HOMELESSNESS AND HOUSING AMONG STATUS IMMIGRANT, NON-STATUS MIGRANT, AND CANADIAN-BORN FAMILIES IN TORONTO

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Within Canada's unhoused population are many immigrant and refugee families. Homelessness and shelter life impose great stress on parents and their children. For immigrants who are also adapting to a new environment, the stress is compounded.

A better understanding of homelessness among immigrant and refugee families can improve public policy and programs for these families. We talked to women and their families in Toronto shelters, to compare the experiences of Canadian-born women, and women who had come to Canada as immigrants, refugees, or other migrants.

TALKING TO HOMELESS WOMEN

The study followed 91 women-led homeless families in two groups: (1) homeless immigrant and refugee families, and (2) Canadian-born homeless families. Each woman was interviewed three times over the course of a year. The first interview took place at a homeless shelter in Toronto, and focused on the women's experiences up to that time. The second and third identified changes since the first interview and the reasons for those changes.

Those born outside Canada came from 22 different countries. Half were from the Caribbean, nine from Africa, six from Asia, three from Europe, and two from Latin America. The women had been in Canada for an average of 4.7 years. Almost all respondents had dependent children staying with them at the shelter at the time of the first interview. The sample was self-selected, and all the women spoke English. As a result, the study did not reflect the additional stresses facing immigrants who do not speak English.

EXPERIENCES OF HOUSING, HOMELESSNESS, AND LIFE IN A SHELTER

Respondents reported housing instability in the two years before the first interview, having lived in an average of four places, including the shelter in which they were interviewed. Almost a third cited abuse as the reason for leaving their last stable form of housing. Other reasons included bad housing conditions and affordability problems. A few respondents had been evicted, others were told to leave by roommates and other cohabitants. Overcrowding, crime and violence, and family conflict were also frequently cited.

Some respondents could not afford their rent after losing a job because of pregnancy; others were asked to leave by cohabitants or landlords because they were pregnant or because their children were noisy. Several were told by child protection authorities to move into shelters to maintain or regain custody of their children. Others left conditions they considered unfit for their children, and were unable to find suitable alternative housing.

At the time of the first interview, 19 percent of respondents were separated from one or more of their children, and about one in four families were separated at some point during the study. Status immigrant women were less likely to be separated from their children than Canadian-born or non-status migrant mothers.

Some women with older children did not have their children with them at the shelter – sometimes because the shelter rules excluded older children, sometimes because their children had chosen to leave. Many seemingly "single" homeless women are in fact mothers separated from their children, and some youth in homeless shelters are separated from their homeless families.

At the time of the first interview, three-quarters of respondents were satisfied or very satisfied with their shelter: they praised the helpful staff, and the cleanliness, safety, privacy, and independence they experienced. Many appreciated the services available, particularly childcare. Those who were less satisfied cited shared rooms, crowded conditions, and noise.

THE DIFFERENCE A YEAR MAKES

At the time of the final interview, only two respondents were still in the shelter. The others had stayed for less than a year. More than 30 percent of the women had received help from shelter staff in finding their current place and about 25 percent had been assisted by a housing help centre or subsidized housing provider. About 10 percent had been helped by another agency, and another 10 percent by a friend or family member. Twenty percent had found housing on their own.

Most of the women were housed in above-grade apartments, while some were in basement apartments or houses. A few were in transitional housing or staying with family members. Nearly all had their children with them and about a quarter were living with a partner. Of the women who had left home because of abuse, only one was living with a partner, which suggests that women did not return to situations of abuse.

Positive comments about their new homes included privacy, quiet, space, good conditions, cleanliness, safe neighbourhoods, proximity to amenities, and affordability. Negative comments reflected poor maintenance, disrepair, infestations, and other problems.

DIFFERENCES BY GROUP

Canadian-born women

Most Canadian-born women had been homeless in the past, and most had lived in at least four places in the preceding two years. Many were forced to leave home due to family conflict with parents, or to secure a safer environment for themselves and their children.

Once homeless, Canadian-born women moved around more than the other groups. Most stayed in more than one shelter during the current period of homelessness. Nevertheless, they spent less time homeless than immigrant women. They were more likely than the other groups to have found their current place with the help of an agency.

Most were living in units of two bedrooms or larger, and their households were the largest of the three groups: many lived with a partner, half of them lived with at least one other adult, and most had more than one child.

Status immigrant women

Immigrant women with permanent resident status tended to have a history of more stable housing, with fewer moves in the preceding two years. About half had lived with partners before entering the shelter. Many had left their homes because of partner abuse or crises such as job loss or fire. Almost all had moved directly from their last stable home into the current shelter, without periods of hidden homelessness or other shelter stays.

Once in the shelter, status immigrant women were less likely to be with a partner than women in the other groups. Their shelter stays were longer than those of Canadian-born women, but most spent less than six months in shelters. They had the highest rate of satisfaction with the shelter of all three groups. They were less likely than the other groups to have found their new housing on their own, and more likely to have received housing search help from family, friends, or partners. Almost all were satisfied with the help they had received.

At the time of the third interview, most were living with more than one dependent child, in above-grade apartments with two or more bedrooms. It appears that they were more likely than other groups to have moved out of the shelter into subsidized housing.

Non-status migrant women

Immigrant women without status had the most unstable pre-shelter housing of the three groups: two-thirds had moved four times or more in the preceding two years. Their last relatively stable homes were often short-term, informal arrangements with acquaintances or family members, where they lacked security of tenure, and were vulnerable to eviction, exploitation, and invasion of privacy. They were less likely than the other groups to have lived with a dependent child at their last stable place, and more likely to have been forced from their homes due to pregnancy.

Non-status women had the fewest, and youngest, children of all groups. They stayed in the shelter much longer than the other groups; one-third were there for more than a year. At the time of the third interview, they were least likely to live with friends or family members, and most were the only adult in their households. The majority lived in one-bedroom apartments, and none lived in places with three or more bedrooms. Most were unsatisfied with their current place.

THE INTERSECTION OF HOMELESSNESS AND LACK OF PERMANENT RESIDENT STATUS

This study systematically analyzed for the first time the causes and effects of homelessness for women living in Canada without permanent resident status, such as refugee claimants. Many spend years here before their claims are decided, and some will never be granted permanent status. Others are temporary workers, who account for about half of all people admitted to Canada each year, but who seldom become permanent residents, and who are subject to severe limitations in their employment options, housing, and access to social benefits. Toronto is also home to many people who live and work in Canada with no legal status, though their numbers cannot be known.

Women without status are extremely vulnerable, often living in conditions of deep poverty, housing instability, danger, and exploitation. Because they have limited access to social assistance, health care, and other social benefits, they rely on under-the-table employment or the compassion of others to secure housing.

Pregnancy and childbirth represent a crisis for these women, making employment impossible, incurring health care costs, and disrupting precarious housing arrangements. Having nowhere else to turn, they are usually forced to go to family shelters with their babies, who may be Canadian-born. Once there, they must try to regularize their status, although many will not qualify as refugees, and their cases for Humanitarian and Compassionate status are generally considered weak. Some are deported. Others wait years, paying substantial sums in legal and administrative fees before achieving stability.

The status regularization process is so protracted that few mothers in this study had reached the end of it by the time of the final interview. While during this process women and their children gained access to social assistance, health care, work permits, and other social benefits, they experienced decreased levels of employment, increased perceptions of discrimination, and reduced mobility while attempting to gain status in Canada.

FAMILY SHELTERS AS TRANSITIONAL AND SUPPORTIVE HOUSING

Family shelters – intended as a crisis resource of last resort – are functioning as transitional and supportive housing for families for whom dedicated housing programs are needed.

Non-status migrant women may maintain housing and employment, sometimes for years, without access to services; but when pregnancy, violence, or other crises disrupt their jobs and housing arrangements, they have nowhere to turn but shelters. Their long shelter stays suggest that they would be better served by a housing program in which they could live with their children while undergoing the status regularization process. Such a program should be more homelike than a shelter, offering separate living quarters, kitchens, and less regimentation. This program need not be as resource-intensive and costly as a shelter, which requires round-the-clock staffing.

Mothers involved with child protection services also need an appropriate residential program. Some respondents were told by child protection authorities to leave unsafe housing in order to maintain or regain custody of their children. While for non-status migrant women, the regimentation of the shelter is intrusive, this is what child protection agencies want. The use of crisis shelters to provide high-support, intensively supervised housing for mothers and children at risk sug¬gests the need for dedicated services.

SHELTERS AND INDEPENDENT HOUSING: A SERIES OF TRADE-OFFS

In some respects, women were better off in the shelter than they were in their own homes. Women's pre-shelter housing was often unaffordable, unsafe, inadequate, isolating, and in poor condition, and many women did not have access to services such as childcare, advocacy, and housing search assistance.

Unfortunately, for most women, their post-shelter housing, incomes, and service access represented only a partial improvement. Before and after staying in the shelter, women were faced with trade-offs: dangerous locations in exchange for affordability, poor physical conditions in exchange for lack of discrimination from neighbours and landlords. The shelter itself represented a trade-off: overcrowding in exchange for food security; regimentation in exchange for safety; lack of autonomy in exchange for services.

Shelters offer relative safety and stability as women and children recover from crises and violence, gain access to services, and search for new homes. At the same time, what dœs it mean for women and children to be "better off" in a shelter than in their own homes? What are the costs, financial and human, of using shelters as a catch-all for families with widely varying needs and capacities? And what are the long-term prospects for families who leave the shelter, but continue to experience poverty, inadequate and unaffordable housing, discrimination, violence, and lack of access to childcare and other services, the problems that caused them to become homeless in the first place?

Homelessness is neither inevitable nor natural. Each time a family becomes homeless represents a failure of services and supports, and suggests a gap to be filled.

DIRECTIONS FOR PUBLIC POLICY

Income support

Most women in the study received no child support; those who did sometimes did not receive the full amount on a regular basis. Most families had multiple income sources. There is a need for a guaranteed income benefit that tops up all other income sources to a level adequate for sustaining stable housing, food security, childcare, and other necessities. Also, some mothers in the study became homeless because their student loan entitlements were insufficient, but rendered them ineligible for welfare.

Housing

All levels of government must act to increase the supply of subsidized housing. Crisis shelters have become

de facto transitional housing for specific groups who require long-term residential and other supports. These families need appropriate housing to meet their needs.

Services

Many respondents did not have access to services they needed, or lost access to services once they were housed. Some were led to expect follow-up services after they were housed, but these services never materialized. Shelters need to offer direct housing search services and provide follow-up for at least one year while families re-establish themselves.

Immigration

Women without permanent resident status encountered barriers while attempting to make a stable home for themselves and their children. The federal government should ensure access to services for all persons living and working in Canada and extend labour protections and benefits equally to all workers, including temporary workers. Non-status persons should have access to all health, crisis, and other services without fear of being reported to immigration authorities. Our study identified a need for a centralized source for information and advocacy for persons seeking to regularize their status, as well as a non-profit employment agency for non-status persons, providing information on labour rights, training, and employment opportunities. Finally, family planning, prenatal, labour and delivery, and postnatal care should be available free to all mothers, whatever their status.

Childcare

Access to childcare is vital to ensure that women can take up opportunities for employment and education. Current forms of childcare do not meet the needs of low-income women whose jobs are often temporary, part-time, casual, shift work, or home-based. Childcare subsidies that allow for varying schedules and varying forms of childcare (part-day, part-week, before- and after-hours, drop-in) would allow parents to use childcare as needed and improve their employment situations.

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For a copy of the full report, *Better Off in a Shelter? A Year of Homelessness and Housing among Status Immigrant, Non-Status Migrant, and Canadian-Born Families* (CUCS Research Paper #213, July 2008), go to: www.urbancentre.utoronto.ca/publications.html