

BRIEFING DOCUMENT: USING A GENDERED LENS TO UNDERSTAND HOMELESSNESS IN SURREY

In the fall and winter of 2016, the Surrey Vulnerable Women and Girls (SVWG) Working Group conducted a series of interviews and a focus group with outreach workers and shelter managers in Surrey. The purpose of the consultation was to get an update on how homelessness is impacting women and girls in the community. It was also an opportunity to hear about what service providers think is needed in Surrey to serve women and girls better.

The content for this briefing document is based primarily on comments from service providers and reflects their perspectives from working on the front line. Homeless Count data, limited as it is, is included to support the commentary.

HOMELESS COUNT NUMBERS

Gender based data for Surrey for the 2017 Homeless Count is not yet available. It is expected in the summer. Here is what we know so far:

- According to the preliminary 2017 Homeless Count report 607 women who are experiencing homelessness and answered this question on the survey were enumerated in Metro Vancouver on Count Day. This represents 27% of the total number of homeless people in the region.
- 602 people experiencing homelessness were counted in Surrey in 2017.
- In 2014, 37% (150) of the 403 people who were counted during the Homeless Count in Surrey were female.
- Keep in mind that the Homeless Count is always an undercount and it is really identifying the minimum number of people who are homeless at a given point in time. Women, in particular are often undercounted in Homeless Counts because they do not present in the same way as men.

CURRENT TRENDS AND EMERGING ISSUES

Service providers report that the number of women and female youth they are seeing on the street in Surrey is increasing and most existing services for people who are homeless are “bursting at the seams”. This reflects the overall increase in homelessness in Surrey and also a shifting proportion. Service providers report that women and female youth seem to be making up an increasing proportion of the homeless population. They are also saying that:

- Women on the street appear to be suffering more acute health issues, such as addiction, chronic illness and mental illness than their male counterparts.

- The 135A Street tent city is being used increasingly by women and female youth. This may be partly because it is perceived as a safe place (safety in numbers) and partly because there are fewer rules than at a shelter.
- Women seem to be banding together more and social media is a key way for them to stay connected.
- Street drugs are increasingly stronger and the violence is worse than ever for women on the street. Service providers who work with women in Surrey believe that these two factors are directly related.
- The pay for street level sex work is currently very low. As a result, a woman who works on the street may agree to more dangerous situations to make more money, especially if she has drug dealer debts.
- “The Strip” is now everywhere in Surrey – not just 135 A Street; this means that vulnerable women are often living and working on the street in isolated areas of Surrey.

Service providers describe women who are experiencing homelessness:

- They can be more difficult to engage in service, partly because they may be looking after others and sometimes because of the severity of their addiction(s).
- The number of Indigenous women, who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, presenting with children is on the increase.
- Generally women will ask for what they need, especially if they have children, as opposed to men who will often not ask for what they need.
- Women generally tend to have more belongings than men.
- There are more women who are older on the streets than in the past. This may be the result of increased health among women experiencing chronic homelessness – they are living longer. It may also be the result of more senior women becoming homeless due to the housing crisis in the region.

Service providers talked about how violence affects the lives of women and female youth:

- Indigenous women who are homeless, or at risk of homelessness, have often experienced high levels of violence.
- At women-serving organizations staff members are seeing increasing numbers of immigrant women who are choosing to leave their husbands because of domestic violence.
- Severely addicted women in the street level sex trade are experiencing increasing levels of violence.

Service providers reported on vulnerable and homeless female youth in Surrey:

- Sexual exploitation of female youth is occurring more indoors, in Surrey hotels, rather than on the street.
- Some younger women are self-organizing their sex work.
- With the current opioid crisis, overdosing is becoming normalized for young people. It has not become a disincentive for drug use.
- Younger women do not access service as readily as older women.

THE RESPONSE TO SEXUAL ASSAULT AND VICTIMIZATION

Service providers in Surrey report that the current response to sexual assault and victimization of homeless women and girls in Surrey is not adequate. Police response varies, depending on the officer. There are reports of competent and supportive assistance as well as reports of victim blaming and lack of knowledge and training demonstrated by RCMP officers in Surrey. In addition, service providers report that Victim's Services can be slow in responding. The process for reporting is complex and often traumatizes the woman who has been assaulted even further. For the victim, the result is often not worth the effort required for reporting.

WHAT SERVICES DO WE NEED FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS IN SURREY?

There are some excellent services for women and girls in Surrey but there are still many unmet needs in the community. Service providers recommend that the following services and projects be developed for women and girls who are experiencing homelessness, or who are at risk of homelessness, in Surrey:

1. Shelter beds for women that are open during the day.
2. Mobile services for health and safety – for women on the streets throughout the city. (*Surrey Women's Centre is currently seeking funding to develop a mobile service van for sex workers in Surrey*).
3. A 24-hour women-only drop-in.
4. Enhanced Victim's Services with wrap around services.
5. Opportunities for ongoing training for outreach workers and shelter staff in: understanding sexual assault, exploitation, and victimization; safety planning for women who are fleeing violence; cultural safety, and trauma informed care.
6. Specifically for youth: A safe house for youth who are younger (13- 15); a house for girls and young women exiting exploitation and addiction with wrap around services - counselling and mental health workers on site; an intervention team (Yankee team) for sexually exploited and at-risk youth in Surrey - with RCMP, youth and trauma counselling, and a nurse involved; more

supports for youth aging out of care; and, more focus on communicating with vulnerable youth on social media.

7. Continued efforts to employ shelter staff and outreach workers who are Indigenous and/or who have lived experience.
8. More options for women's addictions treatment including second stage housing with recovery for women.
9. More accessible mental health services for women and youth.
10. More affordable transportation options, especially for those with children.
11. Public toilets and women-only bathrooms, showers and laundry facilities.
12. Free women's products (e.g. tampons) and harm reduction supplies (e.g. condoms, clean needles).
13. Implementing a "no wrong door" approach to service access.
14. Increasing public awareness of women and girls who are experiencing homelessness and ongoing anti-stigma publicity.

NEXT STEPS:

The SVWG Working Group will actively support the non-profit sector and government to address the service gaps for women and girls listed above. We will also continue to dialogue with women and girls with lived street experience to inform these projects and services as they are developed.

About the Surrey Vulnerable Women and Girls Working Group

The Surrey Vulnerable Women and Girls (SVWG) Working Group formed in 2012 to collaboratively understand the challenges and needs of vulnerable females in Surrey and find workable solutions. In 2014/2015 the working-group undertook "**In Their Own Words**" a research project about the challenges/barriers vulnerable women and youth experienced and the services and housing they need.

The following organizations are represented on the SVWG Working Group: Atira Women's Services, BC Housing, City of Surrey – Public Safety & Social Planning, DIVERSEcity, Elizabeth Fry Society, Fraser Health Authority – Surrey Mental Health and Substance Use Services, Lookout Emergency Aid Society, MCFD, Nightshift Ministries, Options Community Services, Pacific Community Resources Society, Public Safety Canada, Surrey RCMP, Surrey Women's Centre, and the YWCA.

For more information about the SVWG Working Group contact Co-Chairs Michelle Shaw at MShaw@pcrs.ca and Bonnie Moriarty at Bonnie.Moriarty@elizabethfry.com.