

HOMELESS SHELTER USE IN TORONTO

The number of over-night stays in Toronto's homeless shelters has more than doubled since late 2016.

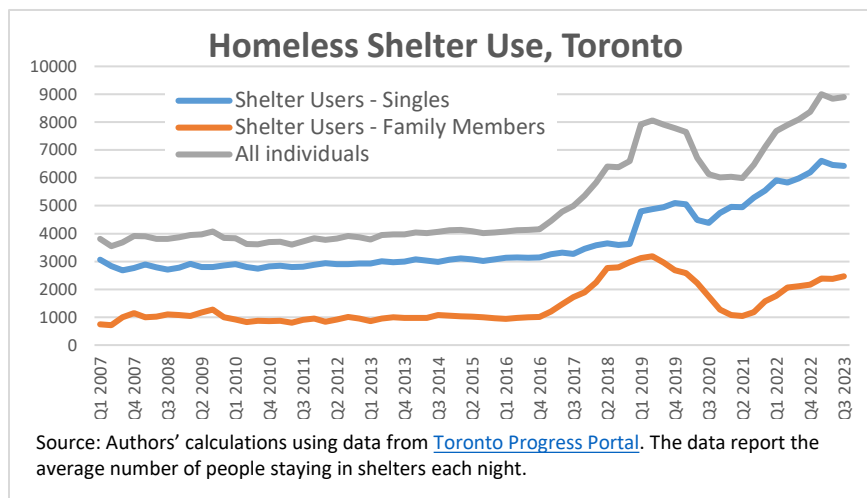
The figure shows the average number of individuals staying in a homeless shelter each night in Toronto. The lines in the graph report the average number of nightly stays in each quarter, from the first quarter of 2007 to the third quarter of 2023. The grey line, which includes singles and family adults, as well as children, shows an increase in the number of overnight stays from an average of 4,158 per night in the fourth quarter of 2016 to an average of 8,892 in the third quarter of 2023.

Prior to 2016, there was very little in the way of either growth or volatility in the total number of shelter stays. Most stays in a shelter were by single adults and there was only modest growth in the number of stays over the previous 10 years. Since then, there's been a large increase in shelter use, driven first by a dramatic increase in family shelter use, but more recently by a steady increase in stays by both singles and families.

Until 2017, as in most other cities, people staying in Toronto's shelters were mainly single adults. In 2019 however, nearly half of shelter users in Toronto were families.

The very large and rapid growth in homeless shelter stays has direct implications for the system administrator. First and foremost, it demands an increase in system capacity, including a shift in services more appropriate to family units. This implies a rapid increase in costs to the system administrator. Additionally, the COVID pandemic and other respiratory viruses have also required an increase in capacity, and therefore costs, to allow for greater distancing within shelters.

What has happened to cause this sudden surge in people relying on the Toronto shelter system? The answer to this question deserves careful study and needs to balance the roles



played by a rising cost of living that makes it challenging to establish or retain housing, the adequacy of income supports, and the potential impact of increased numbers of refugee claimants and asylum seekers residing in Toronto.

With respect to the latter, the City of Toronto [indicates](#) that in 2022 the number of refugee claimants and asylum seekers staying in shelters each night increased by more than 2,000 people. Since a large percentage of refugee claimants and asylum seekers are families, this has certainly contributed to the historically unusual rise in family shelter use. But as shown in the chart, the rise in family shelter use is variable and it is the use of shelters by singles that has been the constant source of growth.

Any analysis of this problem, and suggestion of a relevant response, is complicated by the fact that many people use shelters because of decisions made by all three levels of government. This raises questions of who should pay for shelter services, and how much. The federal government has [recently admitted](#) that due to some decisions it has made, it is appropriate that they contribute to the current funding of shelter spaces.