FIRST ADMISSIONS TO HOMELESS SHELTERS

People who use emergency homeless shelters this month are not necessarily the same people who will use them next month.
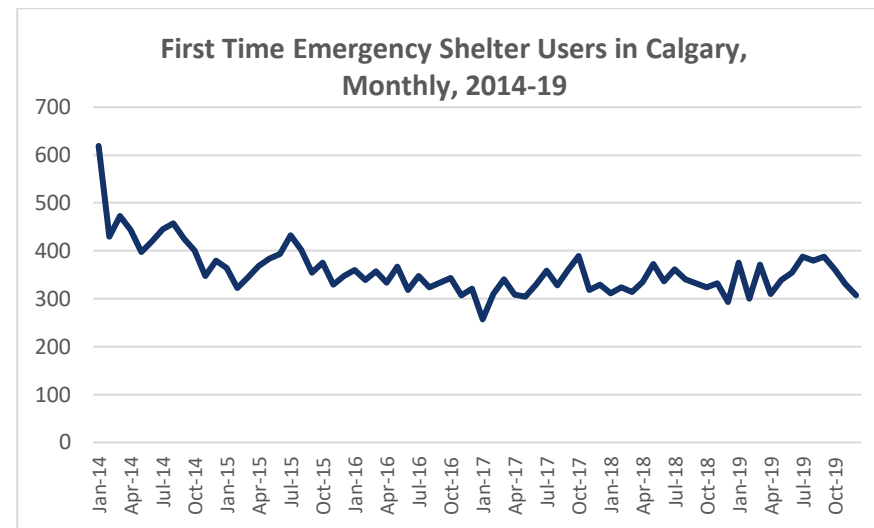
The figure shows, for each month from January 2014 to December 2019, the number of people who made use of an emergency homeless shelter in Calgary for the first time in their lives. Over this period, an average of 359 individuals per month slept in an emergency shelter in Calgary for the first time. In an average month over this period, 27% of all the emergency shelter beds were emptied and filled again by people completely new to the shelter system.

As the figure shows, there was a decline in the number of first-time users of the shelter system from 2014 to 2017 but the number remained more or less constant to the end of 2019. In 2019, the monthly average of new entrants to the shelter system was 350 individuals, a fall from the average of 436 in 2014. Over the whole of 2019, over 4,200 people slept in a homeless shelter for the first time in their lives.

In a typical month in 2019, an average of 350 people slept in an emergency shelter for the first time in their lives. In 2019, over 4,200 Calgarians slept in a shelter who had never done so previously.

These numbers will be surprising to those who believe that people who experience homelessness are the same people, month in and month out. This is a misconception that causes them to think that dealing with homelessness means addressing the needs of a relatively small number of people. This is simply not true.

There is not a rigid boundary that separates people who are securely housed from those who are not. Many people in Canada live in a wide, gray area between these housing extremes. They move back and forth within a range of options that includes rough sleeping, couch surfing, using homeless shelters, and low-priced rental

First Time Emergency Shelter Users in Calgary, Monthly, 2014-19

Source: These data are based on calculations reported in our research published here. We thank the Government of Alberta and the Calgary Homeless Foundation for making the data needed to develop these measures available to us. We are responsible for any errors or misrepresentations.

accommodations. The common denominator for the largest part of this population is an income that is low relative to the cost of maintaining safe and secure housing.

Understanding these facts about homelessness and homeless shelter use is crucial for understanding what are appropriate public policies to address homelessness. A good deal of the battle must be engaged in the community, not in shelters. The figure shows that every month in Calgary there are hundreds of people in the community so precariously housed that an unexpected shock – a loss of a few hours of work or an unexpected bill – will cause them to lose their housing and force them to find emergency shelter. Much of the fight against homelessness is a fight against poverty, unstable income, and high housing costs for people with limited incomes. This is not an issue unique to Calgary.