RESEARCH IN BRIEF

AN ANALYSIS OF SHELTER SYSTEM USE IN TORONTO, 2011-2016

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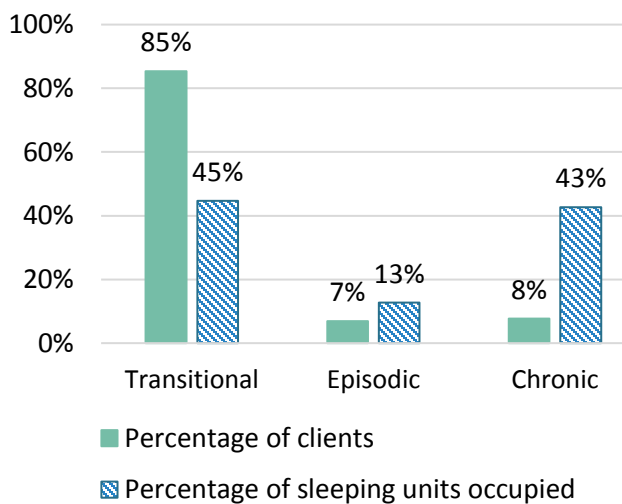
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RESEARCH SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

This report outlines results from an analysis of six years of shelter data from Toronto's Shelter Management Information System (SMIS). The study uses a well-established method to categorize clients of homeless shelters according to the intensity and frequency of shelter use. The analysis explores shelter use patterns by client age and gender, and by shelter sector (adult, family, youth sectors), as well as a year-over-year trend analysis.

TRANSITIONAL, EPISODIC & CHRONIC CLUSTERS

Bar chart showing:
- Transitional: Percentage of clients 85%, Percentage of sleeping units occupied 45%
- Episodic: Percentage of clients 7%, Percentage of sleeping units occupied 13%
- Chronic: Percentage of clients 8%, Percentage of sleeping units occupied 43%

Legend:
- Percentage of clients
- Percentage of sleeping units occupied

MAIN MESSAGES

- Shelter use in Toronto is largely consistent with patterns of use in other large North American cities.

- The vast majority (85%) of people accessing Toronto's shelters do so infrequently and for short periods, staying less than two months per episode on average.

- A minority of clients (8%) use the shelter system for long periods, and despite being small in number, use almost half of available shelter capacity.

- Client use patterns vary across shelter sectors. In the family shelter sector, "chronic" clients use 24% of sector capacity, while in the youth sector chronic clients use 50% of sector capacity.

- Between 2012 and 2015, there was a small but noticeable increase in the percentage of clients using the shelter system for long periods.

- Understanding the patterns of shelter system use among different client groups is important for directing limited resources to where they can be put to best use.

BACKGROUND

The Toronto emergency shelter system includes close to 60 shelters and two central access points. As of 2016, there were close to 4,400 full-time beds in the system and more than 16,000 different people accessed the Toronto shelter system over the course of a year.

In 2010, the City of Toronto implemented SMIS across the shelter system. SMIS is a web-based information and bed management platform that holds client-level data on intakes, admissions and discharges, and basic demographics.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a well-established methodology known as "k-mean clustering" to examine patterns of homeless shelter use, identifying those who use shelters by their frequency of use and length of stay. Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of the three types of shelter users: transitional, episodic, and chronic.

TABLE 1: PATTERNS OF SHELTER STAYS

	Few Episodes	**Many Episodes**
Short Stays	Transitional	Episodic
Long Stays	Chronic	--

While the same clustering method has been used to examine emergency shelter use by single adults in New York and Philadelphia (Kuhn and Culhane 1998) and in Calgary (Kneebone, et.al., 2015), this study is the first to include comparisons with family and youth shelter sectors, and a year-over-year analysis of demographic trends and shelter use patterns across shelter types.

FINDINGS

The analysis finds that most shelter clients in Toronto can be classified as **transitional** users of the shelter system. These clients typically use the system relatively infrequently and for short periods (55 days per episode and 72 days in total on average). Households classified as transitional users of the shelter system make up 85% of all shelter clients in Toronto over the past six years and fill 45% of shelter capacity.

A minority of clients – less than 8% of shelter users – stay in shelters for very long periods (466 days per episode and 761 days in total on average). Despite the fact they are relatively few in number, these so-called **chronic** users of the shelter system fill 43% of shelter capacity.

The remaining 13% of shelter capacity is filled by **episodic** users of the shelter system; those who use the system more frequently (8 episodes on average) but for relatively short stays.

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FAST FACTS

- **Two thirds of clients** accessed shelter only **once** between 2011 and 2016.

- Episodic shelter clients had an average of **8 episodes** in shelter over 2011-2016, while transitional clients averaged 1 episode, and chronic clients averaged 2 episodes.

- **1 in 4 clients** spent a total of **7 days or less** in the shelter system over the past six years. At the other end of the spectrum, another quarter of clients spent more than 180 days in shelter over the same period.

- Just **8% of clients** use the shelter system for long periods (466 days per episode and 761 days in total, on average). These "chronic" clients used **43%** of shelter capacity over 2011-2016.

- **93% of families** had just one episode in the shelter system, but that one episode was quite long on average (about 3 months).

- The percentage of youth shelter users classified as chronic increased from **15%** in 2012 to **20%** in 2015.

VARIATION BY SHELTER SECTOR

Distribution of youth shelter use observed in youth shelters were similar to those of adult singles sector shelters; the great majority of clients are transitional users. Transitional and chronic users of youth shelters experience episodes that are noticeably shorter than those experienced by users of adult shelters.
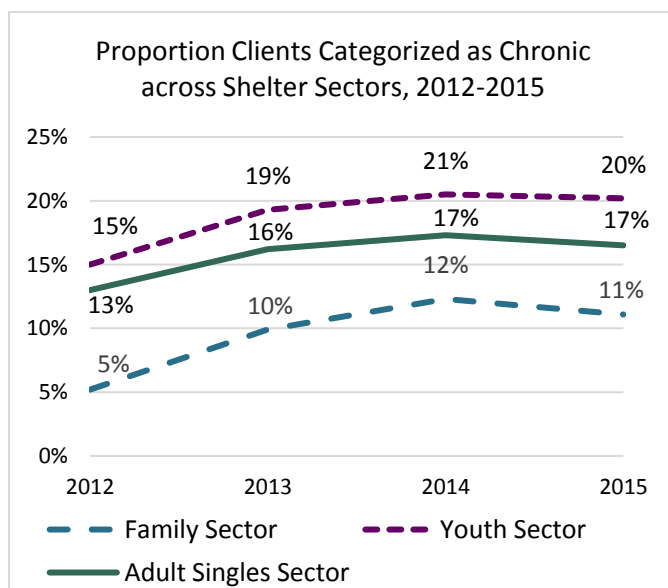
When it comes to family shelters, transitional users are even more heavily represented than in single adult and youth shelters, and the proportion of chronic users is lower.

COMPARISON WITH OTHER CITIES

The intensity and frequency of shelter use in Toronto is largely similar to what has been observed in other large cities, particularly New York and Philadelphia.

TRENDS YEAR-OVER-YEAR

Over 2012-2015 there was an increase in the percentage of shelter clients classified as so-called chronic users of the shelter system from 13% to 17% of clients overall, with most of the increase occurring in 2013. Increases in the proportion of chronic users were observed in all sectors. Age and gender distribution of clients remained consistent year-over-year.

Proportion Clients Categorized as Chronic across Shelter Sectors, 2012-2015

- - - Family Sector   - - - Youth Sector
——— Adult Singles Sector

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TABLE 2: SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS FROM CLUSTER ANALYSIS

Clusters	Transitional	Episodic	Chronic
All Shelters			
Total number of users	34,024	2,733	3,065
Percentage of users	85.4	6.9	7.7
Average number of episodes	1.4	7.5	2.3
Average length of episode (days)	55.3	34.9	466.3
Total No. of Days	71.8	254.1	761.4
Percentage of sleeping units occupied	44.7	12.7	42.7
Single Adult Shelters			
Total number of users	22,854	2,405	2,089
Percentage of users	83.6	8.8	7.6
Average number of episodes	1.5	7.5	2.4
Average length of episode (days)	50.3	33.88	507.3
Total No. of Days	68.9	245.2	835.0
Percentage of sleeping units occupied	40.3	15.1	44.6
Family Shelters			
Total number of users	6,011	442	335
Percentage of users	88.6	6.5	4.9
Average number of episodes	1.0	2.2	1.0
Average length of episode (days)	75.8	91.1	488.2
Total No. of Days	75.8	197.5	504.0
Percentage of sleeping units occupied	64.0	12.3	23.7
Youth Shelters			
Total number of users	6,545	652	803
Percentage of users	81.8	8.2	10.0
Average number of episodes	1.3	5.6	2.1
Average length of episode (days)	35.4	37.4	329.7
Total No. of Days	45.6	209.1	541.9
Percentage of occupied sleeping units	34.3	15.7	50.0

IMPLICATIONS

Understanding the trends and dynamics of shelter system use is an important foundation for service system planning. This study confirms past findings that the majority of people accessing the homeless shelter system do so rarely and briefly. The trends in chronic shelter use require further monitoring, as there was an increase across sectors in 2013, followed by a levelling off in 2014-2015. A growing number of chronic shelter users would strain the ability of the system to provide service to those seeking temporary shelter while they re-establish housing. The high percentage of shelter capacity occupied by clients staying for long periods underscores the importance of targeted interventions to assist these clients to move to housing with the necessary supports.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

CONTACT

For full report or further information, please contact: ssha@toronto.ca

REPORT CITATION

Kneebone, R and A. Jadidzadeh. (2017). An Analysis of Homeless Shelter Use in Toronto, 2011-2016. Toronto: City of Toronto Shelter, Support and Housing Administration.

RELATED RESEARCH

Kuhn, R. and D. Culhane. (1998). Applying Cluster Analysis to Test a Typology of Homelessness by Pattern of Shelter Utilization: Results from the Analysis of Administrative Data. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 26(2), 207-232.

Aubry, T., S. Farrell, S. Hwang and M. Calhoun. (2013). Identifying the Patterns of Emergency Shelter Stayers of Single Individuals in Canadian Cities of Different Sizes. *Housing Studies*, 28(6), 910-927.

Kneebone, R., M. Bell, N. Jackson and A. Jadidzadeh. (2015). Who are the Homeless? Numbers, Trends and Characteristics of Those Without Homes in Calgary. University of Calgary School of Public Policy, *SPP Research Papers*, 8(11).