

OUR HOMELESS COUNT: SURVEY RESULTS FOR VERNON BC



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BACKGROUND

John Howard Society North Okanagan/Kootenay is a non-profit society that has been providing support services to men and women in the Okanagan Valley since 1957, and shelters services to homeless and transient men since 1967 when they opened their first small hostel. Howard House, on 43rd Street, opened in 1973 with dorms and private rooms for men. Gateway Shelter opened in 2008 and provides separate dorm accommodation for men and women. The John Howard Society provides the majority of shelter beds in Vernon for adults who are homeless or at risk of homelessness and works closely with other organizations and outreach services to provide support to the homeless population.

In 2009, the Camp Okanagan Outreach Liaison (COOL) Team was formed by the Partners in Action Committee (PAC). PAC is a problem solving group made up of local health and social service agencies working together to tackle significant community challenges. The COOL Team was formed in order to:

- Gather data and information about homeless people who were NOT accessing the homeless shelters
- Use the data and information gathered to provide targeted support services directly to the men and women living on the street and in the camps
- Ensure that all social, health and bylaw enforcement agencies were communicating and working together to balance the need for support services in the camps with public health and public safety issues

Every member of the COOL Team either works directly with homeless men, women and youth, or comes into contact with them through their daily work. The COOL Team includes members of the City of Vernon Bylaw Department who have responsibility for the public health and safety of the lands on which the people are camped. Since 2009, members of the COOL Team have been making weekly trips to the camps (sharing information via email and phone) and the Team as a whole meets quarterly to report their experiences and strategize.

The Team started conducting a biannual census of the camps (twice yearly – spring and fall) in 2009 – counting the number of tents and counting (or estimating) the number of campers.

In addition, a **protocol** was developed between outreach workers and the by-law department for the decommissioning of homeless camps (i.e. shutting down the camps) – the by-law department has agreed to provide advance notice to both the campers and the COOL Team so there is time to remove valuables and connect campers to other services. A camp would likely be decommissioned if it becomes too large, unsafe or unhealthy, or begins to impact other user groups in high profile public spaces. This is a unique model and has worked extremely well to increase coordination and collaboration between stakeholders since it was established in 2009.

The John Howard Society, as a member of the COOL Team and the operator of two year round homeless shelters (and two seasonal homeless shelters), proposed a different approach to the usual census conducted every fall. It was decided that in addition to counting the number of tents and campers, that an in depth homeless **survey** be conducted in the fall of 2016 – not only in the homeless camps, but also of the homeless people accessing the shelters. The survey was based on those used in Winnipeg, Kelowna and Nelson. An action team was formed from COOL team members to develop a survey that would enable those who are homeless to describe barriers they face in meeting their housing needs. Surveys were conducted with homeless citizens both in the shelters and citizens sleeping outside.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Who Are Our Homeless ? (Based on Survey Results)

- **27%** were female and **73%** were male
- **48%** had grown up in Vernon or had family connections (compared to 74% in 2009)
- **27%** of respondents indicated they had been in the foster care system
- **21%** identified as aboriginal or having indigenous ancestry
- Average age for sleeping outside was **39 years (men)** and **40 years (women)**
- Average age in the shelters was **52 years (men)** and **51 years (women)**

What Are The Main Causes of Homelessness in Vernon?

- The main cause of homelessness in Vernon is low income and high rents – this was the overwhelming response by survey participants and is supported by local data and community indicators.
- When rental vacancy rates are low, people with barriers (such as mental health and substance use issues) are pushed out of the rental market.
- There is not enough supported housing in Vernon to accommodate the number of people who are currently homeless or at risk of homelessness.

What Can We Do About Homelessness?

- Community members can educate themselves regarding the causes of homelessness and the true cost of homelessness to the tax payer.
- It costs the taxpayer \$55,000 per year to ignore homelessness (due to increased costs to health care and the criminal justice system). The average cost to provide supported housing to an individual is \$37,000 per year.
- We can support efforts to:
 - Increase income assistance rates, disability rates and minimum wage
 - Fund affordable and supportive housing projects in the community
 - Develop and take part in a National Housing Strategy
 - Extend supports into early adulthood for children in the foster care system
 - Ensure aboriginal communities have the resources needed to address homelessness

METHODOLOGY/NUMBER OF HOMELESS:

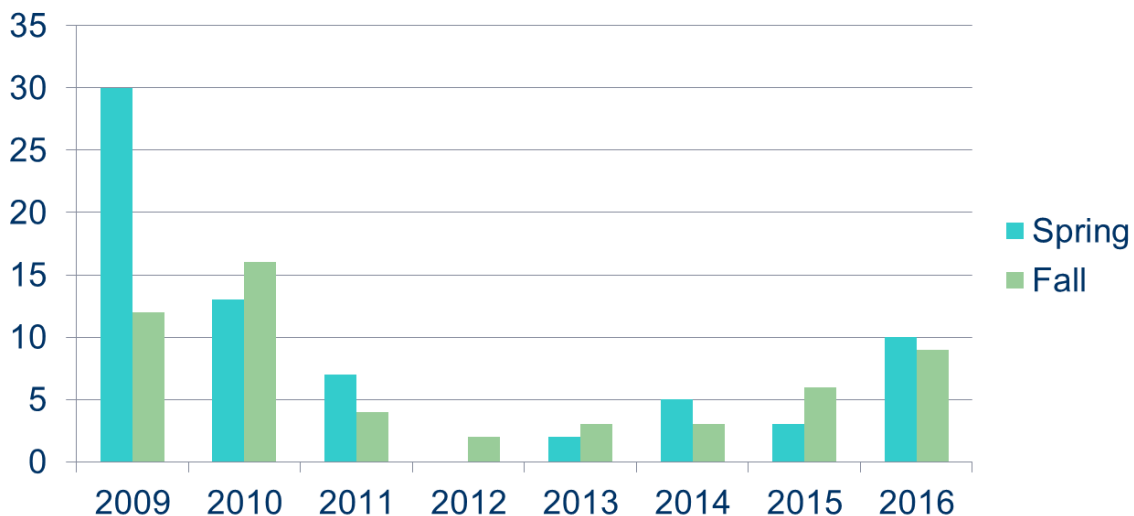
Census:

Prior to October 2016, biannual homeless censuses were conducted to count camps and estimate campers sleeping “rough” or outside. Shelters have not been a part of the biannual homeless censuses. It is recognized that the census is a “snapshot” of the number of camps, rather than a detailed accounting of the number of homeless people.

Since 2009, volunteers from the COOL Team have met early on a designated morning each Spring and Fall to count the number of camps in public spaces in Vernon. Four teams are provided with a map and visit designated areas known to be popular places to camp. Each team takes “care packages” for campers that include the Vernon Survival Guide and Tips for Campers. At least one by-law officer accompanies each team.

A camp is considered a grouping of one or more tents in a confined area. The following chart shows the number of camps observed during each census since 2009. As can be seen, there was a downward trend for a number of years, but now the number of camps is increasing. **Of more concern, is the number of people being observed in the camps. Traditionally, the camps were small with only one or two tents. In 2016, two areas in particular were seen to have larger groupings of people sleeping rough, with five or six tents in close proximity to each other. Although there were more “camps” in 2009, the number of people in the camps this year appears to be equal to 2009.**

Census Results:



Survey:

Although the census has been useful for tracking trends, the survey was developed for two reasons. Firstly, to gain a more accurate accounting of the number of citizens who are homeless in Vernon and secondly, to provide more detailed information on the demographics, causes of homelessness and additional needs of our homeless population. The survey took place over a 15 hour time span, in various locations, starting on the evening of October 18, 2016 and finishing the morning of October 19, 2016:

Target Population	Location	Time
People accessing shelter services	Howard House, Gateway, Vernon Women's Transition House and the Youth Safe House	Evening of October 18, 2016
People sleeping outside	Homeless camps in public spaces in Vernon	Early morning of October 19, 2016
People staying with friends or family (couch surfing)	Upper Room Mission	Morning of October 19, 2016 during breakfast

Surveyors participated in an orientation session to ensure consistency in questioning participants. Homeless citizens were asked if they would like to participate in a survey to voice their needs and barriers in securing housing. Citizens who consented to being surveyed were reassured surveys were anonymous and confidential.

Tally sheets were used to observe homelessness in unsheltered areas. Indicators of homelessness included: person is observed in a tent; acknowledgement of homelessness by the individual; or apparent sleeping space outside. Unsheltered individuals were either counted on the tally sheet or were surveyed.

Survey Results:

144 citizens were counted as homeless in Vernon on October 18, 2016.

Number	Location
55	Howard House
25	Gateway Shelter
10	Temporary Weather Shelter: An additional 9 people tried to register for a bed at Gateway and/or Howard House but there were no available beds (they are included in the homeless camp numbers)
11	Bill's Place (identified themselves as homeless)
10	Vernon Women's Transition House (identified themselves as homeless)
33	Observed in homeless camps
144	TOTAL

SURVEY RESPONSES:

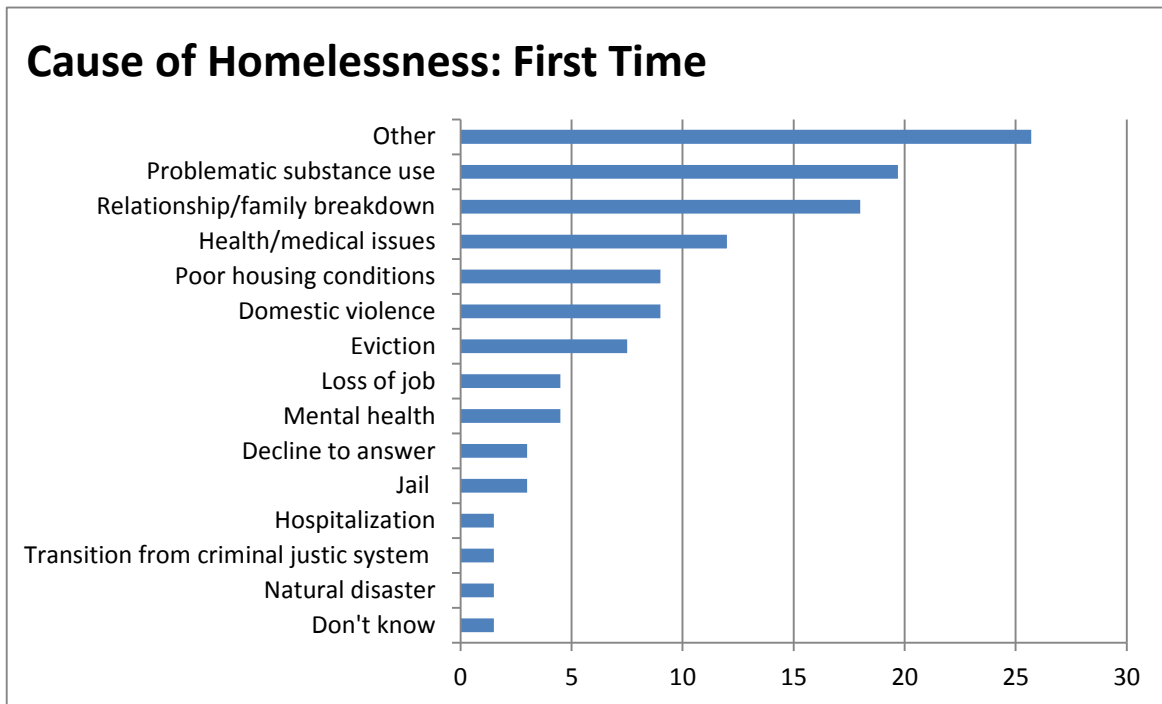
There was a 46% participation rate in the survey from those people who were homeless on the night of October 18, 2016. The survey teams were pleased with this response and it shows the level of trust that is in place between the outreach teams and people who are homeless in our community.

Number	Location
53	Local Shelters
13	Homeless Campers
66	TOTAL

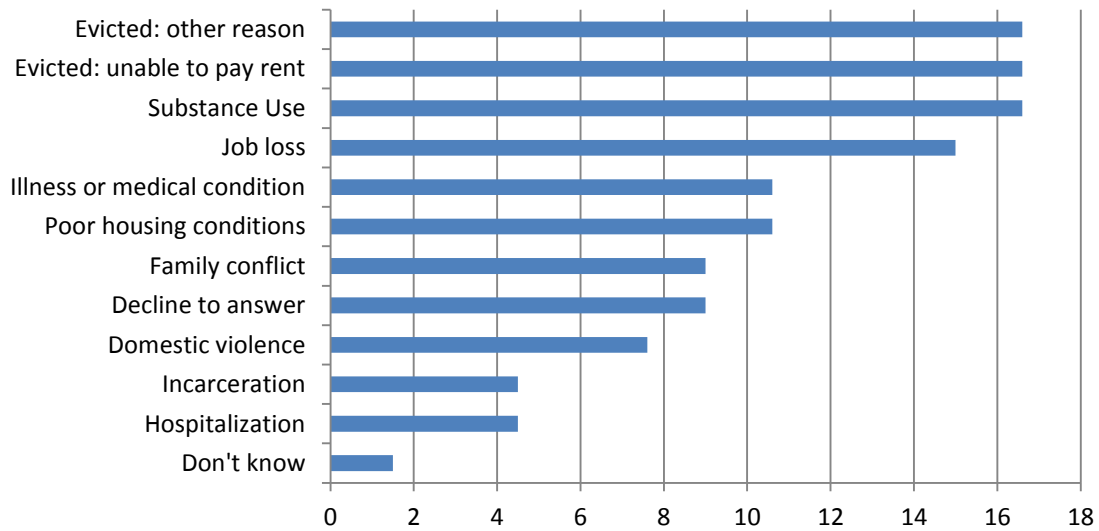
Snapshot of Demographics:

- **48%** had grown up in Vernon or had family connections (compared to 74% in 2009)
- **27%** were female and **73%** were male
- Average age of a man sleeping outside was **39** years
- Average age of a woman sleeping outside was **40** years
- Average ages of men in the shelters was **52** years
- Average ages of women in the shelters was **51** years
- **27%** of respondents indicated they had been in the foster care system
- **21%** identified as aboriginal or having indigenous ancestry
- **3** people identified as having served in the military
- **3** people were homeless with their children
- **2** people identified with the LGBTQ community
- **2** people had pets
- **1** person indicated they were an Immigrant

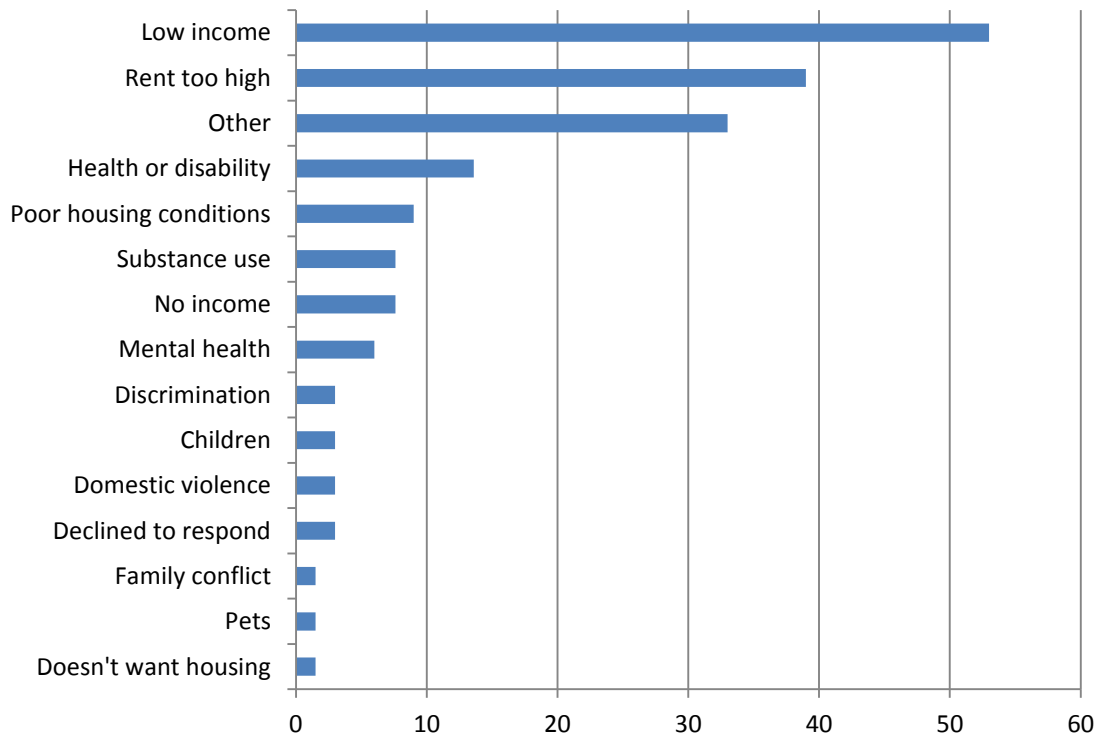
Causes of Homelessness:



Cause of Homelessness: Current Situation



Main Barriers to Finding/Keeping Housing



COMMUNITY INDICATORS (2008 – 2016)

HOMELESSNESS	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016 Jan-June
# of homeless camps in public spaces (Spring/Fall)	n/a	30/12	13/16	7/4	0/2	2/3	5/3	3/6	10/9
# of Individuals Who Stayed at Gateway Shelter (Fiscal Year)	n/a	138	490	252	267	318	286	293	217
# of Individuals Who Stayed at Howard House	n/a	146	216	120	247	133	252	233	239

HOUSING	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016 Jan-June
Rental Vacancy Rate	1.0%	3.1%	6.7%	7.4%	5.8%	7.7%	4.1%	1.9%	n/a
# of new non-profit affordable housing units	0	42	6	0	0	20	0	0	10
# of new supported housing units	16	0	0	0	0	4	0	38	0
<u>Average Rental Rate</u>									
Bachelor	\$485	\$492	\$512	\$514	\$522	\$524	\$531	\$544	n/a
One Bedroom	\$653	\$632	\$638	\$635	\$641	\$636	\$649	\$674	
Two Bedroom	\$764	\$780	\$788	\$773	\$782	\$785	\$794	\$821	
Three Bedroom	\$802	\$831	\$827	\$814	\$830	\$851	\$844	\$906	
Shelter Allowance for Individual on Income Assistance	\$375	\$375	\$375	\$375	\$375	\$375	\$375	\$375	\$375

FOOD SECURITY	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016 Jan-June
# of Food Bank Clients Served	3139	3863	4212	4262	4210	4098	—	—	—
Monthly Food Cost for Family of Four in BC	—	\$872	—	\$868	—	\$914	—	\$974	—
TOTAL Meals Served: Upper Room Mission*	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	69,319	38,017
Average Number of Meals Per Day: Upper Room Mission	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	259	304

*There has been a 14% increase in total meals served when comparing January – June of 2015 to the same period in 2016.

INCOME	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016 Jan-June
BC Income Assistance Monthly For a Single Person	\$610	\$610	\$610	\$610	\$610	\$610	\$610	\$610	\$610
Person with Disability Rate for a Single Person	\$906	\$906	\$906	\$906	\$906	\$906	\$906	\$906	\$983*
Minimum Wage	\$8	\$8	\$8	\$8.75	\$10.25	\$10.25	\$10.25	\$10.45	\$10.45**
Increase in Consumer Price Index	2.3%	.03%	1.8%	2.9%	1.5%	.09%	2.0%	1.1%	n/a

*Although Disability Rates were increased by \$77.00, the annual bus pass is no longer included. Those needing a bus pas would see an increase of \$25.00.

**On September 15, 2016, the minimum wage will rise to \$10.85

Indicator Sources:

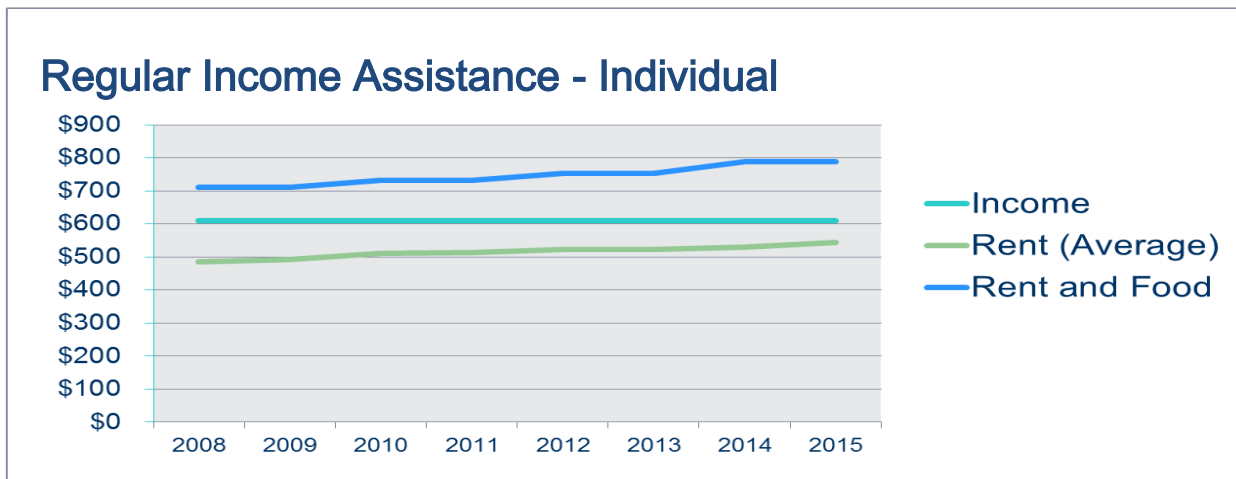
John Howard Society, Upper Room Mission, Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC), Social Planning Council, Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation, Statistics Canada, Provincial Health Services Authority

Housing Inventory:

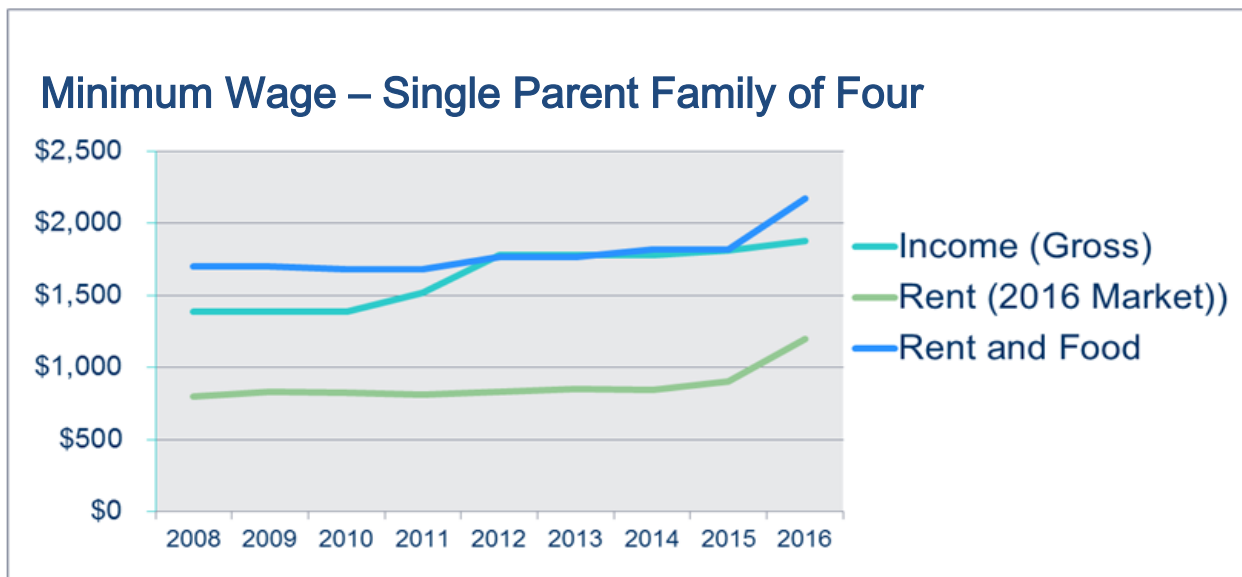
Shelters/Transitional Housing		
Target Population	Number of Units	Program Providers
Men and Women	25 low barrier beds at Gateway Shelter (13 for men, 15 for women) with an additional 10 temporary mats in winter	John Howard Society
Men	24 dormitory beds at Howard House with an additional 10 temporary mats in winter 22 transitional rooms at Howard House and 8 at Bill's Place 9 recovery beds at Howard House and 18 at Bill's Place	John Howard Society
Youth at risk	4 beds	First Nations Friendship Centre
Women leaving violent relationships	25 beds	Vernon Women's Transition House Society
Non-Profit Housing Units		
Target Populations	Number of Units	Program Providers
Low income adults and families	499 units (variety of unit types and sizes) There is a waiting list for the majority of the units.	John Howard Society, Vernon Native Housing Society, CMHA, Kindale Developmental Association, First Nations Friendship Centre, Vernon Women's Transition House Society, Land Trust, Habitat for Humanity

THE COST OF LIVING IN VERNON:

Regular income assistance rates have not increased since 2008 even though housing and the cost of food continue to rise. As can be seen by the chart below, the monthly income assistance rate for an individual does not cover the basic cost of living. The rent line indicates the average rent for a bachelor suite. Once combined with the average monthly food cost, it becomes impossible to meet basic needs.



It is not that much better for a single income family making minimum wage. Once you include the current market rent (in 2016) for a three bedroom apartment plus food costs, families can no longer meet their basic needs.



The income line shows the gross income for someone working 40 hours per week (this is before taxes). This does not take into account clothes, school supplies and recreation. Service providers are now working with families who are homeless (this is a relatively new phenomenon in Vernon) and the Upper Room Mission is now seeing parents bringing their children to the Upper Room Mission for food.

THE TRUE COST OF HOMELESSNESS:

The cost of homelessness on government systems has been studied across Canada and the United States and the research results are consistent. Although the cost of shelters and supported housing is high due to the need for 24 hour staffing and/or additional programs, it is actually more costly to the taxpayer to have a person living on the street.

Indirect costs to the public system include:

- Heavy use of health services such as ambulances, emergency rooms, acute care beds and psychiatric beds;
- Need for policing and greater demand on police officers to be trained in mental health and addictions when there is street homelessness;
- Increased likelihood to be arrested and imprisoned for property or drug crimes and “behavioural” crimes like uttering threats and public intoxication.

There are also significant links between homelessness and health. Homeless people are:

- More poorly nourished and unable to get proper rest;
- Have difficulty following a health plan, or doctor’s orders when they are diagnosed with an illness leading to greater use of emergency health services;
- Are vulnerable to higher rates of physical violence, sexual violence and psychological distress;
- Suffer from much higher rates of depression, drug use, and serious mental health problems.

With average monthly costs for hospital beds running as high as \$30,000, it’s not difficult to see the value of ensuring people stay out of hospital. In April 2006, the Ministry of Health commissioned a report, entitled *Housing and Support for Adults with Severe Addictions and/or Mental Illness in British Columbia*, to determine numbers and associated costs of homelessness.

According to the report (written by five academics at Simon Fraser University, the University of B.C. and the University of Calgary) a total of **\$55,000 per person**, or an annual total of \$644.3 million in health, corrections and social services is spent on the homeless in B.C. If housing and support were provided, it would cost the system **\$37,000 per person** per year. With an estimated 11,700 homeless people in BC, the cost savings to the taxpayer is significant.

CONCLUSION:

The John Howard Society would like to thank all the members of the COOL Team who have participated in the homeless census over the years and who stretched their resources to ensure that the expanded homeless survey took place in 2016.

This information is invaluable to our community and the hope is that this data will help to tell the real story of homelessness in Vernon and that the funding, policies, and programs needed to solve homelessness will soon follow.

Most importantly we wish to thank our homeless population who took part in the survey, told their truth, and trusted the COOL Team with their story. We want each and every person who is homeless in Vernon to know that they count and that their voices have been heard.