

In Their Own Words



The women and men we spoke to described what it was like to be homeless.

The Psychological Effects of Homelessness

"The hardest part is being lonely, not having companionship or someone to talk to. In the shelter I don't talk to anyone because you don't know who to trust."

– man in his 40s, interviewed in a hostel

"The hardest part is psychological. Not having a place is the worst thing that can happen to you. It's very depressing."

– woman in her 40s, interviewed in a shelter

"The hardest part is that you can't do the things that are good for you psychologically because you have to follow someone else's agenda. You can't control your diet, you can't control the situation – you're not able to control your life at all. Every aspect is like a game of chance."

– woman in her 40s, interviewed in a shelter

"If you don't have your own place, there's a high measure of other people controlling your life – your social life, your diet. Freedom and choice, all those things count towards your health."

– man in his 20s, interviewed in a shelter

Poverty

"Money and shelter mean comfort and without comfort your health goes. Trying to stay healthy means trying to get enough money."

– young man in his 20s, interviewed in a shelter

"Money Mart takes \$40 off my cheque. That's my food for a week. Someone stole all my ID so I can't use banks. It is much easier in Vancouver. There you get a letter describing your appearance. You can use it to cash cheques at a bank. We need that."

– man in his 30s, interviewed in a shelter

"I worked as a domestic worker for seven months and received \$400 in total for housekeeping."

– recent immigrant woman, interviewed in a shelter

"The hardest part is lack of money, because with money you can do what you want and eat what you want and you have more choices. If I had the money, everything else would fall in place. That's just the way it is."

– man in his 60s, interviewed in a hostel

"The hardest part is not having the money to get the basic necessities – doing laundry, buying roluids, for example – and not being able to afford a place."

– man in his 30s, interviewed in a hostel

Job Issues

"It is hard to find work at my age. I go to temp agencies but the work is now very slow. You can stay all day from 5 a.m. and never get a job. Today at Queen and Parliament, there were 80 of us. They only took 9 people."

– man in his 50s, interviewed in a hostel

"You go for this job and don't get it – you get discouraged. Especially when you know how to do a job and no one wants to hire you – or there's just no jobs."

– man in his 30s, interviewed in a hostel

"When you're staying at the hostel and working at these temp places, you miss breakfast and get back after supper. That's why some of these guys don't work temp. Besides, they fuck you in the end and all you get is enough money for a pack of smokes and a coffee. I work until 5:30 or 6:00 and miss the meal here at the shelter. I have to go buy food with the money I just made."

– man in his 20s, interviewed in a hostel

Lack of Privacy

"The lack of privacy encompasses alot. You don't go to bed alone, to the bathroom alone, you don't eat alone. You have to build up walls. The hostels are very gloomy."

– woman in her 40s, interviewed in a hostel

"The hardest part to deal with is the lack of privacy when you are feeling ill. I want my own place. It is terrible to have to share a toilet with others. It is humiliating and embarrassing when you have bowel problems."

– woman in her 50s, sleeping outside

Housing

"When I lost my place, I got first and last months' rent (from welfare) and stayed in a place for two weeks. I was afraid for my life. It was a crack house, and violent, so I went back to the hostel. I reapplied for first and last months' rent and they told me I was not eligible to ask for a year."

– man in his 50s, interviewed in a hostel

"I left my last housing because the landlord was having trouble with fire regulations because he had too many people so he had to evict a few."

– man in his 30s, interviewed in a hostel

"The hardest part is not being able to find a room to rent. Some landlords look at me and will not rent because my shoes are dirty. Some places still don't even have hot water."

– man in his 20s, sleeping outside

Hostels

"Hostels are geared to day working. If someone works midnight shifts, there is no place to sleep during the day. There is no place to eat after 7 p.m. Hostels are not structured to help you get ahead."

– man in his 30s, interviewed in a hostel

"In hostels you share everything. You worry about dirt and disease. Colds pass around alot. You get better only to room with another sick person. There is no privacy."

– woman in her 20s, interviewed in a hostel

Getting Proper Sleep and Rest

"The hardest part is when they put you out on the street at 6:30 in the morning and you have no place to go until 7:00 at night. Walking the streets in the cold, tired, unable to lie down anywhere. Those 12 hours are the hardest. You have places to go and eat but you don't have the energy to walk there. At the hostels you don't sleep well because there is fighting and arguing. So you are tired when you come out in the morning."

– man in his 50s, interviewed in a hostel

"The hardest part is the lack of rest, having time to yourself to close the door and say 'ah'."

– man in his 50s, interviewed in a hostel

Safety and Fear

"If you don't have a foundation, you have a house that tumbles. You have homelessness and fear. You have fear that the law will pick you up as a vagrant."

– woman in her 40s, interviewed in a hostel

"Not feeling safe makes it hard for me to sleep."

– woman in her 20s, interviewed in a hostel

"You never know who might steal your stuff, so I sleep with my clothes on."

– man in his 30s, interviewed in a hostel

"I've lost three sets of clothing and ID in the past year."

– man in his 40s, interviewed in a hostel

Food

"I'm allergic to milk, eggs and orange juice. You have no choice when you're in a hostel. When you're hungry, you eat what you can. You eat to fill up. If I miss breakfast at the hostel, I feel 'blah' enough not to have the energy to walk to lunch across town."

– man in his 20s, interviewed in a meal place

"When the shelter makes pork, I can't eat it because I am Muslim. There is no choice of anything else so I can't eat that meal."

– refugee woman in her 20s, interviewed in a shelter

"The food is not up to par. You won't starve, but beans and weiners and macaroni and cheese couldn't support someone doing a hard day's work. It doesn't sustain you except for day to day."

– man in his 30s, interviewed at a meal place

Basic Hygiene

"It's not easy washing your feet in public washrooms."

– woman in her 50s, sleeping outside

"You let basic things slide, like washing and brushing your teeth, when your basic need is to find a place to stay."

– man in his 30s, interviewed in a shelter

"The main thing is trying to stay clean. It's hard to keep clean and well-groomed. The feeling that you don't belong. When you're let out of here in the morning people look at you funny. I'm looking for work but not being well-groomed, it's hard. I applied for a job at a place where they had a "help wanted" sign and they said they weren't hiring. I get really depressed."

– man in his 20s, interviewed in a hostel