

Saskatchewan's Housing Crisis

Addressing the Needs of Women and Children Who Have Experienced Violence

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Introduction

In Saskatchewan, homelessness has become a grave concern and a serious reality for many women and children. Saskatchewan has the highest rates of homelessness in the country with one in five people saying that they are homeless or at risk of being homeless (Salvation Army, 2010). In the past 3 years in Saskatchewan the vacancy rate has been dropping with the rate for 2009 being 1.5%. Regina and Saskatoon have vacancy rates below 1% (HRSDC, 2010).

In Saskatchewan, people regularly pay more than 50% of their income on housing. This percentage is even higher for people receiving social assistance.

Homelessness is compounded by poverty. More than 41% of female-headed lone-parent families in Saskatchewan struggle to provide the basic needs of their families because they live below the poverty line (Child and Family Fact Sheet, 2009). Saskatchewan has the third highest child poverty rate in Canada (Child and Family Poverty Fact Sheet, 2009).

With sky-rocketing home ownership costs and a constantly decreasing availability of safe and affordable housing, the women and children of Saskatchewan who are attempting to exit abusive situations are faced with incredible challenges.

If women cannot find adequate and affordable housing their chances of succeeding in leading lives free from violence are diminished. While the causes and consequences of violence against women exist beyond housing, there is no question that without an adequate, suitable and affordable home to which one can escape, women are choosing to stay in violent relationships or return to abusive partners because they feel they have no other option.

The Study

A study published by PATHS in 2010 provided an in-depth understanding of the intersection between homelessness and the experiences and perceptions of women who have experienced violence by an intimate partner in Saskatchewan.

Thirty-five women who had experienced intimate partner abuse and were accessing sheltering services in Saskatchewan participated in individual interviews addressing both their experiences with abuse and in attempting to access safe, adequate, and affordable housing after exiting an abusive relationship. The situations experienced by the women can clearly be defined as homelessness.

Themes

Eight key themes relating to homelessness in the context of intimate partner abuse emerged from the data.

1. Landlord Issues
2. Living Conditions
3. Consequences of Abusers' Actions
4. Dealing with Addictions
5. The Importance of Family and Children
6. Despair vs. Optimism
7. Neighbourhoods and Communities
8. The Need for Quality Support Systems.

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Recommendations

The conditions described by the women illustrate that we are clearly in a housing crisis in Saskatchewan. These circumstances were reported by women throughout the province - urban, rural, on reserve, off reserve. Listening to their stories causes us to ask the questions, "Is this the kind of society in which we want to live?" "Are these the kind of communities we want to create?" "What can decision-makers and professional helpers do to ensure that women and their children who have experienced violence can access housing so that they do not feel that living with an abusive partner is their only choice?"

For the women interviewed, the emergency shelter was their first point of contact in leaving their abusive relationship. **The following recommendations based on the women's stories are aimed at addressing the policy questions that will enable women to take the next step after shelter.**

- **Rent Control:** Enact rent controls which would work for both landlords and tenants. Saskatchewan citizens deserve the same protection as the 80% of Canadians living in communities which already have rent control.
- **End the Practice of Converting Existing Apartment Buildings into Condominiums:** Turning already scarce rental units into homes for purchase further reduces accommodation options for those with low incomes.
- **Rules and Regulations for the Upkeep for Rental Accommodations:** A stringent set of rules should be enforced to ensure that no resident of Saskatchewan is allowed to live in poor and unacceptable conditions. A rental property registry system would help ensure properties are maintained according to building codes.
- **Access to Safe, Adequate and Affordable Housing:** All levels of government need to commit to ensuring that Canadians, and particularly vulnerable Canadians, have access to safe, affordable housing where they can live with dignity and security. We need a federal housing policy that includes financial support for affordable housing. We could increase the supply of not-for-profit social housing through government housing corporations, community based organizations, and housing cooperatives.
- **Liveable Income:** After exiting abusive situations, many women and children struggle with poverty, a barrier that makes it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to live successfully free from violence. Comprehensive and innovative approaches to extending and strengthening the income security safety net are required.
- **Supportive Housing Programs:** Housing programmes should include supports for women who have experienced violence, which would be sensitive to their needs and provide creative options to address their situations, including innovative addiction counselling and social support approaches.
- **Advocates:** Women should have access to advocates who understand the women's circumstances and can assist them to find housing and access other supports, programmes, and resources.
- **Neighbourhoods:** Make neighbourhoods welcoming and safe, through funding community associations, church programs and community policing initiatives. People need nearby services and opportunities for participation in community activities and dialogue with local decision makers.
- **Public Awareness and Education:** Everyone should be made aware of the challenges women face in finding safe, affordable housing after exiting an abusive situation. Tenants should also be provided with information about their rights and responsibilities.

The Provincial Association of Transition Houses and Services of Saskatchewan supports Transition and Interval Houses and Second Stage Housing that provide services to abused women and their children.

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