

# Examining Gaps in Services for Immigrant and Refugee Women and Children who are Trapped in Canada's Emergency Shelters

## An Institutional Ethnography

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# Context

## Women, families and homelessness

- Between 2005 and 2009, there was a 50% increase in the average length of stay and total numbers of women and children in shelters across Canada (Segaert, 2012)
- Women constitute 25% of the adult homeless population, however, represent the vast majority of lone parent homeless families in shelter (Schellenberg, 2004)
- Homeless women and children experience gender specific vulnerabilities like mental health issues, sexual exploitation, violence assault (Bassuk, Volk, & Oliver, 2010; Paradis & Mosher, 2012)
  - Children from these families may have poorer outcomes later in life  
(Anooshian, 2003; Gully, Koller, & Ainsworth, 2001; Culhane et al., 2007; Benbow, Forchuk, & Ray, 2011)

# Context

## Newcomers to Canada and racialized identities

- Most newcomers and refugees choose to settle in Canada's urban centers, where there is a known affordable housing crisis (Gaetz, & Richter, 2014) and are more likely to live in unsafe or illegal housing, such as illegal secondary suites and overcrowded housing (Pruegger & Tanasescu, 2007)
- The incidence of newcomers to Canada experiencing absolute homelessness is on the rise (Ballay & Bulthuis, 2004)
- A Point in Time count in Calgary in 2014 showed that over 64% those experiencing homelessness were racialized minorities (Calgary Homeless Foundation, 2014)

# Context

## Newcomer mothers and children

- Newcomer women and their children experiencing homelessness are forced to navigate multiple public systems like the homeless, immigration, social assistance, child welfare and justice systems (Covington & Bloom, 2003; Kohl, Edleson, English, & Barth, 2005; Tutty et al., 2012)
- These women are particularly vulnerable to homelessness due to
  - Experiences of intimate partner violence
  - Barriers related to cultural ideals of sexism, isolation, stigma, and shame (Farrell, 2005; Bhuyan et al., 2005; Shirwadkar, 2004; Thurston et al., 2006)
- Homelessness is an inherently gendered experience that requires a gendered lens when developing policies (DuMont & Miller, 2000)

# Objectives

## Research question

How can examining current policies and practices advance a framework for interventions intended to ensure that newcomer women and children do not become trapped into homelessness and dependency?

# Objectives

## Policy change and outcomes

- Identify ways to reduce gaps between immigrant, refugee and newcomers and the homeless sectors
- Improve access to safe and trauma-informed housing programs
- Improve settlement experiences through policy and services
- Prevent immigrant, newcomers and refugee children from future homelessness



# Methodology

## Taking up an Institutional Ethnography

- Sociology framework that studies people from the margins inward to examine power and to uncover how relations of ruling shape people's lives (DeVault, 1999)
- Explore the social relations organizing institutions as people participate in them and to map the institutional aspects of 'ruling' by way of document analysis and qualitative interviews (Smith, 2005)
- Researchers begin inquiry from the perspective of the individuals being impacted, thus focusing on the barriers they previously or currently face (Smith, 2006)

# Methodology

## Research protocol

- Engage stakeholders and community partners from various services and collectives across Calgary that serve women and families experiencing homelessness
  - Inn From the Cold, Journey House, Calgary's YWCA
  - Women and Children's Working Group – Collaborative for Health and Home (Calgary)
- Engage newcomer mothers with lived experience to participate in a member group
- Recruit newcomer mothers currently living in emergency shelters
- Document analysis of federal, provincial and municipal immigration policies

# Methodology

## Project status

- Recruitment collaboration with stakeholders, community partners and working group since early Fall 2017
- 9 mothers living in Calgary's emergency shelters interviewed
  - 5 in early January-February, 2018
  - 4 in late August-September, 2018
- Member check with 1 mother in supportive housing (Journey House)

# Analysis

## Policy documents

- Federal policy documents accessible through Citizenship and Immigration Canada government of Canada website
  - Many policies and documents that include difficult language and are difficult to navigate
  - Immigration and Refugee Act policy document over 175 pages long
  - More information on skilled workers, workers visas and sponsorships than refugee claimants
- Provincial policy documents include information on health care, social assistance and housing
- Municipal information on immigration policies for educating current Calgarian residents rather than for newcomers' sake

# Analysis

## Qualitative interviews

- Various immigration statutes
  - 1 expired temporary foreign worker visa
  - 2 broken down spousal sponsorships
  - 5 refugee status claimants through irregular boarder crossings
  - 2 expired visitor visas, currently without status
- All women have families (with children)
  - when they arrived in Canada some had small children, were pregnant or would later become pregnant
- Some chose Calgary due to partners, others ended up in Calgary by chance

# Analysis

## Qualitative interviews cntd...

- Five women who initially entered Canada as refugee claimants came in through the United States and did not fall under the Safe Third Country Agreement due to irregular border crossing
- The two women currently without status were unaware or unable to claim refugee status when initially entering Canada
- Majority of the women we interviewed had only very recently arrived in Canada (less than 1 year)
- Majority of women were receiving social assistance through Alberta Works but could not access subsidized housing programs

# Refugee crisis in Canada



CHRISTINNE MUSCHI/REUTERS, THE GLOBE AND MAIL, 2018

- From February 2017 to June 2018 the Immigration Refugee Board observed over 32,000 refugee claims by irregular border crossings in Lacolle, Quebec alone (Zilio, 2018)
- Interestingly, many claimants travelled from Nigeria to the United States on a visitors visa then bypassing the Safe Third Country agreement by crossing in Lacolle

# Refugee crisis in Canada



CHARLES KRUPA/AP, THE TORONTO STAR, 2018

- “On our floor where we stay, I have two neighbours that are from [same country] too... We are all refugees. Though our stories are different, our reasons why we move are different, but we’re all refugees.” - Mother

# Analysis

## Preliminary results

- Structural barriers faced by all women
  - Immigration status and navigating complicated system, long wait times for hearings
  - Cultural and language barriers
  - Limited access to housing, income and other social service supports
  - Health care insurance offered for limited terms causing delays and interruptions in accessing life saving interventions
- Intimate partner violence, family violence and past trauma
  - Women were either separated from spouse, whom they relied on, or were forced to flee home country due to family persecution
  - Some families forced to leave country due to state violence and threats of death

# Analysis

## Preliminary results cntd...

- Resiliency, hope and strength among mothers
  - Spoke of feeling hopeful despite situation believing Canada would still be a better alternative
  - Described services in shelter as very generous, supportive and invaluable
  - Acknowledged and admired hard work from staff in emergency shelter

# Policy suggestions

## A sense of urgency

- Immediate and urgent policy reform aimed at addressing wait times for women and children trapped in refugee claimant status
  - A gendered approach to assessing claimants stories that recognizes gendered violence and trauma as legitimate forms of persecution
- Clearer immigration policy and increased access to legal resources to help refugee claimants or women with families whom have spousal sponsorship breakdown
- Additional resources and funding to help further support services working with newcomer women in emergency shelters

# Policy suggestions

## Double edged sword

- Eliminate barriers to accessing federal and provincial supports including health care, income support and most importantly permanent and subsidized housing
  - Allowing lone-parent newcomer families in shelter to access multiple services without the risk or threat of losing others
  - Clarifying for service providers and increasing access to what is available to support newcomer mothers with limited or precarious immigration status

# Thank you for your time!



If you would like more information please contact myself or  
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