Understanding and Measuring

Homelessness in Canada

Stephen Gaetz

Canadian Observatory on Homelessness

Professor, Faculty of Education,
York University, Toronto, Canada

Institute of Global Homelessness

Homelessness in a Global Landscape

June 1-2, 2014

Part 1

WHY research and data matter!

the homeless hub

Three Uses of Research

- Conceptual
- Instrumental
- Symbolic

(Amara, Ouimet, Landry, 2004)

Part 2

Homelessness in Canada

Canada

Population: 35 Million

Government of Canada

Homelessness Partnering Strategy

- Began in 1999
- Funding to communities
- Support for research!

HPS support for 61

"Designated Communities

Provinces and Territories

Key responsibilities for:

- Health care
- Social services
- Child protection
- Corrections
- Housing
- Municipalities

HOMELESSNESS *in* CANADA

BY THE NUMBERS

the homeless hub

OVER

235,000

CANADIANS EXPERIENCE HOMELESSNESS IN A YEAR

5,000

UNSHELTERED

180,000

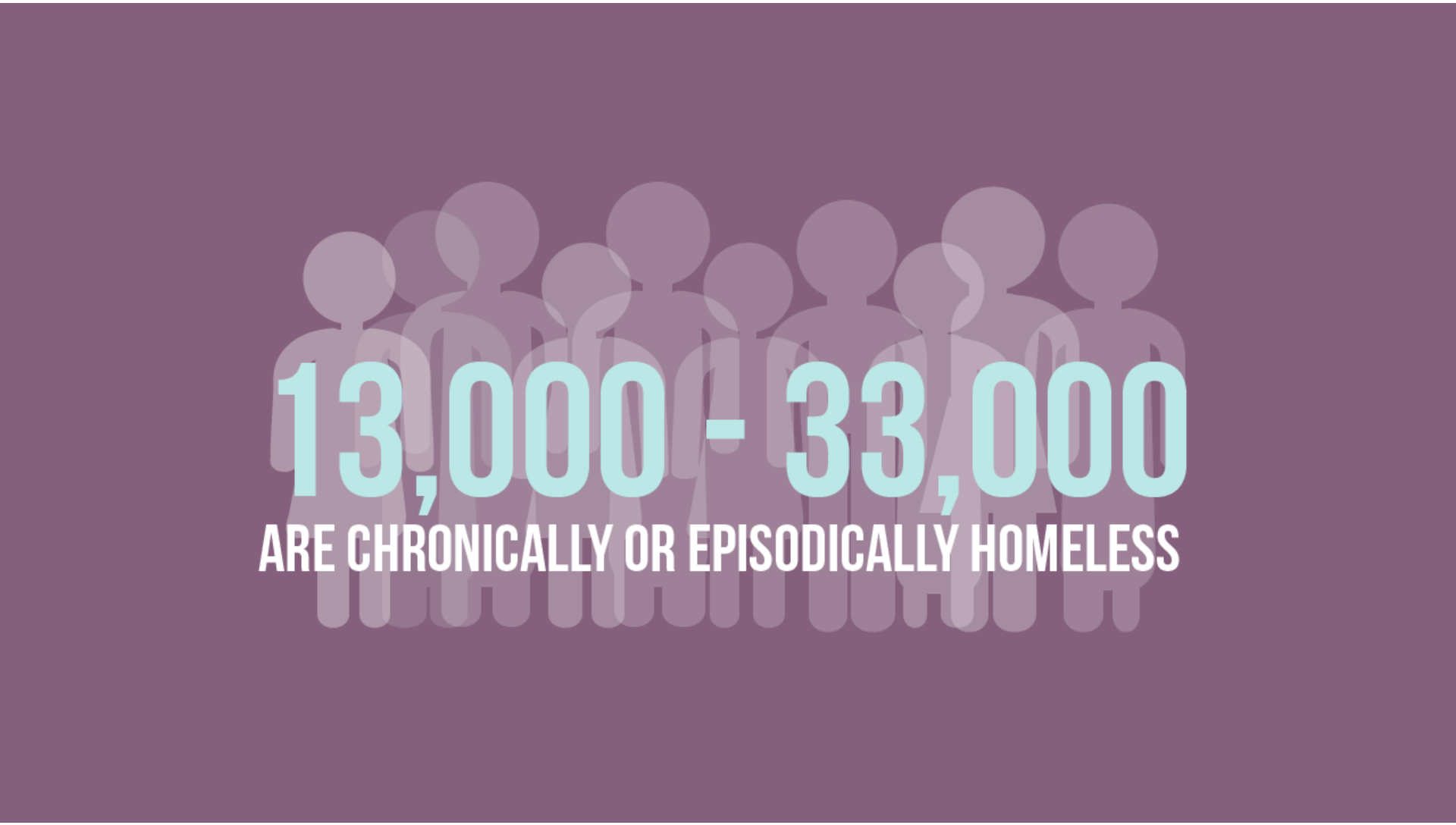
STAYING IN EMERGENCY SHELTERS

50,000

PROVISIONALLY ACCOMMODATED

35,000 CANADIANS ARE HOMELESS ON A GIVEN NIGHT

the homeless hub


13,000 - 33,000
ARE CHRONICALLY OR EPISODICALLY HOMELESS

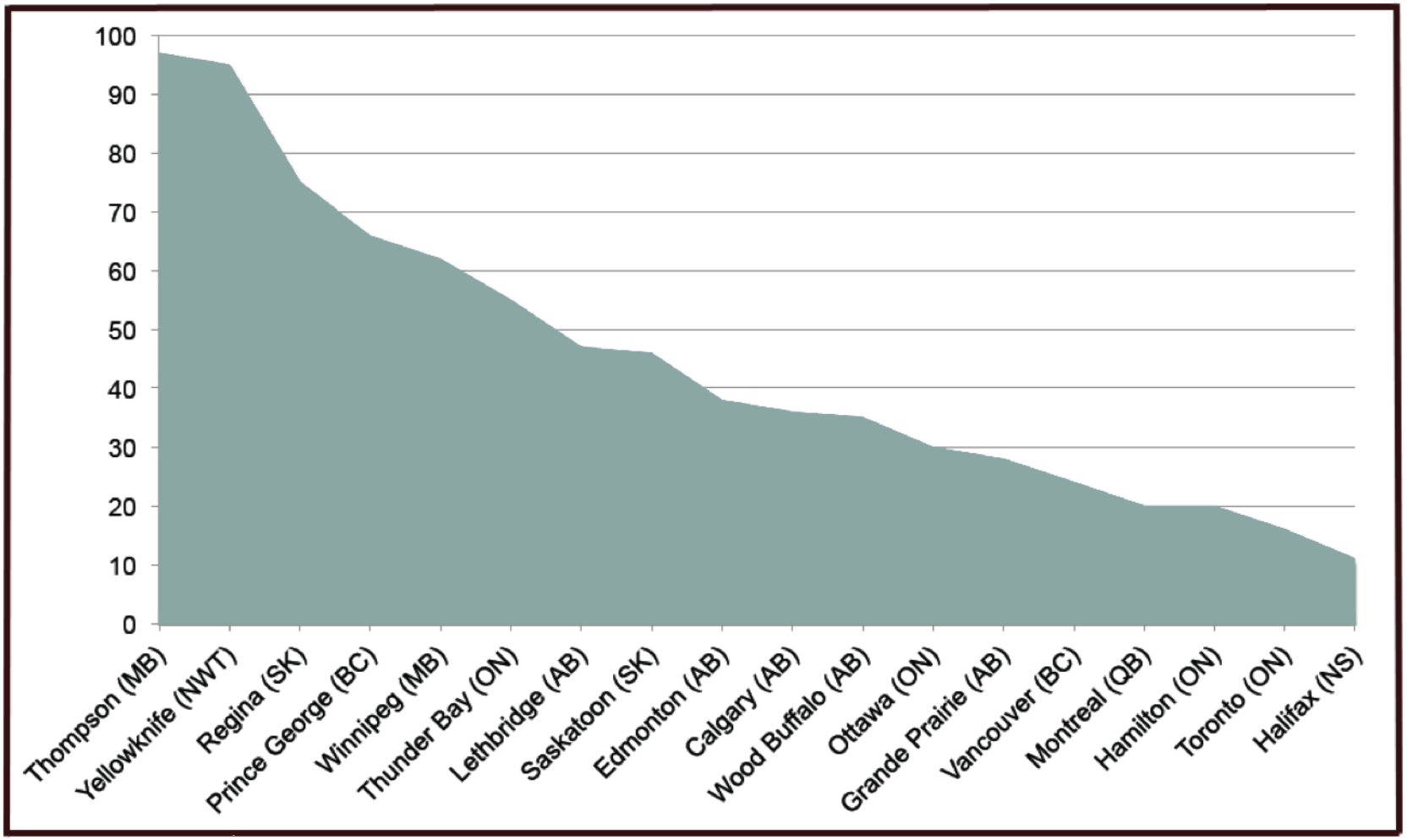
Who is homeless?

Who is homeless?

FAMILIY VIOLENCE
– is a major cause of –
HOMELESSNESS
FOR WOMEN

Who is homeless?

Aboriginal Homelessness in Canada



Belanger, et al. 2012

Part 3

The Canadian Definition of Homelessness

WHY do we need a definition of homelessness?

the homeless hub

A common Canadian Definition of Homelessness allows us to:

- Share a common language about homelessness
- More easily enumerate the problem
- Evaluate outcomes and progress
- Coordinate responses to homelessness
- Develop stronger policy responses

What we did:

a) Conducted an extensive *literature review* of definitions of homelessness in Canada and abroad

b) Assembled a *Stakeholder Working Group* to craft the definition

c) Consulted with other key stakeholders

COH
Canadian Observatory on Homelessness
the homeless hub

The Canadian Definition of Homelessness

DEFINITION

Homelessness describes the situation of an individual or family without stable, permanent, appropriate housing, or the immediate prospect, means and ability of acquiring 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. Most people do not choose to be homeless, and the experience is generally negative, unpleasant, stressful and distressing.

TYPOLOGY of HOMELESSNESS

1. ROUGH SLEEPERS	**1.1** People living in public or private spaces without consent or contract **1.2** People living in places not intended for permanent human habitation
2. EMERGENCY SHELTERED	**2.1** Emergency overnight shelters for people who are homeless **2.2** Shelters for individuals/families impacted by family violence **2.3** Emergency shelter for people fleeing a natural disaster or destruction of accommodation due to fires, floods, etc.
3. PROVISIONALLY ACCOMMODATED	**3.1** Interim Housing for people who are homeless **3.2** People living temporarily with others, but without guarantee of continued residency or immediate prospects for accessing permanent housing **3.3** People accessing short term, temporary rental accommodations without security of tenure **3.4** People in institutional care who lack permanent housing arrangements **3.5** Accommodation / reception centers for recently arrived immigrants and refugees
4. AT RISK OF HOMELESSNESS	**4.1** People at imminent risk of homelessness **4.2** Individuals and families who are precariously housed

1 UNSHELTERED

This includes people who lack housing and are not accessing emergency shelters or accommodation, except during extreme weather conditions. In most cases, people are staying in places that are not designed for or fit for human habitation.

	LIVING SITUATION	GENERIC DEFINITION
1.1	**People living in public or private spaces without consent or contract**	• Public space, such as sidewalks, squares, parks, forests, etc. • Private space and vacant buildings (squatting)
1.2	**People living in places not intended for permanent human habitation**	• Living in cars or other vehicles • Living in garages, attics, closets or buildings not designed for habitation • People in makeshift shelters, shacks or tents

2 EMERGENCY SHELTERED

This refers to people who, because they cannot secure permanent housing, are accessing emergency shelter and system supports, generally provided at no cost or minimal cost to the user. Such accommodation represents an institutional response to homelessness provided by government, non-profit, faith based organizations and / or volunteers.

LIVING SITUATION		GENERIC DEFINITION
2.1	**Emergency overnight shelters for people who are homeless**	These facilities are designed to meet the immediate needs of people who are homeless. Such short-term emergency shelters may target specific sub-populations, including women, families, youth or Aboriginal persons, for instance. These shelters typically have minimal eligibility criteria, offer shared sleeping facilities and amenities, and often expect clients to leave in the morning. They may or may not offer food, clothing or other services. Some emergency shelters allow people to stay on an ongoing basis while others are short term and are set up to respond to special circumstances, such as extreme weather.
2.2	**Shelters for individuals/families impacted by family violence**	
2.3	**Emergency shelter for people fleeing a natural disaster or destruction of accommodation due to fires, floods, etc.**	

3 PROVISIONALLY ACCOMMODATED

This describes situations in which people, who are technically homeless and without permanent shelter, access accommodation that offers no prospect of permanence. Those who are provisionally accommodated may be accessing temporary housing provided by government or the non-profit sector, or may have independently made arrangements for short-term accommodation.

	LIVING SITUATION	GENERIC DEFINITION
3.1	**Interim Housing for people who are homeless**	Interim housing is a systems-supported form of that is meant to bridge the gap between homelessness or emergency accommodation and permanent housing.
3.2	**People living temporarily with others, but without guarantee of continued residency or immediate prospects for accessing permanent housing**	Often referred to as 'couch surfers' or the 'hidden homeless', this describes people who stay with friends, family, or even strangers.
3.3	**People accessing short term, temporary rental accommodations without security of tenure**	In some cases people who are homeless make emporary rental arrangements, such as staying in motels, hostels, rooming houses, etc.
3.4	**People in institutional care who lack permanent housing arrangements**	People who may transition into homelessness upon release from: Penal institutions; Medical / mental health institutions; Residential treatment programs or withdrawal management centers; Children's institutions / group homes.
3.5	**Accommodation / reception centers for recently arrived immigrants and refugees**	Prior to securing their own housing, recently arrived immigrants and refugees may be temporarily housed while receiving settlement support and orientation to life in Canada.

4 AT-RISK of HOMELESSNESS

Although not technically homeless, this includes individuals or families whose current housing situations are dangerously lacking security or stability, and so are considered to be at-risk of homelessness. They are living in housing that is intended for permanent human habitation, and could potentially be permanent (as opposed to those who are provisionally accommodated). However, as a result of external hardship, poverty, personal crisis, discrimination, a lack of other available and affordable housing, and / or the inappropriateness of their current housing (which may be overcrowded or does not meet public health and safety standards) residents may be "at risk" of homelessness.

	LIVING SITUATION	GENERIC DEFINITION
4.1	**People at imminent risk of homelessness**	• Those whose employment is precarious • Those experiencing sudden unemployment • Households facing eviction • Housing with transitional supports about to be discontinued • People with severe and persistent mental illness, active addictions, substance use, and / or behavioural issues • Breakdown in family relations • People facing, or living in direct fear, of violence / abuse
4.2	**Individuals and families who are precariously housed**	Those who face challenges that may or may not leave them homeless in the immediate or near future. CMHC defines a household as being in ***core housing need*** if its housing: "falls below at least one of the **adequacy, affordability or suitability** standards and would have to spend 30% or more of its total before-tax income to pay the median rent of alternative local housing that is acceptable (meets all three housing standards)."

Part 4

Measuring Homelessness

Why do a Count?

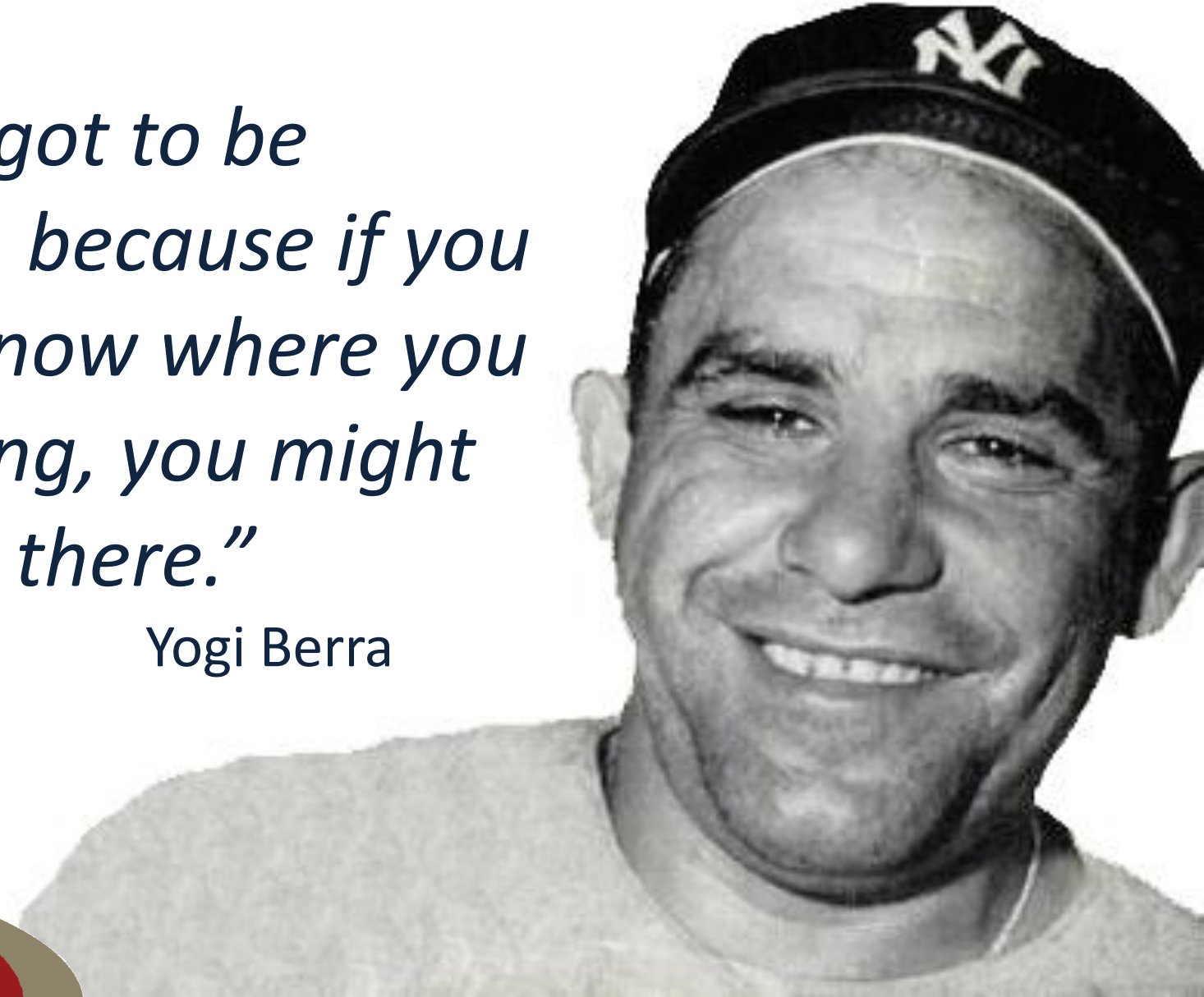
It tells us how we are doing.

- Provides a baseline
- Enables you to measure progress
- Helps identify priority populations

Point in Time Counts in Canada

You've got to be careful, because if you don't know where you are going, you might not get there."

Yogi Berra



the homeless hub

Point in Time Counts in Canada

Prior to 2014

- Only a handful of communities across Canada had ever done a PiT count, of these an even smaller number reported planning future counts:
  - Calgary, Edmonton, Vancouver, Toronto, Lethbridge, Red Deer, Kamloops
- These communities were using very different methods (including definitions, time of year, etc.). This makes it difficult to aggregate data and analyze.
- Communities wedded to their approach and methodology, because of pride and the ability to compare results to previous counts.

Canadian Observatory on Homelessness

NATIONAL

Point-in-Time Count

Winter 2016

the homeless hub

Why a common methodology?

First, communities have access to evidence-based tools. Don't have to reinvent the wheel

Second, communities can compare results.

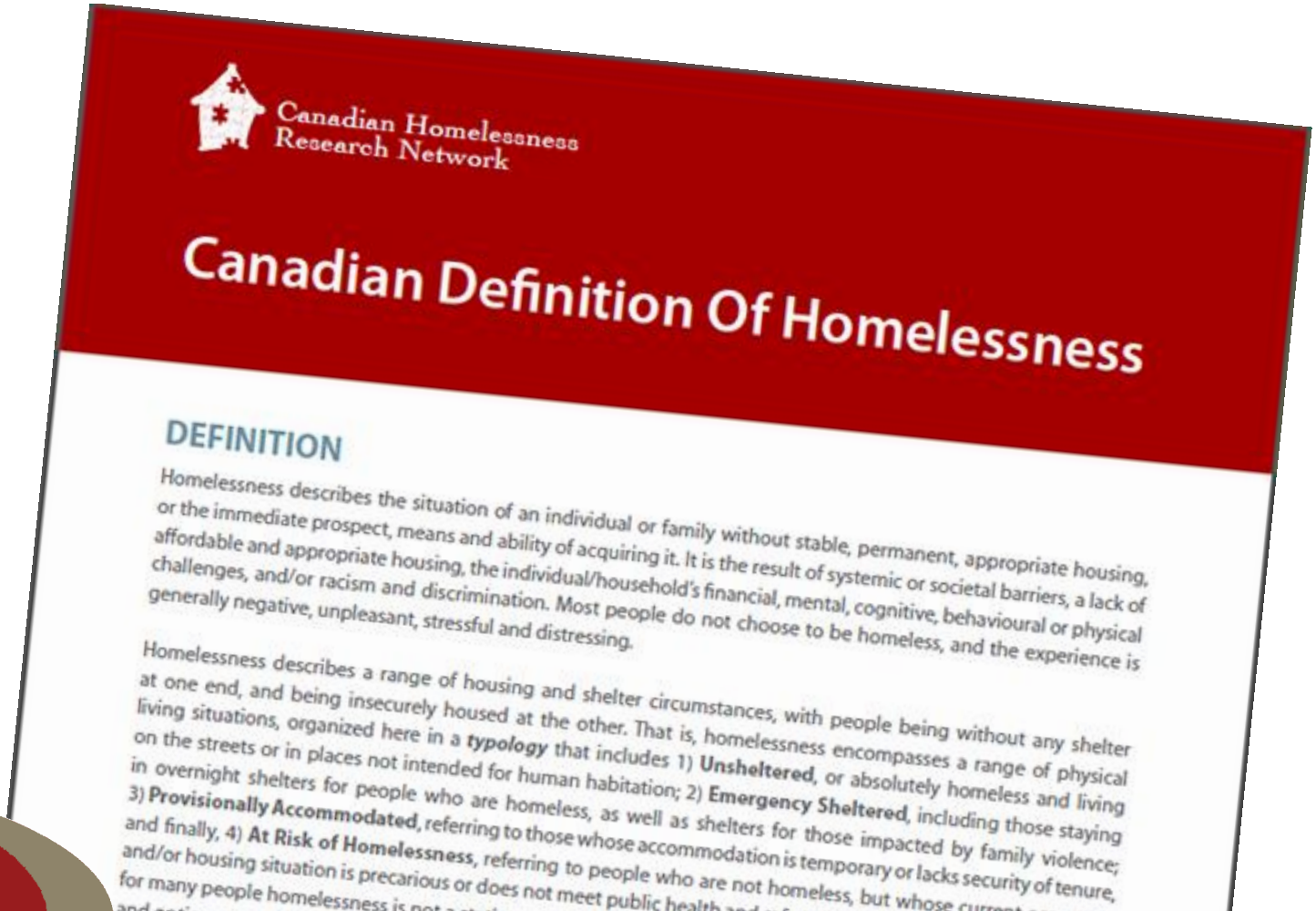
Third, results can be aggregated to provide reliable provincial / regional / pan Canadian data.

Challenges in developing a common method

- Resistance to alignment: 'Specialness' disease.
- local context considerations;
- willingness and capacity participate.

Who to count?

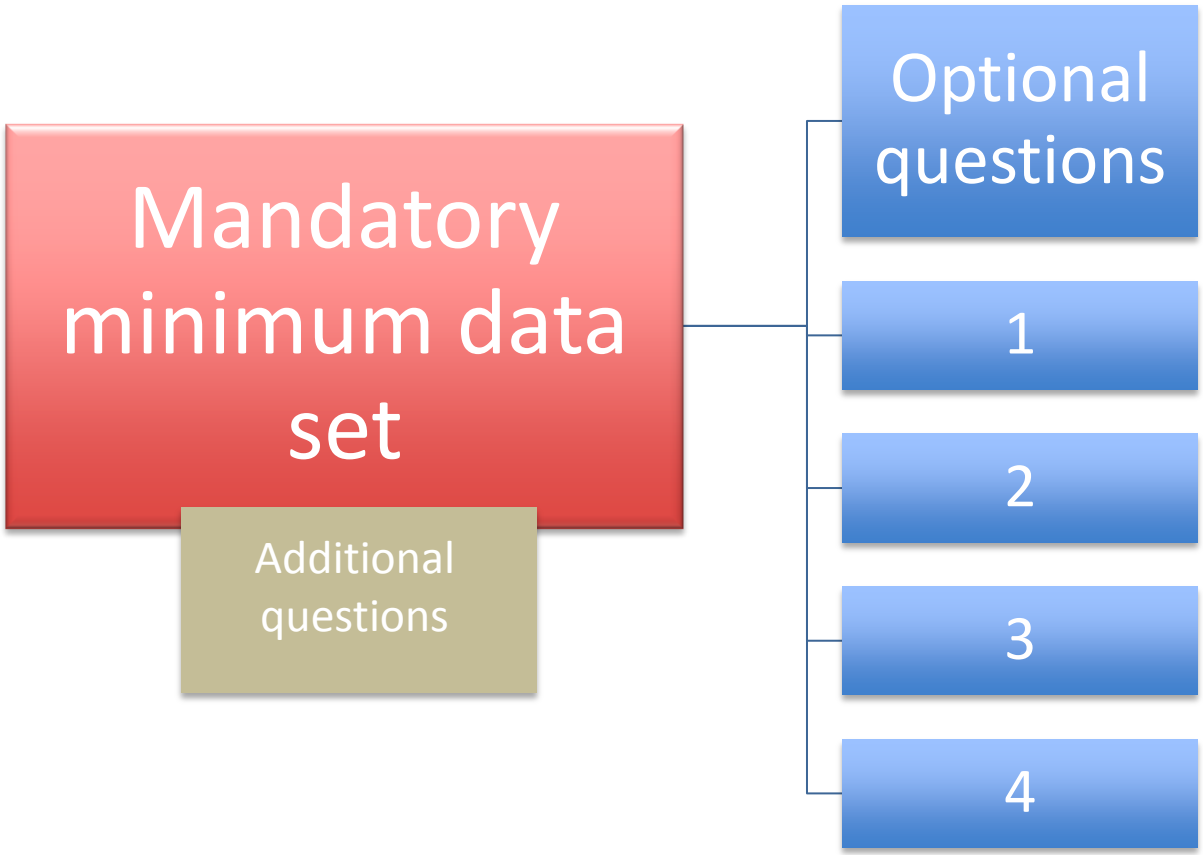
Start with the Canadian Definition of Homelessness



Work from the typology

OPERATIONAL CATEGORY		LIVING SITUATION	COUNTED
1	Unsheltered	1.1 People living in public or private spaces without consent or contract	✔
		1.2 People living in places not intended for permanent human habitation	✔
2	Emergency Sheltered	2.1 Emergency overnight shelters for people who are homeless	✔
		2.2 Violence-Against-Women (VAW) shelters	✔
		2.3 Emergency shelter for people fleeing a natural disaster or destruction of accommodation due to fires, floods etc.	
3	Provisionally Accommodated	3.1 Interim Housing for people who are homeless	✔
		3.2 People living temporarily with others, but without guarantee of continued residency or immediate prospects for accessing permanent housing.	
		3.3 People accessing short term, temporary rental accommodations without security of tenure	
		3.4 People in institutional care who lack permanent housing arrangements.	✔
		3.5 Accommodation / Reception centres for recently arrived immigrants and refugees	
4	At-Risk of Homelessness	4.1 People at imminent risk of homelessness	
		4.2 Individuals and families who are precariously housed.	

What the survey covers?



Mandatory questions

- Screening
- Consent

- Gender
- Age
- Ethnicity
- Migration
- Immigration
- Homelessness History
- Veteran Status

Canadian Point-in-Time Count

Methodology and Toolkit

What is in the tool kit?

1. Overview of PiT Counts
2. Planning your PiT count
3. Implementation
4. The Survey
5. Working with data
6. Mobilizing results

Part 5

Emerging issues in Data

Sub-populations

Issues of definition, measurement and assessment

- Youth
- Women
- Aboriginal people

Sub-populations

Issues of definition, measurement and assessment

The term “Youth homelessness” refers to the experience of young people between the ages of 13 and 24 who are living independently of parents and/or caregivers, and importantly, lack many of the social supports deemed necessary for the transition from childhood to adulthood.

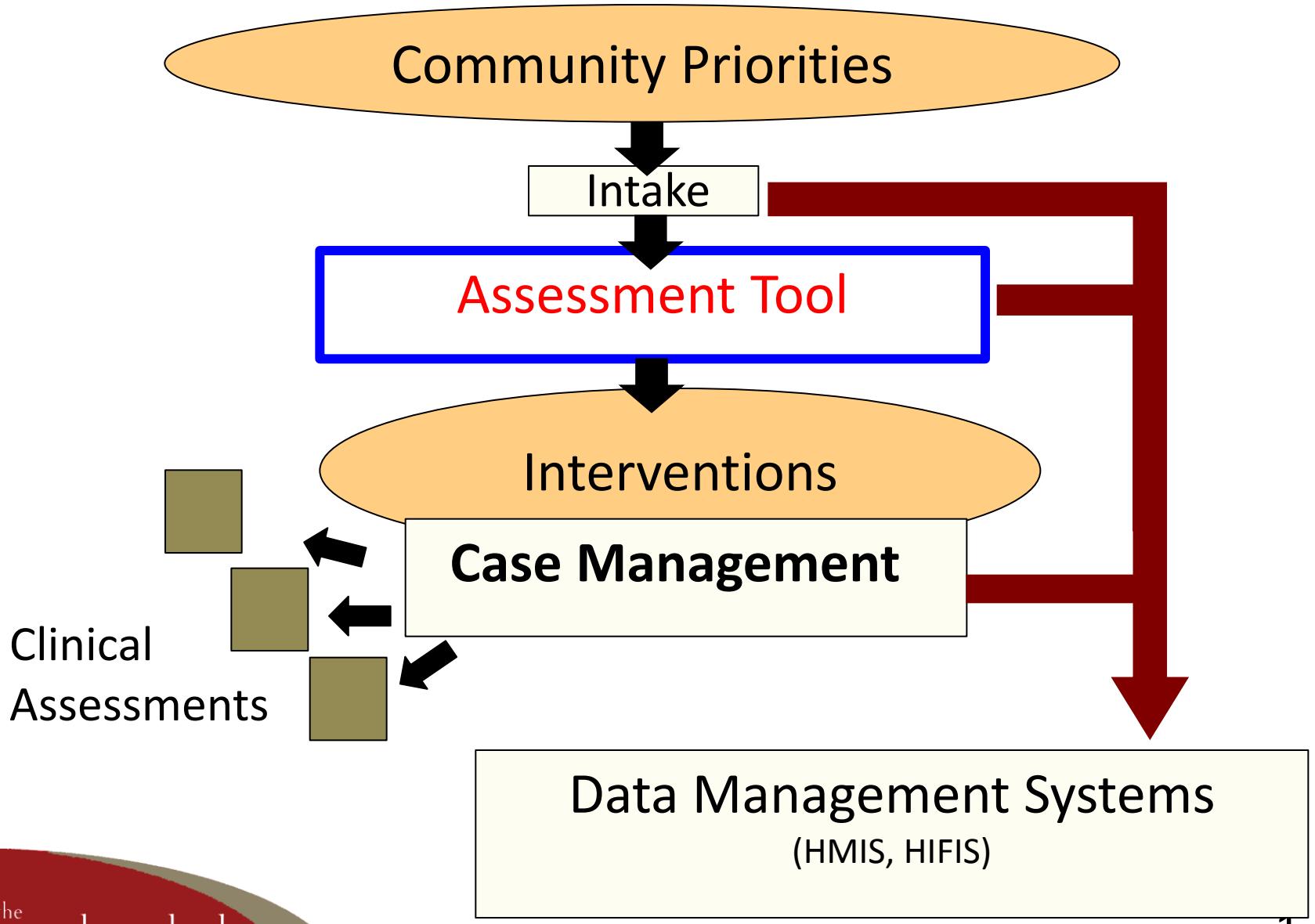
2 Integrated data management systems

- Important for community planning and service integration
- Weak systems currently in place
- Communities lack resources to invest in this

Acuity Assessment and Prioritization

- Has become a priority in many communities because of Housing First
- Consultant driven

Where does ASSESSMENT fit in?



A word of CAUTION!

AVOID *SCIENTISM!*

Assessment tools are one source of information to guide decision making. They are not magic, and they cannot make decisions for you. Trust your own knowledge as well.

4 Growing interest in understanding hidden homelessness

- Challenging to do methodologically
- Can link with prevalence studies

Questions or comments?