

# Violence and Restrictions in Emergency Shelter Systems: The Hidden Pathway into Unsheltered Homelessness

**CAEH23 (November 8, 2023)**

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# Disclosure

- Co-leads: Drs. Vicky Stergiopoulos, Sean Kidd, and Carrie Anne Marshall
- Co-investigators: Drs. Alexia Polillo, Stephen Hwang, Nicole Kozloff, Amanda Noble
- Research Support: Joseph Voronov, Tim de Pass, Corinna Easton, Brooklyn Ward
- Funding: Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, City of Toronto, Canadian Institutes of Health Research
- Acknowledgments: Lauren Kimura, Matthew Dewar, and the community partner organizations that supported data collection and all individuals who participated in the research
- No conflicts of interest to report

# Background

- Emergency shelters are a core component of homeless service systems
- Locations/types of homelessness in Canada are changing; unsheltered homelessness increased 100% from 2016 to 2020-2022. (Infrastructure Canada, 2023)
- Violence is perceived to be common in shelter settings, which is a deterrent to people accessing these services. (Kerman et al., 2023)
- Service restrictions are a common response to shelter-based violence; ~17% of participants in the *At Home/Chez Soi* study reported being restricted from a shelter during a two-year period. (Kerman et al., 2022)
- The role of shelter-based violence and service restrictions in contributing to unsheltered homelessness have not been studied.

# Research Objectives

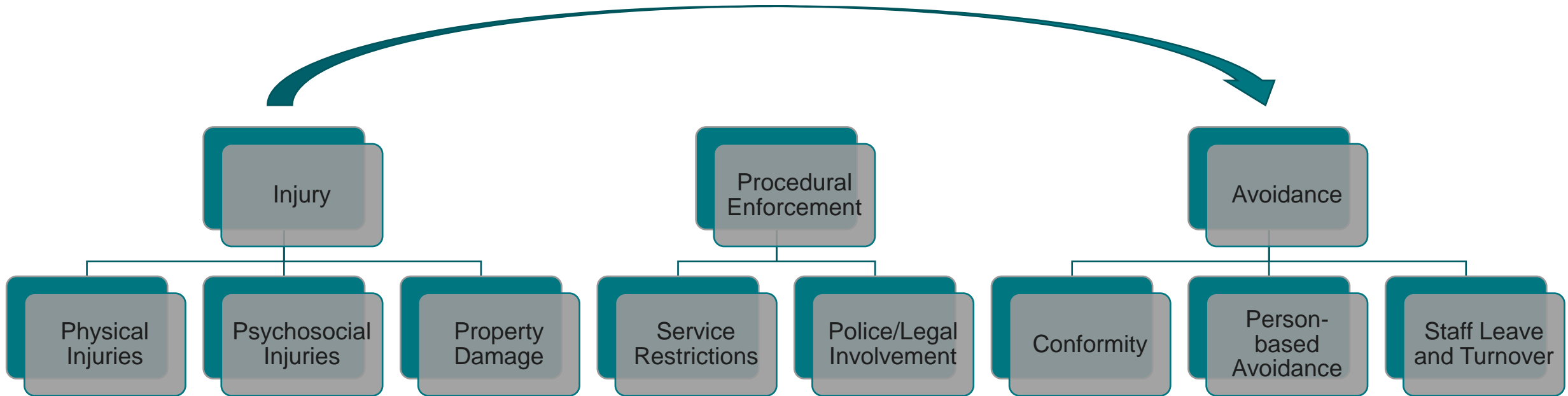
- The objective of this multi-methods, observational study was to examine the factors that contribute to physical and psychological safety in shelters for staff and service users, including causes and consequences of service restrictions and shelter-based violence.
- This presentation will:
  1. Identify the perceived consequences of shelter-based violence
  2. Describe what people experiencing homelessness report as the perceived causes and consequences of service restrictions from shelters
  3. Present multi-stakeholder perspectives on how to create safer shelter settings and reduce shelter-based violence

# Study Design

- 49 qualitative interviews with people experiencing homelessness who had been restricted from a shelter in the past year
  - Recruited from two cities in Ontario
- 27 qualitative interviews with people experiencing homelessness who had experienced violence in a shelter in the past year
- 50 qualitative interviews with shelter staff ( $n = 26$ ) and key informants ( $n = 24$ ) on how to create safer shelter settings



# Consequences of Shelter-based Violence



“It definitely didn’t help with the PTSD at all. It kind of triggered it a lot more. So, then when I did get into the shelter, it was really hard to kind of sleep because I didn't know who to trust.”

– service user

“I hate the feeling of feeling like dread to go into my workplace if I’m honest. And it’s not every day but it’s not once a year either.”

– shelter staff

# Causes of Service Restrictions

- Physical violence between service users (most common reason for restriction)
- Physical or sexual violence toward shelter staff\*
- Verbal abuse and conflicts with shelter staff
- Substance use and possession\*
- Rule violations (e.g., missed bed checks/curfew, maximum stays)\*
- Varying restriction durations and understanding of reasons for restriction\*

\* Difference found between cities

# Consequences of Service Restrictions

- Emotional and cognitive experiences:
  - Intense feelings of anger, perceived unfairness in decision-making
  - Fear, hopelessness, and abandonment
  - Indifference, sense of freedom, and relief (more rare experience)
- Health and social outcomes:
  - Increased substance use
  - Cold-related injuries, principally frostbite
  - Suicidality
  - Food insecurity\*
  - Lost connections to support networks, sense of mistrust after re-sheltering

\* Difference found between cities

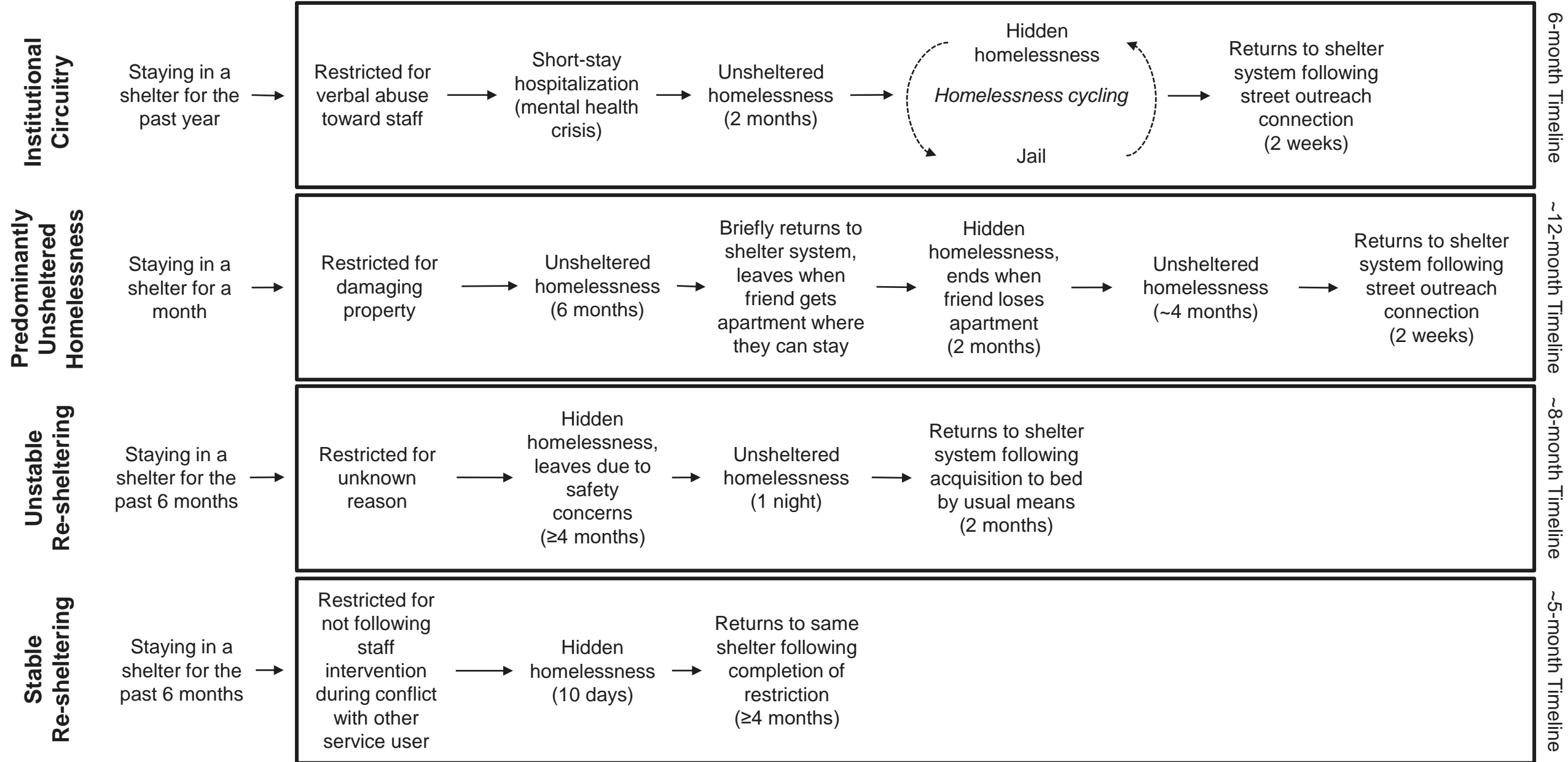


# Consequences of Service Restrictions

- Shelter status changes:
  - 23 participants (46.9%) experienced unsheltered homelessness for one or more nights immediately following their service restriction
  - 35 participants (71.4%) had experienced unsheltered homelessness at some point between their identified service restriction and the interview date
- Four timeline paths:
  1. Institutional circuitry (38.8%)
  2. Predominantly unsheltered homelessness (14.3%)
  3. Unstable re-sheltering (22.4%)\*
  4. Stable re-sheltering (20.4%)\*

\* Difference found between cities

# Consequences of Service Restrictions



# Violence Prevention: Key Policies and Practices

Tier 1	Tier 2	Tier 3
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Active staff presence throughout shelter</li><li>• Service user engagement and community-building</li><li>• Use of de-escalation skills</li><li>• Timely and consistent staff training on violence prevention and related issues</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Transparent shelter rules, policies, and expectations (including on tolerance for violence, weapons, and discriminatory language)</li><li>• Critical incident documentation and use of safety plans</li><li>• Access to mental health supports</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Service user searches and room checks</li><li>• Security guards</li><li>• Use of a graded approach (warnings → discharge)</li></ul>

← Trauma-informed and anti-racist/anti-oppressive →

# Creating Safer Shelters

- Develop smaller shelters with individual rooms (e.g., U.S. Safe Haven shelters)
- Develop floating support teams (healthcare, street outreach, case management)
- Minimize use of service restrictions for non-violent incidents
- Enhance staff training on violence prevention and trauma-informed care (including security)
- Strengthen workplace mental health supports for shelter staff
- Offer a variety of shelter models in communities, with coordinated linkages
- Establish workforce advocacy initiatives intended to reduce understaffing in homeless shelters



# Thank You

If you would like to be notified about study updates and forthcoming publications, please contact:

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Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](#)

 **Health and Place** 




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Victimization, safety, and overdose in homeless shelters: A systematic review and narrative synthesis


Nick Kerman<sup>a,\*</sup>, Sean A. Kidd<sup>a,b</sup>, Joseph Voronov<sup>a</sup>, Carrie Anne Marshall<sup>c</sup>, Branagh O'Shaughnessy<sup>d</sup>, Alex Abramovich<sup>a,c</sup>, Vicky Stergiopoulos<sup>a,b</sup>

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## Victimization, Safety, and Overdose Risk in Homeless Shelters

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J Urban Health  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11524-022-00680-0>

 Check for updates

## Shelter Bans Among People Experiencing Homelessness: an Exploratory Study of Predictors in Two Large Canadian Datasets

Nick Kerman<sup>1</sup> · Ri Wang · Tim Aubry · Jino Distasio · Stephen Gaetz · Stephen W. Hwang · Eric Latimer · Bill O'Grady · Kaitlin Schwan · Julian M. Somers · Vicky Stergiopoulos · Sean A. Kidd