

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

ROOTS & ROUTES OF RURAL HOMELESSNESS *A MANITOBA STUDY*

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Homelessness and mobility in rural contexts are significant issues, despite the fact that awareness about them is limited in contexts like rural Manitoba. Much of the research and literature on issues related to homelessness in Canada take place in urban contexts, and literature that is rural focused is far more prevalent in the United States of America where much larger populations are involved. As a result, there is a need both provincially and nationally to learn more about issues related to homelessness and mobility in rural contexts.

The **purpose** of the research described in this report was to examine the **roots** and **routes** of homelessness in rural Manitoba contexts. We were interested in examining the root causes of individuals experiencing homelessness in rural communities, the routes they took to their current location(s), the services available within rural communities, and the gaps that existed in relation to supports and services available in rural contexts.

This **qualitative study** included interviews with seven participants: three individuals and one couple who had experienced homelessness and mobility as well as two community members who had worked with individuals experiencing such challenges. The five initial participants, who all had links to rural communities (past or present), were interviewed in 2021 by the principal investigator (Candy Skyhar). The interviews were audio recorded. The two community members were interviewed (on video) in 2022 by a videographer hired for the project. Analysis of the data took place using audio/video transcripts and involved multiple phases to form our findings. Recommendations that address the findings are included in the full report.



Source: Candy Skyhar

The chart on the following pages outlines the key thematic findings from the study.

FINDINGS OVERVIEW

SYSTEMIC BARRIERS IN RURAL CONTEXTS

Invisibility: Denial of Rural Homelessness	Homelessness and mobility are largely invisible to many people in rural communities likely due to mobility out of rural settings and the discomfort with seeing it as a local problem.
Housing: Availability, Affordability, Quality, & Safety	Housing availability in rural communities can be an issue due primarily to a physical and pragmatic lack of places to live. Additionally, the negative consequences of reputation/stigma in small communities, financial barriers affecting affordability (e.g., high rent costs, deposits, utility hook-up fees, etc.), the quality of living conditions, and safety concerns pose further barriers for those seeking housing for themselves and their families.
Services & Supports: Knowledge, Availability, & Systems Navigation	Lacking knowledge about where to access services and supports when moving to new communities, the lack of availability of basic services (shelters, grocery stores, transportation, counselling, etc.) in rural communities, the lack of accessibility of government supports, and the navigation of complex benefit systems were all cited as significant barriers for participants in the study.
Employment: Options & Challenges	Lack of employment opportunities in rural contexts increase the likelihood of both homelessness and mobility out of rural communities. Participants also cited individual health concerns (e.g., cancer, brain injury), COVID-19, and lack of affordable childcare and transportation options as challenges related to employment.
Health Care: Access to Care and Treatment	Lacking access to health care was cited as an issue by participants. Lack of local access to such services and the prohibitive costs of travelling outside communities to access them pose significant barriers for individuals experiencing homelessness. Stigma also poses unique challenges in small communities where everyone knows everyone and can see who comes and goes from medical offices.
Education	Participants struggled with completing high school and/or post-secondary education (examples of reasons include teenage pregnancy, conflicts with staff, substance use, and incarceration). In some cases, the education system failed to identify and support children with learning/medical conditions adequately, leading to further trauma and isolation.
Justice System	Incarceration was prominent in the stories of three participants, largely due to theft and violence stemming from substance use. Participants also noted that transitions out of incarceration can be fraught with challenges as individuals try to secure housing and supports to re-establish themselves.

FINDINGS OVERVIEW

PERSONAL BARRIERS & CHALLENGES

Financial Issues	Individual financial issues such as personal debt, outstanding bills, and banking issues were cited by participants as significant barriers. Such financial issues inhibited their ability to secure a place to live and created what seemed to be an insurmountable challenge for individuals to overcome.
Trauma, Abuse, & Violence	The trauma, sexual abuse, and violence experienced by participants in the study impacted them profoundly. Not only did it affect their mental health, but trauma, abuse, and violence also contributed to the mobility of participants out of communities, further driving such issues from the visibility and consciousness of the local community. Child apprehension and intergenerational trauma and abuse were particularly evident in the stories of participants, pointing to the complex, ongoing nature of these issues.
Grief & Loss	Most of the participants in the study experienced grief from having lost someone close to them. Such grief contributed to both issues related to their own mental health and to homelessness itself.
Caregiving	Several of the participants had children, parents, and/or partners who they cared for, which impacted their housing situations, their employment options, their mental health, and the amount of time they had available for other tasks.
Health: Physical/Mental Health & Substance Use	Issues with physical health (e.g., cancer, brain injury), mental health (e.g., ADHD, depression, anxiety, grief), and substance use were interwoven throughout the stories of the participants. Such health concerns profoundly impacted individuals' ability to work, their ability to find and maintain housing, and their mobility in and out of communities.

Rural people experiencing homelessness face a myriad of significant barriers, challenges, and issues at both a systemic and individual level. These issues require increased attention and awareness and call for us to take action; the recommendations in the full report provide concrete areas for institutions and people to address rural homelessness.