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Housing Needs of Indigenous Women Leaving Intimate Partner Violence in Northern Communities

By Allison Groening, Colin Bonnycastle,
Marleny Bonnycastle, Kendra Nixon,
Judith Hughes

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CCPA

CANADIAN CENTRE
for POLICY ALTERNATIVES
MANITOBA OFFICE

Unit 301-583 Ellice Ave., Winnipeg, MB R3B 1Z7

TEL 204-927-3200 FAX 204-927-3201

EMAIL ccpamb@policyalternatives.ca



**University
of Manitoba**



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Canada

About the Authors

Colin Bonnycastle is Associate Professor of Social Work, University of Manitoba.

Judy Hughes is Associate Professor of Social Work, University of Manitoba

Marleny Bonnycastle is Associate Professor of Social Work, University of Manitoba

Kendra Nixon is Associate Professor of Social Work, University of Manitoba.

Allison Groening, MSW, is the Research Assistant on the project.

Accompanying Report

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Introduction

The problems of intimate partner violence and housing insecurity are independent issues and each worthy of discussion on their own. However, for women in northern communities these issues are often co-occurring. Violence is a major contributor to women experiencing homelessness, but the threat of homelessness can be an ever-present concern in a place where access to housing is, in its own right, a challenge. Understanding the problem of intimate partner violence in the Canadian North requires, as stated by Moffitt, Fikowski, Mauricio and Mackenzie (2013), that the problem be explored in context of the “unique geographic, economic, political and cultural features” of women’s experiences in these communities (p. 2). Understanding housing in the North likely requires consideration of these same factors. The affordability and availability of housing in the Canadian North is unto itself and this issue takes on greater meaning when the lack of housing options becomes a barrier to dealing with intimate partner violence. That these issues are impacted by gender makes them even more troubling.

Though few studies have explored intimate partner violence in the specific northern context, those that do highlight the high prevalence of intimate partner violence in rural locations

(Peek-Asa et al., 2011; Wuerch et al., 2016). An American study found that both frequency and severity of physical intimate partner violence grew with increasing rurality (Peek-Asa, 2011). In Canada, women in rural and northern locations experience more instances of physical violence, more severe physical violence and higher rates of psychological abuse, and are at greater risk for intimate partner homicide (RESOLVE Alberta, 2015; Wuerch et al., 2016). Locating Indigenous women, who are at greater risk for intimate partner violence than non-Indigenous women, in this context requires a further understanding of the social injustices and cultural oppression faced by Indigenous people (Daoud et al., 2013; Moffitt et al., 2013; Oelke, Thurston & Turner, 2016; Wuerch et al., 2016). Beyond facing high rates of violence there are likely additional barriers to accessing services in these rural and northern locations. Unfortunately, the research does not go much further than identifying intimate partner violence as a serious issue in the North and further research is needed to understand women’s needs and the effectiveness of services in these areas (Wuerch et al., 2016).

Literature on the pathways women take into homelessness describes a diversity of experienc-

es but the common thread of intimate partner violence runs throughout. Intimate partner violence is characteristic of many women's experiences (Fotheringham, Walsh & Burrowes, 2014; Mayock, Sheridan, & Parker, 2015; Menard, 2001; Sullivan, Bomsta, & Hacskaylo, 2016; Tutty et al., 2014, YWCA Canada, 2013) and is a major facet of the gendered dynamics of homelessness. Including gender in the discussion on homelessness brings to light the unique and numerous

challenges women face when leaving abusive relationships. There is no single way of accessing resources (Coy et al., 2011) and women are dealing with their own individual histories in addition to intimate partner violence (Wendt & Baker, 2013). Many of these issues are compounded for women who reside in rural and northern communities, and the legacy of colonization has further impacted Indigenous women (Moffitt et al., 2013).

Understanding Homelessness

Defining homelessness must be done with an awareness of the ways that gender influences the way it is experienced. The stereotypical perception of visible, street-sleeping homelessness does not account for much of women's experiences, though these ideas prevail in the public eye. The Canadian Homelessness Research Network talks about four different living circumstances that fall under the umbrella of homelessness — unsheltered, emergency sheltered, provisionally accommodated and at risk of homelessness (Gaetz, Gulliver & Richter, 2014; Patrick, 2014). This range of circumstances recognizes that homeless individuals are not a homogenous group, and that "homeless" can be "used to describe a range of individuals and families who experience vastly different circumstances and challenges" (Gaetz et al., 2013, p. 12). It also shows that homelessness is not a fixed or finite state but shifts along with changing options and changing situations (Patrick, 2014). The YWCA Yellowknife (2007) speaks more specifically to the difference between absolute and relative homelessness. Visible, or absolute, homelessness refers to the stereotypical experiences of homelessness where individuals sleep in "places considered unfit for human habitation" (Seychuk, 2004 in YWCA Yellowknife,

2007, p. 2). In comparison, relative homelessness refers to those who have a basic accommodation but one that does not meet other standards for livability, such as protection from the elements, personal safety or affordability. The Canadian Homeless Research Network's discussion of what it means to be "provisionally accommodated" or "at risk of homelessness" speaks to experiences of less visible housing instability (Mott, Moore, & Rothwell, 2012). Those who are provisionally accommodated are living with friends, family or even a partner, but with an emphasis on the temporal nature of that arrangement. This arrangement may be made even more precarious by the underlying threat of family conflict or violence. Women may be at risk of becoming homeless when they are living with uncertainty of finances, employment, rent situation or relationship status. The stress of housing instability is very present for individuals for whom a change in circumstances could lead to eviction or bankruptcy, and thus put their housing at risk. Including those with core housing need under the umbrella of homelessness acknowledges that those whose housing is not affordable, adequate or suitable are also living with housing instability (YWCA Yellowknife, 2007).

The differentiation between visible and hidden homeless is where many women whose housing is impacted by violence become lost in formal counts of homelessness. Violence against women shelters are typically not integrated with the general homeless sector and service users for the two groups are counted separately. For example, a 2009 count of the Canadian homeless population found that 147,000 individuals across Canada accessed emergency shelters. This number does not include transitional housing, shelters for women, shelters for immigrants or refugees, halfway houses or any other temporary shelters (Gaetz et al., 2013). It would also not include women who were living in a home where they faced violence, or even those staying with friends or family. For many of these women, their housing instability manifests in ways such as living in overcrowded circumstances, experiencing family or intimate partner violence in their living situation and having limited financial resources for other necessities of living or to seek new living circumstances (Gaetz et al., 2013).

Women leaving violence are acknowledged as a significant group within the homeless population but they are also undercounted because of the transitional and hidden nature of their homelessness — women are often moving between home, shelters and “couch surfing” (Gaetz et al., 2014). Even among women who are ac-

cessing shelter, this number may comprise only about 10% of women who leave their homes due to abuse (Woolley, 2014). Women who do not access formal services are also part of the hidden homeless (Little, 2015; Tutty et al., 2014) and little is known about their experiences. Accessing formal resources for intimate partner violence often requires that women prove their vulnerability or victimization (Burnett et al., 2015; Tutty et al., 2014), while the “relative” nature of women’s homelessness often excludes them from services focused on relieving absolute and visible types of homelessness (Fotheringham et al., 2014). Relative homelessness, hidden homelessness, precarious housing and core housing need are situations that are not part of the general public’s understanding of homelessness but are clearly important to understanding women’s experiences with homelessness. Knowing that not all types of homelessness are represented among those accessing shelter, the State of Homelessness in Canada (2014) reports that for every individual who is counted as unsheltered there are at least three others who would be considered part of the hidden homeless. This estimate leads to a count of an additional 50,000 Canadians who are part of the hidden homeless on any given night, a population that is made up mostly by women, including mothers and their children (Aleman, 2016).

Themes of Gendered Homelessness

A number of interconnected themes of women's experiences with housing instability and homelessness emerge from the literature. The literature demonstrates that the barriers preventing women from leaving abusive relationships are often the same barriers that complicate women's experiences with homelessness and transitioning out of homelessness. Moreover, these are only a part of the broader structural issues women face — poverty, motherhood, the impacts of colonialism and geographic location play into women's experiences dealing with intimate partner violence and with finding housing. Understanding the complex interplay of these issues provides a basis for understanding the barriers faced by abused women in northern communities. Though women's experiences of homelessness have many features, the connection to intimate partner violence remains the strongest common factor (Sullivan et al., 2016; YWCA Yellowknife, 2007). There are also many facets to women's decisions to leave an abusive relationship or seek assistance while in one. Recognizing housing and partner violence as separate but overlapping issues is not to say that women who leave abusive relationships will inevitably face homelessness. The focus on housing challenges is based in knowing that accessing housing is a major juncture at which formal systems

see women. Women often begin to interact with a variety of services and supports when they have left or are working to leave a relationship, and it is at this point that women's invisible homelessness becomes more visible.

Primarily, the literature demonstrates that entering and exiting homelessness is a gendered process. Characteristic of women's experiences with housing instability is that it is often relative or "hidden," referring to the experience of living in spaces that do not meet standards for protection from the elements, affordability or personal safety (Tutty et al., 2013). Though a woman may have a physical place to live, intimate partner violence may make that home either unsafe or unstable for her (O'Campo et al., 2016; Tutty et al., 2013). For many women, housing instability is a lifelong issue that dates back to childhood experiences of homelessness (Lewinson, Thomas, & White, 2014; Mayock et al., 2015; Postmus et al., 2009; Wilson & Laughon, 2015). The multiple ways women go in and out of "official" homelessness tends to further blur the boundary between homelessness and housing (Mayock et al., 2015). Women are moving "from housing to house, shelter to shelter" as they use both the informal and formal resources available (Wilson & Laughon, 2015, p. 79).

Housing Needs of Women

Accessing housing is one of the most prevalent challenges in Northern Canada. As stated in the YWCA Yellowknife's 2007 report, "everyone living in Canada's three northern territories recognizes that housing is a 'big problem'" (p. 1). One of the reasons this is such a major issue is affordability. The high cost of living in Northern Canada makes basic necessities such as food, transportation and even housing difficult to afford (YWCA Yellowknife, 2007). These expenses, when paired with limited employment opportunities and a population dependent on income support, make the "acute shortage of affordable and adequate housing all across the North" even more problematic (Quillit Nunavut Status of Women Council, p. 34). For instance, due to the high costs of obtaining the materials needed for housing construction there is a minimal private housing market in Nunavut, and because of the high cost of living, the government is in a position to take some responsibility for supplying housing (YWCA Canada, 2009). Unfortunately, the demand for housing far outweighs what is presently available and many residents of Nunavut find themselves in unhealthy and unstable living situations (Quillit Nunavut Status of Women Council, 2007). One study of Indigenous

housing needs estimates that in Nunavut alone, 53% of the Inuit population resides in unfit and/or crowded housing and 15% of the population is waiting for public housing (Belanger, Weasel Head & Awosoga, 2012). The lack of available and affordable housing puts women leaving intimate partner violence in a precarious position: "There's no alternative housing. There's no private housing market. There's no choice" (YWCA Canada, 2009, p. 24). The numbers for First Nations across Canada are not much better, with approximately one-quarter of First Nations adults living in overcrowded housing (First Nations Information Governance Centre, 2012).

With the lack of affordable and available housing in the North, the trend of women primarily seeking out informal resources takes on new relevance. Seeking the support of friends, family and community members provides a way for women to gain assistance without requiring a total change in environments that can be disruptive for women and, if applicable, their children, and some women may not feel safe within the shelter services (Aleman, 2016). Little (2015) discusses how, in some rural and northern communities, people volunteer their homes as a temporary safe space for women. Hosts may provide

informal support to women but generally do not provide counselling, childcare, education or other services that women may receive at a formal shelter. Supports such as these bridge the gap between informal and formal services and are crucial when options are limited by geographic location. That said, Sullivan et al. (2016) outline a number of reasons that few women choose to enter shelters, including the problems of uprooting oneself and children. For some, to move to an unfamiliar location away from informal support systems and to live in a space with other families in crisis is not seen as an option. For other women, moving into a residential shelter facility could result in a loss of other stabilizing factors in their life, such as employment or education.

Women might access a formal shelter when faced with either housing instability or intimate partner violence. This could be a homeless shelter or a domestic violence shelter, though how women choose between the two is not always clear (Long, 2015). Availability of beds or the specific services offered at a particular shelter may be contributing factors, particularly for women leaving an abusive relationship and seeking the counselling, safety planning and violence-related services that are not offered at a general shelter (Little, 2015). Shelters offer time-limited services and often struggle to offer services that find a balance between support and supervision (Little, 2015; Sever, 2002). Transitional housing, or second stage housing, provides a more long-term option for women (Fotheringham et al., 2014; Hoffart, 2015) but still tends to follow a shelter model that includes mandatory programming or other requirements for residents (Long, 2015).

Looking at the availability of shelters in one northern territory, only five of 33 communities in the Northwest Territories have emergency shelters for women leaving abuse and these shelters are not always able to provide services because of funding and/or staffing shortages (Moffitt et al., 2013). The issue of overcrowding and underfunding for women's shelters in the North is pre-

sent throughout the literature (YWCA Yellowknife, 2007). Northern communities also lack available services for legal aid, counselling, life skills training, parenting supports and culture-specific services; when these services are available they may be difficult to access (YWCA Yellowknife, 2007).

Public and social housing options are limited in Canada (Little, 2015; Suttor, 2016) but there have been some efforts made to bridge the financial gap to make private housing more affordable. Initiatives such as the Housing First model have been touted as a means to end homelessness but as Mosher (2013) writes, these models fail to recognize the gendered facets of women's homelessness, as they define "chronic" homelessness — and thus eligibility for Housing First — in terms of the visible homelessness most often experienced by men. Women's "hidden" and "episodic" homelessness makes them ineligible for many Housing First programs.

An American example of providing direct funding to assist with women's housing is found in the flexible funding model. This is a more individualized approach to assisting women who face homelessness because of intimate partner violence by providing financial assistance to survivors that can be used in ways that will benefit them and their family in the short term. In Sullivan's (2016) study, 94% of the survivors were in stable housing six months after receiving the funding. Survivors reported the funds had assisted with stress relief, enabling them to parent and to get "back on track," demonstrating the importance of tangible funding both to stabilizing housing and to women and their children's overall wellbeing (Sullivan et al., 2016). Tangible and choice-based supports provide women with options that meet their own individualized needs, and have been documented elsewhere as helpful methods of service provision (Guo, Slesnick, & Feng, 2016; Postmus et al., 2009; Wendt & Baker, 2013). As Sullivan et al. (2016) note, using a narrow definition of what survivors need

may cause further housing instability to those whose needs do not fit predetermined guidelines. Alternately, short-term and crisis-management services ignore the core issues of homelessness (Walsh et al., 2009).

In spite of the existence of shelters, transitional or second stage housing and safe homes, the reality is that these options are not always available or accessible, particularly in rural and northern communities, and some women may simply not be ready to reach out to those formal services. A common theme of women staying in abusive relationships is that they believed they had nowhere else to go (Christensen, 2011). Housing is a major source of stress and women often perceive that they have few alternatives beyond staying with their abuser or living on the street (Little, 2015; Wilson & Laughon, 2015).

In some cases, the fear of repercussions or retaliation against women for leaving a relationship may override the fear of staying (Moffitt

et al., 2013; RESOLVE Alberta, 2015). Conversely, poor access to housing leaves women vulnerable to further violence, involvement with child welfare and economic hardship (Sev'er, 2002). Moreover, violence does not necessarily stop after women move (Jategaonkar & Ponic, 2011; Moe, 2007; O'Campo et al., 2016). Sev'er (2002) states that assaults perpetrated by former partners after they had left a relationship were even more severe than the assaults perpetrated while they were in that relationship and it is well-documented that women face violence at all stages of the leaving process (Long, 2015). Housing is both a stabilizing factor and preventative measure to ensure that women (and their children) have what they need to feel safe and it can be a proactive service that facilitates leaving an abusive relationship rather than a service provided after leaving that relationship (Ponic, Varcoe, Davies, Ford-Gilboe, Wuest, & Ham-merton, 2011).

Barriers to Housing Services and Supports

Knowing the role that intimate partner violence plays in housing instability, the need for better housing options becomes evident as part of this leaving process. However, tying access to housing to vulnerability and victimization limits women's options for taking steps on their own terms. Service eligibility is often based on women's status as a victim of partner violence, with an identified issue being that women are required to choose between either homeless or domestic violence services. This creates a problematic either/or that demonstrates a lack of available services to meet the specific needs of women and their individual circumstances (Shier, Jones, & Graham, 2011).

Because their homelessness is not of a visible nature, services continue to largely ignore the particular needs of women. Women remain invisible both in terms of their service needs and the recognition by the system (Fotheringham et al., 2014; Shier et al., 2011; Walsh et al., 2009). In many communities, housing services are geared towards women living on the street and do not account for those experiencing "hidden" homelessness (YWCA Yellowknife, 2007). Canada's current lack of a federal comprehensive housing strategy (Suttor, 2016) and the general dearth of affordable housing are also major

contributing problems (Walsh et al., 2009), particularly when housing services must then be attached to a woman's status as either "homeless" or "abused." The unique circumstances faced by women and their families do not always fit easily into these categories, and women may be reluctant to identify themselves as either "homeless" or "abused." Women may feel that disclosing abuse will jeopardize their legal situation, as Jeffries (2016) explores. Courts tend to minimize women's allegations of violence as exaggerated and view their "protective actions" and concerns about violence as "unreasonable, unfriendly, and potentially alienating" (Jeffries, 2016, Domestic Violence in Family Law and Judicial Practice section, para. 6). While women go without housing services, the violence and poverty that are the main causes for their homelessness continue to be a growing problem (Gaetz et al., 2013).

Underlying poverty and economic instability have an impact throughout women's paths to support. Women make up a disproportionate share of low-income Canadians and are at a heightened risk of poverty — women (and their children) leaving violent homes and working to establish themselves face "dramatic financial barriers" (YWCA Canada, 2009, p 18). More than

40% of children in low-income families live with a single female parent (YWCA Canada, 2009). This same report cites a:

crisis in social programs vital to women” such as social assistance, legal aid, and child-care, a trend well represented by the social assistance rates being at their lowest since the 1980’s.

Living on social assistance means a “guarantee of living in poverty. (YWCA Canada, 2009, p. 19)

Minimum wage levels do not provide much more of an opportunity for women and their families. A woman with children working full-time earning minimum wage will still be living below the poverty line (YWCA Canada, 2009).

With these numbers in mind, it comes as no surprise that the ways women’s relationships often have practical or economic dimensions, and the decisions to stay or leave are based on companionship, housing, safety and connection to finances (Mayock et al, 2015; Moe, 2007), as much as safety. Finances can be a major barrier to help seeking and also a barrier to establishing an independent life outside of the shelter (Ham-Rowbottom, Gordon, Jarvis & Novaco, 2005). For individuals and families living in poverty, “instable housing is a common thread and homelessness is never far away” (Gulliver-Garcia, 2016, p. 25). For some, the loss of employment or a source of income is the push into homelessness (Christensen, 2011; Lewinson et al., 2014), while for others poverty and housing instability are not a new experience. Economic and social dependence on their abuser creates a need-based connection that keeps women from breaking ties with that individual (Moffitt et al., 2013) and often leads to the difficult decision of choosing between safety and shelter (Clough et al., 2014; Jategaonkar & Ponik, 2011; Long, 2015; Postmus et al., 2009). Financial security is directly related to housing options and women with lower incomes have less autonomy over their housing (Ponik et al., 2011). For Indigenous women, who tend to be in a lower socio-economic posi-

tion than non-Indigenous women, poverty further limits their already limited housing options (Daoud et al., 2013). For example, in comparison to the rest of Canada, Northern Manitoba First Nations have some of the worst housing conditions (CBC, 2016). The major federal riding there also has the highest child poverty rates in Canada (Campaign 2000).

In addition to the lack of a national housing strategy in Canada, provincial, territorial, municipal and agency-level policy dimensions effectively limit women’s access to both domestic violence and housing services. Income support policies are one of the most limiting as they contribute to the underlying poverty that many women experience, limiting their housing options and also serving as a barrier to leaving an abusive relationship. Income support throughout Canada provides assistance at very low rates, keeping women who receive it in a position where they are unable to meet their basic needs, and at times even requiring that women seek employment as a condition of their benefits (YWCA Yellowknife, 2007). Due to their precarious financial situation, many women perceive they have no choice but to stay with an abusive partner. Income support policies also directly impact housing options. Funds for security or damage deposits are provided only once in an individual’s lifetime and the rates provided are not sufficient for any private market rent (YWCA Yellowknife, 2007). Low rates and tight budgeting means that any financial change can push the precarious housing to a perilous point. Mothers who rely on income support or child benefits risk losing their housing if a child is removed from their care, as they will cease to receive those payments. Even if an apprehension is temporary, it can threaten a family’s housing stability (Shdaimah, 2008).

Women who use shelter services may find this support actually limits their housing options. Financially, women are in a service limbo while in shelter. They are ineligible for income support during their residency and there is no “person-

al needs” allowance available to them through the shelter itself — they receive shelter and food, but have no benefits available to them for items such as clothing or transportation (YWCA Canada, 2009). Seeking housing while in shelter can have complications as well. Often, women cannot apply for income support without a permanent address, an issue that particularly impacts women who are provisionally accommodated.

Child welfare requirements can also complicate a woman’s efforts to secure housing. Finding housing that meets child welfare requirements, such as having a residence with a certain number of bedrooms, can be a challenge for affordability and availability when attempting to do so on a limited budget. In this way, poverty is often an underlying reason for child welfare involvement. Due to the challenges associated with finding appropriate housing, it is often the final step to reunifying children with their caregivers (Shdaimah, 2008). On the preventative side of the issue, child welfare definitions of “unsafe housing” may include homes where domestic violence is present, giving a punitive rationale for apprehension of children (YWCA Yellowknife, 2007). This may also keep women from either accessing services or reporting violence, as they do not want to risk either losing their housing or custody of their children. At the same time, shelter policies and eligibility requirements can actually create more complications than opportunities for women, disallowing male children over a certain age to stay in shelter with their caregivers (Waegemakers Schiff, 2007).

Dealing with landlords can create further barriers to finding safe and secure housing. Landlords will not accept tenants without an up-front cash deposit, which women often do not have without the funds from income support (YWCA Canada, 2009; YWCA Yellowknife, 2007). In the literature, women report experiences with landlords who were unwilling to rent to women on social assistance, who are coming out of shelter and to women with children (Christensen, 2011;

Ponic et al., 2011). Indigenous women, in particular, also report facing discrimination from landlords (Distasio, Sylvestre & Mulligan, 2010). Requirements to have a positive rental history may be an issue for women who are moving out on their own for the first time or for those whose partners whose have impacted this record (Clough, Draughon, Njie-Carr, Rollins, & Glass, 2014). Landlords charge very high rent for substandard housing, and even ask for sexual favours in exchange for housing (Jategaonkar & Ponic, 2011; Lewinson et al., 2014; YWCA Yellowknife, 2007). The lack of protection against landlords exacerbates these issues — landlords can quite easily discriminate based on gender, family status, race and income and are able to evict tenants with little rationale.

Securing public housing is not necessarily an easier or preferable process. Waitlists are long and the availability for these suites is limited. Women may be required to prove abuse in order to access housing after having been in shelter (Burnett et al., 2015). The policies of territorial housing agencies can be problematic — women who want to leave a community cannot be transferred to a new (and perhaps safer) community because there is no support for migration between the territories. Also, strict rules about who may reside in a home means that families cannot take in those who need assistance or who are not on the lease, and may face eviction if they do (YWCA Canada, 2009). These strict rules may also require that women prove where the abusive partner is residing and that they intend to stay there, as a requirement to show that the women applying plans to live independent of him. It is important to note that the responsibility here is placed on the woman to prove her need and her deservedness for the service (Burnett et al., 2015). Subsidized housing options are further limited for women who have rent arrears with a housing agency (Burnett et al., 2015; YWCA Yellowknife, 2007), but in many cases women’s financial situations are already stretched to the

limit and paying back rent arrears is not a simple transaction.

Accessing formal resources can be an overwhelming process for women leaving a violent relationship, and responding to the complex needs that women have requires that institutions think outside of their current service delivery (Tutty et al., 2014). Enabling women to leave a violent relationship is only one aspect of addressing intimate partner violence. Accessing services to assist in this process is complex - women must navigate the “red-tape” or bureaucracy of many support services; they are often re-victimized in being required to tell their story in order to access services; and frequently receive inadequate services from under-resourced and, at times, uninformed services. All of these experiences can be detrimental to women’s ability to leave violent relationships (Clough et al., 2014).

Support to transition out of homelessness is also needed, as barriers to maintaining housing are as significant as barriers to finding housing. Having a home after a period of homelessness is identified as being a stressful time and women require just as much support in this stage of the leaving process (Ruttan, La Boucane-Benson, &

Munro, 2010). The process of finding housing is often just as much about securing general resources as it is about securing housing itself (Long, 2015), and having access to shelters is only one piece of the solution - women need affordable housing, employment, day-care and child-related programs for both themselves and their children if (Sev’er, 2002; Weinreb, Rog, & Henderson, 2010). Knowing that there is no one single resource that can meet all of a woman’s and her family’s needs, general supports and resources that will improve the lives of women and assist in their independence are crucial (Moe, 2007). It is important for services to be flexible to the needs of women and enable their independent decision-making (Guo et al., 2016).

These issues do not cease to be a concern after accessing services or leaving shelter. The act of separating from an abusive partner may require that women leave employment as part of their relocation (Ham-Rowbottom et al., 2005). For women who do not have a source of income, leaving shelter or the home shared with an abusive partner and establishing themselves in the community requires that they secure financial resources first.

Challenges in Rural and Northern Communities

As has been discussed, women in rural locations experience higher rates of violence than those in urban communities (NCCAH, 2009; Peek-Asa et al., 2010). Reasons for this increase in victimization include greater access to firearms, lack of available and affordable transportation out of communities, intricate and complex social relationships, lack of formal support services, lack of employment or educational opportunities, isolation, gender inequalities and a community's unwillingness to see violence as a problem (NCCAH, 2009). Alcohol and substance use are common factors in perpetuating or aggravating domestic violence as it magnifies of economic, family or other existing problems (Billson, 2006; Burnett et al., 2015; Kelly & Idehen, 2005; Moffitt et al., 2013; Shepherd, 2001). Though this is a concern regardless of location, Moffitt et al. (2013) identify that alcohol use in the Canadian Arctic, and particularly Indigenous communities, is an important health problem and connects directly to the perpetration of violence against women. The emphasis on traditional family values found in rural communities, where women's responsibilities are to their home and their family, can pose a challenge for women seeking support in rural and remote areas, in-

cluding those living in northern communities (Kelly & Idehen, 2005).

Communities are often small and include complex webs of intersectional familial relationships (Nixon, Bonnycastle, & Ens, 2015 as cited in Moffitt et al., 2013). Unfortunately, the interconnectedness of rural and reserve communities presents further barriers to women leaving abusive relationships. The abusers or members of their family may be in positions of power or influence and women may be discouraged from speaking out against them, as the culture in many northern communities keeps domestic violence from being talked about (Goudreau, 2011).

Geographic location is a source of barriers for women to access domestic violence services and to secure housing. It is recognized that rural Canada does not have access to the same resources as urban Canada (Kelly & Idehen, 2005). Women in rural communities are much farther away from available resources. Rural women in Peek-Asa's (2011) study were travelling more than 40 miles to access services, and while transportation was provided for rural women more so than women in rural and suburban locations, this does not compensate for the sheer distance to services. Wuerch et al. (2016) highlight further issues with

transportation in northern communities. Road conditions and even the existence of a road itself may be seasonal and depend on weather conditions, and access to public transportation is limited. There is no vehicular public transportation to communities where there is no road, leaving the expensive option of air travel as the only “public” transportation out of the community. Where public transportation is entirely unavailable, women who do not have access to a vehicle or the finances to purchase transportation may be unable to leave a community (Wuerch et al., 2016). The timeliness of transportation is also a concern. Women residing in remote, fly-in communities may need to wait days for transportation, wait-times that are also a problem for service providers such as police and first responders (Wuerch et al., 2016; Shepherd, 2001). This situation raises concerns about the safety of women when they call for assistance or arrange transportation, and while they wait for it to arrive.

The lack of formal services and supports in northern communities directly affects the safety of women and is a barrier both to leaving abusive relationships and general service provision. For example, shelters are limited by working hours and are often at full capacity, forcing women to have to travel even further to access services. The practical issues of concealing a shelter location in the North is also an issue (Wuerch et al., 2016). Not all communities have a police presence and when they do, as Shepherd (2001) notes, they are often community members themselves and may not know how to handle major incidents. When law enforcement officials are called in to respond to an incident, women may face a long wait for RCMP or emergency crews to arrive and must keep themselves safe until they do (Shepherd, 2001, Moffitt et al., 2013).

Due in part to the limited formal services available in northern communities, there is a strong tradition of community members taking women in when they need assistance and shelter (Christensen, 2011; Shepherd, 2001). When

women do reach out to formal resources, communities of informal support also develop among women accessing those services (Fotheringham et al., 2014; Little, 2015). Formal supports are not always seen as helpful and women may avoid them because of the stigma and fear of negative consequences (Postmus et al., 2009; Mayock et al., 2015). The close-knit nature of an isolated community places responsibility on the community itself to create and sustain a non-violent environment by ensuring the provision of shelter and crisis services and facilitating proactive supports for the community (Wuerch et al., 2016).

In addition to distance and the lack of availability of violence-related services, there is also reduced access to mental and physical healthcare, childcare and skilled and professional workers such as law enforcement, judicial personal and professional supports (Peek-Asa, 2011). The YWCA Yellowknife (2007) and RESOLVE Alberta (2015) outline similar concerns, particularly with regards to the justice system. In many small, rural, Indigenous communities, it is non-Indigenous people or individuals from outside the community who fill professional roles (Shepherd, 2001). In these cases, many women do not feel comfortable speaking to the professional supports, feeling that they do not understand the circumstances women are dealing with. This situation is furthered by the lack of trust in law enforcement and social service personnel, most of whom are not from the community (Shepherd, 2011). Women are left with few options for who to go to, where they are comfortable with speaking out (Goudreau, 2011; Moffitt et al., 2013). Courts are also not accessible in northern communities and legal professionals who fly in to a community to provide services may not understand the specific challenges brought about by location, leaving women feeling uncomfortable about accessing legal services (Shepherd, 2001; Wuerch et al., 2016).

The local context of rural and northern communities tends to promote “closed communities.” Moffitt et al. (2017) describe a culture of

“violence and silence” experienced by women in rural and northern communities. Violence is “accepted, minimized, expected” as a part of family life that many have become desensitized to (p.23). This culture exists alongside a belief of long-term commitment to a partner and that there should not be outside interference in what are deemed individual family problems. This set of values sets the stage for a distrust of systems whose mandate is to intervene, and makes women a source of blame and shame if they seek out these systems (Moffitt et al., 2017). Beliefs about family dynamics, non-interference and the role of men in the relationship and household are part of a complex system of values that often prevent women from seeking support (RESOLVE

Alberta, 2015). These cultural and social barriers raise practical concerns for women accessing intimate partner violence services (Wuerch et al., 2016). Practically, there are concerns about confidentiality and anonymity of service. Small communities can make it difficult to stay anonymous, which may contribute to women feeling uncomfortable in accessing resources because either they or their abuser is connected to the service provider. The community itself may put pressure on women to “keep quiet” and to deal with the situation on their own. Women may fear the potential losses they face if they take further action, such as the loss of their home, custody of their children or even retaliation from their former partner (Wuerch et al., 2016).

Challenges for Indigenous Women

Intimate partner violence is a serious issue in Indigenous communities, one that has impacts beyond individual families to being a community problem (Moffitt et al., 2013). Indigenous women experience exponentially higher rates of partner violence than non-Indigenous women. For example, in 2009 they were “almost three times more likely than non-Aboriginal women to report having been a victim of a violent crime” (Brennan, 2011, p. 7). It has been suggested that the reality of rates of violence against women are likely to be much higher, as it is acknowledged that only a small portion of intimate partner violence is reported to authorities (Moffitt et al., 2013).

Regarding regional variation, in 2013 the Territories and the three Prairie Provinces had the highest police reported rates of intimate partner violence (Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 2015). Indigenous people make up a significant population in these regions. For example, First Nations, Métis and Inuit people make up 85% of Nunavut, 51% of the Northwest Territories and 23% of Yukon Territory populations (Moffitt et al., 2013). These numbers intersect with increased violence and lack of services in rural locations (Wuerch, et al., 2016) to give a troubling picture of Indigenous women residing in select commu-

nities in Northern Canada, where rates of abuse range from 70–95% (Goudreau, 2011).

Overall, women who are “Aboriginal, younger, with a lower annual household income, lower education, economically dependent and raising young children” are at a greater likelihood and increased severity for experiencing intimate partner violence (Moffitt et al., 2013, p. 2). More Indigenous women than non-Indigenous women are single parents (Burnett et al., 2015; Daoud et al., 2013), adding another complexity to their help seeking and placing them squarely within the demographic of women who experience intimate partner violence. The shift away from traditional gender dynamics and the implementation of government policies designed to break down families (i.e., residential school system and the “Sixties Scoop”) have caused intergenerational trauma and normalized family violence (Moffitt et al., 2013; NCCAH, 2009). Colonialism and oppression of Indigenous people have contributed to a legacy of homelessness as individuals report having felt homeless for their whole lives (Ruttan et al., 2010). The impact of this “collective violence” (Daoud et al., 2013, p. 282) is crucial to understanding the socioeconomic position and intimate partner violence that Indigenous women face (Wendt, 2010).

Indigenous women face unique barriers when leaving abusive relationships and securing housing is one of them. Indigenous people are over-represented among the homeless population throughout Canada and this overrepresentation is greater in Western Canada and even more so in northern communities (YWCA Canada, 2012; Belanger et al., 2012). It is further estimated that one-third of the Indigenous population lives in unstable housing when compared to 18% of the non-Indigenous population; as with women's hidden homelessness, the relative and hidden nature of this population makes it difficult to obtain an accurate count. These likely underestimated numbers still belie a crucial housing problem among Indigenous persons, both on- and off-reserve. The "quality, safety and affordability" of on-reserve housing is one aspect of the housing issues and continue to create problems as the demand for housing increases faster than construction can meet either the need for renovations or the need for new housing (Gaetz et al., 2014, p. 34). On the federal stage, First Nations housing has not been prioritized, impacting both on-reserve housing and Indigenous-run housing authorities (Belanger et al., 2012). On reserve, these issues manifest in the lack of plumbing and/or electricity, poor insulation, mold, substandard construction and lack of repairs. Patrick (2014) connects these tangible housing needs to financial challenges faced by many Indigenous households, noting that one-third of on-reserve households who were living in unacceptable housing did not have sufficient income to access better options. The combined effects of substandard housing, lack of financial resources and general shortage of housing units may contribute to overcrowding and to families moving off reserve (Belanger et al., 2012). Women fleeing family or partner violence are also part of this migration away from reserve communities (Patrick, 2014).

Housing challenges follow these families off reserve, where 73.4% of Indigenous peoples re-

side. Racial discrimination, poverty, family size and limited housing mobility are contributing factors in overcrowded housing and families living in high-rent situations (Patrick, 2014). Facing these challenges and with few options, one in four urban Indigenous people are more likely to live in homes in need of repair and are also four times more likely to live in a crowded home (Belanger et al., 2012). Discrimination is the underlying cause of many challenges Indigenous peoples face as they seek better housing options off reserve (Distasio et al., 2010). Financial discrimination, in the inability to obtain a mortgage or loan to access housing, and discrimination by housing "gatekeepers" in the form of landlords, property managers, real estate agents and housing personal, further limit housing options for Indigenous individuals and families (Patrick, 2014).

The lack of housing available in most reserve communities also has a gendered dynamic. Women trying to secure their own housing are limited by the lack of legal guidance regarding marital real property on reserve (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 2003). Provincial and territorial laws regarding marital property do not apply on reserve land and the *Indian Act* does not have specific provisions on the issue (Native Women's Association of Canada, 2007), leaving women in an unclear position regarding their rights to housing. The lack of matrimonial law provisions fails to provide women with legal recourse for interim possession of an on-reserve home — women may be able to get a restraining order against an abusive partner, but is not able to get exclusive possession of the marital home unless they were already the sole person on the certificate of possession (Patrick, 2014). When women do choose to leave a relationship, the lack of services in their home communities often forces them to leave their home community for assistance, creating issues related to making travel arrangements and the difficult physical journey, and leaving family, friends and traditions behind (Chris-

tensen, 2011; Coy et al., 2011). For some women, this may also require accessing services that are not in their primary language (Shepherd, 2001). Women also experience a lack of support from their community itself. The YWCA Yellowknife's (2007) study reports that women who were eligible for band financial support lose this funding once they leave the community, even when they left for safety reasons.

Physical dislocation from women's home community also separates them from cultural understandings of family and home (Distasio et al., 2010; Ruttan et al., 2011). Conceptualizing "home" beyond "four walls and a roof" and instead thinking of it in terms of safety, refuge, independence, land, culture and family (Christensen, 2011; Distasio et al., 2010) changes an understanding of the services that women need. It is important to include Indigenous spirituality and culture in service delivery beyond "tokenistic" gestures (Wendt & Baker, 2013) to meet the

specific needs of a community (Daoud et al., 2013; National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health, 2009; Ruttan et al., 2010; Wendt, 2010). Indigenous service-delivery also limits discrimination faced by individuals as they seek services (Distasio et al., 2010).

Culturally relevant services not only redefine home, but also include responsibilities of the family and community. In addition to meeting the needs of individual women, helpful services are identified as being proactive and community-based (NWAC, 2007). Addressing the needs of the whole community and facilitating increased resources to improve the quality of life will help to address some of the root issues that lead to intimate partner violence. Education and employment opportunities and access to housing opportunities on reserve enables women to stay in their home community on their own terms and without compromising their safety or well-being (NWAC, 2007).

Motherhood as a Barrier

Motherhood can also serve as a barrier for women who want to leave abusive relationships, especially for women who experience homelessness or poor housing. Methods used for counting the homeless population make it difficult to obtain a count of homeless women who are mothers. The use of shelter services by families — generally, single parent families headed by women — is the fastest growing segment of the homeless population in Canada (Aleman, 2016; Gaetz et al., 2013). That said, such counts do not generally include households who have used violence against women shelters and they do not represent women who currently do not have children in their care, who are identified as single individuals in such counts. Women, particularly Indigenous women, often lose custody of their children because of intimate partner violence and because of unstable housing (YWCA Canada, 2009), but unless women are actively seeking to have their children returned to their care, they are not identified as mothers in the research.

In spite of the lack of clarity of who within the homeless population counts as a mother, motherhood is undeniably related to women's homelessness. Women facing intimate partner violence are more likely to seek formal support

when there are children involved (Meyer, 2010). Mayock et al. (2015) suggest that women without children in their care do not have the same access to resources that women with children do — these women are only able to access resources for themselves. Unless children are in their care, program eligibility requirements do not acknowledge these women and their needs as mothers. Women whose children are in the custody of child welfare are required to find accommodations that are suitable for themselves *and* their children in order for their children to be returned to their care (Shdaimah, 2008). Landlords are often unwilling to rent to mothers, especially those with large families, and even finding an apartment with enough room for oneself and children is difficult due to the lack of available, affordable housing. Women may also put off dealing with addictions or health issues, or avoid entering emergency shelters for fear that their children will be removed from their care (Burnett et al., 2015; MacInnes, 2016). This matter is of particular concern for Indigenous women, who are not only the most impacted by poverty, homelessness and violence, but are also most likely to have their children apprehended by child welfare (MacInnes, 2016).

Mothering in the context of homelessness poses practical and emotional problems. Women must work to balance their needs with those of their children while dealing with unstable housing and violence and the threat of losing custody of their children if they are not able to meet their needs (Waegemakers Schiff, 2007). Navigating shelter services with children poses additional difficulties. Mayock et al. (2015) found that when children went into the care of others (either the state or relatives), women experienced trauma related to that loss and sought to find housing that would enable them to see children more frequently and in a better circumstance. Christensen (2011) found that women who had left their home communities in order to escape an abusive relationship and then become involved

with the child welfare system faced the decision of returning to their home community (where there was housing) or staying in shelter to stay close to their children. The loss of physically stable housing, even in the context of leaving that housing in order to leave an abusive relationship, often leads to child welfare involvement. Without stable housing, it is difficult to regain custody of children (Christensen, 2011).

Understanding how services define “family” in their models of service provision is also an issue related to motherhood. A shelter that is family-focused and culturally appropriate for Indigenous families may have a more inclusive definition of family that allows for extended family and older children (Waegemakers Schiff, 2007; Wendt & Baker, 2013).

Addressing the Multiplicity of Barriers

Addressing homelessness is not only about housing. Limited and inadequate housing options in northern communities make it difficult for women to begin addressing any of the interrelated issues they face (Christensen, 2011; Moffitt et al., 2013). Securing adequate housing is crucial for women's safety and independence (Menard, 2001) and entitlement to housing as a social need recognizes gender, racial and colonial inequalities that Indigenous women navigate in the process of seeking services (Little, 2015). The provision of adequate housing would assist not only victims of domestic violence but also those women who either cannot or do not seek formal services (Menard, 2001). Policies must also recognize the limitations; for example, the popular Housing First programs cannot work when there is no housing in the first place (Alaazi, Masuda, Evans & Distaio, 2016; Mosher, 2013). Addressing homelessness can help to ameliorate the multitude of stressors faced by women in precarious housing, and thus help to engage and maintain women seeking services. Providing tangible services to meet women's environmental and physical needs creates a stable living environment where women are better able to effectively manage the other stressors they may face

(Guo et al., 2016; Postmus et al., 2009; Wendt & Baker, 2009). The vulnerability associated with homelessness can impact other areas of women's lives; for example, women experience exclusion from employment or other housing opportunities because of factors such as an inconsistent rental history (Shier et al., 2011).

Making the decision to leave is a difficult process (Lewinson et al., 2014; Long, 2015; O'Campo et al., 2016; Ponc et al., 2011) and the tendency to connect leaving a relationship with a residential move does not represent the diverse experiences of women (Ponc et al., 2011). The time-limited nature of formal services fails to recognize this complexity. It is equally important to recognize that the process of leaving is cyclical and women often find themselves returning to a relationship (O'Campo et al., 2016). A 2010 study of women's shelters in Canada found that in 2009 there were 64,500 admissions to these shelters; almost one-third of the women had previously accessed services from that same shelter (Gaetz et al. 2013, p. 23). Services would be more beneficial if they could accommodate both the short-term and long-term needs of individuals experiencing homelessness, regardless of the cause (Distasio et al., 2010). Services are most helpful when women

do not feel that the pressure of a time limit and when supports are available in the long-term, after they leave the shelter (Ham-Rowbottom, 2005; Wendt & Baker, 2013). Just as leaving a relationship is a process, healing from the damage of that relationship is also a process. Having unsafe or insecure housing is a barrier to women's health and healing emotionally and physically from in-

timiate partner violence (Jategaonkar & Ponic, 2011). Having a time and a place to for women to adjust and recover has been found to be very important (Fotheringham et al., 2014). The process of healing involves regaining financial stability, employment and social support networks, as women work to create a "home" that is stable and safe for themselves (O'Campo et al., 2016).

Gaps in the Existing Literature

Participants and sample populations for much of the literature on women's homelessness are made up of those women who are able to and choose to access services (Little, 2015; Ruttan et al., 2010; Tutty et al., 2014). By focusing studies on those who access services, the literature recognizes that the represented population is limited to those women who may have been able to "work the programs" better than others; those who are not able to do so may have very different experiences (Long, 2015).

The distinction between women who are homeless and women who leave abusive relationships creates not only a gap between services for women who access resources specific to their experiences of intimate partner violence and those who access general "homeless" resources, but a gap in the literature as well. There is also a lack of literature on the pathways *out* of homelessness (Weinreb et al., 2010), and little literature exists that follows the experiences of women when they are no longer receiving formal services. There is also little known about the experiences of women who do not access formal services or who leave shelters to pursue housing on their own (Long, 2015), though it is well substantiated that women

tend to access informal resources first and foremost (Meyer, 2010; Moe, 2007; Postmus et al., 2009; Shepherd, 2001). Though the experiences of rural and northern women are identified as unique from those of urban women, there is limited literature on addressing these challenges. Finally, the literature does not often explore different cultural and community definitions of "home" and "homelessness" beyond physical housing. Understanding this from an Indigenous perspective, and how colonialism has contributed to these definitions, is also crucial to improving service provision and understanding the experiences of Indigenous women (Daoud et al., 2013). In specific relation to Indigenous women, the following recommendation for the National Housing Strategy from a Women's Shelter Canada 2017 report holds weight:

Create an Indigenous Housing Strategy that responds to the specific needs of Indigenous women and their families both on- and off-reserve, including co-operative housing and a provision that services are integrated at the beginning (e.g. child care, space for ceremony, collective kitchens, trauma-informed design) (Maki, 2017, p. 280).

Conclusion

Understanding the process of how women come to access either domestic violence resources or homeless shelters is an area for further exploration, as the current research tends to address women experiencing homelessness and those leaving relationships because of domestic violence separately. Services view homelessness and intimate partner violence as separate issues and attempt to address them accordingly (Long, 2015), while in reality they are different facets of gendered homelessness. Women are often required to clearly state partner abuse in order to access domestic violence shelters, and homeless shelters do not specifically provide services for women.

Women face a contradiction in that although they are often supported in making the decision to leave, the act of leaving creates an entirely new set of challenges (Lewinson et al., 2014; Long, 2015). They must navigate complex in-

teractions between their homelessness, mothering, intimate relationships and institutional settings (such as shelters) and draw from their own survival abilities to make the best decisions possible with the limited options available to them (Clough et al., 2014; Jategaonkar & Ponic, 2011; Mayock et al., 2015). Harm management and “making do” are part of women’s efforts to keep themselves and their families safe and to build lives apart from their abuser (Moe, 2007). Women who experience intimate partner violence are marginalized structurally, socially and economically, all of which are further compounded by the isolation of rural northern communities. As women seek to leave intimate partner violence and establish themselves independently, the question underlining their journey is not “why doesn’t she leave” but “how could she leave?” (Sev’er, 2002).

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CCPA

CANADIAN CENTRE
for POLICY ALTERNATIVES
MANITOBA OFFICE

Unit 301-583 Ellice Ave., Winnipeg, MB R3B 1Z7

TEL 204-927-3200 FAX 204-927-3201

EMAIL ccpamb@policyalternatives.ca

WEBSITE www.policyalternatives.ca