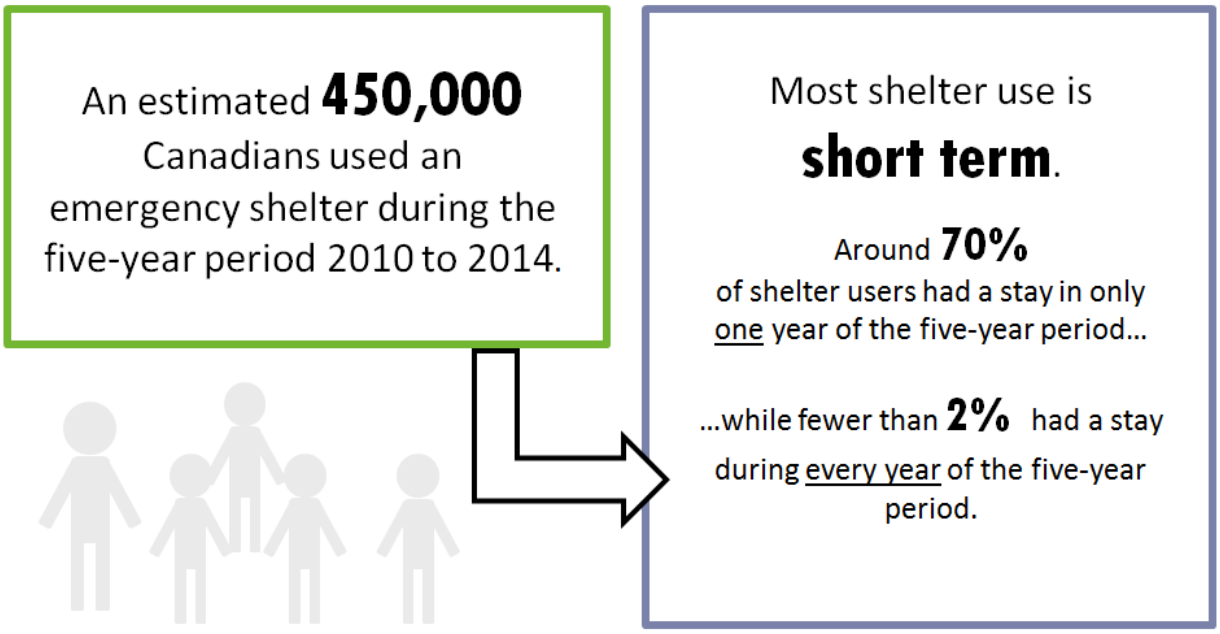


Shelter stays can also be categorized into short (1 to 4 days), medium (5 to 30 days) and long (more than 30 days). Figure 5 shows the percentage of short, medium and long stays for each year of the study. About half of all shelter stays are less than five days. In most years, just fewer than 40% of stays last five to thirty days. The percentage of short and medium stays remained fairly consistent between 2010 and 2014, with the percentage of medium stays slightly higher than before 2010. The percentage of long stays slowly increased over the study period, from around 8 to 9% before 2009 to a high of 13.2% in 2013. Although this is only a slight increase, it makes a large difference in the number of bednights used across the country.

Most Canadians using emergency homeless shelters do not have repeat stays

While the duration of shelter stays increased over the period from 2005 to 2014, only a minority of shelter users repeatedly used shelters year after year. Over the five-year period from 2010 to 2014, an estimated 450,000 people used an emergency shelter (Figure 6). Fewer than 2% of this total used a shelter in each year of the five-year period. Limitations of the dataset prevent estimating the number of shelter users over the entire ten-year period.

Figure 6: Shelter use over a five-year period (2010-2014)



Studies of shelter use in the United States and Canada have consistently shown that most people who use a shelter do so only once or for a short period (e.g. Kuhn and Culhane 1998, Aubry et al. 2013, Kneebone et al. 2015). If between 134,000 and 156,000 people use shelters each year, and most are short-term shelter users, the cumulative number of people who have ever used a shelter will add up quickly over many years.

The large number of short-term shelter users could suggest that shelter use is often related to economic stress. Figure 7 shows the number of Canadians at risk of homelessness due to economic factors such as low income and housing affordability. Nearly five million Canadians are considered low income, with a median after tax income of just $12,570. Over 1.5 million households are in core housing need, spending over 30% of their income on shelter, with an average shelter cost of almost $900 per month. Over 655,000 households are in severe housing need, spending more than 50% of their income on housing. A recent study on hidden homelessness reported that approximately 2.3 million Canadians (8% of the population aged 15 and over) had to temporarily live with family, friends, in their car, or anywhere else because they had nowhere else to live at some point in their life (Rodrigue 2016).

Figure 7

Demographic characteristics of shelter users

The gender breakdown of shelter users has not changed

There was no change in the percentage of males and females using shelters between 2005 and 2014. In 2014, 72.4% of shelter users aged 15 and over were male and 27.3% were female. Remember, however, that VAW shelters are not included in this study. Females using shelters are, on average, younger than males. The average age for males is 40, compared to 36 for females.

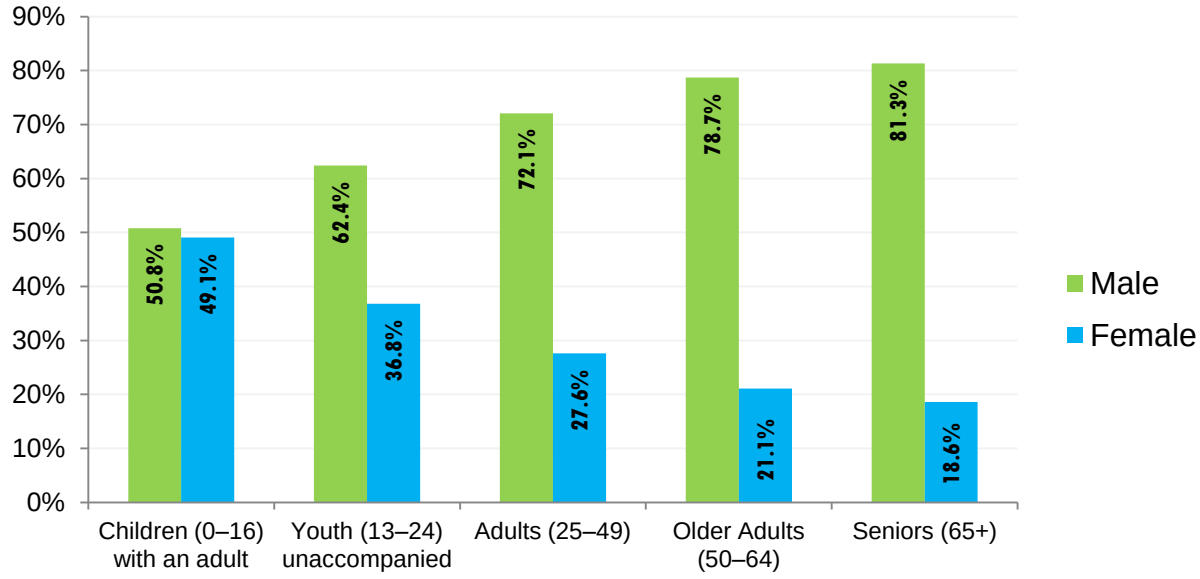
In 2014, about 0.3% of shelter users reported a gender other than male or female. This is likely underreported, as about 0.5% of the Canadian population identifies as transgender (Bauer et al. 2015) and there is evidence that individuals with non-traditional gender identities are over-represented in the homeless population, particularly among youth (Gaetz et al. 2016). Individuals reporting a gender other than male or female had an average age of 30, much lower than the average age for the sample as a whole (see Table 4).

Table 4: Characteristics of emergency shelter users (2014)

Average age by gender	
Adults (age 15+)	39 years
Male	40 years
Female	36 years
Other gender	30 years
Gender (age 15+)	
Male	72.4%
Female	27.3%
Other gender	0.3%

Another consistent finding over the 10-year study period is that the percentage of female shelter users decreased for older age groups. As would be expected, half of children were male and half were female. But fewer than one in five seniors using shelters were female compared to over one in three unaccompanied youth (see Figure 8).

Figure 8: Gender by age group[2]



[2] Percentages are shown for male and female responses only.

Among shelter users, the number of individuals under the age of 50 is down while the number of individuals over the age of 50 is up

In contrast with gender, where there has been little change over the ten-year study period, there have been significant changes in the age structure of the shelter-using population. Figure 9 shows the distribution of age groups in 2014. Please note that age categories have changed since the first release of the NSS. In the new study, children have now been defined as anyone under 16 accompanied by an adult. Shelter users between 13 and 24 years of age who are not accompanied by an adult are considered youth. Adults are between the ages of 25 and 49, older adults are between the ages of 50 and 64, and seniors are 65 and over.

As of 2014, just over half of shelter users were between 25 and 49 years of age. Children and Seniors made up only a small percentage of shelter users (4.2% and 3.2% respectively), while unaccompanied youth between 13 and 24, and older adults between 50 and 64, each comprised around one-fifth of the shelter population.

Figure 9 shows how the age composition of the shelter-using population has changed over time. The overall trend is that the number of shelter users 50 and over is increasing and the number of shelter users under 50 is decreasing.

Figure 9: Age groups (2014)

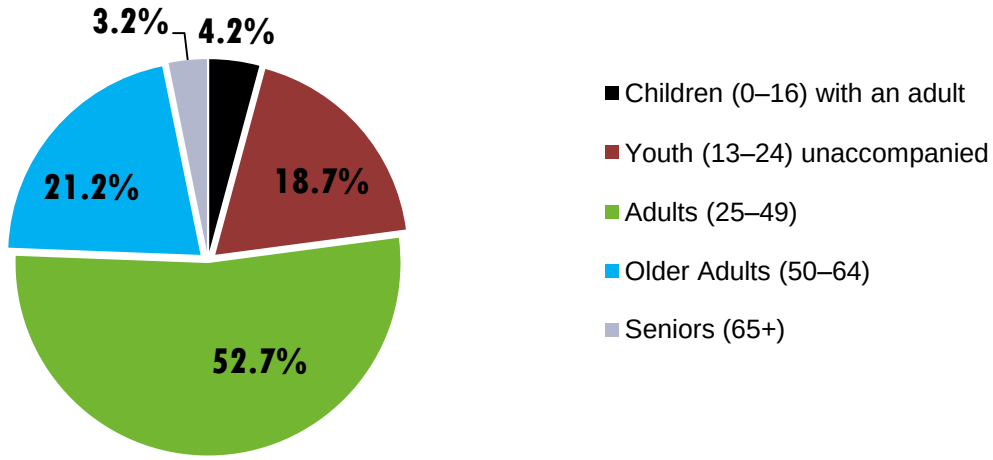
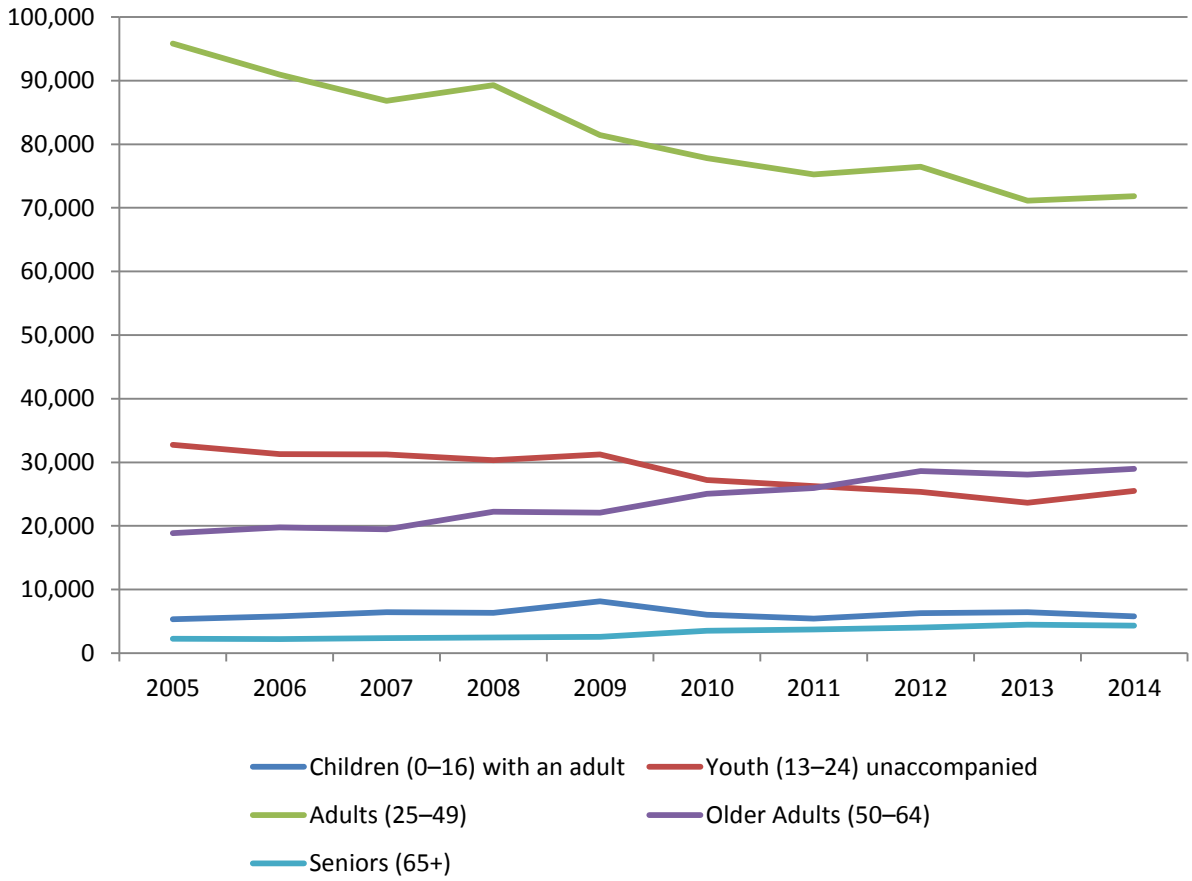
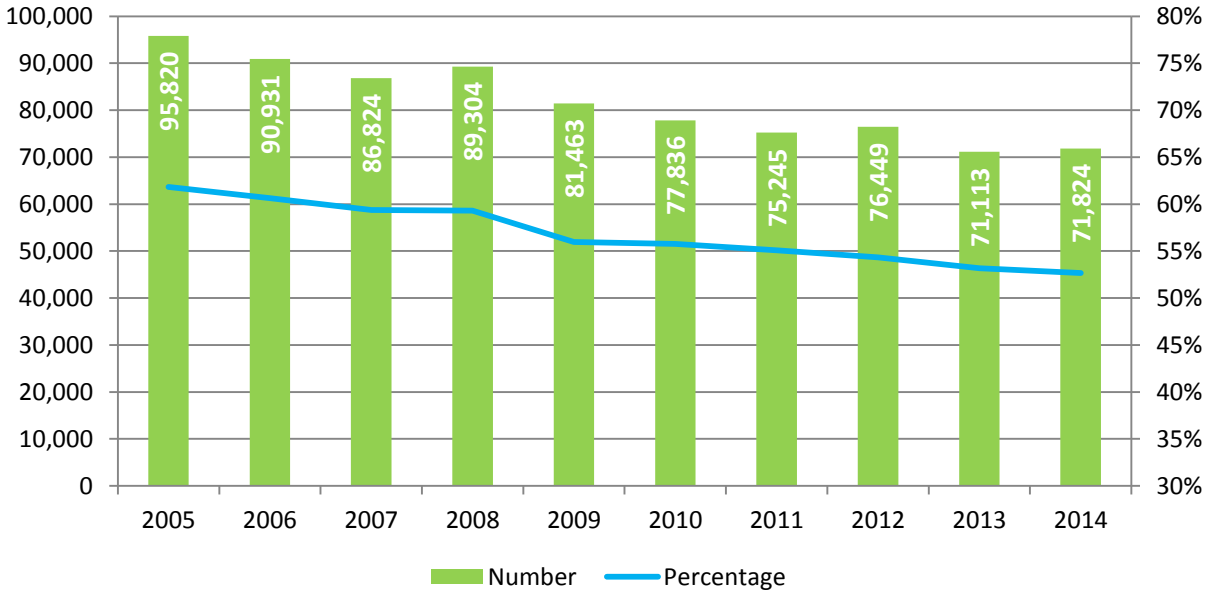


Figure 10: Estimated number of annual shelter users by age group



The number of shelter users between the ages of 25 and 49 dropped considerably between 2005 and 2014 and accounts for the overall decrease in shelter users over the study period. Despite this decline, individuals aged 25–49 continues to make up the largest group of shelter users. Just over half (52.7%) of shelter users fell into this age group, down from 61.8% in 2005.

Figure 11: Number of adults (25-49) using emergency shelters annually (and percentage of total shelter users)

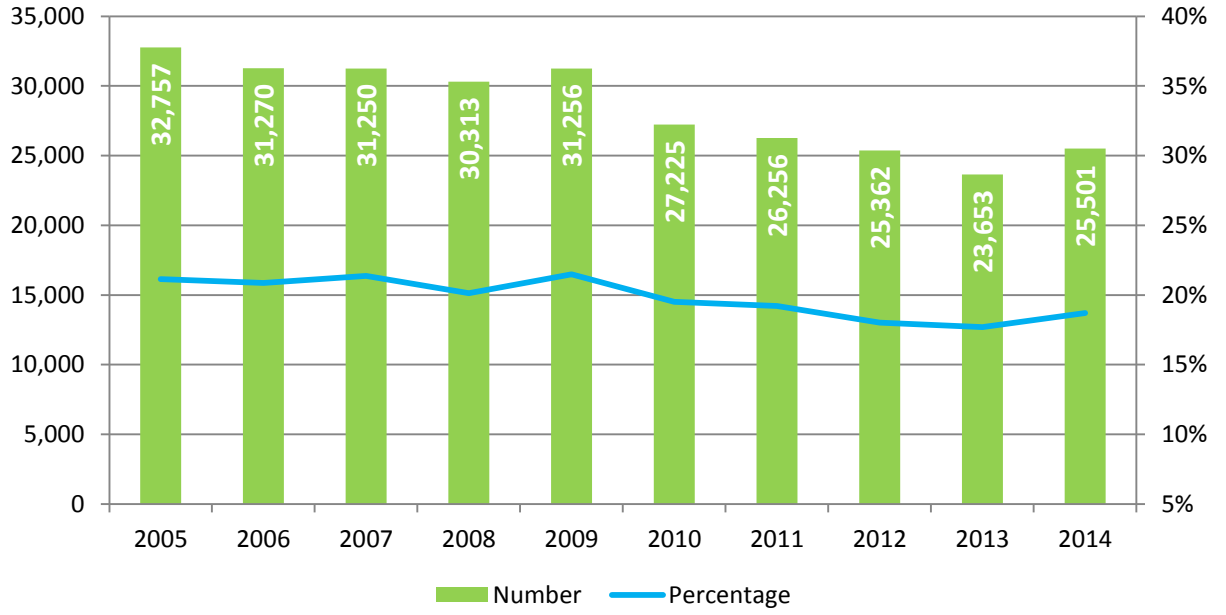


ANOVA F(9, 1424)=4.80, p<.001

Youth (ages 13 to 24, unaccompanied)

Youth make up a highly visible segment of the homeless population, accounting for just below 20% of shelter users in Canada. As can be seen in Figure 12, the number of youth using emergency homeless shelters decreased over the study period, from a high of almost 33,000 in 2005 to a low of just under 24,000 in 2013, a 20% decline in use by this group. In 2014, an estimated 25,513 youth used emergency shelters across the country. Despite this decline, when taking the number of youth in the general population into consideration, young adults between 19 and 23 years of age had the highest rate of shelter use, at around 68 per 10,000 (see Figure 17). This means 1 out of every 150 people of this age group used a shelter in 2014.

Figure 12: Number of youth using emergency shelters annually (and percentage of total shelter users)



ANOVA $F(9,1424)=9.49$, $p<.001$

Some of the decrease in numbers over the 10-year study period may be explained by changes in service provision for youth, with more emphasis on longer term or more intensive solutions such as transitional housing programs, family reunification and ensuring that young people stay in school or return to school. These changes in service provision likely target younger shelter users. Figure 13 splits youth into three age groups, 13-16, 17-20 and 21-24. There are slight decreases in the percentages for the under-21 age groups, and a small but steady increase in the number of youth between 21 and 24. Over half of youth using shelters were over 21 in 2014.

Figure 13: Changes in the number of youth over time

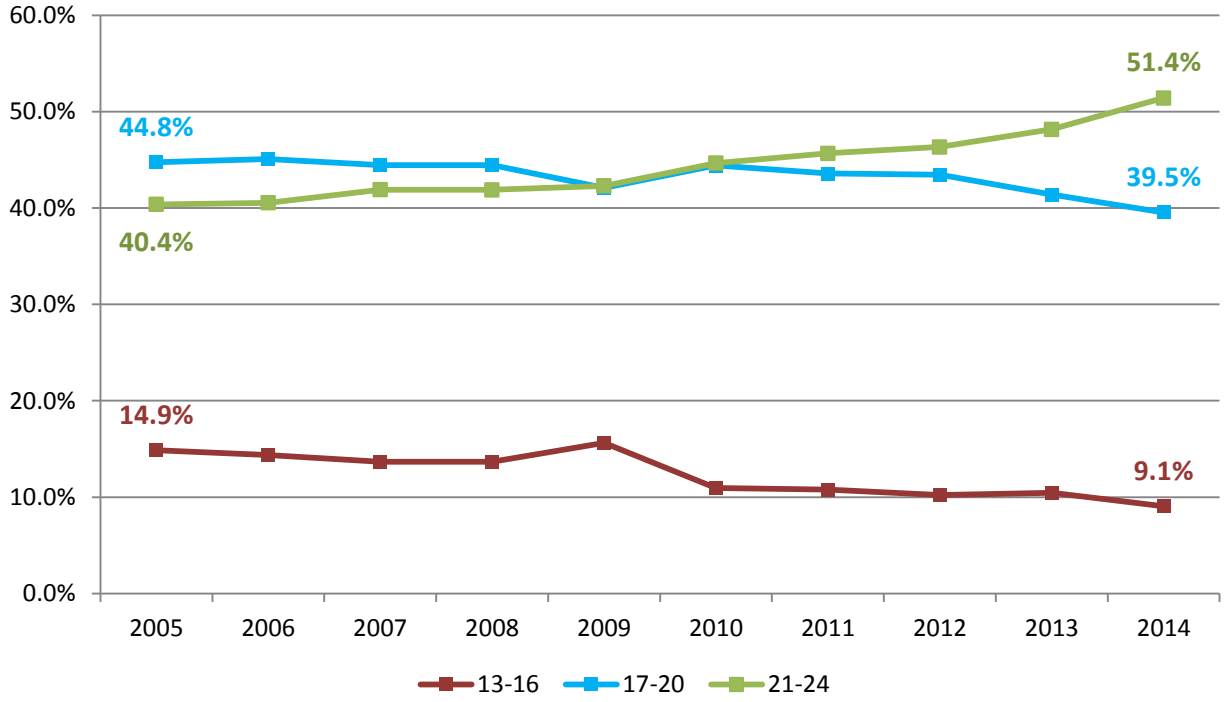
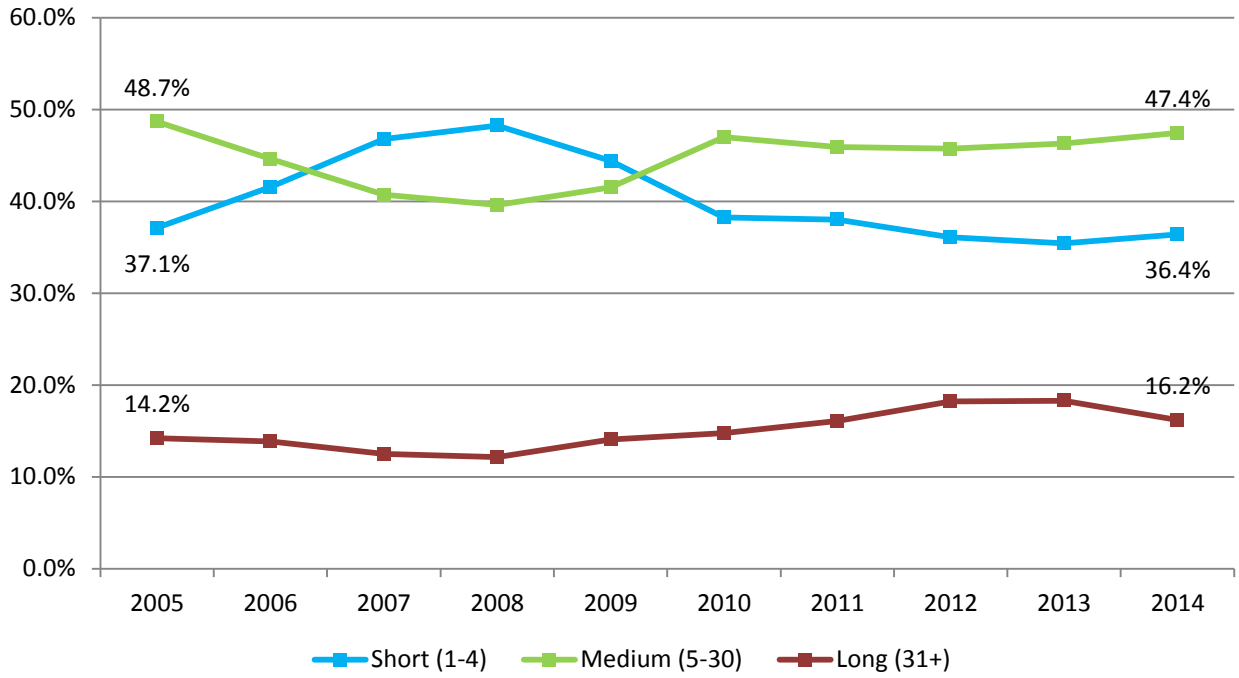


Figure 14 shows the percentage of short stays (less than 5 days) decreased at youth shelters, while medium (5-30 days) and long stays (30 or more) both increased slightly. Shelter stays by youth were of similar duration as for adults, typically around 8.6 days in 2014.

Figure 14: Stay Length at youth shelters



Although there are nearly one hundred emergency shelters in Canada that specifically serve youth, more than half of shelter stays by youth during the study period were at other types of shelters (see Table 5). Male youth are more likely to use general shelters than youth shelters. Almost 17% of stays by female youth occurred at family shelters or shelters for women/women with children. Many of the young women who stayed at family shelters likely have children. Most users of women/women with children shelters did not have dependents, but at least some did. Although there is a lack of information about family status and the numbers are small, looking at the individual-level data (rather than stay-level data), it is likely that somewhere around 11% of females and 2% of males under 25 are using family shelters because they have children of their own.

Table 5: Percentage of stays by youth at different shelter types by gender (2014)

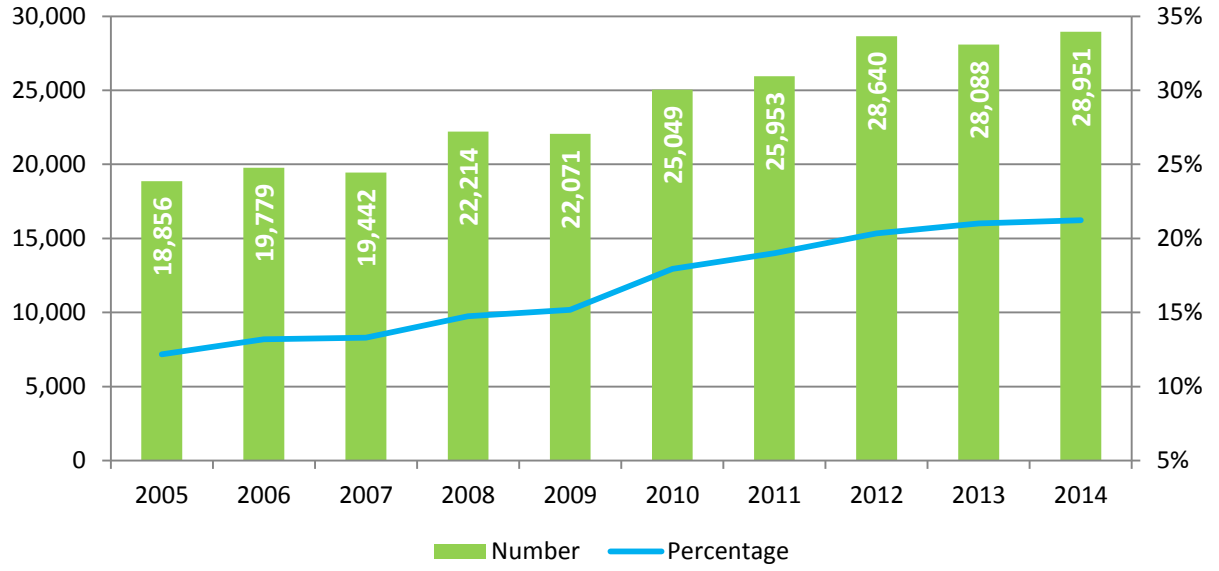
Shelter Type	Males	Females
Youth	42.7%	44.8%
General	55.8%	38.5%
Women/Women with Children	0.0%	10.2%
Family	1.5%	6.5%
Total	100%	100%

Older adults (50-64 years) and seniors (65+)

The percentage of older adults between 50 and 64 years of age increased from 12% of all shelter users in 2005 to 21% in 2014. The total number of 50- to 64- year olds using shelters increased by 10,000 between 2007 and 2012 (see Figure 15). As of 2014, more 50- to 64- year-olds were using shelters than youth. Older adults stayed in shelter much longer than adults under 50 and youth (18.1 days vs 9.1 days).

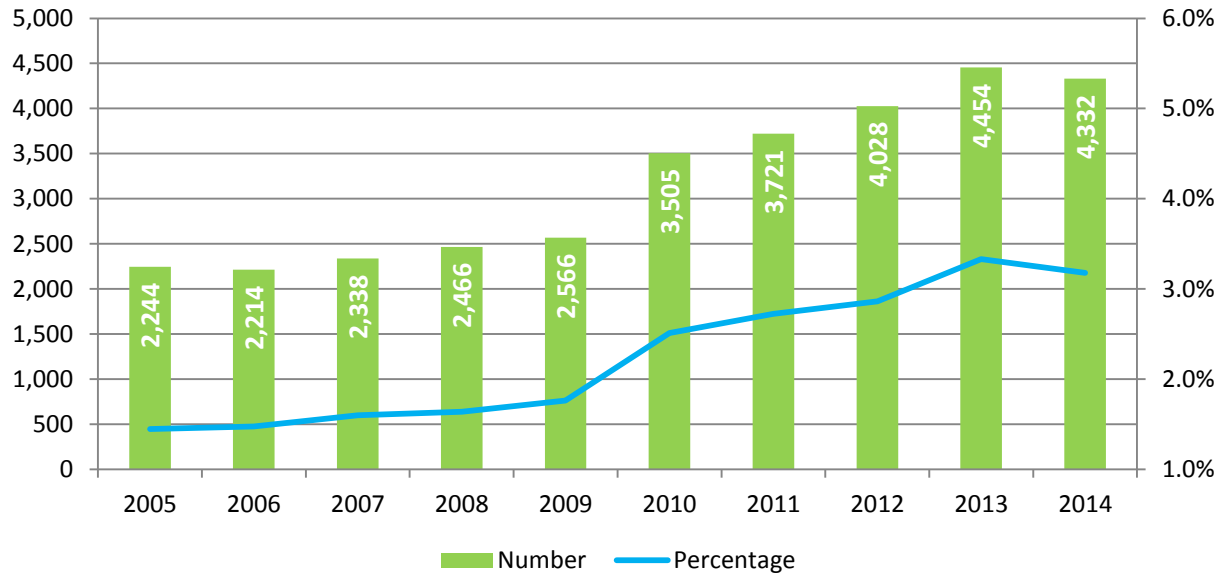
There are relatively few shelter users aged 65 and over. However, the number of seniors using shelters nearly doubled from 2,244 in 2005 to 4,332 in 2014 (see Figure 16). As a percentage of the total shelter population, seniors increased from 1.4% in 2005 to 3.2% in 2014. The largest increases for shelter users over 50 (including seniors) occurred in the three years following the beginning of the recession of late 2008.

Figure 15: Number of older adults (50-64) using shelters annually (and percentage of total shelter users)



Age 50-64 ANOVA F(9,1212)=12.15, p<.001

Figure 16: Number of seniors (65+) using shelters annually (and percentage of total shelter users)

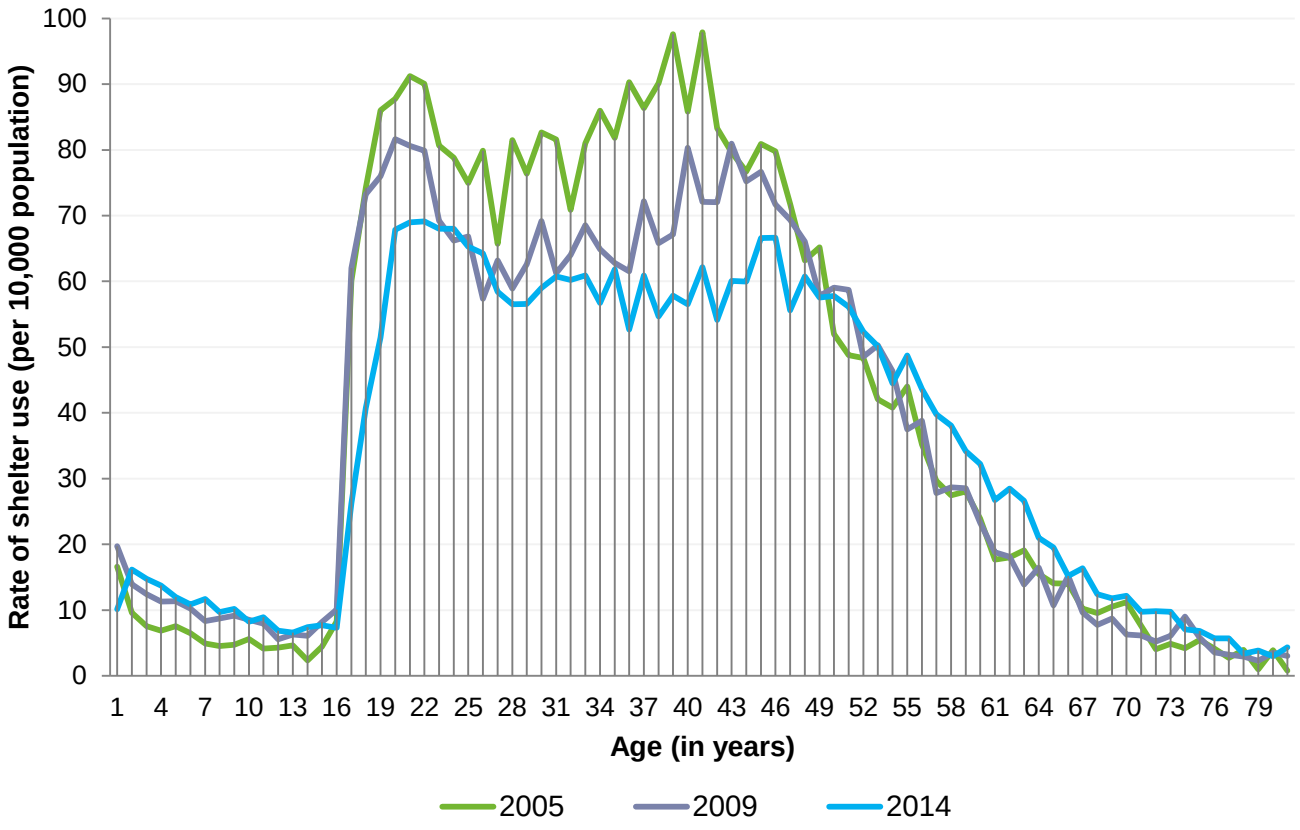


Age 65+ ANOVA F(9, 1212)=25.56, p<.001

The substantial increase in the number of shelter users over 50 can be partly explained by the aging of the Canadian population. There are simply more people over 50 in the general population. But this does not explain the entire increase. Using the rate of shelter use per 10,000 population controls for changes in the age composition of the population over time. As seen in Figure 17, the 2014 rate of shelter use was slightly higher than the 2010 and 2005 rates of shelter use for those over 50. Moreover, the rates of shelter use were much lower in 2014 for those under 50, with the greatest difference seen among those in their late 30s and early 40s, where the rate of shelter use dropped from about 90 per 10,000 population in 2005 to about 60 per 10,000 in 2014.

As indicated in Figure 17, the rate of shelter use dropped quite quickly and quite steadily for individuals in their late 40s and onward. There are probably many reasons for this, such as generational differences and higher mortality rates for those experiencing homelessness and housing insecurity (Hwang et al. 2009). So despite the increased rate of shelter use for those over 50, youth and younger adults are still much more likely to use shelters.

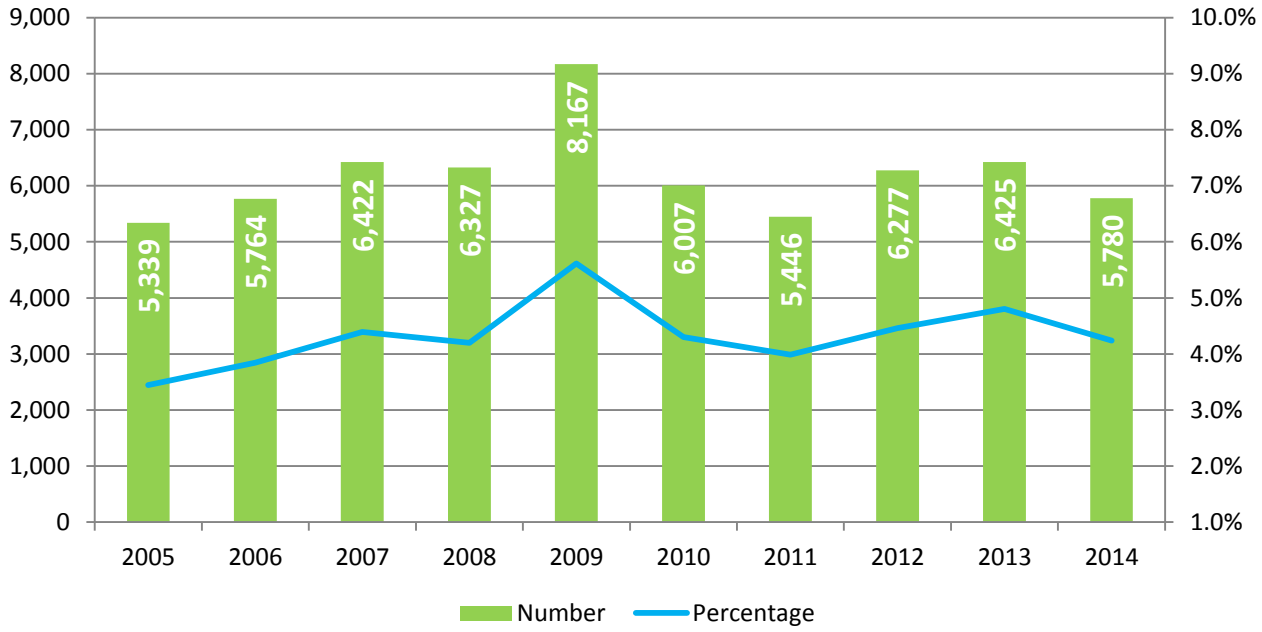
Figure 17: Rate of shelter use by age



Children (under 16, accompanied by an adult)

Among children, the number of shelter users has been relatively stable since 2010, with an average of 6,000 children using emergency shelters each year. With the exception of 2009, the number of children using shelters has been relatively stable at about 6,000 per year (see Figure 18). Again, bear in mind that many children stay at VAW shelters, which are not included in this study. Children accounted for 4.2% of all shelter users in 2014, which is very slightly higher than 3.4% in 2005.

Figure 18: Annual number of children using emergency shelters (and percentage of total shelter users)



ANOVA F(9, 1424)=1.36, p=.202

Family shelters continue to operate at high capacity

Corresponding with the spike in the number of children using shelters in 2009, the first NSS covering 2005 to 2009 reported an increase in the use of family shelters, with the average occupancy rate at family shelters exceeding 100% in 2009. This peak use did not continue in 2010 (see Figure 19). However, the average occupancy rate at family shelters was 86.3% in 2014, almost twenty percentage points higher than the 67.3% occupancy rate reported in 2005.

Figure 19: Average occupancy rate at family shelters

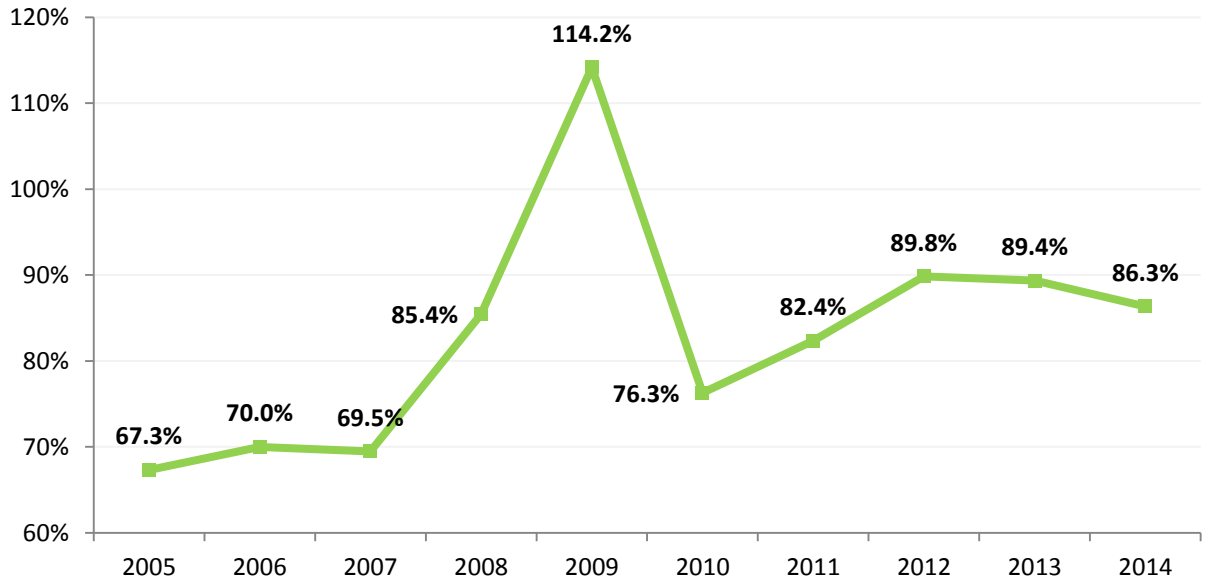
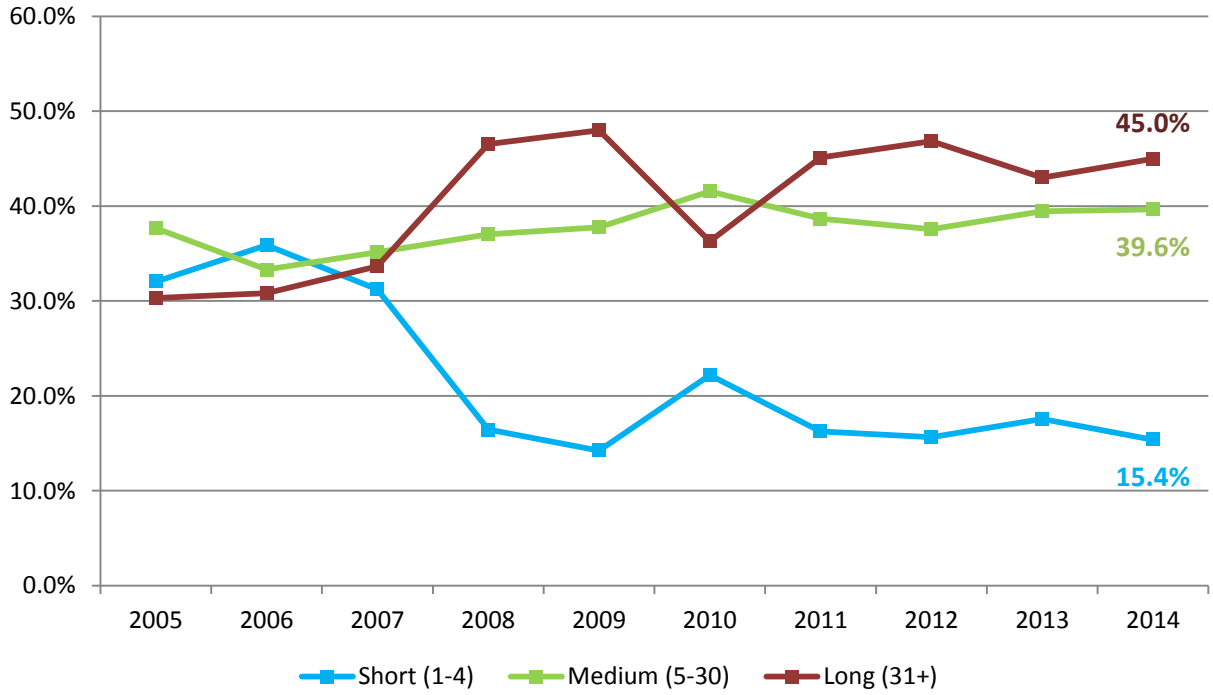


Figure 20: Stay length at family shelters over time



The high occupancy rate at family shelters is driven by increasingly long shelter stays by families. A typical stay at a family shelter increased from 8.3 days in 2005 to 22 days in 2014. Figure 20 shows the percentage of short, medium and long stays at family shelters. From 2008 to 2014, the majority of stays were medium or long in duration.

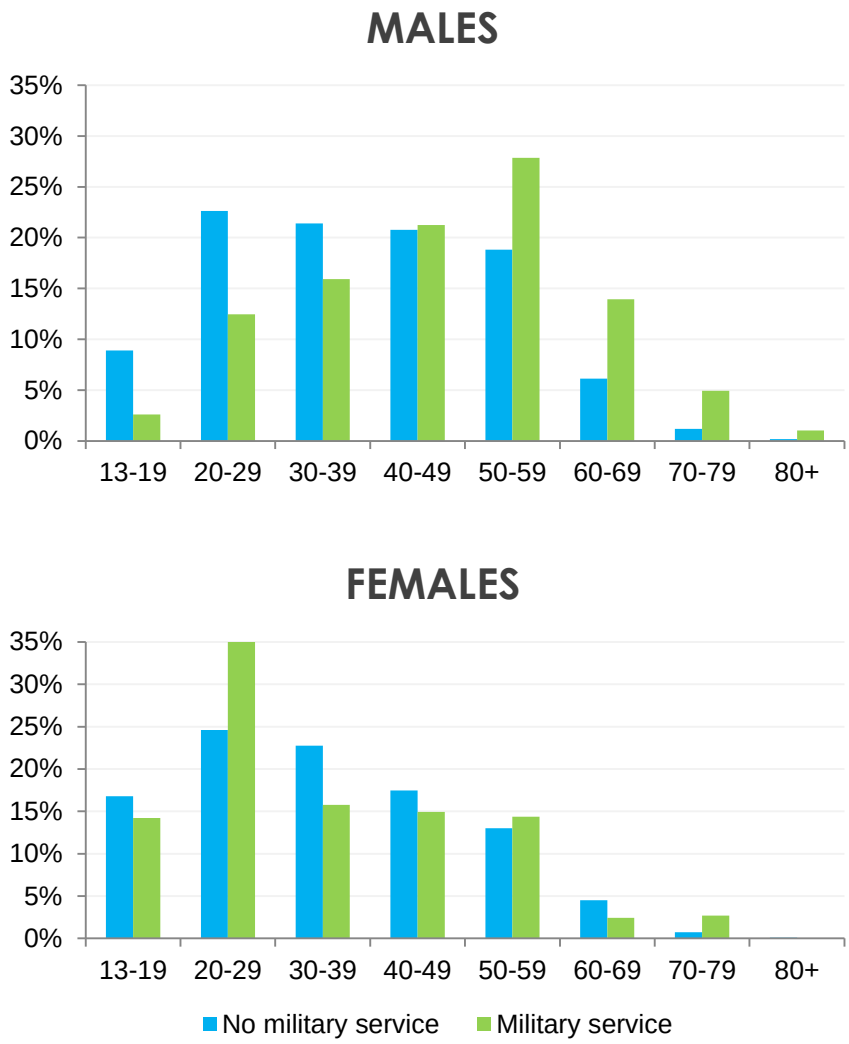
Although families tend to experience much longer shelter stays than individuals, they are less likely to use shelters repeatedly, with only 8.9% of families using a shelter more than once in 2014. Nearly 90% of families using emergency shelters are headed by single females.

In 2014, nearly 3,000 shelter users reported having served in the military

In 2014, 2.2% of shelter users—an estimated 2,950 people—reported having served in the military. This number is slightly higher than the estimate of 2,250 reported in *The Extent and Nature of Veteran Homelessness in Canada* (Segaert and Bauer 2016) previously published by Employment and Social Development Canada. The NSS should be considered more accurate, as it is based on a larger sample of 209 emergency shelters across Canada and was specifically designed to estimate national totals. The estimate in *The Extent and Nature of Veteran Homelessness* was extrapolated from a smaller sample of 60 emergency shelters in 13 communities.

Shelter users reporting military service were more likely to be male. Over half of females reporting military service were under age 30. Males reporting military service tended to be older on average than other shelter users. Figure 21 shows a comparison by age group. There was no significant difference in the length of stay between shelter users with and without military service.

Figure 21: Age distribution for males and females, by military service status



Over 6,000 non-citizens used a shelter in 2014

About 5% of shelter users reported that they are not Canadian citizens, including 5,036 permanent residents or immigrants, 1,095 refugees and 562 temporary residents (student, work or visitor visa, see Table 6). Refugee shelters were not included in this analysis. Typical shelter stays for non-citizens were almost five days longer than for shelter users with Canadian citizenship. Non-citizens stayed an average of 15.6 days in shelter compared to 11 days for citizens.

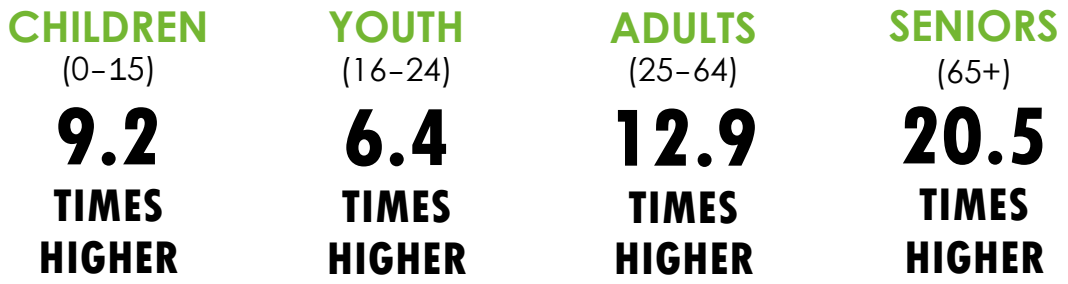
Table 6: Estimated number of shelter users by citizenship status (2014)

Citizenship status	Estimated number of shelter users
Permanent Resident/Immigrant	5,036
Refugee	412
Refugee Claimant	683
Student Visa	150
Visitor Visa	229
Work Visa	183

Indigenous people are 10 times more likely to use a shelter than non-Indigenous people

About 30% of all shelter users are Indigenous. It is estimated that between 38,080 and 45,820 Indigenous people used a shelter in 2014. These results indicate that the rate of shelter use for Indigenous people is 10 times higher than for non-Indigenous people. When compared with rates of shelter use by non-Indigenous people, shelter use was 20 times higher for Indigenous seniors and 13 times higher for Indigenous adults (see Figure 22). The typical length of stay by Indigenous people was over four days less than for non-Indigenous shelter users.

Figure 22: Rate of shelter use for Indigenous compared to non-Indigenous people

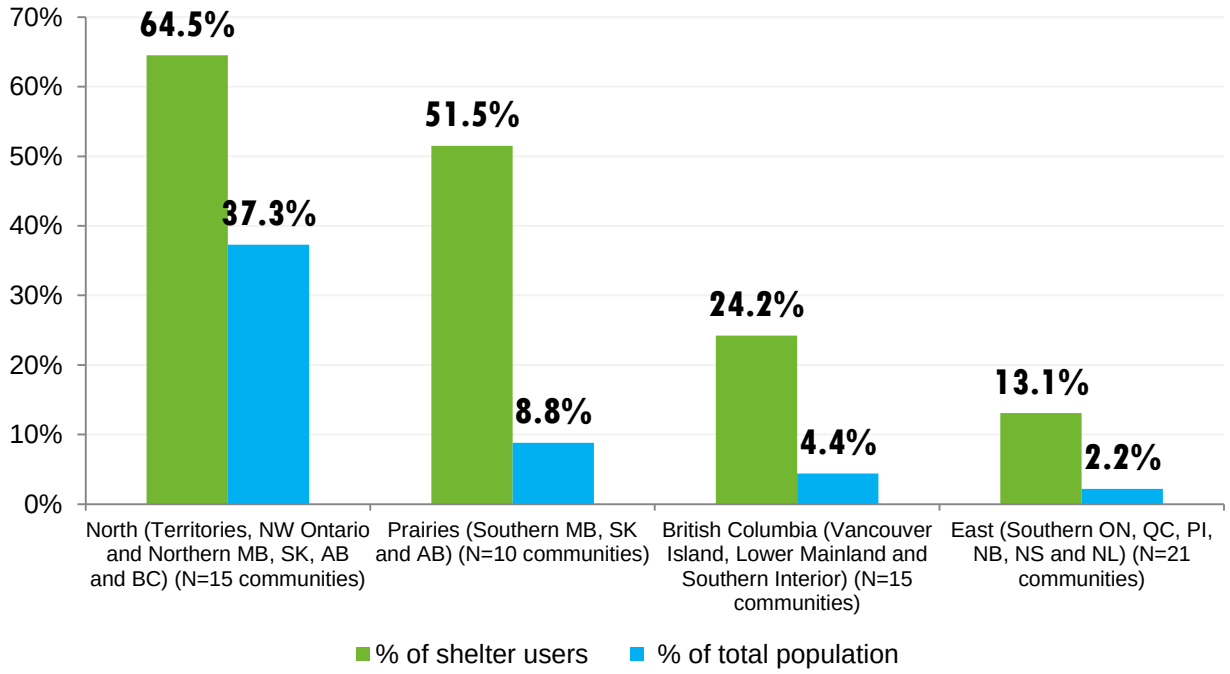


There was a significantly higher rate of homelessness among females for Indigenous people compared to non-Indigenous people. Thirty-two percent of Indigenous shelter users were female compared to 23.5% of non-Indigenous shelter users (Figure 23).

Figure 23: Percentage of female shelter users (Indigenous vs. non-Indigenous)

The percentage of shelter users who reported Indigenous ancestry varied widely by community, from less than 5% in some suburban communities to over 90% in many northern communities. In each of the communities where data are available, Indigenous people were over-represented in homeless shelters compared to their percentage in the general population. The distribution of Indigenous people varies across the country, with higher concentrations in the Prairies and the North. Indigenous people were strongly overrepresented in the shelter population in all regions, with the highest overrepresentation in the Prairies, where 51.5% of shelter users are indigenous compared to 8.8% of the total population (Figure 24).

Figure 24: Percentage of Indigenous shelter users vs percentage of Indigenous population, by region



Conclusion

Rising demand for shelter beds in the face of static capacity

As of 2014, the average occupancy rate at Canada's emergency shelters had risen to over 90%—an increase of almost 10 percentage points since 2005. However, the overall capacity of Canada's emergency shelter system has not changed significantly, with about 400 emergency shelters and just over 15,000 permanent beds.

Almost a half million people used an emergency shelter between 2010 and 2014, with about 70% using shelters during a one year period or less. Although the annual number of individuals using shelters fell from 156,000 in 2005 to 137,000 in 2014, shelters are being used more intensively. On an average night, almost 14,000 Canadians sleep in an emergency shelter. This is almost 800 more per night than in 2005.

The demand for shelter beds increased due to longer shelter stays. Stay lengths have increased since 2005 for all shelter users, with a typical shelter stay increasing to 10.2 days in 2014 compared to 5.7 days in 2005. However, there has been an especially marked increase in stay lengths for families and seniors. A typical shelter stay for a senior or family lasts over 20 days.

The age composition of the shelter-using population has also changed. The number of youths and adults aged 25–49 using shelters has fallen by 25% while the number of adults aged 50 and over has increased by more than 50%. This demographic shift is not completely explained by changes in the structure of the Canadian population, such as population aging, and may be related to the effects of the recession that began in late 2008.

The rate of shelter use takes into consideration the number of people at each age in the Canadian population, thus accounting for changes in the age composition of the Canadian population over time. The overall rate of shelter use for Canadians dropped from 48 per 10,000 in 2005 to 39 per 10,000 in 2014. Despite the increase in the number of shelter users over age 50 and the large decrease in the number of shelter users under age 50, rates of shelter use continue to be much higher for those under age 50. The rate of shelter use declines very rapidly from age 50 onwards. In 2014, young adults between 19 and 23 had the highest rates of shelter use, at around 68 per 10,000 population.

Rates of shelter use are ten times higher for Indigenous people compared to non-Indigenous people. Indigenous people make up around 30% of Canada's shelter population, compared to about 4.3% of the overall Canadian population. The results of the NSS highlight the need for a greater focus on homelessness among Indigenous people.

The goal of the NSS is to estimate the number of people using emergency shelters each year in Canada and to describe the characteristics of the shelter-using population at the national level. With the understanding that emergency shelter use is the best available indicator of large scale trends in homelessness, the NSS examines these trends over a ten-year period to provide a baseline count and description of the homeless population.

This, the second edition of the NSS, builds on the first by increasing the sample size to over 200 shelters, expanding the study period to ten years, and reporting statistics about Indigenous people, citizenship status and military service for the first time in 2014. The analysis of stay lengths demonstrates the use of survival analysis techniques to model duration of shelter stay. Rates of shelter use for various populations are discussed in greater detail, which makes comparison among these groups more meaningful. For the first time, estimates of the number of people using a shelter over a five-year period were produced. Future studies will continue looking at shelter use over a longer period of time to provide better information about long-term chronic and episodic shelter use.

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Appendix

The following tables provide the estimated numbers of shelter users by age group and gender for each year of the study. Please note that these estimates will not exactly total the overall annual estimates and age group estimates in the report. This is because age and gender information is missing for some cases.

Table 7: Estimated number of males using emergency shelters by age group and year

Age	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
0-4	748	849	953	1,101	1,066	1,122	1,015	1,129	1,182	1,158
5-9	548	703	878	725	892	1,024	918	1,066	1,248	1,060
10-14	468	539	639	617	697	769	679	803	788	680
15-19	6,075	5,273	5,585	5,261	5,592	3,704	3,320	3,447	3,006	2,899
20-24	13,691	12,479	12,295	12,062	12,006	11,550	11,017	10,528	9,921	11,061
25-29	11,581	10,678	9,964	10,571	10,551	10,482	9,994	10,086	9,927	10,280
30-34	12,492	11,451	10,940	11,248	10,911	10,711	10,692	10,311	9,913	10,392
35-39	15,699	14,653	13,475	13,601	11,446	10,680	10,420	10,560	9,607	9,992
40-44	17,652	16,689	16,059	16,289	14,522	12,925	11,633	12,158	10,592	9,966
45-49	15,640	14,996	15,296	16,030	15,297	13,862	12,805	12,843	11,642	11,402
50-54	9,120	9,861	9,599	11,613	11,550	11,303	11,281	12,241	11,571	11,339
55-59	5,546	5,158	5,076	5,966	6,114	7,180	7,391	8,203	7,829	8,525
60-64	2,377	2,870	2,724	3,164	2,988	3,829	3,973	4,709	4,561	4,857
65-69	1,197	1,284	1,304	1,332	1,338	2,017	2,104	2,275	2,440	2,422
70-74	570	516	526	581	562	767	830	1,017	1,182	1,113
75-79	250	300	186	193	287	413	494	422	370	422
80+	123	83	124	182	206	226	207	194	258	234

Table 8: Estimated number of females using emergency shelters by age group and year

Age	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
0-4	720	807	1,005	1,073	1,128	1,179	1,088	1,189	1,145	955
5-9	531	780	866	653	862	1,061	1,017	1,155	1,215	1,055
10-14	452	617	637	557	676	757	686	777	856	738
15-19	4,499	4,335	4,420	4,377	5,065	3,764	3,332	3,121	2,763	2,760
20-24	5,870	5,744	5,688	5,549	5,855	5,784	5,794	5,441	4,998	5,550
25-29	5,038	4,691	4,325	4,486	4,276	4,078	4,241	4,432	4,189	4,486
30-34	5,098	5,259	4,396	4,147	4,360	4,230	3,871	4,289	4,076	4,352
35-39	5,252	4,913	4,577	4,538	3,968	3,754	3,646	4,016	3,803	3,795
40-44	5,642	5,514	4,944	5,063	4,289	4,088	3,859	3,795	3,612	3,776
45-49	3,913	4,105	4,112	4,800	4,319	3,978	3,864	3,774	3,434	3,535
50-54	2,315	2,474	2,772	2,766	2,797	2,987	3,180	3,050	3,317	3,138
55-59	1,544	1,406	1,428	1,469	1,585	1,581	1,877	1,957	2,188	2,228
60-64	737	807	696	740	748	905	907	1,059	1,142	1,278
65-69	306	188	364	343	273	426	508	522	642	522
70-74	149	167	175	122	201	232	237	223	249	264
75-79	89	35	48	63	64	106	94	143	94	113
80+	39	55	71	93	79	44	51	69	69	61