

# Wesley - Service User Survey

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## Executive Summary

The goal of this report was to get a snapshot of how the homelessness-serving system is working on the ground for the people experiencing homelessness in Hamilton and to identify any key points where Wesley could make an outsize difference. Special focus was given to the core reasons that they became unhoused, the issues they face within the system, and their experience of becoming housed again.

The interviews found that the causes of homelessness were primarily rooted in family or relationship collapse, addictions, trauma, mental health, and incarceration. It was also common for a first instance of homelessness to occur at a young age, often following time in the foster care system or parental abuse.

Once someone has become unsheltered, the main ‘pain points’ they face are related to theft and violence while out on the street, the removal of services and places they are permitted to be, poor staff at social agencies, and the sheer amount of work it takes to survive on the street.

If they are able to get placed into supportive housing, they give much of the credit to strong staff who coordinate together to get them the placement. A significant number also credit pet ownership and a desire to improve themselves for their children with giving them the motivation to get and remain housed. Remaining housed is not without challenges though. The individuals surveyed described issues with hostile landlords and not having the life skills required to live in a single unit. Both of those were overshadowed, however, by the risks posed by having guests over. This was the leading cause of losing housing and returning to the homelessness system.

When these individuals were asked what was needed in Hamilton, they said that organizations should hire and retain great staff (especially those with lived experience), build specified programs to address service gaps, create housing, and offer a place where they can access laundry, showers, and washrooms.

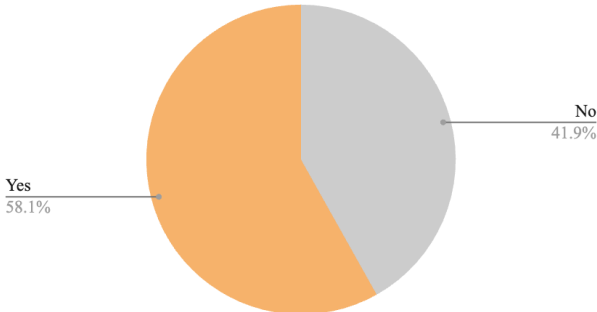
As much as possible, this report is intended to amplify the direct voices of the individuals interviewed and will make extensive use of their own words. All direct quotes will be italicized.

# Survey Methods & Respondents

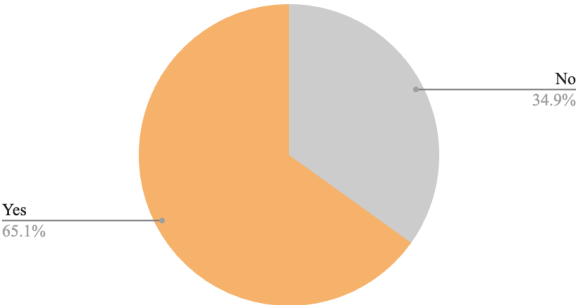
This report is the product of forty-five interviews that took place in Hamilton, Ontario between the dates of December 21st, 2022 to January 11th, 2023. The goal was to get the perspectives of individuals currently experiencing homelessness and of individuals who have successfully transitioned from homelessness in the last few years.

In order to reach this population, the surveyor attended morning drop in centres at Wesley Urban Ministries (52 Catharine St North), evening/overnight drop in centres at The Hub (78 Vine St), and conducted surveys at two supportive housing programs run by Indwell (311 Strathearne Ave & 205 Melvin Ave). The surveys were conducted at all times of day, including overnight at The Hub so that individuals who were more active at night still had an opportunity to contribute. Respondents were given a \$30.00 cash honorarium in exchange for their time.

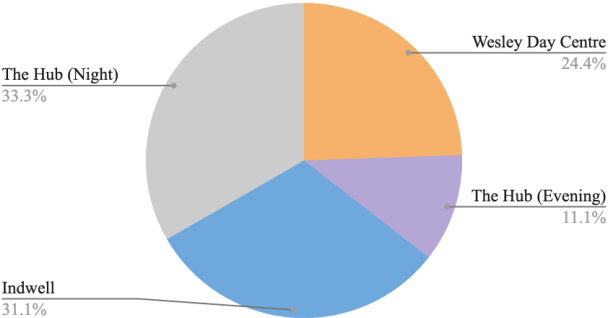
Indigenous Background



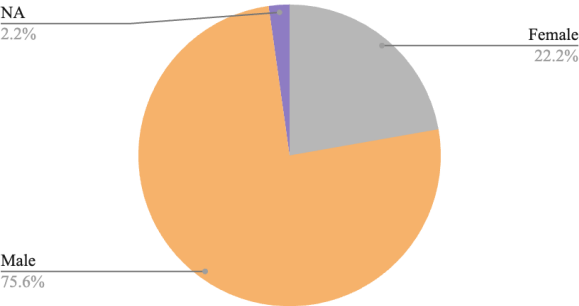
Racialized Background



Time & Location



Gender Identification



As the charts above demonstrate, the majority of respondents were racialized, male and had some indigenous background. Roughly 1/3 of respondents were in supportive housing, 1/3 were interviewed during the day or evening, and 1/3 were interviewed overnight. The average respondent age is 39.

## Causes of Homelessness

At the beginning of the interview, respondents were asked to share the stories around their initial pathway into homelessness. While each story is unique, several key themes came up repeatedly throughout these discussions. They were as follows:

1. Childhood Abuse, Foster Care, & Youth Homelessness - 16 Mentions
2. Family & Relationship Collapse - 23 Mentions
3. Addictions, Trauma & and Mental Health - 28 Mentions
4. Incarceration - 8 Mentions
5. Financial Issues - 4 Mentions

Nearly all of the stories shared by service users had at least one of these themes, and most of them had multiple. Below the line are some quotes that illustrate the themes in clients' own words.

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*Sammy -*

*'I was in 21 homes in 5 years (...). Street life started when I was running away from foster care when I was 14. For 6 months of 17 I was homeless and I was sleeping under bridges with my friends. We'd huddle together for warmth and drink until we could pass out so we didn't feel the cold so much.'*

*Anthony -*

*'I was an operations technical supervisor in the oil sands. When the last crash came, oil went from 130 a barrel to 60 a barrel overnight. I had a call within 4 hours and was let go (...). The day I applied for unemployment, the woman I was living with told me to pack my bags and move out. I was homeless'*

*Playboy -*

*'First time I went homeless I was on welfare, lost my job at 21. In and out of jail, and my father was supporting me at the time. Once I blew all my rent money, I jumped on a bus with my dad. He gave me 2 dollars and said be on your way. All of a sudden I realized I was homeless. I was (...) bewildered. I didn't know what to do'*

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Through the stories, residents show that these root causes of homelessness are often connected, with intergenerational trauma leading to substance abuse issues, mental health challenges, and strained relationships.

There was also significant mention made of the confusion and vulnerability that existed when they were newly on the street, and how survival was dependent on adapting quickly to the rules of this new world. This section of the survey did not examine losing housing after becoming unsheltered though. That will be covered in more detail in the 'Transition From Homelessness' section below.

## Pain Points

After sharing their stories about becoming unhoused, the respondents were asked to walk the interviewer through a regular day, and define the most challenging parts of that day. These were:

### Theft & Violence on Street/Shelters - 17 Mentions

*'Living in the shelters got really sour. It got to be a really sour experience really quick. Everyone was always playing an angle. Not that I'm an idiot. I was raised to look for the good in a person. There's still a lot of good in a lot of people, but the amount of individuals who seem to have lost their humanity along with their housing was just staggering.'* - Anthony

### Pain Points



### Removal of Services - 10 Mentions

*'There is a Wendys at Barton and the letter on the door says 'Due to the overwhelming vagrant population, we are sorry to say only paying customers can use the bathroom.' I just found it ridiculous how they worded it. They can't just say it's for paying customers only? We're not well liked, all because we don't have a place to live. Some of us it's our own fault, drugs, etc. Some didn't have the right guidance and stuff in life. You never know what someone's story is.'* - Patrick

### Poor Staff in Social Services - 10 Mentions

*'If you have to go to the washroom because of withdrawal, but the staff says you can't go because you aren't booked in, people will lose their shit. The staff don't understand, some of them, but other ones look at like you're a fucking prick. Not constantly, but they're still in highschool - look at me like 'I'm a jock, and you're nothing but lowlife pathetic scum!'* - Derek

### Travel & Labour Time - 11 Mentions

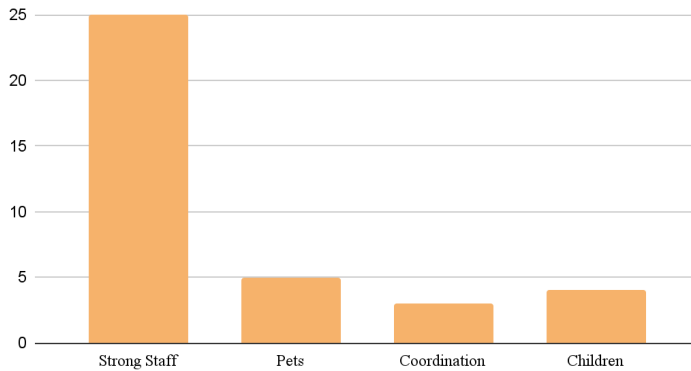
*'Most of the day is devoted to when the next bite you're going to get is, and when you're going to get warm. You don't have time to navigate the social world of housing and a job. Your job is basically keeping alive.'* - Storm

## Transition From Homelessness

For the participants who were in supportive housing, the interview included questions about their journey out of homelessness and what the critical factors were that allowed them to secure housing and remain

housed. These factors included strong staff<sup>1</sup>, ability to have pets, coordination between services, and a desire to reconnect with children.

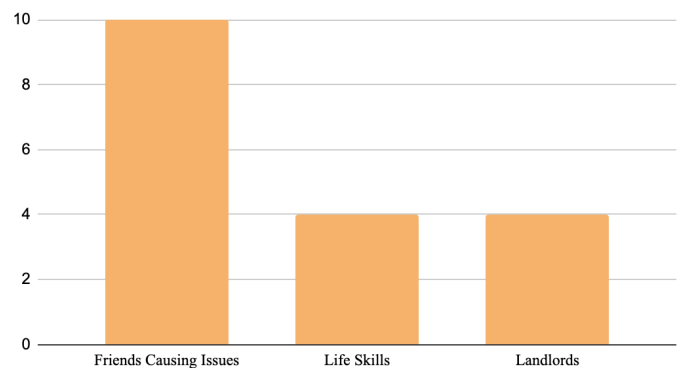
Supports for Transition out of Homelessness



*“Doing the move to having your own place is scary. I didn’t know if I would succeed. There were times I was worried I wouldn’t succeed. I didn’t want to start drinking again. It was a lot of pressure. I needed coping mechanisms - going for long walks. Now that I have a dog I can do that with my dog.” - Mark*

Participants were also asked about what made it difficult to keep housing or why they had lost it in the past. Answers here spanned from death of a roommate by overdose, to landlord issues, to lack of the skills required to run a household. That said the most common reason by far was having friends to come stay with you.

Challenges for Transition out of Homelessness



*‘(The real question is) how would you prevent becoming homeless a second time? I’ve been homeless 4 times. (...) You bring the street mentality to your first place. It’s your apartment, not your home. It’s usually the combo of yourself and the guests you bring that kicks you out. (...)*

*Life skills (Cooking and laundry) are big ones. Laundry took me a long time. Proper maintenance of a place. People get off the streets and their clothes are all over the floor. You have a dresser and it’s all over the floor. Once it’s all you know, it’s very hard to break. The hardest thing to break when you get your first apartment, is that all you know is the streets.*

*You’re basically still homeless except that you get to go to a place that’s yours. You get so used to being in that lifestyle that when you get a place, you don’t know how to live ‘normal (...) I got a place, my roommate went to jail and I couldn’t cover the rent. Got another place and a roommate named Austin... He died of an overdose. Couldn’t carry it without him. Became homeless again.’ - Danny*

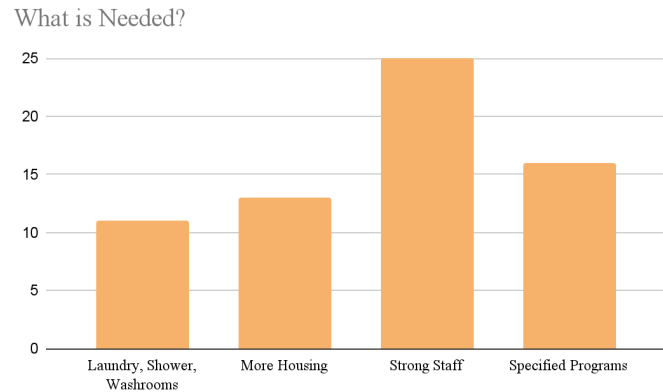
<sup>1</sup> The importance of strong staff came up repeatedly throughout many interviews. It looks artificially high here because the other three responses are coming mainly from the 14 housed individuals, while ‘Strong Staff’ is coming from all 45

## What is Needed in the Community?

After sharing their stories about becoming unhoused, the respondents were asked directly what they thought Wesley should focus on to do the most good. Their main responses were:

### 1. Strong Staff - 25 Mentions

A small number of outstanding staff in Hamilton were mentioned repeatedly in the interviews. These individuals had a major impact, especially when they're able to coordinate efforts between agencies.



### 2. Filling Service Gaps - 16 Mentions

Many of the individuals surveyed have unique needs and wanted to see programs that worked to meet those service gaps. These needs spanned a wide range, from couple's shelters, to after-hours drop ins, to more accessible programs, and rehab facilities.

### 3. Build More Housing - 13 Mentions

The core need many of the respondents face is a lack of housing. From new constructions to renovations of existing buildings, they requested that future programs add to the affordable housing stock in Hamilton.

### 4. Laundry, Showers, and Washrooms - 11 Mentions

Many respondents mentioned that over the last few years there are very few ways to access running water services like laundry, showers, and washrooms if you are unsheltered. They identified this as one of the main pain points of daily life on the street.

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*“Winter is the hardest. Washrooms don't exist. As a woman you are outside and there are no indoor washrooms. During the day, there are only 3 that you're allowed to use without being assaulted by security. (...) There is not one place downtown where a woman can use the washroom at night.” - Jeanette*

*‘Housing is the most terrifying thing to lose - so they should focus their energies on shelters and halfway houses and stuff like that...They should make more centres for the abused. People hiding from their partners.’ - KareBear*

*“Someone who has been through it like me. They need companionship, camaraderie, inclusion, and brotherhood. From that they'll respect you and admire you. Someone who lives it. Not just went to school and read books. They've lived it.” - Mark*