



# Results Report

20,000 Homes Homelessness Count

Dufferin Community Advisory  
Board (CAB)

December 2016

## Contents

Introduction & Background .....	3
Survey Information & Limitations .....	4
Sample & Demographics .....	5
Dufferin County in the Canadian Context.....	7
Broad Trends: Acuity Scores .....	8
Housing Statistics.....	9
Shelter Use .....	9
Cause of Current Homelessness.....	10
Health & Ability .....	11
Chronic Health Issues.....	11
Mental & Cognitive Health and Ability.....	12
Prescription and non-prescription drug use and misuse.....	12
Service Use.....	12
Physical Risks of Homelessness .....	13
Income & Money Owed.....	13
Conclusions .....	14

## **20,000 Homes Dufferin County**

### *Survey Report*

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## Introduction & Background

Dufferin County is home to nearly 57,000 people and composed of 8 local municipalities. Key housing challenges facing the County include a growing senior population in need of retirement appropriate housing, income disparity and housing affordability. As is the case in much of Ontario, even a bachelor apartment is considered unaffordable<sup>1</sup> for someone working a full-time job at minimum wage and living in Dufferin County.<sup>2</sup>

Dufferin County continues to work towards a better understanding of the landscape of homelessness within its borders. The county is 1 of 61 designated communities that receive funding from the Federal Government under the Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS). This strategy focuses in large part on a Housing First approach for people who experience chronic and episodic homelessness.<sup>3</sup>

One of the key HPS directives is to develop a portrait of homelessness in designated communities. In July 2016, complementing the partnership to end homelessness between Dufferin County and the Federal Government, Dufferin's Community Advisory Board voted to join 20,000 Homes (20K Homes) Campaign. The 20K Homes Campaign is a community-led nation-wide initiative that seeks to address the persistently high rates of homelessness in Canada. 20K Homes is "powered" by the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness, and has the goal of permanently housing 20,000 homeless people living in Canada by July 2018. As with the HPS, a key element in the 20K Homes Campaign is developing a better understanding of the landscape of homelessness in Canada's communities. In keeping with the goals of the HPS and as part of 20K Homes Campaign, 101 people experiencing homelessness or who are at-risk-of-homelessness were surveyed in the Dufferin County in October of 2016. The findings from these surveys are presented in this report.

It should be noted, before moving to a discussion of the findings, that Dufferin County is largely rural. In rural communities, struggles to obtain and maintain housing manifest very differently than in urban communities with people often couch surfing,

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<sup>1</sup> If more than 30% of gross income is spent on housing then that housing is considered unaffordable (see Gaetz et al. (2014): *The State of Homelessness in Canada 2014*. Toronto: Canadian Homelessness Research Network Press, pp. 22)

<sup>2</sup> Dufferin County. (2013). *10 Year Housing and Homelessness Plan*. Available at: <http://www.dufferincounty.ca/files/content-pdf/10-year-plan.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> 20K Homes Campaign- Dufferin County. *Community Advisory Board*. Available at: <http://www.20kdufferin.shipshey.ca/campaign.html>

staying in transitional housing units, hospitals or prisons. The lack of visibility can make it very difficult to pinpoint the number of people experiencing homelessness in the County and confirms the need for a comprehensive definition of, and approach to homelessness that encompasses everything from at-risk-of-homelessness to absolute homelessness<sup>4</sup>. Such a definition is congruent with the Canadian Homelessness Research Network (CHRN) which defines homelessness as “the situation of an individual or family without stable, permanent, appropriate housing, or the immediate prospect, means and the ability to acquire it. It is the result of systemic or societal barriers, a lack of affordable and appropriate housing, the individual/household’s financial, mental, cognitive, behavioural or physical challenges, and/or racism and discrimination”<sup>5</sup>. It is this comprehensive understanding of homelessness that informs the 20K Homes Campaign and the associated surveys conducted with Dufferin County residents.

## Survey Information & Limitations

20K Homes members recognized the need for more information about homelessness in the region if the campaign to reduce and ultimately end homelessness was going to be successful. “Knowing who is out there” is a guiding principle of both the national and local campaigns. To this end, on October 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup>, 2016, 20K Homes Dufferin County, with the help of agency staff and volunteers, conducted surveys with people who were at risk of or experiencing homelessness. The surveys asked about a wide range of experiences known to impact both housing status and, inextricable from housing status, the general well-being of people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. As stated, it is the data from the surveys that are presented in this report. The information shared by the research participants is an important step in understanding the landscape of homelessness in Dufferin County.

Due to the nature of the subject matter and the survey methodology, the data presented in this report are limited in some ways. First, the relatively small sample of Dufferin County’s homeless or at-risk population was not randomly selected. The opportunity to participate in the survey was only possible for people present at agencies and service sites visited by volunteers on the two survey days, if potential participants were identified by qualified staff and trained volunteers on validated walking routes, or if they dropped by 1 of 3 established survey locations. In all cases participants had to agree to be surveyed. This selection bias may introduce certain prejudices into the data that do not accurately represent the population.

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<sup>4</sup> Grodzinski, E. and Sutherns, R. (2013). *The State Of Homelessness In Dufferin*. Prepared for Dufferin Community Advisory Board, Available at:

<http://www.dufferincounty.ca/files/content-pdf/sate-of-homelessness-in-dufferin.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Gaetz et al. (2013). Introduction. Youth Homelessness in Canada: Implications for Policy and Practice. Canadian Homelessness Research Network. Eds. S. Gaetz, B. O’Grady, K, Buccieri, J. Karabanow, & A. Marsolais. Toronto: Canadian Homelessness Research Network Press. pp 6-7 (citing report from 2012)

For example, factors such as literacy and English language skills, willingness and comfort being interviewed, and the capacity to travel to the interview may have excluded certain subsections of the homeless or at-risk-of-homelessness population in the county. Therefore, the results presented in this report should not be used to make inferences about the broader homeless population in Dufferin County or in Ontario more generally. Instead, the results of this survey are intended to highlight areas where more research and service attention can be directed.

Moreover, because the survey relied on self-reporting by a marginalized population, questions about the accuracy and reliability of the data may arise. The individuals surveyed may not know the answers to the questions being asked, or they may not feel safe divulging their personal experiences, particularly when illegal activity (such as drug use) is involved. Therefore, it is unsurprising that not all of the survey questions were answered by each respondent. These problems are common and exist in all research of this kind.

Finally, there are several limitations resulting from data collection methods. Certain variables contained responses with different units, or unspecified units, and thus analyzing these variables is impossible. This is particularly true of responses regarding the length and frequency of periods of homelessness. These rare inconsistencies are likely the result of decentralized data collection by volunteers and staff at multiple agencies.

## Sample & Demographics

One hundred and one individuals were interviewed for this survey. Of those respondents, 23 reported having a permanent residence, while the remaining 78 told interviewers that they did not have permanent housing to return to at night. Respondents ranged in age from 15 to 81 years old. The interviewers asked for both age and date of birth: for this analysis we use the reported age of the respondent for consistency:

- 24 of the 101 interview subjects were aged 15 to 20 years old;
- 32 were aged 21 to 30 years;
- 9 were between 31 and 40 years;
- 20 were between 41 and 50 years old;
- 9 were between 51 and 60 years old; and,
- 7 were aged 61 years or older.

Fifty-two of the 101 respondents identified as female, while 45 identified as male. Additionally, 3 identified as transgender, non-binary, or otherwise gendered.

Respondents were asked if they identified as Aboriginal or had Aboriginal heritage. Twenty-five of the 101 individuals interviewed reported answered affirmatively.

The remaining 76 responded either negatively or that they did not know. These individuals were asked to further specify their status:

- 6 identified as First Nations;
- 5 identified as Métis; and,
- 14 were non-status but had Aboriginal ancestry.

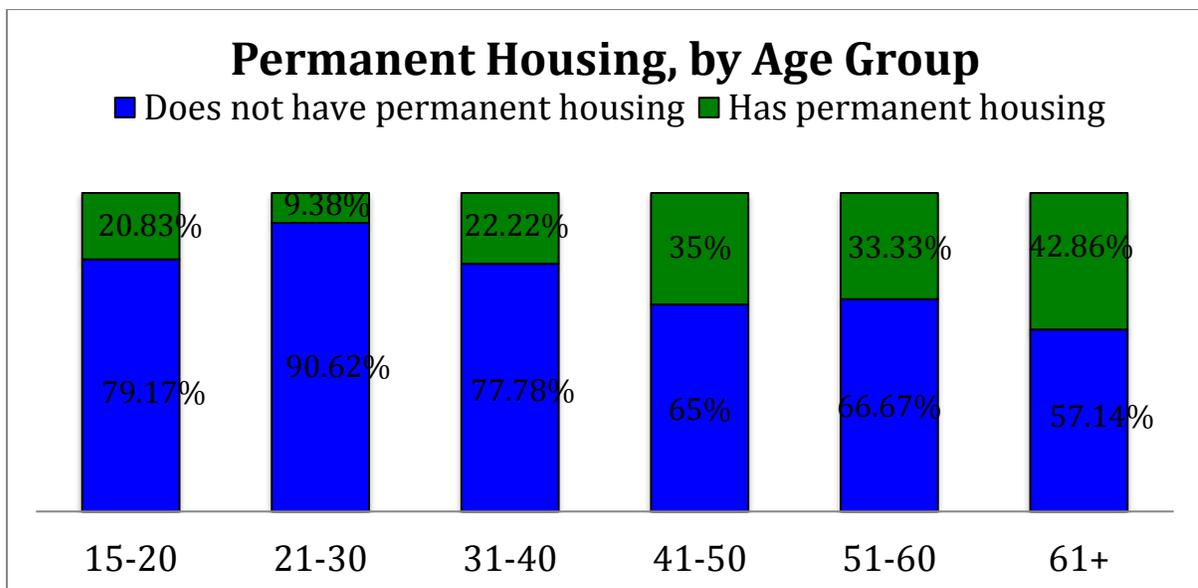
Given the high number of respondents who identify as Aboriginal, and in keeping with the right of Indigenous peoples in Canada to self-determination, there is a need for on-going consultation around service delivery with Indigenous communities and organizations in the County.

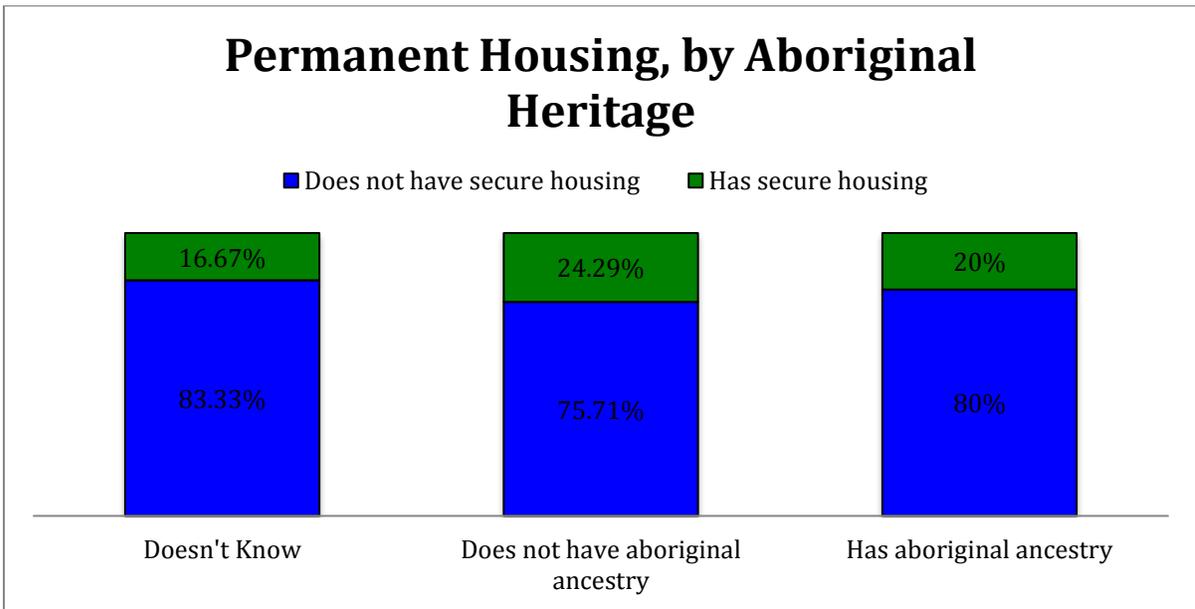
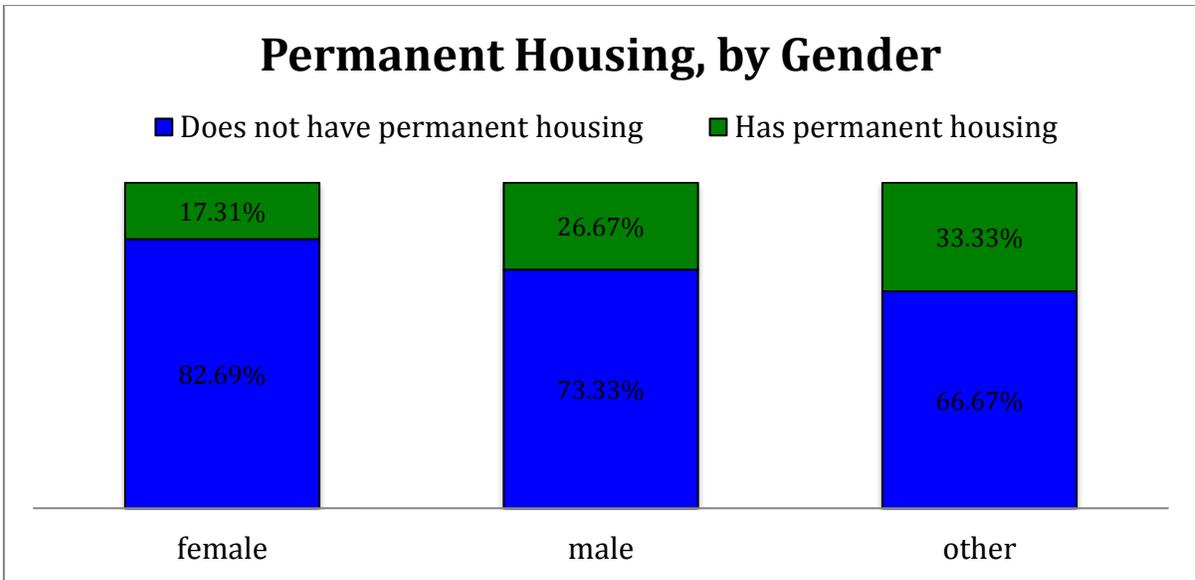
Respondents were asked if they had moved to Dufferin County within the past year. Thirty-two of the 101 individuals interviewed responded affirmatively.

One of the aims of this survey was to learn about the health-related barriers to secure housing. The results reveal that:

- 20 respondents had physical disabilities;
- 38 had chronic health issues;
- 21 had mental health concerns;
- 27 had a learning disability; and,
- 9 had experienced a past head injury that impacted their ability to access housing.

Furthermore, 25 respondents revealed that drinking or drug use had previously impacted or could potentially impact their ability to access secure housing. The following charts display some of the same demographic characteristics noted above, but divided into two categories: those with permanent housing, and those without.





## Dufferin County in the Canadian Context

In Canada, up to 1.3 million people have had experiences with homelessness in the last five years. Approximately 200,000 people have accessed emergency housing services or have slept outside each year. About 30,000 people experience homelessness any night. Up to 50,000 people experience hidden homelessness on any given night; this includes, for instance, individuals who couch-surf or stay with family.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Gaetz et al. (2014): The State of Homelessness in Canada 2014. Toronto: Canadian Homelessness Research Network Press. pp 5-6.

20K Homes Dufferin County interviewed 101 people. This represents about 0.17% of Dufferin's population of about 57,000. Of those 101 people, 78 were experiencing homelessness, which represents approximately 0.13% of Dufferin's population. It is crucial to note that this is *not* the entirety of Dufferin County's homeless or at-risk population. Moreover, this statistic cannot be used to infer the proportion of Dufferin County's population experiencing homelessness. What this data can provide is insight into the needs of the 101 individuals surveyed and, potentially, the capacity of housing agencies in Dufferin County to support them.

While this small amount of data does not provide us with a clear picture of homelessness in Dufferin County, the experiences of those interviewed are broadly consistent with people experiencing homelessness in Ontario. For instance: as with the rest of Ontario, much of the homelessness reported by respondents living in the Dufferin County is hidden (for example, 31% of respondents reported couch surfing and 3% reported staying with friends or family most nights); Indigenous people are over-represented among individuals experiencing or at risk of homelessness (25 of 101 respondents identified as First Nation, Metis or non-status Aboriginal in this sample); and youth homelessness is a serious concern (less than 10% of respondents aged 21-30 reported having permanent housing at the time of the survey).<sup>7</sup> This suggests that the homelessness that exists in Dufferin County follows the same trends as homelessness elsewhere in Ontario. However, more extensive research is needed as confirmation.

## Broad Trends: Acuity Scores

The 20K Homes initiative relies on the Vulnerable Index-Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool (VI-SPDAT) for assessing the acuity of an individuals' service needs. The VI-SPDAT is a triage tool for determining the health and social needs of people experiencing homelessness; individuals are asked a series of questions and their responses correspond with VI-SPDAT scores.<sup>9</sup> An individual's score is then tallied and used to determine the acuity of their need for health and social services and support. The VI-SPDAT was created and is owned by Community Solutions and OrgCode Consulting, Inc.

The questions asked of respondents in this survey were designed with the VI-SPDAT in mind, and as such have been used to determine levels of acuity among people experiencing homelessness in Dufferin County. The scores correspond with recommendations for how an individual should be further supported.

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<sup>7</sup> Government of Ontario. (2015). A Place to Call Home: Report of the Expert Advisory Panel on Homelessness. Available at: <http://www.mah.gov.on.ca/AssetFactory.aspx?did=11038>

Of the 101 respondents:

- 19.5% scored between 0 and 3 (low acuity), which corresponds to a VI-SPDAT recommendation that the individual be supported through mainstream housing programs (i.e. market rent housing and other housing programs that facilitate integrated community based living);
- 34.1% scored between 4 and 7 (moderate acuity), corresponding with the VI-SPDAT recommendation that the individual be supported through Rapid Re-Housing programs, and;
- 46.3% scored 8 or higher (high acuity), which corresponds to the VI-SPDAT recommendation that the individual be provided with Permanent Supportive Housing.

This initial analysis constitutes an overview of the needs of people experiencing homelessness in Dufferin County, and provides agencies with a bird's eye view of homelessness in the region. The following sections examine more closely the features of homelessness and the people it affects in Dufferin County.

## Housing Statistics

The majority (78 of 101 respondents) were experiencing homelessness at the time of their interview. Of those, just over 60% reported having been homeless for more than six months of the past year, which suggests a pattern of chronic homelessness within Dufferin County.

Respondents were asked where they most frequently slept, and were invited to provide as many responses as were applicable. Of those who were experiencing homelessness at the time of the interview:

- 31% reported couch-surfing most of the time;
- 12% reported staying in transitional housing most of the time;
- 5% told interviewers they slept outdoors most often;
- about 3% revealed staying with friends or family most of the time; and,
- fully 50% reported staying in shelters most frequently.

Others reported sleeping in vehicles, or in other unsafe locations most of the time.

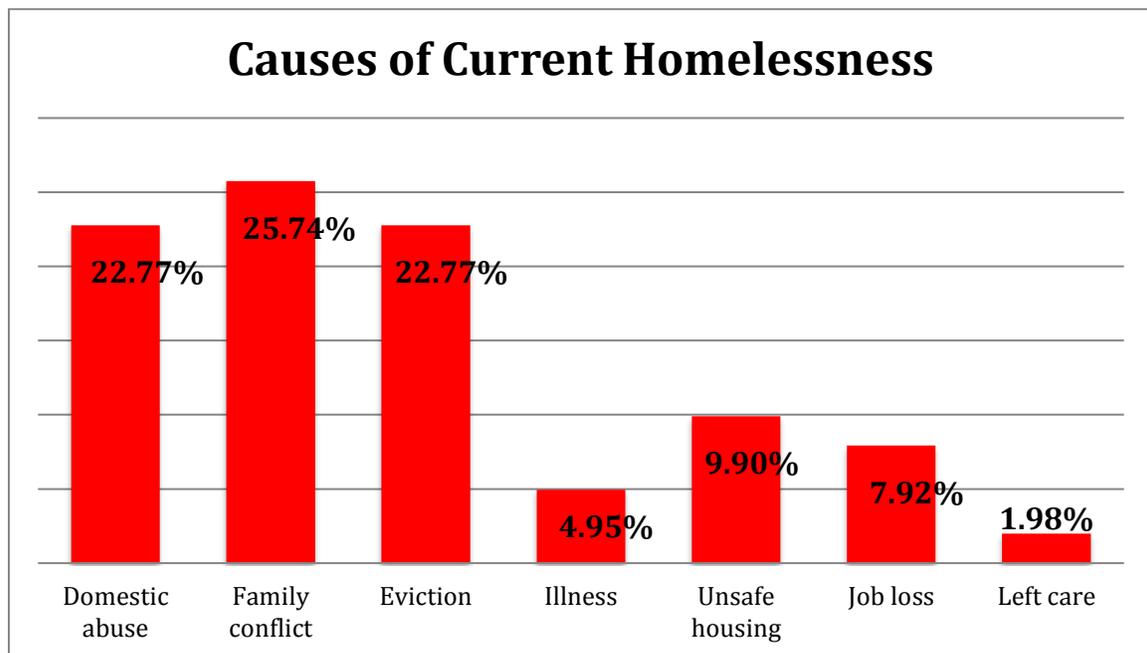
## Shelter Use

Although half of unhoused respondents reported sleeping in emergency shelters most frequently, shelters proved even more essential than that statistic reveals: of the 101 individuals interviewed, 62 shared that they had stayed in an emergency shelter at least once in the past year. This figure highlights the necessity of emergency shelters in Dufferin County. Moreover, shelter use is gendered: about 71% of women surveyed reported having stayed in an emergency shelter in the past year, while only 52% of men did. Respondents were asked "has your current period of homelessness been caused by an experience of emotional, physical, psychological, sexual, or other

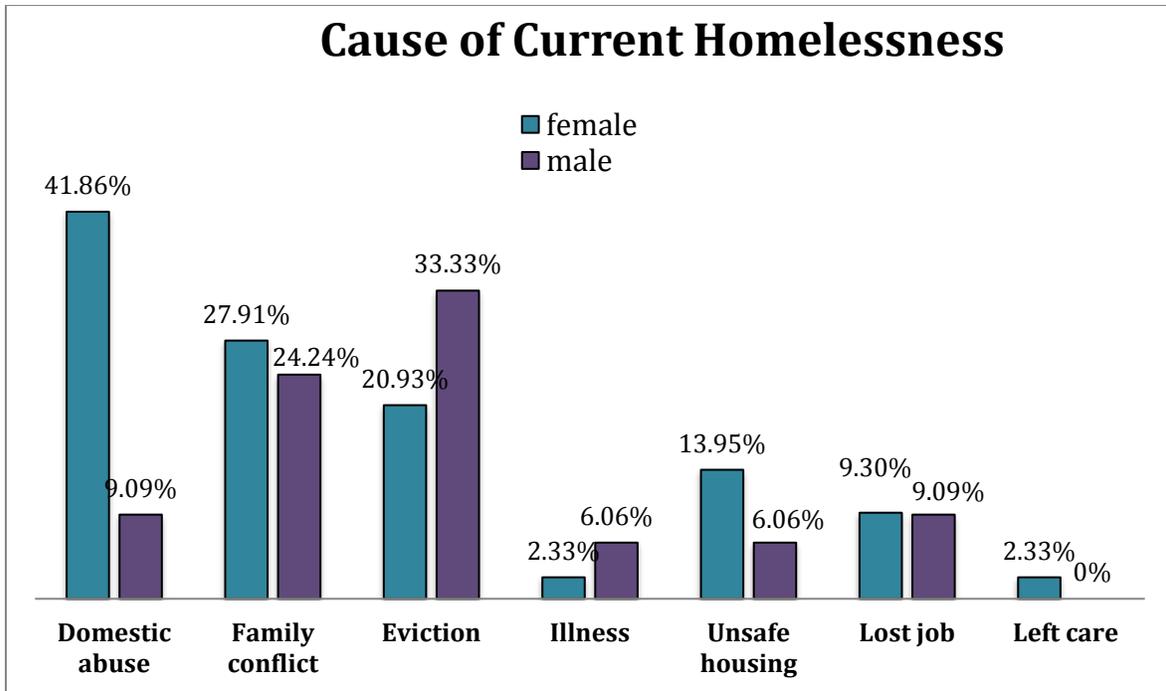
type of abuse, or by any other trauma you have experienced?” A full 70% of those who responded to this question in the affirmative had stayed in a shelter in the past 12 months. It is clear that those who are vulnerable to domestic abuse and homelessness in Dufferin County are often dependent on emergency shelters as a last resort.

## Cause of Current Homelessness

Interviewers asked, “what happened that caused you to lose your housing most recently?” Respondents were invited to provide any and as many responses as were applicable. The chart below displays the responses received and the frequency of their occurrence among the 101 individual responses. Notably, domestic abuse and family conflict are among the most frequently cited responses, which suggests a need for family supports as well as emergency services for individuals experiencing domestic abuse.



The responses to this question varied by gender as well; notably, women were more likely to respond that their homelessness was caused by domestic abuse, family conflict or unsafe housing.



## Health & Ability

It is well-established that health is a social determinant of health.<sup>8</sup> That is, access to safe and affordable housing is essential for good health, and poor health often accompanies insecure housing. As such, the interviews included a series of questions regarding individuals' personal health and how it impacts their access to housing.

### Chronic Health Issues

A question in the survey asked, "Do you have any chronic health issues with your liver, kidneys, stomach, lungs or heart?" About 38% of respondents answered that they did. Of that group, 21% reported having had to leave a past residence due to their physical health- this compares 8% of respondents without chronic health issues who had been in the same situation.

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<sup>8</sup> Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care. (2011). *Open Minds, Healthy Minds: Ontario's Comprehensive Mental Health and Addictions Strategy*. Available at: [http://www.health.gov.on.ca/en/common/ministry/publications/reports/mental\\_health2011/mentalhealth\\_rep2011.pdf](http://www.health.gov.on.ca/en/common/ministry/publications/reports/mental_health2011/mentalhealth_rep2011.pdf)

## Mental & Cognitive Health and Ability

About 21% of respondents shared that mental health issues or concerns had made finding secure housing difficult in the past. Of this group, nearly 48% also disclosed that they had been kicked out of a past residence because of problematic drinking or drug use. This suggests that mental health and substance abuse are related and overlapping, and that programs are needed that target the specific concerns of individuals with mental health or addiction issues.

Twenty-seven respondents reported that learning disabilities impacted their ability to access long-term, good quality housing. Of this subset, 34% reported that living independently was difficult or impossible because of their disability. An additional 9 individuals disclosed that a past head injury had impacted their housing situation, two-thirds of whom have trouble living independently.

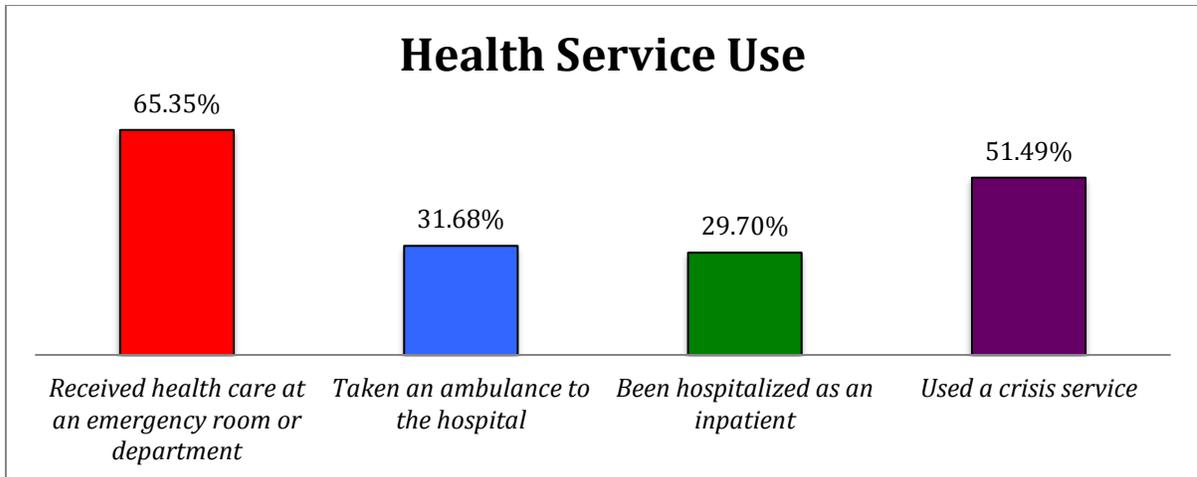
## Prescription and non-prescription drug use and misuse

Interviewers asked whether drinking or drug use impacted their housing situation. A full 50.5% of respondents stated that it did. Although there were no follow-up questions, this is an alarming statistic that suggests that Dufferin County is in need of addiction support services for many of its most at-risk denizens, and even more importantly, that accessible community housing for individuals with substance use problems must be a priority.

Over a quarter of those surveyed (28%) revealed that they had been prescribed medication but that they were not taking it. Similarly, over half the sample told interviewers that when they felt sick, they avoided seeing a doctor. This suggests that for a significant portion of those interviewed, healthcare and prescription drugs are not practically accessible, and that further steps should be taken to ensure that at-risk populations have full access to non-judgmental healthcare services.

## Service Use

Individuals who are at risk of homelessness are often those who can most benefit from public and social services. Several questions in this survey were aimed at determining the extent to which individuals experiencing or at risk of homelessness in Dufferin County are dependent on public services. The following chart reveals the proportion of respondents who have used a variety of services at least once in the six months prior to the survey. The results show relatively high rates of dependence on health services, particularly hospital emergency and crisis services.



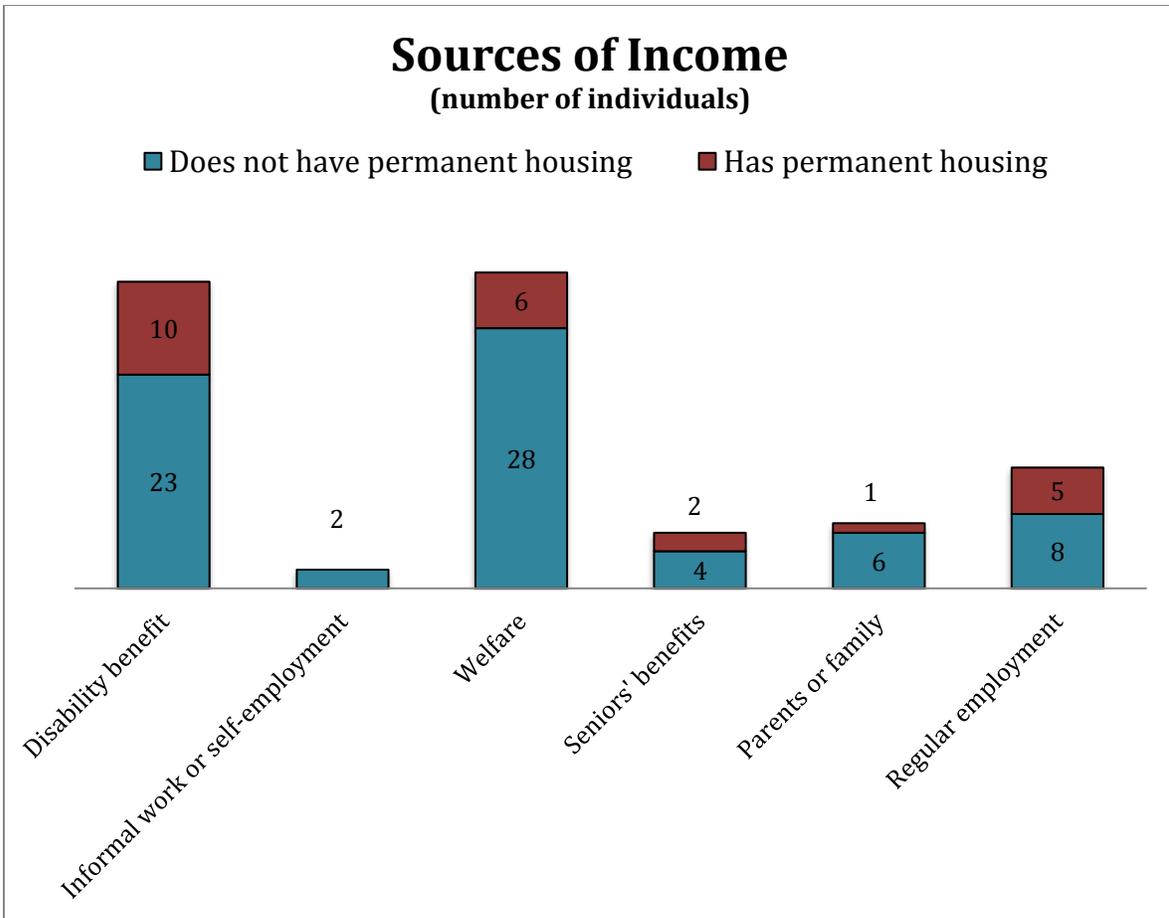
## Physical Risks of Homelessness

Poverty and homelessness are often accompanied by other legal, financial, and physical risks. The 20K Homes survey asks several questions that aim to understand the kinds of risks faced by individuals at risk of or experiencing homelessness in Dufferin County.

Respondents were asked whether they had been attacked or beaten up since becoming homeless. Thirty-two percent responded that they had been. Similarly, 32% reported having threatened or harmed themselves or someone else in the past year. Physical harm or self-harm is thus a very real risk for the homeless population in Dufferin County.

## Income & Money Owed

Although homelessness is often associated with absolute poverty, 77% of those surveyed reported that they did have some source of income. Moreover, having a source of income was not only common among those who had permanent housing: nearly three-quarters of those without a permanent place to sleep (74.4%) shared that they had some money coming in. Respondents were asked to specify the source or sources of their income; their responses are displayed in the following chart.



Although most respondents told interviewers that they had income, 46% also revealed that they owed money to another person or institution. Thus the existence of an earned income is not necessarily reflective of an ability to access safe and secure housing.

## Conclusions

As the 20K Homes Campaign Dufferin continues, more and more will be revealed about the landscape of homelessness in the County. This report has highlighted some of the key issues made available from the 101 interviews conducted in October of 2016.

Of specific significance in this short report are the high correlation between housing insecurity and domestic violence against women, the connection between housing insecurity and problematic substance use, and the high rates of housing insecurity among respondents aged 21-30.