

## **Mortality Trends in the Homeless Population in Toronto**

<b>Date:</b>	May 5, 2008
<b>To:</b>	Board of Health
<b>From:</b>	Medical Officer of Health
<b>Wards:</b>	All
<b>Reference Number:</b>	

### **SUMMARY**

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This report is the first biannual update on mortality trends in the homeless population in the City of Toronto. The most recent available data from three sources of information on deaths among homeless people are summarized.

#### **Financial Impact**

There are no financial implications arising from this report.

#### **DECISION HISTORY**

At its meeting of September 14, 2006 the Board of Health passed the following recommendation: “The Medical Officer of Health report to the Board of Health on aggregate findings and identified trends in deaths in the homeless population on a biannual basis, beginning with 2007 data”.

#### **ISSUE BACKGROUND**

Higher rates of illness and premature death among the homeless population have been widely recognized. However, the often isolated existence of people who are homeless, poses a challenge to efforts to accurately determine mortality levels and trends. In some instances, homeless individuals will not be identified, or may have no known next of kin. In these cases it rests with the shelter system or community agencies, in collaboration with other authorities such as those in law enforcement, social services and health care, to attempt to ensure that clients receive a proper burial and that every effort is made to identify and notify next of kin. There is community concern over what appears to be an escalating death rate and the absence of comprehensive tracking to enable the development of preventive measures such as transitional or supportive housing, or palliative care.

## COMMENTS

The Office of the Chief Coroner (“the Coroner”) generally investigates deaths that are of a sudden, suspicious nature, are accidental or unexpected, or are otherwise not natural. Such deaths are reported to the Coroner by law enforcement officials, health care practitioners and other community service providers, and subsequently investigated by the Coroner’s Office. Most natural deaths do not involve the Coroner; however, if an individual dies while living on the street, even if their death is deemed to be from natural causes, the Coroner will investigate.

The Toronto Indigent Deaths Enquiries (TIDE) Project was established in 1999 as a repository for information regarding deaths among homeless individuals defined as “any person who has no fixed address and dies in a public place (street or building), hostel, or in hospital having been admitted from any of the above”. Between 2000 and 2005, TIDE has recorded an average of approximately 40 deaths per year, or 238 in total. However, despite the above definition, TIDE data only includes those deaths which have been reported to, and investigated by, the Coroner.

The Coroner has made efforts to ensure that all deaths meeting the above description are captured in TIDE data. However, some deaths of homeless individuals may not be included in the Coroner’s data. For example, if a homeless person dies in a shelter or hospital of a previously diagnosed illness, it may be deemed unnecessary for the Coroner to investigate. Such a death would therefore not be registered in TIDE data.

The Coroner’s office cannot publicly release any identifying information regarding a deceased person. The coroner can, however, corroborate or confirm information if a caller provides a name and/or physical description of the deceased. The primary way to initially identify a person is to provide any unique marks, tattoos or other physical description to the Coroner’s staff. In such cases, an agency or shelter worker may visit the morgue to identify an individual. If family members are available, the deceased’s identity can be confirmed through DNA analysis. The Toronto Coroner’s office states that there are generally fewer than ten unidentified bodies per year in their morgue. A collaborative effort to identify the homeless among them could reduce this number further.

The Hostel Services Division of Shelter, Support & Housing Administration in 2007 set up a system to collect information regarding deaths of homeless clients residing in shelters, or clients who had recently been discharged from a shelter to a medical institution or care facility.

A specialized form and guidebook were developed for mandatory use by shelter operators to report such deaths. Shelter operators are required to provide an initial submission on the death within 24 hours and provide further statistical detail within 30 days. Information reported on the form includes: client identification, demographic data, time, date, place, manner and cause of death if available. Hostel Services collects and releases the data in accordance with the Municipal Freedom of Information and Protection of

Privacy Act and policies which ensure the protection of client confidentiality and privacy even after death.

In 2007 there were 24 deaths that met the criteria for inclusion. On an annual basis Hostel Services shelters over 28,000 different individuals. Summary information on these deaths is contained in Tables 1 and 2.

The Toronto Disaster Relief Committee (TDRC) is an organization that is involved in research, advocacy and public education on issues affecting homeless people in Toronto. In addition, TDRC is the national secretariat for the National Housing and Homelessness Network and is involved in the 1% campaign, a national campaign to reintroduce a national housing program. This group has also been recording deaths for their homeless memorial, which names over 550 homeless or formerly homeless people who have died since the mid-1980s. TDRC uses a broader definition of homeless deaths than TIDE. TDRC's definition is "individuals who died while living on the street, staying in a shelter, in custody with no fixed address, in hospital or long-term care with no fixed address in the community, in transitory and short-term accommodations, living in unsafe and/or inadequate accommodation (i.e. squats, rooming houses) and Aboriginals on their home reserve if they went there with the knowledge they were ill".

TDRC gathers information from frontline agencies, homeless individuals and, in some cases, the Coroner's office. In the years since TDRC data has been kept, 551 individual deaths have been tracked, confirmed and documented by the TDRC. However, a significant number remain listed as John or Jane Doe. The list of deaths maintained by the TDRC is attached (see Appendix 1).

Table 1 shows the total number of deaths reported by the three sources for the period 1999 to 2007 for years when data is available. Note: it is likely that a person may appear on more than one list. It is also possible that a homeless death may not appear on any of the lists. Privacy legislation prevents the disclosure of names in both the TIDE data from the Coroner's office and the list from Shelter, Support and Housing Administration. The purpose of using three sources of deaths data is not for cross validation of the data but rather for corroboration of trends in mortality among the homeless population.

**Table 1: Number of Homeless Deaths Reported by Coroner's Office, Hostel Services and Toronto Disaster Relief Committee, 1999 to 2007**

Year	TIDE Reports from Coroner's Office	Hostel Services <sup>1</sup>	TDRC
1999	27 <sup>2</sup>	-	42
2000	36	-	44
2001	34	-	46
2002	46	-	43
2003	39	-	29
2004	38	-	55
2005	45	-	73
2006	n.a. <sup>3</sup>	-	59
2007	n.a.	24	36

1 – Hostel Services began data collection in 2007

2 – Incomplete year based on May-December 1999

3 – TIDE data is not available for approximately 2 years to ensure adequate investigation

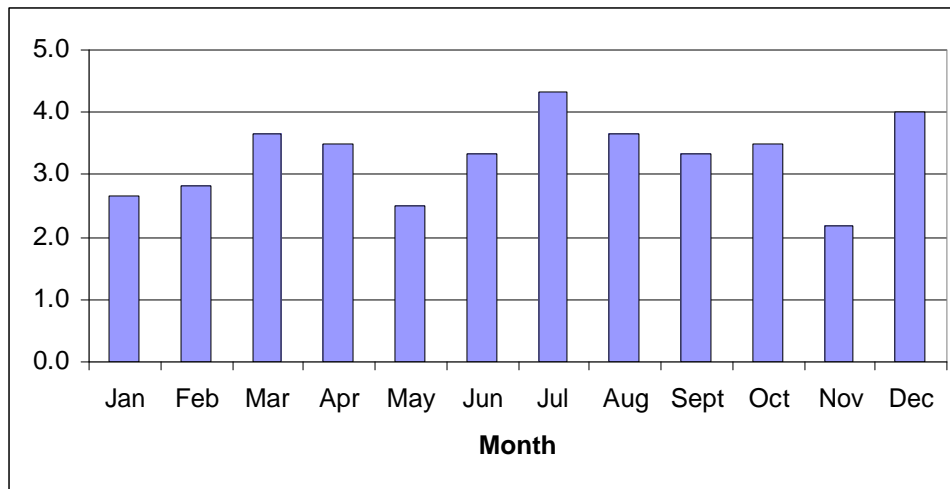
Table 2 summarizes findings from the three sources of data on time trends, sex, age, and cause of death. It should be noted that these information sources may not be mutually exclusive and individuals may be counted in each of the data sets.

**Table 2: Summary of Findings from the Three Sources of Data on Mortality in the Homeless Population - Toronto, 1999 - 2007**

Issue	TIDE – Coroner's Office (1999-2007)	Hostel Services (2007)	TDRC (1999-2007)
Time trends	None apparent	Only one year of data available	Apparent increase 2004-2006
Sex of deceased	Predominately (90%) male	Predominately (92%) male	Predominately male
Age of deceased	Approximately 6% over 60 years of age	Approximately 17% over 60 years of age	No information
Seasonal trends	Peaks in March, July, and December	Insufficient data	Slightly more deaths in late summer
Cause of death	15% due to natural causes (based on all deaths)	Unknown for 15 of 24 deaths	No information

Figure 1 displays deaths by month, based on project TIDE data for 2000-2005.

**Figure 1: Average Number of Homeless Deaths Per Month in Toronto  
Project TIDE, 2000 to 2005**



## **Conclusions**

The frequency of premature death in the homeless population, combined with the often isolated existence of this group, requires a unique collaborative approach to improve both the identification of deceased individuals and the detection of notable mortality trends. Furthermore, efforts to confirm identification will promote a dignified recognition of the death of homeless individuals and facilitate notification of next of kin. The data presented in this report make use of three available sources of information, but reveal important continuing gaps.

## **CONTACT**

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## **SIGNATURE**

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## **LIST OF ATTACHMENTS**

Appendix 1: Toronto Disaster Relief Committee's Homeless Memorial