

**PROJECT**  
**WILLOW**

YWCA-CJI-CMW

**Women Experiencing  
Homelessness:  
Layers of Violence**

**Literature Review**

# Women Experiencing Homelessness: Layers of Violence

## Introduction

The intent of this paper is to capture the layers of violence which street involved/ women experiencing homelessness contend with in urban spaces. These layers are complex and textured and as such the review of the literature has attempted to capture these challenges. Additionally, we will argue that there is a specificity to the violence perpetrated against street involved women which indicates the particular vulnerabilities that they face which differ greatly than their counterparts who access shelter services on a regular basis.

The picture of 235,000 people experiencing homelessness in Canada (Strobel et al., 2021) may not encompass experiences beyond those of the people that are unhoused and living on the streets or staying in shelters. “Hidden homelessness”, which includes living in temporary accommodations like hotels or with friends and strangers or housing situations that are inadequate or precarious, make up much of Canadian women’s experiences of homelessness (Schwan et al., 2020). It is important to keep in mind that these instances of hidden homelessness result in a systematic undercount of the prevalence of homelessness among women when noting that despite this underrepresentation, over 9,000 Canadian women and girls were counted as experiencing homelessness in a single day during the National Point in Time Count in 2018 (ESDC, 2019).

## Women Experiencing Homelessness and Gender Based Violence

Compared to men, women experiencing homelessness face risks and exposure to sexual and physical violent victimization at higher rates compared to men and women overall (Jasinski et al., 2010; Schwan et al., 2020; Wenzel et al., 2000; Wenzel et al., 2001). This is demonstrated through Canadian data indicating that assaults have been experienced by over 90% of street involved women (McInnes, 2016). **Victimization rates of women experiencing homelessness within the span of a year have been found to be higher than the rates of victimization of most women over the span of their lifetimes** (Jasinski et al., 2010).

The violence that street involved women experience exists not only with their current risks and victimization but also within their childhoods and their pathways to homelessness. It has been documented that over 80% of street involved women report experiencing victimization from childhood experiences of abuse to intimate partner violence that leads them to flee and lose access to housing (Broll & Huey, 2020; Jasinski et al., 2010; Wenzel et al., 2001). It is clear that violence can be viewed as a powerful predictor, cause, and consequence of homelessness.

## Factors Impacting Risk of Violence

The daily routines of street involved women can lead to dangerous situations that increase risks for violence. Sleeping outdoors, frequent travelling, and survival activities such as selling items, panhandling, or trading sex for items or housing have been found to be predictors of major violence in women experiencing homelessness (Jasinski et al., 2010; Wenzel et al., 2001). The relational survival activities and precarious supports that women are more often

depend on for survival than men, combined with their invisibility from hidden homelessness leads to increased experiences of violence (Bretherton, 2017).

Personal factors that increase vulnerability to victimization include mania, depression and schizophrenia diagnoses, drug and alcohol dependence, comorbid diagnoses, physical or health limitations, LGBTQ+ identities, women of colour including Black, Hispanic, and Asian women, and Indigenous cultural identities (Martin & Walia, 2019; Schwan et al., 2020; Wenzel et al., 2000).

Sleeping in the streets poses risks within a culture where female bodies become associated with sex work and are deemed as available for men, with ideas about women's sexuality as existing as a means to obtain drugs and money perpetuating rape culture (Flynn et al., 2018). While sleeping outside is an unsafe choice, often women are just as unsafe and in danger of gender-based violence when they are offered a place to stay by a male friend or stranger (Flynn et al., 2018).

### **Substance Use**

There is a demonstrated link between homelessness and substance use. A higher prevalence of substance use and diagnosed substance use disorders among adults experiencing homelessness exists, as do correlations between drug use and pathways to homelessness (Bevitt et al., 2015; Thomas & Menih, 2021; Wenzel et al., 2009). In comparing gender differences between adults experiencing homelessness and substance use, Edens et al. (2011) reported substance use rates as similar between men and women.

Specific to women, is the link between substance use and gender-based violence overall with the high rates of substance use in homeless populations leaving this population with an especially elevated risk of violence (Jasinski et al., 2010). Just spending time in locations where drugs are being sold and purchased increases a woman's risk of victimization (Jasinski et al., 2010).

A study by Beijer et al. (2018) examined the experiences of gender based violence of women struggling with substance abuse. They compared women experiencing homelessness to those who were not. The women in this study experiencing both substance abuse and homelessness had a higher risk of gender-based violence exposure, with over half experiencing violence from five or more males within their lifetime (Beijer et al., 2018). Additionally, the women experiencing both substance abuse and homelessness had a higher risk of being forced to commit criminal acts, posttraumatic stress, sexual abuse, criminal prosecution, and problems associated with their substance use (Beijer et al., 2018).

Women who experience homelessness have reported that their experiences of violent victimization are often directly linked with either their own or someone else's substance use (Thomas & Menih, 2021). Additionally, women's shelters have been viewed as dangerously impacted by the drug-market where increased victimization relating to theft, violence, and purposeful overdosing injections by others (Thomas & Menih, 2021).

Homelessness has been found to intersect with the stigma of substance use to produce increased discrimination and barriers to supports. In a study with women experiencing homelessness in Australia, participants shared stories of overt displays of discrimination and stereotyping related to their homelessness and perceived or actual substance use (Thomas & Menih, 2021). These experiences involved violent victimization and harassment by the police and impacted their overall relationship with law enforcement. Stigmatization was also acted out through service providers expectations, judgements, and punitive measures rendering their supports inaccessible or unwelcoming (Thomas & Menih, 2021). Interestingly, there were also reports of intra-group stigma surrounding substance use where drug use is seen as a hierarchy and those who inject drugs for example are seen as less than (Thomas & Menih, 2021).

In order to mitigate the stigma attached with the intersection of homelessness and substance use, women report avoiding substances and or substance users, engaging in positive social relationships or support groups for addiction, and focusing on other aspects of their identity such as religion as sources of supports (Thomas & Menih, 2021)

## **Motherhood**

Women with and without children experiencing homelessness have been found to share the same level of risk for victimization in a study done by Welch-Iazoritz et al. (2015). In another study, women experiencing homelessness with children had a lower risk of physical or sexual violence, living outdoors, and alcohol dependence (Wenzel et al., 2000). In these instances, having children may influence the choices mothers make about where they are living, how they assess risks, their connection to services or systems like child welfare, or the specific supports they may access related to their children.

Regardless of levels of risk factors to victimization, within the subset of homeless women who are also mothers, there are complicating vulnerabilities, stressors, and additional responsibilities faced uniquely by this group (Welch-Iazoritz et al., 2015). This is especially true for Indigenous mothers, who have increased barriers to safe and stable housing. When thinking about leaving an abusive situation, Indigenous mothers are met with violence through racism and discrimination by landlords or the historical trauma, fears, and realities of child apprehension in the shelter system where mandatory reporting policies make them weary of entering (Martin & Walia, 2019). These additional burdens of Indigenous mothers not being able to safely access shelters without revictimization, fear of losing their children, or the ability to obtain housing leaves more room for vulnerability to and returning to violent situations and relationships.

## **Structural Violence**

The complex needs, challenges, and risks of women experiencing homeless extend to structural systems like healthcare services. Women experiencing homelessness have reported a sense of invisibility and lack of safety or dignity in the healthcare system which perpetuates their multifaceted vulnerabilities and barriers to wellbeing (Kneck et al., 2021). Women experiencing homelessness have shared narratives that highlight a specificity of needs that go unaddressed including care that results from gender-based violence, mental health, and women's health.

Factors associated with avoiding seeking healthcare include previous experience of disrespect or abuse perpetuated by healthcare professionals, shame, and stigma (Kneck et al., 2021). The failure of the healthcare system in providing accessible and respectful care exacerbates the pathways to, and experience of, violence and limits opportunities for preventative measures.

## **Enculturation**

A study done by Huey (2016) interviewing women experiencing homelessness in Los Angeles focused on street culture and the acceptance of violence in street life. Women in the study that were deemed highly street involved, that is socially tied to street culture, experiencing multiple episodes of homelessness over many years, and participating in subsisting activities that were illegal like drug dealing, were more likely to overtly accept violence as part of their lives and to be willing to use violence against others (Huey, 2016).

“**Fronting**” is a strategy found to be used by the women to appear tough and unphased by violence in order to reduce victimization risks and distance themselves emotionally from the effects of their violent experiences (Huey, 2016). Unfortunately, the fronting behaviours that serve to protect these women on the streets can also serve as a barrier to supports and services. Women may choose not to engage in services as this does not align with their “fronted” positioning. Alternatively, those that do get connected with professionals may not be deemed as needing support services to address the impact of their victimization (Huey, 2016).

## **Reporting Victimization**

Overall, crime in the homeless communities is under-reported (Huey, 2007). A study by Huey and Quirouette (2010) looked at the specificity of the experiences of women who experience homelessness and their attitudes with reporting crime. Within homeless communities, an “anti-snitching code” exists and homeless men and women in Edinburgh, Vancouver, and Canada were interviewed about these codes.

Men shared that women are an exception to anti-snitching codes due to more frequent victimization, power differentials between men and women, and vulnerability and exploitation resulting from naivety (Huey & Quirouette, 2010). This view of women specifically within the male homeless culture was found to reinforce masculinity narratives that pointed to men as “more suited to street life” and protectors of women who should retaliate on behalf of them (Huey & Quirouette, 2010).

Unsurprisingly, these narratives that the male interviewees presented were challenged by the narratives of the women interviewed, not to mention the reality of women’s widespread experiences of gender-based violence. The women shared a rejection of this code exception as necessary for their personal safety (Huey & Quirouette, 2010). Some of the women saw the paternalistic assumptions as a trap that questions their worth and respect in the homeless community and presented as tough and self-sufficient, rejecting the need to rely on males or police for protection. Other women felt the male protection and exemption from the snitching code narratives were insincere and did not actually reduce any violence or retaliation risks from reporting victimization given their previous experiences of abusive male partners (Huey &

Quirouette, 2010). Women shared their experiences of reporting their victimization as resulting in an increase of abuse and shame from their community and used this as evidence that it is safer to rely on either silence or retaliation as self-protection methods. The lack of reporting then perpetuates violence and barriers to supports for women who are already marginalized (Huey & Quirouette, 2010).

### **Recommendations for Service Delivery and Prevention**

The policies and services that currently exist to serve Canada's population of homeless individuals are male-centric, and are therefore failing to adequately address the specific needs of our female-identifying street involved citizens, perpetuating instances of gender based violence (Bretherton, 2017).

Given the distinct experiences of women experiencing homelessness and victimization, it is recommended that measures to prevent and respond to violence be inclusive and gender-informed. Best practice examples include a shift from temporary accommodations to the provision of secure housing support that is unconditional and includes additional supports to address intersectional needs and barriers when applicable (Bimpson et al., 2021).

If temporary accommodations are required, it is recommended that there is an increase in access to women-only shelters, as it is well documented that mixed-sex accommodations can be physically and emotionally unsafe and re-traumatizing, increasing risks for further victimization (Bimpson et al., 2021; Bretherton, 2017). The urgent need for increased access to shelters specific to gender-based violence is demonstrated by current statistics in Canada with shelters turning away an average of 1,000 women and children a day due to the overwhelmed capacity of these systems (Schwan et al., 2020). Even for one of the 68,000 women and children admitted to a shelter in Canada in 2017/2018, the vast majority of these shelters offer short-term housing of less than three months (Statistics Canada, 2019). The lack of accessible and long-term housing support then puts women in situations where they are trapped in violent relationships or face unsafe situations without affordable and appropriate housing. Priority therefore must be placed on addressing the current state of underfunded and under-resourced shelter systems.

While typical responses to women fleeing violence involve removing the women to a temporary accommodation, this often places the women on a pathway to homelessness due to the inadequacies of the shelter system just mentioned. Instead of relying on shelters for women, an initiative in the United Kingdom rehouses perpetrators of intimate partner violence and supports the women in remaining in their home while remaining involved with supports for the re-homed perpetrator as well (Bimpson et al., 2021). This response allows for women to remain connected with their support networks, employment, childcare, and environments.

Above all, it is recommended that policy changes reflect an emphasis on preventative measures over responses to crises. This can involve trauma-informed supports and services at all levels of systems where screening measures to detect risk factors for homelessness and violent victimization are in place (Bimpson et al., 2021). Policies and programming should also take into account the protective factor of employment. Women who are street involved are found to have

lower rates of violent victimization when they spend more time at a place of employment (Jasinski et al., 2010).

### **Youth Homelessness and GBV: A Toronto-Based Project**

A five-year community led project based in Toronto called PEACE (Peer Education and Connection through Empowerment) was developed to provide female-identified youth survivors of gender-based violence experiencing homelessness with psychosocial interventions (Kahan et al., 2020). These youth-focused interventions are especially important given the increased risk that youth homelessness creates for gender-based violence such as human trafficking and sexual exploitation (Kidd, 2017). The trauma-informed peer support group promoted skill building, increased awareness in socio-cultural issues, and trust in a physically and emotionally safe and respectful environment. The program was delivered within a pre-existing organization that had well-established positive youth and staff relationships which allowed for increased levels of engagement and participation from youth (Kahan et al., 2020).

The physical environment, a building separate from the main shelter, was set up intentionally in order to offer an inviting, quiet, and easily accessible space (Kahan et al., 2020). Barriers to participation were addressed by scheduling the group in the evenings, sending text reminders, providing public transportation tokens, access to phone the group coordinator after hours, and healthy refreshment options each week as chosen by participants (Kahan et al., 2020).

The group was run with as many options for choice, empowerment, and co-production as possible. Participants in the group co-created group norms, chose recreational activities, and helped to develop the skill building and educational programming (Kahan et al., 2020). The psychoeducation material covered included sex-trafficking, dating violence, and trauma. Participants noted that engaging in discussions around this content resulted in the development of insight into their gendered experiences and their belief systems (Kahan et al., 2020). The trauma disclosures and difficult material covered during sessions was balanced with the recreational activities, which also served to develop group cohesion and supportive relationships among the participants (Kahan, et al., 2020). Overall, this program was a flexible and accessible group that offered youth opportunities to make pro-social connections with peers and staff, have access to resources and supports without judgment, and increase their safety and self-reflection through psychoeducational sessions.

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