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“We got evicted - did I leave that out?”

Stigma and discrimination suffered by people living with a mental illness can be as debilitating as the illness itself. They can disrupt every area of life, preventing people living with a mental illness from becoming healthy and from integrating socially. And while secure housing of good quality is a critical basis that people need in order to attain and maintain mental health, stigma and discrimination can become barriers that force people living with mental illness into deplorable housing situations, or out of housing altogether. So while one in three people in Canada will experience some form of mental illness over their lifetime, the stigma and discrimination associated with this common condition prevent many from acquiring adequate housing, blocking their access to pathways to mental well-being.

Over the summer of 2008, a team of University of Manitoba and community researchers set out to document the forms that stigma and discrimination take in relation to housing in Winnipeg. This was a way of contributing to processes of community transformation through enhancing the provision of housing and services for people living with mental illness. We are grateful to have had a helpful partner in the Canadian Mental Health Association Winnipeg,

and funding from the Manitoba Research Alliance and the United Way.

The work has been written up in the report “*We got evicted...did I leave that out?*” *Stories of housing and mental health*, recently published jointly by the CMHA and the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, Mb. The report shows that people from all of the sectors connected with mental health issues that we worked with – including people living with mental illness, family caregivers and people working in the housing and service systems – held some common views. Study participants affirmed their conviction about the importance of housing in providing a firm basis upon which mental health depends. They recognized that without access to good housing, the efforts of people living with mental illness to lead normalized lives and the work of caregivers and the resources of the service system will all be drastically undermined.

People living with mental illness shared their housing histories, describing the various housing situations they’d been in, showing what was helpful and what was difficult, and explaining why housing situations changed. (That accounts for the title of the report.)



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Unsavory outcomes in the housing market highlighted the vulnerability of people living with mental illness. Many lived with insecure tenure in substandard housing, and experienced: damp, cold, vermin-infested lodgings that exhausted their income; unresponsive landlords; living in parts of the city they didn't like; living in the midst of street crime and, in cases, violence and sexual assault. Many readers may find this unsurprising because it fits the stereotypes. Others may find it unpleasant, but not part of their immediate world.

However, stigma and discrimination experienced by people living with mental illness aren't restricted to housing and they are not cordoned off in certain parts of the city. No one lives in separation from them, because they permeate the social relations that we live and affirm daily. They shape the stigmatized identities that are thrust upon people living with mental illness, and thus they also contribute to shaping the identities of people who aren't labelled as living with mental illness.

Study participants gave many examples of their experience with stigma and discrimination, in their apartment buildings, at schools and workplaces and in their local communities. One described being harassed by another tenant: "There's a lady, I don't even know her...But every time she sees me, she calls me a loser and she doesn't even know me." Another participant, recalling her worry that people at her high school would know she was living with a mental illness, said: You feel that you have that written across your face...it seemed like everyone knew." One was fired upon explaining she was in crisis and couldn't get to work: "I was one of their best employees, I was in the top three and they dropped me like a hot potato." Speaking of the progressive Wolseley community, one said, "I felt very uncomfortable in that neighbourhood. Every

time I went outside, I felt like I was being branded the biggest weirdo in the world."

To address stigma and discrimination, our study makes several recommendations, some of which we have seen before. It also attempts to bring the perspectives and needs of people involved with mental health to the forefront, in order to draw attention to our collective interests in supporting mental well-being. Current economic circumstances force us to reconsider our relationships – let's take this opportunity to build communities that are more inclusive to people living with mental illness.

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