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A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF HOMELESSNESS FOR WOMEN IN TORONTO

Most academic articles and research studies dedicated to the topic of homelessness in Toronto focus on homeless men; single males are overrepresented on the streets, as seen in a survey conducted by Street Needs Assessment, City of Toronto (2018). Homeless women are being referenced as the 'hidden homeless' because they aren't represented as visibly on the streets as men; their shadow existence also means that women are barely represented in the media – only 19% of articles on homelessness are dedicated to this category of homeless (SNA, 2018).



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INTRODUCTION

Realizing this lack of gender-specific research, I aim to study the causes that led to homelessness of women as well as the issues that arise during their assimilation back into mainstream society. Another facet of this study is the subtle social constructs that govern how women are seen and reacted to in everyday life; this includes the perceived gender roles in society. To understand these social constructs and the effects they have on homeless women, we need to take a closer examination of intersectionality; "the complex, cumulative way in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination (such as racism, sexism, and classism) combine, overlap, or intersect especially in the experiences of marginalized individuals or groups," (Merriam-Webster).

OBJECTIVE

In this paper, I present my analysis in three sections, arranged around the themes of violence/abuse, pregnancy/children, and substance use.

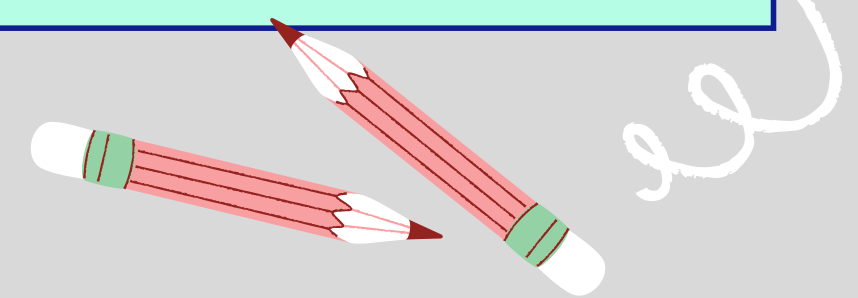
METHODOLOGY

I compiled 30 news articles from various Toronto newspapers and magazines as the key component to the archive which consists of news articles, government reports.

In addition, I conducted interviews with participants who were chosen from social institutions in Toronto that help women find permanent housing or provide shelters for the homeless population.

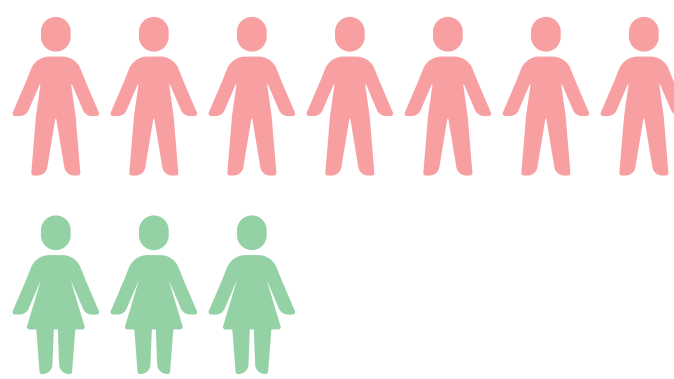
ABUSE AND VIOLENCE

Women, ages 16 and up, with and without children are considered the majority of 'hidden homeless' because they will go to extreme lengths to avoid living on the streets with its increased risk of sexual violence (Street Needs Assessment, 2018). Homeless women are subjected to a kind of violence that is not as experienced by men. It affects their mental and physical state, making it hard to move on. To avoid staying on the streets and risking sexual assault or moving to shelters, abused women tend to stay with friends or family and most times, still with the abuser.



CLOUD OF GRIEF

Most homeless women decide not to disclose their homeless status for fear of having the healthcare workers be biased against them. Women grieving over the loss of their children, whether they were taken away from them or they died, have a hard time pulling themselves out of their depressive slump. As most homeless women have their children with them, the stereotypes and stigma are doubled. With daycare centers not being subsidized, homeless women are limited in the types of jobs they can have as they need to take care of their children.



Although statistics show that 70% of homelessness are men with 29% being women, this number is skewed when taking into account the hidden homeless (Demographic Data Project, 2019).

SUBSTANCE USE

With fewer detox beds, women have a harder time quitting their substance use. As mentioned multiple times during the interviews, there is only 1 detox bed center available solely to women in Toronto and it is not very accessible as the wait time are hours long. With long wait times, women already start to feel the effects of withdrawal which forces them to leave and relapse.

CONCLUSION

To aid those without adequate housing, the different intersections and layers need to be examined; the gender specific struggles need to be considered as social and cultural processes make it difficult to navigate life as a women, doubly so for homeless women. Taking apart these stereotypes, stigmas and norms will allow homeless women to get the help the need and the support to get back on their feet and ease their assimilation back into mainstream society.

References

Demographic Data Project: Gender and Individual Homelessness. (2019, September 30). Retrieved from <https://endhomelessness.org/demographic-data-project-gender-and-individual-homelessness/>

Toronto Street Needs Assessment 2018 Results Report. (2018). Toronto Street Needs Assessment 2018 Results Report. Toronto, Ontario.

