



Fast

# FACTS

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES - MANITOBA

March 6, 2015

## Counting women in: a gender-based analysis of homelessness

International Women's Day (IWD) will be celebrated this weekend. Although progress has been made regarding women's rights and equality, the basic right to a safe and affordable home will be out of reach for too many women across the globe and here in Manitoba.

IWD is an occasion to reflect on the social, economic and political gains women have made. It is also a time to continue working hard towards women's equality. One only needs to browse the headlines to understand that the feminist struggle continues - missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, the wage gap between women and men, violence against women, racialized and gendered poverty, sexual assault rates on university campuses and more. Inequality between women and men is still very real in 2015.

Locally at West Central Women's Resource Centre (WCWRC), a safe hub for inner-city Winnipeg women, women's rights and equality are worked towards daily. WCWRC's Housing Options, Mentorship, and Economic Security (HOMES) program has assisted women with housing and income insecurity for over ten years. "It was the catalyst that created WCWRC", says Lisa Spring, HOMES Program Coordinator. Between 2012-2014, HOMES supported 365 women with housing and income concerns.

### Gendering Homelessness

Women's experiences of homelessness are underestimated. In 2014, The Winnipeg

Poverty Reduction Council estimated that, of the 2,750 people experiencing homelessness in Winnipeg, 30 percent are women. Women, though, are more likely to experience hidden homelessness - living temporarily with others with no guarantee of continued shelter. Hidden homelessness has been estimated as three and a half times the amount actually counted. Women's hidden homelessness has many faces - overcrowding, staying in violent relationships to maintain housing, living in unsuitable or violent situations to maintain custody of one's children and paying high rents that make other necessities, like food, unaffordable. The racialized nature of hidden homelessness is also difficult to pin down, although we know that First Nation, Métis and Inuit women and girls are most at risk.

Women's experiences of homelessness are different than men's. Spring says that gendering homelessness begins with its very definition. "Women's experiences are often not recognized as homelessness, particularly when discussing chronic or episodic homelessness. We have approximately 10 percent of the women served by the HOMES program living on the street, using shelters regularly. We mainly serve women who are couch surfing. Women experiencing hidden homelessness face many systemic barriers within systems like

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Employment and Income Assistance (EIA) housing systems and Child and Family Services (CFS). It's extremely hard to get basic needs met when you're couch surfing."

Women respond to housing instability differently than men. Spring notes that shelters are not seen as a safe or viable option for many women experiencing homelessness. "Women want to avoid shelters for a number of reasons. Sometimes they are caught between violence at home or violence on the street. Mothers often try to keep their children out of the shelter system."

Spring explains, "Many women avoid shelters because they are mothers trying to find safer options for their children. Families facing homelessness are often fearful of involvement with CFS. If children are apprehended women lose their housing because they're more than likely reliant on EIA and will lose their family income and their child tax benefit. So a massive proportion of their income goes out the window and they can no longer maintain housing."

### **Housing First, Women Second?**

Through the Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS), which is investing \$600 million over five years to reduce homelessness, the Federal Government has transitioned to the Housing First (HF) model. The HF model prioritizes moving people experiencing chronic and episodic homelessness into suitable housing and subsequently providing supports and services as needed. 65 percent of HPS funds are dedicated to HF approaches, and 35 percent of the funds are targeted for other initiatives to reduce homelessness. The HF model was piloted in Winnipeg for five years with great success for the chronic and episodically homeless – 45 percent of the participants were housed at the end of the pilot.

While Housing First is an important tool in ending homelessness, further work needs to be done to broaden the strategy

to meet the needs of women experiencing hidden homelessness. Women's hidden and complex homelessness most often does not fit into the traditional definitions of chronic and episodic homelessness, yet 65 percent of federal HPS funds are earmarked for this demographic. Many women experiencing hidden homelessness will be left out of the equation.

Canada's population has increased by 30 percent over the last twenty-five years yet annual federal housing investments have decreased by 46 percent. The decline in federal funding is associated with the rise of homelessness and hidden homelessness. Public investment from all levels of government, particularly federal, is needed to build new housing that creates meaningful options for women and families.

Homelessness is a prime example of why a gender-based analysis is needed for comprehensive and effective policy making. Women and men experience different pathways into homelessness. Logic follows that more equitable solutions to ending homelessness are also needed.

Let's start where women are at, just like WCWRC's HOMES program has been doing for over a decade. Let's respond to homelessness with a gendered lens to ensure all women and children in Manitoba have a safe place to call home.

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