

## IT'S NOT JUST THE COLD

People who sleep out-of-doors, referred to as “rough sleepers,” move into homeless shelters when the weather worsens.

Most people without access to their own housing, or without access to the housing of a friend or relative, stay in an emergency homeless shelter. But some people in this situation prefer to sleep out-of-doors. This population, often referred to as “rough sleepers,” includes people living in encampments.

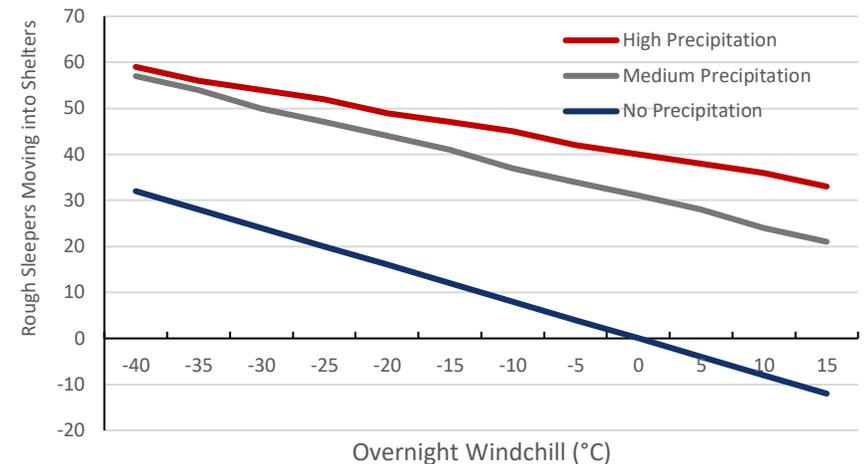
Our best guess of the number of people sleeping rough comes from point-in-time counts. These are infrequent efforts by community organizations, backed by volunteers, to venture out after emergency shelters have closed to count the number of people found sleeping out-of-doors.

A problem recognized by point-in-time count organizers is that their efforts are sensitive to weather conditions on the night of the count. A count made in July provides a different answer from a count made in January. As weather conditions deteriorate, some rough sleepers seek the warm and dry conditions of an emergency shelter. In warmer months, these same people may abandon shelters and return to sleeping rough. The numbers of rough sleepers can be expected to change with weather conditions.

**Very few people sleep rough in all conditions. Many people move between shelters and rough sleeping as weather conditions change.**

Current research at the School of Public Policy is investigating how sensitive to weather conditions these movements into and out of emergency shelters are. Identifying the size of weather-induced shelter use helps determine the number of people sleeping rough on a given day, better preparing shelter operators who need to be able to anticipate when to make more shelter beds available. Beyond assistance in shelter planning, our on-going research shows that it is not just the winter cold that drives rough sleepers indoors.

Weather Conditions and Rough Sleepers, Calgary



Source: [Jadidzadeh and Kneebone \(2024\)](#). Positive values represent movements from rough sleeping into shelters. Negative values represent movement out of shelters to rough sleeping.

While governments provide shelters with extra funding during winter months, the chart suggests policymakers need to consider the shoulder seasons too. This is because precipitation, not just cold, matters. And it matters in a complicated way: As temperatures fall precipitation changes from rain to sleet to snow, and each of these presents a different challenge to rough sleepers.

The chart visualizes data from point-in-time counts and meteorological records in Calgary, Alberta. As temperatures fall (moving from right to left in the chart) the number of rough sleepers moving into emergency shelters increases. If the fall in temperature is accompanied by precipitation, the movement into emergency shelters is even greater. As such, policymakers may want to consider extra funding for shelters to help them accommodate weather-induced movements of rough sleepers not just in the winter, but during shoulder months as well.