



**Research Project on Homelessness  
in Greater Vancouver**

**Volume 3**

**A Methodology to obtain first person qualitative information  
from people who are homeless and  
formerly homeless**

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

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## **Executive Summary**

The purpose of this report is to present a methodology to gather first person qualitative information from people who are currently and formerly homeless. This work was undertaken as a component of regional research on the incidence and nature of homelessness in the Greater Vancouver region, carried out during 2001-2002. The findings of that research are reported in the other volumes of the Research Project on Homelessness in Greater Vancouver (April, 2002).

The goal of this methodology is to provide a tool that will enable community groups or agencies to:

- Obtain qualitative information about the homeless population, including women and men, families with children, seniors, Aboriginal people, people with mental and physical health issues, and people who are chronically and episodically homeless;
- 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 include:

1. A review of approaches used in Canada and the United States to gather first person qualitative information from homeless and formerly homeless people.
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.

The methodology outlined in this report recommends conducting personal interviews to obtain qualitative information about the participant's personal feelings, opinions and experiences.

Some of the key points discussed in the methodology are outlined below.

1. **Number of interviews.** The appropriate number of interviews will 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 both people who are currently and formerly homeless. It is also suggested that researchers identify the specific sub-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 will be 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;
    - Compassionate, feeling, patient, flexible, and good listeners;
    - Will be able to establish a sense of trust and good rapport;
    - 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.** There are several ways to locate or recruit people to interview. Suggestions include:
    - 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 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 might 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.

6. **Protection of privacy.** One of the objectives of this methodology is 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. Given the need for anonymity and confidentiality, photographs should not be taken of any of the people who are interviewed
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. 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. It is important to note that 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.
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 it could take between seven (7) and twelve (12) hours 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.

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## 1. Introduction

The purpose of this report is to present a methodology to gather first person qualitative information from people who are currently and formerly homeless. This work was developed as a component of regional research on the incidence and nature of homelessness in the Greater Vancouver region, carried out during 2001-2002. The findings of that regional research are reported in the other volumes of this Research Project on Homelessness in Greater Vancouver (April, 2002).<sup>1</sup>

The goal of the first person methodology is to provide a tool that will enable community groups or agencies to:

1. Obtain qualitative information about the homeless population, including women and men, families with children, seniors, Aboriginal people, people with mental and physical health issues, and people who are chronically and episodically homeless;
2. Put a face on homelessness;
3. Inform the development of appropriate policy and program responses and target scarce resources as effectively as possible;
4. Document the life experiences of people who become homeless and the situations/processes that led them to become homeless;
5. Document the kinds of services, programs or other assistance that have been found helpful for people to exit homelessness, and to identify services that are missing, and barriers to accessing services;
6. Identify prevention strategies; and
7. Support a communications strategy.

The methodology presented in this report is derived from two main sources:

- It builds on a review of different methods and approaches used by others for similar social research; and
- It incorporates findings from focus groups and seven pilot interviews conducted in November and December, 2001 with people who are currently and formerly homeless.

The steps that were followed to develop this methodology are described more fully in section 3 below.

## 2. Background

This methodology to obtain qualitative information from people who are currently and formerly homeless was part of a larger GVRD research project to develop a profile of people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness throughout the Greater Vancouver

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<sup>1</sup> These reports are available from the Policy and Planning Department of the Greater Vancouver Regional District (GVRD).

region. The research was funded by Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC), and is intended to provide data that will support implementation of the (March 2001) regional plan to address and prevent homelessness in Greater Vancouver. The regional plan was developed through a year-long community-based planning process spearheaded by the Greater Vancouver Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness.

The purpose of the regional research was to:

- Provide a credible estimate of the number of homeless and at-risk persons throughout Greater Vancouver;
- Provide a demographic profile of both these populations; and
- Develop a data management/organization system in the GVRD that will store this data on homelessness, make it accessible, and provide an opportunity for periodic updating.

A fourth objective of the regional research project was to develop a methodology for gathering first person qualitative information because:

- First person information has an immediacy and directness that statistics and service provider testimonials cannot duplicate, and thus it helps sensitize community residents, policy-makers, and interest groups to the particular nature of local homelessness issues;
- This type of research is an effective way of gathering “entry-exiting” information about the homeless population; and
- This type of research shows respect for homeless individuals by providing them with an opportunity to tell their stories and express their views in a direct voice.

### **3. What sources of information were used to develop the methodology proposed in this report?**

In developing the methodology set out in this report, the consultants conducted research as noted below and took the following steps.

1. A review of methods used in Canada and the United States to gather first person qualitative information from homeless and formerly homeless people. The findings from this research are described in the First Interim Report to the GVRD Research Advisory Committee dated July 12, 2001. The report identified four different approaches, including personal interviews (structured and unstructured), focus groups, testimonials, and a combination of methods such as surveys, interviews focus groups, workshops and conferences. The interim report also provided an overview of 12 different examples that used the above noted approaches.
2. Key informant interviews with individuals most closely involved in eight (8) of the examples identified in the First Interim Report. The purpose of the key informant

interviews was to learn more about the advantages and disadvantages of each approach and to provide a brief description of the study. These descriptions are attached as Appendix “A” to this report. A full report of the key informant interviews is contained in the Second Interim Report to the GVRD Research Advisory Committee dated November 16, 2001, titled *A Review of Different Methodologies to Obtain First Person Qualitative Information from Homeless and Formerly Homeless People*.

3. Development of a draft methodology to conduct personal interviews with people who are currently and formerly homeless - based on the information contained in the Second Interim Report.
4. Two focus group meetings. The consultants organized two focus group meetings: one with a group of people who were homeless, and the other with a group of people who had experienced homelessness in the recent past. Participants in these two focus groups were invited by service providers and community outreach workers. The participants provided input on the draft methodology and interview guide. The results of the focus group meetings are contained in the Third Interim Report to the GVRD Research Advisory Committee dated November 8, 2001.
5. Pilot interviews. Based on the input provided by the focus group participants, the consultants conducted pilot interviews with four (4) individuals who were homeless and with three (3) people who had experienced homelessness in the recent past. The purpose of the interviews was to test the draft methodology and interview guide.
6. Review of the draft methodology by a professional qualitative research consultant.<sup>2</sup>

The methodology outlined in Section 6 of this report is based on all 6 of the above steps. In addition it was approved by the GVRD Homelessness Research Advisory Committee.

#### **4. Why obtain first person qualitative information?**

There are several benefits as well as pitfalls to obtaining qualitative information directly from people who are homeless or formerly homeless. The following points paraphrase some of the comments made by key informants who were asked about this issue.

##### **Benefits of obtaining first person qualitative information**

- There are many reports that provide statistical information about homelessness. There is also a need to present homelessness without numbers – to provide information that people can connect to. Personal stories can have a huge impact on how people care about homelessness and how they respond to homelessness in everyday life.
- Personal stories can provide “knock in the guts” information that evokes a visceral

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<sup>2</sup> Sheila Martineau PhD, Qualitative Research Consultant

reaction.

- Personal stories can help break down myths about people who are homeless and help break down the “us and them” mentality.
- First person qualitative information can provide rich and in-depth information.
- For some people who are homeless it is a relief to tell their stories.
- Qualitative information can yield powerful statements. Sometimes a quote can make the reader think about things in a different way. This kind of information can help people to connect on a human level with the issues.
- First person information enables the readers to hear directly from the people being interviewed - “their truth, their words, their experiences, and their culture”. This type of work can avoid stereotypes, generalizations, and reinterpretation of the underclass by professional middle class people, who use their own language and filters.
- First person information enables the reader to understand the full depth of the person’s experiences (e.g. homelessness), and allows for the people who have experienced homelessness to recommend strategies that will be most effective.
- First person information can help the reader see “people who are homeless” as opposed to the “homeless population” or “the homeless”.
- First person information can provide a different perspective than what researchers can obtain from the service agencies. It is similar to an approach of finding out about customer satisfaction. It is important to hear first hand from people living the experience. They know what they need.
- Qualitative research can help identify issues that require further study and help shape future research instruments, including quantitative and surveys.

### **Pitfalls of obtaining first person qualitative information**

- It is sometimes difficult for people to talk about their experience of becoming homeless. It evokes painful memories.
- There are some things that participants may not want to talk about in person to an interviewer. Surveys may be less threatening.
- If the participant does not trust the interviewer, or feels that the interviewer is very naïve, the information may not be reliable.
- Participants may provide superficial answers about their needs (e.g. they need jobs, money, and housing.) It is important to dig deeper - to probe and get more specific information (e.g. what type of housing, what kind of additional support).
- Participants may question the practical implications of obtaining first person information from people who are homeless. There are concerns about whether or not this is tokenism, or research for the sake of research. Will anything happen to benefit homeless people? Will the research lead to action? However, it was also noted that if sharing their experiences will help others, people who are homeless are willing to tell their stories.

## 5. What is qualitative research?

The methodology recommended in this report is a qualitative research model that involves personal interviews with people who are homeless and formerly homeless. In this type of research, the interview questions are mostly open-ended to encourage participants to respond from their own perspective. There is generally a “richness” or “depth” in the quality of the information.

“A qualitative research approach provides in-depth knowledge about a specific topic or issue. It focuses on a participant’s perceptions. Qualitative research generally involves collecting detailed information from a small group of participants. Among other features, qualitative research uses a variety of methods to collect in-depth information from small sub-groups within a specific population for the purpose of understanding the views and needs of that particular group. For example, among street-involved youth, a sub-group might constitute First Nations youth or youth working in the sex trade. In-depth interviews, oral histories, or examining letters or journals are examples of methods used for qualitative research.”

“Quantitative research differs from qualitative research in that the former generally involves the collection of statistical data from large, random samples for the purpose of generalizing findings to the larger population. Surveys, structured interviews or lab experiments are examples of methods used for quantitative research”.<sup>3</sup>

Interviews in quantitative studies generally obtain information that can be measured, quantified, and compared with similar structured questions used in other studies. The questions are mostly closed-ended in that they provide a choice of several possible structured answers.

Both qualitative and quantitative research require rigorous analytic approaches and expertise. However, quantitative data requires mostly statistical analysis while qualitative data predominantly requires text analysis.<sup>4</sup>

## 6. What is the proposed methodology?

### 6.1 Personal interviews

The methodology outlined in this report recommends conducting personal interviews to obtain qualitative information about the participant’s personal feelings, opinions and experiences. This approach was selected because:

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<sup>3</sup> Sheila Martineau PhD, Qualitative Research Consultant

<sup>4</sup> Sheila Martineau PhD, Qualitative Research Consultant

- One-on-one personal interviews give participants an opportunity to have their voices heard and provide rich information;
- It is possible to ask more personal questions in a one-on-one interview compared to what can be asked in a group situation;
- It may be less intimidating for some individuals to participate in a personal interview on the street rather than have to go somewhere else for a group interview (although it has been noted that some people are more comfortable participating in a group); and
- For some individuals it is a relief to tell their stories in a personal interview.

Some disadvantages of this approach should also be noted:

- It is sometimes difficult for people to talk about their experience of becoming homeless – this experience can evoke painful memories;
- It is essential to use skilled and experienced interviewers who can establish a good rapport and trust with the participants and also delve into the issues; and
- It may be necessary for the interviewer to identify the underlying details that result in homelessness.

## **6.2 Interview sample**

### **6.2.1 Number of interviews**

It will be necessary for each research sponsor to determine the number of interviews to be completed for its project. Two of the factors to consider will be the amount of time and funding available. Research analysts who specialize in qualitative studies believe the goal of qualitative research is to obtain in-depth information that is rich in quality. They recommend working with small numbers of individuals. The appropriate number of interviews needs to be determined in the context of the overall research design and timeline of each study. For community-based research with short timelines, 10 one-hour interviews may provide ample data for analysis if the questions are well focused and the interviewers have the necessary skills and experience.<sup>5</sup>

### **6.2.2 Identifying a sub-group or target population**

Qualitative studies do not aim to obtain a random or representative sample. “You can’t judge qualitative research by quantitative standards”. It is recommended that researchers identify the specific sub-group they want to interview for their study based on the purpose of the research.

### **6.2.3 People who are homeless and formerly homeless**

This methodology recommends conducting interviews with both people who are currently and formerly homeless. People who are formerly homeless are often able to

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<sup>5</sup> Sheila Martineau PhD, Qualitative Research Consultant

provide a broad perspective and insight about their past experience, including what kind of programs, services or other assistance provided a benefit with respect to obtaining stable housing. In addition, the backgrounds of people who were once homeless are generally indistinguishable from people who are currently homeless with respect to a range of issues including drug and alcohol use, involvement with the criminal justice system, mental health issues, unemployment, family breakdown, loss of friends and family, loss of care for their own children, foster care, sofa surfing, sleeping rough, and ill health. It is also necessary to hear from people who are currently homeless because they can speak directly about their immediate needs and gaps in existing services. However, people who are currently homeless are often pre-occupied with their immediate need for survival and may not have the time or energy for perspective or insight.

## **6.3 Interviewers**

### **6.3.1 Skills and background**

The skills of the interviewers will be critical to obtaining accurate and credible information through this methodology.

#### **Interviewers must:**

- Be familiar and comfortable with people who are homeless or living in the deepest poverty. People being interviewed will immediately sense if the interviewer is fearful, awkward, remote, condescending and not 100% comfortable with them;
- Be compassionate, feeling, patient, and flexible;
- Feel and show genuine respect for the people being interviewed;
- Be good listeners and interested in what the interviewees have to say;
- Be curious and enjoy one-on-one conversation;
- Have a sense of humour;
- Be accepting and willing to suspend judgement and blame;
- Be able to establish a sense of trust and good rapport;
- Recognize and have some knowledge of substance abuse, mental illness, and physical or medical disabilities;
- Be comfortable making eye contact and giving non-verbal and verbal affirmation;
- Be able to manage confidentiality and pose no risk to people on the street;
- Be able to make an interview feel like a conversation, while keeping the interviewee on track and maintaining their critical faculties;
- Be able to stay focused and synthesize and interpret what is being said in the interview; and
- Have experience in conducting qualitative interviews.

Some key informants and focus group participants suggested that it would also be helpful if the interviewer:

- Has personal experience of homelessness;

- Has personal, previous experience of substance abuse (at least 5 years clean and sober/drug-free); and
- Is familiar to, and trusted by potential interviewees.

In this case, potential candidates to conduct interviews could include well-liked and trusted outreach workers or service providers; and experienced volunteers/staff at organizations that work with people who are homeless or living in poverty, including churches, mental health agencies, drop-in centres, and drug and alcohol programs. However, it is advisable to avoid using interviewers who are currently providing services to interviewees.

Gender, age, and the cultural/ethnic background of people who will be interviewed should also be considered when hiring interviewers. For example, some women will agree to be interviewed only by women, and youth have indicated a preference to be interviewed by other youth.

There may be some benefits of hiring homeless, formerly homeless, or community-based individuals to act as interviewers. They may have better access to the street population than professional researchers, and may be more sensitive in selecting the right choice of words. They know the “ins and outs” of the homeless population and should be able to put interviewees at ease. In addition, hiring homeless individuals can help build capacity within this population, develop skills and provide some income. However, some of the disadvantages are that the quality of the interviews might be better with an experienced or professional interviewer who is skilled at asking probing or follow-up questions and at recording the interviews.<sup>6</sup>

### 6.3.2 Training

Regardless of who is hired to conduct the interviews, training is essential. Interviewers must understand the goals of the study, and should practice role-playing to better understand the people they will be interviewing. Training should include an opportunity to practice some interviews and time to review with interviewees and other interviewers what worked and what did not. The interviewers should be very comfortable with the interview guide that will be used so that the questions will flow easily. Interviewers should also understand the importance of consistency in how questions are asked because the way in which a question is worded may affect the way in which it is answered.

Training should be specifically tailored to the particular interview team. For example, if professional interviewers are used, more emphasis should be placed on issues associated with the target group to be interviewed (e.g. what is the best way to approach people who are homeless or formerly homeless). If homeless, formerly homeless, or community-

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<sup>6</sup> Street youth conducted interviews for the McCreary Centre Society report, *Street Talk: Early Processes in the Lives of Youth Becoming Homeless*, and “organic intellectuals conducted interviews for the Social Alternatives Unit and BC Housing Community Based Research Project, on Homelessness, *The View from the Sidewalk* (see Appendix “A”).

based individuals will be hired to conduct the interviews, it may be necessary to place greater emphasis on standard research methods and recording of interviews. Training should also address issues such as confidentiality, anonymity, the role of the researcher, body language, clothing, and compensating the interviewee.

### 6.3.3 Workers' Compensation

Project sponsors should ensure that all interviewers are protected by Workers' Compensation, either through the interviewers' place of employment or through the research project.

## 6.4 Locating/recruiting people to interview

Some of the different locations where participants can be recruited include drop-in centres, known outdoor locations (e.g. bottle return depots), shelters, and motels.

Researchers may use some or all of the following approaches to locate or recruit people to interview. The approach may vary depending on the purpose of the study and the group or sub-group targeted for the research.

- Ask social or community agencies for assistance in identifying people who are currently or formerly homeless (e.g. drop-in centres, mental health agencies, recovery homes, treatment centres, social service agencies, and other agencies that provide outreach services);
- Ask shelter operators for assistance in identifying people who are homeless;
- Approach people who are homeless directly on the street - people who are sitting may be more willing to talk than those who are walking around. (Note: the interviewer must be able to identify people who are homeless by sight, and this approach is always open to peril of giving offence when mis-identifying homeless people);
- Ask people who are homeless or formerly homeless to help recruit others to interview; and
- Put up notices in places that provide affordable housing (for people who are formerly homeless).

## 6.5 How to approach potential candidates for an interview

In approaching potential candidates for an interview, researchers should:

- Be aware and sensitive to the fact that people who have experienced homelessness may be ashamed to admit this;
- Be aware that potential candidates may be motivated by a desire to help others and may be interested in participating in a study if they feel they could have an impact on government policies to address homelessness;
- Approach people with respect and explain up front the purpose of the study and that the information will be confidential;

- Tell potential candidates up front that they will receive an honorarium; and
- Advise potential candidates how information from the research will be made available to them.

All focus group participants stressed the need to make the person approached feel comfortable. The way to do this might 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.

It has been noted that people who are homeless may be most willing to talk the day or week before welfare cheques are issued.

## **6.6 Interview guide**

A sample Introduction and Consent Form and Interview Guide are attached in Appendix “B” and “C”.<sup>7</sup> The purpose of the interview guide is to learn more 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 was noted during the pilot interviews that the introduction and preliminary information provided should be as brief as possible.

It is expected that groups or agencies using this method 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. A few pilot interviews should be conducted to ensure that the interview guide can achieve the objectives of the specific project for which it is being used. Finally, when printing a final version of the interview guide, plenty of space should be left after each question for the interviewer/recorder to take notes.

## **6.7 Protection of privacy**

One of the objectives of this methodology is 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. This will give participants an identity and enable them to identify themselves in the final report. The interviewer should also advise participants how confidentiality will be handled in reporting the research findings.

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<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that researchers who used a previous version of the interview guide to conduct interviews in Surrey and Langley reported that:

- It can be confusing when interviewing people who have had several episodes of homelessness if participants discuss these different episodes including the first time they were homeless, the most recent episode, and other times in between.
- Some interviewees felt that the questions were too focused on housing when many other issues (e.g. income support, employment, and drug treatment) are key factors in being homeless.

Thanks to Steven Rose, Outreach Coordinator, Pinganodin Lodge, Ottawa for providing comments on a previous version of the interview guide.

## 6.8 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. For example, the interviewer could invite the interviewee to a coffee shop for a coffee or snack. Another possible location may be 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. Ideally, the location should be safe, reasonably quiet, private and offer few distractions.

## 6.9 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 method of recording will be used. Each approach has its advantages and disadvantages. Some studies have used a team of two individuals, where one person asked the questions and the other recorded the information. Focus group participants stated that it would make no difference to them if the interview were tape recorded or if the interviewer took notes. However, they were not sure if this would be the case with others approached for an interview. Some questions were raised about whether people who are interviewed might be more careful with what they say in a taped interview, and they might want to listen to the tape to make sure it reflected what they meant to say. Advantages and disadvantages of different approaches are noted below.

	<b>Teams of 2 people with one writing notes</b>	<b>One interviewer and a tape recorder</b>	<b>One interviewer who also takes notes</b>
<b>Advantages</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Each person can focus on their task.</li> <li>-The note-taker can assist the interviewer if necessary.</li> <li>-Interviewers may feel safer conducting interviews in pairs.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Interviewer can focus on the participant and maintain eye contact.</li> <li>-Can maintain a 1:1 ratio.</li> <li>-Can capture all info on tape.</li> <li>-Costs less than hiring 2 people.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Can maintain a 1:1 ratio.</li> <li>-Costs less than hiring 2 people-</li> </ul>
<b>Disadvantages</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Participants may find it intimidating to have two people present.</li> <li>-Hard to capture all info with notes.</li> <li>-Costs more to hire 2 people.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Interviewer needs to obtain consent to record interview.</li> <li>-There could be technical difficulties (or too much background noise) and information would be lost.</li> <li>-Interviewer may feel less safe if alone.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Difficult to maintain eye contact and take notes at the same time.</li> <li>-Hard to capture all info with notes.</li> <li>-Interviewer may feel less safe if alone.</li> </ul>

## 6.10 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.

## 6.11 Photographs

Given the need for anonymity and confidentiality, photographs should not be taken of any of the people who are interviewed.

## 6.12 Analysis and report preparation

Issues regarding how the information from personal interviews will be analyzed should be addressed during the research design stage. At that time it will be necessary to determine how the results will be used and the depth of analysis that will be required. This discussion should occur with someone who has knowledge and experience in qualitative research, and ideally, this person will be part of the research team. Depending on the depth of analysis desired and the number of interviews to be conducted, it may be necessary to analyze the results with the assistance of appropriate computer software.

Based on the questions contained in the interview guide for this methodology, it should be possible to analyze the responses according to the issues noted below.

Questions	Currently homeless	Formerly homeless
1. Basic demographics (e.g. gender, age, ethnic background, and first language).	Intro	Intro
2. Where respondent is from and length of time in Greater Vancouver.	Intro	Intro
3. Marital status and number of children	Q: 28-29	Q: 26-27
4. Current living situation	Q: 1-2	Q: 1-2
5. Length of time homeless	Q: 3 & 11	Q: 3-4
6. Living situation immediately prior to becoming homeless	Q: 4-8	Q: 5-6
7. Immediate <b>trigger</b> of homelessness and factors that <b>contributed</b> to respondents becoming homeless	Q: 9-10 & 12-14	Q: 7-10
8. Types of assistance that might have <b>prevented</b> the respondents from becoming homeless	Q: 15-17	Q: 11-14
9. Factors that contributed to the respondents <b>remaining homeless</b>		Q: 18 & 21
10. Factors that helped respondents <b>exit</b> homelessness or might have helped the person exit homelessness sooner		Q: 15-17, 19, 20 & 23

11. Services or assistance being used by respondents to exit homelessness (if any)	Q: 18-19	
12. Services or other type of help needed/wanted	Q: 21-22	
13. <b>Barriers</b> to respondents leaving the street	Q: 20 & 24	Q: 17 & 22
14. Factors that helped (or would help) respondents maintain their housing	Q: 23	Q: 24
15. Impact of affordable housing on respondents lives		Q: 25
16. Issues from respondents' childhoods that may be relevant to homelessness	Q: 25-27	Q: 26-28
17. The role of pets in the respondents lives (Q 28)	Q: 30	Q: 31

The seven pilot interviews carried out for this report were not analyzed because this was not the purpose of the pilot. From a cursory review, however, the following is an example of what we were able to learn using the interview guide.

Pilot interviews were conducted with 4 people who were homeless and 3 people who were formerly homeless. Of those who were homeless, 3 were men between the ages of 39 and 45, and one was a woman 45 years of age. All of the formerly homeless interviewees were women between the ages of 22 and 46.

All three of the women who were formerly homeless indicated that the breakdown of their relationship with an abusive partner was the main event that triggered their experience (or most recent experience) of homelessness. For one woman, this coincided with losing her job. Factors that contributed to this woman's homelessness were a lack of support from members of her family, lack of assistance from local community agencies, and an inability to find housing that she could afford while receiving income assistance. Drug addiction was a major factor that contributed to homelessness for the other two women. Using drugs took priority over looking for housing and money that could have been used for housing was used for drugs.

For Alice, (not her real name), a 22 year old woman who is formerly homeless, the use of drugs and alcohol was a factor that contributed to her being episodically homeless from the age of 17. Alice started drinking at the age of 7 and began brewing her own alcohol from the age of 12. She had begun using cocaine by the age of 11. When asked what might have helped Alice from becoming homeless in the past, she said that it might have helped if her parents or someone from school had noticed that she was using drugs and alcohol. The turning point for Alice was when she had a drug overdose, wound up in hospital, and realized she needed to change her life and "get clean and sober". She went to Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous and began seeing a drug and alcohol counsellor. Alice continues to see a counsellor to help address the issues from her past that led to her drug use. She believes the only reason she has stable housing now is because she is in recovery and no longer uses drugs or alcohol.

Among the people interviewed who were currently homeless, the following factors were cited as the immediate triggers of homelessness:

- Eviction;
- Having the hydro cut off;
- Sharing a house with a few other people. One person moved out and things “fell apart”; and
- Breakdown of a common law relationship.

Some of the longer term contributing factors included mental health issues, alcohol and drug use, insufficient income (unless sharing with a common law partner), and literacy issues (e.g. unable to read ads for housing in the newspaper).

The following are examples of some themes that might emerge during the analysis of information obtained from the interviews.

<b>Immediate triggers of homelessness</b>	<b>Longer term factors contributing to homelessness</b>	<b>Factors contributing to an exit from homelessness</b>	<b>Other issues</b>
Eviction	Impact of childhood experiences	Role of outreach workers/agencies	Loneliness as a barrier to leaving the streets
Breakdown of relationship	Mental health issues		Role of pets
	Alcohol and drug use		Impact of housing on people’s lives
	Discrimination by landlords		
	Literacy		

It is important to note that findings from interviews can be discussed only in the context of the individuals who participated in the study. The intention is to understand the sub-group interviewed and not to generalize to the homeless population as a whole.

Persons interviewed for this study indicated that they would be interested in any reports that used their information. Therefore, it is recommended that any reports be written in a way that is accessible to the participants. It was also suggested that the participants have an opportunity to review a draft report to ensure that it reflects the reality of their experiences.

### **6.13 Reporting back to participants after the interviews**

This report recommends that the methodology include an opportunity for people who participated in the interviews to attend a follow-up meeting after analysis of all the interviews is completed. Participants in the both the focus and pilot interviews indicated support for this idea. 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. It has been recognized that it may be difficult to locate homeless people who participated in an interview to notify them of the follow-up meeting. Some strategies to address this issue might be to enlist the assistance of the agency that helped recruit the people who were interviewed (if applicable) or have a date pre-arranged and write this on a business card to be given to all participants. A hot meal (or honorarium) would provide an additional incentive for people to attend.

## 7. Budget issues

In developing a budget for qualitative research, in addition to the costs related to the interviews, it is necessary to identify resources and time required for training, data entry, coding, analysis and interpretation. The following is an estimate of the time that might be required to conduct interviews using the proposed interview guide for a 1.5 hour interview. The estimates were developed based on information from some of the projects described in Appendix “A” and discussions with researchers conducting interviews with people who are homeless and formerly homeless in several municipalities in the GVRD. It is important to note that the information presented should be used only as a guide. The amount of time and resources required to obtain first person qualitative information from people who are currently or formerly homeless will vary greatly depending on the goals of each particular study and objectives regarding the level of analysis to be provided.

<b>Task</b>	<b>Hours/Interview</b>	<b>Hours/Interview</b>	<b>Hours/Interview</b>
	<b>Basic Analysis 1 interviewer</b>	<b>Basic Analysis 2 People/Interview</b>	<b>Enhanced Analysis<sup>8</sup> 1 interviewer</b>
Preparation for interviews, recruiting interviewees, and debriefing	1.5 hours	3.0 hours	1.5 hours
Conducting interviews and travel	2.0 hours	4.0 hours	2.0 hours
Transcribing/ Typing interview notes			3.5 hours
Coding and analysis	3.0 hours	3.0 hours	4.0 hours
Summary of interviews/report	.5 hours	.5 hours	1.0 hours
<b>Total</b>	<b>7 hours</b>	<b>10.5 hours</b>	<b>12 hours</b>

This budget assumes that members of the project team would conduct the interviews. If the team will hire other interviewers, then an additional 10-15 hours should be added for recruitment, training, and co-ordination.

<sup>8</sup> May involve the use of software support the analysis of qualitative research.

The amount of time needed for researchers to recruit interviewees will depend on the approach being taken and the degree to which agencies will assist in this process.

Additional costs will include \$15-\$40 per interview to provide honorariums and snacks for the participants.

## Appendix “A”

### Descriptions of approaches

#### 1.1 Personal interviews

##### 1) Health Canada, The Street Lifestyle Study (1997)

<b>Method</b>	This study used first person interviews to obtain qualitative information from former street youth. The authors also conducted informal interviews with staff members of participating agencies to explore some of the issues raised in the interviews.
<b>Purpose</b>	To learn about risk factors that lead young people to adopt the street lifestyle and factors that influence young people making the transition off the street.
<b>Target Group</b>	Former street youth who were 14-29 years old and who had made a successful transition off the street. Youth were interviewed in Halifax, Montreal, Ottawa, Calgary, and Vancouver.
<b># Interviewed</b>	70 former street youth.
<b>Sampling method</b>	The research design was based on the selection of a convenience sample by staff in the participating agencies. This was seen as the most viable way to gain access to former street youth who met the eligibility criteria.
<b>Recruitment</b>	Youth were recruited by agencies that were participating in the study. Each of the participating agencies was asked to select a sample of 10 to 15 former street youth who met the eligibility criteria. An attempt was made to recruit approximately equal numbers of male and female subjects.
<b>Location of interviews</b>	Interviews were undertaken at offices of the host agencies who participated in this study. These agencies were generally in convenient locations.
<b>Interviewers</b>	Interviews were conducted by the authors of the study.
<b>Interview length</b>	Between 1 and 1.5 hours.
<b>Time of day</b>	Afternoons and evenings.
<b>Compensation</b>	Participants were provided with a nominal fee of \$15 for completing an interview.
<b>Budget</b>	It was noted that qualitative studies may take more time than quantitative ones because of the time required for coding, data entry, and analysis. Total costs will depend on the number of interviews.
<b>Consent</b>	The participating agencies arranged for the youth to sign consent forms.
<b>Questionnaire</b>	
<b>Additional comments</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It was a good choice to interview people who had left the streets because they had tremendous insight. However, it was difficult to find these individuals, and it was necessary to go to agencies that served street youth and ask them to identify youth who had made the transition.</li> <li>• Both homeless and formerly homeless individuals should be studied. Interviews with individuals who came through the experience and left the street can provide a complete picture of what held them to the street, what helped them leave, and what were some of the barriers to leaving. However, the interviewers will not hear from the individuals who have</li> </ul>

	<p>given up. Therefore, ideally, a study of the homeless population should include two sub samples: individuals who are formerly homeless and individuals who are currently homeless and entrenched in street life. It would be important to find out if these people have given up on leaving the streets or not.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It is important to ask more questions about negative school experiences as this seems to have a significant impact on homelessness. It is important to find out why youth are dropping out of school.</li> <li>• It often took youth more than one try to make it off the street. Often, the services they needed were not there for them. For example, welfare may have provided income for one months rent, but landlords wanted a deposit in advance. Also, the youth had no money for cooking utensils or bedding etc. If youth left the street, they were faced with the issue of social isolation. They did not feel accepted by mainstream society, but if they associated with street people, they ended up back on the street. Therefore, it is important to ask questions about this experience.</li> <li>• If interviews are being done with individuals who were formerly homeless, it is OK to use professional researchers to carry out the interviews. However, for interviews with people on the street, it is better to hire individuals who are familiar with this population and who can establish a good rapport with them. The interviewers must be able to find and talk to this population.</li> <li>• To show respect for people who are homeless it is important to reflect that their time and information is worth something. Compensation should be between \$25-\$30.</li> <li>• Interviewers should be clear that all information will be held in strict confidence and that the identity of the participants will be protected (e.g. won't use name or any other identifier).</li> </ul>
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## 1.2 *Personal interviews and focus groups*

### 2) **The McCreary Centre Society, Street Talk: Early Processes in the Lives of Youth Becoming Homeless (Underway)**

<b>Method</b>	This study used first person interviews to obtain qualitative information. A focus group/workshop was also held for street-involved youth to provide advice on the research content and process. Some of the issues covered included: how to access youth under 19, who should carry out the interviews, when should the interviews take place, how can participants be made to feel comfortable, and how should participants be compensated for their time.
<b>Purpose</b>	To explore the early choices and processes involved in youth coming to the street and/or becoming homeless, to inform policy and practice at the national and local levels, and to contribute to the development of early prevention and intervention strategies on behalf of street-involved youth in Canada.
<b>Target Group</b>	Street youth in downtown Vancouver who are 12 to 18 years old.
<b># Interviewed</b>	30 street youth.
<b>Sampling method</b>	The methodology involved a convenience sample. The goal was to interview a cross-section of youth, achieve a gender balance and include the various sub-cultures. The decision to carry out 30 interviews was seen as an attempt to

	balance the need to keep the sample small enough so as not to lose the richness of the data but large enough to include a cross section of youth.
<b>Recruitment</b>	The interviewers looked for participants in their assigned geographic areas of Vancouver. Agencies serving youth in the area were also contacted to assist in recruiting participants.
<b>Location of interviews</b>	Most interviews (60%) took place in restaurants. Approximately 25% of interviews were conducted in an agency. Half of these individuals were approached on the street and decided to go to an agency location for the interview. Another 10% of interviews were conducted on the street or in a park or alley – where the interviewers first approached the youth.
<b>Interviewers</b>	The McCreary Centre Society hired 3 street youth as research assistants and 3 university students as recorders/note takers. They were paired up in teams of two so that the street youth asked the questions and the students took notes. The interviewers and recorders participated in 3 days of training. The interviewers usually brought a tape recorder to the interviews, and most participants agreed to have their interviews taped. The interviewers did not want to rely exclusively on tape recordings because in some cases there would have been too much background noise. Interviewers also took field notes to record their impressions of the interviews and participants.
<b>Length of interview</b>	Approximately one hour.
<b>Time of day</b>	From late morning to mid afternoon and the evening.
<b>Compensation</b>	Each youth received \$15 as compensation for participating in the study, plus the cost of their meal if the interview was in a restaurant.
<b>Budget</b>	It is estimated that each interview took about 7.5 hours (1 hour for the interview x 2 people, 1 hour for preparation, recruiting and debriefing x 2 people, and 3.5 hours for typing/transcribing and submitting notes). In developing a budget, time is also required for training, testing, coding, and analysis.
<b>Consent</b>	Researchers followed a protocol to obtain informed consent and assure participants that their identity would be anonymous and their interview would be kept confidential.
<b>Questionnaire</b>	The questionnaire was developed with input from approximately 25 street youth who participated in a workshop on question topics and strategies for accessing youth. Participants were asked for biographical information (using a pseudonym) and the remaining questions took about 30 minutes.
<b>Additional comments</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The street youth hired as research assistants were very familiar with the various components of the street youth population. E.g. one was familiar with the DES and sex trade, one was familiar with the squeegee and pan handling culture, and one was knowledgeable about boys town.</li> <li>• Advantages of hiring street youth to conduct the interviews were that they were able to have good access to the street youth population. It is believed that the interviewers were able to interview young people who might not have talked with anyone else.</li> <li>• Some of the disadvantages were that one of the youth found it too difficult emotionally to complete the qualitative interviews. In addition, it is possible that a more skilled interviewer would have probed more on some of the questions (but question if that might have been too intrusive).</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• It is essential to provide training on topics such as confidentiality, anonymity, and the role of the researcher. It is important for interviewers to understand their role and that they are not an outreach worker.</li><li>• Pairing the interviewer with a recorder worked well for the interviewers. The recorder provided additional support (e.g. could jump in if the interviewer missed something), and helped with feelings of safety. The interviewers also found it helpful to have someone else take notes and manage the tape recorder. None of the persons interviewed indicated concern about the 2:1 ratio.</li><li>• If a tape recorder is being used it is important to ensure that it will be possible to hear the interview over the background noise.</li><li>• Some youth were not interviewed because they did not speak English well enough. It is important to consider if translation will be feasible at the outset of the project.</li><li>• The focus group was very useful in identifying questions that would be too sensitive to ask youth in a personal interview. There are some things that the youth did not feel comfortable discussing.</li></ul>
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3) **The Social Alternatives Unit and BC Housing, Community Based Research Project on Homelessness (2001), *The View From The Sidewalk, Towards A New Definition of People Who Are Homeless, A Study By Organic Intellectuals***  
 – online at: [www.vcn.bc.ca/~voice](http://www.vcn.bc.ca/~voice)

<b>Method</b>	<p>This study involved personal interviews and several workshops with a core group of 12 Organic Intellectuals over a four month period.</p> <p>The purpose of the workshops with the Organic Intellectuals was to discuss the existing literature on homelessness, review definitions of homelessness, develop a methodology for the interviews, identify themes to be addressed during the interviews, share experiences of the interview process, and discuss the policy implications of their findings.</p> <p>An Organic Intellectual is defined as someone whose knowledge is derived from firsthand experience, and supplemented through formal schooling or alternative educational resources. Part of being an organic intellectual is that these individuals use their intellectualism to help better the social condition/class from which they came, which in this case, is homelessness. This project sought a team of individuals who were homeless or had experienced homelessness in their lives and who had developed, through their life experiences, self-learning, and Humanities 101, analytical tools and the ability to understand and critique government policies, reports and academic work on homelessness.</p>
<b>Purpose</b>	The purpose of this project was to enable people who are homeless or were once homeless to review definitions and policies of homelessness for the purpose of critiquing and possibly redefining them, based on their analytical skills, experiences and interviews with other homeless people.
<b>Target Group</b>	A wide range of people who are homeless in various communities throughout BC, including the invisible homeless, children, men, women, individuals who have a physical or mental disability, people who have been through the criminal justice system, and people with addictions.
<b># Interviewed</b>	The team of Organic Intellectuals carried out interviews with approximately 200 individuals.
<b>Sampling method</b>	The Organic Intellectuals interviewed as many people as they could in a limited period of time. They interviewed all the homeless people they met who were willing to talk to them.
<b>Recruitment</b>	The Organic Intellectuals explained who they were and the nature of their project, and asked potential participants if they would be willing to talk with them.
<b>Location of interviews</b>	The Organic Intellectuals carried out their interviews on the streets, at shelters, drop-in centres, parks, hotels, and anywhere else they encountered homeless people. All these places were very effective. The Organic Intellectuals were able to conduct the interviews in places where people who are homeless are most comfortable.
<b>Interviewers</b>	The Organic Intellectuals carried out all the interviews.
<b>Length of interview</b>	The average interview took from 30-45 minutes. However, some took more and others took less time.

<b>Time of day</b>	Any time, day and night.
<b>Compensation</b>	The interviewees received between \$5 and \$15 depending on the length of the interview. The Organic Intellectuals received \$700 each for their work on this project to review the literature, attend group meetings (approximately 30 hours), conduct interviews outside the lower mainland (a 2-day period), conduct interviews in the lower mainland, and submit readable notes to team members responsible for writing-up the project.
<b>Budget</b>	The total budget for this project was \$50,000.
<b>Consent</b>	Each interviewee signed a release form.
<b>Questionnaire</b>	Interview questions focused on agreed-upon themes. There was no structured questionnaire or interview guide.
<b>Additional comments</b>	It is believed that both the interviewees and Organic Intellectuals should have been paid more for their services and experiences. Too often, the services and time of people who are homeless are undervalued because they are homeless. The professionals who study them may be paid 10 times as much. This is the type of situation that perpetuates homelessness. Unfortunately, this issue was not realized until it was too late.

**4) Morrell-Bellai, Tammy, Paula Goering, and Katherine Boydell, Becoming and Remaining Homeless: A Qualitative Investigation (2000)**

<b>Method</b>	This study used first person interviews to obtain qualitative information. A focus group was also used to help shape the research plan and questions.
<b>Purpose</b>	To explore the process of becoming homeless and the process of remaining homeless. This was the qualitative component of a large-scale study of the homeless population in Toronto.
<b>Target Group</b>	Homeless male and female adults in Toronto. There was a deliberate attempt to include both genders, various age groups, and both shelter users and avoiders. In addition, participants with specific characteristics were sometimes selected to facilitate further exploration of an emerging theme.
<b># Interviewed</b>	29 homeless individuals - The quantitative component of this study involved a representative sample of 300 adult shelter users (selected to match the more than 10,000 adults who stayed in shelters in 1995) and an additional 30 individuals who did not use shelters. Of these 330 individuals, 29 participated in an in-depth, semi-structured qualitative interview.
<b>Sampling method</b>	The 29 individuals were selected based on the need to include a broad range of participants (e.g. length of time homeless, gender, and ethnicity). Other factors included their comfort level in talking about, and ability to recall in detail, the events that occurred in the year prior to becoming homeless. It was felt that 29 interviews was a good number, because each interview provided 50-70 pages of rich text.
<b>Recruitment</b>	All the individuals who participated in the quantitative study were asked if they would be interested in participating in the qualitative interviews.
<b>Location of interviews</b>	
<b>Interviewers</b>	The authors carried out the interviews. All interviews were audio recorded.
<b>Length of interview</b>	

<b>Time of day</b>	
<b>Compensation</b>	Participants were paid \$15/interview. In addition, they were offered coffee and muffins.
<b>Budget</b>	
<b>Consent</b>	Participants signed a consent form for both the qualitative and quantitative parts of the study
<b>Questionnaire</b>	Questions focused on asking the participant to describe the series of events in the year prior to their becoming homeless that they felt had contributed to this eventuality.
<b>Additional comments</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus groups can be very helpful with designing the questionnaire.</li> <li>• It would be a good idea to hire people who have experienced homelessness to carry out the interviews. They know the “ins and outs” of the population and this would enhance the capacity of people who are homeless. However, the interviewers also need to have the necessary skills, and be compassionate, flexible, comfortable, and able to make the interview feel like a conversation.</li> <li>• It is important to provide an honorarium to participants – to acknowledge that their time has value.</li> </ul>

### 1.3 Focus groups

#### 5) Regional Homelessness Plan for Greater Vancouver, Input from People who are homeless/at risk (2001)

<b>Method</b>	This study involved focus groups with people who are homeless.
<b>Purpose</b>	To involve people who are homeless in the Regional Homelessness Plan for Greater Vancouver and provide an opportunity for them to review and comment on the Plan.
<b>Target Group</b>	People in Greater Vancouver who are homeless. This generally included the clients of the host agencies (shelters, drop-in and resource centres) who participated.
<b># Interviewed</b>	Eighteen focus groups were held with from 2-30 people per group
<b>Sampling method</b>	N/a
<b>Recruitment</b>	The Greater Vancouver Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness sent a letter to shelters, drop-ins and resource centres in Greater Vancouver asking them to “host” focus group sessions by providing the meeting space and inviting their clients to attend. The host agencies recruited participants.
<b>Location of interviews</b>	Focus groups were held on the premises of the host agencies (e.g. shelters, drop-ins and resource centres).
<b>Facilitators</b>	Most of the sessions were facilitated by staff from the host agencies. Members of the Steering Committee provided note-takers/recorders for each session.
<b>Length of focus group session</b>	Approximately one hour.
<b>Time of day</b>	Different times of the day and early evening.
<b>Compensation</b>	Food and refreshments were provided.
<b>Consent/ Privacy</b>	Facilitators asked all the participants to respect the personal privacy of others and not to repeat what they had heard. Facilitators were also asked to respect the confidentiality of the participants when reporting on the results of the

	sessions.
<b>Questionnaire</b>	
<b>Additional comments</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One hour may not be enough time to engage in in-depth discussion.</li> <li>• Would recommend that focus groups include 5-7 participants.</li> </ul>

#### 1.4 Testimonials/Personal stories

##### 6) National Coalition for the Homeless, the Homeless Voices project, United States

<b>Method</b>	The National Coalition for the Homeless (NCH) uses testimonials/personal stories to raise awareness about homelessness. These testimonials are available on the NCH web site ( <a href="http://www.nationalhomeless.org">www.nationalhomeless.org</a> ) as part of their Homeless Voices project. Testimonials are also an important part of the Faces of Homelessness Speakers program, which involves presentations by people who are or have been homeless. This program aims to educate the public about homelessness and what can be done to end it. The presentations provide an opportunity to personalize homeless, dispel stereotypes, and inspire hope by presenting the first-hand experience of the panelists, and allowing the general public to interact with these “experts” through question and answer periods and one-to-one discussions after the presentations. The written testimonials are handed out at the presentations, and are also a tool to help the presenters structure their stories.
<b>Purpose</b>	To recognize that homeless people themselves are the true experts in this field, to help break down stereotypes about people who are homeless, and to show that people who are homeless are capable of expressing themselves.
<b>Target Group</b>	Approximately half of the participants are homeless and half were homeless in the past.
<b># Interviewed</b>	N/a
<b>Sampling method</b>	N/a
<b>Location of interviews</b>	NCH staff travel throughout the United States and interview people who are homeless. Interviews may take place on the street or when people come into the NCH office.
<b>Recruitment</b>	Participants are recruited from shelters, service providers or directly from the street.
<b>Interviewers</b>	NCH staff
<b>Length of interview</b>	N/a
<b>Time of day</b>	N/a
<b>Compensation</b>	Speakers receive a \$20 honorarium.
<b>Consent</b>	There are no issues regarding confidentiality and privacy because the purpose of this project is for presenters to share their stories with others. Photographs are taken only with written permission
<b>Questionnaire</b>	Participants are given an interview guide which they may use to help them with their personal stories. NCH staff are also available to offer assistance in developing the presentation or testimonial. (See attached Appendix B)
<b>Additional comments</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The personal connection is very important and powerful. For example, people will remember an anecdote by someone talking about how he felt</li> </ul>

	<p>looking in the phone book and finding his name – something we can all relate to.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The personal connection can have a huge impact on making people care about homelessness and want to do something about it. It can change the way people respond to homelessness in everyday life.</li> </ul>
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### 7) Calgary Drop-In Centre, No Fixed Address: Tales From the Street (2001)

<b>Method</b>	This project involved in-depth interviews to prepare a book of personal stories of people from the streets of Calgary. This method was chosen to put a face on homelessness, and to make it as personal as possible. There have been lots of statistical reports on homelessness, but the goal was to take a visceral approach.
<b>Purpose</b>	The purpose of this book was to put a personal face on homelessness and provide some understanding of the breadth of the situations that led people to become homeless. There are many causes, and it is hoped that by telling peoples' stories, the book will help educate the public and dispel some of the myths about people who are homeless. The book provides insight as to how the people got into their situations and "allows the reader to stand in their shoes for a few minutes". This book was published by the Calgary Drop-In Centre to raise awareness and funds for a new all-purpose facility.
<b>Target Group</b>	Homeless individuals who used the Calgary Drop-In Centre. The goal was to include people who would show the diversity of the homeless population.
<b># Interviewed</b>	This book includes testimonials from 19 individuals with diverse backgrounds who were living on the streets of Calgary.
<b>Sampling method</b>	N/a
<b>Recruitment</b>	The author put up a notice at the Drop-In Centre and some of the staff approached people they thought would be interested. The author also volunteered at the Drop-In. She got to know people and asked them to participate. Information about the project was also spread by word-of-mouth, and more people came forward to tell their stories.
<b>Location of interviews</b>	Several interviews were conducted at the Calgary Drop-in Centre. Many of the older people felt more comfortable there. Other interviews took place in coffee shops and restaurants. The author also went bottle-picking with two individuals. This proved to be a significant event that helped break the ice and build trust.
<b>Interviewers</b>	The interviews were conducted by Susan Scott, a journalist formerly with the Calgary Herald. She volunteered in the Drop-In Centre a few nights a week for close to 2 years. This was an important factor in gaining the trust of the participants. They understood that she was an OK person who wouldn't exploit them.
<b>Length of interview</b>	1.5 hours or longer.
<b>Time of day</b>	Interviews were generally done in the evenings, however, a few participants requested other times and places.
<b>Compensation</b>	Participants did not receive financial compensation. However, if they chose to be interviewed in a coffee shop or restaurant, the author paid for the

	refreshment or meal.
<b>Budget</b>	The research took place over a period of 18 months. It was quite labour intensive - 2-3 hours per night, 2-3 times/week. Time was also spent double and triple checking the information.
<b>Consent</b>	Initially, the authors planned to take pictures of all the participants. However, they became concerned about what could happen if their identities were revealed. Although all the participants signed a consent form, in some cases the authors decided not to use real names or include a photograph. Decisions were made in consultation with staff at the Drop-In Centre. Great care was taken to protect the participants and to decide which photographs should be used or not. The long term good of the participant was paramount, and most photos were not included. However, one woman's name and photo were used, and her story led to a family reconciliation. See attached Appendix B.
<b>Questionnaire</b>	There was no set of questions. Each interview was different. The goal was to help the participants feel comfortable talking and telling their stories. An attempt was made to use a chronological approach as a framework. However, flexibility was very important.
<b>Additional comments</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The author wishes there was another chapter in the book about trends or common threads – something the subjects couldn't put their fingers on but that became evident from all the stories. One of these trends would have been the lack of support in times of crisis.</li> <li>• It is important to listen to what the participants want to say rather than just listen to what you want to hear for your project.</li> </ul>

### 1.5 Interviews, focus groups and testimonials

#### 8) City of Toronto, Homeless Voices (1998)

<b>Method</b>	This study involved a combination of methods to obtain first hand information from people who were homeless. These include interviews with homeless people, interviews with staff working in agencies that provide services to homeless people, focus group discussions with homeless people held in drop-in centres and emergency shelters; and commissioning 20 homeless people to write personal stories based on their first hand experiences of being homeless in Toronto.
<b>Purpose</b>	To update a previous report, <i>Homeless Not Helpless</i> , and understand the ways in which the experience of homelessness in Toronto had changed over the past 8 years. The purpose of the original report was to obtain input from homeless people for the City of Toronto's public planning process and to inform public policy.
<b>Target Group</b>	A cross section of homeless males and females including those who used shelters and those who slept outside.
<b># Interviewed</b>	In total, the authors spoke with over 150 homeless people and over 20 staff from agencies working with homeless people.

<b>Sampling issues</b>	The number of participants was based on the time and resources available. It is difficult to get a random sample. It is important to determine what categories are important (e.g. age, gender and ethnicity) and select people based on that criteria.
<b>Recruitment</b>	Notice for the focus group meetings was provided at the drop-in centres. The interviewers went to drop-in centres to recruit people interested in providing testimonials. The interviewers provided a note book, asked the individuals to write their stories, and said they would meet them in two weeks. Participants were told they would be paid upon receipt of their testimonials.
<b>Location of interviews</b>	Wherever homeless people slept or hung out.
<b>Interviewers</b>	The authors for the study – both of whom have a great deal of experience working with people who are homeless. In addition, the authors often hire homeless people to do interviews and focus groups.
<b>Length of interview</b>	The focus groups were no more than 1 hour.
<b>Time of day</b>	Interviews and focus group meetings held at drop-in centres occurred during the day. Interviews on the streets were done in the evenings and on weekends.
<b>Compensation</b>	Participants were paid \$50 for each testimonial and are usually paid \$20 per interview or focus group.
<b>Budget</b>	The research budget for this project was about \$10,000.
<b>Consent</b>	The interviewers informed the individuals that the information would be strictly confidential and all names would be changed.
<b>Questionnaire</b>	N/a
<b>Additional comments</b>	Factors for success include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make sure the interviewers are experienced and comfortable with the work</li> <li>• Make the participants feel comfortable</li> <li>• Be patient</li> <li>• Guarantee confidentiality</li> </ul>



## **Part B. Additional information**

The purpose of this research is to learn more about the causes of homelessness, about what might be done to prevent people from becoming homeless, and about what people need to get and keep affordable housing. One of the goals is for this information to be used to help shape government policies and programs.

Some important points about this research are that:

- Your participation is entirely voluntary
- We will not ask you your name, so your identity will be anonymous
- You can choose not to answer any question or can stop the interview at any time
- Your participation does not affect your use of services in any way
- Your interview will be kept confidential with the exception of myself and... working under the direction of [name of project sponsor]. All notes from your interview will be stored securely at the [project sponsor's office] for one year and then disposed of.

Your verbal agreement to participate indicates that:

- You have read this letter describing the research project and procedures, or it has been read to you
- You have considered the information
- You understand that your agreement to participate in this research is voluntary.

**PART II. DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION**

<p>I'm going to start by asking you a few simple questions about your age and background. We are asking everyone these questions so we can describe the range of different people we interviewed in our study. We are not going to ask you your name, so the information will be anonymous.</p>	
1. Gender	<p>Male Female</p>
2. Age – What year were you born in? OR How old are you?	<p>Year of birth Age at time of study</p>
3. What is your ethnic background or nationality?	<p>Probe for interviewer:  Caucasian Aboriginal (staus/non-status) Asian Other_____</p>
4. What is your first language?	<p>Probe for interviewer:  English Other_____</p>
5. Where did you spend most of your time growing up?	<p>Probe for interviewer:  City/town_____ Region_____ Province_____ Country_____</p>
6. How long have you lived in Vancouver (or in municipality where the study is taking place)	
7. Where did you live before that?	<p>Probe for interviewer:  City/town_____ Region_____ Province_____ Country_____</p>

**PART III. QUESTIONS – People who are homeless**

**A. Current living situation**

I am now going to ask you some questions about your current living and sleeping situation.

1. Where did you stay/sleep last night?

*Probe: In a shelter, outside somewhere, inside at a friend’s place, other\_\_\_\_\_*

2. How long have you been staying there?

*Probe: A few nights? A few weeks? Longer?*

3. When was the last time you had a permanent address (stayed in one place for 6 months or more)?

*Probe: How long ago?*

4. What type of housing were you living?

*Probe: Apartment? House? Room?*

5. Did you live there alone or were you sharing?

6. Were you staying for free or did you pay rent?

7. How long did you live there?

8. Tell me a bit more about your life at that time?

*Probe: Did you have a job?*

*Were you in school?*

*Source of income?*

**B. Causes of homelessness**

9. Tell us what happened – what were the circumstances that led to your moving out?

*Probe: (e.g. Couldn’t afford the rent, evicted, relationship ended, housing condemned, issues with landlord, other...)*

10. Then what happened - how did you end up on the street?

*Probe: What happened?*

11. Have there been other times in your life when you didn't have a place to live – homeless? If yes, tell me about it.

*Probe: How long ago?*

*How long was it before you found a place to stay?*

*Where did you find to live?*

12. What would you say is the main/biggest reason why you don't have a place of your own to live in right now?

13. Can you think of any other reasons why?

*Probe: Examples might include issues with landlord, lack of housing, low income, lack of support networks, lack of references, discrimination....*

14. Are there any factors related to your health or lifestyle that are or have affected your housing situation?

Ask about:

- Physical health - describe
- Mental health - describe
- Addictions – describe
- Other - describe

### **C. Prevention**

15. Did you go to anyone for help or advice before you lost your housing? If yes, what did they do?

16. Is there anything that anyone could have done to help you keep your place?

17. When you first lost your housing, is there anything that could have been done to help you **get another** place to live?

**D. Help now**

18. Since you have been on the street, has anyone helped or tried to help you:

- a) Get a place to live? If yes, who and what happened?
- b) With income assistance? If yes, who and what happened?
- c) Other kind of assistance? If yes, who and what happened?

19. What kind of services do you think would help you right now?

20. What would you say are some of the barriers/hassles that keep you from getting these services?

**E. Services or other type of help needed/wanted**

21. If you had some choices of the type of housing where you could live right now, what would you choose?

*Probe: Would you want to stay where you are? Move inside?*

*Probe: Would you want your own apartment with a private kitchen and bathroom?*

*Shared housing? Place where meals are provided?*

*Places that have full or part-time support staff?*

*Places where it is OK to use drugs and alcohol? Places where no drugs or alcohol are permitted?*

22. What would you need to get the housing you want?

*Probe: This could be something new - it doesn't have to be something that already exists*

23. If you had housing, what do you think would help you KEEP it?

24. If you were to get housing, is there anything you would miss about your current life? Explain.....

**F. Background**

I have just a few last personal questions.

25. To the best of your memory, how often did you or you and your family move when you were growing up. Do you think it was:

1 or 2 times      3-5 times      6-10 times      more than 10 times

26. Were you ever in foster care as a child?      Yes      No

27. What is the last grade of school that you completed?

28. Are you single, in a relationship (married or common law), separated or divorced?

Single    Married or Common Law    Separated    Divorced

29. Do you have any children?    Yes    No

30. Do you have any pets?    Yes    No

**G.    Reporting back**

31. We are wondering if people we interview would be interested in attending a follow-up meeting to discuss the results of the interviews. If this were an option, would you be interested in attending some type of follow-up meeting?

Yes    No

32. If there were to be a follow-up meeting, would you prefer to:

- a)    Have a private meeting with the other people who were interviewed or
- b)    Participate in a meeting that would include government representatives, service providers, and other people who are homeless or formerly homeless?

Thank you very much for your time

***Pay honorarium***

---

Signature of interviewer to confirm that honorarium was paid

Ask if any comments about the interview process/questions

**H.    Interview and Note-Taker Comments**

Record observations, thoughts, impressions, or questions arising from the interview.

**PART III. QUESTIONS – People who are formerly homeless**

**A. Current living situation**

1. I would like to know about where you currently live. (Reminder that all answers will be strictly confidential).

a) What kind of housing do you have?

Probe for interviewer:

In a non-profit building

Apartment in a building with a private landlord

Room in the main part of a house

Basement suite in a house

Single room occupancy hotel

Other. Please specify \_\_\_\_\_

b) Do you have your own place to live or do you share with other people?

share                      have own place

2. How long have you been living there?

3. Where did you live before that?

**B. Time when homeless**

I appreciate that this may have been a difficult period in your life, but would like to ask you about the time when you did not have your own fixed address and were homeless.

3. How long were without your own fixed address or homeless?

*Probe: Days? Weeks? Months? Years?*

4. During that time, where did you stay most of the time?

*Probe: Shelters? Outside? Abandoned buildings? Couch surfing? Other*

**C. Causes of homelessness**

5. Where were you living before you became homeless? What type of housing was it?

*Probe: Apartment? House? Room? Other?*

6. Did you live there alone or with others?
7. I know that this is personal, but in our study, we are trying to learn more about some of the causes of homelessness. We would appreciate if you would tell us how you lost your housing - what happened – what were the circumstances that led to your moving out?

*Probe: (e.g. Couldn't afford the rent, evicted, relationship ended, housing condemned, issues with landlord, other.....)*

8. Then what happened? How did you end up on the street?

*Probe: What happened?*

9. What would you say were the main reasons why you became homeless?

*Probe: Were there any other reasons?*

*Examples might include issues with landlord, lack of housing, low income, lack of support networks, discrimination.*

10. Were there any factors related to your health or lifestyle that were a cause of your homelessness?

Ask about:

- Physical health - describe
- Mental health - describe
- Addictions - describe
- Other - describe

#### **D. Prevention**

11. Did you go to anyone for help or advice before you lost your housing? If yes, what did they do?
12. Is there anything that might have helped you to keep the last permanent housing you had? Anything anyone could have done to help you?
13. Did you go to anyone for help or advice *immediately* after you lost your housing? If yes, what did they do?
14. Is there anything that could have been done to help you get another place to live at that time?

*Probe: Is there anything that you wish could have been done to help you at that time?*

**E. Moving Back Into Housing**

15. During the time when you didn't have your own place, did anyone help or try to help you:

- a) Get a place to live? If yes, who and what happened?
- b) With income assistance? If yes, who and what happened?
- d) Other kind of assistance? If yes, who and what happened?

16. What kind of services do you think would have helped you at that time?

17. What would you say were some of the barriers/hassles that prevented you from getting these services?

18. Looking back, what were the things about being homeless that kept you there?

19. What were the factors that helped you find stable housing?

*Probe: Did something specific happen?  
What was the turning point?  
Did you get any help?  
What type of help?  
Where did this help come from? Who from?*

20. Looking back, was there anything that could have made it possible for you to get your own place sooner?

*Probe: If yes, what?*

21. Did you try to get your own place more than once?

*Probe: If yes, what caused you to return to the street?*

22. What was the hardest thing about getting off the street?

**F. Services or other type of help needed/wanted**

23. What would you say are the most important things that you needed to be able to get off and stay off the street? (Probe for 3 things?)

24. Once you got housing, what would you say are the most important things you need to be able to keep it?

25. How would you describe your life now that you have permanent housing?

*Probe: Working? School? Arts? Music?*

## **G. Background**

I have just a few last personal questions.

26. To the best of your memory, how often did you or you and your family move when you were growing up. Do you think it was:

1 or 2 times      3-5 times      6-10 times      more than 10 times

27. Were you ever in foster care as a child?

28. What is the last grade of school that you completed?

29. Are you single, in a relationship (married or common law), separated or divorced?

Single      Married or Common Law      Separated      Divorced

30. Do you have any children?    Yes    No

31. Do you have any pets?    Yes    No

## **H. Reporting back**

32. We are wondering if people we interview (not for this study but in the future) would be interested in attending a follow-up meeting to discuss the results of the interviews. If this were an option, would you be interested in attending some type of follow-up meeting?

Yes      No

33. If there were to be a follow-up meeting, would you prefer to:

- a) Have a private meeting with the other people who were interviewed or
- b) Participate in a meeting that would include government representatives, service providers, and other people who are homeless or formerly homeless?

### ***Pay honorarium***

---

Signature of interviewer to confirm that honorarium was paid

Ask if any comments about the interview process/questions

Thank you very much for your time

## **I. Interview and Note-Taker Comments**

Record observations, thoughts, impressions, or questions arising from the interview.