
chapter

8

WOMEN

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Introduction

Women and women-identified people are very seriously impacted by homelessness. While statistics on overall homelessness numbers often suggest that women experience homelessness less frequently than men, careful scrutiny uncovers that women's experiences with homelessness are *different* than those of men.

The present chapter will first discuss what the research tells us about the differences between men's and women's homelessness. It will then offer some insight as to why these differences exist. The chapter will then discuss some promising practices.

What's different about women's experiences with homelessness?

de Vet et al. (2019) undertook a comprehensive literature review on the differences between men's and women's homelessness.¹ They argue that existing comparative research has found the following:

- Women's homelessness is more often hidden. Women tend to make less use of formal homelessness services—they may postpone entering the formal service system longer than men. Some research suggests that women also spend more time 'couch surfing' (e.g. staying with family and friends) than men.
- Some research suggests women spend less time sleeping rough than men.
- Women experiencing homelessness are more likely to care for children than men.
- Women experiencing homelessness are more often unemployed (and receive less income from paid work) than men experiencing homelessness.
- Women experiencing homelessness are more likely to have suffered abuse than men experiencing homelessness, both as children and as adults.
- Women experiencing homelessness are less involved in the criminal justice system than men experiencing homelessness.

There are limitations to the above research. For example, most of it has been cross sectional (i.e., done at a single point in time) and focused on the United States context.

A relatively recent randomized controlled trial in the Netherlands compared women and men in 18 different emergency shelters over a nine-month period. It found that, compared to men, women were more likely to be younger, to have children with them, to have less formal education and to have lower self-esteem. It further found that women were more likely to be unemployed, more likely to have been victimized, and less likely to have used alcohol and cannabis excessively.²

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1 de Vet, R., Beijersbergen, M. D., Lako, D. A., van Hemert, A. M., Herman, D. B., & Wolf, J. R. (2019). Differences between homeless women and men before and after the transition from shelter to community living: A longitudinal analysis. *Health & Social Care in the Community*, 27(5), 1193-1203.

2 de Vet, R., Beijersbergen, M. D., Lako, D. A., van Hemert, A. M., Herman, D. B., & Wolf, J. R. (2019). Differences between homeless women and men before and after the transition from shelter to community living: A longitudinal analysis. *Health & Social Care in the Community*, 27(5), 1193-1203.

Breaking it all down

Having reviewed what some of the academic literature tells us about differences between men's and women's homelessness, we will now seek to shed light on what accounts for these differences.

More hidden homelessness. Women may be less likely to access government-funded homelessness services in part because they are more inclined to see the dangers associated with homeless shelters. Women may also be more effective at negotiating informal arrangements for temporary housing with friends, family and acquaintances. Unfortunately, such informal arrangements may include situations that are unsafe. Women might agree to sex, for example. Pressure to keep their children with them (out of a homeless shelter, and away from child protection) may drive much of this. Unhealthy 'pseudo-relationships' might then develop with another adult, creating further challenges.

Less rough sleeping. It can be very unsafe for women to sleep rough, in part due to risk of physical and sexual violence. Women may be more vulnerable to such forms of violence and be less inclined to engage in risk-taking behaviour in general than are men.

Stronger connection to children (and adults). Women experiencing homelessness are likely to have played a greater role providing care for a variety of vulnerable persons—children, but also parents, aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews and family acquaintances. The reasons for these gendered roles are complex.

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More pronounced role of child protection. When parents separate or divorce, women tend to retain custody of children, more so than men. Women are then watched carefully by child protection authorities. And unfortunately, in many jurisdictions, rather than helping the mother obtain better housing and social supports, child protection authorities may focus more on removing children. Put differently, child protection authorities may remove a child from an unsafe situation, but leave the mother in that unsafe situation.

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Sex work is available to women more so than men.

Sex work increases the risk of child protection involvement.

Fewer labour market opportunities. Unfavourable labour market outcomes for women are well-documented. They stem from sexism, the gendered role of caregiving (as briefly discussed above), and other factors. When the present author worked at an employment program for persons experiencing homelessness, it was common for employers to express a strong preference for male workers. Having said that, when no other options are available, sex work is available to women more so than men; what's more, there is almost always demand for sex work. Further, with sex work, cash can arrive quickly. Sex work can be informal too – e.g., an arrangement to spend an evening with somebody in exchange for a roof over one's head. The use of sex work to meet basic needs poses substantial risks and challenges. Women who engage in sex work are not afforded the same legislative protections as they would in formal employment environments. The risk of victimization and violence is substantially increased, and sex work increases the risk of child protection involvement, as such authorities look unfavourably on such work.

More likely to have suffered abuse. Women are more vulnerable than men to both physical and sexual abuse.³ For example, if they are being held more accountable for the care of their children, they may put up with more. Also, if they are financially dependent on an adult male in their household, they may put up with more abuse.

Different relationship with criminal justice system. The research discussed above finds that women experiencing homelessness are often less involved with the criminal justice system than men experiencing homelessness. This may stem from women being less likely to take part in aggressive, risk-taking behaviour than men. Women may be more effective at staying out of the spotlight, adopting subtle survival skills over time. Fear of losing custody of their children may encourage such caution.

³ See Milaney, K., Williams, N., & Dutton, D. (2018). Falling through the cracks: How the community-based approach has failed Calgary's chronically homeless. *The School of Public Policy Publications*, 11.

Promising practices

In light of the many challenges faced by women experiencing homelessness, it is important to work towards improving outcomes—however they may be defined. What follow are some examples.

A broad suite of funding injections. In most countries, important funding injections could help to both prevent and respond to homelessness among women. This may include:

- targeted funding for early childhood development (e.g., daycare)
- women-led housing options
- eviction prevention
- specialized outreach services (e.g., for women sleeping outside)
- specialized services at emergency shelters
- funding for pre- and post-natal care for pregnant and new mothers experiencing homelessness
- well-designed programs that rehouse women (e.g., Housing First, second-stage domestic violence shelters)

Women who have experienced homelessness should be actively engaged in policy-making, advocacy and the delivery of services.

Lived experience. Women who have experienced homelessness should be actively engaged in policy-making, advocacy and the delivery of services (including on boards of directors). Organizations delivering services in the homeless-serving sector should hire people with lived experience. Further, engagement/contribution of people with lived experience (PWLE) must always be paid and never in-kind. For example, if you have PWLEs participate in a voluntary committee or board, it is important to compensate PWLEs financially even if other members are not (as the latter are mostly likely to be in full-time paid positions). This could include paying for the person's time, transportation, accommodation or any other expense that allows them to participate. Finally, women should be paid on par (or above) their male peers and should not be passed over for leadership positions.

Specialized supportive housing for women. Permanent supportive housing involves a subsidy to help a low-income household afford rent, as well as various forms of professional staff support to assist a household function and remain housed. Features of such supportive housing designed specifically for women might include communal space, in part so women gain support from each other and share informal childcare. Another could be formal childcare, possibly provided on the first floor of a dedicated building. Another might be education and job-training. In some cases, such services could be offered on site; in other cases, women could be told about them and encouraged to participate in community. It may also be advisable

Access to women-specific health care is crucial.

to have men on staff who, among other things, can demonstrate that relationships with men can be safe.

Women-specific health care. Access to women-specific health care is crucial. In some cases, such services could be offered on site (e.g., by public health authorities); in other cases, women could be told about them and encouraged to access them in community. Women-specific health care may include:

- a range of birth control options, including abortion support and services
- pre- and post-natal care for pregnant and new mothers experiencing homelessness (including support for postpartum depression)
- education programs focussed on women’s health (e.g., breast and cervical cancer, menopause, pregnancy, etc.)
- resources and funding for women’s mental health (self harm is prevalent in women experiencing homelessness)
- combined efforts from public health agencies, hospitals, and local clinics to provide free breast and cervical cancer screening at shelters

Large housing units. It is important that communities have housing stock for various types of women-led households, including households with as many as six or more children. For example, four-bedroom apartments and townhouses can be helpful. Flexibility is also important—e.g., design options that allow a unit to become larger or smaller depending on a household’s changing needs. One such feature might be the adjoining doors one sometimes sees between two hotel rooms—the door can be used to make a unit bigger, as more household members join it.

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Staff training. It is very important for non-profit agencies in the homeless-serving sector to organize regularly occurring staff training on a gendered approach to housing that considers women’s needs. Topics covered might include domestic violence, sex work, responding to sexual assault, trauma-informed practice, menopause, period poverty, lack of choice, and signs of trafficking and exploitation. This can come in the form of all-day training sessions for all staff, and should occur several times a year. Staff should also be encouraged to seek training outside such in-house events in the local community.

Guest presentations. While full-day training sessions can be very meaningful, guest presentations on women’s homelessness can be shorter and more frequent (indeed, such presentations can have a duration of one hour or less). They can be made by staff who work at other non-profit organizations, consultants, and university-based researchers—always informed by persons with lived experience. Presentations can be directed to staff, board members, or residents. One possibility is to have lunch-time presentations for staff in 9-5 work settings; another is to have an

evening speaker series at an emergency facility or apartment building. Presenters should be paid for their time (and preparation) and have their expenses covered.

Ongoing evaluation and oversight. Organizations serious about improving services delivered by and for women should endeavour to hold themselves accountable. Accountability mechanisms may include an evaluation framework with inputs, outputs, and outcomes specific to women clients. It might also include an annual survey specifically for women staff and clients. Women should be involved in the development of any evaluation framework—or at least the portions focused on women. That way, they can advise on what is meaningful, how best to phrase questions, how to approach data collection, and how to share evaluation findings. Exit interviews with staff can include questions about women.

Conclusion

Aggregated homelessness figures often suggest that women's homelessness is less pronounced than men's homelessness. Careful consideration, however, reveals that women's homelessness manifests differently. The fact that women are less likely to use emergency shelters and less likely to sleep outside in visible areas does not make their homelessness less important; rather, it means officials have to look harder.

This chapter brings to light the fact that women's homelessness is often

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hidden. This is driven by perceived and real danger in both homeless shelters and with respect to rough sleeping. It is also driven by the risk of child apprehensions. Promising practices include targeted funding injections, the involvement of people with lived experience, specialized supportive housing for women, women-specific health care, larger housing units, staff training, guest presentations and a gendered approach to evaluation and oversight. All such approaches must be informed by lived experience.

Further reading

Bretherton, J., & Mayock, P. (2021). *Women's homelessness: European evidence review*.
<https://www.feantsa.org/en/report/2021/04/01/womens-homelessness-european-evidence-review>

de Vet, R., Beijersbergen, M. D., Lako, D. A., van Hemert, A. M., Herman, D. B., & Wolf, J. R. (2019). Differences between homeless women and men before and after the transition from shelter to community living: A longitudinal analysis. *Health & Social Care in the Community*, 27(5), 1193-1203.

Mayock, P., & Bretherton, J. (Eds.). (2016). *Women's homelessness in Europe* (pp. 127-154). London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Schwan, K., Vaccaro, M., Reid, L., Ali, N., & Baig, K. (2021). *The Pan-Canadian Women's Housing & Homelessness Survey*. Toronto, ON: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness.

About the author

Nick Falvo is a research consultant based in Calgary, Canada. He has a PhD in Public Policy and is Editor-in-Chief, North America, of the *International Journal on Homelessness*. He has academic affiliation at both Carleton University and Case Western Reserve University. Prior to pursuing his PhD, he spent 10 years doing front-line work directly with persons experiencing homelessness.

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About this project

This is Chapter 8 of a sole-authored, open access interdisciplinary textbook intended to provide an introduction to homelessness for students, service providers, researchers and advocates. Focusing on the English-speaking countries of the OECD, it will discuss causes, solutions, challenges, successes, and innovations in the sector. It will serve as ‘launching pad’ for people new to the sector, as well as a refresher for experienced practitioners.

In addition to being open access, this book is different from other books in two key ways: 1) by focusing on all English-speaking countries of the OECD; and 2) by providing an overview of recent innovations in the sector—i.e., what’s new, and what’s working well?—making it useful to practitioners.

- The book’s **intent** is primarily to serve as the main textbook for a university course designed for senior-level undergraduate as well as graduate students. It also serves as a resource for senior leadership in the homelessness sector.
- Book’s **main themes**: contributing factors to homelessness; health conditions and health care challenges of persons experiencing homelessness; the unique needs of various subpopulations; staffing challenges in the sector; an in-depth examination of innovative practices; and solutions to homelessness.
- Book **objectives**: assist readers in understanding the fundamentals of homelessness; introduce them to both successes and ongoing challenges in the sector; and leave them feeling better-informed, able to make critical assessments, confident and empowered to take action within their own respective spheres of influence.

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Target audience

- The book is intended primarily for course use, its primary audience being senior undergraduate students, graduate students and course instructors in English-speaking countries of the OECD. It can also be useful to senior leadership in the homelessness sector (e.g., board members, CEOs and staff).
- The book is intended for courses where homelessness is either the only focus or a major focus. For example, a course on housing and homelessness could benefit from this book. Standalone chapters could also be of great value in various disciplines.
- Some of these courses might be taught outside of the university setting—for example, by the UK-based Chartered Institute of Housing and by its counterparts in other countries, such as CIH Canada.
- The book can be used as either a primary or supplementary text.
- The book is intended to have international appeal, focusing on the English-speaking countries of the OECD: Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States.
- Homelessness is widely researched and quickly evolving, as new approaches to both prevention and response are being developed. Much of the book's content will therefore be new even to experienced researchers and practitioners.

All material for this book is available free of charge at <https://nickfalvo.com/>. Newly-completed chapters will be uploaded throughout the year. The author can be reached at falvo.nicholas@gmail.com.