

Indigenous Homelessness in Guelph-Wellington

AN ANALYSIS OF THE GUELPH-WELLINGTON BY-NAME LIST

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FOR



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ABOUT THIS REPORT

The purpose of this report is to provide insights into Indigenous homelessness in Guelph-Wellington based on analysis of data from the local By-Name List (BNL). Analysis includes data from November 2017 to October 2018 and includes individual adults (age 25 years and over) and unaccompanied youth (age 16 to 24 years). Family data is not included due to the small sample size of Indigenous families on the BNL.

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INTRODUCTION & KEY CONCEPTS

In 2017, Métis scholar Jesse Thistle, in consultation with Indigenous scholars, community members, knowledge keepers and Elders, developed and published the following definition of Indigenous homelessness in Canada:

“Indigenous homelessness is a human condition that describes First Nations, Métis and Inuit individuals, families or communities lacking stable, permanent, appropriate housing, or the immediate prospect, means or ability to acquire such housing. Unlike the common colonialist definition of homelessness, Indigenous homelessness is not defined as lacking a structure of habitation; rather, it is more fully described and understood through a composite lens of Indigenous worldviews. These include: individuals, families and communities isolated from their relationships to land, water, place, family, kin, each other, animals, cultures, languages and identities. Importantly, Indigenous people experiencing these kinds of homelessness cannot culturally, spiritually, emotionally or physically reconnect with their Indigeneity or lost relationships¹.”

In his report, Thistle argues that Canadians “must develop and recognize an Indigenous definition of homelessness that must inform policy-making to solve the tragedy of Indigenous homelessness².”

On November 5, 2018, the Government of Canada committed \$2.2 billion over 10 years to tackle homelessness through a redesigned federal homelessness program, *Reaching Home*³. As a Designated Community, the County of Wellington receives funding to allocate to local initiatives, based on recommendations from a Community Advisory Board. While not directly tied to Indigenous Homelessness, *Reaching Home* presents an opportunity to shape and fund appropriate local responses.

With the announcement, Tim Richter, President & CEO of the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness, noted that *Reaching Home* will support communities to adopt proven approaches to preventing and reducing homelessness, including By-Name Lists and Coordinated Access Systems⁴. While some communities will be accessing *Reaching Home* to develop these strategies, partners in Guelph-Wellington began developing a By-Name List (BNL) in April 2016 and introduced a Coordinated Access System (CAS) in February 2017.

¹ Thistle, J. (2017). *Indigenous Definition of Homelessness in Canada*. Toronto: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press. Available here: <https://homelesshub.ca/sites/default/files/attachments/COHIndigenousHomelessnessDefinition.pdf>

² Thistle, J. (2017)

³ Employment and Social Development Canada (2018). *Reaching Home: Canada’s Homelessness Strategy*. Hamilton: CISON. Available here: <https://www.newswire.ca/news-releases/reaching-home-canadas-homelessness-strategy-699656261.html>

⁴ Employment and Social Development Canada (2018).

The 20,000 Homes Campaign, an initiative of the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness, defines a BNL as the following:

“A By-Name List is a real-time list of all people experiencing homelessness in your community. It includes a robust set of data points that support coordinated access and prioritization at a household level and an understanding of homeless inflow and outflow at a system level. This real-time actionable data supports triage to services, system performance evaluation and advocacy (for the policies and resources necessary to end homelessness)⁵.”

Locally, families and individuals experiencing homelessness are triaged using a Common Assessment Tool – the Vulnerability Index – Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool (VI-SPDAT). The VI-SPDAT is “a brief survey that can be conducted quickly to determine whether a client has high, moderate, or low acuity⁶” (i.e. depth of need). The VI-SPDAT is self-reported and only requires “yes,” “no,” or one-word answers. Once completed, the individual or family is placed on the BNL where a combination of their vulnerability score (determined by the VI-SPDAT) and number of months homeless (i.e. chronicity) determines how they are prioritized for housing supports and services.

The VI-SPDAT is offered by employees of Door Agencies – select organizations and programs that typically connect with those experiencing homelessness and whose employees have been trained to deliver the VI-SPDAT. The process – from initial triage by Door Agencies, to additions to the BNL and prioritizations from it – is all part of the Guelph-Wellington Coordinated Access System.

While some aspects of the local CAS have been evaluated⁷ and BNL data has been shared publicly through annual reports in 2017⁸ and 2018⁹, the only sub-populations to be included in any kind of analysis has been adults, youth, and families.

INDIGENOUS HOMELESSNESS IN GUELPH-WELLINGTON

A Point-in-Time Count (PiT Count) is “a method used to measure sheltered and unsheltered homelessness. It aims to enumerate individuals in a community who are, at a given time, staying in shelters or “sleeping rough” (e.g., on the street, in parks), providing a “snapshot” of homelessness in a community¹⁰.” In 2016, a Guelph-Wellington PiT Count identified 295 individuals experiencing homelessness, with 22% identifying as

⁵ Built for Zero Canada (n.d.) *By-Name Lists*. Available here: <http://www.bfzcanada.ca/by-name-lists/>

⁶ OrgCode Consulting Inc. and Community Solutions (2015). *Vulnerability Index – Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool (VI-SPDAT)*. Canadian version 2.0. Available here: [http://www.peterborough.ca/Assets/City+Assets/Social+Services/Documents/SPDAT+Training+Materials/VI-SPDAT+v2.0+Single+CA+\(Print\).pdf](http://www.peterborough.ca/Assets/City+Assets/Social+Services/Documents/SPDAT+Training+Materials/VI-SPDAT+v2.0+Single+CA+(Print).pdf)

⁷ Guelph & Wellington Task Force for Poverty Elimination (May 2018). *Guelph-Wellington Coordinated Entry System Door Agency Evaluation*. Guelph, ON.

⁸ Ellery, Randalin (November 2017). *2016/17 Annual Report: Guelph-Wellington 20,000 Homes*. Guelph & Wellington Task Force for Poverty Elimination. Available here: <https://www.gwpoverity.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/201617-Annual-Report-Guelph-Wellington-20000-Homes.pdf>

⁹ Ellery, Randalin (January 2018). *2017/18 Annual Report: Guelph-Wellington 20,000 Homes*. Guelph & Wellington Task Force for Poverty Elimination. Available here: <https://www.gwpoverity.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Final-Report-Guelph-Wellington-20K-Homes.pdf>

¹⁰ Government of Canada (2017). *Everyone Counts: Homelessness Partnering Strategy Coordinated Point-in-Time Count*. Employment and Social Development Canada. Available here: <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/communities/homelessness/point-in-time.html>

Indigenous or having Indigenous ancestry¹¹. A follow-up PiT count in 2018, identified 325 individuals experiencing homelessness in Guelph-Wellington, with 14% identifying as Indigenous or having Indigenous ancestry¹².

PiT Counts, however, are fraught with limitations, including difficulties identifying individuals by volunteers, seasonal changes, and potential duplication of individuals¹³. Barriers to participation in a PiT Count may be amplified for Indigenous individuals and research has shown that Indigenous peoples “are likely to be significantly undercounted during PiT Counts. This is due to numerous factors including: their overrepresentation among hidden homeless populations, movement between urban communities and reserves, and expressed unwillingness to participate in PiT Counts.”¹⁴

Due to the limitations associated with PiT Counts, it is believed that analysis of BNL data could provide a more in-depth understanding of Indigenous homelessness in Guelph-Wellington. However, it is acknowledged that the local CAS is not without significant issues, including a failure to include any indigenous-specific services or providers as Door Agencies. Nevertheless, an analysis of Indigenous individuals on the BNL can offer insights into the depths and experiences of homelessness that are worthy of consideration.

RESULTS

During the period of November 2017 to October 2018, 342 unique individuals experienced homelessness for at least one month in Guelph-Wellington, based on data from the BNL. Of those, 68 (20%) self-identified as Indigenous or as having Indigenous ancestry when completing the Common Assessment Tool.

Actively Homeless & Move-Ins

Analysis of the BNL demonstrates that from November 2017 to October 2018, the number of Indigenous individuals that actively experienced homelessness generally fluctuated from 21 to 31. The number experienced an expected spike in April (36) as a result of the Point-in-Time Count (Figure 1). On average, 88% of Indigenous respondents were ‘chronically homeless’ – in other words, they had experienced homelessness for 6 months or more in the past year.

As an overall percentage of those experiencing homelessness in Guelph-Wellington, Indigenous individuals generally accounted for 16-20% compared to non-Indigenous individuals (Figure 2).

¹¹ Ellery, Randalin (2016). *Guelph-Wellington Registry Week 2016*. Guelph & Wellington Task Force for Poverty Elimination. Available here: <https://www.gwpoverty.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Guelph-Wellington-Registry-Week-2016-no-appendices.pdf>

¹² Ellery, Randalin (2018). *Everyone Counts: 2018 Guelph-Wellington Point-in-Time Count*. Available here: <https://www.gwpoverty.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Everyone-Counts-2018-Point-in-Time-Count.pdf>

¹³ Ellery, Randalin (2018).

¹⁴ Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (n.d.). *Point-in-Time Toolkit: Fostering Aboriginal Partnerships and Cultural Competency During your Point-in-Time Count*. Available here: https://workspaceonhomelessness.ca/researchanddata/resources/english/partnering_with_indigenous_communities/pit_count_toolkit_module_fostering_indigenous_partnerships_cultural

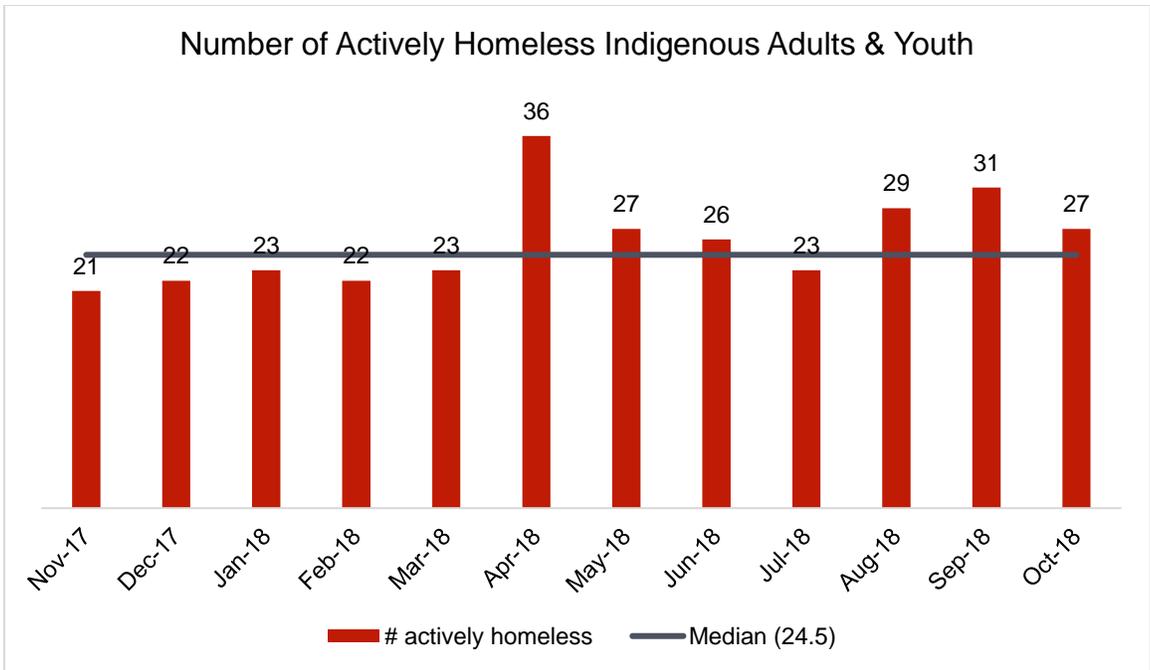


Figure 1: Actively homeless Indigenous adults and youth

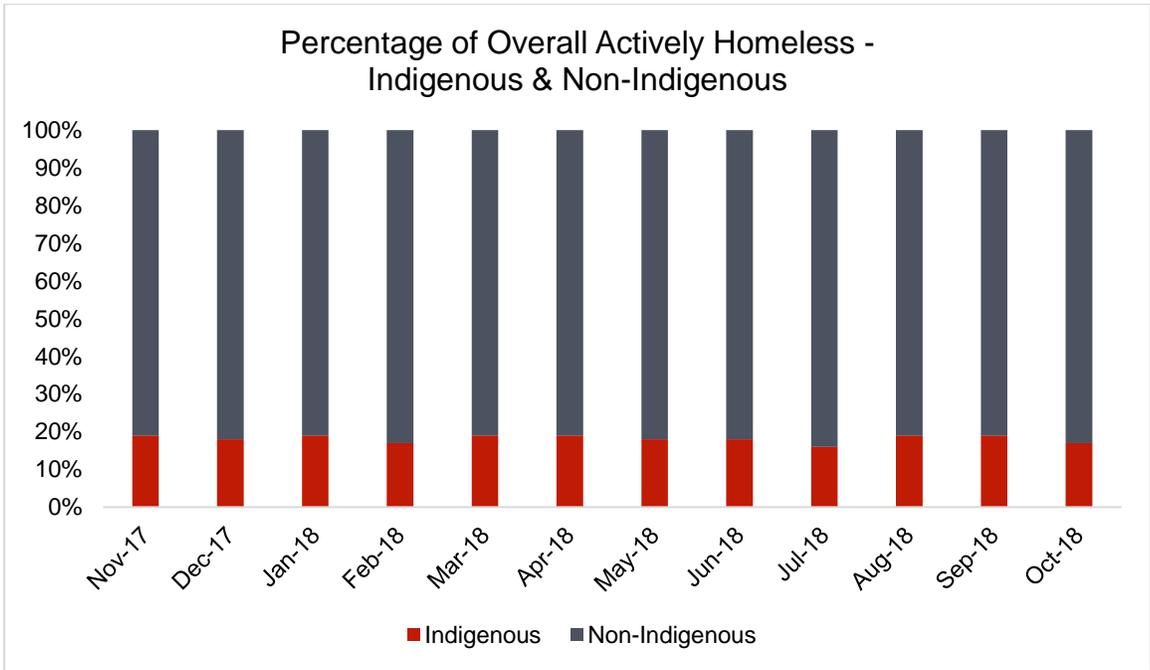


Figure 2: Overall actively homeless – Indigenous and non-Indigenous

The BNL also tracks individuals who move-in to permanent housing after time on the BNL. Overall, the average number of move-ins per month for Indigenous individuals was 3 or 15% of total move-ins (including non-Indigenous) (Figure 3).

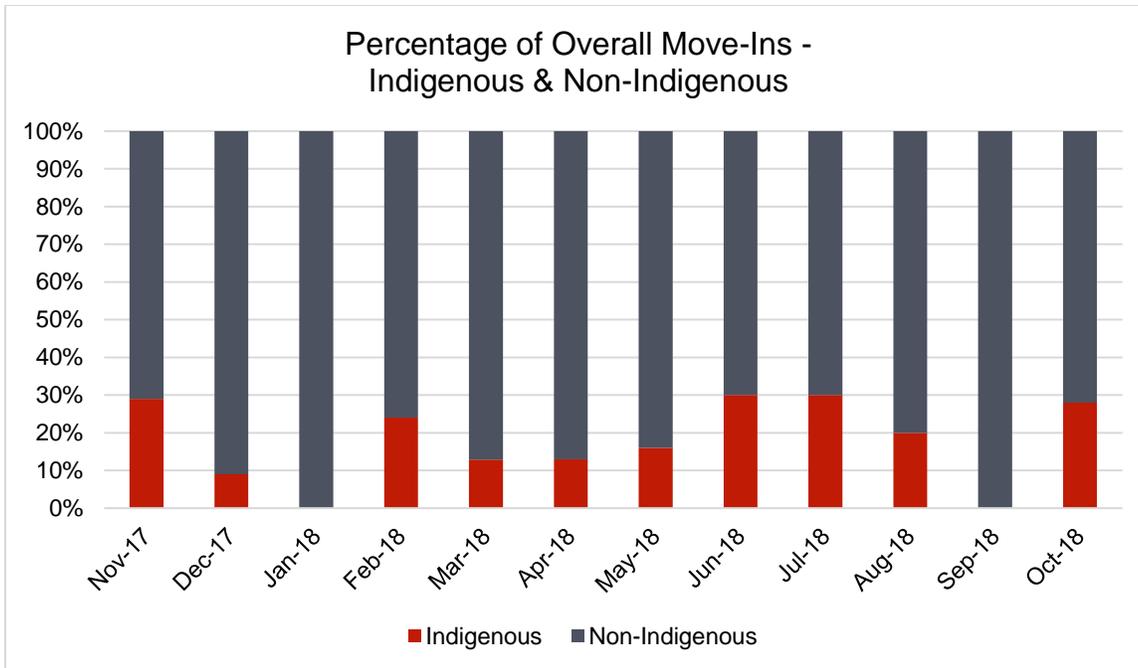


Figure 3: Overall move-ins – Indigenous and non-Indigenous

Demographics

Of those that identified as Indigenous, 40% were female, 58% were male, and 2% selected “other gender.” The average age of Indigenous respondents was 38. The VI-SPDAT allocates a point toward the overall vulnerability score if an individual adult is 60 years or older or if an unaccompanied youth is 18 years and younger. Among the Indigenous population experiencing homelessness, 7 individuals (10%) fell into one of these age categories.

Sleep Location

The VI-SPDAT asks respondents to select the location where they sleep most frequently. If a person answers anything other than shelter, a point is allocated toward their overall acuity score. While a high percentage of Indigenous individuals (37%) answered couch-surfing, a significant percentage (35%) selected emergency shelter (Figure 4).

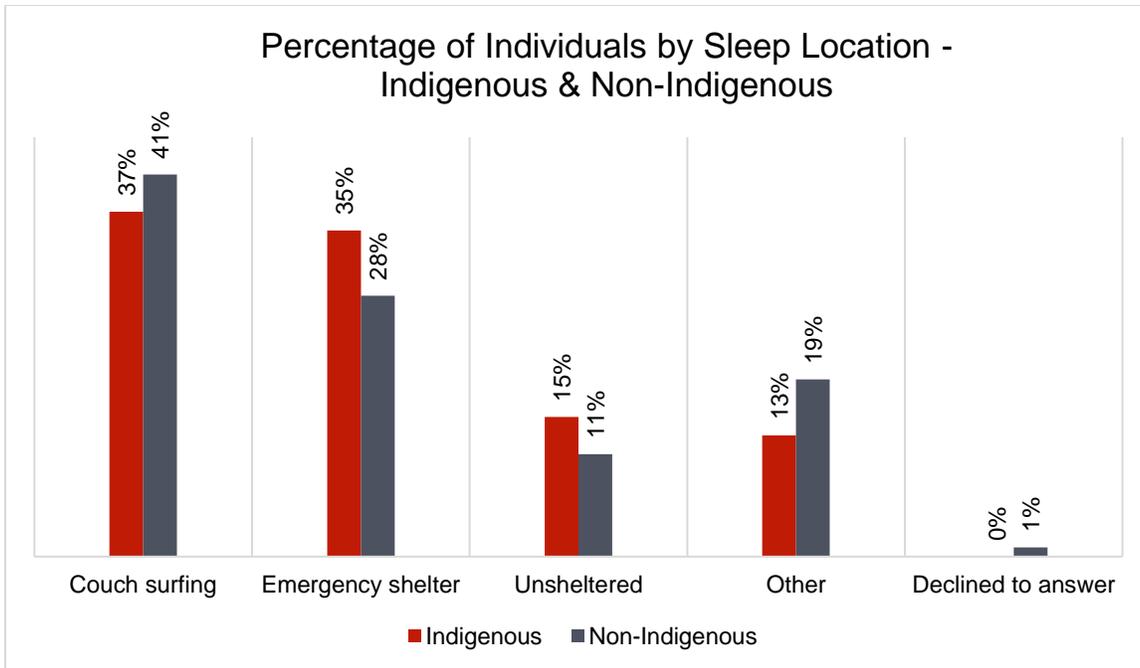


Figure 4: Sleep location – Indigenous & non-Indigenous

System Interactions & Safety

The VI-SPDAT asks respondents to indicate the number of times they have done the following in the past six months:

- Received health care at an emergency department/room
- Taken an ambulance to the hospital
- Been hospitalized as an inpatient
- Used a crisis service, including sexual assault crisis, mental health crisis, family/intimate violence, distress centers and suicide prevention hotlines
- Talked to police because they witnessed a crime, were the victim of a crime, or the alleged perpetrator of a crime or because the police told them they must move along
- Stayed one or more nights in a holding cell, jail or prison, whether it was for a short-term stay like the drunk tank, a longer stay for a more serious offence, or anything in between

If an individual reports 4 or more total interactions, the VI-SPDAT assigns a point toward their overall acuity score for emergency service use. Overall, 60% of Indigenous respondents reported more than 4 interactions. Of those individuals, the majority (88%) had between 4 and 50 interactions, while a small number (12%) had over 100 interactions.

The VI-SPDAT asks respondents questions about their safety to assess their risk of harm and risk of exploitation. A total of 63% of Indigenous respondents (compared to 54% of non-Indigenous respondents) reported that they had been attacked or beaten up since becoming homeless and/or had threatened to or tried to harm themselves or someone else in the last year. Likewise, 57% of Indigenous respondents (compared to 49% of non-Indigenous respondents) reported that someone had forced or tricked them into

doing things they did not want to do and/or did things that others might consider risky (e.g. exchange sex for money, share a needle, etc.).

Wellness

The VI-SPDAT asks respondents several questions about overall wellness. Most of the questions revolve around how different health issues have impacted their history of housing and homelessness. For physical health, the tool asks respondents:

- Have you ever had to leave an apartment, shelter program, or other place you were staying because of your physical health?
- Do you have any chronic health issues with your liver, kidneys, stomach, lungs, or heart?
- Do you have any physical disabilities that would limit the type of housing you could access, or would make it hard to live independently because you'd need help?
- When you are sick or not feeling well, do you avoid getting help?

Adult female respondents are also asked if they are currently pregnant, while all youth are asked, 'are you currently pregnant, have you ever been pregnant, or have you ever gotten someone pregnant?'

If respondents answer 'yes' to any of the questions related to physical health, they are allotted a point toward their overall vulnerability score.

For substance use, the VI-SPDAT allocates a point toward a respondent's overall vulnerability score if they answer 'yes' to any of the following:

- Has your drinking or drug use led you to being kicked out of an apartment or program, where you were staying in the past?
- Will drinking or drug use make it difficult for you stay housed or afford your housing?

Youth are also asked, 'if you've ever used marijuana, did you try it at age 12 or younger?'

For mental health, the VI-SPDAT assigns a point toward a respondent's overall vulnerability score if they answer 'yes' to any of the following:

- Have you ever had trouble maintaining your housing, or been kicked out of an apartment, shelter program or other place you were staying, because of:
 - A mental health issue or concern?
 - A past head injury?
 - A learning disability, developmental disability, or other impairment?
- Do you have any mental health or brain issues that would make it hard for you to live independently because you'd need help?

Overall, 81% of Indigenous respondents received a point toward their vulnerability score for physical health issues, 49% for substance use issues, and 54% for mental health issues. Finally, if a respondent answered positively to all three categories, they were allotted an additional point toward their vulnerability score for tri-morbidity (Figure 5).

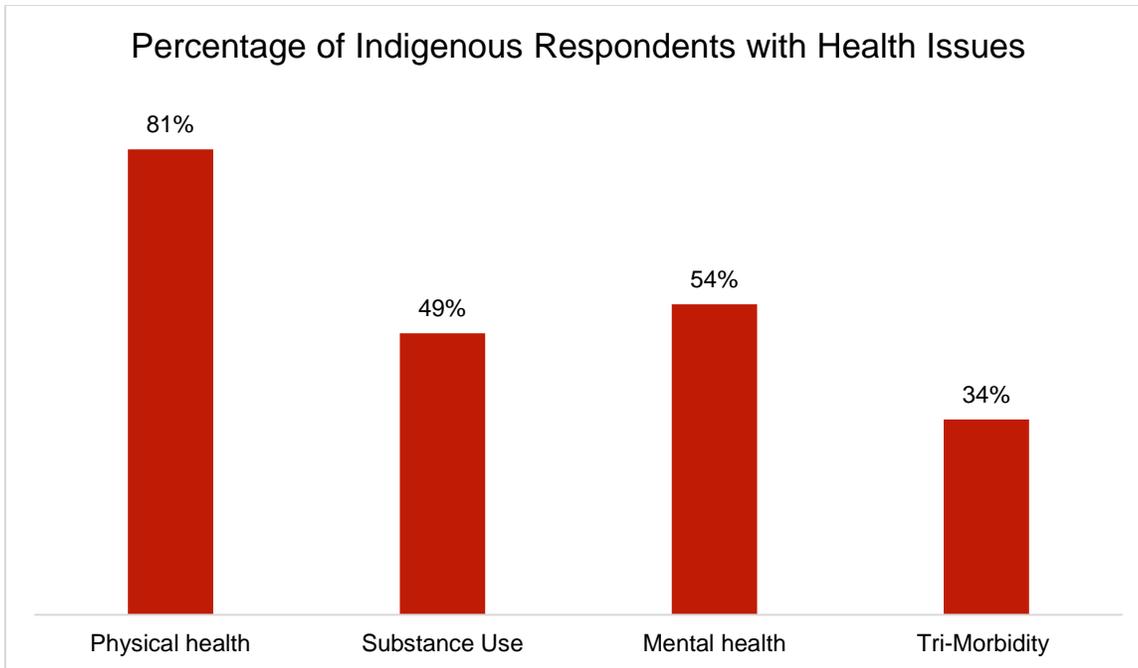


Figure 5: Health issues

The percentage experiencing physical health and substance use issues is very close when comparing responses from Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations. However, a higher percentage of Indigenous respondents reported mental health issues (54% compared to 45%) and tri-morbidity (34% compared to 27%).

In addition to health issues, the VI-SPDAT also asks individuals if their current period of homelessness was caused by any type of abuse or trauma they have experienced. Overall, 62% of Indigenous respondents answered positively to this question, compared to 49% of non-Indigenous.

Acuity Scores

The VI-SPDAT is a brief survey to quickly determine whether a client has high, moderate, or low acuity. If an individual scores low (0-3), no housing interventions are recommended (the individual will likely self-resolve their situation). If an individual scores in the mid-acuity range (4-7), it is recommended that a further assessment be completed for Rapid Re-housing. Finally, if an individual scores in the high-acuity range (8+), further assessment for Permanent Supportive Housing/Housing First is recommended. Locally, individuals that score in the high acuity range are typically referred to as our community's "most vulnerable". Overall, only 1% of Indigenous respondents were low-acuity, 25% were mid-acuity, and the remaining 74% were high-acuity (Figure 6).

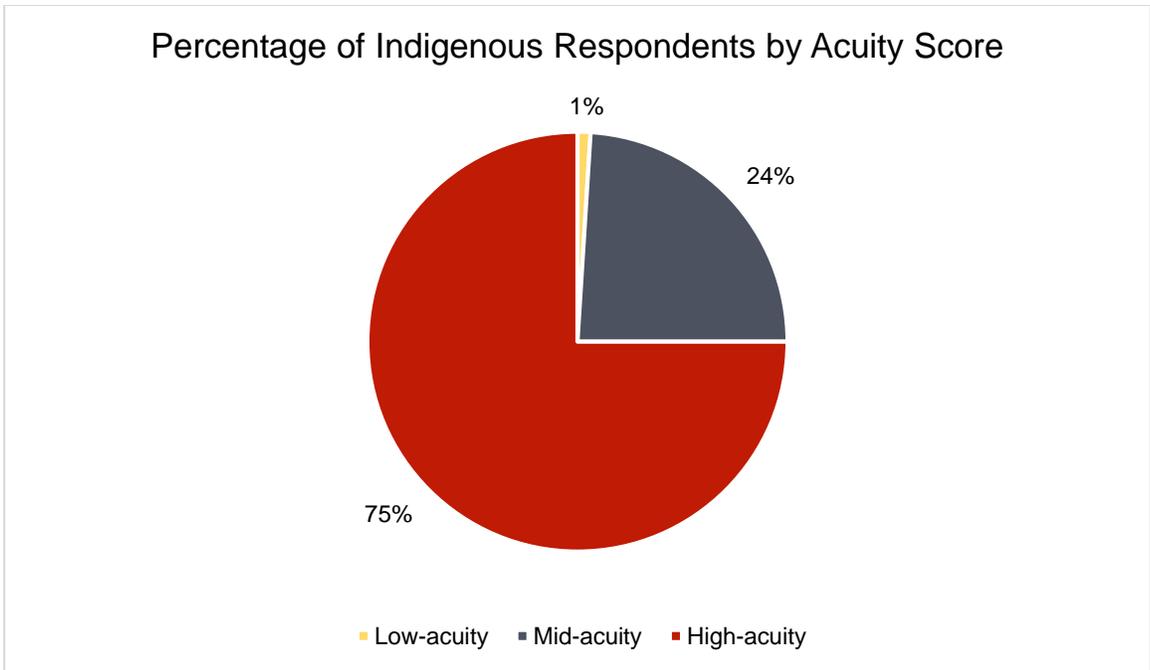


Figure 6: Acuity scores

CONCLUSION

Sufficient available data exists to demonstrate that Indigenous community members in Guelph-Wellington disproportionately experience homelessness compared to the non-Indigenous population. While the Guelph-Wellington By-Name List is not an exhaustive list of every Indigenous individual experiencing homelessness, it does provide significant insights that can inform policy, funding allocations, and program development. The analysis here is intended to deepen our community's understanding of Indigenous homelessness and to inspire solutions.

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