

**MYTH**

Shelters are only busy in the winter.

**FACT**

People access shelter services all year round. In 2008, the average number of different people who accessed shelter in Cambridge between June and August was only 1% lower than the monthly average for the full year.

**MYTH**

The Bridges is so nice; people are coming from all over just to stay there.

**FACT**

The Bridges offers very basic accommodation in dorm-style rooms and two meals a day. During the day, it is expected that residents participate in activities that will eventually lead them back to permanent housing (e.g., job searches, accessing income support, entering treatment programs).

90% of The Bridges residents are from Cambridge.

**MYTH**

All homeless people are mentally ill.

**FACT**

Not all people experiencing homelessness have a mental health issue, although it is true that people with these issues often face difficulties with maintaining housing.

At The Bridges, it was estimated that about 30% of residents have mental health issues. Likewise, at Argus Residence for Young People, it was estimated that half of the residents have mental health issues.

There are waiting lists for all of the programs that provide affordable housing with support for people with mental health issues.

**MYTH**

People on welfare spend all their extra money on smoking, drinking and playing bingo.

**FACT**

Regardless of a person's level of income, choosing to smoke, drink or play bingo are matters of personal choice.

The reality is that there is very little left over at the end of each month for entertainment of any kind when you are accessing Ontario Works. For example, a parent with one child under the age of 12 years receives a maximum of \$1,029 each month from Ontario Works. This includes a \$480 limit for shelter costs – while the average rent for a private market two bedroom apartment in Cambridge is \$805 – and only \$549 to pay for all of your other expenses (food, utilities, transportation, clothes).

**MYTH**

All homeless people are addicted to drugs or alcohol.

**FACT**

Some people experiencing homelessness have problems with substance use. However, it is important to understand that people use mind and mood-altering substances for a variety of reasons and that the effects and consequences of substance use are different for each person. For some, substance use develops into a dependency over time and, as a result, this can create instability in their personal and professional lives. But patterns associated with dependency are not straightforward – people tend to fluctuate in their levels of use regardless of whether or not they receive treatment. Nevertheless, in some cases, people remain actively addicted for years, feeling trapped and unable to live without alcohol and/or drugs.

There are very few housing options for people with active substance use issues and there are no residential treatment facilities located in Cambridge. This leaves people who have lost their housing with very few options for staying off the street.

**MYTH**

If we had enough housing there would be no homelessness.

**FACT**

Stable housing, income and supports are needed to end homelessness:

Housing is a necessity, but it can't be just any housing. It must be housing that is accessible, safe, adequately maintained, of suitable size, affordable, acceptable by the individual and it must have security of tenure.

Also, people need enough income to meet their basic needs, such as shelter, utilities, food, clothing and transportation.

Finally, in some cases, the level of support that is needed is simply too high and people must turn to more formal supports to help them avoid homelessness.

People need access to all *three* resources to maintain housing over the long term.

**MYTH**

They don't need disability pension, they are just lazy and using the system.

**FACT**

Securing an income from the Ontario Disability Support Program is a lengthy process that includes a detailed assessment of level of ability and need – which must be endorsed by a physician. Many applicants are denied benefits and have to appeal. It could take up to a year to be approved.

# Myths & Facts About Homelessness & Poverty

*When people have the housing, income and support they need to maintain stability in their lives over the long term, the risk of homelessness decreases. This is called housing stability and it is the key to ending homelessness in our community.*

*In the fall of 2007, the report "All Roads Lead to Home: A Homelessness to Housing Stability Strategy" was released that identified actions designed to support the vision of housing stability for all community members in Waterloo Region. The Cambridge Action on Homelessness Group (CAHG) chose to lead the action that called for a coordinated educational campaign highlighting issues of housing and homelessness and the cost effectiveness of housing stability.*

*Throughout 2008, members of CAHG worked to develop the following series of myths and facts around homelessness and poverty in Cambridge. The goal of this work is to increase the awareness of these issues in the community. It is hoped that the information will be shared broadly with community groups and members of the general public. To access a copy of this material, including references, please visit the Social Planning Council of Cambridge and North Dumfries website at:*

*[socialplanningcouncil-cnd.org](http://socialplanningcouncil-cnd.org).*

<b>MYTH</b>
There are no homeless people in Cambridge.
<b>FACT</b>
While the problem might not be as visible in Cambridge as in larger metropolitan centres, homelessness is a significant issue for the city.
The number of people who access emergency shelters in a given year is one way to measure homelessness. In 2008, 834 different people stayed at The Bridges and Argus Residence for Young People – they had nearly 22,000 bed nights!
Remember – this only accounts for the number of people accessing shelters. Some people choose not to stay at shelters. Others may “hide” their homelessness by staying with friends or family.

<b>MYTH</b>
If they would just quit smoking, they wouldn't be homeless.
<b>FACT</b>
Regardless of one's housing state, smoking is a personal choice. There is no direct evidence that smoking either causes or prolongs homelessness.

<b>MYTH</b>
It's their choice to be homeless – they could get housing or a job if they wanted to.

<b>FACT</b>
No one chooses to be homeless. Most people are in a state of shock when it happens to them.
An informal survey at The Bridges found that a third of the residents were employed – they were not able to find housing that was affordable at their income level. The remaining two thirds of residents were struggling to find employment for a number of reasons, including disabilities.
Affordable housing is in very short supply in Cambridge. Some people with disabilities also require support in order to maintain housing, even if it is affordable. The waiting list for these kinds of programs is very long.

<b>MYTH</b>
The jails send everyone who is released to The Bridges.

<b>FACT</b>
The vast majority of people released from correctional facilities return to their own communities. 70% return to homes and families and the remaining 30% struggle to find housing, just as anyone in the midst of a transition would.

<b>MYTH</b>
Homeless youth would rather live on the street than follow rules at home.
<b>FACT</b>
The issues surrounding youth homelessness are very complex. Up to 80% of youth experiencing homelessness share similar histories of family conflict, domestic violence or abuse. Other factors include poverty, mental health issues, physical health issues and substance use issues.
These trends have been confirmed for Cambridge: in 2007, 70% of youth accessing Argus Residence for Young People disclosed physical, sexual or emotional abuse to staff at intake.

<b>MYTH</b>
Only men are homeless.
<b>FACT</b>
Homelessness is linked to many of the same issues for men and women – including mental health and substance use issues. Women also tend to lose their housing following family breakdown and issues of abuse.
In 2008, 26% of the residents staying at The Bridges were female, while 42% of the youth staying at Argus Residence for Young People were female. In addition, 33 families were sheltered at The Bridges.
It's expected that females make up a larger proportion of the people experiencing “hidden homelessness”.

<b>MYTH</b>
Immigrants get subsidized housing a lot quicker.
<b>FACT</b>
Nearly all applications for subsidized accommodation are processed in the order that they are received by the office. Some applications are prioritized for special circumstances (such as abuse). However, no special consideration is given for length of time in Canada or where the applicant was born.

<b>MYTH</b>
They are lazy.
<b>FACT</b>
Being “lazy” implies that one's basic needs are met – physical, mental, social and spiritual. This could not be farther from the truth for people experiencing homelessness.
It's impossible to imagine the level of distress that comes with losing your housing until you've been there. People in these situations tend to be very resourceful because they have to be: they are charged with the task of rebuilding their lives in the midst of extreme poverty, marginalization and service barriers.

<b>MYTH</b>
They get everything for free.
<b>FACT</b>
Being homeless does not grant people access to services such as free child care or education. In fact, without a permanent address or identification, people often face significant barriers accessing services open to everyone in the community, such as emergency care or access to walk-in clinic services.

<b>MYTH</b>
They are all criminals.
<b>FACT</b>
While some people with lived homelessness experience have been in contact with the justice system, others have not. Arrests that have occurred are commonly associated with “minor” offences or actions that stem from the drive to survive while living on the street (e.g., trespassing, petty theft, shoplifting or prostitution). Moreover, people experiencing homelessness are at a high risk of being victimized while living on the street.
An informal survey at The Bridges found that half of the residents had no prior involvement with the justice system.

<b>MYTH</b>
Building affordable housing is too expensive.
<b>FACT</b>
Two local studies have provided direct support for the economic advantages of building affordable housing:
First, emergency service responses for people experiencing homelessness are roughly 10 times more expensive than providing affordable housing with support.
Second, for every dollar invested by the Region of Waterloo into the Affordable Housing Strategy, ten additional dollars have been invested into the program by other sources.
The truth is that <i>keeping</i> people homeless is too expensive!

<b>MYTH</b>
You can't be evicted in the winter, especially if you have children.

<b>FACT</b>
You can be evicted at any time of the year. The decision is <i>not</i> influenced by whether or not children live with you.