

Justice System Involvement in the Context of Homelessness and Housing Insecurity Among Women in Thunder Bay

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OVERVIEW

- Background to the research
- Methods
- Findings
- Next steps

Background and approach to the research

- Elizabeth Fry Society of NWO identification of housing needs for the women they work with
- Contacted lead researcher and developed research team including community partners including Indigenous organisations, Law School, and other Lakehead University faculty and students
- Developed research proposal and applied for funding from the Law Foundation of Ontario
- Research process from design to data collection and analysis conducted collaboratively with university and community partners

Funding provided by



Methods

- Environmental scan
- Bail Bed / Court monitoring
- Online survey with defense and duty counsel
- Focus groups
 - Women in the Thunder Bay Correctional Centre
 - Women in community with current / previous involvement with justice system
 - Service providers
- Individual interviews
 - Women recently released
 - Legal professionals

Participant profile

- 25 women involved with criminal justice system for interviews and focus groups
 - 75% self identify as Indigenous women; 20% Ojibwe as first language
 - Most single; 80% with children
 - 30% with post secondary education; 19% high school education; 45% no high school
 - 80% with mental health, addictions, or physical health conditions
- 95 women in court monitoring
 - 32 – housing had direct impact on bail hearing
- 16 service providers and legal professionals

Findings: survey with defense and duty counsel

- Results of not getting bail:
 - reduces the likelihood of going to trial; i.e. women are more likely to accept plea bargains that go to trial for their offence)
 - reduces access to diversion programs
 - leads to an increased chance for institutional misconduct that may affect sentencing
 - promotes guilty pleas
 - increases risk of women receiving more severe sentences with a custodial component instead of other sentences that wouldn't result in a criminal record
 - personal implications such as further victimization and institutionalization

Findings: survey with defense and duty counsel

- Impacts of not getting bail
 - losing custody of children or other dependents
 - losing housing
 - loss of employment or
 - loss of income
 - reduced access to mental health and substance use treatment services
 - increased risk of stigma
 - increased debt
 - further victimized and institutionalized and subject to violence and stress associated with imprisonment
- Lack of stable housing was reported as either often or always a significant contributor to recidivism

Findings: Interviews and focus groups

Overall

- Lack of local suitable housing options
- Difficult for women to transition in housing options that are safe and supportive
- Interest in transitional and supportive housing to assist with community reintegration and avoid substance use relapse and recidivism

Findings: Interview and focus groups

- Discrimination: race, criminal history, income source and credit checks

“Never had problems [at my previous rental] and I had the maintenance man write me a reference letter. It was out of this world, no problem thinking I'll get a place just like that. And I was working full time, I got paid weekly. I showed them my statements and everything. I didn't get a place. And then finally one guy just told me, I'm just being honest with you, you're native you know. It doesn't matter, you can show me that all you want, but there's no way in the world my father will allow it.” (WT3)

“I would much rather-the most frustrating thing you're coming out of jail and you want to start this new life fresh because your mind is fresh and you know you've been clean for a long time. And then, you bump heads with people that won't give you a place to live. You know, you got some money to put down on a place, whatever, and then you just run into obstacles where the landlord doesn't give you a chance. It gets frustrating and it just breaks you down.” (WT3)

- Financial barriers
 - Cost of first and last month rent; issues related to previous arrears; utility connection and moving costs



Findings: Interview and focus groups

- Availability
- Lack of affordable housing and lack of programs for women

“I was also going to add just in general, the services for women are far fewer than they are for men. So when you look at that intersectionality of women that are involved in criminal justice often times there's mental health challenges, substance use challenges, trauma, history of trauma etc. When we look at the treatment system in the community, there's two cycles for every one cycle for women. And then for aftercare, or residential programming afterwards, transitional housing. We have transitional housing for men, we do not have a special space for women. There's a co-ed facility but that's more supported and where do you go for after, more integration into the community. Yeah, even our shelter system is set up that we don't have a specialized homeless shelter for women.” (SP T13)

Findings: Interview and focus groups

- Avoiding addiction relapse and connection to recidivism

“.....they wanted to put me into a building that was full of crack dealers and I can't be around that because I struggled with addiction my whole life and I was addicted to the needle for 15 years and to put myself into that situation would've been horrible for my well being” (W T5)

“While I was in the treatment program [post release] I did good - but afterwards coming back to no home - I get frustrated - in order to deal with frustration I smoke crack.” (W T2)

“I daily have discussions with people about how they try to avoid certain areas because certain areas influence their non-compliance with their conditions. Sleeping at Shelter House, had somebody today say "I have to avoid shelter house" like it's the bermuda triangle because they cannot be around there, like it's an influence to drink or if people are having drugs and I've noticed the women too are extremely vulnerable within that side. So if they're even trying to go out for their first social connections too or going for the daily meals there, they try to eat as fast as they can and come back” (SP T13)



Findings: Interview and focus groups

- Safety

“A lot of young women under the age of 24 range, just the climate of the city, lots of gang involvement, more so lately. They’ve been kind of living with people who they are working for or who are manipulating them, promising them the world so that’s been their housing before they come to us. And when they are at that age, they don’t have references for renting their own place. They’ve never been on their own lots of time.” (SP T13)

“ I would never tell an Indigenous woman she is safe [walking] in this town” (LP T15)



Findings: recommendations for housing and supports

- Some women transitioning back to other communities outside of the city
- Others own homes
- Most women wanted transitional housing with built in and potentially on site supports

A few more thoughts from the women

“I don’t want to be micromanaged because I had enough of that in jail. You need 24-hour staff to make sure that women are meeting their conditions if they have any, but really, women do need to learn to cope on their own. I really like the idea of having access to programs, especially life skills. I think that a year in a place like this would really help the transition back to family life” (W T9)

“I have to be careful about the areas in which I choose to live in. I can’t take necessarily the cheapest and easiest place because it could be in a, you know, a drug neighbourhood or it could be beside a bar or somewhere that would allow me to sink myself.” (W T4)

“If you have the supports, you won’t go back to substance use to cover things up” (W T1)



Findings: recommendations for housing and supports

- Design considerations for transitional housing with supports
 - Safety, location, children, cost, rules and regulations
 - Addictions, mental health, case management, legal services, cultural activities, child welfare, physical health

Next steps

- Translate findings into recommended strategies and design for development of housing, supports for women in the region
- Continued funding for work of EFSNWO, community partners, academic partners to develop additional housing and supports

Thanks!

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