"Don't tell them you're homeless"

Experiences of gender-based violence among women experiencing homelessness in Waterloo Region

Research Team Members

Research Lead:
Jennifer Gordon
Director of Advocacy, YW Kitchener-Waterloo

Racheal Walser
Advocacy Coordinator, YW Kitchener-Waterloo

Kate Crozier
Director of Programs,
Community Justice Initiatives Waterloo Region

Roz Gunn
Director of Communications and Advocacy,
YWCA Cambridge

Suggested Citation

Gordon, J., Walser, R., Crozier, K., Gunn, R. (2022). Project Willow: Experiences of Gender-Based Violence Among Homeless Women in Waterloo Region. Waterloo Region: YW Kitchener-Waterloo.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank Women and Gender Equality Canada for funding this research as part of our larger initiative, Project Willow, focused on creating a collaborative community safety and justice plan to support unhoused or homeless women experiencing gender-based violence. We would also like to acknowledge the contributions of the participants who shared their experience and expertise making this report possible.

Women and Gender Equality Canada

Femmes et Égalité des genres Canada

Contents

Introduction 1

Methodology 2

Demographics 5

Results 6

Defining the violence 6

Frequency of violence 7

Types of violence 8

Where is it happening? 12

Layers of violence 13

Ripple effect of violence 14

Failure of prevention and diversion services 16

Avoiding homelessness and emergency shelters 17

Missing out on needed services 19

Perpetrating violence 21

Impact on mental health 22

How women are dealing with violence (or the threat of it) 23

Support network 24

Safety rituals 27

Coping through substance use 30

Experience of the justice system. 37

Moving forward in this work. 44

Restorative justice 44

Systemic changes for safety 50

Attitudinal shift around shelter use by service providers 51

Mental health and physical health supports 52

Enhancing safety measures 53

Recreational and life skills programming. 56

Expanding models 56

Emergency phones 59

Stronger engagement among systems 59

Housing priority 61

Our commitment 62

Introduction

This report captures the experiences of women (cis, trans, two-spirit) and gender-diverse individuals as they navigate safety, violence and justice while being homeless or unhoused and using emergency services in Waterloo Region.

It explores topics like the frequency of violence, how current systems and policies perpetuate violence, and what sort of change is recommended for our community to build necessary safety and trauma supports into emergency shelter services in order to provide better support to shelter users. This report is based on participants' experiences with gender-based violence, focusing on all the different forms it takes, such as physical violence, verbal violence, emotional/mental violence, sexual violence, spiritual/religious violence, financial violence, racism, homophobia, and transphobia. This research highlights the shortcomings of current systems of support and provides recommendations on how to build emergency services that address, mitigate and prevent experiences of gender-based violence.

It is rare to be able to capture such a candid and extensive account of what it is like for women experiencing homelessness in our community, especially as they navigate gender-based violence. We are thankful for every person who took the time to share their experience, to advocate for themselves and for better systems and to help guide this project and the change it hopes to help facilitate in Waterloo Region. This research is one part of a larger initiative called Project Willow, funded by Women and Gender Equality Canada, that will build community capacity and rally stakeholders to develop a community plan to enhance safety and access to justice for women experiencing housing instability because of violence, as well as those who experience magnified violence because of their housing instability.

> ***"I feel like I am abusing myself but I also feel like everyone is abusing me."***
>
> — Survey participant

Methodology

The criteria for participation in this research was identifying as a women (cis, trans, two-spirit) or gender-diverse individual who have recently used (within the last three years) or were currently using (between December 2021 and February 2022) the YW KW emergency shelter and services. Participants who qualified were engaged to patriciate in a multi-question survey and/or semi-structured interviews.

The project was led by the Director of Advocacy at the YW KW, Jennifer Gordon, who is an experienced researcher with over ten years of experience in academic and community research settings and with research ethics around human participants. All researchers involved in collecting data received TCPS2 training, the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans. This is a certificate research ethics training developed and used by federal agencies CIHR, NSWERC and SSHRC. Researchers also kept reflexive journals, highlighting and addressing any concerns as the research progressed. All concerns were addressed and acted upon by committee. A built-in process for complaints and feedback regarding ethics was developed, encouraging participants to communicate any concerns to the lead researcher as well as giving the option to escalate their concerns to a once-removed governance committee comprised of the CEOs of YW KW and YWCA Cambridge.

Participation was voluntary. We used posters and word-of-mouth to advertise the opportunity for participation and our research assistant helped to ensure folks staying at the shelter were aware of the poster and made themselves available to answer any questions regarding the research. It was made clear to participants that there was no obligation to participate and that there were no consequences if they declined to participate or stopped their participation at any point in the process. We wanted to ensure participants felt they could be honest in their opinions and share freely without any perceived consequences. While most of our participants were staying in the YW KW emergency shelter at the time of engagement, we also asked several other organizations to share information about the project with those who may have recently left the shelter system, including YWCA Cambridge, Sanguen Health Centre, The Working Centre, Cambridge Shelter Corp, and ACCKWA.

Surveys were completed online via a web link which was accessed on provided tablets as well as on paper copies, which were then inputted into the online survey platform. Interviews were conducted over zoom, typically with the participant using a landline phone to call in. Interviews were also recorded with consent and transcripts of these recordings were produced. Real wage compensation was provided to all participants for their time in the form of gift cards.

In total, 48 participants completed the survey, another 13 completed interviews, three of these interviews were conducted mid 2020 during exploratory research intended to inform this project.

"If somebody is going through trauma, it's somebody put that on them. Right? Yeah. I guess sometimes we will return to situations that are no good for us, but it still doesn't really make it our fault, though. It's just, it's part of the process."

— Interview participant 8

Demographics

The anticipated participants in this research were current or recent (within the last three years) service users of the YW KW emergency shelter with a majority of participants staying in the emergency shelter at the time of this research. We collected demographics for our survey participants.

Of the 48 participants, 21, or 45%, had been homeless for over a year at the point of participation; 13 participants had been homeless for six to 12 months, nine had been homeless for four to six months; and four had been homeless for less than three months. A majority, 89%, were between the ages of 25–54; two participants were between 18–24; two participants were between 55–64; and one participant was 65+. In total, 88% of participants self-reported as having a mental health condition and 31% of participants identified as having a disability. In terms of gender identity, 86% of participants identified as a woman and 13% identified as trans or non-binary. Regarding race, 67% of participants identified as white; 4% identified as Black-African; 4% as First Nations, Inuit or Metis and 16% had a mixed heritage. We did not collect demographics for our interview participants due to the small nature of our sample and in the interest of protecting their identities.

To better understand the geographic representation of participants, we asked where participants were spending most of their time. Unsurprisingly, 38 out of 48 participants stated they were spending most of their time in Kitchener, also the location of the YW KW emergency shelter. Three participants stated that they were spending most of their time in Waterloo, and seven participants spent most of their time in Cambridge.

We recognize that, while this research fairly accurately represents the demographics of the folks accessing the YW KW emergency shelter services at the time it was collected, it does present a rather specific group of experiences from a demographics standpoint. Further understanding is needed on the experiences of women and gender-diverse individuals who are experiencing homelessness and choosing to not use emergency shelter services. This form of homelessness tends to remain hidden and is common for women, particularly those from nondominant cultural backgrounds and gender-diverse/LGBTQS2+ people. We encourage readers to carry this critical analysis with them as they read this report and reflect.

Results

Defining the violence

Our community understanding of the experiences of homeless women is limited, even more so when we talk about their experiences of violence. One participant considered the difference between men and women's homelessness resting on the experience of gender-based violence itself:

> ***"The difference is sexual harassment and rape. Just overall being weaker. And yes, they [women] were put in more danger just by size alone. Men are obviously bigger, stronger, more capable to take advantage. And it happens a lot and happens often and it sucks."***
>
> — Interview participant 13

Another participant talked about always feeling vulnerable and scared:

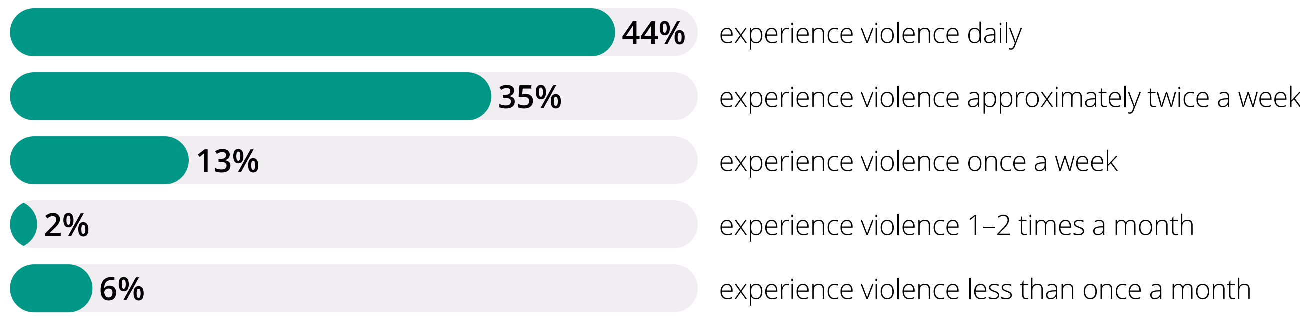
> ***"Everybody's got their own backgrounds, their own lives, their own stories, right? So you run into everybody, and I know not everyone is harmful. But when you're already on edge, and you're scared, and you're nervous, and you've got nowhere to go, and you're just running into people that are from all different walks of life, who may hurt you … "***
>
> — Interview participant 5

Frequency of violence

Responses to our survey showed that the vast majority of women who are currently or recently considered homeless or unhoused experience violence daily or weekly (92%). Broken down: 44% of respondents said they experience violence daily, 35% experience violence approximately twice a week, 13% experience violence once a week, and 8% experienced violence 2 times a month or less.

Figure 1: Frequency of violence experienced

How often do you experience any of the types violence from the last question (physical, verbal, emotional/mental, sexual, spiritual, financial, racism, homophobia and/or transphobia)?

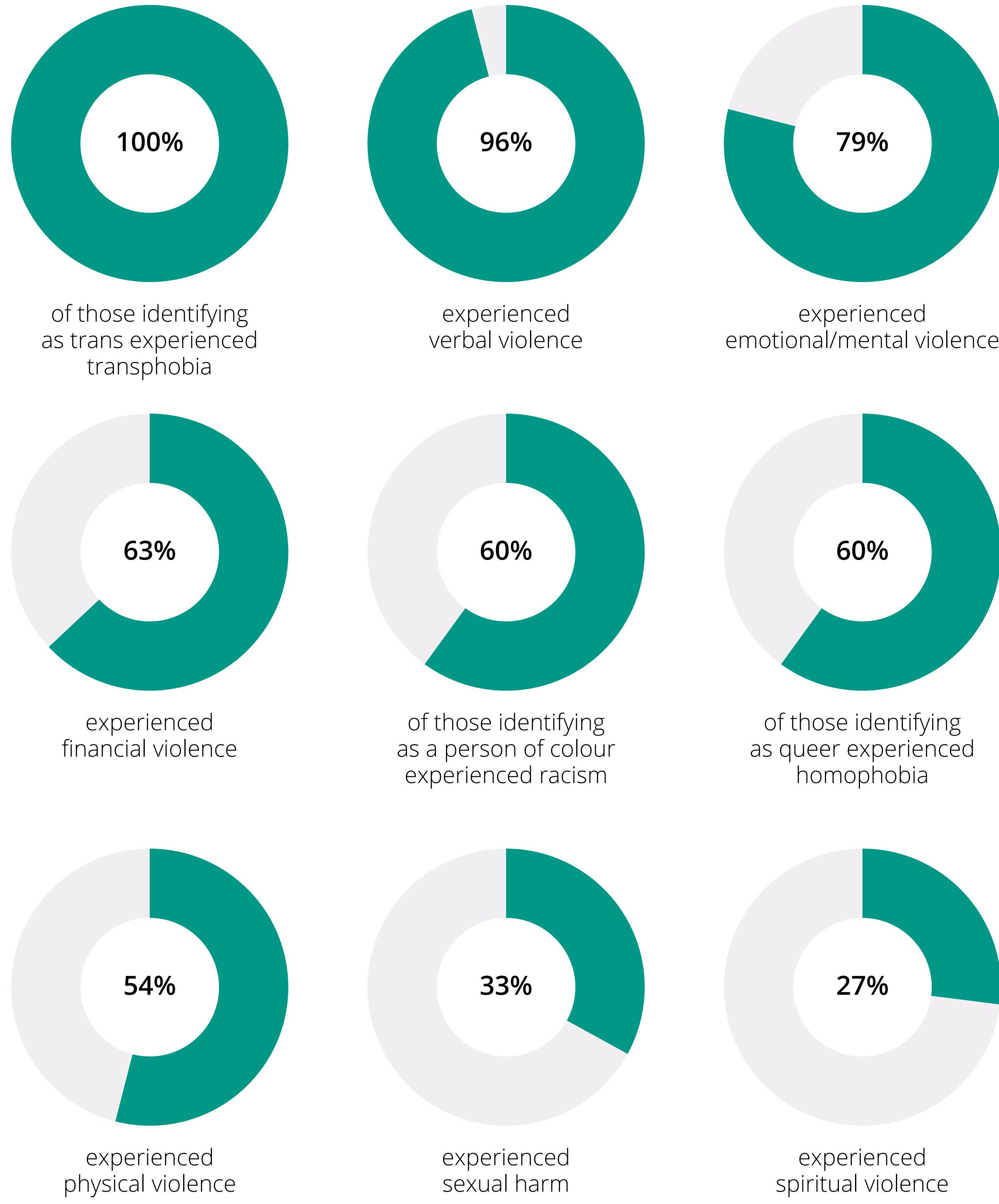


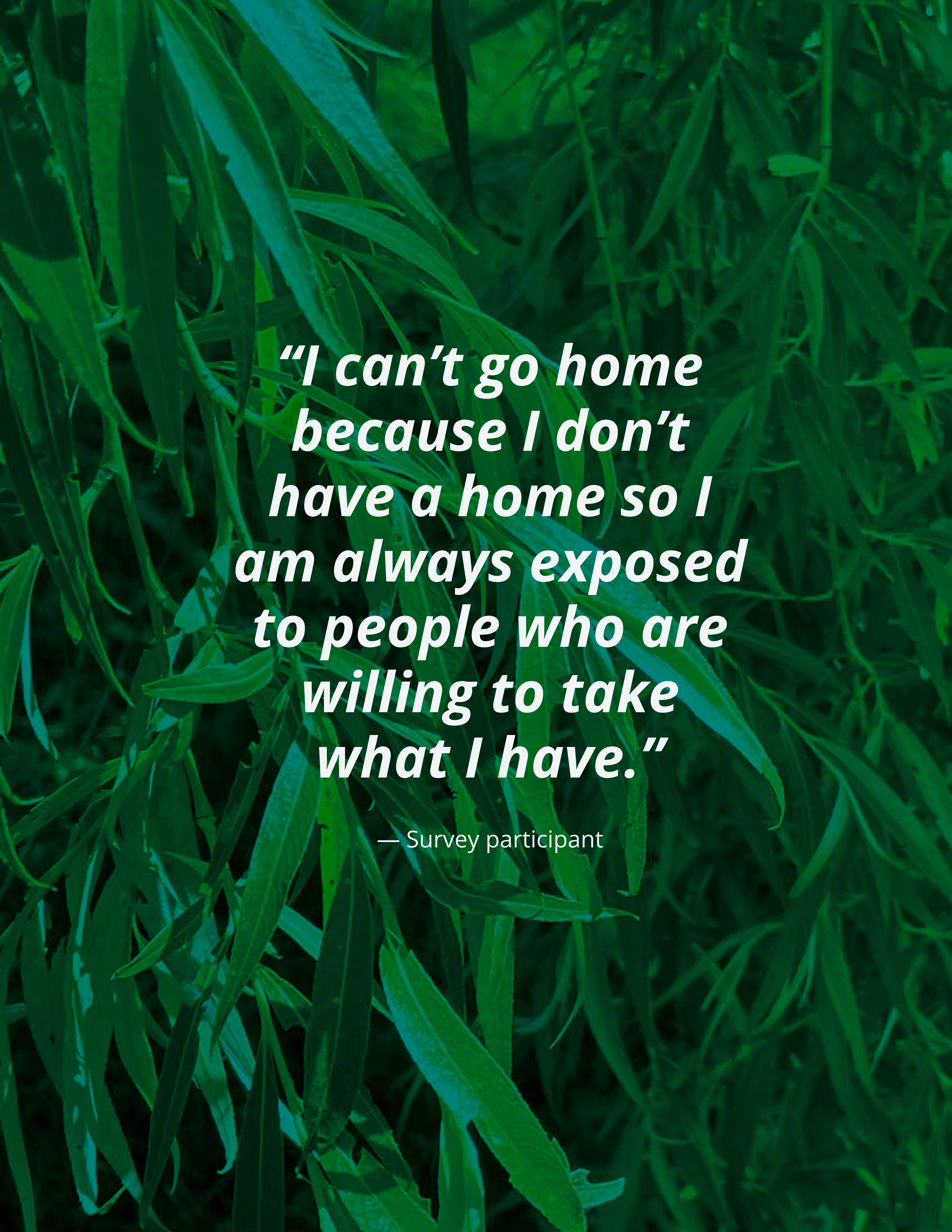
> ***"It happens all the time, like on the streets, like every day on every street. Like every time you walk down the sidewalk. More so in a larger city like Kitchener."***
>
> — Interview participant 6

Types of violence

Figure 2: Types of violence experienced

Based on your experiences, what types of violence might you experience on any given day?





"I can't go home because I don't have a home so I am always exposed to people who are willing to take what I have."

— Survey participant

Our survey asked participants what types of violence they may experience in a given day, week or month and most participants reported experiencing multiple types of violence. The most common type of violence experienced was verbal violence, characterized by yelling, name-calling, shaming, etc., with 96% of participants reporting experiencing it, sometimes from peers or partners, but also sometimes from strangers on the street:

> ***"You can't see verbal abuse. Exactly. Yeah, like for how old I am, I'm 46, I shouldn't look this way. Yeah, so much I've had to put up with, people putting me down and verbally abusing me."***
>
> — Interview participant 7

The second most common type of violence experienced was emotional/mental violence, which was experienced by 79% of participants. Emotional/mental violence was defined as things like controlling your every move, overreacting to things you say, making you feel insecure or little, etc. One participant shared:

> ***You know, in my younger days, I never said nothing. I spent many years in abuse and just kind of smile it away. Right? Yeah, I guess at some point you can't smile anymore. You can't hide it, right?"***
>
> — Interview participant 10

Participants also talked about financial violence, 63% of participants reported having experienced it. Financial violence was characterized by someone taking all of your money, controlling how you use your money or denying you access to your money. Financial violence was identified as happening in intimate relationships, but also from a systemic lens in terms of the limited income they can collect from OW/ODSP and the strict stipulations on how it be used.

Physical violence was experienced by 54% of participants and was defined by things like hitting, punching, beating, kicking, burning or using objects or weapons to inflict harm.

Sexual violence was experienced by 33% of participants on any given day, week or month and spiritual/religious violence, characterized by the use of your spiritual or religious beliefs to hurt, scare or control you, was experienced by 27% of participants.

When it came to racism, 60% of those identifying as a person of colour experienced racism in a given week. Sixty percent of those identifying as queer identified homophobia as a regular weekly violence they experienced and 100% of those identifying as trans in the survey and in our interviews stated that they experienced transphobia on a daily basis. One trans participant shared important words around building acceptance for trans identity:

> ***"There needs to be like a big group meeting for the world so they can open up their eyes and ears to know that these aliens called trans gay weird fruit people exist. I've been here the whole time. We've just been in hiding... But we're at a stage now in the world where like, we are past that. Okay, that idea is long since gone. It's dead now. Yeah. So people need to move forward. They need to accept that whether they want to or not, because the world is gonna keep moving."***
>
> — Interview participant 6

Where is it happening?

Identifying the physical spaces where violence is happening in the community came with the answer of anywhere and seemingly everywhere. This is largely attributed to the lack of safety that comes with being vulnerable and completely exposed without a space to shelter that you can control. So everywhere came with a sense of risk:

> ***"There are no real safe places in the community"***
>
> — Survey participant

> ***"I think I am so nervous everywhere because I have been humiliated so badly the last six months"***
>
> — Survey participant

Participants also talked about shelters feeling unsafe, particularly co-ed shelters and spaces where they are sharing a room with multiple other strangers. Other community services that are more dominated by men were also identified as often feeling unsafe. Motel environments were included in this, with safety concerns largely attributed to drug use and dealing happening at these sites. Participants also talked at length about feeling unsafe in private homes or dwellings, particularly if drugs are involved:

> ***"Violent people can be in a lot of places, but mostly, but mostly crack houses or the more rough places that you don't want to be hanging out in. You know, I don't do dark alleys late, late at night by yourself. You always want to be with somebody..."***
>
> — Interview participant 1

Layers of violence

What we discovered through the survey and conversations with women was that there are layers of violence experienced by participants in this research. On any given day, they can experience unique episodes of many of the different types of violence, and they can experience it at the hands of many different people (felt to be anyone and everyone) and systems. Further, they can experience it almost anywhere in the community. This constant trauma comes to define much of the existence of being a woman or gender-diverse individual and being homeless in Waterloo Region:

> ***"You do not know how much actual physical, emotional and financial trauma that each one of us have gone through before we've even been able to have the strength and the courage to walk through these doors. Okay, because unless you've been through it yourself, then you don't know it."***
>
> — Interview participant 6

This layered experience of violence has made safety an important priority for 92% of participants, a sentiment reiterated by one of our interview participants:

> ***"I can say very happy to hear that you guys are wanting to address the safety of women in general because the violence has escalated and I'm glad to see someone finally take initiative to start taking notice, though we've already lost too many people"***
>
> — Interview Participant 1

Ripple effect of violence

The research team was interested in understanding and documenting the ripple effect of the violence being experienced by women experiencing homelessness, particularly how violence and the quest for safety from violence impacted decision-making, access to necessary services, and how participants themselves perpetrated violence for their own safety.

When we flush this out, decision-making was often done with the goal of reducing experiences of violence or greater harm or was manipulated through the pathways provided to women, most designed to help them avoid shelter use. Some key themes emerged including: failure of prevention and diversion services, avoiding visible homelessness and emergency shelters, not accessing needed services, and the escalation of violence in the way of using violent acts to create a reputation that people do not want to cross .

Figure 3: Ripple effects of violence

Do any of these things apply to you in your effort to stay safe?

83%	I have stayed in a housing situation that is abusive or violent because it felt safer than being homeless.
73%	I have avoided using co-ed emergency shelter services (such as the one in Cambridge) because of safety concerns.
69%	I have avoided using the police or decided not to report a situation of violence because it felt unsafe.
65%	I have avoided accessing the services and support I need? (ex. food, clothing, medical help, etc.) because I was concerned I would run into an abuser and/or experience violence.
65%	I have avoided spaces that can be male-dominated (ex. soup kitchens, safe consumption sites, co-ed shelters, etc.) because I have felt uncomfortable or concerned for my safety.
61%	I have used one or more prevention programs or services (examples: Rent funds, landlord negotiations, referrals to rooming houses or co-ed spaces, someone who helps you do problem-solving so you can stay in the housing you currently have) that kept me in an unsafe situation in order to avoid becoming homeless or accessing a shelter?
41%	I have made connections with people who are known to be violent as a way to keep myself safe.
41%	I have used violence on others to keep myself safe.

Failure of prevention and diversion services

Participants were asked to comment on their use of prevention and diversion services in Waterloo Region. Diversion services are formal and informal services such as rent funds, landlord negotiations or support, referrals to rooming houses, motels, or co-ed spaces, and staff support to help a person mitigate housing issues so they can stay in their current housing. We wanted to understand if/how these services in their current form, designed to help people avoid homelessness and the shelter system, may contribute to experiences of violence. We found that 60% had used a prevention or deterrent service that actually kept them in a violent or unsafe housing situation.

> ***"Because before, when I come to speak or when I had to go homeless, none of the workers helped me. She actually put me right back into the situation that I told her I was getting away from. Every time I've asked for help, they've denied me, misguided me, led me in the wrong direction."***
>
> — Interview participant 7

For one participant, the shelter she was provided with for her and her daughter was in a motel, regardless of the identified safety risks she shared with the worker:

> ***"The worker from when I came here when I was 32 with my daughter, she was eight. Yeah, I told her my ex is a crack dealer and he's dealing at the Sherwood Hotel. You know where she put me and my daughter? In the Sherwood Hotel."***
>
> — Interview participant 7

Avoiding homelessness and emergency shelters

In total, 83% of participants talked about staying in a housing situation that is abusive or violent because it felt safer than being homeless or using the emergency shelter system.

We found that contributing to this statistic is our make-up of shelter options in Waterloo Region outside of the domestic violence shelter system (which caters specifically to women fleeing domestic violence). Currently, women have two guaranteed options: the YW KW emergency shelter in Kitchener or The Bridges co-ed shelter in Cambridge. When it came to looking at these alternatives to staying in an abusive home, there appeared to be gaps around safety considerations in our emergency shelter systems. Seventy three percent of survey respondents stated they felt unsafe in co-ed shelters and so avoided them. One participant shared about the violence they faced while staying in the co-ed shelter:

> ***"I went there once and the first night I was there I was unfortunate to be raped."***
>
> — Interview participant 6

Another participant shared:

> ***"The women's shelter definitely feels safer than a place with co-ed services to me. I've found if you keep your head down and don't start anything those that seem scary will leave you be."***
>
> — Survey participant

For some participants, however, the women's emergency shelter also felt unsafe, which led them to choose camping and other rough sleeping options instead:

> ***"Sometimes, I camp because even staying in an all-women shelter feels unsafe to me. I feel people recommend the shelter too much because it's the only one and I feel unsafe there sometimes."***
>
> — Survey participant

Sleeping rough or in a tent far in the bush was something several participants talked about doing in order to avoid being identified as homeless, but this came with other risks:

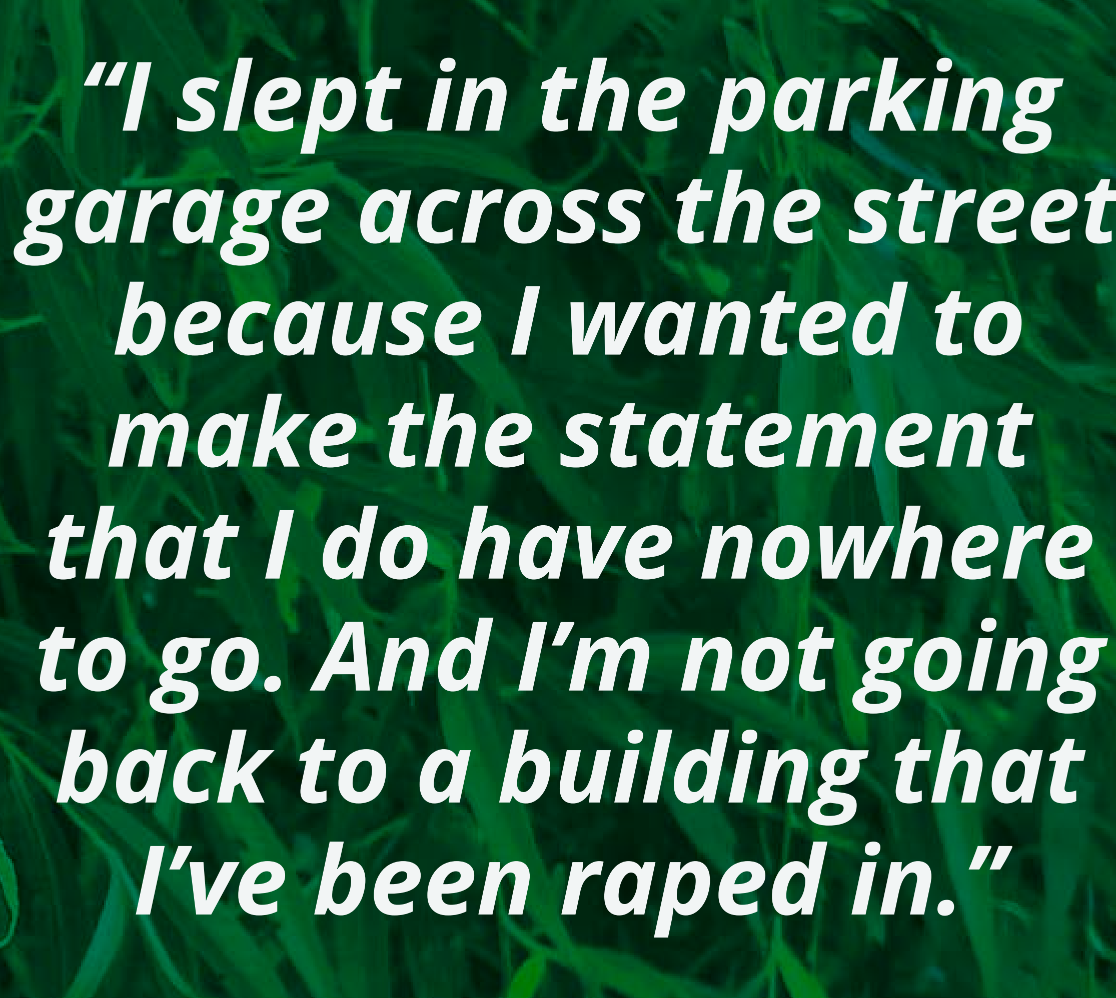
> ***"And I did live in a tent for the four seasons in Canada. And that is not fucking easy to do. If you don't have knowledge of the bush, any knowledge. Like, if you've got no money to start off you're fucked, you're dead. Yeah. Yeah, like point blank."***
>
> — Interview participant 6

Missing out on needed services

Participants talked about male-dominated ("masculinized") spaces or services coming with inherently greater risk should they access them. Sixty four percent of participants said they avoided spaces they perceived to be male-dominated (ex. soup kitchens, meal programs, safe consumption sites, co-ed shelters, etc.) because they had safety concerns. Another 65% stated that they avoided accessing the services and supports they need (ex. food, clothing, medical help, etc.) because they were worried they would run into an abuser and/or experience more violence while trying to access:

> ***"Like any time, yeah I [avoid it]. Mostly the soup kitchen any time I'm there, there's an aggressive situation ..."***
>
> — Interview participant 7

> ***"You know, so I don't want to do the regular people that go there. So just I guess from what I've observed, from my standpoint, men are more comfortable there. Women tend to be a little more cautious. You know, stuff like that."***
>
> — Interview participant 12



"I slept in the parking garage across the street because I wanted to make the statement that I do have nowhere to go. And I'm not going back to a building that I've been raped in."

— Interview participant 6

Perpetrating violence

Perpetrating more intense violence than what they were already experiencing was an avenue for safety for many participants, particularly for those who have been homeless for longer periods of time. A total of 41% of participants reported using violence towards someone else as a perceived way to prevent violence from happening to them. Forty one percent also reported that they strategically engage in relationships and friendships with known violent people as a way to gain protection. One participant recounted the role a violent act she committed played in keeping her safe from others:

> ***"People were like, like she did that tonight? Oh, fear. Yeah. Always. Yeah, there's a lot of people who didn't want to focus on me after that because they thought like I could do some serious damage."***
>
> — Interview participant 13

Participants also talked about keeping weapons on them, just in case, particularly if they didn't have a phone:

> ***"I don't have too many rules, no. I try to carry around a blade but I don't usually have a phone, so..."***
>
> — Interview participant 3

Further, some participants recounted situations where their weapon was critical in helping them get out of an unsafe situation:

> ***"It's only a pellet gun. But I pulled it out. I pulled it out of my backpack. And I said, well follow this. And I pointed it at him and he ran away. I didn't know what he was gonna do to me."***
>
> - Interview Participant 2

Impact on mental health

Mental health concerns were a significant ripple effect of the ongoing threat of violence or experience of it. Eighty eight percent of participants self-reported having mental health concerns. Mental health closely tied to those who had experienced emotional abuse (81% of participants) as well as verbal abuse (98%). Typically, participants' mental health concerns were rooted in past trauma:

> ***"Because you fight back, you're more likely to end up dead. And that's really how I lived the for the first few years of my life by myself. And it caused me a lot of emotional trauma, complex trauma disorder, you know like PTSD."***
>
> — Interview participant 1

However, participants also talked about how their current situation exasperated their mental health. One participant shared this:

> ***"Just an example, when people threaten your life, or beat you up or steal from you or, you know, stick a needle in your arm with something and you're sleeping for 13 hours. Terrifying. You don't know when it's safe to sleep. You don't know. And then you wonder why that person's gone for a week and then they're put back in the room. That same time, you know, it's not like you go tell every staff member because you know, you don't."***
>
> — Interview Participant 5

How women are dealing with violence (or the threat of it)

We asked participants to identify what was the level of their concern for personal safety at the present moment comparative to other stressors in their life, and 92% said it was an important concern to them. When we developed this question, we hadn't anticipated that some participants would be at the point of accepting violence as inevitable and so had given up searching for safety, making it less of a priority for them. One participant stated:

> ***"What's gonna happen is gonna happen. You have no control over it. I can't control if something's gonna happen bad."***
>
> — Interview participant 4

Support network

Participants shared the benefit of talking to people about their situation. Some participants reflected on their younger years when they wanted to stay hidden while experiencing homelessness. As older adults, with more experience, they tend to value talking to staff at social service agencies, to others who could help them, as well as to others who could relate to their experience.

Figure 5: Support networks used

Who do you feel comfortable talking to about your safety concerns and/or experiences of violence?

60%	Staff at social services (e.g., St John's Kitchen, Sanguen, ACCKWA, SOS, YW Shelter, Cambridge Self Help Food Bank, Ray of Hope, etc.)
44%	Other women/trans*/non-binary people experiencing homelessness
33%	Friends
29%	Family
17%	Victim Services
16%	Counsellor/therapists
15%	Crisis Lines (Here 24/7 or SASC)
6%	Hospital staff
4%	Faith leaders
4%	Cultural leaders
2%	Police officers
2%	Paramedics (EMS)
2%	Probation officers

In exploring the support network that participants leaned on for help, we asked who they felt comfortable talking to about their safety concerns and/or experience of violence. Topping the list (60% of participants) was staff at social service agencies. One participant shared:

> ***"Yeah, the staff here at the shelter are pretty good that way. Yeah. They, you know, they see a problem or you talk to them, they try to accommodate and help you in any way they can. Yeah."***
>
> — Interview participant 5

Another common support identified by 44% of participants were their peers, other women/trans/non-binary people experiencing homelessness. Friends were identified by 33% of participants and 29% identified their family as being part of their support network.

However, numerous participants felt like they didn't have a support network at all. This was especially visible in survey responses where participants would write in answers about keeping to themselves, not trusting anyone, not talking to others about their violence or, as one participant shared, that people already knew about their experience and didn't care:

> ***"I don't really tell other women, they see it happen to me and do nothing to stop it."***
>
> — Survey participant

"This is what I was talking about earlier, eh, because I have a lot of knowledge. And I said, just give me a classroom, right, with just twenty women for one day, right, and just one room with them and me and I would tell them so much, and teach them so much. What I went through and how to deal with it now. Just give me one class."

— Interview Participant 2

Safety rituals

Safety rituals are defined as sets of rules, beliefs or processes that someone follows to reduce the risk of violence and enhance personal safety. Often, these safety rituals are in place because of gaps and shortcomings in systems of support or due to the nature of being a woman in community. To explore the informal ways that participants create or find safety, we asked them what advice, based on their own experiences, they would give to a woman who is newly homeless to help them stay safe. Participants were eager to share what they had learned.

The collective advice given told a grim tale of the sacrifices homeless women make to stay safe:

- ***"You can't trust anyone, not even your friends."***
- ***"I will change the way I present myself in the means of my gender or ethics in order to blend in with an environment in which I believe is violent."***
- ***"Always be fully aware of your surroundings and don't be too trusting of those in similar situations, just be observant."***
- ***"Keep to yourself, most people haven't noticed me because of that and so when conflict happens they leave me out of it."***
- ***"Stay away from drugs and drug dealers."***
- ***"Don't tell people you're homeless, it's like giving them permission to take advantage of you."***
- ***"Keep to yourself until you know who you are dealing with."***
- ***"Be friendly to everyone because then you're never somewhere you don't know anyone who can help you."***

There was little consistency in the safety rituals shared by participants. Where one participant would follow one set of rules, another would contradict them, suggesting opposite rituals that work for them. However, among the diversity in approaches used to help create safety, some themes emerged: trusting your gut and your learned intuition, connecting with people by keeping someone you trust close by, keeping a phone on you, staying within public view and isolating from people or trying to blend in.

"If I see any violence, I roll into a ball my cover my head. I fall to the ground, curl into a little ball and cover my head and pray."

"I will change the way I present myself in the means of my gender or ethics in order to blend in with an environment in which I believe is violent."

"Be friendly to everyone because then you're never somewhere you don't know anyone who can help you."

"You can't trust anyone, not even your friends."

"I try to stay safe and spend all my time trying to stay away from people."

"I have no advice, I'm still living in violence."

"Go to shelters, but make sure that you get a stable place to live. Because sometimes, the longer you are in the shelter, the worse you can become."

"Don't tell people you're homeless, it's like giving them permission to take advantage of you."

"Make sure you find somebody you can trust in the community. Don't stay on the street. Don't be alone when you're homeless."

"Don't trust men you don't know, even the ones you do can turn bad."

"Ask for help sooner when people can still help you."

Coping through substance use

Substance use was quickly identified as a method of coping among participants. In our survey, 75% of respondents stated they were using substances to cope with their experiences of violence and resulting trauma. However, substance use also came up as method used among peers to "de-escalate" a violent situation or person, although it was always a temporary measure:

> ***"Okay, I've seen situations where there'd be so many girls, and they all get together and fight. And yes, somebody that they know will be, say they start fighting right inside your room. And if you have any dope, then you give them dope to use and it keeps everybody mellow and fine. And then when it's all gone and they start all over again. It's just a play."***
>
> — Interview participant 3

This same participant also shared how substance use led to more violence perpetrated by users, sharing from her own personal experience:

> ***"They have a puff of that stuff on one person. I mean, I myself died on it, died. Here. One puff of that stuff. And they go to sleep on and on. And don't report the blackout. You don't remember smoking the goodies you got. And when you wake up, you think everybody stole your stuff. Well, you're violent raging that you want your dope back. Meanwhile, you smoked it all."***
>
> — Interview participant 3

Gut feelings and learned intuition

> ***"I go with gut instincts. Things, yes. Checking your surroundings and the people around you."***
>
> — Interview participant 8

Following gut feelings and learned intuition often went hand in hand when women assessed their level of safety in a situation. Participants spoke at length about being aware of their surroundings, always having a plan for a way out and, for some, carrying weapons or pepper spray. They talked about not knowing how to describe it but having instincts that kick in and even if they don't know for sure why these instincts happen, they habitually follow them in order to keep safe. One participant recounted:

> ***"And I go with my gut instinct a lot, actually. Yeah, I guess I could be at Tim Hortons and then just always be inside and just have this really bad feeling. Like for no reason at all. Something inside of me would say we'll just leave and I would just, you know, grab my coffee and go..."***
>
> — Interview participant 5

Participants also talked about past experiences helping to inform their gut instincts. One participant shared what she learned from working on the street:

> ***"Actually, I kind of follow my gut. You kind of get a sense when you're working on the street like I was a young age and also if there's like red flags that they send out, like you can kind of tell if environments are going to be safe. Like, I don't know how to explain it except from a working girl's perspective."***
>
> — Interview participant 1

Another participant talked about how her experience of abuse made her a better judge of character, a quality she uses to help ascertain whether a situation is safe or not for her:

> ***"Yeah, like you always got to be aware of your surroundings, like always know who's around you. I find like, I, it's funny that I've been in an abusive relationship for 15 years because I find like, I am a good judgment of character when it comes to people. I just did find myself trapped. But I think that you always need to, like, kind of know who's around, you know, what type of people are around, you know, where to not overstep with certain people."***
>
> — Interview participant 9

Engaging with people

For some participants, engaging with people was a core strategy for keeping safe, both as a deterrent of violence and to provide help if violence does happen. Trust was a complicated experience for participants, some suggesting it's wisest to trust no one and others emphasizing the importance of finding someone to trust. One participant shared:

> ***"Make sure you find somebody you can trust in the community. Don't stay on the street. Don't be alone when you're homeless. Yes, go to a shelter if you have to. Don't stay outside yourself or go to some guy's house if he offers you place to stay. Don't do that because it's not going to end well."***
>
> — Interview Participant 1

Other participants talked about trying to get to know people around town and being social as a strategy of ensuring someone is around to help you if you need it:

> ***"When I go out all night, I don't worry so much because I know a lot of the people out there and I can go down any alleyway and I know somebody, I know who they are. And I've sat down and talked to some friends of them. So I know there's someone out there. And if something were to happen, they'd be on my side. They'd be there to help."***
>
> — Interview participant 10

Staying in public settings and around numerous people, even strangers, was a common strategy for women to stay safe, particularly so for women who did not have cell phones or other ways of calling for help:

> ***"It's dangerous and don't go where you're not close to the city, and like other people, because if you need help and need to run, you need to get people fast, right? Because that could be life or death."***
>
> — Interview participant 1

Keeping a cell phone

For participants, phones became a critical lifeline to safety, particularly for being able to call for help if they needed it. Access to devices differed among participants, many of them unable to afford a phone. This created a reliance on set up voicemails and public phones or pay phones as well as help from strangers if they needed it. For some participants, this meant they stayed close to the shelter at all times, as they hadn't historically had good experiences relying on strangers for help:

> ***"Right. A lot of times, a lot of people don't want to get involved no more. They'll just walk right by ya."***
>
> — Interview participant 3

For those that did have a cell phone, it was something they kept with them at all times

> ***"I would always make sure, like, I have a phone, if something were to happen that I would be able to call emergency right away or make sure there's people around. Okay. If I have that, then I'm not alone..."***
>
> — Interview participant 5

And for many, cell phones had a track record of helping them:

> ***"Yeah, I'd put my phone on my bed, underneath my sheets. If I thought things was escalating with me and my ex, I just left it there just in case I wasn't sure what was going on, and he'd go 'you call the police?' and I'd say, 'oh yeah, I forgot about that' and ask them in just to help mediate things."***
>
> — Interview participant 10

Isolating and blending In

Some participants, weary of others from experience, recommended isolation and blending in or hiding as a way to stay safe. One participant talked about this process being a journey where she shuts parts of herself down to stay safe:

> ***"I just tend to even shut down more and keep to myself even more and just try to isolate myself and just keep to myself more than I would normally do."***
>
> — Interview participant 1

Another talked about keeping to yourself to avoid being taken advantage of:

> ***"Stick to yourself as much as you can, like, just, you know, don't be so open and giving. Don't let people know too much about you, because they just take advantage and they will take everything from you and just make you weak."***
>
> — Interview participant 5

For participants who chose isolating and blending in, it was also important to not trust people. This was highlighted by one participant who advised not to trust people who are in similar situations:

> ***"Always be fully aware of your surroundings and don't be too trusting of those in similar situations. People that are in desperate situations may act in desperate and harmful ways."***
>
> — Survey participant

Participants also talked about brushing off situations or deflecting violence they are receiving to try and blend in and not bring attention to themselves:

> ***"Like, I would almost not really ignore the situation, but try and like, divert the attention to something different, or just be like, Okay, I understand, I understand, and just kind of try and like, brush it off to the side and walk away from the situation."***
>
> — Interview participant 9

Experience of the justice system

Figure 6: Police

Have you ever decided not to report an experience of violence to the police?

66.7%	Yes (I have experienced violence and not reported it)
12.5%	No (I report the experiences of violence I have)
18.8%	Decline to answer
0%	Not Applicable (I've never been in a situation of violence to report)

The majority of participants had complicated feelings regarding law enforcement. These feelings stemmed from direct experiences with the police as well as their fear of more violence after police involvement. It all amounted to a severe lack of trust in the law enforcement process.

"The climate in which the police and the homeless population encounter each other is fragile and rooted in multiple traumas for the humans accessing services. It is difficult to trust any organization, human or resources that is there to help someone when a human's trauma is often based on the manipulation of that very thing."

— Survey participant

Some participants had past experiences with being detained that included being strip searched for minor theft charges which led to disillusionment with the police:

> ***"I think the police a lot, a lot of times that, you know, you're getting like, you're getting stripped, searched for a theft under or something that you got in trouble within the courts or something. Because you're hungry and you went, you took something from Walmart to eat. I'm just saying, for example, right? You're already feeling like this pig for doing what you're doing. But you're hungry, right. And people will do anything to get their food if you're hungry. Right. So then you go into the police station. I mean, take all your clothes off and you're naked now. And you're completely stripped of any sort of self-worth you have. Right. And I don't think it's necessary. I mean, for a violent crime. Sure. Right. But for something small, um, I think they should really, you know, weigh the two, right?"***
>
> — Interview Participant 8

The experience of being charged by the police and the decisions that followed also made the police an unreliable support for some participants:

> ***"I was in isolation at a detention centre in Hamilton all on my own, and it made me feel unsafe because I was alone and no one would know if something bad happened to me. Looking back, I don't feel like that was warranted."***
>
> — Survey participant

Similarly, past convictions made participants feel like if they used the police services, they might end up back in jail:

> ***"I didn't feel like they needed to know about my past, because I'd made amends to those relationships and I was worried their involvement would ruin that. I didn't deserve the last round of being charged, assaulted or locked in the women's detention centre and I didn't want it to reoccur."***
>
> — Survey participant

Participants recounted situations where they were blamed by police, even though they were the victims who called for help:

> ***"The police don't treat you like the victim. Sometimes, they treat you like you did something wrong."***
>
> — Interview participant 8

One participant had received two convictions through this exact experience:

> ***"I have been arrested twice for crimes I didn't commit, even when I was the victim."***
>
> — Interview participant 11

Lastly, participants also talked about the lack of accountability that often followed when reporting did happen:

> ***"Last time he was released the same night and I had to pay for that."***
>
> — Survey participant
>
> ***"They didn't show up, I waited 6 hours."***
>
> — Survey participant

This yo-yo and unpredictable experience with police has led to less trust or outright refusal to call the police when participants have been the recipient of harm. The majority of participants in our study reported at least some experience with police. Of them, 67% of participants stated they would not involve police if they experienced violence and 19% declined answering.

> ***"Um, yeah, I don't see police or calling police as good, a lot of times people are intimidated by calling them because I don't feel that they're super helpful when it comes to situations that we've been through with them. Personally, I've avoided calling them and dealt with it on my own. I've even lashed out at someone that's lashed out at me, which isn't right... so yeah, I would say that. I don't, I'm not big on calling police."***
>
> — Interview participant 8
>
> ***"I don't trust the police or anything about it. I feel that cops are corrupt and don't believe u sometimes, making bullying 'n abuse more."***
>
> — Survey participant

A common fear of using the police was the threat of violence escalating. One participant shared about a situation which took place while they were staying in shelter and they refused to let staff call police about a serious issue due to such a fear:

> ***"I wouldn't let people [shelter staff] use the police. Yes, they have tried to and no I would not let them. Well, because I'm 1 against 60."***
>
> — Interview participant 3

Police are also being used as a tool of threat in some abusive situations. One participant shared:

> ***"I had been in an abusive relationship for over 15 years. I had been so brainwashed in thinking that I could not survive without my spouse by my side to support me financially. I was afraid to be on my own with my children. I also received a lot of pressure from my in-laws to not report situations because it would "ruin his life." My spouse also had me addicted to narcotics as a means of control and would use it against me by threatening to report me to family services or tell the police."***
>
> — Survey participant

Moving forward in this work

Restorative justice

Participants had a lot to say about their current options around justice and law enforcement. While many made definitive decisions based on past experiences engaging with law enforcement, others saw a gap where their options were to either to forget it or take the chance on what might happen. Participants felt that there were instances in their lives that did not warrant police presence, but still needed some sort of resolution. One participant shared:

> ***"There should be some sort of justice that helps people before the police take a step, before police and maybe a little above counselling, right. Yeah, some sort of profession that intervenes, before it comes to a legal matter, right? Because it's relationship-centred, the world is full of relationships..."***
>
> — Interview participant 8

Along a similar vein, some participants talked about wanting more judgement-free and safe options that didn't do things like risk family destruction or more relationship blow-ups:

> ***"I felt like they were destroying my family because they took my kids' dad over an argument because it was loud and emotional and they assumed there was more to it than there really was. It wasn't fair my kids had to see that."***
>
> — Survey participant

And others shared about wanting to move past the situation, for the violence to just stop, and jail wasn't seen as the most likely means of making this happen:

> ***"He's the father of my children, I don't want him to be in jail, I just wanted it to stop."***
>
> — Survey participant
>
> ***"I didn't want payback."***
>
> — Survey participant

Researchers introduced to participants to restorative justice as a potential process that could fill this identified gap. For some participants, this was a welcome alternative:

> ***"I'd rather tell the staff. I'd rather talk to the staff here than talk to the cops."***
>
> — Interview participant 4

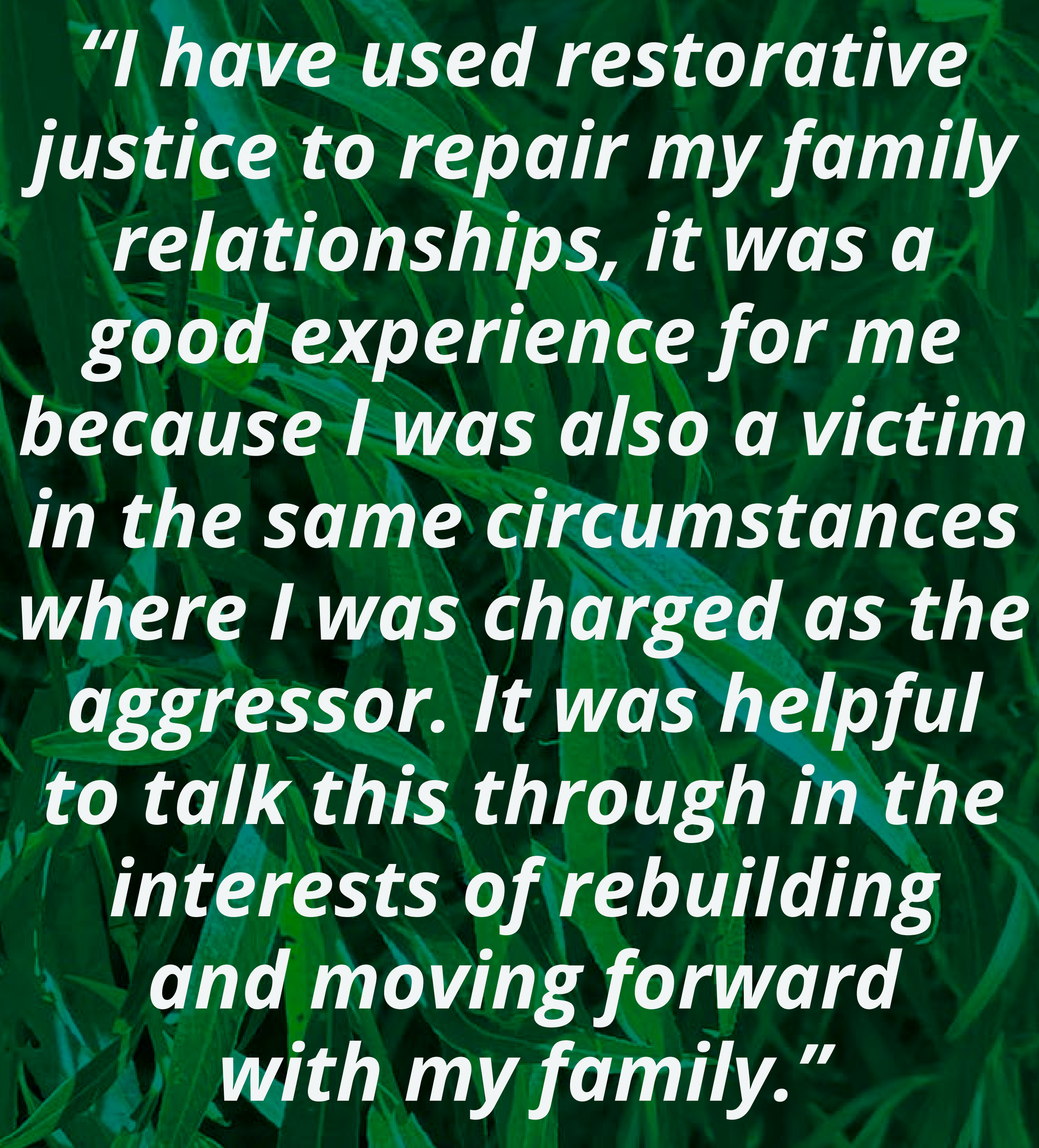
Participants even thought about restorative justice as a way to make amends for their own actions:

> ***"I don't want to talk to everyone who has harmed me, but I want people who I have harmed to talk to me."***
>
> — Survey participant

Participants were asked about scenarios in which they may see themselves using a restorative justice approach. Overall, participants varied in their responses. Situations that included physical or verbal violence, situations of racism, situations of violence based on sexuality, situations of violence based on gender presentation, or big fights or feuds with friends, family or others were all examples where participants felt restorative justice processes could be helpful. Participants also thought restorative justice would be helpful to reconcile situations where they were the aggressor or in exchange for having probation revoked. Results varied in more serious occurrences like sexual assaults and situations where they were controlled or manipulated.

Restorative justice was seen by some as a therapeutic opportunity for folks to work through their trauma, a way to stop the hurt from happening over and over, a way to recognize the help both parties needed and a way to avoid situations getting worse with time:

> ***"I think that yeah, I think the longer you leave it, the worse it could get."***
>
> - Survey Participant
>
> ***"I think that, you know, we're human, we make mistakes, and people sometimes are not in the right, either state of mind, or maybe under the influence, it's something and we may not be thinking at that moment, and we react in different ways. And I think that if we just took the time, and like I said, educated or have classes, stuff like that..."***
>
> - Interview Participant 5



"I have used restorative justice to repair my family relationships, it was a good experience for me because I was also a victim in the same circumstances where I was charged as the aggressor. It was helpful to talk this through in the interests of rebuilding and moving forward with my family."

— Survey participant

Participants further saw restorative justice as a potential way to break up generational violence:

> ***"A lot of abusers have been abused and never received help for that. So, they're just going to continue to lash out. Right? Yeah. I think a lot of men that abuse women have probably been abused as children. Right. I don't think that any of us are just born violent. I think violence is something you saw, or you were involved in or were around. This might help that.***
>
> - Interview Participant 8

Participants discussed some barriers they might face when engaging in restorative justice. One concern was that it might be difficult to open up to their abusers or having their abusers open up to them. Others talked about not knowing if they could trust in the process, and a few felt that it ran the risk of potentially making things worse. A very common concern was about being face-to-face with the person who was violent towards them:

> ***"Being scared that the person is still around you know, then you got to see this person every day? Definitely would be to deter me. I wouldn't, you know, wouldn't want to put the weight back on them unless it was that they were willing to go and get with help with you."***
>
> – Interview Participant 8

Some participants were wary that the process wouldn't be met by their abusers with the same enthusiasm they had to resolve issues.

> ***"Other than that, I just guess, like, the willingness of both parties, both parties, you're gonna have to be willing to try to make it work. Because if you're not, then it's not going to work at all right, then there's really no point."***
>
> \- Survey Participant

Even still, one participant was still willing to try:

> ***"I don't know, like, I'm, I am actually, like, I am all for programs like this. I don't think there's anything that would prevent me from wanting to try. I would always want to try, especially for the sake of my daughters. If there was, like, I think when it comes to what he has done to me, I don't think he would be willing to listen and understand or try and, you know, but I think like, there's a lot of history now with my two daughters, and he's missing out on a relationship with my two daughters. And I think if there was programs that would help in that aspect, I would be all for it as well, I don't think I would not want to try. I would want to try for sure."***
>
> \- Interview Participant 9

Systemic changes for safety

Participants were asked to reflect on a list of potential actions that could be taken to address their raised concerns and highlight the actions they found valuable. The most agreed upon action, with 79% of participants favouring it, was bringing in trauma and mental health supports to the women's emergency shelter. This was framed as a way to help women who have and are experiencing violence to work past mental health as a barrier to moving forward. It was also talked about as a way to help address some of the peer-to-peer violence that can happen in an emergency shelter setting.

Sixty one percent of participants also wanted to see the creation of more gendered housing along the continuum of affordable, supportive and transitional. Looking at solutions around justice, a total of 57% of participants want to see an alternative way to deal with violence rather than relying on the current police or court systems. Lastly, 52% of participants prioritized the creation of spaces and services exclusively for women and gender-diverse folks, this includes adapting current services as well as adding services in order to build in more safety and access.

Beyond giving an analysis on some suggested actions, participants were also encouraged, in the survey and throughout the interviews, to share their own ideas around how to increase safety, minimize the violence they experience, and build stronger pathways of support across systems. Suggestions reflect a few trends: rethinking the approach to emergency shelter services and building on the model, making emergency phones more available, doing more to weave systems of support together, and reconsidering policies/processes around housing priority lists.

Attitudinal shift around shelter use by service providers

The first issue participants highlighted in the interviews and surveys was the need for an attitudinal shift by service providers, including those offering prevention and diversion programming. Participants noted that service staff often try to dissuade women from using the shelter system, thus keeping them in more vulnerable positions and keeping them hidden and with less access to needed support in the community:

> ***"I think women need to know that it's not okay to be abused in any means, and there's no wrong reason to call if you're being abused, you're being abused, and you have every right to call and seek shelter and seek a safe place to be."***
>
> — Interview participant 9

Mental health and physical health supports

Participants talked candidly about how their mental health impacted their safety and how violence impacted their mental health. Introducing more trauma and mental health supports inside the shelter system was talked about extensively by participants and for some this was seen as the first step forward for women accessing services:

> ***"The ability to address the mental health and trauma pieces in which lead women to addictions and homelessness in the first place is something I have always believed to be at the forefront of being a piece of the shelter system. Housing, the safety in which one feels when they don't have to be wet and unsafe on the street is only the tiniest fraction of being able to offer support to women in this community. A piece of the solution, is addressing the fragility of the client in which accesses services."***
>
> — Survey participant

Participants suggested that having counsellors on site who are readily available for when women work up the courage to talk and who were familiar with what they may be experiencing would be optimal. One participant suggested:

> ***"I think having access to a counsellor, or to whoever it is, a worker that people have access to them at all times. Okay! Night or day!"***
>
> — Survey participant

A large part of the recommendation for having supports directly inside the shelter system was due to the immensely negative experiences participants had been subject to when trying to access more mainstream services geared towards the general public. They reported often feeling pushed away or struggling to conform to expectations in that environment:

> ***"It happens. I mean, people, you feel so bad about yourself that you just don't want to be here... And the reason that I'm homeless and I was afraid to say anything, but at the same time I was trying to get some help. It was just like, it wasn't open arms, open door. It was just like, they pushed me away. Yeah, they weren't listening."***
>
> — Interview participant 5

Participants also noted that they would like more readily available physical health supports and suggested a nurse be permanently stationed at the shelter.

Enhancing safety measures

Several participants had experienced both the emergency shelter system and the domestic violence shelter systems in Waterloo Region and they discussed the differing safety measures between the two. For one participant, the presence of fences and surveillance cameras was a key element of feeling safe:

> ***"Um well, you know, as far as difference, there's security differences. Okay. That's definitely security differences because in a domestic shelter there's fences all the way around. There's a lot of cameras right. Here, we're wide- open downtown right. So that's a different thing."***
>
> — Interview participant 8

“Um well, you know, as far as difference, there’s security differences. Okay. That’s definitely security differences because in a domestic shelter there’s fences all the way around. There’s a lot of cameras, right. Here, we’re wide-open downtown, right. So, that’s a different thing.”

— Interview participant 8

When comparing the domestic violence shelter system to the emergency shelter system, participants talked about the security that comes with access to a shelter space 24/7. This was felt to be a benefit of the COVID-19 pandemic measures, which allowed the YW KW emergency shelter to operate 24/7 and folks were not required to leave during the day, as was the previous practice:

> ***"They can come in the shelter at nighttime but then they got to be thrown out on the street at eight o'clock [a.m.]. We were lucky here. The girls here. We're lucky right now. We don't have to leave early in the morning. But the other places do, right."***
>
> — Participant 3

Participants wanted to see more safety within the shelter as stories of situations where folks were violent toward each other emerged. One participant suggested zero tolerance and personal consequences:

> ***"Yeah, because I believe in zero tolerance for violence. Right. And I've seen violence up there, and it's just as brushed off like, right. And it shouldn't be brushed off. I don't think I think I don't, you know, depending on the situation, I think if it needs to be dealt with legally, then cool. Otherwise, there should still be a personal consequence. Yes, that is what I'm trying to say.***
>
> — Interview participant 8

Recreational and life skills programming

Another key distinction of the emergency shelter system noted by participants, particularly those with experience in the youth shelter system and domestic violence shelter system, was the lack of programming available, whether it was recreational to help create more positive relationships among shelter users, opportunities to volunteer or help out around the shelter, or activities more concentrated on life skills building. Participants expressed a desire for more holistic services in the emergency shelters:

> ***"Like, it's not... like it's a shelter. Right. But it's, I think that if a lot of people here, they don't know what to do with themselves. Yeah, even myself, I don't know sometimes. I don't know. You know, there's so many hours in a day, and I'm not working right now. So I'll help clean up or I'll sleep outside just because, you know, yeah. But if they had, like, you know, a game night, or something. I think it would keep some of the women busy and make them feel better about themselves. You know, what I mean?"***
>
> — Interview participant 5

Expanding models

Most of our participants reported feeling overwhelmed by the intensity of being bunked with so many people in a room and some shared that they also felt uneasy in motel settings that have less built-in support, security and that often have more open drug use. Participants suggested a way to account for the differing levels of support and unique needs experienced among shelter users was to expand the model. There was a huge degree of empathy for fellow shelter users and what they may be experiencing, but it came with the realization that having to meet all these different needs in one shelter and under one model wasn't working effectively and supporting participants as well as it could.

One participant broke it down:

> ***"They shouldn't be all in one shelter. Families and mental health should really be concentrated on because there's a lot of these they're not doing anything to help their mental health. They're just making it worse by getting they're not doing anything to help it. They need to make sure that they get the proper help they need and they don't, they just get in one shelter and mix all together in a room and it's a very toxic environment and can break people because we have no choice but we have nowhere else to go."***
>
> — Interview participant 1

Participants also liked the idea of having single-occupant rooms to avoid conflict and theft and to minimize the anxiety of having to watch everybody that comes into the room. Two participants recounted experiences using shelters with individual rooms, one participant spoke of the model used by the domestic violence shelter system in Waterloo Region:

> ***"When they sent me to the shelter on Heritage, I really liked that one, because there was like programs and stuff. Yeah, and teaching classes and stuff like that, and there was counsellors, and you had your own room with its own key and there was a washroom and you know, and there wouldn't be keys floating around. You know, you know that there's not 10 different people that have a key to your room."***
>
> — Interview participant 5

Another participant talked about a shelter model she experienced in downtown Vancouver:

> ***"They turned hotels into single occupancy rooms that were harm reduction and that was your own room, and somehow, you also had your own bathroom at $335 a month, and you get free lunch and nurses who can do anything. They were very very hands on and their heart was in it."***
>
> — Interview participant 1

Another participant suggested a model that left the gendered approach behind altogether:

> ***"The entire idea of gender-based shelters I believe are seeing their end. Between the existence of queer folks, the evolutions of families and the need to have human energy, regardless of gender within your everyday life as you suffer and succeed and try to continue on as normal as possible. It's important to acknowledge the idea of a HUMAN SAFE SPACE… If the system acknowledged the very basic pains of society before the systemization of the humans who suffer from that, wear those people down… and jade, hurt and leave them behind… it seems a much easier idea to entertain."***
>
> — Survey participant

Emergency phones

Participants referenced extensively their reliance on phones in order to call for help if they are experiencing violence as well as a tool that generally helped them feel more in control of their safety. While those without phones often rely on the general public when they are experiencing harm, it wasn't felt that this was a reliable practice. Participants talked about pay phones becoming obsolete in town and so helping to ensuring all accessing women have phones, as a safety tool, was encouraged.

Stronger engagement among systems

Participants found the systems they needed for support to be disjointed and filled with gaps and they felt they were the ones who suffered. Often episodes of violence happened in their lives, which escalated situations to where participants would need to use multiple systems to get the help they need. One participant's experience summed this up perfectly.

This participant was in a violent relationship and found herself fleeing and taking up shelter at Women's Crisis Services. She was able to find stability and secure housing and moved in with her two kids. Sometime later, she got word that she was at the top of the list for affordable housing, and so she gave notice to her current market rent landlord. In a tragic incident, she was attacked on the street and beaten up and had trauma to her head and body. In the hospital, she coded once and was in a medical coma for a week. Her hospital stay was long and during her medical coma, she lost her current housing (as she had given notice) and all of the contents of her house were thrown out, including everything she had saved from her first flee from violence.

Also, because she was in the hospital, she wasn't able to sign the paperwork on her affordable housing unit and no one came looking for her. So she lost her place in line for housing. Still, throughout this whole process (and up to the date of the interview) her ex was stalking her. Given her condition following the attack, she had her kids go live with her mother-in-law, and now her mother-in-law and ex were keeping the kids from her. When the hospital discharged her, she was still medically fragile had nowhere to go, and so the police dropped her off in front of the YW KW emergency shelter. She is now unable to reclaim her old apartment or her spot on the housing list and is unable to find resolution with her abuser in order to see her kids.

Without better collaboration between systems, women who are vulnerable and marginalized can often get lost in these systems and end up deeper in the clutches of violence and more vulnerable than before. Participants shared experiences of being sent all over the community for services and never actually being considered eligible or denied access, being forgotten about for referrals, being turned away because they were passing as not homeless, not qualifying for support in the domestic violence sector and so many more. The reliance on so many systems for support left women particularly vulnerable, especially if they are were not already connected into the shelter system or to support workers who could help advocate on their behalf.

"Some guy beat me up on the street. Yeah, I was in the hospital because of it... I died a few times... Meantime my landlord, he got rid of everything in my apartment and I lost my rent geared to income housing and I ended up discharged from the hospital and driven to the shelter."

— Interview Participant 5

Housing priority

Participants talked about the need for more housing and encouraged the building of that housing to be quick, they also talked about raising rent costs and the impossibility of finding an affordable place. Women are faced with less housing options in our community because of their safety needs. Accommodations like rooming houses and other arrangements that are within their budgets come with a set of inherent risks to safety that many women don't feel comfortable with or have had negative experiences with in the past. They felt that there should be housing priority, as there is for other groups, for homeless women, given their experiences of violence and abuse.

Participants recounted many instances where they felt their male friends, living in similar unhoused situations, were getting housing much quicker than they were and they were also having experiences of getting bumped down the list by women experiencing domestic violence who receive priority placement, an irony when they too have experiences of violence.

Our commitment

Our commitment to the cis women, trans, two-spirit, and non-binary folks who shared their life experiences and vulnerability with us throughout this research is that it will not be in vain. We are dedicated to weaving together the different branches of community to create solutions that prioritize the wellbeing of women, to develop stronger systems that address safety and justice and help women who have experienced gender-based violence move forward from their experiences. This work must always have roots in their shared experience.

It's with optimism that we introduce Project Willow, a community building project dedicated to supporting systemic change for unhoused and homeless women experiencing gender-based violence. Together, the YW Kitchener-Waterloo, Community Justice Initiatives and the Coalition of Muslim Women Kitchener-Waterloo will be working with community stakeholders to create a five-year community safety and justice plan that will respond directly to the shared experience and needs identified through two core research projects, this report included as one. We welcome the community to follow this work and get involved.

Now is the time.

Project Willow advocates for systems change that enhances the safety of women experiencing homelessness from gender-based violence, while also exploring ways of using non-punitive measures to achieve justice and healing. This project is rooted in, and guided by, the voices of those with living experience.

For more information visit:
feministshift.ca/project-willow

Women and Gender Equality Canada
Femmes et Égalité des genres Canada