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Technical Reports on Changes for the 2026 Census

Report on content changes for the 2026 Census of Population: Homelessness

Release date: July 4, 2025

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Cette publication est aussi disponible en français.

Release date: July 4, 2025
Catalogue number 98-20-0005, issue 2026002
ISBN 978-0-660-77906-5



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Report on content changes for the 2026 Census of Population: Homelessness

Why are these questions asked?

Further to consultation and extensive testing, Statistics Canada has added two new questions to the 2026 Census of Population questionnaire to measure the number of people in private dwellings who are experiencing or have experienced homelessness over the past 12 months. The data will help shed light on those with the greatest housing need.

The first question captures homelessness experiences in shelters, on the street or in parks, in a makeshift shelter, in a vehicle, or in an abandoned building over the past 12 months. The second question captures people who are experiencing homelessness on Census Day or have experienced it over the past 12 months in the form of living temporarily with friends, family or others because they had nowhere else to live. The addition of these questions—which complement other data sources on sheltered and unsheltered homelessness—is intended to facilitate more comprehensive national homelessness research.

Current trends and data gaps for this topic

The Census of Population has long been a valuable source of community-level information on the housing needs of Canadians. In recent years, housing shortages, rising rents and increasing house prices have underscored the importance of data on the issue of unmet housing needs, including homelessness. Amid an evolving housing landscape, the Canadian public, federal policy partners, researchers and experts all voiced a need to improve data on homelessness for the 2026 Census. Homelessness has an impact on every community in Canada, affecting individuals and families from all walks of life, including women fleeing violence, youth, seniors, veterans and people with disabilities.

Existing data sources on homelessness include point-in-time counts and administrative data from shelters, which provide a snapshot of homelessness in transitional housing, shelters and unsheltered locations. People in dwellings who have recently experienced homelessness or people who are experiencing homelessness while living temporarily with family, friends or others represent a large proportion of homelessness in communities and a gap in the existing data sources. The information captured by the two new questions will fill this important data gap. While the questions will not be asked for people in shelters or unsheltered locations, this new information from the census will complement other data sources to provide a more comprehensive picture of homelessness in Canada.

Changes evaluated in the 2024 Census Test	Resulting approach for the 2026 Census of Population
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Two new questions were added to collect information on people in dwellings who are experiencing or have recently experienced homelessness. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The long-form questionnaire includes two new questions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The first captures whether people have experienced sheltered or unsheltered homelessness over the past 12 months. The second question captures whether people are experiencing homelessness on Census Day or over the past 12 months in the form of living with friends, family or others because they had nowhere else to live.



1. Introduction

The next Census of Population will take place in May 2026. To maintain the relevance of the census, Statistics Canada evaluates and reviews the questionnaire content in preparation for each census cycle. This includes several stages of consultative engagement, as well as testing and data evaluation, to recommend questionnaire content for the census.

Approximately 222,000 households from communities across the country were selected to participate in the 2024 Census Test. The test helped to determine whether new or modified questions under consideration could be easily understood and answered by Canadians. Testing census content ensures that high-quality data will be available from the 2026 Census of Population to support a wide variety of programs and services in communities across the country.

Census content is routinely adjusted to the current social and economic climate to ensure that data respond to the needs of decision makers and data users.

This series of reports provides an in-depth view of the changes in content for the 2026 Census of Population. This report details the steps taken to develop new questions capturing data about homelessness for the 2026 Census questionnaire.

2. Context and background

In recent years, housing stock and housing need have been an evolving and growing focus for Canadians and governments. In 2019, Parliament passed the [National Housing Strategy Act](#), which affirms housing as a fundamental human right in Canada. The act requires the minister to develop a national housing strategy that, among other things, prioritizes homelessness by setting national goals to address it.

[Reaching Home: Canada's Homelessness Strategy](#) was launched in April 2019 and supports the goals of the [National Housing Strategy](#)—in particular, to help the most vulnerable Canadians maintain safe, stable and affordable housing and to reduce chronic homelessness nationally by 50% by the 2027/2028 fiscal year. When the homelessness strategy was launched, \$2.2 billion was committed to tackling homelessness across the country. Since then, the commitment has nearly doubled to \$4 billion over nine years.

Recent housing shortages, rising rents and increasing house prices have drawn attention to the importance of data on the issue of unmet housing needs, including homelessness. Experiencing homelessness affects an individual's health, security, stability, and participation in society and the economy. It is a challenge that touches on many areas of government, from community support programs to national targets.

The 2022 report on [chronic homelessness](#) released by the Auditor General of Canada included a review of initiatives to improve housing outcomes for people experiencing homelessness. A recommendation from the report was to collect and analyze data and use the information to measure efforts to improve housing outcomes and homelessness for vulnerable Canadians.

This was further supported by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe's [Conference of European Statisticians Recommendations for the 2020 Censuses of Population and Housing](#), which include data collection on people experiencing homelessness. It was recommended that these data tabulations include categories of primary homelessness (defined as people in unsheltered locations) and secondary homelessness (defined as people in sheltered locations or private dwellings). The recommendations also recognize that homelessness is essentially a cultural definition that can be implemented in various ways by different communities.

Statistics Canada has assessed that the 2026 Census provides an opportunity to collect local and nationally comparable data on homelessness. Furthermore, adding questions about homelessness experiences to the already rich demographic portrait available in the census will enable research on homelessness challenges for vulnerable groups and support governments and communities in addressing homelessness.



3. Definitions and data needs

Homelessness is a complex and multifaceted concept, with many dimensions that are often personal and subjective. The Canadian definition of homelessness, created by the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (COH), states homelessness is "...the situation of an individual, family or community without stable, safe, permanent, appropriate housing, or the immediate prospect, means and ability of acquiring it."¹

The [Canadian definition of homelessness](#) distinguishes between three types of homelessness: (1) **unsheltered** or living in places not fit for human habitation; (2) **emergency sheltered**, including staying in overnight shelters for people who are homeless and shelters for those affected by family violence; and (3) **provisionally accommodated**, including those with nowhere else to live staying with others temporarily.

The Census of Population already provides some information on homelessness. Specifically, the census enumerates people in emergency shelters, which are collective dwellings, on Census Day. In addition, the census enumerates all people in private dwellings, including people experiencing homelessness while staying temporarily with others. However, although people experiencing homelessness in private dwellings are included in the census population counts, no information is currently collected to identify or classify their homelessness experiences.

While the census does not enumerate people in unsheltered locations on Census Day, other data sources exist for this category of homelessness. Existing data sources on homelessness include point-in-time counts and administrative data from shelters, which provide a snapshot of homelessness in transitional housing, shelters and unsheltered locations. However, these data sources do not capture people in private dwellings who are experiencing homelessness.

Overall, the census alone does not collect data on all categories of homelessness. Nevertheless, it is well suited for measuring people with nowhere else to live staying temporarily with others in private dwellings—a category that represents a significant data need for measuring homelessness. The census data will complement existing data sources to provide a more complete picture of homelessness.

Changes to the 2026 Census include gathering people's self-reported experiences with homelessness. This information will be combined with demographic and housing characteristics already captured by the census, alongside complementary data sources on homelessness, to create a statistical measure of homelessness in Canada that meets the data needs of governments and organizations.

4. Methodology and approach

Based on the results of extensive engagement, discussions and testing described in detail below, the 2026 Census will include two new questions to measure people in private dwellings who are experiencing or have experienced homelessness over the past 12 months. These new questions will fill two data gaps: (1) people staying temporarily with others because they have nowhere else to live on Census Day and (2) people in private dwellings who have experienced homelessness over the past 12 months. The exact wording for the two new questions can be found in [Appendix 1](#).

The new homelessness questions were developed in three phases. The first phase involved consultations with the public and stakeholders from the fall of 2022 to the spring of 2023. Content consultation results informed the development of an initial set of questions that were evaluated qualitatively through cognitive and one-on-one interviews during the second phase, held in the spring and summer of 2023. Results from qualitative testing were used to improve the questions for the final phase—the 2024 Census Test.

1. Gaetz, S.; Barr, C.; Friesen, A.; Harris, B.; Hill, C.; Kovacs-Burns, K.; Pauly, B.; Pearce, B.; Turner, A.; Marsolais, A. (2012) Canadian Definition of Homelessness. Toronto: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press. [COHhomelessdefinition.pdf](#)



The first phase of the 2024 Census Test was held in May 2024. It included a content test composed of two panels of respondents; each panel received different versions of the long-form (2A-L) questionnaire. The control version of the questionnaire contained the same questions as the 2021 Census, whereas the test version included modifications to existing content areas, as well as the addition of questions on general health, homelessness and second addresses.

The final sample selected for the content test held in May 2024 consisted of 99,926 households across all 10 Canadian provinces. Each respondent panel consisted of half of this total sample; therefore, the questionnaire with the questions on homelessness was sent to 49,963 households.

The initial set of questions developed was largely based on previous surveys that asked respondents to report on lifetime experiences of homelessness. Aspects of the questions were altered to take advantage of the census's strengths, namely the larger sample size, which allows for more recent experiences of homelessness to be measured.

Early testing found that providing examples of homelessness experiences, rather than specifying the definition, improved respondent understanding of the questions. Examples were chosen that balance a variety of situations within the scope of homelessness and provide relevant context to respondents, while considering respondent burden. In addition, the questions were framed within their own section titled "Homelessness" to help convey their intent and to avoid providing overly technical definitions.

Respondent privacy and the sensitivity of the topic were also considered when developing the questions. The questions and response categories were kept general to balance respect for respondent privacy with the need to provide relevant data to stakeholders and policy partners. Respondent feedback on privacy and sensitivity concerns was collected during testing and monitored throughout the development process.

Results from qualitative testing and the 2024 Census Test are presented in detail in the following sections.

5. Key findings or results

Results from qualitative testing are positive; interviews showed the new homelessness questions are well understood by respondents. Respondents showed during interviews that they understand the question wording and what the questions intend to measure. When asked for feedback about the sensitivity of the questions, almost all respondents said they did not have concerns related to sensitivity or privacy. A small number of respondents mentioned that some people facing situations of homelessness may not want to self-identify as experiencing homelessness on the census.

This feedback from respondents during qualitative testing is supported by results from the 2024 Census Test. Response rates for both new homelessness questions are similar to response rates for existing census content, suggesting that respondents are willing and able to provide answers. Few respondents accessed additional help information for the new homelessness questions during the 2024 Census Test, supporting the previous finding that the questions are well understood.

Respondent comments from the 2024 Census Test were also evaluated to identify any concerns related to the new homelessness questions. Overall, fewer than 10 out of 5,873 total comments received from the 2A-L questionnaire test panel mentioned homelessness. Most of these few comments were positive, mentioning support for the new questions. Several comments mentioned that the new homelessness questions cannot measure parts of the population experiencing homelessness. No sensitivity or privacy concerns related to the new homelessness content were identified in the comments.

Estimates based on results from the 2024 Census Test are used to assess respondent understanding, response rates and the ability to provide high-quality responses for the new questions. They are not intended to be used as official estimates of homelessness in Canada. Table 5.1 presents results from the 2024 Census Test for the new homelessness questions.



Table 5.1
Homelessness results from the 2024 Census Test

Census question tested	Percent of population that responded “Yes”	Lower 95% confidence limit percent	Upper 95% confidence limit
Q34. Considering homelessness experiences, over the past 12 months, has this person stayed in a shelter, on the street or in parks, in a makeshift shelter, in a vehicle, or in an abandoned building?	0.82	0.72	0.94
Q35. Considering other types of housing challenges, over the past 12 months, has this person lived temporarily with friends, family or others because they had nowhere else to live?	0.80	0.71	0.90
If “yes” was answered to Q35, respondent will be prompted to answer this question: Is this person currently living in this household temporarily because they have nowhere else to live?	0.31	0.26	0.37

Source: Statistics Canada, 2024 Census Test.

Question 34 measures respondents’ experiences with unsheltered and emergency sheltered homelessness over the past year, while Question 35—which is asked in two parts—measures people’s experiences staying with others temporarily, both currently and over the past 12 months.

To fit the Canadian context, policy experts recommend deriving a nationally consistent statistical measure of homelessness that represents the policy definition. This statistical measure considers a respondent’s self-assessed homeless status, alongside other census characteristics, such as income, to exclude cases that fall outside the definition of homelessness. Such derived measures allow governments and organizations to track policy outcomes unique to their programs and initiatives.

A formal statistical measure of homelessness is being established through consultations with policy experts and stakeholders. As part of this work, a preliminary measure was derived and assessed using data collected from the 2024 Census Test. This derived measure is compared with the self-assessed measure of unsheltered and emergency sheltered homelessness in Table 5.2 below. Note that, among other differences, census test data do not undergo the same processing as those from the census, because they are collected for testing and research purposes.

Table 5.2
Comparison of derived and self-assessed homelessness, 2024 Census Test

Measure of homelessness	Percent of population	Lower 95% confidence limit percent	Upper 95% confidence limit
Derived measure of unsheltered and emergency sheltered homelessness, past 12 months	0.39	0.32	0.48
Self-assessed measure of unsheltered and emergency sheltered homelessness, past 12 months	0.82	0.72	0.94

Source: Statistics Canada, 2024 Census Test.

The relatively large discrepancy between the derived and self-assessed homelessness measures prompted additional investigation during the evaluation of the results. Additional qualitative interviews were held with respondents who reported homelessness experiences in the past 12 months. These interviews found that while



all respondents clearly understood the intent of the homelessness questions, some provided the wrong response by mistake.

To reduce the likelihood of response errors, in some situations, respondents filling out the electronic questionnaire will be prompted to verify their answers to the homelessness questions. Because of technical limitations, similar verification efforts cannot be implemented for the paper questionnaire. Although we expect this to narrow the gap between the derived and self-assessed homelessness measures, part of that difference is likely to remain because of the differences between respondent perceptions of homelessness and how policy makers define homelessness.

6. Discussion

The evaluation of the census test data included comparing estimates of homelessness with past estimates and assessing whether the data are coherent with existing research on homelessness in Canada. The data were assessed by experts from Statistics Canada and Housing, Infrastructure and Communities Canada.

The comparison of the census test with past estimates of homelessness in Canada shows similar annual rates. In 2016, the COH estimated that 0.70% of people in Canada experience homelessness annually, based on emergency shelter use data. Housing, Infrastructure and Communities Canada estimates as many as 1.80% of people in Canada experience homelessness, including people staying with others temporarily. As shown in the results in [section 5](#) above, estimates of homelessness from the census test are within this range.

When comparing estimates between sources, it is important to remember each source's differences and limitations. In particular, existing data sources do not have full coverage of the homeless population in Canada. Point-in-time counts enumerate communities accounting for approximately 80% of the population. Estimates based on shelter data miss areas without shelter services and often do not cover all shelters. Some homelessness estimates, such as those of people currently staying with others temporarily, have no data sources for comparison. The new homelessness questions added to the census will measure homelessness experiences within these regions, and this may affect data comparability at a national level between sources.

When assessing homelessness responses from the census test in the context of existing research in Canada, comparisons were often limited to general trends. While some demographic characteristics, such as age and gender, are shared between data sources, many others are not measured. Thus, rates are unavailable for direct comparison. Despite these limitations, census test data are coherent with expert expectations; age and gender distributions are similar to those measured by point-in-time counts and emergency shelter studies. Other characteristics, such as employment status or educational attainment, were assessed more broadly and found to follow expected trends.

7. Gaps and limitations

The new homelessness questions were shown to work well overall; however, two key limitations remain. First, the new questions do not measure people experiencing unsheltered homelessness on Census Day, because the census is answered by people in dwellings. Second, households may not include people staying with them temporarily on their census questionnaire.

Though the new questions do not measure people experiencing unsheltered homelessness on Census Day, national point-in-time counts will continue to measure this population to provide estimates for any given night. These nightly estimates can help address this gap in the new census questions, providing a more complete estimate of homelessness in Canada.

The census includes instructions to help respondents determine who to include on their questionnaire in Step C. In cases where someone does not have their own usual residence, such as people staying temporarily with nowhere else to live, the census questionnaire instructs respondents to include those people on the questionnaire. Even so, some people may not be included and so would not be measured as staying temporarily by the new questions. Therefore, the new question measuring people staying with others temporarily may underestimate the true size of this population to a degree.



8. Conclusion

Overall, the new homelessness questions showed positive results throughout qualitative testing and the 2024 Census Test. Respondent feedback indicated the questions are clearly worded and that respondents understand what the questions intend to measure. Results from the 2024 Census Test produce estimates of homelessness that are in the range of past estimates and are coherent with existing data sources and research on homelessness in Canada.

After evaluating the results of testing and considering factors such as costs, operations, respondent relations and safeguards against quality loss, Statistics Canada recommended the addition of the homelessness questions to the 2026 Census to the Cabinet of Canada for approval.



Appendix 1 – 2024 Census Test questions on homelessness

Test version question (2024 Census Test)

The following questions were tested during the 2024 Census Test:

Q34: Considering **homelessness experiences**, over the past 12 months, has this person stayed in a shelter, on the street or in parks, in a makeshift shelter, in a vehicle, or in an abandoned building?

- Yes
- No

Q35: Considering other types of housing challenges, over the past 12 months, has this person lived **temporarily** with friends, family or others **because they had nowhere else to live?**

Include temporary living arrangements where the person did not have the resources to secure their own permanent housing (person facing financial difficulties, fleeing abuse, recently evicted, etc.).

Exclude stays for vacation, family visits, or other voluntary short-term stays.

- Yes

Is this person **currently** living in this household **temporarily** because they have nowhere else to live?

- Yes
 - No
- No

Help text (2024 Census Test)

How to answer question 34

Select “Yes” for any person who has experienced homelessness for any amount of time over the past 12 months.

That is, they stayed in a shelter, on the street, in parks, in a makeshift shelter, in a vehicle, in an abandoned building or in a similar place, because they did not have access to stable, permanent and appropriate housing or the immediate prospect, means and ability to acquire it.

Select “No” for any person who has not experienced homelessness over the past 12 months.

How to answer question 35

Select “Yes” for

- any person currently and temporarily living in this household because they have nowhere else to live.
- any person who stayed temporarily with friends, family or others over the past 12 months without a guarantee of continued residency or the immediate prospect for accessing housing because they had nowhere else to live.

When selecting “Yes,” also indicate whether the person is currently living in this household temporarily because they have nowhere else to live.

Reasons why we ask questions 34 and 35

Questions 34 and 35 provide information on people’s experiences with homelessness and other housing challenges over the past 12 months. This information is used by organizations and governments to support communities in addressing homelessness.