

# research snapshot

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## Homelessness Leads to Poor Health in York Region

### What is this research about?

A growing number of reports show that people who are homeless or at-risk of becoming homeless in Toronto have poorer health than the rest of the population. The ability to maintain health in suburban and rural areas such as York Region can be a particular problem. However, there are few studies that document the health-related challenges of homeless and at-risk people in York Region.

### What did the researcher do?

A researcher at the York Region Alliance to End Homelessness set out to get a better sense of the health needs of homeless and at-risk people in York Region. She surveyed frontline staff at a number of local agencies that may deal with homeless and at-risk people. The York Institute for Health Research at York University helped analyze the data.

### What did the researcher find?

A majority of frontline workers said that the physical and mental health of most homeless and at-risk people is either fair or poor. Homeless and at-risk people who do seek healthcare support often face a stigma that causes them to feel disrespected or unfairly judged by healthcare professionals. Tobacco and alcohol use are very common. One of the greatest challenges faced by homeless women

### What you need to know:

Social assistance reforms have tried to combat unemployment and poverty by tying welfare benefits to labour. However, welfare-to-work programs offer little gain for parents who have to balance between work and caregiving demands.

is the high cost of pads and tampons and difficulty accessing pregnancy tests.

Dental and eye care are a particular concern. Two thirds of those frontline workers surveyed reported that the health of their clients' teeth and mouth were either poor or fair. Women, newcomers, and youth were the least likely to have seen a dentist in the past year. Slightly more than half of participants said that their clients were not likely to have had an eye exam in the past year, with newcomers and youth being the least likely. The two most common reasons why homeless and at-risk people haven't had dental or eye exams is: (1) lack of coverage, and (2) expense. Despite the high frequency of pain or discomfort that many homeless and at-risk people experience in their teeth or gums, most aren't able to access the dental care they need.

Mental health conditions may be under-diagnosed among homeless and at-risk people in York Region. Stress and social isolation are widespread. So, too, are suicidal thoughts, especially among homeless

and at-risk youth. The ability to access social networks has an impact on physical and mental health. Social isolation needs to be reduced.

### How can you use this research?

The most urgently identified but lacking supports and resources for homeless and at-risk people in York Region include dental care, a detoxification clinic, nurse practitioners, and eye care. Most frontline workers would like to see a mobile, rotating location health resource. The most frequently suggested sites for a central hub are: Georgina, Richmond Hill, and Newmarket. In general, there need to be more smoking and alcohol treatment programs geared toward homeless and at-risk people in York Region.

The York Region Alliance to End Homelessness should build and strengthen relationships with local healthcare professionals and providers. It should also explore partnerships and funding opportunities through the Central Local Health Integration Network (Central LHIN). It needs to develop safe social spaces where homeless and at-risk people can connect up. It needs to develop a strategy to ensure that homeless and at-risk people get access to feminine hygiene products, pregnancy tests, and other resources. It needs to encourage local agencies to allow frontline staff to take part in suicide prevention and self-care training workshops. More direct research is needed on the health of homeless and at-risk people in York Region.

### About the Researcher

Carolyn Mooi, MPH is Community Development Coordinator at the York Region Alliance to End Homelessness. The Alliance is a coalition of social service agencies and other stakeholders that work collaboratively to facilitate collaborative solutions to issues of homelessness and poverty in York Region.

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### Keywords

Homelessness, York Region, At-risk, Healthcare, Dental health, Mental health

### Knowledge Mobilization at York

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