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UNDERSTANDING FAMILY HOMELESSNESS

A less visible problem: Family homelessness has received less attention, to date, than has homelessness among single adults. In part, this is because it is less visible. Homeless families are not on our street corners, and the costs – to families and to society – are less apparent.

Homeless families in shelters reflect a larger and even more hidden problem of family homelessness, housing instability, and poverty.

- Homeless families may live temporarily with friends or family, as well as in housing that is unaffordable, and of poor quality.
- Over 3,500 families with children are on Ottawa's Centralized Waiting List, in need of subsidized housing (Alliance to End Homelessness, 2016).

Family Homelessness is a complex social problem because within families, there are different members with different needs.

- Children and youth of different ages have unique developmental, physical health, mental health, and educational needs. Risks for children and youth include absences from school and poorer school performance, loss of friends, and increased stress and behavioural problems.
- Family homelessness can affect the heads of households. They have their own physical health, mental health, and educational or employment needs that have to be addressed.
- Family homelessness can affect the family as a whole. Family relationships and routines can be disrupted. Family members may temporarily stay with other family and friends.

FAMILY HOMELESSNESS IN OTTAWA

- In 2015, we saw an increase in the number of homeless families in comparison to the two previous years – up to 782 distinct family units.
- In 2015, there were 1,479 dependents 17 years of age and under, representing 56% of all clients in family shelters, and 21.7% of all emergency shelter clients. When we also factor in 171 unaccompanied single youth (aged 16-17) staying in shelters, we find that about 24% of all shelter users in Ottawa are 17 and under. This is much higher than the Canadian national average of 1 in 7 (Raising the Roof, 2016).
- These counts are an underestimation; they do not include families using shelters and transitional housing within the Violence Against Women sector.
- In 2015, shelter stays were on average 92 nights (about 3 months). From 2006 to 2014, we saw average lengths of stay increase from 35 nights in 2006 to a high of 105 in 2014.
- Lengths of stays are long because most families cannot afford private market rent. Their most likely route out of the shelter is into social housing. Larger families wait the longest because they must wait for units with a sufficient number of bedrooms to accommodate them.



A CLOSER LOOK AT FAMILY HOMELESSNESS IN OTTAWA

In a study funded by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, our team looked more closely at homeless families in Ottawa residing in the shelters from November 2012 to December 2013. Here is what we found:

- About 73% of families were headed by women and 65.3% of these families were single parent families.
- Most heads of families were unemployed (84%), but over a third (34.7%) had completed post-secondary education, and another 28% had completed high school.
- Family annual income was on average \$17,718 per year.
- About half of the heads of families were Canadian citizens. A quarter of participants were permanent residents and immigrants, and another quarter were refugees. Overall, about two thirds were born outside of Canada.
- Over 1/3 (36%) reported experiencing physical violence during adulthood, including threats of physical violence, and another 17% reported experiences of sexual violence during adulthood.

TAKING ACTION

There are three critical time points to address family homelessness:

1. *Before families become homeless*: Examine options for Eviction Prevention Strategies (Raising the Roof, 2016), including Rent Banks, Tenant Education and Advocacy, Energy Assistance (to help address the cost of utilities for low-income families), Credit Counselling, and Landlord Mediation; and work with partners to assist newcomer families to become better established, with appropriate assistance, in their communities.
2. *When families become homeless*: Increase access to housing subsidies; providing housing subsidies was identified in a recent national study in the United States as the most effective way to reduce the length of shelter stays, increase housing stability in the community, and promote family integrity (Family Options, 2016).
3. *When families leave the shelter*: Upon leaving the shelter, personal and interpersonal challenges, or challenges settling into new housing and communities, may continue. There is a need to ensure access for families in need to transitional support programs, like the Families First program offered by the Pinecrest-Queensway Community Health Centre and funded by the City of Ottawa (visit the Alliance website for profiles).

In early 2016, *Raising the Roof* released: **Putting an End to Child & Family Homelessness in Canada** (2016), a report including additional recommendations for all levels of government. These recommendations recognize that preventing family homelessness requires concerted action from all levels of government and the community to address family poverty, create sufficient affordable housing, and ensure integrated systems of support.