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The characteristics of shelter residents

by Sarah McDermott, Adriene Harding, and Jeff Randle

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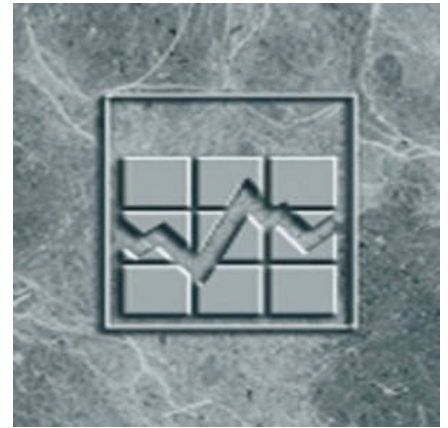
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The characteristics of shelter residents

by **Sarah McDermott, Adriene Harding,** and **Jeff Randle**

Introduction

Access to safe and affordable housing is an important aspect of Canadian well-being. Unfortunately, some Canadians are unable to secure stable housing situations and find themselves facing homelessness.

There are many facets of homelessness and homelessness statistics, such as the incidence and persistence of homelessness. The characteristics of homeless individuals are also important, and are the focus of this paper. Statistics Canada does not measure every aspect of homelessness. Homeless Canadians are often difficult to reach. However, within the framework of the Census, shelter residents are enumerated and a socio-economic profile of these residents can be created using Census data.

The objective of this paper is to provide a picture of Canadians living at shelters, using the 2016 Census of Population to understand the characteristics of these individuals. This report will also discuss Census properties and attributes particular to shelters and collective dwellings in order to develop an understanding of the Census' role in the analysis of homelessness.

The Census and homelessness

The Census Program provides a statistical portrait of the country every five years. Individuals are enumerated at their usual place of residence which can be a private or collective dwelling. Collective dwellings are defined as dwellings of a commercial, institutional or communal nature. Included in this classification are shelters and, prior to Census Day, Statistics Canada developed lists of shelters to make it easier to distinguish homeless shelters from other types of collective dwellings. Shelters are also subcategorized into three types: shelters for persons lacking a fixed address, hereafter referred to as no fixed address shelters, shelters for abused women and their children, and other shelters and lodgings with assistance, such as halfway houses.

Homelessness can be split into two categories: hidden (concealed) homelessness, and absolute homelessness. Hidden homelessness refers to those who are couch-surfing, living in their car, etc. (Library of Parliament, 2012). Absolute homelessness refers to those who are currently living in a shelter or in a public area and have no designated residence (Library of Parliament, 2012). Census data for the population living in shelters can be used to describe a segment of absolute homelessness.

Counting shelters and the population staying at shelters

Over time, the Census enumeration process for counting those living in shelters has evolved. In the 1941 Census, if someone did not have a home, they were enumerated wherever the enumerator observed them (Statistics Canada, 1941, Instructions to commissioners and enumerators, pg. 15). Then, in 1951, shelters were classified as hotels, along with hotels, YM/YWCAs, university residences, rooming houses, and diplomatic residences with at least one Canadian resident (Statistics Canada, 1951, Ninth Census of Canada, Training Manual). The 1961 Census began classifying shelters in a new category of missions, YM/YWCAs and hostels (Statistics Canada, 1971, Dictionary of the Census of terms, pg. 37). It was not until 1981 that shelters became its own collective dwelling sub-category, and was separated from those living at YM/YWCAs (Statistics Canada, 1981 Census dictionary, pg. 83).

Statistics Canada has also tested different types of enumeration methods in the past to count the individuals who were not living in a dwelling. For example, in the 1940s, the Census counted individuals who were residing at soup kitchens. In 2001, Statistics Canada had enumerators count those living in public spaces such as parks; however, this enumeration method was not found to be successful in collecting accurate counts, and was discontinued.

The 2016 Census enumerated people who spent the night between May 9th and 10th in shelters and similar facilities, which represents an important segment of the absolute homeless population. Data was collected using administrative records or Census forms with the assistance of administrators. This means that many individuals who were counted at shelters were not required to self-enumerate. This procedure was the same for many other

types of collective dwellings, however, unlike other types of collectives, all individuals enumerated at a shelter on Census day were enumerated as usual residents[1].

In previous Censuses, people who were part of the absolute homeless population had the ability to call into the Census to make sure they were counted, and were added into imaginary shelters that were created for this purpose. For the 2016 Census, this procedure was modified such that those who called the Census Help Line were enumerated at nearby (existing) shelters. This practice may have led to population counts at certain shelters being above their physical capacity[2].

The Census count of the shelter population does not represent the total number of homeless persons since they may have been enumerated in a number of other places such as other types of collective dwellings or private dwellings with family or friends. It should also be noted that while not all homeless individuals stay at shelters, it is also true that not all individuals staying at shelters are necessarily homeless.

Most usual residents were counted at shelters for persons with no fixed address

The 2016 Census counted 995 shelters with a population of 22,190[3] usual residents. Almost 7 out of 10 usual residents in shelters, or 15,505 individuals, were enumerated at shelters for individuals with no fixed address. Almost one quarter (5,365) of the population in shelters were counted at shelters for abused women and their children and the remainder (1,320) were counted in other shelters. A historical comparison of the population in shelters shows the total number of usual residents grew by more than 2,500 since 2006 (19,630[4]).

Ontario had the most shelters and residents

Ontario had the highest count of usual residents residing in shelters on Census day, with 8,780 usual residents in all shelter types. Ontario is also the province with the most inhabitants in the country. Alberta followed with 4,235 while British Colombia (4,025) was the only other province or territory with more than 4,000 shelter residents.

The province with the largest percentage of no fixed address shelter residents was Ontario, accounting for 41.8% of the total population for these types of shelters. Ontario also had the largest percentage of usual residents in shelters for abused women and their children at 38.7%. Quebec had the highest percentage of people in other shelters, accounting for 42.4% of all other shelter residents.

Ontario and Quebec had the highest number of occupied shelters on Census day. There were 305 shelters in Ontario that reported having usual residents and another 205 in Quebec. Prince Edward Island was the only province with fewer than 10 occupied shelters. All three territories also had 10 or fewer occupied shelters.

It is worth noting that 20.9% of the total number of usual residents in shelters were in Alberta, which is almost double the share of the total population that lives in Alberta, 11.6%.

Unattached individuals, men most common in shelters

Shelter residents were more likely to be unattached individuals[5] when compared to the population in private dwellings[6]. For the population aged 15 and over, 89.1% of those living in shelters were unattached. The proportion of the population aged 15 and over in private dwellings who were married or in common-law was 58.4%. The percentage of unattached individuals was similar across all shelters, being above 88% regardless of type.

Men accounted for a greater proportion of the population in shelters when compared to their share of the population in private dwellings. According to the 2016 Census, 60.8% of all usual residents in shelters were men, compared with 49.2% of the population living in private dwellings.

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1. Usual resident refers to individuals counted at their usual place of residence. In this case, a usual resident's address is the shelter they stayed at on Census day.
2. According to the maximum occupancy for a shelter reported in the Census or other administrative sources.
3. Counts are rounded and may not always add up to the total.
4. Source: 2006 Census of Population. Catalogue no. 97-554-XCB2006054
5. Unattached individuals in this report refers to all individuals whose marital status was not married or common-law. All shelter residents were assigned a common-law status of 'no' for the 2016 Census.
6. The next sections describe the characteristics of shelter residents as determined by the Census. Readers should be aware of high imputation rates to some of these variables as described later in the Coverage and Data Quality section.

While men represented the majority of usual residents at shelters, this differed by shelter type. Most usual residents in no fixed address shelters (72.8%) and other shelters (89.8%) were male, while usual residents of shelters for abused women and their children were predominantly female (80.9%). Men, however, accounted for 3.8% of usual residents over the age of 14 in shelters for abused women and their children. This could partly be attributed to employees of shelters being enumerated at the shelter if it was their usual place of residence.

Seniors, children less common in shelters

Seniors and children were less common among usual residents of shelters when compared to their shares of the population living in private dwellings. Seniors aged 65 and older accounted for just 5.9% of usual residents living at shelters, while they accounted for 15.9% of the population living in private dwellings.

Children aged 0 to 14 accounted for 13.7% of usual residents living at shelters, while accounting for 16.9% of the population living in private dwellings. Young children aged 0 to 4, however, accounted for 16.3% of the usual residents at shelters for abused women and their children, while they represented just 5.5% of the population living in private dwellings.

Part of the reason we see differences in the shares of children and seniors between the population living in shelters and the population living in private dwellings can be attributed to the availability of collective dwelling types with services that are targeted towards seniors and children. Senior residences and nursing homes are two types of collective dwellings with services for seniors, and residential care facilities that are group homes for children have accommodation services for children.

Shelter residents more likely to earn less income, fall below LIM

The 2016 Census Program, for the first time, gathered income information solely from administrative data sources. The integration of income data from Canada Revenue Agency's tax and benefits records into the short-form census allows for the compilation of income statistics for people in shelters. Users should also note the reference periods and reference dates when analyzing income data with other variables. The reference period for income data is the calendar year 2015, while place of residence, type of dwelling and other demographic variables collected on the questionnaire, such as age and sex, reflect respondent characteristics on Census Day, May 10, 2016.

Low income is commonly analysed at the household level when considering private households and the Low Income Measure (LIM) thresholds are determined by household size. Family formations are not derived for shelter residents, which means collective household[7] sizes depend largely on the size and capacity of the collective dwelling. For the purpose of this analysis, low income for shelter residents is determined using the after-tax Low Income Measure (LIM) for one-person households in 2015, $22,133[8]. Of shelter usual residents aged 15 years and over, 84.7% earned an after-tax income that fell below the LIM threshold. In contrast, only 32.0% of one-person households earned an after-tax income which fell below the threshold[9].

Additionally, the 2015 median after-tax income for shelter residents was lower than that of the population who lived in private dwellings. By comparison, the median after-tax income of residents at no fixed address shelters ($10,576), shelters for abused women and their children ($12,599), and other shelters ($4,848) was well below half the median after-tax income of individuals 15 and older in private dwellings ($30,866[10]).

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7. A collective household refers to a person or a group of persons who occupy a collective dwelling and do not have a usual place of residence elsewhere in Canada. Residents who occupy separate rooms within the same collective dwelling are considered to be living in one collective household.
8. Source: Dictionary, Census of Population, 2016, Table 4.2, Low-income measures thresholds (LIM-AT and LIM-BT) for private households of Canada, 2015.
9. Source: Census income data table 42 - Low-income Measures (2), Household Low-income Status (5) and Household Type (5) for Private Households, Census of Population, 2016. Catalogue no.: 98-400-X2016133
10. Source: Income highlight table: Median total income, after-tax income and employment income for income recipients by sex, Census of Population, 2016. Catalogue no.: 98-402-X2016006

Shelter residents less likely to have employment income, investment income and pensions, more likely to receive social assistance and refundable tax credits

While the income was generally lower in shelters, the sources of income also varied for shelter residents when compared with the population living in private dwellings. In 2015, 85.8% of persons in private dwellings received some form of market income. For residents of shelters, the rate was much lower at 46.9%.

Differences across market income sources are also important. Shelter residents received investment and private pension income about six times less often than persons in private dwellings. For employment income, shelter residents (41.2%) were just over half as likely to have some employment income during the year when compared to persons living in private dwellings (71.3%). The contrast for earnings is more noteworthy than the contrast of private pension income considering there are proportionally more potential earners in shelters between the ages of 15 and 64 years.

Despite having been less likely to earn market income than their counterparts in private dwellings, the situation was reversed for shelter residents receiving government transfers. Over nine out of ten shelter residents (90.4%) received some form of government benefit whereas under seven out of ten (68.9%) persons living in private dwellings were recipients. For social assistance benefits, shelters residents (54.1%) were more than ten times more likely to be recipients than their counterparts who lived in private dwellings (4.6%). Shelter residents (66.4%) were also more likely to have received a 2015 GST/HST tax credit compared to those who lived in private dwellings (37.2%).

Though there are significant contrasts between the income sources of persons living in shelters and those living in private dwellings, the variations were much smaller across different shelter types. The income profile for persons living in shelters for abused women and their children showed the most difference from the two other types of shelters where residents were eight to ten times more likely to be recipients of child benefits. They were also more likely than other shelter residents to have some form of investment income and market income not included elsewhere[11].

In general, shelter residents tended to be younger than persons in private dwellings and this factor may have influenced the receipt of Old Age Security pension (OAS), Guaranteed Income Supplement (GIS) as well as benefits from the Canada Pension Plan (CPP) and Quebec Pension Plan (QPP). Shelter residents were less than half as likely as the population in private dwellings to be recipients of these benefits for which eligibility is mainly determined by age and lifetime labour force choices. For the disability component of CPP/QPP benefits; however, shelter residents were more than twice as likely to have received an amount.

Impact of wildfire in Wood-Buffalo, Alberta

On May 1, 2016, a wildfire began southwest of Fort McMurray, Alberta, and on May 3, swept through the community destroying many homes and buildings and forcing the largest wildfire evacuation in Alberta's history. Statistics Canada decided to suspend census data collection (referred to as 'field data collection') in the evacuated areas.

Statistics Canada used a set of measures to ensure that residents of the Wood Buffalo census subdivision (referred to as the Specialized municipality of Wood Buffalo) were included in the 2016 Census of Population. Data for the evacuated area were derived from a combination of sources. First, many residents of the area responded online or by returning a paper questionnaire. Then field data collection was performed for a number of households using short- or long-form questionnaires. Lastly, short-form data were derived from a number of administrative data sources for the households residing in dwellings where field data collection was not possible.

It is impossible to know exactly how the wildfires and enumeration process for Wood Buffalo impacted the data vis-à-vis the shelter population in Alberta. It's also possible that displaced Wood Buffalo residents could have been counted at shelters elsewhere in Alberta. According to the 2016 Census, Alberta had the second highest count of people living in shelters, while having fewer shelters than Ontario, Quebec, and British Colombia. Alberta also had the highest per-capita shelter users when compared to the other provinces. Western provinces

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11. Market income not included elsewhere includes support payments.

also had more shelter residents per capita compared to Eastern provinces. These trends, in part, could be a result of people being displaced from Wood Buffalo; however, it is also possible that other factors such as the economic downturn in the province during that same time period could also partly account for trends. Another possible explanation could be due to a rental market with limited supply in Calgary. Academic and media reports have presented Calgary's housing market as a driver of homelessness in Alberta suggesting that working individuals who could otherwise afford stable housing are forced into homelessness, or shelters, due to housing supply shortages.

Coverage and Data Quality

The Census is not designed to measure all aspects of homelessness in Canada; however, the Census can provide a reasonable overview of certain homeless sub-populations that are not normally included in the target population of surveys, due to their transient lifestyle.

High imputation rates among usual residents at shelters could raise concerns regarding data quality for certain variables. The item non-response in shelters was higher than that of the general population which led to higher imputation rates for those living in shelters. In 2016, marital status was imputed for 65.5% of shelter residents while only being imputed for 4.3% of the total population. The imputation rates for age and sex of shelter residents were 11.9% and 12.3% respectively, which were almost 10 percentage points higher than those for the total population. The administrative data record linkage rate[12] for shelter residents was 69.0% while for the general population the linkage rate was 94.8%.

In the territories, collective dwelling enumeration is conducted earlier in the year to accommodate people leaving their communities in the spring and summer for traditional activities. Like most other collective dwellings, residents at shelters are enumerated with the help of an employee at the shelter.

Shelters, like other collective dwellings, were out-of-scope for the 2016 Census long-form questionnaire. Data collected using the long-form questionnaire includes additional details such as the highest level of education completed, immigration status, Aboriginal identity and visible minority status. Data gaps associated with Aboriginal identity and immigration status for those living in shelters could be filled through existing administrative linkages, however, this analysis has not been conducted at this time.

Other sources of data to inform homelessness

Other initiatives exist to monitor the homeless who are not in shelters, the federal government has, for the past few years, been collecting information on Canada's homeless population. Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) maintains the National Homelessness Information System, which helps facilitate the collection of data from service providers. Statistics Canada also recently began disseminating data from the Homeless Individuals and Families Information System (HIFIS)[13] which reports on capacity, bed and shelter counts for shelters in Canada using data maintained by ESDC. In 2016, the Government of Canada also supported a coordinated count of the homeless in communities across the country. For additional information about this count, refer to the Homelessness Strategy Point-in-Time Count section of the ESDC website.

Two Statistics Canada surveys, the Transition Homes Survey (THS) and the General Social Survey (GSS) – Victimization, also provide statistics related to homelessness. The THS and the GSS - Victimization concentrate on different aspects of homelessness. The THS provides information about the number of beds in shelters for abused women and a point in time count of individuals living in shelters, as well as their experiences with domestic abuse and addiction. The GSS's cycle on victimization asks survey participants about their lifetime experiences with absolute and/or hidden homelessness, as well as other details about their life experiences.

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12. 2016 Census (short-form) CRA record linkage rate refers to the proportion of 2016 Census respondents who were linked to a CRA record. For more information on tax record linkage rates, refer to the Income reference guide, 2016 Census of Population. Catalogue no.: 98-500-X2016004
13. Statistics Canada Table 14-10-0353-01

Table 1
Shelter counts and population, Canada, Provinces and Territories, 2016

		Population in shelters			
	Count of all shelters	All shelters	Shelters for persons lacking a fixed address	Shelters for abused women and their children	Other shelters and lodging with assistance
Canada	995	22,190	15,505	5,365	1,320
Newfoundland and Labrador	15	100	35	50	10
Prince Edward Island	5	10	0	10	0
Nova Scotia	30	325	165	115	50
New Brunswick	20	190	95	45	50
Quebec	205	3,035	1,725	745	560
Ontario	305	8,780	6,475	2,075	235
Manitoba	75	725	520	190	15
Saskatchewan	35	490	250	160	80
Alberta	95	4,235	3,240	840	155
British Columbia	185	4,025	2,820	1,055	145
Yukon	5	75	30	40	5
Northwest Territories	10	150	110	35	0
Nunavut	5	50	40	0	10

Source: 2016 Census of Population.

Table 2
Marital status for the population age 15 years and older by type of dwelling, Canada, 2016

	All shelters	Shelters for persons lacking a fixed address	Shelters for abused women and their children	Other shelters and lodging with assistance	Private dwellings
Total	19,155	14,185	3,655	1,320	28,642,980
Married or common-law[1]	2,080	1,630	330	110	16,731,860
Unattached	17,080	12,550	3,320	1,205	11,911,120

1. All shelter residents were assigned a common-law status of 'no' for the 2016 Census.
Source: 2016 Census of Population.

Table 3
Age and sex for the population by type of dwelling, Canada, 2016

	Shelters	Shelters for persons lacking a fixed address	Shelters for abused women and their children	Other shelters and lodging with assistance	Private dwellings
Total both sexes	22,190	15,505	5,365	1,320	34,460,065
Less than 15 years	3,030	1,320	1,710	0	5,817,085
0 to 4 years	1,570	700	875	0	1,891,160
15 years and over	19,160	14,185	3,655	1,320	28,642,980
15 to 64 years	17,850	13,125	3,470	1,255	23,163,085
65 years and over	1,310	1,060	185	65	5,479,895
Females	8,690	4,225	4,340	130	17,488,515
Less than 15 years	1,360	470	890	0	2,836,160
0 to 4 years	660	205	455	0	922,240
15 years and over	7,330	3,750	3,450	130	14,652,355
15 to 64 years	6,885	3,460	3,300	130	11,723,535
65 years and over	445	290	150	0	2,928,820
Male	13,500	11,280	1,025	1,185	16,971,550
Less than 15 years	1,670	845	820	5	2,980,925
0 to 4 years	915	500	415	0	968,925
15 years and over	11,830	10,440	205	1,185	13,990,620
15 to 64 years	10,965	9,670	175	1,125	11,439,555
65 years and over	865	770	35	60	2,551,070

Source: 2016 Census of Population.

Table 4

After-tax income for the population age 15 years and over living in shelters, Canada, 2016

	Total number of persons 15 years of age or older	Persons without after-tax income	Persons with after-tax income	Persons with after-tax income less than $22,133[1]	Persons with after-tax income greater or equal to $22,133[1]	Persons with after-tax income less than $22,133[1,2] (%)	Median after-tax income[3] ($)
All shelters	19,160	775	18,385	15,450	2,935	84.0	10,884
Shelters for persons lacking a fixed address	14,185	550	13,635	11,690	1,945	85.7	10,576
Shelters for abused women and their children	3,655	145	3,505	2,675	830	76.3	12,599
Other shelters and lodging with assistance	1,315	75	1,245	1,080	155	86.7	4,848
Private dwellings	28,642,980	1,143,795	27,499,185	9,983,415	17,515,770	36.3	30,866
Private dwellings with one-person households	3,969,790	7,645	3,962,145	1,269,160	2,692,990	32.0	31,502

1. Includes negative incomes.
2. As percentage of persons with after-tax income.
3. Median is computed for persons with after-tax income only.
Source: 2016 Census of Population.

Table 5

Presence of selected income sources for the population age 15 years and over by shelter type, Canada, 2016

	Private dwellings	All shelters	Shelters for persons lacking a fixed address	Shelters for abused women and their children	Other shelters and lodging with assistance
			count		
Persons 15 years of age and older	28,642,980	19,160	14,185	3,655	1,320
			%		
Persons 15 years of age and older	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
with total income	96.0	96.0	96.1	96.0	94.3
with market income	85.8	46.9	46.5	47.2	49.6
with employment income	71.3	41.2	41.1	40.2	45.5
with investment income	29.7	4.9	4.6	6.2	4.9
with private retirement income	14.6	2.5	2.7	2.1	1.5
with market income not included elsewhere	15.4	7.2	6.5	9.6	7.6
with government transfers	68.9	90.4	90.6	90.8	87.9
with OAS[1] and GIS[2]	17.5	5.9	6.6	4.7	3.0
with CPP[3] and QPP[1] benefits	23.2	11.5	12.5	8.3	8.3
with CPP[3]/QPP[4] - retirement benefits	20.6	7.6	8.5	4.4	6.4
with CPP[3]/QPP[4] - disability benefits	1.4	3.1	3.4	2.6	1.5
with CPP[3]/QPP[4] - survivor benefits	4.4	1.6	1.6	2.2	0.8
with Employment Insurance (EI) benefits	8.8	6.1	5.7	7.1	6.4
with child benefits	13.6	8.1	3.9	26.5	2.7
with other government transfers	47.4	88.7	89.1	88.0	86.0
with social assistance	4.6	54.1	57.0	54.7	22.0
with workers' compensation benefits	2.0	1.6	1.6	1.4	2.7
with working income tax benefits (WITB)	4.4	7.3	7.6	7.3	4.5
with GST[5] Credit and HST[6] Credit	37.2	66.4	66.8	73.1	43.6
with government transfers not included elsewhere	33.3	70.2	69.2	72.1	75.8
with after-tax total income	96.0	96.0	96.1	96.0	93.9

1. OAS refers to Old Age Security
2. GIS refers to Guaranteed Income Supplement
3. CPP refers to Canadian Pension Plan
4. QPP refers to Quebec Pension Plan
5. GST refers to Goods and Services Tax
6. HST refers to Harmonized Sales Tax
Source: 2016 Census of Population.

Table 6
Imputation rates by questions, Canada, Provinces and Territories, Census of Population, 2016

	Population in shelters (%)			Total population (%)[1]		
	Sex	**Age**	**Marital status**	**Sex**	**Age**	**Marital status**
Canada	12.3	11.9	65.6	2.8	3.1	4.3
Newfoundland and Labrador	7.3	8.3	26.0	3.0	3.1	4.0
Prince Edward Island	0.0	0.0	0.0	3.1	3.0	4.1
Nova Scotia	15.1	12.0	48.0	2.8	2.9	4.1
New Brunswick	25.5	4.2	39.6	2.9	3.0	4.0
Quebec	11.2	10.1	50.1	2.5	2.6	4.4
Ontario	12.9	9.3	64.9	2.5	2.8	3.7
Manitoba	11.8	19.9	54.5	3.1	3.3	4.3
Saskatchewan	11.0	6.3	56.9	3.5	3.8	5.1
Alberta	7.8	16.2	79.9	3.2	3.6	4.8
British Columbia	15.8	13.7	71.3	3.5	3.9	4.9
Yukon	0.0	0.0	45.3	4.5	6.2	7.0
Northwest Territories	22.0	29.3	70.0	7.2	8.2	7.9
Nunavut	5.8	15.4	36.5	8.3	10.7	8.6

1. Drawn from the Families Reference Guide, Census of Population, 2016, Table 1 – catalogue no. 98-500-X2016002.
Source: 2016 Census of Population.

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