

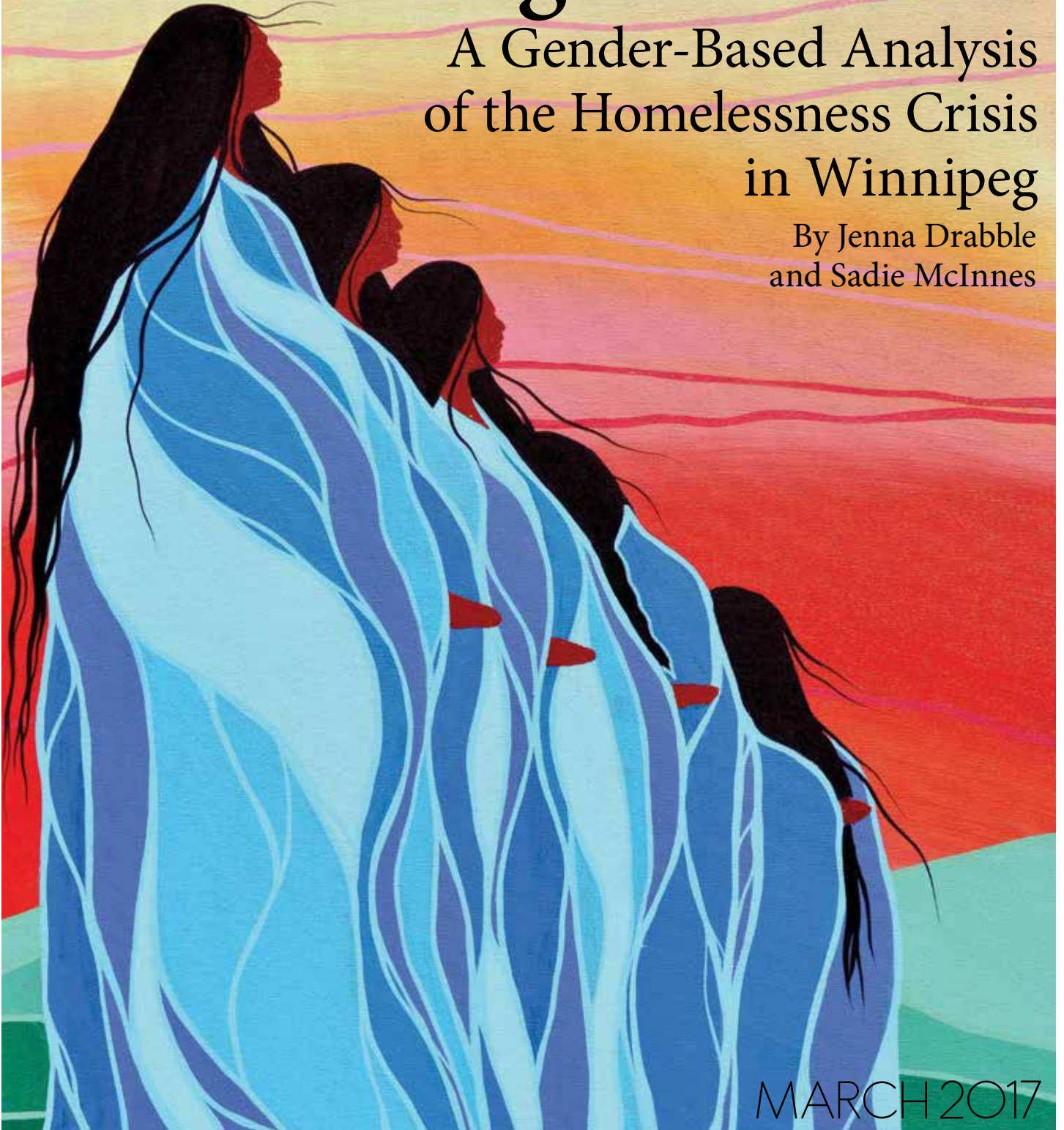
State of the

INNER CITY

Finding Her Home

A Gender-Based Analysis
of the Homelessness Crisis
in Winnipeg

By Jenna Drabble
and Sadie McInnes



MARCH 2017

Finding Her Home: A Gender-Based Analysis of the Homelessness Crisis in Winnipeg

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“Summary of Findings: Women and Homelessness” by Maes Nino, Christina, Maria Godoy, Scott McCullough, Brent Retzlaff, Al Wiebe and Larry Wucherer. 2016. An excerpt from *The Winnipeg Street Census 2015: Final Report*. Winnipeg: Social Planning Council of Winnipeg. Used with permission.

“Finding Her Home: a gender-based analysis of the homelessness crisis in Winnipeg” by Jenna Drabble

“Women and homelessness: A Review of the Literature” by Sadie McInnes

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Cover artwork: Jackie Traverse
Jackie Traverse is an Anishinaabe multi-disciplined artist working in video, sculpture, mixed media, and paint. She is also the founder of Indigenous Rock the Vote and Ikwe Safe Ride, a ride-sharing network that offers safe rides for Indigenous women. She lives in Winnipeg, Manitoba.



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Introduction

The homelessness crisis that has plagued Canadian cities, small and large, shows little signs of abating. The crisis is the most visual sign of a larger problem of unaffordable housing for those struggling with poverty and is interconnected with the experiences of Indigenous peoples still struggling with colonization. The problem of homelessness became more prevalent in the 1990s, subsequent to the federal government ending funding for the creation of social housing. Today the federal government shows some signs of investing again in social housing: that is rent-geared-to-income housing. This is required in a massive scale to make up for twenty years of the federal government falling behind on social housing.

Here in Manitoba, the provincial government responded to calls from community groups to invest in social housing. From 2009–2014 1,500 units of social and 1,500 units of affordable housing were created in partnership with community housing providers. In 2014 another 500 of each was promised, and the province reported meeting half of this goal at the time the provincial government changed hands in Spring 2016. It remains unclear if the new provincial government will continue to lead on the creation of social housing or absolve its responsibility and rely on the federal government to create new housing.

Meanwhile homelessness persists. Recent interest in addressing the homelessness crisis has come from coalitions of business and non-profit sectors across Canada. In 2008 The Canadian Mental Health Commission (CMHC) “At Home/ Chez Soi” study, one of the largest Canadian studies of homelessness, compared the harm-reduction Housing First model to the status quo “recovery” based model. After positive results were proven based on this research, the federal government started investing almost exclusively in Housing First approaches, albeit a scaled back version of the model tested by the CMHC.

The present-day Housing First model is governed by a Community Advisory Board (CAB), in Winnipeg housed with the City, who does little else on housing policy and program delivery. The CAB offers community oversight and its existence is recognition by the federal government of the need to ensure public investment is geared toward local conditions and situations. *The Plan to End Homelessness in Winnipeg* was created in 2014 and is guided by a newly created entity End Homelessness Winnipeg that is working with community, government and the private sector to coordinate and improve services to end homelessness in Winnipeg. However community-based organizations on-the-ground

deal with greater need than the current available policy and program responses to homelessness.

Community-based organizations such as women's centres and family centres located in the inner city of Winnipeg are welcoming places where women and community members can take care of basic needs like doing laundry and having a shower. They offer help to get participants the benefits they have rights to through Employment and Income Assistance (EIA), or with Child and Family Services (CFS) and ladder drop-in participants into available programming at these centres.

Last year, 2016, was one hundred years since *some*¹ women got the vote in Manitoba, yet many Winnipeg women are being left far behind: vulnerable and homeless. Community-based organizations guiding the State of the Inner City Report series wished to draw attention to the homelessness crisis as experienced by women (see Editor's note at end). They asked CCPA Manitoba to do research that helps to understand women's experiences of homelessness and what women themselves identify is needed in order to prevent and end homelessness for women in Winnipeg.

This gender-based analysis looks at the intersectionalities of gender, race, class, sexual identity and other factors. This is important since a "gender-blind" approach — of looking at men and women's experiences together — just scratches the surface of women's experiences, causalities and what is required to end homelessness among women. There are many documented cases of such "gender-blind" approaches not working for women — from health conditions to drugs tested only on men — that leave women behind. Homelessness is no different.

The gender differences are strong, as the two papers in this report will explain. "Finding Her Home: a gender-based analysis of the homelessness crisis in Winnipeg" by author Jenna Drabble

was done with the support of three community researchers Amy Desjarlais, Sandra Wiebe and Genevieve Vanderploeg. 30 women with experience of homelessness were asked a series of open-ended questions using an ethnographic approach. 13 key informants from groups directly dealing with homelessness were also interviewed. The information shared was analyzed and is presented in this paper with recommendations for action. The report was overseen by Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Centre, North End Women's Centre, North Point Douglas Women's Centre, West Central Women's Resource Centre, End Homelessness and the Social Planning Council of Winnipeg (SPCW). We are grateful to the SPCW for disaggregating the 2015 Street Census data for this report, published for the first time in this volume.

"Women and Homelessness: a review of the literature" by Sadie McInnes is a high-level overview of existing Canadian literature on the gendered aspects of homelessness. The "Finding Her Home" study adds to this body of knowledge.

As you will read in these two papers, women become or are homeless for a variety of factors central to this is poverty and lack of income and ways to earn decent money. Women who've experienced homelessness struggle with domestic violence and violence against women. The legacy of colonialism continues to impact Indigenous women, who are over 80 percent of women experiencing homelessness in Winnipeg according to the 2015 Street Count. The vulnerabilities that have led to the loss of so many mothers, sisters and daughters and led to the Inquiry into Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and Girls are inter-related to the reality of homelessness for many women. The root causes that make women vulnerable are the same: the lack of economic options, inter-generational trauma and need for social supports.

¹ The federal government extended the right to vote to all Indigenous people, both women and men, in 1960. Prior to this point in time they were not permitted to vote.

Women experiencing homelessness are more likely to be hidden via overcrowded stays with acquaintances, friends or family. Women are less likely to search out the existing shelter system due to safety fears. Women’s role as caregiver and mother, intersecting with race and poverty leads many women to avoid help due to risk of child apprehension from CFS. Women with addictions struggle to get help and fear their children being removed. The entire experience of homelessness is extremely stressful and places women in survival mode, exasperating mental health and physical health.

Existing services are often siloed and not tailored to women’s intersectional needs. Resources and services that can prevent homelessness for women need to work in harmony to prevent homelessness; this includes EIA, CFS and Corrections. Housing First is geared to only a portion of those who experience homelessness. Community-based organizations have told us they wish to work with governments and funders to provide a continuum of supports and housing options, using a harm-reduction approach, to women and their families. The solutions are within reach, what is required is sustained and focused action — combined with suitable public investment — to remedy these challenges.

100 years after *some* women got the vote in Manitoba, we need to work intensively and persistently to end vulnerabilities for women in our

province. As the largest household expense, it starts with housing. The extreme low vacancy rate for low income housing needs to end with the creation of social housing with supports. In order to end the crisis of homelessness among women more social housing is needed along with targeted supports and coordination amongst governments and community. It is our hope that this report creates a call to action so that we need not have even another year of women’s homelessness in Winnipeg and Manitoba.

Editor’s Note on the term “women”:

Throughout these papers and report we use the general term “women”. In gender terms this generally means “cis” women, that is women who’s biological sex matches their gender identity and those who identify as women in this study as well: trans women. The “Finding Her Home” study included some trans women, however due to limited resources we were not able to reach a significant proportion of trans women. We recommend a study specifically focused on trans women, trans men, two-spirited people, gender-spectrum and non-binary peoples and homelessness. CCPA MB acknowledges that gender is socially constructed and supports further study in order to improve services and access for all women, men, gender-spectrum and non-binary peoples.



Summary of Findings: Women and Homelessness

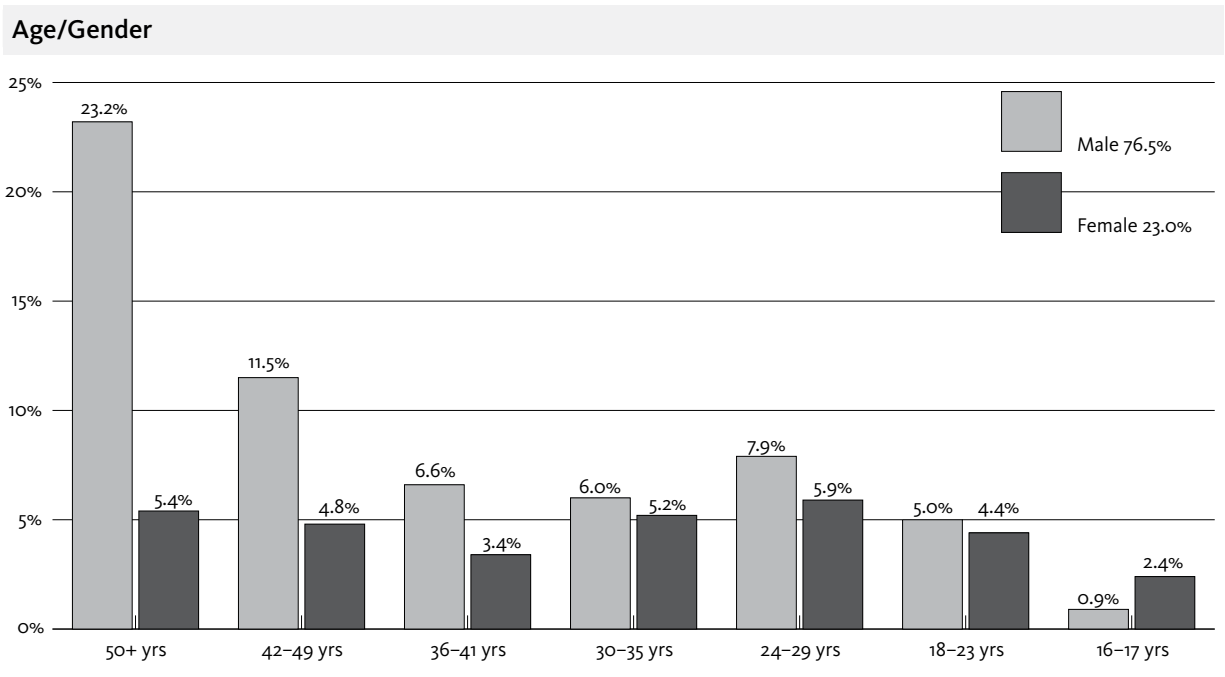
Winnipeg Street Census 2015

The Winnipeg Street Census marks the first ever attempt at a comprehensive view of homelessness in Winnipeg. We sought to ask not only how many people are homeless, but to learn why and to hear their stories. On the night of October 25, 2015, there were at least 1,400 people experiencing homelessness in Winnipeg.

Over 24 hours from October 25-26, 300 volunteers attended, or data was gathered from: 7 emergency, domestic violence and youth shelters,

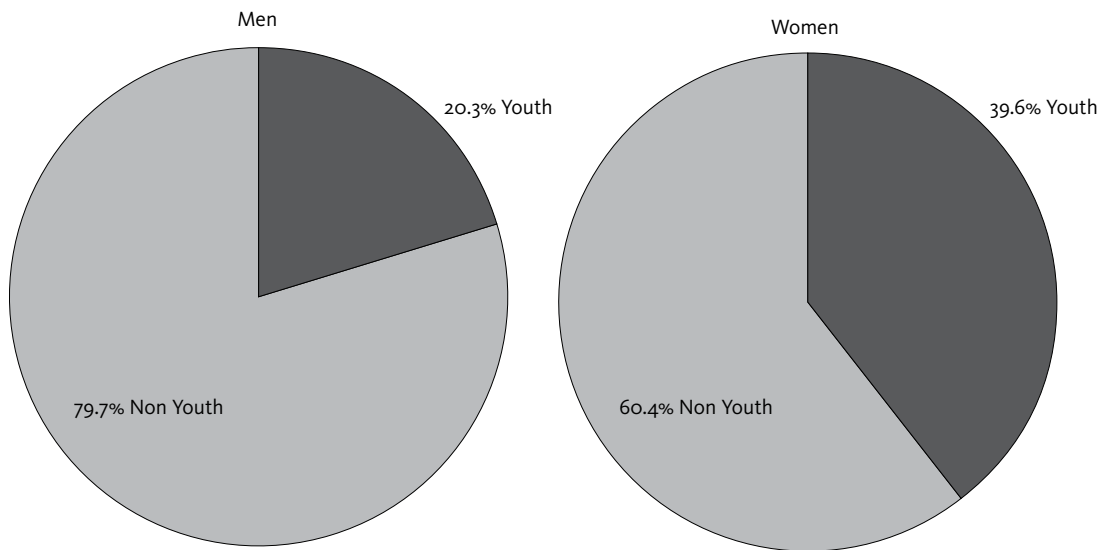
9 transitional housing sites, 10 bottle depots, and 29 community agencies or drop-in locations for Winnipeg's first ever Street Census. Surveyors also walked almost 140km of inner city streets.

For this large-scale survey, everyone encountered was asked about their housing situation to evaluate the magnitude of homelessness in the city. Everyone whose circumstances fit the definition of homelessness was asked to complete a 19 question interview about them and their experiences.

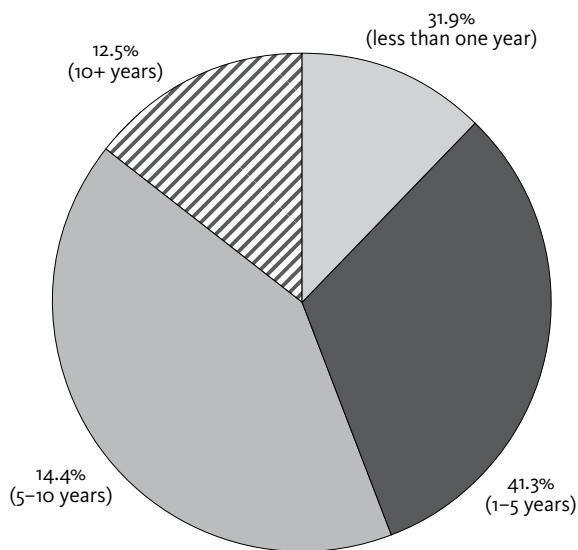


NOTE: 0.25% identified as transgender and 0.25% as two spirit

Youth vs. Non Youth



Length of Time Homeless



This chart represents the length of time women experienced homelessness throughout their lifetime. It compares very closely with the total length of time for men.

However, women tended to have more frequent, but shorter, episodes of homelessness than men.

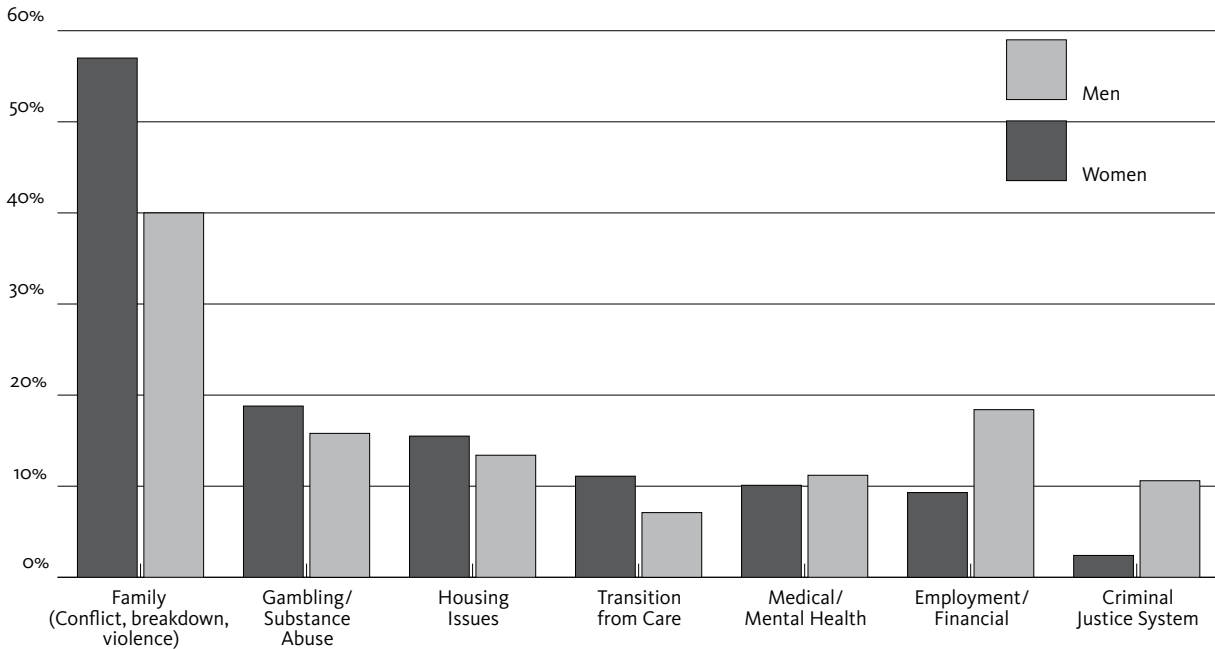
Key Circumstances

41.8% of women reported their main source of income was EIA.

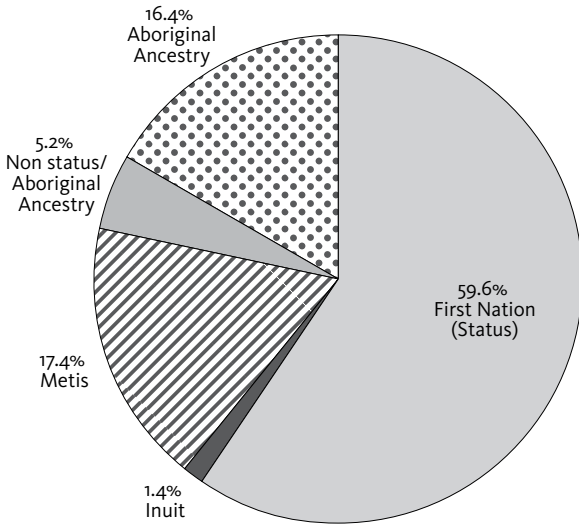
17.5% of women identified as being part of the LGBTQ community, compared to only 6.4% of men.

5.8% of women were pregnant at the time of the survey.

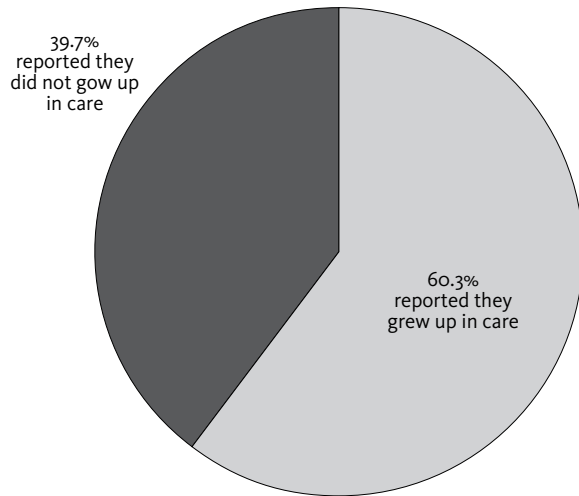
Reasons for First Experience of Homelessness (Participants could select more than one reason.)



Indigeneity



Child and Family Services



31.9% of First Nations women grew up in a **First Nations community**.

83.6% of female respondents identify as **Indigenous**.

60.3% of women reported growing up in **Foster care or Group homes**, and **11.1%** reported becoming homeless when **transitioning from care**.

Finding Her Home: A Gender-Based Analysis of the Homelessness Crisis in Winnipeg

Jenna Drabble

During the winter of 2016–2017, while this research was being conducted, a 53 year-old woman died overnight in minus 32 degree temperatures, frozen to death on the streets of downtown Winnipeg. This tragic and preventable loss serves as a reminder of how Winnipeg is failing to support people who need it the most.

The issue of homelessness in Winnipeg continues to grow in urgency, and in recent years has been the focus of targeted plans and programs in the city. Recognizing the need for a more coordinated response to homelessness, *The Plan to End Homelessness in Winnipeg* was released in 2014. The report outlines a cross-sector plan that was developed through stakeholder consultation with the intention to inspire a shift in strategy from managing the issue of homelessness to ending homelessness. This plan was also informed by the results of the *Winnipeg At Home/Chez Soi* project (MHCC 2014), which provided an unprecedented amount of homelessness data in the city and made a strong case for the effectiveness of Housing First as an approach to addressing homelessness. The *At Home/Chez Soi* project advanced the argument that Housing First is an effective model that can work in any community and for all population sub-groups.

Since *The Plan to End Homelessness* was released, steps have been taken toward implementing a framework for action. One piece of this was the creation of End Homelessness Winnipeg, a new organization with a dedicated focus on carrying out a comprehensive strategy to end homelessness. Support for the Housing First model through the federal Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS) also led to the creation of Doorways, a centralized intake system into Housing First for people experiencing chronic or episodic homelessness. People can access Doorways through partner agencies and through a series of assessments may be accepted into a Housing First program, which provides them with intensive case management and housing support.

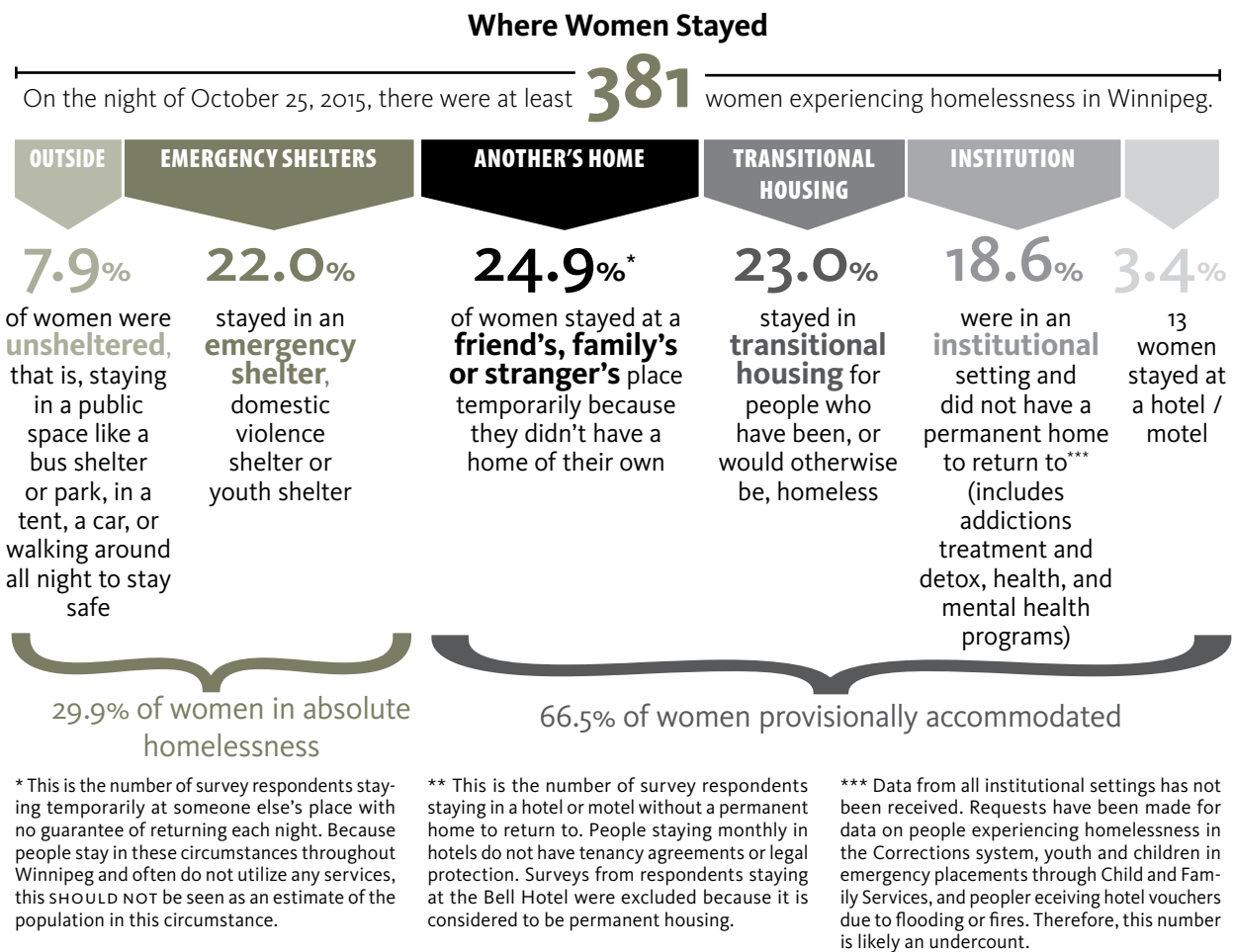
Housing First has gained traction across Canada in recent years, with many communities now favouring this model over more traditional approaches to addressing homelessness. Stock (2016) has raised several concerns about the widespread adoption of Housing First programs, which relate to the challenges of operating these programs in communities with a limited stock of affordable and social housing as well as the fact that population sub-groups, such as women, youth and Indigenous peoples have particular needs and experiences that require a tailored approach. Housing First

programs, he argues, require further high quality research and must be executed as part of a broader comprehensive plan to address homelessness.

Women’s experiences of homelessness are not well understood due to the fact that they are less likely than men to access emergency shelters and as a result their homelessness will not be captured in the data that are collected from shelters (Klodawsky 2009). In 2015, Winnipeg conducted its first ever Street Census (Maes Nino et al 2016), a point-in-time survey that attempted to provide the most comprehensive picture of homelessness in the city to date. The results of this survey revealed that almost 25 percent of the women surveyed were staying in someone else’s home because they did not have a place of their own, counting them among the “hidden homeless” population.

The incidence of hidden homelessness is difficult to measure and is likely higher than these results suggest. Further, as Spring and Klassen (2015: 1) explain, women’s hidden homelessness might include “overcrowding, staying in violent relationships to maintain housing, living in unsuitable or violent situations to maintain custody of one’s children and paying high rents that make other necessities like food, unaffordable.” It is therefore difficult to assess the level of risk or insecurity that women might be facing when their homelessness is hidden. Without better data it is not possible to make accurate estimates about the extent of women’s homelessness or develop informed approaches to dealing with this issue.

According to the Government of Canada (2016), chronic homelessness “refers to individu-



als, often with disabling conditions (e.g. chronic physical or mental illness, substance abuse problems), who are currently homeless and have been homeless for six months or more in the past year (i.e., have spent more than 180 cumulative nights in a shelter or place not fit for human habitation),” and episodic homelessness, which “refers to individuals, often with disabling conditions, who are currently homeless and have experienced three or more episodes of homelessness in the past year (of note, episodes are defined as periods when a person would be in a shelter or place not fit for human habitation, and after at least 30 days, would be back in the shelter or inhabitable location).” Women’s housing advocates have critiqued the terms of these definitions, in particular the requirement that the only “homeless circumstances” that are counted are those in shelter or in a place not fit for human habitation. It is also argued that the way these definitions have been interpreted in local program delivery for Housing First eligibility exclude women’s experiences with homelessness and therefore limit women’s access to housing supports.

The aim of this research project has been to contribute to a better understanding of women’s experiences of homelessness and put forward recommendations for policies and programs focused on addressing women’s housing and support needs. There is much that needs to be learned about women’s pathways into homelessness and the programs, supports and policies that are required.

Methods

The topic of women’s homelessness was identified as an issue for the *State of the Inner City Report* by staff at women’s centres in the community,

who pointed out that 2016 was celebrated as being 100 years since some women got the vote in Manitoba; however, many women continue to experience marginalization, particularly when it comes to housing and homelessness. Guided by an advisory committee made up of community organizations, including End Homelessness Winnipeg, Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Centre, North End Women’s Centre, North Point Douglas Women’s Centre, the Social Planning Council of Winnipeg and West Central Women’s Resource Centre, this project was conceptualized as an opportunity to bring a gender-based analysis to homelessness and housing.

The goal of this study was to better understand the social and economic conditions that contribute to homelessness among women, the supports that are needed for women to find adequate, safe and affordable housing, and how Housing First and other housing strategies can be adapted to better meet the needs of women.¹ We aimed to identify social supports that are working well, gaps in service provision and the impact that system involvement has on housing security. Ultimately the goal is to make key policy recommendations for homelessness prevention and programs tailored to women’s experiences.

Three researchers were hired from the inner city community to conduct the participant interviews. The researchers conducted qualitative interviews with 30 women who either currently or in the past have experiences of homelessness. Interview participants were recruited through partner organizations that shared information about the project with women who visited their programs or accessed their services. These interviews were invaluable in helping us form the recommendations included in this report. We also spoke with

¹For the purposes of best reflecting the spectrum of experiences of inner-city women, as well as best documenting the services available to them and their barriers to housing, this research included trans, cis and two-spirit women. We recognize the unique barriers experienced by these groups and that their experiences of barriers will differ on the basis of other identity features as well. We strongly recommend additional research be done to focus on the particular needs and experiences of trans and two-spirit women in Winnipeg, which, in particular, have not yet been explored in enough depth.

13 key informants who included staff from organizations involved in housing and/or homelessness.

The women we interviewed were between the ages of 22 and 66, with the median age being 42. The majority of interview participants identified as Indigenous (Aboriginal ancestry, First Nation and Metis). Four identified as white/European ancestry and one identified as Black/African-Canadian. Of the women we spoke to, at the time of the interview 12 were homeless (sleeping outside, staying in a shelter or couch surfing with family, friends or acquaintances). Many of the women we interviewed were currently in private housing or rooming houses. Most women were receiving Employment and Income Assistance (EIA), EIA disability, or pension. Many of the women we spoke with had recently moved, with the majority of women having moved at least three times in the past three years.

We asked participants about their current housing situation and housing history, their strategies to find housing, systems involvement (Employment and Income Assistance, Child and Family Services, corrections, addictions and mental health), supports that they have accessed in the community, survival strategies and their hopes for the future. Participants were also asked about what supports are missing that would be helpful in order for women to escape homelessness and obtain adequate housing. Key informants were asked about their experiences working with women facing housing challenges, the barriers that women face in obtaining housing and their recommendations for how to adapt programs and policies to better meet women's needs.

The findings, outlined below, provide some insight into how women experience homelessness in Winnipeg. Through an analysis of the interviews with participants and key informants, we were able to identify some of the common barriers to housing and pathways to homelessness among women, the programs and strategies that are helping to address these issues, and areas where there are gaps in support. Quotes are used

in the findings to illustrate themes that were frequently addressed by interview participants and to make it possible for their voices to be heard.

Many of the women we spoke to had experiences that would fall into the realm of hidden homelessness, which included staying with friends and strangers, or simply avoiding formal services. These experiences were overwhelmingly marked by fear, uncertainty and stress, and participants described the adverse impacts that homelessness has had on their mental and physical health. Interviews with participants and key informants illustrated a number of different pathways to homelessness and barriers to securing housing for women.

Through this research it became clear that the lack of social and affordable housing and prevalence of sub-standard low income rental housing in the city is of particular concern because this is both a pathway to homelessness for women when they are forced to leave unsafe housing as well as a barrier to housing security when they are unable to find housing that meets their needs, thus creating cycles of housing precarity. Social housing is rental housing where the rent is subsidized by government and geared to the income of tenants (RGI) and in affordable housing the rent is set at the median market rent in the city. The vacancy rate for low-rent housing in Winnipeg is considerably lower than the vacancy rate for the most expensive housing in the city, meaning that those most in need of affordable housing have the hardest time finding a decent place to rent (Brandon 2014). The private market is not meeting the needs of low-income families and individuals with multiple barriers.

Other themes included systems involvement and discrimination in the housing sector. These findings highlight the important role of community organizations in providing housing support, advocacy and a sense of community for women, as well as the ways in which some programs and policies inadvertently have a negative impact on women's housing security. The results from our interviews help to demonstrate the need for a

gender-based analysis in homelessness program and policy development. These findings have particular relevance in terms of how Winnipeg moves forward with the implementation of Housing First programs, as a gender-based analysis of homelessness helps to reveal some of the ways in which women can be better served by housing interventions.

Findings

Women's Experiences of Homelessness

Interview participants described many different experiences of homelessness — some had experienced homelessness for weeks or months, others for years. These experiences included both “hidden homelessness”, meaning that women were staying in other people’s homes or places where their homelessness would not be easily detectable, as well as “absolute homelessness”, which includes staying in emergency shelters or sleeping rough. For some, homelessness and precarious housing was a current reality, while others identified their current housing as somewhat secure. Most women described some experience of couch surfing, which ranged from staying in relatively stable situations with family to staying wherever they could, even if it was at a stranger’s place. Couch surfing, it should be noted, is an unsuitable living situation no matter the context because it means that the household is overcrowded (Brandon and Peters 2014). In most situations there was no guarantee of housing stability. Some had spent whole days walking around, either looking for a place to stay for the upcoming night or because they weren’t able to be at the place they were staying during the day. As one participant stated:

It was really unsafe on the street... it wasn't a joke at all, it was just really unsafe. You go to bed at night you just don't know where you are going to sleep... you have to go with strangers just to go sleep at their place, just to have a bed

at night and sometimes you don't even have a place to sleep and you stay up all night and you walk around.

Another participant, who stayed with a number of different families and friends, described how even though she was staying with family, she had no sense of stability or comfort:

I stayed with one family member, my cousin, for a month and after that I went and stayed with one of my children for two months and after that I would stay with another of my children for a month and a half and I would go like this. I stayed with my friend one time for a couple of weeks and it was like that, all the time moving around because they get tired of you and... your welcome became a burden. Even [with] my children.

Some of the participants we spoke to had stayed in an emergency shelter such as Siloam Mission, Main Street Project or Salvation Army; however, many interview participants stated that emergency shelters were unsafe and they would avoid them if possible.

Single women especially talked about how it was difficult to find support as most programs and services were targeted toward women escaping domestic violence or women with children.

All participants described an overall negative impact that homelessness had on their health and well being, including weight loss, a lack of proper or sufficient nutrition, exhaustion, exacerbation of mental health issues such as depression and anxiety, and the inability to think about anything beyond meeting their most basic needs. Many participants described the all-consuming effect that these experiences had on their lives and how this made it difficult to think about how to find housing stability or make any plans for the future. As one participant described:

I'm too busy trying to find a place to stay the night, so it consumes most of my day just trying to find a place to stay for the night. So by the time I do secure a place then most of the

[organizations] to get help are closed, so then I feel like I don't have enough time in the day to get help because I'm too busy looking for a place to stay.

Women who had children in their care while they were homeless described feeling stressed out and worried about not having a safe place to go with their children. A few talked about feeling fear and stress that Child and Family Services (CFS) would apprehend their children. One participant, a newcomer to Canada, explained that when she arrived in Canada she was taught to fear CFS by others in her community. The experience of becoming homeless exacerbated this fear and took a serious toll on her mental and physical health:

In [the SonRise Village] shelter I was afraid. Like, oh my god, CFS is going to come take my kids, you know?

Participants described the destabilizing influence of homelessness on their lives. As many women lost or had to leave their housing suddenly and experienced transience, they also lost many of their belongings, including their identification and household items. This means that not only are women dealing with stress of homelessness, but also that they are often starting from scratch in terms of re-establishing housing security.

I'm too busy trying to find a place to stay the night, so it consumes most of my day just trying to find a place to stay for the night. So by the time I do secure a place then most of the [organizations] to get help are closed, so then I feel like I don't have enough time in the day to get help because I'm too busy looking for a place to stay.

Key informants talked about how in many situations women's homelessness is hidden from their family, friends or service providers because women are not accessing services and instead staying in other people's homes or places where their homelessness is less detectable. Women

may be more incentivized to hide homelessness out of safety concerns for themselves or potentially their children. Louis Sorin, the CEO of End Homelessness Winnipeg, stated that this could obscure the data on women's homelessness and affect the way that interventions are designed:

Women are not always counted in that category of high intensity [homelessness] and they are not hitting the radar... If you're looking at individuals who are chronic, or frequent episodes of homelessness, women don't always fall into the data. They purposely stay out of the data because if they have kids, they lose their kids. They tolerate bad situations.

Key informants also told us that creating a distinction between "hidden" and "absolute" homelessness is not a helpful way to look at the situation or develop the appropriate strategies to address homelessness. As Christina Maes Nino from the Social Planning Council explained, people's experiences of homelessness do not fit into neat categories and are not necessarily easy to identify:

[Homelessness] is hard to categorize. Anyone experiencing homelessness tries to stay hidden [as part of] their survival strategy. Even if they are staying outside, they are wandering around... One of the women surveyed from the [2015] Street Census said she spent the night at Subway. Just sitting there, right. It might not be obvious that that person is experiencing homelessness. And women in particular are very skilled at hiding their homelessness.

Categorizing homelessness can also have the effect of creating a false ranking of the severity of people's experiences, with hidden homelessness being treated less seriously than staying in a shelter or on the street. Key informants emphasized the need to understand homelessness through a lens that takes into account the fact that women will often avoid shelters due to fear for their safety, even when the alternative is not necessarily safer in reality. As Lisa Spring from

Hidden homelessness should be considered homelessness. It's gendered... women don't have a "choice" of going to a shelter or staying in an unsafe place. It's not a real choice, it's a false choice. But women are placed in that position of choosing the devil you know versus the devil you don't.

West Central Women's Resource Centre explained, using a gender analysis helps us to more accurately understand women's vulnerability:

Hidden homelessness should be considered homelessness. It's gendered... women don't have a "choice" of going to a shelter or staying in an unsafe place. It's not a real choice, it's a false choice. But women are placed in that position of choosing the devil you know versus the devil you don't.

Betty Edel, a Community Access Worker at the Doorways program, similarly suggested that hidden homelessness could mean that women are forced into dangerous situations and are facing a particular risk due to their tendency to avoid emergency services:

I think there's a misconception, you know, that if people are couch surfing in some way they are better off than people in shelters. But what I'm finding with women [who are] couch surfing is that women are staying in a violent relationships longer, that women are being taken advantage of to clean people's houses [or] to do child care for nothing every day. They are trading sex for a place to stay. And all of that horribleness is hidden.

Interviews with participants and key informants showed that women's experiences of homelessness could be heavily influenced by fear of the shelter system and other factors that might motivate them to stay off the radar of social service providers. This can make it difficult for service providers to know what risks women are facing

in their homelessness or what kind of support might be needed. Women's experiences of homelessness are highly oriented around daily survival and the constant search for places to stay, making it difficult for them to think about anything beyond their most basic needs.

Survival Strategies

The strength and resilience of women was a prominent theme throughout the interviews we conducted with participants. Participants described surviving physical and emotional abuse, violence, racism, constant fear, mental health struggles and prolonged uncertainty about where they were going to stay from day to day and how they would keep themselves safe. They described dealing with the stress of these situations while having children in their care or with few supports in their lives. It must be recognized that the very task of surviving these experiences, not to mention navigating complex systems and trying to attain housing security, requires a high level of resourcefulness.

The women we spoke to told us about their different survival strategies while living in precarious housing or on the street, including methods of physical protection and the ways that they support their mental and emotional well-being. Many participants had experiences of living in unsafe and substandard housing, and described what they did to feel safer, including having friends stay over or staying with friends or family instead of at home. Many women talked about keeping a weapon on hand when there weren't proper locks on the door of their apartments. When living on the street, participants had to be resourceful and spent a lot of time walking around in order to find food or to stay warm and avoid being bothered by anyone. Participants talked about finding places to go at night, such as Tim Hortons, where they would feel safer. One participant explained her survival strategy while living on the street:

There was just instinct, trying to find someplace to sleep. Survival in the street was hard. Trying to look crazy. Trying to look crazier and mean and so nobody will take advantage of you.

Most participants talked about experiencing violence or abuse at some point in their lives and some spoke about how this trauma had taught them to be tough and independent. One participant stated:

One thing that I realized about myself is that I am a strong individual. I'm not talking physically, I'm talking emotionally. Society taught me to be strong. When I think of how I think of grew up in different foster homes and the abuse that took place, I had to grow up strong.

For some women, who found it necessary to be independent as part of their survival strategy, it was difficult to ask for help, even when they were without a safe place to live. Several of the women we interviewed had adult children or family members in the city but explained that

There was just instinct, trying to find someplace to sleep. Survival in the street was hard. Trying to look crazy. Trying to look crazier and mean and so nobody will take advantage of you.

they would not consider reaching out for help, either out of pride or to protect their family from what they were experiencing. For participants, this meant that they had fewer supports available to them while contending with homelessness. Several participants described their reluctance to reach out to family or access services:

[When I was homeless] I was trying to be all proud, eh. I have a hard time asking for help you know. Like asking my family—I have 9 sisters. They are all married and stuff and I'm the only single one. So yeah, they are all well-to-do but I don't like asking for help.

I would not go to my kids and say, "this is what I'm doing to survive". Because as a parent I

cannot do that to my kids. I would be abusing them by telling them stuff like that. And the way they look at their mother would change. And I can't have that.

I didn't ask [for help]. I was ashamed of my situation. And I was angry. This shouldn't have happened to me you know, I went through university, there should be a job for me you know? And I don't drink, I don't smoke, I don't do drugs. I don't do anything. I'm trying to survive.

The transition from being transient or homeless to being housed is not necessarily easy, as sometimes women's only support networks are rooted within the homeless community. As one participant explained, she didn't want to lose touch with her friends even though she now has her own housing:

I do not want to forget them and don't want to be a snob or stuck up that I'm better than them now, because we're all friends and families around the community. They helped me survive out there, like maybe by the river, walking around at night, showing me how to shelter myself when it was a cold night. So with all due respect I just would feed them sometimes, my friends that are out there. I love them, you know.

Maintaining these relationships can have a negative influence on women's lives and housing security; however, it is not easy to sever these ties. One participant explained how hard she worked to overcome addictions and find stability in her life after being homeless for several years:

When you lose your first family, your kids and stuff like that, you turn to [other people on the street] and that's your family, right? It's not a good, healthy family but they are there for you and stuff like that. I got into housing and got into programs but I still wanted to be by my friends and every time I would go to my friends I ended up using a little bit and I have to stop that. It was hard at first but I did a lot

of programs... to be where I am today. It was really hard. I couldn't give up, I couldn't give up. If I failed the first time I went to a program, I knew I had to do another program. So I just kept trying and trying and now I get to see my kids once a month.

Participants talked about finding inner strength and drawing on faith and prayer to cope with stress and uncertainty. One participant talked about how after experiencing abuse, racism, and the effects of colonization early in life, reconnecting with her Indigenous culture has helped in healing from trauma:

I was in the Manitoba Youth Centre because I was pretty violent and suicidal... I was molested by my foster dad or whatever and they used to brain wash us that powwows and smudging was devil worshipping. So when I got into the Manitoba Youth Centre... they actually started introducing me to sweet grass and all the medicine, so I was curious... The more I was learning about the medicinal, the Red Road they call it, the cultural, the more I started getting to know my spirit name, my colours and my clan, and it helped me through my healing journey.

While many of the women we spoke to accessed services and programs in the community that provided critical supports, their strategies and personal resolve to keep going have been a key part of their survival.

Pathways Into Homelessness

Substandard housing and negligent/absentee landlords were strong themes when women talked about how they became homeless. This included unsafe living standards and infestations of bed bugs, mice or cockroaches. Some talked about the landlord not turning the heat on in the winter. Several women described the experience of not having a proper lock on their door and the landlord refusing to fix it. Many of

these experiences were in privately run rooming houses or hotels. Living in these situations had serious negative impacts on participants' mental health and well-being. Several participants described living in housing not fit for human habitation. One participant described several experiences of moving into run-down rental properties and having to leave soon after due to health and safety concerns. At the time of the interview, she explained that she was looking for a new place for her family because the house she was living in was falling apart:

The house I'm living in right now there is going to be condemned. I was supposed to be there with my kids but they're all at their dad's because the floor kinda sunk in. The ceiling upstairs fell on my daughter.

Another participant spoke about rampant pest infestations, which is an epidemic in the city that has been documented in other research (Lyons and Comack 2015):

I was at Manitoba Housing, and they had a bad infestation of bed bugs. And I couldn't sleep. I never got any sleep the whole night. That's how bad it was. So I went to the Salvation Army and stayed a year there. They had bed bug infestation there as well.

Women also became homeless through the actions of other people. A few participants talked about having roommates who skipped out on the rent, leaving them owing money and eventually being evicted, which resulted in them having arrears as well as a bad rental history. As one participant explained:

I had a roommate and we were going halfers on rent and when she moved out on me I didn't know about it, they actually had the sheriffs kick me out, like literally threw me out of my apartment because I didn't know there was rent owing on it. That's what kind of screwed up my credit and getting in any place with any property.

Many participants had experience living with roommates out of necessity, as this is a more affordable housing option. One participant explained that this can come with risks, particularly if there is not much of a pre-existing relationship with a roommate:

If you really don't know whoever it is you are moving in with, you don't know what they are going through at the time, so whatever they are dealing with you might end up dealing with the backlash or whatever.

Complaints from neighbours as well as the actions of their guests were also listed as causes of eviction. Some women said that they did not know their rights as a tenant at the time and felt that their evictions were unjust. One participant explained:

I don't even know how I got evicted last time. Someone complained and the landlord evicted me, but it was a wrongful eviction. I moved... because I was going to move out anyways because that place was cold and mice were already in the cupboards.

I was at Manitoba Housing, and they had a bad infestation of bed bugs. And I couldn't sleep. I never got any sleep the whole night. That's how bad it was. So I went to the Salvation Army and stayed a year there. They had bed bug infestation there as well.

Another participant shared:

I complained [to the landlord] about it being too cold in the winter and he told me I should just go find someone to keep me warm. Well that's not what I'm looking for, I said, I'm looking for heat. And he gave me a five-day notice to move out because he didn't want to turn up the heat I guess.

Traumatic events also contributed to women developing addictions and struggles with mental health with little support, which put them on

a path to homelessness. Participants listed the death of their partner, the apprehension of their children and divorce as catalysts for becoming homeless. One participant talked about the loss of key supports in her life and how this resulted in self-medicating:

After my daughter moved out and my partner died and my mom passed as well... I was all alone at home, you know. And then I just had started drinking more and using more. Not drugs at the time but I was drinking more.

The women we interviewed described several different pathways that led to their homelessness, including having to leave substandard or poorly managed housing and having nowhere to go, being evicted due to the actions of others and experiencing a downward spiral in their lives after a traumatic event.

Another major pathway was through their involvement with systems, which is described in the following section.

System Involvement

Involvement with systems such as Employment and Income Assistance (EIA), Child and Family Services (CFS) and the justice system is linked to homelessness and precarious housing in a number of ways. Many of our interview participants talked about becoming involved with systems at a young age as youth in foster care. Aging out of foster care has been identified as a common pathway into homelessness among youth, and a risk factor for long-term homelessness among adults (Maes Nino and Godoy 2016). Indeed, for some of the women we interviewed their first experience of homelessness was after they aged out of government care. Key informants expressed serious concern about this issue as the number of youth in care continues to climb and exit plans do not sufficiently prepare youth for the transition out of the system. Christina Keeper from Eagle Urban Transition Centre made the connection between Canada's residential school his-

tory and the current failures of CFS to protect Indigenous families:

There are so many kids aging out of CFS right now and... I'm afraid that these kids coming out of CFS now are going to be the next generation on the street. Right now the people on the street have been failed by systems like residential schools. It's kind of that generation right now. And I'm afraid the next generation will be failed by the CFS system, and they will become homeless because they are not prepared to live independently.

Transitioning between or out of any system can make women housing insecure, as there are often not adequate supports in place to ensure that women have the resources to obtain housing before exiting a system. Key informants and participants raised the example of the justice system, as involvement with this system can lead to the loss of housing. There is often not an adequate housing plan in place when women are released and they can end up being dropped off at an emergency shelter. As one participant noted:

They don't offer you any resources in jail to help [women] find places. That would be a really big help if they help women get those resources in jail, before they get out because you get out and you got nowhere to go but Siloam Mission. And if you're not there at a particular time... they have more male beds than females. So if I don't make in that line early enough then I miss out on a bed to sleep for the night then I have to sleep outside, or I have to search for a friend's place. But if they had those resources in jail for me then it would be better than I could start working on you know doing searching because they do provide access to phones and stuff.

Christina Maes Nino explained that this is a common problem, as systems are generally not designed to consider housing security:

When someone's leaving adult corrections, or a place like a detox program, or if it's a short-term

addictions treatment, generally the exit plan looks at a whole bunch of things. Maybe it looks at income... if it's justice, it's looking at how not to reoffend. If it's addictions, it's looking at how not to relapse. But often it doesn't look at how to be housed, which you would think would be a key component but it's not quite there. It's not always a priority.

Through our interviews with key informants and participants, it became clear that the more systems involved in women's lives, the more at risk they are of homelessness. One example, which was brought up by several participants, is the experience of having a child apprehended by CFS leading to the immediate loss of some or all of the housing allowance provided by EIA. This caused several interview participants to lose their housing:

The day I lost my kids, that's the day I was homeless, when I lost my kids. And I was homeless for a couple years.

They came in and took my kids and everything was seized. All the cheques for the rent stopped. I had nowhere to go.

It is important to recognize that the experience of having a child apprehended is deeply traumatic for parents, and an absence of support in this situation can trigger a downward spiral in women's lives, making it even more difficult to navigate systems or take the steps required to get children back from CFS. Two participants explained how the loss of their children led to their struggles with addictions:

I started to go downhill because when they take your kid away from you, they don't have resources for mothers to go to, you know, for what they are going through. And what [mothers] do is they keep doing drugs because they can't get over it, it's too hard on them. They don't let you see your kids, they don't let you do nothing and so you just want to forget about it

and you get into drugs, right? And I still kept seeing [my kids] and [having] all my visits, but for a while I was going back to jail for boosting for my habit.

I just lost my kids to CFS so I basically lost everything that I have had when I had my kids eh. And I started going in, I don't know, the wrong direction. Being on the streets, using drugs, drinking lots, and you know I was healthy at one time when I wasn't on dialysis... I would just drink to kill the pain.

The day I lost my kids, that's the day I was homeless, when I lost my kids. And I was homeless for a couple years.

The experience of becoming homeless makes it very difficult for mothers to reunify with their children, as CFS requires that they first secure housing with an adequate number of bedrooms for their children. This becomes a catch-22 situation, as EIA will typically only increase a housing allowance once children are returned to their parent's care or a reunification plan has been established. One participant shared her experience:

I have been trying to get my daughter back for the longest time but the money that you get from EIA is not that much and it's not enough to live in a safe, stable environment, you know. And that's what is making the process longer.

The sudden loss of EIA can happen in other ways, and some interview participants described losing their housing or becoming housing insecure after being cut off by EIA, experiencing a long delay in receiving benefits or not being eligible for EIA. As Christina Maes Nino explained, women may not understand why they have stopped receiving EIA or know how to talk to their workers about this issue:

Being cut off [EIA] for various reasons is pretty common. In focus groups with women we have

asked about EIA, and a lot of people say, "I just didn't get my cheque one day and I didn't know why and I didn't know what to do about it", and the rent's not paid and they get evicted. So that's pretty common, getting cut off of EIA, particularly for young women, they say, "I didn't know what to do".

One reason that women may lose their benefits is due to not complying with the criteria set by EIA, which includes attending programs that are designed to transition people into employment. One participant spoke about how her ongoing mental health struggles were interfering with her program attendance and how this made her anxious about being cut off of EIA and becoming homeless again:

[My Housing First worker and I] are trying hard to not get me cut off welfare and I go through that anxiety because there is a huge expectation that welfare wants from us a lot of times. And it's like taking certain programs, trying to get a job, and it's very hard for us to get a job in the city because you know I'm triple minority. One I'm a woman, two I'm Aboriginal, and three I have a disability.

Certain policies within systems can also put women at a disadvantage where housing is concerned. One participant explained that EIA would not approve her application because she refused to share a budget with her partner at the time:

[When I became unable to work] I tried to go to social assistance and at that time they told me that my partner would have to come down and bring all his papers and such into social services. I could not agree with that because of the fact that even though we have been together now for 14 years, we were not together all the time... I can't live under somebody else's thumb. I always paid my own way and I'll continue to do that. And if it means sleeping outside some more I'll continue to do that too.

This policy of EIA requiring couples that are considered common-law to be on a shared budget can make women more vulnerable, as Lisa Spring explained:

What that [policy] does is it forces women to be subservient to men in their budget so the man then controls the money, as the women are unable to have their own budget... It just creates dependency, and it's unnecessary to be dependent especially when maybe they're young, or maybe they have had an on and off relationship and she doesn't want to end it but she knows it's not good for her to be living with him full time right? So you have these women being smart in their relationships and EIA cutting their legs out from under them. That happens regularly in the [HOMES program at West Central Women's Resource Centre].

System involvement was a common pathway into homelessness for interview participants, as well as a barrier to obtaining adequate housing.

The following section explains some of the common barriers that women experienced when trying to find or maintain housing.

Barriers to Housing

Unaffordable and Sub-standard Housing

Once women become homeless, there are a number of barriers that get in the way of restoring stability in their lives. The most prevalent barrier is the lack of affordable and social housing in the city. The poor condition of housing in inner-city Winnipeg is well documented in *Poor Housing: A Silent Crisis* (Brandon and Silver 2015) which identifies several issues with the housing stock in Winnipeg's low income housing market, including rampant bed bug infestations (Lyons and Comack 2015), deteriorating rooming houses that do not meet basic living standards (Lottis and McCracken 2015), negligent or absentee landlords and racism/discrimination against Indigenous tenants, particularly low-income women

with children (Gotthilf and Stavem 2015). The vacancy rate for the cheapest quartile of housing in the city is 0.9%, and even lower for apartments with three or more bedrooms (Brandon 2014).

Based on the interviews with participants, a trend emerged that most were living or had experience living in unstable and substandard housing, which made them vulnerable to homelessness. In this way, substandard housing functions both as a pathway to homelessness as well as a barrier to housing, as low-income women face challenges finding and securing housing that is affordable and meets their needs.

Almost all of the women we spoke to were on social assistance and all had a limited income, which restricts their options in the existing housing market. The gap between the rental allowance provided by EIA and the cost of housing in the city was identified by many participants:

EIA said they will give me like \$533 [for an apartment], but it's so hard to find a place for that much and I'll still have to come up with an extra couple hundred dollars for a decent apartment.

My budget needs to be more. I am allowed \$ 528 for rent through EIA but it's \$650 to \$ 800 for one bedroom.

Some of the women we spoke to explained that the gap between their income and their rent forced them to find other ways to supplement their income, including through work in the sex trade or dealing drugs. Some spoke about having to spend most of their food budget on rent, and having to visit places scattered throughout the city for free meals and groceries.

Most key informants also pointed to housing supply as being at the forefront of the challenges faced by women in securing affordable, safe and adequate housing. Cynthia Drebot, director of the North End Women's Centre, stated:

The main challenge is availability. There isn't really a lot available especially within the price

range. Many women [we work with] are on EIA. So to be able to do it for the rate it is being covered, to find a place, it's almost literally next to impossible.

Annetta Armstrong, the director of the Native Women's Transition Centre, explained that women who enter their transitional housing program are finally able to achieve stability and support, often having escaped exploitative and abusive situations, only to have to eventually leave the program and enter a housing market that cannot provide them with safety or security:

[Some women] don't want to leave because they are comfortable and they get connected to the community... and finally feel supported. And then you move into low income housing that EIA will pay for, that you know is bed bug infested, or sub-par living. [Suitable housing] is hard to find. The local market for low-income housing is small, and getting smaller.

The main challenge is availability. There isn't really a lot available especially within the price range. Many women [we work with] are on EIA. So to be able to do it for the rate it is being covered, to find a place, it's almost literally next to impossible.

Similar challenges exist within any program or system where people are expected to transition quickly to their own housing, including domestic violence shelters, which have a maximum stay of 30 days. Lesley Lindberg, the Executive Director of Willow Place women's domestic violence shelter explained that if case workers are not able to establish a housing plan for women during the course of their stay at the shelter and women do not want to move to an emergency shelter such as the Salvation Army, they will likely end up couch surfing in overcrowded housing or returning to their abusers, both situations that would be considered precarious and unsafe. This also increases the chances of women falling off the

radar of social services as their homelessness becomes hidden.

Through Housing First, participants who qualify for the program are eligible to receive a supplement to their rental allowance, presumably enabling more choice in the type and location of their housing, one of the basic tenants of the Housing First philosophy. In practice, participants in Housing First programs must work hard to find suitable housing and still have limited options even with the rental supplement. Lisa Spring identified the challenge of managing their Housing First program budget while trying to help participants secure housing that meets their basic needs:

We're allowed to give up to \$200 in rent supplement [to each participant], but our global budget in the program doesn't allow us to give that to everybody. [If we did] we would run out of money in our budget, so we have to be kind of selective.... So there is incentive to not use the full housing supplement, but at the same time the rental market is such that it's really difficult for women to find safe housing without spending that much on the private market. So it's a bit of a juggle for us to offer women everything we possibly can to improve housing security while not blowing our funding basically.

For women not participating in a Housing First program and not receiving the rental supplement, housing options tend to be limited to ho-

There was no lock on the door for over a month and a half. I was really paranoid and terrified that somebody would come in, and I would hear people coming in and out of that place all night long. So I put a knife in the door to keep it more secure... and I felt a little better but I didn't feel safe then because you never know.

tel rooms, rooming houses or substandard housing — options that come with safety concerns, as we heard from many of the participants we in-

interviewed. Several participants described similar experiences living in apartments without a proper lock on the door, and not being able to get their landlord to make the necessary repairs. As a result, women felt unsafe in their own homes and took measures to protect themselves. Most had some kind of weapon on hand out of fear that people would try to enter their apartment. One participant explained:

There was no lock on the door for over a month and a half. I was really paranoid and terrified that somebody would come in, and I would hear people coming in and out of that place all night long. So I put a knife in the door to keep it more secure... and I felt a little better but I didn't feel safe then because you never know.

Another common concern was the infestation of bed bugs and other pests that are prevalent in housing that is not well maintained but is some of the only housing that is available to individuals living on a low income (Lyons and Comack 2015). One participant commented that she would rather be homeless and sleeping outside than living in pest-infested housing:

If I'm on social assistance then they won't even accept my [housing] application or they don't even want to. And if it's a place for me to rent, then it's not suitable to live in. It's a slum landlord, they have places that are infested with bugs or mice or stuff like that so that's why I don't have a place because a lot of places do have a lot of mice and bed bugs... and I don't feel safe there too. I'd rather sleep outside with a group of people than rent one of those places.

Discrimination

Participants also cited discrimination based on income, race and gender as a barrier to housing. Many participants, including the woman quoted above, reported having their applications rejected by landlords due to the fact that they were receiving EIA. One participant noted the

discrimination she experienced from landlords due to the fact that she was homeless:

[Housing applications] are very difficult and so much information, it's like applying for a job. Or they want credit and when you tell them you're homeless, right away they don't allow you... Lots of people frown on it, they don't take you if you're homeless or they want people who are working, people who have set incomes — when you're single and homeless, I don't know, it's the worst place to be, I think.

Other participants addressed the added racial discrimination they experience from landlords for being Indigenous and receiving EIA. They spoke about feeling judged when applying for housing, the feeling of being watched closely by landlords or having false accusations made about them and the feeling that they were expected to live in run-down, unlivable housing because they are Indigenous. Participants talked about the unfairness of not being given a chance by landlords who made assumptions about them based on their identity. One participant explained:

[Landlords think], "Native woman, not good. She's going to be trouble"... I get kinda angry and because they don't want to give you a chance. But on paper you look good right, because I have my Bachelors of Nursing and I have been at work. You know. But it doesn't matter what you look like on paper, it matters what you look like on your face.

Another shared:

[At one apartment] I had a viewing, that's when one of the guys kept saying like, "I don't want parties here because all our other tenants are like you guys." Like, the way he said "you guys." Meaning probably us Natives because he was going off about how all these people are always partying and stuff, thinking I was going to live there and party all the time... I said I don't even drink anymore. And he still wouldn't give me a chance.

Gender-based discrimination is also a concern. Many of the key informants we spoke to acknowledged that transgender or two-spirit women experience stigma that can make them more vulnerable if they are homeless or precariously housed. Christina Maes Nino explained that trans women may feel particularly unsafe in the shelter system:

Landlords think], “Native woman, not good. She’s going to be trouble”... I get kinda angry and because they don’t want to give you a chance. But on paper you look good right, because I have my Bachelors of Nursing and I have been at work. You know. But it doesn’t matter what you look like on paper, it matters what you look like on your face.

At Salvation Army, [trans or cis] women get their own room instead of staying on a mat on the floor. That doesn’t mean that they are safe in the building. There is transphobia, people will beat people up, they will assault people, and there is only so much the staff can do, especially once people leave the building. They might try to intervene, but their capacity is limited, they can’t be everywhere all the time.

Transphobia also exists in the rental market. Lisa Spring stated that through her work with the HOMES Program at West Central Women’s Resource Centre, she has seen trans women experience more difficulty securing housing:

[There is more] discrimination in the rental market for trans people. We have heard some pretty terrible stories about that. People just discriminate when somebody presents in a way that isn’t what people are used to, so [we hear about] straight up discrimination by landlords not wanting to rent to trans individuals.

One participant, a trans woman, recounted one experience of several where landlords rejected her housing application based on her gender identity:

[After] I decided to transition last year... I had gone once to rent a place and as soon as I got

there [they said] “somebody came along and rented the suite since we last talked.” That’s telling me that you don’t want me there, and it’s sad that people look at us with fear I guess. Or disgust. Like, I encounter people that will, you know, make a comment about me and about my appearance and I try as best as I can not to show that I have been hurt by the encounter but I come home and yeah, it’s there.

Rental Histories, Damage Deposits and Identification

Many participants identified their lack of rental references and poor rental histories as being barriers to finding housing. The experience of being evicted from an apartment, for example, became part of a cycle of precarious housing in which women found themselves “blacklisted” and it became difficult to find anything other than poorly managed, substandard or unsafe housing.

Some participants noted that access to a damage deposit was a problem. EIA typically only provides one damage deposit for an individual in their lifetime, so if a tenant cannot get their deposit refunded, they struggle to save up for another one. Landlords will often retain a tenant’s damage deposits if she is evicted or there is damage to the apartment. Several of the women we interviewed spoke about losing their damage deposit either when there was no cause for the landlord to retain it, or damage was caused by people in the building, such as broken doors or windows.

Participants also identified a need for financial assistance for items such as education and training or criminal record checks to secure employment and have access to better housing. Participants frequently mentioned that they do not find EIA workers helpful, that workers withheld information from them or don’t return their calls, that workers are inexperienced and constant staff turnover makes it impossible to establish relationships. Some women spoke about how

they feel there is a strong emphasis on attending programs and getting into the workforce but no acknowledgement of the barriers that exist including a lack of education, history of trauma, mental health struggles and lack of secure jobs that pay a decent wage.

The experience of becoming homeless often means that women lose most of their belongings, particularly if they have to leave their housing suddenly, such as in the case of an eviction or escaping violence. Some of the women we spoke to talked about losing all of their identification through the process of bouncing around between different locations while couch surfing and/or sleeping outside. The cost of replacing household items as well as identification is difficult to manage on a low income and some of the women we spoke to were struggling to pull together the resources needed to accomplish this, which created more barriers to obtaining housing. As one participant explained:

[If] I could have a picture ID, I could have a better chance of getting a place because I don't have no ID whatsoever and [I've] just been using my medical card.

Annetta Armstrong also explained that a lack of identification is a barrier to accessing subsidies from Manitoba Housing for the women living at Native Women's Transition Centre:

Manitoba Housing will subsidize us if [our residents] give us their last year of income tax, all their IDs, and all this information that women who are transient or at risk of being homeless generally don't carry (this) around from home to home to home. So it makes it impossible for us to get that extra subsidy.

Aging and Mental Health

Women who are homeless and primarily staying in emergency shelters are in some cases dealing with mental illness and comprise a population that requires a multi-faceted, supportive interven-

tion in order to promote housing stability. Amy Reinink, the Manager of Transition Services at Siloam Mission explained that women are likely to exhaust every resource available to them before arriving at the shelter, and that once they enter the shelter system they are often experiencing acute mental illness and have very few supports available to them in their lives. Hoarding is a common concern among many of the senior women that come to the shelter, which is a significant mental health issue for which there is a lack of appropriate support, creating cycles of homelessness:

Hoarding is the biggest [challenge] for us. We can find [women] new places to live but how do you keep them in that when there are no supports? Homecare can provide light housekeeping but that's not enough to counteract hoarding tendencies. It's not going to be sufficient to overcome that. You just end up getting to the point where they keep hoarding and they lose their housing again and come back here so that's a really hard one to address. And we see it fairly often.

Key informants also described how community organizations are experiencing challenges related to a lack of capacity and resources to support people who have experienced complex trauma and sometimes have cognitive impairments as a result of solvent use or mental health issues. There is an identified need for more resources for organizations that are supporting this population in the community.

Supports in the Community

Basic Needs and Advocacy

Our interviews with participants and key informants revealed many of the critical supports provided by programs and organizations in the community. These include: basic needs support through the provision of food and personal hygiene supplies; relational supports such as counseling,

a sense of community and friendship; advocacy with systems or landlords; work programs that help women pay off debts or save for damage deposits; education about tenant rights; and connections to other resources in the community.

[A staff at the women's centre] helped me out a lot too, like to deal with [Manitoba Housing]. She fought a lot of the arguments for me. I had lots of people fight for me from the women's centre.

Participants talked about how staff at different organizations helped them advocate with different systems, such as EIA or Manitoba Housing, as well as with private landlords about making necessary repairs or returning a damage deposit. One participant shared:

[A staff at the women's centre] helped me out a lot too, like to deal with [Manitoba Housing]. She fought a lot of the arguments for me. I had lots of people fight for me from the women's centre.

Key informants acknowledged that advocacy is an important part of their role in the community. Many of our interview participants reported having issues getting a hold of their caseworkers and how this made it difficult for them to get information that they needed. As Tara Zajac explained:

There also have been times where people won't get the answers from their support worker. If I call and say "I'm Tara Zajac, and I'm the Executive Director of North Point Douglas Women's Centre", for some reason that has a lot of weight to it, and these people will actually help and work with me and give me the answers, because a lot of times it's as simple as helping someone get a hold of their worker to get a cheque.

Key informants involved in advocacy work also stressed the importance of supporting women to self-advocate and coaching them in how to communicate with systems. This helps to shift

the inherent power imbalance and equips women with the skills to navigate complex systems more effectively. Lisa Spring explained this point in the context of the work at West Central Women's Resource Centre:

We try not to own the advocacy. We try and do it with participants and we make sure we're trying to build long-term capacity.

Documenting is a role that we play, just having really clear documentation so we can look back on it. It's really confusing to be in it and to be stressed out because it's affecting your own life, like it's hard to remember all those details but we can take those notes.

Another important intermediary role served by community organizations is in the rental market with landlords. Staff working in Housing First programs as well as those providing general housing support to women found it important to build relationships with landlords in the community in order to help secure housing for women as well as advocate for tenants. Tara Zajac spoke about how these relationships allow her organization to better support women in the community where substandard housing and absentee landlords are common challenges:

We've actually had a few really good landlords come into this area lately and we have built some really good relationships with them so that's been very helpful as well. Because they do seem to understand some of the challenges that people face, and are more understanding of the situation if people are a little late on rent.

Safety and Support

Most participants indicated that there was at least one organization in the community where they felt safe, supported and part of a community. These spaces are significant considering the general lack of safety felt by women experiencing homelessness. For some women, particularly those with whom we spoke who were part of a

Here in the centre I really appreciate [the staff] acknowledging my name and saying who I am, it really makes me feel good. Because when I was [homeless] I was not acknowledged like that, especially by [downtown patrols].

Housing First program, community organizations have played a key role in helping them find and maintain their housing. As women make the difficult transition from homelessness to housing stability, agencies can help to provide a safe, supportive community where women feel a sense of belonging. As one participant noted, it was a powerful thing for her to be acknowledged by name at a women's centre that she visits regularly:

Here in the centre I really appreciate [the staff] acknowledging my name and saying who I am, it really makes me feel good. Because when I was [homeless] I was not acknowledged like that, especially by [downtown patrols].

The lack of safe places for homeless women to go, particularly at night, was raised by many of our interview participants. A 22-year-old participant told us she was grateful for the creation of a 24-hour safe space for youth in her community:

In the summertime [I was couch surfing] and I found out about [the Spence Neighbourhood Association 24 hour Safe Space] so I ended up going there... Some of my friends are drug dealers so I would go sit at their places and they would be selling drugs, they would be sitting there smoking or whatever and I didn't want to be there at that time. So I would just go to the Safe Space.

It was suggested by some participants and key informants that trans women may not be as comfortable accessing community services or women's centres due to a fear of not being accepted, even if organizations are trying to be inclusive. Transphobia and transmisogyny are real and serious threats to trans people's safety, and

how this intersects with housing and homelessness is something that needs further and more focused attention.

Some of the participants we interviewed were living in transitional housing for women.

Transitional housing played an important role for some due to a lack of housing options and them not being ready or not wanting to live alone. Most participants in transitional housing seemed to appreciate the opportunity to live in a safe place with other women who had shared experiences and were working on improving their lives. One participant stated that living with other women in a supportive environment helped her maintain sobriety:

I'm glad that [transitional housing] is here because when I was getting out of the treatment centre I didn't know where I was going to go. I knew I couldn't go back on my own because I would have fallen right back into my addiction.

One participant talked about feeling safe in transitional housing:

[I feel safe] because there are no men around, no abuse. [It's] a place to go home and call your room.

Another participant explained how living in transitional housing helped her find stability:

I moved into [transitional housing] and I was able to get all my IDs together and get a phone... They have helped me out so much.

The Role of Relationships

Understanding the role and importance of trust-based relationships in women's lives is a key piece of designing and providing successful housing supports or homelessness interventions. When participants were asked about where they found support while they were homeless or having issues in their housing, they inevitably referred to their relationships with people they trusted in the community, which included friends, family and staff at organizations. However, some participants also talked about how difficult it was to establish

trust, particularly with people working in community organizations or in systems, after being let down and having their trust broken repeatedly throughout their lives. For Indigenous women, who are often forced to deal with systems borne from colonization, this distrust is difficult to overcome. As one participant explained, there are few people that she feels she can go to for support:

I don't really reach out to anybody. I read a lot of inner healing books. That will help me. I reach out to my worker [through Housing First]. I talk to anybody on the streets and a lot of times when I'm out there drinking and stuff I vent. Vent, vent, vent, right? And part of that is healing, you know. Because who do we trust? We don't trust... a lot of time we don't trust bigger authority figures, because of what we went through.

I'm glad that [transitional housing] is here because when I was getting out of the treatment centre I didn't know where I was going to go. I knew I couldn't go back on my own because I would have fallen right back into my addiction.

Key informants also acknowledged the central role that relationships play in providing successful housing supports for women. Establishing trust as well as providing opportunities for women to build relationships with other women in the community were both frequently identified as priorities for program delivery. Paula Hendrickson, the Director of Services at Aboriginal Health and Wellness and the supervisor of the Doorways program, explained that trusting relationships are vital to working with women:

I think the minute we realize that, that it isn't really about the system pieces often, it's about the relationship the staff makes with the person. Because that person's willing to invest if you're willing to invest... So I think that that's probably one of the biggest strengths; if you can gain a relationship with somebody, that trusting relationship, you can go a far way with some

women. But if they don't trust you they are not going to go very far.

Key informants, particularly those who work in housing programs with Indigenous women, also brought up the need for more resources to provide programming for their participants because of the complex, intergenerational trauma they have experienced. Christina Keeper, a support worker at Eagle Urban Transition Centre, spoke about how important it is to help Housing First participants develop self-esteem and a sense of self worth:

There have been several women that we have housed but they don't want to stay there because they almost feel like they are so undeserving of it. And they don't feel like they deserve this place because they always have lived in [abusive relationships] or you know, living in bad places... Someone has always made them feel like they didn't deserve anything.

Group programs not only help facilitate relationship building but can also play a key role in helping women deal with trauma and develop the skills and confidence needed to successfully live independently.

Housing First

We spoke with six women currently involved in a Housing First program and all generally had positive things to say about their involvement with the program. A couple of participants stated that they did not know where they would be without it, and really appreciated the relational support they received from their caseworker. One woman in particular talked about the transformative impact that being accepted into a Housing First program had on her life:

[Housing First] helped me out lots because, you know, what if I didn't get involved with the program, who knows where I would have been now? If I kept on drinking and I kept on using... you know, a lot of my friends aren't around no

more because they still carried on that lifestyle and here I slowed down and got into housing and started doing programs and stuff like that. So I'm thankful for this program.

Her involvement with Housing First also provided her with a more family-friendly space than the CFS office to have her visits with her children, which has helped her strengthen her bond with her family:

Now I have my visits here [at the centre]. We cook, we spend some more quality time and they let us cook up here. And that's what I want keep going on... that's not the only reason I wanted to stay with the program, that's not the only stuff, but it's just been a big help.

Betty Edel and Paula Hendrickson highlighted how the creation of housing stability through Housing First programs has in some cases supported family reunification. Through Housing First, women have more housing supports in place as well as intensive case management that can allow them to address the challenges that they might be facing in a holistic way. Christina Keeper, who works with women in the Housing First program at Eagle Urban Transition Centre, spoke about the real benefits she has seen for women involved in the program:

Right now we're in a stage where [participants] are making that 36 or 12 month mark of being housed and getting off the street. So that's a huge success right there. And some have gone from being addicted to meth — meth is an epidemic in our city. [One participant] was so bad into it [and we] got her housed. Took a while, a couple of evictions too, [but we] got her rehoused. And she is just working on that addiction and now she's doing a lot better. And right now she's working on getting her kids back.

One of the Housing First participants who we spoke to is currently in housing that she is not happy with due to cost of utilities, as well as the

poor condition of the housing and safety concerns related to drug activity in the building, but she feels as though she can't leave because she signed a one-year lease. Another interview participant who had been couch surfing for a year talked about trying to get into a Housing First program but was told she was not eligible for support.

[Housing First] helped me out lots because, you know, what if I didn't get involved with the program, who knows where I would have been now?

A criticism that has been made about Housing First in Winnipeg, which was mentioned by several key informants, is that the criteria for eligibility into the program tend to exclude women's experiences. The intake process involves an initial eligibility screening and a survey using the Vulnerability Index — Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool (VI-SPDAT) at one of the Doorways partner agencies (the seven HPS funded Housing First agencies in Winnipeg). If the person is eligible and considered high vulnerability, they are then assessed using the full SPDAT by one of Doorways' Community Access Navigators. This assessment provides information that is used by the Doorways Placement Committee to determine which Housing First program is best able to provide Housing First supports to that individual. The way that the federal definition of homelessness has been interpreted and implemented through programs at the local level has raised concerns that couch surfing is not considered to be as serious or warranting the same supports as absolute homelessness because people who are couch surfing are at least provisionally accommodated. Christina Maes Nino explained:

Housing first as a philosophy and as a model works. It's been proven to work, it as a system should meet all needs whether someone is homeless for a day, or homeless for ten years. As a program in the way it's been restricted, it

has tended to exclude women's experiences... If you look at their eligibility criteria, the way they assess vulnerability, the way that they have applied it as sort of this case management model with this team, with these certain supports, it doesn't consider culture. It doesn't consider that people stay in different places for different safety reasons. It doesn't consider family or children. I don't think it needs to be that way but I think both the federal government and we as a community somehow made that choice to apply it in a very restricted way.

In reality, as we learned from the participants we interviewed, women are not necessarily safer or more secure couch surfing than they would be living on the street or staying in a shelter. However, when women in these situations go through the intake process to get into a Housing First program and complete the SPDAT, the survey tool that is used to measure their vulnerability, often does not qualify them for the program. Lisa Spring spoke about having difficulty getting women who need housing support into Housing First because they get screened out in the SPDAT due to the fact that they are couch surfing. She explained the strategies that staff at the women's centre have used to address this challenge:

So in some cases, through the [Doorways intake] process... we have been able to get women through that process who experienced hidden homelessness by highlighting how transient that is. So we often have women who say they are staying with a friend but it's so unsafe that they actually walk around all night long... they just walk all night because they are too scared to go to the shelter but they are too scared to sleep where they are at because it's not safe and they go back during the day when it's quieter, when it's safe during the day. So we have to sometimes coach women in how they present their hidden homelessness to try and get in the back door right? So our position is we should be looking at vulnerability rather than [absolute] homelessness.

Women who stay in domestic violence shelters also do not typically qualify for Housing First if they do not fall into the "chronic" or "episodic" category of homelessness, despite the fact that there are few housing options available to them after they leave the shelter. As Paula Hendrickson explained, this represents a gap in the system:

We haven't come up with a plan for women who go to women's shelters. And as much as they are displaced and they are homeless... Often I think women go back to the abusive situation because we aren't taking them out of the shelters. They have not been identified as chronic or episodic because they are going from a house to a shelter. And so when we look at things we have to look at what's happened prior, too.

Lesley Lindberg expressed similar concern that women's imminent risk of homelessness and the subsequent risks she may be facing when attempting to escape domestic violence is not considered seriously enough by existing Housing First programs:

We see a population [at Willow Place], a portion of our population, who really requires support. Entrenched in addictions, poor social skills, undealt-with trauma, and on top of that lots of mental health issues. We're certainly seeing a population with more schizophrenia and their experience typically being they have been precariously housed for years, right? And we have a very hard time finding a next step for them so the fact that we are not directly linked to Housing First in those cases is an issue. And I think that's one that can be resolved.

As we learned through the participant interviews, and as has been demonstrated in other research, women tend to avoid emergency shelters and are more likely to be among the hidden homeless population. In addition to that, statistics show that the majority of women do not report incidences of domestic violence to police (Statistics Canada 2014). These examples

highlight the challenges of assessing women's vulnerability and the level of risk they might be facing in their living situations. To compound this problem, violence may be so prevalent in women's lives — as it was for many of our interview participants — that it becomes normalized and women may not disclose this information to a service provider, particularly if they do not have a trust-based relationship. It is important to recognize that there are many reasons why a woman would choose not to disclose experiences of violence, including a fear of having children apprehended. This context helps to illustrate some of the challenges of relying on a tool such as the SPDAT to intake women into Housing First programs. Lisa Spring addressed this concern from the perspective of the Housing First program at West Central Women's Resource Centre:

It's not easy to say exactly why the SPDAT isn't catching [some women's] vulnerability, but we see it. So either the questions are not being worded right so they can't answer it honestly and be counted as vulnerable, or it's normalized so people will ask, "do you have experiences of violence?" and [women] will just say no, when in reality they're in violent relationships all the time but it's what they know, so they don't express it that way. Or [in some cases] women who have been living in very vulnerable, chaotic and violent situations for an extended amount of time will just avoid talking about themselves as vulnerable in any way.

There is no perfect tool to assess vulnerability, particularly when intake assessments are typically conducted by people who do not have a relationship with the person being assessed. These concerns do suggest a need to ensure that assessment tools always have a gender-based lens that considers the hidden nature of women's experiences of violence and the particular vulnerabilities women face. The challenges that women face accessing programs may also be indicative of a need for more explicitly women-centred pro-

grams, which can respond to particular issues faced by women including the fear of child apprehension, gender-based violence and the vulnerability experienced when exiting or transitioning between systems.

Changing Polices and Programs to Meet Women's Needs

Safe and Affordable Housing

There is an urgent need to address the issue of substandard housing in the city, as this creates cycles of housing insecurity among women. There are few affordable housing options and many come with serious safety concerns, particularly for women who are vulnerable to exploitation. Staff working in Housing First programs described the challenges of trying to find housing options for their participants that were both affordable and safe, suggesting that there should be conversations between community organizations and people working within the housing sector about the need to develop a plan to prioritize women's safety. Others have recommended that the province and city work together to establish better mechanisms to enforce safe housing standards in rental units.

Interview participants frequently talked about living in sub-standard, unsafe and poorly managed housing, highlighting the well-documented demand for high quality, affordable and social housing in the city (Silver 2015). When participants were asked about what kind of housing they needed or what they liked about their current housing, safety and affordability were of paramount importance. Other common responses included clean and quiet buildings, physical accessibility, enough space for children or grandchildren, central locations close to schools and daycares, no pests such as bed bugs or mice and safe neighbourhoods with nice neighbours. Some participants and key informants also brought up the importance of choice in housing, and that some women may have a preference to live in

transitional housing for the support and sense of community that is provided.

Gender-based Analysis

The information shared by participants and key informants in this report highlights how intersections of identity such as gender, race, income, ability and homelessness can produce outcomes that negatively affect women. The risks that women face, such as sexual violence and exploitation or child apprehension, can incentivize women to hide their homelessness and avoid accessing formal emergency services, which in turn can increase their vulnerability and risk of violence. Programs designed to support people experiencing homelessness tend to focus on the most “acute” cases — people who are staying in emergency shelters or on the street. This can have the effect of marginalizing women’s experiences, as they might be more inclined to couch surf despite the fact that this may not be a safe or stable option. For this reason, some key informants emphasized the necessity of employing a gender-based analysis in program and policy design to ensure that some people are not being left out of plans to address homelessness. Lisa Spring spoke specifically about the importance and timeliness of applying a gender-based analysis to the ongoing development of Housing First programs in Winnipeg:

We want to make sure that these more and more marginalized experiences are informing program development, system development. We’re creating a Housing First system now as we speak... with multi layers of partnerships, multi layers of funding. You know, there is a huge opportunity for us to do something very innovative and different. And there is also a huge opportunity for us to collectively screw this up, and create another barrier for people, right? So if we use these critical lenses in the system design, we will have a better system for people to actually end homelessness.

There is also a particular need to acknowledge the ways in which colonialism and racism are built

into the systems and policies that govern society, and how this is connected to the overrepresentation of Indigenous women living in poverty and homelessness. This analysis also allows us to make connections between systems, housing issues, homelessness and the prevalence of violence against Indigenous women and girls, and the need to respond in a way that connects all of these dots. Louis Sorin addressed this point:

The research is still emerging around the importance of having a tailored systemic response toward women [experiencing homelessness]. And I believe nationally and even as a region, recognizing there is a link between homelessness, and missing and murdered [Indigenous] women, for example. We don’t have the data but we know. We have a reason to respond we can’t ignore. We have a reason to attend to it and design that response.

Similarly, Annetta Armstrong emphasized the connection between the lack of safe places for vulnerable women and the prevalence of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls (MMIWG), a long-standing issue for which there is now an inquiry underway:

We have this great big inquest [into MMIWG], all this money put aside to find out what the problem is. The problem is that women don’t have safe places to live... safe supported places to live like [Native Women’s Transition Centre]. And without that it’s easy to get caught up in making the wrong decisions that take you down the wrong path. Or just having no choice but to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, all the time.

In practice, a gender-based analysis would help to highlight how existing policies put women at a disadvantage. One prominent example raised in this research includes the lack of inclusion of couch surfing or hidden homelessness in how “chronic and episodic” homelessness has been defined at the federal level and interpreted through local implementation of centralized intake into

Housing First programs. The current definition includes a reference to living in places “not fit for human habitation”; however, this leaves enough room for interpretation that couch surfing, or hidden homelessness, tends to exclude people from eligibility into Housing First, even when individuals are living in dangerous or highly unstable conditions. A more inclusive approach could include a nuanced interpretation of chronic and episodic homelessness that recognizes women’s experiences and the reasons why they do not always feel safe accessing emergency services.

Another example can be pulled from the policy set by EIA, which requires that people deemed to be in a common-law relationship must be on a shared budget. While many couples share expenses, a gender-based analysis allows us to see how this rule can make women unnecessarily dependent on their partner. This is of particular concern when women are making an intentional effort to maintain financial autonomy, potentially due to concerns within the relationship.

A first step toward the implementation of gender-based analyses is ensuring that women’s voices are being meaningfully represented at the policy level, particularly women who experience multiple forms of oppression and marginalization. It is important to note that the use of a gender-based analysis in policy and program development does not mean that women’s experiences will be prioritized or that men do not experience oppression. In fact, when plans are informed by the experiences of people who are the most marginalized, this ultimately produces better systems, strategies and programs for everyone.

Women-only Spaces

Interview participants frequently spoke about the lack of safe places in the city for women experiencing homelessness to find shelter. Several participants identified a need for safe places for women to go at night, and particularly those that do not have so many criteria attached — such as sobriety, or women with children only — that

they are inaccessible to many women. One participant stated:

They should have a shelter for women, you know. It’s going to be wintertime, like have somewhere homeless women can go, somewhere to sleep if they needed somewhere to sleep, somewhere to be safe.

Another participant similarly spoke about the need for safe places for older women:

There are not a lot of services for women, especially for older people. Like there are a lot of older women that are homeless because children are on their own and then you’re by yourself...

And EIA is not a lot of money.

It is imperative to include trans and two-spirit women in any conversations around safety and accessibility, in order to understand the needs of this population and how to make them feel safe.

Some participants who experienced homelessness in the past mentioned that they did not know about many of the services and programs that were available at the time. Several suggested that this information needed to be shared more broadly, such as through community bulletin boards in public, high traffic locations.

System Integration and Supportive Transitions

One of the main pathways into homelessness among women that emerged in this research is through specific gaps or barriers within or between systems they are involved with, including EIA, CFS and the justice system. There are different ways that system involvement led to or impacted participant’s experiences of homelessness, including in the transition out of or between systems. Another common pathway was the apprehension of children by CFS leading to a loss or reduction in the EIA housing allowance. This is not an inevitable outcome, especially when there is a reunification plan in place; however, it does require cooperation and collaboration between workers within various

systems as well as support for mothers, which is not always what happens in reality.

Key informants reported having better success advocating with women and navigating systems when there was open communication and collaboration with systems. Participants similarly had more positive experiences with systems when they had a trust-based relationship with their caseworker, though this did not seem to be the norm. Participants and key informants more frequently reported having difficulty accessing information from systems and feeling a lack of support from caseworkers. This issue was raised by the Manitoba Ombudsman in the 2010 *Report on Manitoba's Employment and Income Assistance Program* (Hamilton et al 2010), which pointed to overburdened caseworkers and inconsistent practices in case management as being factors that can negatively impact EIA recipients. Many interview participants described feeling frustrated with EIA and some spoke about how the system was putting up more barriers in their lives. As one participant shared:

I've had more situations where I have had to fight with the workers to help me. [EIA caseworkers] are very difficult and not very understanding.

They seem like they will throw rocks underneath your wheels to keep you from moving forward.

Key informants frequently stated that when they were able to develop relationships with caseworkers and get actors from different systems to work together they were able to find the best success in helping women meet their needs and establish housing security. As Tara Zajac explained, this is not an easy task but is worth the effort:

Getting everybody around the table is usually challenging, but if we can do it, it's the best.

Because a lot of [the women] we do work with have many different support workers, so even if we could just connect with one, there is usually a huge impact with working together to help this person, and also getting the better scope of

things. 'Cause we do only see a certain side and we don't know what else is going on.

As women's experiences with EIA, CFS and corrections describe, more coordination and integration is needed to address how systems can create barriers that lead to homelessness. Systems need to recognize that they have a role to play in preventing homelessness by providing collaborative support to women, particularly when they are transitioning between or out of systems.

Comprehensive System of Care

The Housing First model has received praise and widespread support in recent years for its success as a strategy to address homelessness. Key informants were largely in favour of Housing First and grateful to have this program model in Winnipeg. However, there was concern at the same time that resources have been taken from other services as Housing First has become a key part of the Homelessness Partnering Strategy laid out by the Federal government. There remains a need for a wider spectrum of services that are not just focused on the highest-acuity cases. Paula Hendrickson explained the need to maintain and properly fund a continuum of services, rather than relying on Housing First to meet all needs:

We are still doing this thing where we adopt [a new] system and we throw out the old system. We don't keep what was good about the old system and then add to it... People have different personalities and different needs, right, so that continuum of services need to be happening... rapid rehousing [and] prevention has to be happening all the same time in order for us to make a dent, right?

As we found in our participant interviews, some women may have been able to avoid homelessness altogether if there had been more support available at critical junctures in their lives. Understanding these pathways into homelessness for women will help in developing a broader system of care that

not only effectively addresses homelessness, but also prevents it from happening in the first place.

Income Support

Most interview participants spoke about the almost impossible task of finding adequate housing with the money they receive from EIA. Several talked about cutting into their budget for food and other basic needs in order to pay their rent or a damage deposit. Women receiving EIA often do not have the means to reliably access safe housing, as the current rental allowance enables very little choice in housing. For women who are trying to reunify with their children, obtaining safe and adequate housing is a fundamental step to achieving this goal. Income support should be seen as a necessary tool in creating the conditions for family reunification and stability.

The introduction of the Provincial Rent Assist program, a rental supplement available to people living on a low income, has made a dramatic impact in housing security for individuals and families, though according to housing advocates this supplement still does not keep pace with market prices. As well, the introduction of the Canada Child Benefit has made a difference for women parenting children by providing them with better access to adequate and good quality housing. The importance of having this extra revenue in the form of targeted government transfers cannot be overstated, particularly for individuals and families who are barely able to meet their basic needs. It is critical that these benefits are not only maintained, but also increased as needed to meet the changing nature of the housing market and cost of living.

Organizational Support

Our interviews with participants and key informants revealed the many ways in which women find necessary support from community agencies. Organizations play an essential role by providing basic needs, relational and advocacy support to some of the most marginalized and high

needs women in the community while at the same time often struggling at an organizational level to keep their doors open. Key informants spoke about having to do their work on a shoe string budget while keeping up with the grant and reporting cycles and coping with the constant worry of having core sources of funding cut. Community agencies were often one of the few places where interview participants reported feeling a sense of safety and belonging; it is difficult to imagine the impact of the loss of these key supports in the community.

The data on women's homelessness in Winnipeg point to an overrepresentation of Indigenous women — over 80 percent of homeless women in Winnipeg identify as Indigenous (Maes Nino et al, 2015). Some key informants pointed to this fact as a reason to support the work being done around homelessness by Indigenous-led organizations. Key informants from Indigenous organizations emphasized the importance of providing a holistic model that provides both basic needs and cultural support, recognizing that healing is a crucial part of attaining housing security. This echoes the assertion made by Brandon and Peters (2014) that Indigenous-run organizations have a great capacity to deliver culturally safe services that focus on healing and recovery. The innovation of the Indigenous community around homelessness needs to be recognized and meaningfully implemented at the policy level, and Indigenous communities need to have a strong voice in the design of any programs intended to address homelessness. Issues of housing and homelessness should be seen as fundamentally tied to processes of reconciliation in the city.

Community agencies and shelters exist on the front line of homelessness, and work tirelessly to improve the lives of the most marginalized people in the city. Organizations can provide information about what they are seeing on the ground and can help shape policy design, but require more sustained support from and collaboration with government.

Policy and Program Values Emerging from this Research

The following is a guide for program delivery to end women's homelessness

Low barrier access

- Programs addressing women's homelessness should not have conditions tied to access, such as sobriety, having children or participating in other programs.

Women-centred

- Program and policy design is guided by women's lived experiences.
- Programs use an anti-oppressive approach to service delivery, in a way that promotes social justice and empowerment to the people being served (Strega and Esquao 2009).

Intersectional lens

- Program and policy design considers how different aspects of women's identities, including race, class, sexual identity and ability, influence their experiences and access to programs/supports.

Harm reduction approach

- Programs and policies focus on harm reduction, rather than abstinence, recognizing that this produces better social outcomes for families and communities.

Indigenous-led

- Program and policy design is led by Indigenous women, recognizing that approaches to addressing homelessness must be culturally safe for participants.
- Program and policy is informed and guided by the Seven Sacred Teachings and a decolonization lens.

Strength-based

- Programs and policies acknowledge and draw on the inherent strengths and talents of women.

Relationship-focused

- Programs and policies recognize that women need trust-based relationships that promote mutual support, interdependence and community inclusion.

Conclusions

The results of this research provide insights into women's experiences of homelessness in Winnipeg. The women whom we interviewed had a range of experiences, which often included a mix of hidden homelessness — couch surfing in overcrowded housing with family, friends or strangers — and absolute homelessness, by which is meant either staying in an emergency shelter or sleeping rough on the street. Most interview participants reported experiences of violence and feeling unsafe, and many had developed survival strategies to cope with the constant uncertainty and fear that comes with precarious housing

and homelessness. Homelessness had negative impacts on the health of participants, including the exacerbation of mental health issues and poor nutrition. For some participants, homelessness was their current reality, and for many others this was an ever-present risk, given the lack of affordable housing options in the city and the failure of EIA benefits to meet basic needs.

A common pathway into homelessness, as well as a barrier to housing security for the women we spoke to, is the poor condition of the rental housing stock in the inner city, which highlights the critical need for increased government investment in quality, affordable housing. Specific policies or

gaps in coordination between systems that women were involved with also emerged as a prominent theme that contributed to women's homelessness as well as served as a barrier to obtaining housing. Other barriers to housing included inadequate EIA rates, discrimination based on gender, race and income, lack of rental references and a lack of funds to pay for damage deposits or replace identification.

There is a need for increased income security for low-income individuals in order to overcome some of the major material barriers to housing.

Community organizations were shown to play an important role in helping to address some of these barriers through basic needs provision and advocacy, as well as providing women with a safe space and sense of community. These organizations are an essential resource in the community and need to be adequately and securely funded in order to fulfill their mandates.

Key informants and participants addressed ways in which existing programs and policies have an adverse effect on women's housing security and access to support. Many pointed to a lack of safe places for women to go at night, and the need for low-barrier services that can provide safe emergency shelter for women only. The exclusion of hidden homelessness from eligibility criteria to Housing First illustrates another one of the ways that women's experiences are marginalized in efforts to address homelessness. Applying a gender-based analysis to program design will help to mitigate this issue and ensure that women are not excluded from services that they require.

In recent years, Winnipeg has seen the coalescing of a wide range of stakeholders and resources around the development of a comprehensive plan to end homelessness, while federal investments in Housing First have led to the emergence of programs to support people experiencing federal definitions of chronic and episodic homelessness. This is an opportune time to critically assess whether or not existing strategies are meeting the needs of the whole community, and potentially develop new approaches that better respond to women's needs and experiences.

People experiencing homelessness in Winnipeg will face many of the same issues, including underfunded emergency services, unaffordable and substandard housing, and inadequate EIA benefits. However, women's experiences of homelessness highlight the ways that sexism, misogyny, racism and poverty intersect to produce outcomes for women that can make them particularly vulnerable to violence, exploitation and homelessness. It is important to understand these outcomes and use them as a foundation from which to design policies and programs.

Focusing on the experiences of those who are most marginalized in society will lead to the production of benefits and increased safety for all. There is an urgent need to include women's experiences in the action on homelessness in Winnipeg; doing so will move us toward the creation of a safer and more inclusive city for everyone.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Social (Rent Geared to Income) and affordable housing

- Invest in public/social, co-op and non-profit housing models at all levels of government.
- Develop stronger mechanisms at the municipal and provincial level for enforcing housing standards and upholding tenant's rights in rental units.

2. Implementation of an intersectional gender-based analysis in public policy and programs

An intersectional gender-based analysis acknowledges the ways in which gender, race, class and sexual identity produce social outcomes that marginalize women and put them at greater risk of violence and exploitation as well as affect their access to programs and services. There is a need to apply this lens to programs and policies at all levels of government:

- Federal: Revise the definitions of chronic and episodic homelessness used by the Homelessness Partnering Strategy

to include women's experiences of homelessness, taking into account the ways in which domestic violence, having children in their care and women's avoidance of emergency shelters and other emergency services contributes to hidden homelessness among women.

- Federal: In cases where families are working on a reunification plan through Child and Family Services, provide parents with the Child Canada Benefit prior to reunification to facilitate access to adequate housing.
- Provincial: Apply intersectional gender-based analysis to provincial policies, such as rules around common-law relationships set by EIA.
- Municipal: Apply an intersectional gender-based analysis to all programs and policies that relate to housing and homelessness.

3. Women-centred response to homelessness

Develop and adequately fund a women-centred strategy to end women's homelessness across government departments, co-created with community-based organization. Adapt existing programs and services to be more women-centred and fill in service gaps:

- Conduct a safety audit of emergency shelters led by women with lived experience of homelessness and implement shelter standards that address safety concerns for women.
- Create a 24-hour, low barrier safe space for women and trans women in central Winnipeg. Low barrier means a space that does not require sobriety or other criteria (such as women with children only) as conditions for access. This space should include housing resources and support as well as interim emergency housing and staff that help women secure longer term housing and navigate systems.
- Review Family Violence programming with specific attention to extending the length of

shelter stays beyond 30 days when needed. In addition, provide more transitional, second stage and housing with supports to help women transition out of domestic violence shelters and address barriers such as addictions and mental health.

- Address imminent risk of homelessness among women by developing a broad and coordinated system of care that includes system integration between government systems and community service providers.
- Include focus on trans and two-spirit women's experiences in the development of community programming for women.
- Increase investments in supportive housing programs for Indigenous women.

4. Targeted support for Indigenous organizations working to address homelessness

- Meaningfully include Indigenous women in policy and program decision making level through adequate representation.
- Increase and sustain funding and support for program development.
- Increase investments in Indigenous owned and operated housing.

5. Systems integration

Create better communication and integration between government systems and community services, focusing on providing better overall support for individuals who are transitioning between or out of systems as a way to prevent homelessness. Continue to develop accountability mechanisms for the provision of housing support within systems.

Child and Family Services Ministry and Agencies

- Recognize child apprehension as a pathway into homelessness for both women and their children, and focus on preventing apprehension.
- Prevent youth homelessness by providing more support to youth aging out of care. More specific recommendations tied to

youth in care can be found in *Here and Now: The Winnipeg Plan to End Youth Homelessness* (Maes Nino and Godoy 2016).

- Provide support for mothers when their children are apprehended for homelessness prevention with emphasis on family/individual healing and reunification. Ensure that this support is community-based and relationship-centred.
- Support families in the transition to reunification, such as providing additional income support to women until their Canada Child Benefit is reinstated.
- Develop alternative models for child protection and family support rooted in Indigenous knowledge and values.
- Enable women to access addictions treatment without the risk of having their children apprehended.

Employment and Income Assistance

- Provide more support to address housing barriers, including issuing additional damage deposits and covering the cost of replacing identification.
- Work collaboratively with CFS to support mothers when children are apprehended to prevent homelessness and promote family reunification. Ensure that adequate resources and supports are provided for women to access suitable housing that will facilitate reunification with children.

Corrections

- Build stronger ties with Manitoba Housing, private landlords, non-profit housing agencies and rental networks; provide more support with developing a housing plan for women prior to release. Ensure supports are available to women so that they can secure adequate housing upon release.

Mental Health

- Provide more resources to community organizations that are supporting

individuals who have experienced complex trauma and have mental health issues and cognitive impairments.

6. Increased income security

- Continue the provincial Rent Assist program indexed to inflation.
- Recognize that adequate income security promotes housing and family stability and that this will produce savings in downstream costs associated with homelessness, therefore, EIA shelter benefits and basic needs allowances should be increased to reflect the actual cost of living. Implement increases to the basic needs budget to bring low income people up to the poverty line, following the program model of Rent Assist, as recommended by Make Poverty History Manitoba.
- Coordinate with Child and Family Services to ensure women receive adequate resources (ie. damage deposit, moving expenses) if their housing benefits change as a result of children being apprehended.

7. Housing First

- Provide dedicated funding to agencies who deliver Housing First programs for programming that focuses on building community inclusion, interdependence, self-confidence and healing. Women need access to low barrier to entry safe spaces to address the effects of marginalization and feel a sense of community.
- Build a broad continuum of supports to address homelessness: create homelessness 'hubs' in the community — organizations that are funded to provide HF, rapid rehousing, eviction prevention, etc. Each hub would be connected to and supported by services/systems, giving staff access to expertise that supports range of services.

8. Research and evaluation

- Governments should support ongoing research and evaluation of programs using

a model guided by the community that includes both quantitative and qualitative evaluation methods and Indigenous evaluation frameworks.

- More research is needed on the particular needs of trans and two-spirited women and homelessness.

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Women and Homelessness: Review of the Literature

Sadie McInnes

Homelessness has long been raised as a concern in Canada. In 2006, the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights “declared homelessness in Canada a ‘national emergency’” (Czapska et. al 2008: 10). The Homelessness Hub, based out of Toronto, has estimated that 30,000 people are homeless on any given night and that 200,000 people experience homelessness each year in Canada (Gaetz et. al 2013: 5). In her work on homelessness Susan Scott (2007: 16) cites estimates as high as 100,000 Canadians living without a home, with another “1.7 million unable to afford adequate, suitable shelter.” While there is no specific legislated right in to housing in Canadian law (Czapska et. al (2008: 30). Canada has signed and ratified the 1976 United Nations’ International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), which recognizes: “the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food, clothing and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions.” (Article 11). The extent of the housing problem in a wealthy country such as Canada shows the lack of coordinated federal/ provincial policy framework and leadership at all levels of government.

Winnipeg, in particular, has a history of housing shortages and inner-city poverty (Silver 2015:

11–17). In 2015 it was estimated that on a given night in the city there were at least 1,400 people experiencing homelessness (Maes Nino et. al 2015: 3). In 2008 the Manitoba Urban Native Housing Association reported a housing shortage with as many as 2,300 people on their wait lists (Silver 2015: 19). In 2003, Manitoba Housing reported 3,000 households on their wait list for public housing (Ibid.). Jim Silver (2015: 19) notes that these numbers are “relatively unchanged in 2014.”

Winnipeg is home to the largest urban Indigenous population in Canada and traditionally has poverty rates among the highest in the country (Brandon 2015: 29). As Silver (2015: 20) writes, “Discrimination against Aboriginal people and mothers with children and on welfare has a long history in Winnipeg. This has not changed.” In 2011, the Social Planning Council of Winnipeg found that Indigenous peoples were “drastically over represented among those experiencing housing crises in Winnipeg” (6). Furthermore, the city’s urban Indigenous population, as well as recent immigrants, refugees and non-landed immigrants, and lone-parent households — all those most likely to experience core housing need — are concentrated in the inner city (Brandon 2015: 34–35).

Of the extensive study of homelessness in Canada women have not received enough targeted attention when it comes to the particularities of their housing needs. This is in part because women are “at increased risk for hidden homelessness, living in overcrowded conditions or having sufficient money for shelter, but not for other necessities” (Gaetz et. al 2013: 26). As Scott (2007: 15) writes,

“For women there are many ways of being homeless, besides living on the street: staying with a violent partner because she can’t afford to leave; being bound to a pimp or a dealer; couch-surfing from one relative to another; or living in unhygienic and unsafe buildings and/or over-crowded conditions with cockroaches in the fridge and two families squeezed into a one-bedroom apartment. While all women living in these situations have a roof, none has the kind of place where most of us would feel ‘at home.’”

Estimates place as many as 50,000 people as “hidden homeless” in Canada on a given night, but these estimates may be far off, for as Gaetz et. al (6) write, “there is no reliable data on hidden homelessness in Canada at the national level and very little at the community level.” Importantly, if women cannot afford to leave an abusive partner, or are sharing a condemned house with far too many others, they will not be counted as homeless because they are difficult to track down — and this is the situation most homeless women find themselves in (Scott 2007: 16).

We do know a few things clearly about hidden homelessness, however. Women report staying with partners, family, strangers, to avoid shelters or because they cannot find alternative housing options. There is little data on hidden homelessness, due to its hidden nature it is hard to track.

Women have fewer resources available to them if they find themselves in absolute homelessness as they report feeling unsafe in shelters. Women in the Winnipeg Street Health Report report feeling unsafe in emergency shelters, an-

other factor in the “hidden” nature of their homelessness (Gessler et al. 2011: 15). “Forty-three percent (43 percent) of women we interviewed told us they were sexually harassed in the past year. When asked how often they were sexually harassed in the past year, five women told us “every day” (Ibid). Women felt more unsafe in emergency shelters, 40 percent felt unsafe versus 28 percent of men (Ibid).

Sexual assault is more common for homeless women. One in five had been sexually assaulted in the past year, most of them more than once. Physical violence is common too: 46 percent the homeless women the Winnipeg Street Health Report spoke to were physically assaulted in the past year:

- 26 percent by a stranger
- 20 percent by an acquaintance
- 17 percent by a spouse or partner
- 10 percent by another shelter resident (Ibid)

Winnipeg has no homelessness services for only women; several of the shelters have a women’s wing (Ibid). This applies to treatment centres and detoxes as well (Ibid.).

Low income LGBTQ* women report being pushed into hidden homelessness more often, fearing homophobia and transphobia at shelters and “preferring to sleep rough, couch-surf, live in dangerous situations, or form a liaison with a man for protection and camouflage” (Scott 2007: 165).

Women’s homelessness and insecurity housing relates more often to challenges in the family such as family conflict, family breakdown or violence. In the 2015 Winnipeg Street Census, 56 percent of women cited this as their reason for first experience of homelessness compared to 40 percent of men (Maes Nino, 2015). This is consistent with the other research on women and homelessness: women are more at risk of experiencing sexual exploitation in relation to housing.

Women’s lower incomes and power dynamics with private market male landlords can put

them in a vulnerable position. Women with low incomes, lacking government and social network supports, are vulnerable to exploitation from male landlords (Czapska et. al 2008: 8–10). Women report “sleeping with the landlord or allowing him to sleep with their daughters so that he will waive payments” (Scott 2007: 29). The Winnipeg Street Health Report from 2011 reports that, “Women reported frequent abuse by landlords” and quotes one survey respondent as saying “I just had a problem with a landlord that wanted sexual favours in order not to evict me [...] The landlord tried to make me have sex with him. He came on to me and said afterwards that we would talk about the rent. There was no lease there [...] When I did not want to do sexual favours just to stay in the place he evicted me” (Gessler et. al 2011: 13). Safety is the number one issue for women in housing (Scott 2007:206).

Additional knowledge about women’s experiences of homelessness for this review was pulled from studies from larger cities across Canada, or from national work, as very little has been focused on the Winnipeg housing context. When it comes to the causes of homelessness for women, for example, nationally it is clear that experiences of violence — often facilitated by poverty — are central (Gaetz et. al 2013: 7). A 2010 point in time study of women staying in shelters across Canada found that 71 per cent of women cited abuse as their reason for admissions, and 60 per cent had not reported this violence to the police (Burcycka and Cotter, 2011: 5). As Czapska et. al (2008: 12) write:

“If there is one overreaching, extremely harmful similarity in the experiences of the girls we interviewed, it is domestic sexual abuse. The extent and impact of sexual abuse in the home on the lives of teenage girls cannot be ignored or underestimated. A majority of the young women with whom we spoke talked about experiencing sexual abuse in their homes and then experiencing further male violence

while homeless or living in deplorable housing conditions.”

These experiences seem to be universal to women of all ages, however young women are more vulnerable. In fact, women under 25 are at the highest risk of domestic violence or murder by a male partner (Ibid: 13). In 2007, a survey of homeless youth aged 12 to 18 found that 57 per cent of the girls interviewed had been sexually abused (Ibid). This statistic rose to 84 per cent when girls were Indigenous (Ibid).

Women’s homelessness is also facilitated by a patriarchal labour market that finds women most often in precarious, casual and low paying work, both in the formal and informal economies (O’Grady and Gaetz 2004: 397). In a survey of homeless youth in Toronto, it was found that even in the “street economy,” “males are involved in the more financially lucrative sectors” (Ibid). Moreover, “although men can often pick up laboring jobs, temporary work for women is more difficult to come by because most unskilled jobs, like waiting table, require a neat, clean appearance and a certain standard of wardrobe, not always available on the street,” thus exacerbating poverty and homelessness (Scott 2007: 28–29).

The disadvantage this places women at is largely ignored in the Canadian legal and criminal system. Gendered inequities are compounded for racialized and Indigenous women. Women, and particularly Indigenous and women of colour, are over represented in “unpaid, low-wage and precarious employment,” have “less access to social and community resources and supports including welfare and affordable day care and [...] much higher rates of physical, sexual and emotional abuse throughout both their adolescent and adult lives”. Changes to Employment Insurance in 1997 disqualified many people from benefits, in particular part-time workers, of whom 80 percent are women (Scott 2007: 27).

Despite these inequities and the need for increased safety for women, it is women’s incarceration

tion that has increased (Walsh et. al 2015: 6–7). For incarcerated Indigenous women in particular, there was a 72.5 per cent increase in incarceration between 1996 and 2004 (Ibid). That there is a significant cycle between poverty, incarceration, and homelessness has been well documented. Martin et. al (2012: 108) found that 63 per cent of the women who had been incarcerated, in a survey of homeless women, said finding housing was a problem upon release, and 56 per cent stated that homelessness contributed to a return to crime.

When it comes to women's experiences *while* homeless, violence is once again a central theme. As Gaetz et. al (2013: 26) write, "When women become homeless, they are at increased risk of violence and assault, sexual exploitation and abuse." Scott (2007: 42) writes that "91 per cent of homeless women report being assaulted at some time in their lives, and 42 per cent of long-term homeless women report an assault in the last 12 months." Czapska et. al (2008: 21) also share this perspective, writing that:

"It is widely accepted that homelessness is a key factor in young women's vulnerability to various forms of victimization. Once they are on the street, girls experience staggering levels of violence, from assaults by passers-by, abuse through prostitution, rape and assault by boyfriends and male street 'brothers,' extreme mental and physical cruelty by pimps and drug dealers, to sexual harassment, assault and brutality by police, private security and prison guards. Homeless women are 10 times more likely to die than women in the general population."

They also note how rarely men are charged for these crimes. In fact, "Until recently, girls who were sexually abused through prostitution were charged under prostitution-related statutes approximately 60 times more often than adult males who exploit them" (Ibid., 27).

These experiences of violence translate into a lesser capacity to access other services as well.

For example, "women in the shelter system have traditionally fared poorly in drug and alcohol treatment programs compared to men. Rates of entry, retention, and completion of treatment are significantly lower" (Scott 2007: 75). This may be in part because women are detoxing in "environments where there are predatory older men," which, "given that sexual abuse and violence is often the underlying issue for girls who are addicted to drugs" can be incredibly damaging (Czapska et. al 2008: 24). This is especially concerning given that "Official estimates state that 30 to 40 per cent of homeless women have addictions," but that service providers "sometimes venture to put the number of addicted homeless women as high as 90 per cent" (Scott 2007: 73).

In Winnipeg, women with addictions who are homeless face limited options and are marginalized in the shelter system. Domestic violence shelters do not permit drug/alcohol use. In Winnipeg the two shelters that have separate rooms for women (Salvation Army and Siloam Mission) are also abstinence-based. Therefore, if a woman in Winnipeg has an addiction, the only emergency shelter is Main Street Project, which provides very little separation between men and women in the space (Maes Nino, 2016)

It is also clear that women's experiences while homeless are crucially impacted by other facets of their identity: whether they are mothers, single mothers, Indigenous, LGBTQ*, racialized, or have status in Canada, for example. As Gaetz et. al (2013: 27) notes, "the sharpest increase in shelter use has been amongst families (in most cases headed by women) and therefore children." There was a 50 per cent increase in children staying in shelters between 2005 and 2009 (Ibid). Scott (2007: 28) also notes that, "the presence of children can make it difficult for mothers to take any accommodation that happens to come up in the right price bracket. Mothers parenting children have to think about safety, accessibility to schools, grocery stores, bus routes, and other amenities — if the landlord accepts children in

the first place.” She also adds that, “Ironically, it appears that the heavy, and understandable, emphasis on child poverty has blinded everyone to the obvious: children are poor because their mothers are poor” (Ibid). Moreover, the focus of federal homelessness funding has been “chronic and episodic homelessness” exclusively.

Furthermore, fear — unfortunately not unfounded — of having their children apprehended by Child and Family Services (CFS) is a strong inhibitor to accessing services for poor or homeless mothers. On accessing drug treatment or detox programs, Scott (2007: 76) writes, “Those with children are very unwilling to go into a program because they fear, often with foundation, that the authorities will declare them unfit mothers, even though they are seeking treatment in order to become better parents.” Indigenous mothers are most likely to have this concern, given that approximately 87 per cent of Manitoba children in state care are Indigenous, as part of Canada’s ongoing colonialism and cultural genocide of Indigenous peoples. Moreover, most children are taken into state care under the category of “neglect” which is “a word that thinly disguises the fact that children are taken into government care because their families are poor and sometimes cannot provide their children with basic needs” (Czapska et. al 2008: 14). In 43 percent of those cases of substantiated neglect in Canada, the child was removed from a lone female parent family, a statistic easily explained by the incredibly high rates of poverty among single mothers (Ibid.).

Finding “adequate housing with enough bedrooms” is a requirement in order to have children returned by CFS, meaning mothers who have had their children apprehended and who are homeless may find the experience of homelessness particularly painful (Lottis and McCracken 2015: 118). Housing is a key factor in reunification of parents with their children (Torricco 2009). If a parent is on EIA and children are apprehended, the housing allowance for her child(ren) ends after three months, how-

ever the amount of time needed for a parent to be reunited with her child(ren) is often indeterminate. Parents working toward reunification with their children must follow their case plan and take steps to demonstrate self-improvement through parenting classes, anger-management classes, addictions treatment and/or counseling. If parents have taken these steps and a reunification plan is made, without adequate housing with enough bedrooms based on National Occupancy Standards, parents cannot be reunited with their children. Another complicating factor is that families on EIA are reliant on the federal Canada Child Benefit, which they do not receive for six weeks or longer after they are reunited with their children (Lottis and McCracken 2015: 118).

Women who are Indigenous also face particularly challenging obstacles to housing. Amnesty International has concluded that Indigenous women “have been pushed into dangerous situations of extreme poverty, homelessness, and prostitution that make it easy for men, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, to be extremely violent towards them” (Amnesty International 2004 qtd. in Scott 2008: 149). Across Canada, Indigenous women report challenges finding culturally appropriate services (Czapska et. al: 24), and in Winnipeg Brandon and Peters (2015: 87) write that “A commonly reported experience was that individuals would go to view an apartment, and once the landlord realized they were Aboriginal, they were told it had already been rented.” Though over 80 percent of the homeless population in Winnipeg is Indigenous, and homeless women were found to be more likely than men to be Indigenous in the city’s 2011 Street Health Report, still few reports seem to focus on Indigenous women as a group distinct from Indigenous men and distinct from white women when it comes to their needs (Gessler et. al 2011: 33).

Finally, LGBTQ* women and racialized women face distinct barriers on account of their identity. Scott (2007: 163) writes that, “Although the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and trans community in

Canada totals only about 10 per cent of the general population, some care providers and homeless women say they may total as many as 40 per cent of the people on the streets of our cities.” Moreover, many women’s shelters refuse to accept trans women, and in many cases, shelters will deny help to trans women unless they can prove they have had genital surgery (Scott 2007: 167; Banks 2015: n.p.). Black women and Women of Colour are also impacted “not only by sexism, poverty and male violence but also by the compounding effects of living with systemic and individual racism” (Czapska et. al 2008: 17). For immigrant women “the migration process can present additional challenges” on top of what they might experience otherwise (Thurston 2013: 1). As Thurston (Ibid.) writes, “Ability to speak English, knowledge of Canadian systems, cultural background, and family structure all profoundly affect immigrant woman’s experience of the pathways into and out of homelessness.”

Though all this is known, few of these studies have looked at Winnipeg, and even fewer have done so in the context of the recent adoption of a Housing First model. Given that, of the individuals who used a Tenant Landlord Cooperation program in Winnipeg’s inner city, 81 per cent were Indigenous and 86 per cent were female, it is clear that this is a population in need of appropriate housing supports (Gotthilf and Stavem 2015: 50). The Housing First (HF) model has already garnered criticism for its accessibility for women, yet little has been proposed to address its shortcomings. As Matt Stock (2016:15) writes, “With regards to women, the major challenge that HF faces relates to access. This is because the large majority of homeless women are part of the hidden homeless population, as opposed to the visibly homeless population generally targeted by HF programs.” The program that guides the federal HF dollars, the Homelessness Partnering Strategy follows the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness’ Definition of Homelessness,

which includes hidden homelessness, for point-in-time counts and in other policy research. The HF definition of “episodic and chronic homelessness” program delivery specifically excludes hidden homelessness or homeless experiences of less than six months because of the HF focus on shelter and street homelessness.

There is a need to make homelessness programs accessible, in particular for women, and in particular for the hidden homeless population (Stock, 2016:18). The CCPA Manitoba’s collaboration with community organizations from the inner-city this intended to promote just that. Given the likelihood of women who are homeless experiencing overwhelming violence, of having their children apprehended, and of struggling to access services — the stakes are high for addressing the needs of this population. In light of all this, understanding how Housing First can be adapted for women in Winnipeg is an important first step. The next step requires ensuring enough social, rent-g geared-to-income housing is available to women with built-in social supports.

The intersectoralities of women’s identities and experiences must be considered together and systems (EIA, CFS, corrections) women interact with should work in concert to prevent homelessness. Women’s vulnerabilities to domestic violence and sexual exploitation must be considered in all homelessness and housing services. Addictions services and programs with no barriers to entry must be available to women. Women’s lower income status can be rectified through increased income transfers from government and improved access to education, training and decent work. The challenges that make women vulnerable to homelessness are well-documented. What is required is political will, coordination across all levels of government and government departments and with community-based organizations within a plan to action to end women’s homelessness in Winnipeg and across Canada.

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