

MORTALITY RATES AND EDMONTON'S HOMELESS POPULATION

Recommendation

That the May 21, 2024, Community Services report CS01744, be received for information.

Requested Action	Information only		
ConnectEdmonton's Guiding Principle	ConnectEdmonton Strategic Goals		
CONNECTED This unifies our work to achieve our strategic goals.	Healthy City		
City Plan Values	LIVE		
City Plan Big City Move(s)	Inclusive and compassionate	Relationship to Council's Strategic Priorities	Community safety and well-being
Corporate Business Plan	Serving Edmontonians		
Council Policy, Program or Project Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> City Policy C620 - Supporting Vulnerable People During Extreme Weather Conditions Policy 		
Related Council Discussions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> May 1, 2023, Community Services report, CS01762 Edmonton's Approach (2023/24) - Supporting Those Experiencing Homelessness 		

Previous Council/Committee Action

At the February 7, 2023, Community and Public Services Committee meeting, the following motion was passed:

That Administration work with the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner to provide a report to Committee on deaths related to unhoused populations.

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Executive Summary

- The Office of the Chief Medical Examiner reported the number of deaths of people experiencing homelessness¹ in Edmonton has increased from 30 individuals in 2017 to 302 individuals in 2023.
- When a death occurs suddenly or it cannot be explained, the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner conducts an investigation, under the authority of the *Fatality Inquiries Act*. The Office investigates deaths to determine identity of the deceased, date and place of death, medical reason for death and the manner of death.
- Prior to 2022, the status of a deceased individual's address, or lack thereof, was not consistently noted in a medical examiner report, as being "homeless" is not a medical cause and manner of death.
- As such, deaths of people experiencing homelessness in Edmonton may have been missed in the search for data prior to 2022.

REPORT

The Canadian Observatory on Homelessness defines homelessness as a situation of an individual, family or community without stable, safe, permanent, appropriate housing, or the immediate prospect, means and ability of acquiring it.²

The By Name List (BNL) is a perpetually updated registry of people experiencing homelessness in Edmonton who are accessing services within the homeless-serving sector. Location of stay is self-reported by individuals in response to the question, "where do you sleep most frequently?" As of April 4, 2024, approximately 859 people reported they were unsheltered and 506 people reported they stayed in shelters.³

The impacts of homelessness on individuals, particularly chronic homelessness, can be severe. These impacts include issues with physical health (infectious and chronic diseases, injuries, foot and skin issues and nutritional deficiencies) and mental health conditions (impaired cognitive performance, alcohol and drug dependence, depression and psychotic illness)⁴.

¹ The goal of Administration is to use respectful, dignified, and accurate language when discussing a person or family's housing situation. Historically, Administration has used the term homelessness to describe a lack of housing in order to align with a standardized definition and participate in local, provincial and national benchmarking activities that track progress on the issue. Administration wants to acknowledge that there is a diversity of perspectives on the language and wish to clarify that it remains Administration's intention to use person-first language and to characterize homelessness or homelessness as a temporary condition that does not define an individual's identity.

² <https://www.homelesshub.ca/about-homelessness/homelessness-101/what-homelessness>

³ <https://homewardtrust.ca/data-analytics-reporting/> Accessed January 4, 2024. Dashboard last updated April 4, 2024.

⁴ <https://www.publichealthontario.ca/-/media/documents/E/2019/eb-homelessness-health.pdf>

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The health challenges faced by people experiencing homelessness not only impacts their day-to-day life but can result in a reduction to their life expectancy. The average life expectancy of a person experiencing homelessness in Canada is estimated to be 39 years⁵, while the average life expectancy of an Albertan is about 80 years⁶.

Homelessness Mortality Data - Office of the Chief Medical Examiner

Administration requested information on deaths of Edmontonians experiencing homelessness from the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner (OCME), who is responsible for managing data related to mortality rates in Alberta.

The OCME has the authority to review deaths under the *Fatality Inquiries Act*⁷, giving jurisdiction to investigate sudden, unexpected or unexplained deaths. The OCME investigates cases of people who die in Alberta from homicidal violence, from suicide, from an accident, unexpectedly when in apparent good health, when unattended by a physician, while in the care of the government, such as in mental health or correctional facilities, in suspicious circumstances or from medical assistance in dying⁸.

As a result, not all deaths in Alberta are investigated by the OCME. If an individual is experiencing homelessness and the death is natural, (such as from cancer or another illness), the OCME may not be involved as the death does not fit their criteria for investigation. The OCME death investigation process determines the identity of the deceased, the date and place of death, the cause of death and the manner of death⁹.

The OCME noted that within their files, "homelessness" may include someone living on the street, in a shelter, staying for short periods of time at friends' houses or other forms of homelessness. If this information was provided to the OCME, it was listed as "no fixed address" in the death investigation reports, rather than "homelessness." However, information on housing status was not a mandatory data element collected for the data that Administration received from the OCME. This means the data may not be comprehensive.

The table below details the information provided by the OCME regarding homelessness mortalities from 2017 to 2023.

Number of people who died while experiencing no fixed address/homelessness in Edmonton							
No Fixed Address Type	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Emergency sheltered	2	2	6	6	24	24	27
Provisionally accommodated	19	15	15	16	38	69	87
Unsheltered	9	5	16	19	79	107	188
Total	30	22	37	41	141	200	302

⁵ Charity Intelligence Canada. Homelessness in Canada. <https://www.charityintelligence.ca/images/Ci-Homeless-in-Canada.pdf>

⁶ <https://open.alberta.ca/opendata/life-expectancy-in-alberta-at-birth-and-age-65>.

⁷ <https://open.alberta.ca/publications/f09>. Accessed March 27, 2024.

⁸ <https://www.alberta.ca/office-of-chief-medical-examiner-overview>

⁹ <https://www.alberta.ca/death-investigation-process>. Accessed March 27, 2024.

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Homelessness Mortality Data - Limitations

As part of the data transfer, the OCME expressed a number of limitations regarding homelessness mortality:

- Prior to 2022, the status of a deceased's address, or lack of, wasn't always noted in a medical examiner report, as being homeless is not a medical cause and manner of death. As such, deaths of people experiencing homelessness in Edmonton may have been missed in the search for data prior to 2022.
- The label "no fixed address" is not a confirmation that the individual was experiencing homelessness, just that no specific address was determined for the individual.
- The OCME generally does not capture deaths that occur in hospitals, when those deaths are from natural causes.
- The OCME may connect with other entities (e.g. police, agencies, family, etc.) to confirm the housing status of an individual if it is pertinent to the death investigation. However, they do not confirm every death of a person experiencing homelessness with homeless serving systems of care.

Community Insight

Administration obtained information on the deaths of Edmontonians experiencing homelessness from the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner as directed. No additional public engagement or community insight was sought.

GBA+

Historically, 2SLGBTQ+ Canadians, as well as other at-risk groups, including youth, seniors, Indigenous People, newcomers and/or people with mental health or addiction issues have accounted for a large percentage of Canadians who are homeless, at risk of being homeless or in core housing need¹⁰. In Edmonton, consistent with national research, Indigenous adults and youth experience a higher rate of unsheltered homelessness, compared to non-Indigenous adults and youth.

People experiencing homelessness have high rates of complex health needs but low rates of preventative and/or non-emergent health care use. While there is limited local data on the mortality rate from homelessness, research shows that people experiencing homelessness are at increased risk of opioid poisoning and contracting communicable diseases such as COVID-19 and most recently, shigella. In the colder months of the year, people experiencing unsheltered homelessness are at increased risk of fire injury or death and amputation due to exposure.

¹⁰ "2SLGBTQIA+ Housing Needs and Challenges." . Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation. [cited March 7, 2023].