

Surveillance of the Deaths of People Experiencing Homelessness in Toronto

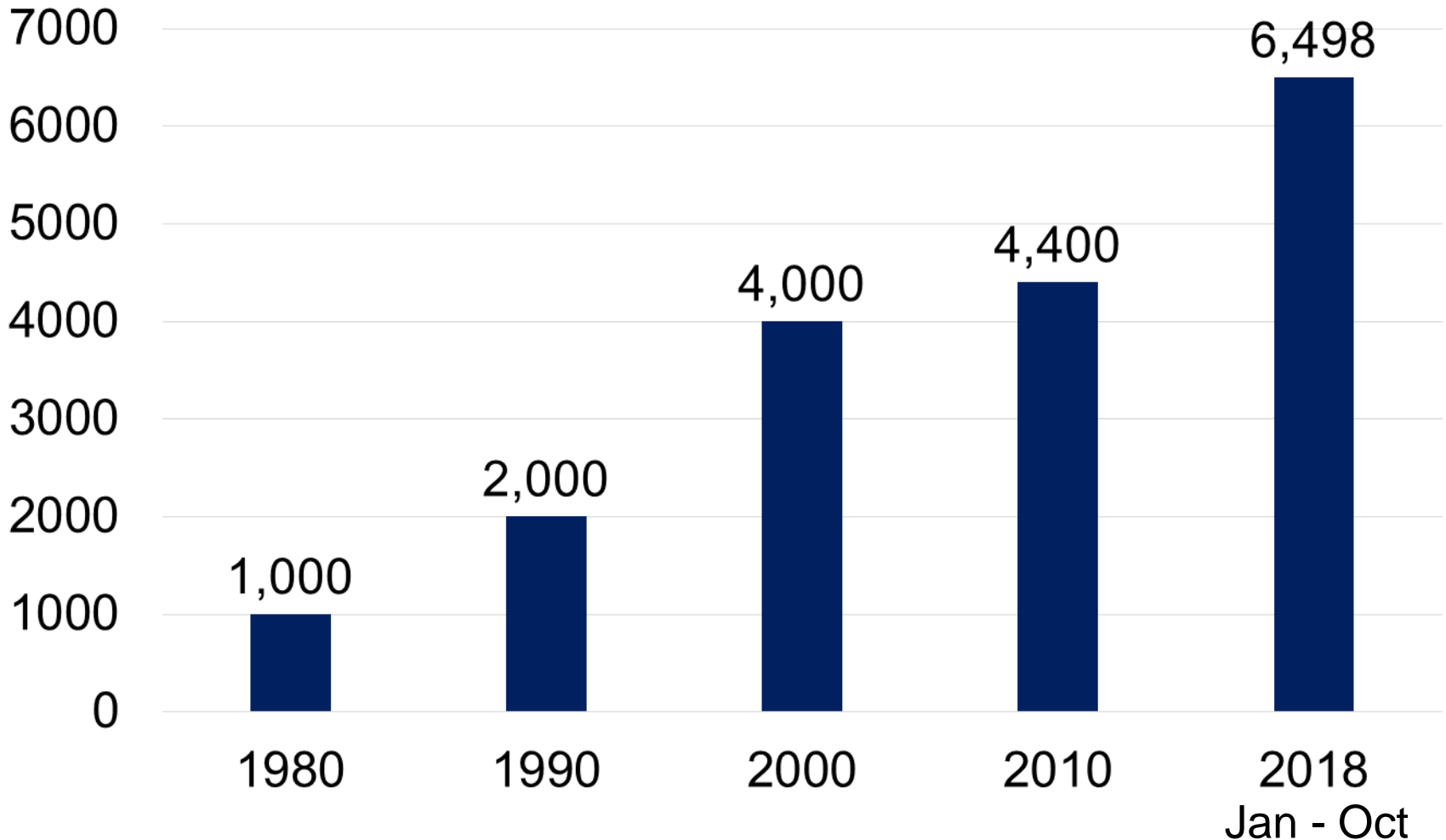
Janet Heng

Epidemiologist, Toronto Public Health

APHEO Conference
Niagara Falls, Ontario
November 27, 2018

- Background
- Methods
- Results
- Reflection

Background: Toronto Nightly Shelter Occupancy



Motion to Conduct Surveillance of Deaths of Homeless People in Toronto

- February 2016: Toronto Star published the article “Ontario’s Uncounted Homeless Dead”
- April 2016: Citing the Toronto Star article above, City Council directed appropriate City staff to
 - “Collect all relevant data related to the deaths of homeless individuals for occurrences within and outside homeless shelters”

- Literature review
- Community consultations with:
 - Toronto Shelter, Support & Housing Administration
 - Toronto Homeless Memorial volunteers
 - Drop-in centres
 - Needle exchange sites
 - Hospitals
 - Community health centres
 - Outreach teams
 - Religious institutions
 - People who have experienced homelessness

- Communication with existing networks
- Enthusiasm from front-line workers
- Hospitals
 - Health information custodians
 - Possible approaches:
 - Hospital social workers
 - Morgue staff
 - Flagging homeless patients on admission
 - Chart reviews

- Community-based network of ‘sentinels’
 - Method based on a former surveillance project - counts of births among homeless women¹
 - Over 200 agencies/programs on board as ‘sentinel’ reporters
- Definition of homelessness
 - Canadian definition, which encompasses a continuum of circumstances, including people without any shelter and those insecurely housed²

¹Shah, S. et al. (2017). Three hundred babies born to underhoused mothers in Toronto – understanding the problem and how we can help. *Paediatrics & Child Health*, 22(5), 282-284.

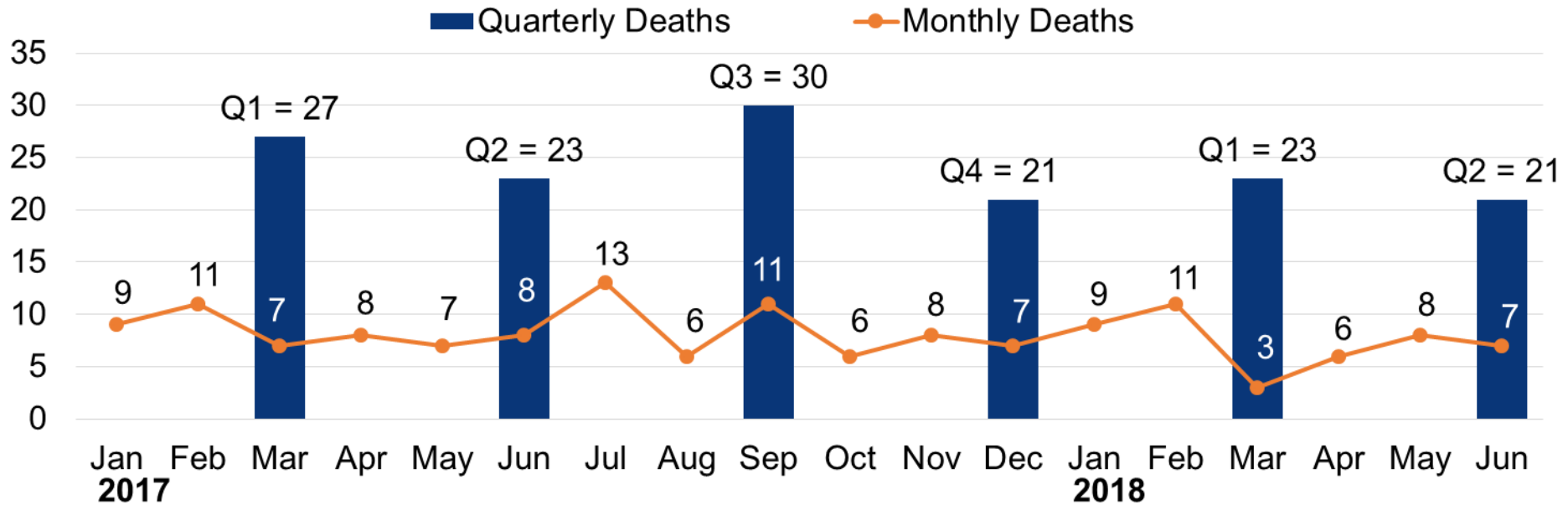
²Gaetz, S.; Barr, C.; Friesen, A.; Harris, B.; Hill, C.; Kovacs-Burns, K.; Pauly, B.; Pearce, B.; Turner, A.; Marsolais, A. (2012) *Canadian Definition of Homelessness*. Toronto: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press.

- Surveillance began January 2017
- Reports submitted through CheckMarket
- Duplicates aggregated
- Information verified by the coroner, where possible
- Data entered into secure database
- Results posted on TPH's website:

<https://www.toronto.ca/community-people/health-wellness-care/health-inspections-monitoring/monitoring-deaths-of-homeless-people/>

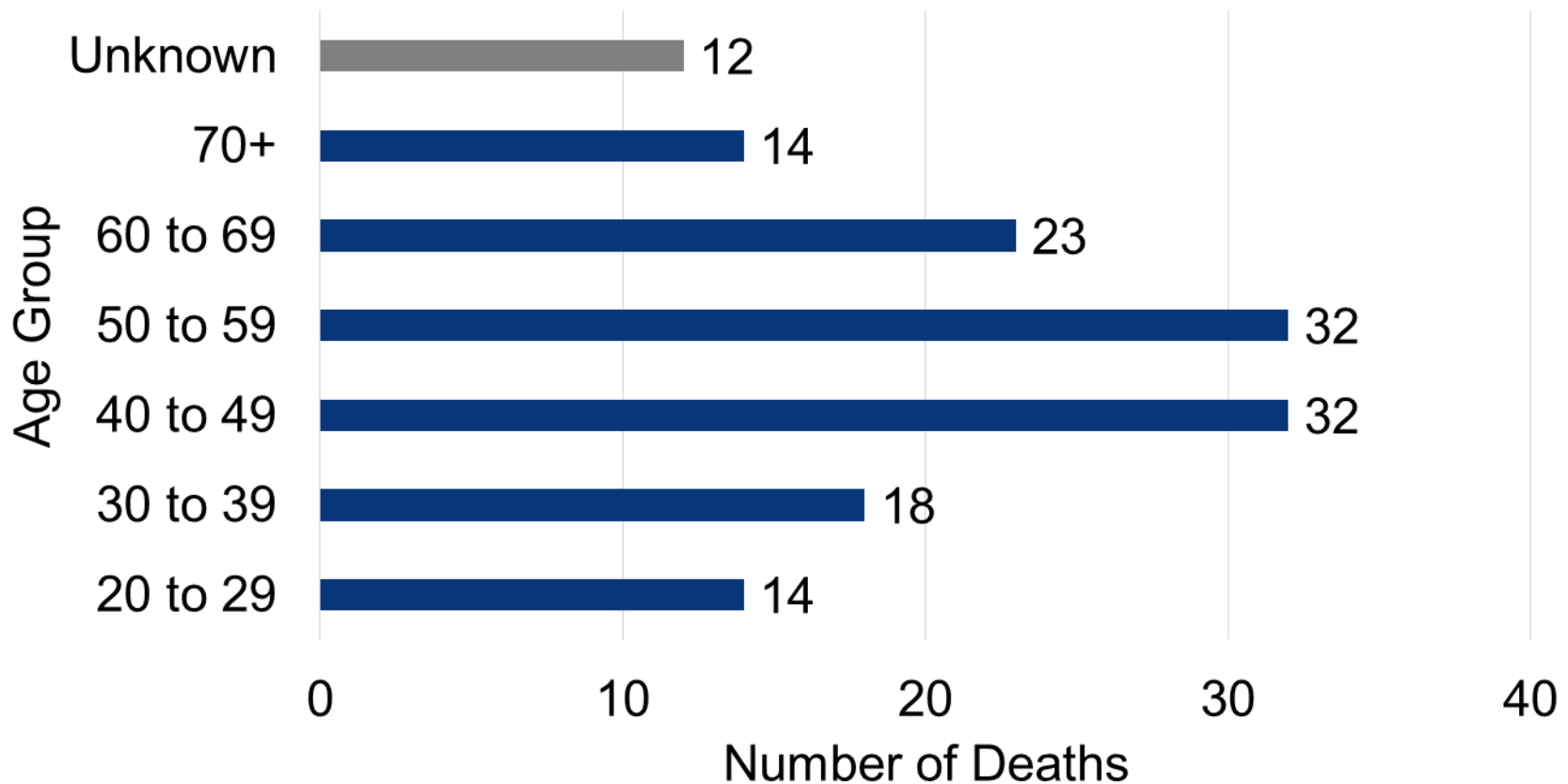
- Demographics – name, age, gender, Indigenous status
- Descriptors of death – date, address, place, cause
- Health challenges
- Homeless history
- Agencies used
- Reporter's contact information
- Any other information they want to share

Results: Homeless Deaths, Toronto January 2017 – June 2018



Total deaths: 145
110 males (76%)

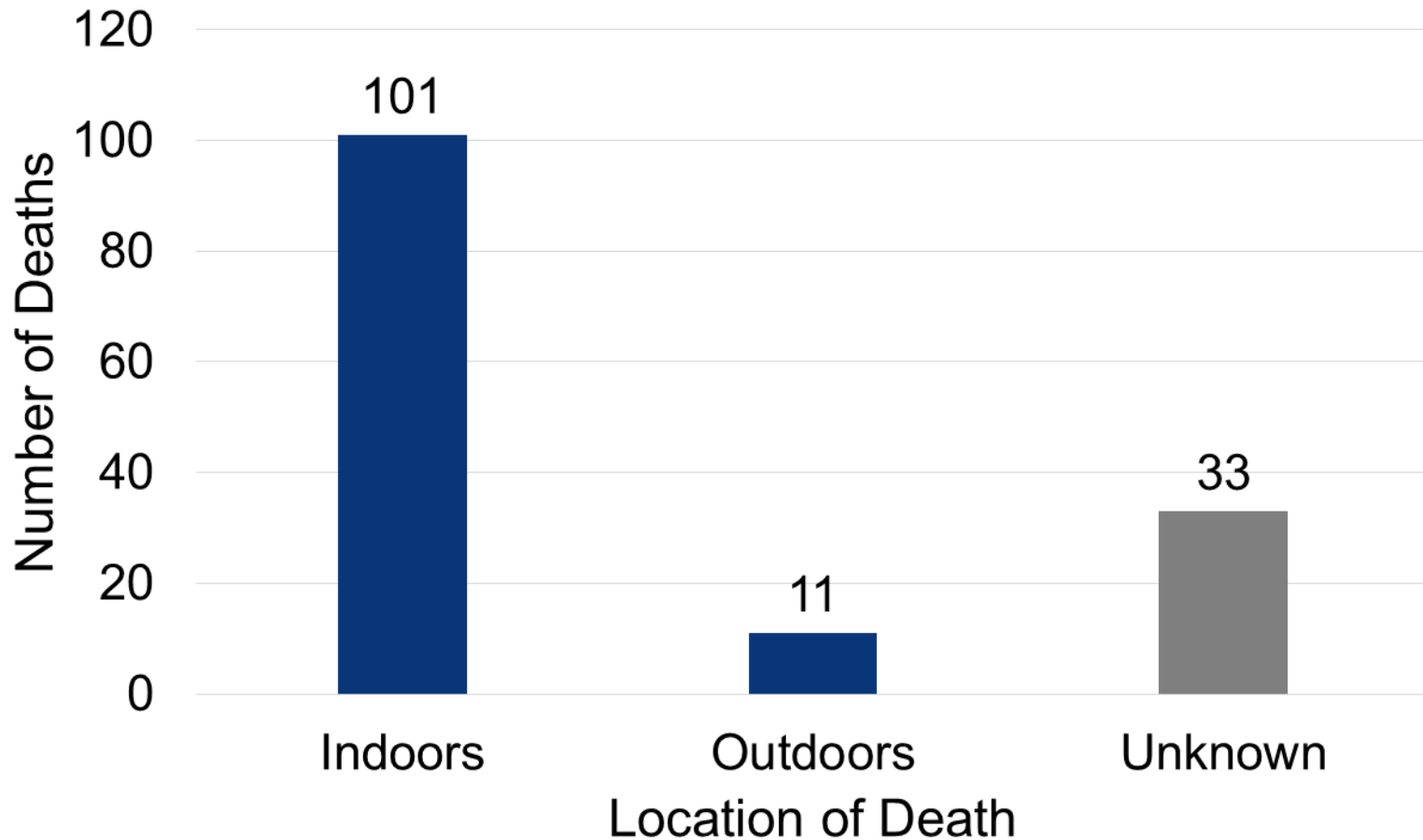
Results: Homeless Deaths, Toronto January 2017 – June 2018, by Age Group



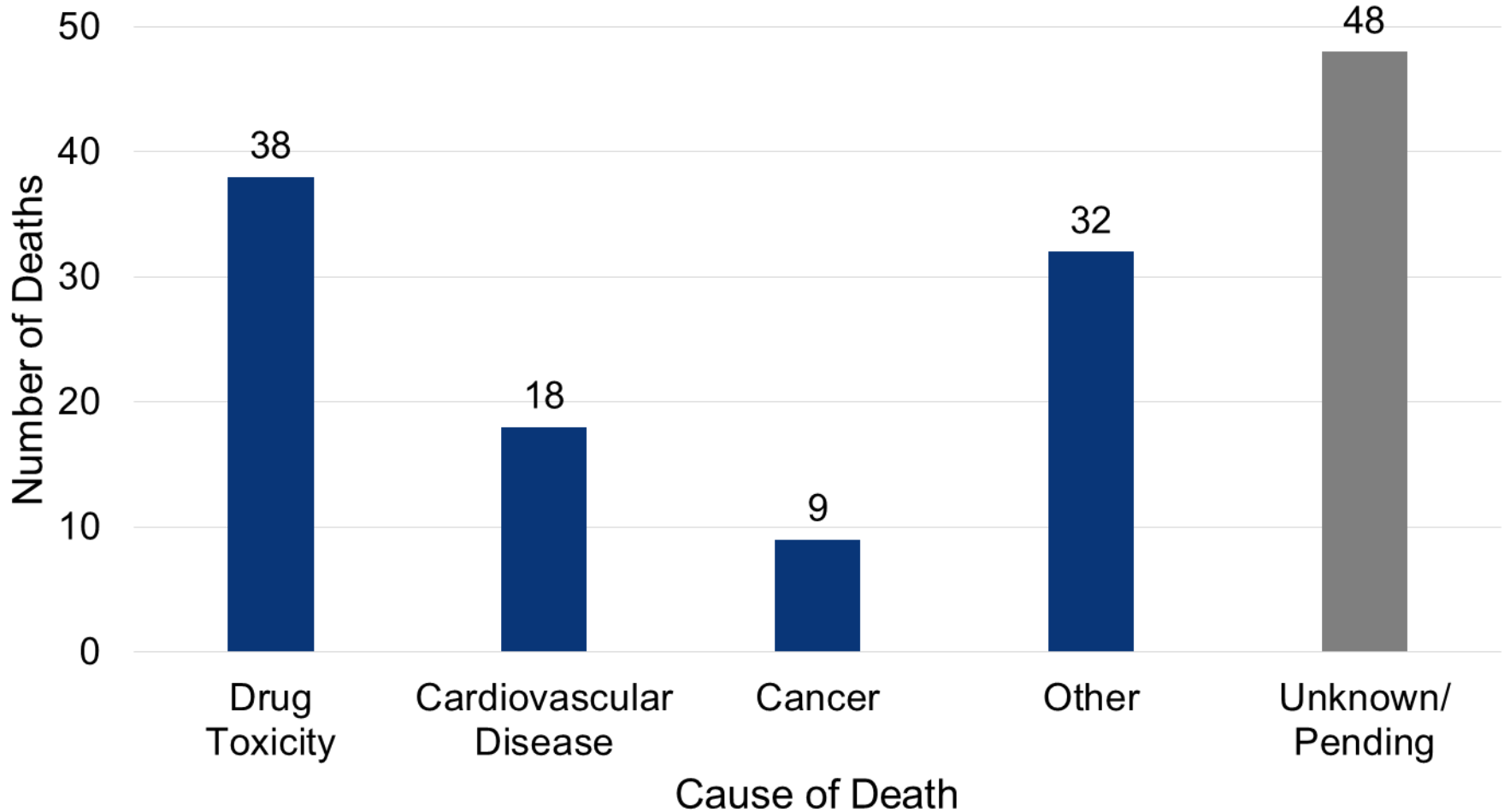
Median age of death: 50 years

Life expectancy, Canada (2016): 81 years males, 85 years females

Results: Homeless Deaths, Toronto January 2017 – June 2018, by Location



Results: Homeless Deaths, Toronto January 2017 – June 2018, by Cause



- Continue to monitor, validate, assess and report
- Data emphasizes the need to support homeless individuals with chronic illnesses
- Continue to work towards adding hospitals, violence against women (VAW) shelters, and respite centres as ‘sentinel’ reporters
- Challenge early on – frequency of reporting
- Being clear about our role
- Wording is important
- Continue knowledge sharing activities

Contact Information:

Janet Heng

janet.heng@toronto.ca

416-338-7810