



# NOT TO BE FORGOTTEN:

## HOMELESS WOMEN IN HAMILTON

Summary Report • May 2011



“Women’s homelessness is not an extraordinary phenomenon but one closely intertwined with women’s vulnerabilities in the labour market and at home.”

Fran Klodawsky, *Landscapes on the margins: Gender and homelessness in Canada.*

Since the late 1980s, homelessness in Canada among women has been rising, both in absolute numbers and in the complexity of the issues facing homeless women. Among Hamilton’s homeless youth population, there are almost as many women as men.

This report attempts to give at least a partial picture of the conditions faced by homeless women in Hamilton with the aim of bringing more attention to the challenges they face and to help agencies in their planning of services for this population.

The full report is available on the SPRC website at:  
<http://sprc.hamilton.on.ca/>

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# “Ignoring the consequences of violence is in effect accepting it.”

Susan Scott, *All our Sisters*

## Homeless women in Hamilton and beyond: pathways and barriers

### VIOLENCE

Violence is a relentless part of homeless women's lives. Violence in childhood and/or adulthood causes homelessness for many women. Once they are homeless, women are vulnerable to even more violence. Post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and other mental illnesses, substance abuse, negative self-worth, learning difficulties are all consequences of the violence in homeless women's lives and become major challenges to regaining a foothold in mainstream society.

Homeless transwomen face gender-based violence and discrimination both for being women and for disrupting gender norms.

The current provincial funding model that prioritizes services for victims of current spousal abuse may be sending a message to other homeless women that the other kinds of violence they experience is not as important, and not worth seeking shelter from, nor worth seeking healing from.

### POVERTY

Poverty is another root cause of homelessness among women. The segregation of the labour market by gender exists at all levels, including on the street, where men may earn 50% more than women through the informal economy.

Sex work and informal sex bartering is the only option for many women's economic survival.

"Homelessness among women has been less visible than among the male population, in large part due to women relying on their domestic role to avoid shelters, often taking up residences in short-term sexual relationships." Suzanne Lenon, *Living on The Edge: Women & Homelessness in Canada*

More than 4 out of 5 women jailed in Canada are for offences related to poverty such as fraud, shoplifting and sex work. A York University researcher notes that the Canadian prison system is a central strategy to deal with homelessness and extreme poverty, yet it is also a very expensive way to deal with the problem.

The prison system itself also causes poverty with more prisoners being homeless after incarceration than before. Women offenders are a growing population in Canada, which means criminalization will become an even greater cause of women's homelessness.

### CHILDREN

At least a third of homeless women outside of the violence against women shelter system are also mothers. Some may be seeking shelter with their children, while others may be trying to reestablish stability in their lives so that they can regain custody of their children.

A report about the health needs of the homeless population in Hamilton explained that the responsibility for children falls on women's shoulders makes the lives of homeless women or women at risk of homelessness all the more complex: "Some mother's biggest fear is that her kids will be taken away because she cannot find a decent place to live or feed them properly [...] If they take kids to the doctor or hospital with normal illnesses Children's Aid will be called on them [...] If a woman has an addiction, she is not going to seek treatment because she could lose her kids. You could lose your housing because if you go to treatment then you lose your source of income while you're in treatment." Helen Thomas and colleagues, *Health and Homelessness: Health Needs Assessment*

### HEALTH

Homeless women have 10 times the mortality rate of other women, and die on average at age 39, which is half of the Canadian life expectancy for women (81 years).

Mental health challenges are highly prevalent among homeless women. A Toronto Study of homeless women found that they were twice as likely to receive a mental health diagnosis as homeless men. Addiction is one of the difficult health issues that many homeless women face. Almost a third of women who seek addiction recovery services in Hamilton are homeless. Relapses during recovery from addiction are more common when women don't have safe and affordable housing.

“The needs of homeless women [...] tend to be even more complex than men. Women tend to access shelter only after exhausting all other social and community resources making it that much harder to assist them in rebuilding their lives.”

City of Hamilton  
Funding for Emergency Shelter  
and Intensive Case Management Services

## Homeless women and women at risk of homelessness in Hamilton

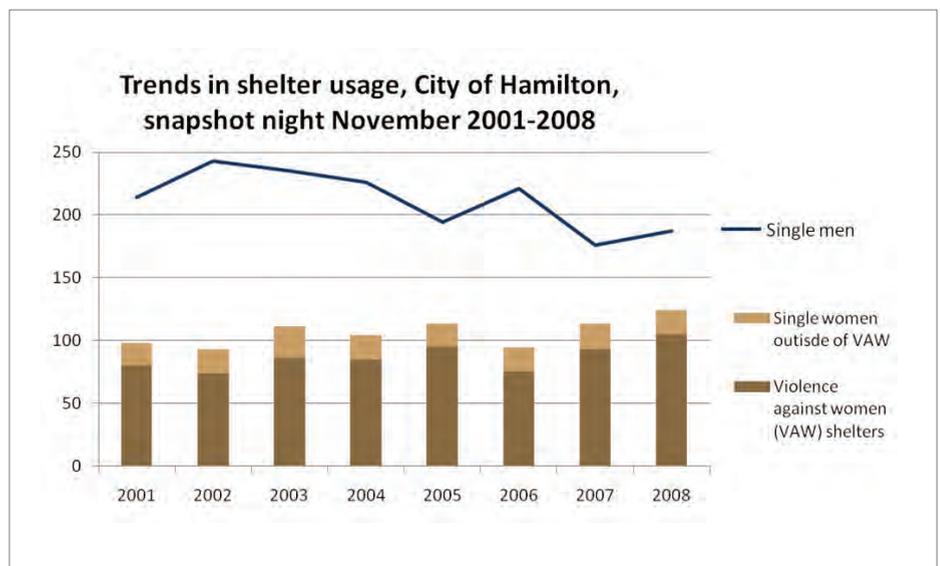
Women’s shelters in Hamilton constantly operate at or very near capacity. In 2009, 1,609 requests by women for shelter at Mary’s place were turned away because the shelter was full.

There has been a small increase in the number of beds for homeless women more recently with Good Shepherd relocating Mary’s place and Martha House in to a modern facility.

In Hamilton, there are over 7,000 women and their families at economic risk of homelessness because they are paying at least half their income on rent. This represents 24% of Hamilton’s renter households headed by women. It is estimated that at least

3,000 additional women in Hamilton are part of the hidden homeless, staying with friends or family indefinitely.

An analysis of Hamilton census data shows that women are at greater economic risk of homelessness if they are: young adults, recent immigrants, Aboriginal, have young children or have no children, a visible minority (esp. Black, Chinese, Korean), are of British Isles, Canadian, French, Chinese or African ethnic origin, single, separated, divorced or widowed, or work in occupations such as waitressing, bar tenders, cashiers, personal support workers, and saleswomen. For women who may belong to multiple groups, their risk of homelessness is compounded.



## Towards solutions for women's homelessness

Evidence from Hamilton and cities across North America has shown that Housing First (also known as rapid re-housing, or supported housing) is one of the keys to reduce homelessness. The first incarnation of a Housing First program in Hamilton had difficulties serving the needs of homeless women. But services have improved

and 20% of new clients to Hamilton's Transitions to Homes program are now homeless women.

The gaps within services for homeless women include transitional housing. The insufficient number of transitional housing beds and services has left many women cycling through the shelter system. While women-focussed services are more effective for vulnerable women as compared to mixed gender programs, there are more gender-segregated services for homeless men than women in Hamilton. In particular, there is a need for women-specific hospital discharge beds and managed alcohol treatment beds.

"The problem of women's homelessness cannot be individualized, it is systemic forces that create it, and it is only through a systemic approach that it will be eradicated." *Key informant*

## Recommendations

There are three levels at which women's homelessness can be reduced and eventually eliminated:

### SOCIETY:

1. Improve the way women are treated in personal relationships, and in employment, and how they are portrayed in the media,
2. Reduce the glorification and condoning of violence in Canada's culture (and cultures around the world).

These steps would reduce both the economic and violence factors that lead to homelessness among women.

### GOVERNMENTS:

3. Increase the rates for social assistance, or replace the social assistance system with a Guaranteed Annual income to match the price of rental units available to the homeless to allow women and men to live, eat and be sheltered and avoid homelessness.
4. Expand the subsidized housing system (either through rent supplements or funding new rent-g geared-to income units) and continue steps to recognize through funding that housing is a key determinant of health.
5. Recognize that violence has been a part of almost all homeless women's lives and extend the provincial funding for violence against women programs including trauma counseling and support services to all agencies serving homeless women and women at risk of homelessness.
6. Adequately fund on-site and mobile housing supports and require that these services are better adapted to women's needs and are culturally appropriate.
7. Increase funding for mental health and addiction counselling and treatment.
8. Create policy instruments to give non-custodial mothers additional income benefits when they are in the process of regaining custody of their children, so that they can secure safe and appropriate housing in order to satisfy the needs of child welfare agencies and/or the courts.

These steps would create realistic options for women to find stable housing after seeking shelter.

### ORGANIZATIONS:

9. Coordinate services among providers to better collaborate and share strategies and expertise, using the principles of The Playbook, the City of Hamilton's Human Services Plan.
10. Women's shelter and housing service providers attend and take leadership in the City of Hamilton's Women's Sector Homelessness System Planning Meetings
11. Provide more services tailored to homeless women's specific needs for gender-segregated environments and gender-specific approaches Women-focused services must be welcoming to transwomen as their needs cannot be met in the men's system.
12. Work collaboratively with other organizations to help more Hamilton homeless women receive rapid re-housing services alongside homeless men, including meeting the unique needs of homeless women involved in sex work.
13. Involve women with past or present experience of homelessness in the planning and evaluation of services, so that their voices and insights help to improve present and future programs and policies.

These steps would help organizations address the issues of the cyclical and/or chronic nature of many women's shelter usage and provide more support to women so they can move along the housing continuum into more stable and permanent housing.

“Younger homeless women are at extremely high risk of death, and secondly, the things that they're dying from are potentially treatable.”

Dr. Stephen Hwang,  
St. Michael's Hospital