

Rural Canada's visible homelessness problem driven by pandemic, high cost of housing

'We're seeing more tent encampments pop up,' says manager with Communities Ending Poverty



This 58-year-old man was living in a \$400 monthly rental that came under new ownership six months into the pandemic. He now lives outside, and asked CBC News to not share his name (Allison Devereaux/CBC)

Stephanie Elliott and Allison George are right on the edge, not knowing if they'll spend this winter housed or in a tent.

They live in Goderich, Ont., a small town north of London with postcard-worthy views of Lake Huron and a hot housing market. The couple are among the many rural Canadians, the new visible homeless, who face a second pandemic winter outside.

"Housing is an absolute crisis," says George, 34, who grew up in Blyth, Ont. "There is absolutely nothing."

Together they can afford their monthly \$500 rent, a low rate that's becoming increasingly rare in small-town Ontario and beyond.

George has a part-time job cleaning at a grocery store; Elliott survives on the Ontario Disability Support Program. Their choices are limited: to purchase a winterized tent or stay in the only apartment they can find, one they both describe as unsuitable.

They spend a lot of their time outdoors in Goderich's Courthouse Square along with their friend Candy Middelkamp.



'It feels like life has been pulled to an absolute, grinding halt,' says Allison George, with partner Stephanie Elliott. The Goderich, Ont., couple and other rural Canadians are part of a visibly homeless demographic that some experts say is growing. (Allison Devereaux/CBC)

Elliott said she scans Kijiji and other online sites daily, but most of the one-bedroom units listed are \$1,300 to \$1,600, well beyond their budget.

For now, they are stuck in a county where the average home price more than doubled in the last five years, from \$264, 000 to to \$594,000, according to data from the Canadian Real Estate Association. It jumped by \$150,000 in a one-year period from 2020 to 2021.



Elliott and George discuss his day after returning from a shift cleaning at a grocery store. (Allison Devereaux/CBC)

Homelessness no longer hidden

"We're seeing more tent encampments pop up, and more visible homelessness in the rural areas," said Natasha Pei, manager of cities with Tamarack Institute's Communities Ending Poverty.

In the past, homelessness was more hidden, with people couch surfing, sleeping in cars or living in buildings without heat or running water.



This 58-year-old man was displaced last year. He spent his first winter at a shelter run by the county at Lakeshore United Church in Goderich, and finding spots to sleep around the town for the other months. (Allison Devereaux/CBC)

The pandemic revealed pre-existing problems and worsened others, such as rising rent, addictions, lack of diverse housing, heightened mental health demands and transportation barriers faced by rural communities.

Then, an unexpected trend began: urban buyers started fleeing the city in search of wide open spaces.

"We're seeing more people from the cities creating a boom on housing prices in rural communities," said Pei.

"Because they're going remote, they're able to move into these communities without needing to commute anymore and they're just driving up the costs."

This has contributed to the disappearance of rental stock, squeezing out vulnerable people who depend on cheaper rent.



With George's help, Candy Middelkamp attempts to open a can of salmon using scissors. She says it's difficult to cook items from the food bank without a kitchen. (Allison Devereaux/CBC)

"It seems like there's a lot of evictions happening where landlords are selling their rental stock, which is typically a bit more affordable, said Erin Schooley, homelessness program supervisor for the County of Huron. "And they're not being re-entered back on the market.

"It's also even more complex for folks who may be more vulnerable, or compromised in any way, to be taken on by landlords when their complexities are significant."

Rural people staying at home

Another trend is also taking shape, with people from rural areas staying close to home and not leaving for major cities, according to Pei.

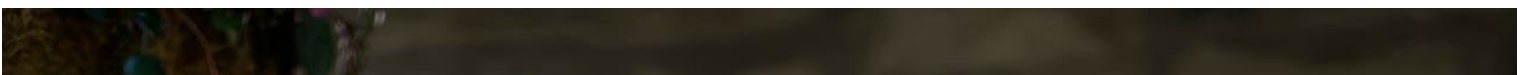


Stephen Webster drives a truck part time when his health allows. He says he supports his father in a long-term care home in Clinton, Ont., and the money left is only enough to live outside. (Allison Devereaux/CBC)

"Goderich is my home," said Stephen Webster, 59, who has lived in shelters across Ontario, including Toronto, Windsor and Brampton.

He drives a truck part time, when his health allows, and uses that money to support his father in a long-term care home in nearby Clinton, Ont. What's left is enough to get by on the street.

"I know people. I have places I can sometimes couch surf for two or three days," he said.







Shawn Walker is executive director of Huron Turning Point in Exeter, Ont. It has received 66 applications since opening five years ago and housed 33 men. (Submitted by Shawn Walker)

It's a trend that Shawn Walker thinks could help the problem. For years, people experiencing homelessness in rural areas have left for cities to access services, support and shelter. Walker runs Huron Turning Point, a transition home for men in Exeter, Ont.

"There's probably a better chance of them getting to permanent, stable housing in a community that they understand and know, and can be supported by, as opposed to sending them off to another city and a whole different area where they may not have connections," Walker said.

The home has helped 25 men move from the street to stable housing in the past five years. While it may be better for people experiencing homelessness to stay in their communities, it doesn't solve the problem of a lack of affordable rentals.

"Our stays are now longer than they have been in the past, because there's guys that are home right now that are ready to go to into an apartment," said Walker. "They've got the services they need, they're doing well, everything is good. It's just finding that apartment that doesn't exist."

Call for urban-rural anti-homelessness strategy

"All of rural Canada has these issues and they're really working in isolation trying to deal with it," said Dee Ann Benard, executive director of the Rural Development Network.



Middelkamp draws a picture in Courthouse Square in Goderich. The 41-year-old moved to Ontario from Alberta while in a relationship that's since ended. She's been experiencing homelessness for two years. (Allison Devereaux/CBC)

She's calling for an urban-rural strategy that addresses the problem across the country, firstly by sharing data to get a clear picture of migration patterns.

The Ontario government directed counties and regions to count the number of people who are homeless in their areas by Dec. 15, in order to help develop a list of each person's individual needs.

Elliott, who has struggled with addiction and family violence, has a more personal request.

"I just wish people would have more compassion and understanding toward people who have less than

them. They don't understand trauma is what causes this," she said.

"We've all been through things out here. Nobody chooses this."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



[Allison Devereaux](#)

Allison Devereaux is radio producer and host in London, Ont. She's been with CBC News for a decade, reporting from Whitehorse, Yellowknife, Winnipeg and Halifax. allison.devereaux@cbc.ca

[CBC's Journalistic Standards and Practices](#) | [About CBC News](#)

[Report Typo or Error](#)

My Account

- [Profile](#)
- [CBC Gem](#)
- [Newsletters](#)
- [About CBC Membership](#)

Connect with CBC

- [Facebook](#)
- [Twitter](#)
- [YouTube](#)
- [Instagram](#)
- [Mobile](#)
- [RSS](#)
- [Podcasts](#)

Contact CBC

- [Submit Feedback](#)
- [Help Centre](#)

Audience Relations, CBC
P.O. Box 500 Station A
Toronto, ON
Canada, M5W 1E6

Toll-free (Canada only):
1-866-306-4636

TTY/Teletype writer:
1-866-220-6045