

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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