

UNDERSTANDING AND ADDRESSING FAMILY HOMELESSNESS IN A NORTHERN COMMUNITY—TIMMINS, ONTARIO

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THREE NORTHERN ONTARIO COMMUNITIES

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Presented to
Homelessness Partnering Strategy
Employment and Social Development Canada

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POVERTÉ, SANS-ABRISME ET MIGRATION
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Poverty, Homelessness and Migration
Pauvreté, sans-abrisme et migration

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I. INTRODUCTION

Homelessness and inadequate housing are increasingly recognized as persistent social issues in the small cities and towns of northeastern Ontario (Kauppi, Pallard, King, Srigley, Lemieux et al., 2013). Timmins, a small urban city located on the Mattagami River in northeastern Ontario, is grappling with a growing crisis of homelessness and poverty (Kauppi, Pallard, Lemieux, & Nkosi, 2012). The total population of the city is 43,165, of which 55.7% is Anglophone and is 37.2% Francophone (Statistics Canada, 2012). Timmins is also home to a significant Indigenous population which currently accounts for 7.7% of its population (Germain, Costa & Kelly-Scott, 2009). Between 2001 and 2006, the Indigenous population in Timmins increased by 14%. The subgroup of people with First Nations heritage grew by 29%, while the Métis population grew by 2%.

The economy in Timmins is based on a boom-and-bust business cycle, primarily influenced by the mining industry which is susceptible to uncertainty regarding the demand for metals in the volatile local, national and global markets. The forestry sector has also been in decline in recent years. The other economic sectors include retail stores, educational, health care and other public services, construction, manufacturing, accommodation and food services, transportation and warehousing (City of Timmins, 2012). Despite the volatility, according to Statistics Canada (2011), the unemployment rate for Timmins (6.1%) has been lower than the provincial rate (7.7%) and the national rate (7.5%) in recent years.

A low vacancy rate, a strong demand for rental accommodations and increasing rents were noted as significant contributing factors to homelessness in Timmins.

In January 2011, *Poverty, Homelessness and Migration (PHM)*, a Community-University Research Alliance (CURA), conducted a period prevalence count of homeless persons in Timmins in collaboration with the Cochrane District Social Services Administration Board (DSSAB), the Timmins Native Friendship Centre and thirty-one other local partners (Kauppi et al., 2012). According to the findings of this study, the population of persons at risk of homelessness and absolutely homeless (n=720) in Timmins was proportionately larger than in North Bay, a northern Ontario city of similar size (Kauppi et al., 2013). One-third of the homeless and near homeless population in Timmins was under the age of 15—thus infants, children and adolescents comprised a significant subgroup. Furthermore, women, children and youth under age 20 constituted about two-thirds of those who were absolutely homeless in Timmins.

A low vacancy rate, a strong demand for rental accommodations and increasing rents were noted as significant contributing factors to homelessness in Timmins (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2012). The overall vacancy rate for the rental market was 0.8% as of October 2012. The vacancy rates were similar for one-bedroom apartments (1.5%), two-bedroom apartments (0%) and apartments with three or more bedrooms (1.1%). Average rents respectively were \$692, \$817 and \$1,017 per month. The elevated average rents and low vacancy rates contribute to the struggles of low-

income people and those living in poverty in securing adequate, affordable and appropriate housing. Notably, 3 in 10

A need to conduct additional research aimed at gaining better understanding of the prevalence and nature of family homelessness was identified by local stakeholders.

Indigenous persons were living under the Low Income Cut-Off (LICO) and nearly 1 in 10 non-Indigenous persons were living under the LICO in Timmins (Statistics Canada, 2007). For all persons in private households, 8.4% of individuals had incomes below the LICO standards. Lone-parent families were particularly adversely affected as 20.8% of single-male and 28.3% of single-female households were living under the LICO standards (Statistics Canada, 2007). In addition to the structural problems of poverty and unaffordable housing within the city of Timmins, the economic downturn in the region north of Timmins, characterized by the closure of mills and local industries, such as those in the nearby communities of Smooth Rock Falls and Hearst, precipitated the out-migration of families to Timmins, further exacerbating the issues of inadequate housing and homelessness in this city (Kauppi et al., 2012).

During the period prevalence count of homeless persons in the city of Timmins, the municipality and service providers expressed deep concerns about the growing presence of families in the homeless population and consequent challenges to the capacity of the service system for homeless persons in Timmins (Kauppi et al., 2012). A need to conduct additional research aimed at gaining a better understanding of the prevalence and nature of family homelessness was identified by local stakeholders. This research was considered necessary to develop long-term sustainable policy and program solutions, to prevent family homelessness, and to mitigate its impacts on individuals and the larger community.

A six-phase multi-method study was designed as an extension of the *Poverty, Homelessness and Migration* project to acquire an in-depth understanding of the prevalence, nature and reasons for family homelessness, of service use patterns, and of the service needs of homeless and precariously housed families in Timmins. In the second phase of this study, the existing databases of the *PHM* project were re-analyzed to generate a community specific profile of family homelessness for the city of Timmins. In addition, a comparison group comprising families from three other northeastern communities—Sudbury, North Bay and Hearst—was created to enable an examination of similarities and differences between the two groups. This report delineates the major findings emerging from the re-analysis of the database and provides information about the extent, nature, and circumstances surrounding family homelessness in communities within northeastern Ontario.

The current project adopted an inclusive definition of homelessness by taking into account people who were precariously housed and vulnerable to becoming homeless in addition to those who were absolutely homeless at the time of the study.

A. Definition of Homelessness

Homelessness is a broad term that can encompass a range of housing conditions situated along a continuum of types of shelters (Echenberg & Jensen, 2008; Gaetz, 2004; Girard, 2006). At one end of the continuum there is absolute homelessness which includes living on the street or in emergency shelters. In the middle of the continuum is hidden or concealed homelessness which includes people without a place of their own and who may live in a car, with family or friends, or in a long-term institution. At the other end of the spectrum are persons who experience relative homelessness; they are housed but reside in substandard housing or they may be at-risk of losing their homes.

An alternative approach to defining homelessness involves the element of time (Echenberg & Jensen, 2008). The frequency and duration of homeless episodes can have important implications for how the problem is understood and addressed. Taking into account the time element, homelessness may be divided into three categories including chronic, cyclical and temporary forms. Chronic homelessness is often experienced by those with recurring or continuing illness or addiction problems. Cyclical homelessness may result from a change in circumstances, for example release or discharge

from an institution (e.g., prison or hospital). In contrast, temporary homelessness, relatively short in duration, may be caused by natural disasters or house fires (Echenberg & Jensen, 2008).

The current project adopted an inclusive definition of homelessness by taking into account people who were precariously housed and vulnerable to becoming homeless in addition to those who were absolutely homeless at the time of the study (Kauppi et al., 2012). This inclusive definition guided the *PHM* project and was derived from the work of Daly (1996) who combined elements of time and housing conditions to propose that homeless persons “include those individuals who are absolutely, periodically or temporarily without shelter as well as those who are at substantial risk of being in the street in the immediate future” (p. 24).

The concepts of absolute homelessness and at-risk or near homelessness were consistently applied in the larger *PHM* study as well as in the current six-phase project on family homelessness in Timmins (Kauppi et al., 2012). The following definitions were used to guide the research.

1. Absolute homelessness

During period prevalence count, a person was identified as absolutely homeless when in the following situations: (a) he/she did not have place to call home, (b) his/her home was neither a room, an apartment, nor a house, (c) his/her room, apartment or house was not his/her own, (d) he/she either stayed there four times a week or less, or (e) he/she did not have arrangement to sleep there regularly.

2. At-Risk of homelessness

A person was considered at an elevated risk for homelessness if he or she was (a) facing a pending eviction, (b) had extremely low income, (c) was victim of familial abuse, (d) was unable to pay rent, (e) had an existing medical condition with no benefits, or (f) any other circumstance that presented a threat regarding the loss of housing.

B. Definition of Family Homelessness

In the present study, a homeless family was defined as one or more homeless persons with custody of at least one child.

As part of the current project on family homelessness, an extensive review of the published literature was conducted (Shaikh, Kauppi, Pallard, Gervais, Kiverago et al., 2013). The literature revealed multiple and diverse definitions of a homeless family. In general, a homeless family was conceptualized as being composed of one or more homeless adults caring for or accompanied by at least one child under the age of eighteen (Johnson, McChesney, Rocha & Butterfield, 1995; Rossi, 1994). Some researchers have utilized broader definitions by including homeless pregnant women (Bassuk, Rubin & Lauriat, 1986; Gaubatz, 2001), homeless married or unmarried couples (Tischler & Vostanis, 2007), parents accompanied

by biological and nonbiological children (McCaughey, 1991), homeless mothers separated from their children (Glick, 1996), homeless parents in the process of acquiring custody of a minor child (Gould & Williams, 2010), adolescent mothers with dependent children under the age of eighteen (Kennedy, 2007), and homeless fathers with dependent children (Zubrzycki, Rochester, & Thomson, 2006).

In the present study, a homeless family was defined as one or more homeless persons with custody of at least one child. The person could be a biological parent, a grandparent, a non-biological parent, a foster parent or guardian with custody of a child under the age of majority. Moreover, homeless persons under the age of majority with custody of at least one child were also included in the study. This definition was broad enough to include adolescent mothers and fathers and other guardians who had custody of children. Such a broad definition captures Indigenous families that often include multiple generations and where grandparents or other extended family members may assume responsibility for children (Anderson, 2010).

II. METHODOLOGY

In this second phase of the study on family homelessness in Timmins, the research team re-analyzed databases of the *PHM* project based on period prevalence counts of homeless persons which were carried out in Timmins, Sudbury, North Bay and Hearst. The unduplicated count of homeless persons was obtained in the cities of Sudbury, North Bay and Timmins by utilizing a service-based method. The study in Hearst included two components: a service-based method was combined with a community, door-to-door survey of a systematic sample of households. Emergency shelters, social service agencies, other service providers and teams of researchers played a pivotal role in gathering information about the total number of homeless persons, including those having custody of children, their demographic characteristics, sources of income, reasons for homelessness and mental and physical health conditions. The following sub-sections of this report describe the approach to the research, the data collection tool, the procedures for its administration, and the data analysis.

A. Approach to the Study

In order to obtain accurate data and estimates that reflected the extent of homelessness in Sudbury, North Bay and Timmins, the research team utilized a service-based method in which shelters and allied agencies serving homeless people were invited to participate in the study (Kauppi, 2012). As Peressini, McDonald & Hulchanski (2010) observed, studies employing comprehensive, inclusive and relative definitions must sample from a wide range of locations to cover the greatest number of sites where persons facing a range of housing conditions can be found. In Timmins, the period prevalence count took place during a seven-day period at the end of the month, in the week of 24 to 30 January 2011. The data collection was extended over an entire week to maximize the number of people included in the study. The timing of the study was planned so that the data collection would be conducted at the end of the month when homelessness has been found to increase (Peressini, McDonald & Hulchanski, 1996). The same method was followed in the period prevalence counts in North Bay and Sudbury. However, in Hearst, a town with a population of 5090 (Statistics Canada, 2012), the service-based method was combined with a door-to-door survey which drew from a systematic sample of households.

B. Data Collection Tool

The data collection instrument consisted of a questionnaire for collecting information on each homeless person using shelters and allied services (Kauppi et al., 2012) and, in Hearst, hidden homeless persons staying in private households. The tool was designed to generate information providing a valid, unduplicated count of the homeless population without raising concerns about violating the privacy rights of individuals using services. This tool was adapted from the Automated National Client-specific Homeless Services Recording System (ANChOR), an information system developed to support the coordination of services to the homeless. It also collects basic socio-demographic information about homeless persons, including the first, middle, and last initials, date of birth, gender, ethnicity/race or cultural group, linguistic orientation, marital status, use of services and referral (Peressini, McDonald and Hulchanski, 1996). In addition, information regarding employment, education, social assistance status and income, reasons for homelessness, physical and mental health, history of homelessness and migration patterns was collected through this questionnaire.

C. Data Collection Procedures in Timmins

Given the inherent difficulties in studying homeless people, the research team worked with local service providers in Timmins in order to create an accurate snapshot of the homeless population during a one week period (Kauppi et al., 2012). Any count will produce an under-estimate of the total homeless population. The participation of a majority of service providers in Timmins made it possible to obtain a reasonable estimate of the homeless population.

A preliminary list of providers was developed and then expanded to ensure that all organizations serving this population would be invited to participate. Searches were conducted to identify and locate additional services such as food banks. Using the internet, telephone directories and the network of identified service providers, a list of 31 services was produced. A letter explaining the objectives of the study and the need for participation from all providers was delivered to the agencies along with a copy of the data collection instrument to be used for the count. Every provider was subsequently contacted by telephone in order to set a date and time for a meeting to review the information to be collected in the study and to determine how the data could be collected from that agency.

By involving service providers, who are experts in their field, in the design of the study, the level of intrusiveness of the data collection could be reduced and client confidentiality reinforced. However, given limited staff resources available to perform this task and service pressures for some agencies, it was imperative to involve research team members in the data collection process in some agencies. The research team members received training and were closely supervised to ensure that the study protocols were followed. Some of the agencies contacted did not participate for various reasons. However, it is also possible that some of the same homeless persons utilized the services of both non-participating and participating agencies, thereby enabling them to be included in the study.

1. Unduplicated Count of Homeless Families

The data collection instrument allowed for the identification of unduplicated cases. An unduplicated count was obtained by examining the first, middle, and last initials as well as the date of birth and gender. Individuals with identical information were considered to be the same person and the duplicated information was eliminated from further analysis. Most individuals provided all of the information required to identify duplicate cases.

D. Data Analysis

In order to meet the objectives of the study on family homelessness with a focus on Timmins, a sub-group of homeless persons with custody of children was identified and data pertaining to this sub-group were re-analyzed utilizing SPSS to gain an understanding about the prevalence, nature and circumstances surrounding family homelessness in this community. In addition, data from three other communities (i.e., Sudbury, North Bay, and Hearst) were combined and analyzed to compare the profile of homeless families in northeastern Ontario with that of the Timmins sample. Combining participants from these three communities provided for a diverse sample from northeastern Ontario. Sudbury is the main urban centre, North Bay is a medium-sized city and Hearst is a town with a primarily Francophone population. Hearst is significant because it is one of the smaller communities near Timmins which are depopulating due to the closure of mills and other local industries, and families are out-migrating to larger communities such as Timmins. For the purpose of comparisons, data collected during three previous studies in Sudbury (2003, 2007, and 2009) were combined with studies conducted in Hearst (2011) and North Bay (2011).

There are two ways of reporting on data from questions where participants were invited to give multiple responses, (for example, sources of income and reasons for homelessness): first, one may report the percentage of all responses represented by any given category, which percentage will sum to 100%; or secondly, one may report the percentage of respondents referring to a given category. All multiple response tables in this report show the percentage of responses. We further elaborate in the text on the results by indicating significant categories which reflect substantial proportions of respondents referring to that category.

In the next section, the major findings of this comparative analysis are presented. Particular attention was paid to Indigenous homeless families so as to address the knowledge gap in this area and enhance our understanding of the factors related to homelessness encountered by this specific group.

III. RESULTS

Data collected through period prevalence counts of homeless persons in four communities including Sudbury, North Bay, Hearst and Timmins were examined to obtain an overall picture of family homelessness. The total sample consisted of 3628 homeless individuals across four communities.

The findings regarding family homelessness are organized in four major sections; these sections include (i) all homeless families with custody of children, (ii) absolutely homeless families with custody of children, (iii) at-risk homeless families with custody of children, and (iv) Indigenous homeless families with custody of children. Each section includes a community-specific profile of one type of family homelessness in Timmins and compares it with the combined population of the same type of family homeless in the three other communities (i.e., Sudbury, North Bay and Hearst). Information is provided about the sample from which the sub-group of homeless families with custody of children was drawn.

A. The Database

Data collected through period prevalence counts of homeless persons in four communities including Sudbury, North Bay, Hearst, and Timmins were examined to obtain an overall picture of family homelessness. The total sample consisted of 3628 homeless individuals across four communities (see Table 1). Among these homeless individuals, 29.3% identified as having children, 11.8% mentioned having custody of children and 9.5% were accompanied by children at the time of study. For the current project, a sub-sample of homeless families (n=429), defined as persons having custody of children, was selected for further analysis.

Table 1. Homeless person and children in northern Ontario

Homeless persons	N	%
Total sample	3628	100.0
Persons having children	1062	29.3
Persons having custody of children	429	11.8
Persons with accompanying children	345	9.5

B. Homeless Families with Custody of Children

Homeless families with custody of children in Timmins were compared with a larger sample of homeless families in northern Ontario on several measures including prevalence (count), composition of the family, demographic features of parents/guardians, marital status, sources of income, reasons for homelessness, mental and physical health issues faced by parents/guardians, and lifetime experience of absolute homelessness. The period prevalence counts of homeless people indicated that, among 429 families with custody of children, 30% were from Timmins while the remaining homeless families (70%) were from the other three communities (see Table 2).

Table 2. Period prevalence count of homeless families

Timmins		Sudbury-North Bay-Hearst	
N	%	N	%
129	30	300	69.9

1. Homeless parents or guardians accompanied by children

As the literature on family homelessness shows, many homeless parents or guardians leave their children in care of other relatives and family members while accessing shelters and allied services (Barrow & Lawinski, 2009; Cummins, First & Tommey, 1998; Glick, 1996). Often these parents and guardians, despite having custody of children, are counted as “single individuals” as they are not accompanied by their child or children. In our sub-sample of 429 homeless families with custody of children, this was readily apparent as 63.2% of parents or guardians in Timmins were accompanied by a child or children, while 36.8% were unaccompanied, during the week of the period prevalence count when accessing varied services for people experiencing extreme poverty or homelessness (see Table 3). Similarly in the other three communities, more than two-thirds (68.3%) of homeless parents or guardians were accompanied by children, while about one-third (31.7%) were not accompanied by their children while accessing services.

Table 3. All homeless families accompanied by children¹

Timmins		Sudbury-North Bay-Hearst	
N	%	N	%
60	63.2	177	68.3

A majority, 63.2% of parents or guardians, in Timmins were accompanied by a child or children, while 36.8% were unaccompanied, when accessing varied services for people experiencing extreme poverty or homelessness.

¹Of the homeless families with custody of children, 17.5% did not answer this question on the questionnaire.

2. Demographic characteristics of homeless parents or guardians

An examination of the gender distribution revealed an elevated percentage of women parents or guardians in the sample of homeless families within the two samples. In Timmins, 81.3% of parents or guardians were women as compared to 69.8% in Sudbury, North Bay and Hearst. With regard to the ethno-cultural self-identification, most homeless parents or guardians reported that they were Anglophones or Francophones of European origin, compared with visible minorities or Indigenous persons within the two samples (see Table 4).

Indigenous parents or guardians were overrepresented amongst homeless families in Timmins as well as in the comparison sample of northeastern Ontario.

Table 4. Characteristics of homeless parents or guardians

	Timmins		Sudbury-North Bay-Hearst	
	N	%	N	%
<i>Gender</i>				
Women	100	81.3	201	69.8
Men	23	18.7	87	30.2
<i>Ethno-cultural group</i>				
Anglophone	51	41.5	135	47.9
Francophone	24	19.5	78	27.7
Indigenous	44	35.8	61	21.6
Visible Minority	4	3.3	8	2.8
<i>Language*</i>				
English	72	58.5	166	59.5
French	34	27.6	88	31.5
First Nations	15	12.2	18	6.5
Other	2	1.6	7	2.5
<i>Age</i>				
15-19	2	1.6	6	2.0
20-24	13	10.4	38	13.0
25-29	15	12.1	39	13.4
30-34	24	19.3	52	17.9
35-39	18	14.5	53	18.1
40-44	20	16.1	40	13.7
45-49	12	9.7	33	11.3
50-54	10	8.0	19	6.5
55-59	4	3.2	5	1.7
60+	6	4.8	7	2.4

*Language first learnt as a child and still spoken.

However, it is important to note that Indigenous parents or guardians were overrepresented amongst homeless families in Timmins as well as in the comparison sample of northeastern Ontario. In Timmins, Indigenous parents or guardians made up about one-third (35.8%) of homeless families, while the 2006 census data indicated that the Indigenous people, including North American Indians and Métis, made up 7.7% of the total population (Germain et al., 2009). In contrast, French-speaking parents or guardians comprised 19.5% of homeless families, and thus were underrepresented in relation to the overall population of 37.2% of Francophones in Timmins (Statistics Canada, 2012). While the northeastern Ontario sample indicates a larger proportion of Francophone families (27.7) compared with Timmins (19.5), the former is influenced by the linguistic composition of the population of Hearst, in which 87% of the people are primarily French-speaking (Statistics Canada, 2012). It is notable that over a third of homeless families in Timmins were of Indigenous origins compared with approximately a fifth of the northeastern Ontario comparison sample.

Homeless parents or guardians ranged in age from 16 to 83 years with a mean age of 37 years. As shown in Table 4, the overall age distribution showed that a substantial proportion of homeless parents or guardians were between 20 and 59 years of age (93.6% in Timmins and 96% in the comparison sample). Few people aged 60 and older were identified among the homeless parents or guardians in Timmins (4.8%) or in the comparison sample (2.4%). Similarly, a small number of parents or guardians were in the age range of 15 to 19 years (1.6% in Timmins and 2% in the comparison sample).

3. Number of children by gender of homeless parents or guardians

Homeless parents or guardians
ranged in age from 16 to 83 years
with a mean age of 37 years.

Overall, the number of children in the custody of parents or guardians ranged from one to ten for homeless women in Timmins (see Table 5).

Table 5. Number of children by gender

Number of children	Timmins				Sudbury-North Bay-Hearst			
	Women		Men		Women		Men	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
1	36	36.4	8	34.8	66	33.0	27	32.5
2	39	39.4	11	47.8	75	37.5	37	44.6
3	10	10.1	2	8.7	40	20.0	12	14.5
4	5	5.1	0	0.0	10	5.0	5	6.0
5	3	3.0	2	8.7	6	3.0	0	0.0
6	3	3.0	0	0.0	2	1.0	2	2.4
7+	3	3.0	0	0.0	1	0.5	0	0.0

In the comparison sample, homeless women reported having one to seven children in their custody. Similarly, men had between one and six children in their custody. Among homeless women, 39.4% in Timmins and 37.5% in the comparison sample of Sudbury, North Bay and Hearst reported having two children. Similarly, 47.8% of men in Timmins

and 44.6% of men in the comparison sample reported having two children in their custody. This was the most common form of family composition identified by homeless parents and guardians in the current study.

4. Marital status of homeless parents/guardians

The majority of homeless parents or guardians—51.6% in Timmins and 44.3% in the comparison communities—were married or in a common-law relationship (see Table 6). Approximately one-fourth of parents or guardians reported being single, and about one-fourth were separated, divorced or widowed.

Table 6. Marital status among homeless parents or guardians

Marital status	Timmins		Sudbury-North Bay-Hearst	
	N	%	N	%
Single	29	23.8	80	28.4
Married or common law	63	51.6	125	44.3
Separated, divorced or widowed	30	24.6	77	27.3

5. Sources of income among homeless parents or guardians

The main forms of financial support received from government sources were the Ontario Disabilities Support Program (ODSP) and Ontario Works (OW) in both samples (see Table 7). In Timmins, ODSP and Ontario Works accounted for financial support among 28.1% and 18% of homeless families respectively. The pattern was somewhat different in the comparison communities since a larger proportion of families relied on financial assistance from Ontario Works (34%) than from ODSP (19.2%).

Another major source of income was employment, cited by 28.9% of homeless families in Timmins and 26.9% of homeless families in Sudbury, North Bay and Hearst. A slightly higher proportion of homeless families (11%) relied on employment insurance or WSIB benefits in Timmins as compared to those (7%) in the comparison sample. The other forms of government support included Canada Pension Plan or Old Age Security (7.1% in Timmins and 5.1% in the comparison communities). Non-governmental support came from a variety of sources (e.g., private pension plans, financial support from family members) to 11% of homeless families in Timmins and 8% in Sudbury, North Bay and Hearst. Some families in Timmins and in the comparison sample (i.e. less than 10%) reported that they had no income.

Table 7. Sources of income among all homeless families

Sources of income*	Timmins		Sudbury-North Bay-Hearst	
	N	%	N	%
No income	9	7.0	26	8.8
Ontario Works	23	18.0	101	34.0
ODSP	36	28.1	57	19.2
Employment	37	28.9	80	26.9
Employment Insurance or WSIB	14	11.0	14	4.7
CPP/OAS	9	7.1	15	5.1
Other (private pension, family support)	14	11.0	24	8.0

*Results are based on multiple responses; therefore the number of responses may exceed the total number of homeless families with custody of children.

6. Reasons for family homelessness

Participants stated that low wages, lack of money and unemployment led to homelessness or being at risk of homelessness.

Table 8 summarizes the main reasons for homelessness amongst families with custody of children in Timmins and in the comparison communities.

The participants were asked to identify all relevant reasons for homelessness; consequently the number of responses is greater than the number of homeless families with custody of children. The major reasons for homelessness fell into structural (e.g., unemployment, low-wages, inadequate social assistance, unaffordable housing), familial (e.g., varied family issues) and personal (e.g., illness and disability) domains.

The largest proportion of responses among homeless families in Timmins referred to problems with work (25.7%); a slightly smaller percentage of responses related to work were noted by those in the comparison sample (19.5%). The participants stated that low wages, lack of money and unemployment led to homelessness or being at risk of homelessness. A second set of reasons pertained to varied family issues; challenges related to families constituted the central reason for homelessness and precarious housing conditions. The specific reasons cited pertained to divorce or separation, abuse or general challenges associated with family life. Thirdly, approximately a sixth of the families in Timmins and the comparison communities cited difficulties with social assistance such as insufficient benefits to meet basic needs, late payment of benefits, termination of benefits or ineligibility for benefits. Problems with housing were cited in approximately 13% the responses within both samples. Thirty-nine families in Timmins stated that homelessness resulted from an inability to pay rent or from eviction from housing. A small number of homeless families attributed their homelessness to substance abuse, release from incarceration, and travelling or transience.

Slightly less than one-fourth of homeless parents or guardians in both Timmins and the comparison communities reported mental health problems.

Table 8. Reasons for homelessness

Reasons*	Timmins		Sudbury-North Bay-Hearst	
	N	%	N	%
<i>Problems with work</i>				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unemployment • Low wages • No money • Seeking work 	74	25.7	138	19.5
<i>Problems with social assistance (including ODSP)</i>				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inadequate benefits • Cut in social assistance cut • Late payment • Does not qualify 	50	17.4	113	16.0
<i>Illness, disability or mental illness</i>				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mental illness • Physical illness & disability 	44	15.3	109	15.4
<i>Problems with housing</i>				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unable to pay rent or mortgage • Evicted or kicked out • Housing not adequate • Trouble with landlord, roommates or neighbours • City deemed apartment unfit 	39	13.5	91	12.9
<i>Family</i>				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Domestic violence or abuse • Divorce or separation • Unspecified family issues 	51	17.7	146	20.6
<i>Substance use</i>	9	3.1	49	6.9
<i>Release from jail</i>	7	2.4	18	2.5
<i>Travelling/transient/relocated, transferred or moving</i>	12	4.2	35	4.9
<i>Other</i>	2	.7	9	1.3

*Results are based on multiple responses; therefore the number of responses exceeds the total number of homeless families with custody of children.

7. Mental health of homeless parents or guardians

Slightly less than one-fourth of homeless parents or guardians in both Timmins and the comparison communities reported mental health problems. The most commonly mentioned mental health difficulties were depression and anxiety (see Table 9). Approximately half of the homeless parents or guardians who reported that they were experiencing mental

health challenges, 44.1% in Timmins and 60.6% in the comparison communities, stated that they were suffering from depression or postpartum depression. A second set of mental health challenges pertained to stress, anxiety, panic attacks, and suicidal thoughts; about one-fourth of the sample identified anxiety as a major mental health issue. Stress was experienced by 9.7% of homeless parents in Timmins and 15.2% in the comparison communities. Other major mental health concerns pertained to specific disorders including bi-polar, PTSD, and addictions-related disorders.

The same proportion that reported mental health challenges, one-fourth of the respondents, reported physical health problems.

Table 9. Mental health issues among homeless parents or guardians²

Mental health issue*	Timmins		Sudbury-North Bay-Hearst	
	N	%	N	%
Depression or postpartum depression	14	44.1	40	60.6
Stress, anxiety, panic attacks, suicidal thoughts	12	38.7	25	38.0
Bi-polar	9	29.0	8	12.1
PTSD	4	12.9	4	6.1
Substance use	2	6.5	4	6.1
Other (e.g., borderline personality disorder, schizophrenia)	4	12.9	13	19.69

*Results are based on multiple responses and the percentage of participants rather than the percentage of responses as in some other tables.

8. Physical health problems among homeless parents or guardians

The same proportion that reported mental health challenges, one-fourth of the respondents, reported physical health problems. The most common were chronic conditions such as back problems, knee problems, heart problems, diabetes, and arthritis in Timmins and the comparison communities (see Table 10).

In Timmins, about one-fourth of the homeless parents or guardians (26.7%) reported back problems, followed by diabetes (16.7%), and knee problems (10%). In the comparison communities, the top three health concerns included back problems (21.5%), heart problems (12.7%) and arthritis (10.1%). A small number of respondents cited asthma, blood pressure, epilepsy, cancer, multiple sclerosis, insomnia and other physical conditions.

Thirty-eight percent of homeless parents or guardians in Timmins and 43.2% in the comparison communities reported that they had been absolutely homeless during their lifetime.

²Of the homeless parents/guardians, 77.4% did not identify any mental health problem

9. Experience of absolute homelessness

Responding to the questions concerning absolute homelessness, 38.8% of homeless parents or guardians in Timmins and 43.2% in the comparison communities reported that they had been absolutely homeless during their lifetime. Moreover, in the year prior to the study, approximately one-fourth of the respondents had experienced absolute homelessness. A small number of homeless parents and guardians in Timmins (n=6) and in other communities (n=19), had slept on the streets or outdoors.

Table 10. Physical health issues among homeless parents or guardians³

Physical health issue*	Timmins		Sudbury-North Bay-Hearst	
	N	%	N	%
Back problem	8	26.7	17	21.5
Asthma	1	3.3	4	5.1
Knee problems	3	10.0	2	2.5
Diabetes	5	16.7	2	2.5
Blood pressure	1	3.3	2	2.5
Heart problems	2	6.7	10	12.7
Arthritis	2	6.7	8	10.1
Epilepsy	1	3.3	2	2.5
Cancer	1	3.3	3	3.8
Multiple sclerosis	1	3.3	1	1.3
Insomnia	1	3.3	1	1.3
Other (e.g., eye problems)	4	13.3	27	34.17

*Results are based on multiple responses and the percentage of participants rather than the percentage of responses as in some other tables.

Table 11. Lifetime experience of absolute homelessness among all families⁴

	Timmins		Sudbury-North Bay-Hearst	
	N	%	N	%
Lifetime experience of absolute homelessness	47	38.8	119	43.2
Absolutely homeless in the previous year	25	20.6	76	27.8
Slept on streets or outdoors in the previous year*	6	5.0	19	7.6

³Of the homeless parents/guardians, 74.6% did not identify any mental health problem.

⁴Of the homeless families with custody of children, 11.1% did not respond to the question regarding sleeping rough.

C. Absolutely Homeless Families with Custody of Children

A further analysis of data pertaining to the families experiencing absolute homelessness at the time of study was conducted to gain a better understanding of the prevalence, characteristics of homeless parents or guardians, marital status, sources of income, and reasons for absolute homelessness.

Eighteen percent of families in Timmins and 30% of families in the comparison sample (Sudbury, North-Bay and Hearst) were experiencing absolute homelessness at the time of study.

1. Count of absolutely homeless families

The count revealed that 18.7% of families in Timmins and 30.8% of families in the comparison sample (Sudbury, North-Bay and Hearst) were experiencing absolute homelessness at the time of study (see Table 12). While all of these homeless families included parents or guardians with custody of children, it is not apparent whether they were accompanied by children when the data were collected.

Further analysis of this sub-group of homeless families revealed that about 24.2% had experienced absolute homelessness in the year prior to the study in Timmins. Amongst these respondents, about one-third reported that they had slept on the streets or outdoors. In the comparison communities, 73.5% of the respondents had been absolutely homeless in the year prior to the study. Two-thirds (66.7%) had slept on the streets or outdoors.

Table 12. Absolutely homeless families with custody of children

Timmins		Sudbury-North Bay-Hearst	
N	%	N	%
23	18.7	84	30.8

A large majority of absolutely homeless parents or guardians were Anglophone, followed by Indigenous and Francophone parents.

2. Demographic characteristics of absolutely homeless parents or guardians

The gender distribution of absolutely homeless parents or guardians differed from the total population of homeless families in the study (see Table 13). Men constituted about one-third (34.8%) and women about two-thirds (65.2%) of absolutely homeless parents or guardians in Timmins. In the comparison sample, men comprised about one-fourth (26.2%) and women comprised about three-fourths (73.8%). A large majority of absolutely homeless parents or guardians were Anglophone, followed by Indigenous and Francophone parents. However, Indigenous persons were overrepresented in the population of absolutely homeless families in all study communities.

Table 13. Characteristics of absolutely homeless parents or guardians

	Timmins		Sudbury-North Bay-Hearst	
	N	%	N	%
<i>Gender</i>				
Women	15	65.2	62	73.8
Men	8	34.8	22	26.2
<i>Ethno-cultural group</i>				
Anglophone	11	47.8	45	52.3
Francophone	4	17.4	13	15.1
Indigenous	8	34.8	24	27.9
Visible minority	0	—	4	4.7
<i>Language*</i>				
English	15	65.2	59	71.1
French	4	17.4	18	21.7
First Nations	4	17.4	3	3.6
Other	0	—	3	3.6
<i>Age</i>				
15-19	1	4.5	4	4.6
20-24	3	13.7	13	15.1
25-29	2	9.1	11	12.8
30-34	5	22.7	20	23.3
35-39	4	18.2	18	20.9
40-44	5	22.7	8	9.3
45-49	0	0.0	10	11.6
50-54	2	9.1	1	1.2
55-59	—	—	—	—
60+	0	0.0	1	1.2

*Language first learnt as a child and still spoken.

Within the sample of absolutely homeless families, the age range of parents or guardians spanned 16 to 69 years with a mean age of 34 years. Examination of the age distribution of parents in Timmins revealed that 95.5% were between 20 and 59 years (see Table 13). Similarly, 94.2 % of absolutely homeless parents or guardians were in the same age range in the comparison communities. A small number of parents were adolescents in Timmins (n=1) and the comparison communities (n=4). Moreover, 1.2% of absolutely homeless parents or guardians were above 60 years in the comparison sample but none of the absolutely homeless parents or guardians were above 60 years in Timmins.

The largest segment of absolutely homeless families relied on government assistance in the forms of ODSP and Ontario Works in Timmins and the comparison communities.

3. Marital status among absolutely homeless parents or guardians

Examination of the marital status (see Table 14) of absolutely homeless parents or guardians in Timmins showed the prominence of married or common-law individuals (43.5%).

The second largest group included single parents or guardians (34.8%) followed by a group of separated, divorced or widowed parents or guardians (21.7%). In the comparison sample, slightly less than one-third (31.4%) of absolutely homeless parents or guardians were single, and the same proportion were separated, divorced or widowed. Similarly, just over a third (37.2%) of absolutely homeless parents or guardians were married or in common-law relationship in the comparison group.

Table 14. Marital status among absolutely homeless parents or guardians

Marital Status	Timmins		Sudbury-North Bay-Hearst	
	N	%	N	%
Single	8	34.8	27	31.4
Married or common law	10	43.5	32	37.2
Separated, divorced or widowed	5	21.7	27	31.4

4. Sources of income among absolutely homeless families

The largest segment of absolutely homeless families relied on government assistance in the forms of ODSP and Ontario Works in Timmins and the comparison communities (see Table 15). This group constituted around 40% of absolutely homeless families. In the comparison sample, a greater percentage of absolutely homeless families identified Ontario Works (39.5%) as their primary source of income. Furthermore, ODSP was cited as a central source of income by 18.6% of absolutely homeless families in the comparison group.

Table 15. Sources of income among absolutely homeless families

Sources of Income*	Timmins		Sudbury-North Bay-Hearst	
	N	%	N	%
No income	2	8.7	15	17.4
Ontario Works	9	39.1	34	39.5
ODSP	10	43.5	16	18.6
Employment (including casual work)	0	0.0	14	16.3
Employment Insurance	2	8.7	3	3.5
Other (private pension, family support, WSIB, CPP)	2	8.7	10	11.6

*Results are based on multiple responses. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding error.

Furthermore, in the comparison sample, 16.3% of absolutely homeless families derived their income through employment including casual and part-time work. In contrast, not a single homeless family facing absolute homelessness identified employment as their source of income in Timmins. The number of absolutely homeless families receiving employment insurance was small in Timmins (n=2) as well as in comparison communities (n=3). Similarly, a small percentage of absolutely homeless families reported that they had no income at all. The proportion of parents or guardians reporting that they had no source of income was higher in the comparison sample (17.4%) than it was in Timmins (8.7%). Other sources of income included private pension, financial assistance from family members, WSIB and Canada Pension Plan (CPP).

5. Reasons for Absolute Family Homelessness

As noted above, the questionnaire allowed participants to indicate multiple reasons for homelessness based on the perceptions of the homeless parents and guardians. The results shown in Table 16 are based on the number of responses; given the multiple responses, the numbers are greater than the number of participants. The most striking reason for absolute homelessness, viewed as a single category, pertained to varied family issues. In Timmins, all of the parents or guardians noted family problems as a major cause of absolute homelessness (see Table 16). In the comparison communities of northeastern Ontario, two-thirds of the respondents mentioned family matters as the leading cause of absolute homelessness.

The second most common precipitating factor for absolute homelessness identified by parents/guardians included various structural problems such as unemployment, seeking work, low wages, insufficient social assistance, and inability to pay rent. These factors were similar in terms of the proportions citing them in Timmins and the comparison sample. If problems with work, social assistance and housing are combined to reflect the major structural factors related to homelessness, they account for more than half of the reasons cited. Mental illness, physical health issues, and disability were also recognized as reasons for absolute homelessness by a relatively large segment of families encountering absolute homelessness, particularly in Timmins. Additional reasons for absolute homelessness among some families pertained to substance abuse, release from prison, and transience or relocation.

The most striking reason for absolute homelessness, viewed as a single category, pertained to varied family issues. In Timmins, all of the parents or guardians noted family problems as a major cause of absolute homelessness.

Table 16. Reasons for absolute homelessness among families

Reasons*	Timmins		Sudbury-North Bay-Hearst	
	N	%	N	%
<i>Problems with work</i>				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unemployment • Low wages • No money • Seeking work 	54	29.7	82	22.6
<i>Problems with social assistance (including ODSP):</i>				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inadequate social assistance • Cut in social assistance cut • Late payment • Does not qualify 	32	17.6	53	14.6
<i>Illness, disability, or mental illness</i>				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mental illness • Physical illness and disability 	24	13.1	31	8.5
<i>Problems with housing</i>				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unable to pay rent or mortgage • Evicted or kicked out 	24	13.1	49	13.5
<i>Family</i>				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Domestic violence or abuse • Divorce or separation • Unspecified family issues 	28	15.4	78	21.5
<i>Substance use</i>	6	3.3	29	8.0
<i>Release from jail</i>	6	3.3	7	1.9
<i>Travelling/transient/ relocated, transferred or moving</i>	6	3.3	29	8.0
<i>Other</i>	2	1.1	5	1.4

*Results are based on multiple responses; therefore the number of responses exceeds the total number of homeless families with custody of children.

D. Families At-Risk of Homelessness

In addition to examining the issue of absolute homelessness among families, we conducted an analysis of a sub-group of those families who indicated that they were vulnerable to losing their homes. In particular, we attempted to understand how many families were facing precarious housing conditions and the reasons surrounding their vulnerability to homeless in the immediate future.

1. Count of families at-risk of homelessness

The count of families at-risk of homelessness revealed that 77.2% of families with custody of children were precariously housed in Timmins. A slightly smaller portion of the respondents in the comparison communities, 62.5% of families, were facing the prospect of losing their homes (see Table 17).

2. Reasons for being at-risk of homelessness

Families experiencing precarious housing conditions and risk of homelessness identified multiple reasons for their housing situation (see Table 18). The central reason pertained to the structural problem of unemployment in Timmins; three-quarters of the participants gave this as a reason. The same issue was identified as a contributing factor by a third of the participants in the comparison sample. Other structural problems, insufficient social assistance, and inability to pay rent were cited as reasons for uncertain housing situation.

Table 17. Families at-risk of homelessness

Timmins		Sudbury-North Bay-Hearst	
N	%	N	%
95	77.2	167	62.5

Three-quarters of the families experiencing precarious housing conditions and risk of homelessness identified the structural problem of unemployment in Timmins as the reason for homelessness.

The second prominent reason pertained to varied family issues (mentioned by over half of the respondents in Timmins and in the comparison communities) that were creating a risk of homelessness. Illness and disability were noted as reasons by one-third of families in Timmins and more than one-fourth of families in the comparison sample. Travelling, transience and relocation contributed to the risk of homelessness among a sixth of the families in Timmins and about a third of families in the comparison communities. Other factors leading to potential homelessness were substance abuse, pending eviction, and release from jail. The percentage of responses for each issue, shown in Table 18, differs slightly from the percentage of participants reporting them.

Table 18. Reasons for being at-risk of homelessness

Reasons*	Timmins		Sudbury-North Bay-Hearst	
	N	%	N	%
<i>Problems with work</i>				
• Unemployment	36	36.0	69	24.6
• Low wages				
• Seeking work				
<i>Problems with social assistance (including ODSP)</i>				
• Inadequate social assistance	15	15.0	31	11.1
• Social assistance cut				
• Late payment				
• Does not qualify				
<i>Illness, disability, or mental illness</i>				
• Mental Illness	13	13.0	31	11.1
• Physical health issues or disability				
<i>Problems with housing</i>				
• Unable to pay rent or mortgage	12	12.0	35	12.5
• Evicted or kicked out				
<i>Family</i>				
• Domestic violence or abuse	14	14.0	62	22.1
• Divorce or separation				
• Unspecified family issues				
<i>Substance use</i>	3	3.0	18	6.4
<i>Out of jail</i>	3	3.0	5	1.8
<i>Travelling/transient/relocated, transferred or moving</i>	3	3.0	25	8.9
<i>Other</i>	1	1.0	4	1.4

*Results are based on multiple responses, therefore the number of responses may exceed the total number of homeless families with custody of children.

E. Indigenous Homeless Families: Comparison of Communities

As mentioned above, Indigenous families, including those who were absolutely homeless, were over-represented in all our period prevalence studies. It is important, therefore, to delve further into the reasons behind this over-representation. Indigenous families were selected for the analysis on the basis of demographic characteristics, marital status, sources of income and lifetime experience of absolute homelessness, as well as the reasons for and circumstances surrounding homelessness. Mental and physical health issues were also analyzed among this particular sub-group of homeless families. Indigenous families in Timmins are compared with the sample of Indigenous families in Sudbury, North Bay and Hearst.

1. Demographic characteristics of indigenous homeless parents or guardians

The gender distribution of Indigenous parents and guardians was heavily skewed towards women (90.9%) in Timmins (see Table 19). However, women comprised a smaller proportion (62.3%) of Indigenous homeless parents or guardians in the comparison communities. Notably, 43.5% of respondents in Timmins and 55% of those in the comparison communities had first learnt to speak English as a child. About one-third of the respondents had learnt to speak an Indigenous language as a child. A smaller proportion mentioned learning French as a child in Timmins (21.7%) and in the comparison communities (13.3%).

The age-range for Indigenous homeless parents or guardians was from 18 to 71. The mean age was 35 years. About 93.1% of Indigenous homeless parents or guardians fell into the age range of 20 to 59 years in Timmins. A similarly large segment of this sub-group (93.6%) was in the same age range as the comparison sample. A small percentage of Indigenous parents were below 19 years in Timmins (2.3%) and in the comparison communities (3.2%). Moreover, few of the Indigenous parents or guardians were above 60 years in Timmins and the comparison sample (4.6% and 3.2%, respectively).

Table 19. Profile of homeless Indigenous families

	Timmins		Sudbury-North Bay-Hearst	
	N	%	N	%
<i>Gender of parent or guardian</i>				
Female	40	90.9	38	62.3
Male	4	9.1	23	37.7
<i>Language*</i>				
English	20	43.5	33	55.0
French	10	21.7	8	13.3
Indigenous	16	34.8	18	30.0
<i>Age</i>				
15-19	1	2.3	2	3.2
20-24	7	16.3	11	17.7
25-29	6	14.0	8	13.0
30-34	8	18.6	13	21.0
35-39	6	14.0	9	14.5
40-44	6	14.0	10	16.1
45-49	4	9.3	4	6.5
50-54	1	2.3	2	3.2
55-59	2	4.6	1	1.6
60+	2	4.6	2	3.2

*Language first learnt as a child and still spoken.

2. Marital status among indigenous homeless parents or guardians

Nearly half (45.6%) of the Indigenous parents or guardians in Timmins were single (see Table 20). In contrast, about half of the Indigenous parents or guardians (49.2%) in the comparison communities identified themselves as being married or in a common-law relationship. Less than one-fourth of respondents (i.e., 17.4% in Timmins and 21.3% in the comparison sample) reported their marital status as separated, divorced or widowed.

Table 20. Marital status of Indigenous parents or guardians

Marital status	Timmins		Sudbury-North Bay-Hearst	
	N	%	Nr	%
Single	21	45.6	18	29.5
Married or common law	17	37.0	30	49.2
Separated, divorced or widowed	8	17.4	13	21.3

3. Sources of income among homeless indigenous families

Government assistance in the form of Ontario Works was the primary source of income among Indigenous homeless families in both samples (see Table 21). However, 28.3% of families relied on employment for income in Timmins as compared to 9.7% families in other three communities. Another form of government assistance was ODSP. A small group of Indigenous families (10.9%) received their income through employment insurance in Timmins. In contrast, none of the Indigenous families derived income through this particular source in the comparison cities. Other sources of income included government support (Canada Pension Plan and Old Age Security), private pension, and family support. Few Indigenous families in Timmins and the comparison communities reported that they had no income whatsoever.

Table 21. Sources of income among Indigenous homeless families

Sources of income	Timmins		Sudbury-North Bay-Hearst	
	N	%	N	%
No Income	2	4.3	1	1.6
Ontario Works	17	37.0	36	58.1
ODSP	5	10.9	15	24.2
Employment (including casual work)	13	28.3	6	9.7
Employment Insurance	5	10.9	0	0
Other (private pension, CPP, family support, Old Age Security)	11	8.6	9	6.4

Government assistance in the form of Ontario Works was the primary source of income among Indigenous homeless families in both samples.

4. Lifetime experience of absolute homelessness among indigenous parents or guardians

Indigenous families outside of Timmins reported greater exposure to absolute homelessness. One-third of Indigenous families had experienced absolute homelessness in their life time and in the past year in Timmins (see Table 22). In the comparison communities, about two-thirds of families had experienced absolute homelessness in their life time and in the previous year. As far as sleeping on the streets or outdoors was concerned, one-third of Indigenous families in Timmins and two-thirds of families in the three other communities had done so in the year prior to the study.

Table 22. Absolute homelessness among Indigenous families

	Timmins		Sudbury-North Bay-Hearst	
	N	%	N	%
Lifetime experience of absolute homelessness	18	32.1	38	67.9
Absolutely homeless previous year	11	34.4	21	65.6
Sleeping on streets or outdoors in the previous year	4	33.3	8	66.7

5. Reasons for homelessness among indigenous families

In Timmins, respondents more often cited problems with work and with social assistance than did those in the comparison communities. The central reasons for homelessness among Indigenous families in Timmins pertained to a combination of the structural problems associated with social assistance, unemployment, and inability to pay rent (see Table 23). In the comparison communities, the important factors related to homelessness were more varied; they included structural problems of low wages and inadequate social assistance, but also illness, housing, and family were of similar importance.

In addition to structural problems, family issues emerged as a strong cause of homelessness among Indigenous families in the two samples. Illness and disability were cited as important precipitating factors for homelessness by Indigenous families living in Sudbury, North Bay and Hearst, but were cited less often by those living in Timmins.

As far as sleeping on the streets or outdoors was concerned, one-third of Indigenous families in Timmins and two-thirds of families in the three other communities had done so in the year prior to the study.

In Timmins, respondents more often cited problems with work and with social assistance than did those in the comparison communities.

Table 23. Reasons for homelessness among Indigenous families⁵

Reasons*	Timmins		Sudbury-North Bay-Hearst	
	N	%	N	%
<i>Problems with work</i>				
• Unemployment	30	33.0	37	18.0
• Low wages				
• Seeking work				
<i>Problems with social assistance (including ODSP)</i>				
• Inadequate social assistance	24	26.3	32	15.6
• Cut in social assistance				
• Late payment				
• Does not qualify				
<i>Illness, disability, or mental illness</i>				
• Mental illness	3	3.3	33	16.1
• Physical Illness and disability				
<i>Problems with housing</i>				
• Unable to pay rent or mortgage	14	15.4	25	12.2
• Evicted or kicked out				
<i>Family</i>				
• Divorce or separation	15	16.5	36	17.6
• Unspecified family issues				
<i>Substance use</i>	2	2.2	19	9.3
<i>Out of jail</i>	3	3.3	8	3.9
<i>Travelling/transient/ relocated, transferred or moving</i>	0	0	12	5.9
<i>Other</i>	0	0	3	1.4

*Results are based on multiple responses, therefore the number of responses exceed the total number of homeless Indigenous families with custody of children.

6. Mental and physical health problems among indigenous homeless parents or guardians

Among Indigenous homeless parents or guardians, depression emerged as a major mental health problem in Timmins; it was reported by three-quarters of Timmins parents/guardians and a similar proportion (71.4%) of those in the comparison communities (see Table 24). The other mental health concerns included anxiety, postpartum depression, and substance abuse.

About half of the respondents reported suffering from specific mental health disorders (e.g., bi-polar disorder, schizophrenia) in the comparison communities of Sudbury, North Bay and Hearst. In Timmins, none of the respondents reported these specific mental health disorders.

⁵Thirty-one% of Indigenous families did not indicate reasons for homelessness.

Table 24. Mental and physical health issues among Indigenous homeless parents or guardians

	Timmins		Sudbury-North Bay-Hearst	
	N	%	N	%
<i>Mental illness*</i>				
Depression	6	75.0	10	71.4
Anxiety	2	25.0	2	14.3
Postpartum depression	1	12.5	0	0.0
Substance abuse	1	12.5	1	7.1
Others (e.g., bi-polar, schizophrenia, PTSD, seasonal affective disorder, concurrent disorders)	—	—	7	50.0
<i>Physical health problems**</i>				
Back problems	6	54.5	3	18.8
Asthma	1	9.1	0	0
Knee problems	2	18.2	2	12.5
Diabetes	1	9.1	1	6.3
Arthritis	1	9.1	3	18.8
Injury due to an accident	1	9.1	0	0.0
Other (e.g., cancer, hand and wrist problems, bone problems)	0	0	11	68.8

*Results are based on multiple responses and the percentage of participants rather than the percentage of responses as in some other tables.

In terms of physical health problems, the most prominent issues involved back and knee problems among Indigenous homeless parents or guardians in Timmins. In the comparison sample, about half of the respondents reported a wide range of health problems including cancer, hand and wrist problems, and bone problems. Chronic health problems such as arthritis and diabetes were cited as concerns among Indigenous homeless parents or guardians in both samples. Asthma as well as injury due to accident were cited by Indigenous parents or guardians in Timmins but not in the comparison communities.

Among Indigenous homeless parents or guardians, depression emerged as a major mental health problem in Timmins; it was reported by three-quarters of Timmins parents/guardians.

⁶Of homeless Indigenous parents/guardians, 75% did not indicate any physical health problems.

IV. DISCUSSION

The self-identified mental health problems experienced by homeless parents or guardians included depression, anxiety and stress.

Anglophones and Francophones of European origins were under-represented, while Indigenous people were greatly over-represented in the sample of all homeless families and those facing absolute homelessness in Timmins and in the comparison communities of Sudbury, North Bay and Timmins. Moreover, two-thirds of Indigenous families were absolutely homeless in the past year and had slept on the streets or outdoors in Timmins.

The demographic profile revealed that women constituted a greater proportion of homeless parents or guardians among the entire sample of homeless families as well as among absolutely homeless families. Moreover, women constituted an extremely high percentage of the sub-group of Indigenous parents or guardians in Timmins. Interestingly, a majority of homeless parents or guardians in Timmins and the comparison communities were married or in a common-law relationship which counters the findings of earlier studies indicating a high prevalence of single mothers in the population of homeless families (Bassuk, Weinreb, Buckner, Browne, Salomon & Bassuk, 1996; Rossi, 1994). However, it should be noted that among Indigenous homeless parents or guardians in Timmins, there was a greater prevalence of single individuals (i.e., lone parents or guardians) as opposed to those married or in a common-law relationship. In terms of age distribution, a large proportion of homeless parents or guardians were in a range of 20 to 54 years with much smaller proportions falling below 19 and above 60 years of age.

The primary sources of income among all homeless families and those facing absolute homelessness, in both samples, included government assistance in the forms of Ontario Works and the Ontario Disabilities Support Program. Employment also emerged as one of the sources of income in the total sample of homeless families as well as in the sub-group of Indigenous homeless families in Timmins and the comparison communities. However, in the sub-sample of absolutely homeless families, no parent or guardian identified employment as a source of income in Timmins.

An examination of the reasons for homelessness among families revealed that family issues constituted the central reason for homelessness and precarious housing conditions in the total sample of homeless families in Timmins and in the comparison communities. Among absolutely homeless families, family issues emerged as a powerful contributing factor in Timmins. On the other hand, structural problems related to unemployment, insufficient social assistance, and low wages were cited as major contributing factors to homelessness and to precarious housing conditions. These findings are consistent with previous studies which showed the prominence of structural problems (Gould & Williams, 2010; Lee, 2012) and various forms of familial issues such as domestic violence, dissolution of marriage, separation from partners, drug problems, family friction (e.g., conflicts with support networks), and estrangement from extended family as precipitating factors for homelessness among families

Two-thirds of Indigenous families were absolutely homeless in the past year and had slept on the streets or outdoors in Timmins.

(Fertig & Reingold, 2008; Johnson, 1989; Lehmann, Kass, Drake & Nichols, 2007; Sev'er, 2002; Shinn, Weitzman, Stojanovic, Knickman, Jimenez et al., 1998; Wood, Valdez, Hayashi & Shen, 1990a).

The self-identified mental health problems experienced by homeless parents or guardians included depression, anxiety, and stress. Depression was identified as a major mental health concern by Indigenous homeless families in Timmins and the other three cities. A small number of parents or guardians were suffering from postpartum depression, PTSD, and suicidal ideation. The prominent physical health conditions included back, knee, and heart problems, diabetes and arthritis among homeless parents or guardians in Timmins and the comparison communities. Among Indigenous homeless families living in Timmins, back and knee problems were significant health concerns. Other health conditions included chronic diseases (e.g., asthma, epilepsy), terminal illness (e.g., cancer) and a wide range of other health problems (e.g., eye problems, shoulder problems).

Structural problems related to unemployment, insufficient social assistance, and low wages were cited as major contributing factors to homelessness and to precarious housing conditions.

V. FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The findings of this report will influence the subsequent phases of the study on family homelessness in Timmins. In particular, attention will be paid to the nature and circumstances surrounding homelessness faced by families belonging to the three ethno-cultural groups (i.e., Anglophones, Francophone and Indigenous). These factors will be explored in greater depth in qualitative interviews and focus groups. The reasons for homelessness, characterized by the structural problems, family issues, and personal factors will be studied to inform ameliorative and preventive policy and program development. In addition, service use patterns and the capacity of the current service system in meeting the needs of homeless families will be examined.

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