Comparative Data from the 2016, 2018, 2021 and 2024 Thunder Bay Point in Time Counts

Report Overview

This analysis compares data from four Point-in-Time (PiT) counts conducted in Thunder Bay, each providing a snapshot of homelessness on a single night. PiT counts are key tools for identifying trends with housing and homelessness, informing policy, and guiding community responses.

By examining changes across PiT counts, the analysis offers insight into shifts in the number, demographics, and experiences of those experiencing homelessness, supporting evidence-based planning and coordinated action.

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Introduction

This report provides a comparative analysis of key data collected during the four federally mandated Point-in-Time (PiT) Counts conducted in Thunder Bay in 2016, 2018, 2021, and 2024. With the exception of 2021, survey participation has grown year over year. In 2024, 557 individuals participated in the survey, a 92% increase since 2016. These counts are part of a national strategy to monitor homelessness trends across Canada and offer local insights into the nature, scope, and evolving profile of homelessness in the community.

There is a special focus on a series of demographic and situational variables that have been consistently tracked across the PiT Count cycles. Demographic data include detailed breakdowns of respondents' age groups, gender identities (including transgender, non-binary, and gender-diverse participants), and racial and cultural identities. These figures are analyzed in relation to the broader population of Thunder Bay, with particular attention to groups that are overrepresented among individuals experiencing homelessness.

Thunder Bay is a mid-sized city in Northwestern Ontario with a population of approximately 110,000. The city has a relatively high proportion of Indigenous residents—more than 13% according to recent census data—compared to the national average. This demographic reality is reflected in our PiT Count data, which continues to show a significant overrepresentation of Indigenous people among those experiencing homelessness. This underscores the need for culturally appropriate supports and the recognition of intergenerational trauma, colonial legacy, and systemic barriers in housing and service access.

In addition to demographic profiles, the report examines other key variables: geographic location within the city where individuals were found sleeping rough or accessing emergency services; sources of income (including reliance on government benefits or informal employment); overnight sheltering arrangements; frequency and duration of homelessness episodes; pathways into homelessness (including eviction, family breakdown, or fleeing violence); and self-reported barriers to obtaining or maintaining housing.

Together, these data points contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the structural and personal factors contributing to homelessness in Thunder Bay. They also inform local and regional policy, support service planning, and the development of targeted interventions that reflect the realities faced by vulnerable populations across the city.

Age

Youth, between the ages of 16 and 24, average between 9% of the unsheltered population across the 2018, 2021 and 2024 counts. Young adults between the ages of 25 and 35 constitute a significant segment of the unhoused, accounting for about a third of all participants. By far middle-aged adults represent the single largest demographic group of the survey, representing between 37 and 41% of respondents. Seniors 50-65+ comprise an important but often unseen population element among those living unhoused. Seniors constitute between 10-20% of the unsheltered survey population. Data related to age was not captured in 2016.

Figure 1 Age of respondents (2018)

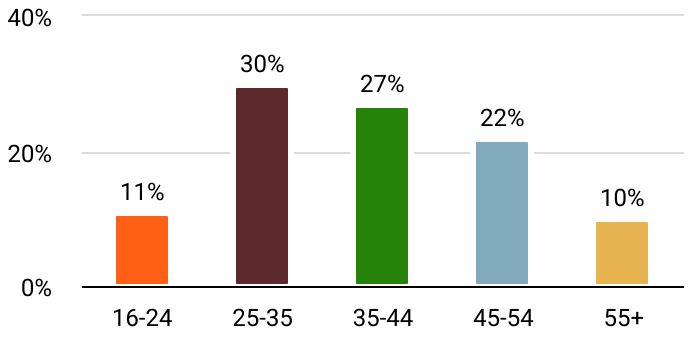


Figure 2 Age of respondents (2021)

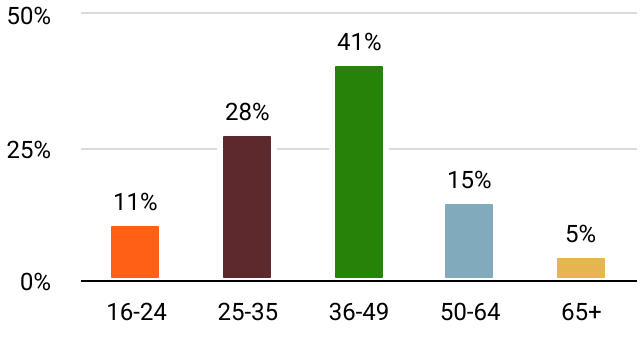
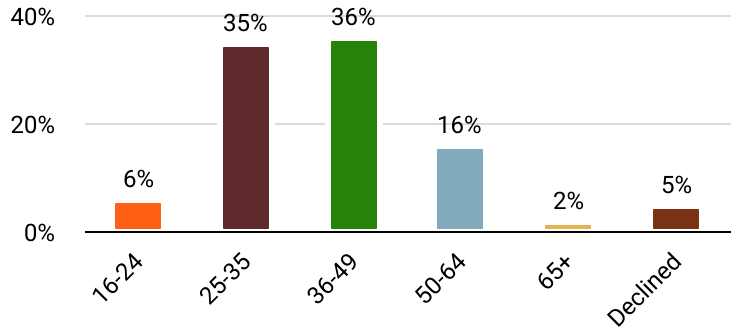


Figure 3 Age of respondents (2024)



Understanding the age and generational differences among persons experiencing homelessness is crucial in crafting unique interventions and public responses suitable to each population group. Young adults may encounter traumatic and adverse experiences; middle age adults may face employment or educational challenges, and older adults may confront complex medical conditions with limited income. All of these factors may contribute to or predict future housing precarity.

Gender

A gender based analysis reveals that cisgendered males make up between half and two-thirds of the unsheltered survey population across all four Point in Time counts. Cisgendered females account for approximately a third of the population and transgender, non-binary and Two-spirit persons account for about 1% of responses. Between 0 - 6% declined to answer. It's important to consider that women and gender diverse persons are often undercounted in PiT counts owing to a reluctance to access traditional shelter systems for fear of violence or discrimination or face access related barriers (limited women-specific emergency shelter beds, capacity restrictions at domestic violence shelters, etc.). Different genders experience different entry paths into homelessness and require distinct interventions to mitigate against unsheltered living.

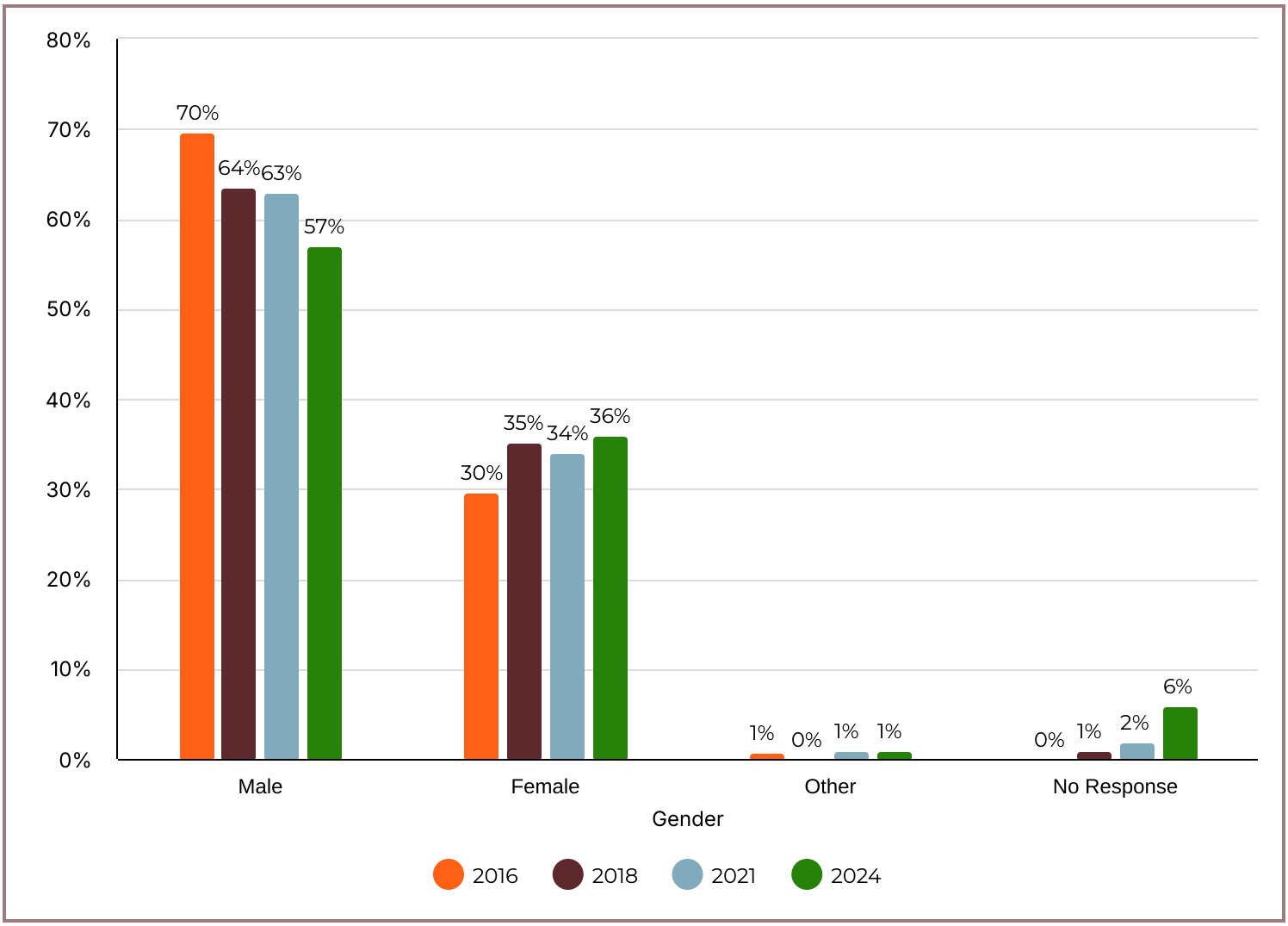


Figure 4 Gender distribution from the 2016, 2018, 2021 and 2024 survey

Geographic Location

In 2016, nearly a third of all respondents reported they were a newcomer or recently arrived immigrant to Thunder Bay. During the 2018 PiT count, the percentage of respondents with a newcomer background remained relatively constant at 19%. A significant percentage reported relocating to Thunder Bay from other communities inside Ontario (62%) while a minority claimed origins from elsewhere in Canada (19%). Around a quarter of participants originated in Thunder Bay. Local residents made up a slightly higher percentage of responses in 2021. In 2024, the percentage of those originating from other communities in Ontario fell dramatically since 2021, from 62% to 16%. Those who indicated origins from Ontario outside Thunder Bay were further subdivided by individual community: 6% were from Fort Frances, 3% were from Sioux Lookout and Longlac and 2% were from Kenora and Toronto. About 6% reported origins from elsewhere in Canada. Although Thunder Bay serves as an important East-West transit hub, these mobility patterns suggest an overall decline in migrants to Thunder Bay originating within and outside Ontario.

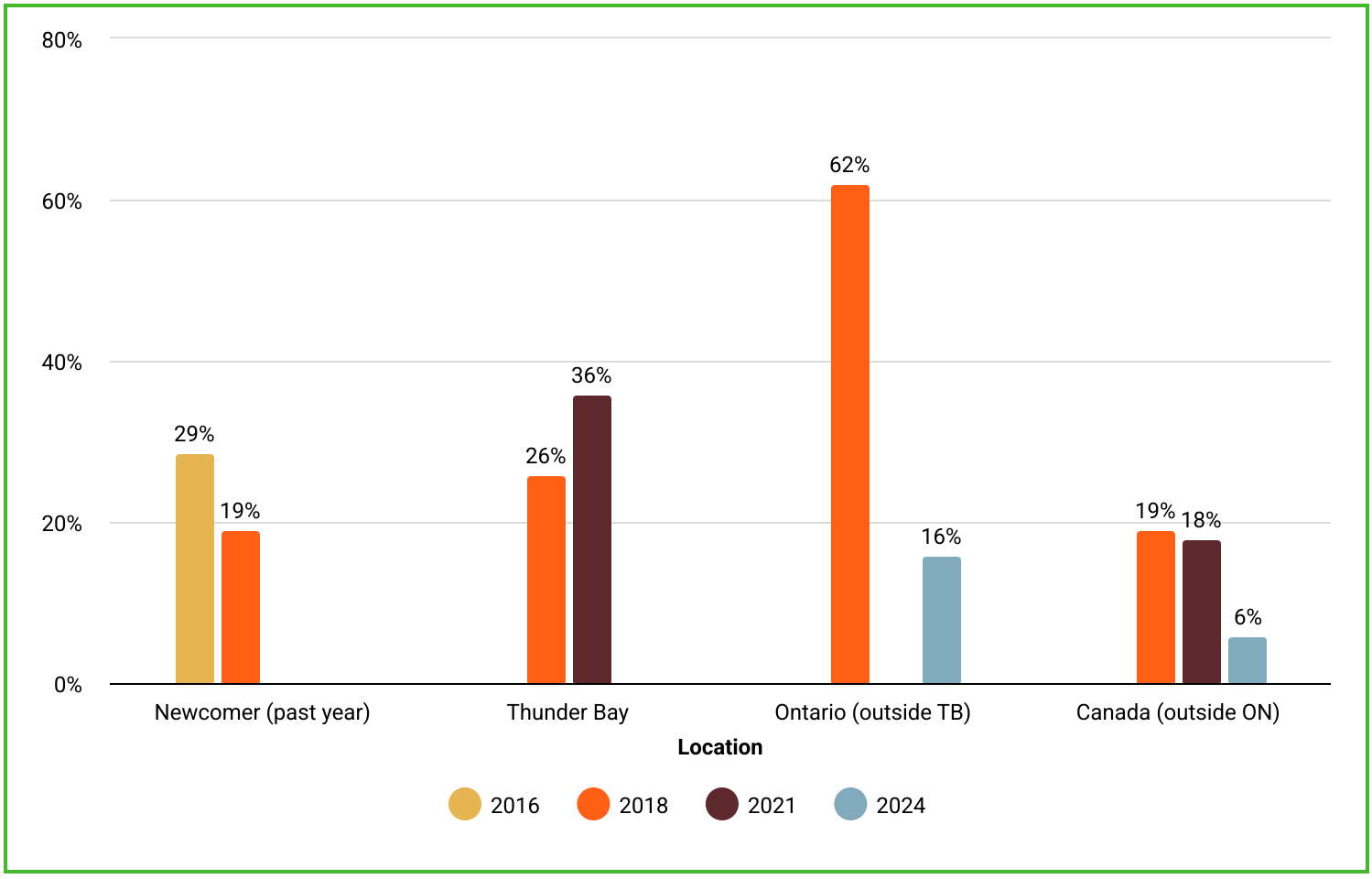


Figure 5 Geographic location of respondents from 2016, 2018, 2021 and 2024

Indigenous Identity

Indigenous people make up a sizeable majority of the urban homelessness population in Canada and within Thunder Bay. Canadian research findings suggest Indigenous people are at least five times more likely to experience unsheltered homelessness than the general population. The 2021 Thunder Bay census revealed that 14% of our community identified as Indigenous but 78% of people experiencing homelessness that were surveyed identify as Indigenous.

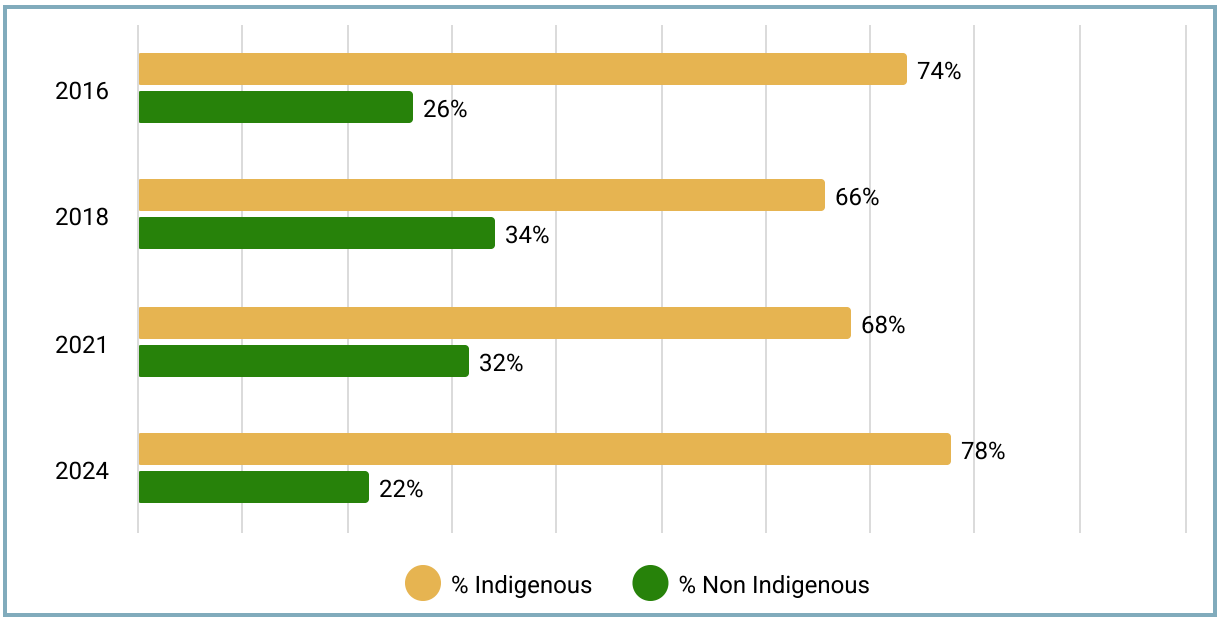


Figure 6 Breakdown of responses from Indigenous people during the 2016, 2018, 2021 and 2024 PiT Counts

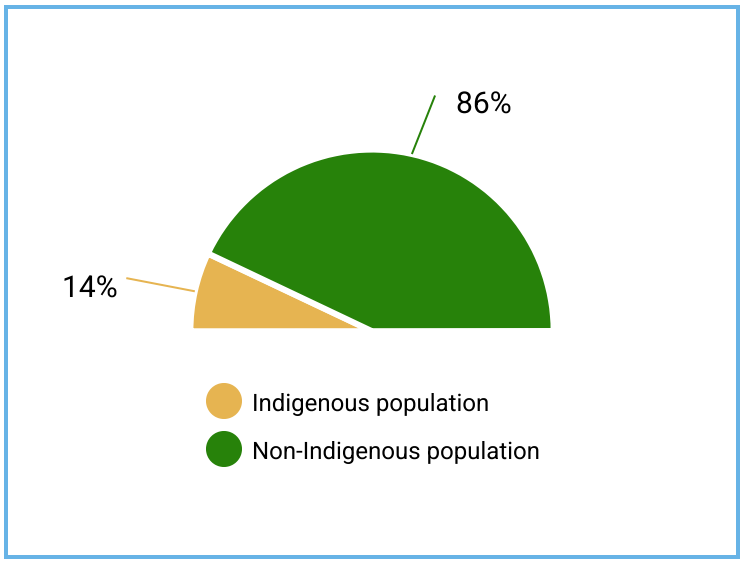


Figure 7 Ethnic composition of Thunder Bay from the 2021 Population Census

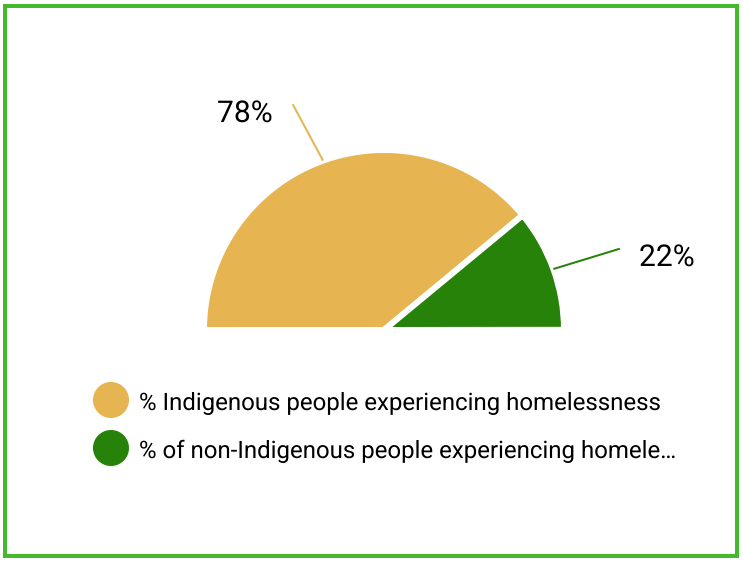
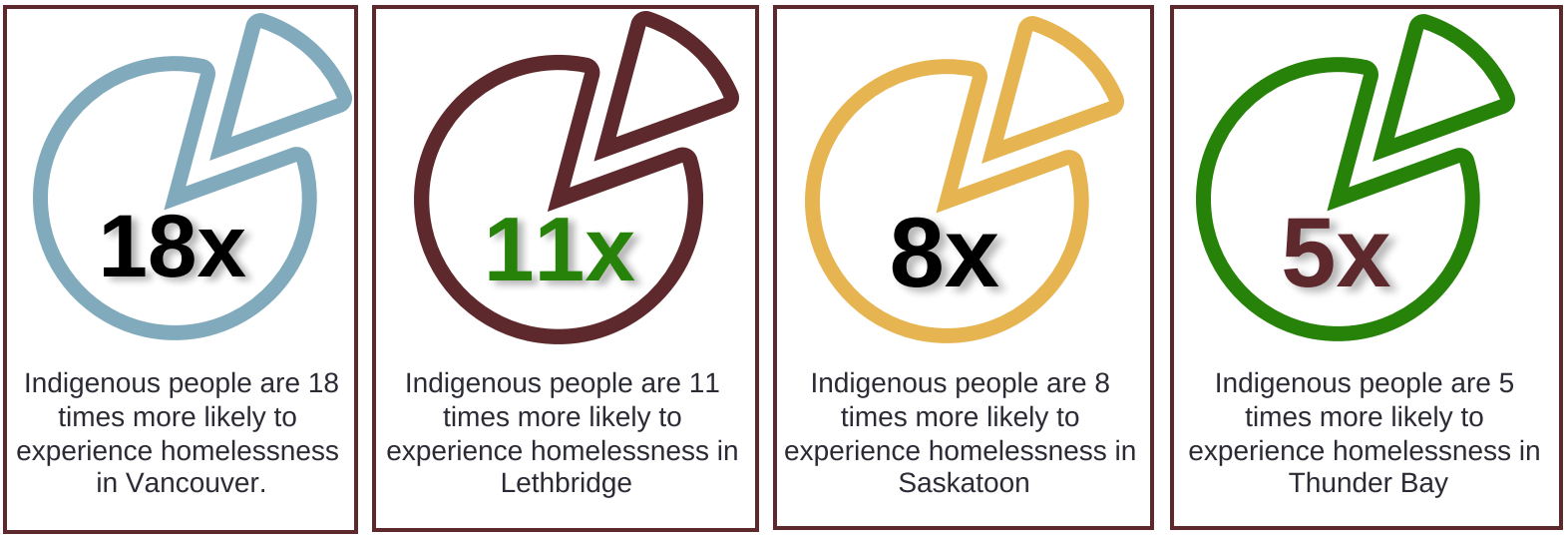


Figure 8 % of Indigenous persons experiencing homelessness from the 2024 count

Indigenous Identity

The over-representation of Indigenous people experiencing homelessness is not unique to Thunder Bay. In fact, this same pattern is nearly identical in communities across the country, including in Halifax, Saskatoon, Lethbridge, Edmonton, Nanaimo, Victoria and Vancouver to name a few.



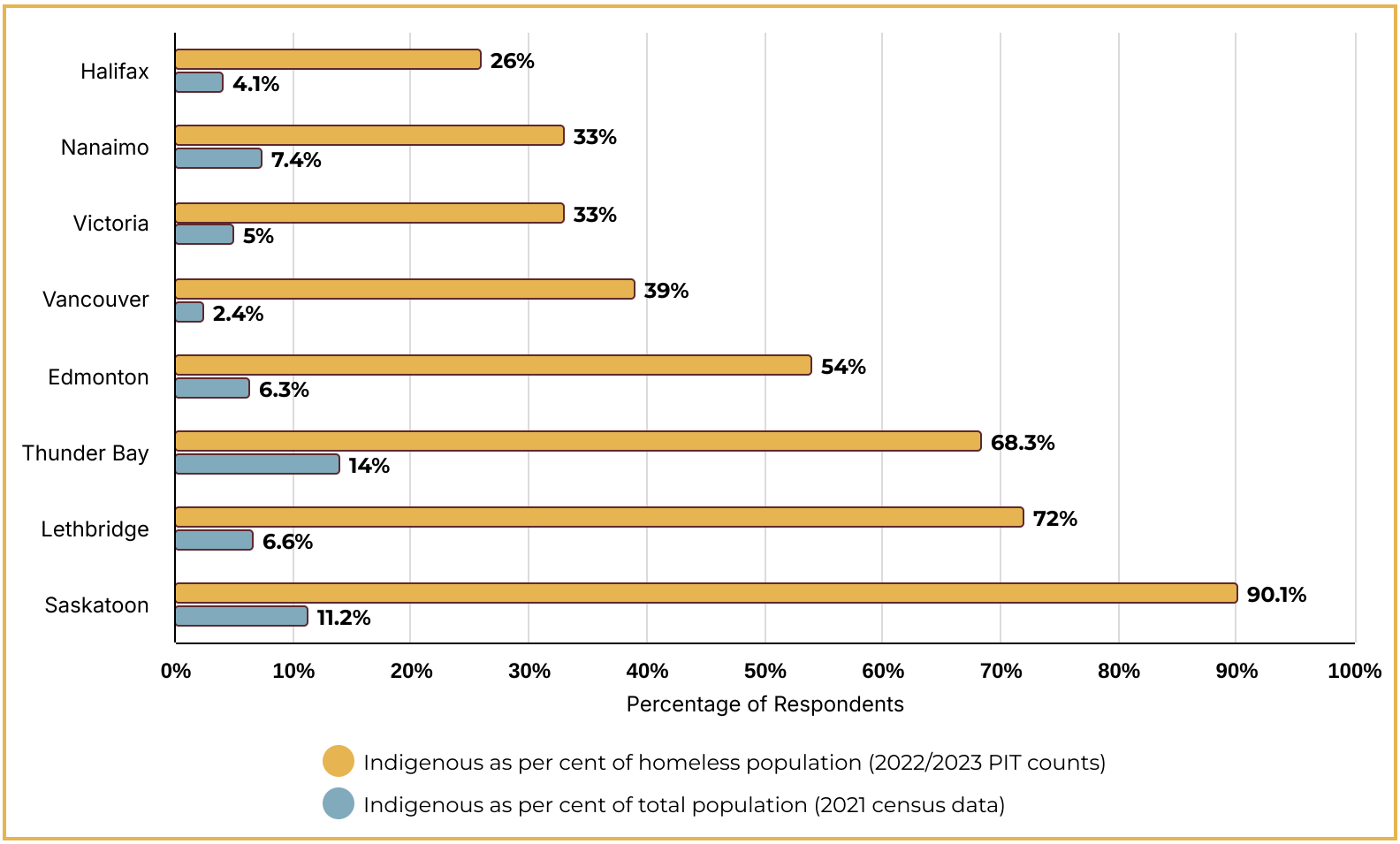


Figure 13 A comparison of Indigenous population in Canadian cities against Indigenous populations represented in PiT count data

Non-Indigenous Racialized Identity

Non-Indigenous racialized identity (Arab, Southeast Asian, East-Asian, South Asian/Indo-Caribbean, Black) was collected for the first time in the most recent 2024 PIT count. The 2021 Census reported that racialized persons make up approximately 7.1% of the city's ethnic demographic but comprise 12% of the homeless community. This means racialized persons are overrepresented in the homelessness data by a factor of nearly 2 in Thunder Bay. However, the overrepresentation factor greatly increases in major urban centres. It's important to consider that racialized persons may be undercounted in the PIT survey owing to several factors, including a reluctance to participate or access traditional shelters owing to past experiences of racism, discrimination and social exclusion, leading some toward more hidden expressions of homeless living (living in vehicles, couch surfing, etc.).

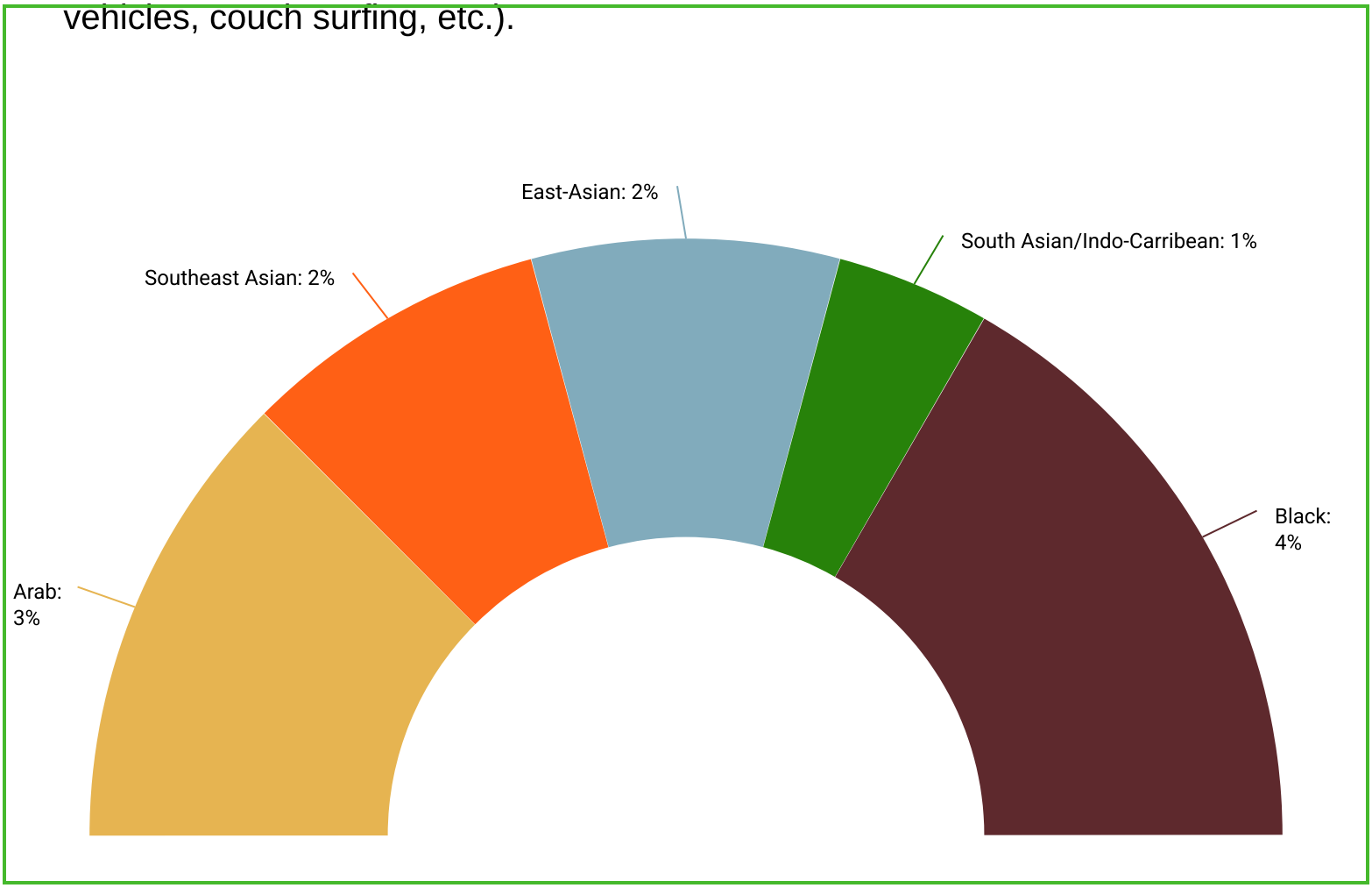


Figure 14 Breakdown of non-Indigenous racialized identity from the 2024 survey

Foster care/group home background

Over one-third to nearly one-half of all survey respondents across the last three PiT counts (2018, 2021, 2024) have lived in foster care or a group home, making them the second largest overrepresented group among the city's unhoused population. We asked participants to indicate whether they found Child Protection Services (CPS) helpful in their transition to independent living. Alarmingly, 32% of respondents expressed that CPS had not been helpful in this regard. We also asked participants to identify their first occurrence of homeless living since leaving the child welfare system. Around 11% of individuals responded that they had began experiencing homeless in their first year upon aging out of care.

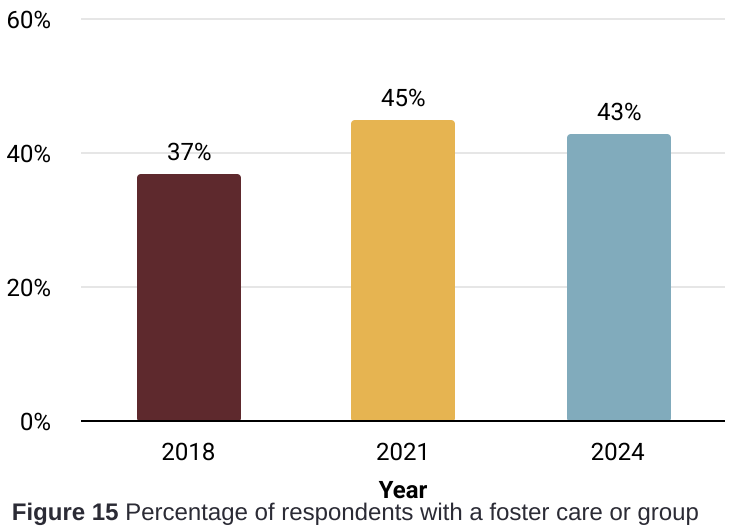


Figure 15 Percentage of respondents with a foster care or group background

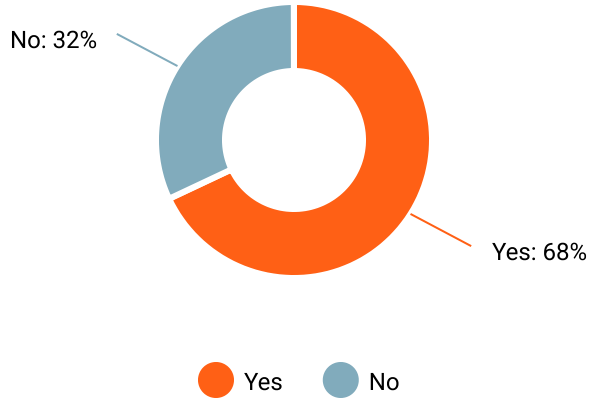


Figure 16 Percentage who identified if CPS was helpful in transitioning to independence

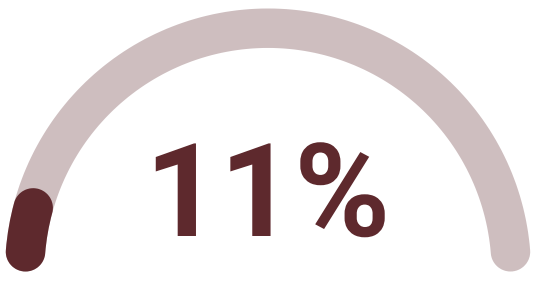


Figure 17 First occurrence of homelessness within one year following exit from child welfare system

Overnight Location

Shelter use has remained consistent throughout all four surveys, but peaked during 2021, perhaps due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Couch surfing made up roughly half of respondents' overnight sleeping location in 2016 and 2018, but reduced dramatically in 2021, perhaps a result of public health measures and self-isolation guidelines. Couch surfing numbers have not returned to pre-pandemic levels. The high percentage of the 'other' category in 2021 reflects a greater use of treatment facilities in that year but usage fell sharply in 2024, which could be a result of treatment overcapacity and limited intake spaces at detox centres and substance use programs. Transitional housing use peaked at 8% in 2021, but returned near to its baseline 2016 value of 4% in 2024. This finding might reflect either an increase in hidden homelessness or a lack of capacity in transitional housing. Those experiencing unsheltered living in public spaces or encampments rose 12 percentage points between 2021 and 2024, largely coinciding with the establishment of local encampments in the city. The data suggests a temporary shift in location patterns, with a decreased reliance on shelters and/or a decrease in couch surfing opportunities in favour of outdoor/encampment habitation.

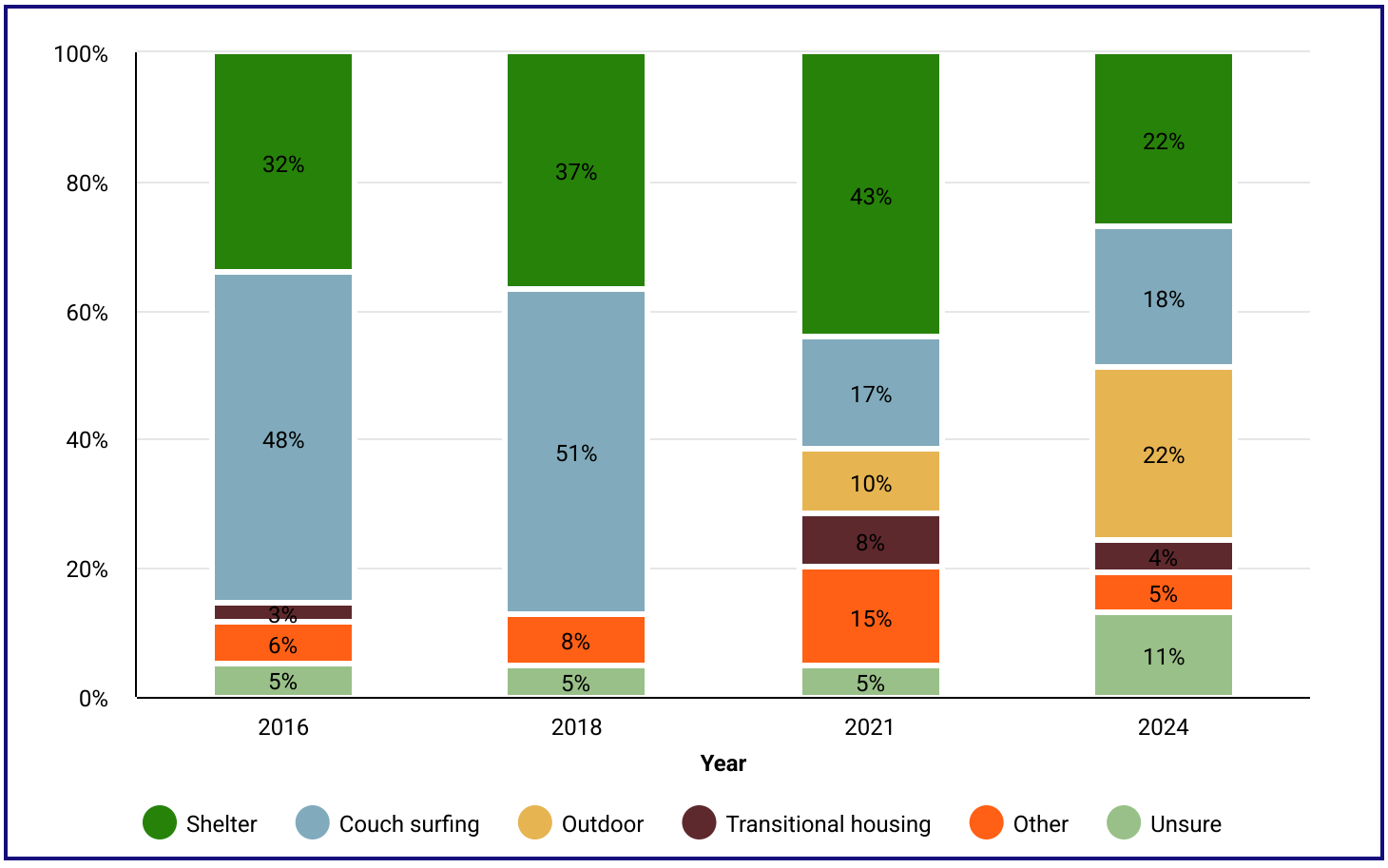


Figure 18 Overnight sleeping location indicated by respondents from 2016, 2018, 2021 and 2024

Sources of Income

The most frequently cited income source among respondents is social assistance, namely Ontario Works (OW) and the Ontario Disability Support program (ODSP). These two programs make up the vast majority of a person's income while living unsheltered. Employment represented the second largest source of income for participants. 12% of respondents reported earning an income from employment in 2016, although this value declined to 5% during 2021, likely as a result of the pandemic and rebounded to 16% in 2024. Employment activity reflected a variety of part-time, casual and informal roles. Financial assistance from family and friends represented only a fraction of support reported by respondents. This isn't too surprising considering those experiencing unsheltered living often find themselves isolated from important systems of social and emotional support or experience strained or severed family relationships. Of particular concern, between 8%-17% of participants reported having no source of income, signifying profound levels of poverty and extreme vulnerability to food insecurity, poor health and victimization.

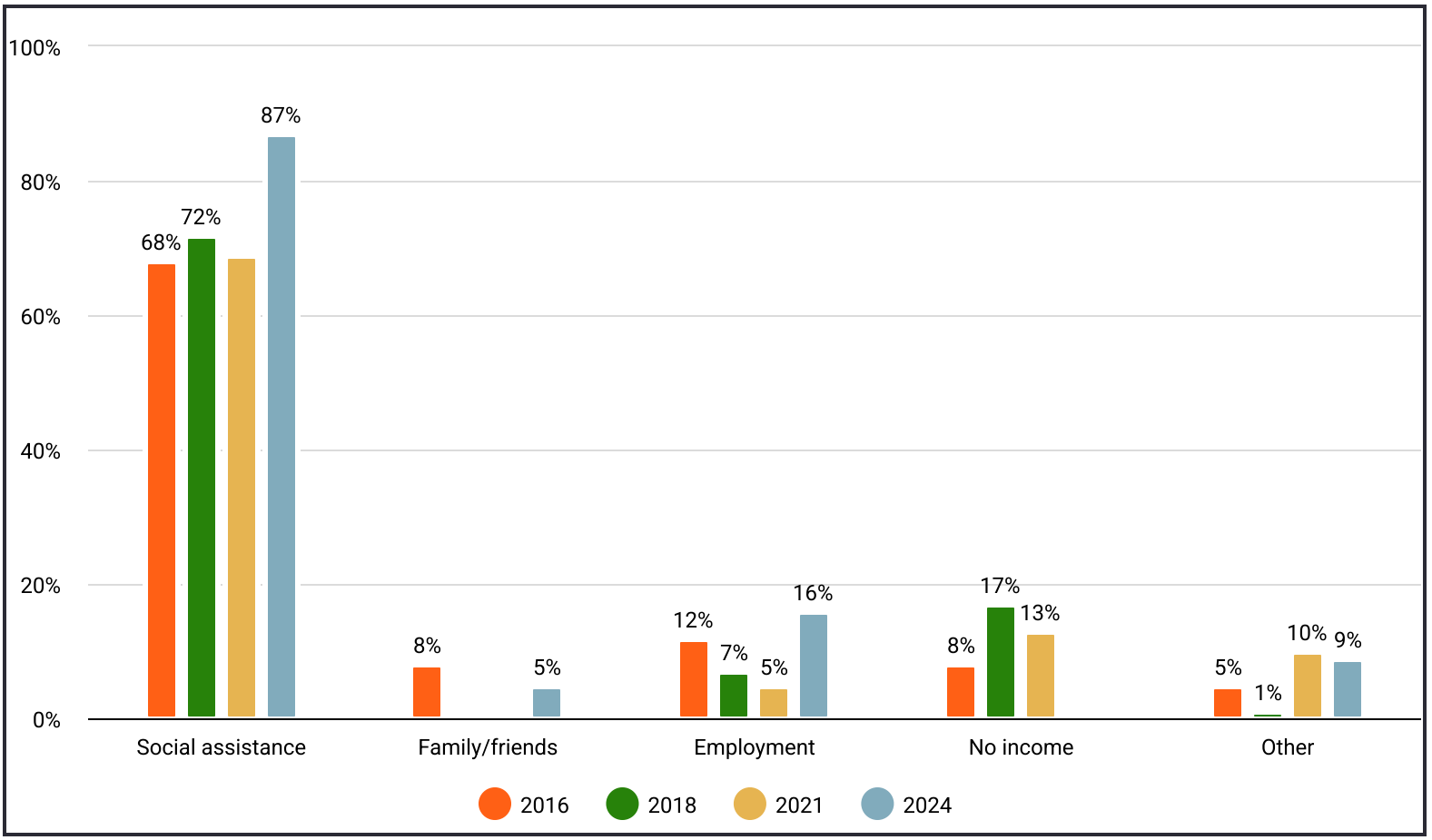


Figure 27 Sources of income reported by participants from 2016, 2018, 2021 and 2024

First occurrence of homelessness

Most respondents reported first experiencing homelessness before the age of 25. 61% of participants in 2018 identified their first occurrence prior to 25. In 2021, 33% reported their first episode of homeless living between the ages of 16 and 24 and 20% before the age of 15. Nearly 25% first experienced homelessness in young adulthood (25-39), 17% in middle-age (40-59), and a small minority in older-age (60+). In 2024, 47% of participants experienced homelessness during youth (15-23) and 16% recounted that their first episode of homelessness occurred before the age of 15. The high percentage of respondents raised in foster care may partially explain the finding that most individuals first experienced homeless living during youth. The significant presence of youth among the unsheltered population underscores the importance of early intervention and planning measures to mitigate against the risk factors underpinning youth homelessness.

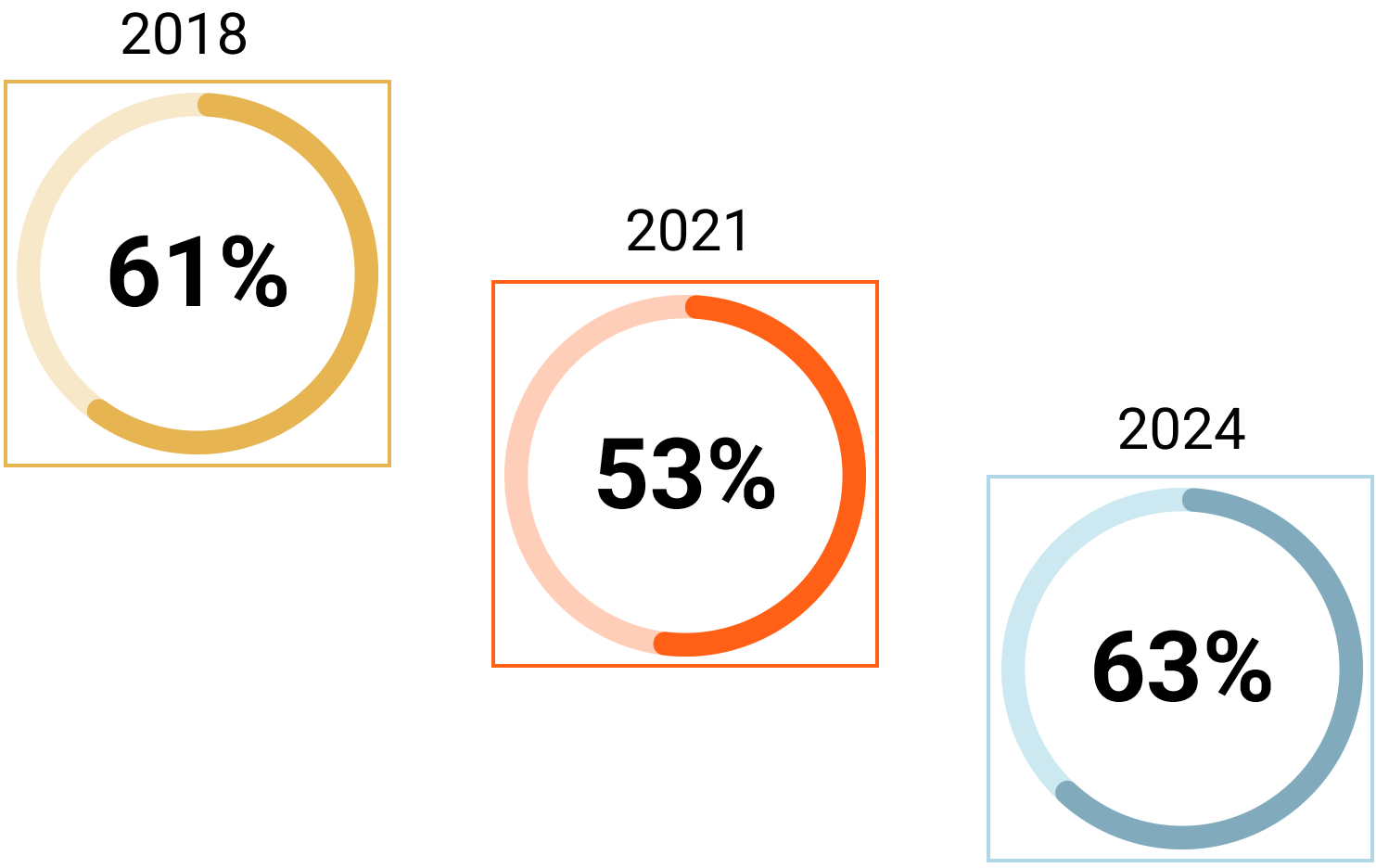


Figure 19 Percentage of respondents who first experienced homelessness before the age of 25

Duration of homelessness

A person is said to be experiencing chronic homelessness if they remain unsheltered for a minimum of 6 months or experiencing multiple occurrences of homelessness over a 3-year time span which total at least 18 months. Chronic homelessness has steadily increased during each successive PIT count (2016, 2018, 2021 and 2024). Specifically, a far greater segment of the surveyed population reported being homeless for 6 months or longer in 2024 than in any previous PiT count. In 2024, 61% of people reported experiencing homeless for at least 18 months within the past three years.

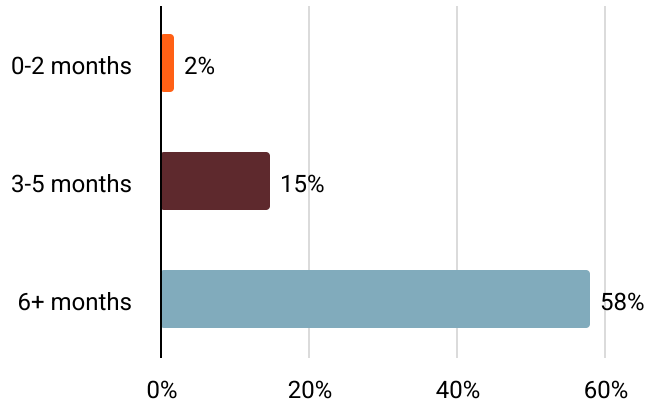


Figure 20 Duration of homelessness (2016)

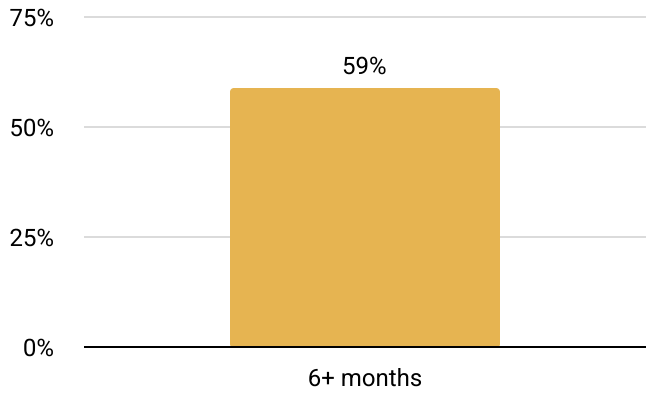


Figure 21 Duration of homelessness (2018)

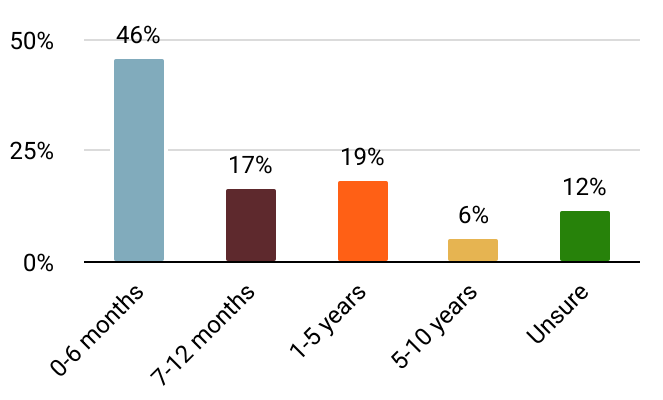


Figure 22 Duration of homelessness (2021)

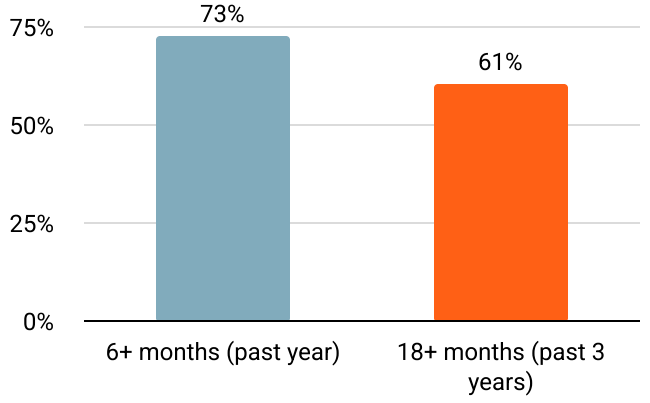


Figure 23 Duration of homelessness (2024)

Frequency of homelessness

In 2016, most respondents reported experiencing homeless over a single occurrence (37%) or on three or more occasions (35%). Those who reported living without shelter on at least one occasion may comprise several distinct groups, made up of individuals and families entering homelessness for the first time or persons who have experienced chronic, long-term homelessness. Those who reported three or more instances of unsheltered living in 2016 represent a more episodic form of homelessness where individuals cycle between periods of stable and unstable housing. In 2018, the percentage of individuals reporting three or more occurrences of homelessness declined to 21%, although the number of respondents who experienced episodic homelessness remained constant at 23% in 2024. No data was collected in 2021.

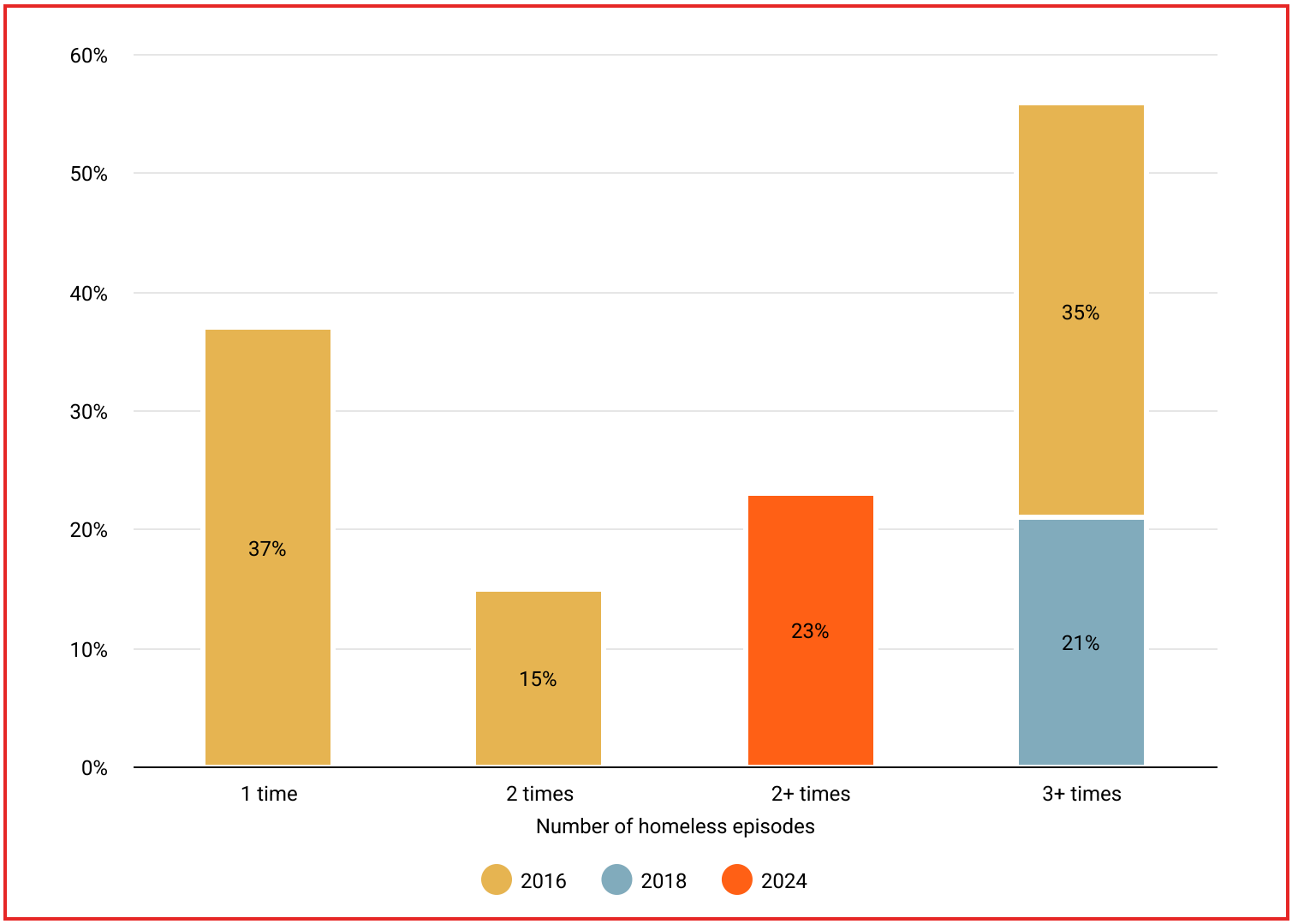


Figure 24 Frequency of homelessness, represented as the number of distinct episodes in 2016, 2018 and 2024

Barriers to Housing

The 2021 PiT count showed that 51% of participants cited rent as their primary housing barrier, followed by 33% who stated that a lack of internet access was their greatest housing obstacle. In 2024, rent and low income were the two largest housing barriers cited among participants at 67% and 62%, respectively. Also in 2024, 39% of respondents reported problematic substance use as a major housing barrier, 28% claimed inadequate or unsafe living conditions as a major deterrent in locating stable housing and 25% cited a lack of identification as an additional barrier to housing. Together, these data points suggest that high rent, together with low income and an insufficiency in addiction programming represent persistent obstacles in accessing stable and secure housing.

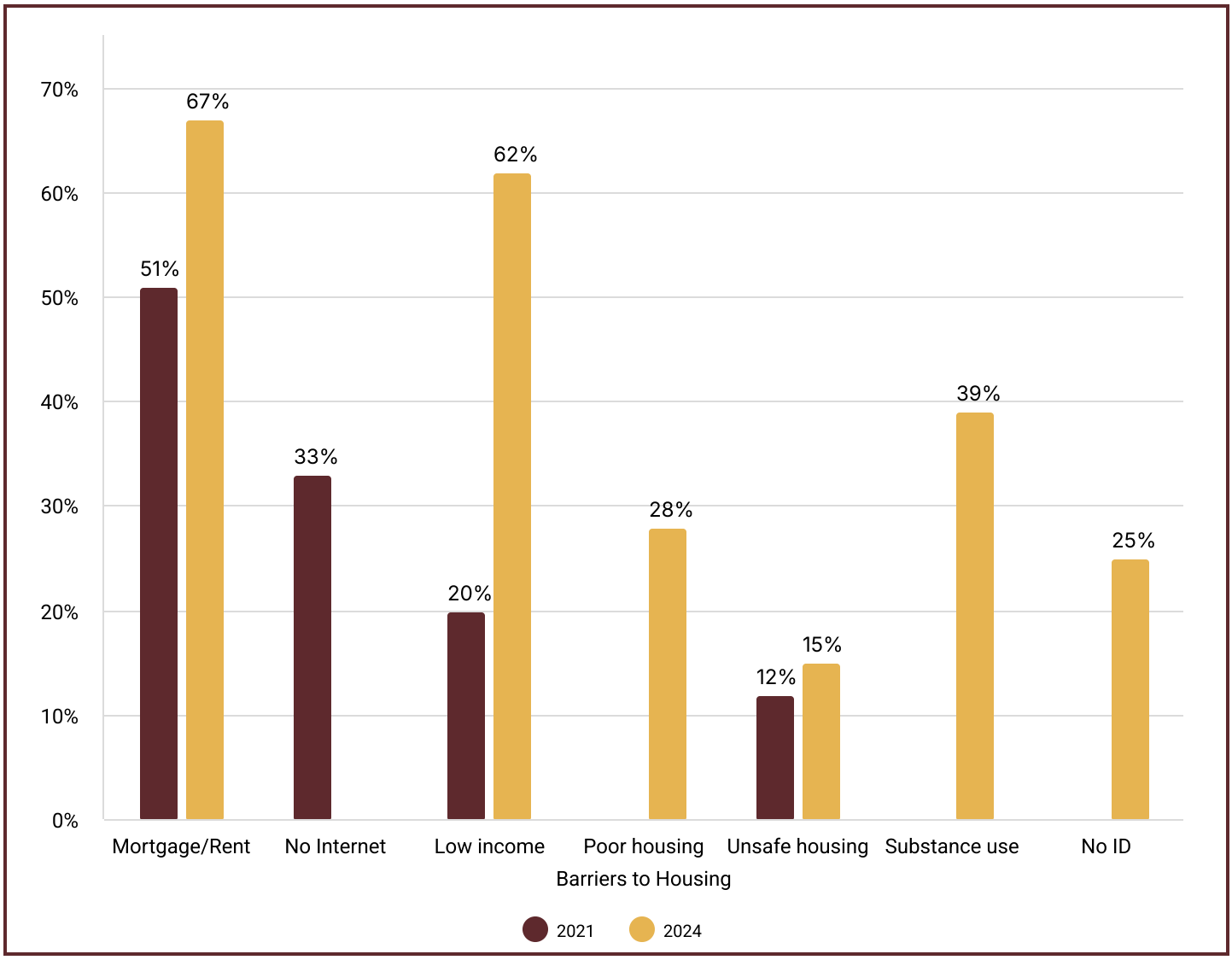


Figure 25 Major barriers to housing in 2021 and 2024

Reasons for Housing Loss

In 2016, substance use challenges was the largest source of housing loss, reported by 28% of participants. Challenging interpersonal relationships with a spouse, partner or family member were described by 20% of respondents, and 10% attributed their housing loss to an eviction or loss of employment. Addiction remained the largest precipitator of housing loss in 2018, followed closely by conflict with a spouse and rising housing costs. In 2021, respondents attributed their dispossession to general housing inadequacies and finances (50%), health or corrections (37%) and interpersonal dynamics or family issues (31%). For 2024, the primary contributors to housing loss in rank order include substance use, romantic/marital strife, low income, landlord disputes, unsafe housing, incarceration and parental conflict. 42% of participants also reported their housing loss was the result of an eviction. Addiction and substance use are consistently cited as one of the top contributors for housing loss across all four PiT counts. Interpersonal and familial conflict, poor quality housing and limited finances are also significant factors underlying housing loss.

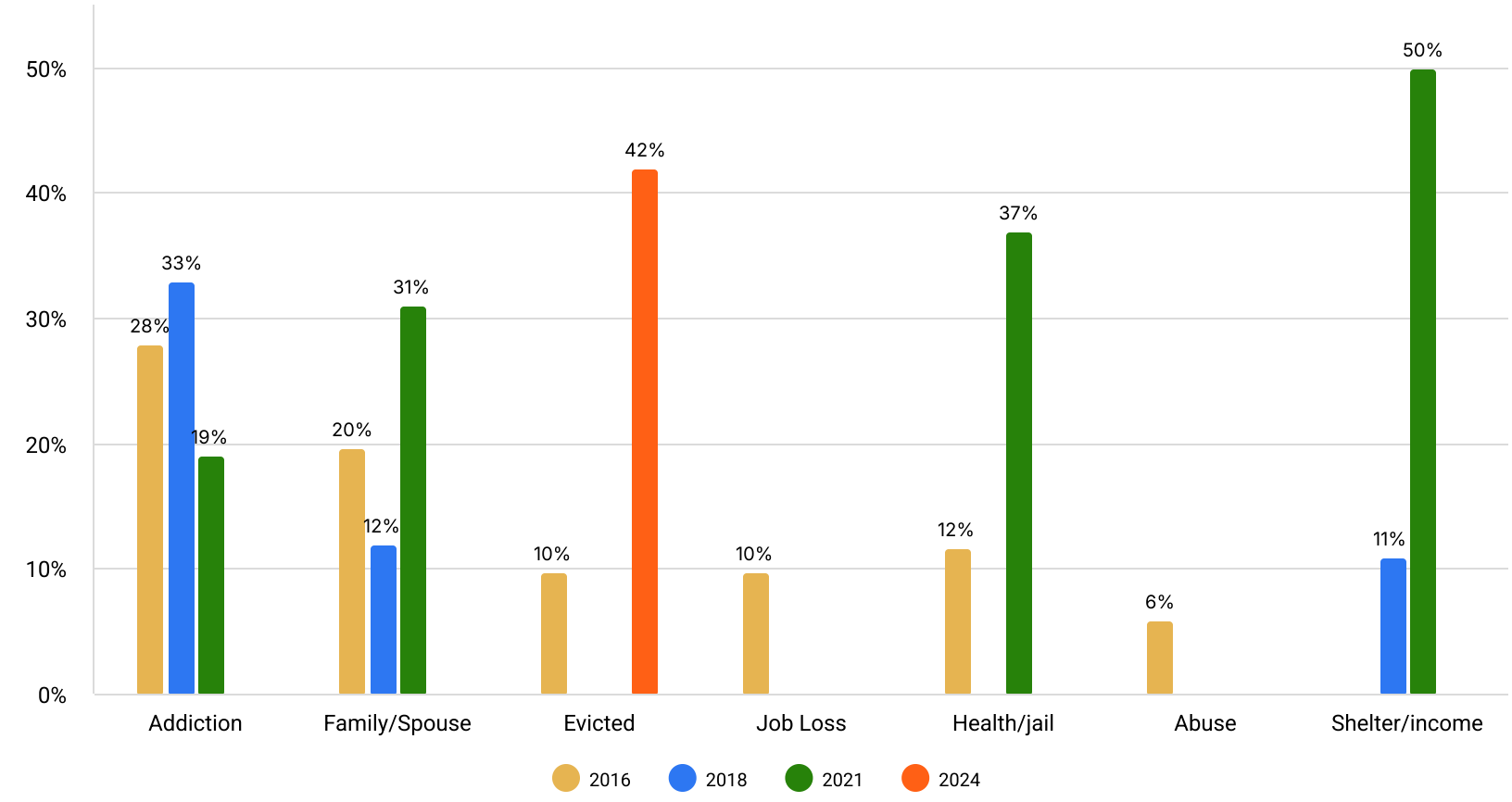


Figure 26 Reported reasons for housing loss for 2016, 2018, 2021 and 2024

Conclusion

The comparative analysis of Thunder Bay's Point-in-Time Counts provides valuable insight into the changing dynamics of homelessness within the community. The data highlights both consistencies and emerging trends across years, offering a clearer understanding of demographic characteristics, service usage, and unmet needs. This evidence forms an essential foundation for developing strategies that respond to local realities and support effective decision-making.

The results further emphasize the disproportionate impacts experienced by certain groups, especially Indigenous peoples and structurally vulnerable populations. These findings reinforce the importance of culturally appropriate, equity-focused interventions and the continued alignment of services with identified community needs. Sustained monitoring and evaluation remain critical to ensuring that resources are directed where they are most effective.

An Administrative Point-in-Time Count, scheduled for October 2025, will provide an additional opportunity to refine and expand upon these findings. By drawing on administrative data from local service providers, this count will enhance the reliability and depth of information, allowing for more precise tracking of trends over time. The results will contribute to a stronger evidence base for comparative analysis and long-term planning.

As the Community Entity for the Reaching Home program, the Lakehead Social Planning Council will use these findings to help guide the management and allocation of federal homelessness funding in Thunder Bay. This evidence will strengthen our ability to set priorities, support effective community programming, and ensure accountability in addressing homelessness. Looking forward, the integration of these data-driven insights into funding decisions will help the community achieve measurable reductions in homelessness, while advancing coordinated and sustainable approaches to housing stability.

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