

# Rural Homelessness Study

Prepared for the County of Wellington

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## KEY FINDINGS

- The magnitude of the homelessness problem is a heavily contested issue. Rural homelessness, perhaps even more so than urban, is tough to quantify and measure
- The majority of so-called “homeless” individuals who were interviewed for this study were very reluctant to self-identify as being homeless, even if they were living in a car or couch surfing. Perhaps this is due to the stigma and stereotypes that accompany this designation, but most likely it is because they simply do not perceive themselves as such.
- Rural residents are reluctant to access emergency shelters in the city. At present, 5-6% of Guelph’s shelter users come from the County.
- Rural homelessness is largely hidden/concealed. People prefer to couch surf, stay in uninhabited shelters (e.g. sheds, cars, tents), or return to their family homes and what are often unsafe conditions.
- Poverty and substance abuse now trump mental health as leading causes/triggers of homelessness, particularly for youth.
- The rural context presents issues that differentiate the rural homeless experience from more urban settings. For example:
  - There is a lack of infrastructure, such as emergency shelters, drop-in centres and public transportation.
  - Many essential services (that do exist) are located in large urban centres. Clients are required to travel long distances to access these services in person.
  - Travel time and distances, combined with a lack of public transportation and winter road conditions, make it extremely difficult for individuals to attend appointments, food shop, and go to the laundromat.
  - The close-knit nature of rural communities, which in some cases marginalizes homeless people in part by making their presence more overt, can also have positive implications. For many individuals, rural ties and friendships are the greatest deterrents to leaving, especially for youth.
  - There is limited affordable rental housing. And while rental rates may be cheaper than in urban areas, other costs of daily living (e.g. food and transportation) tend to be more expensive.
  - There is a lack of appropriate social housing, especially family sized units. Much of the existing stock is designed for seniors.
  - Many individuals are reluctant to recognize the existence of homelessness in their communities, thereby impeding the funding and development of mechanisms that are truly supportive.
- Overall, it appears that homelessness is a challenge, but not a priority issue in the community. More concerning is that the triggers that lead to homelessness - poverty, substance abuse, lack of well-paying jobs, lack of affordable/suitable rental housing – are on the rise.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report has been prepared for the County of Wellington's Social Services department, to use in planning effective, sustainable solutions to address the homeless population living in East, Centre and North Wellington.

In order to ensure that the ultimate goal of this project – to understand the make-up and needs of the homeless population of Wellington County – was kept at the fore throughout, the primary research method involved consultations with individuals who are (or have been) homeless or who are precariously housed, as well as local service providers. Five group discussions and numerous interviews were held, reaching a total of 78 participants, consisting of 49 service providers (representing 34 organizations) and 29 service users. This information was supplemented by a review of relevant literature (both Canadian and international), and an in-depth analysis of existing program and socio-economic data related to homelessness in Wellington County.

### *What “homeless” means*

The term “homeless” used in this study encompasses the following three meanings:

- Absolute - living on the street or in emergency shelters
- Hidden or concealed - living with friends or family, in a car, in a long-term institution
- Relative - living in sub-standard conditions or at-risk of losing their homes (i.e. living in “core housing need”)

However, the authors note caution when applying this term to individuals, as many of the so-called “homeless” who were interviewed for this study do not feel this label applies to them.

### *The rural context*

It is important to recognize that the rural context presents issues that differentiate the rural homeless experience from urban settings. For example, the close-knit nature of rural communities, which in some cases marginalizes homeless people in part by making their presence more overt, can also have positive implications. For many individuals, rural ties and friendships are the greatest deterrents to leaving, especially for youth.

There is a stereotype that homeless people migrate to rural areas for cheaper housing. The reality is that there is a lack of affordable rental housing options in rural communities. And while rental rates may be cheaper than in urban areas, other costs of daily living (e.g. food and transportation) tend to be more expensive.

In rural areas, transportation is a vital issue. Due to distances, winter weather, and the lack of public transportation, getting to work, going food shopping or to the laundromat, and accessing social services is extremely challenging. For the most part, taxi services are not available, and where they do exist, they tend to be limited and prohibitively expensive for individuals with a limited income. In response to this issue, a collaborative of local community service providers established the Wellington Transportation Services a few years ago. This volunteer driver program is managed by Community Resource Centre and funded by the County of Wellington.

Although this service is vital in helping residents to access necessary medical, social and legal appointments and services, it is not a panacea. The program is fully reliant on the recruitment and availability of volunteer drivers. And due to liability issues, volunteer drivers are not permitted to transport youth without a legal guardian present.

### *How many people are homeless?*

It is impossible to give an accurate count of the number of homeless individuals in Wellington County, and there was little consensus from local service providers on the trends anecdotally.

At present, data on Wellington residents' usage of emergency shelters in Ontario is only available for Guelph. An analysis of the County of Wellington's Homeless Individuals and Families Information System (HIFIS) data reveals that 72 households/individuals (including 20 dependents) from Wellington County visited the emergency shelters located in Guelph between January 2009 and December 2010. Several of those shelter users stayed multiple times. This represents 5-6% of all Guelph's shelter users.

The low usage rate of Guelph's shelters by Wellington residents is not surprising given the research regarding rural life and social connections. Rural residents report strong friendships and ties to their communities, and consider cities to be unsafe and overwhelming. For individuals and families who have local support networks and jobs being transported to an urban centre for shelter and support services is not an ideal solution. This is especially true if children, youth and schooling are involved. Of those that do leave, the majority report the need for a "fresh start", or are purposely moving away from unhealthy domestic situations, and as a result, are willing to relocate.

Overall, it appears that homelessness is a challenge, but not a priority issue in the community. More concerning is that the triggers that lead to homelessness - poverty, substance abuse, lack of well-paying jobs, lack of affordable/suitable rental housing, long waiting lists for social housing – are on the rise.

### *Why are they homeless?*

Poverty and substance abuse now trump mental health as leading causes/triggers of homelessness, particularly for young people. The most common causes of poverty mentioned during this study were: lack of employment, inadequate social assistance rates, low paying jobs and the expense of raising children as a lone parent. Job losses were noted as being particularly evident within the past year, coinciding with the economic downturn in manufacturing which is an important component of the economy of Wellington County and surrounding areas. On more than one occasion, the current income support system was described as "setting people up to fail."

Another significant contributing factor to homelessness is relational strife, including abuse and family breakdown. Many of the young people who participated in this study do not live at home because of a history of trauma, conflict and instability there, which leaves them vulnerable to poverty, homelessness and many other risks.

There is a great stigma attached to homelessness and poverty. Homeless youth, in particular, described feeling judged by their peers, by workers in the system, by prospective employers

and by landlords refusing to rent to them. Some are, and most are perceived as being, involved in illegal activities. One service provider noted that even people who live in social housing judge people who live in social housing. As a result, this population is not considered highly employable or desirable as tenants or legal witnesses. They are vulnerable to harassment and exploitation. Stories of being bullied across all age groups were common.

### *How do they cope?*

In general, homeless people are extremely resourceful. They use informal, creative strategies to solve problems and meet basic needs. In terms of finding shelter, the main theme is transience. People are on the move a lot. They couch surf, stay in uninhabited shelters (e.g. sheds, cars, tents), or return to their family homes and what are often unsafe conditions.

Those with housing struggle with which bills to pay each month because not all basic needs can be covered with the funds available. This choice is usually made based on which creditor is complaining the loudest at any given time. When they have access to credit, people are accumulating significant debt.

Regardless of the coping strategy, there is a strong preference for staying local and “making do”.

### *What would help?*

Some simple bureaucratic/administrative changes could make a difference in addressing not only homelessness, but also the social inequities that underlie it. It is recommended that the County of Wellington:

1. Improve the equity between Guelph and Wellington County, by offering more local “homeless and eviction prevention” services in rural areas
2. Promote practices that make the Employment & Income Support Program more user-friendly and welcoming
3. Work with local youth service providers to provide youth with safe shelter alternatives, as well as opportunities to play and learn life skills
4. Adopt a Housing First Policy

In summary, this report paints a picture of homelessness in Wellington County, by synthesizing large amounts of existing data and combining it with the lived experiences of precariously housed individuals and the service providers who work with them. It is a canvas marked with poverty, addiction, family breakdown and mental illness. Yet it is also characterized by resourcefulness, and a strong commitment to home and to place, even by those deemed not to have a home.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>KEY FINDINGS .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>TABLE OF CONTENTS.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>1. INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>8</b>
1.1 Background (The Setting).....	8
1.2 Purpose .....	8
1.3 Methodology.....	9
<b>2. THE TERM “HOMELESS” .....</b>	<b>9</b>
2.1 Defining Homelessness.....	9
2.2 Measurement Challenges.....	10
<b>3. SETTING THE CONTEXT - HOMELESSNESS &amp; RURAL LIFE.....</b>	<b>11</b>
3.1 What Rural Means .....	11
3.2 Social Connections .....	11
3.3 The Rural Economy & Affordable Housing.....	12
3.4 Transportation .....	12
3.5 Lack of Social Services & Infrastructure .....	13
<b>4. THE EXTENT OF HOMELESSNESS IN WELLINGTON COUNTY .....</b>	<b>13</b>
4.1 Emergency Shelter Usage.....	13
4.2 Households at Risk.....	14
4.3 Emergency Rent Bank Usage .....	15
<b>5. FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO HOMELESSNESS IN WELLINGTON COUNTY.....</b>	<b>16</b>
5.1 Poverty.....	16
5.2 Unemployment .....	17
5.3 Inadequate Income Support Levels .....	18
5.4 Lack of Affordable Rental Housing .....	18
5.5 Waiting Lists for Social Housing .....	19
5.6 Food.....	20
<b>6. UNDERSTANDING THE HOMELESS EXPERIENCE IN WELLINGTON COUNTY.....</b>	<b>21</b>
6.1 Why are they homeless? .....	21
6.2 How they describe their experiences .....	22
6.3 Who is at highest risk?.....	23
6.4 Is homelessness a significant issue in Wellington County?.....	24
6.5 What services are available to help?.....	24
6.6 What are the barriers? .....	25
6.6 How do people cope?.....	26
<b>7. RECOMMENDATIONS.....</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>8. CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>APPENDIX A - WORKS CITED.....</b>	<b>33</b>

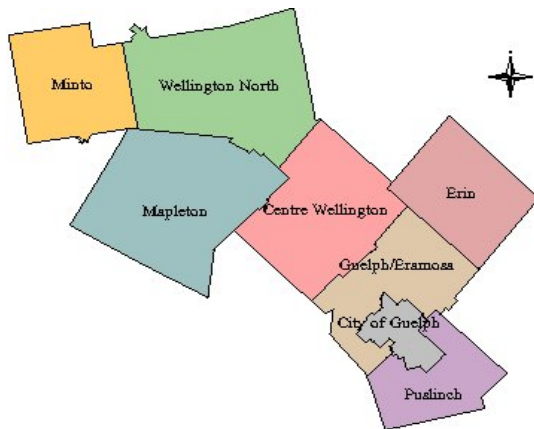
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<b>APPENDIX B – RESEARCH METHODOLOGY</b> .....	<b>36</b>
<b>1. Focus Groups &amp; Key Informant Interviews</b> .....	<b>36</b>
<b>2. Literature Review</b> .....	<b>37</b>
<b>3. Statistical Analysis</b> .....	<b>37</b>
<b>APPENDIX C – PARTICIPANTS</b> .....	<b>39</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	<b>39</b>
<b>Service Providers</b> .....	<b>39</b>
<b>Community Members</b> .....	<b>41</b>
<b>APPENDIX D – PROFILE OF WELLINGTON SHELTER USERS</b> .....	<b>42</b>
<b>APPENDIX E – HOMELESS &amp; EVICTION PREVENTION PROGRAMS FUNDED BY THE COUNTY OF WELLINGTON, 2010</b> .....	<b>46</b>

## I. INTRODUCTION

### I.1 Background (The Setting)

Wellington County is a picturesque region located in south-western Ontario, encompassing several villages, hamlets and a large amount of agricultural land. A distinguishing feature of the region is the Grand River watershed, which offers extensive camping and conservation areas. The County (excluding Guelph) covers a large landmass, of 2,570 square kilometers [1]. In other words, it takes approximately two hours to travel by car from one end of the region to the other.



According to 2009 population estimates there are 91,290 people living in Wellington County [2]. Due to a variety of social and economic factors, some townships are experiencing significant growth (Puslinch) while other areas are seeing declines in population (Wellington North) [3]. The median age (38.8 in 2006) for Wellington County (including Guelph) is slightly less than for the province as a whole (39.9), but like the rest of Canada the population is aging [4].

### Local Government

The County of Wellington is an upper-tier municipality comprised of seven members: Centre Wellington, Erin, Guelph/Eramosa, Mapleton, Minto, Puslinch, and Wellington North. (The City of Guelph is a separated municipality.)

The County of Wellington is the designated Consolidated Municipal Service Manager (CMSM). As such, the County of Wellington is responsible for delivering *Social Services* (i.e. social housing, social assistance and childcare) for both Wellington and Guelph. These responsibilities include *homelessness and eviction prevention*, which involves administering the following programs:

- Domiciliary Hostels (e.g. Retirement Homes, Youth Residential Facilities)
- Transient Hostel Programme (e.g. Emergency Shelters)
- Consolidated Homelessness Prevention Program (CHPP)
- Provincial Rent Bank
- Emergency Energy Fund

The administration centre for these services is located in Guelph.

### I.2 Purpose

Despite various research studies on homelessness in urban areas, information on rural homelessness in Canada is scarce. Consequently there is a lack of knowledge about the homeless population in rural areas like Wellington County – Who are they? How many are there? How are they coping? What would help them?



In recent years, concerns about homelessness have been raised in various pockets of Wellington County. In the summer of 2008, for example, a group of homeless youth were living under a bridge in Fergus. Citizens were looking to the County of Wellington for solutions.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the make-up and needs of the homeless population living in East, Centre and North Wellington. This report has been prepared for the County of Wellington's Social Services department, to use in planning effective, sustainable solutions for the homeless residents of Wellington County.<sup>1</sup>

### 1.3 Methodology

In August 2010, JPMC Services Inc. was retained by the County of Wellington to research and assess the need for services to address the homeless population of Wellington County.

In order to ensure that the ultimate goal of this project – to understand the make-up and needs of the homeless population of Wellington County – was kept at the fore throughout, the primary research method involved consultations with individuals who are (or have been) homeless or who are precariously housed, as well as local service providers. Five group discussions and numerous interviews were held, reaching a total of 78 participants, consisting of 49 service providers (representing 34 organizations) and 29 service users.

The information obtained through the above-mentioned interviews and focus groups was then supplemented by a review of relevant literature (both Canadian and international), and an in-depth analysis of existing program and socio-economic data related to homelessness in Wellington County.

For detailed information on the methodology, including a list of participants, interview questions, and bibliography, please refer to Appendices A-C.

## 2. THE TERM “HOMELESS”

### 2.1 Defining Homelessness

*The majority of so-called “homeless” individuals who were interviewed for this study were very reluctant to self-identify as being homeless, even if they were couch surfing or living in a car. Perhaps this is due to the stigma and stereotypes that accompany this designation, but most likely it is because they simply do not perceive themselves as such.*

*As one youth remarked, “I have a home, but I cannot live there.”*

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<sup>1</sup> The County of Wellington is concurrently in the process of updating its Affordable Housing Strategy. This strategy focuses on preserving and increasing the supply of affordable rental and social housing units in Guelph and Wellington County. It is anticipated that the housing report will contain information and recommendations that are relevant to the rural homeless population discussed here.

The very term “homeless” is a heavily contested issue. In urban centres, homelessness can be found, literally, on your doorstep. For example, images of a homeless person in a shop doorway, sleeping over a sewer grate, or occupying a park bench immediately come to mind. This type of homelessness is often referred to as “absolute”, and embodies the mainstream, stereotypical image of homelessness in Canada.

For this study, it was essential to seek a definition of homelessness that extends beyond “rooflessness” [5]. Not only does equating homelessness simply with rooflessness skew the data, it ignores the struggles that individuals and families living in precarious housing situations face [6].

The Canadian federal government currently defines homelessness in three terms [7]:

- Absolute - living on the street or in emergency shelters
- Hidden or concealed - living with friends or family, in a car, in a long-term institution
- Relative - living in sub-standard conditions or at-risk of losing their homes (i.e. living in “core housing need”<sup>2</sup>)

Absolute homelessness is merely the “tip of the iceberg” [8]. The terms “hidden” and “relative” recognize that homelessness is equally rife with: insecurity; having little choice about where one calls home; being forced to live on the move, or in unsafe and overcrowded conditions; being restricted about what you can take with you; and living day-to-day without a general sense of belonging.

The term “homeless” used in this study encompasses all three of the above definitions – absolute, hidden and relative. However, the authors note caution when applying this term to individuals, as many of the so-called “homeless” who were interviewed for this study do not feel this label applies to them.

## 2.2 Measurement Challenges

The majority of international research relating to homelessness has taken place in large metropolitan centres [9]. In fact, a recent study on Canadian youth homelessness based its research and statistical investigations in major urban hubs, those being Calgary, Toronto and St. John’s [10]. Rural locations are generally excluded from discussions of homelessness. Although international studies have emerged which attempt to paint a picture of rural homelessness, such as a recent American report that estimates their national homeless population to be 7 percent rural [11], widespread methodological inconsistencies in physically quantifying rural homelessness renders such figures basically useless.

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<sup>2</sup> A household is in **core housing need** if its housing does not meet one or more standards for housing adequacy (repair), suitability (crowding), or affordability and if it would have to spend 30 per cent or more of its before-tax income to pay the median rent (including utilities) of appropriately sized alternative local market housing [6].

*“In urban areas, estimates have commonly relied on counts of persons using services. However, by this measure, homeless persons in rural areas are likely substantially undercounted due to the lack of rural service sites, the difficulty capturing persons who do not use homeless services, the limited number of researchers working in rural communities, and the minimal incentive for rural providers to collect data on their clients.” [12]*

Different counting mechanisms across social agencies have also been shown to impede the ability to track, compare, and reach an accurate number of rural individuals in a state of homelessness. The homeless experience is often intermittent, meaning that identifying and counting these individuals is nearly impossible [13].

### 3. SETTING THE CONTEXT - HOMELESSNESS & RURAL LIFE

The Canadian rural landscape is full of images that conjure up feelings of comfort, serenity, peacefulness and tranquility. This rural idyll promises an escape from the everyday hustle and bustle of city life, where friendly, familiar faces abound, and separation from urban troubles is celebrated. Nonetheless, rural communities are filled with the same “blemishes” as urban places - pollution, drug use, unemployment and homelessness. And despite its supposedly “invisible” nature [14, 15], homelessness continues to rise in rural areas at a faster rate than that found within urban centres [16]. In fact, a study by the Canadian Mental Health Association found that rural and urban homelessness are fundamentally linked in that over half of the homeless people who end up in large cities come from a small town or rural community [17].

It is important to recognize that the rural context presents issues that differentiate the homeless experience from urban settings. The following section provides a brief overview of current research and knowledge relating to rural homelessness, in the hope that it will enhance understanding of homelessness in rural Wellington.

#### 3.1 What Rural Means

When examining issues facing rural communities, it is important to define what the term “rural” means. The difficulty is that even trusted and often-referenced sources paint a generic and sweeping picture of rural life. Take the latest classification by Statistics Canada, for example: rural residents are defined as those “persons living in sparsely populated lands lying outside urban areas”; or, “living outside places of 1,000 people or more, or outside places with population densities of 400 or more people per square kilometre” [18]. Essentially, what Statistics Canada suggests is that rural is simply a lack of urban-ness. Critics warn that such generalizations are problematic, and that rural communities differ markedly from one another, in terms of community characteristics, geographies and resources [19, 20]. Rurality is as much a cultural and relational term as well as a geographical one.

#### 3.2 Social Connections

The close-knit nature of rural communities, which in some cases marginalizes homeless people in part by making their presence more overt, can also have positive implications. For many individuals, rural ties and friendships, even those that seem superficial, are the greatest deterrents to leaving, especially for youth [21, 22]. Additionally, many individuals express strong

attachments to their rural communities, due to an ease and familiarity with the environment, whereas urban centers can appear dangerous, alienating, and overwhelming [23].

In supportive communities, residents watch out and help one another (e.g. delivering food to a senior living in an isolated farmhouse, letting someone sleep in their barn or shed, etc.). The positive outcome of this caring is that rural homeless people are more likely to foster lifelong relationships with local service providers and other concerned members of the community [24]. Neighbourly help, however, can be a mixed blessing, if it inadvertently perpetuates the cycle of homelessness (i.e. pretending there is no problem, lack of timely referrals to appropriate mental health care, etc.) or is perceived as judgmental and meddling. The lack of anonymity may mean that no one slips through the cracks, but it can also mean that there are no private spaces where those at risk can safely find help. Rural communities also tend to be quite conservative, and marginalized people describe a very fine line between being cared for versus feeling blamed.

*“A defining aspect of rural homelessness is having your problems on display to everyone, open for judgement.” [25]*

### 3.3 The Rural Economy & Affordable Housing

Increased global trade and competition with international markets has meant that the influence and demand for goods produced in Canada’s rural communities has declined in recent years [26]. This weakened economy is compounded by the fact that most rural communities in Ontario rank lower than their urban counterparts with regards to employment and education rates [27].

There is a stereotype that homeless people migrate to rural areas for cheaper housing. As a result of this impression, homeless people are often blamed for bringing negative and anti-social behaviour to the community [28]. The reality is that there is a lack of affordable rental housing options in rural communities. Rural gentrification and the cost of new construction<sup>3</sup> negatively impact the affordable housing market, making housing inaccessible to low-income individuals. The rental housing that is available is often second-rate, unsafe and overcrowded [29, 30]. And while rental rates may be cheaper than in urban areas, other costs of daily living (e.g. food and transportation) tend to be more expensive.

### 3.4 Transportation

In rural areas, transportation is a vital issue. Due to distances, winter weather, and the lack of public transportation, getting to work, going food shopping or to the laundromat, and accessing social services is extremely challenging. For the most part, taxi services are not available, and where they do exist, they tend to be limited and prohibitively expensive for individuals with a limited income.

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<sup>3</sup> The cost of new rental construction is increased by factors such as the price of land and septic system requirements. As a result, the economic rent landlords need to charge to cover the cost of new construction and operating costs is far greater than market rent in most urban areas in Ontario.

### 3.5 Lack of Social Services & Infrastructure

There is an obvious connection between rural homelessness and the lack of services and infrastructure. In rural communities, low population levels means that it is not financially sustainable to open an emergency shelter, for example. A common solution is to transport those needing shelter to a larger centre. For individuals and families who have local support networks, jobs and school-aged children being transported to an urban centre for shelter is far from optimal.

Despite the prevalence of homelessness in rural areas, many communities are reluctant to acknowledge its existence, thus impeding the development and funding of support services. Where social services do exist, they tend to be underfunded and their staffs are stretched to the limit, serving wide catchment areas while dealing with “hard-to-serve” clients and challenging issues. As a result, staff burnout and turnover is high, leading to less trust and familiarity between clients and staff [31, 32]. In addition, there tends to be less collaboration among service providers, as they are often working alone and have fewer opportunities to congregate than their urban counterparts. Isolation, of clients and service providers, is a very real risk in rural regions.

## 4. THE EXTENT OF HOMELESSNESS IN WELLINGTON COUNTY

As previously discussed, it is impossible to give an accurate count of the number of homeless individuals in Wellington County. What is quantifiable, however, are the number of people accessing emergency shelter services, and the number of households living in precarious housing situations. The following section explores available service utilization and core housing need data. This information helps to paint a picture of who are the homeless and the scope of the problem. The caveat is that many individuals do not access social services. For a variety of reasons (which are explored in subsequent sections of this paper), they live “under the radar” (e.g. couch surfing, camping, sleeping in cars and abandoned sheds) and are therefore not represented in the numbers below.

### 4.1 Emergency Shelter Usage

“Absolute” homelessness is often measured in terms of shelter bed usage. At present, there are no emergency shelter beds located in Wellington County. The exception is a transitional hostel located in Mount Forest, which serves young women who are pregnant or parenting a child under the age of one year. Consequently, anyone in need of shelter services must travel outside of the region to Guelph, Orangeville, Kitchener-Waterloo or Owen Sound.

At present, data on Wellington residents’ usage of emergency shelters is only available for Guelph. An analysis of the County of Wellington’s Homeless Individuals and Families Information System (HIFIS) data reveals that 72 households/individuals (including 20 dependents) from Wellington County visited the emergency shelters located in Guelph between January 2009 and December 2010 – 54 to the adult shelters and 20 to the youth

shelter.<sup>4</sup> (This does not include users of the women's shelter.<sup>5</sup>) Some of these households/individuals stayed multiple times. Overall, Wellington residents make up 5-6% of the clients staying in Guelph's shelter system.

The low usage rate of Guelph's shelters by Wellington residents is not surprising given the research regarding social connections cited above. Rural residents report strong friendships and ties to their communities, and consider cities to be unsafe and overwhelming. Most people will choose to stay in untenable situations in order to remain close to their social support networks. This is especially true if children, youth and schooling are involved. Of those that do leave, the majority report the need for a "fresh start", or are purposely moving away from unhealthy domestic situations, and as a result, are willing to relocate.

For more details on the profile of Wellington shelter users (e.g. monthly trends, age and gender profile, length of stay, and reasons for admission) including limitations of the HIFIS data, please refer to Appendix D.

#### 4.2 Households at Risk

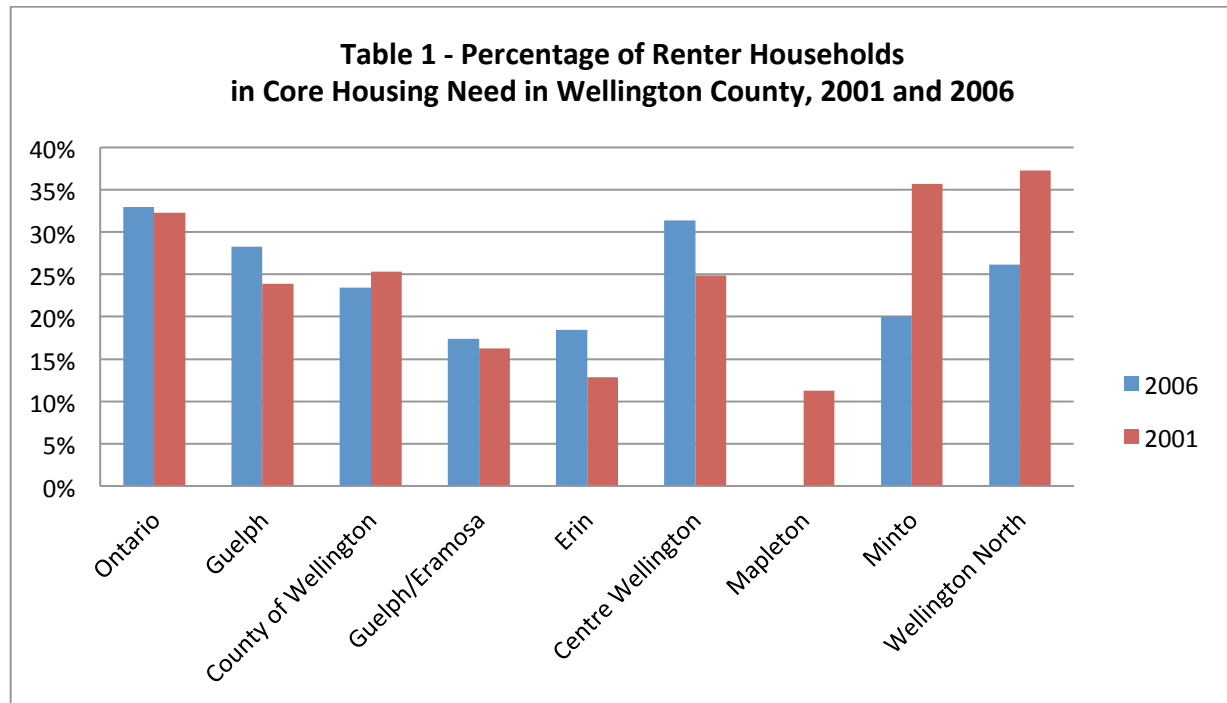
Households "at risk" of homelessness are generally considered to be those in **core housing need**. Households are considered in core housing need if they pay more than 30% of their income for housing, or if the housing is inadequate (poorly maintained) or unsuitable (too small for the family size). Renters tend to be at higher risk of being precariously housed than homeowners.

According to the 2006 Census, there were a total of 27,880 households in Wellington County (excluding Guelph); 14.9% (4,155) of which were renters. Of the renter households, 23.5% (975) were living in core housing need in 2006 (see table 1), with rates varying substantially among the towns, from a low of under 25 renter households in Mapleton to a high of 460 renter households (31.4%) in Centre Wellington.

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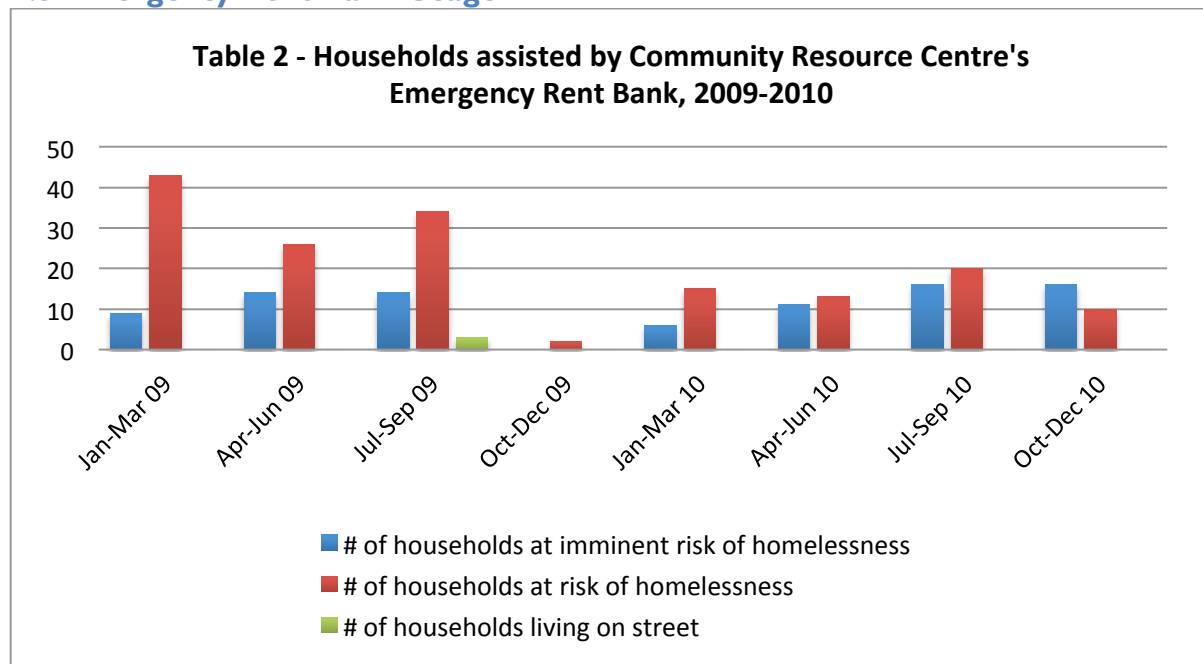
<sup>4</sup> "Wellington County" clients are those that report a prior address in Wellington County during the 12 months prior to admission to a shelter, and are identified as such by the Shelter Intake Workers. In some cases an additional code of "no fixed address (NFA)" was used. Because this was not used at all times in all shelters, these percentages are of total shelter users excluding those coded as NFA. For details on the data methodology and limitations, refer to Appendix D.

<sup>5</sup> These figures are based on data provided by Guelph-Wellington Women in Crisis, and are for 2009 only. Women's shelters track and report statistics differently than emergency shelters, due to funding and reporting relationships (i.e. the emergency shelters receive per diems from the County of Wellington; whereas Marianne's Place receives funding from the provincial government).



Source: Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, special tabulation

### 4.3 Emergency Rent Bank Usage



Source: Community Resource Centre

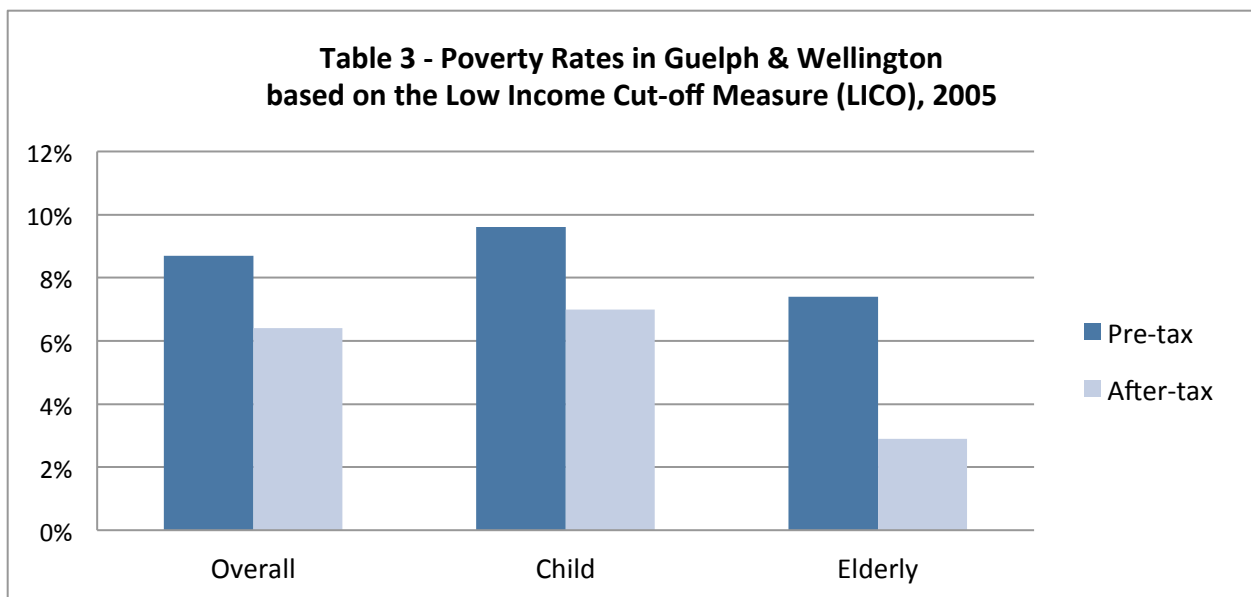
In 2009-2010, a total of 242 Wellington households accessed the Emergency Rent/Utility Bank operated by the Community Resource Centre (CRC). This program is instrumental in helping people to maintain their home through their financial crisis. It provides to \$325 in emergency

funds to help low-income households who cannot pay their monthly rent or are in danger of having utilities cut off. As Table 2 illustrates, the usage rate varies by month, due to both demand and the availability of funds (i.e. CRC was only able to assist two families in the last quarter of 2009 due to restricted funding).

## 5. FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO HOMELESSNESS IN WELLINGTON COUNTY

Only by understanding the reasons behind a problem can relevant solutions be developed. This section explores the socio-economic factors behind homelessness in Wellington County, taking into consideration both the quantitative and qualitative data gathered in this study. These factors – poverty, unemployment, insufficient income support levels, lack of affordable housing, long waiting lists for social housing, and rising food costs - are numerous, complicated and mutually reinforcing. While that observation may seem self-evident, it illustrates the complexity of solving the homelessness problem.

### 5.1 Poverty



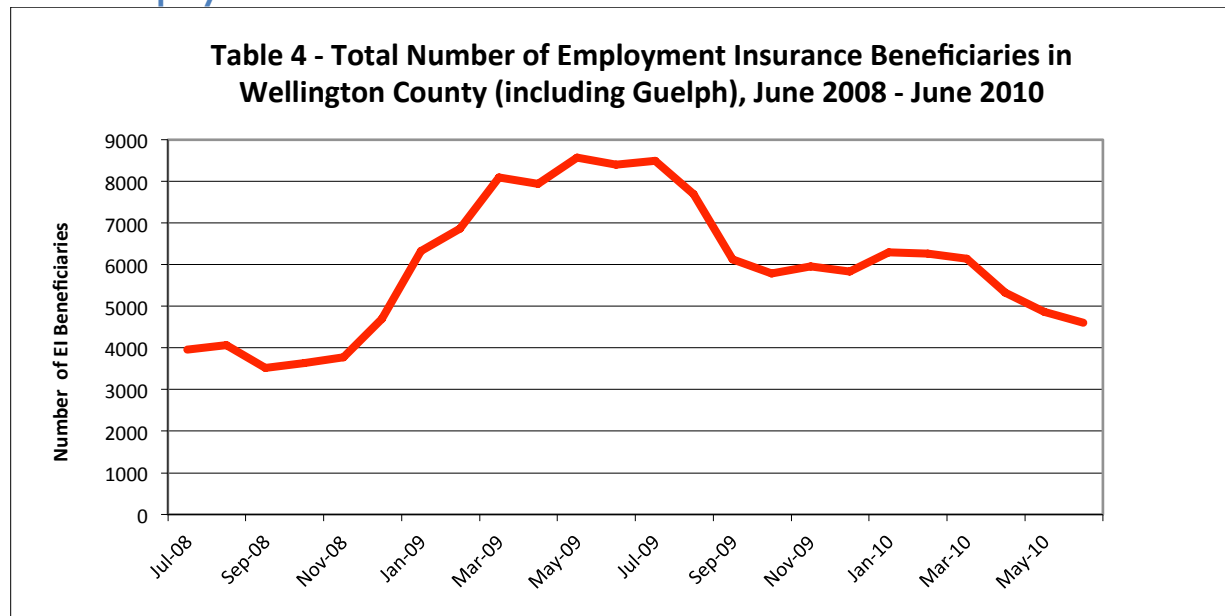
Source: Guelph Community Foundation [33]

According to the before-tax Low Income Cut-Off Measure (LICO), 8.7% of households living in Wellington County (including Guelph) are living in poverty – struggling to choose between paying their rent or other basic necessities like food, clothing and transportation [34]. It should be noted that this figure was calculated from the 2006 Census, and does not take into account the fallout from the recent economic downturn. The current proportion of people living in poverty in Wellington County is likely greater than what is reported in Table 3. What is important to note, however, is that children (many of whom are undoubtedly living in single parent families) are more likely than seniors and the general population to be living in poverty.



Poverty is caused by numerous factors, many of which are described in more detail below. The ones most often mentioned during this study were: lack of employment, inadequate social assistance levels, low paying jobs and the expense of raising children as a lone parent. Job losses were noted as being particularly evident within the past year, coinciding with the economic downturn in manufacturing which is an important component of the economy of Wellington County and surrounding areas. Some service providers noted that poor budgeting and money management skills exacerbate the problem.

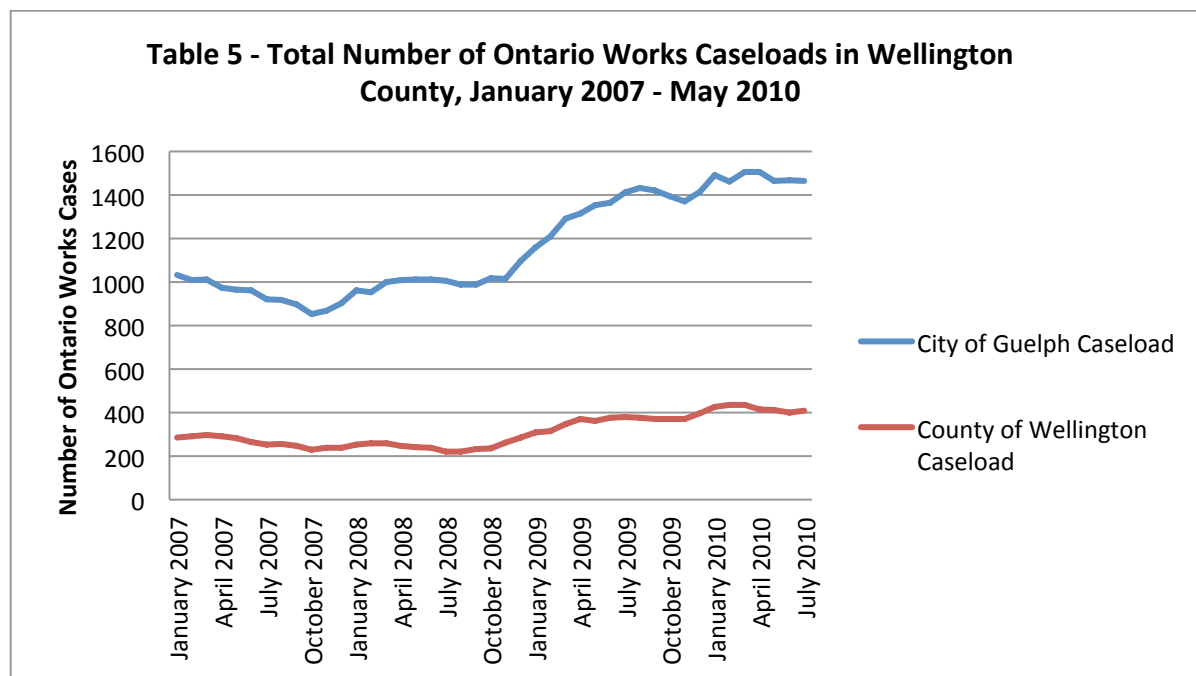
## 5.2 Unemployment



Source: County of Wellington

As indicated above, Wellington County has been hard hit by the recent recession. For some time before the middle of 2008 the area unemployment rate was lower than that for the province. But during 2008 and 2009 the unemployment rate in Guelph<sup>6</sup> was higher than the province's. Table 4 shows the more than doubling of Employment Insurance (EI) cases in Wellington County between July 2008 and March 2009. Cases have dropped since then, partly as a result of creation of jobs in the county but also because the benefits have run out for many recipients. It is likely many of these households are now on Ontario Works (OW). As Table 5 illustrates, the caseloads for OW have increased steadily during this same time period.

<sup>6</sup> Unemployment rates for Wellington County are not available but are considered to move in the general direction as Guelph's.



Source: County of Wellington

### 5.3 Inadequate Income Support Levels

Because it was raised so often during the consultation process of this study, it is important to pause here to explain how the income support programs that are designed to help people - EI, OW, Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP), – often have the unintended consequences of keeping people in poverty, and therefore at risk of homelessness. On more than one occasion, OW was described as “setting people up to fail.”

**Table 6 - Rental Rates in Wellington County in comparison to Social Assistance Rates**

Family Size	Ontario Works Maximum Shelter Allowance (December 2010)	Average Annual Market Rent in Wellington (Fall 2009)	Shortfall in Shelter Allowance
1	\$368	\$548 (bachelor)	\$180
2	\$578	\$676 (1-bedroom)	\$96
3	\$627	\$747 (2-bedroom)	\$120
4	\$681	\$773 (3-bedroom)	\$92
5	\$734		
6+	\$761		

Source: Calculated by the authors, using market rent data from County of Wellington [37, 38]

Consider for example, a single mother of two children, ages 8 and 10 years. Assuming she has no assets and child support, she could be eligible to receive an allowance of \$971 per month from OW - \$344 for basic needs and \$627 for shelter – before income deductions, if applicable [35]. The average rate for a two bedroom apartment in Wellington County is \$747 [36], meaning her shelter allowance would be short by \$120, which would have to come out of her basic needs allowance. How does she manage to feed, clothe and transport her family on the remainder of \$224 per month? How does she cover necessary expenses like school supplies,

gym clothes and field trips? What extra-curricular activities is she able to offer her children, which could help them succeed?

#### 5.4 Lack of Affordable Rental Housing

In 2010, there were 65 affordable rental-housing units in Wellington County:

- 10 in Arthur (Rent = Market Rent)
- 55 in Fergus (Rent = 80% of Average Market Rent)

These are not affordable in the sense of being “rent geared to income” but some of these units receive subsidies through the County of Wellington’s rent supplement program.

Most rental properties available in the region are market rent. A recent survey of market rental housing shows that monthly rental rates range from \$370 - \$1,100 in Wellington County depending on the unit size and location [39]. A unit is considered to be affordable if the household pays less than 30% of their gross income on rent plus utilities. As illustrated in Tables 6 and 7, the current rental rates in Wellington County are unattainable for people with low incomes.

**Table 7 – Rental Rates in comparison to Minimum Wage**

<b>Unit Size</b>	<b>Average Monthly Market Rent in Wellington County (Fall 2009)</b>	<b>Monthly Household Income on Minimum Wage</b>	<b>Percentage of Income Spent on Housing</b>
<b>Bachelor</b>	\$548	An individual in a full-time position earning minimum wages of \$10.25 per hour earns approximately \$1,500 in gross income per month	36.5%
<b>1 Bedroom</b>	\$676		45.0%
<b>2 Bedroom</b>	\$747		49.8%
<b>3 Bedroom</b>	\$773		51.5%

Source: Calculated by the authors, using market rent data from County of Wellington [40]

#### 5.5 Waiting Lists for Social Housing

There are a total of 516 units of permanent social housing located throughout Wellington County (see table 9). The majority of which are designed for seniors with 1-2 bedrooms. In addition, the County of Wellington administered a total 19 rent supplement units (12 in Fergus and 7 in Arthur) in 2010.

**Table 8 - Geographic Distribution of Social Housing Units by Municipality**

<b>Municipality</b>	<b>Number of Units</b>
Minto	129
Wellington North	126
Mapleton	47
Centre Wellington	132
Erin	56
Guelph/Eramosa	26
Puslinch	0
<b>Total Wellington County</b>	<b>516</b>

Source: Wellington County, Housing Services

As of December 31, 2010, there were a total of 377 households on the waiting list for housing in Wellington County. Many of these households are on the waiting list in more than one

municipality. As Table 9 illustrates, one-bedroom units for single adults and two or more bedroom units for adults with dependents are in the greatest demand.

**Table 9 - Centralized Waiting List by Municipality in Wellington County, December 31, 2010**

Target Group	Seniors		Adults No Dependents			Adults with Dependents				Total
	1 bdrm	2 bdrm	1 bdrm	2 bdrm	3 bdrm	1 bdrm	2 bdrm	3 bdrm	4+ bdrm	
<b>Minto</b>	13	1	38	1	0	1	6	23	15	98
<b>Wellington North</b>	30	1	72	2	1	2	28	29	15	180
<b>Mapleton</b>	4	0	4	1	0	0	0	1	0	10
<b>Centre Wellington</b>	70	2	94	1	0	1	48	36	21	273
<b>Erin</b>	22	1	43	1	0	0	10	1	0	78
<b>Guelph/ Eramosa</b>	21	0	13	1	0	0	4	1	1	41

Source: County of Wellington, Housing Services

Wait times vary according to unit size and location, from two to eight years (see table 10). In Wellington County, wait times increased for 1-2 bedroom units in 2009-2010, and remained constant for 3+ bedrooms.

**Table 10 - Centralized Waiting List Average Wait Times (2007-2008) and (2009-2010) for units in Wellington County**

Unit Size	2007 - 2008	2009 - 2010
<b>1 bedroom</b>	3-5 years	4-5 years
<b>2 bedroom</b>	2 years	3 years
<b>3 bedroom</b>	2 years	2 years
<b>4+ bedroom</b>	2.5 years	2.5 years

Source: County of Wellington, Housing Services

## 5.6 Food

According to the local public health unit, the cost of a weekly food basket to feed a family of four in the region was \$170.73 in 2010 [41]. This cost has increased steadily every year it has been measured.

In Wellington/Guelph, food bank usage increased 36.8% between March 2005 and March 2009 [42]. Across Canada, food bank usage has skyrocketed so much since the recession that it has now at its highest level on record. According to a recent survey of Canadian Food Banks (March 2010), almost 10% of users walked through the door for the first time. In Ontario, 74% of food banks saw an increase in clientele between 2009 and 2010 [43].

Food Banks are not intended for the “absolute” homeless; clients need to report an address. As a result, many food bank clients have jobs and own their own home. For example, in Ontario, 11% report employment income, 4% receive EI, 45% receive OW, and 23% receive ODSP [44].

In rural areas in Canada, food bank users are more likely to be working (12%) or on EI (7%). In

addition, they are more likely to be homeowners (17%). Of those that do rent, 52% pay market rent and 16% pay subsidized rent [45].

In Wellington County, Food Pantries/Banks are located in Clifford, Drayton, Erin, Fergus, Harriston, Mount Forest, and Palmerston. These agencies do not receive government funding. Instead, they receive support from community food drives, grocery stores, local farmers, donations and volunteers. As a result, the quality, content and availability of food hampers differ widely across the region. The Centre Wellington Food Bank, for example, offers three-week hampers and recently built a community kitchen staffed by a chef who prepares nutritionally balanced frozen meals for their clients; while other programs are, in essence, a food cupboard run out of a volunteer's home.

## 6. UNDERSTANDING THE HOMELESS EXPERIENCE IN WELLINGTON COUNTY

In this section, the focus shifts onto the personal experiences of those who are homeless – What are their stories? What has helped them? How do they cope? These stories were gathered during the extensive consultations held between October 2010 and February 2011. They are the lived experiences of local residents and the service providers who work with them. It is important to acknowledge that these experiences reflect individual participants' situations, worldviews, and interpretations of government policy and regulations. At times, the findings reveal competing viewpoints.

### 6.1 Why are they homeless?

**“Poverty is at the root of the housing problem” – Local service provider**

Poverty was reported to be the leading cause of homelessness. This is significant because in stereotypes and in many urban realities, mental health struggles are thought to be largely responsible for homelessness. Although these were mentioned in passing, they appeared to be more of a symptom of homelessness and other stresses than a direct cause. Substance abuse (e.g. prescription drugs, street drugs and/or alcohol) was also identified as a very important trigger of homelessness, particularly among young people, often because of the financial burdens and relational stresses that addictions impose.

Another significant contributing factor to homelessness is relational strife, including abuse and family breakdown. Many of the young people who participated in this study do not live at home because of a history of trauma, conflict and instability there, which leaves them vulnerable to poverty, homelessness and many other risks. For some, leaving home is often the mature, safe choice. For many adults, relational conflict that has led to family separation in turn often leads to poverty and precarious housing, particularly for women.

**“Homelessness is not a lifestyle people choose.” – Local service provider**

Other less common triggers for homelessness include:

- Eviction from shelters or social housing because of not following “house rules”. (Hoarding by social housing tenants was raised as a related concern).
- Eviction due to buildings being condemned or otherwise no longer available
- “Thrill seeking” behaviour that leads young people to live in precarious situations out of a desire for adventure and/or freedom. This motivation appears to be fairly common but short-lived and not typical of those who are homeless for more than a few days.

People deemed at risk for homelessness also frequently exhibit common patterns of social behaviour. Relationally, their behaviour may seem paradoxical in that they often have difficulty getting along with other people, yet they identify their relational ties as the main reason they do not travel to larger communities to access services. As one worker said, “People would rather be homeless in their own community than housed and isolated elsewhere.” They often exhibit poor coping skills (e.g. managing anger, conflict, finances, time, employment) due in part to having been raised in dysfunctional environments. They are often people who struggle with structure; they do not want to be part of any “system.” They come into contact with the social service system through word of mouth and food banks, but are very unlikely to sign up for support sessions, participate in scheduled activities or join things. Often a lack of awareness or personal pride will cause people not to make use of the services that are available. As a result, they find themselves homeless when there might in fact be viable housing options and other supports available to them.

Taken together, it is not difficult to understand why a person who is experiencing any or all of the above characteristics might find it problematic to find and maintain suitable housing. This is particularly true when placed against the backdrop of rural conservatism, struggling economies and limited services.

## 6.2 How they describe their experiences

When asked about the reasons underlying rural homelessness, one worker said, “There is never one single generalizable story, but there is always a story.” This section highlights the common features of the individual stories heard, to paint a picture of the cumulative challenges that frequently result in homelessness.

**“I don’t know how I’ll get through each day, let alone a month.” – Food bank user**

Poverty is the defining feature of the precariously housed in Wellington County. This population includes recipients of OW and ODSP, the working poor, and others with limited, fixed and/or no income. One implication of living in economic hardship is being vulnerable when any unplanned expense presents itself, such as lost wages due to illness, car repair bills, or a need to purchase supplies for children heading back to school. They live with the chronic stress of being one pay cheque away from losing their homes.

The experience of poverty is clearly shaped by a person’s stage of life. For seniors, the cost of support services to keep them living in their homes is often prohibitive, as is the cost of assisted living facilities. For elderly couples who find themselves needing long-

**“You just can’t believe it’s happening to you.” – Homeless participant**

term care for one person, the double cost of care plus maintaining a home is a very difficult burden.

Poverty also intersects with family relationships in multiple and complex ways. For example, in cases where precariously housed persons do have family members involved in supporting them, there is a high likelihood that those relatives are struggling financially too, resulting in having limited capacity with which to help out. For instance, one woman described having no access to a washing machine and no money to go to a laundromat. Her mother was willing to do her laundry, but could not afford the cost of gas to drive the clothes to and from her daughter's house. Another participant indicated that if she moved away, she would never see her family because neither of them could afford the transportation to visit one another.

***“A 16-year old shouldn't live in her own apartment.” - Local service provider***

There is a great stigma attached to homelessness and poverty. Homeless youth, in particular, described feeling judged by their peers, by workers in the system, by prospective employers and by landlords refusing to rent to them. Some are, and most are perceived as being, involved in illegal activities. One service provider noted that even people who live in social housing judge people who live in social housing. As a result, this population is not considered highly employable or desirable as tenants or legal witnesses. They are vulnerable to harassment and exploitation. Stories of being bullied across all age groups were common.

### 6.3 Who is at highest risk?

There appear to be particular “priority populations” who are more likely to be at risk of homelessness in Wellington County than others. These groups are distinctive in that they require different kinds of supports and services.

***“People need to understand that is does happen in small towns, and they are our children.” – Youth participant***

The primary group includes:

- Large families (with 3+ children), particularly given the scarcity of affordable family housing units in the County
- Youth, especially 16 to 18 year-olds (There is much confusion re when youth are “kicked-off” the child welfare system, and the rules about youth accessing social assistance).
- Young and/or single parents
- Individuals/families experiencing job loss and credit problems (bankruptcy)

Secondary populations who are also vulnerable include:

- Young adults with limited job prospects who return to their home communities when they have nowhere else to go
- Those who come from families with a history of poverty and/or transience
- Long-time locals with inadequate shelter (e.g. poorly heated farm houses)
- Seniors
- Men living on their own

Many residents fall into more than one of these population groups, putting them at a cumulative disadvantage.

#### 6.4 Is homelessness a significant issue in Wellington County?

As previously explained, accurate measures of rural homelessness in the County are very difficult to obtain, and there was little consensus on the trends anecdotally. Some report that the problem is about the same or better than it used to be. Others say that the problem has gone underground. For example, the bridge in Fergus has been fenced off and is regularly policed, so the issue of youth homelessness is no longer visible. And many service providers could relay stories of individuals sleeping in cars, living in campgrounds, and couch surfing.

Overall, it appears that homelessness is a challenge, but not a priority issue in the community. More concerning is that the triggers that lead to homelessness - poverty, substance abuse, lack of well-paying jobs, lack of affordable and suitable rental housing – are on the rise.

#### 6.5 What services are available to help?

There are a variety of health and social supports located in Wellington County. These include, but are not limited to:

- Addiction support groups
- Community mental health services
- Community outreach and housing support services
- Counselling and support groups for victims of domestic violence
- Food Banks/Pantries
- Information & Referral
- Literacy programs
- Parent and child programs
- Rent & Utility Banks
- Seniors programs (recreation, volunteer visiting, meals-on-wheels, etc.)
- Volunteer Transportation
- Youth drop-in centers

***“People work hard to stay local, even if the services aren’t there.”  
– Local service provider***

Appendix E contains a list of the programs currently receiving funding support from the County of Wellington.

***“You can’t underestimate how much good gets done.” – Local service provider***

In general, the challenge is that in comparison to their urban counterparts, Wellington-based services are limited and under-resourced (in both human and financial terms). For example, Alcoholics Anonymous offers numerous group gatherings every day of the week in Guelph, whereas meeting locations and times are restricted in the County. In addition, “at risk” populations, who in a larger centre would be housed separately, get grouped together, resulting in interpersonal conflicts and potential for exploitation. For example, there is a private rooming house in Mount Forest that houses individuals with various issues and needs together (i.e. developmental delays, victims of domestic violence, etc.).



Outreach services vary by agency, and are not universally available across the County. For instance, the County of Wellington currently funds CRC's Outreach Program and the Emergency Rent Bank, yet there are no comparable services offered by East Wellington Community Services (EWCS). Furthermore, some necessary services are only available in large urban centres, and although staff do their best to serve clients over the phone and by fax, it is often necessary for individuals to show-up in person.

Many of the organizations providing essential supports and services in rural communities are Christian-based. Although these organizations are open to serving and working with people of all faiths and beliefs, individuals from secular and diverse backgrounds may be reluctant to access their programs.

### 6.6 What are the barriers?

Not surprisingly, because poverty and un[der]employment are at the crux of this issue, people identify a lack of employment opportunities, particularly well-paid and full-time positions, as being a critical barrier to improving their situation. With a job, they could afford rent and transportation. Other related barriers include high and rising hydro rates (particularly salient when heating poorly insulated rural farm houses), inadequate OW levels, and the requirement to pay first and last months' rent when moving into rented accommodation. People describe many everyday contexts where money is just assumed to be available, such as schools, where students are expected to pay for writing supplies, gym clothes, field trips, uniforms and countless other expenses that are unaffordable when money is very tight.

The next most common barrier that people describe is bureaucracy, which manifests itself in various ways. They point to complicated rules, excessive paperwork and appointment-based services in other communities when they have no way to get there. They talk about specific regulations that work against them, such as the need to have an address in order to qualify for certain services such as the food bank, or inappropriate or sporadic timing of notices and cheques arriving in the mail, or the perception that they need to rid themselves of all assets in order to qualify for the assistance they require. In one such example, someone recounted needing roughly \$400 to fix his vehicle. Without that money, he could not get his car running and therefore could not get to work. He therefore lost his job and went on OW – a much more expensive and less empowering solution than finding a way to provide him with the \$400 he required to repair his car. In another example, concern was raised that eviction notices were being sent to social housing tenants too quickly, as a threat or motivator rather than an actual notification. Stories were also told of abusive fathers who are not tracked by Children's Aid, and as a result, often remarry and reoffend.

***“They say they can, but it never seems to work for us.” – Local service provider***

Alongside complaints about bureaucracy came concerns with the people who work within that bureaucracy and the lack of help navigating a way through it. There was a large discrepancy in OW experiences among individuals who have “advocates” (service providers with well-established relationships) versus those who approached OW on their own or were not prepared by their community outreach workers. This results in the perception that OW workers are quick to return telephone calls when they come from another worker in the

system, but slow when those calls come from clients. Overall, there was a universal desire to see OW become a more compassionate service, whereby workers would proactively make clients aware of their options and how they can help. People did, however, describe the positive benefit of having community outreach workers and specialized OW case workers (i.e. addictions, youth, etc.) available to help them navigate their way. Unfortunately, the number of these workers is not seen as adequate to meet the current need.

One of the biggest obstacles to accessing services in Wellington is transportation. Rural distances, combined with a lack of public and/or affordable transportation and often wintery road conditions, make it difficult for vulnerable people to attend appointments or get to work. When people who may already struggle with punctuality or creative problem solving are faced with transportation challenges, it can cause them to give up altogether. In response to this issue, a collaborative of local community service providers established the Wellington Transportation Services a few years ago. This volunteer driver program is managed by Community Resource Centre and funded by the County of Wellington. Although this service is vital in helping residents to access necessary medical, social and legal appointments and services, services, it is not a panacea. The program is fully reliant on the recruitment and availability of volunteer drivers. And due to liability issues, volunteer drivers are not permitted to transport youth without a legal guardian present.

***“We act as if ‘the County’ is all one thing.” - Local service provider***

***“Housing is more of a problem in Wellington County than most people think.” - Local service provider***

A lack of affordable housing is another obvious barrier, although it is not experienced uniformly across Wellington County. In some communities, vacancy rates are low. Elsewhere, availability is less of a problem than affordability. Where affordable units are available, they may not be well maintained or safe, and/or landlords may not be willing to rent them. In the case of social housing units, family units are in short supply. Waiting times for other units can be very long, particularly closer to Guelph.

Interestingly, a lack of formal services (such as shelters or drop-in centres) was not often mentioned as a barrier, particularly not by the homeless themselves. This may be reflective of that population’s reluctance to make use of services, and/or of their expectations that rural places are generally underserved. As one rural worker noted, there are supports available in small communities, but they are individual rather than organized.

## 6.6 How do people cope?

Given the long list of barriers faced by the homeless in Wellington County, how do they cope? When it takes three to five years to move into a social housing unit, what do people do in the meantime?

In general, homeless people are extremely resourceful. They use informal, creative strategies to solve problems and meet basic needs. In terms of finding shelter, the main theme is transience. People are on the move a lot, and typically stay in substandard conditions. The three coping strategies most often used include:

- a. Couch surfing with friends, acquaintances or occasionally with family. This was the most common strategy, but not the most stable, safe or geared to their needs. Examples were relayed of young people, both male and female, being taken advantage of, financially and/or sexually by adults in exchange for providing them with a place to sleep. As one provider noted, “Drug dealers love kids that are lost.” Even in safer situations, such as in friends’ homes, couch surfing results in multiple moves.
- b. Using existing uninhabited shelters such as sheds, sold or unfinished houses, barns, unheated trailers, cars or tents. Local residents describe being aware of people in their towns who are living in these precarious conditions. Sometimes they are offered an out building to use while the homeowner “looks the other way.” Nevertheless, the illegality of this activity makes it particularly precarious, and severe weather conditions can make many of these living situations unsafe.
 

**“Homelessness is cold, and a good way to lose weight.” – Youth participant**
- c. Returning home. Many examples were cited of people returning to their family home because they simply had nowhere else to turn. In some cases, this is a step toward repairing broken relationships. But for many, it is an unsafe or unhealthy choice, particularly in cases of domestic violence and abuse.

Those with housing struggle with which bills to pay each month because not all basic needs can be covered with the funds available. This choice is usually made based on which creditor is complaining the loudest at any given time. When they have access to credit, people are accumulating significant debt. Regardless of the coping strategy, there is a strong preference for staying local and “making do”, contradicting the research cited in section 3 about rural people relocating to large cities [46].

**“People who come to us are not homeless. They are paying a lot of money for rent they can’t afford.” – Local service provider**

## 7. RECOMMENDATIONS

The previous sections illustrate that the triggers that lead to homelessness - poverty, substance abuse, lack of well-paying jobs, lack of affordable and suitable rental housing – are on the rise in Wellington County. This section contains a number of recommendations under four headings for consideration by the County of Wellington. These recommendations are meant to initiate discussion as potential ways to help address service barriers and gaps, as well as improve the experiences of those who find themselves in homeless situations.

### *1. Improve services to Wellington County, by offering more local “homeless and eviction prevention” services in rural areas*

Throughout this report, it has been reported that rural residents prefer to stay local due to relationships and familiarity, and are reluctant to access necessary services in urban centres. Instead, people prefer to couch surf, stay in uninhabited shelters (e.g. sheds, cars, tents), or return to their family homes and what are often unsafe conditions. In addition, transportation has repeatedly been cited as one of the biggest obstacles to accessing services. Travel time and distances, combined with a lack of public transportation and winter road conditions, make it extremely difficult for individuals to attend appointments, food shop, and go to the laundromat. The solution, therefore, is to offer more local services. For example:

- a. In order to access social assistance, clients are required to attend appointments in-person at the County of Wellington’s administration office in Guelph. This causes undue hardship for many clients. It is recommended that the County of Wellington establish satellite Employment and Income Support services, whereby OW workers spend at least one day a week in various locations throughout East, Centre and North Wellington.
- b. The programs funded through the County of Wellington’s CHPP program – volunteer transportation, emergency rent bank, and community outreach workers – are extremely vital. In rural areas, outreach workers carry large caseloads and, due to travel times and distances, are limited in how much intensive case management services they are able to provide each client. Nevertheless, the services provided are essential in preventing and alleviating homelessness. It is therefore recommended that the Emergency Rent Bank and Outreach Worker Programs be expanded and enhanced, to be more equitable across the region.
- c. The Guelph Community Health Centre’s ID clinic, which is also funded through the County of Wellington’s CHPP program, offers flexible services for rural clients (i.e. phone appointments, faxing paperwork, etc.). However, in many instances, clients are required to travel to the Guelph office for signatures. It is recommended that the ID Clinic explore the feasibility of offering services in Wellington County once a month or more frequently.
- d. Across North America, numerous non-profit and governmental organizations are investing in shared office spaces to promote healthy and vibrant communities. The

benefits of shared spaces are numerous, and include economic, networking and collaboration, and safety reasons. An added advantage is that in a small community shared spaces support privacy and confidentiality (i.e. no one knows why someone is going there – are they going to the food bank, to the library, to the child care centre, for counselling, etc.?). At present, a number of local service providers, including the County of Wellington, have office spaces in local towns. It is recommended that the County of Wellington explore establishing shared community spaces throughout Wellington County.

## **2. Promote practices that make the Employment & Income Support Program more user-friendly and welcoming**

It goes without saying that the current funding levels for social assistance are inadequate to cover basic living costs (e.g. food, housing, clothing and transportation) in Ontario. The County of Wellington and the Guelph & Wellington Task Force for Poverty Elimination therefore have an important role to play in advocating funding and legislative changes to the provincial and federal governments that would improve the effectiveness of the system (i.e. implementing the recommendations of the recent Senate Report, *In from the Margins: A Call to Action on Poverty, Housing and Homelessness*) [47]. In the meantime, there are a number of activities the County of Wellington could undertake to make Employment & Income Support services more user-friendly and welcoming on a local basis.

SAIL is a human services approach that has recently being adopted by the County of Wellington, whereby staff is trained in the necessary knowledge, skills, and supportive behaviours to work effectively with clients, colleagues and communities. This is an excellent first step. Moving forward will require a continual focus on practices. For example:

- a. The advent of information technology has changed the way people access information. Many service providers and local residents are extremely techno savvy. Youth, even homeless youth, use social media sites like Facebook to share information (e.g. where to find a couch for the night). It is recommended that the County of Wellington improve its on-line presence, making its website more interactive (e.g. offer on-line applications, videos, and easy-to-access information about client rights and responsibilities, eligibility criteria, the appeal process, and financial benefits). For example, see the Region of Waterloo's movie (<http://video.region.waterloo.on.ca/ontarioworks/ontarioworks-small.mov>) and the City of Toronto's website which includes an on-line application and social assistance rates (<http://www.toronto.ca/socialservices/>).
- b. Employment and Income Support programs are provincially legislated, however, the interpretation and application of these directives at the municipal level differ slightly across the province. It is recommended that the County of Wellington review its policies and procedures, and where possible, revise them to be more client-centered. This review should include clarifying (and if possible expanding) the

- process for accessing discretionary benefits, as well as pro-actively giving out information about what is possible and/or available.
- c. Local service providers who are well informed about OW make excellent system advocates. It is recommended that the County of Wellington educate and work in collaboration with local service providers (e.g. CRC, EWCS, WIC's Rural Women's Support Program, etc.) to ensure they have the necessary knowledge, information and tools to help their clients succeed.
  - d. The specialty case management positions (i.e. youth, addictions) are well regarded in the community. It is recommended that the County of Wellington explore expanding these positions.
  - e. As suggested (in 1a.) above, it is recommended that the County of Wellington provide OW services in satellite locations throughout North, Centre and East Wellington. Not only will this improve service access, but it will also advance customer relations.

### 3. *Provide youth with safe shelter alternatives, as well as opportunities to play and learn life skills*

Given the recent news events regarding homeless youth in Fergus, addiction issues, inaccessibility of youth shelters, and limited recreation and employment opportunities, rural youth are viewed as a priority population. The good news is that there is momentum among local educators and service providers to address these issues.

***“Although Wyndham House is amazing, these kids do not want to wake up in Guelph.” – Local service provider***

- a. Low population levels and the large geographic area of Wellington County means that it is not financially sustainable to open a traditional youth shelter here. An alternative solution is to establish a “Host Home Program” like the one offered by Bridging the Gap Halton. This program provides a home-based alternative to emergency shelters, and assists youth in achieving their personal goals while maintaining a connection to their community. Host Homes are available to youth, ages 16-24, for up to four months. Host Homes offer a private/separate sleeping area, with access to laundry and washroom facilities, and provide youth with breakfast and supper, in return for a small per diem reimbursement. Youth are pre-screened for addiction or mental health problems, and must agree to abide by curfews and house rules set by the host provider. It is recommended that the County of Wellington work in collaboration with local service providers, like Wyndham House and Family & Children's Services, to explore the feasibility of setting up a “Bridging the Gap” program in Wellington County. For more details, see [www.bridgingthegaphalton.ca](http://www.bridgingthegaphalton.ca).
- b. There is a need to provide a fun, safe and inclusive environment for all youth in

Wellington County that offers a myriad of opportunities, ranging from arts and culture, to fitness and recreation, to employment and life skills through social enterprise ventures. Examples of best practices in Ontario include the Fusion Youth Activity and Technology Centre in Ingersoll, Youth Opportunities Unlimited in London, and Peel Youth Village in Mississauga. It is recommended that the County of Wellington, in collaboration with the Wellington Youth Service Providers, explore the feasibility of establishing Fusion-type centres to be located near the local high schools in Wellington County. For more details, see [www.fusionyouthcentre.ca](http://www.fusionyouthcentre.ca).

#### 4. Adopt a Housing First Policy

The effects of the recent recession are far from over. Many individuals and households are struggling to survive on little income, whether it is social assistance or low paying jobs. Finding and maintaining satisfactory and affordable housing is a key concern, as it is the largest expenditure for the majority of households.

***“Homelessness may not only be a housing problem, but it is always a housing problem. And you can’t deal with whatever other problems a person is facing until they are in stable, appropriate housing.” [48]***

“Housing First” is a concept that recognizes that an individual/family’s primary need is to obtain a roof over their heads, and that other issues that may affect the household (e.g. food security, education, employment, etc.) cannot be addressed until stable housing is obtained. It is recommended that the County of Wellington adopt a Housing First Policy.

As is the case with social assistance, much of the funding and legislative changes required to improve the availability of affordable and social housing are beyond the purview of the County of Wellington. Nevertheless, the County of Wellington could play an important advocacy role. For example:

- Encouraging the development of transitional and supportive housing units in Wellington County.
- Promoting the need to make homelessness a priority status on the Centralized Waiting List for Social Housing.
- Supporting the development of more social housing units in Wellington County, especially units for families with 3+ children.
- In the absence of family units, allowing families to be “under-housed” on an interim basis (i.e. a family of five sharing a 2-bedroom unit), rather than forcing them to go to an emergency shelter or take inappropriate accommodations in the private market.

When funding does come available to build new affordable and/or social housing units, it is important that the County of Wellington work in collaboration with local organizations whose services may be impacted by the new tenants (e.g. food banks).

## 8. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this report has synthesized large amounts of existing data and combined it with the lived experiences of precariously housed individuals and the service providers who work with them, to paint a picture of homelessness in Wellington County. It is a canvas marked with poverty, addiction, family breakdown and mental illness. Yet it is also characterized by resourcefulness, and a strong commitment to home and to place, even by those deemed not to have a home.

The causes of homelessness and the actions required to address it are multiple and complex. Jurisdictional issues related to implementing possible solutions are complicated. Yet policy decision makers cannot allow complexity to paralyze them into inaction. The recommendations outlined here provide the County of Wellington with an opportunity to make a difference in addressing not only homelessness, but also the social inequities that underlie it.



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## APPENDIX B – RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research process for this project was three-fold. It involved:

1. Consultations with individuals who are (or have been) homeless or who are at risk of becoming homeless, as well as local service providers.
2. Review of relevant literature
3. Statistical analysis of existing program and socio-economic data related to homelessness in Wellington County

The following is a description of the research process and questions posed. The activities themselves were carried out concurrently.

### I. Focus Groups & Key Informant Interviews

Seventy-eight individuals participated in a variety focus groups and key informant interviews, consisting of 49 service providers (representing 34 organizations) and 29 service users. The participants came from a range of backgrounds, age groups and service sectors. For details, please refer to Appendix B.

All told, 42 interviews were conducted (26 in person and 16 by telephone). And five focus groups were held at existing gatherings:

- October 25, 2010 - North Wellington Food Banks/Pantries, Mount Forest
- November 10, 2010 - CRC's Young Parent's Group, Fergus
- November 17, 2010 - The Door's Peer-to-Lead Youth Group, Fergus
- November 18, 2010 - Wellington & Guelph Housing Committee, Guelph
- November 24, 2010 - Wellington Youth Services Providers, Fergus

Local service providers assisted by providing introductions to community members, who had experiences with homelessness. In one instance, an interview was conducted by EWCS on the authors' behalf. In addition, five members of The Door's Peer-to-Lead Program (Fergus chapter) received interview training by Rebecca Sutherns, a member of the research team. They, in turn, identified youth participants and conducted interviews, reaching a total of 16 youth.

The discussion questions were adjusted according to the audience and time allotment of each consultation, but in general, the following was asked:

#### *Questions for the Homeless*

1. Please share your story of how you have experienced homelessness.
2. If you had to pick 3 words to describe your experience, what would they be?
3. What helped you most? What didn't help?
4. What (formal and informal) supports and services did you access? Were/are you aware of others?
5. What would have made those supports and services more helpful? What new ones should exist?

### Questions for Service Providers

1. What are the triggers for homelessness in Wellington County?
2. To what extent, is homelessness a salient issue in Wellington County?
3. What options are currently available to homeless or at-risk households in Wellington County?
4. What is the reach of your organization in this area? To what extent are Wellington County residents accessing your services (for Guelph providers)?
5. From your perspective, what are the top 3 emerging issues/needs re: rural homelessness? Which population groups are most at risk in Wellington County?
6. What needs to happen over the next 3 years to strengthen services for rural residents?

## 2. Literature Review

The purpose of the literature review was to gather existing research, information, and knowledge relating to rural homelessness, both within Canada and abroad. The following research questions were used to inform this report:

1. What is the accepted definition of “homeless”, and what are the challenges are involved in measuring it?
2. How does the rural context differentiate the experience of rural homelessness from urban homelessness?
3. What are some recent best practices and policy initiatives developed for addressing rural homelessness?

The reference sources came from primarily from literature published since 2006, accessed using a variety of academic databases, as well as selected resources referred to the authors by colleagues working in the field of housing and homelessness.

## 3. Statistical Analysis

A variety of program and socio-economic data related to homelessness in Wellington County was collected and analyzed. Sources of this data included:

- County of Wellington
- Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC)
- Food Banks Canada
- Guelph Community Foundation
- Guelph-Wellington Women In Crisis
- Ontario Non-Profit Housing Association (ONPHA)
- Statistics Canada
- United Way of Guelph & Wellington
- Waterloo-Wellington LHIN

An email query was sent to other municipalities in Ontario to determine if they track data on “Wellington” shelter users. This poll revealed that many communities in Ontario not yet using Homeless Individuals and Families Information System (HIFIS). Only two communities (Peel and Sudbury) track shelter users by municipality. Most just capture “other”, like the County of

Wellington does. No Wellington residents were reported to have used shelters in other regions in Ontario in 2009.

## APPENDIX C – PARTICIPANTS

### Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all the individuals and organizations that provided information and statistics or in any way helped in creating this report. We are extremely grateful to the 77 individuals listed below who participated in focus group meetings and/or individual interviews.

A special thanks goes to The Door’s Kevin Coghill and the members of the Peer-to-Lead program who, with a little training, conducted interviews with 16 “at risk” youth on our behalf.

### Service Providers

<b>Organization</b>	<b>Participant</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>FG</b>	<b>KII</b>
1. 2 <sup>nd</sup> Chance Employment	Michelle Huestis		X	
2. AIDS Committee	Gary Roche	Housing Support Coordinator	X	
3. Centre Wellington Food Bank	Fred Aleksandrowiz			X
4. Centre Wellington Hydro	Doug Sherwood			X
5. CMHA	Kim Ackerman	Rural Support Worker		X
6. CMHA	Debbie Fazari		X	
7. Community Pantry, Mount Forest	Marg Rapp		X	
8. Community Resource Centre	Naomi Melnick	Manager, Outreach & Support Services	X	X
9. Community Resource Centre	Frances Livingstone	Youth/Outreach Worker	X	X
10. Community Torchlight (Distress Centre)	Elizabeth Pease		X	
11. County of Wellington	Heather Burke	Director, Housing		X
12. County of Wellington	Diane Laur	Manager, Housing		X
13. County of Wellington	Sheila Cramner-Byng	Manager, Housing		X
14. The Door Youth Drop In Centre	Kevin Coghill	Director	X	X
15. East Wellington Community Services	Gillian Riseborough	Manager, Community Supports & Volunteers		X
16. East Wellington Community Services	David Robart-Morgan	Past President		X
17. Family & Children’s Services	Amanda Bayer		X	
18. Family & Children’s Services	Mary Lou Fretz			X

<b>Organization</b>	<b>Participant</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>FG</b>	<b>KII</b>
19. Guelph Community Health Centre	Trish Miller	Community Health Outreach Worker, ID Clinic		X
20. Guelph-Wellington Women In Crisis	Jacinta Gillen	Manager, Rural Women's Support Program	X	X
21. Guelph-Wellington Women In Crisis	Christine Wilson	Manager, Marianne's Place		X
22. Harriston Food Bank	Bev May		X	
23. Homewood Community Addiction	Tamara McCurty		X	
24. John Howard Society	Jennifer Cochrane		X	
25. Legal Clinic of Guelph & Wellington County	Kristen Thompson		X	
26. Lutherwood	Ray Hollinger	Youth Contact	X	
27. Michael House	Amy Wilson	Program Manager/Intake Worker		X
28. Palmerston Food Bank	Barbara Burrows		X	
29. Palmerston Food Bank	Margaret Todd		X	
30. Ramoth House	Priscilla Cochrane	Director		X
31. Royal City Evangelical Missionary Church	Paul George		X	
32. Seniors Centre of Excellence	Helen Edwards			X
33. Trellis Mental Health & Developmental Services	Paul Young		X	
34. United Way of Guelph & Wellington	Sarah Haanstra	Director, Social Planning		X
35. United Way of Guelph & Wellington	Bethany Wagler-Mantle	Social Planner, Poverty Coalition	X	
36. Upper Grand District School Board	Audrey Morrison	Child & Youth Counsellor, Centre Wellington District High School	X	
37. Upper Grand District School Board	Laura May Culver	Social Worker/Attendance Counsellor, Wellington Heights Secondary School		X
38. Victorian Order of Nurses	Sharon O'Sullivan	Coordinator, Volunteer Visiting		X
39. Welcome In Drop In Centre	Sister Christine Leyser		X	X
40. Welcome In Drop In Centre	Alberta	Stepping Stone		X
41. Wellington Catholic District School Board	Diane Fountain	Youth Worker	X	
42. Wellington County Learning Centre	Elizabeth DeBergh	Executive Director		X
43. Wellington Dufferin Guelph Health Unit	Debbie Veldhuizen	Nurse		X



<b>Organization</b>	<b>Participant</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>FG</b>	<b>KII</b>
44. Wellington Dufferin Guelph Health Unit	Nancy Thurston	Nurse		X
45. Wellington Dufferin Guelph Public Health	Dawn MacRae Stevens	Public Health Nurse	X	
46. WWCFDC & CW Connection	Jane Shaw		X	
47. WWCFDC & CW Connection	Jana Reichert		X	
48. Wyndham House	Debbie Bentley-Lauzon	Executive Director		X
49. Wyndham House	Leisha Burley	Program Manager	X	

### Community Members (29)

Members of the Door's Peer to Lead Group (5 youth, ages 15-18 years)

Amanda (female, 17)

Anonymous

Anonymous (female, 22)

Becky (female, 14)

Bobby (female, 16)

Caleb (male, 15)

Catherine and Jaren (parents, 1 child, mid-20s)

Dakota (male, 16)

Dave (male, divorced, father of 3 kids, mid-40s)

DJ (male, 15)

Hannah (female, 15)

Jaime (female, 15)

John (male, married, mid-30s)

Josh (male, 17)

Kelly (female, 21)

Logan (male, 16)

Melissa (female, single mother, 1 child, mid-20s)

Pat (female, married, 62)

Sam (female, single mother, 1 child, mid-20s)

Sam (male, 16)

Shalyn (female, 15)

Tanya (female, single mother of 3 kids, 37)

Timmy (male, 17)

## APPENDIX D – PROFILE OF WELLINGTON SHELTER USERS

This analysis is based on a review of monthly Homeless Individuals and Families Information System (HIFIS) statistics for the period of 2009-2010. The adult emergency shelters include: Stepping Stone and Elizabeth Place, plus overflow beds at local motels. The youth emergency shelter is operated by Wyndham House.

“Wellington County” clients are those that report a prior address in Wellington County during the 12 months prior to admission to a shelter, and are identified as such by the Shelter Intake Workers. Data was gathered from their intake forms with all identifying data removed.

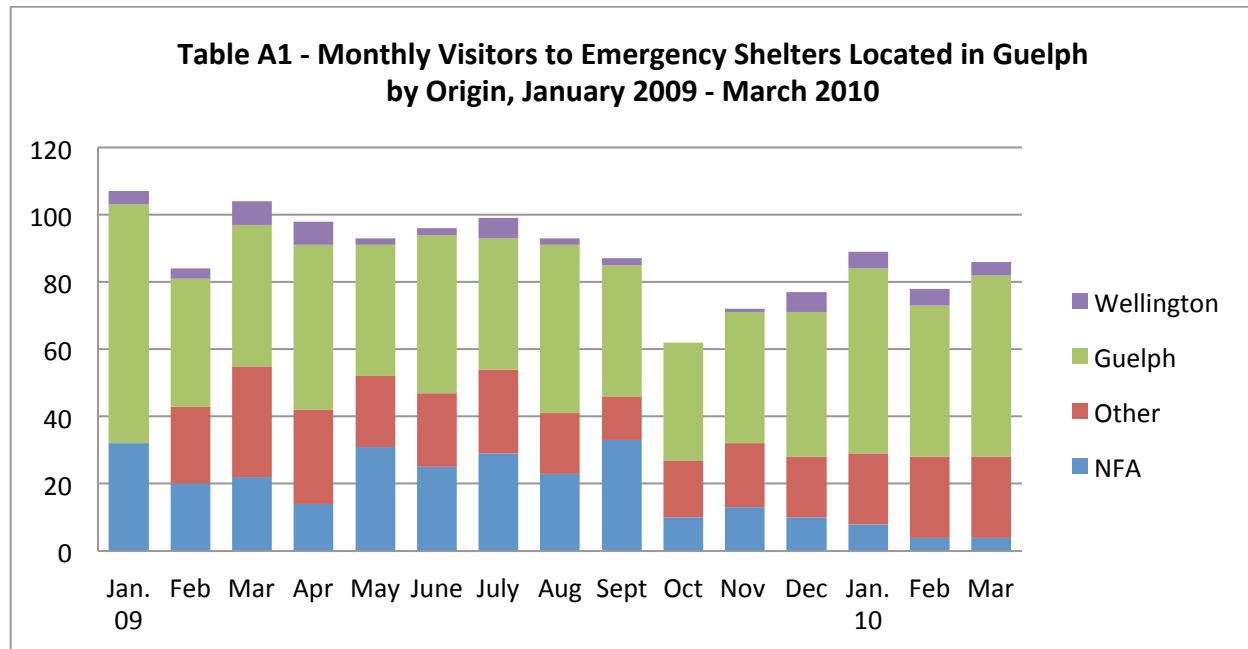
In reviewing the HIFIS statistics, the following caveats should be noted:

- Adult shelter users also include dependents (spouses/partners and children).
- The forms are completed by the Shelter Intake Workers, based on information reported by the clients. As a result, some of the fields were incomplete.
- The Intake form was revised in October 2009.
- As of April 2010, the County of Wellington revised how it counts clients. Previous to that time, they tracked “applicants” (i.e. if John Doe visited the shelter three times in one month - he was only counted once. Also, his dependents were not counted separately). From April 2010 on, the reporting method was changed to match the billing data (i.e. If Jane Smith has two children and they stay at the shelter twice in a month, they would be counted as six clients.)

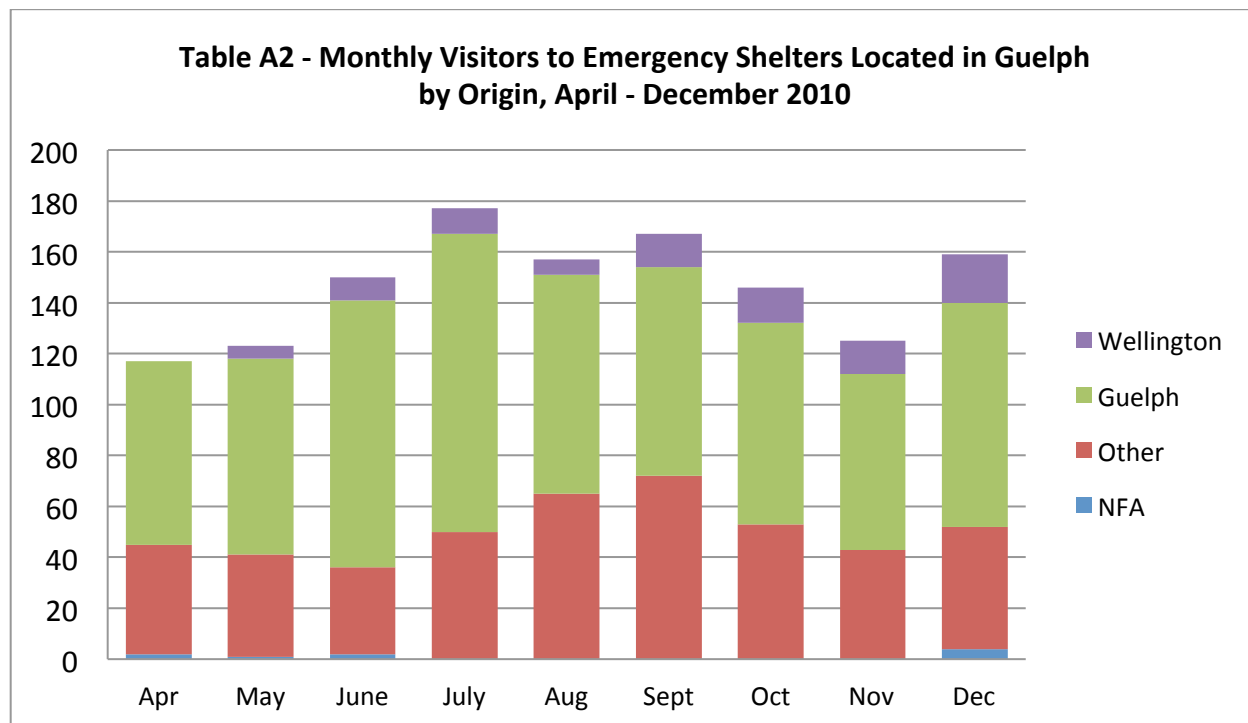
### *Monthly Trends*

A total of 72 households/individuals (including 20 dependents) from Wellington County visited the emergency shelters located in Guelph in 2009-2010 – 54 to the adult shelters and 20 to the youth shelter. (This does not include users of the women’s shelter.) Some of these individuals stayed multiple times (see length of stay data below).

The following graphs show the total number of emergency shelter users by month by origin, for both the adult and youth shelters (Due to the change in data collection method noted above, the graphs are separated into two time periods – pre/post April 2010). Surprisingly, usage in the summer is not markedly lower than in the winter months.



Source: Calculated by authors



Source: Calculated by authors

**Profile of Wellington Shelter Users**

Eighty percent of the Wellington residents who stayed at the emergency shelters were male, not including dependents (for both the youth and adult shelters). The following tables display the age distribution at intake of those visiting shelters in 2009 and 2010. Please note that these

numbers are for heads of household only (i.e. if an individual stayed more than once, he/she was only counted once in the profile analysis).

**Table A3 - Age of Youth Shelter Users from Wellington County, 2009-2010**

Age	2009	2010
17	1	2
18	1	5
19	1	2
20	0	3
21	1	2
<b>Total</b>	4	14

Source: Calculated by authors

**Table A4 - Age of Adult Shelter Users from Wellington County, 2009-2010 (not including dependents)**

Age	2009	2010
<20	0	1
21-25	4	4
26-35	6	5
36-50	0	12
51-64	16	6
>65	0	0
<b>Total</b>	26	28

Source: Calculated by authors

Of the 54 households/individuals (including 20 dependents) from Wellington County who visited the adult HIFIS shelters in 2009-2010:

- 35 were single
- 4 were female single parents (children accompanying)
- 2 were male single parents (children accompanying)
- 3 were two parent families with children
- 8 were couples without children with them
- 1 was widowed

Of the 20 dependents who accompanied their parents to adult shelters:

- 9 were under 5
- 6 were 5-9
- 2 were 10-14
- 3 were 15 or older; the oldest was 16

### **Length of Stay**

Many of those from the county visiting shelters during 2009-2010 stayed only once (43% of adults and 60% of youth). A further 27% of youth and 44% of adults stayed 2 or 3 times. The proportion staying more than 3 times was 6%. The average length of stay for youth was 4.3 days; for adults the average was 10.9 days. There was a wide range in the length of stay around this average; the longest stay at one time for a youth was 30 days and 31 for an adult. Stays of more than 2 weeks represented 32% of adult visits and 8.6% of youth visits.

### **Reasons for Needing a Shelter Bed**

The following table lists the reasons Wellington County residents gave for requiring a shelter bed during their intake interviews. For youth, almost half needed shelter because of family conflict. Eviction was the second most frequently cited reason for youth, and the most common reason for adult shelter users. For both groups, this was sometimes eviction by a family member, which is a further indication of family conflict. Nearly eight percent of youth indicated they were entering a treatment program, yet no adults reported entering treatment as a reason for shelter use. (Since this is self-reported information, addictions and mental health problems may be underreported). Job loss and lack of income were cited by 19.4% of Wellington County residents as a reason for accessing the adult shelters.

Please note that these numbers are for heads of household only (i.e. if an individual stayed more than once, he/she was only counted once in the profile analysis). In addition, as these reasons are self-reported, it is most likely that mental health and addictions issues are underestimated.

**Table A5 – Self-reported Reasons for Wellington Residents Needing a Shelter Bed, 2009-2010**

Reason Given	Percentage Citing This Reason	
	Adult Shelters	Youth Shelter
Family Conflict/Breakdown	19.4%	46.2%
Eviction (by landlord or family member)	25.8%	23.1%
Family abuse		7.7%
Stranded/temporary	3.2%	15.4%
Unsafe Housing	19.4%	
Entering a Treatment Program		7.7%
Released from Jail	3.4%	
Lack of income/Income drop/Job loss	19.4%	
Mental Health/Illness/Breakdown	9.7%	
Temporary	3.2%	

Source: Calculated by authors

## APPENDIX E – HOMELESS & EVICTION PREVENTION PROGRAMS FUNDED BY THE COUNTY OF WELLINGTON, 2010

<b>Organization</b>	<b>Programs supported by County of Wellington<sup>7</sup></b>	<b>Age Group</b>	<b>Location</b>
<b>Community Resource Centre (CRC)</b> <a href="http://www.communityresourcecentre.org">www.communityresourcecentre.org</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Outreach &amp; Housing Support Services</li> <li>• Rent Bank</li> <li>• Volunteer Transportation</li> </ul>	All ages	Administrative office is in Fergus, plus 2 outreach workers
<b>Guelph Community Health Centre</b> <a href="http://www.guelphchc.ca">www.guelphchc.ca</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ID Clinic</li> </ul>	Adults (18+)	Guelph
<b>Michael House</b> <a href="http://www.michaelhouse.ca">www.michaelhouse.ca</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shelter</li> </ul>	Young pregnant women and infants (up to 1 year)	Guelph
<b>Ramoth House</b> <a href="http://www.ramoth.ca">www.ramoth.ca</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shelter</li> </ul>	Young pregnant women and infants (up to 1 year)	Mount Forest
<b>Welcome In Drop In Centre</b> <a href="http://www.ibvm.ca/works/justice/welcome-drop-in">www.ibvm.ca/works/justice/welcome-drop-in</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stepping Stone (emergency shelter for men)</li> <li>• Elizabeth Place (emergency shelter for women)</li> <li>• Parkview Motel (overflow beds)</li> <li>• Wayfare Motel (overflow beds)</li> </ul>	Adults plus dependants	Guelph
<b>Wyndham House</b> <a href="http://www.wyndhamhouse.org">www.wyndhamhouse.org</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Youth Emergency Shelter</li> <li>• Long Term Residential Programs</li> </ul>	16-21 years	Guelph

<sup>7</sup> Many of these organizations offer other programs. The services listed here are only those that received funding from the County of Wellington's Homeless & Eviction Prevention Programs in 2010.