

# Housing Needs In Western Newfoundland

Amanda Asiamah, Abdul-Rasheed Abubakari Ature, Abigail Oppong, Leanna Butters, Kelly Vodden, Stephen Decker

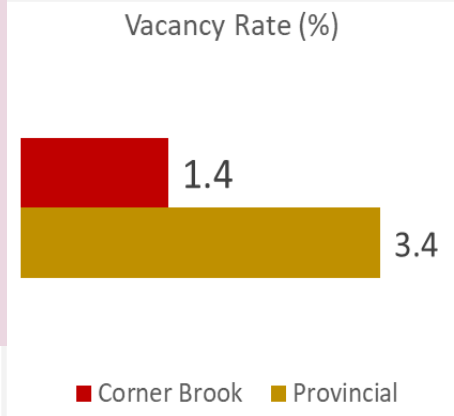
## About this Study

*Quantifying Housing Needs in Western Newfoundland* was a collaborative project with a focus on Corner Brook, the Bay of Islands (BOI), and the Humber Valley regions of western Newfoundland. The research took place from early 2020 until April 2022. The study sought to update existing data around rental housing and homelessness including highlighting trends in demographics, housing characteristics, and housing experiences that should be addressed to better support residents. This was accomplished using a mixed-method approach involving literature and secondary data review, a tenant survey (109 respondents), a landlord survey (40 respondents), a service-based count, a Town Hall session, and key informant discussions.



## Vacancy Rate and Tenant Mobility

Corner Brook had a vacancy rate of 1.4% in 2021 [CMHC, 2021], which is lower than the provincial vacancy rate of 3.4%. This means that it is more difficult to find a rental unit in Corner Brook than elsewhere in the province. According to landlords', 50% of rental units were vacant for less than one month in a given year. Many tenants in western Newfoundland also did not move much in 2020-21 (50% did not move at all), possibly due to the impacts of Covid-19.



## Tenants' Access to Essential Services

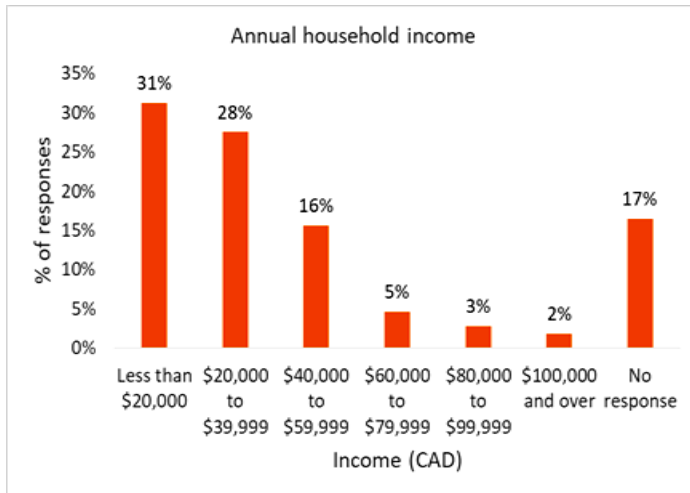
Most tenants noted that they lived in close proximity to grocery stores (87%), parks and green spaces (85%), and recreational facilities (79%). Many, however, indicated not having access to public transportation (59%) (especially in Deer Lake). Renters in Corner Brook and the BOI had more access to medical services compared to Deer Lake and Pasadena. Laundromat services were also more accessible in Corner Brook and the BOI than in Deer Lake and Pasadena.

## Tenant Wellbeing

The highest number of tenants rated their health as very good (27%), excellent (21%) and fair (18%). For mental health, the highest number of tenants indicated that their mental health was good (27%), excellent (18%) and very good (18%). In terms of stress levels, the highest number of respondents selected a bit stressful (25%), quite a bit stressful (22%) or not very stressful (21%). How rental housing-related experiences factor into tenant wellbeing is an important question for future research.

## Core Housing Need

This study found that there is not enough affordable housing in western Newfoundland to meet the demand, including for low-income earners and the post-secondary student population.



In total, 44% of tenants were experiencing core housing need due to housing not being affordable and/or adequate. In terms of affordability, 31% of tenants spent more than 30% of their monthly before-tax income on housing. However, this number could be higher.

The average cost of rent and utilities per month in western Newfoundland is \$951.25 and the majority (59%) of households surveyed earned less than \$40,000 per year (about \$3171.75 per month). This means that the average cost of housing and utilities is more than 30% of these tenants' household income before tax. Many tenants (57%) did have assistance paying their rent, mainly from a spouse or common law partner (27%) followed by income support (9%) or a roommate (8%).

With regards to adequacy, most rental units were in good condition and only needed regular maintenance (74%). Also, 91% of rentals had no signs of rats or mice, 70% had no mold or mildew, and 93% had no broken glass that could cause injury. However, 13% of units were in need of major repairs, meaning that they did not meet the adequacy standard.

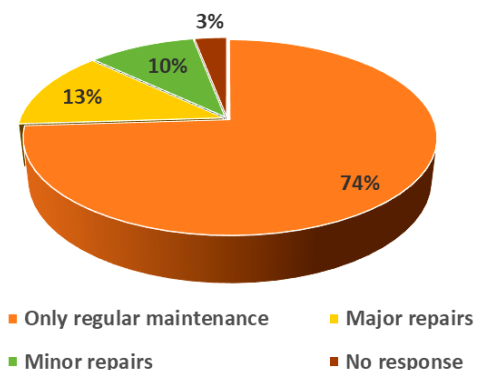


The majority of respondents (56%) paid between \$501 and \$900 in rent each month. The highest number of respondents (31%) in the Corner Brook and the BOI region paid between \$701-900 per month for their rentals, whereas 50% respondents in Pasadena and Deer Lake most often paid between \$501-700 per month in rent. The average household income in Pasadena and Deer Lake, however, tended to be higher than in Corner Brook and the BOI, meaning that tenants were more likely to have lower incomes and pay more for their rental unit if they lived in Corner Brook and the BOI. Affordable rentals may be easier to find outside of Corner Brook but if an individual rents housing outside of Corner Brook, they likely need access to a personal vehicle in order to travel to key services available in Corner Brook, adding to their cost of living.

## What do we mean by 'core housing need'?

*A household is said to be in 'core housing need' if its housing falls below at least one of the adequacy, affordability, or suitability standards and the household would have to spend 30% or more of its before-tax income to access acceptable local housing. (CMHC, 2019)*

Adequacy of rental units



## Homelessness

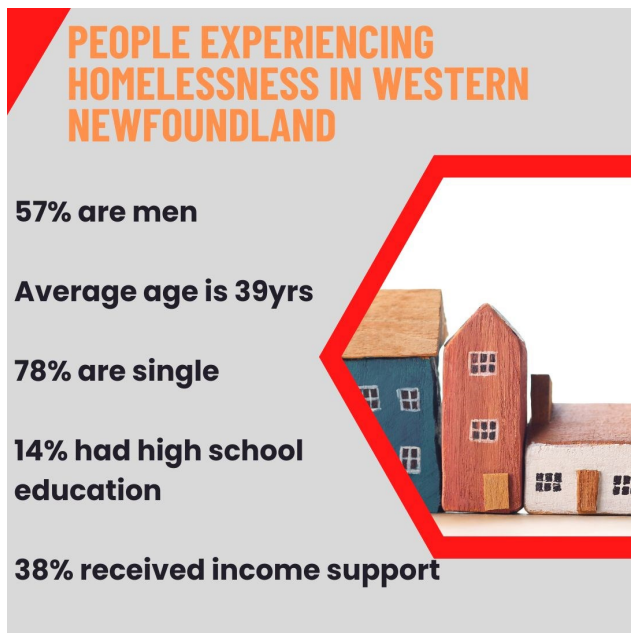
Homelessness is a challenge in western Newfoundland, but it is mainly hidden. Our service-based count identified 51 individuals experiencing homelessness or at risk of becoming homeless. The majority (80%) were sheltered but living in temporary places (including in shelters, transitional housing, with family members, with friends, or in short-term temporary rentals) or in institutional care. The remaining 20% were unsheltered, living in public/outdoor spaces, in vehicles, and in abandoned/vacant buildings.

Homeless persons were identified in all age categories (from 16-18 years of age to 65 years and older), but especially in the 19-24 (16%) and 30-39 (14%) age ranges. Most homeless persons were single (78%) and identified as male (57%). Income support was the highest source of income (38%) followed by employment insurance (15%).

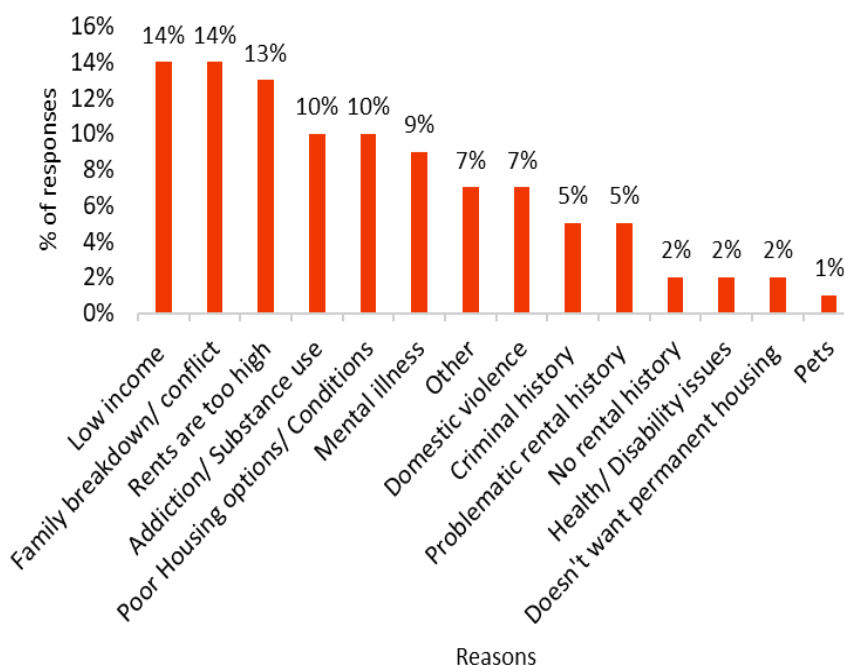
Several homeless persons had high school (14%) or college/university-level education (8%), though the educational attainment of most was unknown to service providers. As to why these individuals were experiencing homelessness, the reasons selected most often were low income (14%), family breakdown/conflict (14%), the high cost of rent (13%), addiction/substance use issues (10%) and poor housing options/conditions (10%).

Homelessness- "A situation of an individual or family without stable, permanent, appropriate housing, or the immediate prospect, means, and ability to acquire it".

*Gaetz et al. (2012)*



Reasons accounting for clients losing housing



## Service Gaps

Service providers noted that the demand for services such as shelter housing, public housing, supportive living, and mental health services exceeded their current capacities. While there are funding programs available to start new initiatives, concerns were voiced about applications being too bureaucratic/ complicated.

Inadequate access to health services, like family doctors, have implications for access to housing supports. For example, some vulnerable persons with no family doctors have found it challenging to get required notes to confirm special needs/mental illnesses in order to avail of necessary support services. A low number of shelter

beds for men, low awareness of existing housing support programs, and communication gaps (for instance, between service providers of different types like government agencies and NGOs) also emerged.



## Highlights from the Town Hall

- Service providers highlighted that the cost of housing is expensive and that there is not enough affordable and accessible housing available in the region. The challenges they noted include: low income support rates that don't match the cost of living; stigma around renting to individuals with mental health challenges or on income support; inadequate public housing; landlord rental restrictions; not enough wheelchair accessible housing; and concern that the inspection of rental properties locally is not adequate.
- Covid-19 was seen as a curse and a blessing at the same time. During the pandemic, tenants were encouraged to shelter in place due to covid-19 restrictions, meaning that tenants did not move as often and their units remained unavailable. At the same time, service providers noted that the availability of affordable housing actually increased for a time because students were not able to come to Corner Brook (reducing competition).
- Collaboration between local service providers (including non-profit organizations, health authorities, and municipalities, etc.) and new funding opportunities have allowed service providers to better cater for the needs of their clientele.
- In order to address housing challenges, service providers recommended: an increase in income support rates; more shelter spaces (including for men); providing assistance to landlords to avail of programs available through Western Health and others; more direct-funding programs to assist with emergency housing needs; and increased publicity for existing housing programs and services (for example, provincial organizations could better publicize available supports and address bureaucratic and communication barriers around funding applications).



## Next Steps? (Recommendations)

- Income support rates are not meeting the needs of residents most in need. As such, there is a need to revisit the Income and Employment Support Act and consider effective engagement with those in need to better understand and address support shortcomings.
- There is a need to increase the number of public housing units, particularly those that accommodate individuals and small families.
- Increasing residence spaces at Grenfell Campus, Memorial University could help reduce pressure on rental housing stock in western Newfoundland communities.
- Incorporating universally accessible design guidelines into new-builds (e.g. creating new municipal policies/regulations, information campaigns) could help improve the proportion of accessible housing available.
- Continuing to invest resources in local service providers to increase capacity to expand services and their effectiveness in their region.
- For this study, information on homeless persons were collected passively. Future research should consider the need to gather information directly from the clients of service providers. There is also the need to repeat this study overtime to monitor changes in need and efficacy of strategies implemented.

*For more information about this study, please contact:*

Kelly Vodden (Grenfell Campus),  
kvodden@grenfell.mun.ca (709-639-2703)

Jade Kearley (CMHI),  
cmhi.iac@gmail.com (709-634-4117)