IMMIGRANT WOMEN, FAMILY VIOLENCE, AND PATHWAYS OUT OF HOMELESSNESS RESEARCH PROJECT

SUMMARY

Context and Objectives

There has been little investigation into the connections between family violence, immigration, and homelessness of women (Braun & Black, 2003). Abused immigrant women and Canadian-born women face similar barriers to independent living; however, the migration process can present additional challenges for immigrant women. For abused immigrant women, homelessness is often cyclical and compounded by a range of factors; ability to speak English[1], knowledge of Canadian systems, cultural background, and family structure all profoundly affect the immigrant woman's experience of the pathways into and out of homelessness. In order to prevent homelessness and to plan programs and policies for populations, theoretical models that address key solutions and acknowledge critical temporal factors are required (Thurston & Potvin, 2003).

This study explored the nature and extent of homelessness or housing insecurity among immigrant women experiencing family violence. Research was conducted in Calgary, Winnipeg, and Halifax. Academic and community partners included the following:

Calgary

• Brenda Strafford Centre
• Calgary Coalition on Family Violence
• RESOLVE Alberta.
• The University of Calgary Department of Sociology
• The University of Calgary Faculty of Social Work

Winnipeg

• The Prairie Women's Health Centre of Excellence
• Osborne House
• Immigrant Women's Counselling Services
• Needs Centre for War-Affected Families

Halifax

• The Atlantic Centre of Excellence for Women's Health
• Bryony House
• Adsum House

Methodology

This study used prospective multidisciplinary combined methods to explore immigrant women's experiences of family violence and housing insecurity. This research design was not dependent on controlled environments and maintenance of standardized data collection strategies over time but combined structured and unstructured data collection to allow for the emergence of new information (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998).

The following research activities were completed:

• longitudinal qualitative interviews (three interviews over six months) with 37 immigrant women who had experienced family violence and housing insecurity[2];
• one-time qualitative interviews with 26 service providers working with immigrant women who had experienced family violence and housing insecurity;
• analysis of quantitative data on immigrant, Aboriginal and Canadian-born women who used one particular second-stage women's shelter[3];
• inventory of employment and educational services aimed at immigrant populations in the three study sites

Through these research activities we explored a number of themes including housing, health, and service awareness and access. We analyzed the data and addressed the following research questions:

1. What are the key systemic and individual causes of persistent and repetitive homelessness of immigrant women experiencing family violence?
      i. What are the key indicators of an increased risk of homelessness?
      ii. What are the key indicators for decreased risk?

2. What are the pathways into and out of homelessness? What are the specific conjunctures where critical interventions are most effective?

3. What existing services are most effective in assisting people exit homelessness, and how can homeless people or those at risk of homelessness access them?

Key Findings

Based on the results of our study, four key points were highlighted:

1. **Systemic factors are most relevant to prevention of homelessness in women who experience abuse.** Almost all individual causes of homelessness and housing insecurity are embedded in systemic causes. This is an important point in terms of policies and programs; that is, programs aimed at systemic factors (e.g. enforcing labour standards) may have a better chance of wide-spread success than programs aimed at building individual capacity (e.g., knowing your workplace rights). Programs directed at "enabling" individual women to protect themselves and their children are likely to fail at

reducing the incidence of housing insecurity in this population if the systematic causes are not also addressed.

2. **Different issues are foregrounded for women along the pathway of housing insecurity.** A particular value of this longitudinal study is that we were able to follow women through transitions between temporary and (in)secure housing. We learned that although women faced a broad range of issues through all of their experiences, certain factors were in the foreground at certain times, while others were less critical. This suggests that programs need to be designed to respond to the foreground issues if women are going to find them useful and if the programs are going to help ensure housing security.

3. **Indicators of increased or decreased risk are complex and not always opposites of each other.** Indicators of increased risk and decreased risk are often different in important ways that affect program planning. One is not necessarily the reverse of the other. A woman with minimal English (or French) ability, for example, is more isolated and unable to obtain information in a context or system where services and information are not made available in languages other than English (or French). In such a case, lack of language capacity may be a barrier to obtaining crisis housing or to obtaining information from outside of a specific ethnocultural community. Thus, the interventions to decrease risk may not be just language training in a second language, but language training that builds a woman's literacy about her rights and common social problems, such as family violence, that women face in Canada.

4. **Advocacy is key to the ability of immigrant women to end family violence and to obtain secure housing.** Advocacy is important to service accessibility among immigrant women experiencing family violence and housing issues. Networking among service providers, both within and between the different sectors, can support advocacy work by increasing awareness of services among service providers. This could also be assisted by a more broad-level coordination between immigrant serving agencies, family violence, and housing sectors.

Conclusions

This study provides data linking individual level and social level explanations in a model that has utility for program planning and policy review in any setting. A model that would address the need for systemic change, recognition of indicators of risk and indicators of decreased risk separately, the need to address the foregrounded issues, and advocacy is a "one-stop-shop" for family violence intervention. In this model, government and non-government organizations partner and form a new agency where women can be referred, or which they can contact themselves, to obtain information and referral relevant to their specific needs. This model moves beyond a justice system focus on intervention, but includes the justice sector (e.g., police, courts) as partners. The key for the population discussed here is inclusion of local representatives from immigrant serving agencies and from Citizenship and Immigration Canada in the collaboration. Inclusion of ethnocultural and women-centred communities and services in the

governance may ensure long-term success and sustainability. It is necessary that the philosophy and policies are women-centred; that is, that the gendered nature of violence and poverty are understood and the safety of women and children is paramount.

Disclaimer: This summary is part of the final report that has been forwarded to the National Secretariat on Homelessness, the primary funder.

The final report can be found at www.dal.ca/acewh

Notes

1. Even though English and French are official languages in Canada, the participants in this study only cited their ability to speak English.
2. We completed 37 first interviews with immigrant women but 7 of those women did not continue through to the third interview.
3. Due to limited resources, this activity was only planned for Calgary.