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How is homelessness changing in Lanark County?

The following is part of a three-part series about homelessness in Lanark County.

Homelessness has been increasing in Lanark County and across Ontario, particularly in rural Ontario. It is evolving, with visible homelessness becoming more apparent.

Homelessness can look like many things for people. It can mean living in an emergency shelter or temporary accommodation, such as couch surfing with friends or family. It can happen when someone leaves a correctional facility, hospital or the child welfare system and has nowhere to go. It can result from job loss or a job that doesn't pay quite enough, divorce, domestic violence, illness or an unexpected large expense. It can mean living in a makeshift shelter, such as a car, trailer or encampment, or having no shelter at all.

In a "State of Homelessness" report to Lanark County Council in May, Director of Social Services Emily Hollington said from 2021 up to May 2026, 800 people have registered with the county's By-Name List for homelessness, which is a real-time list that helps to identify those most vulnerable and track progress toward permanent, sustainable housing. A committee consisting of numerous community partners works to connect people to supports through a coordinated access system.

"Couch surfing continues to be one of the most common sleeping arrangements, but the number of unsheltered individuals is increasing, and this kind of visibility can raise tension in communities," Hollington said. "It can add pressure to emergency and community services."

In Lanark County, homelessness is most prevalent in Smiths Falls, Carleton Place and Perth, where access to needed supports and transitional housing or treatment programs can be easier.

A 2026 report by the Association of Municipalities of Ontario, the Ontario Municipal Social Services Association and the Northern Ontario Service Deliverers Association found homelessness accelerated during the pandemic period and housing and supports have not kept up. Homelessness is increasing rapidly in mostly rural communities, with a 31 per cent jump between 2024 and 2025 compared to 7.8 per cent provincially. In Lanark County, homelessness increased by 37 per cent in that time period. As well, encampments now exist in most areas of



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Ontario, including Lanark County. The report says homelessness is projected to more than double by 2035 and that people are also staying homeless for longer periods.

Hollington explained people experiencing homelessness have an increased risk of chronic health conditions, infection, injury, assault, exploitation and premature death – even after being housed. “Homelessness means living in survival mode, staying constantly alert, which strains the nervous system. Many remain hyper-vigilant even once housed, struggling to feel safe again.”

She added this can lead to difficulty keeping appointments and maintaining employment, family connections and friends. “Stigma leads to shame and distrust of systems. Everyone who experiences homelessness experiences trauma. It erodes dignity, identity and self-worth. It breaks social connections and damages physical and mental health. Homelessness changes how a person sees the world.”

Across Ontario, communities are seeing that affordable housing with adequate supports takes time and money to build, and the problem is exacerbated by inadequate income, increased cost of living, wait lists and a need for more resources for mental health and addictions.

“Even though we continue every year to provide more options on the housing continuum, the number of unhoused people continues to escalate in Lanark County and across the province,” said CAO Kurt Greaves. “This illustrates that there are root causes of homelessness that need a concerted effort from all levels of government to solve.”

To learn more about housing supports in Lanark County, see <https://www.lanarkcounty.ca/living/social-services/>. If you are experiencing homelessness, call the Lanark County Homeless Response Team at 613-267-4200 ext. 2140 or 1-888-952-6275 Monday to Friday from 8:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. or after hours at 613-206-1486.

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