



**Research Project on Homelessness  
In Greater Vancouver**

**Prepared for:  
The Greater Vancouver Regional District**

**July 2002**

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**Advisory Issued November 2005**  
**Errors in CMHC Core Housing Need data affect estimates of households**  
**At-risk of Homelessness in Greater Vancouver**

CMHC is releasing revisions to previous estimates of core housing need. During verification of ongoing research, CMHC found that some households had been misclassified when Statistics Canada applied core housing need to both the 1996 and 2001 Censuses. The outcome of the misclassification was to overestimate core housing need for both 1996 and 2001. Data for 1991 were not affected. The at-risk of homelessness data used in this report identifies Greater Vancouver households that are in core housing need and spending at least 50% of their income on housing. Because at-risk households were identified using core housing need data from 1996 and/or 2001, errors in the collection of that data impact the at-risk of homelessness data for the region. The extent of that impact will be assessed upon receiving revised data from CMHC.

Further information on the impact of the misclassification is available at [http://www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/en/About/whwedo/whwedo\\_021.cfm](http://www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/en/About/whwedo/whwedo_021.cfm).



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**This report contains three (3) volumes  
Volume 2 and Volume 3 each has its own Table of Contents**

**Volume 1 – Executive summary**

**Volume 2 – Profile of homeless and at-risk people in Greater Vancouver**

**Volume 3 – A methodology to obtain first person qualitative information  
from people who are homeless and formerly homeless**



**Research Project on Homelessness  
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**Volume 1**

**Executive Summary**

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# ***Executive Summary***

## **Introduction**

In July 2001, the Greater Vancouver Regional District (GVRD) commenced this research project on homelessness in Greater Vancouver. The work was conducted by a team of consultants whose work was guided by GVRD staff and by a Research Advisory Committee, whose members included representatives of organizations providing services to the homeless in the region, and of local and senior governments. This research project is intended to provide data that will support implementation of the (March, 2001) *Regional Homelessness Plan for Greater Vancouver* to prevent and alleviate homelessness.

The objectives of the research were to:

- Provide a credible estimate of the number of homeless and “at-risk” persons, by sub-region in Greater Vancouver;
- Provide a demographic profile of both these populations;
- Develop a data management system at the GVRD to provide a means of storing and organizing this data in a form that allows for periodic updating, and making this information accessible to all those working to address homelessness in the Greater Vancouver region; and
- Develop a methodology to conduct first person interviews with homeless and formerly homeless people.

This research report on homelessness in Greater Vancouver is set out in three volumes:

- Volume 1 provides the executive summary and overview of the entire project;
- Volume 2 provides the profile of homeless and at-risk people in Greater Vancouver; and
- Volume 3 provides a methodology to obtain first person qualitative information from people who are homeless or were formerly homeless.

This research was funded by Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) under the “Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative” (SCPI).

## **Profile of homeless and at-risk people in Greater Vancouver (Volume 2)**

The purpose of the homelessness profile detailed in Volume 2 was to provide good quality information about the size and nature of the homeless population and of people who are at-risk of homelessness in Greater Vancouver.

The information is presented in two parts. Part I estimates and describes the population and households at-risk of homelessness in the GVRD. Part II describes the nature and

extent of homelessness in the region. Research data was collected by municipality, and is contained in Appendices A and B to this report; Appendix C contains a contact list of agencies in the region; Appendix D contains a description of research methods for the survey of homeless people. For the purposes of analysis, municipal data was aggregated for a number of sub-regions in Greater Vancouver, and both this sub-regional and overall regional analysis appears in the text of the report. In both parts of Volume 2, a regional picture is presented first, followed by a profile of specific groups of people within the homeless and at-risk population (e.g. seniors, urban Aboriginals), wherever possible. The report then describes the at-risk and homeless situation in the six sub-regions that comprise the GVRD, where data allows.

## **Major Findings**

### ***Part I – Population at-risk of homelessness***

This research project provides a quantified estimate of those persons and households at economic risk of homelessness. It used the “INALHM” concept applied to 1996 Census data as a measure of the risk of homelessness.<sup>1</sup> This measure of risk best describes those persons and households with economic issues that may lead to homelessness, including those living in inadequate or unsuitable accommodation. It does not capture the entire population at-risk of homelessness, in recognition of an array of factors that could contribute to someone being at-risk of homelessness. For example, a woman at-risk of homelessness due to violence in her home would not be included in these figures if her present household were not also at economic risk of homelessness.

#### **Magnitude and trends**

The figures show an alarming increase in the number of households and persons in households at-risk of homelessness in the GVRD between 1991 and 1996: an increase from 39,005 to 57,685 households. This increase in the population at-risk of homelessness may be attributed to: strong population growth over the period (14%) and generally worsening conditions for owners and renters. For example, the average value of dwellings in the region grew 14.2% between 1991 and 1996 (constant dollars). Rental rates for bachelor apartments in Greater Vancouver also increased by almost 13% in real terms over the period.<sup>2</sup> Incomes on the other hand, showed a decline. From 1990 to 1995 average (real) household income declined by 4.3% in the GVRD. In addition, very low vacancy rates between 1991 (2.2%) and 1996 (1.1%) suggest a limited supply of rental housing.

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<sup>1</sup> “INALHM” refers to in core housing Need and spending At Least Half” of their household income for shelter (Modified). The adjective “Modified” here refers to a database that includes Aboriginal households. Based on CMHC. May 2001. *Research Highlights. Special Studies on 1996 Census Data: Canadian Households in Core Housing Need and Spending at Least Half of their Income on Shelter*. Socio-economic Series. Issue 55-7. Census 2001 data is not available at time of writing.

<sup>2</sup> CMHC Rental Market Report. BC & Yukon Region.

Similar comparative data showed that residents of the GVRD are relatively worse off in terms of the risk of homelessness compared to their counterparts in Toronto and Calgary. Renter households are over-represented among those at-risk, forming almost two thirds of the GVRD's at-risk households, whereas renter households represented 41% of total GVRD households in 1996. Approximately one in seven renter households in the GVRD is precariously housed and at-risk of homelessness. Owner households, however, also represent a considerable share of this population, about one third.

### **Key Characteristics of the Population At-Risk**

People between the ages of 25 and 44 years represented the largest share of people at risk of homelessness in 1996. Almost 60% of the 130,000 *people* at-risk lived in dual and single parent family households with children, a ratio that was even higher among those living in owner households. In contrast, among all at-risk *households*, single person households predominated. While lack of education can be said to be a factor in risk of homelessness and many at-risk individuals had not completed high school, there was also a significant number who had attended or were attending university. Aboriginal people were over-represented among those at-risk of homelessness, compared to the GVRD as a whole (5% compared to 1.7%), especially in renter households. Most at-risk persons were Caucasian, although approximately 40% of persons in at-risk households were members of a visible minority, and among these persons, the largest visible minority group was Chinese. People in at-risk households moved frequently, and tended to live in an apartment. They had a high unemployment rate of 21%. However, notably, almost half of at-risk persons (48%) had employment income as their major income source.

### **Differences between at-risk owners and renters**

There were some obvious differences between owner and renter households at-risk of homelessness, both in terms of incidence and their characteristics. Firstly, more renter households than owner households were at-risk, and they represented a greater share of at-risk households compared to the proportion of renter households among all GVRD households. This disparity in the incidence of at-risk households among renter and owner households may be explained by the fact that the INALHM data is measure of *economic* risk, and that the economic disparity between renter and owner households in Greater Vancouver has increased between 1991 and 1996, when measured by average household income, as well as by household wealth/assets.<sup>3</sup> But, the biggest increase in the number of households at-risk between 1991 and 1996 occurred among owner households: an increase of 88% or 8,260 owner households.

At-risk renter households:

- were most likely to consist either of one person (50%) or be single or dual parent families with children (30%);

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<sup>3</sup> Source: David Hulchanski, *A Tale of Two Canadas: Homeowners Getting Richer, Renters Getting Poorer*. University of Toronto Urban and Community Studies, August 2001.

- had lower household incomes than owner households, by 37%;
- spent slightly less of their income on shelter (65%) than owner households (68%)

When compared with people living in at-risk owner households, people living in at-risk renter households:

- had similar levels of educational attainment;
- were more likely to be of Aboriginal ethnicity;
- were less likely to be a member of a visible minority group;
- were less likely to be immigrants;
- were more likely to be disabled;
- were more likely to have moved in the previous year;
- had a higher unemployment rate;
- were more likely to report government transfer payments as their major income source; and
- were more likely to live in an apartment that needed major repairs.

#### **Comparison with all GVRD residents**

Compared to all GVRD residents, the population at-risk of homelessness in 1996:

- mirrored GVRD residents in terms of the share of population age 25 – 44 years (36% versus 35%)
- had a much lower average household income (\$16,303 versus \$54,055)
- was less likely to have completed high school (35% versus 28%)
- was more likely to be of Aboriginal ethnicity (5% compared to 1.7%)
- was more likely to be an immigrant (41% compared to 35%)
- was more likely to have moved in the previous 5 years (69% versus 44%)
- was more likely to be unemployed (21% versus 8.6%)
- was more likely to live in an apartment as opposed to a single detached dwelling (38% compared to 25%)

#### **Sub-groups at-risk of homelessness**

The profile examined the situation of some specific sub-populations of individuals at-risk of homelessness, notably women, Aboriginal people, seniors, immigrants, lone parents and persons with disabilities. Of these, the two largest sub-groups of individuals at-risk of homelessness in the GVRD were females (67,435, or 51% of the total at-risk population) and immigrants (53,100, or 41% of the total at-risk population). However, the incidence of these two sub-groups among at-risk individuals may be linked to their relative share of the overall population. On the other hand, although smaller in absolute numbers, Aboriginal persons, lone parents and persons with a disability had the highest incidence of risk. For example, 15% of all Aboriginal persons in the GVRD were at-risk of homelessness according to these figures. Likewise, 15% of all GVRD lone parents, and 10% of all persons with a disability in the GVRD were at-risk of homeless in 1996.

Some notable findings:

- A significant share of **Aboriginal** persons at-risk of homelessness were children under the age of 10 years (25% or 1,748 persons), a much higher share than for all at-risk individuals (16%).
- **Aboriginal household maintainers** were between the ages of 25 and 44 years, the largest share were single person households, and 43% had not graduated from high school;
- **Females and immigrants** comprised the largest sub-groups among those at-risk of homelessness in 1996, representing 51% and 41% respectively of the 131,000 at-risk persons in the GVRD.
- **Most at-risk immigrants** were living in households comprised of dual parent families with children (52%).
- **Persons with a disability** who were at-risk of homelessness comprised 13% of all at-risk persons in the GVRD. Seniors made up a relatively large share of this group, about 37%. Persons with a disability were more likely to be female and living by themselves; they also had a higher unemployment rate (35%) than at-risk persons generally.
- There were over 67,000 **females** of all age groups among the at-risk population, 7.5% of women region-wide.
- Fifteen percent of all **lone parents** in the region were at-risk of homelessness. They were 39 years old on average and were most likely to be female (88%). Most were living in a single-family household, but 4% lived in a multi-family household.
- **Seniors** of age 55 and over represented about 15% of all persons at-risk of homelessness in the GVRD, but 20% of the overall GVRD population, meaning they were under-represented in the at-risk population. Most at-risk seniors were of the age 65 and over, with an average age of 68 years. At-risk seniors were more likely to be female and living by themselves.
- At-risk **youth** had an average age of 14 years. Most were living in family households with their parents (54%); males were over-represented among youth aged 10 to 14 years, and older youth were more likely to be of Aboriginal ethnicity.

### Sub-regions

The Vancouver sub-region (comprised of the City of Vancouver and (UEL) University Endowment Lands in this study) had the largest number of households at-risk of homelessness in 1996 and possessed the largest share of all at-risk households (40%). This is not surprising since Vancouver also had the largest share of all regional households in 1996 (32%). These at-risk households comprised almost 10% of all Vancouver households, exceeding the regional incidence of 8.4%. The South of Fraser sub-region (comprised of White Rock, Surrey, Delta, and both the City and Township of Langley) had the second largest share of households at-risk of homelessness (22%), slightly lower than its share of all regional households (26%). At-risk households in both Vancouver and the North Shore (comprised of the District and City of North Vancouver, West Vancouver, Lions Bay and Bowen Island) paid the largest share of their income for

rent compared to the regional average. Growth in the number of households at-risk of homelessness between 1991 and 1996 ranged from 26% in the North Shore to a high of 82% in the Northeast Sector (comprised of Coquitlam, Port Coquitlam, Port Moody, Anmore and Belcarra) compared to a regional rate of 48% over five years.

- At-risk households in the **Vancouver sub-region** were most likely to consist of one or two unrelated persons living in rental apartment accommodation. Their unemployment rate (23%) exceeded the rate for all at-risk households and this is reflected in the 32% of households earning less than \$10,000 per year. Primary household maintainers in this sub-region were more likely to be of Aboriginal ethnicity than elsewhere in the region.
- In the **South of Fraser sub-region**, at-risk households were more likely to be families with children, and a significant share were female led lone parent households. They were also more likely to be living in a single detached house which they owned.
- Primary maintainers of at-risk households in the **Inner Municipalities** were more likely to be over the age of 65 (20%) compared to 9% regionally and of Chinese visible minority status (21%) compared to 15% regionally.
- More at-risk households in the **Northeast Sector** reported employment as their major income source (55%) compared to elsewhere in the region.
- The highest share of non-visible minority maintainers of at-risk households was located in the **Ridge Meadows sub-region**.
- More at-risk household maintainers in the **North Shore sub-region** were over age 55 than in any other sub-region (35% compared to 15% regionally). These households were more likely to report Old Age Security/Guaranteed Income Supplement (OAS/GIS) or pension as their major income source.

## ***Part II – Homeless population in Greater Vancouver***

### **Magnitude and trends**

A survey of the number of emergency shelter clients across the Province was done in 1999, but no previous estimate of the number of homeless people in Greater Vancouver has been available until now. The estimate in this study is derived from the findings of a “snapshot survey” of homeless people completed as part of this study, as well as an estimate of the “undercount” of these survey numbers. The survey involved a night time count of sheltered homeless people at 40 emergency shelters, transition and safe houses in the region, and a daytime count of street homeless at 45 locations across the region where homeless people congregate during the day. The 24-hour homeless snapshot survey in Greater Vancouver produced a count of between 1,181 and 1,206 homeless persons on January 14/15, 2002. While not all homeless people were counted that day, these survey figures are the best available using established methods. Homeless people were found in virtually every municipality within the GVRD. In addition, a significant number of street homeless were found that day, particularly in areas outside the City of Vancouver.

A review of some preliminary (and limited) Homeless Individuals and Families Information System (HIFIS) data showed that roughly double (2,098) the number of homeless individuals used emergency shelters between January and November 2001 compared to the number of homeless people actually enumerated on snapshot day (1,181 to 1,206 persons) in January, 2002.

### **Characteristics**

The profile information generated by the snapshot survey confirms what is generally understood by service-providers about the characteristics of people who are homeless:

- 68% are male;
- most are between 25 and 44 years;
- they are living alone;
- most are Caucasian, followed in level of incidence by Aboriginal ethnicity;
- they are homeless because of abuse and family breakdown, moving, or being stranded;
- 38% had been homeless for less than one month;
- 32% had been homeless for more than 6 months;
- 71% stated their permanent home was within the GVRD;
- their major income source was income assistance or a training program;
- 66% had at least one health condition;
- addiction was the most common (self-reported) health condition; and
- the profile of shelter clients has not changed significantly since 1999.

### **Difference between the street homeless and sheltered homeless**

The sheltered homeless comprised 68.5% of all homeless persons enumerated during the 24-hour homeless snapshot, and the street homeless 31.5%. Compared to the sheltered homeless, the street homeless:

- were more likely to be female;
- were under 19 years of age;
- were living with a partner;
- were of Aboriginal ethnicity;
- were more likely to identify abuse and family breakdown, addiction, and lack of a job as the main reason they were homeless;
- had been homeless longer – 29% had been homeless for one year or more, compared to only 14% of the sheltered homeless;
- were less likely to be receiving income assistance;
- were more likely to have had no source of income at all, and some relied on binning, panhandling, squeegeeing, and bottle collecting; and
- were in poorer health - they were more likely to have at least one (self-reported) health condition (72% compared to 63%) and they reported roughly twice the incidence of addiction, medical conditions, and physical disability.

## **Comparison with at-risk population**

The homeless population shared several characteristics with the at-risk population profiled in Part I. Firstly, the majority of homeless people in Greater Vancouver were in the 25 to 44 age group, as was the at-risk population. Aboriginal people were over-represented in both populations. Compared to the population at-risk, the homeless differed in that males outnumbered females, they were mostly living alone, and their major income source was income assistance, not employment, (although 11% of homeless persons reported employment income as their major source of income at the time of the snapshot survey).

## **Sub-groups**

Separate profiles of five different sub-populations of homeless persons (women, seniors, Aboriginal people, unaccompanied youth, and the long term homeless) show distinct differences among them. The two largest sub-groups were females and the long term homeless. Homeless seniors over age 55 tended to be Caucasian and homeless youth tended to be more equally split between males and females. Homeless women were more likely to be of Aboriginal ethnicity than all homeless persons. The Aboriginal homeless had been homeless the longest, with 43% reporting a duration of 6 months or longer. They were also more likely to be living with an addiction compared to members of other sub-groups. The long-term homeless (those who had been homeless 6 months or more) had the highest rate of (self-reported) mental illness of all the sub-groups and compared to the entire homeless population.

## **Geographic Sub-regions**

The largest number and share of homeless persons was found in the Vancouver sub-region, followed by the South of Fraser and Inner Municipalities sub-regions. Interestingly, where the homeless were found does not necessarily reflect the place they view as their permanent home or home community. While 60% of the homeless were located in Vancouver, only 26% viewed Vancouver as their last permanent home. The distribution of the sheltered and street homeless among the sub-regions differed. The largest number of sheltered homeless persons was located in Vancouver (likely due to the fact that Vancouver had about 70% of the total number of shelter beds in the region), while the largest number of street homeless was found in the South of Fraser sub-region. Compared to the Inner Municipalities and South of Fraser sub-regions, Vancouver's homeless population was more likely to be male and of Aboriginal origin. They were also more likely to view their last permanent home as outside of BC. Homeless persons in the Inner Municipalities tended to reflect more closely the profile of the regional homeless population, while those in the South of Fraser sub-region tended to be equally split between males and females, tended to have youth over-represented, a larger share was living with a partner, and few were receiving income assistance as their major income source.

## **Methodology to obtain first person qualitative information (Volume 3)**

The purpose of the methodology presented in Volume 3 was to provide a tool that will enable community groups or agencies to obtain qualitative information about the homeless population, through “first-person” research with homeless and formerly homeless people. Findings from this type of research can be used to:

- Put a face on homelessness;
- Inform the development of appropriate policy and program responses and target scarce resources as effectively as possible;
- Document the life experiences of people who become homeless and the situations/processes that led them to become homeless;
- Document the kinds of services, programs or other assistance that have been found helpful for people to exit homelessness, and to identify what services are missing, and what are the barriers to accessing services;
- Identify prevention strategies; and
- Support a communications strategy.

The steps that were followed to develop this methodology included:

1. A review of approaches used in Canada and the United States to gather first person qualitative information from homeless and formerly homeless people. This included close collaboration with the City of Vancouver’s Co-ordinator of the Tenant Assistance Program, who for several years, has worked with enumeration of street homeless people in that city.
2. Key informant interviews with individuals most closely involved in eight (8) of the examples identified in the above noted review.
3. Development of a draft methodology to conduct personal interviews with people who are homeless and formerly homeless.
4. Two focus group meetings with people who were currently and formerly homeless to obtain their input on the draft methodology and interview guide.
5. Pilot interviews with four (4) individuals who were homeless and with three (3) people who had experienced homelessness in the recent past.
6. Review of the methodology by a professional qualitative research consultant.

As for the entire research project, this methodology was developed under the guidance of the Research Advisory Committee.

Some of the key points discussed in Vol. 3’s presentation of the methodology are outlined below.

1. **Number of interviews.** The appropriate number of interviews need to be determined in the context of the overall research design and timeline of each study. Research analysts who specialize in qualitative studies believe the goal of qualitative research is to obtain in-depth information that is rich in quality, and they recommend working with small numbers of individuals.
2. **Target population and specific sub-group to be studied.** This methodology recommends conducting interviews with people who are both currently and formerly homeless. Researchers need to identify the specific group they want to interview for their study, based on the purpose of their research.
3. **Skills and background of interviewers.** The skills of the interviewers are critical to the attainment of accurate and credible information. It is important to use skilled interviewers who:
  - Are familiar and comfortable with people who are homeless;
  - Are compassionate, respectful, patient, flexible, and good listeners;
  - Will be able to establish a sense of trust and good rapport (this may require consideration of the gender or age of the interviewer to “match” that of the study participants);
  - Are able to stay focused and synthesize and interpret what is being said in the interview; and
  - Have experience in conducting qualitative interviews.

Interviewers could include well-liked and trusted outreach workers or service providers, experienced staff, and homeless, formerly homeless, or community-based individuals.

4. **Training.** Training is essential and should be specifically tailored to the team of interviewers hired for each project.
5. **Locating, recruiting and approaching people to interview.** Among the ways to locate or recruit people to interview are:
  - Approaching social or community agencies for assistance;
  - Asking shelter operators for assistance;
  - Approaching people who are homeless directly on the street;
  - Asking people who are homeless or formerly homeless to help recruit others to interview; and
  - Putting up “recruitment notices” in places that provide affordable housing (for people who are formerly homeless).

In approaching potential candidates for an interview, interviewers must be able to make the person approached feel comfortable. The way to do this will vary from person to person. However, interviewers should dress casually (e.g. jeans), and offer food and/or coffee, or other appropriate means of compensation (see #9 below).

6. **Protection of privacy.** It is critical to respect and protect the privacy of study participants. One way to achieve this is to ask interview participants to provide a pseudonym at the beginning of the interview. Anonymity and confidentiality are required and the study participants should be assured of this at the outset. Photographs should not be taken of any of the people who are interviewed. Observers of these interviews should not be permitted.
7. **Location of interviews.** Interviews should take place wherever the person being interviewed will be most comfortable and where both the participant and the interviewer feel safe. This could include a coffee shop or in the offices of a recruiting agency. Some people who are approached for an interview might feel more relaxed if they are inside, while others may wish to remain exactly where the interviewer finds them, which includes being on the street. Ideally, the location should be safe, reasonably quiet, private and offer few distractions.
8. **Recording of interviews.** Researchers may wish to record interviews by taking hand-written notes or by using a tape recorder. Regardless of the approach taken, the interviewer should advise the participant which methodology of recording will be used. Some studies have used a team of two individuals, where one person asked the questions and the other recorded the information.
9. **Honorariums.** Interviewers should provide participants with an honorarium to show respect for the time and information provided by the participant. Currently, a reasonable honorarium could be from \$15-\$30 per interview, plus the cost of a meal or coffee for an interview that will last from 1 to 1.5 hours.
10. **Analysis and report preparation.** The way in which information from personal interviews will be analyzed should be addressed during the research design stage. It is necessary to determine how the results will be used and the depth of analysis that will be required. Findings from interviews cannot be used to draw conclusions about the homeless population as a whole. Reports should also be written in a way that is accessible to the participants, and this may involve presentation of research findings in formats other than written reports.
11. **Reporting back to participants after the interviews.** The methodology recommends providing an opportunity for people who participated in the interviews to attend a follow-up meeting after analysis of all the interviews is completed. The purpose of the meeting would be to thank the participants for their input, discuss the results of the interviews and review a draft report.
12. **Budget.** In developing a budget for this work, it is estimated that between seven (7) and twelve (12) hours are required to conduct a 1.5 hour interview, depending on the level of detail to be provided in the analysis. This would include time for:

- Interview preparation
- Recruiting interviewees
- Debriefing
- Conducting interviews and travel
- Coding
- Transcribing/typing interview notes
- Analysis and summary of interviews

13. **Interview guide.** A sample Introduction and Consent Form and Interview Guide are attached to this methodology. The purpose of the interview guide is to obtain information about the life experiences of people who become homeless, about what might be done to prevent people from becoming homeless, and about what people need to access and maintain stable housing. It is expected that groups or agencies using this methodology might wish to adapt the interview guide for their own use depending on the specific goals of their study and the group targeted for interviews.