Community Responses to Homeless Encampments in Canada

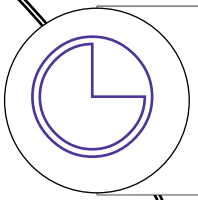
Infrastructure Canada

November 8, 2023

Agenda

- The *National Survey on Homeless Encampments*
- Current status and recent trends
- Contributors to encampment use
- Community responses
- Resources and barriers
- Successes and future strategies

Homelessness Data Sources

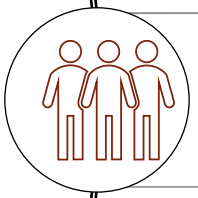


Point-in-Time Counts

- Enumeration: One-night snapshot of homelessness, counting the number of people in sheltered locations, unsheltered locations and transitional housing
- Survey: Providing information on demographics and experiences of homelessness

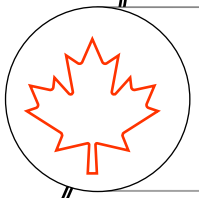
Homelessness Management Information System Data (e.g. HIFIS)

- Administrative data from homelessness services, including shelters, outreach, etc.
- Statistics on service use and on those who access them, as well as case management information



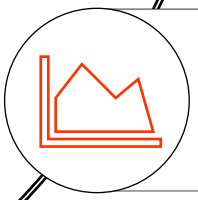
Unique Identifier List / By Name List

- Community-level "real-time" list of people who access shelter (and consent to be on the Unique Identifier List or By Name List)
- Allows for long-term tracking of inflow, outflow, and returns to homelessness



National Surveys

- Questions on homelessness in the Canadians' Safety cycle of the GSS, the Canadian Housing Survey, etc.
- Census shelter counts



Emerging Data Sources

- Research underway to identify indicators of homelessness in other data sources, such as health data (e.g. Ontario's ICES database), to add indicators of housing status to some data sources (e.g. Coroner data), and to link data sets (e.g. BC's Integrated Data Project)

Preventing and reducing homelessness: An integrated data project - Province of British Columbia (gov.bc.ca)
Getting the data on homelessness | Lawson Health Research Institute (lawsonresearch.ca)

Survey design and distribution

- Three key themes:
  1. Current status and recent trends
  2. Drivers and Contributors
  3. Local Responses

- Administered online
  - via MS Forms by INFC in October 2022
  - via PDF form by the Ministry of Health and Social Services (MSSS) in Quebec in January 2023

- 94 unique communities invited to participate in total
  - 91 Community Entity (CE) representatives from all four Reaching Home regional funding streams
  - 21 representatives from Integrated Health and Social Services Centres (CISSS/CUISSS) in Quebec

Survey responses

- Responses received from 72 communities (77% response rate)
  - 35 urban communities
  - 37 rural communities
- In total, 75 responses were received (three communities with two submissions each)

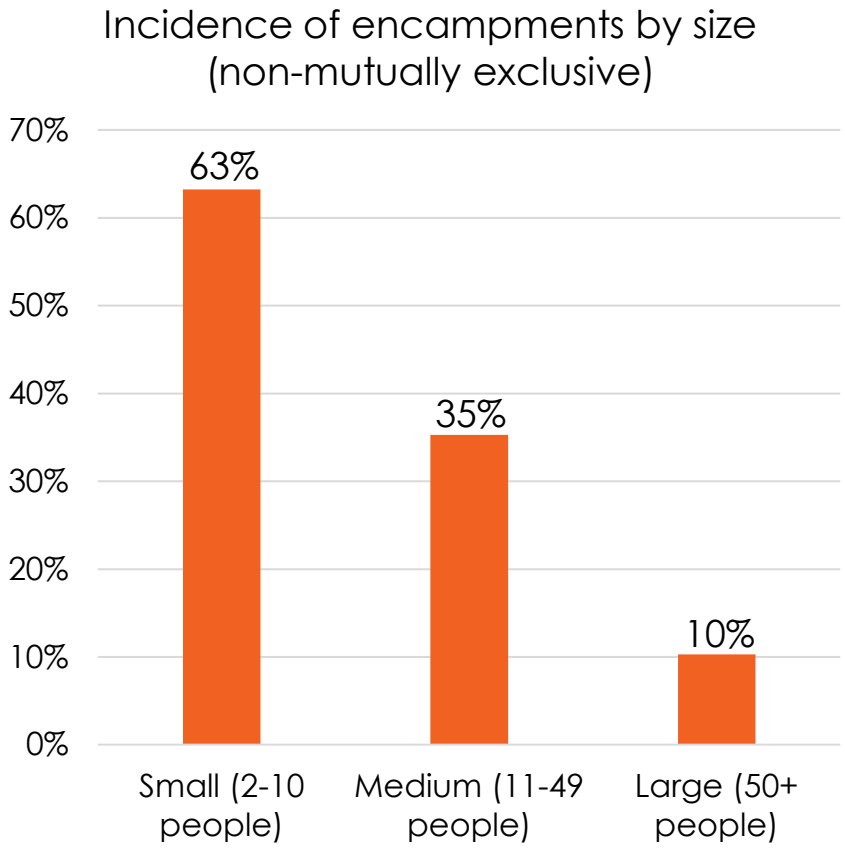
Current status and recent trends

Prevalence of encampment homelessness

- Nearly all communities (94%, or 68 out of 72) reported having homeless encampments
- Almost two thirds (61%) of respondents reported regularly tracking information regarding the number and size of encampments
- An estimated 14-23% of the population of individuals experiencing homelessness in these communities were reported to be staying in encampments

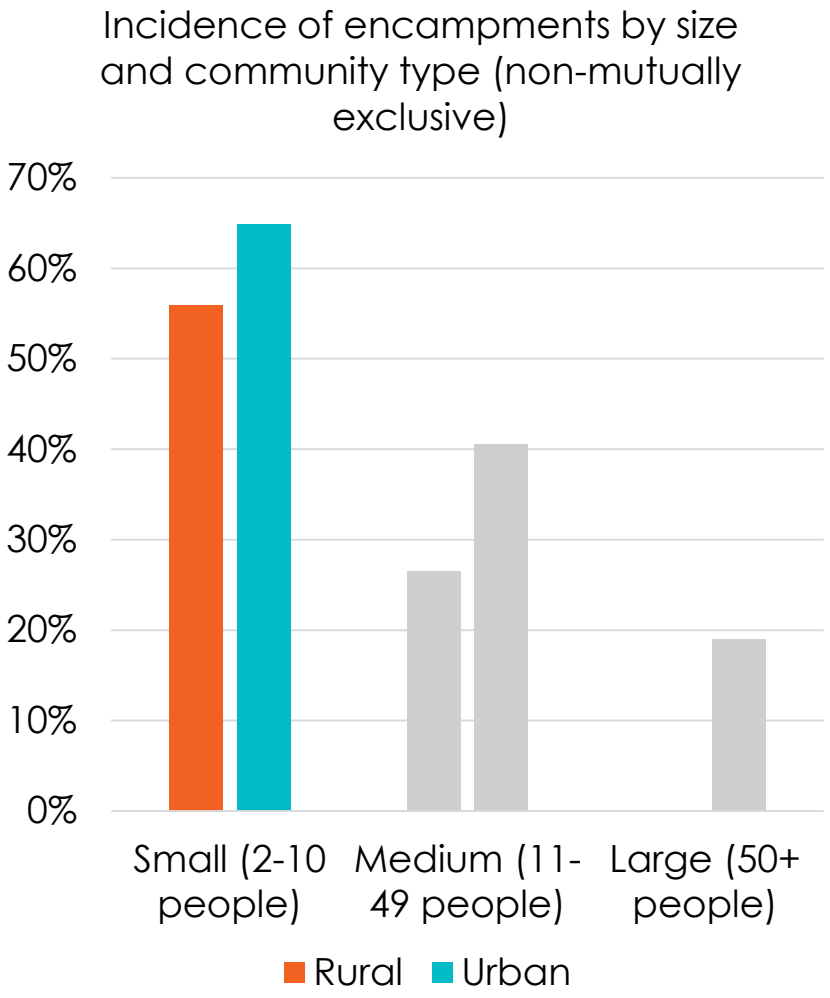
Encampment characteristics – Size

Small encampments were more common and numerous than large encampments.



Encampment size reported	Median	Range
Small (2-10 people)	10	1 to 135
Medium (11-49 people)	2	1 to 19
Large (50+ people)	1	1 to 2

Encampment characteristics – Geography



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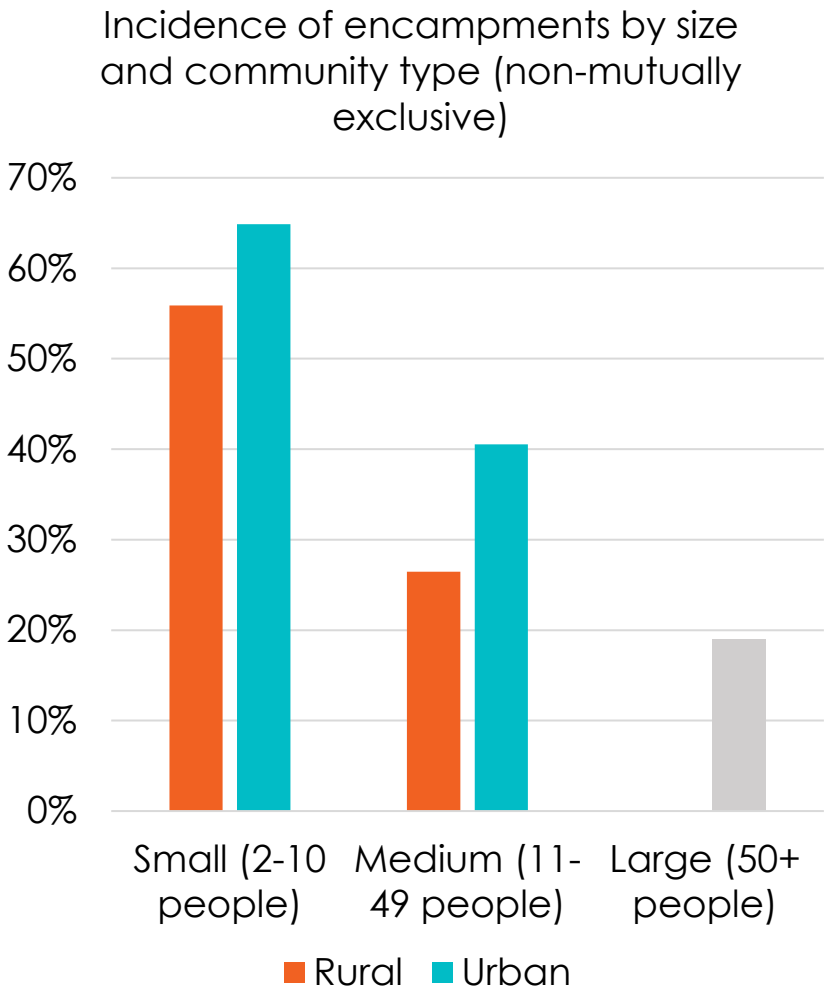
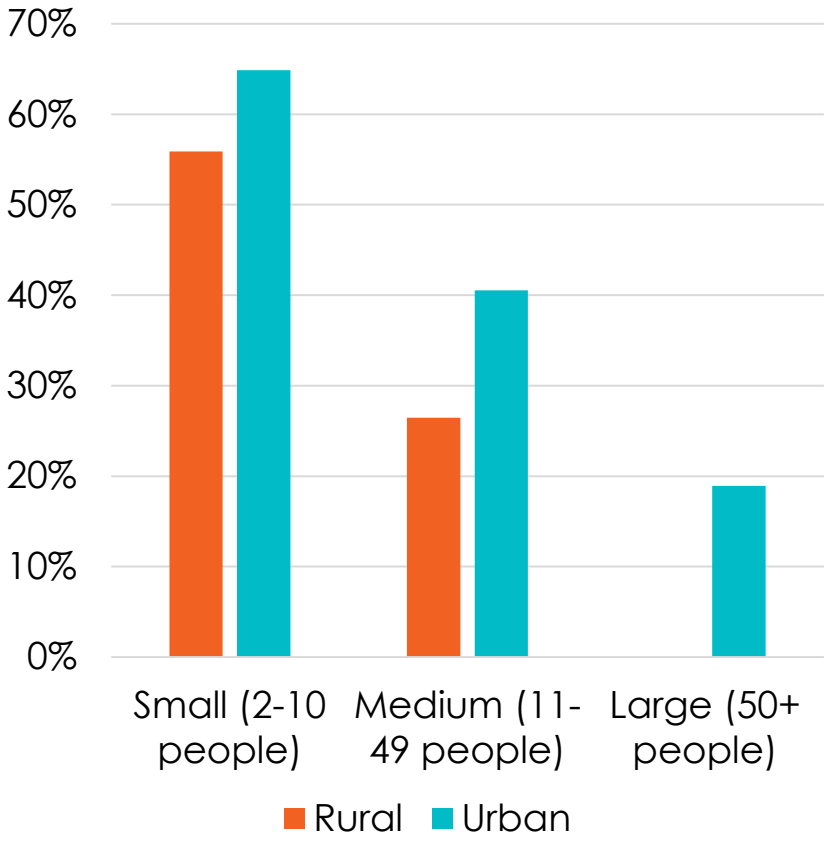


Encampment characteristics – Geography

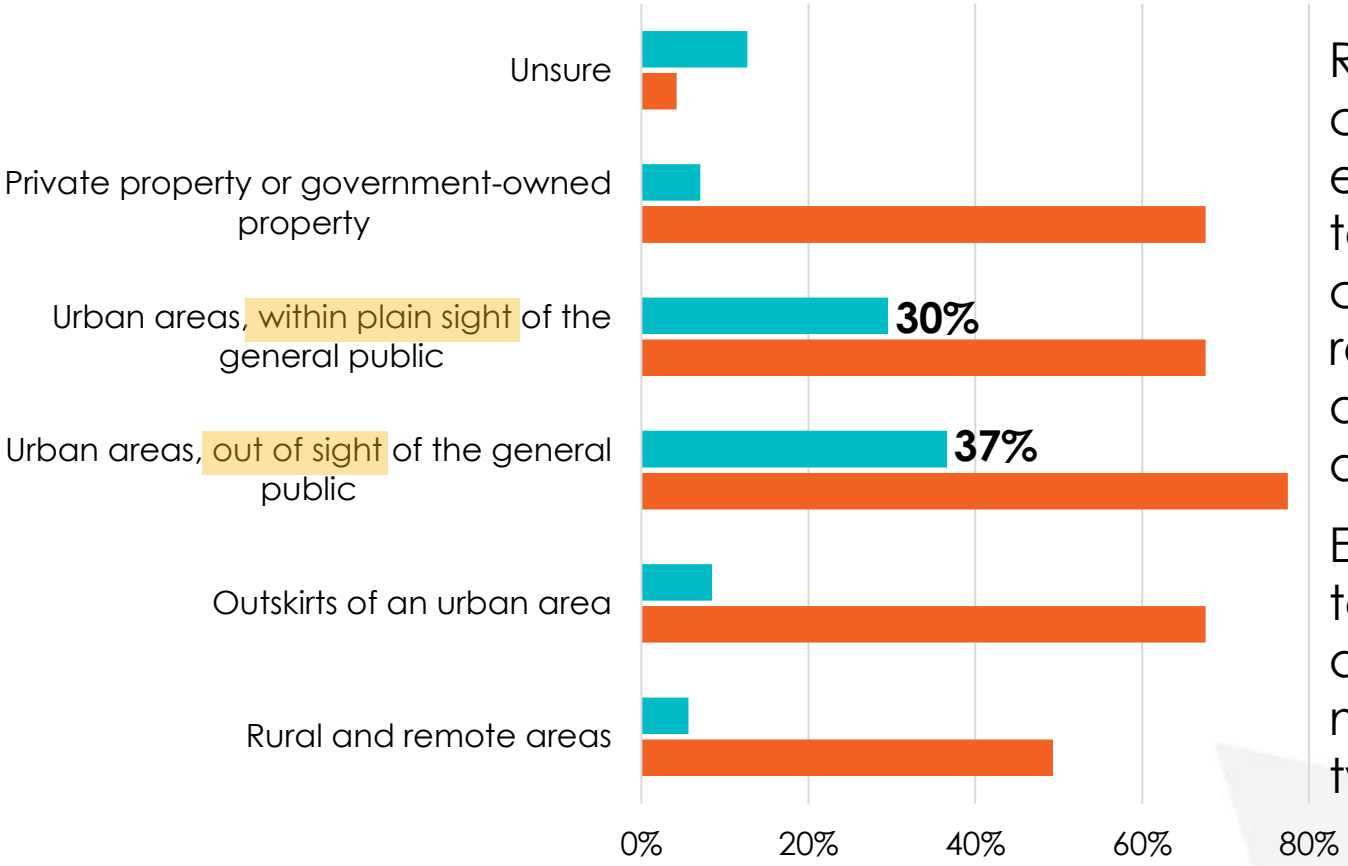
Incidence of encampments by size and community type (non-mutually exclusive)



Larger encampments were more common in urban communities, but encampment homelessness was more prevalent overall in rural communities.

	Rural	Urban
Rate of homelessness (per 1,000 people)	2.4	2.1
Encampment use (per 1,000 people)	0.57-0.79	0.29-0.48
Proportion of homelessness experienced in encampments	26-35%	13-22%

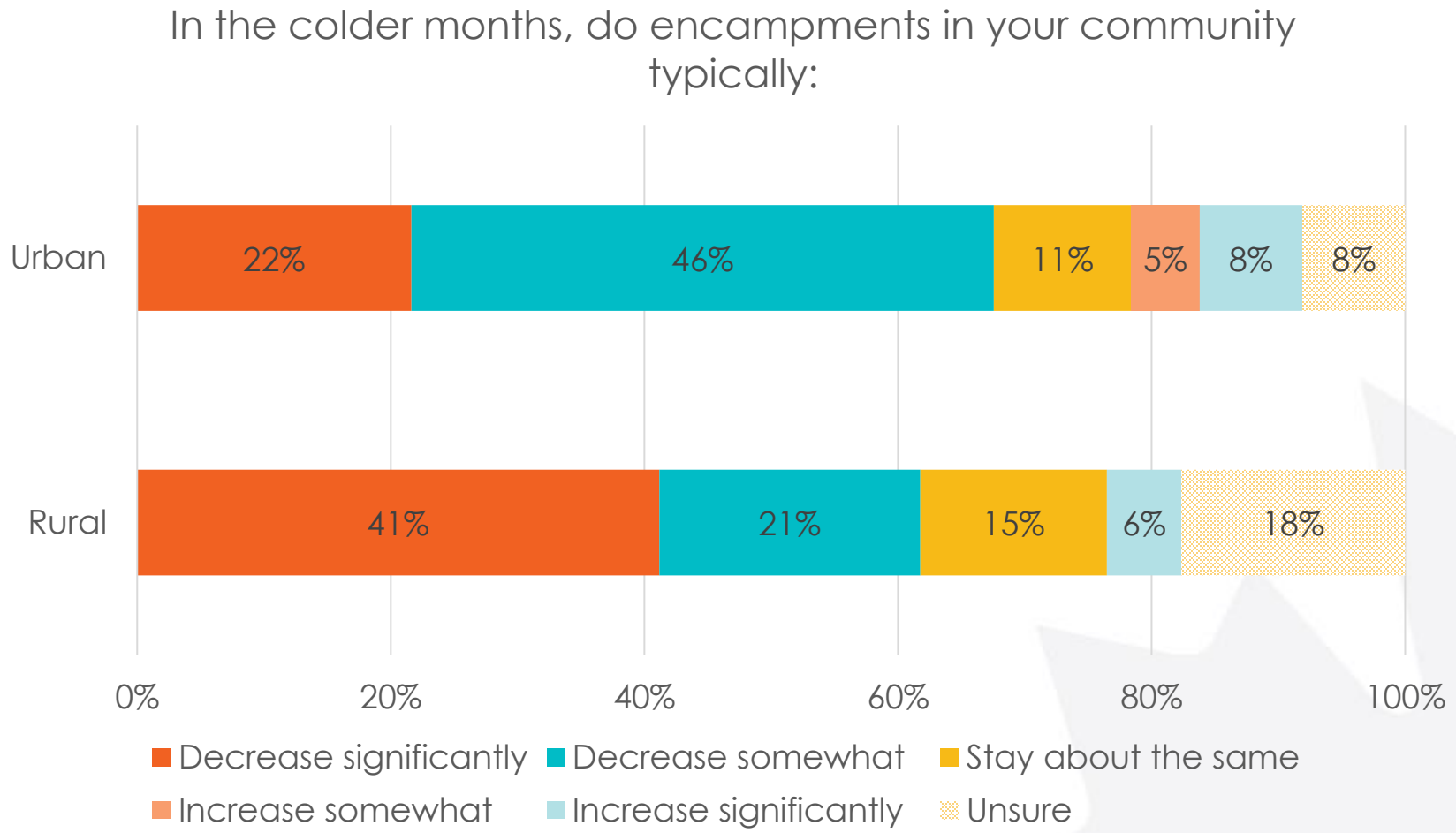
Encampment characteristics – Location



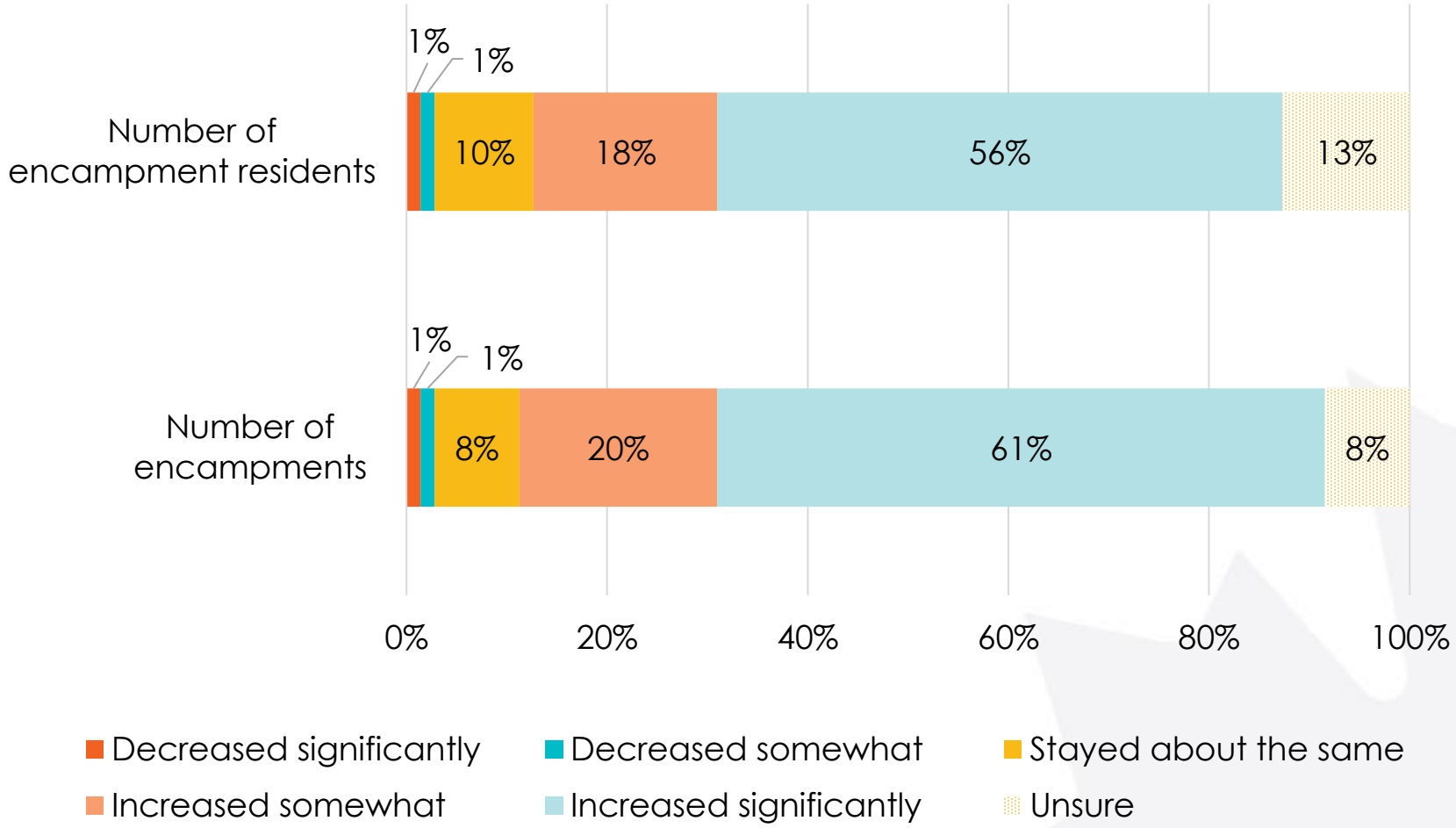
Regardless of community size, encampments tended to be concentrated in relatively central or densely populated areas.

Encampments tend to be dispersed across multiple location types.

Seasonal variations



Changes since the pandemic



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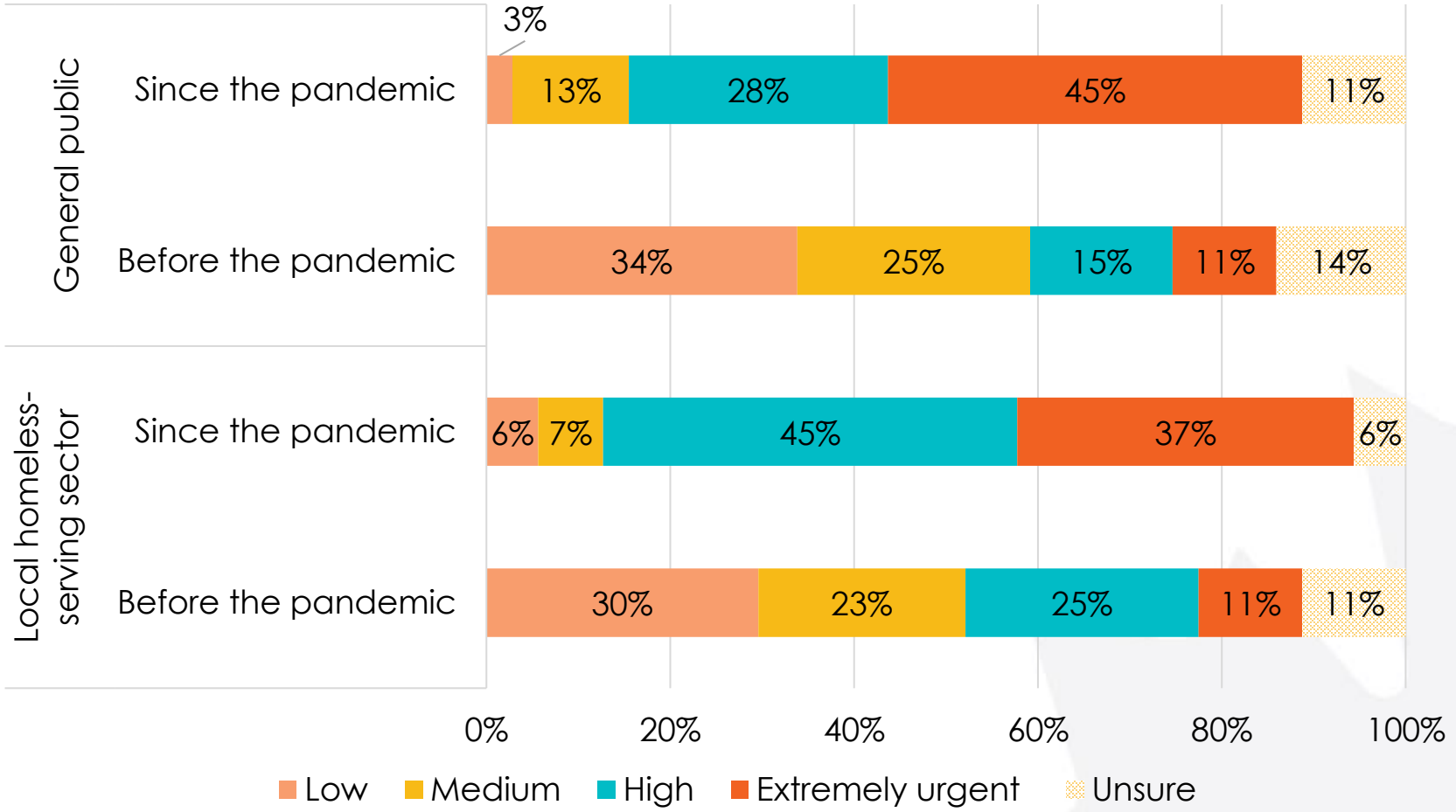
Encampment homelessness as a community priority



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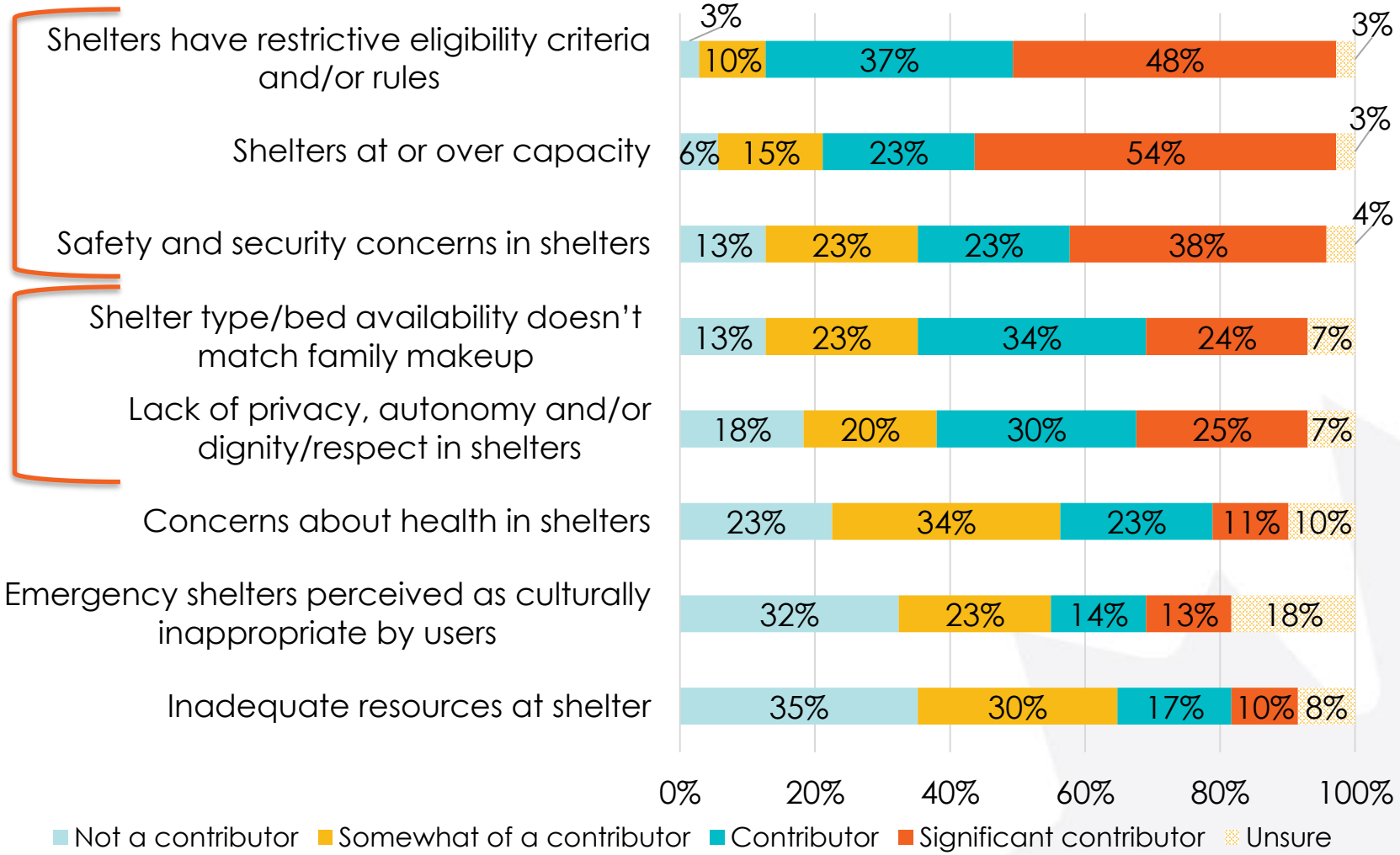
Contributors to encampment use

Drivers of encampment use rather than shelter use



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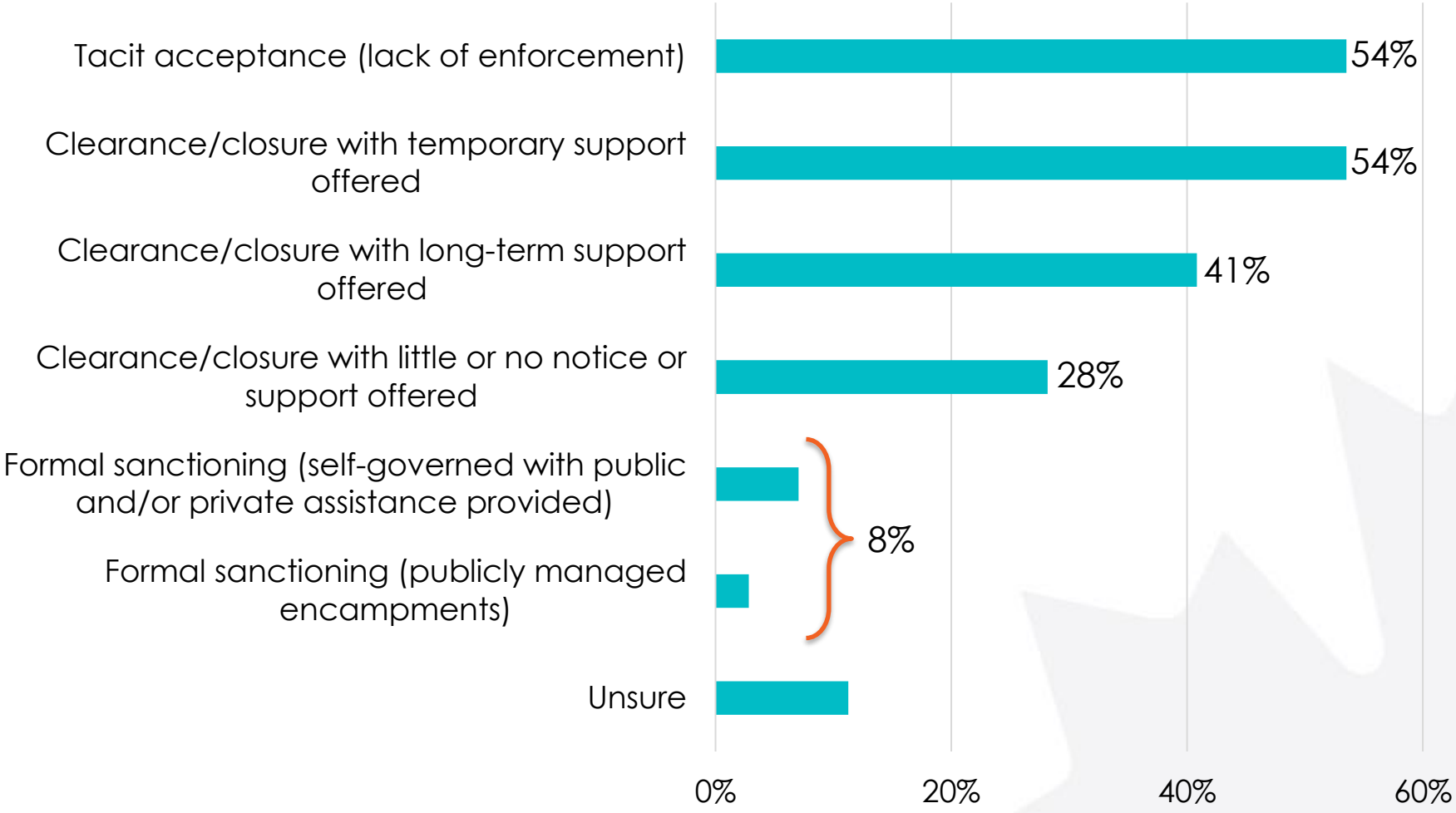
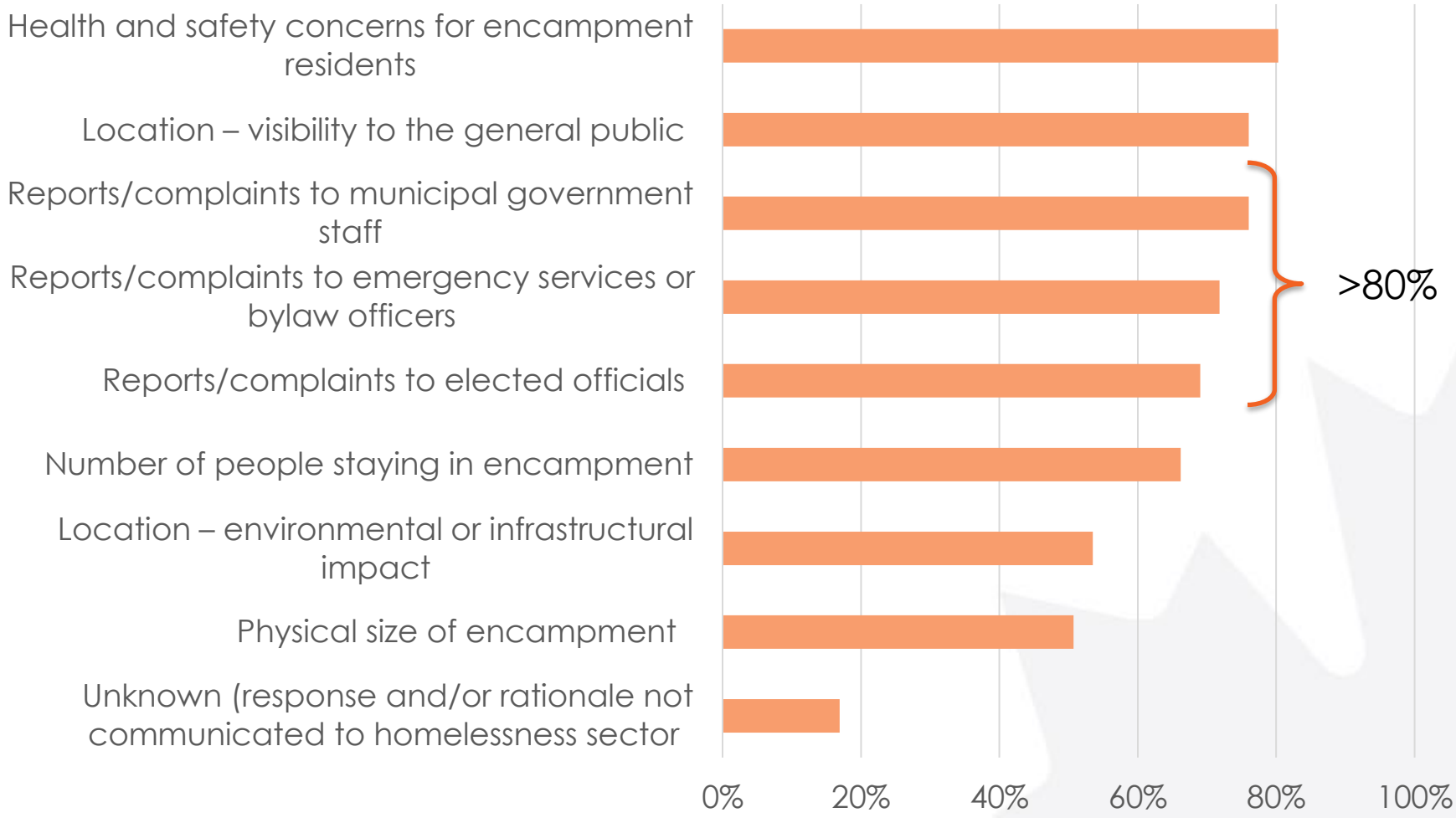
Community Responses

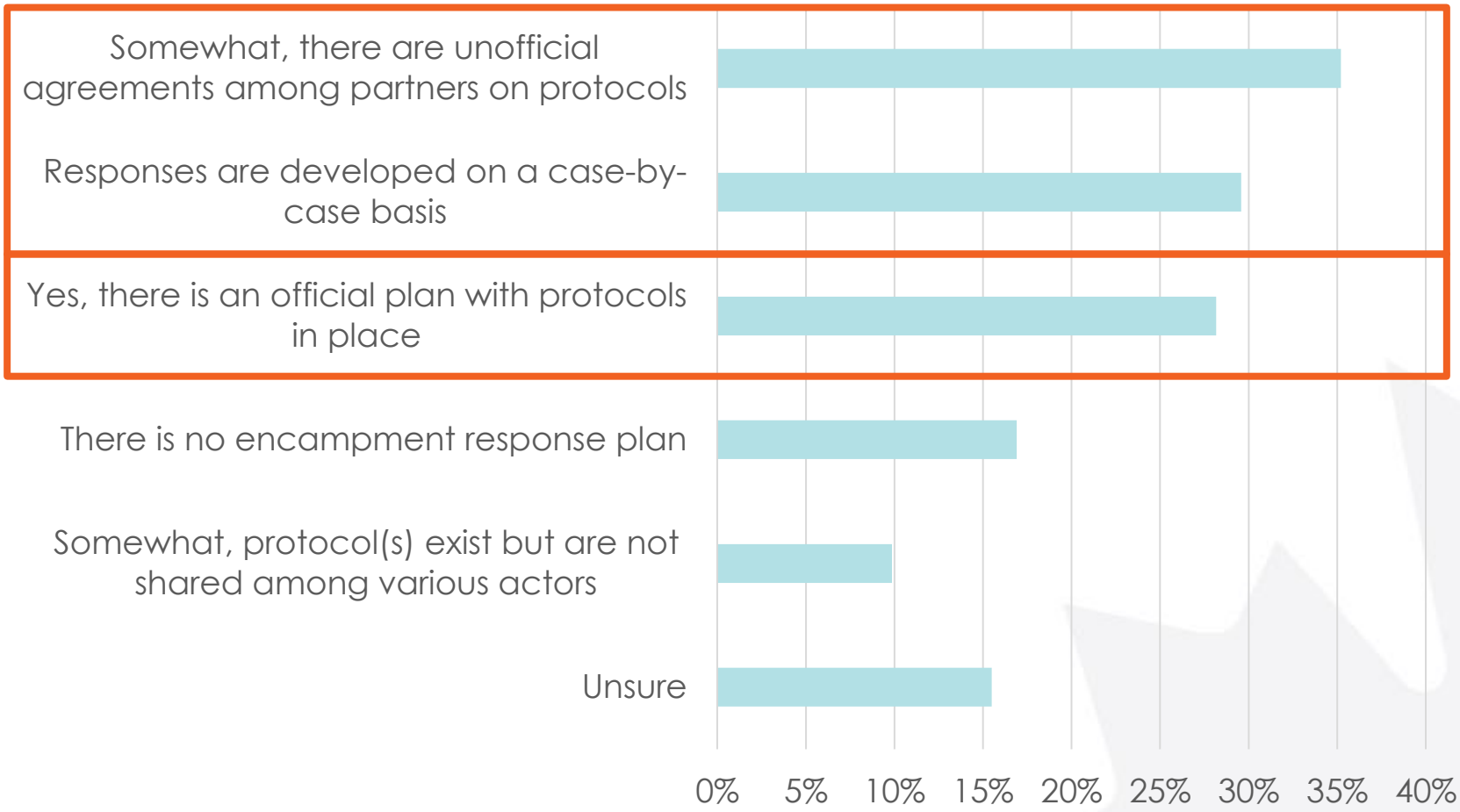
Types of community responses



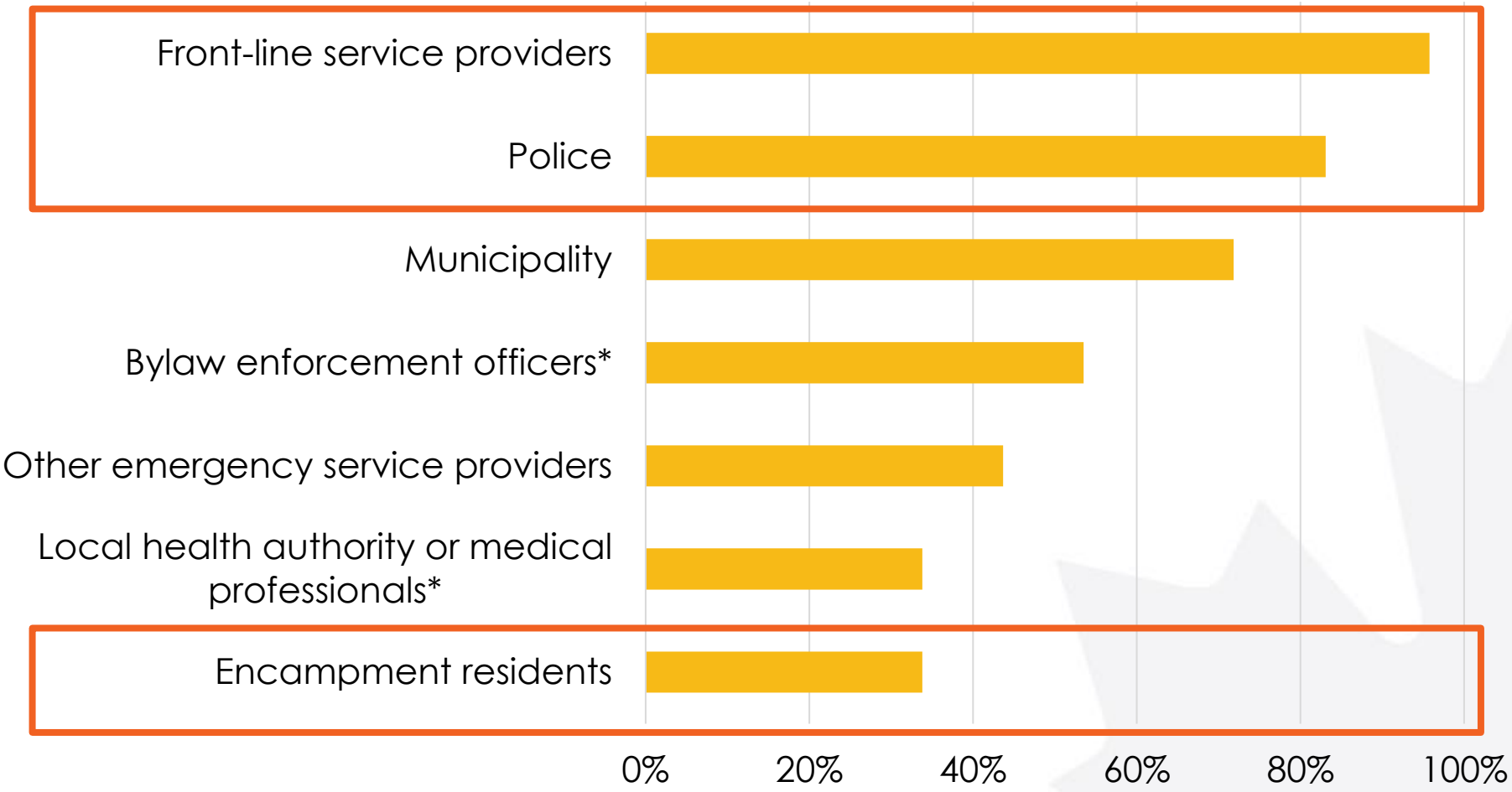
Factors influencing community response



Existence of community response plans

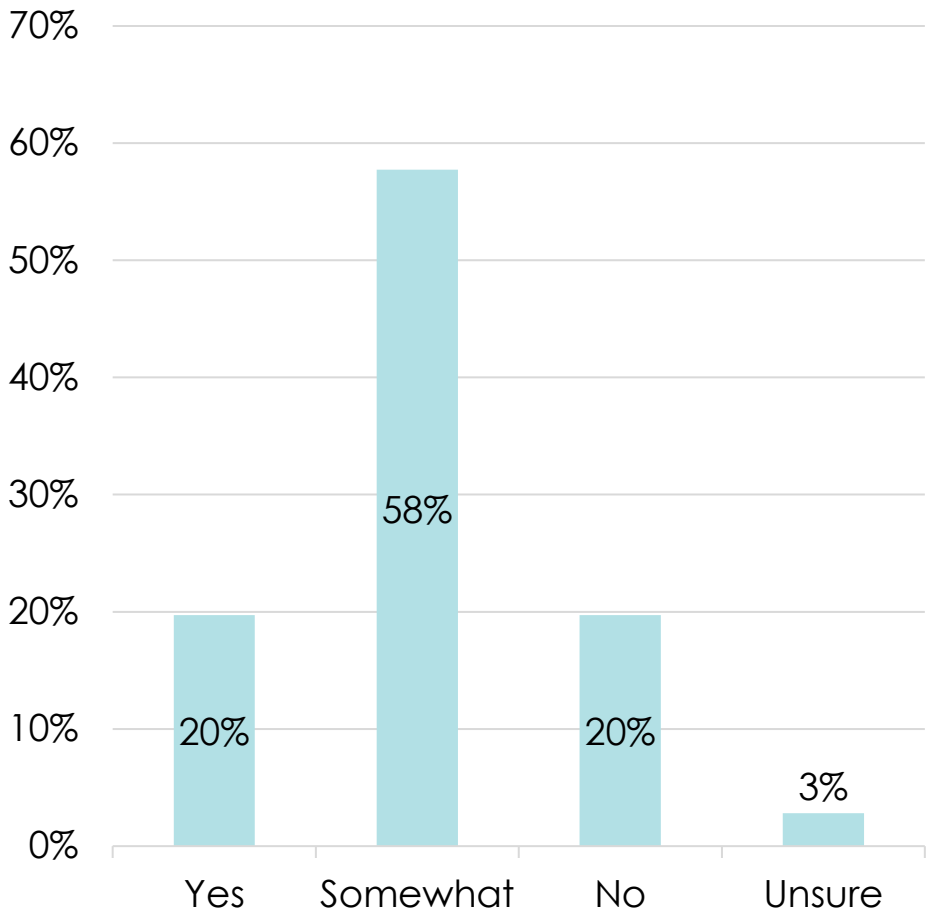


Actors involved in community responses



*Options not included in QC survey.

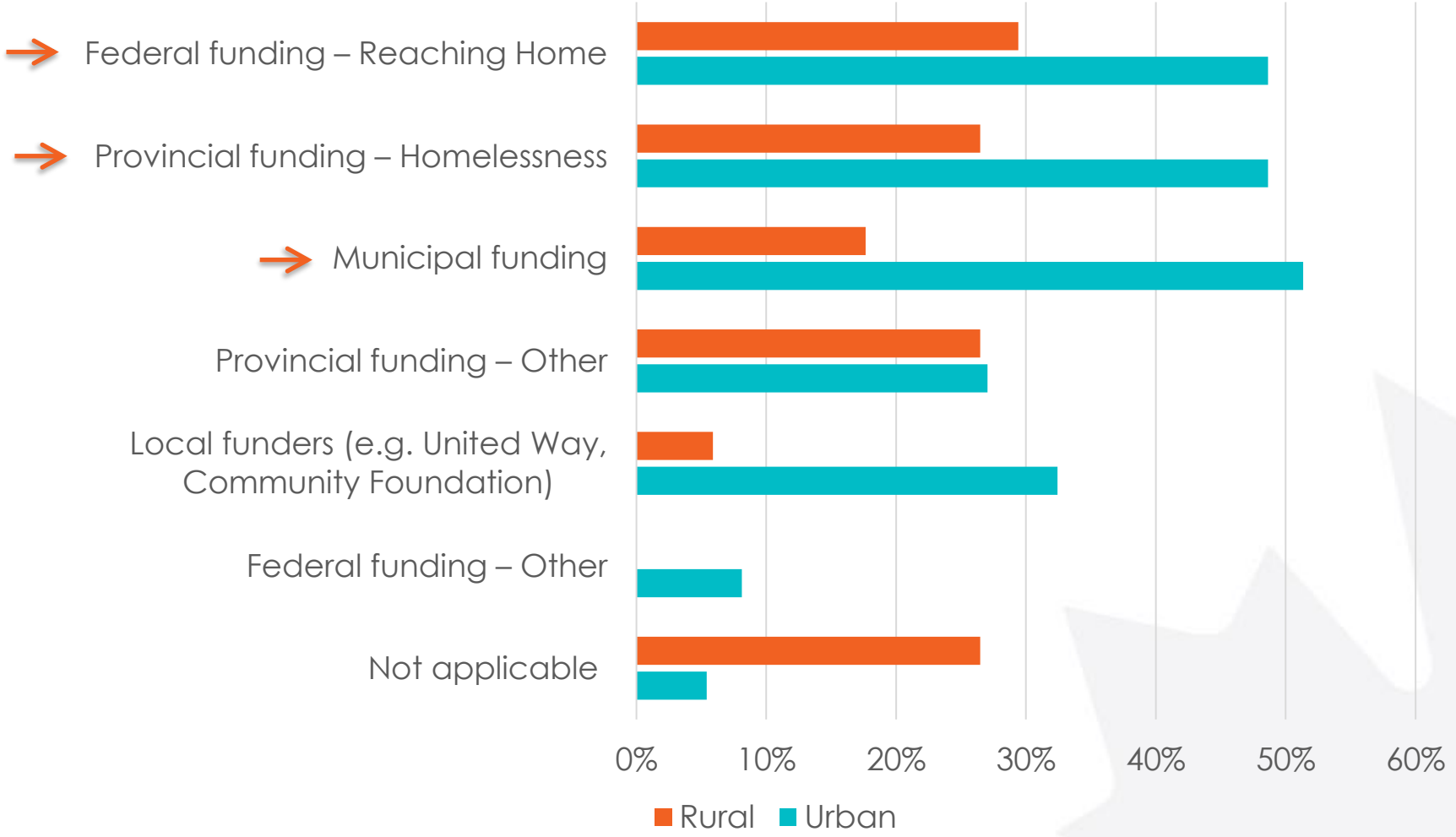
On-site or on-call services and facilities



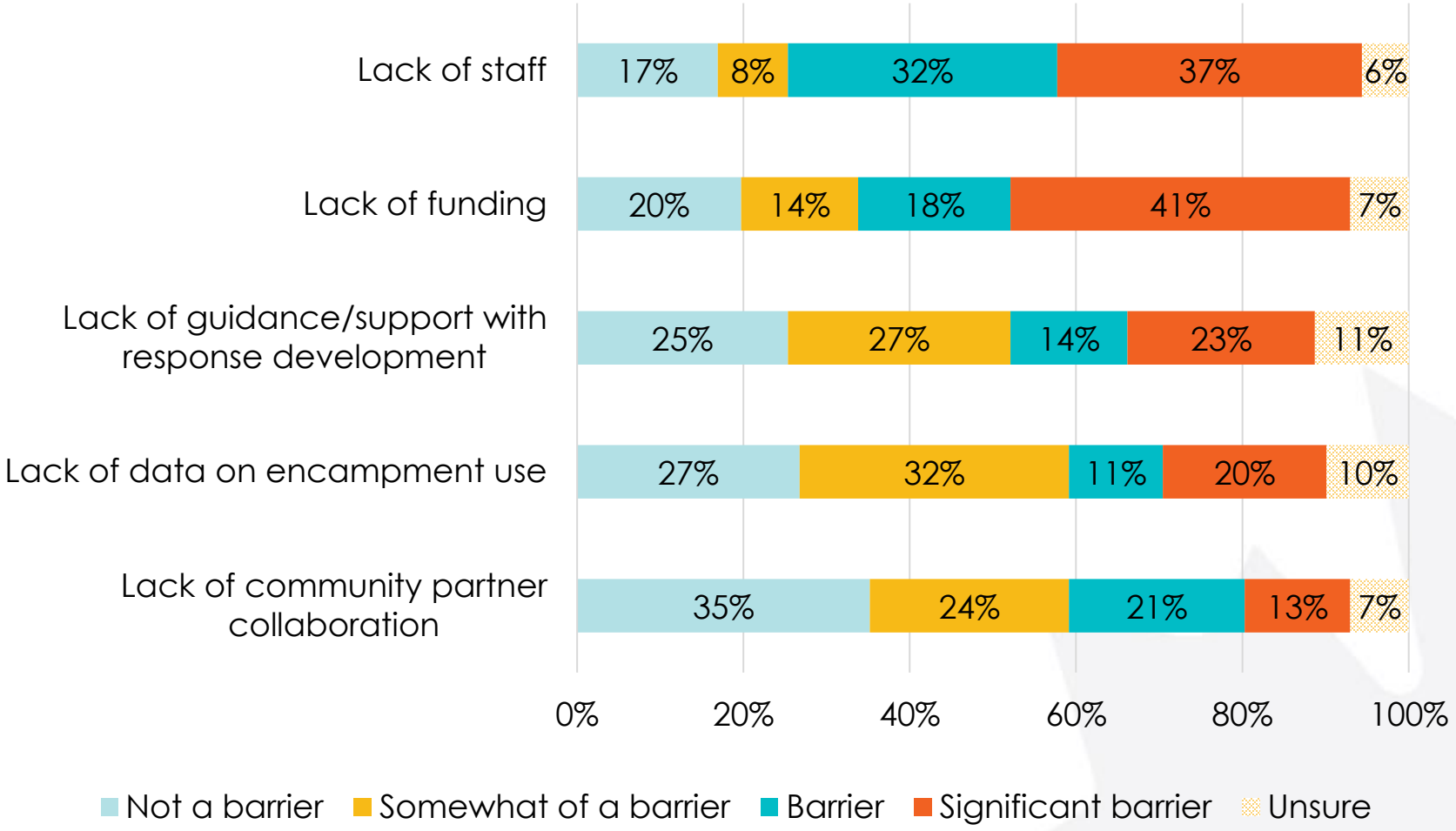
- Mental/physical healthcare
- Storage
- Food service
- Potable water
- Sanitation and hygiene services
- Pest control
- Solid waste disposal
- Etc.

Resources and barriers

Funding sources



Barriers to addressing encampment use



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Barriers – respondent comments

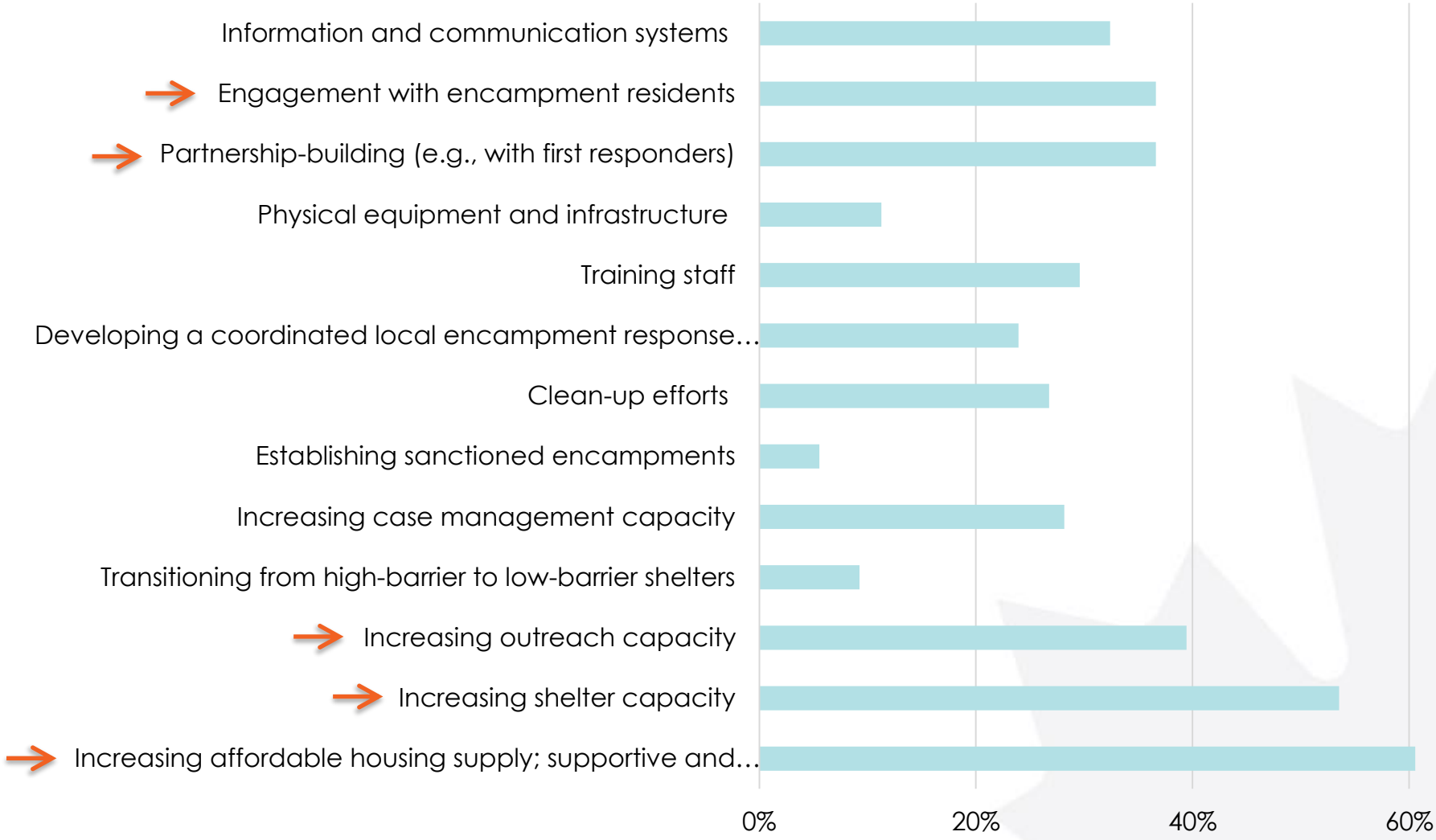
- Barriers include quality and nature of resources available
- Impacts of local attitudes and perceptions, political inertia, controversy, distrust between parties (reported by 38% of respondents via comments)
- Lack of system capacity to adequately respond to the needs and interests of high-acuity populations, including those experiencing chronic homelessness (reported by 20% of respondents)
- Barriers complicate and exacerbate each other, compounding their negative impacts

Successful responses and future strategies

Encampment Response Strategies	Reported use	Reported success rate
Creating new shelters*	55% (27 out of 49)	59%
Increasing availability of public and/or transitional housing	47% (28 out of 60)	57%
Increasing capacity of existing shelters	65% (41 out of 63)	54%
Creating/transitioning to low-barrier shelters*	48% (21 out of 44)	52%
Converting existing buildings to COVID shelters*	60% (27 out of 45)	48%
Increased coordination amongst service providers	93% (56 out of 60)	46%
Adding/increasing case management services (related to housing, occupation, family, rehabilitation and recovery, etc.)	78% (46 out of 59)	46%
Expanding outreach activities or increasing outreach workers	83% (52 out of 63)	42%
Enhancing resources/facilities of existing shelters	57% (34 out of 60)	41%
Increasing availability of housing programs (e.g., Housing First, rapid rehousing)*	57% (27 out of 47)	33%
Engagement with encampment residents to help inform local responses	58% (31 out of 53)	32%
Relocation support services (e.g., transportation, storage)	59% (32 out of 54)	31%
Referrals to shelter/housing programs for encampment residents*	87% (41 out of 47)	27%
Harm reduction services*	83% (35 out of 42)	26%
Referrals to treatment programs for encampment residents*	58% (22 out of 38)	23%
Expanded health supports*	60% (27 out of 45)	15%
Legal assistance/representation*	30% (10 out of 33)	10%

*Response options not included in Quebec survey.

Planned strategies (in the 6-12 month period following the survey)



Key findings

- An estimated 14-23% of the homeless population
- Prevalence of encampments has increased since the beginning of the pandemic
- Significant contributing factors:
  - restrictive rules and eligibility criteria at shelters
  - shelters being at or over capacity
  - safety and security concerns in shelters
  - lack of affordable, safe, stable, and suitable housing
  - local mental health and addictions crises
- Successful response strategies:
  - creating new shelters
  - increasing availability of public and/or transitional housing
  - increasing capacity in existing shelters
  - creating or transitioning to low-barrier shelters

Key findings (continued)

- Significant barriers:
  - inadequate staff
  - inadequate funding
  - local attitudes and politics
- Just over a quarter of communities have an official encampment response plan with protocols in place
- Common responses:
  - clearance/closure with temporary support
  - tacit acceptance
  - clearance/closure with long-term support
  - Clearance/closure with little to no notice or support
- Most actively engaged: Front-line service providers and police
  Least actively engaged: Encampment residents

Areas for Further Exploration

- What are the root causes of encampment use?
- What are the most successful strategies to support encampment residents?
  - What are the necessary and sufficient conditions for success?
  - What are the relevant metrics of success?
- How can data collection be improved with respect to encampments and unsheltered homelessness?

Do you have any questions for us?

Contact Information

Reaching Home Website

Infrastructure Canada - About Reaching Home: Canada's Homelessness Strategy

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