



# FROM STREETS TO PRISON AND BACK AGAIN

EXAMINING THE CYCLE OF WOMEN'S HOMELESSNESS AND CRIMINALIZATION



# OVERVIEW OF OUR DISCUSSION POINTS

- Factors of women's criminalization
- Connection to homelessness
- Joyce Kope House
- Risks and challenges for women experiencing homelessness and criminalization
- Important tools for working with criminalized women
- Prison and the hypocrisy of the reintegration mandate
- Criminalized Canadians on the Homelessness agenda

# FACTORS OF WOMEN'S CRIMINALIZATION

- **Financial Instability** - Non-violent, property, and drug offences represent the majority of crimes for which women are convicted.
- **Intimate Partner Violence** -The serious violent crimes for which women are charged and convicted must be appropriately contextualized. Overwhelmingly, the actions of women in these contexts are defensive or otherwise reactive to violence directed at themselves, their children, or another third party.
- **Job Insecurity** -Approximately 66% of provincially sentenced women and 78% of federally sentenced women were unemployed at the time of their admission to prison.
- **Abuse** -85% of federally sentenced women have a history of physical abuse, while 68% have a history of sexual abuse. This rate increases to 90% for Indigenous women.
- **Mental Health** –An estimated one in three women (29%) entering prison are diagnosed with mental health issues.
- **Addictions** - According to the Correctional Investigator, more than 50% of women in prison report a current or previous addiction. Researchers estimate that more than 90% of women in prisons have used substances.

# FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO WOMEN'S HOMELESSNESS

- **Financial Instability** – Poverty reduces options for a woman may stem from her partner withholding wages, work absences due to abuse, low wages, precarious employment. Women earn less in proportion to men and are more likely to experience poverty and struggle with financial independence.
- **Intimate Partner Violence**- Impacts of abuse and other stressors compromise a woman's search for housing when leaving violence. Finding housing is stressful at the best of times. However, women experiencing IPV are trying to find housing while navigating the obstacles and risks generated by an abusive partner, such as threats against her and her children, stalking, withholding of money, and destruction of property.
- **Job Insecurity** – A major structural determinant for homelessness is job insecurity, low wages, difficulty accessing social assistance, maintaining employment due to childcare or illness (women's and child's).
- **Abuse** – Historical patterns of abuse are replayed as women seek shelter options last after exploring often unsafe housing options with family, friends, wider social network which can lead to emotional and sexual exploitation which repeats the cycle of abuse and dependence as an adult.
- **Mental Health** – Mental health is a key factor contributing to women's homelessness however research is unclear as to whether it is a precursor or is exacerbated by the conditions of being homeless. Regardless, mental health issues often make effective and consistent delivery of programs and supports difficult and challenging. This is only compounded by the lack of mental health supports and treatments that are accessible and consistent for women.
- **Addictions** – Due to high rates of trauma, sexual violence and abuse the use of drugs and alcohol as a means of self- medication often make retaining housing a challenge and contribute to the homelessness and criminalization of women.

# JOYCE KOPE HOUSE

- **Joyce Kope House – Elizabeth Fry Society of Simcoe County**
  - 27 bed safe residence and Community Residential Facility (halfway house) for federally and provincially sentenced women and women on bail who, without a supervised place of residence, would otherwise be held as prisoners.
- **Hybrid model - 4 Beds Types:**
  - Correctional Service Canada (CSC) – 5 beds dedicated to women released on parole supervised by CSC.
  - Ministry of Community Safety and Correctional Services – 2 beds .
  - Ministry of Attorney General (Bail Beds) – 4 beds for women with mental health/substance use.
  - County of Simcoe – 16 beds women experiencing homelessness.
- 511 admissions in 2017 with stays ranging from 1 day – 365 days.

# RISKS AND CHALLENGES FOR WOMEN EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS AND CRIMINALIZATION

- Cyclical experience of incarceration to homelessness and back again – women experiencing homelessness are over policed and more likely to be criminalized.
- Incarceration often leads to loss of housing for women: 51% of survey participants indicated that they had no home to go to post incarceration. Lack of discharge planning leaves women without housing options and returning to community admitted into shelters and/or living rough.
- Homelessness, shelter stays and living rough are not conducive to conditions of release, often leading to additional charges and breach of conditions.
- Safety: increasingly women experiencing homelessness are subjected to sexual exploitation and are at a higher risk of sexual assault than the general population.
- Trauma associated to criminalization and imprisonment – arrests and conditions of confinement often violate human rights.

# IMPORTANT TOOLS FOR WORKING WITH CRIMINALIZED WOMEN

- Prevention
  - Court and imprisonment diversion programs, community supervision and advocacy for less restrictive conditions.
  - Shelter Diversion – from intuitions and community.
- Community Action
  - Partnership with local housing support, Housing First and Rapid Rehousing Programs and institutional discharge planners.
  - SAFE and affordable housing for women – permanent, choice of what and where, autonomous, supported (if necessary), inclusive of family, private etc.
  - Tiered and individualized case management based on needs assessments of each women.
  - Trauma informed support – Awareness of the IMPACT of a history trauma including trauma associated to arrest and imprisonment.
  - Culturally competent services that address needs and recognize barriers for marginalized and criminalized individuals and communities, especially indigenous women and girls.

# PRISON AND THE HYPOCRISY OF THE REINTEGRATION MANDATE

- Lack of government identification
- Lack of pre-release support and preparation
- Lack of access to medications or medical professionals for follow up and renewal
- Lack of money (food, personal hygiene products, over the counter medications, transportation costs such as a bus pass)
- Barriers to securing employment (record checks)
- Barriers to securing housing (record checks, deposits)
- Unrealistic restrictions on release conditions



# CRIMINALIZED CANADIANS ON THE HOMELESSNESS AGENDA

- **The Homelessness agenda** should be advocating for safe, secure, affordable and supportive housing as a key to decreasing the number of criminalized women
- **The Homelessness agenda** should include efforts to reduce the rate of incarcerated women by connecting with the need for housing which will also decrease the rate of children in foster care systems
- **The Homelessness agenda** should be advocating for supportive housing models (access to social, mental health, and addictions support workers) to provide community-based options for in community supervision options as a diversion to jail and prison.
- **The Homelessness agenda** should be advocating for supportive housing models to replace the default role of prisons as a catch-all for the addicted, the abused, the poor, the disenfranchised. Economics of prison are counter productive to creating safer and healthier communities. Prison bed for 1 year can average 150k while an in community supportive housing bed as and average cost of 60k a year.
- **The Homelessness agenda** should be advocating against criminal record checks and for record suspensions to remove barriers to housing for criminalized Canadians.