

HOUSING INSECURITY & JUSTICE SYSTEM

INVOLVEMENT AMONG WOMEN
in the Thunder Bay Region

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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ABOUT US

Elizabeth Fry Society Northwestern Ontario is a vibrant charitable organization that supports and advocates for women in prison, women transitioning back into the community, and women at risk of criminalization. We work to provide integrated programs and support services that best meet the needs of women and their families, with the goal of building healthy communities and reducing incarceration.

We conduct partnered research to help us identify ways to better support women in the community and understand barriers that face them in our region.



CONTENTS

4 Background
& Objectives

6 Methods

7 Results

14 About the
research team

BACKGROUND & OBJECTIVES

Homelessness and housing insecurity can be both predictors and outcomes of criminal justice system involvement. This study assessed the perceived relationship between these two variables for women in Thunder Bay with the aim of identifying gaps and needs in our community. More specifically, the objectives were to:

1

Assess the degree to which homelessness and housing insecurity affect criminal justice system involvement for women in Thunder Bay, with particular consideration of Indigenous women.

2

Identify housing, social, mental health and legal support needs for housing insecure women involved with the criminal justice system, with particular attention to gender-specific and culturally-relevant needs.

3

Identify evidence-based approaches/promising practices/innovations for providing gender-sensitive and culturally-relevant housing, social, and legal support for women who are involved with the criminal justice system which are applicable to the context of Northwestern Ontario.





AS OF JUNE 2019,

our country became one of the few to indicate that housing is a human right through federal legislation.

Canada has recently signalled a commitment to addressing homelessness and housing issues through the introduction of the National Housing Strategy, a

10 YEAR
\$55 billion
INVESTMENTS
into affordable housing.

The current research can serve to inform future developments of the unique needs of our community.

The National Housing Strategy has identified Northern Canada

& Indigenous peoples

AS PRIORITY AREAS

for providing affordable housing and reducing homelessness.



METHODS

A mixed method design was utilized involving quantitative (i.e. surveys) and qualitative (i.e. interviews and focus groups) approaches to data collection. Researchers collected information from



who were involved in the criminal justice system

by conducting individual interviews in the community and holding focus groups at the Thunder Bay Correctional Centre and John Howard Society.

In addition, information was collected from professionals in the legal and social services sector through an online survey and a focus group.

Additional data collection involved an environmental scan and gap analysis of local services relating to transitional housing, housing and support services and substance use treatment facilities. Lastly, the bail courts were monitored to determine the influence of housing on bail planning and release. Data were triangulated and analysed to meet the study objectives.

RESULTS

Bail court monitoring indicated that in approximately

50% OF CASES

housing was an important factor in determining if the woman was released on bail or was remanded into custody.

47% OF CASES

where housing was a required condition for release, women did not have housing available to them. Therefore, the ability to secure housing is a barrier to local women seeking bail or release.

A survey of legal professionals revealed similar results. Respondents noted that many (50-89%) of their clients are under-housed and that housing is often a very important component of bail and discharge planning. Respondents noted that the inability of women to make bail or be released from jail often leads to other negative consequences such as the loss of their children, housing, or employment and can delay access to important services such as mental health or substance use treatment. Lastly, the legal professionals felt that housing instability is often associated with recidivism.

Women involved with the criminal justice system were asked about barriers to securing and maintaining housing which revealed three themes:

1 DISCRIMINATION

(based on race, previous involvement with the criminal justice system, credit rating, and income source)

2 FINANCIAL BARRIERS

3 AVAILABILITY OF AFFORDABLE SUITABLE OPTIONS.

Barriers unique to bail release involved the restrictions around finding a surety. Women could not use an individual as their surety if the individual lives in subsidized housing or has a criminal record.

This research indicated that homelessness and housing insecurity affects criminal justice system involvement in several ways.

FIRST, housing insecurity increases the likelihood of recidivism. Women who do not have a safe and stable home may commit crimes out of need, be unable to access needed treatment, or may return to the circumstances or environments that led to their arrest (e.g. leading to breaches).

SIMILARLY, homelessness and housing insecurity threaten the recovery of women who are striving for sobriety following release from a correctional facility. Several research participants expressed a need for mental health and addiction services. Stable housing can provide a foundation for women's recovery, health and wellness.

LASTLY, the inability to secure housing can threaten women's safety by increasing the likelihood of exploitation, assault or returning to unsafe situations such as violent relationships. All of these situations could lead to further contact with the criminal justice system.



The environmental scan and gap analysis revealed that there is a clear lack of transitional housing options exclusively for women.

THE SHELTERS THAT DO ACCOMMODATE ONLY WOMEN ARE FOCUSED ON WOMEN AND CHILDREN IN ABUSIVE SITUATIONS.

WOMEN WHO ARE NOT IN THIS SITUATION OR HAVE ABUSE HISTORIES (AS OPPOSED TO CURRENT) ARE FORCED TO STAY IN CO-ED TRANSITIONAL HOUSING OPTIONS WHICH MAY BE UNDESIRABLE FOR VARIOUS REASONS.

An additional key finding is the lack of service options for women prior to and following substance use treatment. The only local organization to provide this service is Crossroads Centre which is open to men and women.





WOMEN WERE ASKED ABOUT THEIR NEEDS AND PREFERENCES FOR HOUSING AND/OR TRANSITIONAL HOUSING IN THUNDER BAY.

Although there was some variability in responses, preferences voiced by the majority will be presented in the summary. Cost and location were frequently mentioned.

Respondents described the importance of avoiding areas fraught with criminal activity such as drug dealing, human trafficking and violence. This is important for preventing recidivism and relapse but also for the protection of women and families. For transitional housing, women reported that a rooming-house style would be suitable where women have private bedrooms but were open to sharing accommodations such as a common living space, kitchen and bathroom (in some cases). It is important that the transitional housing provides a space where women can visit and play with their children.

WOMEN NEED
affordable
HOUSING IN A SAFE NEIGHBORHOOD.

Participants agreed that rules and regulations were necessary, but women noted that it was important to have rules balanced with autonomy. A graduated system may be appropriate depending on women's unique situation (e.g. bail conditions).

NEARLY ALL PARTICIPANTS
EXPRESSED A DESIRE FOR
**ADDITIONAL SERVICES
TO BE OFFERED**

ON SITE INCLUDING



ADDICTIONS
MENTAL HEALTH
CASE MANAGEMENT
LEGAL MATTERS
CULTURAL ACTIVITIES
CHILD WELFARE & PHYSICAL HEALTH.

Other recommended services included training in life skills such as computers, cooking and job seeking.

Consistent with the aims of the NHS, this research highlighted some significant gaps in services in Thunder Bay. It drew this conclusion through consultation with a wide range of affected parties (i.e. women in the criminal justice system, service providers and legal professionals).

THERE IS A NEED FOR TRANSITIONAL HOUSING IN THUNDER BAY

THAT FOCUSES ON THE UNIQUE NEEDS OF MARGINALIZED WOMEN, WHO HAVE EXPERIENCES OF TRAUMA, POVERTY AND VIOLENCE, PARTICULARLY INDIGENOUS WOMEN.

Understanding that the criminalization of Indigenous women is intrinsically linked to the impacts of colonization, intergenerational trauma and cultural genocide requires support services that are sensitive to the root causes of their lived experiences. A facility that caters to all women could assist in bail and discharge planning while protecting women from the negative effects of homelessness such as increased risk of recidivism, substance use and physical harm.



Although this research focused on housing issues, several other important issues were brought to light;

FOR EXAMPLE, THE IMPORTANCE OF

MENTAL HEALTH AND ADDICTION WHEN EVALUATING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HOUSING INSECURITY AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM INVOLVEMENT.



THIS RESEARCH DEMONSTRATED THAT

HOUSING IS TRULY THE FOUNDATION FOR WELLNESS.

Without stable or transitional housing, women are unable to focus on other important aspects of social reintegration. The gender and culture sensitive recommendations in this report reflect the perceived needs of the women from the criminal justice system and professionals who serve them.

about the **RESEARCH TEAM**

STEPHANIE CAMPBELL: Is a Ph.D. student in Clinical Psychology at Lakehead University. At Lakehead, she works as a teaching and research assistant and previously served as the Lakehead Psi Chi chapter president. Stephanie plans to specialize in adult clinical psychology and forensic psychology post-graduation.

MARY KOZORYS: Is the Programme Co-ordinator with the Elizabeth Fry Society Northwestern Ontario. She has extensive community experience in the not-for-profit sector, working on issues related to advocacy, social justice, and equitable access to services.

DR. REBECCA SCHIFF: Is a transdisciplinary scholar with grounding in sustainability studies, health sciences and public health, social work, community development, environment and geography, and justice studies. She is an Associate Professor in the Department of Health Sciences at Lakehead University. Much of her research investigates community health and social issues for marginalized communities across diverse urban, rural, and remote geographies.

DR. HELLE MOLLER: Is an Associate Professor in the Department of Health Sciences at Lakehead University. She is an interdisciplinary health researcher and teacher with a background in medical anthropology and nursing. Framed within a social justice perspective Dr. Moller's areas of research and teaching span the social and ecological determinants of health with an emphasis on the Northern regions of the globe, on Indigenous, women's and maternal health and more.

DR. DEBORAH SCHARF: Is a clinical and health psychologist. She is an Assistant Professor of Psychology (primary) and Education (adjunct) at Lakehead University. Dr. Scharf's research includes studies of healthcare access for poor and underserved groups; behavioral health delivery systems; tobacco use, treatment, and policy; behavioral healthcare services for military personnel and veterans; and innovations in in vivo electronic data capture.



For the full report, please visit:

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