

WHAT ARE WOMEN SAYING? PHASE I

Homeless and Unstably Housed Women

in BC's Capital Region

A report for the Victoria Real Estate Board



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Acknowledgements

The Community Council was commissioned by the Victoria Real Estate Board to prepare this report, and takes responsibility for its content.

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The Community Council is a registered charity with a mission to provide leadership that brings the community together to create a sustainable quality of life for everyone in BC's Capital Region. The Community Council is respected for the relevance and quality of its community-based research, and for providing a range of research, communications and collaboration services within BC's Capital Region. For further research by and information about the Community Council, see www.communitycouncil.ca.

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Section 1: Background

This report has been commissioned by the Community Relations Committee of the Victoria Real Estate Board in order to better inform their internal 'Quality of Life' 2007 Initiative of future opportunities to assist women in British Columbia's (BC) Capital Region.

Determining the exact number of homeless people is very difficult because they are so transient. It is even more difficult to accurately determine how many women are homeless. A number of studies in Canada show that about 30% of the homeless population is women. The *Homeless Needs Survey 2007*¹ conducted within BC's Capital Region found thirty percent (30%) of the adults who responded to the survey were women.

Homeless women are less visible than homeless men because they are not seen on the street to the same extent. According to the Burnside Gorge Community Association this is because homeless women, more often than men, tend to stay with family and friends, often moving from week to week. If these women have children, they are afraid that their children may be taken away from them. So, they choose to remain hidden.

Poor women often prefer to live in unaffordable housing that is safe. Low end rooming houses are cheap, but women do not feel safe. Instead, many will pay over 85% of their income on their housing. That leaves them with just a few dollars for food and other necessities.

A parliamentary report² outlining all homeless research in Canada in 1999 states,

All researchers agree, however, that this lower visibility of homeless women results from a number of factors. First, since the enumeration of the homeless is generally based on the users of services, homeless women are less evident simply because fewer services cater to them. Some studies have also suggested that homeless women are less visible on the street because they pay more attention than homeless men to their personal hygiene and clothing. Furthermore, women are normally homeless for shorter periods than men, since they often manage to find shelter in exchange for sexual or domestic services. One writer even states:

They are simply not safe. As well, because they are so at risk "on the street," women are frequently forced into the condition of cohabiting with men, often residing in physically, sexually, and emotionally abusive relationships.

Families, especially single-parent families headed by women, are very vulnerable to homelessness, which often seems to result when potential

¹ All reports referenced in this document are included in the Section Six: Bibliography.

² Lyne Casavant, Political and Social Affairs Division, Library of Parliament. Jan. 1999

back-up resources, such as the extended family and friends, are exhausted. Social isolation is a major factor in family homelessness. The families most at risk are those in which domestic violence prevails. The situation of mothers who are the victims of family violence is particularly acute.

Although the above statements were written in 1999, the situation has not improved. Since that time, a number of research studies, reports, and homeless counts have been carried out in the Capital Regional District of British Columbia that detail the situation of women's homelessness and instability of housing. Details in each report and the experience of the Burnside Gorge Community Association's Homeless Families Outreach project differ, but the conclusions are the same: **the number of homeless women and those living unstable lives (with or without children) is unacceptable**. Without appropriate interventions, supports, and new housing opportunities, the situation will only get worse.

This report combines the findings from local research to present a comprehensive picture of homeless women in British Columbia's Capital Region, the struggles they face, and the housing needed to help them move towards stability. Homeless women and those living unstable lives, themselves, helped to develop this picture. Their input is important so that any solutions to the problem will meet the needs stated by the women themselves. In this way, lasting solutions are more likely to be found.

Section 2: Current Numbers

Homeless Women in BC's Capital Region

The following information was collected and reported in three local research studies. This data has its limitations:

- 1) Although there was rigor to the research, it is not possible to ensure that all homeless people were included. They may not have been "found", especially those who were couch surfing or hiding. They may not have been able to respond to the questionnaire because of substance misuse or mental health issues. They may not have wanted to respond.
- 2) Not all information collected had a gendered analysis and, therefore, information may not distinguish between male and female realities.

Summary of the Community Plan Assessment Phase 2 for the Victoria Steering Committee on Homelessness. Urban Aspects Consulting Group and Trudy Norman (June 2007).

- 1350 homeless people
- 8100 individuals at risk of homelessness
- 24,300 families unstably housed (including "hidden homeless")
- 25% of homeless people are aboriginal
- 250-300 of homeless people are street youth

Housing First – Plus Supports - The Homeless Needs Survey 2007 A Pathway Home. Cool Aid Society and Community Council. (2007)

275 women: 142 were homeless and 133 lived in unstable housing. (Their total homeless count was higher but 275 women chose to be interviewed). This totals 30% of adults surveyed.

Homeless Outreach Project for Families: What Happens to the Children? Irish Journal of Applied Social Studies. Vol 6. No. 1. Kasting, C., Artz, S., (Autumn 2005).

300 homeless or unstably housed families per year. Of those, 78% are headed by women.

Shelter or Transitional Beds available for Women in BC's Capital Region

Emergency beds

Sandy Merriman House	15 beds: up to 7 days at a time. No children
Cool Aid Streetlink	11 beds for women. 1 for couple. No children
Victoria Women's Transition House	18 beds for max 30 days. No male children over 16 For women leaving violent households only
Hill House	Women leaving violent households only 18 beds: 30 day limit. No male children over age 16
Low end motels	A few hotels will accept homeless families on income assistance. Must phone government hot line after 4:30 pm each day
Victoria Human Exchange	31 units – recovery from Drug and Alcohol with mental health issues. Male and female. Some emergency housing
Out of the Rain Coalition	30 beds - mats on floors for 6 months per year. For youth only. Male and female.

Short term transitional beds

Margaret Laurence House	6 townhouses for single mothers to one year
Harrison Place	23 units for older women to 3 years
Cridge Centre	31 units women and children for 1-3 years
Victoria Native Friendship Centre	8 units for at-risk women and children
Kiwanis House	8 units for single female parents aged 16-29 and one child for up to 12 months
Kiwanis Emergency Youth Shelter	5 beds for females 13-19
Casa Maria	2 units for families – generally up to 3 months

What are Women Saying?

The following unpublished information arose from the surveys given to 275 homeless women in the Homeless Needs Survey 2007. This information speaks to the housing and work related needs *as expressed by the women themselves*. Totals may add to more than 100% because women may have experienced more than one of the options that were given.

What was your source of income?

Disability income	33.5%	92 women
Welfare (income assistance)	31.2%	86 women

Substantially more women than men received their income from family/friends or sex work.

Where did you stay in the last month?

Street	38%	104 women
Shelter	33%	89 women
Rented	42%	114 women
Friends	29%	79 women

Substantially more women than men rented places to live but fewer women stayed in rooming houses. This is most likely due to the fact that women do not feel safe living where the majority of room house tenants are men.

Nearly 50% (125 women) said that they sometimes use shelters. Only one third (88 women) said that they had never been homeless. A quarter of them (71 women) had been homeless once before and the rest (109 women) had been homeless from 2 – 20 times.

What were the factors leading to your current housing situation?

Substance abuse	39%	105 women
Mental problems	34%	91 women
Social emotions problems	30%	81 women
Evictions	24%	64 women
Unable to pay rent	23%	63 women

More women live(d) in unsafe housing than men and just over one third of the women experienced domestic violence. Ironically, fewer women than men had their housing stability compromised because of low wages.

Did you have your children living with you?

28 women had children living with them as compared to 14 men with children living with them. It is not known how many women and men were part of a couple. Nearly one fifth of all the children were homeless and 80% were unstably housed.

What would help you find and maintain your housing?

Affordable housing	81%	222 women
Bus passes or tickets	55%	141 women
Advocacy	40%	104 women

There are differences between women and men. More women stated that they needed references, more asked for mental health supports or advocacy for mental health issues, and more women suggested that there should be less rental discrimination for those with children.

What would help you find work?

Clothing	60%	164 women
Training	56%	154 women
Education	55%	153 women
Resume	42%	115 women
Available Jobs	41%	112 women

As well, women asked for better mental health care, help getting motivated, fitting in at work and conflict/anger management. This could be because of the type of work that women look for, such as office and retail; whereas men often look for outdoor, technical or menial labour. Women also asked for help with child care.

Domestic Abuse

One other area of concern of homeless and unstably housed women is that of domestic violence and historical caregiver abuse. Ninety (90) women had experienced domestic violence and 39 women had experienced abuse by their caregivers or parents and 103 women had experienced both.

Section 3: Overview of Local Studies and/or Reports

The following tables list studies and reports which have been done in BC's Capital Region, with an overview of the key findings and recommendations as well as the gaps regarding homeless women, women unstably housed, and women-headed families.

<i>Housing Policy Options for Women Living in Urban Poverty (2001)</i>	
Key Findings/Recommendations	Gaps: Women's Housing and/or Shelters
<p>Increase economic capacity of women in order to expand their housing options</p> <p>Increase the stock of small-scale, quality rental units in the private market.</p> <p>Retain and maintain existing affordable housing stock in both public and private sectors</p> <p>Increase social housing stock by establishing flexible and locally/regionally based housing trusts with dedicated funding</p> <p>Increase housing with supportive services for certain groups of women living on low incomes, such as young single mothers and women with mental health issues</p> <p>Broaden eligibility criteria for social housing to include different categories of low-income women, such as unattached older women</p> <p>Promote increased participation of renters in the management of social housing complexes and their future development</p>	Lack of housing and housing options for older women

<i>Housing Thousands of Women (2005)</i>	
Key Findings/Recommendations	Gaps: Women's Housing and/or Shelters
<p>This report focused on housing for single, older women (between 45 and 64) because women service providers and researchers in the community who came together to solve some housing problems identified a large housing gap for women in this age group.</p> <p>A housing wheel was developed that offered a list of considerations when building/creating housing for women:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Affordability • Adequacy • Suitable for living and working • Safety and health • Control of choices, including security and permanence • Freedom from discrimination and racism • Proximity to necessities • Connections and relationships • Advocacy 	<p>Older women, disabled women, and aboriginal and immigrant women have disproportionately higher levels of housing instability than other women</p>

<i>Closing the Gap: Housing Needs and Priorities for BC's Urban Aboriginal People (2007)</i>	
Key Findings/Recommendations	Gaps: Women's Housing and/or Shelters
<p>Approximately 50% of the homeless who were surveyed self-identified as First Nations people</p> <p>The issues that created homelessness among women were often related to family circumstances</p>	<p>Culturally appropriate shelters and housing so that aboriginal people, especially coming from rural areas, feel safe</p> <p>Family Shelters with support</p> <p>Student housing</p>

<i>What Happens to the Children? (2005)</i>	
Key Findings/Recommendations	Gaps: Women's Housing and/or Shelters
<p>From March 2002 to December 31, 2003, staff met with 382 clients who had 749 children, most of whom were living with the parents. Of these parents, 61.6% were absolutely homeless. Just under half were on income assistance. 1/6 were working. Most were single parents and three quarters of those were single mothers. Factors affecting homeless parents:</p> <p>Poverty: 99%</p> <p>Substance misuse: reported 12%, suspected 24.6% total 36.6%</p> <p>Mental health: evidence 32%, diagnosed 14.5% total 45%</p> <p>Past abuse reported: 70%</p> <p>Children under 6: 40% of all children - ie no pre-school or outside support. Of the 60% who were school aged, 21% did not attend school</p>	<p>No shelters in BC's Capital Region for homeless families</p> <p>No supports for homeless children</p>

<i>Planning Charrette Report: Housing for Homeless Families (March 21, 2006)</i>	
Key Findings/Recommendations	Gaps: Women's Housing and/or Shelters
<p>Extent to which family homelessness exists in Victoria (approx 80% were single mothers)</p> <p>Need for shelter and transitional housing that include "wrap around" supports for parents and their children</p>	<p>A continuum of housing need and housing type is required</p> <p>A progressive housing model could include: an emergency/crisis shelter option where families could go for 10-30 days and transitional housing (1 to 18 months) to enable families to be connected to and receive social service supports.</p>

<i>Challenges Facing Homeless Parents in Greater Victoria; Past or Present Abuse, Mental Health Problems and Substance Misuse Issues (2007)</i>	
Key Findings/Recommendations	Gaps: Women's Housing and/or Shelters
<p>Family violence and past abuse is linked with homelessness</p> <p>Considerations to how living in an unstable home environment with parents who are struggling with serious challenges will affect the immediate and future development of their children</p> <p>Families (homeless or at-risk) with employed parents experience significantly lower rates of mental health and/or substance abuse issues than families with unemployed parents</p> <p>Parents who have children living with them have less mental health problems, less substance misuse issues. Whether it is because the children in severely dysfunctional homes are removed or whether parents with children make a larger effort to "hold it together" is unclear.</p>	<p>Reasons for families in housing crisis:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 28% fleeing violence 29% evicted 30% unstable housing situations (substandard, unaffordable) <p>Fire triangle of homelessness:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 30% struggle with substance misuse 37% battle with mental health problems 45% past or present have experience with abuse <p>Gap: ensuring that appropriate interventions and support is found</p>

<i>Summary of Community Plan Assessment (2007)</i>	
Key Findings/Recommendations	Gaps: Women's Housing and/or Shelters
<p>Recommendations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need for a more diverse range of low-barrier and supportive housing and shelter • more affordable rental housing • housing placement • access and maintenance supports • intensive community support services • outreach, health and treatment services • employment and income supports • short term core services during transition, • life skills services 	<p>Chronically homeless, including families with children, youth and Aboriginal people</p> <p>Not enough transitional/supportive housing stock</p> <p>Assistance needed for homeless and those at-risk to find and maintain affordable housing in the private sector</p>

Housing First - Plus Supports - The Homeless Needs Survey 2007 A Pathway Home

Key Findings/Recommendations	Gaps: Women's Housing and/or Shelters
<p>Recommendations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a range of affordable housing options • Provide intensive community support for housing homeless people • Provide a range of harm reduction and treatment services • Provide income supports for people who are homeless or unstably housed • Provide short-term solutions during the transition to affordable housing • Engage the broader community in solutions 	<p>RE single homeless and unstably housed women:</p> <p>30% of homeless adults are women</p> <p>33% never been homeless</p> <p>50% short term – stop gap homeless</p> <p>9% chronically homeless</p>

Stepping Stones (to be completed spring 2008)

Key Findings/Recommendations	Gaps: Women's Housing and/or Shelters
<p>Work in Progress – lead by a Steering Committee of agency and organizations who work with this population</p> <p>This project focuses on homeless and unstably housed families. It is based on previous work done by the Burnside Gorge Community Association and Stepping Stones Charrette</p>	<p>Approximately 80% female-headed households</p> <p>10% male-headed households</p> <p>10% 2 parent-headed households</p>

Section 4: For Consideration

The information presented in the research reports and in the Homeless Needs Survey 2007 analysis has revealed a number of points:

1. There is a continuum of housing needs and a continuum of issues relating to mental health and substance use. For example, among homeless mothers, depression is common. That could be because of their homelessness or it could cause homelessness.
2. Research suggests that more women than men comprise the "hidden" homeless population. They stay with friends and family, in low cost rentals. If they have children with them, they are concerned about losing their children to the "system" so try to stay "under the radar".
3. The majority of homeless or unstably housed women have had a background of violence (historical and/or present).
4. Women who experience violence within the household may choose to stay "hidden" and housed rather than move, usually with their children, to unknown situations. This is especially true if the woman has no job or skills.
5. Mental health and/or addictions feature largely in most of their lives. It is not known if mental health issues and/or addictions are a result of homelessness, cause homelessness or are unrelated. Research suggests that depression of homeless mothers is very high (up to 90%). This can lead to mental health issues or addictions if left unchecked.
6. Working women (both homeless and at-risk), have less incidence of mental health and/or substance abuse issues. They are more likely to have their children living with them, even if they are homeless.
7. Homeless women ask for support to find and maintain both appropriate housing and jobs.

Section 5: Next Steps for Research – Phase II

A clear strategy is needed to work toward solutions to the critical concerns of women and children who are homeless and unstably housed. The strategy could include a framework for one or two projects that can house these women in such a manner that they retain safe, secure housing.

In order for this to be done further information is needed through research and discussions with homeless women. This could be provided through:

- Providing a table of projects for women currently being considered for development by various agencies
- A deeper analysis and testing of the information that already exists to prioritize the needs and to ensure that solutions are those which women want. Appropriate interventions and/or housing options are good only if they will be used by the women themselves
- 2006 Statistics Canada Census data
- Gathering new information about the living situations of homeless female youth and the homeless girl-child. There is little known about these two groups.

The Victoria Real Estate Board's leadership at this time could further their internal 'Quality of Life' goal that

Every British Columbian has the right to safe, decent and affordable housing near where they work, shop and play, and that choice in style and location is critical to increasing home ownership

and could contribute significantly to improving the lives of vulnerable women and their children who live in this region.

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