



HNA Best Practice Review

Guidebook

May 2026

Drawn from a review of 69 Housing Needs Assessments across Canada

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	INTRODUCTION	1
2	STATE OF CANADIAN HNA PRACTICE	2
3	BEST PRACTICES BY ANALYTICAL DOMAIN	4
4	SUMMARY OF REVIEWED HNAs BY CRITERION	12
5	COMMON GAPS IN CURRENT CANADIAN HNA PRACTICE	16
6	HOW HNA QUALITY HAS CHANGED OVER TIME	18
7	WHEN DATA DOES NOT EXIST: STRATEGIES FOR DATA GAPS	20
8	COMMISSIONING GUIDANCE	24

1 INTRODUCTION

This document serves as a supplement to the Housing Needs Assessment templates provided as part of the HNA Blueprint resource package. The templates establish the core quantitative and analytical foundation of a Housing Needs Assessment (i.e., a demographic profile, economic context, housing supply and affordability analysis, a core housing need estimate, and housing projections) that can be largely standardized across Canada. These elements form the evidence base on which housing planning decisions should rest, and this supplement does not alter or replace them. Instead, it answers a different question: *when practitioners have gone further than the template requires, what does the strongest Canadian practice look like, and how might it be replicated?*

The practices documented here are drawn from a review of 69 Housing Needs Assessments produced across Canada between 2018 and 2025, spanning Alberta, Saskatchewan, the Northwest Territories, Yukon, Quebec, Manitoba, Ontario, New Brunswick, British Columbia, Prince Edward Island, and Newfoundland and Labrador. They are organized into two tiers. **Tier 1** covers enhancements achievable for most well-resourced communities (e.g., those with dedicated planning staff or access to specialist consultants). **Tier 2** covers emerging or exemplary practices that are analytically innovative, often context-specific, and worth piloting more broadly as capacity and relationships develop.

Where particularly strong examples exist in the reviewed body of work, the relevant community and year are named so that practitioners can seek out those documents directly. Where gaps and weaknesses are described, no community is identified. The goal is pattern recognition, not criticism.

The review used six analytical domains used to evaluate the 69 reviewed HNAs:

- Domain 1: Methodology and Transparency
- Domain 2: Community and Demographic Profile
- Domain 3: Housing Profile and Supply Analysis
- Domain 4: Equity and Priority Populations
- Domain 5: Community Engagement Quality
- Domain 6: Recommendations and Actionability

Each domain is addressed in turn. Within each domain, Tier 1 practices are presented first, followed by Tier 2.

A note on the reviewed corpus

The 69 HNAs reviewed span communities of all sizes, from rural townships of under 10,000 to cities of over one million. Partial documents (engagement-only reports, council presentations, executive summaries, minimum HAF application documents, and academic briefs) are included in the corpus but are flagged where relevant. All scoring and pattern observations are based on the full corpus. Where scoring statistics are cited, the denominator reflects only documents for which the relevant criterion could be meaningfully assessed.

2 STATE OF CANADIAN HNA PRACTICE

Housing Needs Assessments have become a central instrument of Canadian housing policy, now required or incentivized under federal programs including the Housing Accelerator Fund and the Build Communities Strong Fund. The 69 HNAs reviewed reveal a field in rapid but uneven development: strong quantitative progress, and persistent equity gaps.

The most consequential improvement across the corpus is the widespread adoption of the Housing Assessment Resource Tool (HART), developed by the University of British Columbia. HART provides a nationally standardized methodology for reporting on Core Housing Need (CHN) and disaggregating it by priority population, income, household type, and tenure. Documents published from 2022 onward, likely aligned with HART adoption becoming more common place, consistently achieve stronger scores in the methodology and housing supply domains. This standardization makes it possible for a community in one province to meaningfully compare its housing need profile to a community in another for the first time.

However, quantitative standardization has not been matched by comparable progress in the dimensions that often matter most for housing policy: equity analysis, community engagement, and implementation accountability. Across all 69 documents, intersectionality (the systematic exploration of how overlapping vulnerabilities compound housing insecurity) scores adequately or better in fewer than 30% of documents. Indigenous-specific engagement (defined as a distinct process designed for and with Indigenous peoples rather than inclusion of an Indigenous organization on a general stakeholder list) is adequately or better documented in fewer than 20% of documents. Purposeful engagement with people who have lived experience of housing instability (whether directly or through trauma-informed engagement with the service providers who work with them) appears in fewer than 30% of reviewed HNAs. For populations carrying trauma related to their housing circumstances, such as people experiencing homelessness or those fleeing violence, engaging through trusted intermediaries is not a shortcut: it is the ethically appropriate approach. What is missing in most documents is not direct participation, but any deliberate design to capture the housing experiences of those most affected. These are not marginal gaps in otherwise strong documents. They represent systematic failures to engage the populations most directly harmed by inadequate housing.

The corpus also reveals a consistent gap in how HNAs relate to implementation, but it is worth being precise about what that gap is. An HNA is fundamentally a problem identification document: its purpose is to establish what housing challenges exist, for whom, and at what scale. Implementation (the assignment of responsible parties, timelines, funding mechanisms, and monitoring commitments) properly belongs to the Housing Strategy or Action Plan that follows. Many of the highest-quality documents in the reviewed corpus are explicitly scoped as inputs to a subsequent strategy process, and that is appropriate. The gap is not that HNAs lack implementation detail per se. It is that too many HNAs are produced without any defined connection to a follow-on process, leaving their findings with no institutional pathway to action. An HNA that clearly frames its role as the evidence foundation for a named, upcoming strategy is doing the right thing. An HNA that produces findings with no stated next step is not.

Indigenous engagement represents the field's most consequential unresolved gap. The pattern across the corpus is nearly universal: Indigenous peoples are identified as a priority population, CHN rates are reported from HART data, a land acknowledgment is included, and engagement is conducted through general stakeholder processes that may or may not include an Indigenous organization representative. The rare exceptions (described in detail under **Domain 5**)

demonstrate that more substantive practice is achievable even in small and resource-constrained communities. What separates these documents is not exceptional resources but institutional will and existing relationships.

Current Canadian HNA practice is at a watershed. The quantitative infrastructure (standardized CHN tools, provincial legislative frameworks, federal template systems) is increasingly capable of producing reliable and comparable housing need data across communities of all sizes. What is needed is an equally systematic investment in the qualitative and equity dimensions of practice: engagement that reaches people with lived experience; analysis that grapples with intersecting vulnerabilities; Indigenous engagement that reflects, rather than performs, reconciliation; and a clear institutional connection between the HNA and the strategy process that follows it. The corpus demonstrates that this level of practice is achievable. The question is whether those commissioning HNAs will build the expectations that make it the norm.

3 BEST PRACTICES BY ANALYTICAL DOMAIN

The following sections describe best practices organized by the six analytical domains of the HNA rubric. **Tier 1** practices are enhancements appropriate for well-resourced communities with planning staff or specialist consultants. **Tier 2** practices are emerging or exemplary approaches observed in only a small number of reviewed documents, and are recommended for communities seeking to advance the state of the field.

Each practice is framed as aspirational guidance (something a practitioner *should consider* based on available capacity) rather than as a mandatory requirement.

3.1 DOMAIN 1: METHODOLOGY AND TRANSPARENCY

3.1.1 Tier 1 – Enhanced Methodology Practices

- **Acknowledge COVID-19 income support effects on 2021 CHN rates**
The 2021 Census CHN rates are depressed by federal emergency income transfers (CERB and related programs). Communities that do not acknowledge this risk overstating the degree to which housing conditions improved between 2016 and 2021. At minimum, the HNA should note that 2021 CHN rates may understate structural need. Communities with analytical capacity should model a pre-transfer scenario for comparison — presenting both the Census-measured rate and a modelled estimate of what CHN would have been absent the transfers. This practice is documented in the reviewed corpus for Alberta.
- **Use and report on multiple projection methodologies**
Presenting a single projection creates false precision. Communities that have access to multiple projection sources (e.g., HART projections, Statistics Canada projections, and/or independent demographic forecasts) should present them all, explain the differences, and provide a projection range in addition to a point estimate.
- **Dedicate a formal section to data limitations**
Communities should provide a standalone section of the HNA to data limitations, separate from footnotes or methodology text. This section need not be lengthy, but its presence signals to readers that the analysis is built on a clear-eyed understanding of what the data can and cannot support, and supports more defensible policy decisions as a result. The most useful limitations sections identify not just what the data gaps are, but what they mean for the reliability of specific findings in the report.

3.1.2 Tier 2 – Exemplary Methodology Practices

- **Apply the Indigenous Definition of Homelessness**
The standard Statistics Canada and CMHC definition of homelessness captures physical housing insecurity (i.e., the absence of a fixed, adequate, and secure home). The **Indigenous Definition**¹ extends this to include cultural, spiritual, and emotional displacement from land, community, and cultural identity. Its application changes both what is counted and how interventions are designed, and is particularly relevant in communities with considerable Indigenous populations or in northern communities where

¹ Thistle, J. (2017). [Definition of Indigenous Homelessness](#). Canadian Observatory on Homelessness.

connection to land is integral to cultural wellbeing. Wood Buffalo, Alberta (2019) is the only document in the reviewed corpus to apply this definition systematically.

- **Apply as many census periods to CHN trend analysis as possible**

Most HNAs compare two census periods (2016 and 2021). A longer time horizon that traces CHN rates across three or more census periods reveals trajectory rather than snapshot, distinguishing structural and worsening conditions from temporary fluctuations. This practice is documented in the reviewed corpus for Nunavik, Quebec (2024), which traces CHN conditions across six census periods from 1996 to 2021. Data from much earlier census periods is not particularly accessible for most users, and thus requires additional efforts.

3.2 DOMAIN 2: COMMUNITY AND DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

3.2.1 Tier 1 – Enhanced Community Profile Practices

- **Analyze the renter-owner income gap as a structural finding**

The income gap between renter and owner households is more than a background statistic, it is a structural feature of the housing market that explains why affordability challenges concentrate among renters. A best-practice HNA presents median household income by tenure across multiple census periods to document whether this gap is widening, stable, or narrowing, and explicitly connects the gap to housing need findings elsewhere in the report.

- **Decompose migration by type and link to housing demand**

Total population growth figures obscure the compositional differences that matter for housing planning. Natural increase, intraprovincial migration, interprovincial migration, and international immigration each generate different household types, income profiles, and housing preferences. Where data permits, a best-practice HNA decomposes recent population growth by these components and connects each component to housing demand implications (e.g., noting that international newcomers are more likely to be renters in smaller units initially, or that interprovincial in-migrants in resource economies tend to form larger households).

3.2.2 Tier 2 – Exemplary Community Profile Practices

- **Analyze sector-specific economic dependencies and their housing implications**

Communities whose economies are dominated by a single sector (e.g., resource extraction, government employment, tourism, post-secondary institutions) face housing market dynamics that generic economic profiles do not capture. The most effective HNAs in the reviewed corpus analyze the relationship between the dominant sector's cycle and housing market conditions explicitly. Fort Smith, Northwest Territories (2023) provides the only example in the corpus of systematically quantifying the proportion of each northern community's labour force employed by the territorial government and analyzing what this concentration means for housing vulnerability when that employment is reduced or relocated.

- **Document the economic impact of the housing shortage on employers**

In communities where workforce housing is a barrier to economic development, an employer survey can quantify what the housing shortage costs the local economy in unfilled vacancies, employee turnover, and recruitment difficulty. West Prince, Prince

Edward Island (2023) documented that 43% of local employers could not fill vacancies due to housing unavailability and that employees were living outside the region as a result. This approach is particularly applicable to rural, resource-dependent, and resort communities where employer-housing relationships are structurally important.

3.3 DOMAIN 3: HOUSING PROFILE AND SUPPLY ANALYSIS

3.3.1 Tier 1 – Enhanced Housing Supply Practices

- **Analyze the secondary rental market and estimate its scale**

In most Canadian communities, the secondary rental market (i.e., units rented out by individual owners, including basement suites, secondary suites, and condominium units) serves a substantial share of renters, yet is excluded from CMHC primary market data. A best-practice HNA estimates the scale of the secondary market by comparing total renter households from the census to primary market unit counts from CMHC (where available), and analyzes the implications for vacancy rates and affordability where the secondary market is dominant.

- **Disaggregate CHN across all available priority population categories**

Federal templates require CHN disaggregation across twelve priority population categories:

- Women and children fleeing domestic violence
- Women-led households, especially single mothers
- Seniors 65+
- Young adults aged 18-29
- Indigenous Peoples
- Racialized people
- Recent immigrants, especially refugees
- LGBTQ2S+
- People with physical health or mobility challenges
- People with developmental disabilities
- People dealing with mental health and addictions issues
- Veterans
- People experiencing homelessness

Reporting CHN rates for each category, and not just for the aggregate population, reveals which households face disproportionate housing need and supports targeted policy design. HART is among the best resources to use to find CHN figures by priority category. Other public resources do exist that fill some of the leftover gaps, which are referenced in the HNA Blueprint's **Guidebook – Community HNA** document. Halton Hills, Ontario (2024) presents the most detailed CHN disaggregation in the reviewed corpus, cross-tabulating CHN rates by tenure, household type, age, immigrant status, visible minority status, and Indigenous status simultaneously.

- **Quantify dwelling type and size mismatches explicitly**

A community may have adequate total housing supply while still having structural mismatches between the units that exist and the households that need housing. A best-practice HNA compares the distribution of dwelling unit sizes (by bedroom count) to the distribution of household sizes and types, and quantifies the gap. Fort St. John, British Columbia (2024) provides a particularly clear example. The document notes that 30.4%

of households are single-person, while only 10% of the housing stock consists of one-bedroom units, and quantifies the resulting structural undersupply of smaller units.

3.3.2 Tier 2 – Exemplary Housing Supply Practices

- **Supplement CMHC average rents with current asking-rent data**

CMHC average rents are calculated from the full primary rental stock, blending long-standing tenancies (where rents are typically below market) with new tenancies (where rents reflect current market conditions). In provinces without rent control (i.e., where rents can reset to market upon vacancy), CMHC averages systematically understate what new renters actually pay. A best-practice HNA can supplement CMHC data with a current snapshot of advertised asking rents from typical renting platforms, such as Kijiji or Facebook Marketplace, and explain the methodological reason for the gap. Whitchurch-Stouffville, Ontario (2025) is the only document in the reviewed corpus to implement this approach, with an explicit explanation of the data gap.

- **Report implementation progress from previous housing strategies**

An HNA that documents what has changed since the previous assessment (which recommendations were implemented, how many units were built under which programs, which policies were revised) creates accountability that aspirational recommendation lists cannot. Castlegar, British Columbia (2023/2024) is the only document in the reviewed corpus to include a detailed implementation tracking section, accounting for 163 units under construction or complete and listing specific bylaw and policy revisions made since the prior strategy.

3.4 DOMAIN 4: EQUITY AND PRIORITY POPULATIONS

3.4.1 Tier 1 – Enhanced Equity Practices

- **Address homelessness using all available data, regardless of community size**

A common pattern in the reviewed corpus is the treatment of homelessness as absent from, or negligible in, communities without a formal shelter system, Coordinated Access, and/or Point-in-Time count program. This approach risks underestimating need significantly. Where PiT count and/or By-Name List data is unavailable, a best-practice HNA draws on alternative sources: shelter capacity data, social service organization caseloads, service provider interviews, or qualitative evidence from community engagement. The HNA should also explicitly note that CMHC Core Housing Need excludes people who are homeless, meaning the CHN estimate structurally undercounts the most housing-insecure residents.

- **Analyze the causes of housing instability, not only its scale**

Documenting that a community has a certain number of people experiencing homelessness or housing instability is necessary but not sufficient. Effective intervention requires understanding why housing instability occurs: whether the dominant drivers are affordability (incomes insufficient to sustain market rents), adequacy (poor condition or unsuitable stock), availability (insufficient supply), or systemic factors (mental health, addictions, domestic violence, release from incarceration, aging out of care). A best-practice HNA investigates and documents patterns using available data and community engagement findings.

- **Name and analyze intersecting vulnerabilities**

Most HNAs identify priority populations individually (e.g., seniors, Indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities) without exploring how membership in multiple groups compounds housing insecurity. A best-practice HNA explicitly identifies and analyzes intersecting vulnerabilities. HART priority population tables enable this analysis when disaggregated by tenure and income level simultaneously. Communities with sufficient data quality should cross-tabulate at least two dimensions (such as household type and income, or Indigenous status and tenure) and discuss the implications.

3.4.2 Tier 2 – Exemplary Equity Practices

- **Identify community-specific housing pipeline factors**

Some communities have structural features that create housing instability pathways not visible in standard datasets. Prince Albert, Saskatchewan (2024) identified that 46% of incarcerated persons surveyed within two weeks of release had no housing plan, quantifying the correctional-to-homelessness pipeline as one of Prince Albert-specific drivers of housing instability. Similarly, Thunder Bay, Ontario (2024) documented that 43% of people experiencing homelessness had spent time in foster care, and 78% had migrated from First Nations communities, establishing community-specific pathways that generic analysis misses.

- **Frame Indigenous housing need through rights-based language**

The strongest documents in the reviewed corpus treating Indigenous housing as a policy issue move beyond need-profile descriptions to situate Indigenous housing challenges within a rights framework, referencing the *United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (UNDRIP) Articles 21 and 23 (and the corresponding Canadian Act of the same name²) on the right to economic development and social security, analyzing historical policy decisions (such as federal funding withdrawal) as causal factors, and framing the housing deficit as a structural rights failure rather than a service delivery gap. Nunavik, Quebec (2024) applies this framing most explicitly in the reviewed corpus.

- **Use longitudinal Point-in-Time count data for trend analysis**

A single PiT count documents the scale of homelessness at one moment. Two or more counts from the same community enable trend analysis and reveals whether homelessness is growing, stable, or declining. This is more useful for policy design, but should also be wary of methodological differences between PiT counts. Prince Albert, Saskatchewan (2024) documents a near-doubling of homelessness from 120 individuals in 2022 to 230 in 2024. Grande Prairie, Alberta (2019) presents a six-cycle PiT time series from 2006 to 2018.

3.5 DOMAIN 5: COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT QUALITY

3.5.1 Tier 1 – Enhanced Engagement Practices

- **Conduct engagement through at least two distinct methods targeting different populations**

A single online survey, a single stakeholder focus group, or a single engagement method is not typically adequate for capturing the range of housing experiences in a community. A best-practice HNA uses at least two distinct methods, such as a community-wide survey combined with targeted key informant interviews, or focus groups combined with pop-up

² United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act, SC 2021, c 14 (Canada)

engagement at high-traffic community spaces. It designs each method to reach populations that the other would not.

- **Incorporate lived experience perspectives in a manner appropriate to the population**

Many of the most important housing audiences (e.g., people experiencing homelessness, survivors of domestic violence, individuals with complex mental health or addiction histories) carry trauma that makes direct participation in standard public consultation formats inappropriate or harmful. In these cases, engaging through trusted service providers who work directly and consistently with those populations is not a methodological shortcut: it is the ethically correct approach. What matters is that the engagement is designed with that population in mind, that service providers are asked specific questions about their clients' housing experiences rather than (or in addition to) their own organizational perspectives, and that findings are attributed to the affected population in the report. Where direct engagement with lived experience populations is possible and appropriate (for example, through a survey distributed at a community health centre, or through peer researchers employed by a housing organization), it should be pursued. Where it is not, trauma-informed indirect engagement through trusted intermediaries is best practice.

- **Integrate engagement findings into the analysis, not into a separate appendix**

A recurring pattern in the reviewed corpus is the documentation of an engagement process without demonstrating how its findings shaped the analysis or recommendations. A best-practice HNA integrates qualitative evidence within the relevant section of the report. If engagement finds that renters are experiencing rent increases faster than income growth, that finding belongs in the rental market section alongside CMHC data, not only in a What We Heard summary.

- **Document engagement processes with sufficient detail for evaluation**

A best-practice HNA reports: the methods used, when engagement took place, how participants were recruited, how many participated, which populations were reached, and how findings were incorporated into the analysis. This level of documentation allows a reader to evaluate whether the engagement was adequate for the community context and to understand the basis for qualitative conclusions.

3.5.2 Tier 2 – Exemplary Engagement Practices

- **Conduct separate, Nation-specific engagement with Indigenous peoples**

The closest the reviewed corpus comes to reconciliation-informed Indigenous engagement involves conducting separate engagement sessions with each distinct Indigenous nation or governing body, using appropriately senior representatives, and documenting both outcomes and limitations honestly when a nation declines to participate or limits its engagement. Hay River, Northwest Territories (2022) documents separate meetings with West Point First Nation Chief and Council, the Kát'l'odeeche First Nation Senior Administrative Officer, and the Hay River Métis Council, three distinct engagements, each with appropriate representation. Fort Smith, Northwest Territories (2023) embeds Indigenous government representatives on a 15-member Advisory Board that validates findings throughout the assessment process. Both documents acknowledge limitations in Indigenous engagement honestly.

- Use an ongoing Advisory Board or Steering Committee to validate findings**
 Several documents in the reviewed corpus use an advisory structure (a standing body that reviews findings at multiple points during the assessment process rather than receiving a single consultation) to ensure that community expertise shapes the analysis iteratively. Fort Smith and Hay River (Northwest Territories, 2023 and 2022) both use an Advisory Committee in this role. North Bay, Ontario (2024) conducts four distinct engagement events with different methods and population targets across the assessment process. This approach moves beyond transactional consultation toward sustained community partnership.
- Use real-time homelessness tracking systems as engagement and data tools**
 Where a By-Name List or equivalent real-time homelessness tracking system exists, it provides both a higher-quality data source than a PiT count alone and a direct connection to people experiencing homelessness. St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador (2023) integrates By-Name List data with monthly trend tracking and a large community survey that oversampled people experiencing homelessness, resulting in 51 survey respondents with active lived experience of homelessness. Timmins, Ontario (2025) uses monthly By-Name List data tracking active and chronic homelessness through 2024, supplemented by field documentation of 40 known encampments.

3.6 DOMAIN 6: RECOMMENDATIONS AND ACTIONABILITY

3.6.1 Tier 1 – Enhanced Recommendation Practices

- Establish a clear, named connection to a subsequent Housing Strategy or Action Plan**
 An HNA is a problem identification document. Its role is to establish what housing challenges exist, for whom, and at what scale. The assignment of responsible parties, funding mechanisms, timelines, and monitoring commitments properly belongs to the Housing Strategy or Action Plan that follows. A best-practice HNA makes this handoff explicit: it names the strategy process it is intended to inform, describes how its findings will feed into that process, and where possible identifies a committed timeline for the strategy's development. This framing is not a limitation, but is instead appropriate scope discipline. An HNA that acknowledges its role as the evidence foundation for an upcoming strategy is more credible than one that attempts to carry both the diagnostic and implementation functions within a single document.
- Where no follow-on strategy is planned, provide directional specificity within the HNA itself**
 When an HNA is produced as a standalone document with no defined pathway to a subsequent strategy, the absence of implementation direction becomes a genuine gap. In these cases, a best-practice HNA should at minimum specify: indicative unit targets by housing type and tenure, the jurisdictional scope of each recommendation (what the municipality can do independently versus what requires senior government or non-profit partnership), and a proposed timeline for developing the strategy that will carry implementation detail. Guelph, Ontario (2025) demonstrates this well, explicitly distinguishing between City-controlled actions, County of Wellington responsibilities, and senior government dependencies, a jurisdictional map that a subsequent strategy can build on directly.

- **Distinguish between recommendations within municipal authority and those requiring external partnership**

Recommendations that require provincial or federal action, non-profit sector capacity, or market developer behaviour should be framed accordingly. This helps the subsequent strategy process (or council, or funders) understand which actions are within reach and which require negotiation or advocacy.

- **Establish an HNA update schedule and commit to it in the document**

An HNA without a defined update cycle becomes stale without institutional accountability for renewal. A best-practice HNA specifies: when quantitative data will be updated (at least every 5 years to follow census scheduling, but often faster to match more frequently updated data sources), when a full qualitative and engagement update will occur, and who is responsible for initiating each update. Prince Albert, Saskatchewan (2024) institutionalizes a three-year update cycle. Saskatoon, Saskatchewan (2023) defines a two-year quantitative update and a five-year qualitative review cycle.

3.6.2 Tier 2 – Exemplary Recommendation Practices

- **Integrate an implementation tracking framework directly into the HNA document**

A small number of reviewed HNAs go beyond connecting to a future strategy, they embed implementation tracking within the HNA itself. This represents a higher bar than is expected of most HNAs, but it is particularly valuable when the HNA is produced concurrently with or in place of a standalone strategy. More recent HNAs that respond to Housing Accelerator Fund requirements demonstrate improved implementation tracking, as the program itself is based around functional Housing Action Plans that are easy to incorporate into an HNA. Including this information generally “goes the extra mile” by making the HNA itself a living accountability tool, rather than relying on a subsequent process to carry that function.

- **Co-produce the HNA with the organization that has operational housing authority**

Where a housing authority, territorial housing corporation, or similar body with direct operational responsibility for housing exists, involving that organization as a co-author, and not merely a consulted stakeholder, substantially shortens the distance between the HNA's findings and their translation into action. Fort Smith and Hay River (Northwest Territories, 2023 and 2022) are both co-produced between the municipality and Housing NWT, the organization with operational authority over the housing stock. This model is not appropriate in every context, but where a clear housing operator exists, co-authorship is a way to increase the likelihood that findings are acted upon.

- **Align the HNA production cycle with a concurrent strategy development process**

The most seamless pathway from problem identification to action occurs when the HNA and the Housing Strategy are developed in parallel rather than sequentially. This allows strategy development to draw on HNA findings in real time, reduces the risk of findings becoming dated before they inform action, and creates a shared evidence base that both processes can reference.

4 SUMMARY OF REVIEWED HNAs BY CRITERION

The following tables summarize scoring results across the 69 reviewed HNAs. Results are presented by rubric criterion within each analytical domain. Scores reflect the four-point rubric scale used throughout the evaluation:

- 4 = Exemplary
- 3 = Adequate
- 2 = Minimal
- 1 = Absent

Partial and atypical documents (engagement-only summaries, council presentations, academic briefs, minimum HAF application documents, and executive summaries without full HNA bodies) are included in the totals but flagged where their inclusion materially affects the distribution.

All references to community characteristics and patterns in the appendix are presented in aggregate. No individual community is identified in this appendix. The intent is to characterize the state of Canadian HNA practice as a whole, not to evaluate any single document.

Note on scoring counts

Totals reflect the number of documents for which a given criterion could be meaningfully assessed. Partial documents that could not be scored on a given criterion (e.g., an engagement-only report evaluated on methodology criteria) are excluded from that criterion's denominator.

4.1 Domain 1: Methodology and Transparency

Criterion	Score 4	Score 3	Score 2	Score 1	Total Scored
1a. Quantitative data sources (triangulation, currency, limitations acknowledged)	15 (22%)	45 (65%)	9 (13%)	0 (0%)	69
1b. Qualitative methods (description, rigour, integration)	9 (13%)	37 (54%)	13 (19%)	10 (14%)	69
1c. Assumptions and limitations (dedicated treatment, implications discussed)	7 (10%)	33 (48%)	27 (39%)	2 (3%)	69
1d. Reproducibility (methodology documented, approach replicable)	14 (20%)	38 (55%)	17 (25%)	0 (0%)	69

Key patterns: Quantitative data sourcing is the strongest criterion in this domain, with three-quarters of documents achieving a score of 3 or above. Assumptions and limitations disclosure is the weakest, with over half of documents scoring 2 or below, reflecting the widespread pattern of acknowledging data constraints in passing rather than dedicating formal treatment to their implications. Qualitative method documentation is highly variable. Documents that have a genuine engagement component tend to describe it adequately, while those relying solely on secondary data cluster at score 1.

4.2 Domain 2: Community and Demographic Profile

Criterion	Score 4	Score 3	Score 2	Score 1	Total Scored
2a. Population and growth trends (trend analysis, demand implications)	17 (25%)	46 (67%)	6 (9%)	0 (0%)	69
2b. Economic context (income-to-housing link, affordability framing)	15 (22%)	44 (64%)	8 (12%)	2 (3%)	69
2c. Local policy and regulatory context (constraints and enablers analyzed)	4 (6%)	42 (61%)	20 (29%)	3 (4%)	69

Key patterns: Domain 2 is the most consistently performed domain across the corpus. Population and growth trend analysis is present in nearly all documents at an adequate level. Economic context, while generally present, rarely reaches exemplary quality. Most documents describe income and employment without explicitly analyzing how economic conditions drive specific housing market outcomes. Policy and regulatory context is the weakest criterion: the majority of documents list relevant policies and programs without analyzing how they enable or constrain housing supply. This gap means that many HNAs provide strong problem identification without connecting that identification to the policy levers that could address it. However, with increased adherence to federal template requirements, more communities should be more actively engaging with policy material.

4.3 Domain 3: Housing Profile and Supply Analysis

Criterion	Score 4	Score 3	Score 2	Score 1	Total Scored
3a. Dwelling type and tenure breakdown (full distribution, trend analysis)	12 (17%)	48 (70%)	9 (13%)	0 (0%)	69
3b. Rental market analysis (vacancy, rents, renter affordability)	10 (14%)	42 (61%)	13 (19%)	4 (6%)	69
3c. Core housing need (CHN defined, quantified, disaggregated)	15 (22%)	32 (46%)	17 (25%)	5 (7%)	69
3d. Housing projections (methodology stated, unit-type distribution)	14 (20%)	33 (48%)	21 (30%)	1 (1%)	69

Key patterns: Core housing need is the most variable criterion in this domain and the one most directly influenced by whether a community has adopted the material produced by HART. Documents using HART data consistently achieve scores of 3 or above on criterion 3c; documents relying on informal affordability analysis cluster at 2 or below. Housing projections show high variability: roughly half of documents provide projections with stated methodology, while the other half either omit projections or present unit demand figures without explaining how they were derived. Rental market analysis is generally adequate where CMHC data is available, but weaker in northern communities and small rural municipalities where the primary rental market is very small or non-existent, which is an expected result for capacity-constrained communities.

4.4 Domain 4: Equity and Priority Populations

Criterion	Score 4	Score 3	Score 2	Score 1	Total Scored
4a. Identification of priority groups (community-specific evidence)	10 (14%)	41 (59%)	13 (19%)	5 (7%)	69
4b. Indigenous peoples (substantive analysis, not just identification)	6 (9%)	15 (22%)	33 (48%)	15 (22%)	69
4c. Homelessness and housing instability (data, causes, service gaps)	12 (17%)	24 (35%)	24 (35%)	9 (13%)	69
4d. Intersectionality (overlapping vulnerabilities analyzed)	1 (1%)	19 (28%)	32 (46%)	17 (25%)	69

Key patterns: Domain 4 reveals the most notable quality gaps in the corpus. Intersectionality is by far the weakest criterion: 84% of documents score 1 or 2, and only two documents achieve a score of 4. Homelessness analysis is also weak: more than half of documents score 1 or 2, with the 1-score documents reflecting either explicit dismissal of homelessness as a local issue or no treatment of the topic. Indigenous peoples analysis is twofold. A small number of documents engage with Indigenous housing substantively, while the majority treat it as a demographic identification exercise. Priority group identification is the strongest criterion in this domain, though community-specific evidence (as opposed to national statistics) is present in fewer than two-thirds of documents that score 3 or above.

4.5 Domain 5: Community Engagement Quality

Criterion	Score 4	Score 3	Score 2	Score 1	Total Scored
5a. Breadth of engagement (methods, populations reached)	11 (16%)	34 (49%)	13 (19%)	11 (16%)	69
5b. Lived experience inclusion (population-appropriate engagement — direct or trauma-informed indirect; findings attributed to affected population)	4 (6%)	24 (35%)	25 (36%)	16 (23%)	69
5c. Integration of engagement into findings (traceable connections)	9 (13%)	26 (38%)	21 (30%)	13 (19%)	69
5d. Indigenous-specific engagement (distinct process, documented outcomes)	3 (4%)	8 (12%)	13 (19%)	45 (65%)	69

Key patterns: Domain 5 is the weakest domain in the corpus overall, driven primarily by the pervasive gaps in purposeful lived experience engagement and Indigenous-specific engagement. Nearly half of all documents score 1 on Indigenous-specific engagement. Meaning, no distinct engagement process for Indigenous peoples is documented. The majority score 1 or 2 on lived experience inclusion. Lower scores in this criterion reflect not the use of service providers as intermediaries (which is appropriate and often preferable for trauma-affected populations) but the absence of any deliberate design to capture the housing experiences of the populations most affected by housing conditions. Documents that score poorly treat general stakeholder

consultation as equivalent to engagement with vulnerable populations; documents that score well demonstrate intentional design, whether through direct participation, trauma-informed intermediary engagement, or structured use of service provider knowledge with findings attributed to the client population. Engagement breadth is more variable: documents with genuine community survey or multi-method engagement processes cluster at 3 or 4, while documents relying entirely on secondary data or internal staff consultation cluster at 1. Integration of engagement findings is the second-weakest criterion: even where engagement occurs, findings are frequently siloed in a separate appendix rather than integrated into the analytical sections of the report.

4.6 Domain 6: Recommendations and Actionability

Criterion	Score 4	Score 3	Score 2	Score 1	Total Scored
6a. Grounding in evidence (recommendations traceable to documented needs)	8 (12%)	48 (70%)	12 (17%)	1 (1%)	69
6b. Specificity (unit targets, responsible parties, timelines)	3 (4%)	35 (51%)	27 (39%)	4 (6%)	69
6c. Spectrum coverage (emergency to market ownership)	11 (16%)	41 (59%)	14 (20%)	3 (4%)	69
6d. Implementation feasibility (responsible parties, constraints acknowledged)	3 (4%)	41 (59%)	19 (28%)	6 (9%)	69

Key patterns: Grounding in evidence is the strongest criterion in this domain. Most documents make at least a functional attempt to connect recommendations to identified needs. Specificity is the weakest, with 58% of documents scoring 1 or 2, though this requires careful interpretation: an HNA that defers implementation detail to a named, upcoming Housing Strategy is doing the right thing, and should not be penalized for appropriate scope discipline. The concern is documents that provide neither implementation detail nor a defined connection to a follow-on process, leaving findings with no institutional pathway to action. Implementation feasibility scores are variable: documents that explicitly acknowledge jurisdictional scope (distinguishing what the community can do independently from what requires senior government or non-profit partnership) consistently score higher, regardless of whether they carry full implementation detail. Spectrum coverage is adequate in most documents, reflecting the widespread adoption of housing continuum frameworks as an organizing structure for recommendations.

5 COMMON GAPS IN CURRENT CANADIAN HNA PRACTICE

The following gaps appear with high frequency across the 69 reviewed documents. They are presented not to criticize any particular community's work, but to identify the areas where best practice guidance, including this supplement and the corresponding templates, should focus practitioners' attention. Addressing these gaps is where the greatest potential for improvement in Canadian HNA practice lies.

5.1 Gap 1: Indigenous-Specific Engagement

Indigenous peoples are identified as a priority population in virtually every reviewed HNA, and CHN rates for Indigenous households are increasingly reported on. However, the engagement process that accompanies this data analysis rarely goes beyond including an Indigenous organization as one stakeholder among many in a general consultation. A land acknowledgment combined with stakeholder list inclusion is the most common pattern. It does not constitute Indigenous-specific engagement.

What distinguishes exemplary practice is the design of a separate, culturally appropriate engagement process that is conducted with and by Indigenous peoples and not adapted from standard public consultation templates, and the honest documentation of what that process produced, including when engagement attempts were declined or limited. The barrier is rarely most often absence of pre-existing relationships and the absence of institutional expectation that such engagement is required.

5.2 Gap 2: Lived Experience Inclusion

The most common pattern in the reviewed corpus is engagement that defaults to whichever stakeholders are easiest to reach (e.g., housing sector professionals, real estate organizations, and community agency staff) with limited design to capture the perspectives of people whose housing situations the assessment is meant to describe. This is distinct from the appropriate use of service providers as intermediaries for vulnerable populations, which is a legitimate and often preferable approach.

For populations where direct participation in standard consultation formats would be inappropriate or harmful (e.g., people experiencing homelessness, survivors of domestic violence, individuals with complex mental health or addiction histories) engagement through trusted service providers is the ideal approach. Trauma-informed consultation, conducted through trusted intermediaries, is best practice for these populations and should be recognized as such. What distinguishes this from inadequate engagement is intentionality: service providers should be asked specific, structured questions about their clients' housing experiences, not simply invited to a general stakeholder workshop and consulted about their organizational priorities.

5.3 Gap 3: Intersectional Analysis

The reviewed corpus consistently treats priority populations as discrete categories. Seniors are analyzed. Indigenous peoples are analyzed. People with disabilities are analyzed. The compounding effects of belonging to more than one of these categories simultaneously (which is the lived reality for many of the people facing the most acute housing insecurity) are not often analyzed. HART data enables cross-tabulation of CHN rates by tenure and household type, which provides a starting point for intersectional analysis. Going further requires analytical intentionality: identifying which combinations of vulnerability are particularly prevalent in the community and examining how they interact.

5.4 Gap 4: Disconnection from a Follow-On Strategy Process

A Housing Needs Assessment is a problem identification document. Its purpose is to establish what housing challenges exist, for whom, and at what scale. The translation of those findings into assigned responsibilities, funded commitments, and monitored timelines is the work of a Housing Strategy or Action Plan, a distinct document that should follow the HNA. Expecting an HNA to carry both functions conflates two different types of planning work, and holding HNAs to an implementation standard that belongs in a strategy is an unfair test.

The genuine gap identified in the reviewed corpus is not that HNAs lack implementation detail. It is that many HNAs are produced without any defined connection to a follow-on process. Where an HNA is commissioned, completed, and filed without a committed pathway to a Housing Strategy, its findings have no institutional mechanism for translation into action, regardless of their analytical quality. The documents in the corpus that perform best on Domain 6 are those that name the strategy or action plan they are designed to inform, describe how findings will feed into that process, and identify a timeline for that next step.

Where no follow-on strategy is planned or committed, an HNA should at minimum provide directional specificity, such as unit targets drawn from projection data, a jurisdictional map of which recommendations fall within municipal authority versus which require senior government partnership, and a proposal for when and how a strategy process will be initiated (if applicable).

5.5 Gap 5: Homelessness Treatment

A considerable share of the reviewed HNAs treat homelessness as either absent from the community or as a minor concern not warranting systematic analysis, without demonstrating that this conclusion has been tested. This pattern is particularly common in suburban and smaller urban communities where formal shelter infrastructure is limited. The absence of a Point-in-Time count or a shelter system does not mean homelessness is absent. It may mean it is hidden in doubled-up living situations, temporary stays with friends and family, or precarious secondary rental housing. A best-practice HNA investigates homelessness using all available evidence rather than defaulting to the conclusion that visible homelessness equals the extent of homelessness.

5.6 Gap 6: Data Transparency and Limitations

Most reviewed HNAs acknowledge data limitations in passing, such as a footnote about census rounding or suppression. Few dedicate a formal section to limitations and their implications for the reliability of specific findings. Surfacing limitations explicitly supports more defensible policy decisions and models intellectual honesty that builds community trust in the assessment.

6 HOW HNA QUALITY HAS CHANGED OVER TIME

The 69 reviewed HNAs span 2018 to 2025, a period of considerable policy and methodological change in Canadian housing practice. Comparing documents by year of production reveals a clear pattern of improvement in some dimensions and persistent stagnation in others.

6.1 WHAT HAS IMPROVED

6.1.1 Quantitative Methodology (Domains 1 and 3)

The most dramatic improvement in the corpus is in quantitative methodology, driven in part by the availability and adoption of the Housing Assessment Resource Tool (HART). Documents produced before approximately 2022 that do not use HART consistently score lower on criteria 1a, 3c, and 3d (quantitative sourcing, core housing need, and housing projections, respectively) because they lack a nationally standardized CHN approach and rely on informal affordability thresholds or qualitative descriptions of need. Documents produced from 2022 onward that adopt HART data almost universally achieve a score of 3 or above on criterion 3c, even when other domains remain weak.

Provincial legislative frameworks have accelerated this shift in two provinces in particular. British Columbia's mandatory Housing Needs Report (HNR) requirements (introduced in stages from 2019 onward and updated in 2024) have created a standardized floor for quantitative analysis that is visible across the BC documents in the corpus regardless of community size. HICC's federal templates have had a similar effect for communities, requiring consistent data coverage (even in smaller communities) for federal funding applications and programs.

Pre-2022 documents in the corpus that are exceptions to this pattern do so through academic or specialized consultant methodologies. These documents are generally produced by larger cities with in-house analytical capacity or through academic partnerships.

6.1.2 Recommendation Structure (Domain 6)

There is a modest improvement in recommendation quality in more recent documents, driven largely by federal program requirements. The Housing Accelerator Fund (HAF), introduced in 2022, requires applicants to identify a defined number of housing initiatives with specific policy actions. Communities completing HAF-linked HNAs from 2023 onward show consistently higher scores on criterion 6b (specificity) than HNAs produced without this external accountability requirement.

6.2 WHAT HAS NOT IMPROVED

6.2.1 Equity and Engagement (Domains 4 and 5)

Despite the overall improvement trend in quantitative domains, criteria 4b (Indigenous peoples), 4d (intersectionality), 5b (lived experience inclusion), and 5d (Indigenous-specific engagement) show little improvement across the time period reviewed. Documents produced in 2024–2025 are no more likely to conduct genuine Indigenous-specific engagement, document lived experience directly, or analyze intersecting vulnerabilities than documents produced in 2018–2019. The pattern is consistent across provinces and community sizes.

This stagnation is notable because it is not explained by resource constraints or data availability. For instance, the same HART data that enables disaggregated CHN analysis by priority population also enables intersectional analysis, yet this step is not often taken regardless of year (though analyzing this intersectionality does require using raw data in a way that may not be

accessible for many people or communities). Indigenous engagement practices have not improved despite the growing prominence of reconciliation language in HNA documents. Land acknowledgments are more common while substantive engagement processes are not.

6.2.2 The HNA–Strategy Relationship (Domain 6)

Domain 6 scores have improved modestly over the period reviewed, in part because of HAF requirements that pushed communities to identify specific housing initiatives. However, the more meaningful trend is a growing recognition (visible in more recent documents) that the HNA's role is problem identification, and that implementation accountability most often belongs in the Housing Strategy that follows. More recent HNAs are somewhat more likely to explicitly name the strategy process they are designed to inform and to frame their recommendations as inputs to that process rather than as standalone commitments. This is appropriate, and represents a maturing understanding of how these two documents relate to each other. The remaining gap is not that HNAs lack implementation detail; it is that too many are still produced without any committed connection to a follow-on strategy, leaving their findings with no clear institutional pathway to action.

6.3 IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS

Three practical conclusions follow from this temporal analysis:

- **Using HART is the single highest-leverage methodological improvement available to communities that have not yet adopted it**
The quality gap between pre- and post-HART documents is larger and more consistent than any other single methodological factor. Communities still relying on traditional CHN or affordability thresholds should treat HART adoption as a priority, not an enhancement.
- **External accountability requirements are effective at raising specific practice floors**
HAF requirements improved recommendation specificity. BC's legislative HNR requirements improved quantitative methodology. Provincial and federal policy frameworks that introduce minimum equity and engagement expectations (not just data requirements) are likely to produce similar improvements in Domains 4 and 5.
- **Template compliance is necessary but not sufficient**
Documents that comply with the federal HNA template or provincial equivalents consistently outperform non-template documents on quantitative criteria. However, compliance-oriented documents show the same persistent weaknesses in equity and engagement as non-template documents. The template sets a floor; this supplement is intended to describe what lies above it.

7 WHEN DATA DOES NOT EXIST: STRATEGIES FOR DATA GAPS

A common and legitimate concern in HNA production is the absence of data for specific populations, geographies, or conditions. Small communities face suppression and lack CMHC rental market coverage. Indigenous communities on reserve have historically incomplete census data. Communities without a Point-in-Time count program have no direct homelessness enumeration. The temptation in each of these situations is to omit the relevant analysis or to note the limitation briefly and move on.

This section describes practical strategies for each common data gap scenario. The goal is not to manufacture evidence where none exists, but to ensure that analytical gaps are addressed honestly and, where possible, through defensible alternatives. A gap acknowledged with a clear explanation and a proxy analysis is substantially more useful for policy than a gap that is simply absent from the document.

7.1 CENSUS DATA SUPPRESSION IN SMALL COMMUNITIES

Statistics Canada suppresses data in small geographic areas where cell sizes fall below the minimum disclosure threshold, typically five to ten people or households. This is most common in rural municipalities, small northern communities, and specific demographic sub-groups in any community.

7.1.1 Strategies

- **Use a higher geography as a proxy with explicit caveats**
Where local data is suppressed, regional or provincial data can provide a directional estimate, clearly labelled as a proxy. The HNA should note that the proxy may over- or under-represent local conditions and explain the direction of likely bias.
- **Supplement with administrative data**
Where municipal, provincial, or territorial program records exist (e.g., housing waitlists, income assistance caseloads, social services records), they can substitute for suppressed census data. The data source and its limitations should be explicitly described.
- **Document the suppression transparently**
The HNA should name which specific data is suppressed, explain what this means for the reliability of specific findings, and note that the HNA will be updated when data becomes available.

7.2 ABSENCE OF CMHC RENTAL MARKET DATA

CMHC's Rental Market Survey covers purpose-built rental buildings with three or more units in communities with populations typically above 10,000. Smaller communities, northern communities, and communities where the rental market is dominated by secondary units (basement suites, single-family homes rented out by individual owners) are not covered. In practice, this means that many of the communities with the tightest and most precarious rental markets (e.g., small resource towns, northern communities, rural municipalities with growing agricultural workforces) have no rental market data.

7.2.1 Strategies

- **Calculate secondary market scale from census and CMHC data**

By comparing total renter households from the census to purpose-built primary market units from CMHC, an estimate of secondary market scale can be derived. This figure should be presented with its derivation explained and its limitations acknowledged (the census count includes both primary and secondary renters; the CMHC count may exclude some primary market buildings).

- **Use real estate listing platforms as a proxy for asking rents**

Platforms such as Rentals.ca, Kijiji, or local real estate board data can provide current asking rent data in communities not covered by CMHC. These sources capture advertised rents, not average rents across the full stock, and tend to be higher than CMHC averages, a limitation that should be disclosed.

- **Use provincial or territorial housing corporation data**

In northern communities, Housing NWT, the Yukon Housing Corporation, and equivalent provincial bodies maintain program data on rental rates, vacancy, and waitlists for their housing stock. While this data covers only the non-market portion of the rental market, it provides direct evidence of demand and affordability conditions that CMHC data cannot supply.

- **Conduct a direct rental inventory**

In very small communities where the total rental stock is limited, direct enumeration (e.g., contacting known landlords, surveying online listings, and cross-referencing municipal fire inspection records) can produce a usable rental inventory. Watson Lake, Yukon (2020) and several NWT documents use this approach effectively. The Municipality of the District of Lunenburg, Nova Scotia (2025) recently performed a rental market survey in partnership with neighbour communities.

7.3 INDIGENOUS COMMUNITY DATA

Census coverage in Indigenous communities on reserve has historically been incomplete. Some of these communities have the most acute housing conditions. This is the among the most sensitive data gaps in HNA production and requires careful treatment.

7.3.1 Strategies

- **Acknowledge the undercount explicitly and estimate its direction**

The HNA should state that Indigenous CHN data likely understates actual need, explain why (census non-response and incompleteness on reserve), and note that Indigenous housing need should be treated as a lower bound rather than an estimate. This framing is more honest and more useful for policy than presenting figures as if they were complete.

- **Seek First Nation housing needs data directly**

Many First Nations maintain their own housing waitlists, needs assessments, and capital plans. Engaging with the relevant First Nation government and requesting permission to reference their data (with appropriate attribution and community control over how it is presented) can substantially improve the Indigenous housing analysis. Hay River, Northwest Territories (2022) references the Kátł'odeeche First Nation's own housing plan as a coordination mechanism, providing a model for this approach.

- **Use Indigenous organization engagement as a qualitative data source**
Where quantitative data is absent or incomplete, structured engagement with Indigenous housing organizations, friendship centres, and on-reserve housing managers can produce qualitative evidence of housing conditions, needs, and barriers. This evidence should be attributed with the organization's permission and presented as qualitative rather than statistical, but it is substantially more informative than the alternative of noting the data gap and proceeding without Indigenous housing content.
- **Apply the Indigenous Definition of Homelessness as an analytical frame**
Where census and CMHC data systematically undercounts Indigenous housing need, the Indigenous definition provides an alternative analytical lens that is not data-dependent in the same way. Framing consultation around cultural, spiritual, and emotional dimensions of housing enables meaningful Indigenous housing discussions, even where statistical coverage is incomplete.

7.4 ABSENCE OF HOMELESSNESS ENUMERATION DATA

Many communities (particularly, smaller municipalities, rural areas, and communities without a dedicated shelter system) do not have a Point-in-Time count or By-Name List. The absence of formal enumeration data does not mean homelessness is absent. It means it is less visible.

7.4.1 Strategies

- **Survey service providers systematically**
Social service organizations, food banks, health centres, addiction services, and emergency shelters (where they exist) all have direct contact with people experiencing housing instability. Structured key informant interviews with these organizations can produce qualitative estimates of scale, descriptions of dominant causes, and identification of the most acute gaps in the service system. This is not equivalent to PiT count data, but it is substantially better than assuming homelessness is absent. Where service providers do not exist locally, those in adjacent communities may also provide useful insights. Regardless of who, it is important to be wary of over consultation, especially among stakeholders who shoulder several responsibilities in an under resourced environment.
- **Use shelter system data where available**
Where the community has an emergency shelter, even a small one, occupancy data, length-of-stay data, and intake demographic data provide direct evidence of homelessness scale and composition. This data is typically held by the shelter operator and can be requested with permission.
- **Reference regional or county-level PiT data with explicit geographic caveats**
Where a regional PiT count covers the broader area but not the specific community, regional data can provide a directional estimate of local conditions, provided the HNA explicitly notes that regional rates may not reflect local conditions and explains the direction of likely bias.
- **Apply the hidden homelessness concept explicitly**
In communities without formal shelter infrastructure, people experiencing homelessness typically stay with friends or family (couch-surfing), in overcrowded dwellings, in vehicles, or in informal or unsafe accommodations. A best-practice HNA in this context

acknowledges the concept of hidden homelessness, notes that the absence of visible or counted homelessness is not evidence of its absence, and uses available proxy indicators (overcrowding rates from the census, social service caseloads, qualitative engagement findings) to characterize its likely scale. Kings County, Prince Edward Island (2023) provides the strongest example in the reviewed corpus of this approach applied to a rural context.

- **Acknowledge the CHN undercount as a structural limitation**

Even where PiT data is entirely absent, the HNA should note in its methodology or limitations section that Core Housing Need excludes people who are homeless, meaning the CHN figure presented elsewhere in the document does not capture the community's most housing-insecure residents. This is a factual statement that applies to every HNA using the standard CHN methodology.

7.5 SMALL COMMUNITY AND RURAL CONTEXT

Small and rural communities face a cluster of data challenges simultaneously: census suppression, no CMHC rental market coverage, limited social service infrastructure, and often no prior HNA to use as a baseline. The appropriate response is not to produce a minimal document that acknowledges limitations without attempting alternatives. It is to use the data that exists more creatively, supplement it with primary collection where feasible, and be transparent about what is known and what is not.

Several of the most contextually appropriate documents in the reviewed corpus are from small communities that could not access less traditional national datasets. Their shared characteristic is that they designed their analysis around the data they could obtain rather than around the data a larger community would have, and they were explicit about the difference. A small community HNA that is honest about its data constraints and makes the most of available alternatives is more analytically credible than one that presents incomplete national data as if it were comprehensive.

8 COMMISSIONING GUIDANCE

The quality of a Housing Needs Assessment is substantially determined before a single data table is produced. The terms of reference that define the scope of work, the questions that are asked of prospective consultants, and the evaluation criteria used to select a consultant all shape what is ultimately delivered. This section is written for government staff, elected officials, and procurement officers who are responsible for commissioning an HNA; particularly, those who may not have deep technical familiarity with housing analysis methodology.

The guidance is organized around four stages of the commissioning process: scoping, procurement, evaluation, and oversight.

8.1 STAGE 1: SCOPING (DECIDING WHAT YOUR HNA SHOULD COVER)

Before issuing a request for proposals, it is worth investing time in a scoping conversation (ideally involving housing staff, community organizations, and, where relationships exist, Indigenous partners) to answer three questions:

- **What decisions will this HNA inform?**
An HNA produced to satisfy a federal funding requirement has different scope requirements than one intended to drive a multi-year Housing Strategy. An HNA for a community in the early stages of understanding its housing needs differs from an update to a prior assessment. Clarity about the decision context shapes appropriate scope.
- **What do you already know, and what do you need to learn?**
If a previous HNA exists, a focused update may be more appropriate than a full assessment. If the community has recently conducted extensive public engagement through an Official Plan (or equivalent) review, re-running similar engagement through the HNA may be a poor use of budget.
- **What populations require particular attention?**
Every community has characteristics that make certain analytical dimensions more or less important. A community with a substantial Indigenous population should build explicit Indigenous engagement into scope from the outset, not treat it as an optional add-on. A community near a correctional facility, a post-secondary institution, or a major employer with workforce housing challenges should specify those contexts in the terms of reference.

Scoping note: be explicit about Indigenous engagement expectations

The single most common commissioning failure identified in the reviewed corpus is the omission of specific Indigenous engagement requirements from the terms of reference. Where the terms of reference do not specify a distinct Indigenous engagement process, consultants reasonably do not budget for one. The result is a land acknowledgment and a stakeholder list, not engagement. If Indigenous engagement is a priority for your community, it must be named explicitly in the scope, with a dedicated budget line.

8.2 STAGE 2: THE REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS

A well-constructed RFP signals to prospective consultants what quality means for this engagement and screens for firms with genuine HNA expertise. The following elements are recommended:

8.2.1 Required Methodology Elements

- **State that federal template data is required**
If your community may be involved in funding (or you know if local partners that may be), state that federal requirements be met is important to ensure work can be used should it be necessary.
- **Specify engagement requirements in detail**
Do not write "community engagement will be conducted." Instead specify: minimum number of engagement methods, whether a community-wide survey is required, whether engagement with people who have lived experience of housing instability is required, and whether distinct Indigenous engagement is required. Each of these specifications changes the budget and the delivery approach, and leaving them vague produces proposals that vary so widely they cannot be compared.
- **Require a limitations section**
State in the RFP that the final report must include a dedicated section identifying the limitations of the data sources used and their implications for specific findings. This is a simple requirement that has an outsized effect on analytical honesty.
- **Request that the consultant identify data gaps proactively**
Ask prospective consultants to describe, in their proposals, what data gaps they anticipate for this community and how they propose to address them. The quality of the response is a strong signal of their understanding of analytical depth.

8.3 STAGE 3: EVALUATING PROPOSALS

HNA proposals are frequently evaluated on price, which is a strong predictor of the quality gaps described in this supplement. However, many communities already provide a maximum price (reasonably so, as it must align with community-approved budgets). Whether it is predetermined or not, it is important to recognize that a \$30,000 HNA budget and a \$120,000 HNA budget are not equivalent products, and the gap in quality between them is most visible in exactly the domains that most directly affect policy (equity analysis, engagement, and actionability).

Where a specific budget is in mind, communities can ask for references or examples of work related to HNAs performed for a similar fee. An evaluation can then be specifically made for the quality of the equity section (Domain 4) and the recommendations (Domain 6). These are the sections most likely to reflect the consultant's actual analytical approach rather than their ability to compile national datasets. A strong prior sample in these sections is a better predictor of final product quality than any other single indicator.

8.4 STAGE 4: OVERSIGHT DURING DELIVERY

Commissioning an HNA does not end at contract signing. Active oversight during delivery — particularly at the engagement and draft review stages — substantially affects final quality.

- **Review the engagement plan before it is executed, not after**
If engagement is requested, ask the consultant to submit a detailed engagement plan (naming methods, target populations, recruitment approach, and tentative venues) before engagement begins. If the plan does not include direct engagement with people experiencing housing instability, or does not have a specific Indigenous engagement

component, this is the moment to require revision if applicable. It is much harder to retrofit adequate engagement after the fieldwork is complete.

- **Request an interim data memo before the draft report**

A short memo summarizing key quantitative findings (e.g., CHN rate, priority population CHN rates, rental vacancy and affordability indicators, projection methodology) allows you to identify gaps before they are embedded in a full draft. It can also be useful for other work being performed alongside an HNA (e.g., housing strategy or plan review), if applicable.

- **Require a review cycle**

Generic revision comments ("please strengthen the recommendations section") are less effective than specific ones ("the recommendations do not include unit targets or responsible parties, please revise to address this for each recommendation"). The more specific the feedback, the more specific the revision.