



The Experiences and Support Needs of People Living at Abbotsford's Rest Stops



CEDAR
OUTREACH SOCIETY



Elizabeth Fry Society
of Greater Vancouver



Acknowledgements

We respectfully acknowledge that this project was conducted on the ancestral and traditional territory of the Stó:lō people, including the Semá:th First Nation, Máthxwí First Nation, and Leq'á:mel First Nation. These First Nations have lived on this land since time immemorial. With gratitude, we recognize the opportunity to work, learn, and build community here.

We extend our sincere appreciation to the residents and former residents of the Whatcom Road and Cole Road rest stops in Abbotsford who generously shared their time, experiences, and perspectives. Their willingness to speak openly about their circumstances made this study possible.

This study was funded through Reaching Home: Canada's Homelessness Strategy, a federal program of Housing, Infrastructure and Communities Canada (HICC). The funding was administered by the City of Abbotsford in its role as the local Community Entity. CEDAR Outreach Society of BC led the project in partnership with The Elizabeth Fry Society of Greater Vancouver, Archway Community Services, and the International Centre for Criminal Law Reform.

We thank members of the research team, Raelyn O'Hara, Megan Capp, Chrystal Lattie, and Yvon Dandurand, and the outreach workers who facilitated contacts with residents, including Andrea Hoefner, Ravneet Kaur, Kabiru Lawal and Ethan Beltran.

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Please direct inquiries to:

Megan Capp, Executive Director

CEDAR Outreach Society of British Columbia

www.cedaroutreach.com

Contents

Executive Summary	4
Introduction.....	6
Understanding vehicular homelessness.....	7
Community context.....	8
The rest stops.....	9
Methodology	9
Finding 1: There is no single pathway into RV living	11
Housing instability, evictions, and barriers to housing	11
Housing costs and income adequacy	12
Employment, income, and financial stability	13
Pets and housing access	14
Health, disability, and housing stability	15
Family loss, relationship breakdown, and social disconnection.....	16
Justice system involvement and legal barriers	17
Service navigation and access to supports	17
Finding 2: The rest stops functioned as communities	18
Finding 3: Safety was shaped primarily by external factors	20
Finding 4: Stigma shapes daily life	21
Finding 5: Barriers to services and housing stability	22
Transportation.....	23
Access to Healthcare	23
Hygiene and Basic Infrastructure.....	24
Service Navigation.....	24
Recommendations for Practice	24
1. Plan decampments around individualized transition and housing plans.	25
2. Preserve social connections and continuity of support during relocation.	25
3. Provide coordinated, mobile service navigation.....	25

4. Expand housing pathways that reflect the realities of vehicle residents.	26
5. Pair housing responses with practical access to healthcare, transportation, and income supports.	26
6. Use stigma-informed, respectful engagement across systems.....	26
Conclusion.....	26
References	28

Executive Summary

This study aimed to better understand the experiences and support needs of people living at the Whatcom Road and Cole Road rest stops in Abbotsford, BC, and to identify barriers and opportunities for service providers, policymakers, and community organizations responding to vehicular homelessness. Through interviews and focus groups conducted with rest stop residents in 2025, the study sought to contribute to local understanding of an issue that remains relatively underexplored in British Columbia and across Canada.

The findings show no single pathway into vehicular homelessness. Participants described diverse experiences that contributed to housing instability, including poverty, rising housing costs, disability, declining health, bereavement, relationship breakdown, eviction, justice system involvement, and difficulties accessing services and benefits. For many residents, housing loss resulted from multiple interacting factors rather than a single event.

A recurring theme throughout the study was the widening gap between income and housing costs. Participants relying on disability assistance, pensions, casual employment, or low-wage work consistently reported that available housing options were unaffordable. Many also faced additional barriers, including pet-related restrictions, criminal records, security deposits, and a limited supply of affordable rental housing.

Although living conditions at the rest stops were often difficult, residents frequently described them as communities characterized by mutual support, information sharing, and informal social networks. Many participants valued the independence and sense of belonging they experienced there, even as they expressed a desire for greater stability.

Stigma also emerged as a prominent theme experienced by those residing at the rest stops. Our participants described being judged, photographed,

harassed, and stereotyped because of where they lived. They also identified housing, transportation, access to healthcare, hygiene facilities, legal assistance, food security, and help navigating complex systems as among the most important supports needed to improve their quality of life and housing stability.

The stories shared throughout this study show that vehicular homelessness rarely results from a single issue; instead, housing costs, income, health, personal relationships, access to services, and public perceptions of homelessness can intersect to shape people's lives and housing options. The report concludes with six recommendations focused on person-centred decampment planning, continuity of community supports, coordinated navigation, low-barrier and pet-inclusive housing pathways, practical access to healthcare and transportation, and stigma-informed engagement.

Introduction

Across Canada, housing affordability has become one of the most significant social policy challenges facing communities. Rising housing costs, limited affordable rental housing, low vacancy rates, and inadequate incomes have contributed to rising housing insecurity and homelessness across the country (Infrastructure Canada, 2024b; National Advisory Council on Poverty, 2025).

For some individuals, living in a vehicle, trailer, or RV represents an alternative to emergency shelter or sleeping outdoors when stable and affordable housing is unavailable. Although vehicle living is not a substitute for stable housing, it may offer temporary protection from the elements, personal safety, privacy, storage for belongings, and a greater degree of control over daily life (Potter, 2023; USICH, 2022). For people with companion animals, it may also provide a way to remain with pets when available shelters or housing options do not accommodate them (Kerman et al., 2020). These relative advantages coexist with continued housing instability, limited access to basic services, and the risk of displacement.

Although research on vehicular homelessness is growing, relatively little is known about the experiences and support needs of people living in RVs and other vehicles in Canadian communities. This study was undertaken to begin to fill that gap by better understanding the experiences and support needs of individuals living at the Whatcom Road and Cole Road highway rest stops in Abbotsford, British Columbia.

Specifically, the study sought to broadly explore four questions:

1. What circumstances led residents to live at the rest stops?
2. What are residents' experiences while living there?
3. What barriers prevent residents from securing stable housing?
4. What supports do residents identify as most helpful?

This report begins by providing context on vehicular homelessness and the housing challenges facing communities such as Abbotsford. It then presents findings from interviews and focus groups with residents, exploring how people came to live at the rest stops, what life was like there, the challenges they faced, and the supports they identified as most important. The report concludes by reflecting on what these experiences may mean for practitioners, service providers, and others working to address housing instability in the community.

Understanding vehicular homelessness

Vehicular homelessness has become increasingly visible across North America as housing costs have risen and affordable housing options have become harder to access. The term generally refers to people who live in cars, vans, trailers, motorhomes, or recreational vehicles because they lack access to stable and affordable housing. It is important to note that definitions vary across jurisdictions and do not always classify RV and camper residents consistently (Potter, 2023; United States Interagency Council on Homelessness [USICH], 2022).

The limited existing research shows that there is no single pathway into vehicular homelessness. People begin living in RVs, trailers, and other vehicles through varied and often intersecting circumstances, including housing instability, health challenges, disability, job loss, family disruption, bereavement, and financial hardship (Infrastructure Canada, 2024a; Statistics Canada, 2023). Canadian research on vehicle living further shows how limited access to affordable housing and high living costs can constrain people's housing choices and contribute to the use of vehicles as informal housing (Chretien, 2021).

Research also indicates that people experiencing homelessness do not always view vehicle living as the least desirable option available. Compared with emergency shelters or sleeping outdoors, vehicles may offer greater privacy and autonomy, space to store belongings, and the ability to remain with partners or pets. Vehicle living may therefore function as a strategy for avoiding unsheltered homelessness while preserving some control over daily life (USICH, 2022).

The relative advantages of vehicle living do not, however, make it stable or adequate housing. People living in vehicles may face limited access to water, sanitation, waste disposal, transportation, healthcare, and safe places to park. They may also experience uncertainty arising from enforcement and displacement, including the disruption of informal support networks that develop within vehicle communities. Research from Los Angeles found that vehicle-dwelling restrictions reduced vehicle residence in regulated areas but produced stronger displacement effects in neighbouring areas, suggesting that such measures may relocate visible vehicle homelessness without addressing its underlying causes (Giamarino et al., 2023).

Emerging research further suggests that people living in vehicles may differ in important ways from other unsheltered populations. A Los Angeles study found that vehicle residents were more likely than people living in tents, makeshift shelters, or public spaces to be women, to live in larger households with

children, and to have experienced homelessness for shorter periods (Giamarino et al., 2024). Although these findings arise from a specific US context, they underscore the diversity of people experiencing vehicular homelessness and the importance of avoiding assumptions that vehicle residents have similar circumstances or support needs.

Recent scholarship has also highlighted the role of stigma in shaping the experiences of people experiencing homelessness more generally. Public attitudes often portray homelessness as the result of individual failings rather than structural factors such as housing affordability, poverty, disability, or health challenges. These perceptions can deter people from seeking help, erode trust in institutions, and create additional barriers to housing, employment, and services (Dandurand et al., 2025).

Many of these themes were evident in the experiences shared by participants in the present study. Like people experiencing homelessness more broadly, rest stop residents described challenges related to housing affordability, income adequacy, health, stigma, and access to services (Infrastructure Canada, 2024a). However, they also described issues more specific to vehicle-based homelessness, including the need for safe places to park and the relative privacy, autonomy, security, and capacity to retain belongings that vehicles offered compared with shelters or other available options. Participants with companion animals also described vehicle living as a way to remain with pets when other housing or service options did not accommodate them.

Community context

Participants' experiences occurred within a broader context of mounting housing pressures and increasing homelessness in Abbotsford. These local conditions form part of a broader national pattern. Recently, a federal survey of Canadian communities found that encampments had become widespread and were associated with intersecting pressures involving housing markets, chronic homelessness, health and social-service systems, and the rising cost of living (Housing, Infrastructure and Communities Canada, 2023).

According to the City of Abbotsford's 2024 Point-in-Time Homeless Count, 465 individuals were identified as experiencing homelessness during the count period. Of these, 43% were unsheltered, including those living in vehicles and encampments, while 66% reported experiencing homelessness for more than one year (City of Abbotsford, 2025).

Housing affordability remains a significant challenge across the Fraser Valley. The Fraser Valley living wage was calculated at \$23.23 per hour in 2024, based on the income needed for working households to cover basic living

costs in the region (Living Wage BC, 2024). Despite minimum-wage increases and other housing benefits, many households still struggle to secure affordable housing.

CMHC's October 2025 Rental Market Survey reported an average monthly rent of \$1,470 for a purpose-built rental apartment in Abbotsford and \$1,447 across Abbotsford–Mission. Across the Abbotsford–Mission market, average rents were \$1,278 for a one-bedroom apartment and \$1,623 for a two-bedroom apartment (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2025). These market rents exceed the amount many participants reported having available for housing after relying on disability assistance, pensions, low-wage work, or irregular employment.

Participants' experiences suggest these broader housing pressures hit hardest for people living on fixed incomes, disability assistance, pensions, or low-wage employment. Several residents described situations in which they could not secure rental housing despite having some form of regular income.

The rest stops

Over the past several years, the Whatcom Road and Cole Road highway rest stops evolved into informal communities where individuals living in RVs, trailers, vans, and other vehicles could remain for extended periods. The sites form part of British Columbia's provincial highway and rest-area system and are provincially owned and managed (Province of British Columbia, 2026). Although never intended as residential sites, the rest stops provided a degree of stability for individuals who were unable or unwilling to access other, more appropriate, housing options

When the interviews and focus groups were conducted, residents in RVs, trailers, vans, and other vehicles occupied both the Whatcom Road and Cole Road rest stops. After data collection was completed, closure processes for both sites were initiated, and residents were required to relocate. References to the Whatcom Road and Cole Road communities throughout this report therefore reflect participants' experiences prior to the closures.

Although coordinated provincial outreach efforts helped residents relocate, publicly available information on former residents' long-term housing outcomes remains limited.

Methodology

Researchers interviewed individuals currently residing at the rest stops who volunteered to participate. The semi-structured, open-ended, confidential

interviews invited participants to discuss their experiences freely. Topics covered included housing instability, access to services, health issues, personal safety, and daily struggles. As a gesture of appreciation, each participant received a \$50 Visa gift card after the interview.

Data collection proceeded in two phases: semi-structured interviews on June 25 and 26, 2025, and follow-up focus groups on September 26, 2025, at the Whatcom Road and Cole Road highway rest stops in Abbotsford, BC. The initial recruitment target for Phase 1 was 25 participants, but interest exceeded expectations, with 36 people completing semi-structured interviews (22 at Whatcom Road and 14 at Cole Road).

Phase 2 focus groups included 12 additional participants, with 9 at Cole Road (including one woman) and 3 at the Whatcom Road rest stop (all men). Some overlap with Phase 1 participants may have occurred. 25% of Phase 1 participants identified as women and 75% as men; approximately 30% identified as Indigenous. Age information was available for Phase 1 interview participants but was not systematically collected for Phase 2 focus group participants due to the more conversational and less structured approach utilized at this stage. Among Phase 1 participants, ages ranged from 28 to 73 years, with an average age of 52, indicating a largely middle-aged and older interview cohort.

For both phases, the interview team brought Tim Hortons coffee, water, donuts, and muffins, which were freely available to all residents; participation in the study was clearly separate from access to any food or beverages. CEDAR Outreach workers were relied on for recruitment and initial engagement with potential participants, as they frequently interact with those at the rest stops and have earned their trust through consistent support. This approach is also aligned with York University's (2025) guidelines, which state that "Research practices should be conducted in ways that minimize distress for homeless research participants" (p. 4).

The interview team comprised professional researchers, outreach workers, and non-profit program leadership. The professional researchers trained the team during a pre-field briefing on conducting interviews, covering informed consent procedures, safety protocols, and criteria for pausing or ending an interview to protect participant well-being (e.g., signs of distress or impaired capacity). The team then engaged individuals through a respectful, informal approach, including knocking on trailer and RV doors, approaching people outside their vehicles, and speaking with those who approached them. As the research team remained on site, residents began contacting them to ask about the project and express interest in taking part.

Finding 1: There is no single pathway into RV living

One of the clearest findings of this study is that no single pathway leads to vehicular homelessness. Participants arrived at the rest stops through a wide range of circumstances, often involving multiple, interconnected challenges.

The stories residents shared align with broader research showing that homelessness rarely stems from a single event. Instead, housing loss often occurs at the intersection of poverty, housing affordability challenges, health concerns, family disruption, and gaps in support systems (Infrastructure Canada, 2024a; Statistics Canada, 2023).

For some residents, the pathway began with job loss or a decline in income. Others described health crises that kept them from working and forced them to rely on disability benefits or pensions that were insufficient to cover local housing costs. Several participants linked their circumstances to the death of a spouse or partner, a relationship breakdown, family conflict, or eviction.

Others described difficulties re-entering the community after incarceration or navigating complex administrative systems. Several residents reported challenges accessing benefits, pensions, housing supports, or legal assistance, despite being eligible for certain forms of support.

While the circumstances varied from person to person, most participants did not describe a single turning point that led to homelessness. Rather, they described a succession of setbacks that accumulated over time, making it increasingly difficult to maintain housing and leaving them with few alternatives.

Housing instability, evictions, and barriers to housing

For many participants, the housing loss that led to their current situation was neither sudden nor unexpected. Many described a gradual descent into housing instability rather than a sudden loss of housing. Rising rents, limited affordable housing, health challenges, relationship changes, and financial pressures often accumulated over time, leaving people with fewer and fewer options until living in an RV, trailer, or vehicle became the most realistic alternative.

Residents frequently described a pattern in which a single challenge, such as illness, job loss, or the end of a relationship, triggered a series of housing-related difficulties that ultimately led to RV or trailer living.

Research shows that eviction from market housing is a major pathway to homelessness. A study using Canadian Housing Survey data found that renters in British Columbia reported the highest five-year eviction rate among the provinces and territories included in the analysis. The estimated rate among Indigenous renters was also higher than the national renter average, although that estimate was imprecise (Xuereb, 2021).

Several individuals described being required to leave their housing following disputes with landlords, rent increases, the sale of rental properties, or circumstances that left them unable

to pay rent. Participants often

emphasized that housing loss was more complex than a simple matter of affordability. Many described insecure

"Even if I had the money, there's nowhere to rent."

tenancies, strained landlord-tenant relationships, and difficulties understanding or exercising their rights as tenants. Some felt that formal complaint processes were inaccessible or ineffective, leaving them with few options when disputes arose.

Several participants described moving through a series of increasingly unstable living arrangements before arriving at the rest stops. Staying temporarily with friends or family,

moving between campgrounds, living in hotels, and residing in vehicles were all described as attempts to avoid homelessness. In many cases, these arrangements proved financially

"I was living in a campground hoping something would come up by the fall. It didn't, and this became my only option."

unsustainable or were available only

for short periods. For many participants, living at the RV rest stop began as a temporary solution that gradually became a long-term living situation.

The findings also underscore the importance of understanding housing instability as a cumulative process rather than a single event. Consistent with broader research on homelessness pathways, participants often experienced multiple housing disruptions before reaching the rest stops (Infrastructure Canada, 2024a). Housing loss remains closely intertwined with poverty, declining health, family changes, and limited access to support systems.

Housing costs and income adequacy

Housing affordability emerged as one of the most frequently discussed issues across the interviews and focus groups.

Residents consistently described a gap between their income and local housing costs. Individuals receiving disability assistance, pensions, or low

wages reported that most rental housing in Abbotsford was beyond their financial reach. Even participants with some income often felt that securing housing would leave them unable to meet other basic needs, such as food, transportation, and utilities.

These concerns reflect broader affordability challenges throughout the Fraser Valley. The living wage for the region was calculated at \$23.23 per hour in 2024, substantially higher than the provincial minimum wage (Living Wage BC, 2024). While it is not intended to reflect all household circumstances, it highlights the growing gap between the cost of living and the money available to many low-income community members.

For participants receiving disability assistance or pension income, the financial challenge was particularly pronounced. Several explained that after paying rent, little would remain for food, transportation, medications, fuel, or other necessities. Others described situations in which they could afford monthly rent but could not save enough for security deposits, pet deposits, moving expenses, or basic household items required to establish a new tenancy.

When participants discussed affordability, they rarely considered housing costs in isolation. Instead, they described the constant balancing act of paying rent while still trying to afford everyday necessities. For many, housing became increasingly difficult to maintain because they had little income left to absorb unexpected expenses or keep up with rising costs.

Employment, income, and financial stability

Participants' experiences highlighted the complex relationship between employment, income, and housing stability. While some residents could not work because of age, disability, or health concerns, others actively sought employment or took whatever work was available. Several participants described earning income through seasonal agricultural work, day labour, bottle collection, or informal community jobs. However, these opportunities were often irregular, inconsistent, and insufficient to support stable housing.

A common theme was that employment alone did not necessarily resolve housing challenges. Some participants had worked for much of their adult lives before illness, injury, family loss, or other circumstances disrupted their ability to maintain employment. Others described difficulty finding work that paid enough to keep pace with rising housing costs.

Several residents described the challenges of finding employment while

"I want to work, but I need something that will actually get me ahead."

"You can work all week and still not be able to afford rent."

living in an RV or trailer. Limited transportation, health concerns, a lack of reliable communication tools, and the demands of day-to-day survival often made job searching difficult. Others expressed frustration with temporary or low-paying work that did little to improve their overall situation.

When asked what would help them move forward, participants overwhelmingly cited financial support. As one participant put it, “first month’s rent and the deposit would help a lot.”

Others emphasized the need for more affordable rentals, shorter wait times for subsidized units, and better access to stable employment. However, not everyone saw access to employment as a clear path forward. Several participants explained that they were turned away from jobs and struggled to find the motivation to keep applying.

Pets and housing access

For some rest stop residents, pets played a significant role in their lives and housing decisions.

These participants described their pets as sources of companionship, emotional support, and stability. Several explained that their animals helped them cope with isolation, grief, anxiety, or the stresses of homelessness. As one resident observed, the relationship was reciprocal, with both the person and the animal dependent on one another.

"The dog is what helps keep my sanity. We help each other."

At the same time, participants repeatedly cited pet restrictions as a significant barrier to housing. Some residents reported being turned away from rental opportunities because they owned dogs or cats, even when they believed they could afford the rent. Others described situations in which landlords required substantial pet deposits or imposed restrictions that were difficult to meet.

Participants' experiences suggest that pet restrictions can present an additional barrier to housing, particularly when rental options are already limited. For many participants, pets were family. They provided companionship, emotional support, and a sense of purpose during periods of uncertainty and instability. Several participants explained that they were unwilling to part with their animals, even if doing so might improve their housing prospects.

"I could pay the rent, but nobody would take me with my dog. Losing him wasn't an option."

These accounts are consistent with research showing that companion animals can provide emotional support, routine, a sense of responsibility, and social connection for people experiencing homelessness. At the same time, restrictions on animals in shelters and rental housing can create significant barriers to services and housing stability (Kerman et al., 2020).

Health, disability, and housing stability

Health challenges emerged as another important pathway into housing instability.

Several participants described injuries, chronic health conditions, disabilities, or declining physical health that disrupted employment and reduced income. In many cases, these health concerns triggered broader financial difficulties, making it increasingly difficult to maintain housing.

One participant explained that after breaking his shoulder and back, he was unable to return to work and eventually had to rely on a \$300 trailer as his only housing option. Similarly, two former truck drivers described how decades of steady employment ended when medical issues forced them to leave the profession. Others recounted injuries that kept them from returning to work or significantly limited their earning potential. Several participants reported relying on disability benefits following health-related employment disruptions.

Research consistently shows strong links among homelessness, disability, and poor health outcomes. National survey data show that Canadians who had experienced homelessness were more than twice as likely as the overall population to report fair or poor mental health, at 38.0% compared with 17.3% (Uppal, 2022).

Similarly, the 2024 Abbotsford Point-in-Time Count found that nearly all respondents reported at least one significant health-related challenge (City of Abbotsford, 2025).

Participants' experiences suggest that health challenges often affected housing stability indirectly. While illness itself was rarely identified as the sole cause of homelessness, declining health frequently reduced employment opportunities, increased financial pressures, and limited the ability to recover from housing setbacks.

Health problems not only caused job loss but also exposed the inadequacy of income support systems. Participants reported turning to disability benefits or pensions, only to find the payments far too low to cover living expenses in Abbotsford. For some, disability assistance had already been exhausted, while others relied on pensions that barely supplemented their limited income. As

one participant explained, even after years of work, switching to disability income left him unable to afford housing.

For some participants, these challenges were compounded by concerns about access to healthcare. Participants identified dental care, vision care, mental health services, and transportation to appointments as particular areas of difficulty. While some participants expressed gratitude for the medical outreach services available to them, several individuals felt that these services did not adequately address the realities of living in vehicles or trailers.

Family loss, relationship breakdown, and social disconnection

Changes in family relationships were a common feature of participants' pathways into rest stop living. While relationship breakdown did not always lead to homelessness on its own, several participants described how divorce, separation, bereavement, or family conflict significantly reduced their housing options and financial stability.

"My wife passed away, and our rent was \$1,400. I couldn't afford that on my own."

One woman explained that after her children moved out, she could no longer pay her rent without the child tax benefits that had previously supplemented her income. Others highlighted how abusive or unsafe relationships contributed to their displacement. One participant described hiding at the rest stop to escape an abusive ex-partner, while another said that after years of conflict with a roommate, he eventually left and had no other option but to stay at the rest stop. In another instance, a participant had lost her job and her relationship and had to join her mother, who was already staying at the rest stop.

Several participants described how the loss of a relationship, whether through separation, family conflict, or the death of a loved one, contributed to their housing instability. Similar pathways have been identified in national homelessness research, with relationship breakdown and interpersonal conflict commonly reported as reasons for housing loss (Infrastructure Canada, 2024a).

Another notable finding was the extent of social isolation reported by some residents. Several participants described limited contact with family members or long periods of estrangement from relatives. Others maintained family relationships but were reluctant to impose on relatives or to seek temporary accommodation. In many cases, the rest stop communities had become

important sources of social connection, partially compensating for the absence of family support.

Justice system involvement and legal barriers

Some participants described justice system experiences and access to justice issues that affected their housing situation.

A few participants reported difficulty securing housing after incarceration. One man, after serving a seven-year sentence at Kent Institution and seeing his release plans fall through, had no housing and ended up living at the rest stop. Like others in the study, he found that what began as a temporary solution ultimately became a much longer stay.

Other participants discussed the challenges associated with criminal records, which they believed limited both employment opportunities and access to rental housing.

Research has consistently identified housing as one of the most significant challenges for individuals returning to the community after incarceration (Chin & Dandurand, 2018; Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2026). Housing instability can hinder social reintegration, while barriers to employment and income can further limit housing options.

Participants also identified legal needs unrelated to criminal justice involvement. In focus groups, residents raised concerns about landlord-tenant disputes, unlawful treatment by landlords, and a lack of affordable legal assistance. Several felt that existing complaint mechanisms were difficult to navigate and rarely led to satisfactory outcomes.

More broadly, some participants described challenges understanding and accessing benefits, pensions, housing supports, and government services.

These accounts suggest that legal and administrative barriers may contribute to housing instability in ways that are often overlooked. Similar findings have emerged in access-to-justice research, which shows that people experiencing poverty, homelessness, and other forms of vulnerability often face significant challenges in navigating complex systems and asserting their rights (Dandurand et al., 2022; Dandurand & Chin, 2026).

Service navigation and access to supports

Difficulties navigating services emerged as a recurring theme across participant interviews and focus groups. While residents identified a range of practical needs, many challenges stemmed not from a lack of services but from

difficulties accessing existing programs, understanding eligibility requirements, completing applications, or maintaining contact with service providers.

Several participants described challenges accessing pensions, disability benefits, housing supports, healthcare services, and legal assistance. Others expressed uncertainty about where to seek help or how to resolve problems related to housing, income, identification, or healthcare. In some cases, these barriers contributed directly to housing instability.

Residents who needed assistance with completing applications, gathering documentation, or understanding available supports often struggled to access services they may have been entitled to. Similar challenges were identified through Abbotsford's Journey Mapping Project, which explored how people experiencing homelessness navigate local systems and access support (City of Abbotsford & Centre for Advancing Health Outcomes, 2024).

Difficulties navigating administrative and legal processes have also been documented in other studies of populations experiencing housing instability and social marginalization. For example, the evaluation of the Elizabeth Fry Society's Pardon Me Program found that many individuals faced significant challenges in completing applications and accessing legal remedies because of barriers related to poverty, mobility, housing instability, literacy, and limited access to support services (Dandurand & Chin, 2026). Similar issues were evident in the present study, with participants describing difficulties accessing pensions, benefits, housing supports, and other services.

The findings also underscore the value of outreach workers, who were frequently described as trusted sources of information, advocacy, and practical assistance.

The experiences shared by participants suggest that service navigation should be understood as a stand-alone, coordinated support need. Access to housing, healthcare, income supports, legal assistance, and other resources often depends on an individual's ability to navigate systems that can be difficult to understand, particularly during periods of crisis, trauma, or housing instability.

Finding 2: The rest stops functioned as communities

Public discussions about RV encampments often centre on risk, disorder, or visible poverty. While participants acknowledged many challenges of life at the rest stops, they also described the sites as communities that offered important social connections and practical support.

Many residents reported looking out for one another, sharing information, checking on neighbours, and helping newcomers understand how the sites operated. Informal support networks were especially important for individuals with limited family contact, health challenges, or mobility issues.

"The community here has my back more than most people ever have."

Residents described informal rules intended to maintain order and minimize conflict. These included expectations regarding noise, cleanliness, and respectful behaviour. In both locations, participants identified individuals who had assumed informal leadership roles and reminded residents of community expectations.

Participants also described collective efforts to maintain the sites. At Cole Road, residents reported organizing community cleanups and attempting to keep the area orderly despite limited access to infrastructure. Similar cooperation was noted at Whatcom Road.

"People think we're all dangerous, but we look out for each other."

Several residents emphasized that they felt safer in the RV communities than elsewhere. Women who participated in the study were particularly likely to say they felt protected by the presence of familiar neighbours. One woman on Cole Road described feeling comfortable enough to sleep with her RV door open during the summer heat.

Although participants raised concerns about theft and personal safety, they generally distinguished between risks originating within the community and those originating outside it.

These findings are consistent with research from British Columbia recognizing that informal homeless communities may provide autonomy, privacy, social cohesion, and a sense of safety that residents do not necessarily experience in shelters or while living alone (BC Housing, 2021). More broadly, research involving people who had experienced homelessness found that improvements in social support predicted enhanced well-being even after housing stability was taken into account (Johnstone et al., 2016).

The significance of these relationships became particularly clear when discussing the future of the rest stops. Participants frequently expressed concern about site closures, not only because they were uncertain where they would go, but also because they feared losing the relationships and support systems they had built.

The subsequent closure of both sites adds context to this finding. While many participants described the rest stops as places where they had formed friendships, routines, and informal support networks, they also acknowledged that life in the camps was not without challenges. Concerns about theft, conflict, harassment, and personal safety were raised throughout the study, and some residents recognized that the camps could be very difficult places to live.

At the same time, participants frequently spoke about looking out for one another and the sense of community that had developed among many residents. Their experiences suggest that the camps were complex, fluid living environments in which people navigated both significant risks and sources of support.

Finding 3: Safety was shaped primarily by external factors

Safety was a major concern for residents at both rest stop sites, although it was felt differently.

While participants raised concerns about theft and conflicts within the communities, they generally reported feeling relatively safe among fellow residents. Instead, most safety concerns centred on threats originating outside the camps.

Residents frequently described harassment by passing motorists, particularly in the evening and at night. Accounts included yelling insults, honking horns, shining lights into trailers, photographing residents, and attempting to intimidate people living at the sites. Participants viewed these incidents as both disruptive and dehumanizing.

The physical environments themselves also raised safety concerns. Residents of Cole Road reported concerns about poor lighting, especially after the streetlights were deactivated. Others highlighted worries about emergency access, winter weather, extreme heat, and the security of personal belongings.

Several participants described staying with their vehicles rather than attending appointments or accessing services because they feared theft. Others reported sleep interruptions due to noise, anxiety, or safety concerns.

When discussing police, participants expressed mixed views. Some believed that a greater police presence would improve safety and deter unwanted activity. Others felt that police largely ignored their concerns or interacted with the sites only when investigating vehicle-related issues.

Participants at both rest stops expressed a desire for greater safety and order in their environments, though their reasons differed slightly. At the Cole Road rest stop, residents wanted a more visible, clearly marked police presence to signal that the area would not tolerate crime. They believed this could help shift perceptions of the area and reduce unwanted activity. At Whatcom Road, participants highlighted the need for increased police visibility to address real safety concerns, such as disturbances or potential threats at night.

Participants at both sites generally did not request increased enforcement. Instead, they expressed interest in respectful and constructive relationships with law enforcement and other public agencies.

It is important to note that participants expressed these views before several serious incidents occurred at or near Abbotsford encampment sites. On March 23, 2026, a 69-year-old resident of the Whatcom Road rest stop was killed in what police described as a targeted shooting (Abbotsford Police Department, 2026). Three days later, a fire involving an RV and other structures occurred at the same site, with no injuries reported (Fraser Valley Today, 2026). On April 24, 2026, a man was found deceased following a fire at the Peardonville encampment. A person charged in connection with the death was subsequently charged with first-degree murder and arson on May 15, 2026 (Hopes, 2026). These findings therefore reflect residents' perceptions of safety at the time of data collection and may not reflect how subsequent events affected community experiences.

Finding 4: Stigma shapes daily life

Stigma emerged as one of the strongest themes across interviews and focus groups.

Participants consistently reported feeling judged because of where they lived. Many described situations in which members of the public assumed they were involved in criminal activity, substance use, or other forms of problematic behaviour. Residents frequently rejected these assumptions, emphasizing that the challenges they faced were more closely tied to poverty, housing affordability, disability, health concerns, or life circumstances.

"We're struggling to live like everyone else. I don't know why we're judged so harshly."

Several participants described feeling a loss of privacy and dignity while living at the rest stops. Unlike people whose housing circumstances remain hidden, residents felt their living situation was highly visible. Being photographed by passersby, stared at by motorists, or subjected to public commentary

contributed to feelings of embarrassment, frustration, and exclusion, and for some, a sense of being constantly watched or judged.

Research suggests that stigma surrounding homelessness influences not only social experiences but also access to housing, services, employment, and healthcare (Dandurand et al., 2025). Experiences or expectations of judgement may also affect people's willingness to engage with systems or seek support, particularly when previous interactions have been negative or stigmatizing. Participants' accounts support this conclusion. Some residents believed stigma affected how landlords, service providers, police, and members of the general public treated them. Others felt that homelessness became a defining feature of their identity and overshadowed other aspects of their identity and experience.

Some participants actively resisted narratives that portrayed homelessness as evidence of criminality, substance use, personal failure, and individual irresponsibility. Importantly, participants often linked stigma to misconceptions about who lives at the rest stops. Residents emphasized the community's diversity, noting that it included seniors, people receiving pensions, people living with disabilities, people recovering from health crises, and individuals who had previously owned homes or maintained stable employment. Particularly at Cole Road, there was an emphasis that not everyone there used substances or alcohol regularly.

"People think we're drug addicts. They're wrong. Most of us are just poor."

This finding suggests that homelessness-related stigma operates at interpersonal, institutional, and structural levels. It shapes everyday interactions, affects residents' privacy and sense of belonging, influences their encounters with institutions, and creates or reinforces barriers to housing, employment, healthcare, and other supports.

Finding 5: Barriers to services and housing stability

Participants identified a range of barriers that hindered efforts to improve their circumstances or secure housing.

Transportation

Transportation was among the most frequently discussed challenges.

Participants described difficulties in attending medical appointments, accessing grocery stores, meeting with service providers, and maintaining social connections.

"Everything is in town, but getting there is the hard part."

While some residents owned vehicles, many reported that their vehicles were unreliable, uninsured, or rarely used. Others lived in trailers without tow vehicles or relied on friends, outreach workers, or community agencies for transportation.

Transportation barriers often led to missed appointments and reduced access to services. Participants suggested transportation assistance, rides to appointments, gas cards, and transit support as practical ways to improve access to healthcare, housing services, and community resources.

"If I can't get to an appointment, I can't get the help I need."

These experiences are consistent with a systematic review identifying transportation as an important but under-researched factor affecting access to employment, education, healthcare, and social services among people experiencing homelessness (Murphy, 2019).

Access to healthcare

Access to healthcare was identified as a significant gap. Participants described chronic health conditions, untreated injuries, dental and vision problems, mobility limitations, anxiety, and depression. Although some reported positive experiences with existing medical outreach, others lacked consistent access to care or avoided hospitals and walk-in clinics because of long wait times, stigma, or previous negative experiences. For some, not having a fixed address also complicated access to follow-up care, prescriptions, and health identification documents.

Dental and vision care were among the most commonly cited gaps. Participants also discussed challenges in accessing mental health services and support for trauma-related concerns. They explained that accessing mental health or substance use supports often involved complex referral processes, long waitlists, or rigid program requirements that didn't align with the realities of life at a rest stop. This left them without suitable mental health care options. Moreover, some individuals felt overlooked, noting that, in their

experience, available support services seemed designed primarily for people who regularly use substances.

Several residents suggested that increased access to mobile services and outreach-based healthcare models would be helpful, particularly for individuals with limited transportation options. They generally expressed gratitude for the medical outreach services that do currently exist.

Hygiene and basic infrastructure

Access to hygiene facilities emerged as another significant concern. Participants reported difficulty accessing showers, laundry facilities, washrooms, and sanitation services. Although the availability of facilities differed between the two sites, with Cole Road having on-site washrooms, residents at both locations identified hygiene as an important issue affecting health, dignity, social interactions, and employment opportunities.

Garbage removal remained a persistent concern for rest stop residents. Without access to regular waste disposal services, participants explained that they had no choice but to let garbage accumulate near their vehicles. Several individuals expressed frustration that their living areas were often judged by the visible waste buildup, despite having no practical way to remove it themselves.

Individuals staying at the Cole Road rest stop expressed the urgent need for a garbage bin, similar to the one available at Whatcom. Meanwhile, residents at Whatcom Road highlighted the lack of a sanitary dump station, which they knew existed at Cole Road.

Service navigation

Many participants described challenges in navigating complex service systems. Housing applications, benefits programs, healthcare services, and legal processes were often perceived as confusing or difficult to access.

Participants frequently spoke about the value of outreach workers who helped them understand available resources, complete paperwork, and access services. The findings suggest that supportive navigation may be as important as service availability.

Recommendations for Practice

The following recommendations translate the study findings into practical directions for governments, service providers, and community partners responding to vehicular homelessness and future decampments. They are

consistent with emerging Canadian guidance emphasizing meaningful engagement, protection of dignity, continuity of essential supports, and access to adequate housing when responding to encampments and other informal living environments (Office of the Federal Housing Advocate, 2024).

Many of these recommendations are already reflected in existing practices and service delivery approaches in Abbotsford, demonstrating a strong degree of alignment between the study findings and the community's ongoing response efforts. While grounded in the Abbotsford context, these recommendations may also be relevant to other communities facing similar challenges related to vehicular homelessness, encampments, and housing instability.

1. Plan decampments around individualized transition and housing plans.

Before a vehicle community is closed or residents are required to relocate, establish a coordinated process that identifies each resident's housing preferences, income, health needs, transportation requirements, pets, belongings, and trusted supports. This could happen long before closure is imminent. Upon closure of the site, provide clear notice, consistent communication, and active follow-through until a viable destination is secured. Participants described multiple, intersecting barriers and emphasized that relocation without practical transition support can deepen instability.

2. Preserve social connections and continuity of support during relocation.

Where safe and feasible, give residents options to relocate near trusted neighbours, partners, pets, and outreach workers. Assign a consistent contact person or team through the transition. Residents repeatedly described the rest stops as communities where people shared information, checked on one another, and provided informal safety and support. Decampment planning should avoid unnecessarily dismantling these protective relationships.

3. Provide coordinated, mobile service navigation.

Recognize the deep value in a dedicated, low-barrier navigation team that can meet people where they are and assist with identification, benefits, pensions, housing applications, legal issues, healthcare referrals, documentation, and communication with multiple agencies. Participants often struggled not because no service existed, but because eligibility rules, paperwork, fragmented systems, and limited communication made existing supports difficult to access.

4. Expand housing pathways that reflect the realities of vehicle residents.

Develop a range of immediate and longer-term options, including low-barrier shelter, supportive and subsidized housing, rent supplements, move-in assistance, and, where legally and operationally feasible, time-limited parking or transition arrangements that support movement toward stable housing. Housing responses should accommodate couples, pets, mobility needs, belongings, and varying levels of independence. Participants consistently identified affordability, deposits, pet restrictions, limited supply, and program requirements as barriers to housing.

5. Pair housing responses with practical access to healthcare, transportation, and income supports.

Provide transportation to appointments and housing viewings, mobile or outreach-based healthcare, access to hygiene and waste-disposal facilities during transitions, and connections to employment, training, disability benefits, pensions, and other income supports. Residents described these practical barriers as interconnected: missed appointments, untreated health needs, unreliable transportation, and inadequate income all reduced their ability to secure and sustain housing.

6. Use stigma-informed, respectful engagement across systems.

Train staff and partners to avoid assumptions that equate vehicular homelessness with criminality, substance use, or personal failure. Engagement should prioritize dignity, privacy, transparency, and meaningful resident participation in decisions that affect them. Participants described stigma as shaping their interactions with the public, landlords, institutions, and services, sometimes discouraging them from seeking help.

Taken together, these recommendations call for responses that are planned with residents rather than for them, maintain continuity through periods of displacement, and connect immediate relocation decisions to realistic pathways toward stable housing.

Conclusion

The experiences shared by people who were living at the Whatcom Road and Cole Road rest stops at the time of the study provide important insight into the complexity of vehicular homelessness in Abbotsford, BC. Participants arrived at the rest stops through diverse pathways that included poverty, housing

instability, health challenges, disability, bereavement, relationship breakdown, justice system involvement, and difficulties accessing services and benefits.

Although their circumstances varied, many described common barriers to housing stability, including inadequate income, limited affordable housing options, transportation challenges, difficulties navigating systems, and stigma. Many also expressed a desire to work and improve their financial circumstances, highlighting that stable employment remained an important goal despite significant barriers.

Participants frequently described the rest stops as communities that provided social connection, mutual support, and a degree of stability during difficult periods of their lives. At the same time, they acknowledged the challenges associated with living in these environments, including concerns about safety, conflict, uncertainty, and displacement.

The closure of both sites in the months following this study further underscores the challenges associated with responding to vehicular homelessness. Because the sites were provincially owned and managed highway rest areas rather than City properties, the closures also illustrate the need for clear intergovernmental roles and coordinated transition planning. While the closures addressed concerns about the long-term use of highway infrastructure for residential purposes, they also highlight the importance of supporting residents when established vehicle-based communities are displaced. Beyond housing, participants identified transportation, healthcare, service navigation, community connections, and practical transition supports as important to achieving greater stability.

Ultimately, the findings suggest that vehicular homelessness is best understood as the result of multiple, interconnected challenges rather than any single event or individual circumstance. Participants' experiences illustrate how housing affordability, income, health, relationships, access to services, and public perceptions of homelessness can combine in ways that gradually narrow housing options and make stability difficult to achieve. Taken together, these findings suggest that responses to vehicular homelessness are most likely to be effective when they reflect this complexity and recognize that housing stability is shaped by far more than housing alone.

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