



WHERE DOES NANAIMO STAND?

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF HOMELESSNESS
IN THE ERA OF COVID-19

SEPTEMBER 2021

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



This report is dedicated to all individuals facing homelessness in our community. We hope this project contributes to creating solutions that provides housing for them.

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The report was prepared by Andrew Thornton, (PhD, Research and Knowledge Mobilization Consultant) under the auspices of the Centre for Justice, Education and Research at Nanaimo Region John Howard Society. Community Development practitioner John McCormick (M.A., LLB) formerly Executive Director of NRJHS supplied input and editorial comments on the final draft of this report. Thank you to Megan Terepocki (PhD, Research Consultant) for extensive editorial comments and support on all drafts. Sam Tsemberis (PhD, Pathways Housing First Institute) provided invaluable guidance on the final draft of the report. Thank you to United Way British Columbia - Central and Northern Vancouver Island for providing clarifying editorial support.

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Working with communities in BC's Interior, Lower Mainland, Central & Northern Vancouver Island

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LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT



We would like to acknowledge that this work took place on the traditional and unceded territory of the Coast Salish Peoples, including the Traditional Territory of the Snuneymuxw First Nation and the Snaw-naw-as First Nation.

INTRODUCTION

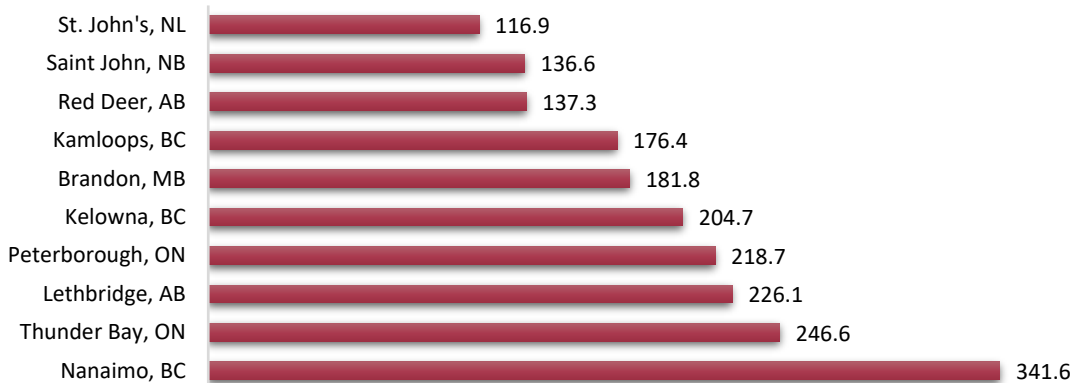


In this study, we explore factors influencing Nanaimo's homelessness crisis to try and better understand why our city appears to be more heavily impacted than most, if not all, other Canadian cities. This report will also act as a benchmark so changes in homelessness may be tracked over time.

NANAIMO IN CRISIS

When comparing the selected communities in this study, Nanaimo appears to have the highest rate of homelessness per capita. Not only that, but we'll show that Nanaimo is first in many other indicators that threaten the housing security of those at risk of homelessness. Among the communities in our study Nanaimo has the highest percentage of individuals experiencing homelessness who have no access to shelter of any kind.

Homelessness per 100,000
2018 Point-in-Time Count



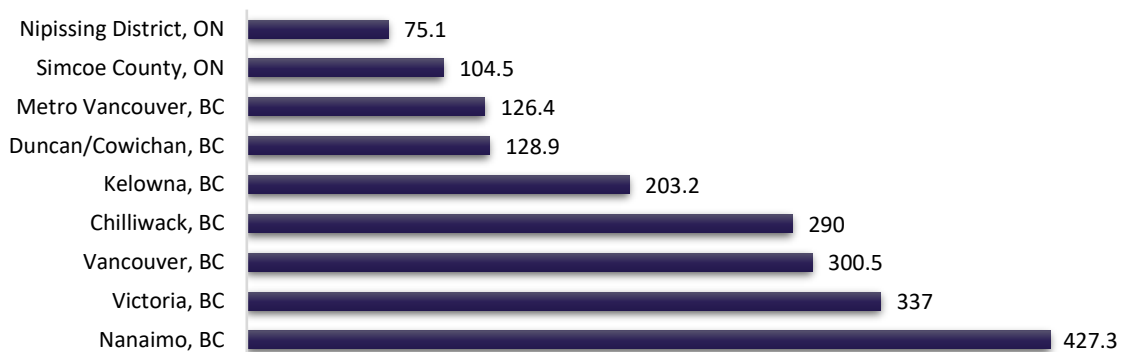
■ Homelessness per 100,000 - 2018 Point-in-Time Count Enumeration

DATA COLLECTION

The bi-annual Point-in-Time Count is currently the only community wide mechanism that provides data on Nanaimo's homelessness profile. In this report, we suggest that other community wide data, like average income and core housing need, can provide a solid basis for comparing Nanaimo's overall homelessness situation with other communities, when combined with PIT Count data.

Our report focuses on cities with a population of 100,000 and data gathered from 2018 the Point-in Counts (PiT Counts). Data from the few communities able to conduct PiT Counts in 2020 (many delayed due to COVID-19) also supports the thesis that Nanaimo has one of the worst homelessness problems of communities of any size in Canada.

Homelessness per 100,000 2020 Pit Count



■ Homelessness per 100,000 - 2020 Point-in-Time Count Enumeration

In this study we explore factors influencing Nanaimo's homelessness struggle to try and understand why our city appears to be more heavily impacted than most, if not, all other Canadian cities. This report will also benchmark where Nanaimo is now, so we may track changes in the affordable housing and homelessness crisis over time.

We see this report as the start of a conversation and recommend that future resources be devoted to refine the methods of data collection as a basis for longitudinal analysis on homelessness in Nanaimo. While affordable housing and

homelessness is a nation-wide crisis, in Nanaimo a specific combination of factors has created a perfect storm of housing insecurity. The data we've used is drawn from reliable and easily accessible data sources, like Statistics Canada Census tables. Whatever deficiencies there are in the Census data; it usually forms the basis of most federal and provincial policy discussions.

Our primary goal is to outline the shape of the problem as a basis for our community to seek solutions.

LOCAL ACTION



Our purpose is not to single Nanaimo out for criticism. While Nanaimo is representative of a national housing and homelessness crisis, it's also ideally situated to lead the way in finding solutions.

One goal of this comprehensive study is to provide useful context and support for funders, agencies, and governments, to determine Nanaimo's need for resources to address homelessness. As such, it provides support for responding to homelessness *locally*. It's interesting to note that little attention has been paid in policy and research to the relative size of communities in comparison to their rates and patterns of homelessness. We suggest that it will be valuable to conduct further research to analyse population size and how it impacts the numbers and patterns of homelessness.

NANAIMO'S HEALTH AND HOUSING ACTION PLAN

In 2021, the City of Nanaimo-led Health and Housing Task Force undertook a year of systems mapping and public engagement work to form Nanaimo's Health and Housing Action Plan, a five-year plan to address Nanaimo's crisis.¹ Work is underway to implement the actions outlined in this plan.

COORDINATED ACCESS SYSTEMS

As a Designated Community funded through the Government of Canada's Reaching Home: Canada's Homelessness Strategy, Nanaimo is required to develop Integrated Coordinated Access Systems (CAS). The goal of CAS is to streamline processes, making it more efficient to connect vulnerable populations to the available supports. Through a Registry Week, Nanaimo will complete its first By-Name List which will provide real-time data on Nanaimo's homeless and at-risk populations. The collaborative design and implementation of these local interventions will provide solutions to support and house the most vulnerable in our community. Our report provides a basis for supporting these solutions and recommends innovations such as a nation-wide collaboration with medium-sized cities.

Although this report focuses on analysing trends and patterns in data, we must acknowledge that behind these figures lies the reality that members of our communities are living in dire and inhumane conditions. Homelessness has been at 'pandemic' levels long before COVID-19 arrived. We hope that this research will contribute to transforming this local and national travesty.

¹ Turner Strategies (2021). [Nanaimo Health and Housing Action Plan: Building Our Path Forward](#)



COMPARING NANAIMO TO 10 CANADIAN CITIES OF SIMILAR POPULATION

NANAIMO RANKS FIRST

- Per Capita Homelessness
- Per Capita Unsheltered Homelessness
- Lowest Rental Vacancy Rates (in 2020)
- Percentage of Increase in Average Rents 2015-2020
- Percentage of Lone Parent Renters in Core Housing Need
- Percentage of Female Lone Parent Renters in Core Housing

NANAIMO RANKS SECOND & THIRD

- Percentage of All Households in Core Housing Need
- Percentage of Renter Households in Core Housing Need
- Percentage of Indigenous Renters in Core Housing Need
- Population Growth (2016 to 2020)
- Average Rent 2015 -2020
- Average Rent Increase Absolute Dollars 2015 – 2020

WHERE DOES NANAIMO STAND?

When we began this research, we hypothesised that compared to other municipalities, Nanaimo had an inordinately high per capita of individuals experiencing homelessness. It seemed likely that other indicators (like high rental rates and low vacancy rates) would show context where the risk of homelessness was also comparatively very high. Our hypothesis is entirely supported by the data and our analysis. The discussion that follows provides evidence.

INDIGENOUS POPULATIONS

Per the left-hand column, Nanaimo ranks first in a number of categories. The one measure where Nanaimo does not rank as highly as other municipalities is the rate of Indigenous homelessness. However, as Nanaimo's 2018 and 2020 PiT Counts show, one-third of survey respondents (not the enumeration total) identified as Indigenous, Metis, or First Nations, yet they constitute only 7% to 8 % of Nanaimo's population.

The over-representation of Indigenous populations in data on homelessness is well documented. For example, the summary findings combining data from over 60 PiT Counts from 2018 found that nearly one third (30%) of all respondents identified as Indigenous, with the majority identifying as First Nations². In contrast, approximately 5% of the Canadian population identified as Indigenous in the 2016 census.

The degree of over-representation of Indigenous populations in homelessness data can be quantified in a 'Racial Disproportionality Index' and provides one way of illustrating the depth of the problem.

For example, in the Vancouver 2020 Point-in-Time Count:

When compared to what their presence in the general population would predict, Indigenous people are 13.2 times (in Vancouver) more likely to experience homelessness.³

² [Everyone Counts 2018: Highlights: Preliminary results from the second nationally coordinated Point-in-Time count of homelessness in Canadian communities](#)

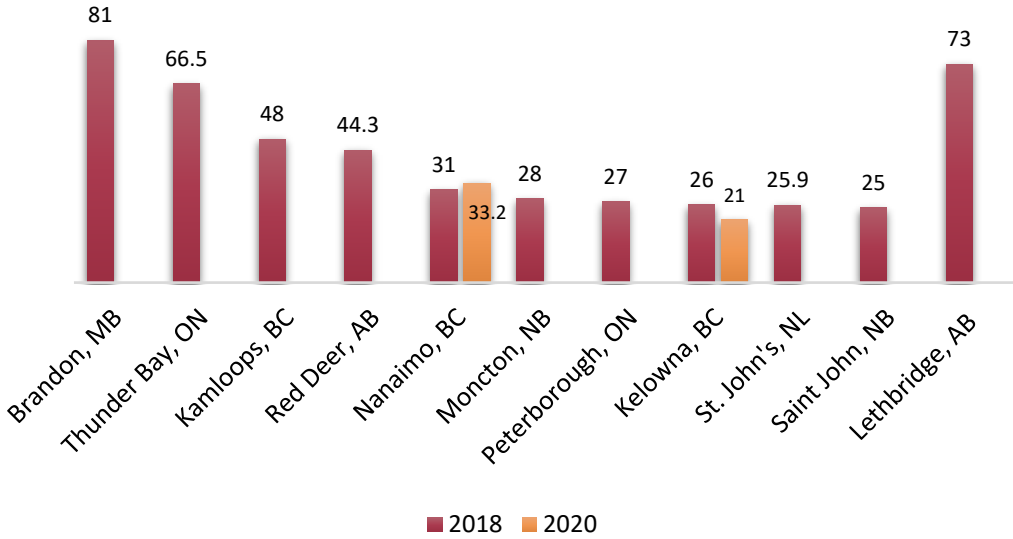
The disproportionate rates of Indigenous homelessness is evident in communities across Canada, as shown in the chart below. In many communities, homelessness is almost entirely Indigenous homelessness. This is most starkly represented in our study by the rates of Indigenous homelessness in Brandon, MB (81%), Lethbridge, AB (73%) and Thunder Bay, ON (66.5%).

Jesse Thistle (2017) has eloquently articulated that homelessness for Indigenous people is complex, multifactorial, and is shaped by the ongoing effects of colonialism and systemic racism and as such needs to be understood and responded to differently than non-Indigenous homelessness.

While the rate of Indigenous homelessness in Nanaimo is relatively 'low' among our comparison group, it is still disproportionately high compared to non-Indigenous homelessness.

Addressing Indigenous homelessness will require a nuanced and deep political commitment by all levels of Canadian government, working government-to-government and nation-to-nation.

% of PiT Count respondents who identified as Indigenous



³ This was determined using a Racial Disproportionality Index calculation. See page 58 of the [2020 Homeless Count in Metro Vancouver](#)

COMPARISON CITIES - “DESIGNATED CITIES”

All of the municipalities chosen as comparison cities for this study are ‘Designated Communities’ under the Government of Canada’s Reaching Home: Canada’s Homelessness Strategy ⁴ - a community-based program aimed at preventing and reducing homelessness across Canada. This program provides funding to urban, Indigenous, rural and remote communities to help them address their local homelessness needs.

Comparison Cities Population and Growth Estimates (Statistics Canada) ⁵					
	2016 Adjusted for Under coverage	2018	2020	2016-2020 Estimated Growth	2016-2020 Estimated Growth %
Nanaimo, BC	94,278	98,070	101,336	7,058	7.5
Kamloops, BC	94,276	98,659	101,198	6,922	7.3
Kelowna, BC	133,579	139,727	146,127	12,548	9.4
Lethbridge, AB	95,522	98,645	101,324	5,802	6.1
Red Deer, AB	103,314	104,882	106,736	3,422	3.3
Brandon, MB	50,444	52,258	53,734	3,290	6.5
Thunder Bay, ON	111,089	111,929	112,602	1,513	1.4
Peterborough, ON	83,216	85,954	86,736	3,520	4.2
Moncton, NB	73,872	75,675	79,508	5,636	7.6
Saint John, NB	69,117	70,259	71,364	2,247	3.3
St. John’s, NL	111,467	111,161	111,663	196	0.18

One of the key sources of data that we consulted was the Reaching Home Point-in-Time (PiT) Homelessness Counts⁶. The data gathered from the selected PiT Counts provides a sound basis for comparison because Designated Communities have used the same guidelines to conduct PiT Count ‘Enumerations’ starting in 2016 (See Appendix A)

However, each community does implement the PiT Count guidelines in a slightly different fashion. For example, there is a standard set of questions that Reaching Home requires communities to use, but how the data is collected varies considerably. Some communities may only choose to complete PiT counts in their shelter system, while others may make concerted efforts to reach those experiencing hidden homelessness and/or unsheltered homelessness.

⁴ Government of Canada’s Reaching Home: Canada’s Homelessness Strategy Directives.

⁵ Statistics Canada. Table 17-10-0142-01 Population estimates, July 1, by census subdivision, 2016 boundaries.

⁶ Guide to Point-in-Time Counts in Canada: 3rd Edition.

DATA COLLECTION IMPACT

The variation in approaches can have a serious impact on the data. Something as simple as time of year the Point-in-Time Count (PiT Count) is conducted can have an impact (i.e., a PiT Count conducted on a rainy night in March can yield different results than a count conducted on a beautiful day in June).

Communities that chose to combine their PiT Count with a Registry Week may yield better quality data in that coverage efforts are prioritized. Increases or unexpected variance in homelessness numbers can be real – but they can also be about improvements made to the methodology over time.⁷

A review of the available PiT Count reports showed that all communities in our study employed largely the same methods to gather their PiT Count data, apart from Thunder Bay, ON. All other communities had magnet events, extensive street and encampment surveys, extensive shelter outreach, and held their counts in March or April. Thunder Bay is the only community in our study that conducted a Registry Week at the same time as its PiT Count (This may account for the high number of ‘hidden homeless’ included in their data).

In this report we were primarily comparing only the total enumeration figures which are based on answers to required Reaching Home questions. Therefore, we argue, the figures captured by the community Enumerations are valid for comparison, despite variations, because they are based on an adequately consistent approach to data collection.

We’ve also used other sources of data including Statistics Canada (StatsCan) data on population estimates; Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) data on Core Housing Need, Average Rents and Vacancy rates.

**Nanaimo
appears to
unequivocally
have the most
severe needs
for affordable
housing and
homelessness.**

⁷ Thanks to Randalin Ellery (Director: Data Impact & Policy) at the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness for pointing out the need to identify the limitations and variations of PiT Count methodology and the resulting impacts on data.

METHODS

Our approach was to use data sources that were as up to date as possible or gathered by the same methodology and or the same organization. For example, we use the 2016 Census data for our population estimates, but we also used the same source's *projected estimates* for 2018 and 2020 figures. Most municipalities cite many sources for their population data, but these tend to be derived by a variety of different and inconsistent methods. For example, if the reader searches for population estimates for Nanaimo in 2018, they will find a wide range of figures (as we did in our search for a consistent and reliable source of data).

PiT Count enumerations are known to be an undercount of the homeless population as it is not possible to engage with every homeless person on any given day.

If there is any bias in the data or source in terms of supporting our thesis this bias would reside in the pre-existing data and not in our selection of sources. In other words, we did not select only the data sources that will support our thesis. However, based on the consistency of patterns evident in the data, Nanaimo appears to *unequivocally* have the most severe needs around housing and homelessness compared to the other ten communities in our study.

WHAT IS ENUMERATION?

UNDERSTANDING POINT-IN-TIME HOMELESS COUNT DATA

A Point-in-Time Homeless Count (PiT Count) is based on an 'Enumeration' which provides a minimum estimate of the numbers of people experiencing homelessness on a single day. PiT Count numbers are representative only of those reached by the PiT Count efforts, rather than reflective of all experiences of homelessness.

PiT Count homeless data only represents people staying in participating facilities and those who are approached and consent to participating in the survey. Therefore, PiT count enumerations are known to be an undercount of the homeless population as it is not possible to engage with every homeless person on any given day.

POINT-IN-TIME COUNT DATA

The Point-in-Time Count 'Enumeration' data come from two sources:

ADMINISTRATIVE DATA FROM SERVICE PROVIDERS: This includes only basic demographic data on individuals staying in emergency shelters (cold weather and Violence against women), transition houses, and 'systems' data, e.g., hospitals and corrections.

HOUSING NEEDS SURVEY: Survey respondents who indicated they were staying in public spaces, parks, vehicles, and other conditions unfit for human habitation. This means only those reached by the PiT Count efforts were "counted," which was neither a comprehensive, nor completely accurate count of all individuals who stayed in these specific types of living situations.

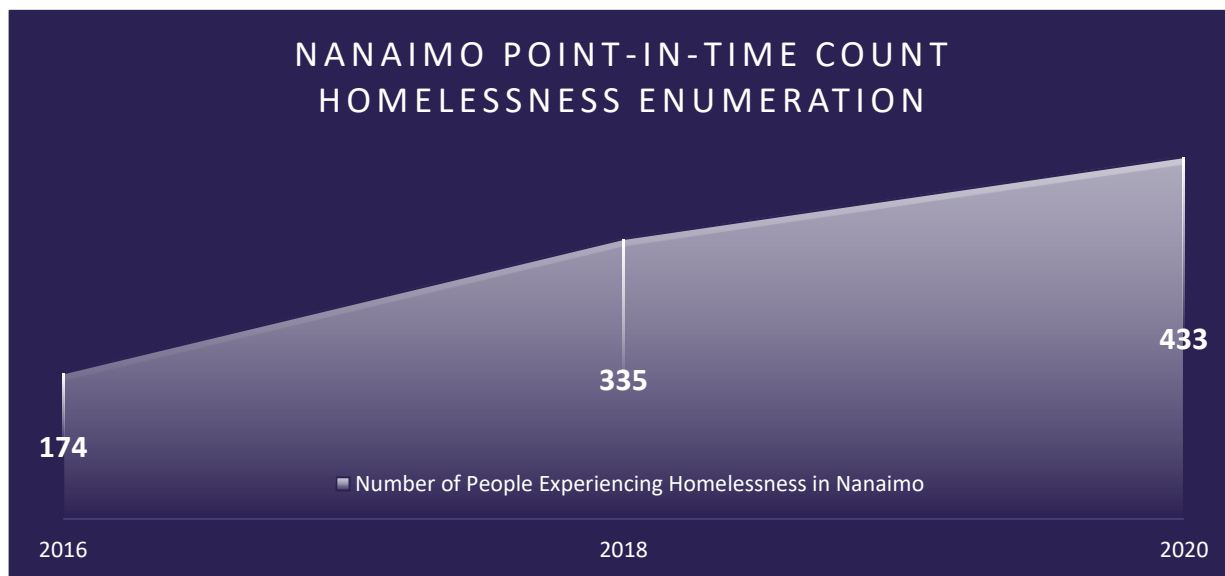
PiT Counts are based on a housing needs survey which is conducted throughout a community over one 24-hour period or 'Point-in-Time'. The housing needs surveys are done either the night of or the day after administrative data is gathered. *This means that some of the individuals surveyed were likely already 'enumerated'.* Thus, enumeration figures in PiT Count reporting are different from the number of survey respondents. Most of the discussion and analysis in PiT Count Reports are focussed on data gathered from the responses to surveys. The number of survey respondents is usually substantially fewer than the enumeration.

In the Reaching Home methodology, any respondent who indicates that they stayed in a sheltered situation is removed from the enumeration total as they have likely already been counted or 'enumerated' via administrative data gathered from various shelters and institutions. However, their survey responses are part of the broader database that describes the conditions of homelessness. As such, the enumeration total is based upon the administrative data totals added to the number of survey respondents who indicated they were facing homelessness, plus systems data and accompanying children (18 and under).

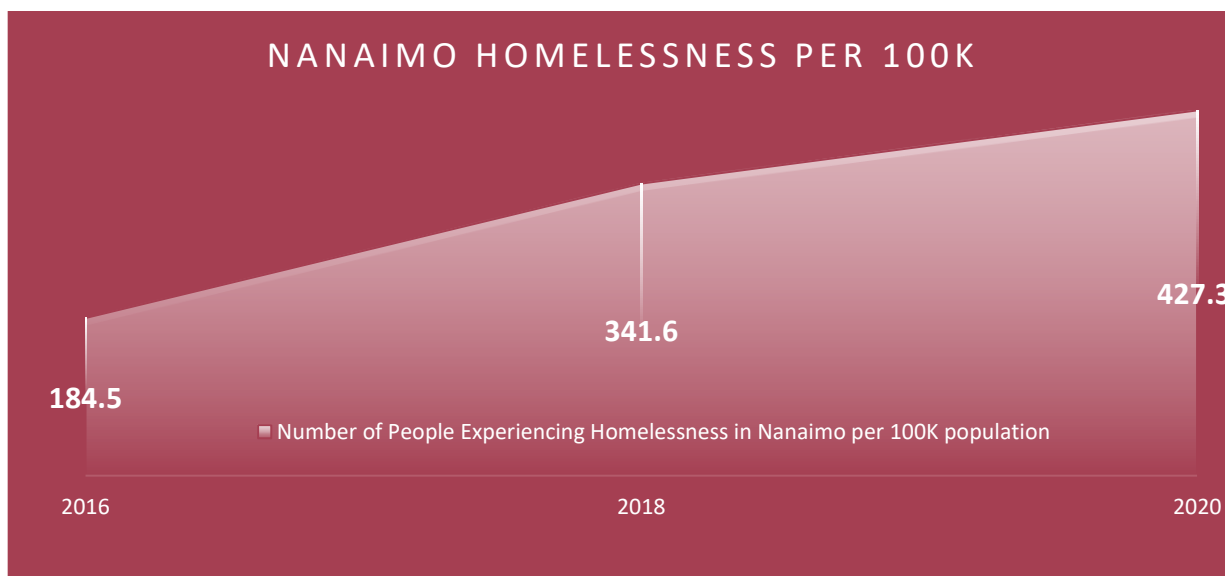
The enumeration total is not supposed to include the hidden homeless (though this is most definitely a type of homelessness), which we'll discuss later. Nonetheless, the survey responses of the 'hidden homeless' are often included in the analysis of the trends and patterns of those experiencing homelessness.

BIG CITY PROBLEMS IN MEDIUM-SIZED NANAIMO

In 2020, Nanaimo, BC had a population of 101,336. Based on the Nanaimo 2020 PiT Count, at least 433 individuals were experiencing homelessness. This number equates to 427.3 people per 100,000 population in Nanaimo who were experiencing homelessness. Throughout this report we use both absolute numbers and ratios to frame the analysis. As we can see from the graphs below, Nanaimo's homelessness was trending steeply upwards between 2016 and 2020.



Though not our primary focus, a comparison with the few communities able to conduct PiT Counts in 2020, shows Nanaimo's rate of homelessness is 427.3 per 100,000 population. *This figure is higher than both Victoria, BC (337) and Vancouver, BC (126.4) (See Appendix C).*

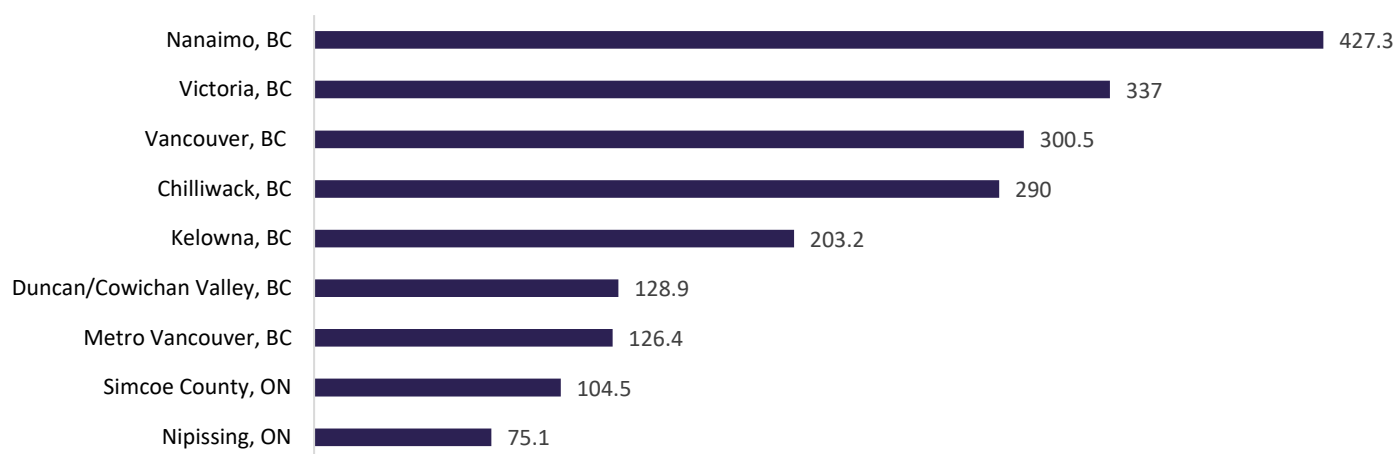


Vancouver and Victoria are large urban metropolitan centres, and the absolute numbers are staggering with over 3,500 homeless in Vancouver and approximately 1,500 in Victoria. Nanaimo is essentially a medium-sized, semi-urban city (by Canadian standards). It is unusual for a city the size of Nanaimo to have a ‘big city’ problem like high homelessness numbers.

Significantly, it appears that both Victoria and Vancouver are at least holding steady in their homelessness numbers between 2018 and 2020. However, Nanaimo has increased by 30% in the same time frame⁸ which is another indicator of the severity of the problem.

2020 Point-in-Time Homeless Count Results

Comparing rates per 100K population



■ Number of people experiencing homelessness per 100,000 population in communities that conducted the 2020 PiT Count

To make the scale of the problem in Nanaimo more obvious, let us assume that Metro Vancouver (population 2,737,698) had Nanaimo’s 2020 reported rate of homelessness of 427.3 per 100,000. If this were the case, in 2020 Metro Vancouver would have had *approximately 11,698 community members experiencing homelessness*. We arrive at this figure by dividing 2,737,698 by 100,000 which is 27.37698 and multiplying that by 427.3 (the rate of homelessness per 100,000 in Nanaimo).

This figure, 11,698, is *approximately three and a half times the current number* of people experiencing homelessness in Metro Vancouver⁹. Such a situation would likely (and rightly) be considered an unmitigated social and political disaster and call forth huge public outcry and governmental response.

⁸ The 2018 Calgary Reaching Home PiT Count (page 1) reported that 2,911 people were found to be experiencing homelessness on the night of April 11, 2018. This represents an 11% per-capita decrease from 2016 and a 32% per-capita decrease since 2008. And Calgary’s homelessness per 100,000, depending on the population estimate used, would be 233.6 (Civic Census Results- 1,246,337) or 222.1 (StatsCan Census Table (CY) Sub-Division 2018 estimate - 1,310,472). Whichever figure is employed is still a third less than Nanaimo in 2018. [See full report here.](#)

⁹ It might be argued that a more valid comparison would be between the City of Vancouver and the City of Nanaimo. The City of Vancouver as a subset of the Metro Vancouver PiT Count reported 2095 homeless in 2020 and a population estimated at 697,266. Therefore, The City of Vancouver’s rate of homelessness per 100,000 would equate to 300.5. This figure is still approximately 30% less than Nanaimo’s 2020 rate of 427.3. Nanaimo has on a per capita basis 30% more homelessness than the City of Vancouver. Though less dramatic than the figure of close to 12,000 cited above, this number would mean the City of Vancouver would have reported almost 3,000 (2979) homeless instead of just over 2,000 (2095) in 2020.

From these results and comparisons above, it is obvious that Nanaimo's rate of homelessness per capita is remarkably high.

However, large urban metropolitan cities are quantitatively and qualitatively different from medium-sized cities like Nanaimo. Therefore, as in this study, we suggest that it is more valid to compare Nanaimo to other cities of approximately the same population of 100,000. Most of the comparison cities in this report meet this threshold, except for the outlier of Brandon, MB (approximately 54,000 in 2020). We wanted to include a sample from as much of the country as possible and so decided to include Brandon. It matches Nanaimo on several other important criteria: a Reaching Home Designated Community; an important social and economic hub or centre in its region; Indigenous communities play an important role and there are high rates of Indigenous homelessness; it is also identified as one of the fastest-growing communities in Canada; and, it has a university that has a major impact locally.

Each city or community in our study has unique features that make comparisons difficult and which impact housing and homelessness in different ways, yet there are many basic and relevant similarities. For example, the relative amount of *Reaching Home* dollars that go to Designated Communities on a per capita basis are roughly the same, and the scale and complexity of local governments and social service provision would arguably be proportionately the same. Another issue that impacts homelessness that is not addressed in this study is climate; the communities in our study have widely divergent climates. A close analysis of the relationship between climate and patterns of homelessness would also seem worthy of further study. Let's consider two of the key factors contributing to Nanaimo's homelessness situation:

#1: Nanaimo's proximity to Victoria and Vancouver's inflated housing markets is having a major impact on the cost of housing in Nanaimo as investors and individuals seek better value for their dollar in areas close by.

In 2020, the average annual price of a new single-family home dropped by -9.1% in Greater Vancouver and by -5.9% in BC. The price for a similar new home increased by +11.6% in Nanaimo and +4.2% in Victoria. *Despite the drop in prices in Vancouver*, the same brand-new single family detached home in Nanaimo costs roughly one-third the price of Vancouver and less than three-quarters the price of Victoria.

#2: The Vancouver and Victoria housing markets are clearly impacting the cost of housing in Nanaimo, so much so that:

Nanaimo ranks in the top five most expensive housing markets in Canada, as well as one of the top 20 least-affordable cities for housing in the world.

- Turner Strategies

Nanaimo is considered a 'destination' location for retirees and tourists precisely because of its livability and temperate climate. Yet, this livability directly contributes to problems in housing and homelessness by creating pressure on the cost and availability of housing of all kinds. This combination of factors and their impacts on homelessness is not unique to Nanaimo. For example, Kelowna, BC, one of the comparison cities, has similar factors that impact its highly touted livability. Not surprisingly, Kelowna also has relatively high homeless numbers per capita, low vacancy rates and high average rents. It appears the specific factors we're analysing in our study also impact upon homelessness in other communities.

There are some other unique features of Nanaimo's geographical, social, and political situation that may contribute to its high homelessness numbers. Nanaimo's location as a transportation hub for Central and Northern Vancouver Island is key among these features. Nanaimo is also one of the main transport links between mainland British Columbia and the Island. In simple terms, a lot of people travel to and through Nanaimo on a year-round basis which increases the likelihood of people stopping in Nanaimo. Arguably the same could be said for Vancouver and Victoria, both of which are also transport hubs and important social, political, and economic hubs in their regions. And not surprisingly they have high rates of homelessness.

There is a public mythology that homeless individuals come to Nanaimo for the weather and or access to social services. This has been reported by social service staff in Victoria and Vancouver, however, data from PIT Counts does not show that homeless individuals migrate en masse to larger, urban, or socio-economic centres. There is some evidence from discussions with homeless serving organizations that Nanaimo is a central point of an *Island wide* movement or circulation of vulnerable populations, however, the dynamics of this movement are not well understood. A fuller analysis of the reasons Nanaimo has the amount and type of homelessness it does warrants further investigation, but is beyond the scope of this study.

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON PIT COUNTS

Due to COVID-19 restrictions, most Reaching Home communities were unable to conduct their PiT Counts in 2020. Nanaimo completed theirs on March 12, 2020, a few days before COVID-19 restrictions in BC were initiated. Nanaimo's data on was collected during the pre-lockdown pandemic order. Most Canadian communities do not possess this data, however, it is the case that some other PiT Counts in BC were conducted using a different (though largely similar) Province of BC determined methodology.¹⁰



This high ratio of homelessness and individuals at risk (approximately 8% in total) has put overwhelming pressure on housing supports and service provision in Nanaimo. It points to an urgent need for expanded service provision and funding and building more housing options (even as some initiatives have recently been announced by the BC government.)

Furthermore, Nanaimo is experiencing sustained population growth. Between 2017 and 2041 the Nanaimo region is expected to grow by (at least) an additional 30,000 people¹¹, all of whom will need to be housed. This factor alone will continue to increase pressure on the housing supply and support systems in Nanaimo. Frontline staff from across Canada report that COVID-19 has impacted those experiencing homelessness quite directly, unfortunately, there is limited systematic research-based evidence to support this claim, although more is emerging as we move further along the pandemic continuum. However, it has been demonstrated that those experiencing homelessness are more susceptible and impacted more significantly by public outbreaks of disease.¹²

¹⁰ In the spring of 2020, the Province of British Columbia provided funding to conduct homeless counts in 16 B.C. communities. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, only 8 of the 16 communities were able to conduct their counts. They completed their counts before March 17, 2020, when British Columbia's Provincial Health Officer declared a public health emergency under British Columbia's Public Health Act.

¹¹ *BC Stats* population estimates. [Access Data](#)

¹² Page 2, Ontario Agency for Health Protection and Promotion (Public Health Ontario), Berenbaum E. *Evidence Brief: homelessness and health outcomes: what are the associations?* Toronto, ON: Queen's Printer for Ontario, 2019. [Access full report.](#)

HIDDEN HOMELESSNESS

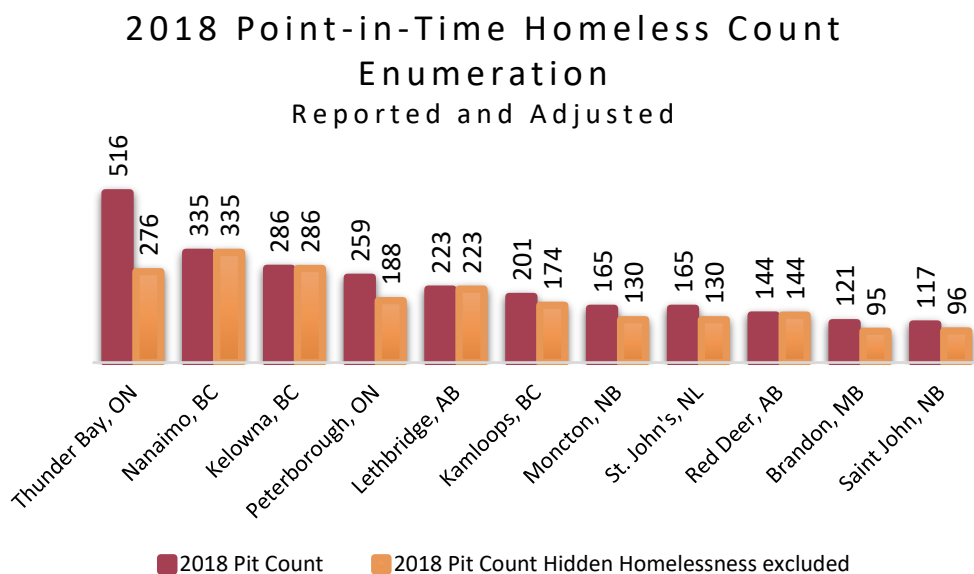
COMPARING LIKE WITH LIKE

It is stated in the guidance for Reaching Home PiT Counts (3rd Edition) that hidden homelessness should not be enumerated. However, it is suggested by Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC), the agency that oversees federally funded PiT Counts, that municipalities could *survey* this population as this data can provide insight on experiences of homelessness:

People staying with others, sleeping in their vehicle, or staying in a motel because they are unable to secure a place of their own are referred to as the ‘hidden homeless’.

PiT Counts are unable to enumerate hidden homelessness because the people experiencing it are unlikely to be found in count locations like shelters. There is no means to determine how many individuals were not counted. Nevertheless, you may consider conducting the survey with those experiencing hidden homelessness to better understand their needs¹³. Several municipalities have included hidden homelessness in their PiT Count enumerations.

In this report, we have removed hidden homelessness from the PiT Count Enumeration totals for two reasons. One, as shown above, ESDC recommends this as the correct approach, and two, because Nanaimo PiT Counts have *not* included hidden homelessness in their 2018 or 2020 Enumerations.

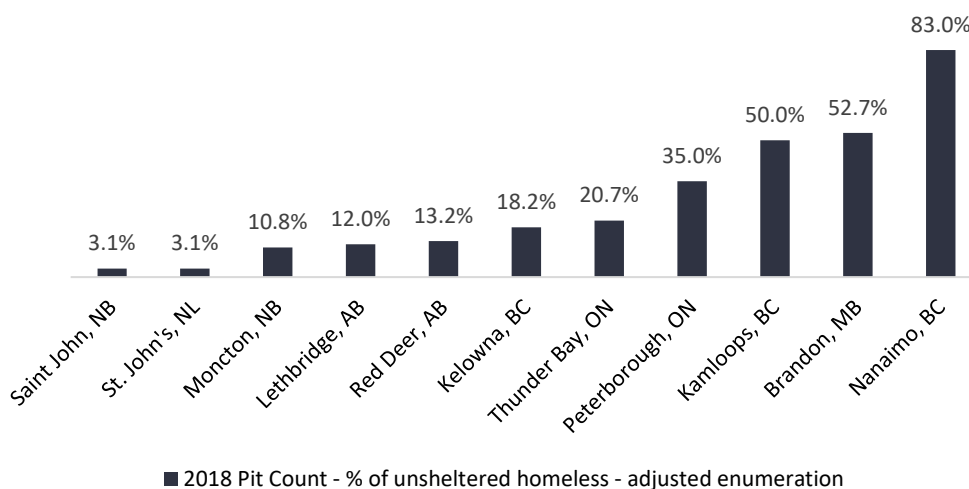


¹³ Employment and Social Development Canada (2021) [Everyone Counts: A guide to Point-in-Time Counts in Canada \(Edition 3.1\)](#).

We have adjusted all reported figures from PiT Counts in other municipalities to exclude data on hidden homelessness. Not that hidden homelessness is unimportant, but our approach makes us more able to compare like with like. The impact of this adjustment can be significant. For example, Thunder Bay's 2018 PiT Count enumeration is reported as 516 but this figure includes 240 identified as 'couch surfing' or hidden homeless. For our purposes, we subtracted 240 from 516 and the adjusted enumeration total for Thunder Bay is 276. The chart above, *2018 PiT Count Enumeration*, shows both reported and adjusted 2018 PiT Count Enumeration figures (See [Appendix B](#) for a full breakdown of the data) and have *not* included hidden homelessness in their 2018 or 2020 enumerations.

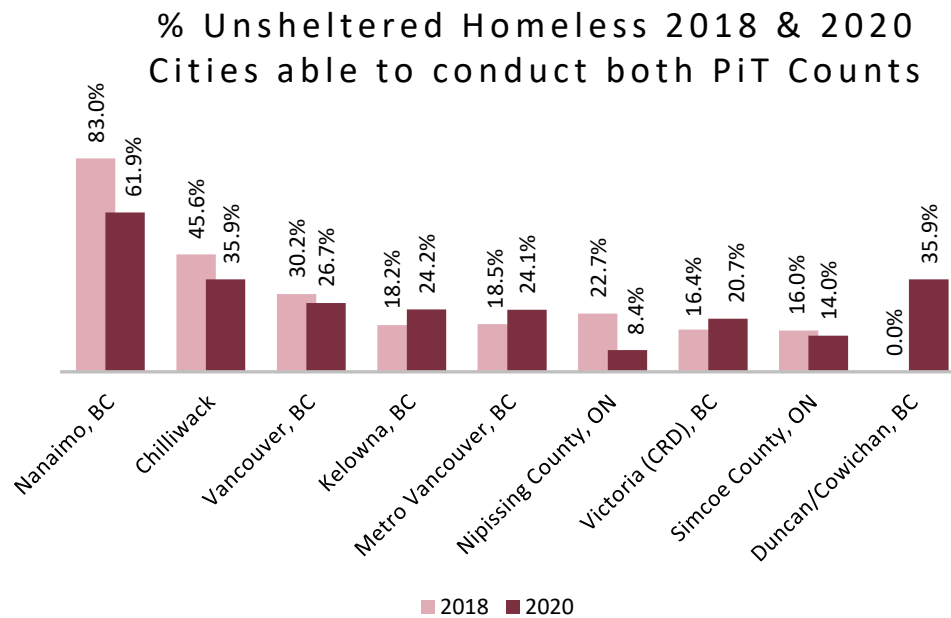
Nanaimo's 2018 PiT Count identified that 83% of those enumerated (278/335) were unsheltered, that is, staying in places unfit for human habitation - often called 'sleeping rough' - which can include sleeping in parks, under bridges, in the woods, and or abandoned buildings or in vehicles. Even though Kamloops reports a high percentage of unsheltered homelessness, the absolute number, 87, is substantially lower than Nanaimo's 278.

2018 PiT Count Adjusted Enumeration % Unsheltered Homeless



Comparatively, the 2018 PiT Count enumerations in Kelowna and Kamloops reported that 18% and 50% respectively were unsheltered (staying in habitation unfit for humans). Some municipalities in colder climates, like Moncton and St John's (Nfld.) report very low percentages of those enumerated as unsheltered, at 10.8 and 3.1 % respectively.

In the 2020 Nanaimo enumeration the percentage of unsheltered homelessness drops to 61.9% but the absolute numbers of unsheltered individuals (268 of 433) remained essentially the same as 2018 (see Appendix C for Detail of 2020 PiT Count Data).



As this chart shows, Nanaimo has a higher percentage of unsheltered homelessness compared to our larger neighbours of Victoria and Vancouver. It is worth highlighting that Victoria (CRD), with a population over four times the size, reported about the same number of unsheltered homeless (285) as Nanaimo (268) in 2020. Based on this observation it appears as though Nanaimo has a severe shortage of emergency and other shelter spaces both in absolute and relative terms.

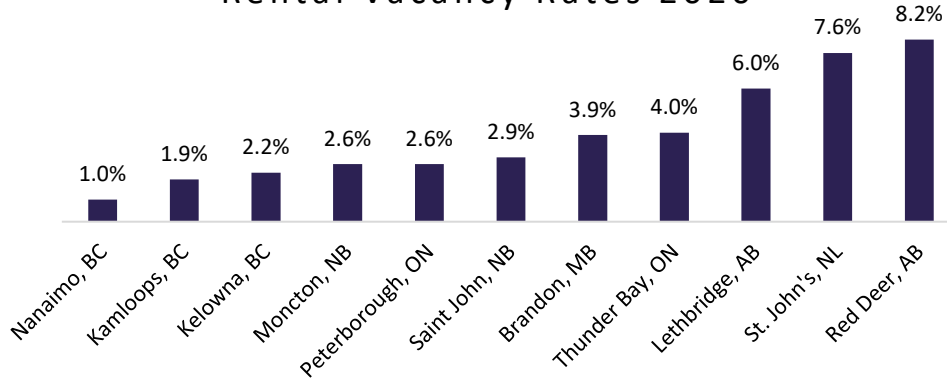
Nanaimo continues to have by far the highest proportion of unsheltered homelessness, perhaps, in the entire country.

The lack of substantial improvement in unsheltered homelessness occurred even though Nanaimo added 50-70 emergency shelter spaces between 2018 and 2020. This stagnation occurred despite BC Housing’s provision of temporary emergency supportive housing for 160 individuals in response to the ‘Tent City’ (homelessness encampment), during the same period. There are many supportive housing units and scattered site housing in Nanaimo funded by various levels of government. However, we are concerned in this report with the most vulnerable populations who are chronically homeless, most for many years on end. It is vital that we build housing and fund supports for our most vulnerable populations, but this alone will not solve Nanaimo’s housing and homelessness crisis: Given that there is a continuum of housing need it must be addressed with a continuum of solutions.

REALLY LOW & REALLY HIGH VACANCY RATES & AVERAGE RENT

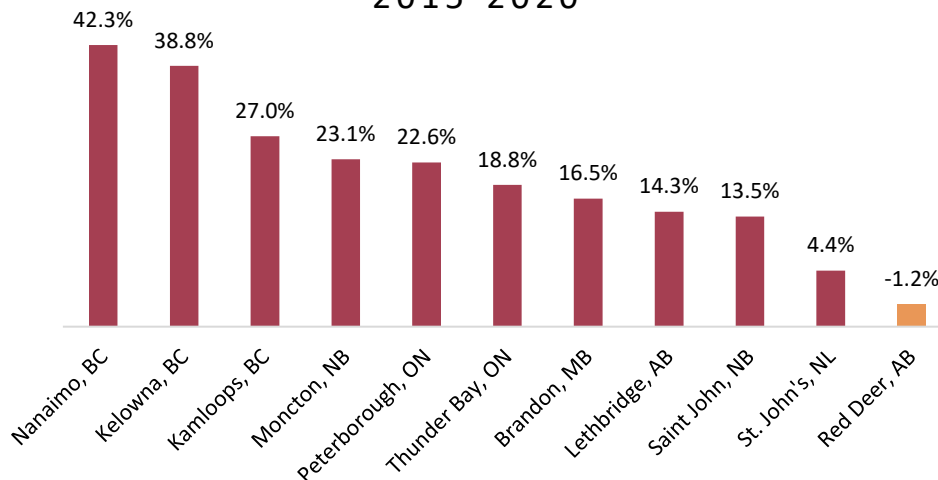
It is clear from the data on vacancy rates and rent, drawn from the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC), that rental rates across Canada have largely been escalating, and arguably, at unsustainable rates ([See Appendix D](#)).

Rental Vacancy Rates 2020



The ongoing escalation in average rent does not in any way match raises in wages and or social assistance benefits. Without a major recalibration of social assistance rates and/or some constraints on rents, the situation will continue to worsen. From this data set, it is also clear that communities in BC have the most severe rental problems for Canadian communities of this size (and perhaps of any size).

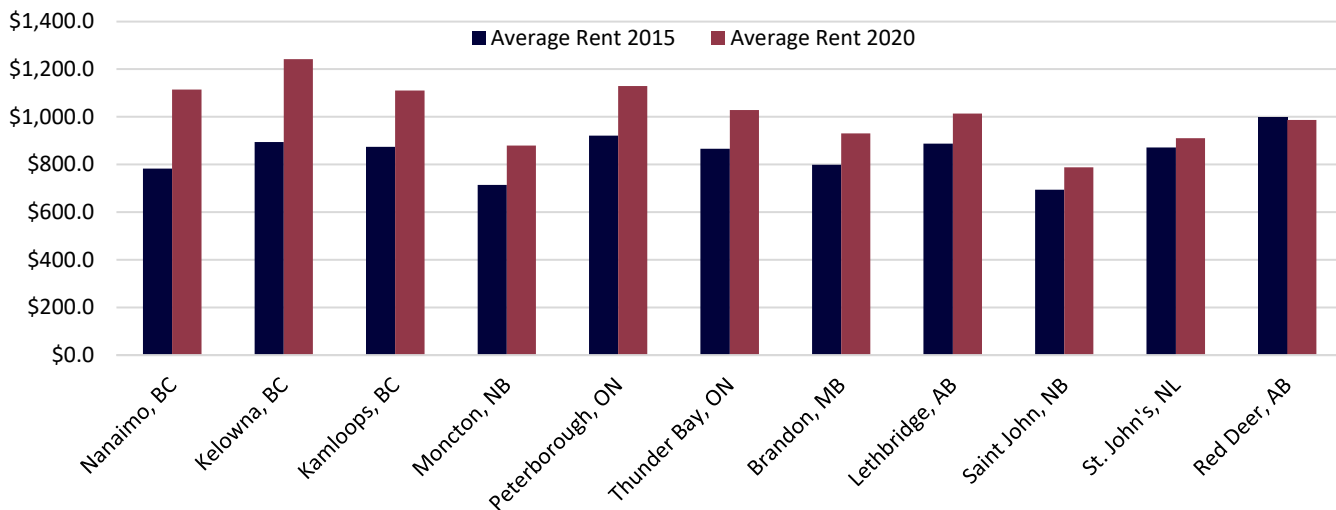
% Average Rental Rate Increase
2015-2020



Nanaimo and Kelowna are both showing about a 40% increase in average rents in the reporting period and these rents are likely not considered affordable to anyone with barriers to housing. High rental rates are a direct cause of housing instability for those at risk of homelessness. High rents and low income are the most often cited reasons for lack of access to housing in PiT Counts across Canada.

As we can see below, Nanaimo also has one of the highest percentages of renters in ‘Core Housing Need’ which is driven by, among other factors, inflated rental rates. High rental rates are, in fact, part of a nationwide crisis in housing accessibility and affordability.

Average Rent Absolute Dollars 2015 vs 2020



The combination of exceedingly low rental vacancy rates and average high rent is creating more and more housing instability across the continuum of housing in Nanaimo, and the impact of the pandemic is not easing the situation. According to the City of Nanaimo’s (2021) annual State of the Economy report:

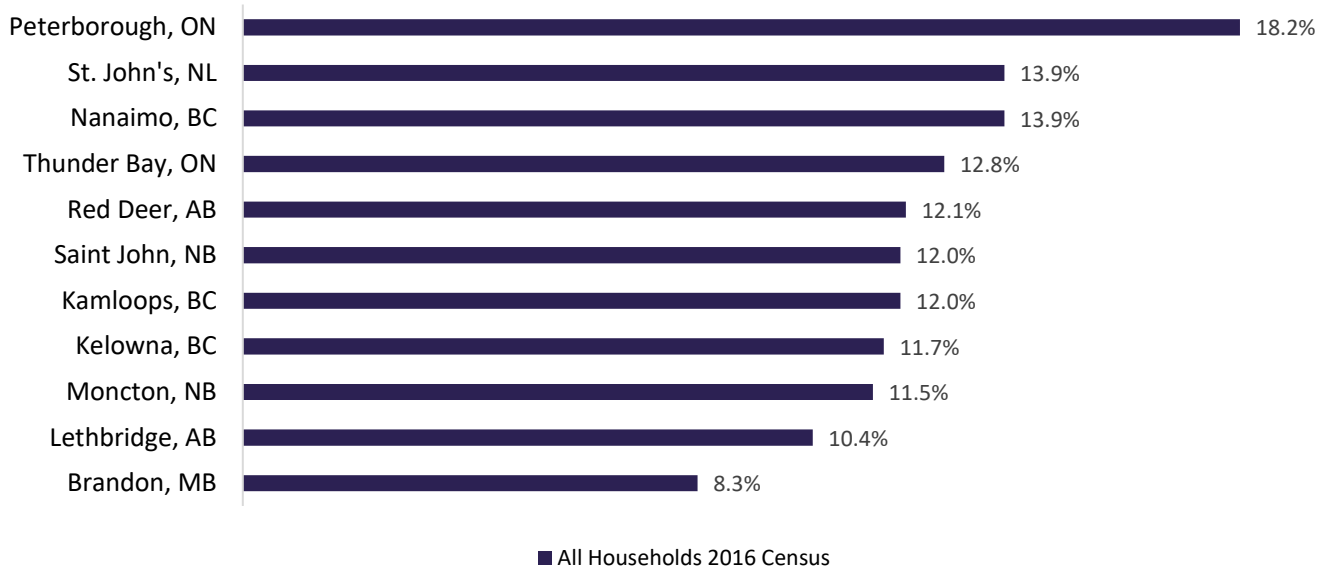
- Overall average rent in Nanaimo increased by 7% and vacancy dropped from 2% to 1%.
- The number of units in supply increased by 154, representing a 4% increase year-over-year.
- Vacancy rates in Victoria increased from 1% to 2.2% and in Vancouver from 1.1% to 2.6%.
- The supply of units in Victoria increased by 5.3% and in Vancouver by 2.2%.
- Average rent for a two-bedroom apartment in Nanaimo increased by 8.6%, in Greater Victoria by 4.1% and Greater Vancouver by 2.5%.

In part, it is likely that vacancy rates were driven down by a Provincial order preventing landlords from evicting tenants, and a temporary freeze on rental increases to the end of 2021. For most communities in BC, the end of these policies will likely result in increased evictions, increased rents, increased housing instability and increased homelessness. Due to the unique set of factors driving Nanaimo’s housing and homelessness problems, the impact could be much more acute. As Falvo (2021) has pointed out, evictions are one factor to assess and mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on housing and homelessness.

CORE HOUSING NEED

A household is said to be in 'core housing need'¹⁴¹⁵ if its housing falls below at least one of the adequacy, affordability, or suitability standards, and it would have to spend 30% or more of its total before-tax income to pay the median rent of alternative local housing that is acceptable. To gain a deeper insight into core housing need it is useful to cross-reference it with income distribution (see [Appendix E](#) for Core Housing Data Table).

% of all Households in Core Need by City



CITY OF NANAIMO STATE OF THE ECONOMY 2021

The largest number of households in Nanaimo (8,574 or 21%) report household income between \$20,000 and \$39,999 per annum.

The second largest number of households (6,651 or 16%) report household income of \$40,000 to \$60,000 per annum.

14,125 households (34%) report annual income over \$100,000 per annum.

2,990 households (7%) earned over \$200,000 and 852 households (2%) earned over \$300,000 per annum.

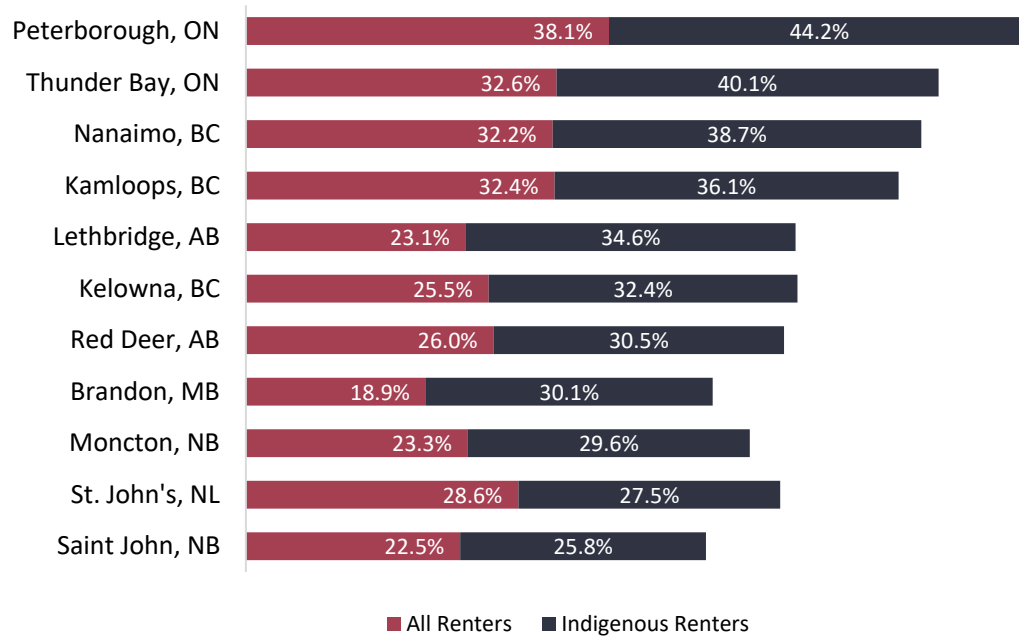
¹⁴Statistics Canada. 2017. [Income Highlight Tables, 2016 Census](#).

¹⁵ Statistics Canada (2017), [Dictionary Census Population 2016: Core Housing Need](#)

Housing insecurity is a deeply racialized and gendered issue.

Nanaimo clearly has wide gaps in the structure of its income distribution. In other words, there are a lot of people in Nanaimo with very comfortable (for lack of a better term) levels of income, with relatively few at the next level, followed by a large, combined group of low and very low incomes. The gaps in income distribution directly reflect the structure of core housing need and housing instability in Nanaimo, especially for renters.

% Renters in Core Housing Need



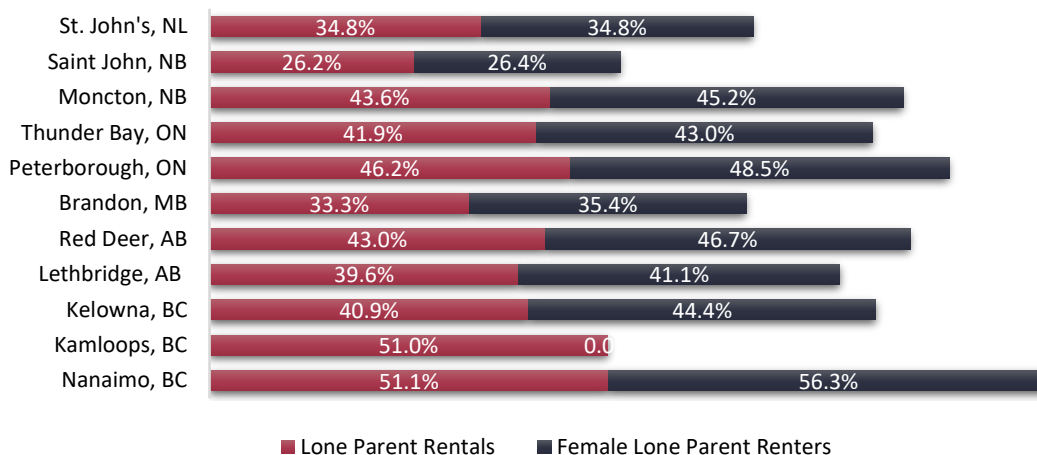
Core housing need is also a nationwide crisis. Based on a 2018 Statistics Canada study 23% of all renters nation-wide were found to be in core housing need.¹⁶

As of 2016, most of the communities in our study, including Nanaimo, were above this level. The 2016 data shows that over 38% of Nanaimo's renters were above this level which places it second highest in this regard in our comparison group. Given that the housing crisis has deepened since 2016 it's likely the percentage of Nanaimo renters in core housing need has increased. As we can see from the data, housing insecurity is also a deeply racialized and gendered phenomenon as renters who are Indigenous or lone female renters face very high degrees of core housing need.

¹⁶ One in ten Canadian households living in core housing need in 2018. [Accessed Data.](#)

This finding points to the need to prioritize women with children and indigenous individuals for housing supports but also to prioritize the creation of housing that can accommodate families. A recent report on Nanaimo’s Affordable Housing Strategy¹⁷ showed that there are very few rental apartments being built with three or more bedrooms which are the types of housing that would best suit families. The lack of appropriate housing for low income or at-risk families is also identified in PIT Count reports across Canada.

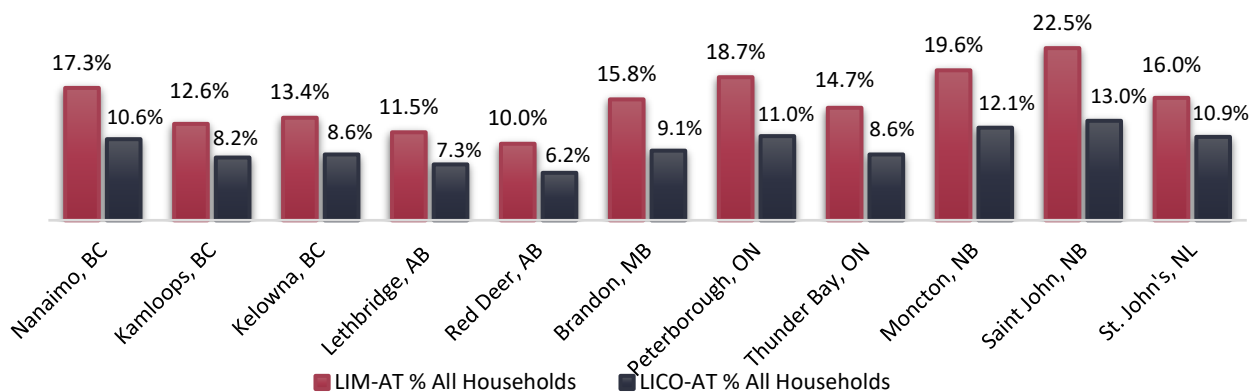
% of Lone Parents in Core Housing Need



In terms of the percentage of its households below Low-Income Measure after Tax (LIM-AT)¹⁸ Nanaimo ranks fourth and fifth for Low Income Cut-offs after Tax (LICO-AT)¹⁹. The extraordinarily tough housing and rental market combined with the relatively high percentage of households below Low-Income Measures is a further exacerbating factor in Nanaimo’s homelessness crisis.²⁰

% of All Households

Low Income Measure after Tax (Lim-AT) & Low Income Cut-offs after Tax (LICO-AT)



¹⁷ Affordable Housing Strategy 2020 Annual Update Information Report Governance and Priorities Committee 2021-APR-26. [Access Report.](#)

¹⁸ Low-income measure after tax (LIM-AT) In simple terms, the Low-income measure after tax (LIM-AT) is a fixed percentage (50%) of median adjusted after-tax income of households observed at the person level, where 'adjusted' indicates that a household's needs are considered. Adjustment for household sizes reflects the fact that a household's needs increase as the number of members increase, although not necessarily by the same proportion per additional member. [Access Report.](#)

¹⁹ What are LICOS? The low-income cut-offs (LICO) are income thresholds below which a family will likely devote a larger share of its income on the necessities of food, shelter, and clothing than the average family. The approach is essentially to estimate an income threshold at which families are expected to spend 20 percentage points more than the average family on food, shelter, and clothing. [Access Report.](#)

²⁰ [Statistics Canada. 2017. Income Highlight Tables, 2016 Census](#)

CONCLUSION



The combination of high ‘livability’ factors, high property values, high rents, low vacancy rates, low availability of and expensive rental housing stock, high core housing need and large numbers of households with low and very low incomes has created a perfect storm of housing insecurity in Nanaimo, BC.

In comparison to communities of its size, Nanaimo has the highest rates of homelessness and a comprehensive range of factors working, in an unfortunately harmonious fashion, to produce these high numbers. A necessary step to finding solutions is gaining some insight into the factors driving these problems, and fully and openly acknowledging where we are at.

Responses to system-wide problems like homelessness, prevention and intervention need to work together, because as Fowler, Hovmand, Marcal and Das (2019) point out:

To drain a tub, the volume of water from the tap must be less than the volume of outflow after pulling the stopper. Thus, the tub will never completely empty after opening the drain without also closing the tap. Likewise, closing the tap will not reduce water levels if the drain remains blocked. As anyone who has dealt with an overflowing toilet knows, the complexity can trigger poorly timed and counter-productive reactions.

**Communities
the size of
Nanaimo
have unique
strengths
and
capabilities
to enable
solutions.**

GOVERNMENT INVESTMENTS

It has been reported in local media that the BC government spent more than \$126 million in the past fiscal year trying to house those sheltering in Greater Victoria parks and approximately another \$250 million in Metro Vancouver (Shaw, 2021). It's unclear how many of these dollars are new investments and which are previously committed, but the report indicates these are primarily new dollars. These are much needed and important investments that will make a major impact on homelessness in these communities in the short and long term.

Nanaimo's population, as stated earlier, is about one-quarter the size of Greater Victoria. Therefore, a reasonable estimate for new investment that Nanaimo should have been granted in fiscal 2020-21 or 2021-22 would be about \$31.5 million (or one-quarter of \$126 million). It is unclear that Nanaimo will or has received this amount of funding for housing and homelessness for either period. While money will not solve all of Nanaimo's homelessness problems, having a reasoned estimate of the need is a good place to start.²¹

RESEARCH

Current research on homelessness in Canada tends to focus on large urban centres or rural and remote areas. There are fewer cities in Canada than one might expect with 100,000 people, but most, as we have shown, are 'Designated Communities' with high rates of homelessness. Therefore, studying these 'medium' sized cities may yield specific insights about homelessness that are not reflected in the current research.

After conversations with service provider staff in several communities, it appears as though there is something unique about the shape and size of homelessness in cities of 100,000. Most of the staff we spoke with believe there are unique strengths and capabilities that should enable 'Nanaimo-sized' communities to find solutions. It was suggested that these cities are big enough to meet the challenges, but the communities were not so big that they would be overwhelmed from the start by sheer numbers. Or as one commentator said, "it's not like Calgary where they are dealing with 3,000 inter-agency referrals on a regular basis." The new solutions generated would have direct implications for transforming provincial and federal policy and funding to address the needs of medium-sized cities.

²¹ Nanaimo Health & Housing Task Force Report (Turner Strategies, 2021) - Immediate Action Steps states, "the Funders' Table committee will secure the \$18.5M needed for Year 1 rollout." Based on the report date of December 2020 this would mean that this amount of funding would need to be secured by December 2021.



POLICY ANALYST
NICK FALVO
RECOMMENDS THE
FEDERAL GOVERNMENT
TRACK THE FOLLOWING
IMPACT INDICATORS AS
THE IMPACTS OF
COVID-19 UNFOLD:

- UNEMPLOYMENT RATES
- % OF CANADIANS FALLING BELOW MARKET BASKET MEASURE (ESPECIALLY BELOW 75%)
- SOCIAL ASSISTANCE BENEFITS LEVEL
- MEDIAN RENT LEVELS
- RENTAL VACANCY RATE
- % OF HOUSEHOLDS WITH EXTREME SHELTER BURDEN
- EVICTION NUMBERS
- AVERAGE NIGHTLY OCCUPANCY IN EMERGENCY SHELTERS

COVID-19 IMPACTS

Nanaimo may possess unique social, political, and economic circumstances, but this does not change the need for finding solutions to the twinned problems of affordable housing and homelessness. The pandemic created a deep economic recession though we will not see the totality of its impact locally, provincially, or nationally in the short term.

Policy analyst and homelessness researcher, Nick Falvo, suggests that there is likely to be a lag of one to five years in how the recessionary effects of the COVID-19 pandemic will impact homelessness in Canada. He points out that this will be unevenly experienced across and within communities. Falvo recommends that policymakers track various indicators, presumably as warning signs of improvement or decline²².

Our study lays a foundation for identifying and tracking factors that impact housing and homelessness. There should be a concrete effort to create a mechanism to monitor and report on homelessness related data in Nanaimo. While data management systems may help, this activity will require dedicated resources and personnel as the data gathering will be complex and in-depth.

We also recommend that Nanaimo collaborate with other communities in this study to develop tracking methods that can be linked to garner local knowledge and to assess similarities and differences in homelessness trends. This will improve our ability to find viable solutions that addresses the specific scale and complexity of our locale.

While the primary responsibility for responding to housing and homelessness issues rests with the provincial and federal governments, it would behoove us to continue to try and understand what is happening in our backyard. With locally generated data and knowledge, we better inform local policy and funding requests when we engage with various levels of governments.

The intent of our report was not to single Nanaimo out for criticism, rather it was to show that *Nanaimo is representative of a national problem*. Nanaimo may be a key site for leading the conversation on solutions for communities of our size. In discussions with managers and staff across Canada it has become clear that the solutions being deployed in large cities like Toronto and Calgary do not work for smaller communities: 'One size does not fit all' when it comes to responding to homelessness. As such we need to re-think and re-shape our approaches to responding to, preventing, and ending homelessness.

²² Falvo also recommends that the recent Reaching Home enhancements ought to be made permanent. The AFB Recovery Plan would make permanent the recent enhancement to federal Reaching Home funding. Across Canada, federal funding for homelessness (i.e., Reaching Home) is rather modest. According to a 2018 federal program evaluation, for each \$1 invested federally, \$13 is invested by other sources (mostly provincial and municipal dollars.) Falvo's report is also worth reading as a primer on understanding Homelessness data and research.



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2. City of Nanaimo (2021). 2021 State of the Nanaimo Economy. [Document Link.](#)
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APPENDIX A

POINT-IN-TIME HOMELESS COUNT REPORTS: 2017 - 2020

ALBERTA

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MANITOBA

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MacKinnon, M. (2018). 'Everyone counts' in New Brunswick: Highlights from the 2018 Point in Time Count. Human Development Council. Saint John, NB. [Document Link.](#)

NEWFOUNDLAND

Memarpour, P. (2018). Everyone Counts: St. John's Homeless Point-in-Time Count 2018. End Homelessness St. John's. St. John's, NL. [Document Link.](#)

ONTARIO

Everyone Counts - Nipissing District (2020). Findings from Point in Time (PiT) Count 2020 [Power Point Slides]. [Document Link.](#)

ICountPtbo (2018). A Roof Over My Head: 2018 Enumeration Report. United Way Peterborough and District. Peterborough, ON. [Document Link.](#)

Simcoe County Alliance to End Homelessness (2018). Everyone Counts – Report of the 2018 Simcoe County Homeless Enumeration. [Document Link.](#)

The District of Thunder Bay Social Services Administration Board and Lakehead Social Planning Council (2018). 2018 District of Thunder Bay Point-In-Time Count of People Experiencing Homeless. Thunder Bay, ON. [Document Link.](#)



APPENDIX B

2018 REACHING HOME POINT-IN-TIME COUNT ENUMERATION DATA

Reported and Adjusted

	2018 PIT COUNT REPORTED	2018 PIT COUNT ADJUSTED HIDDEN HOMELESSNESS EXCLUDED	UNSHELTERED	SHELTERED	HIDDEN HOMELESS
NANAIMO	335	335	278	57	0
KAMLOOPS	201	174	87	87	27
KELOWNA	286	286	52	234	0
LETHBRIDGE	223	223	12	211	0
RED DEER	144	144	19	125	0
BRANDON	121	95	51	44	26
THUNDER BAY	516	276	57	219	240
PETERBOROUGH	259	188	35	153	71
MONCTON	113	83	9	74	30
SAINT JOHN	117	96	3	93	21
ST. JOHN'S	165	130	4	126	35



APPENDIX C

CITIES THAT CONDUCTED POINT-IN-TIME HOMELESS COUNTS IN 2020

(Prior to COVID-19 Restrictions)

	HOMELESSNESS per 100K 2020 PIT COUNT	POPULATION 2020	2020 PIT COUNT ENUMERATION	HIDDEN HOMELESS 2020 ENUMERATION	ADJUSTED ENUMERATION 2020	UNSHeltered PIT COUNT 2020
NANAIMO (CY)	427.3	101,336	433	0	433	268
SIMCOE COUNTY (CMA)	104.5	538,192	563	0	563	79
NIPISSING DISTRICT (CMA)	75.1	299,572	293	68	225	19
DUNCAN / COWICHAN (CMA)	128.9	90,776	129	12	117	42
CHILLIWACK (CY)	290	95,178	306	30	276	99
METRO VANCOUVER (CMA)	126.4	2,737,698	3634	180	3454	831
VANCOUVER (CY)	300.5	697,266	2095	46	2049	547
KELOWNA (CY)	203.2	146,127	297	0	297	72
VICTORIA (CMA)	337	408,883	1523	145	1378	285



APPENDIX D

VACANCY RATES, AVERAGE RENTS AND PERCENTAGE INCREASE: 2015 – 2020

	VACANCY RATE 2020	AVERAGE RENT 2020	AVERAGE RENT 2015	CHANGE RENT ABSOLUTE \$	CHANGE RENT %
NANAIMO	1%	\$1,114.00	\$783.00	331	42.3
KAMLOOPS	1.9%	\$1,110.00	\$874.00	236	27
KELOWNA	2.2%	\$1,242.00	\$895.00	347	38.8
LETHBRIDGE	6.0%	\$1,014.00	\$887.00	127	14.3
RED DEER	8.2%	\$987.00	\$999.00	-\$12.00	-1.2
BRANDON	3.9%	\$931.00	\$799.00	132	16.5
THUNDER BAY	4.0%	\$1,029.00	\$866.00	163	18.8
PETERBOROUGH	2.6%	\$1,129.00	\$921.00	208	22.6
MONCTON	2.6%	\$880.00	\$715.00	165	23.1
SAINT JOHN	2.9%	\$788.00	\$694.00	94	13.5
ST. JOHN'S	7.6%	\$910.00	\$872.00	38	4.4



APPENDIX E

CORE HOUSING NEED

	% RENTERS IN CORE HOUSING NEED	% INDIGENOUS RENTERS IN CORE HOUSING NEED	% LONE PARENT (CHN-RENTERS)	% FEMALE LONE PARENT CHN- RENTERS
NANAIMO	32.3	38.7	51.1	56.3
KAMLOOPS	32.4	36.1	51	53.6
KELOWNA	25.5	32.4	40.9	44.4
LETHBRIDGE	23.1	34.6	39.6	41.1
RED DEER	26	30.5	43	46.7
BRANDON	18.9	30.1	33.3	35.4
PETERBOROUGH	38.1	44.2	46.2	48.5
THUNDER BAY	32.6	40.1	41.9	43
MONCTON	23.3	29.6	43.6	45.2
SAINT JOHN	22.5	25.8	26.2	26.4
ST. JOHN'S	28.6	27.5	34.8	34.8



APPENDIX F

CITIES THAT CONDUCTED REACHING HOME 2020 POINT-IN-TIME HOMELESS COUNTS

	2018 UNSHelterED %	2020 UNSHelterED %	ADJUSTED ENUMERATION 2020	2020 UNSHelterED	ADJUSTED ENUMERATION 2017 OR 2018	UNSHelterED 2018
NANAIMO	83	61.9	433	268	335	278
SIMCOE COUNTY	16	14	563	79	564	90
NIPISSING DISTRICT	22.7	8.4	225	19	119	27
DUNCAN/ COWICHAN	0	35.9	117	42	150	0
CHILLIWACK	45.6	35.9	276	99	169	77
METRO VANCOUVER	18.5	24.1	3454	831	3336	618
VANCOUVER	30.2	26.7	2049	547	2181	659
KELOWNA	18.2	24.2	297	72	286	52
VICTORIA (CRD)	16.4	20.7	1378	285	1430	235

