2024 Well-being Insights: Community Perceptions of Homelessness & Related Service Provision

SURVEY SUMMARY

Selkirk College | SELKIRK INNOVATES

2025 West Kootenay Homelessness Response Summit

Purpose

This summary provides a selection of results from a survey conducted as part of the Selkirk College applied research project, **Bridging Rural Homelessness and Well-Being: A Sustainable and Collaborative Regional Response**. Detailed results will be available in a full report on the project website.

> ## OBJECTIVE
>
> To understand community perceptions of homelessness in order to inform better decisions, address stereotypes, support effective, evidence-based solutions, and help create a safe and inclusive community for all.

Methodology

Community members from Nelson, Castlegar, and Trail were invited to participate in a voluntary online survey that was open from July 1–August 19, 2024.

The survey included open-ended questions to hear people's thoughts in their own words (qualitative), along with rating and ranking questions to gather measurable responses (quantitative).

These results were analyzed using thematic coding and descriptive statistics.
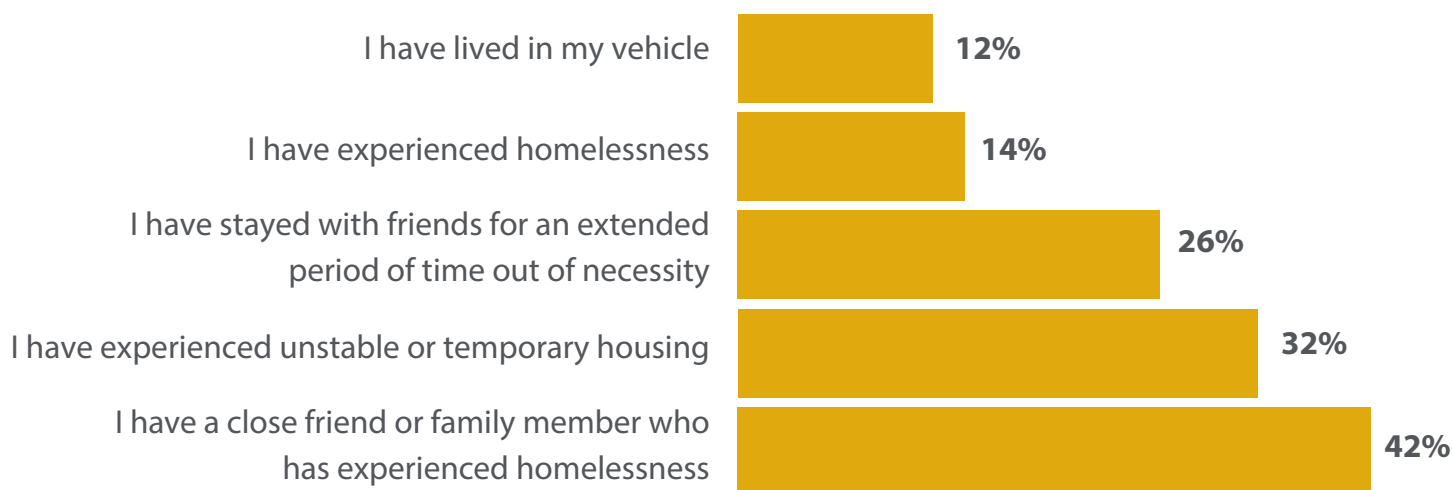
Total Responses **835**

RESPONDENTS BY COMMUNITY

Castlegar 21% (n=174)

Nelson 40% (n=338)

Trail 39% (n=323)
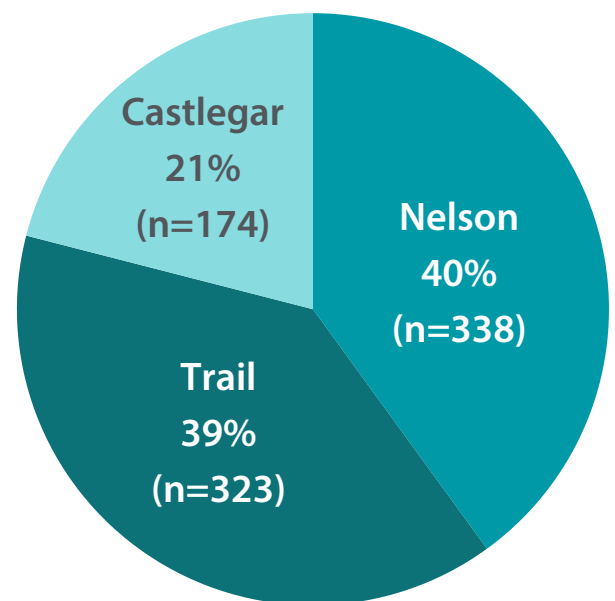
n = number of respondents

Results

PERSONAL EXPERIENCES OF HOMELESSNESS

Respondents were asked to share if they have experienced homelessness.

I have lived in my vehicle	12%
I have experienced homelessness	14%
I have stayed with friends for an extended period of time out of necessity	26%
I have experienced unstable or temporary housing	32%
I have a close friend or family member who has experienced homelessness	42%

PERSONAL EXPERIENCES OF HOMELESSNESS
(n=571)

63% of respondents have noticed a **substantial increase** in the unhoused population over the last five years

PERCEIVED CAUSES OF HOMELESSNESS

Respondents were asked to indicate what they perceive as the top three causes of homelessness in their community. They could choose from a provided list or specify their own response.

Addiction or substance use	**63%**
Mental health concerns	**55%**
Housing affordability	**45%**

TOP THREE PERCEIVED CAUSES OF HOMELESSNESS
(n=747)

The lack of housing supply, the market cost of housing, the lack of land trusts, co-op and other housing alternatives is impacting ever more people as income gaps increase, and the cost of living gets higher. "
– Trail resident

IMPACT OF HOMELESSNESS

Respondents were asked to rate the impact of homelessness in their community from 1 to 7, with 1 being "no impact" and 7 being "a big impact." Across all communities, **87% of respondents provided a rating of 5 or higher**, indicating that homelessness is seen as having a moderate to big impact.

AVERAGE SCORE: 6.1/7

(n=743)

Respondents were also asked to describe what the impact of homelessness looks like in their communities. Of the 633 responses, comments were mostly divided between community impacts and the impacts the unhoused population experience.

IMPACT ON THE COMMMUNITY

Social Impacts
- Safety is an important theme shaping community perceptions of homelessness, with concerns about unpredictable or threatening behaviour, crime, and risks to vulnerable groups, property, and public spaces.
- Respondents also express worries about housed residents' quality of life, the mental health and substance use crises, and other public health concerns.

Environmental Impacts
- The visibility of homelessness in public spaces contributes to perceptions of the community environment.
- Respondents indicate concerns about environmental health (e.g., garbage), the sense that homelessness is increasing or worsening, and the overall experience and aesthetics of shared spaces.

Economic impacts
- Respondents mention concerns about strain on commercial areas (i.e., downtown core) and increased pressure on public services (e.g., emergency responders, healthcare).

"The impact of homelessness in my community makes it look and feel like an unsafe place to live." – Nelson resident

(n=401)

Economic Impacts 12%

Environmental Impacts 35%

Social Impacts 54%
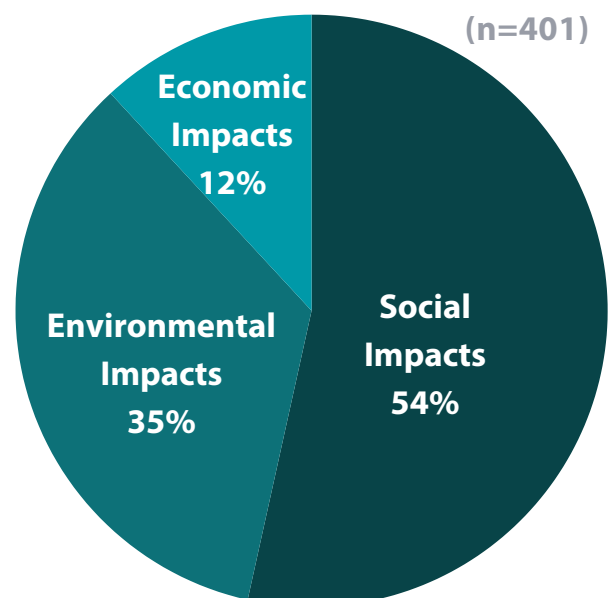
IMPACT ON THE UNHOUSED

Health & Well-being Impacts

Respondents express concern for people experiencing homelessness, with comments about issues including:

- Unsafe living conditions (e.g., sleeping in cars, tents, or overcrowded accommodations).
- Reduced quality of life marked by despair, stress, and being in survival mode.
- Limited access to basic needs (i.e., food, water, toilet and shower facilities).
- Mental health and substance use challenges.
- Physical health concerns (e.g., exposure to extreme weather, inadequate sanitation, lack of medical care).
- A lack of belonging or social connection.

"I think any community with unhoused folks translates to an impact of inequity in resources, supports, and housing." – Castlegar resident

Service Access & Gaps

Respondents point to gaps in services, including:

- Insufficient shelter options.
- Limited access to social and supportive housing, medical care, and mental health and substance use services.
- A lack of public facilities (i.e., toilets, showers) and life skills or job training opportunities.
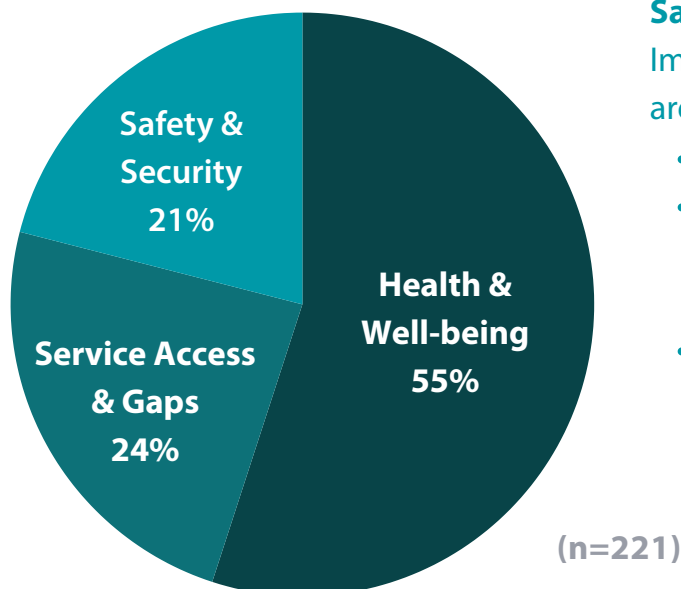
Safety & Security Impacts

Impacts to the safety and security of people who are unhoused are reflected in comments about:

- Experiences of stigma and discrimination.
- A lack of safe places to live or sleep, with vulnerability to the elements and other potential harms.
- Experiences of victimization and crime.

Safety & Security 21%
Service Access & Gaps 24%
Health & Well-being 55%
(n=221)

"People who are homeless get abused for a problem that is too big for them to solve alone." – Trail resident

SUPPORT FOR SERVICES WITHIN CITY LIMITS

Respondents were presented with a list of services and asked to rate their level of agreement with having each of the services within the limits of their community.
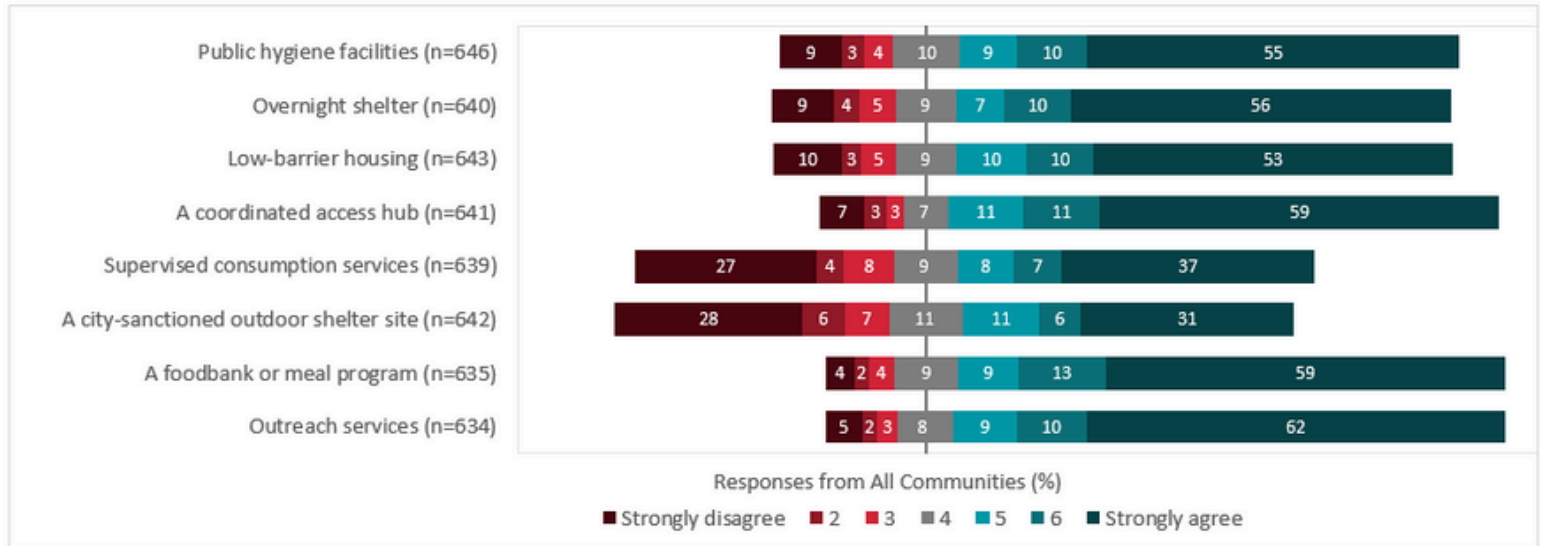
Respondents indicate **strong support for outreach services, a coordinated access hub, and food programs**. There are more polarized views on outdoor city-sanctioned shelter sites and supervised consumption services.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ADVOCACY FOR FUNDING

On a scale from 1 to 7, with 1 being "strongly disagree" and 7 being "strongly agree," respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the following statement: *"I think my local government should source funds to increase supports for the unhoused population in my community."* Across all three communities, 14% of respondents indicate that they strongly disagree, while 49% strongly agree.

AVERAGE SCORE: 5.2/7

(n=641)

"The province needs to do much more to fund, coordinate and deliver affordable housing, mental health/substance use resources, including easily accessible treatment/rehab, accessible healthcare, support and social services."
– Trail resident

SHELTERS AND SOCIAL HOUSING

> "We absolutely, without question, need increased shelter capacity and social housing capacity. In order to implement the housing first principle - that people need to be housed first, then can be supported in addressing mental health, addiction, employment, etc. - we need to have the literal structures in place to house people."
> – Nelson resident

Respondents were asked to share their thoughts on having a shelter and/or social housing (i.e., subsidized housing operated by the government or non-profits) in their community, with 513 responses received.

45% of respondents are conditionally supportive

79% of respondents express support for shelters and social housing

13% of respondents express opposition, while **12%** voice concerns

SUPPORT DEPENDS ON:
- Access to mental health and substance use supports
- Safe, well-located sites with adequate staffing
- Community consultation in decision-making

CONCERNS INCLUDE:
- Safety and crime
- Attracting people from other areas
- Dependency on services
- Inappropriate behaviours
- A lack of adequate services

27% of respondents offer recommendations

RECOMMENDATIONS
- **Government Action:** More funding, oversight, and accountability
- **Support Delivery:** Detox, complex care, prevention programs, community kitchens
- **Housing Management:** Smaller developments, transparency, lived experience input
- **Funding Ideas:** Pay-for-service, crowdfunding, public ownership
- **Vacant Spaces:** Repurpose hotels, churches, and other buildings

> "Something that is missing from all three towns of focus are youth shelters. Youth who for whatever reason cannot/will not be with caregivers and are not able to be provided with homes (i.e., foster care, out-of-care arrangements, youth agreements) end up couch surfing and often in highly unsafe, risky environments. This then increases their risks in multiple areas and perpetuates harmful cycles. Each town should have staffed 24/hr youth shelters." – Nelson resident

ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE UNHOUSED

58% of respondents agree to some extent that they have **witnessed discrimination** towards people who are unhoused in their community

64% of respondents agree to some extent that **negative attitudes are impacting the well-being** of people who are unhoused in their community

REDUCING NEGATIVE ATTITUDES

Respondents were asked their opinion on the best way to reduce negative attitudes about the unhoused population in their community, with 300 responses received.

Theme	What Respondents Think Can Help
Service Provision (77%)	Providing access to detox and treatment, mental health care, housing, job supports, education, and more responsive services
Public Education (75%)	Raising awareness, sharing real stories, highlighting systemic causes of homelessness, and running anti-stigma campaigns
Personal & Community Interactions (61%)	Building connections through kindness, volunteering, and creating a sense of belonging
Location (36%)	Opening drop-in spaces and building housing to help reduce visibility and promote stability. A few suggest options outside city limits.
Responsibility (22%)	Encouraging personal accountability, shared expectations, and informed governance to reduce harm, improve policy, and support lasting solutions.

"I believe that people absolutely have the right to safe secure housing and the choice what they do with their bodies. That being said, with rights come responsibilities and people in our communities feel unsafe, from improperly disposed drug paraphernalia in public spaces, to unsafe fires, increase in theft, trespassing, violence and encampments overflowing with trash. These things need to be addressed - there will be no decrease in stigma without a significant shift in the visibility of these things."– Nelson resident

EFFECTIVE MEANS OF SUPPORT

Respondents were asked to rank the most effective means of support for the unhoused population by sorting a list of 12 options.

1	Overnight shelter or low-barrier housing
2	Food banks/lunch programs
3	Hygiene facilities

TOP THREE MOST EFFECTIVE MEANS OF SUPPORT
(n=633)

IDEAS TO IMPROVE THE WELL-BEING OF THE UNHOUSED

Respondents were asked what ideas they have for improving the well-being of the unhoused population in their community, with 472 responses received.

Theme	Respondents' Ideas
Addressing Basic Needs (77%)	Building safe and appropriate housing across the housing continuum for diverse populations. Providing access to food and hygiene facilities.
Health & Wellness (61%)	Providing wrap-around, timely, responsive, and integrated mental and physical health services. Increasing access to detox, treatment, and harm reduction.
Service Provision (61%)	Increasing services and supports (e.g., financial). Increasing access to resources, drop-in centres, and employment training. Paying careful attention to safety and security for all. Consulting with people with lived experience.
Systemic Change (27%)	Mobilizing more government resources for homelessness prevention and response. Designing services with a trauma-informed lens.
Community Involvement (22%)	Creating more inclusive spaces. Providing anti-stigma education. Encouraging more community volunteers, donations, acts of kindness, and interactions with people who are unhoused.
Opposition (11%)	Opposing services for fear of attracting people to the area or enabling them. Opposing safe supply and promoting abstinence-based soutions. Hiding services from the public.

INFORMATION SOURCES

49% of respondents agree to some extent that they are able to access information about services and programs for the unhoused population

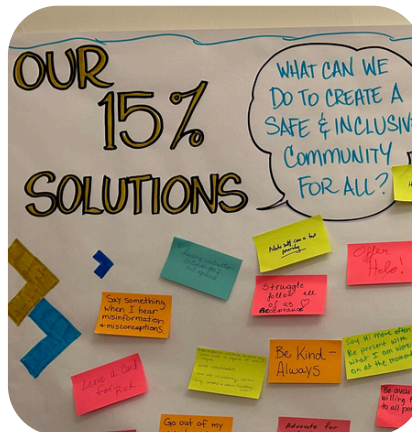**51%** of respondents agree to some extent that they trust the information they find

COMMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

56% of respondents are likely to take action to improve the well-being of those experiencing homelessness in their community

46% of respondents disagree to some extent that they have opportunities to share their perspectives on services and supports for the unhoused population

64% of respondents disagree to some extent that their perspective is considered by local decision-makers

"Homelessness appears as a community problem, but it's much bigger than that. The federal government has to initiate a 'housing first' policy and mandate to provincial and municipal governments that at least 25% of all housing must be affordable social housing. Until we can house people, it will be futile to do anything else."

– Castlegar resident

PERSONAL CONTRIBUTIONS

Respondents were asked how they felt they could personally contribute to improving the well-being of the unhoused population in their communities, with 414 responses received.

Theme	Personal Contributions
Support (39%)	Providing donations (e.g., food and water, supplies, money), supporting local service providers, working in fields that support people experiencing homelessness.
Attitudes & Behaviours (25%)	Engaging with people experiencing homelessness and establishing communication, being kind and friendly, showing compassion and empathy, being respectful, and treating them with dignity.
Opposition (19%)	Refusing to contribute.
Advocate (16%)	Speaking up for people experiencing homelessness and advocating on their behalf with local decision-makers and other levels of government.
Volunteer (13%)	Donating personal time to local programs and services (e.g., food banks, shelters, warming/cooling centres, outreach).
Education (12%)	Continuing to learn and work on self-improvement, increasing public education, and challenging assumptions, stereotypes, and misinformation.

"Participating in community-building activities that bring together the housed and unhoused, such as communal gardens or shared meal events, could help foster a sense of belonging and connection."
– Nelson resident

"Kindness and supporting political leaders who understand the issue."
– Castlegar resident

"Continue to speak out about lack of mental health resources within the community, including how established systems are overwhelmed."
– Trail resident

"I am willing to contribute time to advocating on their behalf publicly, for example at city council or door to door discussions, as well as helping to produce media that can communicate their needs, programs available, etc."
– Nelson resident

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