



HOMELESSNESS PARTNERING STRATEGY

Summary

Uncovering Invisibilities: Understanding Experiences of Newcomer Women across the Homeless Spectrum

Christine Walsh, University of Calgary, Haly, J. et al., McGill University (2011)

This study explored the plight of immigrant women across the homeless spectrum in Montreal, from women on the street, to women in temporary housing arrangements, as well as those at risk.

Population examined

Newcomer women in Montreal, including immigrants, temporary foreign workers, refugees and asylum seekers.

How the study was done

- In-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with 26 newcomer women in Montreal who had immigrated to Canada within the last 10 years.
- Researchers also explored the experiences of 5 key informants who worked with immigrant women in local women's shelters.
- Community events were held in Montreal and Calgary with newcomer women to validate findings.
- A literature review was prepared by Quebec-based community groups that addressed homelessness, housing issues, women's and immigration issues.

Who was interviewed

- The women came from around the world: 13 from African countries; 5 from Mexico and the Caribbean; 4 from the Philippines; and 1 each from Japan, China, France and Canada (an immigrant woman who was a long-time resident of Canada and had experienced homelessness several times).
- 14 were permanent residents; 3 were citizens; 4 were refugee claimants; and 3 were undocumented. The status of 2 women was not identified.
- The women had come to Canada for many reasons:
 - o invited as skilled workers
 - o students

- o women who had left secure jobs to advance their qualifications in Canada
- o fleeing violence in their home countries
- o under pressure from spouses to emigrate.

Insecure in an unfamiliar land

- No matter the legal status, all immigrant women are at greater risk of homelessness.
- Undocumented women are the most vulnerable, and most susceptible to abuse because their survival depends on others.
- Income provided to refugee women isn't enough to cover basic costs.
- Women fleeing violence in their home country are not prepared for North American life.
- Domestic conflict is a factor in homelessness of immigrant women.
- Finding services in a different culture is difficult; some turn to sympathetic taxi drivers or strangers on the street for help.
- Even immigrant women with higher education have trouble finding a job.

What the study showed

- Unlike Canadian-born women, refugee and immigrant women lack familiarity with their new environment and have limited resources to deal with homelessness.
- To avoid being on the street, they share accommodation, stay in temporary quarters, and rely on social contacts for temporary and precarious housing.
- Housing problems are compounded by many challenges including racism, language difficulties, unemployment and poverty.
- Financial uncertainty is the top reason for housing insecurity.
- Finding a decent place to live was highly stressful – few women reported getting effective help from community organizations.
- Often landlords asked for personal documentation and large deposits. This happens even in Quebec where it is illegal.
- Many reported being refused apartments because of their ethnicity, language, immigration status, source of income and having children.
- Some women said they got the worst housing available but took it because they felt they had no other choice.
- Besides housing, relationship problems often caused a great deal of stress and led to a sense of insecurity.

Recognizing their strengths

- Women coped by making use of their social networks.
- They used services offered by community and government organizations.
- The majority of women said they drew strength from their faith, their personal attributes and their culture.
- Most had the ability to look to the future, which meant being granted permanent resident status, finding employment, and making a better life for themselves and their children.

What immigrant women want improved

- **Shelters:** Sharing rooms with strangers added to stress and insecurity. Women recommended rooms be set aside for families.
- **Housing and employment:** End discriminatory practices, recognize foreign credentials, and provide enough subsidized daycare spaces.
- **Welfare rates:** Women found the level of aid impossible to live on; and recommended rates be increased.
- **Access to healthcare:** Health issues often led to housing problems; women reported it was difficult to obtain service if not a permanent resident.

Recommendations

- Increase co-operation and communications between housing organizations and settlement services.
 - o Homeless shelters had little information about clients' immigration status.
 - o Settlement services knew little about people's experiences once they were in housing. For example, if women found themselves in substandard housing, there was little settlement services could do.
- Provide wrap-around services to better support immigrant women to find housing (such as accompanying them on their housing search so they are not exploited), healthcare, education and childcare services.
- Provide longer-term transitional housing that would give immigrant women the stability and security they need in a "tough and unfamiliar situation".