

# THE STATE OF WOMEN'S HOUSING NEED & HOMELESSNESS IN CANADA

## Key Findings

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# KEY FINDINGS

## The State of Women's Housing Need & Homelessness in Canada

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# KEY FINDINGS

## Homelessness amongst women, girls, and gender diverse peoples<sup>1</sup> is a crisis in Canada – hiding in plain sight.

In all provinces and territories, women, girls, and gender diverse peoples experience some of the most severe forms of housing need. Black women, women of colour, Indigenous women, gender diverse peoples, (dis)abled women, poor women, LGBTQ2S+ peoples, sex workers, incarcerated women, newcomer women, and younger and older women are all disproportionately affected (Van Berkum & Oudshoorn, 2015). Best available estimates of women's homelessness and housing insecurity amongst women in Canada are significant undercounts, in part due to the often hidden nature of their homelessness (Maki, 2017). Women are less likely to appear in mainstream shelters, drop in spaces, public spaces, or access other homeless-specific services, and are more likely to rely on relational, precarious, and dangerous supports to survive (Bretherton, 2017). The prominence and greater visibility of men in the homelessness sector has led to a male-centric policy and service environment, creating the conditions for women's homelessness to remain invisible (Bretherton, 2017). As a result, we are greatly underestimating – and failing to respond to – the immense number of women who are homeless in Canada.

Research also shows that existing support systems fail to transition women and girls out of homelessness quickly (if at all), and in many cases they are left with no option but to **return to situations of violence**, precarity, and marginalization (Statistics Canada, 2019b). Women and gender diverse peoples face profound violence on the streets and in public systems and are regularly separated from their children because of their housing status and exposure to violence (Van Berkum & Oudshoorn, 2015). Despite this, housing policy rarely focuses on their realities, resulting in an acute lack of

women-only, trauma-informed housing services (Fotheringham, Walsh & Burrowes, 2013; Kirkby & Mettler, 2016). In the absence of access to safe, adequate, and affordable housing, women across Canada are driven into emergency systems that are often insufficient and may not meet their needs. In many cases, these emergency systems are overwhelmed with demand, chronically underfunded, and so regularly turn away women experiencing violence, homelessness, and extreme forms of marginalization (Vecchio, 2019).

In order to better understand these challenges, the **Women's National Housing and Homelessness Network** (WNHHN) decided to undertake an extensive scoping review of available evidence on women's homelessness in Canada. The Canadian Observatory was hired to complete this **literature review**, guided at each step by the expertise of WNHHN members, including members with lived experience of homelessness. This review explored evidence on the unique causes, consequences, and experiences of homelessness and housing precarity for women, girls, and gender diverse peoples in Canada. We relied on the expertise of our partners at Keepers of the Circle, an Indigenous Hub operated by the Temiskaming Native Women's Support Group in Northern Ontario, to analyze the research on Indigenous women's experiences. The review triangulated multiple data sources, including: scholarly literature, government reports, policy briefs, fact sheets, parliamentary committee proceedings, statistical data, and deputations made to all levels of government (published between 2000 and 2019).<sup>2</sup> This document highlights our key findings across this collective research.

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this document we explore the experiences of women, girls, and gender diverse peoples in a gender-inclusive manner. Within our definition of women we include any person who self-identifies as a woman, and we also seek to highlight the distinct challenges that gender diverse peoples face to accessing adequate housing. Given that there is limited research available on gender diverse peoples' experiences of homelessness and housing need in Canada, a majority of the research reported discusses women exclusively. There is a dire need for research on gender diverse peoples' experiences of homelessness and housing need, and the WNHHN would like to highlight our frustration that the experiences and voices of gender diverse peoples continue to be absent in scholarly and community-based research.

<sup>2</sup> For details on the methodology, see the Methodology chapter in [The State of Women's Housing Need & Homelessness in Canada: A Literature Review](#).

*In drawing together our findings, we identified **eight key challenges and opportunities** we face as a nation in seeking to prevent and end homelessness amongst women, girls, and gender diverse peoples:*

## One

The number of women, girls, and gender diverse peoples experiencing homelessness in Canada is dramatically underestimated. Women's homelessness is made invisible by how we define, measure, and respond to housing need and homelessness.

## Two

There is a profound lack of safe, affordable, adequate, and appropriate housing for women, girls, and gender diverse peoples in communities across Canada.

## Three

Lack of women-specific housing and supports drive women into emergency shelters and services that may not recognize them as homeless, are not designed to respond to their needs, and are often underfunded and overwhelmed.

As a result, many women remain trapped in traumatizing situations of homelessness and violence.

## Four

Homelessness is uniquely dangerous for women and gender diverse peoples. When we fail to prevent or end housing need or homelessness for women, we ensure repeated cycles of violence and housing precarity.

## Five

Gaps, silos, policies, and practices within Violence Against Women (VAW) and homelessness sectors can inadvertently create hardship for some women and gender diverse peoples, in some cases contributing to housing instability and exposure to violence.

## Six

Indigenous women, girls, and gender diverse peoples experience the most egregious housing conditions throughout Canada and remain the most underserved in both the VAW and homelessness sectors.

## Seven

Mothers' experiences of housing instability and violence create the conditions for intergenerational homelessness.

Addressing the housing needs of women – particularly those of mothers and their children – is critical to solving chronic and intergenerational homelessness.

## Eight

Multiple and compounding public system failures drive women and their children into housing instability and homelessness, contributing to intergenerational cycles of homelessness, housing instability, marginalization, and violence.

These challenges are not insurmountable. In fact, they come at a time when Canada has the unique opportunity to develop policy and practice solutions that can transform homelessness for women, girls, and gender diverse peoples. Last year, the **National Housing Strategy Act** (NHSA) received royal assent, recognizing Canada’s commitment to the right to housing for all. In 2019, the federal government also committed to allocate at least 25% of the **National Housing Strategy** investments to address the distinct needs of women and girls. In light of these historic commitments, it is critical that responses to homelessness amongst women, girls, and gender diverse peoples are urgently prioritized. This urgency must be reflected in evidence-based policy solutions, investments in housing, and expansions to services and supports – all shaped by the meaningful inclusion and leadership of diverse women with lived expertise.

“The form women’s homelessness often takes is referred to as ‘hidden homelessness.’ Their bodies —our bodies—literally go unseen, our needs unmet, and our stories unheard. The crisis of women’s homelessness, because of this lack of visibility, is much worse than even best estimates can fathom: we need to be seen if we want to end homelessness.”

- **Alex Nelson**, Lived Expert  
PhD Candidate Western University



# 8 Key Challenges and Opportunities for Change

**1.** The number of women, girls, and gender diverse peoples experiencing homelessness in Canada is dramatically underestimated. Women's homelessness is made invisible by how we define, measure, and respond to housing need and homelessness.

Our best estimates of homelessness and housing insecurity amongst women and gender diverse people in Canada are significant undercounts, in part due to the often hidden nature of their homelessness.<sup>3</sup>

Women are less likely to appear in mainstream shelters, drop in spaces, public spaces, or access other homeless-specific services (Bapitista, 2010; Maki, 2017) and are more likely to rely on relational, precarious, and dangerous supports to survive (Bretherton, 2017). It is well-recognized that women experiencing homelessness negotiate a number of high-risk survival strategies to obtain shelter and avoid the dangers of the streets and co-ed shelter spaces, including by staying in unsafe and exploitative relationships and exchanging sex for shelter (Bretherton, 2017). As a result, women are systematically undercounted in Point in Time (PiT) Counts and other "snapshot" methodologies, which commonly focus on measuring absolute/street homelessness and homeless shelter usage, both of which tend to be male-dominated (Bretherton, 2017). This means that the full extent of homelessness amongst women, girls, and gender diverse peoples is largely unknown (May, Cloke, & Johnsen, 2007), leaving governments to design and implement policies and programming in the absence of key knowledge and data.

“The sites at which homelessness is studied, and the ways in which data are collected, limit accuracy of measurement and inhibit understanding.”

(Bretherton, 2017, p. 1)

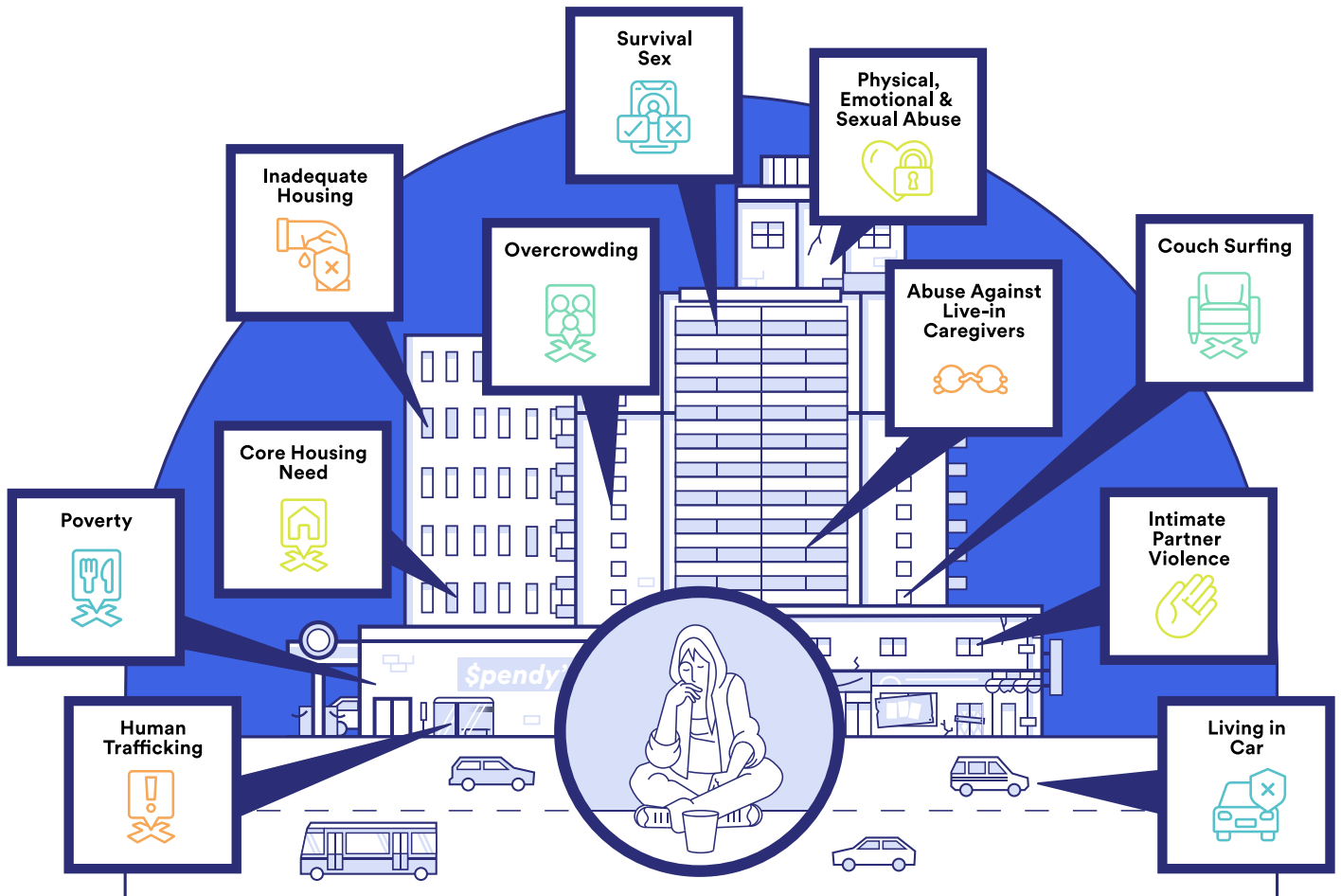
“Everywhere I visited I heard stories of professionals struggling to evidence women's homelessness, especially young women's homelessness, and the need for services.”

(Sample, 2019, p. 12)

<sup>3</sup> The **Canadian Definition of Homelessness** characterizes hidden homelessness as a form of provisional accommodation which includes “people living temporarily with others but without guarantee of continued residency or immediate prospects for accessing permanent housing” (Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, 2017, p. 3).

# Hidden Homelessness

## Amongst Women, Girls, & Gender Diverse People



**FIGURE 1**

While we may imagine homelessness as the person asking for change on the street corner, women's homelessness is often hidden behind closed doors. It includes couch surfing with friends, trading sex for housing, or living in a tiny, overcrowded apartment.

**Systematic undercounting makes it difficult to accurately estimate the number of women and girls experiencing homelessness in Canada** (Bopp et al., 2007; Van Berkum & Oudshoorn, 2015; Pleace, 2016). This undercounting is not unique to the Canadian context: global trends demonstrate that women have been under-represented in research on homelessness, in part due to the hidden nature of their homelessness (Bretherton, 2017; Fotheringham et al., 2014; Pleace, 2016). Lack of research on hidden homelessness is partially attributed to:

- ↳ Many countries failing to include forms of hidden homelessness (e.g., couch surfing) within their definition(s) of homelessness (Bretherton, 2017).
- ↳ The methodological challenges involved in enumerating hidden homelessness, such as difficulty capturing its temporary and transitory nature, as well as the “inherent difficulty in counting multiple households living in a single dwelling” (Bretherton, 2017, p. 7; Pleace & Bretherton, 2013).



Despite these issues, both international and domestic research suggests that hidden homelessness is more prevalent compared to absolute/street homelessness and constitutes a significant portion of the homeless population. Some countries have attempted to enumerate hidden homelessness with variable success. For example:

- ↳ Finland has used both data collection and estimation to enumerate homelessness, finding that 76% of the homeless population is experiencing hidden homelessness (Bretherton, 2017; Sample, 2018).<sup>4</sup>
- ↳ In Ireland it is estimated that 43% of the homeless population is experiencing hidden homelessness, based on survey data and statistical enumeration (Pleace & Bretherton, 2013).
- ↳ Denmark has reported that “28% of all homelessness is people sharing housing temporarily with friends or family” (Bretherton, 2017, p. 8; Busch-Geertsema et al., 2014).

In Canada, government-based data indicates that a large section of the Canadian population have experienced hidden homelessness. According to Statistic Canada’s 2014 **General Social Survey on Canadian’s Safety (Victimization)**, 2.3 million Canadians (nearly 1 in 10 Canadians) experienced hidden homelessness at one point in their lives (Rodrigue, 2016, p. 2).<sup>5</sup> When compared to the estimated 235,000 people experiencing homelessness each year (Gaetz et al., 2016), this data underscores the prevalence of hidden homelessness in Canada. Some reports have indicated that hidden homelessness is “estimated as three and a half times the amount actually counted” (Klassen & Spring, 2015, p. 1), but the empirical evidence supporting these estimates is scarce.

*While limited, the available data we do have suggests the scale of women’s housing need and homelessness is much larger than we currently estimate. In the absence of more comprehensive data, improving estimations requires that we piece together various types of data.* As shown in Figure 2 - *The Real Scale of Women’s Housing Need & Homelessness* (p. 10), this includes data such as:

- ↳ Family shelter occupancy rates
- ↳ Women-led families living in poverty
- ↳ Indigenous women’s housing need on reserves
- ↳ Rates of abuse and intimate partner violence (IPV)
- ↳ VAW shelter and service usage
- ↳ Women and children turned away from homelessness or VAW shelters due to capacity issues
- ↳ Women and gender diverse peoples experiencing human trafficking

In drawing together this data, it is critical that we include many women who are typically not understood or counted as being homeless, including those who may not see themselves as homeless. For example, understanding the real scale of women’s homelessness would mean including data on:

- ↳ Women who are incarcerated and have no housing to return to once released
- ↳ Women who were turned away from shelters (for varying reasons) and are residing in hospitals or other healthcare facilities
- ↳ Women who are temporarily living in low-budget hotels and motels with no security of tenure
- ↳ Young women who are transitioning out of group homes or foster care with little or no plans for future housing placements
- ↳ Women in treatment facilities whose discharge plan is to return to an abusive relationship or a homeless shelter

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<sup>4</sup> Comparing several nations’ approaches to enumerating women’s homelessness, Esther Sample (2018) concludes: “The most comprehensive national approach of measuring women’s homelessness I found was in Finland. In Finland women’s homelessness statistics also includes those who are ‘sofa surfing’ or in more hidden homeless situations. They collate the total from service data, data from social services and homelessness departments, and from population data and surveys” (p. 14).

<sup>5</sup> The Survey defined hidden homelessness as having “to temporarily live with family, friends, in their car, or anywhere else because they had nowhere else to live” (Rodrigue, 2016, p. 2).

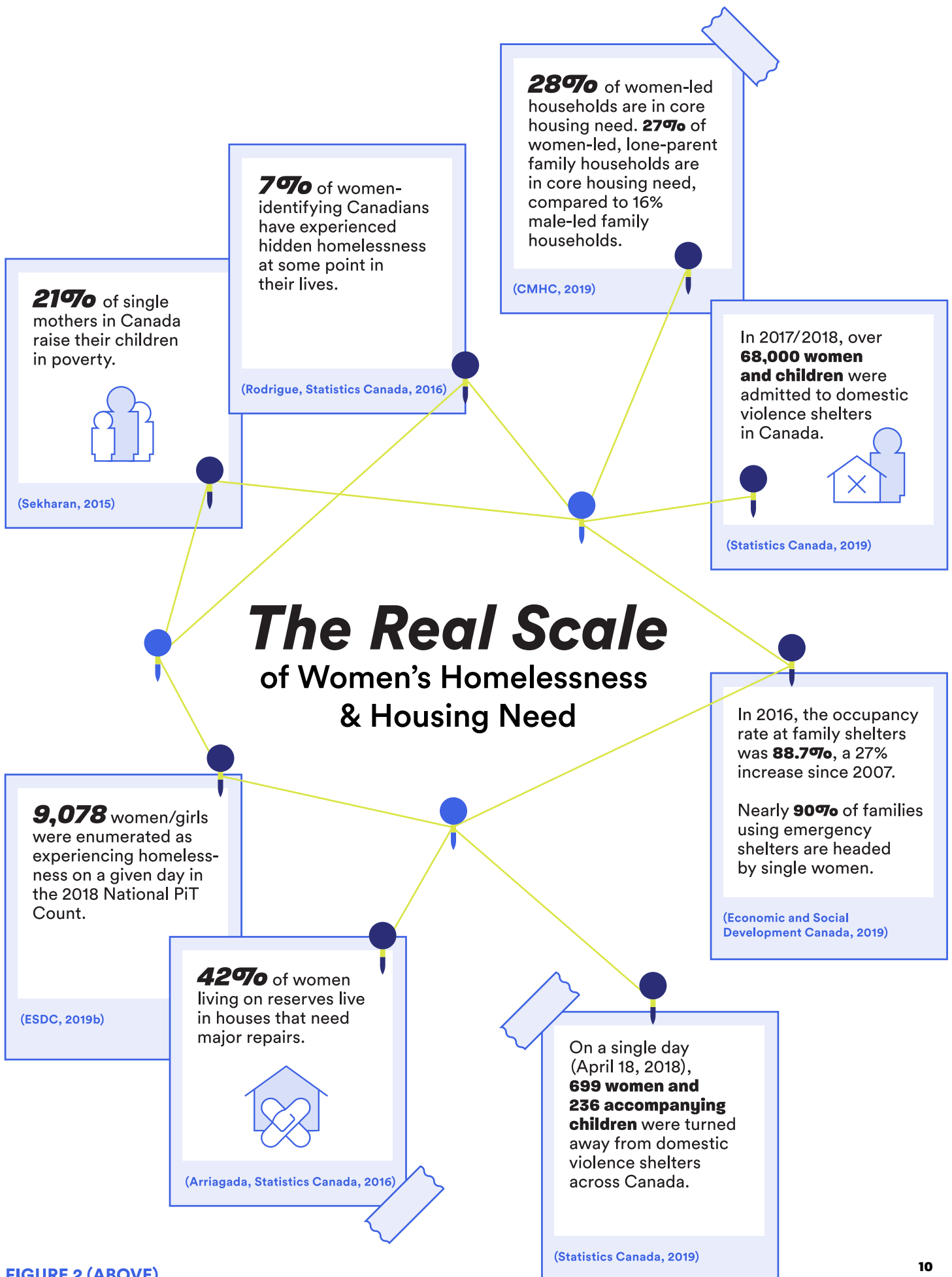


FIGURE 2 (ABOVE)

Women in these dire situations may cycle in and out of various precarious housing situations, healthcare settings, and abusive relationships so as not to find themselves absolutely homeless and on the streets. *In many cases, these women remain largely invisible to the mainstream homelessness sector.*

**If nothing else, the triangulation of available data indicates:**

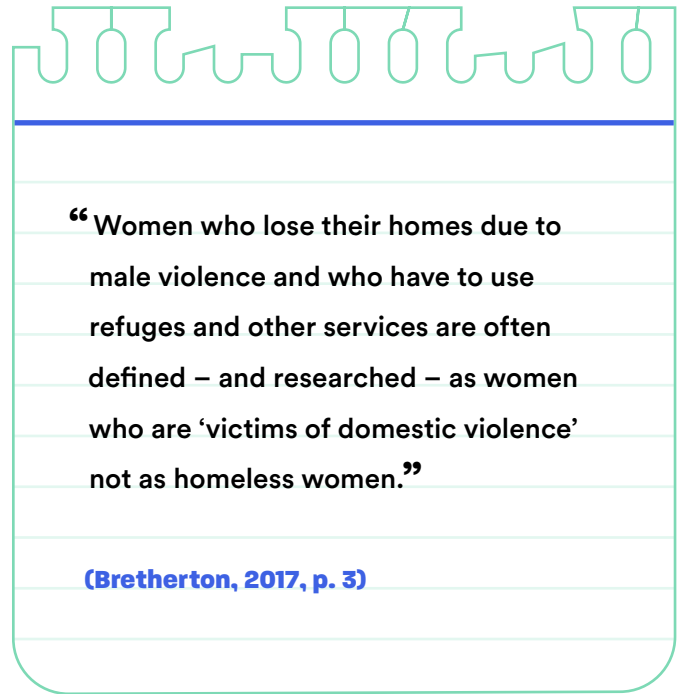
**One,** we are likely vastly underestimating the number of women, girls, and gender diverse peoples experiencing homelessness in Canada, and

**Two,** we have not yet implemented effective research measures and methods capable of generating a strong statistical portrait of homelessness among women in Canada.

Our current approaches to measurement have not captured the scale of women's homelessness, the chronicity of women's homelessness, and how women move in and out of homelessness. Nicholas Pleace's (2016) critique in the European context thus might be similarly offered in relation to Canada:

“The state of statistical knowledge on women's homelessness in Europe is clearly underdeveloped. This statement has to be contextualized by noting that robust, comprehensive, clear and comparable homelessness data of any sort are still a relative rarity in Europe, but even allowing for that, the state of data collection on women's homelessness is unacceptably poor” (2016, p. 121).<sup>6</sup>

*In order to better understand the scale of women's homelessness in Canada, and to prevent it, we need to move beyond traditional methodologies used to enumerate and research homeless populations.* Developing improved data on women's homelessness will also require coordinating data across systems and sectors, including the VAW sector, given that “women in the [gender-based violence] sector have not been counted in the homeless numbers locally or nationally” (ANOVA quoted in Vecchio, 2019, p. 47).



*Foundational to this is ensuring that women and gender diverse peoples' unique experiences of homelessness are included in definitions of homelessness.* Part of the reason that women's homelessness remains understudied, undercounted, and underfunded is because it is often not recognized as such (Bretherton, 2017). Given the addum that “what can be defined can be measured, and what can be measured can be managed” (at least in theory), it is critical that governments adopt a national definition that is inclusive of how women and gender diverse peoples experience homelessness. Such a definition is critical to ensuring gender equity with respect to homelessness funding as well, given concerns raised by the Minister's Advisory Committee on Homelessness (2018) that “[t]he lack of an agreed-upon definition of homelessness creates a critical disadvantage to accessing Homelessness Partnering Strategy funds for women” (p. 22). Given the scope and severity of women and gender diverse peoples' homelessness in Canada, adopting a more inclusive definition of homelessness at the national level is an urgent priority.

<sup>6</sup> Pleace goes on to argue, “What right-leaning politicians and researchers do not like is evidence that structures, systems and policies, rather than individual behaviour, may be causing homelessness. This means the right has an incentive to avoid defining homelessness as including poor people in insecure, overcrowded and unfit housing (Anderson 1993; O'Flaherty 2010), which, of course, makes it more likely that homeless women will not be counted (Baptista 2010)” (2016, p. 121).

## 2. There is a profound lack of safe, affordable, adequate, and appropriate housing for women, girls, and gender diverse peoples in communities across Canada.

In 2019 Canada ratified the right to housing in domestic legislation in the **National Housing Strategy Act** (2019), recognizing that “housing is essential to the inherent dignity and well-being of the person and to building sustainable and inclusive communities.” The Act commits Canada to the progressive realization of this right as defined under the **International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights**, which codifies “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” (UN General Assembly, 1966). In addition, Canada has ratified the **Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women** (OHCHR, 2019), which guarantees women the right to “enjoy adequate living conditions, particularly in relation to housing” (UN General Assembly, 1979). Despite this, women across Canada continue to experience disproportionate levels of housing need and housing instability, with untold numbers of women experiencing homelessness.

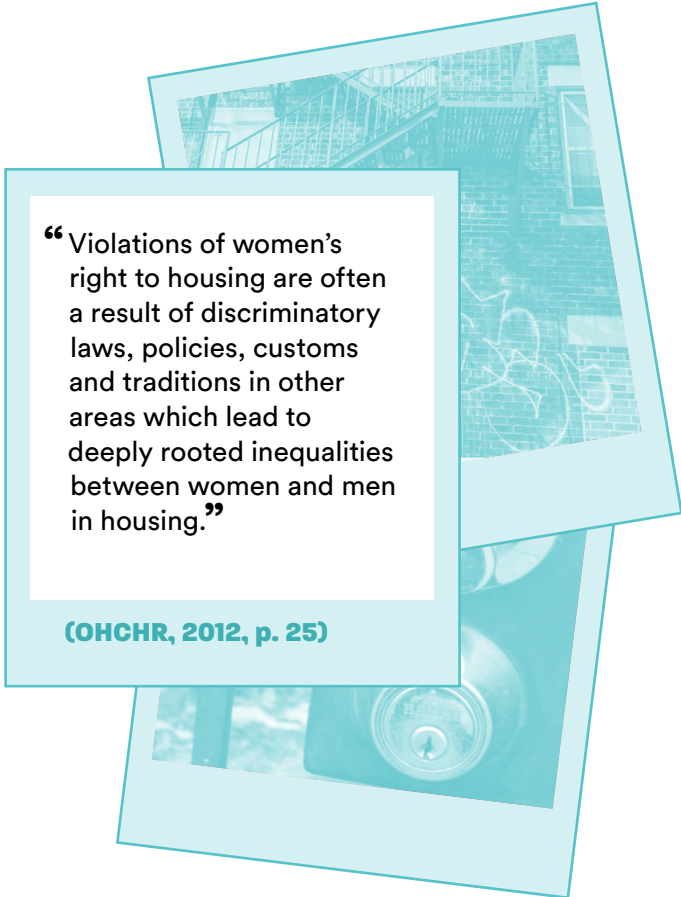
Of the 1.7 million people experiencing core housing need<sup>7</sup> in Canada in 2016, 28% of these were women-led households (CMHC, 2019). Data also shows that 27% of women-led, lone-parent family households are in core housing need, almost double the rate of men-led households (16%) (CMHC, 2019). More women-led households live in subsidized housing than households led by men (44.1% vs. 40.5%) (CMHC, 2019), and these numbers are even more stark for particular groups of women.

### Research (Prentice & Simonova, 2019) indicates core housing need among:

**21%** of senior, women-led households

**22%** of young, women-led households

**25%** of Indigenous, women-led households off reserve



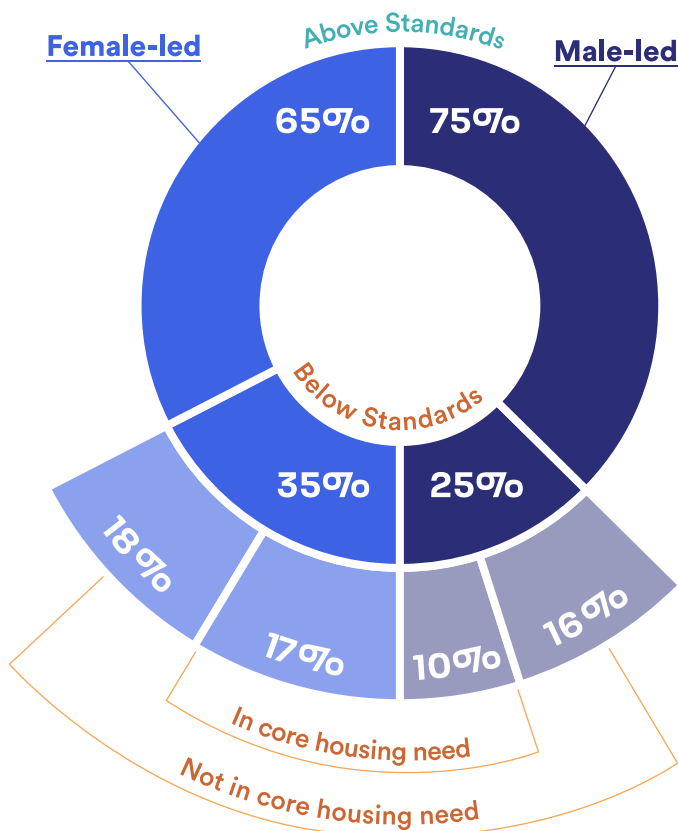
“Violations of women’s right to housing are often a result of discriminatory laws, policies, customs and traditions in other areas which lead to deeply rooted inequalities between women and men in housing.”

(OHCHR, 2012, p. 25)

In the face of core housing need – linked to escalating rental costs and decreases in rental vacancy (Rental Market Report, 2018) – many women seek out social or affordable housing. However, Statistics Canada’s **Canadian Housing Survey** (2018) revealed that “One quarter of a million households, representing 1.9% or 283,800 Canadian households, had at least one member on a waiting list for social and affordable housing. Of these households, almost two-thirds (61.2%) or 173,600 households were on a waiting list for two years or longer” (Statistics Canada, 2019a, p. 2). These statistics are troubling, given that remaining stuck in poor housing and on long waitlists for subsidized housing can trap women in cycles of poverty and abuse while also creating the conditions for child welfare investigations when neglect is conflated with poverty (OACAS, 2016; Trocme et al., 2004).

<sup>7</sup> According to **Statistics Canada** (2017), “a household is said to be in 'core housing need' if its housing falls below at least one of the adequacy, affordability, or suitability standards and it would have to spend 30% or more of its total before-tax income to pay the median rent of alternative local housing that is acceptable (meets all three housing standards)” (n.p.).

## Percentage of female-led households living in below standard housing and in core housing need



## Prevalence of **Low Income** Among Women in Canada

**16.3%**

Senior women

**21%**

Racialized women

**23%**

Women with disabilities

**31.4%**

Newcomer women (immigrated between 2011 and 2016)

**32.3%**

Indigenous women with registered or treaty status

**42%**

Children (age 0 to 17) in women-led, lone-parent families

### ABOVE: FIGURE 3

Source: (Canadian Women's Foundation, 2018)

### LEFT: FIGURE 4

Source: Prentice & Simonova, 2019 (Census-based indicators and data)  
Note: Percentages may not add up because of rounding

**The disproportionate levels of housing need faced by women are linked to the unique challenges they face when seeking adequate housing.** Hidden homelessness, intimate partner violence, childcare responsibilities, and poverty all contribute to difficulties accessing and maintaining safe, affordable housing for women (Nemiroff, Aubry & Klodawsky, 2011; Walsh, Rutherford, & Kuzmak, 2009). For example, we know that:

- ↳ Women face discrimination and racism in the private housing market, with research demonstrating landlords discriminate against single mothers, women on financial assistance, and Indigenous women (Vecchio, 2019).
- ↳ For example, a report on Indigenous women's experiences of housing discrimination in Vancouver revealed: landlords' refusal to rent to Indigenous women receiving welfare; illegal rent increases; building staff who attempt to elicit sex in exchange for maintenance; poor sanitation; pest infestations; and illegal rules such as curfews and room checks (Martin & Walia, 2019, p. 20).
- ↳ The feminization of poverty makes it difficult for many women and women-led families to afford rent and other necessities (van Berkum & Oudshoorn, 2015; Sekharan, 2015). Research shows poverty and income inequality is experienced along lines of race as well. For example, 2016 national census data indicates that one-quarter of Black women in Canada live below the poverty line (Statistics Canada, 2017). Similarly, unemployment rates among Black women were twice the rate of non-racialized women (12.2% vs 6.4%), even though labour participation was higher (Block, Galabuzi, & Tranjan, 2019). In the General Toronto Area (GTA) in 2016, working poverty amongst Black women was indicated at 10.5%, more than twice the rates for white male workers (4.8%) and white female workers (4.7%) (Stapleton, 2019).

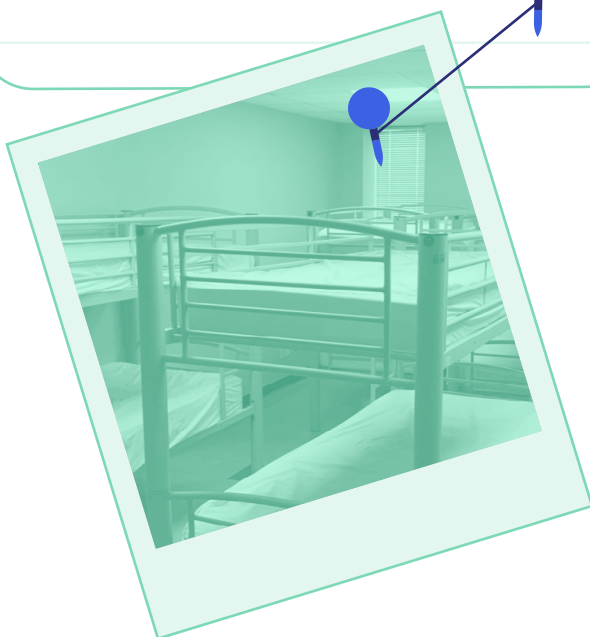
- ↳ Lack of childcare and child-friendly services can make it difficult to access housing supports for mothers (Fortin, Jackson, Maher & Moravac, 2014; Styron, Janoff-Bulman, & Davidson, 2000).
- ↳ Insufficient rental allowance in social assistance programs and rigid eligibility criteria make it difficult for women to find and retain affordable housing (Martin & Walia, 2019; Wallace, Klein & Reitsma-Street, 2006).

*In the absence of providing access to affordable housing, it is incumbent upon the governments to provide women with adequate emergency shelter and supports that are designed to address their unique needs and recognize the unique ways in which they experience homelessness.* However, many homeless shelters geared to women and families are at and over capacity, and the length of shelter stays amongst families has increased significantly in recent years (Segaert 2017). VAW shelters are similarly at or over capacity in almost every community, with the majority only offering short-term lodging to women fleeing violence (less than 3 months) (Statistics Canada, 2019). The most recent national data indicates that 78% of VAW shelters across Canada are short term (428 out of 552 shelters), and the top challenge facing women when they leave abusive situations is lack of affordable and appropriate long-term housing options (Statistics Canada, 2019b).

“VAW shelters were not intended as a long-term solution for victims of gender-based and family violence but women may live for years in emergency shelters because there is no affordable housing available. In order to support women leaving abusive situations, access to safe, affordable housing is essential.”

(NWAC, 2018, p. 1)

Safe, affordable, and permanent housing is the only long-term solution to homelessness for women, girls, and gender diverse peoples (van Berkum & Oudshoorn, 2015). A gendered, intersectional lens that takes into account women’s varied experiences and identities such as age, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status is critical for guiding expansions to affordable housing. Policy tools (e.g., the national portable housing benefit) must be developed and implemented with an eye to ensuring they meet the needs of women, girls, and gender diverse peoples.



### 3. Lack of women-specific housing and supports drive women into emergency shelters and services that may not recognize them as homeless, are not designed to respond to their needs, and are often underfunded and overwhelmed. As a result, many women remain trapped in traumatizing situations of homelessness and violence.

In addition to the broader housing affordability crisis faced by Canada, research consistently demonstrates a lack of women-only, trauma-informed housing services for women experiencing housing precarity, poverty, and/or violence (Fotheringham, Walsh & Burrowes, 2013; Kirkby & Mettler, 2016). In the absence of access to adequate housing, women across Canada are driven into emergency systems that are often insufficient and do not meet their needs. In many cases, these emergency systems are overwhelmed with demand and regularly turn away women experiencing extreme forms of marginalization.

Data from Statistics Canada (2019), Employment and Social Development Canada (2019), parliamentary reports (Vecchio, 2019), municipalities (e.g., City of Toronto, 2018), and independent research (Jadidzadeh & Kneebone, 2018; Gadon, 2018) consistently indicate that emergency shelters across the country are operating at (or over) capacity. This is true in both the homelessness sector and the VAW sector. In some communities, shelters have been operating at or over capacity for decades (e.g., City of Toronto), while other communities have seen their demand grow in recent years. **ESDC’s National Shelter Study** (2019b) found that while the number of emergency shelter beds across Canada changed very little between 2005 and 2014 (hovering around 15,000 beds), the demand for shelter beds has increased.<sup>8</sup> On any given night in 2014, 92% of Canada’s shelter beds were in use. In 2005, by comparison, just over 80% of shelter beds were in use across Canada.

### Emergency shelter beds by clientele served, PiT 2018

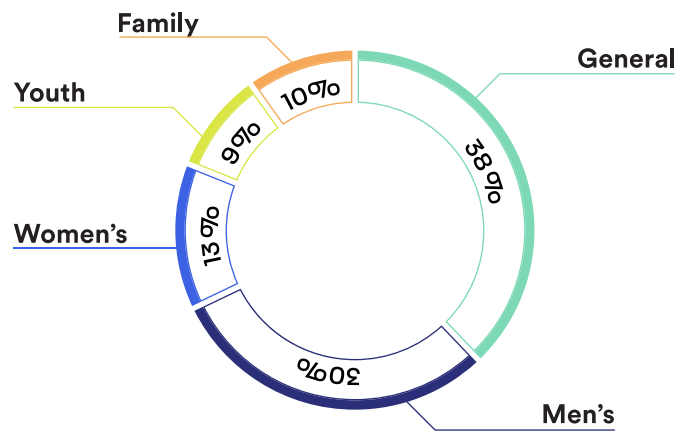



FIGURE 5 Source: (ESDC, 2019b)

As demand for shelter beds increases, women and gender diverse peoples face some of the greatest disadvantage. **Across Canada, there are fewer women-specific emergency shelter beds – 68% of shelter beds are co-ed or dedicated to men, compared to 13% dedicated to women** (ESDC, 2019b). Men’s shelters also have more than double the number of beds that women’s emergency shelters have (4,280 beds compared to 2,092 beds). Further, while 38% of beds are reported to be within “general” emergency shelters across Canada (ESDC, 2019b) – meaning shelter beds that are co-ed or open to all genders – research consistently demonstrates that many women will avoid co-ed shelters for fear of violence or because they have experienced violence within those spaces (Bretheron, 2017; National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, 2019).

<sup>8</sup> The National Shelter Study (2019) did not include VAW shelters or transitional housing.

# Emergency Shelters by Clientele Served, (2018)

	<b>Total</b>	<b>General</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Youth</b>	<b>Family</b>
<b>Shelters (Beds)</b>	<b>392</b> (15,859)	<b>126</b> (5,959)	<b>79</b> (4,820)	<b>67</b> (2,029)	<b>88</b> (1,442)	<b>32</b> (1,609)
<b>Newfoundland and Labrador</b>	7 (67)	3 (32)	-	-	3 (20)	1 (15)
<b>Nova Scotia</b>	9 (220)	1 (16)	3 (138)	<b>3</b> (42)	2 (24)	0 (0)
<b>New Brunswick</b>	9 (157)	4 (82)	2 (45)	<b>2</b> (20)	1 (10)	-
<b>Prince Edward Island</b>	1 (7)	-	1 (7)	-	-	-
<b>Québec</b>	65 (1,757)	20 (363)	7 (887)	<b>12</b> (220)	25 (274)	1 (13)
<b>Ontario</b>	149 (6,898)	27 (1,053)	39 (2,701)	<b>27</b> (1,067)	32 (774)	24 (1,303)
<b>Manitoba</b>	13 (650)	8 (520)	-	-	2 (24)	3 (106)
<b>Saskatchewan</b>	18 (476)	2 (56)	6 (156)	<b>7</b> (225)	3 (39)	-
<b>Alberta</b>	35 (3,304)	17 (2,485)	4 (320)	<b>4</b> (197)	8 (132)	2 (170)
<b>British Columbia</b>	78 (2,170)	43 (1,338)	14 (483)	<b>10</b> (221)	10 (126)	1 (2)
<b>Yukon</b>	3 (27)	1 (14)	1 (2)	-	1 (11)	-
<b>Northwest Territories</b>	3 (82)	-	1 (49)	<b>1</b> (25)	1 (8)	-
<b>Nunavut</b>	2 (44)	-	1 (32)	<b>1</b> (12)	-	-

**FIGURE 6** Source: (ESDC, 2019a)

The [Shelter Capacity Report 2018](#) indicates a very uneven spread of emergency shelters across the Canadian provinces/territories (see Figure 6). For example, there are only two women-specific emergency shelters across all three territories, with a total of 37 beds across them (ESDC, 2019). Remarkably, the report revealed that some provinces and territories

had zero women-specific emergency shelters in 2018, including PEI and the Yukon (ESDC, 2019). Similarly, data indicates that 70% of northern reserves have no safe houses or emergency shelters for women escaping violence, despite evidence that gender-based violence is particularly high in many of these communities (Martin & Walia, 2019).



Despite the profound violence and trauma that women and their children face on the streets, each day many are turned away from VAW and homeless shelters due to capacity issues. Many shelters, if not most, simply do not have the number of beds needed to meet demand. A 2019 report by the Standing Committee on the Status of Women recently reviewed national data, research, and testimonies on this trend in the VAW sector, reporting:

“The Committee heard that violence against women shelters and transition houses often operate at capacity. Almost every witness told the Committee that shelters and transitions houses often turn away women and children fleeing violence because of a lack of space” (Vecchio, 2019, p. 27).

This is perhaps most dramatically demonstrated in a 2019 Statistics Canada report - **Canadian Residential Facilities for Victims of Abuse, 2017/2018**. The study coordinated simultaneous data collection at VAW shelters across the country, finding that:

“On the snapshot day of April 18, 2018, 669 women, 236 accompanying children, and 6 men were turned away from residential facilities for victims of abuse. The most common reason reported for a woman being turned away was that the facility was full (82%)” (p. 3).

## Women & Children Turned Away from VAW Shelters on Snapshot Day (April 18, 2018)

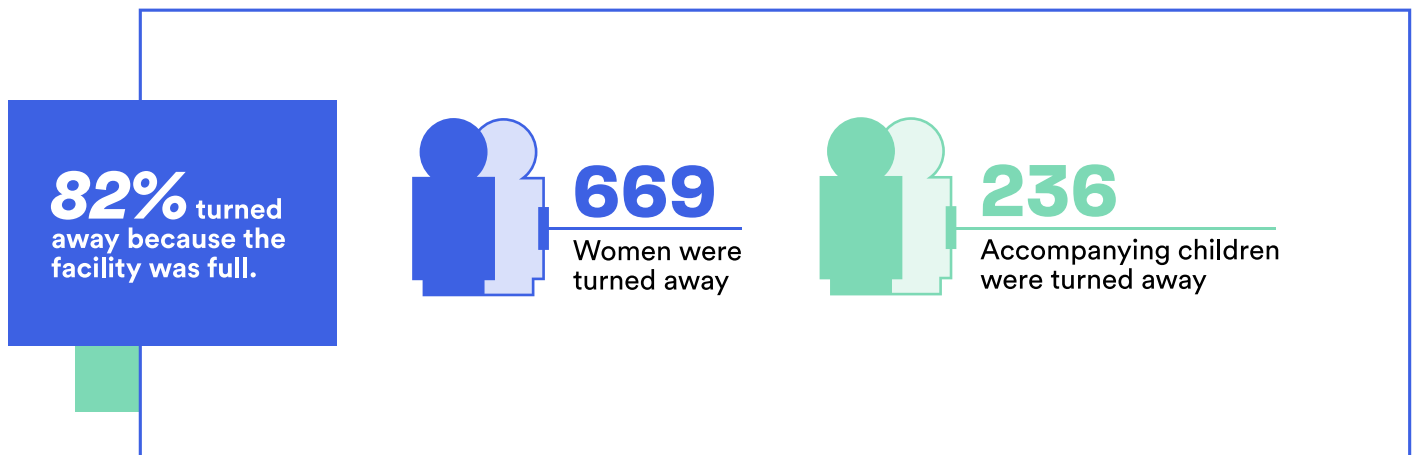


FIGURE 7 Source: (Statistics Canada, 2019b)

The importance of this finding cannot be overstated. *On an average day, VAW shelters across Canada turn away almost 1,000 women and their children – many of whom will return to situations of violence and precarity.* The VAW system is so overwhelmed that hundreds of women and their children are forced to return to life-threatening situations everyday.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Other countries in the Global North report similar patterns. For example, in a survey of 321 domestic violence shelters in England, 57% of these reports that they “frequently” turned away women and children due to capacity issues (Bretherton, 2017). See also Quilgars & Preece, 2010.

**Statistics Canada data (2019) indicates that for many women who are able to access a VAW shelter, few transition from these shelters into safe, affordable, or adequate housing. In fact, about 1 in 5 return to live with their abuser.**

**On the snapshot day of April 18, 2018, it was found that amongst women who left the shelter:**

**21%** said they were returning to a residence where their abuser continued to live

**36%** did not know where they were going upon departure (or the facility did not know)

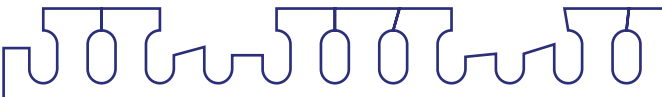
**18%** reported they would be living with friends or relatives

**11%** were entering another VAW shelter

Only 14% reported other plans, such as “returning home or moving to a new residence without their abuser” (p. 2). Data was not collected on the type or location of housing women were moving into or whether mothers were separated from their children in the process.

**What this data suggests is that few women are transitioning from VAW shelters into safe, affordable, or adequate housing.** This is undoubtedly linked to the lack of affordable housing in communities across the country, with 77% of VAW shelters across Canada reporting that the top challenge facing residents was “a lack of affordable and appropriate long-term housing options upon departure” (Statistics Canada, 2019, p. 3; see also Maki, 2017).

**Regrettably, we do not have similar comparable, national-level data on exits from homeless shelters for women or their children.** There is limited follow-up research and evaluation information pertaining to women and girls who leave homeless shelter services (Homelessness Policy Research Institute [HPRI], 2018). A number of issues exist with common working definitions of “exit” from homelessness (HPRI, 2018), as well as its measurement using data from shelter information management systems (Gaetz, Ward, & Kimura, 2019). Moreover, scholarship exploring girls’ and women’s pathways or trajectories out of homelessness, particularly from an intersectional gendered lens, is needed to understand the experiences and needs of all groups/populations of girls and women leaving homelessness (Van Berkum & Oudshoorn, 2015).



“Imagine having to run for your life in the middle of the night to escape being beaten to death. For many, escaping is the time when they would be most at risk of losing their life. You show up at the front door of a shelter with nothing but the clothes on your back. You then have to share your story with complete strangers and tell them about the horrors you have experienced, all the while blaming yourself for much of the abuse you have endured. You are then told that the shelter is full. Now what? You will likely return to your abuser, not because you want to but because if you had any other option you would have tried it before coming to a shelter.”

- **Jennifer Lepko**, Chief Executive Officer of the YWCA Lethbridge and District (FEWO quoted in Vecchio, 2019, p. 27)

*At the heart of capacity issues in both the VAW and homeless shelter sectors is the unavailability of adequate housing to transition women into.* This is exacerbated by chronic underfunding, with 46% of VAW shelters across Canada reporting that the top challenge facing service delivery was lack of funding (Statistics Canada, 2019). The Standing Committee on the Status of Women’s 2019 report analyzed testimonies and depositions from VAW shelters across Canada, writing that:

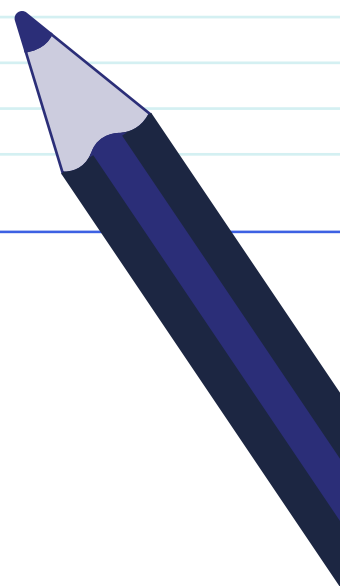
“The Committee heard that shelters and transition houses serving women and children affected by violence are underfunded and often rely on funding that is project-based and limited in time. Many witnesses told the Committee that the funding received for their shelters or transition houses has not increased in several years and that current funding levels are not sufficient to cover all of the organizations’ expenses” (p. 17).

Funding challenges are particularly evident in communities with the highest levels of housing need, and often disproportionately affect groups facing the most severe forms of marginalization and violence (National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019; Vecchio, 2019). For example, data shows that the distribution of shelters varies significantly across Canada but that in northern communities, rural communities, and remote communities there is a particular lack of shelters and shelter beds for women – both within VAW and homelessness systems – despite the fact that rates of police-reported violent crimes committed against women are highest in the territories (FEWO in Vecchio, 2019, p. 14). Statistic Canada’s **Transition Home Survey** (2014) – the most comprehensive data on VAW shelters in Canada – enumerate a total of 12,058 beds in 627 VAW shelters across Canada. However, recent data from the **Shelter Capacity report** (Figure 3) indicates that these beds are unevenly distributed across Canada. Not surprisingly, the territories had some of the highest occupancy rates in VAW shelters in Canada, reporting an overall occupancy rate of 98% (Nunavut 113%; Yukon 96%; the Northwest Territories 80%) (Statistics Canada, 2019).

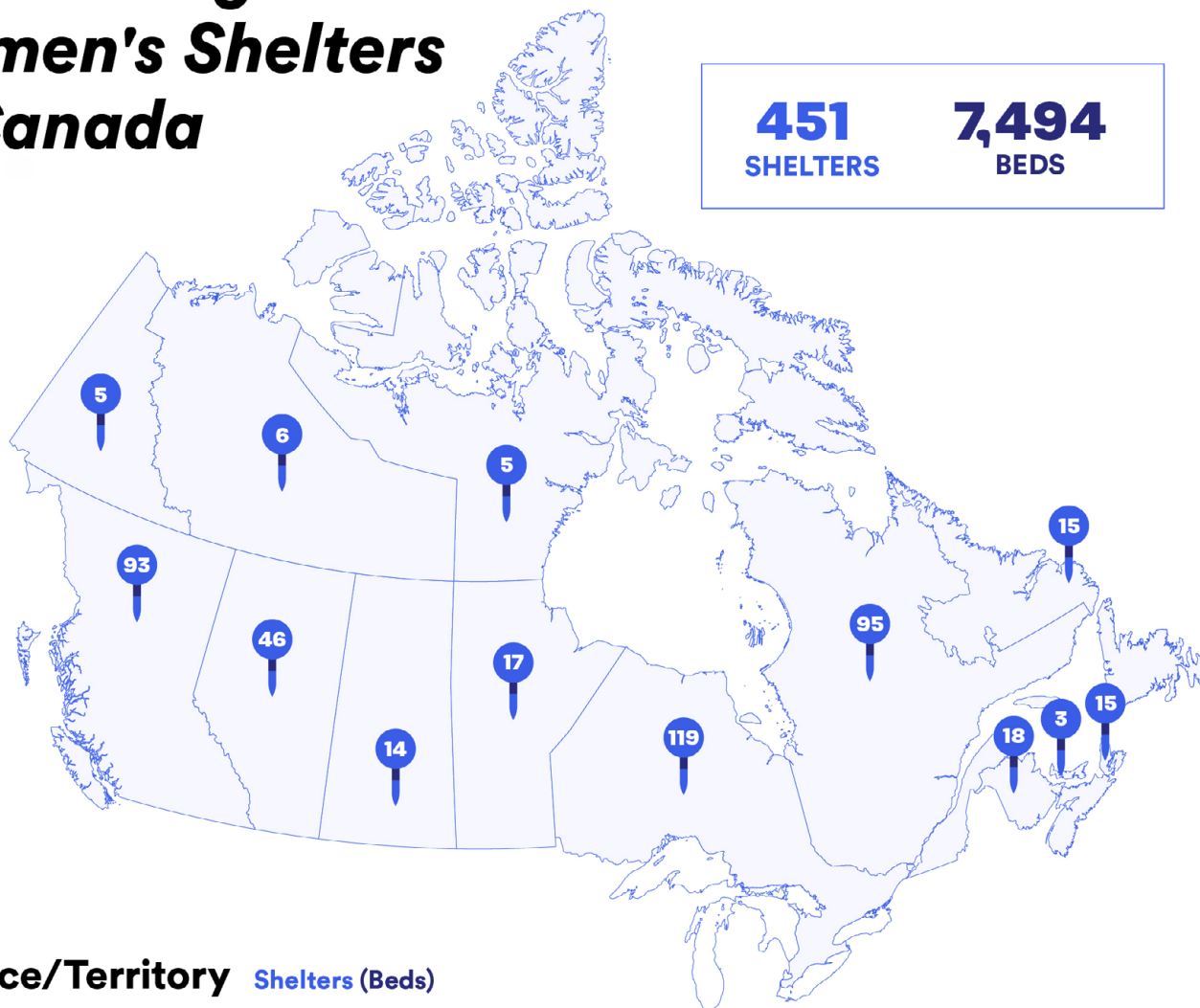
“While the institutional barriers that exist are sometimes rooted in the agencies and programs themselves, in many cases, the barriers are created and sustained by underlying systemic and structural issues that make it difficult for these agencies and programs to provide services in the ways that they know would best fit the needs of those who use them.

In the context of anti-violence services – and, specifically, Indigenous-led anti-violence services – limited access to funding from government and other sources, particularly stable, multi-year funding and not project-based funding, must be recognized as being at the root of the inaccessibility Indigenous women face in seeking safety.”

(National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019a, p. 579).



# Violence Against Women's Shelters in Canada



## Province/Territory Shelters (Beds)

Newfoundland and Labrador	15 (176)	Saskatchewan	14 (283)
Nova Scotia	15 (192)	Alberta	46 (1,223)
New Brunswick	18 (298)	British Columbia	93 (953)
Prince Edward Island	3 (45)	Yukon	5 (49)
Québec	95 (1,360)	Northwest Territories	6 (44)
Ontario	119 (2,466)	Nunavut	5 (41)
Manitoba	17 (364)	<b>CANADA</b>	<b>451 (7,494)</b>

**FIGURE 8**

Source: (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2019c)

Profound gaps in services and shelters are found in rural areas across Canada as well. For example, while Statistics Canada (2019) research found that 81% of emergency shelter beds are found in large cities, **The Canadian Femicide Observatory for Justice and Accountability** (2019) reports high rates of violence against women in rural communities, with data indicating that approximately 34% of women and girls who were killed in 2018 were residing in rural areas (p. 60). In cities or regions that lack emergency shelters or VAW supports, the result can be a “revolving-door phenomenon where women are referred from one resource to another, reinforcing the cycle of instability and threatening their safety” (Table de concertation de Laval en condition féminine quoted in Vecchio, 2019, p. 31).

*It is clear that a lack of affordable housing and supports drives women into emergency systems that are insufficient and do not meet their needs.* Further, if we continue to underfund homelessness and VAW shelters across Canada - and these critical services operate at or over capacity - we threaten the lives of women, girls, and gender diverse peoples by trapping them in homelessness. Each day women and their children are turned away at the door of shelters.

Many of those who do obtain a shelter bed return to situations of homelessness, violence, and precarity. The need for women-focused emergency shelters and housing vastly outpaces the availability in virtually every region in Canada, particularly where it is most needed (e.g., in Indigenous communities, rural communities). In so doing, we are not only failing these women, we are violating their human rights to housing and life.

“Lots of nights I just walked around all night because it made me feel more in control. I never drank by myself. I was straight all the time except when I interacted with others. I never panhandled for money to drink or do drugs. I panhandled to eat. And as I walked at night I could always tell when a creep spotted me because they would start circling the block in their car trying to find where I went, and every time I’d just find somewhere to hide until they left the area ... And I always remember the one prevailing thought I always carried was, ‘Does anybody care?’”

- **Michelle G.** quoted in National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, 2019, p. 595



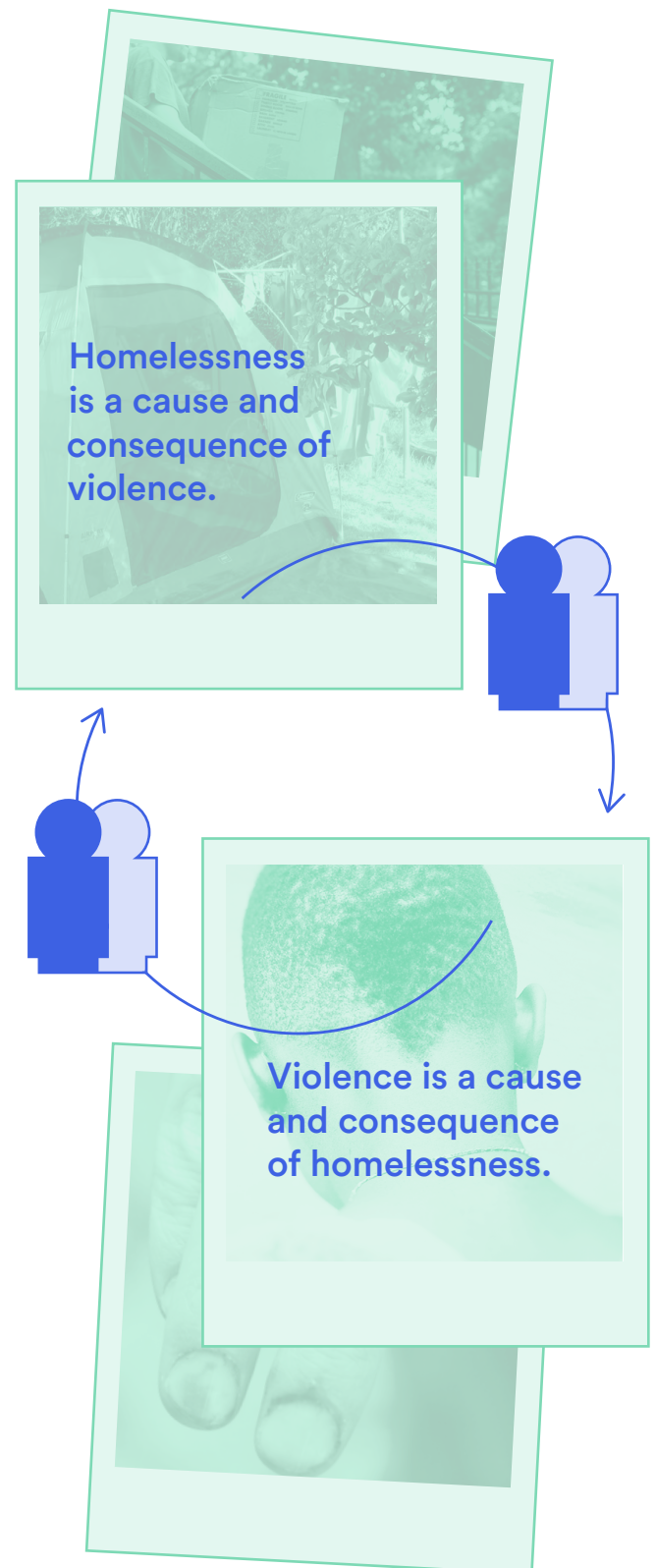
## 4. Homelessness is uniquely dangerous for women and gender diverse peoples. When we fail to prevent or end housing need or homelessness for women, we ensure repeated cycles of violence and housing precarity.

Issues of housing and safety are indivisible in the lives of women and gender diverse peoples. The lack of safe, affordable, and adequate housing across Canada contributes to this risk of violence, and experiences of violence can cause or perpetuate housing instability (van Berkum & Oudshoorn, 2015). This bidirectional relationship contributes to profound suffering and trauma for many women, in some cases leading to death. *Research consistently demonstrates that homelessness is uniquely dangerous for women and gender diverse peoples.* Available national data indicates that 91% of women in Canada who are homeless have experienced assault in their lifetime (McInnes, 2016). Research shows that young women who are homeless are much more likely to be victims of sex trafficking (Miller-Perrin & Wurtele, 2017) and experience violent victimization while on the streets, with national data (Gaetz et al., 2016) indicating that in the 12 months previous to participating in the study:

**37.4%** of young homeless women had experienced a sexual assault, compared to 8.2% of young homeless men

**41.3%** of trans and gender non-binary homeless youth had experienced sexual assault

**35.6%** of LGBTQ2S+ homeless youth had experienced a sexual assault, compared to 14.8% of straight homeless youth



# Occurrence of Sexual Assault

amongst Youth Experiencing Homelessness

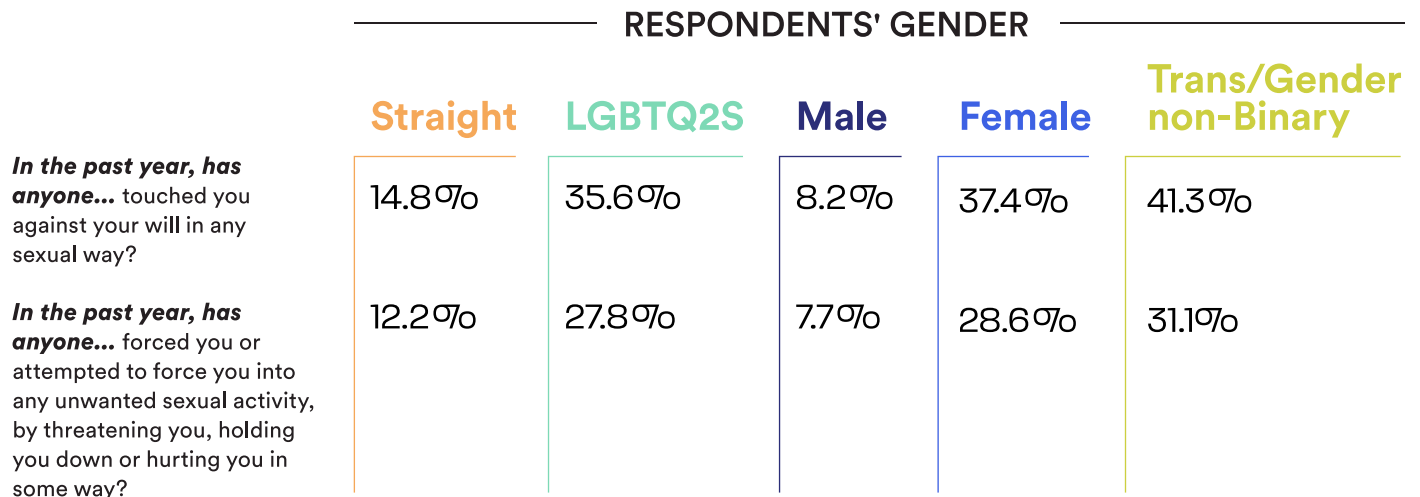


FIGURE 9 Source: (Gaetz et al., 2016)

As demonstrated in Figure 10, this violence is often a continuation of the childhood violence experienced by many young women and LGBTQ2S+ youth who are homeless. Multiple studies also demonstrate that women are much more likely to engage in survival sex (Watson, 2011; Wesely, 2009), with one Vancouver-based study indicating that roughly 86% of women and girls engaging in survival sex are experiencing homelessness (Farley, Lynne, & Cotton, 2005).

Importantly, this violence can occur within homelessness services and supports themselves, with multiple studies documenting sexual violence in co-ed shelters across the country (Lazarus et al., 2011, Walsh et al., 2010). This violence is particularly pronounced for gender diverse peoples (Abramovich, 2017; Lyons et al., 2016).

# Experiences of Abuse in Childhood

Amongst Youth Experiencing Homelessness

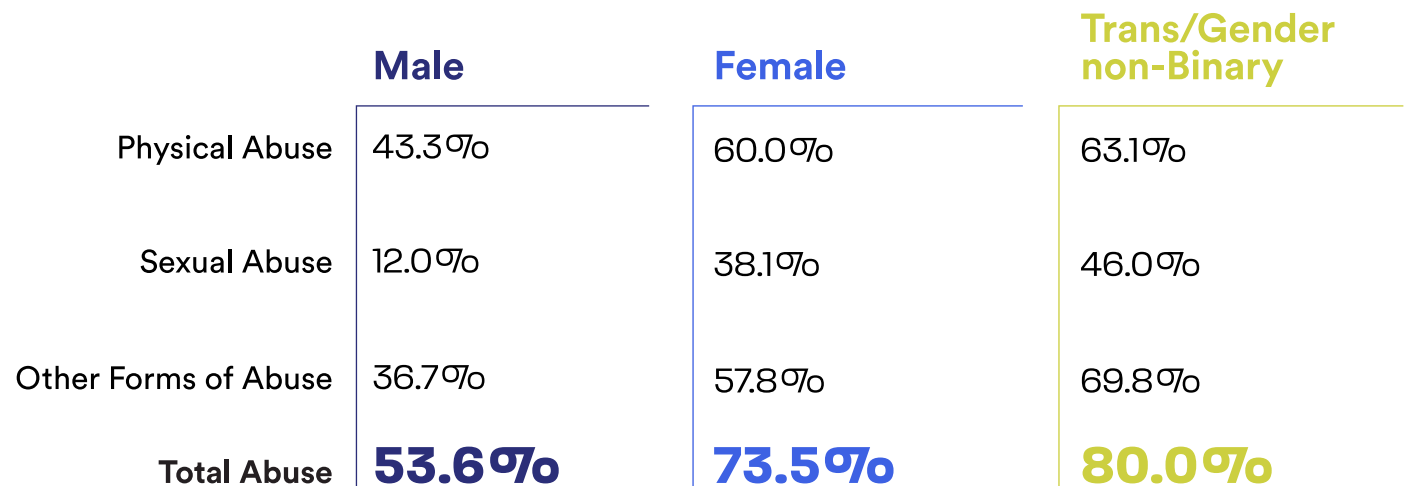
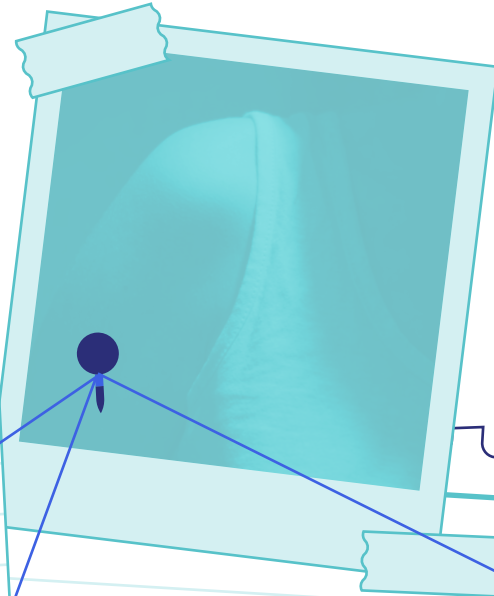


FIGURE 10 Source: (Gaetz et al., 2016)

“They asked me why don’t I go to men’s. I was like I did go to men’s before and I was getting sexually harassed all the time. I remember one time waking up at [a men’s shelter] and there was like five guys standing around my bed in the dark and they were all naked from the waist down. [After the sexual assault] I left the building. I never went back.”

- **Mae** (Lived expert quoted in Lyons et al., 2016, p. 374)



“Women have been kicked out of their homes in the middle of the night with no shoes or boots in the winter; they’ve been beaten and left for dead; they’ve been choked and pursued as they fled for help.”

- **Lyda Fuller**, Executive Director, YWCA NWT, quoted in FEWO, Evidence, 1st Session, 42nd Parliament, 24 October 2018, 1635

“When governments fail to provide safe, accessible housing for homeless girls, older exploitive men step in.”

(Czapska et al., 2008, p. 10)



Women and gender diverse peoples may feel safer remaining in violent or exploitative relationships than they do on the streets or in a shelter (Watson, 2016). Some young women express that they would rather stay in an abusive relationship than sleep rough because then they face violence from only one man, rather than many (Watson, 2016). Further, emergency shelters and housing can also be spaces wherein women and gender diverse peoples are recruited into sex trafficking, leading to experiences of profound violence and trauma (MMIWG, 2019; Ricard-Guay & Hanley, 2014; Public Safety Canada, 2016; McAleese & Schick, 2018).

“Regardless of age group, rates of sexual offences against girls and young women were higher than their male counterparts. Rates were *three times higher for younger girls* aged 11 and younger (181 versus 60 for younger boys), *over nine times higher for older girls* aged 12 to 17 (921 versus 98 for older boys) and *nearly 14 times higher for young women* aged 18 to 24 (371 versus 27 for young men).”

(Conroy, 2018, p. 6)

Even amongst the general public, sexual violence against women has been increasing in Canada for years. At the national level, data indicates that between 2007 and 2017, police-reported violence has not declined for women in the ways that it has for men (Conroy, 2018), and that police-reported sexual assaults against women and girls have actually increased (Conroy, 2018).<sup>10</sup> Importantly, Statistics Canada found that “regardless of the type of offence, girls and young women were most commonly victimized on private property and, of those who were, nearly two-thirds were victimized in their own home” (Conroy, 2018, p. 3). Such data indicates that women’s safety is increasingly being compromised within their own homes, in addition to the violence they face on the streets. In 2019, the Report of the Standing Committee on Violence Against Women concluded that “violence against women is a public health crisis in Canada” (p. 1).

*These findings suggest that investments in housing are simultaneously investments in violence prevention.* The lack of available, affordable housing for women (and their children) can trap women in housing in which they are being abused or assaulted and make it profoundly difficult for women who are homeless to transition off the streets. When the Canadian government fails to invest in housing and emergency supports that meet the unique needs of women, we condemn many women and their children to repeated violent victimization. As a matter of human rights, and as a member of the **United Nations Commission on the Status of Women**, Canada must invest significantly in violence and homelessness prevention for women, girls, and gender diverse peoples.

<sup>10</sup> It is critical to note that much violent victimization against women is not reported to the police. For example, studies have demonstrated that approximately 1 in 5 violent crimes are reported to police, including spousal or intimate partner violence (Perreault, 2015; Simpson, 2018; Sinha, 2015).

## 5. Gaps, silos, policies, and practices within VAW and homelessness sectors can inadvertently create hardship for some women and gender diverse peoples, in some cases contributing to housing instability and exposure to violence.

Research demonstrates that despite best intentions, some women and gender diverse peoples are harmed by how the homelessness and VAW sectors structure and deliver services. Difficulties tend to occur in three areas:

- ↳ **Policies and practices *WITHIN* the VAW and homelessness sectors**
- ↳ **Silos *BETWEEN* the VAW and homelessness sector**
- ↳ ***GAPS IN SERVICES* within the VAW and homelessness sectors**

### A) Policies and practices within the VAW and homelessness sectors can create unintended harm for some women.

Research suggests a range of ways in which particular policies and practices within the VAW and homelessness sectors create harm for those seeking help, including on the basis of eligibility criteria, duty to report policies, and discriminatory policies and practices.

#### **Eligibility Criteria**

In many communities, access to services, supports, or housing is contingent upon meeting particular eligibility criteria that some women are unable to meet. For example, women may need to demonstrate abstinence from substances in order to access a VAW or homeless shelter (Greaves et al., 2006, p. 388) or may need to comply with particular rules that are difficult to follow due to complex needs or health challenges (Vecchio, 2019).

In other cases, access to services is dependent upon women experiencing particular forms of violence or

“Last year, before December, we had a case of two clients. One who had to go into a bar and sell herself for a beer, so she can walk into Detox because she didn’t have a place to go. The shelter did not take her because they didn’t have a place for her. We’re desperately looking for a place for her. So then she said, don’t worry, I’ll manage myself. So finally, she called me and said, ‘I went. I sold myself to a guy. He gave me a beer, he did what he wanted to do and then I walked into Detox.’ It was cold and she had a place to sleep for at least four or five days. Then, the other one, because Blue Feather was closed and she got kicked out of the place and she didn’t have a place to go...We knew she was selling herself so that she can have a place to stay. That’s too much. Why do women have to go and sell themselves, their bodies, so they can have a place to sleep? And that’s exactly what’s happening in town.”

(Hrenchuck & Bopp, 2007, p. 95)

exclusion, or experiencing homelessness for a particular length of time. For example, some VAW shelters may not enable women to access shelter beds if they experienced violence at the hands of a stranger (e.g., rape), rather than a partner (A. Hache, personal communication, May 1 2020). Similarly, some homeless shelters also do not provide access to services for women who have experienced IPV (Drabble & McInnes, 2017; Tutty, 2015). In effect, eligibility criteria may block access to services and supports for some of the most marginalized women, contributing to further exposure to violence, trauma, and housing instability.

## ***Duty to Report Policies***

Some VAW and homeless shelters and housing programs have policies that mandate child welfare services are alerted under particular conditions (Montgomery et al., 2011). These mandatory reporting policies may make women with children hesitant to access VAW or homelessness services for fear of child apprehension (Maki, 2017; Martin & Walia, 2019) or may result in women leaving their children with others in order to access supports (Caplan, 2019). In some cases, these practices and policies directly result in mother-child separation, a considerable risk factor for trauma and a range of negative outcomes (Shinn, Rog, & Culhane, 2005; Shelton et al., 2009).

In the United States, a survey of **6,450** transgender and gender non-conforming people found that one-fifth had experienced homelessness, and that “the majority of those trying to access a homeless shelter were harassed by shelter staff or residents (**55%**), **29%** were turned away altogether, and **22%** were sexually assaulted by residents or staff.”

(Grant et al., 2011, p. 4)

## ***Discriminatory Policies and Practices***

Discriminatory policies and practices within both the VAW and homelessness sector can create profound harm in the lives of women, girls, and gender diverse peoples. While a range of discriminatory practices has been identified (e.g., Abramovich, 2017; Klingspohn, 2018), the exclusion and oppression of LGBTQ2S+ and gender diverse peoples is particularly evident in available research. For instance, Canadian research indicates that housing and shelter programs for youth experiencing homelessness are “designed primarily to accommodate cisgender residents” and that “the culture of the shelter system is an overall atmosphere of normalized oppression” (Abramovich, 2017, p. 2). American research similarly shows that transgender youth experience “humiliation and physical or sexual victimization” at homelessness shelters (Keuroghlian, Shtasel, & Bassuk, 2012, p. 68), including at the hands of shelter staff (Grant et al., 2011, p. 4). Given this, researchers and lived experts alike have called for anti-oppressive, trauma-informed supports, policies,

and staff training as critical to ensuring the safety, dignity, and inclusion of LGBTQ2S+ women and gender diverse peoples (Abramovich, 2012, 2017; Chapple, 2020; Ecker et al., 2019).

## **B) Gaps in services within the VAW and homelessness sectors create barriers to accessing supports and housing, particularly for multiply-marginalized women, girls, and gender diverse peoples.**

In the absence of affordable housing, women-only housing services emergency systems, and sufficient funding for emergency services and shelters, it is no surprise that significant gaps have emerged across Canada. However, these gaps are not distributed equitably. In many cases, gaps occur along lines of race, Indigeneity, gender, ability, sexuality, neighbourhood, and other dimensions. Multiply-marginalized women, girls, and gender diverse peoples are most likely to encounter services that don’t meet their needs or are harmful, or they are unable to access services at all. For example, research demonstrates:

- ↳ There is a profound lack of emergency services for women and gender diverse peoples with disabilities. A DAWN Canada study reports that only 75% of homeless shelters have a wheelchair accessible entrance, 66% provide wheelchair accessible rooms and bathrooms, 17% provide sign language, and 5% offer braille reading materials (Alimi, Singh, & Brayton, 2018).
- ↳ There are limited culturally appropriate services for Indigenous and newcomer women, girls, and gender diverse peoples across Canada (Yerichuk, Johnson, Felix-Mah & Hanson, 2016), with many communities lacking any shelters or drop-ins run by and for Indigenous women (Martin & Walia, 2019).
- ↳ Women-only, trauma-informed housing services are limited and grossly underfunded (Fotheringham, Walsh, & Burrowes, 2013; Kirkby & Mettler, 2016)
- ↳ There is a lack of services and supports for gender non-conforming and LGBTQ2S+ peoples within both VAW and homelessness services (Abramovich, 2017), with a national survey indicating that only 53% of VAW shelters provide supports for gender non-conforming peoples (Statistics Canada, 2019).

At best, these gaps in services make it difficult for particular women and gender diverse peoples to access housing and supports they are entitled to. At worst, these gaps contribute to the deepening of violence, poverty, homelessness, and exclusion in the lives of the most marginalized women and gender diverse peoples in the country.

### C) The needs of many women are not met because of silos in services, policy, funding, and research between the homelessness sector and the VAW sector.

There is an undeniable overlap between the VAW sector and the homelessness sector in the lives of women, girls, and gender diverse peoples. Research suggests that women often move between services in both sectors – sometimes by choice, often by necessity (Maki, 2017). For example, when a VAW shelter is full, a woman may be referred to a homeless shelter or may be transitioned into a homeless shelter if they reach their time limit in VAW transitional housing (Maki, 2017; Statistics Canada, 2019; Vecchio, 2019). In other cases, a woman seeking safety and shelter may bounce between various VAW and homeless shelters based on whether she is able to meet particular eligibility criteria or whether a child or partner accompanies her.

Despite overlap between these sectors, women may not be able to get all of their needs met in either service setting. For example, services in the VAW sector may fail to provide services to support sustained exits from homelessness, and the homelessness sector may fail to provide staff, supports, and safety targeted to women experiencing IPV or gender-based violence (Bretherton, 2017). These gaps in provision are linked to funding priorities and as well. For example, the Minister’s Advisory Committee on Homelessness argues,

“The prioritization of chronic homelessness inadvertently excludes many women for being eligible for Homelessness Partnering Strategy funding because chronic homelessness is interpreted as chronically homeless emergency shelter users (where women are often under-represented) and chronically homeless individuals (many women are accompanied by children in homelessness) and does not consider the high degrees of situational vulnerability and high acuity homeless women often experience” (p. 22).

Importantly, however, studies demonstrate that there are considerable silos between the VAW and the homelessness sector in Canada. An extensive discussion paper by Women’s Shelters Canada (Maki, 2017) found that:

“While there is a general recognition of the link between violence against women (VAW), housing, and homelessness, the VAW shelter sector has had limited involvement with the housing and homelessness sectors” (p. 4).

This disconnect, combined with gaps in services in both sectors, can contribute to exposure to precarity and violence for women and girls who are being shifted between sectors. Underlying funding silos between these sectors are foundational to this disconnect, according to some scholars and advocates (Vecchio, 2019).



## 6. Indigenous women, girls, and gender diverse peoples experience the most egregious housing conditions throughout Canada and remain the most underserved in both the VAW and homelessness sectors.

Even a cursory review of housing realities across Canada demonstrates one decisive reality: Indigenous women, girls, and gender diverse peoples experience the most profound forms of housing need in all parts of the country.

### Rate of Shelter Use For Indigenous Peoples Compared to Non-Indigenous People

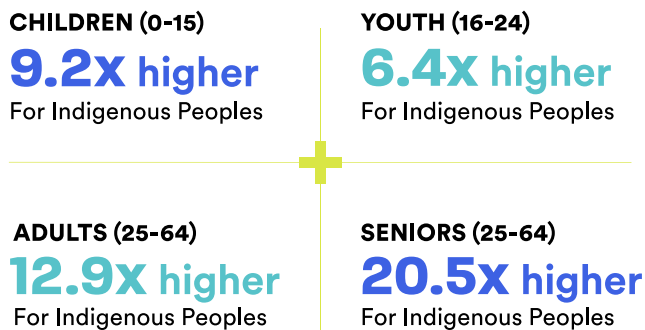


FIGURE 11

Source: (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2016)

National data on *housing need* (O'Donnell & Wallace, 2011) indicates that in 2006:

**31%** of Inuit women and girls were living in crowded homes, compared to 3% of non-Indigenous women and girls

**28%** of First Nations and Inuit women and girls and 14% of Métis women and girls were living in dwellings that were in need of major repairs (compared to 7% of non-Indigenous women and girls)

**44%** of women and girls living in reserve communities were living in dwellings that were in need of major repairs

Research on *homelessness* reveals similar inequities for Indigenous women and girls, with data indicating:

- ↳ Indigenous women are overrepresented amongst women who are homeless (Schiff & Waegemakers Schff, 2010; Walsh, MacDonald, Rutherford, Moore, & Krieg, 2012).
- ↳ Indigenous women are 15 times more likely to use a homeless shelter than non-Indigenous women over the course of a year (Falvo, 2019).
- ↳ Indigenous women are overrepresented in domestic violence shelters by approximately five times their representation in the Canadian population, and Indigenous children were overrepresented by approximately three times (Statistics Canada, 2019).
- ↳ Indigenous women who are homeless are six times more likely to be victims of sexual violence than Indigenous men, and significantly more likely to experience PTSD and suicidality (Bingham et al., 2019, p. 6).
- ↳ Indigenous women are more likely to experience hidden homelessness than many other groups (Christensen, 2013).
- ↳ Indigenous people experiencing homelessness are more likely to be women and younger than non-Indigenous people experiencing homelessness (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2017, p. 21).

*These housing challenges coincide with the disproportionate violence experienced by Indigenous women, girls, and gender diverse peoples – a pattern declared a national human rights crisis* (Amnesty International, 2014). The **National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls** (2019a) highlights that Indigenous women and girls are 12 times more likely to be murdered or missing than any other group of women in Canada and are 16 times more likely to be murdered or missing than white women (p. 55). While all Indigenous peoples are overrepresented amongst victims of violence in Canada (Boyce, 2016; Miladinovic & Mulligan, 2015; Perreault, 2015; Scrim, 2009), research indicates that Indigenous identity increases the likelihood of violent victimization for women, but not for men (after controlling for other risk factors, such as younger age or lower educational achievement) (Perreault, 2015). Analysis of the 2014 General Social Survey on Victimization found that Indigenous women experienced violent victimization at nearly triple the rate of non-Indigenous women (220 violent incidents per 1,000 population vs. 81 per 1,000) (Boyce, 2016).

“I would say I was raped three sometimes four times a week ... I was just trying to survive. I was drinking a lot to not have the pain. I was always drunk. I drank pop to kill the pain of hunger. I'd steal. Go in the liquor store and steal bottles of booze. I'd be drunk and then I ended up with these men. They figured oh yeah we're going to have a party and then end up being raped. How many parks I had to crawl out of. I was always alone.”

- **Marlene J.** (National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019a, p. 544).

Exposure to violence is particularly pronounced for Indigenous women who are experiencing homelessness (Martin & Walia, 2019). In sharing about her experiences while homeless, Marlene J. explains:

While such violence against Indigenous women has been long documented and increasingly publicized in Canada, in many cases it “has not informed the planning of housing interventions” (Bingham et al., 2019, p. 1).

*Despite the disproportionate violence and housing need they experience, Indigenous women remain the most underserved within both the VAW and homelessness sectors across the country.* There is a profound lack of women-focused homeless shelters or VAW shelters in Indigenous communities and on reserves across Canada (Martin & Walia, 2019; National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019). Data indicates that 70% of northern reserves have no safe houses or emergency shelters for women escaping violence (Martin & Walia, 2019). Similarly, more than 70% of the 52 Inuit communities across Inuit Nunangat do not have safe shelters for women, despite experiencing the highest rates of violence in the country (Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada quoted in Vecchio, 2019). In fact, nationally only 6% of VAW shelters are located on a reserve (Statistics Canada, 2019).

In many cases the deepening of violence and housing precarity for Indigenous women is linked to the lack of financial support for Indigenous housing, Indigenous-led anti-violence services, and Indigenous-run shelters and supports (National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019). For example, The Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (2019) reports that “the federal government provides funding for only 41 shelters to serve the 634 recognized First Nations communities in Canada” and there are “roughly 15 shelters and transition houses serving 53 Inuit communities across the Arctic” (p. 576).

“Many shelters in Inuit communities are extremely small, and most communities are accessible only by air. Many Inuit women may be long distances away from the nearest shelter, and even if they are able to make the often cost-prohibitive flight to a shelter, there may not be room for them to stay. The federal government doesn't provide funding to shelters in Inuit communities” (p. 576).

These gaps in funding and services are also experienced in urban centres across Canada as well. While the National Housing Strategy committed the federal government to develop “distinction-based” Indigenous housing strategies in partnership with national Indigenous organizations, this approach “fails the 79.7% of Indigenous people who are not living on reserve” – including Indigenous women, girls, and gender diverse peoples (“Statement on National Urban Indigenous Housing Strategy,” 2019, p.1). For example, despite the hundreds of agencies in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver, there remains no Indigenous women’s drop-in-centre that is run by and for Indigenous women (Martin & Walia, 2019, p. 43). Such spaces are critical given evidence that Indigenous women face discrimination and violence when seeking emergency housing and shelter (Curry, 2018). This is particularly true for Indigenous two-spirit and trans people, who face “obvious discrimination” when seeking access to housing services and shelters that are gender segregated (Ristock & Zoccole, 2011, p. 16).

*Colonization and ongoing cultural genocide are the foundation of disproportionate housing need for Indigenous women and girls as well as the violence they face.* Continued colonial practices and attitudes also underpin the lack of government funding in addressing these inequities. Given the Canadian government’s establishment of housing as a human right in the **National Housing Strategy Act**, it is critical that government make Indigenous women, girls, and gender diverse peoples’ right to housing an urgent priority. In so doing, all levels of Canadian government must ensure the participation of Indigenous Peoples in all decision-making processes that affect them, guided by principles of free, prior, and informed consent (UN General Assembly, 2007).

“So our families resided in Kitchenuhmaykoosib, which is a reserve north of here, about 500 kilometres. And it’s a fly-in community only, so it’s very isolated. So back during the time before my sister Patricia was murdered, there really wasn’t much in place on the reserve, as far as supports. For example, there was no family drop-in places where she could take her kids. At the time, there was no sexual assault workers. They had no advocates to go with them during meetings with Child and Family Services, which in our area is Tikinagan. And – and so I’ve always believed that if we had more services, like those in place, that the circumstances leading to my sister’s death, her murder, may not have happened.”

- **Jennifer Lepko**, Chief Executive Officer of the YWCA Lethbridge and District (FEWO quoted in Vecchio, 2019, p. 27)

## CALL TO JUSTICE 4.7

“We call upon all governments to support the establishment and long-term sustainable funding of Indigenous-led low-barrier shelters, safe spaces, transition homes, second stage housing, and services for Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people who are homeless, near homeless, dealing with food insecurity, or in poverty, and who are fleeing violence or have been subjected to sexualized violence and exploitation.”

National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019b, p. 182

## 7. Mothers' experiences of housing instability and violence create the conditions for intergenerational homelessness. Addressing the housing needs of women – particularly those of mothers and their children – is critical to solving chronic and intergenerational homelessness.

*Canadian and international evidence show that adult homelessness often has its roots in childhood experiences of housing instability and violence.*

For example, the most recent PiT Count found that 50% of people experiencing homelessness had their first experience of homelessness before the age of 25 (ESDC, 2019b, p. 9). Similarly, research has consistently indicated a correlation between child maltreatment and abuse, youth homelessness (Gaetz et al., 2016), and the risk of violent victimization as an adult, including severe intimate partner violence (**Burczycka, 2017; Perreault, 2015**). This research suggests that child and youth experiences of housing instability and violence are predictive of adult homelessness (Caplan, 2019; ESDC, 2019b), parent-child separation (Shelton et al., 2009), and violent victimization (**Burczycka, 2017; Perreault, 2015**). In fact, some studies suggest that one of the best predictors of adult homelessness is parent-child separation (Shelton et al., 2009; Shinn, Rog, & Culhane, 2005). Emerging evidence also demonstrates that a child born into homelessness is at risk of entering the homelessness system later in life (Crawford et al., 2011). Given this, many scholars have argued that if we want to move further upstream in addressing adult homelessness, we must invest in the prevention of child and youth homelessness (e.g., Gaetz et al., 2019; Schwan et al., 2018).

What has drawn less attention, however, is that these childhood and adolescent experiences are often intertwined with the experiences of the child's primary caregiver – in many cases, a child's mother. Housing instability and violence in a child's life usually occur in the context of their mother's experiences of eviction,

“While she was sleeping she was kind of whimpering. I thought she was dreaming but she was actually freezing to death, so I reached over and touched her hand, and her hand was icy cold, so I have to remove her from the bus stop, and we went and laid the rest of the night at the grocery store doorway, because there was kind of warm heat coming through the bottom of the door, and I couldn't drift off to sleep.”

Lived expert quoted  
in Milligan, 2012, p. 85

“I thought it was the way life was. Because in the neighborhood I grew up in, it was nothing to see a woman dragged, knocked down, stomped, and beat. And there was no safe house, there was no shelter that a wife or women could run to and be protected. So, many women, including my mother — they stood there and they took it. But I saw a lot of women die as a result of being abused. I would tell my mother, ‘He's killing her over there, Ma.’ And she'd say, ‘Leave it alone.’ And I took on that generational trait. You were just supposed to take it.”

Lived expert quoted in Wesely, 2009, p. 96



intimate partner violence, sexual assault, poverty, or homelessness. And when these challenges arise for a family, women most often become the prime or sole caregiver for their children. Research shows that mothers are often responsible for the primary caregiving of children and youth within families facing housing instability (Christensen, 2016), and that homeless families are overwhelmingly led by women (Gulliver-Garcia, 2016; Paradis, 2014, p. 52). In fact, **The National Shelter Study** found that nearly 90% of families using emergency shelters in Canada are headed by single women (ESDC, 2017).<sup>11</sup>

*In addition to their disproportionate childcare responsibilities, single mothers face overwhelming structural challenges to accessing safe, affordable, and adequate housing.* National data indicate that women-led, lone-parent family households are significantly more likely to be in core housing need than men-led households (27% vs. 16%) (CHMC, 2019), and that single mothers experience greater levels of poverty (Fotheringham, Walsh, & Burrowes, 2014). These difficulties are heightened for multi-marginalized women and their children, particularly Indigenous women. For example, the rate of shelter use for Indigenous children (ages 0-15) is 9.2 times higher than non-Indigenous children (ESDC, 2017), and research consistently shows that Indigenous mothers face unique burdens to regaining housing stability, such as racist and discriminatory treatment by landlords (Martin & Walia, 2019).

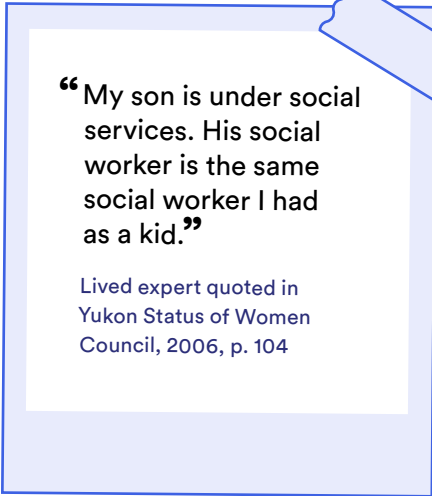
*For many mothers, intimate partner violence profoundly shapes their vulnerability to housing instability.* For example, a mother's desire for a stable home for their children (Thurston et al., 2013), their fear of losing custody and/or fear of their children's safety in the care of their partners (Benbow et al., 2018), and the social pressure they feel as mothers to maintain the family unit (Crisafi & Jasinski, 2016) can lead to staying with or returning to an abusive relationship. Mothers who do leave situations of intimate partner violence with their children often experience housing need and profound, systemic challenges to accessing supports and regaining housing stability (Gulliver-Garcia, 2016; Tutty et al., 2013; Barrow & Laborde, 2008; Vecchio, 2019).

<sup>11</sup> "Family homelessness often involves lone women with dependent children and is closely linked to domestic violence and economic marginalisation. It is not often associated with the high rates of severe mental illness, drug use, contact with the criminal justice system and poor health, seen among single long-term and recurrently homeless men" (Bretherton, 2017, p. 2).

*The accumulation of these challenges can contribute to the intervention of child welfare services – an experience that contributes to a risk of homelessness for both mothers and their children.* Research shows that children and youth with experiences of child welfare involvement are at greater risk of becoming homeless as young people (Gaetz et al., 2016), and that losing custody of one's child is a traumatic crisis that precipitates homelessness for some women (Van Berkum & Oudshoorn, 2015, p. 10). While child apprehension has been linked to both abuse and neglect (Zlotnick et al., 1998), other studies show child apprehension has been associated solely with systemic issues such as unstable housing and economic insecurity (Bussiere, 1990; Nelson, 1992; Roman & Wolfe, 1995).

*The triangulation of this research points us to an important insight: by failing to address the needs of mothers experiencing violence and housing instability, we create the conditions for their children to become the homeless adults of tomorrow.* If we choose to address the unique housing challenges many women face – including those that are intertwined with abuse and violence – we may be able to prevent future generations from experiencing homelessness and violence.

*This suggests that while women's housing instability and homelessness remains a largely understudied and 'niche' focus in research and policy, it may actually be key to solving adult homelessness, chronic homelessness, and intergenerational homelessness.* Given this, it is critical that we focus research, policy, and interventions on preventing and ending housing instability and violence in the lives of mothers and their children.



“My son is under social services. His social worker is the same social worker I had as a kid.”

Lived expert quoted in  
Yukon Status of Women  
Council, 2006, p. 104

## 8. Multiple and compounding public system failures drive women and their children into housing instability and homelessness, contributing to intergenerational cycles of homelessness, housing instability, marginalization, and violence.

*While we often discuss women's homelessness in the context of interpersonal violence, it is also rooted in structural violence – violence produced by the ways in which social structures and systems are organized* (Taylor, 2013). This includes laws, regulations, and institutions (Mullaly, 2010; Lundy, 2011), as well as transit systems, healthcare centres, schools, and welfare offices (Middleman & Wood, cited in Lundy, 2011, p. 89). Experiences of housing precarity are often linked to failures in public systems like the child welfare system or criminal justice and often involve inadequate, discriminatory, or harmful policies and practices that create pathways into homelessness. In such systems, seemingly benign bureaucratic processes that appear neutral or even purport to advance social good may result in violent outcomes for women and their children (e.g., eviction, child apprehension) (Ho, 2007). It is critical that such policies and practices are understood as a form of violence and as foundational to experiences of homelessness for women and gender diverse peoples.

### **Examples of such public system failures include:**

- ↳ Contradictory policies across systems (e.g., between social assistance, child welfare, and social housing) that make it difficult for women to qualify for the income or housing supports and re-gain custody (Maki, 2017). For example, most social assistance systems cut entitlements for a mother as soon as her child is apprehended by child welfare, putting her in a position of losing her housing (which is not easily re-established).  
  
This dramatically affects her ability to have her children returned to her care. Similarly, housing providers often consider a woman immediately over-housed if she loses custody of her children or will not consider the mother's family size for housing entitlement if her children are not currently in her care.
- ↳ Failure to provide access to supports, housing, or income to women transitioning out of public systems, such as healthcare settings, prison, or child welfare placements (Schwan et al., 2018; Tutty et al., 2014).
- ↳ Child welfare policies that require mothers to enter an emergency or VAW shelter in order to maintain or regain custody of their children (Azim et al., 2018; Caplan, 2019; Montgomery, Brown, & Forchuk, 2011; Paradis et al., 2008), in some cases resulting in parent-child separation (Guo, Slesnick, & Feng, 2016).
- ↳ Child welfare policies and practices that fail to make a distinction between neglect and poverty, contributing to the apprehension of children from families who are struggling with inadequate housing, socioeconomic marginalization, and/or other structural factors that are largely beyond women's control (Trocmé, Knoke, & Blackstock, 2004). As a result, poor households are more likely to experience child apprehension for "neglect" because they lack money for new clothing or nutritious food. Such practices are decidedly linked to colonial violence, with research demonstrating that "neglect" is the main reason that Indigenous children enter the child welfare system (Trocmé et al., 2004), and that the rate of "neglect only" investigations in First Nations homes is six times higher than non-Indigenous homes (Sinha et al., 2011).

These types of practices and policies can create the conditions for some women to lose their housing, remain stuck on the streets, lose custody of their children, or stay in situations of abuse.

System failures accumulate. A powerful example is the compounding discriminations faced by Indigenous women in the criminal justice system. Carol Muree Martin and Harsha Walia (2019) explain:

“Discrimination against Indigenous women in the prison system is a series of compounding discriminations. Indigenous women serve disproportionately more of their sentence behind bars before first release and are more likely to remain in prison until their statutory release date or warrant expiry date; are over-classified in maximum security institutions and under-represented in community supervision populations or Healing Lodges; are disproportionately placed into segregation; have less access to rehabilitative and culturally-relevant programs in prison; are generally excluded from the Mother-Child Program; are more likely to return to prison on revocation of parole; and are often labeled ‘dangerous offenders’ or ‘hard to manage’ because of offenses in resistance to prisons” (p. 23).

Failures in the child welfare system create similar feedback loops of marginalization for Indigenous peoples and many others.<sup>12</sup> *Research shows there is a cyclical and mutually reinforcing relationship between child welfare involvement and homelessness, in some cases spanning multiple generations.* For instance, we know that:

- ↳ Losing custody of children is a traumatic crisis that precipitates homelessness for mothers (Van Berkum & Oudshoorn, 2015, p. 10). The trauma associated with child apprehension can contribute to substance use, mental health challenges, and loss of income, putting mothers at risk of loss of housing and deepening marginalization (National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019a).<sup>13</sup>
- ↳ Adolescent mothers in the care of child protective services are at an increased risk of having their children taken into care (Wall-Wieler et al., 2018).<sup>15</sup>
- ↳ Young women with child welfare involvement are at significantly greater risk of becoming homeless (Gaetz et al., 2016),<sup>14</sup> experiencing sex trafficking (Murphy, 2018), and becoming involved with the criminal justice system (British Columbia Representative for Children and Youth, 2009).
- ↳ Women with children may avoid services for fear of child apprehension, remaining trapped in unstable or abusive situations without the supports they need to exit (Martin & Walia, 2019; Maki, 2017).

These complex entanglements can contribute to generations of people experiencing trauma, housing instability, mental health challenges, and family disintegration.

While women’s homelessness is often framed as the responsibility of the VAW or homelessness sector, the truth is that many public systems affect the housing status of women, girls, and gender diverse peoples. This means that homelessness prevention for women is closely linked to reforms of systems like criminal justice, child welfare, and social service systems (e.g., income assistance). *It is time to transform our public systems to improve outcomes for all women, girls, and gender diverse peoples across Canada.*

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<sup>12</sup> While we know these difficulties are heightened for multi-marginalized women and their children, there remain significant gaps in knowledge with respect to specific sub-populations. For example, we know very little about queer mothers experiencing housing precarity and their interactions with the child welfare system. The lived realities of LGBTQ2S+ parents are almost entirely absent from current discourse and understandings of family homelessness.

<sup>13</sup> In the case of Indigenous Peoples, the Final Report of the Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (2019) reports that the “massive group trauma” experienced by Indigenous peoples through colonial violence creates “historical trauma response” that “reframes challenges such as substance use, addiction, or suicidal thoughts, which are often seen as personal failings, as understandable responses to the trauma of colonial violence” (Vol.1a, p. 112).

<sup>14</sup> The National Youth Homelessness Survey (2016) found that almost 60% of youth experiencing homelessness had been involved with the child welfare system at some point in their lives (Gaetz et al., 2016). Based on these statistics, youth experiencing homelessness are 193 times more likely than youth in the general population to report involvement with the child welfare system (Nichols et al., 2017).

<sup>15</sup> Wall-Wieler and colleagues’ Manitoba-based study (2018) found that adolescent mothers who were in the care of child protective services when they gave birth are seven times more likely to have their child taken into care before age two than adolescent mothers who were not in care.

# Ending Women's Homelessness in Canada: If Not Now, When?

*The findings of this literature review make one thing clear: the housing crisis in Canada is gendered.*

Women, girls, and gender diverse peoples across Canada disproportionately bear the burden of poverty, core housing need, interpersonal violence, and childcare responsibilities. These burdens are greatest for those experiencing multiple forms of marginalization. The dearth of affordable, safe, and appropriate housing for women and gender diverse peoples means that many remain trapped in situations of hidden homelessness and violence. Overburdened and underfunded emergency systems often fail to meet the needs of these groups, and inadvertently contribute to cycles of violence and precarity. It is egregious that many women and girls consistently explain they would rather remain sheltered and face the violence of one man, than become homeless and face the violence of many men on the street or in shelters (Watson, 2009, 2011).

If we are serious about ending homelessness for women, girls, and gender diverse peoples, we must understand and invest in housing solutions that work for these groups. However, large gaps in research and data continue to exist, leaving governments and advocates in the dark with respect to the scale of the issue, who is struggling, and where to go from here.

## **Gaps in research include:**

- ↳ Lack of national data on hidden homelessness, including in rural, remote and Northern communities.
- ↳ Extremely limited research on Black women, girls, and gender diverse people's experiences of housing need and homelessness.
- ↳ Limited comparative accounts of programs or interventions that effectively prevent or end homelessness for women.
- ↳ Gaps in data on where women go when they exit homeless or VAW shelters, or when they are turned away due to capacity issues.
- ↳ Inadequate data on transwomen's experience of violence and exclusion within public systems, the homelessness sector, and the VAW sector.
- ↳ Limited research on newcomer women's experiences of violence and exclusion within public systems, the homelessness sector, and the VAW sector.
- ↳ Lack of comparative data on supportive housing models that are effective for diverse women experiencing housing need, violence, and/or systemic oppression.
- ↳ Gaps in data on the experiences of LGBTQ2S+ women and gender diverse people's experiences of housing need, including those who are pregnant and parenting.

Our review suggests that the siloing of data collection and analysis across systems and sectors – including the homelessness and VAW sectors – prohibits a robust understanding of women's housing need and homelessness. It would seem that many public systems and scholarly disciplines fail to share data, instead viewing women from the perspective of a particular system or field. Given that women's homelessness is a policy fusion issue, this approach creates barriers to preventing and ending homelessness for women. A focus on data justice, and cross-sectoral data analysis, will be critical for moving the dial.

Most importantly, our review suggests that women and gender diverse people are uniquely vulnerable to structural and systemic barriers to housing, and find themselves excluded from much housing and homelessness policy. A fully implemented right to housing will be critical for uncovering and resolving these systemic barriers. Implementing such a right is not only life-saving and life-affirming for women and gender diverse peoples, but is central to tackling broader issues of chronic homelessness and intergenerational poverty and violence.

The time for action is now. If Canada is serious about building a more just society from the ashes of COVID-19, gender equity must stand at the centre. And housing is a great place to start.

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