

THE DISTINCT HOUSING NEEDS OF RURAL COMMUNITIES

There is no clear definition on what is considered rural or small town, and definitions vary by province or data source.

We drew from the Federation of Canadian Municipalities' definition and distinguish between urban areas as areas categorized by Statistics Canada as part of a census metropolitan area (CMA), and rural areas and small towns as areas that are not categorized as part of a CMA. CMAs are areas with a population of at least 100,000 and a core population at least 50,000 or more.³ This includes a diverse range of communities, from remote communities to smaller towns and cities.

Rural communities also face issues with housing need. However, there is significantly less research or data on the extent of this need. This is partly because homelessness and housing insecurity are less visible in rural areas.¹ It is exacerbated by an existing lack of services, forcing households in need of assistance to move to urban areas.²

What makes rural and small-town communities unique?

Rural areas:

- Are **older and growing more slowly** than urban areas in Canada and face distinct pressures, including housing need.⁴
- **Primarily consist of single-detached owned housing**, with little to no multi-unit housing, and many rural communities **face barriers to increase the supply** of low-cost, multi-unit housing.⁵
- **Often do not have a robust system of social assistance** to address issues such as homelessness or housing need.⁶ Government funding often follows population-based patterns, with more money given to shelters and housing services in urban centres.⁷

Rural areas close to boom-and-bust industries (e.g., oil and gas) face additional pressures on housing supply, availability of rental units, in- and out-migration, and underdeveloped social infrastructure to respond to changing housing need.⁸

Rural areas often do not have a robust system of social assistance to address issues such as homelessness or housing need.

What kind of community opposition do rural communities experience?

Acknowledging that housing need and homelessness exist appears to be the main distinct form of community opposition.

Housing need and homelessness are often seen as urban issues.

As Waegemakers, Schiff and Turner write, "The existence of homelessness counters the mythology of idyllic small-town living, thus it takes more to bring it to the surface as a priority issue."¹⁰

Because the issue is hidden, it is more **difficult to obtain accurate counts of those in need of housing, obtain funding, or find solutions** for rural households.¹¹

There is often no land appropriately zoned for multi-unit housing, affordable housing, or emergency shelters.¹² This is a barrier in and of itself. It also means that affordable housing developments have to go to public hearings, which is the most likely time that developments face community opposition.

Community opposition in rural communities share many similarities with urban communities including concerns for increased traffic, property values, and changes to community character.

There are also distinct reasons for opposition in rural communities, as rural communities are unique in their populations, housing stock, funding, and awareness of the need for affordable housing.⁹

Example:

Wetaskiwin is a small city in rural Alberta with a population of approximately 13,000. In November 2020, the City's Emergency Advisory Committee declared a state of local emergency to "provide Wetaskiwin and area's vulnerable humans with immediate access to shelter and integrated supports." This State of Local Emergency was initiated to be able to use civic buildings to support those experiencing homelessness as the city did not have a permanent emergency shelter.¹³

In May 2021, Wetaskiwin City Council voted to terminate the lease agreement with Open Doors at the Civic Building after receiving numerous complaints from community members.¹⁴

The group running the emergency shelter had found a permanent space earlier in the year but experienced community opposition on the grounds that the property was not adequately zoned for the use and were concerned that amendments to the land use bylaw were unlikely to be approved to allow for a shelter.¹⁵

As of July 2021, The Hub had not found a new space but has transitioned to an outreach model of support.¹⁶

How can housing providers respond to community opposition in rural and small towns?

1. Collect better data on housing need.

The lack of data on rural homelessness and housing need impedes a clear understanding of the complexity and specificity of this issue and is a barrier to implementing programs and developments aimed at creating affordable housing.¹⁷

Addressing housing needs requires a level of coordination and service planning that many rural areas are not equipped for and need further government support to achieve.

Collecting better data on housing needs and raising awareness can help rural communities partner with other governments to meet their housing needs.

It is difficult to obtain data on the number of individuals or households experiencing homelessness or housing issues in rural communities, as traditional approaches for collecting this data in urban areas (such as counts from shelters and service providers or waitlist data for affordable housing) do not translate to rural environments where these services are lacking in the first place.¹⁸

2. Raise awareness for the need for affordable housing.

Awareness:

- **informs** decisions to allocate funding for these projects,
- **reduces** the stigma about people who need affordable housing,
- **combats** stereotypes about affordable housing, and
- **supports** advocacy and partnerships with all levels of government.

Example:

Morinville is a town of approximately 10,000 people located about 35 km north of Edmonton. In 2008, the Town of Morinville completed an assessment of the housing needs of the community, indicating the need for more affordable housing. In 2009, the Town Council approved the Community Housing Plan which outlined housing targets for the community, including developing affordable housing.¹⁹

In February 2021, Morinville's first affordable housing complex opened in the town, featuring 40 units in a mix of one- to three-bedroom layouts and using a net zero design, and with support from the provincial and federal government.²⁰ In an article on the development, Mayor Barry Turner said, "This development will make Morinville a more inclusive community where people will no longer have to leave town simply to find a home they can afford."²¹

¹ Alberta Rural Development Network, "Rural Homelessness Estimation Project: Provincial Report"; Bruce, *Housing Needs of Low-Income People Living in Rural Areas*.

² Waegemakers Schiff, Schiff, and Turner, "Rural Homelessness in Western Canada."

³ FCM, "Rural Challenges, National Opportunity: Shaping the Future of Rural Canada."

⁴ FCM.

⁵ Bruce, *Housing Needs of Low-Income People Living in Rural Areas*; Nesbitt, "Affordable Housing and NIMBYism: Urban, Suburban, and Rural Strategies."

⁶ Waegemakers Schiff et al., "Rural Homelessness in Canada"; Waegemakers Schiff and Turner, "Housing First in Rural Canada."

⁷ Groening et al., *Housing Needs of Indigenous Women Leaving Intimate Partner Violence in Northern Communities*; Waegemakers Schiff et al., "Rural Homelessness in Canada."

⁸ Bruce, *Housing Needs of Low-Income People Living in Rural Areas*; Waegemakers Schiff, Schiff, and Turner, "Rural Homelessness in Western Canada."

⁹ Nesbitt, "Affordable Housing and NIMBYism: Urban, Suburban, and Rural Strategies."

¹⁰ Waegemakers Schiff and Turner, "Housing First in Rural Canada.", p.18

¹¹ Groening et al., *Housing Needs of Indigenous Women Leaving Intimate Partner Violence in Northern Communities*.

¹² Bruce, *Housing Needs of Low-Income People Living in Rural Areas*; Nesbitt, "Affordable Housing and NIMBYism: Urban, Suburban, and Rural Strategies."

¹³ City of Wetaskiwin, "Wetaskiwin Declares State of Local Emergency to Provide Immediate Assistance to Vulnerable Humans in Wetaskiwin and Area."

¹⁴ McEwan, "'Monumental Concerns': City of Wetaskiwin Revokes Use of Building as Homeless Shelter."

¹⁵ Max, "Open Door given 90 Days to Relocate."

¹⁶ Dansereau, "Wetaskiwin Hub Moving to Outreach Model Following Revoked Lease to the Civic Building."

¹⁷ Waegemakers Schiff, Schiff, and Turner, "Rural Homelessness in Western Canada."

¹⁸ Alberta Rural Development Network, "Step-by-Step Guide to Estimating Rural Homelessness"; Waegemakers Schiff et al., "Rural Homelessness in Canada."

¹⁹ Town of Morinville, "Community Housing Plan."

²⁰ Morinville Online, "Morinville Affordable Housing Project Now Open."

²¹ Ma, "Paul Krauskopf Court Opens for Residents."