

5 WAYS DATA MADE A DIFFERENCE IN RESPONDING TO HOMELESSNESS



Gord Tanner
General Manager
Toronto Shelter & Support Services

WHAT WE'VE LEARNED FROM THE DATA

Over 25 years working within Toronto's homelessness system, one pattern stands out:

When we changed how we used data,
we changed how we responded.

This talk shares five moments where that shift made a difference.



When you hear “Homelessness Data,” what is the first word that comes to mind?

WELLESLEY CENTRAL HEALTH BUS

1990s



Outreach program of Wellesley Central Hospital



Low barrier access to health care service for individuals who face barriers



Volunteer and community nurses and outreach workers



Harm reduction supplies, socks & vitamins



2005

STREETS TO HOMES

BEFORE

- Fragmented responses across divisions
- People moved along, not supported
- ~100 people sleeping at Nathan Phillips Square
- Community-operated teams

A shift from managing homelessness to ending it

AFTER

- Coordinated outreach and housing-first approach
- One system response across the City
- 350–500 people housed each year
- City-led team
- World Habitat Award 2007



TORONTO'S HOMELESSNESS SERVICE SYSTEM

City-led, large-scale, and highly coordinated



100+
SHELTER PROGRAMS

Mixed delivery model



24/7
ACCESS



SPECIALIZED PROGRAMS

Seniors, youth, all gender adults, families, Indigenous people, 2SLGBTQ+ people, refugees



4 DAILY NEWSPAPERS

& an engaged activist community



1 STREET NEEDS ASSESSMENTS

Comprehensive count and survey on what people need to end their homelessness

Note: This document only includes questions that have to be shown to the survey participant and have to be asked through the survey.
Survey Leads print and have a copy of this document to show to the survey participant.

Have you already done the survey with someone who has this logo?

STREET NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Have you spent at least one night in any of the following in the past year?

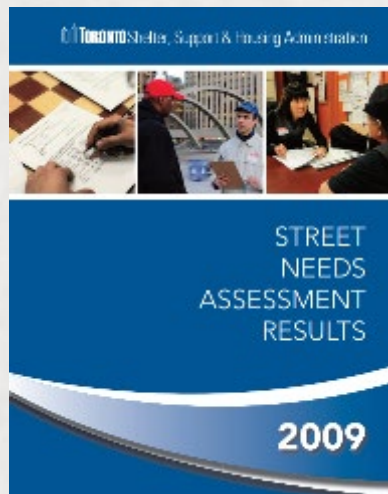
- Homeless shelter (e.g., emergency, family, drop-in)
- Transitional shelter
- 24-hour respite site or warming centre
- 24-hour women's drop-in
- Hotel/motel funded by City or homeless program
- Transitional housing

- Unsheltered in a public space (e.g., street, park, etc.)
- Transit station or stop (e.g., bus shelter, etc.)
- Encampment (a structure supporting people to live outdoors)
- Religious-based building or place of worship
- Vehicle (e.g., car, van, recreational vehicle, etc.)
- Someone else's place (e.g., friend's house, etc.)
- Hospital or other facility
- Jail or other correctional facility

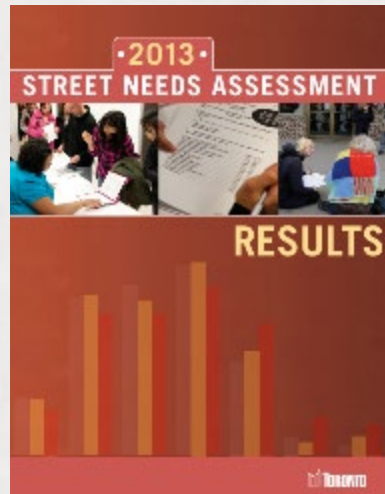
STREET NEEDS ASSESSMENT (PIT COUNT)

Nearly two decades of data to understand homelessness and inform better decisions

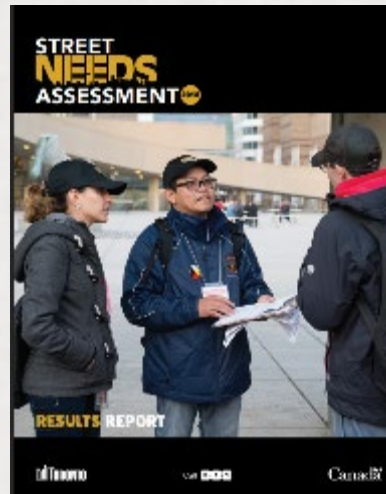
2006
FIRST
COUNT



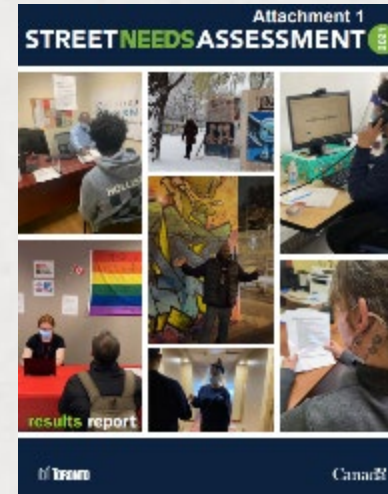
2009



2013



2018



2021

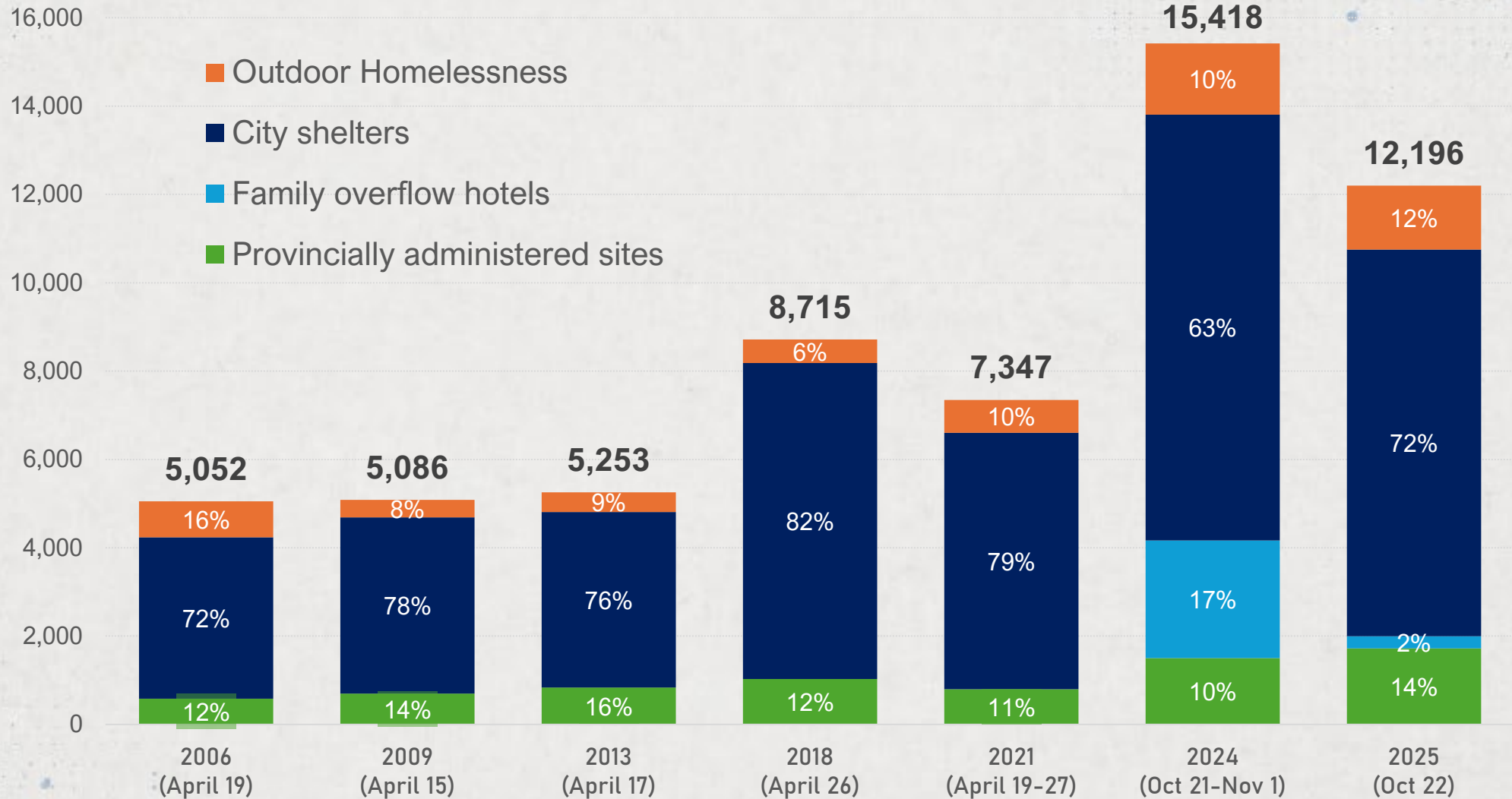


2024

2025
LATEST
RESULTS

STREET NEEDS ASSESSMENT COUNTS

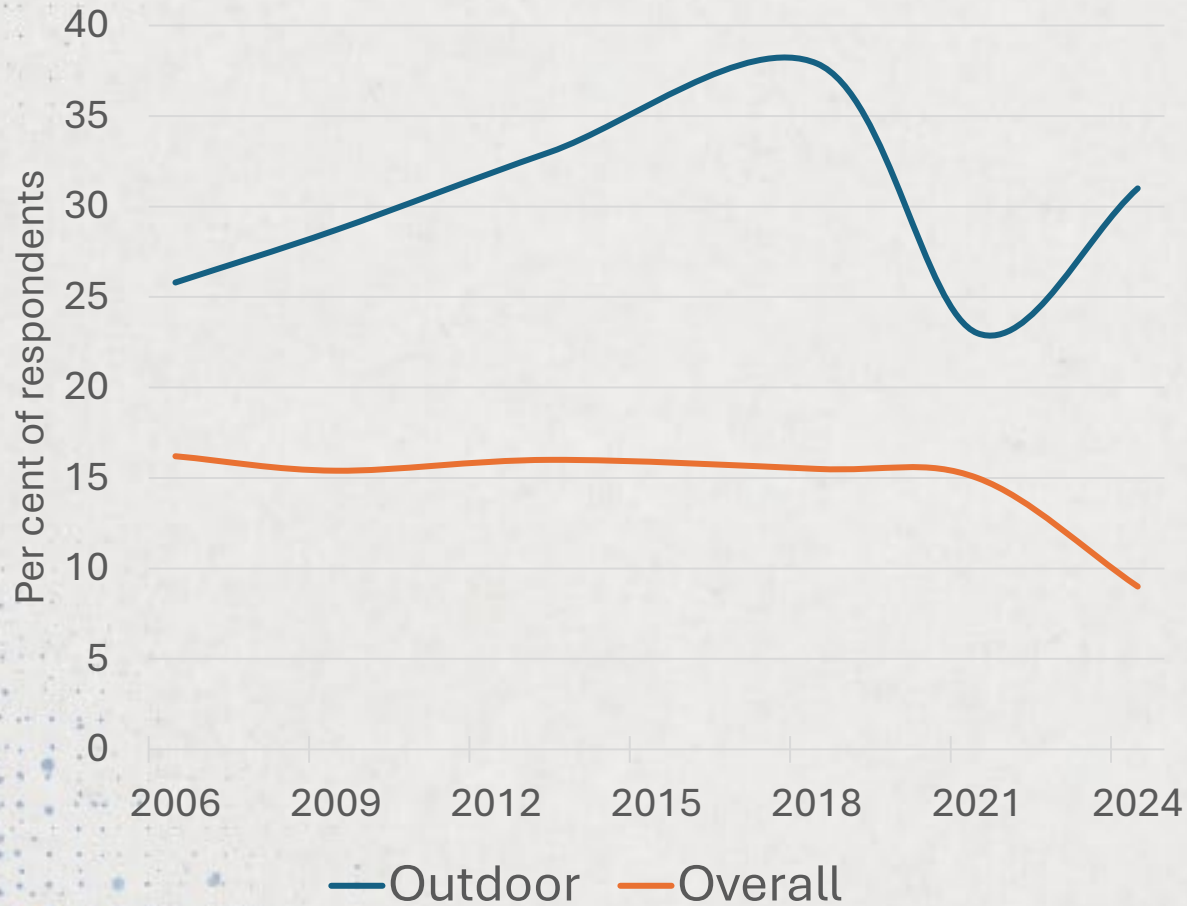
2006-2025



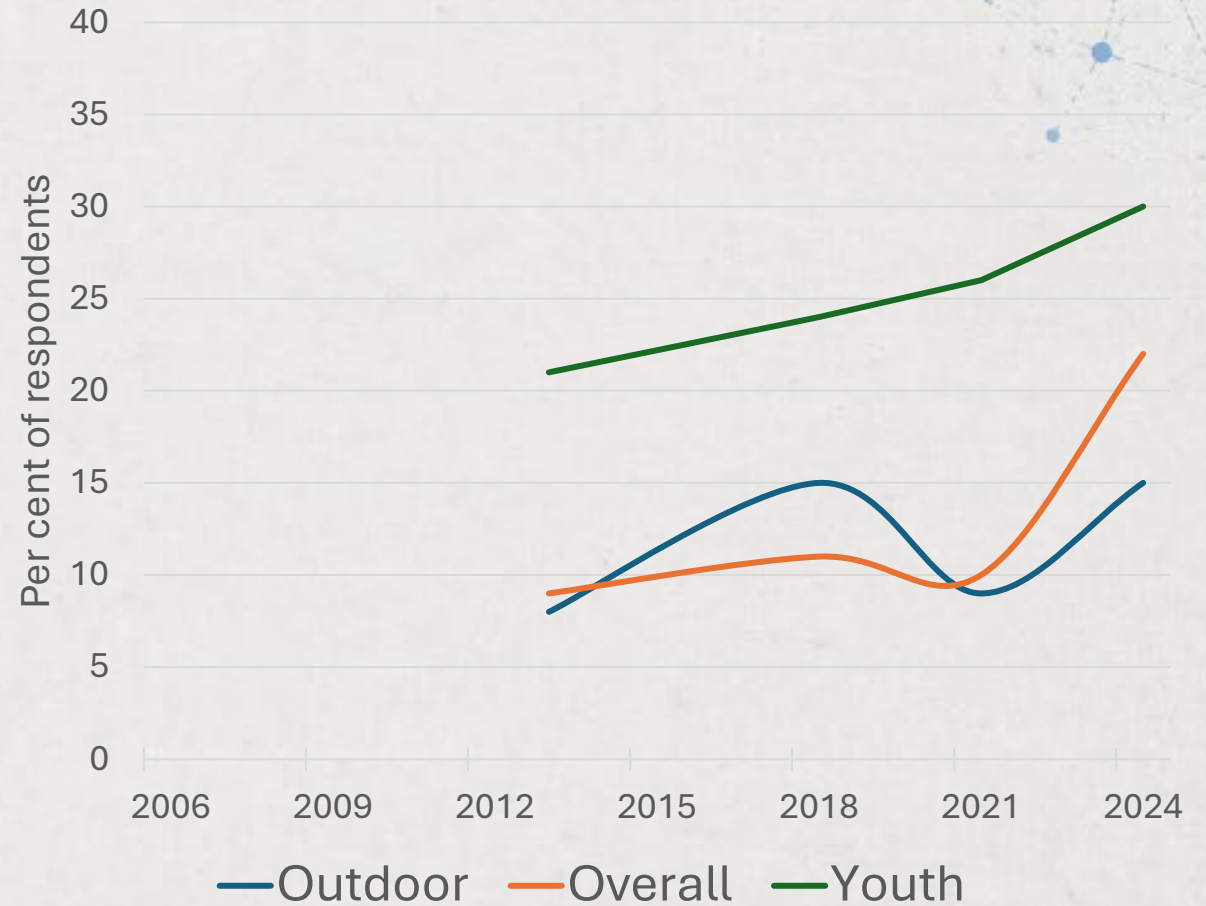
KEY POPULATION INSIGHTS

From the Street Needs Assessments

Indigenous respondents



2SLGBTQ+ respondents



WHAT SURVEYING PEOPLE REVEALED

Street Needs Assessments made the invisible visible



Who is overrepresented

- Indigenous people
- 2SLGBTQ+ youth and adults



This led to increased investment and specific programming



What people actually need

- A permanent, safe place to call home

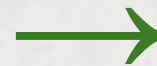


This drove a shift toward housing-first responses



Hidden system connections

- Link between child welfare and adult homelessness
- High demand for mental health and substance use supports



This informs broader system responses

2 MOVE FROM OCCUPANCY TO UNMET DEMAND

We stopped measuring what was easy (occupancy) and started measuring what mattered (unmet demand)

—
**THE SYSTEM
IS AT ITS
LIMIT.**



Housing advocates are calling for the city to speed up the installation of emergency shelters.

Housing advocates call for state of emergency

ANDREW FRANCIS WALLACE TORONTO STAR

**More beds
needed now**

Are we 'taking all measures' to warm those in need?

Shelter system is full to overflowing, as advocates call out for opening of armouries

Edward Keenan

"The city is taking all measures to protect the health and safety of the public, artists, volunteers and event staff," the city government said in a news release announcing the scaling back of festivities. And understandably so. After all, it's fr-fr-freezing c-c-c-cold. But really, it isn't performers and parties whose health and safety seem most endangered. The most

HOMELESSNESS CRISIS

Council will be asked to approve a review of the creation of 1,000 new shelter beds, **GT3**

WHY “UNOCCUPIED BEDS” DON’T TELL THE FULL STORY

This is an excerpt of the City’s Daily Occupancy and Capacity reporting web report.

Shelter Programs, Bed-Based	Individuals	Occupied Beds	Unoccupied Beds	Actual Bed Capacity	Occupancy Rate
Singles Sectors, Total	3,771	3,771	22	3,793	99.4%
Emergency Shelter Programs, Total	3,122	3,122	6	3,128	99.8%
Mixed Adult, Emergency	587	587	0	587	100.0%
Men, Emergency	1,441	1,441	2	1,443	99.9%
Women, Emergency	686	686	0	686	100.0%
Youth, Emergency	408	408	4	412	99.0%



When unoccupied beds was the only dataset available, lots of focus on the fact that there were **some beds showing as available** every night.

WINTER CRISIS OF 2016-17

A catalyst for change and a stronger system



LACK OF PUBLIC TRUST IN OUR DATA

Committed to open and transparent data



CREATION OF WORK PLAN

To invest in and build out central intake



CREATION 24/7 SYSTEM OVERSIGHT

To ensure round-the-clock response and coordination



CREATION OF OUR BUSINESS INTELLIGENCE TEAM

To turn data into insight and action



LINKING WITH ECCC

On extreme weather announcements



CENTRAL INTAKE MODERNIZATION

Central Intake provides a 24/7 telephone-based service that offers referrals to emergency shelter and other overnight accommodation, as well as information about other housing stability services.

Working with the Ombudsman's Office, SSHA staff led a comprehensive internal review of the Central Intake program. The review identified a number of areas for enhancements.

The enhancements to Central Intake, implemented by Strategy and Program Solutions and Operations' multi-disciplinary staff team, focused on improving the client experience through enhanced technology, revitalized training, development of key performance indicators and an expanded workforce.

Central Intake's modernization is a key to ensuring that people who experience homelessness and request emergency accommodation by phone, have access to timely, accurate information about available services, the first time, every time.



■ Staff answer the phones 24/7



■ Performance improves dramatically



■ Assisting clients every day



■ Staff assist clients to find accommodation every day



■ Staff provide timely accurate information

Since the launch of the new call centre, Central Intake has seen an increase in the percentage of calls handled, resulting in better service provided to clients.

Thank you to both 311 and Toronto Paramedic Services for lending SSHA staffing resources and expertise to support this important transformation project in 2018.

Central Intake performance improved dramatically in 2018



24/7 SYSTEM OVERSIGHT DUTY OFFICERS



Real-time system-wide monitoring



Rapid response to incidents



Central coordination point

Single Point

CAPACITY

- 35.5 Influences total has contingency status
- SWA is 24/7
- SOW teams are backbone to 24/7 - SHAYCRC
- CONNECT is 24/7 CA/WA are 24/7 - SHAYCRC
- OMB/PA is 24/7 CA/WK/Info are 7 days
- CITRIX and OIA CA's 24/7 (additional 7 x 24)
- Skysync 24/7

RESPONSIVE

- All applications: Report - SNOW, IT needs to respond within 1 hour
- Network: Report - SNOW, IT needs noTfloo
- Respond across core outage sites 7 K 24
- IS Service Desk: 24/7 on call
- Service: at 2 A.M., Call out responses for SW

ON-CALL

- Weekdays 4 pm to 8 am
- Saturdays
- Monthly rotation to On
- General 24/7 at all gen

YAMMER (online)

- Stream
 - Interventions, system or process
 - IT news or business announcements
 - ITCR updates for changes that are operational longer than normal
 - Actions with an assigned lead to be reviewed or reviewed
 - Incidents with assigned groups/outside groups persons
 - Notes
- Private
 - Urgent interrupts or diversions to get the attention to
 - Provides review or information
 - Visible to selected users
 - Incidents that are not operational - at some level, done
 - Incidents that are not done
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SYSTEM 24/7

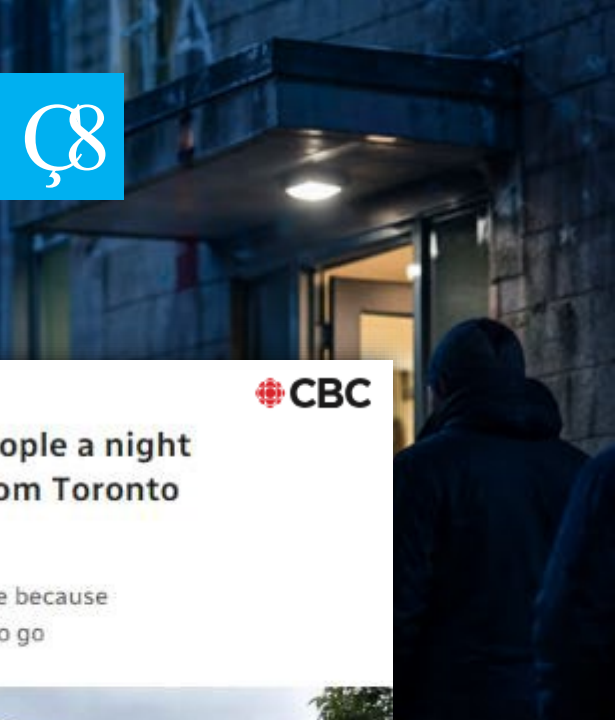
- C13 X 7 IM/WO/Oc info
- Enter Paid time off, & Service Weekend escalations WeekendOnCall

endTo point.co



Ü _ 8Ç28 _ ` 2 HAS REPLACED f - - Üs ` - ó v Ç8 AS THE KEY CAPACITY MEASURE

f - - Üs ` - ó v Ç8



2019

PressProgress



19/01/19 14:44:36

This article is more than 6 years old

ANALYSIS

Toronto's Shelters Are Now Consistently Above 90% Capacity – And That Is Extremely Dangerous

'It's like a scene after a natural disaster ... They are packed like sardines'

by PressProgress
January 28, 2019

Data from the City of Toronto shows occupancy at local shelters and overnight centres has been above its 90% limit for years.

2022

HOME | SOCIETY | POVERTY

CBC

New city data shows 40 people a night on average turned away from Toronto homeless shelters

Advocates say number is unacceptable because unhoused people have nowhere else to go



A view of Seaton House, a large homeless shelter in downtown Toronto, in May 2022.

PHOTO: CBC/MURIEL DRAAEMSA

3 PANDEMIC RESPONSE

Data enabled rapid decisions during crisis



ONE CRISIS. MANY ISSUES

COVID among
homeless may
overwhelm
St. Mike's

City settles lawsuit
over homeless shelters

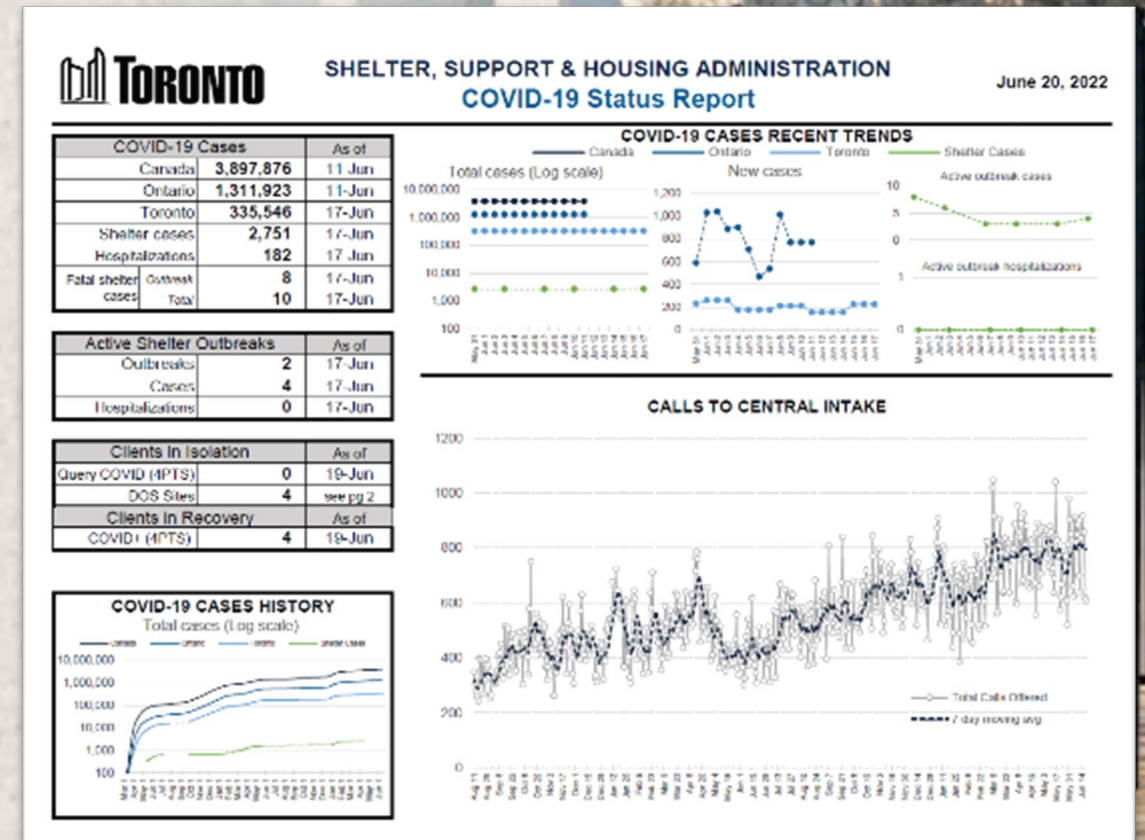
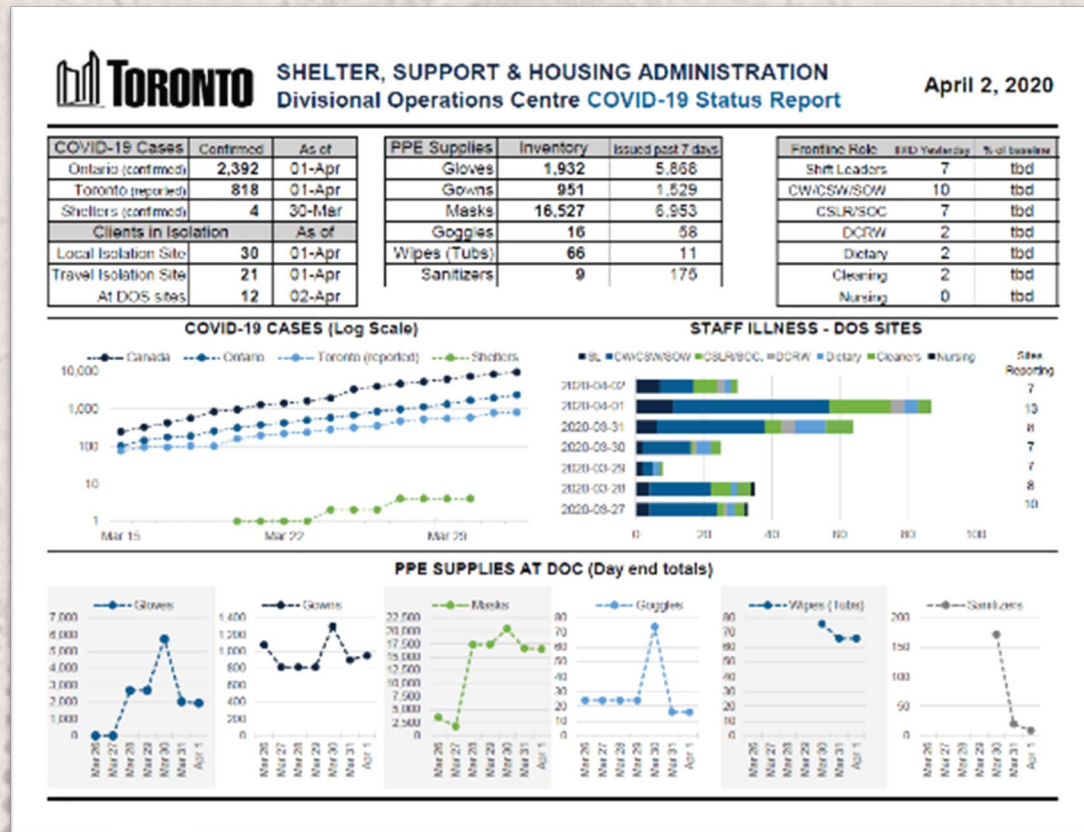
Faith leaders want more for homeless

Move fast on housing the homeless, advocates say

From a tent in an encampment to a hotel room

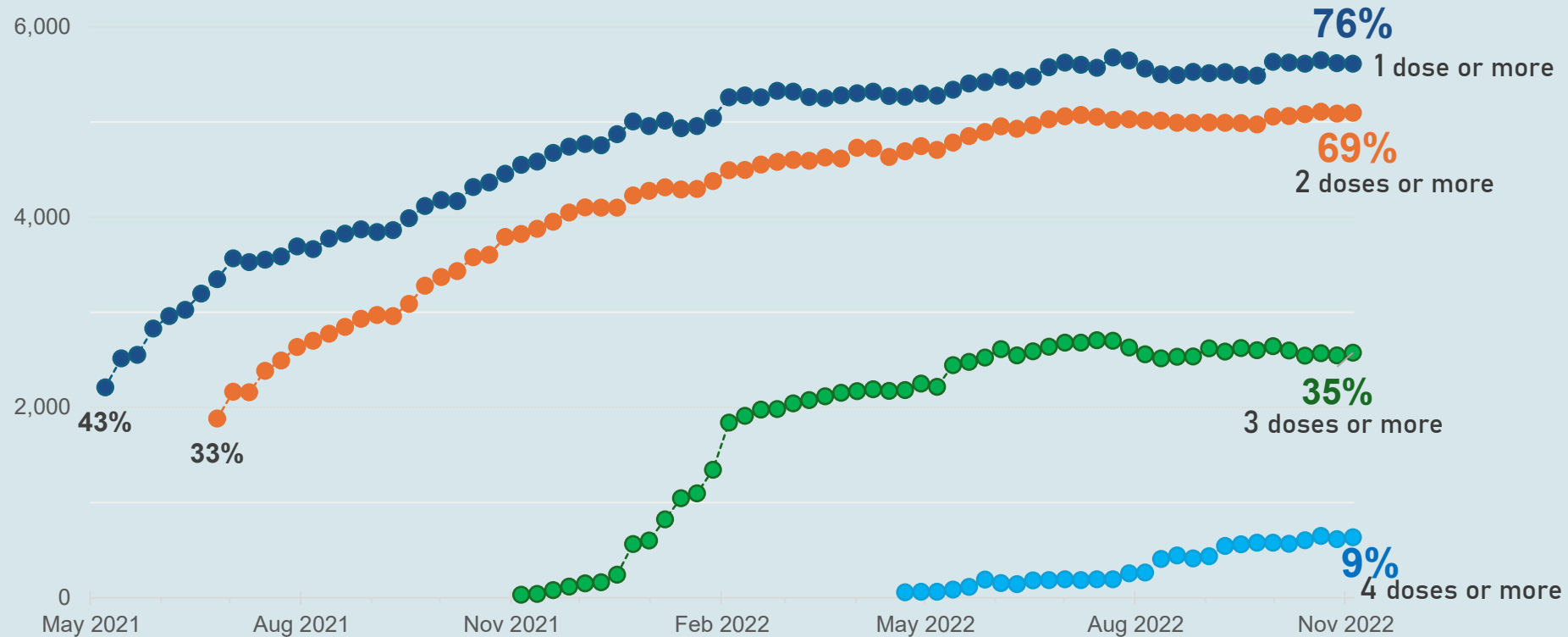
DATA DROVE REAL-TIME DECISIONS

Real-time status reports gave us the visibility to respond faster, allocate resources better and keep people safe.



VACCINATION RATES ROSE RAPIDLY ACROSS THE SHELTER SYSTEM

NUMBER AND PROPORTION OF ELIGIBLE SERVICE USERS VACCINATED AGAINST COVID-19



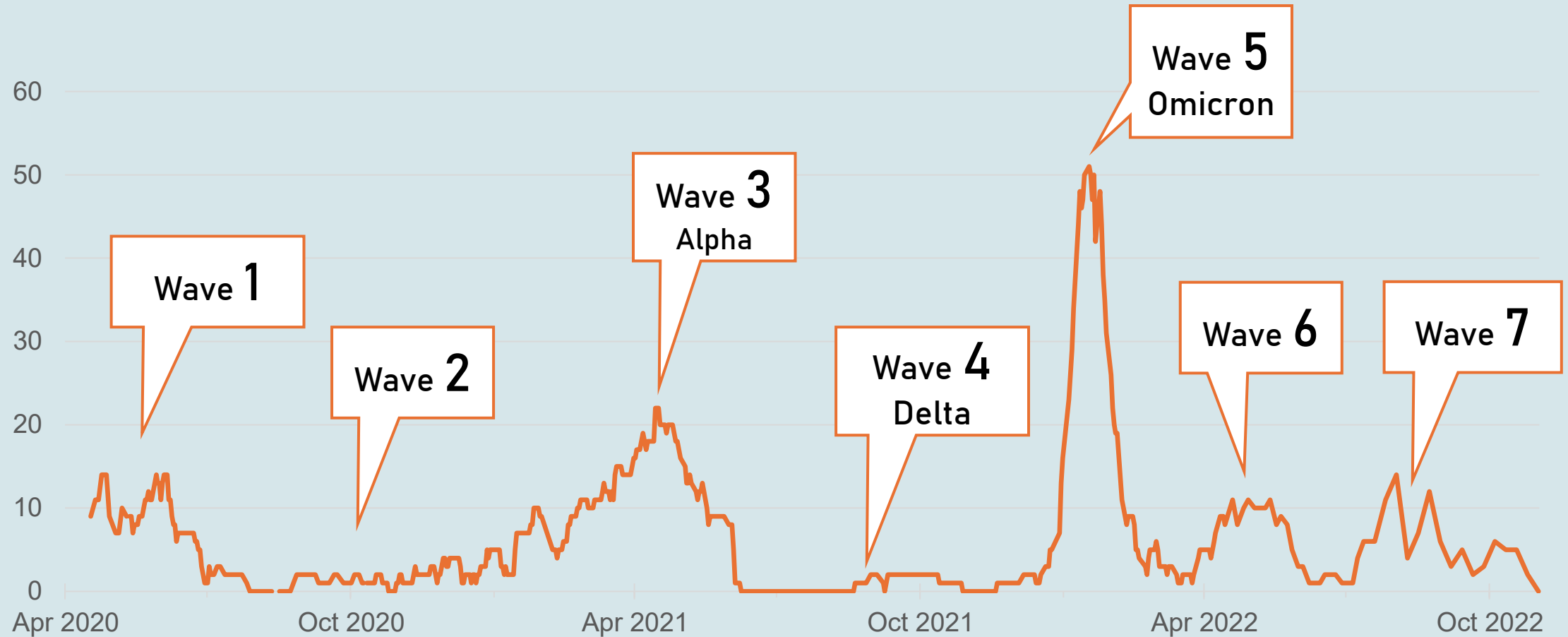
**HIGH COVERAGE
ACROSS PROGRAMS**

84%

OF PROGRAMS REACHED 65%+
1ST DOSE VACCINATION



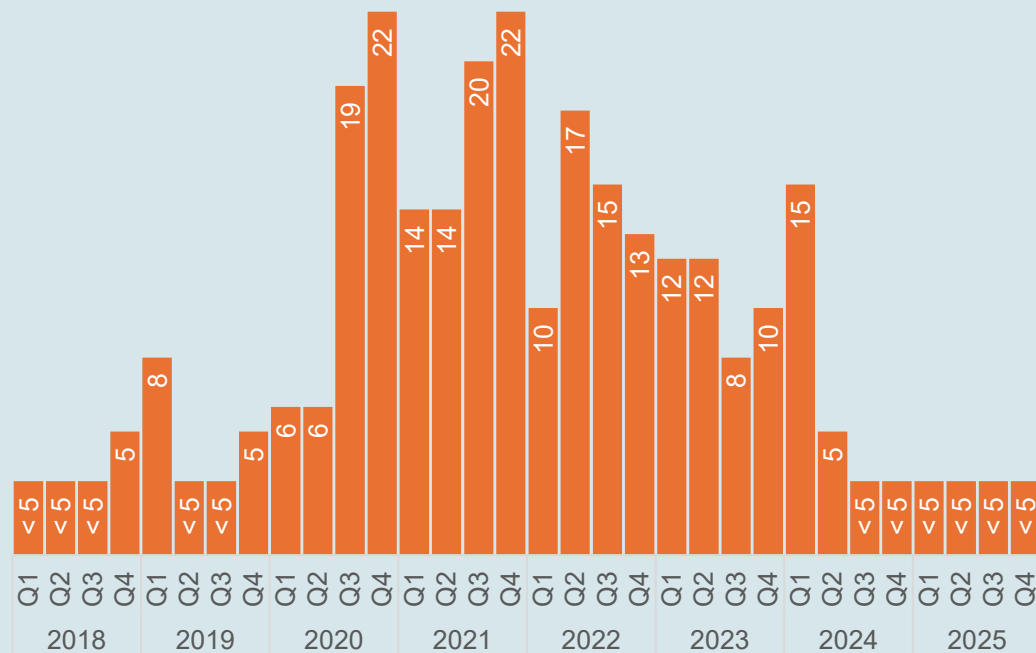
COVID-19 OUTBREAKS IN TORONTO SHELTERS MATCHED THE WAVES OF THE PANDEMIC



OVERDOSES IN HOMELESSNESS SERVICE SETTINGS IN TORONTO ACROSS THE SHELTER SYSTEM

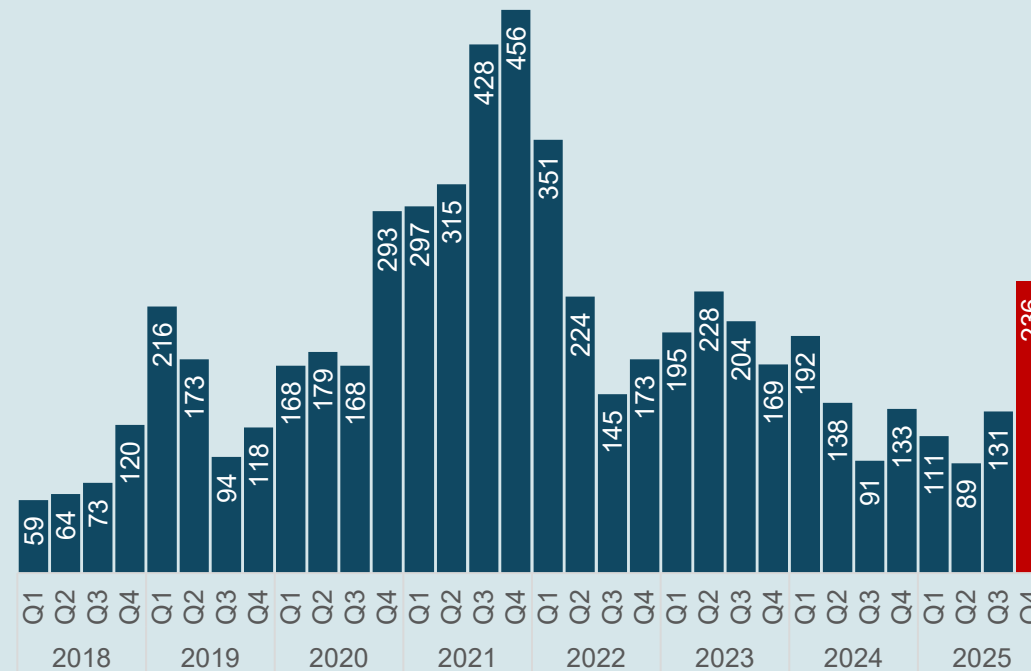
FATAL OVERDOSES

(Office of the Chief Coroner for Ontario data)



NON-FATAL OVERDOSES

(Toronto Paramedic Services data)



iPHARE

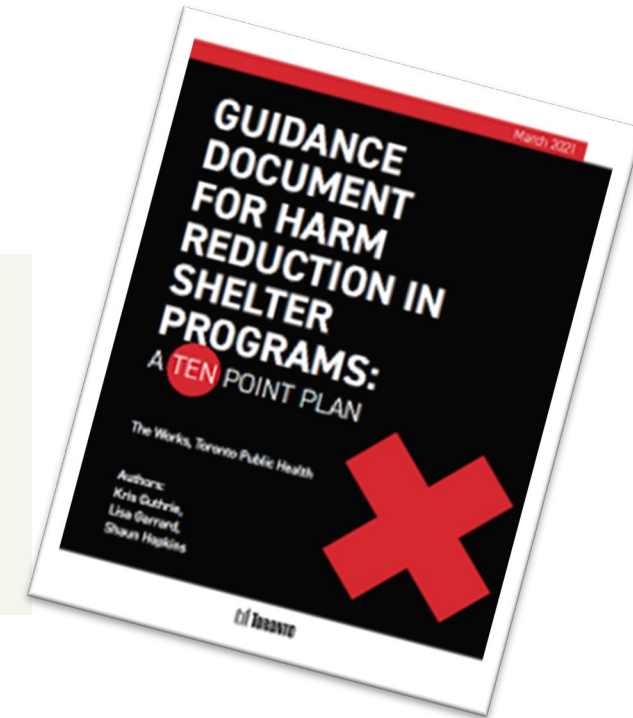
INTEGRATED PREVENTION & HARM REDUCTION INITIATIVE



DIRECT SUPPORTS IN
SHELTERS

INTENSIVE MENTAL
HEALTH CASE
MANAGEMENT
SUPPORTS

URGENT PUBLIC
HEALTH RESPONSE
SITES



COMMUNITY PARTNERS

SafeSpot



PARKDALE
QUEEN WEST
Community
Health Centre



4 SHELTER SAFETY STUDY

Incident data revealed patterns
and led to a system-wide safety
action plan



A GROWING SAFETY CRISIS

Making shelters safer must be a priority

The cost of helping our most vulnerable

Study reveals the mental-health challenges facing shelter workers and others who help the homeless.

City alarmed by rising violence in homeless shelters

TRENDS IN SHELTER-BASED VIOLENCE AND SERVICE RESTRICTIONS

Interpersonal Violence

(incl. physical assaults on staff or service users, verbal abuse of staff or service users, threats of death/harm, and harassment)

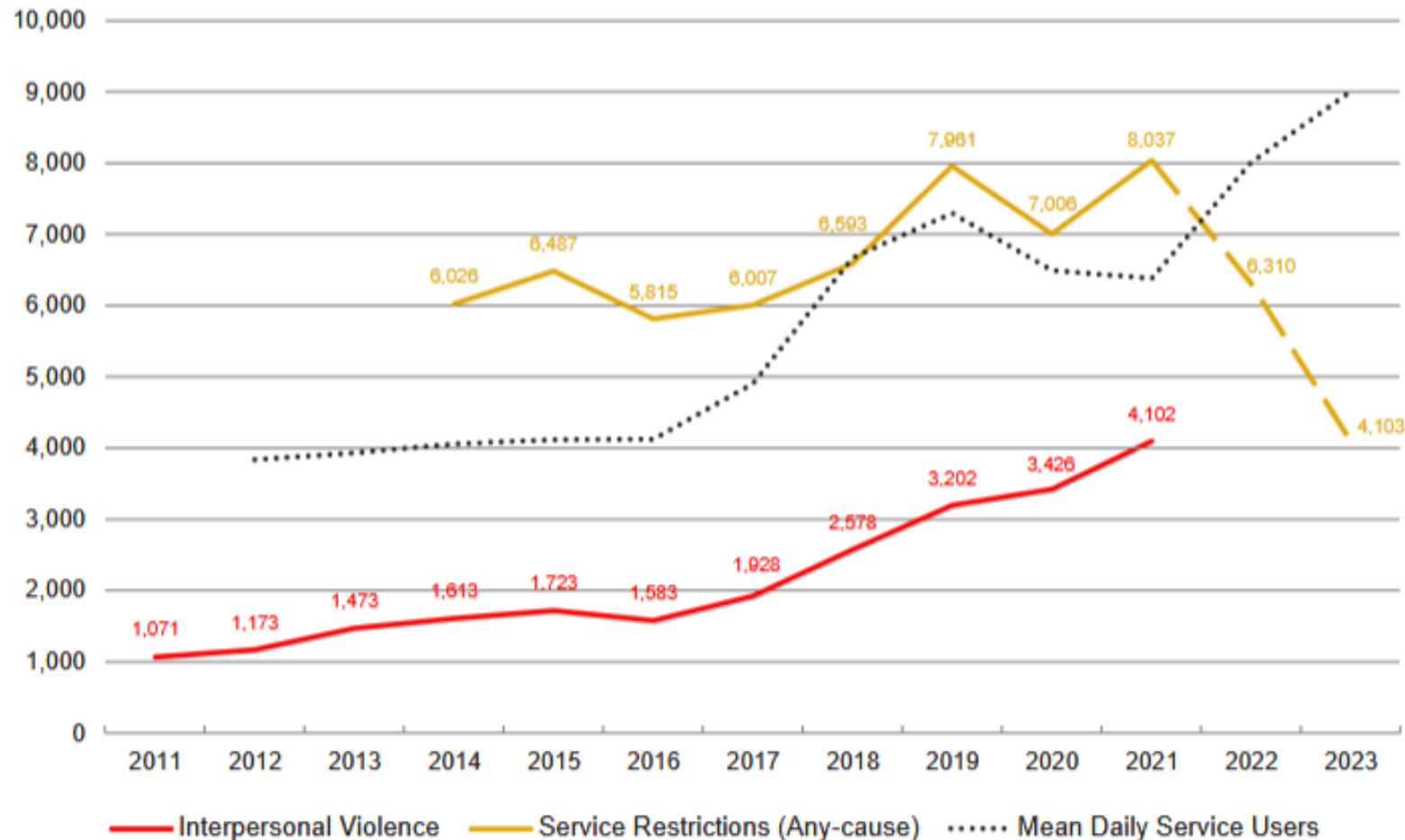
↑ 283% from 2011-2021

Service Restrictions

↑ 33% from 2014-2021
(restrictions for assault and property damage increased the most; restrictions for non-violence causes all decreased)

↓ 49% from 2021-2023

Annual Number of Any-cause Critical Incidents and Service Restrictions



Higher Risk Service Users with Unmet Needs

17 service users had 522 service restrictions in 2021 (6.5% of all restrictions that year)

24 service users had 638 critical incidents in 2021 (6.6% of all incidents that year)

SHELTER SAFETY IS A SYSTEM ISSUE

Not isolated incidents.



36.2%

of shelter staff feel very or somewhat unsafe in the workplace

43.2%

of Black and Indigenous shelter staff experience daily abuse involving racism

KEY FACTORS

Crowded shelters and COVID-19 pandemic

Policies that limit privacy and client control

Unmet needs among service users and unsupportive staff interventions

SHELTER SAFETY ACTION PLAN

SAFER STAFF.
SAFER CLIENTS.
STRONGER SYSTEM



OUR RESPONSE



SUPPORTING
STAFF SAFETY



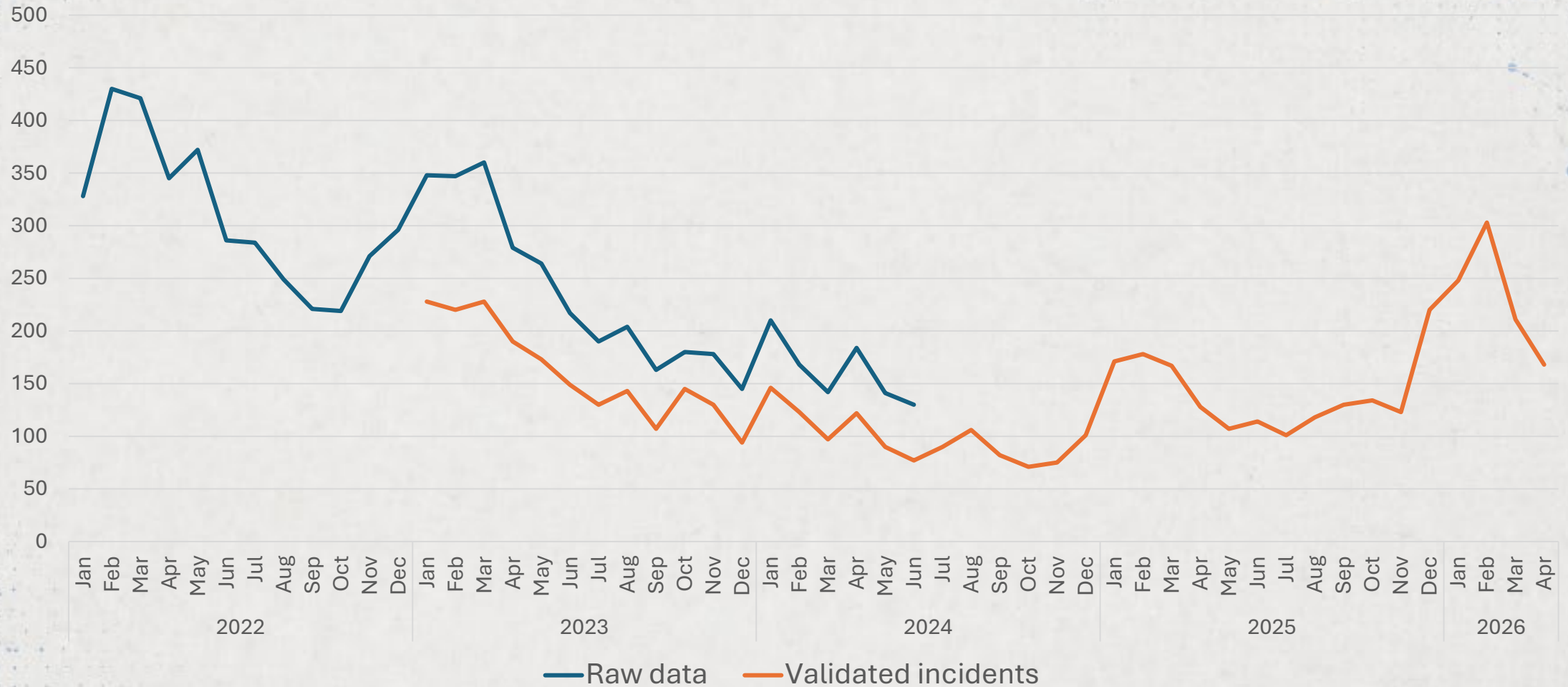
SUPPORTING
CLIENT SAFETY



IMPROVING SYSTEM-
WIDE OVERSIGHT ON
SAFETY

TSSS WORKPLACE VIOLENCE INCIDENT REPORTS FROM SHELTERS

2022-2026



5 REFUGEE RESPONSE

Data linked external pressures – like refugee arrivals – to shelter demand

REFUGEE SURGES

2017-2019, 2022-2024



System pressure escalated rapidly

- Refugee arrivals overwhelmed shelter capacity in GTHA



Clear link to shelter demand

- Strong correlation between refugee claims and shelter use
- Encampments and outdoor homelessness increased



System response lagged

- Jurisdictional conflict with the federal government
- Delays in funding and coordination

WHAT THE DATA SHOWS

Shelter usage trends tell a more complete story

Overdue aid for refugees

Regions seek aid to house asylum seekers

Chow 'lying to Torontonians,' MP says

Liberal backbencher argues federal government has supported city, calls tax hike 'irresponsible'

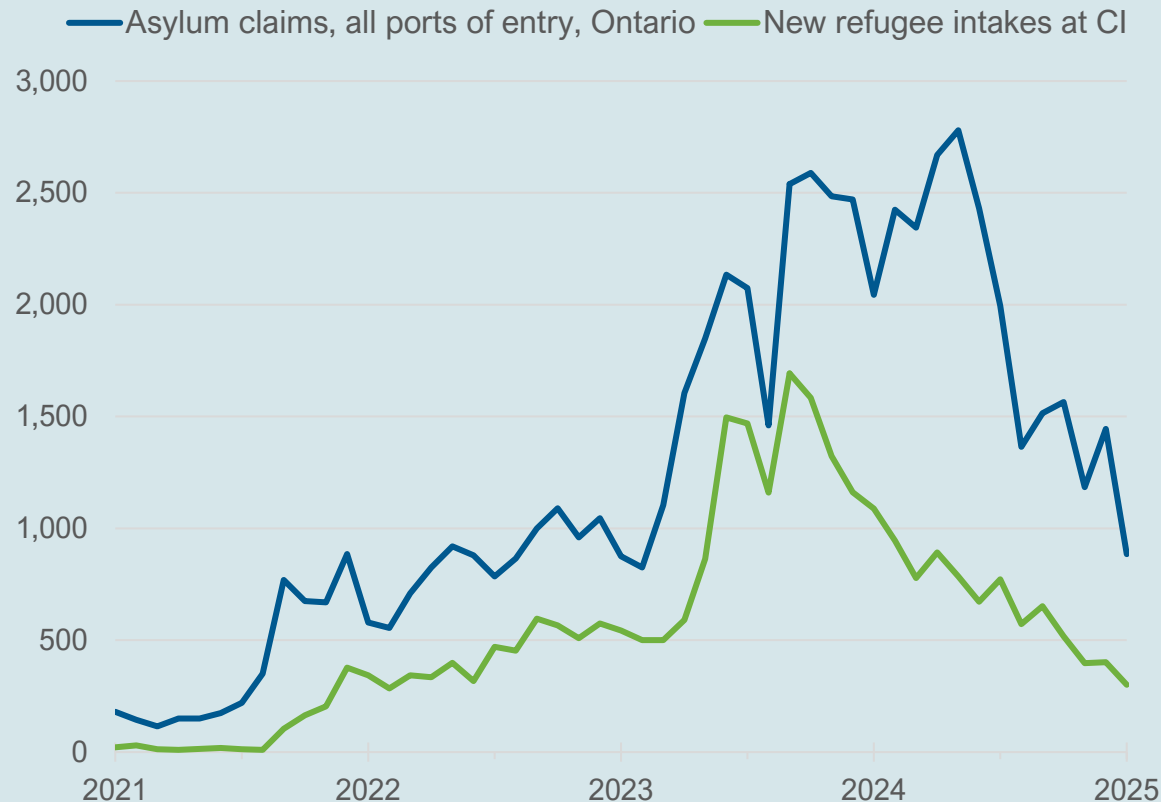
Federal Liberals don't have moral high ground



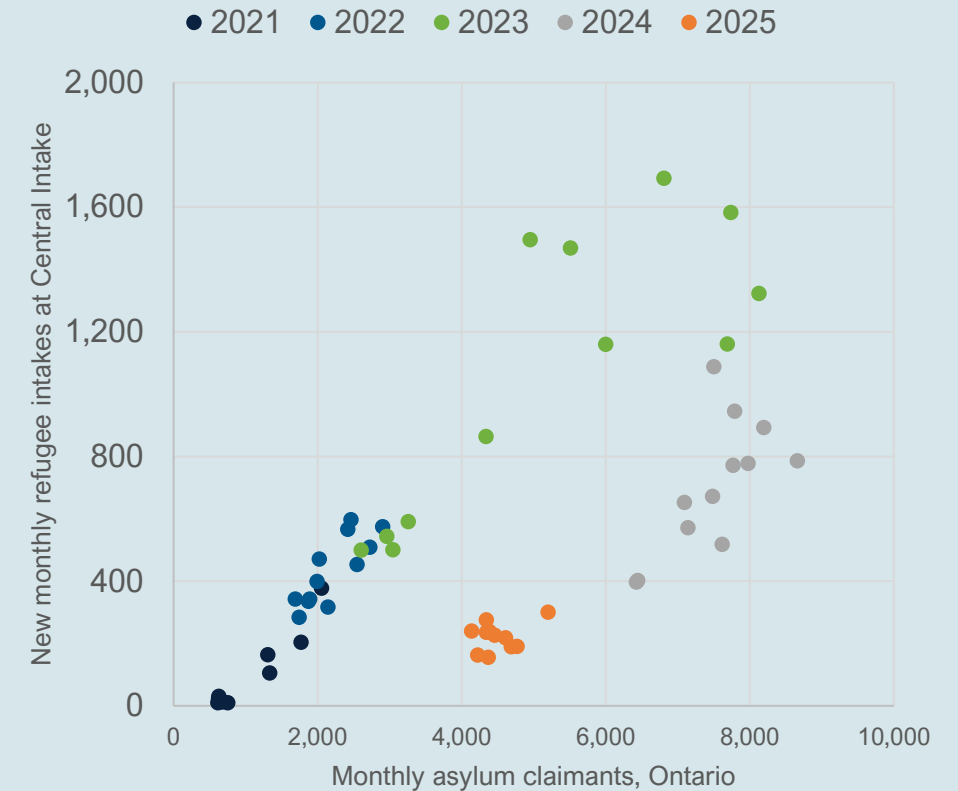
UPDATED IRCC ASYLUM CLAIMANT REPORTING

Shows Strong Correlation with New Refugee Intakes At Central Intake

Asylum claims at ports of entry in Ontario & new refugee intakes with Central Intake



Ontario asylum claims and new refugee callers to Central Intake, monthly totals





DATA DOESN'T CHANGE SYSTEMS DECISIONS DO.



Share your data openly and thoughtfully



Build data-sharing partnerships
beyond your own system



Use data to tell a story – not just
report numbers



What's one way data has made a difference in your community?

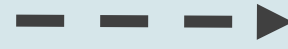


What's one area where you wish data had made a difference, but hasn't yet?

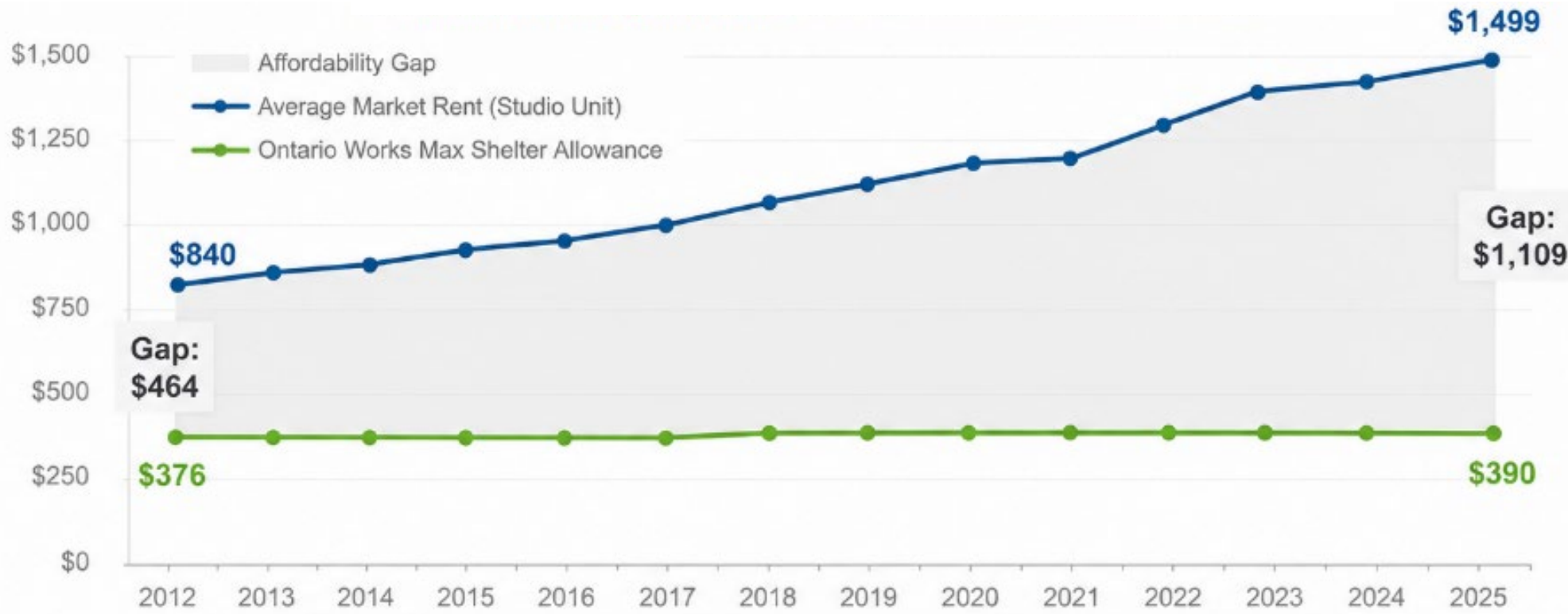
WHERE DATA NEEDS TO GO NEXT



- SOCIAL ASSISTANCE RATES
- AVAILABILITY OF HOUSING BENEFITS



HOUSING STABILITY
OUTCOMES



The **affordability gap** is growing in Toronto.

Avg. rent for a studio is \$1,109 higher than the max. housing allowance for a single person on OW benefits.

THANK YOU

5 WAYS DATA MADE A DIFFERENCE
IN RESPONDING TO HOMELESSNESS

DTMAD Conference

24 Apr - 30 Jun 2026

Poll results

Table of contents

- When you hear “Homelessness Data,” what is the first word that comes to mind?
- What’s one way data has made a difference in your community?
- What’s one area where you wish data had made a difference, but hasn’t yet?

When you hear "Homelessness Data," what is the first word that comes to mind?

071



What's one way data has made a difference in your community?

0 4 8

(1/3)

- Increase emergency shelter
- informs equitable service delivery
- Insight
- Evidence based decision making
- Drives investment
- Cuts through bias
- Measuring change over time
- Inform program design
- Increased prevention & diversion
- Improving gaps
- Advocates for needs
- Pivoting
- Resource allocation for greatest impact
- Makes arguing for policy change easier (somewhat)
- Trends over time
- Access to better resources
- Informing policymakers
- Improved access
- Advocacy
- Greater understanding of accessibility needs
- Better policies
- What clients need
- Learning size of the oroblem
- Identify needs
- Ability to make data informed

What's one way data has made a difference in your community?

0 4 8

(2/3)

- decisions about program needs
- Learning what pieces of our service delivery are most impactful for clients
- making it easier to speak to the experiences which we see every day with proof
- Resource allocation
- Safety within housing programs
- Creation of new services
- Data sharing
- Gaps
- Shows needs
- Perspective for electds
- Access to right services.
- Increased funding for supportive housing
- Represents truth
- Increased coordination of housing exits
- Understanding client complexity
- Increases in investment for prevention and diversion
- Driven advocacy
- Better access to resources
- More supports for those in need
- Continuous improvement
- Informed decisions and changes

What's one way data has made a difference in your community? (3/3)

0 4 8

- Highlights the impact of our programs, and prove that they work.
- Highlights gaps
- Tells us what kind of housing to build
- Resource allocation

What's one area where you wish data had made a difference, but hasn't yet?

060

(1/4)

- Indigenous over representation
- Data on the CAA waitlist needs to be shared across the sector to make better and more informed decisions
- We need high support housing, and a lot of it
- Primary prevention investments
- Medical supports for dentists and glasses and other expensive needs people can't access without money
- Creating more and more deeply affordable housing options
- Funding is contingent on data, and data is contingent on incredibly complex and moving metrics from systems level choices made above the heads of non-profits.
- Coordination of services
- Housing first approaches
- Indigenous advocacy
- Establishing supportive housing
- Funding and to move people through the system when appropriate
- Cross systems navigation
- Sharing information more across the sector

What's one area where you wish data had made a difference, but hasn't yet?

060

(2/4)

- Addiction and harm reduction still sucks
- Increased staffing to provide supports and services
- Real support
- Privacy focus and agency of data
- Targeted service
- Capturing the voice of the community
- Diversified Housing options
- Need to change models of care. Status quo isn't working.
- Justice system outcomes and connection to housing
- Front line worker support and retention
- The perception of misuse of support systems. The data says misuse is rare, but the myth persists
- Homelessness
- Clarifying priority for investment in NEUROinclusive housing
- Reducing unemployment
- Prevention focus
- Collaboration
- Implementing supportive and transitional supports into rural communities.

What's one area where you wish data had made a difference, but hasn't yet?

060

(3/4)

- fatal overdose data
- In Calgary - more youth emergency shelters and specially for 2slgbtqi+ youth
- Targeted housing investments
- Economic investment
- Within staff processes
- Creation of enough resources for those in need
- Changing of principles.
- More housing resources
- Reduce encampment
- Targeted services
- Dont close supervised consumption sites
- Reduce homeless population
- Prevention work
- Consistency
- health care for unhoused people
- Community education and understanding
- Integration between health and housing
- More prevention and diversion funding
- Funding
- Intersectoral partnerships
- Homelessness

What's one area where you wish data had made a difference, but hasn't yet?

060

(4/4)

- Access to affordable accessible housing
- More affordable housing
- Increased funding
- Overthrowing the political government
- Funding of the systems
- Funding
- Housing x100
- Reduce unemployment
- Hidden homelessness
- The need for a congestive continuum of services
- Demonstrating prevention works!
- Increased funding for demonstrated need.
- Targeted interventions
- Convincing Alberta government this is a priority
- Housing