



UNIVERSITY OF  
CALGARY

Health Equity HUB

# **Inn from the Cold: A long-term community-led research relationship to co-create solutions to family homelessness**

Case Study

## Background

Family homelessness is a critical and complex issue, with families and children being the fastest-growing demographic experiencing homelessness in Canada. In Calgary, it was estimated that 3,000 individuals in families experienced homelessness in 2023, representing 20% of the city's total homeless population. Over 90% of families in shelters are headed by women, who are at higher risk of experiencing homelessness due to factors such as domestic violence, financial insecurity, gender discrimination in employment, and systemic barriers in accessing support services.

Since 2010, academic members from the Health Equity Hub at the O'Brien Institute for Public Health have collaborated with *Inn from the Cold*, a Calgary-based organization addressing family homelessness. This partnership has resulted in three interrelated studies exploring the experiences of different equity-deserving groups disproportionately affected by homelessness, including women experiencing domestic violence, Indigenous families, and refugee families. A fourth study is currently underway, focusing on family homelessness and the child welfare system.

## Methodology

The community-based research studies have predominantly employed qualitative methods (such as interviews), with some quantitative methods (e.g., surveys and analyses of housing retention rates). The ongoing study on the child welfare system applies an institutional ethnography approach, which involves policy analysis of provincial legislation, a review of child welfare annual reports, and mapping policy intent against the lived experiences of families experiencing homelessness and staff working on these issues.

## Key findings

Common pathways into homelessness for families have emerged across all studies. Many families face structural barriers in housing, immigration, child welfare, healthcare, and education systems, where racism and discrimination further limit access to services. Domestic violence is a primary factor forcing women into homelessness, often exacerbated by a lack of financial resources and social support. Women experiencing homelessness face unique challenges, including lower education levels, high unemployment rates, and childcare responsibilities that restrict their ability to secure stable housing. Many also experienced recurring periods of housing insecurity and homelessness, struggling to compete for affordable housing options.

Newcomer women often face challenges related to limited employment opportunities, domestic violence, and barriers to support services. Immigration policies tend to penalize women who leave abusive relationships, forcing many to remain with violent partners to retain sponsorship benefits. Policies also fail to address gender-specific vulnerabilities which leaves many newcomer mothers trapped in cycles of homelessness and violence. Gaps in federal, provincial, and municipal responsibilities further exacerbate these challenges.

Women navigating homelessness often face racism and discrimination, with many fearing eviction and violence from landlords. Anti-discrimination policies frequently fail to account for the impacts of colonialism, intergenerational trauma, and systemic racism on Indigenous families, yet Indigenous women are ten times more likely to experience homelessness than non-Indigenous women.

## **Policy recommendations**

A multi-level, coordinated approach is necessary to prevent and address family homelessness:

### Collaboration

- Improve interagency collaborations between homelessness services, legal aid, education, and healthcare sectors.
- Expand and enhance the continuum of care by strengthening partnerships between shelters, immigration/settlement agencies, and housing providers.

### Housing

- Provide flexible funding and housing supports that follow families through their journey of homelessness, reducing the risk of recurrent homelessness.
- Increase investments in affordable housing and ensure accessible financial benefits for low-income families.

### Policies and Procedures

- Implement gender-responsive, culturally safe and trauma-informed services within housing and social programs to better support families.
- Address policy gaps in immigration, social assistance, and child welfare to prevent unintended consequences that push women and families into homelessness.

## **Why community-led research?**

Community-led, participatory research ensures that findings directly influence service delivery, helping to break down power imbalances between researchers and participants while fostering trust. By centering the voices of families experiencing homelessness and nurturing long-term partnerships between academia and frontline service providers, this research has generated actionable insights that continue to inform the prevention and response to homelessness. For example, shelters are increasingly prioritizing rapid housing access over prolonged shelter stays, forming partnerships with landlords and acquiring housing. Enhanced case management also helps families navigate complex systems, including immigration and legal aid, with some shelters hiring immigration and legal experts to provide specialized support for refugee families.

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