

Family Violence and Homelessness Connections and Dynamics

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Note: This research bulletin is based on a detailed literature review. Given the space constraints of this form of publication, only a very few of the references have been retained. See the full publication, at the URL listed above, for the complete reference list.

1. The “new” homeless

Research has documented the changing demographic profile of Canada’s homeless population, which is increasingly composed of women, families, youth, and children – often referred to as the “new” homeless. Aboriginal women also experience a higher rate of homelessness than non-Aboriginal women. Explanations for the emergence of these new groups have acknowledged high rates of family violence in their backgrounds and research studies have begun to probe the contributing role of family breakdown, trauma and adverse childhood experiences to homelessness.

Research on this issue generally focuses on those who use homeless shelters, but this constitutes only a portion of the total. Although many women who flee abusive spouses use family violence shelters, most stay with friends or relatives, moving from one short-term arrangement to another or returning to the abusive home environment. Victims of family violence constitute a large portion of the hidden or relatively homeless.

Despite this research problem, studies in Canada and elsewhere have consistently found rates of family violence to be very high and more prevalent in the histories of homeless people than among the non-homeless.

Studies have found high rates of abuse in the childhoods of homeless people – most notably women and female youth. This association is strong enough that some researchers have concluded that family violence is a major cause of homelessness. Moreover, it is increasingly identified by shelter users themselves as the reason for their homelessness.

2. The devastating consequences of family violence

In a review of studies on homeless families, Rosenheck et al. (1999) concluded: “Interpersonal violence may well be the subtext of family homelessness. Abuse and assault seem to be salient features of homeless mothers’ childhood and adult experiences. Women suffer its devastating medical and emotional consequences for the rest of their lives.” Studies have consistently found, in the histories of both individuals and families who are homeless, high rates of physical and sexual abuse in childhood, frequent foster care and other out-of-home placements, and a variety of other family disruptions. Most studies have found higher rates of family violence among homeless than among other poor families.

Family violence is also a common antecedent for the institutional experiences of homeless persons, including high rates of involvement with the child welfare system or out-of-home placement during childhood. Among homeless single adults, especially women, there are high rates of psychiatric hospitalization and among homeless single men, high rates of incarceration.

Children who have been abused typically display behavioural problems in their youth and adulthood that are also associated with homelessness. These include developmental delays, disruptive classroom behaviour, school-age pregnancy, truancy and running away, delinquency and prostitution, use of illicit drugs and alcohol and addictions, and suicide attempts. The long-term effects of childhood abuse include impaired relationship skills, social isolation, re-victimization, substance abuse, and eating disorders, as well as foster care and other forms of family separation, all of which are also associated with the risk of homelessness.

3. *Adverse childhood experiences as risk factors for homelessness*

There are clear gender differences in rates of childhood abuse among the homeless. Studies in Ottawa and Toronto have found that women have experienced higher rates of abuse, especially sexual abuse, than men. This pattern is also evident among homeless youth.

Herman et al. (1997) investigated whether adverse childhood experiences were risk factors for adult homelessness. They determined that lack of care or physical abuse from a parent during childhood sharply increased the likelihood of subsequent homelessness. Sexual abuse was not significantly associated with homelessness, but the combination of lack of parental care and physical or sexual abuse increased the odds of homelessness. They concluded that adverse childhood experiences were powerful risk factors for adult homelessness.

High levels of family disruption and childhood abuse are a consistent finding in studies of street-involved and homeless youth in Canada. A study of homeless youth in downtown Vancouver (McCreary 2002) explored the early process of becoming street involved. The youths told the researchers about chaos and conflict at home, constant movement between households or communities, and a lack of connections with supportive adults.

A study of Toronto street youth (Hagan and McCarthy 1997) revealed that, on average, they had left home at 13 and experienced some form of family disruption, such as unemployment, single parenthood, re-

constituted families, or out-of-home placement. Their families were also more likely to have been violent.

Family violence is clearly the predominant reason for homelessness among children and youth. Poverty is not as strongly associated with homelessness among youth as it is among adults.

4. *Family violence and repeat homelessness*

Most shelter users enter the system once and do not return. Those who are repeatedly homeless are of special concern. Is family violence a factor in chronic homelessness? Gardiner and Cairns (2002) developed a profile of the repeatedly homeless, whom they characterized as “less resilient” and having histories of neglect by parents or other forms of family violence.

A Toronto study found that rates of childhood abuse were equally high among both the repeatedly homeless and those who were homeless for the first time (Goering et al. 2002). A two-year U.S. study, however, found that rates of childhood sexual abuse were higher among the repeatedly homeless than among first-time homeless mothers (Bassuk and Perloff 2001). As well, first-time homeless mothers who experienced violence at the hands of a partner after being re-housed were more than three times as likely to experience a second homeless episode, even controlling for the effects of childhood sexual abuse. Repeatedly homeless mothers were also twice

as likely to have been sexually abused as children, and more likely to have experienced random anger from both parents and to have histories of running away.

The contrast in the findings of these two studies may relate to the differences in their subjects. The Toronto study was conducted with homeless single people, while the U.S. study focused on homeless mothers. The presence of dependent children, among other factors, may account for the different results. Moreover, the Toronto study looked at the effects of childhood abuse, while the U.S. study examined the effects of partner abuse as well as sexual abuse during childhood.

Zappardino and DeBare (1992) identified additional factors that may contribute to the greater likelihood of

A clear connection

“Interpersonal violence may well be the subtext of family homelessness. Abuse and assault seem to be salient features of homeless mothers’ childhood and adult experiences. Women suffer its devastating medical and emotional consequences for the rest of their lives.”
R. Rosenheck et al.

repeat homelessness among victims: abrupt, unanticipated homelessness (unlike that experienced by someone who knows that an eviction is imminent); crisis compounded by trauma; use of denial as a coping mechanism that impairs problem-solving ability; and child custody disputes.

5. Family violence and homelessness among specific populations

Aboriginal people

Aboriginal people experience a higher rate of both family violence and homelessness than non-Aboriginal people. Aboriginal women are three times more likely to have experienced spousal abuse than non-Aboriginal women, and twice as likely to have experienced it than Aboriginal men. Aboriginal people are also over-represented among the homeless in studies conducted in several Canadian cities, including Calgary, Edmonton, Winnipeg, Vancouver, and Toronto.

Immigrants and racial minorities

In societies around the world, the greater the inequality between men and women and the greater the degree of social disorganization, the higher the rate of assaults against wives.

Members of some immigrant groups in Canada may experience multiple oppressions that affect their views of, and responses to, family violence. Their cultural backgrounds and immigration status may also affect their use of, and treatment by, service agencies. Some immigrant women who move out of the marital home and set up independent households to avoid family violence risk being ostracized and socially isolated by their communities.

Recent refugees appear to be more vulnerable to both family violence and homelessness. Racial minority households, especially black households, whether immigrant or not, face discrimination in housing and labour markets that increases the stress they experience and makes it harder for victims to establish and maintain independent households.

Residents of rural or remote communities

Because most emergency shelters are in cities, homelessness is often assumed to be an urban phenomenon. This is not the case: people in rural or remote communities may also become homeless. The difference is that they have fewer housing alternatives, short of doubling up with friends or relatives or moving to a larger community.

Victims of family violence in rural Canada are no different from those in urban environments, and there is no reason to believe that family violence occurs less frequently in rural environments. However, services are more likely to be absent in rural settings or more difficult to access. Also, victims may move to cities because those environments can offer a greater degree of anonymity; maintaining confidentiality in small communities is very difficult.

In a study of victims of spousal abuse in rural Saskatchewan, Martz and Sarauer (2000) noted that some women who wanted to leave an abuser could not afford the resulting economic losses in household and farm property. Limited transportation was identified as another barrier to leaving. Few victims were aware of legal remedies that would remove the abuser and give them exclusive possession of their home. Most of the women who did leave home went to shelters in Saskatoon and Moose Jaw.

Similar dynamics apply to military wives, especially those living on military bases far from urban services. Frequent moves can also place such women in communities speaking a language other than their own.

Older persons

A small proportion of family violence literature addresses elder abuse and homelessness among older persons. While the abuse of older persons has become a recognized phenomenon, professionals working to prevent it say it typically occurs in a closed setting where the abused person is a “prisoner of their milieu.” They report few cases in which an older person being abused will choose to leave. If an older person in an abusive family environment is not considered competent, he or she may be removed and placed in a protected setting, such as a seniors’ home.

In Inuit communities, situations of overcrowding, coupled with resentment among adult children who are forced to remain in their parents’ homes, have been linked to physical and financial abuse of elders.

Hightower et al. (2001) investigated the situation of older women who experienced family violence. In many cases, there was a long history of wife assault; some women had repeatedly left and returned to the family home. The impacts of leaving are not the same as for younger women; in the course of a long marriage, a woman tends to accumulate many belongings, including treasured possessions that become increasingly precious in later years of life. For a woman who has invested a lifetime of care, leaving a home that holds such personal effects can be shattering and feel like a loss of self.

People with severe mental illness

The trend of deinstitutionalization and withdrawal of services for persons with intellectual disabilities and mental health problems constitutes another significant factor in homelessness, especially among long-term homeless single women. It appears that the relationship among these factors is dynamic, that is, the women with psychiatric disabilities who live in poverty are at a high risk of being abused and being homeless. Being abused and being homeless also constitute traumas that exacerbate, if not cause, mental health problems.

6. Dynamics of family violence and homelessness

Family violence is disproportionately a phenomenon of youth. As victims and offenders, the rates are highest for those between the ages of 18 and 30. Males are more likely than females to be offenders, and females are more likely than males to be victims. Homelessness and housing unaffordability are also predominantly problems of the young, the result of poverty and inadequate social resources. Those conditions cause a high level of stress and increase the likelihood of being victimized.

While family violence occurs in all social and economic groups, the risk of child abuse, wife abuse, and elder abuse is greater among those who are poor, unemployed, or holding low-prestige jobs. As well, those with fewer resources and more stress are more likely to become violent.

The relationship between family violence and housing status is complex. Clearly, housing problems, such as crowding and unaffordable costs, are linked to household stress and can contribute to abusive behaviour within the family. Women living in urban public housing also experience a greater rate of violence from intimates than do other women. Unequal power — economic, physical, and social — within society and within household relations also affects whether family violence occurs and what access to alternative housing is available to the victim.

Various policies and institutions are implicated in these dynamics, including a weak response to family violence on the part of the criminal justice system. Child protection and child care services (access to good quality child care, early intervention in cases of abuse and neglect, and improved effectiveness of the foster care

system) and spousal violence legislation (to facilitate removal of the abusive partner from the home or ensure consistent law enforcement) may also be factors in homelessness. Health and housing agencies can affect how victims achieve safety, recovery, and housing stability. Subsidized housing and short-term emergency shelter are required to curb female victimization by male partners and promote women's safety, autonomy and self-reliance.

Because women's access to housing is largely dependent on their position in families, when marital relationships break down, the economic consequences for women are usually severe. After divorce, the poverty rate for women increases almost threefold. Their household income drops significantly, while men's increases slightly. CMHC has found that single women and single mothers account for almost half of households with affordability problems.

Discrimination in labour and housing markets has not been eliminated, especially for Aboriginal and other racial minority women. Such socio-economic inequalities affect the power dynamics within families. Dependent members are under pressure to stay because of their inability to afford alternate housing, and this can fuel more conflict.

Since the early 1970s, the "battered women's movement" has stressed that the lack of affordable

housing is a barrier that prevents abused women and their children from moving on after shelter stays. The economic inability of women to set up independent households plays a clear role in their decisions to stay with or return to abusive partners. "Homelessness is not resolved for women by having a roof over her head unless this roof is accompanied by a sense of safety and security" (Neal 2004). Supportive, safe shelters can provide a much-needed temporary respite for women and children facing harsh, ongoing realities of poverty, partner abuse, victimization and trauma.

The dynamics of family violence can contribute to poverty as well as financial and social vulnerability. Men who abuse their wives or partners commonly also restrict the women's social relationships with friends and other family members and control their ability to work outside the home; the abused woman may then have limited social and economic resources to help her deal with homelessness.

The need for security

"Homelessness is not resolved for women by having a roof over her head unless this roof is accompanied by a sense of safety and security."

R. Neal

7. Implications for service provision

Victims of violence in homeless shelters

Most victims of family violence typically seek informal support rather than formal assistance. They tend to stay with friends or relatives and thereby become members of the hidden homeless. This may account for the fact that there is very little literature that explicitly addresses the implications for service provision with relation to family violence and homelessness or the kinds of service that are most appropriate and effective.

However, it is increasingly the case that women and children who are victims of family violence are using homeless shelters rather than shelters designed for victims of domestic violence. This trend, which has been documented in Toronto and Vancouver, may be a result of the fact that some shelter staff cooperate to accept each others' overflow, or it may be that victims of family violence prefer to use homeless shelters for various reasons: they may not consider themselves victims of family violence; they fear the associated stigma; they seek shelters with fewer restrictive rules and policies; if parents, they fear being reported to child welfare authorities; or they want to avoid separation from older male adolescent children who are generally excluded from family violence shelters.

On the other hand, many victims of family violence require the services offered only at family violence shelters – the greater security from abusive family members that such shelters provide, and the personal counselling they need to deal with their traumatic experiences. Homeless shelters may not provide the same level of safety for victims of family violence. This is critical, as the likelihood of partner abuse and escalated violence increases for some women who leave their partner. This risk must be seriously considered in safety planning and service provision. It is not mitigated by the fact that for many women, becoming homeless is a safer option than remaining in an abusive relationship.

Abused women may, however, avoid homeless shelters because of the presence of male residents, the lack of staff trained in family violence issues, the lack of services for children, the lack of confidentiality safeguards, the lack of any safety planning for abused women, inadequate building security, and rules that require residents to spend the day outside the shelter.

Homeless youth generally prefer to use shelters and services designed for youth rather than adults. The legacy of family violence among homeless youth includes high levels of alienation, mistrust, and self-imposed isolation. These conditions can contribute to the develop-

ment of psycho-social impediments, post-traumatic stress disorder, and depression. They also deter homeless youth from seeking help from adults. For these reasons, youth-specific services are needed. Currently, however, they are available only in major cities.

Most youth shelters are gender-mixed, which raises issues of safety. Young homeless heterosexual women may be subject to sexual exploitation and dating violence while staying in gender-mixed youth shelters.

Recovery and mental health

In her research on trauma, Herman emphasized that recovery from family violence victimization is a slow process, “a gradual shift from unpredictable danger to reliable safety, from dissociated trauma to acknowledged memory, and from stigmatized isolation to restored social connection” (Herman 1992). Safe shelter and supportive relationships are critical to recovery.

Some researchers have urged service providers to be aware of the effects of family violence among their clientele. But researchers rarely suggest how professional practice should be altered. Staff and residents may not agree on the service needs of family violence victims, including those who suffer from symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. Staff in shelters and transitional housing projects may place more emphasis on residents' mental health and therapeutic needs than the residents, who are more focused on the need to find a safe and secure place in which to manage their lives. This suggests that, even for severely traumatized victims, the provision of permanent affordable housing is a prerequisite to the recovery process.

When victims are ready to begin healing, the lack of sufficient mental health services covered by public insurance is a major barrier to recovery for both homeless youth and adults.

Services for older adults

Senior victims of family violence are not well served by family violence shelters. The shelters are not structurally designed to accommodate the needs of older people; the noise and activity levels are too stressful for seniors; there is a lack of peer support; and the shelters are not designed to accommodate the needs of a couple who may be escaping abuse together. A completely different form of shelter may be required for these seniors.

Services for homeless children

While most children who accompany their mothers to family violence shelters are between one and four years of age, some are school-age. Shelter staff report

that poor self-esteem is the most common problem among these children, followed by behavioural problems, poor social skills, poor school achievement (in many cases they do not continue to attend the same school after leaving home), and physical or mental health issues. Because of limited resources, only some shelters are able to provide any follow-up services to families.

Services for homeless youth

Adolescent runaways forced to flee sexual abuse and physical brutality in their families have special emotional needs that set them apart from youth who are escaping overly strict parents or leaving home for other reasons. They have more severe separation problems, unresolved issues with their parents, and difficulties in their post-runaway relationships.

Furthermore, with increasing emotional separation from parents, adolescents become more reliant on peers who provide information and support and teach them street survival skills. Deviant social networks and high-risk behaviours increase the likelihood of serious re-victimization, leading to assaults and exploitation. Since re-victimization and coercive relationships reinforce what they learned in their families, this process is very hard to reverse. Attempts to force submission only confirm their negative world view. The inevitable encounters with the legal system do the same.

Youth who have been abused, including the “doubly homeless” who have run from public care, need in-depth assessment, treatment, and placement services delivered through multi-agency coordination and services that are flexible and forgiving. Services should provide housing arrangements that differ from the foster or group homes from which many have run away.

Programs that focus on training and employment readiness are not appropriate for all homeless youth. Those who have been traumatized by family violence may not be able to seek or maintain employment until recovery is well under way.

Transitional and supportive housing

Transitional housing programs usually involve temporary provision of housing for between three

months and three years, in combination with support services. Most families who complete the programs achieve housing stability, but the success rate is lower among abused women, and their employment status may not improve. Also, the effectiveness of transitional housing programs is predicated on the availability of affordable housing that the individual or family can move into after completing the program.

In its most recent report on homelessness, the City of Toronto identified a need for more supportive housing units (that is, permanent, subsidized housing with support services, with no time limit imposed on the duration of stay) for several sub-groups of homeless people, including women fleeing abusive relationships (City of Toronto 2003).

Child welfare

The public care system in Canada has been criticized for creating too much transience in placement locations and, more importantly, in relationships. A stable, trusting, long-term relationship with caregivers works best for youth in care, but is seldom available. In Ontario, Crown wards average one change of placement or social worker a year. As well, the foster care system often fails to provide children with therapy to help them deal with their experiences of abuse and neglect. In a few cases, children have experienced further abuse within their foster families or group home residences.

Special priority housing policies

Special priority housing policies for victims of family violence are intended to quickly re-house family violence victims who become homeless by giving them priority allocations of subsidized housing. Unfortunately, there have been no assessments of their effectiveness in meeting their primary objective or in preventing homelessness.

One problem with the system is the requirement in Ontario that abused women submit an application for housing within three months of separating from an abusive spouse. Given the common pattern of abusive spouses continuing to stalk, threaten, and attack their former partners for several years after separation, and the fact that the greatest risk to women is during the first year after separation, the three-month time limit consti-

Responding appropriately

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tutes an unnecessary barrier for women who are being abused or are under threat of abuse.

Family violence and the prevention of homelessness

Risk factors for homelessness could be reduced by universal strategies to prevent family violence (by changing norms of acceptable behaviour, punishing perpetrators, and providing support and education to parents) and to reduce the need for, and increase the quality of, foster care. But since most victims of abuse do not become homeless, benefits for the prevention of homelessness would be very gradual.

Moreover, identifying families at risk of violence and determining the appropriate interventions pose significant challenges. Although programs to prevent family violence are useful in themselves, some researchers do not support such programs as an approach to preventing homelessness. In households that are already experiencing violence, they advise against attempts to maintain the household. The provision of emergency shelters and permanent, subsidized housing are the only effective prevention programs.

Re-housing victims

Homeless women more often have histories of family violence and high rates of mental illness, while homeless men more often have histories of unemployment, incarceration and substance abuse. New housing projects that mix formerly homeless women and men with little or no attention to their different histories may be inappropriate.

Many such gender-mixed projects were developed in Toronto in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Most consisted of small, self-contained units; some were shared apartments. An investigation of women's experiences in such projects found that although they were satisfied with their new dwellings in many ways, they faced harassment and abuse from male residents. Sexual harassment was generally not reported to managers, but when women did complain about harassment, they were very disappointed with the outcomes. Housing developers, managers and other staff need training to anticipate the risks, prevent sexual harassment and offer meaningful remedies.

8. Research gaps

Research associating family violence with homelessness is still in its early stages. A great many questions remain unanswered, particularly the overlooked, complex realities of women experiencing family vio-

lence and homelessness, and service delivery best practices. Research on the factors contributing to the overrepresentation of Aboriginal women among the homeless is especially warranted.

The link between poverty and homelessness continues to be deserving of focused research that will provide reliable statistics. Related to this broad issue is its relationship with the availability of public housing and of sufficient affordable housing.

We also lack information on abused women's use of and experiences with homeless shelters, as opposed to family violence shelters and about the long-term housing and support service needs of family violence victims. Finally, there has been no research on the effectiveness of Canadian legal remedies to remove perpetrators of family violence from the family home or otherwise protect victims from financial loss.

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