

Changes in informal access to selected indoor public spaces in Toronto, Winter 2020/21

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This is an interim summary of an information-gathering and mapping project by staff at the MAP research centre at St. Michael's Hospital, which is a site of Unity Health Toronto.

Our goal is to explore the loss of access to specific types of indoor public space during the COVID-19 pandemic, and to examine the City of Toronto's "Winter Plan for People Experiencing Homelessness" to see if it addresses these losses. Previous research from our centre demonstrates that while extreme cold temperatures put people at higher risk of hypothermia, most cases of injury and death due to cold occur in moderate winter weather.¹

We will finish the project in January 2020. Due to the urgency of this situation, we wanted to share what we have learned so far. For more information, please contact: info@maphealth.ca.

What we've found so far

There is a severe lack of access to public, indoor space in the winter of 2020/21, even during cold weather alerts.² The City of Toronto's "Winter Plan for People Experiencing Homelessness" does not address this lack of access. The situation is particularly alarming during the evening and overnight. Access to indoor space became even more difficult with the new provincial lockdown on December 26. In particular, there is no longer access to bathrooms at sites such as libraries.³ The current lack of access to indoor public space underlines the urgency of asks that have been coming for months from people and groups across Toronto.⁴ These include the need for the City to:

- Place an immediate moratorium on encampment evictions.
- Outfit encampments with necessities such as winter survival gear and access to sanitation.
- Immediately add enough hotel rooms so that everyone who wants one has access to one. Embed overdose prevention and harm reduction supports onsite, and ensure that a large number of these hotel rooms are in the downtown core.

It is important note that while the situation has been exacerbated by the pandemic, the lack of safe, accessible, indoor space in Toronto, in particular during the winter, is a longstanding issue.¹

What we're doing

- Examining Toronto's "Winter Plan for People Experiencing Homelessness" for 2019/20 and 2020/21.
- Calling city-run community recreation centres and libraries to ask about current drop-in access.
- Mapping 24-hour fast food restaurants and coffee shops on "blue line" night bus routes that were open in the winter of 2019/20.
- Looking at changes to the Out of the Cold program.

What we're not doing

We are not looking at organized drop-in spaces run by community agencies at this stage. Frontline workers and volunteers are doing incredible work to keep drop-in spaces and outreach going with limited resources and under very difficult circumstances.

Further, we are not looking at how welcoming specific public spaces are or were to people looking to come in out of the cold. There will be significant variation between different community centres, libraries, coffee shops and restaurants.

Some details about what we've found so far

Libraries, community centres and 24-hour coffee shops and restaurants

All indoor dining in the city is now closed, including all 24-hour coffee shops and restaurants. In addition, many community centres and some libraries have shut down. Before December 26, those that were open offered only brief access to bathrooms and, in the case of libraries, computers. (There were a few exceptions, with a very small number of community centres offering additional access.) Given the terms of the provincial lockdown on December 26, access to public indoor space will be even more restricted. For example, Toronto Public Library has announced the suspension of access to bathrooms and computers starting December 28.³ Notably, some libraries told us they frequently have to turn people away, and that they don't know where to refer them. Still others could name spaces that used to be available (such as Metro Hall, which is no longer a warming centre), but weren't aware of current warming centres, or respites.

Respite centres

In City documents, respite centres are described as prioritizing, "ease of access to safe indoor space," and they are highlighted as part of the City's Winter Plan.^{5,6} It seems, however, that at least some are operating similarly to bedded programs, with many spaces accessed through phone call booking. As a result, there may be less "ease of access to safe indoor space" than indicated in the Winter Plan.

Currently, most areas in Toronto are without respite centres. In 2020/21, the City has six respite centres, with approximately 212 spaces in total. A significant number of respite spaces have been lost—there were more than twice as many available in 2019/20.⁷ According to the City's Shelter Census on December 22, of the 212 respite spaces available city-wide, 205 were in use. Several respites were at 100 per cent capacity, including the only one in Scarborough.⁸ All respites are close to downtown, with the exception of the location in Scarborough. There are no respite centres in York, East York, North York or Etobicoke.

Warming centres

Warming centres are open only when an extreme cold weather alert is called, or when the City otherwise deems it appropriate to do so. The current threshold for a cold weather alert is -15. Currently, most areas in Toronto are without access to warming centres. In 2020/21, the City of Toronto has four

warming centres, with approximately 130 spaces⁹ in total (in 2019/20, there was one warming centre at Metro Hall, with a capacity of 50 people). On December 15, the City opened the warming centres for the first time this season, for three days. We accessed the City's Shelter Census on December 17. On that day, 112 people used the warming centres. Two of the warming centres are downtown, one is in Scarborough, and one is in North York. On December 17, 32 of the 35 spots in the North York warming centre were occupied.⁹ There are no warming centres in East York, York or Etobicoke.

It should be noted that December 17 was not an extreme cold weather alert—the City elected to open the warming centres as it was the first extended cold period of the season. It is likely that demand will increase as temperatures dip, and as people become aware of the new warming centre locations. Overall, the increase in the number of city-wide warming centre spaces from 50 in 2019/20 to approximately 130 in 2020/21 will not compensate for decrease in respite spaces, and the near-total loss of access to public indoor space.

Out of the Colds

According to City's Winter Plan, the Out of the Cold (OOTC) program has been replaced by 90 beds at a "central location" by Dixon Hall. However, in 2019/20 many of the 16 OOTC locations maintained significant drop-in and dinner capacity above and beyond their overnight beds. They also had locations outside of downtown, with several locations in midtown, where there are no respites or warming centres.¹⁰

Next Steps

The information-gathering we have completed so far has shown a striking reduction in access to public indoor space during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has not been replaced by the current warming centres or respite centres. The lockdown period beginning December 26 will result in further restrictions. Over the coming weeks, we will continue to process information, and report on what we learn.

One additional significant takeaway to date is the difficulty of parsing information provided by City officials, backgrounders and data. In the context of this project, as highlighted in the footnotes, the numbers provided by the City in terms of both capacity and new winter spaces fluctuate from document to document. It is also unclear when all the space mentioned in the Winter Plan will become available. Finally, the role of some spaces (e.g. respite centres) may have shifted due to the need for shelter beds, and may no longer be operating as described in City background documents.

This type of discrepancy has been well-noted by many others. As one example, while the City seemed to maintain that it had capacity in the shelter system this fall, people calling Central Intake in real time demonstrated that this was not the case.¹¹ Eventually, a snapshot provided by the City itself demonstrated that an average of 38 people a day were turned away from the shelter system in early November when they called looking for space.¹²

More generally, City communications often seem to suggest that Toronto is not in crisis when it comes to access to COVID-19-safe, appropriate, indoor space. However, our work—and the experiences, decisions, reports, statements and evidence of people and groups city-wide—demonstrates that this is not the case.^{13,14}

Footnotes

1. <https://maphealth.ca/homeless-cold-injury-toronto>
2. Community groups estimate that well over 1,000 people are currently sleeping outside, while shelters are full or close to capacity. The 2020/21 Winter Plan for People Experiencing Homelessness states that the City will add between 560 or 620 new spaces between November and April 2021, depending on the source. Even if all these spaces become available by early in the new year—this leaves hundreds without access to shelter, or indoor space, in particular overnight. At the same time, most public indoor spaces are currently locked down or offering very limited access. Details for the numbers above:
 - Community groups estimate that well over 1,000 people are living outside in Toronto (<https://right2housingto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/R2HTO-Encampments-Rights-Review-final.pdf>; <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/city-legal-action-toronto-carpenter-toronto-tiny-shelters-unhoused-people-1.5811589>; <https://globalnews.ca/news/7383291/toronto-homeless-centre-plastic-barriers>).
 - The Oct. 6 press release for the City's Winter Plan states that the City will add 560 new spaces between November and April 2020 (<https://www.toronto.ca/news/torontos-2020-2021-winter-plan-for-people-experiencing-homelessness-includes-more-spaces-and-enhanced-street-outreach>). The linked fact sheet states that the City will add 620 new spaces during this same time period. (<https://www.toronto.ca/news/city-of-toronto-2020-2021-winter-plan-for-people-experiencing-homelessness>).
 - Between November 3 and November 17, an average of 38 people a night were turned away from the shelter system (<https://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2020/ec/bgrd/backgroundfile-158747.pdf>, p. 8).
3. https://torontopubliclibrary.typepad.com/programming/our-reopening-plan.html?utm_source=General+Communications&utm_campaign=Toronto+Public+Library+Service+Update%3A+Expanded+Grey-Lockdown+restrictions+and+TPL&utm_medium=email
4. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/homeless-advocates-moratorium-evictions-encampments-city-parks-1.5831855>
5. <https://www.toronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/9522-housing-homlessness-services-glossary.pdf>
6. <https://www.toronto.ca/news/torontos-2020-2021-winter-plan-for-people-experiencing-homelessness-includes-more-spaces-and-enhanced-street-outreach>
7. The 2020/21 Winter Plan for People Experiencing Homelessness states that there will be 221 respite centre spaces available this winter (<https://www.toronto.ca/news/torontos-2020-2021-winter-plan-for-people-experiencing-homelessness-includes-more-spaces-and-enhanced-street-outreach>). However, the daily shelter census for Dec 22 2020 states that total respite capacity is 212 spaces (<https://www.toronto.ca/city-government/data-research-maps/research-reports/housing-and-homelessness-research-and-reports/shelter-census>).

According to the 2019/20 Winter Plan for People Experiencing Homelessness, total respite capacity last year was 464. This included 416 existing respite sites, and the addition of a new, 50-space respite site (<https://wx.toronto.ca/inter/it/newsrel.nsf/11476e3d3711f56e85256616006b891f/a12733be914680b4852584aa007644f7?OpenDocument>). This would suggest that more than half of the City's respite spaces have been lost this winter. As detailed in the main text, however, it is unclear whether or not all—or any—of the respite centres still have the mandate of offering “ease of access to safe indoor space.” Instead, many if not all seem to be functioning more as shelters, with access booked in advance over the phone.

Finally, the spaces available at Better Living Centre (BLC) are sometimes referred to as “respite spaces.” However, in the City Shelter Census the BLC is referred to as a “response site.” As a result, we have not

included the spaces in the BLC as part of the respite system. The BLC has separate spaces for a warming centre when the City chooses to open warming centres due to weather conditions. We have included include the BLC's warming centre in this document.

8. Respite occupancy for Dec. 22 (<https://www.toronto.ca/city-government/data-research-maps/research-reports/housing-and-homelessness-research-and-reports/shelter-census>):

	PEOPLE	VACANCIES	CAPACITY	OCCUPANCY
Dixon Hall – 351 Lakeshore Blvd E. Respite	43	0	43	100.0%
Fred Victor – 1A Strachan Ave. Respite	44	1	45	97.8%
Margaret's – 21 Park Rd. Respite	24	1	25	96.0%
St. Felix Centre – 25 Augusta Ave. Respite	19	0	19	100.0%
St. Felix Centre – 69 Fraser Respite	38	5	43	88.4%
Warden Woods – 705 Progress Ave Respite	37	0	37	100.0%

9. The total capacity listed for Warming Centres varies. On the December 17 Shelter Census report, total capacity is listed as 130. On the City's Winter Plan, total capacity for warming centres is listed as "150 spaces in total." Warming centre occupancy for Dec. 17 is as follows (<https://www.toronto.ca/city-government/data-research-maps/research-reports/housing-and-homelessness-research-and-reports/shelter-census>):

	PEOPLE	VACANCIES	CAPACITY	OCCUPANCY
129 Peter Street	11	4	15	73%
Better Living Centre	46	4	50	92%
5800 Yonge St.	32	3	35	91%
Scarborough Civic Centre	23	7	30	77%

10. <https://dixonhall.org/blog-post/the-out-of-the-cold-2019-2020-season-calendar-is-here>
 11. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/toronto-shelter-space-1.5808905>
 12. <https://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2020/ec/bgrd/backgroundfile-158747.pdf>, p. 8
 13. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/toronto-homeless-shelters-airborne-risk-1.5823896>
 14. <https://nowtoronto.com/news/housing-advocates-say-toronto-shelter-people-in-glass-cages>